a song for agency

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This year, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ngugi Wa Mirii's co-authored play, *I Will Marry When I Want*, returned to Kenyan theaters after an unintended 32-year hiatus. First produced in 1977, the powerful postcolonial play was banned six weeks after staging for the first time by Daniel Moi, then Jomo Kenyatta's vice president, followed by his banishment of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o to prison later that year. It would later be performed before it was banned again in 1990 by the late president Daniel Moi's regime. Its return to the theater three decades later is a bold statement of the literary defiance that timeless and universal works represent.

To understand Ngugi's clash with Moi, it is crucial to reflect on the latter's personal history that influenced his political philosophy, which in turn gave rise to his ideological background that is attributed to his illiberalism, dictatorial tendencies, and his intolerance to dissent.This also forms the backstory to his becoming, and is fundamental.

The late president Daniel Moi was born Toroitich Arap Moi in the village of Sacho, in what is today's Baringo County in the larger Rift Valley region, in 1924, four years after Kenya was declared a British colony. During the same year, the British held elections for the Legislative Council (LegCo), a colonial parliament, for the first time. Moi would join the LegCo thirty-one years later as the Rift Valley representative, making a radical shift from his teaching job to active politics.

When Moi was four years old, his father, Kimoi arap Chebii, died. Hence, Moi was raised by his mother and under the wings of his paternal uncle, Senior Chief Kiplabet, who served as a colonial chief.

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When the British colonized Kenya, they found it immensely arduous to use direct rule, for among other reasons, the cultural and ethnic diversity of Kenyan-Africans– who belonged to over forty ethnic groups– and a lack of common language to use in giving administrative orders. Hence, to address that seemingly intractable challenge, the colonial officers opted for indirect rule, which meant they needed to recruit friendly local Kenyans to rule their fellow countrymen.

Initially, and like in many traditional African societies, Kenyan-Africans lived within communities governed by the council of elders. The councils had authority they exercised over their subjects, and which was legitimized by the fact that their underlying responsibility was to ensure that the community moved forward in all aspects: culturally, socially, economically, and politically, which meant that governance was coherent and progressive.

The respected community elders' foremost obligation was conflict resolution and maintaining law, order, and cohesion. They solved any form of land disputes, from cattle raiding or rustling to family disputes.

To institute their violent invasion and subsequent rule over the Kenyan communities, the colonial officers sought local collaborators who were selected mainly based on their willingness to betray their fellow men in exchange for colonial accolades. The collaborators were then appointed paramount chiefs and assigned to the roles of British government colonial rulers of the Kenyan-Africans. The creation of the chieftaincy system was an attempt to counter the authority of the existing council of elders' governance system and, eventually, replace it to forcefully govern the people based on the rules that the British colonial government had now created, and which were being executed on their behalf by the paramount Chiefs.

Hence, Moi's paternal uncle, Senior Chief Kiplabet, served as a paramount chief, enforcing British colonial rule over his people. Part of the responsibilities of the paramount chiefs, besides enforcing security, was to ensure that children attended mission schools. Then, Senior Chief Kiplabet ensured that his nephew, Toroitich arap Moi, was among the children under his chieftaincy who attended the mission school.

Later, Moi attended Tambach Teachers' Training College and Kagumo Teacher's College, after which he taught in an intermediate school as a qualified teacher. While the thirty-year-old Moi was serving as a teacher in 1955, the then Rift Valley representative to the LegCo, John Ole Tamemo was recalled from his post by the Rift Valley councilors for neglecting his duty and instead, imbibing excessively. Tamemo resigned and there was a vacancy.

The British colonial government moved swiftly to find a worthy replacement for Ole Tamemo. They sought the help of Moses Mudavadi, then the Area Educational Officer and school inspector in charge largely of the Rift Valley region and the father of Kenya's current Prime Cabinet Secretary, Musalia Mudavadi. The British had profound faith and trust in Mudavadi that they constantly sought his advice. To replace Ole Tamemo, Moses Mudavadi successfully persuaded Moi to leave his teaching job to join the LegCo in 1955, reassuring him that if the political bid failed, he would allow him back to class with full benefits of a teacher of his stature. And with that reassurance, Moi ditched the classroom for colonial parliament.

