



NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S EARLY STUDENTSHIP: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE MAKING OF A GREAT AFRICAN LITERARY WRITER

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ABSTRACT: *Do you know that most prolific or acclaimed writers the world celebrates have detected their talent since their prime? Do you also know that some renowned writers taught themselves or were taught by their masters at home prior to when they began to write? Do you know that some of them have not acquired profound formal education up to the university? Yet, it should be known that there are innumerable others, who greatly vary, for they have deeply studied instead. Writing is a natural prodigy; hence it requires no profound literacy to blossom. Take some immediate common instances in mind: Daniel Defoe, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Sembene Ousmene, Wole Soyinka, Aye Kwei Armah, Naguib Mahfouz, Ngugi wa Thiong'o to name just but a few. At any rate, education is the fulcrum and the nucleus to writing no matter how little it is acquired. This is the focus of which this paper is concerned about. Its prime goal is to unveil how Ngugi's early educational sojourn from the primary school through to the university has rolled out the writing carpet for him to step on as a novice writer, and to keep striding on it with varying degrees of artistic, strength and vigour, which subsequently cleared the challenging path for him to emerge as a legendary and dynamic African writer.*

KEYWORDS: Ngugi, Studentship, Education Role, Writer.



INTRODUCTION

There is only one good, knowledge, and one evil, ignorance (63)

Socrates, in Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.

In the above quoted epigraph, “ignorance” for the classical philosopher of living memory begets evil: the womb that invariably gives birth to amoral disposition, jeopardy, calamity and chaos, all of which bring about human retrogression that in most cases may lead to a total doom. On the other hand, “knowledge” which stands for education begets excellence. This equally paves the way for impeccable and disciplined character, moral fibre and orderliness; some of the common ingredients of human tranquillity, development and perpetual elevation. This is not dumbfounding, given the gargantuan role classical education played in the development of Greek society as the root of European civilization. Evidences that merged from this proposition were Plato’s Athens academy of philosophy and Aristotle’s Lyceum: the two famous classical learning institutions of philosophical doctrines that subsequently led to the rise of innumerable intellectuals, whose contributions to the educational development of the world is immeasurable and interminable. So, in Africa, the Kamandura Primary School, the Maanguu Independent School, the Alliance High School and the Makerere College Uganda in the Eastern part of the continent are to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, what the two classical institutes of philosophy were to Plato and Aristotle. Undoubtedly, these schools constitute the intellectual foundation of Ngugi wa thiong'o's emergence as a writer. They accorded him with the educational rudiments through their designed curriculum and their inspirational environment prepared the writing desk and the pen for him to begin to scribble. This spells out the momentous role Ngugi’s primary, post-primary and the university education played in igniting his writing fire residing with him, as a stepping stone towards making him an influential, literary writer Africa and the world to reckon with.

The Primary School

It is worthy of note that Ngugi wa Thiong’o had his primary school education in two primary schools: Kamandura Primary School, popularly known as the Church of Scotland Mission School (CSM) near Limuru in 1947-48 and subsequently Maanguu Independent School at Karinga from 1948-55 (Gikandi xi). Fascinatingly, Manangu Independent School was one of the several schools founded and operated by the Kikuyu community in rebellion against missionary influences. The aim of this school was to provide education of a kind appropriate to African students (Killam 5) as Ngugi. So, the educational sojourn, which began from here, had bequeathed Ngugi with the semi-rudiment tools that would subsequently clear the writing path for him to smoothly trek.

The Secondary School/High School

The writing path opened up at Alliance, where the trekking was scintillating and luminous. It should be deciphered that the Alliance High School was the most popular and prestigious secondary school in Kenya founded on 1 March, 1926 (3). Thursday, January 20, 1955 was Ngugi’s first day in the school which had subsequently influenced his career as a writer. (1). In *In the House of the Interpreter: A Memoir* (2012) Ngugi depicts his arrival escapades in Alliance, whose “stone building with so many of them in a place seemed to be a veritable fortress that differed from that of the mud and grass-thatched huts he left at home”. His hosts,



whom he subsequently learnt were prefects, took him and other new students on tour of the grounds. In the dormitories to which they were later taken, there were two rows of beds, facing each other. In between them were drawers whose flat tops served as tables. His luggage, one box, fit under the bed and the entire dormitory reminded him of the ward in King George Hospital, where he was once admitted because of his eyes. However, it did not smell of hospital but of Lavender. For the first time in his life ever, Ngugi had a real bed of his own. Consequently, in the following morning, he felt like pinching his skin to convince himself. The next day and of course his first weekend at Alliance was momentous as he recalls that “on Friday, my second day, we registered and sorted out tuition at the bursar’s office; on Saturday, we were each issued the school uniform of a pair of khaki shorts and shirts two cotton T-shirts white for pyjamas, red for work, and a blue tie. That first weekend passed quickly as in a soft dream, everything swiftly losing its outline in a mist. The howl of the hounds hovered over the horizon”(3).

