

NGUGI WATHIONG'O'S DETENTION By BERNTHLINDFORS

The publication of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's fourth novel *Petals of Blood* in July 1977 was hailed as a major event in Kenya's young literary history. Ngugi, the country's best-known author, had not published a novel for ten years, and here at last was *Wockbuster*, his longest and most complex work of fiction. The book was formally launched at a public ceremony in Nairobi by Mwai Kibaki. Then Ministry of Education officials were talking about adopting it as a prescribed text for the "A"-Level School Certificate Examination. Booksellers in Nairobi had difficulty keeping up with the demand for the novel, and Heinemann East Africa had to airfreight more copies from its London headquarters when supplies became depleted after only a few weeks. In short, ***Petals of Blood*** was a huge success, and the publicity surrounding its publication thrust Ngugi back into the national lime-light. July 1977 was probably the supreme highpoint in his career as a writer.

But within six months Ngugi was in prison, having been detained by the Kenya government for reasons that have never been publicly explained. He had been picked up in the early hours of December 31st when eleven police officers entered his home at Limuru saying that they wanted to interrogate him and to examine some of the books in his possession. After a two-hour search, the police took Ngugi to a police station in Kiambu about fifteen miles away, and his family and friends did not see him again until nearly twelve months later when he and other political detainees were released by Jomo Kenyatta's successor, Daniel Arap Moi, on Jamhuri Day (Independence Day, December 12th) in a gesture of national reconciliation.

Since that time most of the ex-detainees have been reabsorbed into the main-stream of Kenyan society (several in fact won seats in Parliament in the last election), but Ngugi has not been permitted to return to his position as Associate Professor in the Literature Department at the University of Nairobi. He has applied for re-instatement, and students and faculty at the university have made numerous appeals in his behalf to institutional and state authorities, but so far these efforts have not brought any tangible results. Ngugi remains the victim of an insidiously secretive form of repression — one that shows no official profile, presses no formal charges, answers no questions, honours no laws, respects no rights. Until the human faces behind this invisible force can be identified

and held accountable for perverting justice, Ngugi very likely will continue to suffer harassment and persecution.

The questions about Ngugi's case that still need to be answered are (1) why was he detained, and (2) upon being released from detention, why was he prevented from resuming his position at the University of Nairobi? In the absence of official ex-planations from the Kenya government, one can only speculate about such matters, but there are sufficient clues in the public record to suggest plausible answers to both questions. Let us look at the avialable evidence and try to interpret it.

What could have happened between July and December of 1977 to persuade people in power that Ngugi deserved to be put away? He had committed no known crimes, criminal or civil, so his offence must have been a political one, but what kind of political offence merits a penalty as severe as detention? Had Ngugi been plotting to overthrow the government by force or take some other drastic treasonable action, he presumably would have been working in collusion with others but since no one else was rounded up and incarcerated at the same time he was, we must conclude that it was the government's view that whatever he did, he did alone. What had he done that no one else had done? Well, he had written that pro-letarian novel, *Petals of Blood*, which contained the harshest indictment of post-colonial Kenya that had ever appeared in local print, albeit in a fictional mode. The novel characterized the landowners and politicians in the country as greedy capitalist leeches living off the lifeblood of peasants and workers. And certain ac-tions depicted in the narrative had an uncomfortably close correlation with real hap-penings, real settings, real people; here was recent Kenyan history being presented as a horror story about villainy in high places. Moreover, it was transparently clear that a portion of the verbal barrage was being aimed at prominent members of the Kenyatta family and that the Old Man himself was not wholly exempt from the mockery and criticism. This was powerful stuff indeed. Nearly all the reviews of the novel published in the Kenyan media spoke of it as an "explosive" book, a "bomb-shell" — and with good reason. Ngugi had said some things that no one else had dared to say quite so openly. Had this been Uganda under Idi Amin, such out-spokenness would have been rewarded with instant execution. But this was Kenya, a more "democratic" society, where freedom of speech was still tolerated, or so it seemed. Ngugi himself, in an interview that appeared in Nairobi's Sunday Nation shortly after the novel was published, said that he had no fears of getting in

trouble with the authorities because of what he had written. He was only doing his job as a loyal citizen, a servant of his society:

I do believe that criticism of our social institutions and structures is a very healthy thing for our society. I believe that we can move forward only through open and healthy criticisms. Writers must sincerely examine all aspects of our national life. If writers chd not do this anywhere in the world, they would be failing in their duties.

