Decolonising Memory: A Curatorial Encounter With Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Linguistic Philosophy

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The nomenclature of museum collections is rarely treated as a site of politics, yet every catalogue entry, accession record and display label carries an epistemic charge. Objects removed from African communities were renamed as they were removed, described through European frameworks and ordered according to taxonomies that positioned them as evidence of difference rather than as expressions of knowledge. This reflective essay argues that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's philosophy of linguistic decolonisation, developed principally in relation to literature, offers a usable framework for curatorial and conservation practice. Working from my position as a heritage practitioner and doctoral researcher in South Africa, and drawing on encounters with African collections at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art during an African Museology Exchange fellowship, I trace how the argument that language carries memory and worldview can be extended from the novel to the object label. The essay proceeds through four movements: a reading of Ngũgĩ's linguistic philosophy and its relevance to material culture; a reflexive account of my own formation, including a formative encounter with the African Writers Series; an examination of renaming as a curatorial practice, illustrated through isiZulu terms such as umkhonto and isihlangu; and an honest reckoning with the institutional, geopolitical and personal constraints that limit such work, including my own reliance on English. Renaming is not proposed as a technical correction. It is advanced as a modest but consequential act of epistemic justice, and one whose contradictions must be held in view rather than resolved rhetorically.

Keywords: African languages, curatorial practice, decolonisation, epistemic justice, museum nomenclature

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Introduction

The weight of colonial nomenclature presses heavily upon museum collections across the world. Each label, each catalogue entry and each archival description carries within it a sedimented history: objects severed from the communities that made and used them, described through European eyes, and ordered according to taxonomies that were never designed to accommodate the knowledge systems from which those objects came. The violence of removal is well documented and increasingly well litigated. The violence of description is quieter, more durable, and considerably harder to reverse, because it has been absorbed into the infrastructure of the museum itself, into its accession registers, its database fields and its habits of speech.

As a curator and conservator working with African collections in South Africa, I confront this quieter violence daily. It appears when a nineteenth-century catalogue card describes a ceremonial object as a curiosity; when a display panel renders an entire regional practice as a single ethnographic type; when a database field will not accept the diacritics that an indigenous name requires. These are small frictions, and their smallness is precisely the point. They are the accumulated residue of a linguistic order that determined, long before any of us arrived at our posts, what African material culture could be said to be.

This essay traces how Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's philosophy of linguistic decolonisation extends from literature into the realm of material culture. Ngũgĩ's central claim, developed most fully in *Decolonising the Mind*, is that language is not a neutral medium of communication but a carrier of culture, memory and worldview, and that the imposition of a colonial language performs a form of dispossession that outlasts formal political independence (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). If this is true of the novel, it is no less true of the label. The proposition I advance here is straightforward in statement and difficult in execution: that restoring indigenous names to African objects in museum collections constitutes a substantive act of epistemic restoration, and that the practical, institutional and personal obstacles to doing so are themselves diagnostic of how deeply colonial linguistic orders remain embedded in heritage institutions.

The essay is deliberately reflective in register. It emerges from the intersection of scholarly formation and professional practice, and it is grounded in encounters with African collections during an African Museology Exchange fellowship at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, as well as in ongoing work with southern African collections in South Africa. It does not report the results of a controlled study. It offers, instead, a situated account of what it means to attempt decolonial work from inside institutions that were built to do something else entirely.

Language as the Keeper of Memory

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's literary career supplies the ground for his linguistic argument, and the two cannot be usefully separated. His early novels, *Weep Not, Child* and *A Grain of Wheat*, placed Kenyan experience at the centre of the narrative frame at a moment when African literature in English was still routinely read as a supplement to a European canon (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1964, 1967). The later works, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*, extended his critique beyond the colonial administration to the post-colonial elite, whose accumulation reproduced the extractive logic that independence was meant to have ended (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1977, 1980). The trajectory matters because it establishes that Ngũgĩ's concern was

never merely with who governs, but with the epistemic architecture that survives changes of government.

