

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's politics of language: commitment and complicity

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ABSTRACT. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's politics of language has been controversially received by his critics, who tend to either overemphasize his revolutionary trajectory as an African writer or devalue his efforts to produce an African language-based literature. Through a historical and cultural analysis, the present work offers an alternative view of Ngũgĩ's treatment of the language question as a problematic, yet necessary, attempt to interrogate and alter his cultural alignments with European colonialism.

Keywords: African languages, European languages, colonialism, exile, politics of language.

RESUMO. A política linguística de Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: comprometimento e cumplicidade. A política linguística do escritor queniano Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o é recebida de forma controversa pelos críticos, que tendem a superenfatizar sua trajetória revolucionária como escritor ou a depreciar seus esforços para produzir obras literárias em línguas africanas. A partir de uma análise histórica e cultural, este ensaio oferece uma visão alternativa do tratamento dado por Ngũgĩ à questão linguística como uma tentativa problemática, porém necessária, de interrogar e alterar suas alianças culturais com o colonialismo europeu.

Palavras-chave: línguas africanas, línguas europeias, colonialismo, exílio, política linguística.

Introduction

The rift between Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's formal education and the familial and political contexts in which he was born and raised, as well as the literary impasses that ensued from his condition as an exiled constitute some of the main issues the writer has tried to negotiate in the course of his career¹. For many of his critics, Ngũgĩ has succeeded in overcoming the colonialist bases of his European education, a change he himself has defined as an "epistemological break" with his past. Such rupture, it is worth remembering, resulted, according to the writer, from his contact with the people of the Kamĩĩĩthũ Community Education and Culture Centre, who invited him to participate in the Centre's cultural projects as an educator and playwright in 1976. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1997,

p. 44-45) comments in "The Language of African Theatre", "the process was one of continuous learning. Learning of our history. Learning of what obtains in factories. Learning of what goes on in farms and plantations. Learning our language, for the peasants were essentially the guardians of the language through years of use". In the writer's words, the project ultimately "forced" him "to turn to Gĩkũyũ", his mother tongue, and to begin writing in that language².

In spite of his claims, however, Ngũgĩ has been criticized for not having established a complete rupture with his European background as he adopted a bourgeois conception of art and became somehow complicit with a Eurocentric academic environment. This second position, embraced by critics such as Simon Gikandi and A. O. Amoko, offers a more complex account of Ngũgĩ's trajectory as it points to the contradictions and ambiguities intrinsic to his writings and political claims. The present study shares some of Gikandi's and Amoko's arguments, while advancing the alternative view that

¹ Born in Limuru, Kenya, in 1938, and belonging to a family of peasants, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o received his primary education in a Gĩkũyũ Independent School from 1948 to 1955. Later, he was sent to Alliance High School, a British-based missionary centre of secondary education, which he attended from 1955 to 1959. He spent the next few years (1959-1964) at Makerere University (Uganda) and then left for Leeds University, England, where he began a dissertation on Caribbean literature. A detailed account of Ngũgĩ's formal education can be found in Carol Sicherman's *Ngũgĩ's Colonial Education: The Subversion of the African Mind* (In: NAZARETH, P. (Org.). "Critical Essays on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o". New York: Twayne Publishers, 2000. p. 17-47). See also Sicherman's "Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o: The Making of a Rebel: A Source Book in Kenyan Literature and Resistance" (Documentary Research in African Written Literatures, 1. Oxford: Hans Zell, 1990).

² Ngũgĩ has written extensively about the Kamĩĩĩthũ Centre in the following books: "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary" (London: Heinemann, 1981); "Barrel of a Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya" (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1983); and "Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature" (London: James Currey, 1997).

Ngũgĩ's political agenda needs to be analyzed from a perspective that contemplates the question of exile and his condition as a colonial/postcolonial intellectual. That is to say, as a divided writer, coming from a decolonized country, and profoundly influenced by a colonialist epistemology, Ngũgĩ could hardly escape the fractured locus of enunciation typical of the recently decolonized areas of the planet. In what follows, I will argue that Ngũgĩ's literary and political performance should be perceived in terms of a commitment to understand and interrogate the cultural alignments that constituted the very basis of his formal education – which comprises, of course, his contact with the English language – as well as his problematic relationship with Western academic institutions. This will hopefully reveal Ngũgĩ's case as an important example of the blurred frontiers between commitment and complicity and of some of the possibilities of negotiation between the two with respect to the exiled intellectual.

