

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: UCLA James S. Coleman Memorial Lecture



A many-sided intellectual, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is a novelist, essayist, playwright, journalist, editor, academic and social activist.

UCLA International Institute, June 13, 2017 — Celebrated novelist, playwright and postcolonial theorist Ngugi wa Thiong’o delivered the annual James S. Coleman Memorial Lecture on May 25, 2017, at the Billy Wilder Theater of the Hammer Museum. Sponsored by the UCLA Center for African Studies and co-presented by the Hammer Museum, the event featured readings by Ngugi from his memoirs, together with many informal asides and reminiscences. Despite his protestations to the contrary, the author’s storytelling talent and theatrical instincts were delightfully on display.

Although the setting was formal, Ngugi's charm and spirited readings made for an intimate evening that playfully revealed how he became a writer and the magic that the written word holds for him. "It was," he said, "simply because I grew up in a house of storytelling in the evening, as is probably the case in most... peasant-based communities.

"I grew up in the kind of household where anybody who came from outside was a bringer of narratives," he recounted. "And so every evening, we sat at the fireside and people [told] stories — fictional [stories]. Again, it could be narratives of what happened in 'Araby,' or what they think happened abroad — like during the Second World War, when they talked about what was happening, even when they hadn't been there.

"But there was a problem we had, for those stories could only be told in the evening," continued Ngugi. "They told us that stories disappeared in daytime — they ran away. But they come in the evening when all the work, when all the chores, are done.... The only problem is that I really wanted stories in daytime as well," he commented.

It was his mother's decision to send him to school that, he said, "enabled me to tell myself stories in daytime." He then read a long passage from his first memoir, "*Dreams in a Time of War: A Childhood Memoir*" (Harvill Secker, 2010), that culminated in his being able to read — and his realization that words carried music:

Even when not reading it, I can hear the music in the choice and the arrangements of the words, the cadence. I can't think of one thing that makes it so beautiful and long-lived in my memory, that even written words can carry the music I love in stories.... And yet, this is not a story. It is a description. It does not have clarity and illustration. It is a picture in itself. And yet, ahhh, more than a picture, than a description — it is music. Written words can also sing.

Background

Ngugi is distinguished professor of comparative literature and English at the School of Humanities of the University of California Irvine. Born in Kenya, he attended Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda from 1959 through 1963 — just prior to the time that James S. Coleman, founder of UCLA's African Studies Center, taught at that university (1965–67). Coleman served as a representative of the Rockefeller Foundation in East Africa from 1967 to 1978, during which he also directed the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi and later taught at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania.

After graduating from Makerere, Ngugi taught at the University of Nairobi from 1967 to 1977 while he continued to write short stories, plays, novels, essays and political works. He was arrested and imprisoned in Kenya in 1977 due to the critical nature of his play, "I Will Marry When I Want" (co-authored by Ngugi wa Mirii) and its popular performances at a theater that Ngugi himself had founded. Upon his release in late 1978, the author was denied the right to teach at a university in Kenya. He went into exile in 1982, living and teaching first in the United Kingdom and then, after 1989, the United States. He has taught at UC Riverside since 2003.

Steven Nelson, director of the African Studies Center and professor of African and African American art history at UCLA, noted in his introduction of Ngugi, "During the past half-century, Professor Ngugi's esteemed body of work has challenged our very definitions of African literature. Refusing to write in English, the language of Kenya's former colonizer Great Britain, by the late 1970s Professor Ngugi began to write primarily in Gikuyu, his mother tongue.

"This space-clearing gesture constituted a battle to create a platform for the publishing of literature in marginalized languages," said Nelson. "Moreover, he embraced the publishing in African languages because it provided a means to decolonize the mind. Be it in his writing or his activism, the impetus to decolonize the mind, as well as his desire to place Africa at the center of the globalized present, has fueled his publishing and his activism."

To date, Ngugi has written three memoirs: the aforementioned "*Dreams in a Time of War*," as well as "*In the House of the Interpreter*" (Pantheon, 2012) and "*Birth of a Dream Weaver: A Writer's Awakening*" (New Press, 2016). The memoirs cover his early childhood and primary school years, his middle and high school years and his college years, respectively. Ngugi read primarily from the first and the last of those titles.

Why One Writes Is Not Important!

Ngugi recounted the history of his first novel in order to clear up a matter that a friend had brought to his attention. "The Rockefeller Foundation," he said, "in 1961 or 1960 set up a novel-writing competition for East Africa, they [gave] money to East Africa to organize the competition. And actually that's how my first novel '*The River Between*' (1965) came into being. I was writing for money!" he laughed.

"And the reason why I'm making this confession is because if you have seen some interviews I have given, I am claiming that writers don't write for money....," continued the author. "[S]o I'm always saying now, 'No, no, no. It doesn't matter what motivates you to write, it's what you write that is important. Not the motive for writing.'

“It was at Makerere that now I became a teller of stories through writing,” explained Ngugi. “The title, by the way, is ‘Dream Weaver’ because nowadays storytelling is sort of like weaving dreams... in your hands are images, pictures, that you are conjuring — it’s a conjuring trick in written form,” he said.

The prize offered by the Rockefeller Foundation was 1,000 U.K. shillings, the equivalent of about 50 pounds at the time, a sum Ngugi said represented a fortune to a university student. He went on to read several extracts from “Dream Weaver” that described his difficulties in finding a story to tell in his novel, and how he was stymied in terms of writing until ideas and words began to arrive in his mind. At one point, he read, “It’s magic. Imagination is a magic that makes possible connections across time and space.”

After recounting his struggles to write the novel, Ngugi noted that he met the deadline for the competition and hand-delivered the manuscript to the Rockefeller office in Nairobi. By that time, the title had changed from “Wrestling with the God” to “The Black Messiah;” it was changed yet again when it published a year later as “*The River Between*” (1965, Heinemann). Some of the most touching and entertaining extracts read by the author concerned his first exposure to social dancing at his university hall and his meeting with U.S. poet Langston Hughes at the first African writers’ conference in 1962. Despite plans to give Hughes a tour of the architectural treasures of Kampala, Ngugi ended up spending an hour with Hughes in the cacophonous artisan neighborhood adjacent to the Makerere campus, where the American writer became enthralled by the people and local shops and appeared to soak in the atmosphere of the place.

Ngugi later urged would-be writers to write for any reason — whether to impress the girl or boy next store, for money or to get something: “Just write! What is important is the result, not what motivated you to do it. Whatever motivated you to write is a good thing,” he said.

Despite publishing many short stories in the student literary magazine, writing several plays and numerous works of journalism, the UC Irvine professor said that as a young man, he was reluctant for a long time to call himself a writer. “It was if I had not yet written the novel I wanted to write, but the desire to weave dreams remained a flame, an integral part of my life,” he said. “So this ‘Dream Weaver’ is really all about that: from being a colonial subject to becoming a citizen and what I was able to do in between.”

Ngugi returned to this theme again when asked if he had ever written the novel he wanted to write. “No,” he said, “Maybe what drives me to write is that I feel I have not yet written it.” When working on all of his major novels, he explained, he hoped that each would be THE one, only to decide it was not. “So not yet,” concluded the writer. “I’m just trying to get that novel, so I’ve come to the conclusion that my best novel is that which has not yet been written by me.”

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