

Decolonial Thoughts, Lands, and Indigenous Languages: A Tribute to Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a renowned Kenyan literary scholar, joined the Great Ancestors May 28, 2025. He was born on January 5, 1938, in Kamirithu, Kenya. At the time, Kenya was a British colony. Ngugi lived through and experienced European colonialism and the fight for Kenya's independence. He attended Alliance High School in Kenya and later Makerere University in Uganda, as well as Leeds University in the United Kingdom.

Like many other scholars and students around the world, I have also immensely benefited and learned from Ngugi's work, both in my growing up in Kenya and as a scholar now living in Canada. I honour Ngugi, who has left a rich literary and academic legacy both locally and globally. Throughout his career and life, Ngugi was passionate and committed to decolonization, language resurgence, reclaiming a People's cultural identity, and indigeneity. His scholarship on linguistic imperialism and the importance of decolonizing the mind has been widely read and used internationally. In this tribute, I consider Ngugi's legacy, as seen through his commitment to decolonization and language reclamation. I hope that his lasting

legacy and impact will continue to advance conversations, dialogues, and the exchange of ideas across the world.

Colonialism and Its Offshoots

The theme of colonialism runs throughout Ngugi's writings. While this commentary does not capture all his works (see Book Series in Order, n.d.), I will look at some examples and lessons from *Petals of Blood*, *A Grain of Wheat*, and *Decolonizing the Mind*. In the novel *Petals of Blood* (1976), Ngugi problematizes African countries' political independence (in the context of the novel, Kenya) from the European colonizers (the British) in theory, but which left strongly rooted physical, economic, and psychological scars and structures that have never been severed. These structures continue to undermine many African countries' social, political, and economic systems today. European colonizers still wield significant social, economic, political, and technological influence. Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, described Europe's continued influence on Africa even after political independence as neocolonialism, a situation in which a country appears to have social, political, and economic sovereignty, yet the core systems are controlled by external/European powers (Nkrumah, 1965). Neocolonialism persists in Africa today and is "marketed" through mechanisms and structures such as foreign aid and international loans, unfavourable trade relations and agreements, and other economic policies that overwhelmingly favour Western countries. These structures continue to harm the lives of African Indigenous Peoples, their communities, Lands, and resources.

Ngugi's work shows how Kenya continues to be significantly impacted by Euro-Western capitalist systems and policies manifest through the expropriation and extraction of African Indigenous Lands and resources. Historically, European settlers in Kenya prioritized areas where they settled, pushing Indigenous communities to reserve communities, which were often unsuitable for their daily living. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi reflects on how colonial systems continued to be

perpetuated even after Kenya gained its political “independence” in 1963. The legacy of colonialism remains across many institutions in Kenya. The European colonizers psychologically and systemically depleted Africa (see Moyo, 2009), then trapped many countries in a vicious cycle of debilitating high-interest loans and structural adjustment programs while further extracting from African Peoples’ Lands for their own (Europeans’) capitalist gains.

In his other novel, *A Grain of Wheat* (1992; 1962), Ngugi also demonstrates how Europeans transferred their divide-and-conquer tactics and class structure to the African countries they colonized. He discusses abolishing capitalism, a system designed, imported, and imposed by the Europeans on Indigenous Africans, and which divided Africans along class lines. Ngugi sees these divisions as informing the dichotomizing of global nations and regions as “Global North” and “Global South.” These dichotomies contributed to the socio-economic disparities evident between the two spaces today. He further explains that European colonizers promoted divide and conquer by elevating some African communities at the expense of others. For Ngugi, the West’s continued social, political, and economic exploitation of Africa and its resources has exacerbated the continent’s economic inequities. Ngugi thus reminds us that political independence did not necessarily translate into political, social, and economic freedom for the African People. Individuals and communities remain disenfranchised due to class and ethnic divisions, which were created and reinforced by colonizers, and these continue to have significant implications today.

What Is Happening Today?