Early critics: the epistemological break

Critics have usually agreed that Ngũgĩ's early fictional works, such as *Weep Not, Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) are saturated with images, descriptions, and characters that echo a literary tradition which is essentially Western in character, whereas in his later works, such as *Caitani Mũtharaba-inĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*, 1980) and *Matigari ma Njirũũgi* (*Matigari*, 1986), Ngũgĩ reassesses that paradigm in order to incorporate elements and a narrative structure closer to Gĩkũyũ oral traditions. For example, in "Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Visions of Africa," Christine Lofin (2000, p. 263) argues that the description of landscape in Ngũgĩ's novels has undergone considerable changes from his early works to the more recent ones. From such changes, it is possible to "trace a development of his fiction from a limited acceptance of Western techniques of description to a rejection of these techniques as implying a view of nature that Ngũgĩ no longer shares". Also, in "Orality and the Literature of Combat: The Legacy of Fanon," Alamin Mazrui and Lupenga Mphande assert that the use of orality in Ngũgĩ's early works assumed a "non-dynamic" character as they were aimed at a Western audience. This "museum-type" of orality was changed into a creative and dynamic aspect of his later works once he managed to redefine his public and began to write for a Gĩkũyũ audience. As the authors explain, while in the process of writing *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Ngũgĩ and Mĩcere

Mũgo, unsatisfied with the official history of the Mau Mau revolution, turned to the oral history of the movement. The play was then based on the people's account of the Mau Mau, which varied significantly from the official reports on the revolution. However, while orality as a mere "source of information" can be found in many of Ngũgĩ's works, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* included, it gained a new significance in *Matigari*: "Matigari can be considered a rekindling of the spirit of the people's oral history of Mau Mau" and the figure of Matigari has to be understood as "both a product of the oral tradition and a revalidation of a people's oral history in the politics of power" (MAZRUI; MPHANDE, 1995, p. 166). The authors finally argue that Ngũgĩ's return to the people, both in terms of narrative structure and language (*Caitani Mũtharaba-inĩ* was Ngũgĩ's first novel in Gĩkũyũ, followed by *Matigari ma Njirũũgi*), places his later fictional works within what Frantz Fanon called a "literature of combat," that is, a literature that "moulds the national consciousness," "assumes responsibility," and "is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space" (MAZRUI; MPHANDE, 1995, p. 171). They conclude:

[In Ngũgĩ's early works] orality is treated as a pristine, static and unchangeable phenomenon, employed within the Western concept of the novel, and necessitating, in Fanon's words, a "borrowed aesthetics" for its interpretation. (...) As his own creative development leads him to re-define his audience, Ngũgĩ modifies his use of the most identifiable oral forms by enlivening them to maximize their revolutionary potential. Nevertheless, to accomplish this, Ngũgĩ had first to totally identify himself with the people, and see history from their point of view (MAZRUI; MPHANDE, 1995, p. 172).

Likewise, Neil Lazarus draws attention to Ngũgĩ's redefinition of the role of African intellectuals after the independence of Kenya in 1963. Lazarus (1995, p. 15) remarks that "in the literary and critical works even of authors like Soyinka, Achebe and Awoonor (...) it remained possible always to discern a residual strain of elitism [which was] a function of their colonially and neocolonially induced alienation from the working classes of their own society". In contrast with the intellectualism prevalent among numerous African writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s—whose literary works were mainly concerned with the "disillusionment and frustration resulted from the gloomy directions taken by the post-colonial situation"—Lazarus (1995, p. 21) asserts that Ngũgĩ's

decision to return to the people redefined the boundaries of the African writer's participation in the post-colonial society.

In sum, Ngũgĩ's trajectory has often been understood as a successful effort to improve the people's level of education, to recuperate the peasants' oral history, and to produce a literature that would be closer to the people's reality and to which they would have access. It has been taken, in other words, as an attempt to empower the people. Yet, to consider his career and political beliefs from a general standpoint, one which focuses primarily on Ngũgĩ's alleged rupture with his colonial past, may blind critics to the inherent problems that also inform his fictional and non-fictional works. In fact, few critics have paid close attention to the contradictions that spring from Ngũgĩ's writings and political claims. Among them, Simon Gikandi has probably produced the most complex and significant criticism on Ngũgĩ's *oeuvre*, to which I will now turn. As I promised earlier, I will also return to Amoko's critique of the abolition of the English Department at the University of Nairobi since it is related directly to Ngũgĩ's political and academic projects in Kenya.

