

# LANGUAGE POLICY IN A FREE AZANIA

**DECOLONISING THE MIND: The Politics of Language in African Literature by Ngugi wa Thiong'o** (London, James Currey Ltd, 1986), 114 pp, R29,95 + R3,89 GST. Available from DAVID PHILIP PUBLISHER (PTY) LTD, PO Box 408, Claremont, 7735, Telephone 021-644136

**LANGUAGE POLICY AND NATIONAL UNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA/AZANIA: An Essay by Neville Alexander** (Cape Town, Buchu Books, 1989), 85 pp, R12,00 + R1,56 GST. Available from BUCHU BOOKS, PO Box 2580, Cape Town, 8000, Telephone 021-453786

NGUGI expresses the hope that the issues he raises in *Decolonising the Mind* will find echoes in our hearts. I make bold to say that the issues he raises must tug at the chords of every Black heart, that *Decolonising the Mind* is a journey that dispossessed people everywhere must undertake in their individual and collective sojourns to recover their birthrights, so that they can sleep not to dream "but dream to change the world." (pg. 3)

## The Cultural Bomb

Ngugi's approach to the "study of African realities" is avowedly anti-imperialistic. He says in the "Introduction" to this book:

"Any blow against imperialism, no matter the ethnic and regional origins of the blow, is a victory for all anti-imperialistic elements in all the nationalities. The sum total of all these blows no matter what their weight, size, scale, location in time and space makes the national heritage." (pg. 2)

Imperialism is no mere slogan, says Ngugi:

"It is real, it is palpable in content and form and in its methods and effects . . . Imperialism is total: it has econ-

omic, political, military, cultural and psychological consequences for the people of the world today. It could even lead to holocaust." (*Ibid*)

From the very onset, we are exposed to Ngugi's analysis of contending social forces. His book is one that is born of the day-to-day struggles of African people, more specifically the working people (the peasantry and proletariat) against the "weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism" against their "collective defiance" viz. "the cultural bomb"



Dr Neville Alexander

(pg. 3):

"The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves."

The net results of the cultural bomb are "despair, despondency and a collective death-wish" which allows colonialism to thrive.

## Language has a Dual Character

In the cultural arena, Ngugi sees real revolution as possible if the indigenous languages regain ascendancy and assume command of everyday interaction and relations between people. He elaborately shows how any language has a dual character - as a means of communication and as a

carrier of culture.

Language as communication has three elements, viz.:

- (a) the language of real life ie the relations people enter into in the labour process,
- (b) speech ie communication in production,
- (c) written signs.

Similarly, language as culture also has three elements, viz:

- (a) as a product and a reflection of human beings communicating with one another in the very struggle to create wealth and to control it,
- (b) as an image-forming agent,
- (c) as a distinguishing feature of a culture which has its peculiar history and tradition.

Language as communication and culture is the quintessence of human beingness:

"Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings" (pg.16)

and the capacity to "order sounds in a manner that makes for mutual comprehension between human beings is universal." (pg.15)

## Europeanizing Afrika

Despite the crisis of identity of the vacillating African petit bourgeoisie who produced literature in European languages "as if there had never been literature in African languages," African languages simply "refused to die". The peasantry "saw no contradiction between speaking their own mother-tongues and belonging to a larger national or continental geography", they had "no complexes about their languages and the cultures they carried!". (pgs. 22-23)

To those who argue that that the unity of the African people requires the use of one or another foreign language – whether English, French, German or Portuguese – as *lingue franche* Ngugi has a question:

"(B)y our continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says that Africa cannot do without European languages?" (pg. 26)

Ngugi makes the forceful point that literature in foreign languages can never constitute African literature!

The domination of Black languages by European languages bolsters and buttresses the political and economic marauding of Africa and the entire Black world by imperialism. It subjects the very language of real life to foreign domination. Ngugi declares:

"The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to the entire universe. Hence language has always been at the heart of the two contending social forces in Africa of the twentieth century." (ie imperialism and the resistance) (pg. 4)

Ngugi seeks to initiate a break with this prevailing trend of Europeanizing Afrika. He says:

"This book, *Decolonising the Mind*, is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on, it is Gikuyu and KiSwahili all the way. However, I hope that through the age old medium of translation I shall be able to continue dialogue with all." (pg. xiv)

After all, Afrika "needs back its economy, its politics, its culture, its languages and all its patriotic writers." (pg. xii, emphasis mine)

Writing in African languages amounts to targeting the social force that stands diametrically opposed to imperialism viz the working masses. It amounts to writing in the languages

of resistance, rebellion and revolution and reducing the role of foreign languages to international communication. Writing in foreign languages means that the working people whose struggles feed the writer's work will never read it.

