

BIRTH OF A DREAM WEAVER: A WRITER'S AWAKENING

BY NGŪGĨ WA THIONG'O

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Birth of a Dream Weaver: A Writer's Awakening is the third instalment in a series of scintillating memoirs that Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o has been writing. The first instalment titled *Dreams in a Time of War* was published in 2010. The second memoir, *In the House of the Interpreter*, followed in 2012.

Birth of a Dream Weaver is an account of the years that Ngugi wa Thiong'o spent as a student at Makerere University College between the July 1959 and March 1964. The memoir depicts the efforts, exertions, and escapades that marked Ngugi's significant breakthroughs in his initiation as a burgeoning writer. Apart from earning a BA Honors in English in the Upper Second Division, Ngugi had one novel titled *Weep Not Child* (1964) published, a second one in the pipeline, a three-act play titled *The Black Hermit*, two one-act play and over sixty pieces of journalism in newspapers and magazines by the time he left Makerere. Undoubtedly, this was a remarkable feat for a twenty-six-year-old fresh graduate who grew up in adverse circumstances of colonial oppression, armed conflict, and material deprivation. He was already exhibiting the intellectual horsepower, creative brio and political passion that established him firmly on the gallery of the world's most illustrious writers.

Ngugi credits the heady and intellectually stimulating atmosphere of his undergraduate years at Makerere as an enabling and challenging environment that motivated him to forge a solid career as a "weaver of dreams" as he prefers to call the writerly vocation. Makerere, which started in 1922 as a technical high school perched on a lofty vantage point of Kampala and later progressed into a degree-awarding institution affiliated with the University of London in 1949, admitted students from mainly Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Malawi (then Nyasaland), Zambia and Zimbabwe (then Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia). In the memoir Ngugi recalls how he was exhilarated by the oath that students had to take as part of their initiation rites at Makerere. Students were made to swear to seek the truth and study diligence. The oath augmented the encouragement he got from his mother to always strive to do the best. He was galvanised to relentlessly pursue the truth and to scrupulously contribute to the pool of emancipatory knowledge. He quickly learnt the academic discipline of valuing facts, assessing evidence, the procedures of citation, the protocols of logic and the skill of organising material into a coherent argument. Ngugi also ably recreates the lively academic engagements and social activities of Makerere as a barometer of the political and cultural pulse at a time when the spirit of independence was pervasive.

Ngugi's peers who would later emerge as significant writers, educators, cultural activists, and literary critics included among others, Peter Nazareth, Rebecca Njau, and Benjamin Mkapa who served as the third president of Tanzania. The Makerere student body has its fair share of colourful personalities. Ngugi recalls a brilliant student of medicine and scout leader who also used his room on campus as the command centre of a cross-border vehicle theft and robbery operation spanning the Congo, Uganda, Kenya, and Tanganyika. After completing his studies, the individual in question continued running a prosperous medical practice while overseeing robberies across international borders. Makerere had its tragic geniuses and eccentric characters.

Ngugi remembers the department of English at Makerere as the "crown jewel" of the college. It was blessed with faculty members who were keen on creative arts such as dance, theatre, and creative writing, and who actively nurtured creative aspirations of students. Students were encouraged to contribute poems, stories, plays, and essays to *Penpoint*, a signature literary publication produced by the department of English. Students not only submitted literary items to *Penpoint*; they also edited it. Furthermore, students were nudged to enter literary competitions and stage theatre productions on campus and at the Kampala National Theatre.

Ngugi lays out the twists and turns of his literary awakening as instructors and fellow students fanned the flames of his literary ambition. The curricula menu at Makerere included writings by Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, D.H Lawrence, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Peter Abrahams, George Lamming, among others. As his exposure broadened, his attention was drawn to the work of the founders of the Negritude cultural and literary movement such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Damas and Aimé Césaire.

A fellow student encouraged Ngugi to look beyond submitting stories to the student publication and venture into the more lucrative and competitive publishing arena. He started working on the manuscript of his first novel. His motive was to bag the prize of one thousand shilling in a novel-writing competition organised by East African Literature Bureau. He was driven by an ardent need to write about Limuru, his village in Kenya. He felt the urge to chronicle the hardship that members of his family and community had to endure under colonial occupation. He wanted to document the tensions that tore his community apart as well as the brutality meted against those who dared to resist colonial oppression. The memoir recounts the hurdles Ngugi surmounted in order to produce the manuscript of his first novel which he delivered to the publishers on December 28, 1961. Years later the manuscript was published as a novel titled *The River Between* (1965)

A flagship literary event took place at Makerere in 1962. This event provided a marvellous opportunity for Ngugi. The event was the First International Conference of Writers of English Expression. The conference was organised by Ezekiel Mphahlele. Among the participants were South Africa writers living in exile such as Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, and Arthur Maimane, among others. In the contingent from Nigeria were Wole Soyinka,

Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo and J.P Clark. Kofi Awoonor from Ghana was present. Kenyan writers Rebecca Njau and Grace Ogot were there. Ngugi was invited by dint of his literary connections and his promising output. Besides absorbing the invigorating debates, Ngugi approached Chinua Achebe and requested him to read a manuscript of a novel-in-progress. To cut a long story short, the manuscript was published as a novel titled *Weep Not, Child* (1964). Ngugi also got a chance to treat Langston Hughes to a guided-tour of Kampala neighbourhoods where the iconic African-American poet sampled local brews.

The conference was famously condemned by literary critic Obi Wali, who was not present at the conference, for leaving out literature written in African languages. It was later revealed that the conference was secretly sponsored by the Central American Intelligence through the Paris-based Congress for Cultural Freedom. Unbeknown to the organisers and participants, the conference was an arena of Cold-War machinations. For Ngugi, the conference was a propitious gathering of writers that allowed him to pass on his manuscript to Chinua Achebe who facilitated its publication by Heinemann in the African Writers Series.

While working on his first novel, Ngugi made forays into journalistic writing. He wrote articles on a freelance basis to augment his income. He also worked as a reporter and columnist in Nairobi during vacations. Ngugi made a mark as both a playwright and theatre producer when he staged an award-winning play called *The Black Hermit* at the National Theatre of Uganda in celebration of Ugandan independence to tremendous acclaim. Ngugi's growing prominence in the literary space, his deepening insight into African political dynamics as well as the wider geo-political contradictions compelled him to seriously reflect on his role as an intellectual and writer. He worked briefly as a journalist and then decided to apply for further studies. The memoir ends with Ngugi having been admitted to Leeds University. The British Council also awarded him a scholarship.

Birth of a Dream Weaver ends with a brief lament on how the good fortunes of Makerere University College were crudely reversed when Idi Amin grabbed the levers of state power in 1971 and unleashed terror on the Makerere community. Amin installed himself as chancellor and bestowed honorary degrees on himself. Academics who were fortunate not to be killed, maimed, or imprisoned fled the country.

The volume also contains fascinating photographs and illustrations marking Ngugi's memorable moments as a student at Makerere. The memoir is masterfully rendered by literary performance by a gifted and conscientious storyteller. The memoir gives the reader a clear sense of the electrifying milieu that Ngugi traversed as a student at Makerere between the years 1959 and 1964. Aficionados of African literary production, cultural theorists and practitioners, educationists, historians, and general readers will surely benefit from reading this inspiring recollection of Ngugi's days as an undergraduate student.