



# Fifty Years Later, The Caged Bird Still Sings

By Wandia Njoya



A few years ago, I attended a public lecture by Micere Mugo at the University of Nairobi. The event was electrifying, and three memories have stayed with me.

First was to hear Prof. Mugo's journey as an African woman in an anti-African world. Recounting her journey was not a story about herself, but a story about all of us. From the toxic space that was (and still is) Kenya, to Zimbabwe where she initially landed, and finally the United States, Prof Mugo was profoundly African and connected with brothers and sisters wherever she landed. She would later speak at a lecture at Riara University words which I tweeted and which may therefore not be verbatim: "If you have chosen the path of struggle, you must have the courage to build a new home wherever your path leads. Don't romanticise home; you must have the courage to make new homes and new roots."

The second memory was a brilliant orature-performance by Mshai Mwangola in her introduction of Micere Mugo. The performance included the rehashing of a heated conversation on African studies that had been launched in 1995 by Phillip Curtin, the eminent African history scholar in the United States. Curtin expressed concern that African history scholarship was being reduced to a "ghetto" because American universities were reserving African history positions for African faculty rather than considering competence. Prof. Mugo's response then was captivating, and Mshai's performance seared it in my memory so deeply that a few years later, I was inspired by Prof Mugo's courage [to take a similar stand](#).

The third memory was a sadder one. In the afterglow of electrifying performances by scholars and students, a University of Nairobi student asked Prof. Mugo during the question and answer session: “How can you help us the youth [it’s always “the youth”] get the opportunities you got?”

Clearly, the student didn’t hear Prof. Mugo recount being arrested, fleeing the country with two young daughters and having her Kenyan citizenship nullified. In an act of amazing mental acrobatics, the student’s mind cut out Prof. Mugo’s journey and fixated the whole time on the optics. All that the student saw was an elder (that’s what the term “youth” is for — to disconnect young people from the stories of their elders) who was based in the US (where we all aspire to go) and who was now launching a book. Kenyan youth need to be successful like that (never mind the tears) and this student wanted to know, not how to do what Prof. Mugo had done, but how Prof. Mugo could help her achieve the same feat of working in the US and standing at a podium in Kenya.

That disconnect, between the stories of the elders and the fixation of the youth with optics, is something with which we teachers of literature constantly struggle. Students these days are spectacularly unable to enjoy stories and to explore their imagination. The school system teaches children to turn off their hearts and minds when they listen to stories. Kenyans have told me on social media that when they encountered our folk tales in class, the primary thing they were asked was to identify “the moral of the story”.

My own difficult experience teaching literature bears this out. Students’ response to every African story is that “the white man stole our culture, we are ashamed of our identity and need to return to our cultures”. But even as they limit colonialism to an exclusively cultural enterprise, they are not able to connect with stories of the past to which they say we should return to.

For instance, when I teach one of my favorite Kenyan plays, Omtatah’s rendition of the Luo legend Lwanda Magere, the students cannot see a story from the past. They see politics, not humanity or esthetics. Some see the story as ethnic and exclusively Luo, so they cannot discuss the legend as an artistic and human expression. Other students who’ve heard something about feminism say that the legend demonstrates how African women are relegated to the role of “housewives”. Who can blame the students for thinking that way when the theater performance *Brazen* missed the tragic aspect of the legend and sensualised the Lang’o princess? Another student said that Lwanda Magere was an ogre and read the story as a motivational speech with teachings which “help one to live to its optimal success”.

And just before Kenyan adults distance themselves from these responses and blame the 8.4.4 system, they need to see that the youth are just responding with the language we have taught them. Remember the excitement about the movie *Black Panther* which electrified the world? For Kenyans, the primary concern was the [authenticity of the accents](#) and the depiction of Africa. Some went so far as to say - no chills - that they are glad not to have the same identity crises as African Americans. At least we Kenyans know who we are, they said, something that I highly doubt when I look at how profoundly Eurocentric the Kenyan government is.