His decision, after detention in 1977, to write his creative work primarily in Gikuyu was therefore continuous with that concern rather than a departure from it. Language, in his account, is the keeper of memory: it holds a people's accumulated understanding of their world, and the substitution of one language for another does not simply change the medium of expression but alters what can be readily thought, named and transmitted (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). Colonial education, on this reading, operated less by prohibiting African knowledge outright than by making it linguistically inaccessible to the very people who inherited it, so that the educated African became fluent in the categories of the coloniser and increasingly halting in her own.

Two further dimensions of Ngũgĩ's thought bear directly on museum work. The first is his insistence on moving the centre: the argument that intellectual authority should not be understood as radiating outward from European metropoles, and that knowledge produced in Johannesburg ought to resonate in Lagos, Nairobi and Accra without requiring validation in London or New York (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1993). Colonialism functioned as a fragmenting force, and the fragmentation persists in the routing of African scholarship through northern institutions and northern languages. The second is his account of dismemberment, developed in *Something Torn and New*, where the severing of a people from their languages, names and memory is figured as a bodily wounding that requires deliberate re-membering (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 2009). The metaphor is unusually apt for collections work. Museums hold, quite literally, the dismembered parts of cultural bodies, and they hold them under names imposed at the moment of severance.

Ngũgĩ's position has been extended by scholars who read the university and the archive as continuous with the colonial project. Mbembe (2016) argues that decolonising the institution requires more than curricular addition, demanding instead a reconsideration of what counts as knowledge and who is authorised to produce it. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) frames the task as one of epistemic freedom, distinguishing the political decolonisation of the twentieth century from the unfinished epistemic decolonisation of the present. Read alongside Smith's (2012) account of research as an instrument of colonisation, these arguments converge on a point that is easily stated and rarely operationalised: that the vocabulary of a discipline is not incidental to its politics.

A Reflective Methodology

This essay draws on personal narrative and professional experience, aligning itself with the reflexive turn in African studies. Mama (2007) argues that the ethics of studying Africa require researchers to account for the conditions and interests that shape their work, while Nyamnjoh (2012) describes the persistence of colonial education as a structure that continues to cultivate African intellectuals as transplanted specimens rather than as rooted thinkers. Both positions hold that knowledge is situated and that acknowledging the researcher's position enriches rather than compromises scholarly rigour.

Three features of my own position shape what follows. The first is generational. I belong to a cohort born after the formal end of apartheid, which inherits its legacies without having lived its formal machinery, and which is frequently addressed as though the inheritance were an achievement rather than a burden. The second is institutional. I work within organisations built during colonial and apartheid periods, whose collections were assembled under those

conditions, and which are now tasked, often with limited resources, with dismantling the assumptions on which they were founded. The third is the contradiction that runs through this entire essay: I attempt decolonial work while writing, reading and, for the most part, thinking in English.

I state these positions at the outset because the argument that follows is not offered from a position of resolution. Reflexivity here is not a disclaimer appended to a method section. It is the method, in the sense that the frictions I encounter in daily practice are themselves the evidence, and the honest reporting of those frictions, including the ones I cannot resolve, is what the essay has to offer.

The African Writers Series and a Formative Encounter

My encounter with Ngũgĩ was not, in the first instance, scholarly. It occurred through the African Writers Series, the Heinemann imprint that published some 359 titles between 1962 and 2003 and that constituted, for several generations of African readers, an archive of literary voice that no national curriculum supplied (Currey, 2008). Reading *A Grain of Wheat* as a teenager opened a window onto an Africa that exceeded the national narrative I had inherited. The series carried Chinua Achebe, whose *Things Fall Apart* inaugurated it, alongside Steve Biko, Nadine Gordimer, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and Okot p'Bitek (Achebe, 1958). To read across those volumes was to encounter a continent in conversation with itself.