The illusion of the epistemological break

In *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o*, Gikandi provides a meticulous account of Ngũgĩ's major works, focusing on the dilemmas that have haunted the writer from the beginning of his career. Gikandi's (2000, p. 13) main goal is to disclose the "explicit changes in Ngũgĩ's aesthetic ideology while tracing the implicit continuities in his novels and plays". For the critic, despite Ngũgĩ's claims that a radical "epistemological break" occurred after his experience at the Kamĩrĩthũ Community Education and Culture Centre, Ngũgĩ could never rid himself of the aesthetics acquired in his colonial education. Thus, in spite of Ngũgĩ's materialist conception of art, inherited from Fanon and Marx, he has always retained a bourgeois sense of the autonomy of the work of art. The reasons for providing the reader with an understanding of Ngũgĩ's problematic relation to art, Gikandi explains, are.

"first, to underline a certain continuity in his thinking on art and literature even in the midst of his many declarations about the epistemological ruptures that characterize his career. [And] secondly, to foreground his troubled relation to the colonial culture that had created him as a writer and from which he has been trying to escape ever since" (GIKANDI, 2000, p. 250).

Gikandi finds the explanation for such contradictions in the conflict between the context of colonization and decolonization in Kenya and Ngũgĩ's European education:

One way of thinking about these problems is to recall a point that I have been making throughout this study: that apart from his own experiences growing up under colonialism in Kenya and maturing as a writer in the culture of arrested decolonization, Ngũgĩ's aesthetic foundation was not in Marx or Fanon, whom he discovered later in his career, but in the doctrines of Englishness associated with Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis and promoted in the imperial sphere by colonial schools and universities (GIKANDI, 2000, p. 250).

Ngũgĩ's concern with the relationship between literature and the educational system is, according to Gikandi, a symptom of his inability to overcome the ideology embedded in the Arnoldian and Leavisite basis of his formal education at Alliance High School and Makerere University: "[w]hile the gist of Ngũgĩ's essays on the teaching of literature in the postcolony was his critique of the continuing hegemony of English in Kenya schools, he was not troubled by the fact that his view that literature reflected 'the life of a people' in words and images was, in effect, an endorsement of colonial Englishness" (GIKANDI, 2000, p. 262). Gikandi also contends that Ngũgĩ's proposal for a rethinking of the language problematic in Africa should be read as a form of nativism. For the critic, Ngũgĩ's return to Gĩkũyũ, and "his nativist or idealist notion of language was yoked to a Marxist or materialist theory of language that Ngũgĩ had been espousing for over ten years", that is, Ngũgĩ's perception of language as an instrument of social transformation disregarded the class divisions inherent to society, so that language could be taken as a vehicle of unification of disparate social strata:

how could it [language] transcend historically engendered social divisions to become the signifier of a unified nation and its many voices? Indeed, how could the materiality of language be reconciled with Ngũgĩ's romantic conception of literary language as a special dimension of a *Sprachgeist*? (GIKANDI, 2000, p. 265) (grifo do autor).

Gikandi (2000, p. 272) answers these questions by affirming that Ngũgĩ's theory of language lumped together three irreconcilable conceptions of language, namely, "the materialist, the romantic, and the phenomenological." This problematic combination was, in Gikandi's view, the ultimate result of Ngũgĩ's undesirable necessity to reject European notions of realism after he "wrote *Petals of*

Blood" (1977). Thus, Ngũgĩ's resort to Gikũyũ, Gikandi (2000, p. 272) contends, was the pathway that led him out of this ideological impasse, insofar as it gave him the opportunity to "reject realism without renouncing it" and to "accept a hitherto unrecognized affinity between modernist and postmodernist forms and African oral traditions". As a consequence, language acquired a new status in Ngũgĩ's cultural production, being considered the principal phenomenon in the constitution of human life: "The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a peoples' definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe" (qtd. in GIKANDI, 2000, p. 272). For Gikandi, this points to a radical rupture with Ngũgĩ's materialist conception of language:

This shift from political economy to language has an important ideological implication: it marks Ngũgĩ's break with his Marxist past and its materialist theories of language and allows him to bolster his case for language choice by positing a theory of identity and social consciousness which, in its nativism, ignores historicity and social agency. (GIKANDI, 2000, p. 273)

Gikandi (2000, p. 287) concludes that although Ngũgĩ has been generally recognized for the rupture with his formal colonial education and subsequent rejection of the English language, the politics of language he has advocated for so long is "fairly close to that espoused by African writers such as Achebe".

