

Interview with Ngugi wa Thiong'o

by William Acworth

[Editor's note: This interview was conducted on 10 November 1990 in Washington, D. C. Mwakenya is the source for all figures given. Readers interested in more background information on the current political circumstances in Kenya can refer to the Nairobi-based Weekly Review of 21 December 1990, which includes a number of articles under the heading "A Tumultuous Year."]

Could you describe *Mwakenya* and your role in it?

I am simply a spokesman. *Mwakenya* has been and still is an underground movement, but it was felt that a spokesman was needed to reply to allegations that have been made about *Mwakenya*.

In 1987 we released our "Draft Minimum Program." According to this document, we have seven objectives: 1) the recovery of national sovereignty, which has been compromised by successive post-colonial regimes; 2) the establishment of a national economy, where the resources of the land will go to the benefit of all Kenyans; 3) the establishment of a democratic political system, guaranteeing the right to freedom of speech and the freedom to organize; 4) social justice for the majority; 5) a democratic and patriotic culture; 6) the pursuit of an independent foreign policy; and 7) the establishment of a strong people's defense force.

But to understand *Mwakenya* you must see it in the context of the growth of repression and resistance in Kenya since the mid-1970s. With the banning of the Kenya People's Union in 1970, it was increasingly clear that it was not possible for us to organize above ground. Kenya had become a *de facto* one-party state, which was formalized in 1982. From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s all independent social, cultural and political organizations were either totally abolished or incorporated as organs of the ruling party. For example, look what just happened to Maendeleo ya Wanawake. We saw a very sharp intensification of repression during this period—detention without trial, imprisonment on false charges, forcing people into exile, torture, and death in police cells, and so on. There was the Wanjiru massacre in 1984, when more than 1000 Kenyan Somali were wiped out. This was totally hushed up inside the country. The most recent examples are the deaths of Bishop Muge and (Robert) Ouko, the Foreign Minister, (even though he was a loyalist. Since 1988, the secret ballot was replaced by

queuing, the independence of the judiciary was removed, and other changes were made. What has happened is that Kenya has moved from a [President Daniel Arap] Moi-KANU dictatorship to a personal dictatorship, using KANU as an instrument of personal rule.

How does *Mwakenya* fit into this context?

In the mid-1970s people began to organize underground, manifesting themselves in above-ground publications, such as *Independent Kenya*, by the Chache group. These culminated in the appearance of the December 12th Movement and its publication *Pambana*, which was circulated widely in 1982. *Mwakenya* is an offshoot of the December 12th Movement.

Why December 12th?

The December 12th Movement said that what had gone wrong with Kenya began the very day of independence. They believed that the KANU manifesto was basically a good document, but thereafter was subverted in various ways.

As a writer, you put a strong emphasis on the relationship between present-day politics and changes taking place within African societies during the colonial era. Yet what you just said seems to imply that the problems only started after independence. What is *Mwakenya's* analysis of the colonial era?

You should look at our Draft Minimum Program, it is all there. Basically it traces the history of resistance to foreign invasions as well as internal repression. As early as the 17th century Kenyans revolted against the Portuguese. By the same token, if you look at that history, there have always been those who collaborated with forces of external control or who were themselves part of the internal machinery of repression.

What does the term "multiparty democracy" mean in the Kenyan context?

The multiparty label is a symbol for many things. No one believes that a multiparty system by itself will bring about democracy, since even during the years 1970 to 1982 Kenya was legally a multiparty state and yet there was no democracy. But equally well a one-party state is not a guarantor of democracy either! At the heart of democracy is the question of accountability to the people. The right to

choose, the right to organize. Unless we have these rights, we cannot have democracy.

The interesting thing is that if you look at the underground publications from the early 1980s you will see that these ideas have been consistent themes. It is the underground resistance which has linked the economic, political and social problems to the KANU political system. What has happened in 1990 is that what has often been debated underground has suddenly come to the fore and has been taken up by other forces, for instance, the clergy and the lawyers. Whereas before, workers were always on strike, peasants were uprooting trees, students were demonstrating, but there was a tendency to see these things in isolation. That is, the workers would see their problems as economic, or the peasants might see their problem as wrong official in a cooperative. Now for the first time all these forces began to openly link their problems to the political system, as symbolized by Moi and KANU. They are saying that our problems have to do with the type of party KANU is and the type of leader Moi is.

So the multiparty label symbolizes a rejection of Moi and KANU and what they represent, no matter in what guise they may come tomorrow or the next day.

There is another important aspect of democracy in Africa. The evolution of democracy is not an abstract phenomenon, even in the West. It was always linked to a struggle against something else. For example the evolution of bourgeois democracy in Europe has to be linked to the struggle against feudal systems. In the same way, the struggle for democracy in Africa today becomes meaningful when it is linked to the struggle against neocolonial structures.