Mudavadi and Moi had struck a formidable friendship in the course of duty. First, Moi would use his bicycle to fetch firewood from the rural interior and give it to Mudavadi as a gift, who then transported it away in his rugged Land Rover. In return, Moi would get favorable treatment, like a transfer to teach at a school near his home and a promotion to the head teacher position. As the

education officer in the area where Moi taught, Mudavadi occasionally met him and benefited from Moi's magnanimity.

Moi would then forever leave his teaching job at Kabarnet Intermediate School, where he was the head, and thrust himself into active politics.

Three years earlier, in 1952, Mau Mau freedom fighters, largely drawn from the Kikuyu tribe, the largest ethnic group in Kenya and dominantly living on the slopes of Mount Kenya and on the highlands that were invaded and dubbed white highlands, had begun their bloody, armed revolt against the British colonial rulers. Soon after, one of the men accused of supporting the war, Jomo Kenyatta, who would later become Kenya's first president, was arrested.

Moi would serve in the LegCo, first as a nominated member, then as an elected member in 1957, and then as a Minister of Education. Moi established a close rapport with the powerful elite and kept a relatively low profile while ardently proving to be politically shrewd. He knew that to stay in good books, he needed to appeal to the higher powers ethnically.

And so, while serving in the LegCo, he visited Jomo Kenyatta in 1959 in prison, where he was jailed for his alleged involvement in the liberation struggle. Hence, Moi's growing camaraderie with Kenyatta, who hailed from the Kikuyu ethnic group and had been portrayed as the Kikuyu hero both by the colonial government and the large section of the Kikuyu community, gave him a front seat with the largest ethnic group in Kenya.

At the time, and as it is now, power legitimacy was accorded by the acceptability of a leader by the majority. With Moi coming from a small ethnic group, he needed the larger Kikuyu community to legitimize his politics. Well, even though that was not immediately, it was inevitable.

When Kenya gained independence in 1963, two years after the release of Jomo Kenyatta from prison, Moi was still serving in the colonial parliament. He had never fought against the invasive colonial powers. Hence, his sole political career was grounded on implementing colonial laws and executing the demands and instructions of the colonial powers. To that far, he had never participated in the liberation struggle.

Before Ngugi and his writing, Moi had never witnessed the revolution from the working classes. In his political career, he had seen the elite fallout between Jomo Kenyatta and his vice president, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. This fallout led Moi to become the third vice president and the second most powerful politician in post-colonial Kenya. Moi would serve Kenyatta so faithfully and loyally that there are no known battles between the two.

Besides, the powerful men in Kenyatta's circles never viewed Moi as a threat to the Kikuyu hegemony. After all, he hailed from a small tribe, compared to Kenyatta's most prominent ethnic tribe, and hence, many believed that Moi would always need the Kikuyu to govern Kenya. He, too, never showed any ambitions to the contrary. And when Kenyatta passed on in 1978, Moi was set to succeed him. But that would only happen with a fight. Moi had to overcome the Kikuyu mafia, including one led by the then attorney general, the late Charles Njonjo, who were hell-bent on stopping Moi's ascension to the presidency. Shrewd as he was and sober as he was, Moi beat the Kikuyu mafia at their own game and was sworn in as the second president of post-independence Kenya.

Hence, Moi, a boy born into a family of British collaborators, and raised under the shadows of a senior colonial chief, became the president of the post-colonial Kenya.

Moi had no philosophy of his own. He ruled Kenya with an iron fist, following the *nyayo,* footsteps of

his predecessor. When he came into power, he vowed to follow in Kenyatta's footsteps. He did not come with a vision of his own. Instead, he offered to live under the shadow of his predecessor. But what exactly were those footsteps, and what shoes did Moi attempt to fit? Unlike Kenyatta, who came from a large tribal community, Moi hailed from a small tribe. Kenyatta had never been to the bush to fight alongside Mau Mau but was allegedly jailed for supporting the freedom fighters agitating for a free Kenya.