A similar criticism on Ngũgĩ's problematic relationship to literature was written by Amoko with respect to the abolition of the English Department at the University of Nairobi in 1968, in which Ngũgĩ played an important part. As Amoko (2001, p. 33) points out, the movement was both "revolutionary and retrogressive": on the one hand it represented a successful attempt to disengage the notion of aesthetics from "Englishness"; on the other, it fostered the creation of a discourse on "African-ness", which became the new principle guiding the study of literature. As Amoko explains, the abolition of the department involved the construction of a sense of national unity through the promotion of a legitimate African/black aesthetics. In this sense, students were "interpellated [...] as ethnic subjects, then citizens of an actually existing postcolonial nation-state, then citizens of an imaginary pan-African nation, and finally, full-fledged citizens of a utopic black nation" (AMOKO, 2001, p. 33). In Amoko's view, the movement as a whole was then informed by a racist and nativist ideology, which, in its will towards the affirmation of an authentic African aesthetics, disregarded altogether the very

constitution of the institutional apparatus, the university, from which the movement sprang. Here is Amoko:

The three authors [Ngũgĩ and his colleagues] accept uncritically the argument that the mandate of a university literary education, *even in a generally non-literate and nonliterary postcolony*, is the production of exemplary national subjects where nationality is defined by an incremental and evolutionary logic in terms of national, continental, and racial civilizations. There is no attempt to acknowledge the specificity and peculiarity of the institutional locus of the university in general and the literary academy in particular. There is no attempt to acknowledge the functioning of the postcolonial university as a means for the unequal distribution of cultural or knowledge capital and as a means, therefore, for the reproduction of unequal social relations (AMOKO, 2001, p. 36) (grifo do autor).

Building on Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of the production and consumption of cultural and symbolic goods and on John Guillory's problematization of the social function of knowledge production, Amoko (2001, p. 20) contends that, in the Nairobi revolution, what passed for the construction of a "national culture" was in fact the reproduction of a discursive formation based on a fallacious "idea of Africa," and of a "school culture," a term he uses in order to "underscore the fact that an aesthetic disposition is the product of a restricted process of formal training and is therefore implicated in processes of unequal social reproduction". "Ngũgĩ and his colleagues," Amoko (2001, p. 39) concludes, "articulated an implausible vision of literary citizenship on the basis of an invented African tradition, a tradition invented paradoxically by recourse to the colonial library, specifically the anthropological library".

Amoko's analysis points to a contradiction in Ngũgĩ's discussions about the class problem that affects the Anglophone African writer. According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1997, p. 20-21), the production of African literature in English helped "the petty-bourgeoisie [to construct] a past, a culture and a literature with which to confront the racist bigotry of Europe". What Amoko underscores is the fact that Ngũgĩ has, to a certain extent, also been part of this "petty-bourgeoisie," which was very much preoccupied in creating a "literary frame of references," that could add confidence to such a class of writers. Ngũgĩ's position at the Nairobi revolution reveals, in a sense, his own desire to "confront the racist bigotry of Europe" by creating a space for the production of a "truly" national, Pan-African, and Black literature that could counteract

the Englishness which had prevailed in African universities for so long.

One could argue, however, that this elitist position was later overcome as Ngũgĩ changed the directions of his works and writing career. If during the Nairobi revolution Ngũgĩ was supporting and nurturing a "school culture," his works at the Kamĩrĩthũ Centre, which took place a few years after the Nairobi episode, changed that somewhat bourgeois and elitist positioning and created the occasion for Ngũgĩ to rethink his alignments. Amoko's critique is thus valid and illuminating as it unveils some of the main ambiguities involved in the Nairobi revolution, which also reflected some of Ngũgĩ's early political endeavors. But it cannot be taken as a basis from which to understand Ngũgĩ's politics as a whole, which has changed and matured in the course of his writing career.