Educated Kenyans are spectacularly unable to suspend reality and enjoy a story for what it is, because esthetics and imagination have been alienated from the arts in Kenya. Even our drama festivals are about competition and “talent”, not a celebration of the richness of our cultures. These days, the festival even requires plays to be written to the chosen political theme of the year, and now students are not writing plays because the schools are hiring professional playwrights to improve the schools’ chances of winning.

But that is not as annoying as the clichéd lament about talent that is repeated in almost every sphere of Kenyan life. The lament goes something like this: “Our drama festivals show how much talent we

have, but that talent goes to waste because nobody gives the youth the chance to use it". I detest that line because what Kenyans call "talent" is a concept which refuses to see the arts as work, skill and knowledge, and instead seeks comfort in the quasi-Senghorian idea of arts being in our DNA as Africans because our skin is black. The concept of "talent" demeans African work, knowledge and skill, and demeans Africans as thinking beings. But as the public narrative goes, knowledge in Kenya is "useless theory". We Kenyans don't waste time on thinking, imagining and creating; we benchmark solutions which work.

In any case, talent is not wasted after school. What happens is that Kenyan artists who outgrow the narrow drama festival box will meet another headmaster called Ezekiel Mutua who will crush their work in the name of morality, and he will get support from a significant proportion of the Kenyan church. Ironically, Mutua will praise drama festivals as producing people who "[make money and find a life](#)", establish industries comparable to manufacturing, and promote the programmes of government ministries. In other words, humanity is not at the heart of the arts.

And that logic seeps into the universities and education policy. It is now a Kenyan truism that arts education is a waste of the country's resources and that arts programmes should be shut down. And the impact of this onslaught may not be immediately visible to people in public universities, because it is reserved for private universities where the arts are largely absent.

A more insidious development is being ushered in by private universities, which the current the Education Cabinet Secretary George Magoha said he is [committed to supporting](#). Universities increasingly train students in the applied arts without training them in the arts. So universities train economists or peace and conflict experts with no knowledge of history, sociology or anthropology. They train journalists who are not skilled writers, and flood the arts spaces with public relations graduates. They have film students who confidently discuss film festivals, camera angles and lenses but cannot say much about the stories which the films tell. They train graphic artists who never paint or sculpt. A few years back, celebrated writer Yvonne Owuor [wondered at this absurdity](#): "I hear that high schools are sending students to university engineering, design and architecture faculties, who cannot draw, who cannot even describe a painting. How? Really, how? Is it ignorance or is there a secret plan to bankrupt the Kenyan imagination?"

The problem is not so much that we have no students in arts programmes, but that we are producing a generation of graduates with no esthetic or emotional sensibilities, and as Owuor says, with no imagination. We have left these areas to be weaponised by corporations and the imperialist state. So Cambridge Analytica was able to have a field day in Kenya during the 2017 elections by [manipulating our emotions](#), and now Health Cabinet Secretary Mutahi Kagwe is taking us through the pandemic with imperial orders about [how we must express our grief](#) for Dr Stephen Mogusu's death. When the state has the gall to tell us how to mourn the victims of its own corruption, there's a problem.

In the political arena, politicians sponsor music for campaigns and for turning ethnic groups against each other. Performances of traditional arts are most celebrated at political rallies or at contrived "elders' councils" which anoint politicians for office. Oaths, spears and arrows are at their most useful not for teaching our children the history of African military warfare, [but for gerrymandering](#), the American term for what we in Kenya call "election violence", a tool for fixing election results. *Wazungu* are pleased when we're fighting over ballots with oaths and spears, because it shows they still have something to teach us savages about liberal democracy. And now the BBI proposes to further control not just the arts, [but also memory](#), by writing an "official history of Kenya" dating 1000 years, appointing an Official Historian and putting the National Archives under the Office of the President.

When the arts are not suffering from government suffocation, they are being corporatised. Safaricom, the country's largest corporate, was the sponsor of its own arts forums while *Kwani?* and *Story Moja* festivals limped and eventually fell silent.

In the end, the only space left for the arts to publicly thrive uninhibited is the university. But as the Department of Literature's installment of the University of Nairobi's [50th anniversary celebration shows](#), even that is fraught with the same contradictions.

