

Mary Ann Newman

## Ngugi Speaks for Us All

The Premi Internacional Catalunya was established in 1989 to recognize individuals who have contributed decisively to the development of cultural, scientific or humanitarian values throughout the world.

Over thirty years, the PIC has celebrated a gamut of extraordinary figures, from the first prizewinner, philosopher Karl Popper, to Egyptian psychoanalyst and feminist, Nawal al-Sadaawi, to Italian geneticist, Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza or anthropologist Jane Goodall. On its thirtieth anniversary, the PIC entered the age of cybernetics with an award to Vinton Cerf, renowned as the “father of the internet.”

Among the over seventy nominees for the 2019 award, one candidate stood out: Ngugi wa Thiong’o, dubbed a “language warrior” by the *Los Angeles Times*. Ngugi was imprisoned in 1977 by the regime of Daniel Arap Moi for writing *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*. Tired of writing about the plight of his people in a language none of them understood, he offered daily sessions in Gikuyu, performed by peasants and workers in the town square of his village. Its message of class struggle, defense of Kenyan traditions, and condemnation of post-colonial corruption earned him the enthusiasm of the viewers and the wrath of the dictator.

In prison, Ngugi wrote *Devil on a Cross*, the first novel every to be written in Gikuyu. The voluminous oeuvre that follows includes novels, memoirs, short story collections, plays, and such influential essays as *Decolonizing the Mind*, his groundbreaking defense of the use of the vernacular. Though the essay refers to African languages, in his travels around the world Ngugi discovered that people in New Zealand or in the Faroe Islands would tell him, “You are not speaking of Africa, Ngugi. You are talking about us.”

Ngugi *is* talking about us. About the power of languages, no matter the number of speakers. For Ngugi, monolingualism is “the carbon monoxide of cultures and multilingualism is their oxygen.” True to his defense of smaller languages and the power of translation, Ngugi tells us that the last time he was in Catalonia, Laura Huerga, his publisher, gave him Ronald Puppó’s English translation of *Canigó*. When he read of *Canigó*, in his mind’s eye he saw Mount Kenya. And he thought, “Why not write the epic of Kenya?” The result is his most recent book, *Kenda Muiyuru: Rugano rwa Gikuyu na Mumbi (The Perfect Nine: The Epic of Gikuyu and Mumbi)*.

I invite you to spend an hour or so with Ngugi and the many scholars and friends who honor him in the ceremony of the Premi Internacional Catalunya. Hear his son read a poem he composed for him on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday; see a photo from the PEN World Voices Festival at which Ngugi is surrounded by generations of African writers; hear the song composed by Clara Peya for his short story, “Ituĩka Rĩa Mũrũngarũ” (“The Upright

Revolution"). And listen to the lullaby he sings for his absent mother, begging her forgiveness for abandoning the language she gave him at birth. A moving conversation, across cultures and languages; a ceremony truly in the spirit of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. You will find it here. <https://we.tl/t-uOkgu67mOK>