The illusion reconsidered

Ngũgĩ's participation in the Kamĩrĩthũ Community Education and Culture Centre, which prompted the production of his first work in Gĩkũyũ, the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*), first staged in 1977, was interrupted by his imprisonment in that same year. Ngũgĩ wrote *Caitani Mũtharaba-inĩ* (*Devil on the Cross*, 1980) while in prison and took pains to consider the difficulties of writing a novel, a bourgeois form of art, in his native language. Ngũgĩ did not disregard that as a fact, but set out to create a form of novel that would, first of all, be accessible to the audience he wanted to address. He began to envisage the re-appropriation of the novel by the peasants and workers inasmuch as "the African novel as an extended narrative in written form had antecedents in African oral literature [orature]," which was based, in turn, on sequences of events that would end up forming a story (NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O, 1997, p. 69). As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1997, p. 70) remarks, the development of the African novel was affected from the very beginning by the control of missionaries, of the colonial administration, and by the rise of universities and colleges which incentivized the production of Afro-European novels. The latter became a great opportunity for multinational publishers such as Longman and "homegrown varieties" such as East African Publishing House. The African novel was therefore appropriated by the colonial and neo-colonial systems, having become a profitable investment in the international market. For Ngũgĩ, the reappropriation of the novel by the peasants and workers in Africa was an important social, cultural,

and political event that could only be accomplished once it was written in African languages and in a model that was accessible to them. In other words, it would have to be "a new novel", one that should be understood in its difference from the European model. That is precisely what he undertook from then on, writing books such *Caitani Mũtharaba-inĩ*, *Matigari ma Njirũũngi* and *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*The Wizard of the Crow*, 2003). Since his experience at the Kamĩrĩthũ Centre, Ngũgĩ has also published the play *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, the musical *Maitũ Njugĩra* (*Mother Sing for Me*), and three books for children, *Njamba Nene na Mbaathi ĩ Mathagu* (*Njamba Nene and the Flying Bus*), *Bathitoora ya Njamba Nene* (*Njamba Nene's Pistol*), *Njamba Nene na Cibũ Kĩng' -ang'I* (*Njamba Nene and the Cruel Chief*). In exile, Ngũgĩ has also edited and published the Gĩkũyũ language journal, *Mũtiiri*, since 1994.

Ngũgĩ was in jail for two years and was exiled in 1982. As a consequence, his participation in the Kamĩrĩthũ Centre's project came to a halt. His condition as an exiled intellectual for twenty-two years and the assault on his life and his wife's in their visit to Kenya in 2004, make his a unique case in which the relationship between commitment and complicity gain exclusive and very complex contours. The problem of exile must then be carefully examined. One of the most relevant approaches to the subject can be found in Aijaz Ahmad's "Languages of Class, Ideologies of Immigration," in which he argues that the predominance of English in India's administrative and cultural life after the independence attests to a clear connection between the colonial and the post-colonial period and the maintenance of the bourgeois state, whose power has been considerably enlarged since decolonization. For Ahmad (1994, p. 75), the continuing use of English by Indian writers helps to consolidate English's status as a national language and, consequently, fortifies the ideologies of the ruling class. In other words, the Indian writer who develops his works in English actually contributes to the post-colonial power of the bourgeois state, even when he claims to contest that same power and presents himself as a representative of "Indian national experience". As for the Indian writer who migrates to the metropolitan countries and affirms to be part of and to collaborate with the formation of a counter-canonical archive, Ahmad explains that the project to construct a counter-canonical archive, comprised, exclusively, of non-Western writings from all epochs – the so-called Third World Literature, which

emerged in the late 1960's and early 1970's – was appropriated by an “elite immigrant intelligentsia” and began to encompass those writings produced precisely within the ‘West’. The project, then, became an opportunity to promote and secure academic status. Thus, as Ahmad points out, the

Third World Intellectuals who are based in the metropolitan university [...] can now materially represent the undifferentiated colonized Other – more recently and more fashionably, the post-colonial Other – without much examining of their own presence in that institution, except perhaps in the characteristically postmodernist mode of ironic pleasure in observing the duplicities and multiplicities of one's own persona. The East, reborn and greatly expanded now as a ‘Third World’ seems to have become, yet again, a career – even for the ‘Oriental’ this time, and within the ‘Occident’ too (AHMAD, 1994, p. 93-94).