Further, he insisted that the novel was more an attack on the nature of neocolonialism in a representative African nation than it has a critique of particular "grabbers of fruits" of independence in Kenya.

It is very, very important for people to realize that it is not a question of one or two names... The novel tries to look at the structure of our society as the root of our social evils, rather than one or two individuals. It looks at things like social inequalities, what is at the root of unequal distribution of wealth, unemployment, etc. Even when talking about the so-called few Africans in top positions, this is not the issue really. The issue is having our own national life dominated by foreigners. Grabbing is a direct consequence of our economy being -dominated by imperialism.

So Ngugi was writing another nationalistic novel, another assault on neocolonialism and imperialism, not merely a diatribe directed against the rich and powerful in Kenya. The real enemy was a foreign abstraction, not a local flesh-and-blood personage.

The novel nonetheless may have offended or disconcerted some of the ruling elite who perhaps, felt that they had glimpsed unflattering reflections of themselves in it. But the novel alone did not lead to Ngugi's detention. Indeed, it has never been ban-ned and is still freely available in Kenyan bookshops. Written words, especially those contained in literacy works, do not seem to matter very much in Kenya. At least they have not yet been known to earn their authors a term in prison.

Spoken words, however, may have an altogether different resonance, particularly if they are spoken in one of Kenya's local languages. Ngugi appears to have been safe from harm so long as he continued writing his works in English. He first got into serious trouble when he co-authored a play in Kikuyu that was staged by villagers at the Kamirithu Community Educational and Cultural Centre in Limuru from October through

November of 1977. After seven weeks of playing to full houses in an open-air theatre that seated more than two thousand people, the production was closed down by the District Commissioner of the area who branded it "provocative" and "not to the best interest of the republic in general".⁴ Forty days later Ngugi was picked up by the police for questioning, the first step towards his detention.

The play, entitled *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I'll marry when I want), was built around a tripartite theme of economic, religious and sexual exploitation. Kiguunda, a poor farm labourer, is persuaded by Kioi, his wealthy Christian employer, to sanctify his "sinful" traditional marriage in church. Kiguunda does not have enough money to pay for the expensive ceremony; so he borrows some from Kioi's bank by offering his own one-and-a-half acres of farm land as collateral. When he defaults on the loan, the land is auctioned off and Kioi buys it so that he and a business associate can build an insecticide factory on it in partnership with a foreign firm. While this is going on, Kioi's playboy son seduces and impregnates Kiguunda's daughter and then rejects her. Kiguunda confronts Kioi on this issue, but Kioi denies that his son would have taken up with a "prostitute" and challenges Kiguunda to bring the matter to court so that "we shall see on whose side the law is."⁵ Kiguunda responds by drawing his sword and threatening Kioi's life, a gesture that could be interpreted as symbolizing the successful armed revolt of the exploited masses against their bourgeois oppressors.

The play itself was not banned by the authorities. Rather, the District Commissioner revoked the Kamirithu Centre's licence to perform it. The play was published in Kikuyu by Heinemann East Africa in April 1980 and has sold quite briskly, going through three printings (a total of 13,000 copies) in its first three months on the market. The Kenyan government has not attempted to prevent or discourage its publication or to interfere with its distribution to booksellers — facts that would seem to confirm the notion that oral performances speak louder than printed words in Kenya.

Why should a rural production of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* have been found so objectionable as to necessitate government suppression? After all, the play itself was not directly critical of the government nor was it unpopular locally. Indeed, according to reports in the newspapers, this three-hour musical drama was an extraordinarily successful show, and people were coming from miles around to see it. Moreover, it was a community enterprise, almost a model harambee (self-help) project that

in-volved a cross-section of the Limuru population — peasants, factory workers, petty traders, unemployed youths, university lecturers. It had originated as a scheme to promote and sustain literacy among villagers who had been taught to read and write at the Kamirithu Community Education and Cultural Centre. Ngugi wa Mirii, who was supervising these literacy classes, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who was living in the community while teaching at the University of Nairobi, had been commissioned by the governing committee of the Centre to write a play that would give the new literates in the community something to do that would help them improve their recently acquired skills. The villagers actually collaborated in the development of the script, designed and built the open-air theatre, and raised the 75,000 shillings (about \$10,000) necessary to produce the play. 6 From start to finish, the production was truly a communal undertaking.

