

Let Us Cry for Our Beloved Country: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o



☒ Listen to Wiyathi na Ithaka - Joseph Kamaru

[Listen to **Wiyathi na Ithaka** ('Freedom and Land'), an anthem of the Mau Mau rebellion against British colonial rule, sung by Joseph Kamaru.]

'Who are those singing? Why are they crying? They are singing for their hero coming from the forest'. Sung in Gĩkũyũ, these were the words that welcomed Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938–2025) as he landed in his homeland of Kenya on 8 August 2004, concluding twenty-two years of exile. Thousands welcomed one of Africa's most well-known anti-colonial and Marxist writers at the Nairobi airport. They sang liberation songs from the **Mau Mau rebellion** (1952–1960) against British colonialism, a crucial historical backdrop to many of his novels, including *Weep Not, Child* (1964) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967).

Amongst those in the crowd was Gacheke Gachihi, who had travelled a far distance by bus as part of the youth delegation organising Ngũgĩ's reception. Daniel arap Moi's twenty-four-year dictatorship had ended two years earlier, marking an end of an era and the possibility of Ngũgĩ's return.



Now the coordinator of the Mathare Social Justice Centre in Nairobi, Gachihi recalls the scene twenty-one years earlier when Ngũgĩ arrived. While government officials tried to quietly escort him away, he insisted on getting out of the car to touch the Kenyan soil. It was in that moment that Gachihi approached him, with his copy *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993) in hand – Ngũgĩ’s collection of essays on the persistence of cultural imperialism.

‘Which book is this?’ Ngũgĩ asked him, before signing the book that transformed his thinking and helped propel him into political activism. This moment marked the first of several meetings between Gachihi, Ngũgĩ, and his family over the following two decades.

‘I remember one word from *The River Between* (1965) that stayed with me for twenty years – “bourgeoisie”,

Gachihi recalls as we discussed Ngũgĩ's legacy the day after his passing on 28 May 2025, at the age of eighty-seven years. 'It troubled me until I began studying class and class analysis'. Gachihi is amongst the generations of activists and revolutionaries who were politicised by Ngũgĩ's writing, spanning six decades, as well as his own political work.

'Unfortunately, much of his revolutionary legacy has been depoliticised', he laments. 'The mainstream – the educational system, the media, and even cultural institutions – focuses on his work in language and culture, ignoring his critique of neo-colonialism and class, and erasing the most radical aspects of his work'.