Arif Dirlik's more recent and perhaps excessively celebrated assertion that postcolonialism begins when Third World intellectuals arrive in the First World (as the result of a faster circulation of capital in the global market, an ultimate consequence of the rise and development of global capitalism) is hardly anything more than the repetition of Ahmad's earlier accurate perception of the problem. Like Ahmad, Dirlik (1997, p. 62) believes that the term postcolonial has to be understood as “a discourse that seeks to constitute the world in the self-image of intellectuals who view themselves [...] as postcolonial intellectuals”. In this way, intellectuals that were previously marginal gained a “new respectability” within institutions and began to constitute a “newfound power” from which, and in benefit of which, new beliefs are articulated and established. While proclaiming to produce a discourse that aims to be counter-hegemonic, intellectuals “overlook” their privileged positions within American and European institutions. Postcolonial intellectuals denominate themselves as such, ignoring, many times, that they were produced as subjects in a certain historical moment of the accumulation of capital. In other words, they are allowed by the system to represent themselves as postcolonial scholars, while overlooking the fact that they may become the perpetuators of an exercise of power disguised accordingly. In this sense they are able to disregard their connections with the global capital that transforms them into instruments of its own expansion.

It is certainly reasonable to consider that not all intellectuals participate uncritically and irresponsibly in the network of power that informs the role of

institutions. And, of course, the movement to the metropolises involves very problematic issues, exile included. Yet, even for those intellectuals seriously committed to political questions, the fact of being linked to, and to a certain extent complicit with, metropolitan institutional programs, might turn out to be a limiting factor for their quests. One should, however, carefully discriminate among different post-colonial or Third World intellectuals whose political proposals may vary considerably, even though their roles within institutions might be catalogued under the same label. For some, the space they have acquired within the Western academy may be little more than a pathway leading to self-promotion. However, to discuss the role of Third World intellectuals without considering specific contexts is a reductionist way to approach the problem, not to say that it might be reasonably unfair.

While Dirlik conveniently forgets these issues in order to advance his thesis of the intellectual as instrumental to the capitalist system, Ahmad (1994, p. 86), on the contrary, calls attention to particular situations, especially in what concerns the contrast between migration and exile, that is, the difference between the Indian writer who must leave her home and the one who deliberately “chooses to live in the metropolitan country”. The latter has often been called “the diasporic Indian,” as Ahmad puts it, and, therefore, the very materiality of exile has become “a condition of the soul”, that is, exile is dismissed altogether as a political phenomenon that involves not only dislocation, but suffering, and becomes a fashionable expression to designate those who have migrated to the metropolitan institutions.

As far as Ngũgĩ is concerned, exile meant the end of his educational and literary projects in Kenya. It allowed, however, for the elaboration of a politics of language, which runs along three basic premises: the importance of recognizing the process of mental colonization as maintained today in the so-called neocolonial world; the need to emphasize the role of the intellectual as fundamental to the empowerment of minority or subaltern languages; and the necessity of encouraging a productive dialogue between marginalized and dominant languages. Moreover, Ngũgĩ has been consistent in remarking that African and European languages must co-exist, preferably on equal terms. His position as Director of the Centre for Writing and Translation at the University of Irvine, California, attested to his continuing preoccupation with the promotion of a more egalitarian relationship between dominant and

minority languages. When I asked him about the goals of the Centre, he described them as follows:³

Our idea is to encourage a model of cultural conversation, which means, marginalized languages having a conversation among themselves. We interpret translation as conversation. And conversation assumes equality. So you can have a Native American language having that along with a Kenya language, with a Brazilian language, with an Indian/Asian language, or you can have that kind of dialogue between a marginalized language and a European one, for example. This is the kind of thinking that we are developing here at the centre, and we believe that that kind of model is applicable to Kenya and to many other parts of the world (RODRIGUES, 2004, p. 162).

The premises which guide the project should be enough grounds to question the idea, spurred by many of his critics, that Ngũgĩ's politics of language ultimately constitutes a form of nativism. For 22 years in exile, while belonging to the Western academy, Ngũgĩ was concerned with the advancement of a dialectics of empowerment which aims at strategically employing the advantages provided by Western institutions in order to produce a dialogue among languages, subaltern or otherwise, which is precisely the goal of the Centre. It is also possible to assert that Gikandi's austere point of view that Ngũgĩ's politics of language was enacted in fact by a "brief" return to Gikũyũ was premature. Ngũgĩ's last 1,200-page novel, *Mũrogi wa Kagogo* (*The Wizard of the Crow*, 2003), attests to the continuity of his project⁴. Without denying Gikandi's assertion about Ngũgĩ's problematic relationship with his European background, it is necessary to consider Ngũgĩ's continuous, although not always successful, attempt to interrogate and change the colonial epistemology that constituted the basis of his formation. Ngũgĩ's return to Gikũyũ represented, it seems to me, a commitment to change, at least in part, his alignments with the colonialist education he received. As Raymond Williams reminds us in "The Writer: Commitment and Alignment", the way we see the world, our values, tastes, beliefs, and the language in which we