Moi, on the other hand, had been born into and raised in a family of colonial collaborators. In all his life and political career, Moi had, by default, served the interests of the oppressive colonial masters. And so, when he came into power, the only footsteps he seemed to have followed were amassing ridiculously huge amounts of money, looting land and plundering the country on an unprecedentedly mega scale, and quashing dissent like his predecessor Kenyatta.

Kenyatta had turned Kenya into a one-party state by destroying his competitors, including his former vice president, Jaramogi Oginga.

In 1982, Moi made the attempted coup a more reason to squeeze his grip on democracy in Kenya. He turned the country officially into a single-party state. Besides, he only allowed those he considered loyal to him to succeed politically and quelled any form of rebellion against his authoritarian rule that was quickly morphing into a worse experience than the one Kenyans suffered under British rule, which they had fought against.

The Kenyan people had hardly witnessed the fruit of independence when a new challenge that was homegrown was presented to them: they had to deal with an African tyrant. By that time, in the 1980s, the optimism that people had regarding living in a free Kenya had begun to wane. Kenyans were becoming disillusioned about independence. When the first vice-president in the newly independent Kenya, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, fell out with his boss Kenyatta, he tendered his resignation and termed it flag independence.

In the 1980s, when writers, including Ngugi and Micere Mugo, were making sense of the new post-colonial state in their writings, a new voice seeking change in Kenya began to be heard. Ngugi was born in 1938, almost two decades after Kenya became a British colony. He was raised in Limuru, a region in the Mount Kenya highlands where the British held a tight grip on the people. His parents and extended family members endured the brunt of the colonial master's rule, as he reflects in his memoir, *Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*. In the memoir, Ngugi relives some of the most traumatic experiences he endured as a young school-going child who, unlike Moi, had lived the colonial reality.

Of arguably the most reflected on incident, which Ngugi makes a reference to as the apotheosis of the inhumanness of the brutal colonial police, is the cold-blooded killing of his deaf half-brother. After white colonial officers raided their village and killed people while displacing others, as was their norm, Ngugi learned of the killing of his half-brother, one who operated a butchery in Limuru and was known to be at peace with everyone. He writes, "A few days later, we learned that some people had been killed, one of the casualties being Gĩtogo, my half-brother, the last born of Wangarĩ's sons. His case was tragic. Gĩtogo worked in a butchery in Limuru. He had started running, following the example of others. Being deaf, he did not hear the white officer shouting *simama*, stop. They shot him in the back."

It is not a wonder, then, that Ngugi wrote vastly on the colonial occupation of Kenya and its impact on the larger population of the ordinary people, who repulsed the forceful occupiers of Kenya. Besides, as a writer, his role has always been to reflect the society, paint a picture of where the country is and the power struggles, and instill hope, in many, of a free nation-state.

In December of 1977, when then vice president Daniel Moi ordered his arrest, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o had worked as a lecturer at the University of Nairobi for a decade. His arrest was a response by the elite to the theater work he was doing with the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre at Kamiriithu in Limuru, which he had helped co-found. The Kamiriithu group, whose members were mainly the peasants, and people who had suffered immensely under the colonial and post-colonial governments, participated in the staging of the play *I Will Marry When I Want*. The first staging attracted a crowd of over ten thousand people, sending shockwaves to the ruling elite regarding a socio-political consciousness that was likely to brew a popular revolution.

Ngugi was using the play and, by extension, the theater, to sensitize the ordinary people on the power struggles raging on and defying repressive political powers. In essence, Ngugi was ideologically co-opting the common people to resolve to demand better quality of life, particularly in regard to social and economic justice, from the political elite. Moi, a man who had no philosophy to lead a post-struggle Kenya, and who had never witnessed or been part of a revolt led by the ordinary citizens, was directly threatened.