He was the only student from Limuru, his region to be enrolled by the school and he was invariably among the three best students at the end of each term. It was there that he became a devout Christian, owing to his profound reading and comprehension of the Bible as reflected in his novels. However, there is more to this exclusive colonial post-primary school, for which reason it is pertinent to explore how it was founded and its educational mission in Kenya.

Alliance was founded as a result of a short-lived alliance by the Protestant Missions of the Church of Scotland, the Church Missionary Society, the Methodist Church and the Africa Inland Mission. It was the first secondary school for Africans in the country and the only reminder of the missions’ feel-good moment of togetherness. Its establishment meant that African graduates of the elementary school now had an alternative to vocational institutes. The high school followed the recommendation of the 1924 Phelps Stokes Commission for Education in East Africa, bankrolled by the New York-based Phelps Stokes Fund and modelled on the 19th-century system for educating the Native Americans and Africans and African Americans in the South. It was set up with the educational mission of producing civic minded blacks who would work within the parameters of the existing racial state. Its motto was strong to serve, and its anthem celebrated strength of the body, mind and character (3).

For Ngugi, although Alliance had literary education at its core, the vocational character of the American South model was maintained through classes in carpentry and Agriculture. Like its models, it produced mostly teachers, some later employed in mission and government schools and the independent African schools before their ban. This model remained unaltered until in 1940, when Edward Carey Francis became the principal of the school. He soon enough grafted a four-year English grammar onto its vocational American stem. Carey Francis saw Alliance as a grand opportunity to morally and intellectually mould a future leadership that could navigate among contending extremes (3).

However, contrary to the conscious intentions of its founders, Alliance had also birthed a radical anti-colonial nationalist fever. This is because, in its very structure, Alliance undoubtedly subverted the colonial system it was meant to serve, and Carey Francis turned out to be the most consistently subversive of the colonial order. What brought about this first and foremost was the presence of Africans on the staff as equals with the white teachers undermined in the students’ eyes colonial apartheid and the depiction of the African as inferior. Some of them were more effective in the classroom than their white counterparts. But no matter what



or how they taught, the African teachers were role models of what they would become. By insisting on high performance in the playing field and in the classroom, Carey Francis produced self-confident, college-prepared, intellectual minds. This is why by the time Ngugi left Alliance, he felt that academically, he could go-toe to-toe with the best that any European or Asian school could produce (4). It is on this note that Sicherman testifies that “under the leadership of the charismatic Carey Francis, Alliance High School, an English-medium boarding facilitated Ngugi’s progress towards Makerere, Leeds and the world. It is a tightly programmed world modelled on the British public school. Prefects appointed on grounds of character rather than academic ability, performed as the headmaster’s agents rather like the system of indirect rule propounded by Lord Lugard” (36).

The million dollar question is who Edward Carey Francis and what are his goals? He was a colonial missionary who believed that the African should be “educated into the ways of Christian virtues and faith” (37). These were without doubt the ways of “Englishness”. Alliance’s goal under Francis was “to produce the African as perfect colonial subjects” in addition to being “run on the lines of English grammar” (37). Much more than that, this brainy, British headmaster was enthusiastic “even amidst the Mau Mau and the political crisis in Kenya in 1950, to draw attention to the way some Africans could be educated”. This is not astounding for as Gikandi argues further, he was a product of Cambridge hence, a replica of Thomas Arnold in the colonial sphere. As a school administrator who understood profoundly the Africans and their ways, he felt that his African students were paucity of the “finer things of the European civilization and its material culture, but they could be educated into civility through games, work, and Shakespeare” (Gikandi 350).