express ourselves, all this represents our deepest alignments to a certain social environment. For Williams (1989, p. 86-87), to be committed is precisely to be aware of "our own real alignments", which we might deliberately decide to confirm or to alter. Williams contends with respect to the writer that this signifies "a very high kind of freedom": "This is when you are free to choose, or to choose to try to alter, that which is really pressuring you, in your whole social formation, in your understanding of the possibilities of writing". Ngũgĩ's trajectory as a writer must be understood, I believe, in the light of such a notion of commitment, which, in his case, amounts to a relentless effort to question and alter his affiliations with the metropolitan culture and to promote a more inclusive politics of language on the African continent.

Ngũgĩ's choice for Gikũyũ after his experience in Kamĩrĩĩthũ was an attempt to become somehow closer to the men and women who were fighting poverty, social exclusion, and oppression from the government. It was, in other words, an attempt to join in their struggle and overcome, to a certain extent, the school culture characteristic of the academic locus. This perspective can be better appreciated if read side by side with Paulin Hountondji's down to earth critique of the scientific production in Africa as being fundamentally extraverted. As Hountondji points out, the process of extraversion constitutes a system of research and knowledge production that is mainly preoccupied with satisfying the foreign demands to which they are unquestionably subordinate. This attests, therefore, to a profound dependency on the West's scientific production, which, far from being a distinctive African phenomenon, characterizes the knowledge production in most peripheral countries. Among the consequences of such a process of extraversion is the belief in the emancipatory and modernizing potential of European languages, a problem that Hountondji clearly defines:

Scientific extraversion shows itself as well by using merely Western languages as languages of science, obliging the Third World researcher to accept the humiliating terms of these languages of foreign origin in order to have access to knowledge and, even more so, to reproduce and extend it. ... Equally to be recognized is the antinatural character of the real relationships that presently exist in certain Third World countries, and particularly in Black Africa, between the native languages and the imported languages: the factual marginalization of the former to the exclusive advantage of the latter, the relegation of native languages to substandard languages, indeed, "dialects" or "patois," barely good enough to

³ "Beyond Nativism: An Interview with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o", published in 2004, was conducted on September 25th, 2003, at the International Centre for Writing and Translation. On this occasion, Ngũgĩ responded to my questions on his projects as director of the Centre and on his concern with the question of literature, language, and power in contemporary Africa. The interview emphasized, in particular, some of the critical responses to Ngũgĩ's views on language and art. Ngũgĩ spoke with enthusiasm about his novel, *Mũrogi wa Kagogo*, and about the personal rewards coming from the results of the journal *Mũtĩri*. Despite the controversies that often rise as a result of his reflections on the role of the African writer, Ngũgĩ was optimistic about the present activities of the Centre regarding the always conflicting relationship between dominant and marginalized languages. Last, and most importantly, he was visibly moved at the prospect of visiting his homeland after the many years spent in exile.

⁴ It is worth noting that Ngũgĩ also uses a great deal of old Sheng in this novel.

express the platitudes of everyday life, [and] the absence of a daring project of generalized literacy (HOUNTONDI, 1992, p. 248).

Hountondji sees the language problematic in Africa as part of a larger process of epistemological dependency, which represents only one of the results of the neocolonial structures of domination that have assaulted the continent during the last decades. In fact, Ngũgĩ's and Hountondji's claims become particularly relevant when one considers the language question in sub-Saharan Africa. As is well known, the place of European languages in postcolonial Africa is highly problematic. In former British colonies, for instance, English has become an indispensable cultural capital in terms of social mobility. Yet, only an elite minority has access to the language through formal education, which creates disarticulations of all kinds as the masses of people are socially and politically excluded and African languages blatantly marginalized⁵.