What appears to have worried the authorities a bit Was the play's immense popularity. Had it been flop or fiasco, the government probably would not have bothered to intervene, preferring instead to allow this unusual theatrical experiment to die a quick, natural death. But the play was attracting hordes of viewers, the vast majority of whom were unrestrainedly enthusiastic about what they saw.

And it wasn't only the spectacle of a vibrant stage performance involving singing, dancing and drama that enthralled them; the message embedded in the play was getting across. Ngugi himself has said:

I believe that the play, NGAAHIKA NDEENDA, was very popular because it talked about the extreme poverty of the people. I believe the play was popular because it talked about landlessness in our country. I believe the play was popular because^ it talked about the betrayal of the peasants and workers by the political 'big-wigs'. I believe the play was popular because it talked about the arrogance and the greed of the powerful and the wealthy. Again, I believe the play was popular because it depicted the true conditions of the rural people in the rural villages.

If this is so, then it is not surprising that the District Commissioner of Kiambu received complaints about the performance from some members of the community who did not approve of what was being said and enacted on the Kamirithu stage. These complaints, supplemented by eye-witness reports from, his officers, led the D.C. to decide to shut down the play, even though he himself had never seen a performance.

The reasons given by the Kiambu D.C. taking this course of action are worth scrutinizing.⁸ In elaborating his charge that the production was "provocative", the D.C. reiterated some of the complaints he had received that "the songs, dances and even the dialogue in the play were aimed at creating conflict between different classes of people in Kenya". He noted in particular that the term "homeguards" (Kamatimu) had been used frequently and that "such terms should not be used in public or elsewhere, since they could in the long run revive the bitterness of the Emergency period". Further, he felt that the play sought to "urge people to engage in a 'free-for-all' class war". He concluded his remarks by repeating that "the play does not put across the idea of reminding people to forget the past as our good government has been exhorting us".

These are far from trivial issues in the Kikuyu highlands, an area bloodied by very bitter fighting during the Mau Mau war. There are still many old wounds from that war that have not healed with time, many old scores that have never been settled. This play, the D.C. was saying, was reviving past animosities, reopening those wounds. The issue of "homeguards" was particularly sensitive one, for this was the term applied to the Kikuyu who had fought in the war for independence on the side of the British colonial government. Some of these "homeguards" were portrayed in the play as among the worst of Kenya's neo-colonial exploiters today, men who had profited handsomely from the national independence they had earlier sought to forestall, retard to subvert. The D.C. apparently feared that the play, by stirring up memories of the past, might lead to a disturbance of the peace, perhaps even to serious violence and mayhem. The revocation of the licence of the play may therefore be viewed as an effort to maintain law and order by suppressing a re-awakening of the community's collective consciousness of history.

But the detention of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's forty days later must be regarded as an act of another sort, especially since he was never charged with any crimes. It appears that he was victimized both as a penalty for his writings and as a warning to others who might be tempted by his example to mix too much potpourri with literature.

Since no one else associated with *Ngaahika IMdeenda* — his co-author, the director, the actors — was detained, one must conclude that it was not the play — alone that led to Ngugi's imprisonment; the play may have been the last straw but it was not the only straw in Ngugi's case. Also, since no charges were filed against him, it must be assumed that the Kenyan government knew that it had no legal justification for denying

him his freedom. The state was deliberately victimizing him for no valid reasons. So while the closing down of the play may be seen as a preventive measure, the detention of Ngugi must be recognised as a terror tactic.

