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A Statement

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Abstract

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Below is the statement made by Ngugi wa Thiong'o on the Kenya Government's refusal to grant a stage licence to Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre Theatre Group at a press conference held on Wednesday, 10 March 1982:

Ladies and gentlemen of the Press, I have been asked by the management committee of Kamiriithu Theatre Group and those responsible for the production of our new play, *Maitu Njugira*, to express the following observations regarding our efforts to obtain a government stage licence for the Kenya National Theatre.

First I must express our extreme disappointment and even much anger at the grossly irresponsible manner in which the authorities chose to deal with our application for the licence, normally a quick routine administrative procedure, unnecessary in most countries, but introduced in most British colonies as a method of vetting and censoring native cultural expression.

Dutifully we applied for this licence in writing on 2 November 1981 to the Nairobi Provincial Commissioner. We then followed this up with a reminder on 12 November 1981. On 18 November 1981 we got a letter from the Nairobi Provincial Commissioner's Office asking us to do something that no other theatre group has ever been asked to do, that is, to go back to the District Commissioner, Kiambu, to ask for a recommendation, this on the pretext that the physical address of our Group was in Kiambu. Still we went ahead and on 23 November 1981 we wrote to the District Commissioner, Kiambu, asking for a recommendation. We have never received a reply from the D.C. Kiambu but throughout December 1981 and January 1982 the Chairman of our Group, Mr Ngugi wa Mirii, kept moving between Kiambu and Nairobi trying to get a reply and a result to our application. On 3 February 1982 we wrote a second reminder to the Nairobi Provincial Commissioner. On 16 February 1982, three days before the scheduled opening of our performances at the

Kenya National Theatre, we wrote a third reminder, which we even copied to the Chief Secretary.

To all these letters and reminders, the Government, through the Nairobi Provincial Commissioner, never responded in writing. Instead the management of the Kenya National Theatre was given secret instructions not to allow our group into the theatre either for the technical rehearsals starting on 15 February or for the opening night of 19 February. The police must have also been given instructions to harass us, for on 19 February, the police kept patrolling the grounds of the Kenya National Theatre where our Group sat singing, waiting for a last minute reply to our application for the stage licence.

After 19 February, our Group resumed rehearsals at the Theatre Two of the University of Nairobi where we had been rehearsing. But once again, on 25 February, the University authorities were instructed by telephone not to allow us the use of their premises. I would like to make it clear that up to now the Government has not formally written to us about the fate of our application.

By so doing, the Government denied us one of the most elementary human and democratic rights: the right of every human community to cultural expression. The administration's handling of the matter showed total insensitivity to the sheer amount of labour, effort and money put up by a village group over a three-month period. By refusing us a licence, the administration denied Kenyans the right to an entertainment of their choice. The fact that the rehearsals attracted over 10,000 people was an indication that they wanted the show. The play which heavily drew from the songs and dances of different Kenyan nationalities showed practical possibilities for the integration of Kenyan cultures. And as brilliantly directed by Waigwa Wachira and Kimani Gecau, the play suggested a whole new basis for Kenyan theatre. It now looks as if Kenyans, especially peasants, are not supposed to dance, sing and act out their history of struggle against colonial oppression.

The play *Maitu Njugira* draft written by myself and subsequently enriched by the cast is what may be called a dramatized documentary on the forced labour and 'Kipande' laws in the colonial Kenya of the twenties and thirties. It shows the attempts in one community to repulse these and other injustices and to survive as a unit despite tremendous official intrigue and brutality. It shows indirectly the genesis of some of our peoples' subsequent political movement and the seeds of their defeats and partial triumphs.

This play is unlike our earlier effort at communal drama, *Ngaahika*

Ndeenda, whose staging was stopped without explanation by the Government in 1977 after a highly acclaimed brief run, and whose basic theme revolved around present day Kenyan society. Understandably, the wealthy who control the Government did not like the stark realities of their own social origins enacted on the stage by simple villagers. As a result, we were harassed, some of us even detained as you know. We did not apologize. We still believe in and stand by the content of that play. The spirit of the Centre (that is, Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre) was not killed or even impaired.