## Nairobi and Kamiriithu

An important landmark in Ngugi's growth was the 1974 Nairobi conference on the teaching of African literature in schools. A working committee drafted recommendations on policy and on syllabi in accordance with the Conference resolution that the Eurocentric language and literature syllabi be overhauled. Says Ngugi:

"All in all, the report is shot through and through with a consciousness that literature is a powerful instrument in evolving the cultural ethos of a people." (pg. 99)

Decisive in Ngugi's "epistemological break" with his past praxis in the area of fiction and theatre was his participation in the activities of the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre since 1976:

"The process . . . was one of continuous learning. Learning of our history. Learning of what obtains in factories. Learning of what goes on in farms and plantations. Learning our language, for the peasants were essentially the guardians of the language through years of use." (pg. 45)

Ngugi's abandonment of English as the vehicle of his ideas represents the climax of his own long struggle against the oppressive and dehumanising neo-colonial reality he saw around him, the climax of his long "quest for relevance" as an African writer.

Since 1977 when Ngugi penned *Petals of Blood*, he has written many works in Gikuyu which have been translated *inter alia* into English. There is no way that the non-Gikuyu/KiSwahili-speaking world will be deprived of Ngugi's creativity and genius.

## A Welcome Decision!

Ngugi's decision is a bold one which must be applauded and emulated. Ngugi does not argue that writing in Black languages *per se* will bring about a Black cultural renaissance: such writing must carry the content of the people's anti-imperialist struggles to liberate their productive forces from foreign control.

The spirit which Ngugi displays reminds us of that which underlies the following quotations, the first from a rather unlikely source:

"The language of the oppressor in the mouth of the oppressed is the language of slaves." (Johannes Hendricus Brand, the President of the Orange Free State Republic, commenting on the Anglicization policy imposed on the Boers. This quotation was often used by participants in the Soweto Uprising to reject the imposition of Afrikaans on Black schoolchildren!) and

"(D)ecolonization is always a violent phenomenon . . . Its unusual importance is that it constitutes, from the very first day, the minimum demands of the colonized. To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up. The extraordinary importance of this change is that it is willed, called for, demanded. The need for this change exists in crude state, impetuous and compelling, in the consciousness and in the lives of the men and women who are colonized. But the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of another 'species' of men and women: the colonizers." (Frantz Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth*)

## The Second Severing of the Umbilical Cord

One is struck by the fact that for the Black intelligentsia, there are two moments in their lives when their umbilical cords are severed – the first at birth and the second with the adoption of the colonizer's language. The process of alienation could not be

more complete.

Ngugi is at pains to emphasize that how we view ourselves and our environment is dependent "on where we stand in relationship to imperialism in its colonial and neo-colonial stages . . ." (pg. 88) This quotation acts as a foil for locating the views propounded by Alexander in his essay.

## The Scorpion

Alexander tackles the question of language from the standpoint that for a new society to emerge, all inequalities between and amongst people must be destroyed. He says:

". . . (A)ll these different 'questions' are part and parcel of one overriding question, viz., how do we abolish social inequality based on colour, class, religious beliefs, sex, language group or any other basis?" (pg. 7)

Alexander stresses that in spite of diverse interpretations and ideological trends in the struggle in Azania, all participants are agreed that they are "trying to bring about national unity." He adds:

". . . (W)e are trying to encourage all our people to become conscious of the fact that they belong to one South African/Azania nation." (*Ibid*)

Building a nation means ". . . fighting against racism and against ethnic divisions or ethnic consciousness." (pg. 8)

In his advocacy of "nation-building", Alexander insists that the difference between advocates of non-racialism and those of anti-racism are inconsequential since "being non-racial or anti-racist means being *for* something." Alexander's preoccupation with superficial unity (leading to monstrosities like "South Africa/Azania" and "non-racialism/anti-racism") leads to his glossing over the very real ideological struggle being waged around the concepts of anti-racism and non-racialism. Non-racialism simply means the non-existence of racist attitudes or tendencies: it does not mean opposition to racism (let alone racism) at all. Anti-racism means active opposition to an



all-pervading system which allows one group to subjugate another using the concept of "race". Anti-racism encapsulates non-racialism.