Ngugi's experiences after his release from detention in December 1978 tend to confirm suspicions that he is being singled out for harassment, but it remains difficult to identify his harassers. First there was an attempt in March 1979 to ruin his reputation as a responsible citizen. He and the co-author of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, Ngugi wa Mirii had gone to a small bar at Kamirithu Trading Centre on the evening of March 7th, and at 12:40 a.m. local police officers swooped in and arrested them for drinking after hours (i.e., after midnight). They were also charged with behaving in a disorderly manner at the police station while they were being booked. It was said that they had shouted, banged the police counter and cell doors, refused to be searched or to have their belts taken off, and tried to force officers on duty to release them and other prisoners. Both men were later released on bail pending a hearing.

When the case was tried in court on April 27th, the two Ngugis denied all charges claiming that they were picked up about 11:30p.m., not 12:40a.m., and that they had never resisted arrest, used abusive language, or behaved in a disorderly manner. They then made several counter-charges, asserting that they had been beaten up and kicked by the arresting officers, had been thrown like "a bag of salt" into the police vehicle, and had never at any time been told why they were being arrested, even though they had repeatedly demanded to know the charges.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o' went further and stated that he had been sober, having drunk only two bottles of beer during the day; he explained that since being released from detention, he had been living peacefully at home with his family, and on the few occasions when he went out, he was very careful to monitor his alcoholic intake because he had been receiving constant death threats on the telephone: "I have been receiving these threats, including three yesterday. This has forced me to restrict my movements, because I don't know who is behind these death threats".

He therefore drank very little "because I must be in the position of knowing what is happening around me."¹⁰ Ngugi's charges of physical brutality were supported by a doctor who had examined both defendants on March 8th and found them suffering from injuries which might have

been caused by a blunt instrument such as a shoe or a boot. The Kiambu senior resident magistrate who heard the case was of the opinion that there had been exaggerations by both the prosecution and the defence, but he acquitted the Ngugis of «the drinks charge on a minor technicality (the bar was not licenced), cleared them of ancillary charges of disorderly conduct, and reprimanded the police for using unnecessary force in the arrest.¹¹ Ngugi wa Thiong had successfully exonerated himself in court, but the ominous telephone death threats continued in the months that followed.

Who would make such threats? Powerful national or local political figures? Wealthy landowners and businessmen? Ex-homeguards? Cranks? Pranksters? Ngugi himself said he did not know, and at present it is impossible to determine whether this sort of terror emanates from a source inside or outside the Kenyan government. One would like to think that government officials would not use such tactics, but then how does one account for the trumped-up drinks charge? Who would have sent policemen in the middle of the night to arrest two sober adults at a Kamirithu bar? Whoever is responsible for their arrest must have sufficient political power to influence the manner in which laws are enforced in the community. Not everyone has the authority to send cops out on a raid.

The campaign to get Ngugi reinstated in his job at the University of Nairobi began almost as soon as he was released from detention. Initially Ngugi himself did not take an active part in this campaign, preferring to wait to hear from the university. But when university officials remained silent on the matter, students began to hold mass meetings, make appeals to the administrative authorities, and then sent petitions directly to the Chancellor, who happens to be President Daniel Arap Moi. Still nothing happened. After two and half months had passed, Ngugi's faculty colleagues met and revived a quiescent University Academic Staff Union which also exerted pressure of their own.

The Executive Committee of the Union met with the Vice-Chancellor and then the Union addressed its own petition to Chancellor Moi, urging that Ngugi be allowed to resume his teaching duties on the grounds that:

he is a patriot and a scholar who greatly loves his country; he is an outstanding teacher with proven capability to contribute to the development of our society; he is the only Kenyan creative writer of

international repute... (and) he can fully participate fully in nation-building by taking his place in the Univer-sity.

The government's response to this petition took the form of complete silence. Another two and a half months passed. Finally, Ngugi himself wrote to the University Council expressing his readiness to resume teaching duties. Following upon this, the Executive Committee of the Union met with the Vice-Chancellor early in June to discuss the case further, whereupon they were told that "the question of Prof. Ngugi rested with people other than the University authorities. His situation... was an 'act of state'."

During the next six weeks the faculty Union tried without success to arrange an appointment with President/Chancellor Moi. They also sent him another petition and issued a lengthy press release telling what had led to their petition. By the end of July, members of Kenya's Parliament were beginning to ask the "Assistant Minister of Education to explain why Ngugi was being denied the opportunity to resume his duties at the university. The Assistant Minister replied that Ngugi could resume his teaching career if he complied with his employer's wish that he reapply for his former position and meet certain conditions. The university authorities felt it was necessary for him to reapply because he had already been paid his terminal benefits when his contract had expired while he was in detention.