Ngugi advocates for the decolonizing of the mind as core to not only African Peoples’ identities and intellect but also to their political, social, economic, scientific, and technological knowledge systems. I argue that while the Europeans might have “left” physically (although many remain on the continent), they never really left Africa, African Peoples and African Lands and resources alone. For

instance, France has continued to control many African nations' finances and political decisions in its former French colonies in West Africa. Additionally, the way the colonizers framed Land and resource "ownership" in many African nations remains divisive and contentious. Indigenous African Peoples were displaced, and this displacement continues. Many of the colonizers' companies retained ownership of mining, oil, and agricultural operations to date, a practice that has continued to create deep economic inequities and exploitation, leading to instability and economic uncertainties.

Nonetheless, African Peoples are fighting back in different ways. An example is President Ibrahim Traore of Burkina Faso, who is returning his country's resources to Indigenous Africans to have their own control. African Peoples have shown that they are not passive consumers of Euro-Western imposition. I agree with Táíwò's (2022) observation that Africa has the agency to, and can engage with, and transform global knowledge systems (see also Amuzu, 2024; Mama, 2007). I add that Africa can engage with global economic, political, scientific, and technological systems if left without interference from colonizers. President Traore has shown that Africa has its own legitimate knowledge and knowledge production systems (see also Hountondji, 1983), is economically self-sufficient, and produces meaningful local solutions to local challenges.

Language Is Life

Another central theme in Ngugi's work is the power of language in the process of decolonization, both individually and collectively. His seminal book, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), examines the centrality of language in the decolonization process. For Ngugi, linguistic decolonization is critical to reclaiming African People's cultural identity and intellectual autonomy, and especially the reclamation of Indigenous languages in African literature and in the academy. According to Ngugi, denying and destroying African Peoples' languages has caused psychological and cultural harm. African Indigenous languages must be revitalized as a critical step

toward decolonization. Ngugi argued that language is key for preserving a people's identity, culture, and collective memory. The European colonizers knew the power of African Indigenous languages and made deliberate attempts to erase and suppress the languages. As he explained in his more recent collection, *The Language of Languages: Reflections on Translation* (2023), "Unfortunately, the imperial logic has been the dominant in relationship between languages. My language and culture are higher than your language and culture, sang all the colonial systems as they set out to conquer and dominate and subjugate" (wa Thiong'o, 2023, p. 8). Indigenous African languages were negatively stereotyped and degraded. The colonizers attacked and destroyed Indigenous languages, and which are the "very basis of knowledge production and storage" (wa Thiong'o, 2023, p. 8). The inferioritization and destruction of Indigenous languages by the European colonizers made it difficult for Indigenous Africans to transmit their cultures and knowledge to the next generation (wa Thiong'o, 1986). As a result, multiple generations of African Indigenous Peoples have become disconnected from their cultures and have grown up with little appreciation or knowledge of who they are.

In emphasizing ancestral languages and their significance to Indigenous Africans, Ngugi wrote that one cannot meaningfully discuss the language of African literature without discussing the impact of colonization on the language. He noted:

... imperialism continues to control the economy, politics, and cultures of Africa. But on the other, and pitted against it, are the ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics and culture from that Euro-American-based stranglehold to usher in a new era of true communal self-regulation and self-determination. It is an ever-continuing struggle to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space. The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of

themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe. ... (wa Thiong'o, 1998, p.1126).

Ngugi led the call to linguistic decolonization by example when he stopped writing in English in 1977. Commenting on Ngugi's call to write in African Indigenous languages, Kimani (2016) noted:

Without a doubt, Africa would be poorer without the efforts of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and other pioneering writers to tell the African story. He [Ngugi] was an important figure in post-colonial studies. His constant questioning of the privileging of the English language and culture in Kenya's national discourse saw him lead a movement that led to the scrapping of the Department of English at the University of Nairobi – replaced by a Department of Literature that placed African literature and its diasporas at the centre of scholarship (para.9).

Ngugi urged and encouraged African authors and academics to write in their Indigenous languages as a way of reclaiming and retelling their own stories. Cultural and linguistic decolonization and reclamation are among the critical steps to truly decolonizing our minds. For Ngugi, if Indigenous African People reclaim and restore their languages, their identities will be restored too, and consequently their self-determination and sovereignty. Ngugi will be missed. May his legacy on true liberation, decolonization, and linguistic revitalization live on.

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