Alexander's departure point is that "if we want to fight against racial prejudice and racism, then we have, among other things, to break down the language barriers." (pg. 10) He then sets out to show how English and Afrikaans became dominant over other languages in occupied Azania, maintaining that this language policy accords with the "economic and political domination of the white minority in this country." (*Ibid*) Thus "the oppressed people have to forge weapons out of the same materials so that they can defend themselves and break the domination of the ruling group." (pg. 11)

Alexander's departure point smacks of a "take-whatever-you-can-from-the-system-to-destroy-it" syndrome. The expectation is that the scorpion will sting itself to death. But this is dangerous, because the scorpion might well turn on us! Says Ngugi about this very attitude:

"The classes fighting against imperialism . . . have to confront this threat with the higher and more creative culture of resolute struggle. These classes have to wield even more firmly the weapons of the struggle contained in their cultures." (pg. 3)

## Cultural Imperialism

Alexander's outline of the British policy on the language question notes:

"By the middle 1870's the Chief Justice, J.H. de Villiers, could tell an audience that although the time is still far distant when the inhabitants of this colony will speak and acknowledge one common mother-tongue, it would come at last, and when it does come, the language of Great Britain will also be the language of South Africa." (pg. 16)

Alexander sketches the cultural imperialism perpetrated by Westerners in occupied Azania very clearly:

"Their (individual missionaries) avowed aim was to assimilate their 'wards' into the 'Western Christian Civilization' which they genuinely believed was superior to anything that Africans had ever produced." (pg. 17) and

"For the colonised people themselves, this (British language policy) meant that English language and English cultural traits acquired an economic and social value that was treasured above all else while their own languages and many of their cultural traits were devalued and often despised. A typical colonised mind or slave mentality became one of the most potent weapons of colonial pol-

icy, a programme built into the consciousness of black people (and of many whites) that ensured that the *status quo* was, by and large, accepted as good and just. All that one had to do was to climb up the socio-economic ladder which stood ready for every competent, abstinent and disciplined person to mount. If one had these attributes and was able to communicate in English, then – in the mythology of colour-blind individual rights – the sky was the limit!" (pg. 20)

For Alexander,

"South Africa . . . is a country where African, European and Asian cultural traditions have intersected for some three centuries and more and in which an emerging national culture is being carried and given expression to by means of many different languages." (pg. 48)

This is a fallacy: it was *inter alia* through the subjugation of African and Asian (ie Black) cultural traditions that white people ascended to the position of domination and control. The struggle taking place in the linguistic arena is merely a part of a struggle which includes Black people's quest for true humanity as a vital ingredient.

The "intersection" Alexander refers to presupposes mutual intermingling of cultures devoid of struggles for domination. This cultural miscegenation and bastardization suggests that white dominant culture is not an imposition on Black culture. This position actually negates struggle in the cultural terrain. Advocates of this position attempt to defeat the need for solidarity, the awareness of identity, the strengthening of the "we" versus "them" attitude. This, in short, amounts to assimilation and ultimately to CAPITULATION!

Alexander correctly states:

"In the emergent Azanian/South African nation, the interests of the majority, i.e., of the black workers, are and should be paramount and we should, therefore, base our language policies at all levels of our society on this fact." (pg. 52)

He promptly somersaults, however:

". . . (T)he most appropriate scenario appears to be one which assumes that English will be the *lingua franca* of a liberated Azania, regardless of the socio-economic system that will prevail." (pg. 53)

Alexander is careful about how he words his suggestion:

"What would appear to be a most likely scenario is one where English is universally accepted as an official language together with other languages, which would enjoy official status on a regional basis, depending on the initial concentration of mother tongue speakers of the respective languages." (pg. 54 – emphasis mine)