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After the official welcome remarks from the Head of Department and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Prof. Indangasi conducted a reprise of his questioning the hallowed status of Ngugi wa Thiong'o in African literature. Indangasi had [most recently done this](#) with an analysis of the Spanish separatist politics underlying the award of the Catalonia International Literary Prize, which Ngugi accepted with a speech in Kikuyu. During this commemoration, Prof. Indangasi presented archival records [to cast doubts on](#) Ngugi's claims to credit for renaming the Department of English to the Department of Literature. The argument he has always made is that Kenyan literary studies have shut off the universal, denied students the pleasure of studying non-African literature and have put political ideology above academic pursuits. The iconic status of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, he suggests, remains an obstacle to addressing these issues.

Prof Indangasi's presentation was followed by more mellowed considerations of Ngugi's legacy from Prof. Evan Mwangi, who is based at Northwestern University in the US. Prof. Mwangi acknowledged the blind spots of Ngugi's work, but ended with a call to envision literary studies within the inclusivity politics of the American academy, where expansion of literary studies is measured by how many more identity groups are included.

Prof. Peter Amuka followed with a historical contextualisation of the targets of Prof. Indangasi's criticism, especially Owuor Anyumba and Ngugi. He credited these two men for Africanising the curriculum by breaking the disciplinary boundary limits beyond the snobbish classics and encouraging the study of the literature of the people. An interesting but troubling anecdote he gave was of being a student in the US in the 70s, and being told by an American political science professor that the Literature department of the University of Nairobi had now been "tamed" and relieved of its firebrands.

As is expected of we women academics who do not separate our biographies from academic and national discussions, the women speakers reflected on their personal journeys as threads of national and academic histories. Prof. Wangui wa Goro spoke of how her growth as a translator of literature intersected with the department's scholars and literary activities. Prof. Ciarunji Chesaina began her presentation with a song for Micere Mugo, in the spirit of Prof. Mugo's poetry, to pay homage to Prof. Mugo for her legacy in the study of oral literature.

Before Micere Mugo gave her keynote speech, Kithaka wa Mberia went through the contributions of self-publishing to the Kenyan literary space.

Micere Mugo's celebration of the department, in her classic and moving orature style, gave the audience the backdrop of what her generation was confronting in the 1960s and 1970s. The education system was still controlled by British civil servants even after independence, and the urgency was to Africanise the system. Micere Mugo was the first African chief examiner for 'A' level literature and was part of the team that pushed for an African literature curriculum in schools. In her day, she said, it was a compliment to be told that one behaved like a *mzungu* or looked like a *mzungu*. She also called for affirming the integrity of African knowledge and African systems of

knowing.

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What is the link between the reflections of our elders and the current situation facing the arts that I have described?

Initially, I felt that there was no link and that these elders were stuck in the past. But upon further reflection, I remembered that one of the lessons I have learned from oral literature is that there is value in the elders repeating the past over and over again, because each time, new lessons are learned.

That is when I saw what my discomfort was about. It was about [the failure of our generation](#) of scholars to take the baton from the elders and continue the race. Because various political and historical events which some of us are still trying to understand, our generation is stuck in the battles between the so-called “universal” scholarship and academic culture on one hand, and Africanising the curriculum on the other. The political class reduced the Africanisation of the curriculum to a spectacle, and then used that spectacle to crush our children’s imagination.

In fact, when you think of it, the side that is hostile to what Prof. Indangasi calls “literary activism” is the side that dominates arts and education. He may be a lone voice on this position within the Literature Department, but that “universal” view has now colonised Kenya’s education system. Only a few years ago, I was the sole African on a panel with a “global” face, in my own country, fighting like Micere Mugo for Kenyan scholarship to be part of the post-graduate curriculum. In addition, Prof. Indangasi’s lament that Owuor Anyumba and Ngugi wa Thiong’o are not academically qualified is now the *rungu* with which the Commission of University Education beats us through demands that all university educators must have PhDs. In the area of music, for example, the Commission alienates Kenyan musicians who are more skilled in the craft than many music academics. Several times, I’ve personally raised this question with CUE officials and have received no answer: where are we going to find a seasoned performer of the *nyatiti*, for example, with a PhD? Our fixation on papers denies students the opportunity to learn from Kenya’s rich cultural heritage.