There is a reason for this. Carey Francis was one of “the most brilliant mathematicians of his generation” who believed that science was not central in educating the Africans but instead, “sports and English were more in tune with colonial thinking on such matters”. Consequently, the few, exceptional students, that “mastered English were accorded a place in the colonial order of things”. So, for Gikandi, Ngugi was “one of strongest adherents to this creed” so much that when he arrived at Makerere University enthusiastic “to master English and Englishness, its moral tone, its manners, and its literary text, undoubtedly justified that Ngugi would join an English Department cast in Arnold and Levis mould, that promoted universal values, interiority and individualism” (351). Gikandi thus concludes with one more pertinent role as played by the Alliance High School on Ngugi:

Ngugi’s aesthetic foundation was not in Marx or Fanon, whom he discovered later on in his career, but in the doctrines of Englishness associated with Mathew Arnold and F.R. Levis and promoted in the imperial sphere by colonial culture represented by colonial schools and universities. This began in the prestigious Alliance High School where Ngugi was a model student product of the colonial culture represented by Edward Carey Francis the headmaster of the school (350).

This is thus why apart from the required academic work Ngugi was also involved in popular pastimes such as sports, Shakespeare productions and teaching Sunday school to local children. Shakespeare, as he writes in *Decolonizing the Mind*, like the Speech Day, was an annual event. Between 1955 and 1988 he saw *As You Like It*, *Henry IV* part one, *King Lear* and *Midsummer Nights Dream* roughly in that order. “In the fiftieth, through the British Council and a government appointed colony-wide drama and music officer, the school drama was



systematised into an annual schools Drama Festival” (38). There were also few extracurricular activities organised and held by school associations such as inter-tribal society, short plays written or produced in Kiswahili, a history devoted to subjects excluded from the AHS Magazine, an annual student magazine and a Debating society. No sooner Ngugi arrived at Alliance, than he took part in a debate on the motion “The Western Education Had Done More Harm than Good in Kenya”. Ngugi spoke in the debate for the motion trembling with anger saying that “western education could not be equated with the land taken from the peasants by the British” (36). This could be the motive why Ngugi’s interest in African subjects could be slightly slaked through extracurricular reading of Alan Paton and the sight of Peter Abrahams *Tell Freedom*. So, Ngugi came to Makerere still very much a product of Carey Francis: a devout Christian with a first-division pass in the School Certificate exam (36). In the view of Killam (5) as a missionary-operated school, Ngugi’s experience at “Alliance has remained important to him as a writer and one dramatised in each of his novels”.

One of the humiliating experiences Ngugi had at Alliance was the penalty meted out to students caught speaking Kikuyu within the school’s vicinity. The student was given a corporal punishment which comprised three to five strokes of the cane on his bare buttocks, or he/she was asked to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes, the student was asked to pay some money as fine which he/she could not afford. There was a way such students were caught speaking their mother tongue or Gikuyu. It was a button given first to one pupil, who handed it over to whoever was caught speaking his mother tongue. Whoever had the button with him/her at the end of the day would be asked to sing who had given it to him and the “ensuing process would bring out all the day’s culprits. For Ngugi, this turned the children into witch hunters and by implication taught them the “lucrative value of being traitors to their own immediate community” (11).

It is against this background that Ngugi opines that the colonial system of education in addition to its apartheid racial demarcation had the structure of a pyramid. There was a broad primary base, narrowing secondary twiddle, and an even narrower university apex. Selection from primary to secondary school was through an examination. In this examination, an examinee had to pass six subjects ranging from maths to nature study and Kiswahili. All the papers were written in English. Nobody could pass the exam, no matter how brilliantly he had done in other subjects as much as he failed the English language paper. Ngugi recalls an incident involving one boy in his class in 1954 that had distinctions in all subjects except English. He failed the entire exam. The boy subsequently became a turn boy in a bus company. Ngugi, who had only passed but a credit in English was admitted by the Alliance High School. What is more, the requirements for a place at the university, Makerere University College, were the same (12). Meanwhile, during his school days Ngugi learnt about the Gikuyu values and history and also experienced the Kikuyu traditional rite ceremonies. A very good example is circumcision. It was also during this period that his step brother was killed when the colonial government declared a State of Emergency. His parents were also arrested and tortured. His high school years began in 1955 and ended in 1959.

In his seminal essay “Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Early Journalism” Lindfords argues that “Ngugi wanted to write when he was in secondary school but had never actually got down to it until he got to the university” (23). Untrue is this assertion, for according to Lovesey (2015), Ngugi, inspired by Tolstoy’s childhood and youth, whose novels he read as one of his favourite European literary writers at Alliance, wrote a story in 1957 entitled “My Childhood”. However,



the editors changed the title in the editorial process to “I Try Witchcraft”. They inserted in it, a declaration of Christianity’s triumph over superstition (52).

