

Interview with Mukoma wa Ngugi

Introduction:

Dr Mukoma wa Ngugi is Professor of English at Cornell University. In 2013, *New African Magazine* named him one of the 100 most Influential Africans. In 2015 he was a juror for the Writivism Short Story Prize and the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature. He is the author of the novels *Nairobi Heat*, *Black Star Nairobi* and *Mrs. Shaw*. The German translation of *Nairobi Heat* was named the 2014 Crime Book of the Season by *Buchkultur*. He is the co-founder of the Mabati-Cornell Kiswahili Prize for African Literature and co-director of the Global South Project-Cornell. This project is based on the idea of a South-to-South communication, as opposed to a Eurocentric perspective. Its aims are to highlight the cultural and intellectual connections in the Global South about questions of language, identity, and the role of culture in the work of decolonization. Discussions about the ties that bind the South to the South encourage to imagine and create a more democratic and egalitarian global culture.

In his speech "Mapping the Global through Africans and African Americans - Solidarity and Contradictions" at the Afraso Symposium "Entanglements - Envisioning World Literature from the Global South" held at Frankfurt University in January 2016, Mukoma explores the relationship between Africans and African Americans while drawing out the implications for global South concepts and theories. Further, striking out the necessity of an equal understanding of languages and the importance of translation, Mukoma wa Ngugi defends the thesis that translations between African languages and between other world languages would enrich our literature while contributing to the larger body of world literature.

Today we are here at Afroton, a place where the language of music is talking to us. What role does music play in your life in general and as a writer? Do you play any instruments? If yes, what is your favorite instrument?

First, thanks for bringing me here: this is a great place to do an interview. I play the guitar - not very well, but I've been playing all my life. I can get into the spirit of music when I play. When I was writing my last novel about the Ethiopian Tizita music allowed me to get into the spirit of the sitar, so I could imagine it better. I was having an argument with my dad and Ben Okri about what came first, whether word or sound, and I think we all agree that sound, and language, did. There is music in words, there is music in poetry. Music is a way to go into the soul of a society, especially with songs that have been played over and over again, like folk songs. The best experiment you can do is listening to music in a language you don't understand, being able to listen to the human voice as an instrument. As you're not trying to find meaning in words, you will be able to find meaning in the sound. If I didn't listen to music I wouldn't be a writer, let's put it that way.

Now back to pen and paper, the instruments of writing - How does it look like when you are writing? Would you describe us a scenario of you writing? At what place and time, maybe with a glass of wine or a Tusker beer as an inspiring companion?

When I was younger I liked to go to bars. In Boston I used to go to a bar called Wally's pub, which had jazz musicians or a blues band playing. I used to sit there and write, feeling like I was stealing their energy. I could write well, having a whiskey or a beer. But now I usually write at home. My office is at the bottom floor of our house and has a very good view, so I just sit there and write with music in the background.

While conducting our research about you we watched an interview of your colleague Dr Dagmawi Woubshet from Cornell University who claimed that, let me quote here, "story telling is what distinguishes us from other species". What do you think is the role of storytelling and literature for us, as human beings?

When people say that Internet is killing the novel I say that it may change the form a little but it can't kill the novel, as we have been telling stories all the time. We have been telling stories as places where we deposit our fears, like folk stories that are supposed to be scary. Historically that's a place where we face our nightmares. I like that feeling when I write my books. In *Black Star Nairobi*, for example, I am facing the nightmare that Kenya became in 2007. And I think this is the most important function, more important than to entertain, for society to reflect itself or for the writer to find himself.

In your writings, for example in Nairobi Heat as well as in Black Star Nairobi, the question of identity, of Afro-American identities and labels like being black or Mzungu are raised like a red thread, concerning Ishmael's "blackness" or the forthcoming election of Obama. How do you consider your own role as a writer in dismantling such stereotypes?

Prejudices travel from generation to generation. In the case of Ismael [the protagonist of *Nairobi Heat* and *Black Star Nairobi*], who comes from the US, prejudices stem from slavery. When we talk about race and racism we could go back to the Enlightenment, which produced not only ideas of liberation but also racist views and classifications. When Ismael is in the US dealing with racism it's about deeply historical questions. I am aware of that, but Ismael may be not, he is just a policeman in the US. But it is my task as a writer to talk about identity and colonialism and to be able to unveil this process. Identity and racism are tied to class and justice as well, as colonialism used race to justify exploitation and marginalization of Africans.

Ismael for example has a tough life: being a black in the US, with the current atmosphere of racial shootings and killings, is not easy. Half of the cops are black, and when they go back to their community they are seen as part of these oppressive forces. Ismael then goes to Kenya and he's called *Mzungu*, which for him is a shock. He leaves the US thinking about racism, then he goes to Kenya and he's been given the name of the oppressor. But I wanted to show this reality: an African American friend of mine went to Tanzania and Kenya and he and his group were not only called *Mzungu*, but also they were not welcome. When they call them *Mzungu* they do not know of the psychological damage they are doing to an African American. My friends just cut their visit short, they couldn't stand it. Many Africans are not aware of the history, they are also not aware of all the things African Americans have done for Africa, for example their involvement in anti-apartheid struggles in South Africa or their struggles against militarization.

In an article for The Guardian you claimed that the African community is not supporting the African Americans enough in their struggles against inequalities. Why do you think African intel-

lectuals do not feel so involved in this type of discourse? How would you consider their level of influence on sociopolitical discourses?