Given that Kenya is itself a state created by the partition of Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1885, is it not a neocolonial way of thinking when *Mwakenya* speaks of a Kenyan nation?

Not necessarily. The Kenyan nation, the sense of Kenyan-ness, if formed in the struggle against external forms of domination. This also happened in Europe, different municipalities evolved in struggle against what they saw as inhibitive structures. By the way, do you know what *Mwakenya* stands for? *Muungano wa Wazalendo wa Kenya*—the Union of Patriots for the Liberation of Kenya.

How do you interpret recent efforts at reform by the government, such as the KANU review committee?

Our position is that the regime is using the Review Committee as a way of containing internal and external pressures. We think they are

going to make a few concessions, such as restoring the secret ballot or allowing the people expelled from KANU to return. But we do not expect them to address the central issue, the right of Kenyans to organized, to make their own choices. If the reforms do not address these issues, they will be no more than reformist gestures.

The U. S. Congress recently set sharp restrictions on aid to Kenya. What effect will this have on Kenya?

The way to look at it is this. The Kenyan government feels more confident in repressing when they feel they have support from the West. To criticism from within they react with police boots and military violence, but to external pressure they whine and cry and then employ very expensive public relations firms to get their point across. Their mentality is such that they feel more accountable to the West than to their own people. I feel the U. S. A. can do more, but that was an important step. Aid should be tied to democracy inside the country, democracy as accountability.

How is the situation in Kenya linked to the rest of Africa?

Mwakenya believes very strongly in the unity of East Africa. Our Draft Minimum Program states quite categorically that we are committed to the regional unity of East African and the unity of the continent as a whole, in that order. Therefore, we do not see any contradiction between the aspirations of Kenyan peoples, and the aspirations of the Tanzanian peoples, the Ugandan peoples, the Sudanese peoples, the Ethiopian peoples, and the Somali peoples.

The other thing that is happening across the continent, and this is more my own thought, is that external observers are seeing for the first time what we have been saying all along, that there can be no stability without democracy, democracy as defined as real and genuine accountability to the people. There cannot even be economic development without democracy, for the two are tied. Economic instability creates political instability and political instability inhibits people's capacity to be fully involved in production and to come up with imaginative responses to their economic woes. So the two are tied. It is only now that the external world is beginning to say "Ah ha! so there is a linkage between democracy and these things," whereas Africans have been saying all along that there is no democracy.

This point is very important. All along we have been saying that we want democracy. Even during the colonial era, they were saying the same thing. We had no democracy during the colonial era. When were there ever elections during the colonial era? It is very insulting to Africans when outside observers say that what is happening in Africa is

because of Eastern Europe. What about all the years of anticolonial struggle? What about all the literature of the 1960s, the 1970s, and the 1980s that cried for democracy? But the West is very keen to always interpret events in Africa in terms of tribes.

What is the connection between *Umoja-Kenya* and *Mwakenya*?

Mwakenya is an underground movement inside the country. *Umoja-Kenya* is externally based and above ground. The membership consists mainly of Kenyans in exile. They support *Mwakenya's* Draft Minimum Program, particularly the seven objectives. Abdulatif Abdulla is the coordinator.

In its documents, *Mwakenya* has often referred to the "culture of fear and silence." What exactly are you referring to?

From the mid-1970s up to now, there has been a culture of fear and silence in Kenya. This has been the culture that the government has tried to impose. You can see how detentions were so selectively done to impose silence among Kenyans. This year the people just revolted against that culture. Despite the killings, the detentions, the arrests, people inside Kenya are speaking much more openly. The barrier has been broken.

Our booklet, "Moi's Reign of Terror," shows that between 1979 and 1989 there have been over 6000 killings by the armed forces of the regime. This is a devastating record. It is ridiculous for people in the West to say that Kenya is not as bad as certain other countries, when in fact by any statistics, what is happening is as bloody if not bloodier than other tyrannies. What is worse for the Kenyan people is that while other tyrannies can be explained in terms of military regimes, Kenya has been wearing a mask of a democratic regime.

What will your next book be?

I have no idea. It's always a secret, you know, what a writer is working on. Which can often mean he is not working! Actually, I am working on some critical essays in Gikuyu, philosophical essays. I am working on developing the dimensions of the language.

Why did the government ban your last book, *Matigari*?

In 1986, when the novel came out, you remember how repressive it really was. People were being detained, killed tortured.

When the novel came out, people started talking about the main character, Matigari, as if he were a real person, going around the country talking about truth and justice. When the police found that he was only a character in a book, they then ordered for the book to be arrested instead. In February 1987 the book was removed from all the bookshops in the entire country. So Matigari is now in exile. He is only available in English, and also only outside the country. But we hear Matigari has illegally reentered the country.