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Abstract

Ingrid Bjorkman interviewed Ngugi wa Thiong' o in London in December 1982 when they discussed his play *Maitu Njurgira*, its background, reception and the reason for its banning by the Kenyan Government. Prior to that she was in Kenya where she interviewed people who had acted in the play as well as people who had seen it. The photographs are taken during a performance of the play. Because of security we are unable to give the name of the photographer.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o

INTERVIEW

Ingrid Björkman interviewed Ngugi wa Thiong'o in London in December 1982 when they discussed his play *Maitu Njurgira*, its background, reception and the reason for its banning by the Kenyan Government. Prior to that she was in Kenya where she interviewed people who had acted in the play as well as people who had seen it. The photographs are taken during a performance of the play. Because of security we are unable to give the name of the photographer.

Although permission was not granted for it to be performed at the Kenya National Theatre in Nairobi, as was planned, *Maitu Njugira* was nevertheless a tremendous success. Whilst waiting for the stage licence to arrive, the theatre group went on rehearsing at the University. Between twelve and fifteen thousand people managed to see the musical before it was finally stopped. The rehearsals started at 6.30 p.m., but after 3 p.m. it was impossible to get a seat in the hall. Hired buses came from all over the country, even from as far away as Mombasa.

Why was the musical set in the 20s and 30s?

Because that was when British colonialism introduced capitalism into Kenya. Now, to have capitalism you must of course have a wage-earning class. To get a wage-earning class they had to create a landless peasantry and this was done very easily by taking away people's land. The conditions in these plantations were very, very harsh, indeed. The workers could be beaten, even killed.

In order to obtain efficient control of the Kenyan labour force the colonial government passed several labour laws, for example the native registration ordinances, which made it compulsory for adult male African workers in Kenya to wear a chain and a metal container around their necks. Inside the container was an identification paper with information useful to the employer. Together with the paper the container was

called the kipande. Not carrying a kipande was considered a criminal act and carried severe punishment. The emerging African petty bourgeoisie, however, was exempted from the kipande, as their labour force was not needed in the plantations. It can be seen that the kipande gave the African worker a lower status and thus contributed to the founding of the sharply structured Kenyan class society.

Whilst the capitalist wage-labour system created a Kenyan working class, it also forged the strength and consciousness of that working class against imperialism. Now, in the 20s and 30s, the workers of Kenya waged a tremendous struggle against these repressive labour conditions, especially as they were symbolized by the kipande system. And there developed songs of the different Kenyan nationalities in Kenya, expressing these anti-imperialist interests and their struggle against the repressive labour systems. So when I was about to script the play, I had to get these songs from different people. In assembling the songs I was helped by many people from different nationalities. There are four types of songs in the play. There are songs which were sung in the 20s and 30s, with the appropriate tunes and words. In other cases I have used old tunes and put in new words to fit into the situation of the play. On some occasions there are fresh compositions with new words and new tunes but of course related to the history of the period. And then there are contemporary songs, the tunes of which people are familiar with, but I have moved them back to the earlier period by giving them words that are, broadly speaking, appropriate to those times.

The result of this collective work has been an all-Kenyan musical drama, which addresses itself to Kenyans of all nationalities. The spoken text, which is in Gikuyu, is confined to a minimum and the drama relies heavily on mime, song and dance, which are, Ngugi says, 'part and parcel of the national cultural traditions of the Kenyan people'.

Was that the reason why you chose the art form of a musical?

Yes, one of the reasons. The peasants often expressed themselves through song. Their songs were functional. They sang during their work, when they were digging the earth, harvesting, building the railway and so on. There are songs of fatigue. People sang to get strength and courage. If you look at the struggles of Kenya, you will find that the revolt of the people has often been expressed through their cultural assertions, especially through song.

Another reason for making *Maitu Njugira* a musical was that it was going to be performed at the National Theatre in Nairobi, where of

course one anticipated audiences from different nationalities and different linguistic groups, who would not necessarily understand Gikuyu. So I was trying to develop a theatre that could speak to people despite the language barriers. In *Maitu Njugira* there was less emphasis on dialogue and more emphasis on action, dance, mime and song.

In Kenya, a few months ago, I interviewed a number of non-Gikuyu speaking Kenyans who had seen Maitu Njugira, in order to find out if they had understood the play. Everybody, even quite illiterate informants, had understood it completely and gave me detailed information about the story. And everybody had been profoundly moved. Many had seen the musical several times. I was told that towards the end of the performance the audience had often streamed onto the stage, joined in the dancing, and the whole theatre had united in the final song. They had been filled with sadness, with hope, and above all with the feeling that 'we are one people, we are all Kenyans'. And they had walked home in the warm night singing 'A people united can never be defeated'.

I am told, however, that the ending of the original script was not positive. Is that correct?

Yes. But the actors rejected the ending, because they found it too pessimistic. They felt that they had to show that despite the tremendous oppression the struggle continues. The fact that one was defeated did not mean that one could not rise up again and continue the struggle.

According to the people who were interviewed the actors had really succeeded in conveying their spirit of defiance and survival to the audience by emphasizing the symbolic solution shown in different silent scenes: a stick is broken into pieces, one piece after another. Then the broken pieces are tied together into a bundle — and look! It is impossible to break the bundle.

One of the questions I asked was 'why had the audience been so fascinated and moved by the play. Most people interviewed said it was because of the strong commitment and the exceptional creative power of the actors, who were not professionals but workers from Kamirũthu village and Nairobi. How was it possible, people asked, that ordinary uneducated people could perform in such an outstanding way? One of the informants said: 'They did not perform. They were themselves.'

To this question Ngugi replied:



The opening scene: the suffering Kenyan peasantry.