There are several things. If you are an African intellectual in the US, your accent gives you what I call a “foreigner privilege”. Somehow you end up becoming a buffer between black America and white America. In my case, this is anecdotal, I was asking for a beer and somebody heard my accent and suddenly I was somehow put in a third safe category. If you look at all the reports about African people in the US, they are about how they are doing well, how they are going to schools like Harvard with the idea that Africans, although black, are more enterprising than African Americans. There is a privilege. As an intellectual you are benefiting from this category. If you are an African intellectual you are not facing the same racism, so somehow it can be difficult to empathize with African Americans. Historically you had intellectuals who had gone beyond what society is offering them who refused that binary thinking, for example my dad [Ngugi wa Thiong’o]. But generally speaking we are living in a society where there is no encouragement to think about structures of racism or class for African Americans.

When we talk about African literature, what is the role of language and translation here? Do you see any boundaries, and if so, where?

Let me start here with the question of translation. And I am paraphrasing my dad now: translation is a place where languages meet on a mutual basis. It is the only place where languages can meet as equals. Translation means to carry across, it is the only place where knowledge exchange can happen on a mutual basis. When we talk about South-to-South relations or even relations from South to West, translation becomes the means through which knowledge can be democratized. And now if you look how translation has been thought of traditionally, it is always the translation from African languages into English, French and so on. What is most rare is the translation between African languages, like from Zulu to Kiswahili or from Yoruba to Gikuyu. There are no ways in which translation is enabling a conversation between Africans in their own languages, which means we are not really exchanging knowledges. And if there is a translation, for example between Bantu languages, there is the question “How this translation differs - for example - from a Bantu language to French?” from the perspective of translation as art. And then it becomes interesting, you can go down the rabbit hole of translation. If I am translating between Kiswahili and Gikuyu, both are Bantu languages, they have the same structure and the same music. Translating languages from people who had also the same experiences and suffered the same becomes much easier. There is not much effort necessary to translate the meaning. For me, translation is the most important thing we can do for African literature.

How did you come up with the idea for the Mabati-Cornell Prize for African Literature? Do you think this prize may function as a gatekeeper for African Writers to reach a national and international audience, although or because of language?

For the Mabati Prize, the idea came to me and Lizzy Attree during the *Africa Writes* festival in London. Talking about African languages, we thought how great it would be to find money for a Kiswahili prize. But finding money was the hardest thing. As I said today, most Westerners do not take African languages seriously. First I felt very bad about that, but then I questioned myself: why? Shouldn’t that be the job of African philanthropy?

Finally, we found someone in Kenya, Mabati Rolling Mills who agreed to sponsor us for three years. We now have only money for three years and then we will start looking again.

The reason to start this prize was to level the playing field. There are close to one billion people in Africa living in 55 different countries. But how many literary prizes can you name? Maybe three or four. And how many journals? How many publishing houses? This despite the fact that Africa is an enormous and diverse continent. There is a kind of psychological block, somehow people cannot see what seems so simple. You cannot talk about world literature if you have a continent with about 4000 languages where the literature is under-resourced. Therefore, we started the prize as template for other people to follow. Literally speaking a small drop in an ocean of languages.

Since we invited you today here to Afraso at Goethe University Frankfurt to talk with us about Envisioning World Literature from the Global South, what is World Literature from the Global South for you?

What I thought about in the last two days: we cannot talk about world literature until we consider all languages and all literatures. You have to start from the principle that all languages and all literatures are equal, and after that you can argue what is the contribution of the Global South towards this vast place of democratic meetings between literatures. To me Global South literature would be how literatures from the Global South have been in conversation with each other. Think about the influence of Caribbean literature to African writers and vice versa. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, a Caribbean writer, came to Kenya in the 1970s. He was friend with my father and then he did not like to be called Edward anymore and my grandmother renamed him Kamau. It is just an anecdote, but it shows the level of the deep connection between Caribbean and African writers. To me that is Global South literature. And part of your work is going back and talk about these connections, which we haven't done enough here.

You are the co-director of the Global South Project which brings south-to-south concepts and theories into conversation. How do you think literature can function as a tool for a transnational dialogue?

National literatures can become chauvinistic. They become so self-defensive that they refuse to be in conversation with other literatures. Some writers haven't been in conversation with different cultures even within the same nation. One example was my dad, who before 'Asia in my life' had never written anything about Indians in Kenya. In that sense I would suggest that literature has the role to connect us first to our own neighborhood and then also to broader struggles and societies. Even the books themselves contain Global South networks. The most important concept of the Global South is from Glissant when he talks about relations and rhizomes, by which he means these plants which have never ending long roots that grow horizontally. Literature can allow us to follow these roots.

One last question: In the frame of AFRASO, Africa's Asian Options, what are your hopes of writing from the South?

We have to go back into history, otherwise we cannot move forward. There is no future without going to the past. If we keep going to the future without looking at the past, then we are left with a rootless discussion about what are China, Brazil or India doing in Africa.

We are not inventing a new South-to-South, the networks are already there and we need to go back, read and understand them. We have to understand what writers have done and what went wrong. After that we can say what can we do for today. The future for South-to-South is in the past. We just haven't done enough. Just think about Cuba, the relationship with the US and the sanctions. Cuba undertook many actions in the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s and 1990s. As Mandela said, without Cuba apartheid would have taken a longer time to fall. Che Guevara was in Congo with some Cuban troops. We need to go into these histories, it is about rediscovering the past. When people talk about South-to-South it feels as if they think there is already a common ground to talk on, but that is not the sort of scholarship that is needed. The sort of scholarship that is needed is to go back and look not at the solidarities but at the contradictions. We should not be looking for ideological stability. We need to go back to the common network of struggles.

Interview conducted by Eleonora Rapisardi and Anja Brünner (Afroton, Frankfurt, 21 January, 2016).