So, *In the House of the Interpreter*, Ngugi comments on the head start of this new development in his early writing career that it is “a condemnation and pre-Christian life and beliefs of a whole community and simultaneously, an ingratiating acknowledgment of the beneficial effects of enlightenment. I was turned into a prosecution witness for the imperial literary tradition from which I had been trying to escape. Although well-intentioned, this editorial intrusion smothered the creative fire within me (166-7). Very much so! For the smothered creative fire at Alliance kept on burning at an inestimable proportion in Makerere, where Ngugi’s literary writing star began to sparkle.

Makerere University College

Ngugi proceeded to Makerere University College in Kampala Uganda in 1959, following his triumphant completion of Alliance High School. In a seminal essay “English Language Fiction in East Africa” published in *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*, Elder reveals the rationale behind Makerere University’s establishment. Established in 1939, the university was designed to provide higher education for all of British East Africa such as Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika, and Zanzibar. Consequently, it attracted an interterritorial group of students namely Ngugi wa Thiong’o from Kenya for instance, and Ugandan Asians like Peter Nazareth, as well as Europe and after its affiliation with the University of London in 1953, it drew its staff from universities in Europe and America (51).

However, in *The Postcolonial Intellectual: Ngugi wa Thiong’o in Context*, Lovesey argues that it was in the 1950s that “Makerere had begun to operate as the university college of East Africa under an arrangement with the University of London”. This is what gave English institutions of the curriculum as well as examinations (45). In the year 1961 as Lovesey holds, Makerere, with similar institutions in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam must break from London and establish an independent identity as the University of East Africa, a move which was greeted with much hope by Ngugi in his journalistic articles, but the new institution was not a success. The reason being Ngugi had to spend his first two years preparing three subjects at A-level to sit the London preliminary exam. As an Honours student, he then studied a single subject for three years. His subject was the novels of Joseph Conrad (45). However, there is more to this Makerere curriculum for which reason Sicherman explicates further that:

The Makerere curriculum was determined in Ngugi’s day by the University of London through a special arrangement that began in 1950. Because most East African secondary schools, including Alliance, did not then offer A-levels, their graduates spent their first two years at Makerere preparing for the London preliminary examination. Honours students spent three years on their major subjects - English in English, a dense and demanding syllabus spanning Chaucer to T.S. Eliot (37).

In teaching literature, the staff, Sicherman argues, took an Arnoldian and Leavisite approach, exposing the students to “the best that has been thought and said in the world” in the words of Arnold, which meant the British literary tradition. However, there were some changes in the requirements during the 1960s. In Ngugi’s group eight for instance, three-hours of examinations and separately prepared “special subject” crowned the Honours course. Ngugi could find in the library, but not in his coursework, the kind of literature that told him of another



world which was in many instances his own. This aroused his interest in the writing of Peter Abrahams, Chinua Achebe, George Lamming, Cyprian Ekwensi, Aime Cesaire, Leopard Sedar Senghor and others (37).

At the time when Ngugi was a student at Makerere, Alan Warner was the Professor of English. Warner and the entire staff of the department believed that they could help foster the development of East African Literature by emphasising possible models for burgeoning African writers such as “Homer and Synge with their roots in oral tradition” (38). The critical approach of the Makerere Department of English syllabus Sicherman observes was close study of “great works”, an emphasis on interiority and individualism and the assumption “universal” moral values was unsuitable to the development of east African writing and criticism for at least four reasons:

- First, a tip--of-the-iceberg curriculum, composed of western classics and concealing the inferior works that form the bulk of European writing, might well be totally alienating to neophyte writers and critics (Whittock 1969, quoted by Sicherman).
- Second, the focus on themes on isolation discouraged any challenge to British cultural hegemony because it distracted attention from East African communitarian traditions.
- Third, the wholly espousal of “universal” values intended to diminish analysis of the specific and local. Universal values if they exist are always contained in the framework of social realities.
- Fourth, by restricting study to written forms of verbal creativity, the syllabus automatically excluded the full blooded literary culture, vivid and alive (39).