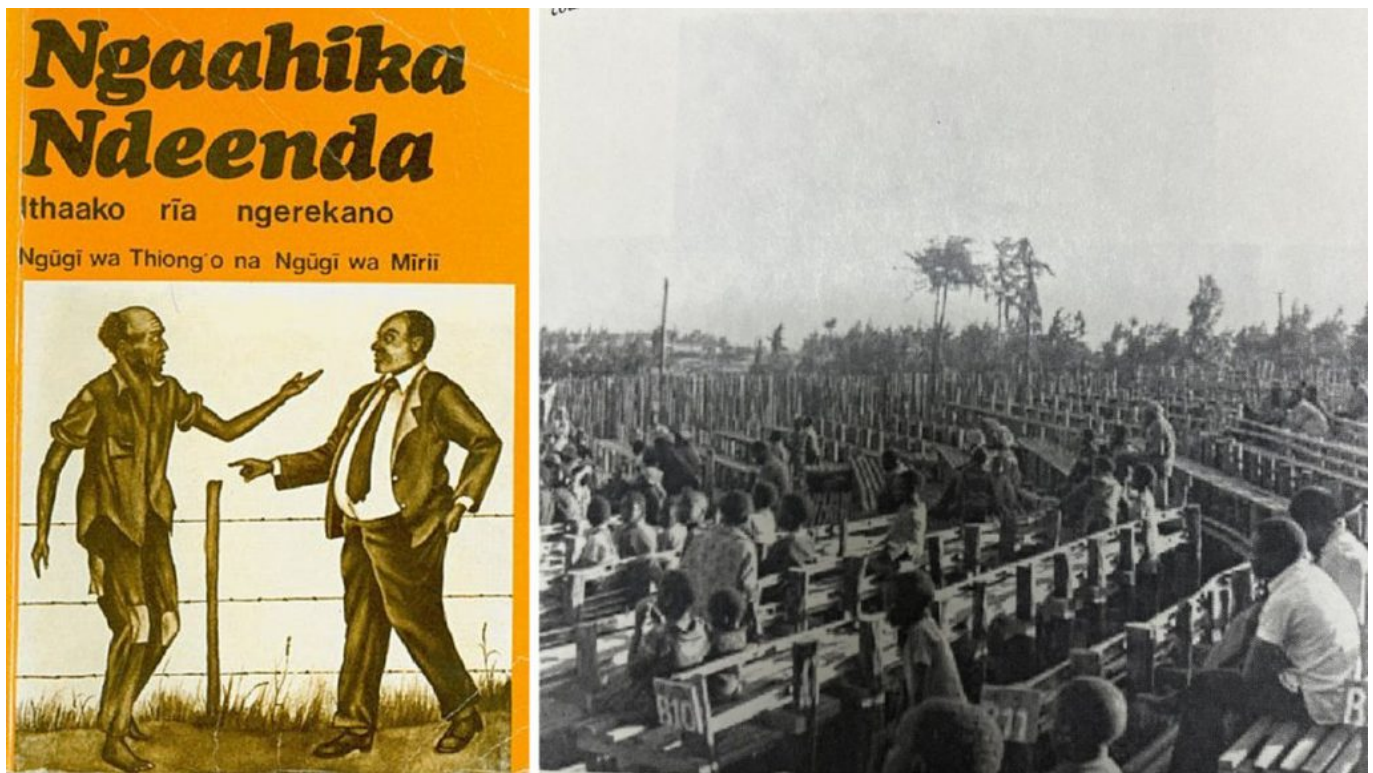


Left: Issue of Pambana (July 1983); Right: MWAKENYA's Draft Minimum Programme (1987). Credit: Ukombozi Library.

He was referring to Ngũgĩ's involvement in the December Twelve Movement (DTM), an underground Marxist-Leninist organisation active in the 1970s and 1980s. Named after the date of Kenya's independence from British rule in 1963, the movement, also known as MWAKENYA, or *Muungano wa Wazalendo wa Kukomboa Kenya* ('Union of Patriots for the Liberation of Kenya'), formed the foundations of Kenya's radical left. In an interview with William Acworth in 1990, Ngũgĩ spoke about his role as the spokesperson in the midst of increasing oppression under Moi's government, including the Wagaalla Massacre in 1984, which took the lives of over 1000 Kenyan Somalis. He cited some of the objectives of their Draft Minimum Program (1987): the recovery of national sovereignty, forming a democratic and patriotic culture, the pursuit

of an independent foreign policy, and the establishment of a democratic political system. To him, the struggle for democracy was ‘not an abstract phenomenon’ but ‘becomes meaningful when it is linked to the struggle against neo colonial structure’.

Around the time of MWAKENYA’s founding, Ngũgĩ became active in the grassroots open-air Kamiriithu Theatre, as an instructor and collaborator, experimenting with performances in local African languages with local peasants and factory workers, building a space for education and cultural expression. It was there that he and fellow playwright Ngũgĩ wa Mirii staged the Gikuyu-language play *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (‘I Will Marry When I Want’) for six weeks. For their cultural and political work, on 31 December 1977, both writers were arrested and jailed without trial for the following year. The play, a sharp Marxist critique of post-colonial society, continued peasant dispossession and the effects of Christianity, was banned by the government based on ‘Public Security Regulations’.



Left: Cover of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (‘I Will Marry When I Want’); Right: Kamiriithu Theatre, ca. 1970s.

Imprisonment in a maximum security prison, however, sharpened Ngũgĩ’s politics. He developed the ideas behind *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986). In that seminal work, he introduced the concept of the ‘cultural bomb’ to describe violence of imperialism that ‘annihilate[s] a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, and in their capacities and ultimately in themselves’. Preserving and propagating African languages – ‘the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history’ – was a deeply decolonial and political act.