Hence, Moi's motivation to jail Ngugi and ban the play from staging was a fear that he derived from his lack of philosophy, which led to his insecurities, and his instinctive reaction as opposed to leading based on logic. Like many tyrants around the world, Moi was afraid of an informed and politically conscious citizenry, who would demand better services, better political leadership, and a fundamental shift from the fetters of brutal colonial masters, things he was unprepared for and had no means to offer. He had lived through intra-elite wars between Kenyatta and Jaramogi and among the Kikuyu mafia during his ascension to the presidency. Still, he had never lived to see the power of ordinary citizens. And that made him tremble at the prospects of ordinary revolt.

Moi succeeded in his dictatorial rule until he left power in 2002. However, the critical socio-political consciousness that Ngugi's work sparked in many generations has kept the flame of agitation for pro-people and democratic governance tendencies alive for decades. While writing from exile, his progressive and consistent thematic foci on revolution by popular means, democracy, and people power have stayed alive and spread against the wish and the intention of powerful colonial apologists like Moi.

The return of his play in Kenyan theaters is a testimony to the transience of political and oppressive power and the formidability of democratic and popular revolutionary values. It is a call for unwavering belief and the hope that the people will always triumph, no matter how long it may take. More importantly, it is a hope that can be borrowed all across Africa, especially where democratic spaces are constricted, and the political elite feel threatened by creatives and writers.

Ngugi's political persecution is not an isolated development in East Africa but is a common phenomenon in post-colonial African states. A case in point is the continued mistreatment of the prolific Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangaremba. A highly acclaimed and decorated playwright and award-winning filmmaker, Tsitsi has been a consistent voice in agitating for political and social reforms in her home country.

In 2020, she participated in a peaceful protest walk, carrying a placard that bore the message: "WE WANT BETTER REFORM OUR INSTITUTIONS". The government of President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa, which has come into the spotlight for continued human rights violations, and its allergy to constructive criticism, arrested her and charged her with inciting the public to create violence. Like in Ngugi's case, Tsitsi can be understood as having been accused by the government of awakening the larger public's socio-political consciousness of their circumstances and empowering them to reimagine better quality of life and to demand it from those to whom the people's power is donated.

Tsitsi has been doing so through her novels, plays, and films, which address themes around social issues. However, her active participation in the protest march was seen as a direct threat to the repressive regime. One may wonder why, but as Tsitsi confirmed in one of her media interviews, access to books in Zimbabwe is a huge deal. It means that even when good books that address and suggest solutions to the plight of the people are written, it is only sometimes practically possible to reach a wide audience. Hence, making book-only awakening a colossal task. In retrospect, active participation in peaceful protests, engagement of the peasants and the ordinary folk in the streets, and solidarity with the people by an intellectual of her stature are seen as a direct threat to the establishment. Consequently, in the last two years, Tsitsi has been in and out of court corridors, fighting trumped-up charges by the government.

In Uganda, authors Stella Nyanzi and Kakwenza Rukirabashaija are in exile in Germany. Their crimes border those of Ngugi before them and their compatriot, Tsitsi Dangarembga, in Zimbabwe. They were arrested and brutalized by the post-colonial regime of President Yoweri Museveni for their scathing criticism of the repressive regime. They were scandalized for their literary works, detained incommunicado, and charged with trumped-up charges. They then escaped into exile, from where they continue to advance their literary cause by writing their way to freedom.

The underlying characteristic cutting across the tribulations of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Stella Nyanzi, and Kakwenza Rukirabashaija is that they have, in their lives as writers, been faced with the responsibility of awakening the socio-political consciousness of their countrymen. As it is, writers' function in society is to reflect it, especially the ills, and to suggest practical solutions. However, the post-colonial establishments, headed by dictatorial tyrants, have made it almost impossible for them to enjoy their human rights and freedoms as they do their work of sensitizing the masses. But, as with the return of Ngugi's play, it is evident that tyranny is eventually defeated, and writers are encouraged to keep doing their work, the dire circumstances notwithstanding.

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