### **Lingua franca cum Linking Language**

As in his ambivalence about "South Africa" or "Azania", "non-racialism" or "anti-racism", Alexander refers to English as both a *lingua franca* and a "linking language". He strongly suggests that there emerge a Standardised Nguni and Standardised Sotho which "need not lead to the disappearance of Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Siswati, Sipeidi and Tswana and their dialects." (pg. 64)

The fact of the matter is that the majority of the people ie the Black working class and the peasantry do not understand English. Is Alexander's policy not strenuous and burdensome for the universal class? Alexander joins the imperialists in subordinating the people's languages to the colonizer's language – English. Note how Alexander betrays his lack of commitment to the socialist revolution by postulating his policy "regardless of the socio-economic system that will prevail." WE say that the Dictatorship of the Black Proletariat will prevail. What is the use of going the whole hog to formulate a language policy if we do not know the nature of the society we are designing it for?

Alexander blandly asserts:

". . . (D)espite the problematizing of the idea of English as the linking language in South Africa, most pro-

gressive people accept that between now and liberation we have to promote this solution." (pg. 59)

But Alexander is not seriously suggesting that English provides merely a stopgap solution. He is saying that no matter what English has to be the *lingua franca*:

"We have to understand that unless the vast majority of the South African population are organically motivated to learn and use English for the conduct of their affairs, English will become or remain, as in so many African and Asian countries, the language of the privileged neo-colonialist middle class." (pg. 60)

Hence Alexander says: ". . . (I)t is more than likely that another *lingua franca* may eventually displace English in this for internal purposes" (pg. 61 – emphasis mine). He nowhere says that attempts have to be made to make this materialize. Instead, his proposal amounts to enshrining and popularizing English and making its position unassailable:

"All that can be said with some certainty is that we have to begin *today* to produce a generation of highly skilled, well-trained language teachers. In particular, we need to insist on a few specialist English teachers being employed in every primary school in South Africa." (pgs. 66-67, emphasis in original)

At the conference on Language and Struggle held on 28-29 April 1989 at the University of Natal (Durban) Alexander remarked:

"In future . . . the role of *lingua franca* will become *exclusively* that of the English language, and Afrikaans, Nguni and Sotho will play, at least initially, a socially less important role except in those regions where mother-tongue speakers of these languages predominate."

– "So what about Afrikaans?" *Language Projects Review* Volume 4 Number 2 (July 1989) at 16

No cogent argument is presented as to why English – and not Afrikaans which Alexander admits is spoken and understood by more people in

occupied Azania than English – ought to be the *lingua franca* or even the linking language. While both English and Afrikaans are languages used to entrench oppression, Afrikaans is a language which belongs to the Black people and must be repossessed by them.

The idea of standardizing the Nguni and Sotho languages is an excellent one and work must begin now to:

1. achieve and popularize their standardization,
2. have literary works flower in the people's languages,
3. develop a technical lexicon for the people's languages.

Joseph Tubiana in an article "The Linguistic Approach to Self-Determination" in *Nationalism & Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa* (edited by I.M. Lewis, Ithaca Press, London, 1983) sets out to demonstrate the interests served by the choice of an official language:

"The choice of this language (ie official language) is entirely the decision of the state and the choice is based purely on the convenience, needs and interests of the continuity of the state. The impartial observer would note that the individual who challenges the choice of official language has automatically challenged the structure of the state, and has sought to change this in seeking to change the choice of language . . ." (pgs. 24-5)

Alexander's proposals will perpetuate the colonization of Black people in the linguistic arena.

The nub of Tubiana's article is the declaration:

"In effect language is one of the elements constituting a culture yet at the same time it embodies the entire culture . . . all that threatens the language threatens the culture as a whole." (pg. 27)

## The Somali Experience

Alexander's problem with the people's languages is that they:

". . . do not have enough literature and lack an adequate technical vocabulary for the teaching of most natural science and mathematical subjects above certain standards." (pg. 66)

This argument, puerile and ideologically loaded as it is, is ripped apart by a study of the Somali experience. Within a short time, Somali became an official national language and displaced both English and Italian. In an article entitled "Language, National Consciousness and Identity – the Somali Experience", Hussein M. Adams says:

"The modernized Somali language reaches its peak of succinctness and precision in the field of science and mathematics." (Lewis ed. at pg. 35) and

"Even before the advent of written Somali, Somali broadcasters pioneered the expression of new concepts and ideas while avoiding foreign borrowings as far as possible." (pg. 33)

Surely the same can be done in occupied Azania. One good example is the coining of *ngculaza* which is the Zulu equivalent for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and *ngqalasizinda* which means infrastructure by Thokozani M.E. Nene, an announcer for Radio Zulu.

