

Prof. Ngugi wa Thiongo; Public Lecture on African Languages in Devolution

3rd June, 2015 at Kenyatta University

‘Europe gave Africa the resource of their accent, Africa gave Europe the access of its resources’ Prof. Ngugi wa Thiongo

The mood in the room was tense, not because of the stories he narrated but because of the realization of so much undoing we have exposed ourselves to. When he talked, you could hear people clap occasionally, but rarely could you hear someone whisper to their neighbors. His words took us by surprise; he is such a good local language activist.

50 Years on...

This was Prof. Ngugi wa Thiongo, the one whose novel you must have done as a set text in one of the levels of Education you went through. The author of *Weep Not Child*, his first title among 40 other titles published in different genres is here for a ‘tour’ and a celebration of 50 years since the publication of the above named title. He will be in Kenya for the whole month of June.

Like father...

The renowned scholar walked into a fully packed room with his family of writers. Practically, all his children are either accomplished writers or practicing journalists. Starting from Wanjiku wa Ngugi, Mukami wa Ngugi, Ndosho wa Ngugi, Njoki wa Ngugi to all others who were not present at the event, they have learnt the art of writing from a teacher under their roof top; Prof. Ngugi himself.

Proud borrower

The seven Honorary Doctorate fellow talked with so much passion on how we are not ‘proud of ourselves’. He started from a story of Kenya’s first attorney general, banning Gishamba’s locally made aero plane which flew few yards. He likened the situation to that of a household using light of a neighbor and getting proud not to light their own house. He said the innovation of ‘a Bicycle Engineer’ was banned just because there were better qualities from Europe and other countries.’ What if we nurture our own talent?’ he quipped.

‘We have to find a way to control our resources’ Prof. Ngugi wa Thiongo

The acclaimed writer narrated that he has very special memories for Kenyatta University. ‘This is the University where I delivered my last lecture, before I found myself in a Maximum prison’ he said.

Local Languages Vs. Foreign Breed

To me, I never realized any issue with foreign and local languages until the professor came. Now, I even feel like I should be writing this report in my mother tongue. He started by telling a story of how England imposed English on its Captives. He started from Ireland. A small country in the now United Kingdom. Earlier in history, the Professor said, that Ireland was a staunch Irish speaking country. Not until it came to the hands of the English. Upon pondering how the English culture would be adopted in the country, the English officials made it a law that English was to be spoken in the country. However, this did not meet much success. They therefore restructured their strategies by changing the names of the Irish people. They omitted some aspects of culture in their naming system and replaced with the English style. All the efforts to assimilate the naming system was meant to alter the record of their memory and hence adopt the new approach brought by the English. This strategy did not meet much success.

Conqueror and Conquered

Similarly in India, he said, the English made efforts to ‘change the mind of an Indian’. There was a deliberate attempt to develop class of Indians, with Indian color, but with an English mind. This class was to later act as intermediaries between the Indians and English in business.

In the world over, he stated, the conqueror has always done its best to fully erase the memory of origin of the conquered. Coming closer home, to African languages, he stated that it was ridiculous that an African Child can be punished for speaking an African language.

‘Learning to speak your mother tongue fluently then learning other languages is empowerment, learning to speak other languages before fluently learning to speak mother tongue is slavery.’ Prof. Ngugi wa Thiongo

The author of the famous *The River Between*, mocked the African behavior of being proud of other languages and literally demonizing their own languages. ‘It is funny how parents are nowadays proud that their children cannot speak mother tongue but can speak foreign languages with imported accent’ he said imitating the ‘*twenging*’ nature of Africans.

Be true to your origin

He advised that the only way to remember our origin is to value our respective languages before opting to learn other ‘imported’ languages. He wondered why there is ‘Chinese Institute for Chinese Language in Kenya but there is no Luo Institute for Luo language in China. He lamented that Africa has a lot of resources but the problem has always been the mindset.

From the story of Kenya rejecting its first Aero plane, Kenya 1, to the story of his arrest as a result of championing for the local language, all the way to the story of numerous attempts and cases of conquerors clipping the memories of the conquered, the story of Africa remains the same; we have failed to put our minds to work.

Prof. Ngugi wa Thiongo honored the Invite upon invitation by Dr. Catherine Ndung'u, the Director of Institute of African Languages in Kenyatta University. The event was graced by senior members of management of the University. The acclaimed writer will be part of a tour organized by his Publisher, East African Educational Publisher to celebrate 50 years of his first title.

At the end of the day, I feel so challenged. I feel like I have betrayed my mother tongue. I feel like I have betrayed my traditions. I feel like I have betrayed Africa.

But I am still alive, I can correct it. And I will do just that.

By Gabriel Dinda