In Ngũgĩ’s assessment of colonialism’s brutality, ‘The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation’. So in prison, he decided to abandon English as his primary language of creative writing to embrace his mother tongue, writing his first novel in Gĩkũyũ on

pieces of toilet paper. As he elaborates in *Decolonising the Mind*, writing in ‘a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggle of Kenyan and African peoples’. This act was also an attempt to bridge the class divide and make literature accessible to the very people, the peasants and the working class, whose struggles he sought to represent.



Ngũgĩ at a Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya protest in London, 1988. Credit: Ukombozi Library.

After leaving prison, Ngũgĩ was forced into exile in 1982, ending up in London, where he was supported by revolutionary comrades such as the Tanzanian Marxist Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu. There, Ngũgĩ took inspiration from South African anti-apartheid efforts and formed the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners in Kenya (CRPPK). Publishing the *Kenya News* bulletin, the CRPPK was one of the most vocal groups to bear witness and broadcast the abuses of the Moi government.

While in exile, Ngũgĩ continued to write. In one of the most surreal and powerful examples of literary resistance, his 1986 novel *Matigari ma Njiruungi* ('The Bullets of the Patriots') about a freedom fighter Matigari gained widespread success in Kenya; it was read in bars, in buses, and in homes. So much so that rumours began to spread that this prophet-like figure was roaming through Central Province. In a climate of fear and repression, the Moi government even issued an order to arrest Matigari. Upon realising their embarrassment, police officers raided bookshops seizing every copy of the novel that they could find.

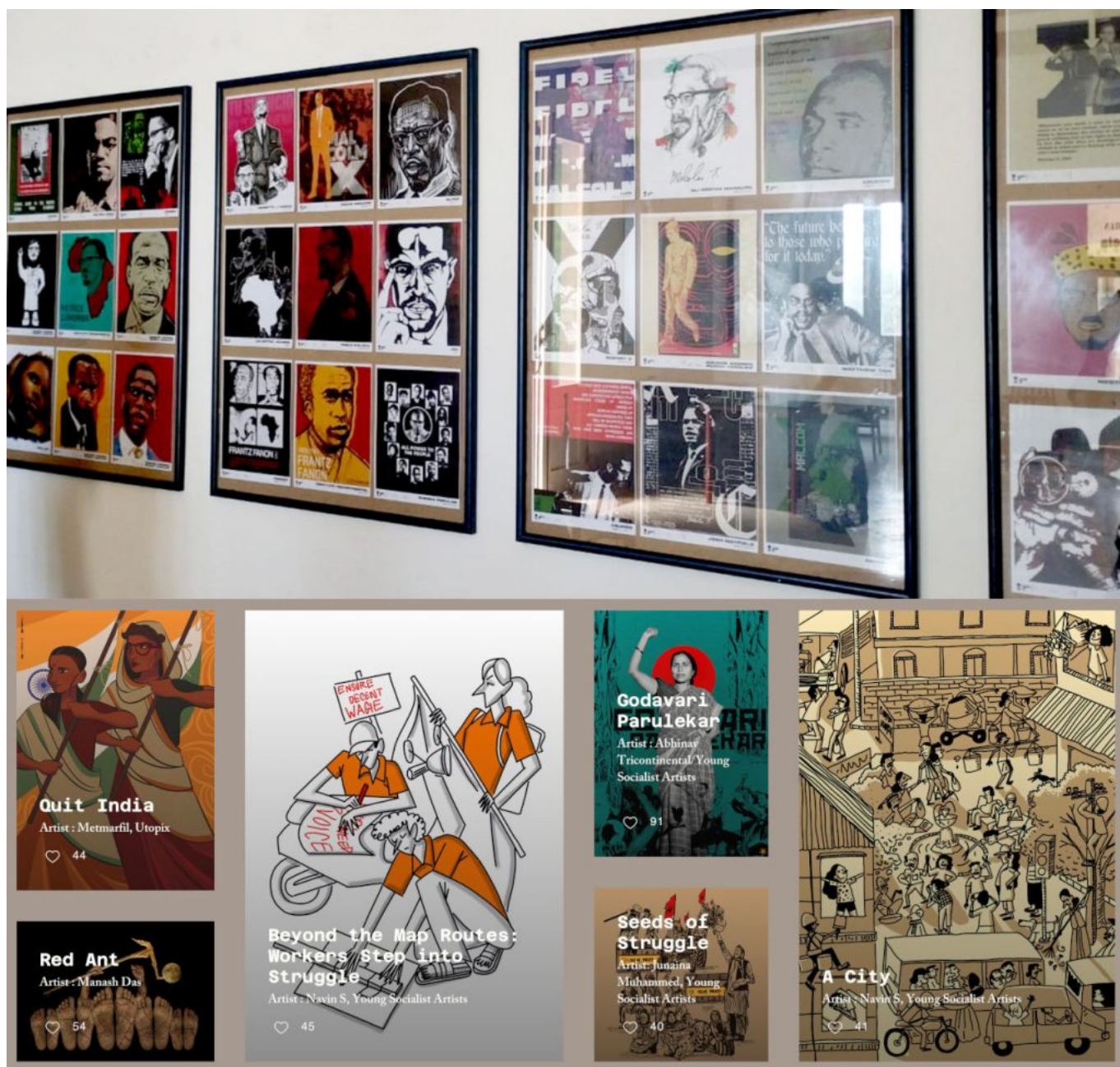
'Ngũgĩ was arrested not for an act, but for a book', says Gachihi, whose social justice centre runs a **book club**