Explaining how the Somali vocabulary developed to meet modern needs, Adam mentions four methods:

1. utilizing the wide range and subtle distinctions potentially existing in everyday speech.
2. drawing upon traditional and archaic vocabulary to provide words and expressions to meet changing needs.
3. employing old roots from both the general everyday speech and the more specialized vocabulary, to form new words.
4. borrowing words from Arabic, Italian and English. (pg. 34)

In Somalia, public life is run and regulated through the medium of Somali. With regard to education, Adam says:

"Lower level training programmes utilize Somali to a considerable extent. Middle level training programmes often use Somali lectures and also training material in foreign languages (English or Italian). In higher level training programmes (as well as in university education) foreign languages are still used, sometimes with interpretation into Somali depending on the background of the students involved." (pg. 36)

Adam emphasizes that:

"The writing and modernizing of Somali has made the Somalis a people who constitute a society with rapidly developing means of communication. It has also assisted in narrowing the gaps between Somali dialects by providing one main 'Standard Dialect' in all mass media (radio and press) and in books and publications for the schools and for literacy campaigns. This represents the attainment of one of the long-frustrated objectives of the self-determination struggle." (pg. 40)

## Our Language Policy: Some Thoughts

The Somali experience proves that what Alexander regards as an inhibiting factor regarding the use of the people's languages in occupied Azania is no more than an excuse for not developing and elevating them to national and even international importance. Failure to do this would be an abrogation of our revolutionary responsibilities.

The number of languages spoken in occupied Azania and the variations of dialects within each language make the construction of a language policy a mammoth but immensely challenging task. There is no excuse for footling and doing a shoddy job of this task.

"The Gadfly" writing in *Umtapo Focus* argues that the use of English as a *lingua franca* prevents ethnic squabbles and the fostering of divisions within the Black community. This is preposterous indeed! As Chairman Mao emphasized, "of all things in the world, human beings are

the most precious. With the masses, every kind of miracle under the sun can be performed."

Formulating a language policy is an integral part of the unfolding day-to-day struggles for national liberation and social emancipation. The transition from capitalism to socialism is not a logical and predestined consequence: it requires the injection of revolutionary consciousness. The masses of people must deliberately take their fate and future in their own hands.

The language policy for a free Azania has to be adroitly designed such that it does not antagonize and polarize the masses but instead treats them with reverence and love. The departure point of the language policy is "POLITICS IN COMMAND." This – and nothing else – provides the guarantee that the language policy will develop and flower within anti-ethnic and anti-racist contours. People will, as the result of a painstaking conscientization programme, transcend ethnic consciousness and achieve Black Consciousness.

An interim solution, therefore, is to make one each of the major Nguni languages (isiZulu and isiXhosa) and Sotho languages (Southern sotho and SiPedi) a national official language. English should also be made a national official language, primarily for international communication. English ought to play only a secondary role in national and social intercourse in Azania, and curriculae should provide for all three national languages to be studied at school.

The reason why English rather than Afrikaans should be a national official language lies in the historical proficiency of the British at colonialism. Afrikaans, being a language developed by Black people and one which dislodged High Dutch as a spoken and written language, is in the peculiar position of being a major indigenous language outside the Nguni and Sotho group but it requires

conscious application to re-direct decades of ruling class intervention, adoption and theft of this people's language. Achmat Davids observes that Afrikaans as a spoken language was used for comic effect in the 1830's by journalists such as C.E. Boniface, A.G. Bain and L.H. Meurant who acknowledged it to be the language of the "non-whites" (sic!). He outlines how the slaves and political exiles from south-East Asia (subsequently known as the "Cape Malays") used the Arabic script for the communication of Dutch and how these publications were the beginning of Afrikaans literature. He says:

