

Petals of Blood: Some Background

We are now undertaking our most ambitious reading for the semester, *Petals of Blood* by the Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Please read it patiently, with an eye to understanding the world it depicts as well as the story it tells. Here is a very sketchy chronology to orient you to the setting of *Petals of the Blood* and its place in Ngũgĩ’s career. “Ilmorog” is an imaginary village in north-central Kenya which serves as the setting for several of Ngũgĩ’s novels. Kenya is a multiethnic nation which became independent from British rule in 1963. *Petals* was written in the 1970s. One of the central questions for Ngũgĩ in *Petals* is to understand what has and has not changed—politically, economically, and culturally—in the time since independence.

year	general history	Ngũgĩ’s life
1856	Sultanate of Zanzibar est.	
1895	British E. Africa Protectorate est.	
1920	Kenya Colony est.	
1938		James Ngugi b. Limuru , near Nairobi
1944	Kenya Africa Union (anticolonial organization) est.	
1952	Kenya Land Freedom Army fights War of Independence (Mau Mau Rebellion)	Ngugi’s mother tortured and his village destroyed
1963	Kenyan independence; Jomo Kenyatta becomes president	BA Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda
1964	economic growth and increasing inequality; foreign investment and foreign profits	<i>Weep Not, Child</i> (London: Heinemann)
1967		teaches English literature, U. of Nairobi
1970		adopts Gikũyũ-style name Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o
1977		<i>Petals of Blood</i> (partly drafted in USSR) <i>Ngaahika Ndeenda</i> (Gikũyũ play) leads to Ngũgĩ’s imprisonment for a year
1978	Daniel arap Moi becomes president, declares state of emergency, arrests dissidents	abandons English as language of first composition; drafts <i>Devil on the Cross</i> in Gikũyũ in prison
1982	attempted coup suppressed; opposition parties outlawed	exiled under death threat, moves to London
1989		moves to US; academic positions
2002	Mwai Kibaki elected president; continuing political violence	
2006		<i>Wizard of the Crow</i> (New York: Pantheon)

Sources: *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vols. 5–7; “Kenya (1963–present),” in Mark Mullenbach, ed., Dynamic Analysis of Dispute Management Project, uca.edu/politicalscience/dadm-project; “Kenya country profile,” BBC.com; “Profile of a Literary and Social Activist,” ngugiwathiongo.com/about.

To be sure, a lot has happened for Kenya and for Ngũgĩ since the novel came out in 1977, so don’t think that this novel from almost fifty years ago is today’s news about Kenya! For that, you might check out the Kenyan publication *The Elephant* (theelephant.info) or, for commentary across the continent, the sarcastically-named *Africa Is a Country* (africasacountry.com).

PRONUNCIATION

Many of the characters and places have Kikuyu (Gĩkũyũ) names. According to the language guides I have found, the pronunciation of the Gĩkũyũ letters is as follows:

a	like a in father
e	like e in bet
i	like ee in beet
o	like ough in bought
u	like oo in boot
ĩ	like ai in bait
ũ	like oa in boat

Vowels can be short or long; long vowels are sometimes written doubled (aa, ii, etc.) but not in *Petals of Blood*.

Consonants are roughly like English, except:

th	like th in there
c	like s in sip (or sh in ship)
b, g	fricatives (no English equivalents), except in mb, ng’
r	trilled like in Spanish

Unfortunately, in *Petals of Blood* the (English) publisher did not print the diacritics to distinguish ĩ from i or ũ from u, so you have to know the language to know how to pronounce these vowels. Later in his career, Ngũgĩ was able to get publishers to follow the spellings he wanted. We will have to do our best.

Sources: Mwarĩ wa Mangĩ, “Let’s learn kikuyu/gĩkũyũ lesson 1,” youtu.be/x7cy3rNttSc; Robert Englebretson with Wambũi Mũringo Wa-Ngatho, “A Basic Sketch Grammar of Gĩkũyũ,” *Rice Working Papers in Linguistics* 6 (July 2015), www.ruf.rice.edu/~reng/kik.

You can listen to Ngũgĩ introduce himself at the start of an interview with Tania Adam, youtu.be/FOXqc-8zCPE, CCCB Lab, September 10, 2019. He goes on to discuss the problem of language choice for African writers, something we will come back to. Ngũgĩ is famous for having achieved some renown as a writer in English and then switched to composing in Gĩkũyũ, though he continues to publish in English translation as well. *Petals of Blood* was his last novel composed in English.