Maitu Njugira by contrast addresses itself to the rulers of a previous, albeit related, era and it came to us as curious that the ghosts of the settler colonial regime of the thirties should in 1982 come to haunt the same tiny circle of wealth that *Ngaahika Ndeenda* so terrified. It now seems, despite constitutional safeguards, that any public examination of Kenya's society, its history or future cannot be done without raising the nervousness of the authorities.

We consider this attitude undemocratic and extremely dangerous. It is our right to represent our art and culture from our own viewpoint so long as in the process no extant law is broken. We have sought to act strictly according to law and with complete legitimacy in all aspects of our work. We have followed the unnecessarily difficult and frustrating due process of registering ourselves, applying for permits and all the other now commonplace pre-requisites of self-expression in Kenya. We have been very patient.

In return we have received official lies, ping-pong tactics from office to office, authority to authority, Ministry to Ministry, never so much as a word of hard decisions, only indirect instructions as for example the administration's last minute letter to the National Theatre not to permit us entry on 15 February 1982. There has been no courage to address decisively or conclusively to our countless communications over a period of three months. Instead only monumental indecision and a farrago of verbal excuses to frustrate us.

The manner in which the refusal of permission to stage the play was carried out reveals a very serious element in Kenya today. The fact that the Government conducted their instructions verbally or by telephone without ever writing to us directly so that no written record exists reinforces a dangerous trend. Thus acts are carried out without any officials being held accountable. Under such an atmosphere, anything can be done to any Kenyan or group of Kenyans by officials without written documentation or accountability.

This is not just simple irresponsibility and heavy-handed use of authority. The Government seems mortally terrified of peasants organizing themselves on their terms and their own initiative.

We wish to denounce in the strongest possible terms the Government's increasing intolerance and repression of the Kenyan people's cultural initiatives. Secondly we now question fundamentally the seriousness of the Government's commitment to Kenyan culture. If, as we are told, the economy has slowed down for 'external factors' of recession, inflation and petroleum prices, we ask, is Kenyan culture to slow down or stagnate for the same reasons? If we had chosen to do often mindless and always irrelevant pieces as the foreign groups we probably might not have met with such official hostility. Foreign theatre can freely thrive on Kenyan soil. But there is no room for Kenyan theatre on Kenyan soil. During the Emergency, the British colonial regime introduced severe censorship of Kenyan theatre, particularly in detention camps like Athi River, and employed African rehabilitation officers to do their dirty work. Similar tactics are being used in Kenya today! We now call for an end of censorship of Kenyan people's cultural expression.

Finally, as you are now aware, we had secured independently a fully sponsored invitation to Zimbabwe to perform during the month of April as part of their rural cultural project. The invitation of the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education and Culture, dated 2 December 1981, and which we accepted on 21 December 1981, was a tremendous boost to our morale and was an important recognition of the contribution of the Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre to rural community based theatre and was very much in the spirit of intra-African cultural exchange. In our letter of acceptance, we asked our prospective hosts to formalize this invitation, if only for simple protocol, through the relevant authorities in the Kenya Government. We believe they did this in writing. We too have written to the Government through the Ministry of Culture about the visit but we have had no reply.

We now fear that the same forces which worked against our getting a stage licence to perform *Maitu Njugira* at the Kenya National Theatre will now work to prevent the visit of our group to Zimbabwe during April.

Thank you.

P.S.:

1. On Thursday, 11 March, the Government, through the Provincial Commissioner for Central Province, Mr Musila, de-registered Kamiriithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre. All theatre activities in the village were stopped.

2. On Friday, 12 March, the District Officer for Limuru led three truck-loads of heavily armed police and demolished Kamiriithu people's Open Air Theatre.

3. We were unable to go to Zimbabwe.