The government, in other words, was shifting the blame for his non-reinstatement back to the university as well as unto Ngugi himself. It was merely a matter of completing all the bureaucratic paper-work, filling out the necessary forms. But Ngugi didn't see it this way, and he was quick to point out the contradictions between the statements made by the Assistant Minister of Education and those contained in letters and remarks by university officials.

First, he revealed that he had been paid terminal benefits on December 18, 1978, ix days after he had been released from detention, not while he was in detention.

Second, he pointed out that he was on "permanent and pensionable terms of service and not on contract" at the university; this meant that he should not have been dismissed except upon conviction for criminal activity, but during the many months he was in detention, he had never even been charged with committing a crime.

Third, he had not been offered new terms of employment by the university. Moreover, only a few days after the Assistant Minister's statement, he had received a letter from the Registrar of the university reiterating the view that "the contract between yourself and the University of Nairobi was dissolved by an act of state the day you were taken away and detained." Ngugi had also been told this earlier by the Vice-Chancellor of the university, who had stated that his case was "a matter of public security and needed clearance from somewhere". When Ngugi had asked him to put this into writing, the Vice-Chancellor had told him that "nothing involving him and the university could be put in writing". Ngugi concluded that the university authorities, by making such statements and denying any responsibility for his dismissal, were "trying to imply that my case was beyond solution by any authority in Kenya." He characterised the dismissal itself as secret, unilateral, unjust, arbitrary and illegal.

In the year and some months since Ngugi made these charges, no progress has been made toward his reinstatement. In November 1979, the post of Professor in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi was publicly advertised, and Ngugi applied for it, but no action has yet been taken on his application. In June 1980, Kenya's House of Parliament passed a motion urging the Government and the private sector "to assist the ex-detainees in obtaining the jobs for which they qualify to enable them to earn a living," but a month later President Moi responded by stating that he "could not be expected to give such people priority in jobs since they had been 'undermining' the government of the late President Jomo Kenyatta."!

At the same time Moi accused the University Academic Staff Union of planning subversive activities, including killings, and took steps to have it banned.¹⁸ Thus Ngugi lost the services of the one organised group in Kenya that was energetically lobbying in his behalf.

Ngugi's plight remains a national embarrassment today, but no one in the Kenyan Government seems to be disposed to help him out. Soon he will have spent three full years in limbo, a form of detention without bars. Can Kenya afford to waste the talents of one of its most dedicated and highly principled sons? More important, can Kenya long continue to deny basic human rights to one of its citizens without suffering serious erosion of its credibility as a decent and just society?

Kenya has high reputation abroad not only for its stability and commitment to democratic ways but also for its moral integrity. The United States Department of State recently published a report declared that "Kenya's human rights record is among the best in Africa." But if someone like Ngugi wa Thiong'o' can be locked up for a year for no lawful reason, if he can be harassed afterwards by police authorities, if he can be prevented from returning to his job "without clearance from somewhere", then Kenya does not deserve its reputation for social justice. Indeed, such deliberate victimization of individuals or groups is a sure sign of tyranny.

The most ominous aspect of Ngugi's situation is that he is not the only artist in Kenya to have suffered at the hands of the Government. Ngugi himself recently cited other examples in a BBC interview:

The most important case was Abdilatif Abdullah, the well-known Swahili poet who was for three years put in a maximum security prison for writing a pamphlet saying "Kenya Twendapi?" (Kenya, where are we heading to?) Then in 1977...another writer and critic. Dr. Micere Mugo, was tortured in police cells. Much more recently in 1979, there was a case of some girls at a secondary school who wrote a play called "What a World, My People!" which was officially entered for a national drama competition.

The play was performed in English to enthusiastic audiences, but the moment they translated the play into Kikuyu and performed it for their peasant parents the police moved in and stopped the performance of the play. Subsequently, all the girls involved in writing the play or in acting in the play were expelled from the school. Let me put it this way: the girls were expelled from the school under one pretext or another, but it was very noticeable that all the girls expelled had been involved in the play. I am talking about a general tendency, since Independence, for increasing repressive measures against writers and artists.