in Matigari's honour. 'The dictatorship thought they had detained a person. They feared the power of his words. That book became a key political text for educating the masses. His writing continued to build consciousness while in exile'.

Today, when reading the obituaries or homages to Ngũgĩ's legacy, little is said of his political militancy from MWAKENYA to the CRPPK. 'After decades of dictatorship and neoliberal rule, we still don't have institutions to preserve and pass on these histories', Gachihi laments. 'Unlike in South Africa or Tanzania, where he is celebrated as a revolutionary intellectual, in Kenya he is seen more as a literary icon. He is like the prophet who is not honoured in his home'.

Ngũgĩ also warned against the dangers of the erasure of historical memory. In 2023, 60 years after Kenya achieved independence, Ngũgĩ published an **article** where he reflected on his political and creative work that pushed him into exile and the many 'sacrifices that intellectuals, artists, and activists have had to endure to democratise our country'. He called on 'our young patriots' to study history – naming the **Ukombozi Library**, which generously provided materials for this art bulletin – particularly the archives of MWAKENYA and CRPPK. In that same article, he remembered the horrendous attack on him and his wife in his home shortly after returning from exile, saying, 'Please don't cry for me. Let us cry for our beloved country'. This Bulletin comes as **thousands** of Kenyans took to the streets across the country this week — 16 protesters were killed by the police — on the anniversary of the Finance Bill protests. The struggle for a more just Kenya continues. As we mourn Ngũgĩ passing and remember his life and work as a writer and political activist, we should take heed of these very words.

In Other News...



Exhibitions in Cuba and India.

For the 100-year anniversary of Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and Patrice Lumumba's births, our friends at **Utopix** hosted a joint international poster exhibition, which includes work from our art department. The first was hosted at Casa de Las Américas, in Havana, Cuba, this month, alongside the III International Colloquium of the Afroamérica Study Program.

Last month, we also collaborated with Young Socialist Artists in India to host the '**May We Rise**' exhibition, commemorating various revolutionary events and historical figures in the month of May, from May Day to Malcom X, from Ho Chi Minh to Rabindranath Tagore.



As part of our monthly portrait **gallery**, a collaboration between Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and Utopix, we pay homage to Malagantana Valente Ngwenya (1936–2011), one of Mozambique’s most celebrated painters and poets. Born this month, Malagantana, like Ngũgĩ, was a figure whose decolonial artistic genesis developed alongside his political involvement with FRELIMO (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique), the liberation movement that overthrew Portuguese colonialism. This art bulletin is dedicated to Ngũgĩ, Malagantana, and the generations of militant artists whose life and work were dedicated to the unfinished struggle to liberate the African continent and the African people, with culture being one of the main theatres of struggle. As Ngũgĩ said, ‘The struggle for Africa’s soul is the struggle for its languages and cultures. It is the struggle for its memory. It is the struggle for its future’.

Warmly,

Tings Chak

Art Director, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research