This is what our generation has not told our elders like Micere Mugo: the colonialist is still in our education system. These days, the colonialist is not a British civil servant sitting in Jogoo house. Rather, it is a British [nursery school teacher](#) working at the British Council and sponsoring the return of the ‘A’ level system, otherwise dubbed as CBC. PR has given colonialism a new vocabulary to re-assert its power over our education system. Colonialism now calls itself “[quality](#)” and “benchmarking” as it asserts the policies of corporations and Western governments in our education system.

The elders Africanised education, but my generation did not take over that struggle and Africanise power. When the colonial logic of power remained intact, it was only a matter of time before power appropriated the tools of Africanisation to perpetuate itself. Thus, when Binyavanga was starting *Kwani?*, it [is us academics](#) who called the artists “literary gangsters”. We even turned African culture into a tool of condemnation by saying that those artists were not tied to their cultural roots. As writers struggled to find publishers, we berated them for the quality of their publications. Now politicians have solidly captured African culture and made it synonymous with enmity, tribal hatred and sexism.

And after the Africanisation of the ‘A’ Level curriculum, we have since discovered a truth which was smothered by the brutality of Moi: the ‘A’ level system was designed [to exclude and limit](#) the number of Africans attending university. Moreover, that exclusion disproportionately affected people from

communities outside Central Province and Nyanza. But that exclusion has now returned with CBC which has increased the number of examination hoops which students have to go through (but which have been baptised “assessments”), and has restored the number of years in high school to six.

What my generation did not see is that capital capitulated to Africanisation and gave us the logic of inclusivity - which Prof. Mwangi called for more of - and which, in the American academy, goes under the banner [of postcolonial theory](#). In this logic, culture is reified to the exclusion of everything else, especially material conditions.

A few years ago, I witnessed an expression of this dynamic at the Samosa Festival conference held at the University of Nairobi. Some presenters said that the Mau Mau took up arms to fight for the right to practice their culture. It appeared that for them, the fight was not about land or against oppression. At the conference, we who said that not everything is about ethnicity, were derided as entitled Kenyans who had never been outside Nairobi, yet the point of the festival was to discuss the alienation of people like Asians, Nubians, Somalis, the Shona and the Makonde, from Kenyan citizenship.

Which brings me back to the dilemmas of younger Kenyans and how our generation is mis-teaching them. Coloniality of power has now clothed itself in “African identity” to entrench itself in the education system, so that students who interact with African arts are spectacularly unable to imagine or to connect with humanity, and instead parrot whatever government or NGO slogan comes to their mind. Moreover, the media has occupied the space that should be occupied by culture, performance and academic research, so that, as Mwenda Kithinji [recently said](#), the junk which the media consistently feeds us has made us academics impotent in flagging the return of racist policies to our education system.

And that was the ultimate point of westernising our curriculum in the first place. It was not for us to forget our cultures, as my students innocently but mistakenly repeat. It was for power to keep exploiting us by killing our ability to imagine a different reality.

And that discussion is happening not within the academy, but outside it. Most of the Kenyans addressing these issues are not allowed to teach in Kenyan universities. To adapt Mordecai Ogada’s observation, the people who sing the songs which Micere Mugo sang are still being exiled from the education system and from spaces where the songs can be heard by the next generation.

But the songs are still being sung. We have not been tamed by neoliberal regulations about qualifications and morality. We have not been tamed by what Ogada called an internal brain drain, where our skills and ideas are wasted on dead bureaucracy. We are still singing those songs. We are singing them outside the academy in online spaces and through self-publishing. Our young people are singing them as they battle with the hammer of censorship and the snobbery of the academy. To adopt the words of Maya Angelou, and of Paul Lawrence Dunbar before her, we may be caged by neoliberalism, deadened minds and soulless people. But the caged bird sings, not because it has a solution, but because it always has a song.

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