What calls for such repressive measures? Why should the Government feel impelled to take such steps against writers and artists? Of his own case Ngugi has said: "I believe I was detained because I wrote truthfully about the Kenyan historical situation, both past and current."²¹ This appears to have been the same offence that got Abdillatif Abdullah, Micere Mugo, and high school creators of "What a World, My People!" into trouble. Evidently, in Kenya today, "truth hurts", but it is most likely to hurt not those about whom it is spoken, nor those to whom it is

spoken, but rather those patriots who dare to speak such truth aloud in a local language.

NOTES

1. Micere Githae-Mugo, then a Lecturer in the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi, had been interrogated, physically abused by police, and held in prison for a few days early in 1978; no formal charges were ever brought against her and she was not detained. She co-authored a play with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (Nairobi: Heinemann East Africa, 1976), which imaginatively reconstructed an episode in the life of Kenya's most famous Mau Mau leader. The play had been performed in Nairobi in October 1976 and had been one of two plays chosen to represent Kenya in the drama competition at the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos in January and February of 1977.
2. See, e.g., *Weekly Review*, 27 June 1979, pp. 39-40; *Nairobi Times*, 6 November 1977, p. 11; *Viva*, July 1977, pp. 35-36; *Daily Nation*, 15 July 1977, p. 14.
3. *Nation*, 15 July 1977, p. 14.
4. *Sunday Nation*, 17 July 1977, p. 10.
5. Mungai wa Kamau, "Ngugi play banned because 'provocative'." *Nairobi Times*, 4 December 1977, p. 1.
6. This summary is based on several reviews of the play: Karugu Gitau, *Weekly Review*, January 1978, p. 13; Maguyu K. Maguyi, *Weekly Review*, 25 April 1980, p. 17.
7. For a brief history of the production, see *Weekly Review* 9 January, 1978, pp. 11-12; Ngugi wa Mirie, "Kamirithu Literacy Project", *Kenya Journal of Adult Education*, 7, 1 (1979), 7-10; Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "For the first time, the people could see themselves," *Guardian*, 11 June 1980, p. 15; Miriam Kahiga, "Kamirithu Revisited," *Daily Nation*, 19 January 1979, p. 11; and Ahmed Rajab, "Detained in Kenya," *Index on Censorship*, 7, 3, (1978), 7-10. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirie have also prefaced the published version of *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (Nairobi: Heinemann East Africa, 1980) with an account, in Kikuyu, of the production.
8. *Weekly Review*, 5 January 1979, p. 32.
9. See Mungai wa Kamau, p. 1, and Fibi Munene, "The Last Word," *Daily Nation*, 14 December 1977, p. 19.

10. Standard, 9 March 1979, p. 1; Weekly Review, 16 March 1979, pp. 21-22.
11. Daily Nation, 28 April 1979, p. 24.
12. Daily Nation, 5 May 1979, pp. 1,24, Weekly Review, 11 May 1979, p. 23.
13. Quoted from "A Brief Report on USD's Struggle to Have Prof. Ngugi Resume His Duties at the University", mimeographed newsletter of the University Academic Staff Union (ca. May 1980), pp. 55—56. Weekly Review, 20 July 1979, p. 13.
14. Daily Nation, 1 August 1979, 4; Weekly Review, 3 August 1979, pp. 5—6.
15. Weekly Review, 24 August 1979, p. 11; Daily Nation, 21 August 1979, p. 20; Standard, 21 August 1979, p. 2.
16. Standard, 12 June 1980 p. 2; Sunday Nation, 15 June 1980, p. 5.
17. Weekly Review, 11 July 1980, pp. 10-11.
18. Weekly Review, 18 July 1980, p. 4.
19. United States Department of State Bureau of Public Affairs, "Horn of Africa," Current Policy, No. 141 (25 February 1980) p.3.
20. BBC African Service, Arts and Africa, No. 347G (1980). p. 1.
21. Ngugi wa Thiong'o "The Making of a Rebel," Index on Censorship, 9,3, (1980), 24.