It is presumably against this background that Elder argues that in spite of the pertinent role Makerere was to play in the promotion of creative literatures, its colonial biasness of studying the Great Tradition of canonised British texts and its rigid insistence on “correct” British usage, undoubtedly mitigated against the early development of an authentic East African voice in English. Thus, for him, “it is precisely because of this almost sanctified approach to English that east Africa failed to produce its own Tutuola” (51). What is more, there was limited usage of other registers of English which resulted in “absurd inflexibility in the creation of near-life characters and even semi-educated protagonists in Ngugi’s novels speak formal, grammatical English” (51). The reason is not far-fetched, for Makerere writers were not favoured with West Africa’s luck in having an English based Creole and Pidgin on whose resources they could draw (51). However, it was the generation of students of the fiftieth in the twentieth century that led the way towards establishing a legacy of literature in the English language. In the words of Ngugi:

In the fifties and early sixties Makerere was the intellectual capital of East and Central Africa, a role later taken over by the Dar es Salaam University of the early sixties. The majority of the students came from Uganda and Tanzania. Tanzania was then in its two separate identities of Tanganyika and Zanzibar. But there were others from Malawi and Zimbabwe. As students, members of the same institution, we became accustomed to doing things together. An example of this was the running of the students clubs and associations particularly the main students body, Makerere Student Guild. These were led by whoever commanded the confidence of the majority no matter the country of their origins. We were East Africans, Pan-Africans, at least we regarded ourselves as such, and we were proud of it (164).



Consequently, Sicherman argues, Makerere became the most eminent centre of literary activity. The first evident example of literature which drew on the East African experience was created there (52). Ngugi began to write short plays as part of competition in the University but the growing biasness of the white teachers against the black students deterred neither of his plays from winning any prize. Ngugi also actively participated as writer and editor in numerous Makerere and Kampala-based publications. *The Makererean*, *Penpoint* and *Transition* are some handful examples. In the words of Elder, we comprehend that: “all these student journals were extremely important in encouraging and offering outlets for many writers later to shape the East African literary scene: Peter Nazareth, Ngugi, and Barnabas Katigula are just a few examples” (52).

What is more, it was the writing and the publication of his two short stories that qualified him to attend the legendary conference of African writers of English expression at Makerere in June 1962, as a student. It was during this rare gathering of African renowned authors that he was fortunate enough to meet and consult the Nigerian Chinua Achebe about the manuscript of his first novel, *Weep Not, Child* (Lovesey: 45). Other African writers who attended and presented papers at the conference were Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo and J.P. Clark. In *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedom*, Ngugi reveals the significance of Makerere University to him as a writer:

It was Makerere and Uganda which made me discover my sense of being a Kenyan. It had established a home, a base, and a distance from which I could look back on my Kenyan experience and try to recapture its meaning in words. There were literary journals like *Penpoint* and later *Transition* to take in some of my earliest attempts in that direction. The *Black Hermit*, a play; the two novels, *The River Between* and *Weep Not, Child*; numerous short stories and journalism were written while I was a student at Makerere (165).

After Ngugi graduated from Makerere College in 1964, he worked momentarily at Nairobi's Daily Nation before he left for East Africa to pursue his post-graduate studies at the University of Leeds.

CONCLUSION

For Lovesey therefore, both Alliance and Makerere as he sums up attempted with their student groups and extracurricular activities to homogenise ethnic and national differences and foster a Pan-Kenyan or even Pan-East African federation. Both Alliance and Makerere also stressed the principles of F. R. Leavis, whose pupils had carried his cultural program to the outposts of the colonial world, Leavis Great Tradition of canonical English authors, George Eliot, inclusive (46). However, Sicherman's abridged view is diametrically opposed to Lovesey. The latter holds that Ngugi's British education had four sites. First, according to Ngugi himself, his primary education in a Gikuyu Independent School gave him an awareness of colonialism, as an oppressive force and a pride in peasant culture which itself had provided an informal education in songs, stories, proverbs and riddles. Second, at Alliance High School, a combination of ethnic pluralism with a rigid and proselytising Christian-colonial doctrinalism, along with high intellectual demands, made a profound and lasting impact on its famous graduate and gave him intellectual tools which later to attack the colonial control. This combination of pluralism, doctrinalism, and intellectual rigour appeared as he further argues,



as well at the third site of Ngugi's formal education, Makerere University, but differently proportioned: with the doctrine muted, the intellectual demands increased, and, perhaps most important, a much greater encouragement to write creatively. Ngugi's critique of colonialism, mainly expressed in his journalism on current issues in the Kenyan press, began to be formulated publicly during this period. Fourth, at Leeds University, Ngugi found Fanon and Marx a doctrine to replace the Christian-colonial model inculcated at Alliance and assumed at Makerere. Not entirely new, this fanonist way of thinking took root in nationalist soil prepared in the Gikuyu Independent School (36). Thus, the educational curriculum and goals of the two early primary schools, the Alliance High School, the Makerere University College, as well as the learning experiences he has had, have prepared, inspired and shaped Ngugi to become a phenomenal writer within the African literary landscape and beyond.

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