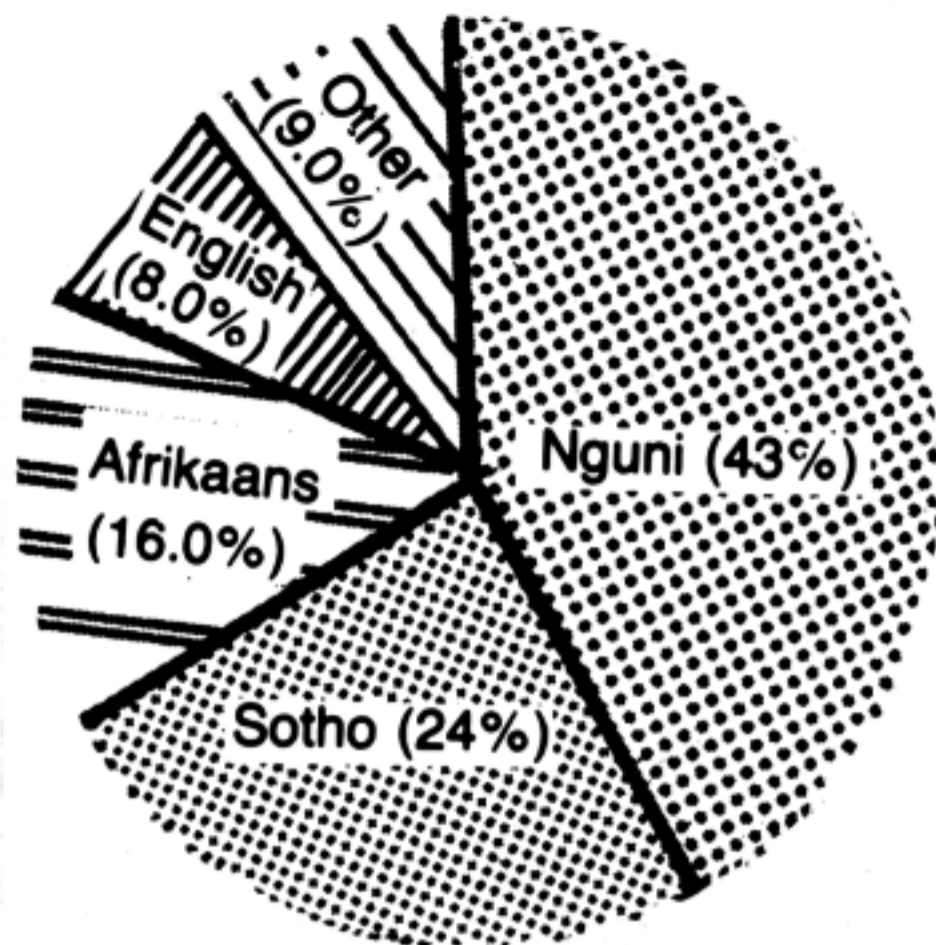
"It is, therefore, not mere coincidence that the grammatical structure of Afrikaans is closer to Malay than to Nederlands."

(See 'Arabic used to convey Afrikaans' *Muslim Views* December 1988 and 'Muslim Contribution to Afrikaans' *Muslim Views* January-February 1989)

In the longer term, the standardization of Nguni and Sotho must be regarded as priority number one for our language policy. This standardization does not mean the eclipse of any of the Nguni or Sotho languages: on the contrary, the standardization is designed precisely so that the different languages can thrive and grow. One must agree with Alexander when he says that it is desirable that we are able to be proficient in most of the languages spoken in Azania.

## Recommendation

Both books are recommended:



Ngugi's book is a must for reading, re-reading and re-reading yet again. It is an uplifting and challenging work, demanding a commitment:

"To turn the struggles into common experience and Justice into a passion." (pg. 105)

Alexander's essay needs to be approached with caution and his suggestions evaluated with a critical and discerning eye, for his views are a reflection of the existence of the sub-culture described by Aimé Césaire in his address to the Congress of Black Writers and Artists, Paris, 1956:

"Wherever colonisation is a fact, the indigenous culture begins to rot. And among the ruins something begins to be born which is not a culture but a kind of sub-culture, a sub-culture which is condemned to exist on the margin allowed by European culture. This then becomes the province of a few men, the elite, who find themselves placed in the most artificial conditions, deprived of any revivifying contact with the masses of the people."

– Sibusiso ka Thusi