A bundle of sticks can not be broken. A people united can never be defeated.

I think the reason why they participated with such great enthusiasm was that they felt that the play was telling them something about themselves. They felt that the theatre they evolved was reflecting the true history of their struggle against the colonial stage of imperialism. And they participated in so many ways, all the time. They taught us how to dance. They rejected songs and added new ones. They really participated in developing the script, which is definitely not the work of one man.

Some of the participants told me how happy they were while working with the two plays. Now they say they have lost their hope. The communal art of traditional society seems to have been revived at Kamiriithu, which must have meant a lot to the villagers?

The important thing is not so much that it is communal but rather what it has to say. It is the nature of reality reflected in that art. In this case the people felt that the theatre they evolved was part and parcel of their true history. But of course I think that art, theatre, should be communal. Cultural activity is something that is natural for everybody, not just for a few professional artists. Evolving theatre is creative. It stimulates, creates discussion.

One reason for my choosing the dramatic art form is that more people get involved. It makes them discuss not only the script but also their social problems. And in the course of the discussion it happened that they changed the script.

Don't you think that they had a feeling that this dramatic action could lead them to another sort of action, that they could help to change their social reality?

I recently read a line from Martin Carter. It goes like this: 'I do not sleep to dream/ I dream to change the world.' People must not only understand the world but they must understand it in order to change it, to make it meet their needs in a more meaningful way.

The audience felt that the musical was telling them something about themselves, and that was the main reason for their commitment. The play took place on a plantation where the white settler, after having been shot by the workers because of his ruthless oppression, is succeeded by a Kenyan who continues the oppression of the people in the same way as his predecessor. The musical is set in the 20s and 30s with a background of projections of slides showing the actual laws regulating the conditions

of the workers at that time. However, the audience had felt that the musical reflected not only the social reality of Kenyans fifty years ago but also their own contemporary reality. They had seen the present through the past, and they had realized that Kenyan society had not changed in any essential respect since those days.

To understand this one has to make it clear how Kenya has developed after flag independence. Have the dreams of freedom been realized? No, they have not. Kenyan raw materials and markets are controlled and the Kenyan people are ruthlessly exploited by foreign imperialist forces, supported by a corrupt native ruling class which has been educated within the colonial system and has inherited the colonial ideology. The people who fought the struggle of independence have been betrayed. In order to change their conditions they have to unite across the borders of language, nationalities, races.

Now, the economic consequences of neo-colonialism are massive impoverishment of the peasantry and the working population. Politically the ruling regime becomes even more detached from the people and it can only maintain power by detention and murder of democratic dissidents and through military terrorism of the entire population. We have never been allowed to try out democracy in Kenya and see if it worked. But the oppression was less comprehensive previously, more sporadic than it is now.

But economic and political control can never be complete and efficient without mental control through the control of the people's culture. The native bourgeoisie, through which imperialism in a neo-colonial state like Kenya works, controls the state instruments of coercion, persuasion and propaganda. In their state-controlled cinemas, theatres, TV stations and radio they allow foreign programmes. No foreign play or any play by foreign European groups has ever been prevented from staging at the National Theatre. At the same time as *Maitu Njugira* was stopped from being performed at the National Theatre, *Flame Trees of Thika*, a film in seven episodes based on Elspeth Huxley's book of the same title, was bought and screened on Kenya National Television despite a great national outcry. The book pictures the Kenya of the 20s and 30s, the same period as *Maitu Njugira*, but from a colonial point of view. Both the book and the film portray Kenyans as dumb creatures, part and parcel of the animal world and natural landscape. A musical, depicting in a Kenyan language and music the heroic struggle of Kenyan workers against the very repressive colonial labour laws was hounded out of the Kenya National Theatre.

But a film showing that Kenyans had no capacity for resistance was given prime time on television for several weeks. Now the Government has increased its control by censoring and even stopping small plays which school pupils perform for each other. The police go through libraries to find out who reads what, and all school text books must be approved by a special commission.

In discussing neo-colonialism one of the inevitable subjects is culture-clash; could you say something about this?

The conflict of cultures is often seen in the simple terms of a conflict between the rural and the urban, or between tradition and modernity, but this is a deliberate mystification of the real conflict. The conflict is class-bound. Out of the struggle for total liberation from imperialism there emerged a new national culture, rooted in the patriotic and heroic traditions of the peasantry. The programmed attempts to destroy people's dances, songs and literature created its opposite. There are today in the colonies and neo-colonial societies two cultures in mortal conflict: a foreign imperialist culture and a national patriotic culture, which is a resistance culture and is both urban and rural. This national culture is in opposition to foreign imperialist exploitation and domination as well as to internal exploitation and oppression by a native ruling class in servile alliance with imperialism.

The period in which *Maitu Njugira* is set was the period when this modern culture of resistance emerged. There was a tremendous cultural assertion. Most of our poets and singers in the 20s and 30s as well as in the 50s were imprisoned by the British for the songs they sang.

Fifty years ago, thirty years ago, the singers of the people were imprisoned by the British. Today they are imprisoned by their fellow-countrymen. *Maitu Njugira* is made up of songs from the 30s which were forbidden then. It pictures the social reality of the 30s. And it is forbidden today. One can have no clearer illustration of how those in power today have dissociated themselves from their own people and have identified with the former colonial power.

As a writer in what way do you think you can help change our world into a better one?

As a writer I can only help people to understand the forces at work in their society. I can only hope to try as faithfully as I can to reflect all these forces. And I would like people to understand what affects their

lives and in the very process of understanding — be they Kenyans, Swedish, British, Americans — help them work out for themselves the options open to them.



The face of neo-colonialism. Uniform as well as ideology inherited. Kenyan police officer.