In view of such problems, the idea that Ngũgĩ's politics of language overlooks class divisions and is carried out merely in order for the writer to "reject realism without renouncing it" suggests a profound misunderstanding of his proposals. If realism persisted in the works that came after *Petals of Blood* (1977) and if that was Ngũgĩ's sole reason to start writing in Gikũyũ, in other words, if Ngũgĩ was never really concerned with the language question in Africa, but only with his writing career, as Gikandi wants to believe, then, at least Ngũgĩ contributed (and keeps contributing) to the development of the language. It should be noticed, however, that any language can be used as an instrument of power and oppression by the dominant classes in society and function, simultaneously, as a vehicle for mass mobilization and interaction. It would be unwise, I believe, to assume that Ngũgĩ is not aware of these issues. What is more, it is no longer possible to ignore the linguistic divide that configures our world order – which seriously affects African countries – as well as the economic and political interests involved in such division. The point that should be emphasized in Ngũgĩ's trajectory as both a writer and an activist is precisely his attempt to join in the struggle for the empowerment of African languages. However contradictorily positioned in relation to the colonial

culture, Ngũgĩ has proven it feasible for the African writer educated in the 'West' to begin writing in his/her mother tongue. His works have undeniably contributed to the enrichment and promotion of Gikũyũ and it is not difficult to envisage how, for example, some of his books (or parts of them) might be included in a curriculum for the primary and secondary levels of education in Kenyan schools, in case a multilingual system of education will ever thrive.

To consider the language question in Africa and to undertake any project that might contribute to the promotion of indigenous languages on the continent is, today, an urgent initiative that should involve African intellectuals. To be concerned with the language problematic in Africa – which encompasses the marginalization of African languages, the official use of European languages after decolonization, and a politics of control – amounts to a clear preoccupation with history, historicity, and social agency, to which Gikandi refers. At one point Ngũgĩ was concerned with an identity politics which might have been classicist and even nativist, but his claims and actions have undergone considerable changes and that should not pass unnoticed.

Final considerations

In May, 2009, Ngũgĩ stepped down from his position as Director of the International Centre for Writing and Translation and is now one of the Directors of the Centre for the Advancement of African Languages and Literatures (Kituo Cha Ukuzaji Wa Lugha Na Fasihi Za Kiafrika). Based in Kenya, "Ndimi" Centre aims at fostering "the promotion, advancement, restoration and preservation of the languages and literatures of Africa." In order to accomplish this, the Centre "will actively collaborate with other institutions, particularly publishers, schools, academic institutions and policy makers to enhance language curricula." This seems to be an important move in Ngũgĩ's trajectory, since "Ndimi" is a public, non-profit organization, established not in the US or in Europe, but in Africa. Such dislocation is significant insofar as it represents a certain autonomy of African intellectuals in terms of their capacity to create solutions to African problems. In other words, "Ndimi's" proposals are, in essence, an attempt to combat the process of extraversion.

Whether or not "Ndimi" will accomplish its goals is a question for the future. Institutions and organizations do not always find the means to reach the peoples who can really benefit from their projects. In the case of the ICWT, for instance, if its

⁵ On this topic see, for instance, Efurosibina Adegboja's "Language Attitudes in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Socialist Overview" (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters LTD, 1994); Ayo Bamgbose's "Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa" (Hamburg: Lit, 2000); Alamin Mazrui's "English in Africa: After the Cold War" (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2004); Angela L. Rodrigues' African Languages in the World of Global English ("History Compass", v. 7, n. 2, p. 343-362, 2009).

projects stop at the production of literature per se and leave out the more problematic questions of how the poor people will have access to that written material, of how it can contribute to the eradication of illiteracy in Africa, and of the extent to which it can add to the democratization of education in African countries, it might run the risk of contributing to the promotion of unequal knowledge distribution (the "school culture") by other means. "Ndimi's" mission seems to avoid such dangers as it proposes to closely participate and intervene in Kenya's educational and social affairs.

In any case, political, institutional, and market forces are powerful instruments of containment from which one can hardly escape. Ultimately, one is always relatively free to choose to alter one's social, political and cultural alignments. If this is true, maybe all that is left to be done is to acknowledge and negotiate the tension between commitment and complicity so as to produce particular, and most of the time, modest, interventions in specific social and cultural contexts. As for Ngũgĩ, it seems to me, the fact that he has been persistent in revisiting his alignments puts him in the rank of those men and women whose voices have become important, although always limited, vehicles of contestation and change, in a historical moment that desperately needs them.

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