There is an irony in this formation that I have come to regard as instructive rather than merely uncomfortable. The series that gave me access to African literary thought was published in London, in English, by a British educational publisher, and it circulated through school systems designed under colonial administration. My access to a decolonial literary imagination was itself mediated by colonial infrastructure. This is not a reason to discount the encounter. It is a reason to be precise about what such encounters can and cannot accomplish, and to notice how frequently the instruments available for decolonial work are instruments inherited from the very order they seek to dismantle.

The same irony surfaces in the museum, and in the mouth. Many of us who work with African collections stumble over the indigenous names of objects held in our own institutions, pronouncing them tentatively, checking them against a written source, uncertain of tone and vowel length. Our tongues stumble over names that should feel like home. That stumbling is not a personal deficiency; it is a measure of how effectively colonial education severed a generation from its own linguistic traditions, and it is one of the more precise diagnostics available to us of what remains to be done.

Renaming as Restoration

The practical form that Ngũgĩ's argument takes in curatorial work is nomenclature. Colonial-era records describe African objects in a vocabulary that is at once vague and evaluative: the primitive weapon, the ethnic costume, the fetish. Each of these terms performs the same double operation. It withholds specificity, collapsing distinct object classes into an undifferentiated category, and it assigns a position on a developmental scale that positions the object as evidence of an earlier stage of human society. The apparent neutrality of the museum register is precisely what makes it effective: the descriptor arrives as information rather than as judgement.

Relabelling an object as umkhonto rather than simply as a spear does more than substitute one word for another. It acknowledges that isiZulu contains a differentiated vocabulary for objects that English renders with a single term, that this vocabulary encodes distinctions of form, function and occasion, and that those distinctions constitute knowledge. It also resists the assumption, rarely stated but widely operative, that English terms are more precise, more scientific or more universal than the terms used by the communities who made the object. Kreps (2003) has shown that curatorial and conservation practices exist in many cultural traditions, and that the museum's professional vocabulary represents one such tradition rather than a neutral standard against which others are measured. Table 1 sets out the pattern as I have encountered it.

Table 1

Colonial Descriptors and isiZulu Nomenclature in Museum Records

Colonial descriptor	isiZulu term	What the renaming restores
Primitive weapon	Umkhonto	Recognition of a differentiated object class with its own metallurgy, martial vocabulary and ceremonial associations
Native shield	Isihlangu	Regimental identity, hide selection and the authority vested in the bearer
Ethnic costume	Isidwaba	Marital status, ceremonial obligation and the lineage relations the garment enacts
Fetish	Named sacred object	Ritual function and the custodial relationships through which the object remains active

Note. Descriptors are composites drawn from cataloguing conventions encountered across southern African and North American collections and are illustrative rather than transcriptions of any single record.

Open Questions

Presented in this form, renaming appears straightforward. In practice it raises questions that practitioners cannot resolve unilaterally, and I regard the questions as more valuable than any settled answer I might offer.

The first concerns authority. Who determines the correct indigenous name, and on what basis? Objects in museum collections were frequently removed without record of the individual, homestead or region of origin, and naming them now involves an act of attribution that risks reproducing, in decolonial idiom, the same generalising move that produced the colonial descriptor. A name applied by a curator in Pretoria on the basis of typological resemblance is not equivalent to a name supplied by a custodian community, and the difference should be visible in the record rather than smoothed away.

The second concerns multiplicity. Southern Africa is multilingual, and object classes move across language boundaries. A term that is precise in isiZulu may be inaccurate in Sesotho or Xitsonga, and choosing one language over another for a shared object class enacts a hierarchy of its own. The third concerns infrastructure. Museum databases and collection management systems were designed around Latin-script fields, English-language controlled vocabularies and thesauri built in the global North; they frequently mishandle diacritics, resist multiple simultaneous names for a single object and offer no field structure capable of recording who supplied a name and with what authority. The fourth concerns audience. Bilingual labelling

extends accessibility for some visitors while risking the relegation of the indigenous term to a parenthetical gloss, which reinscribes the hierarchy it was meant to unsettle.

None of these questions constitutes an argument against renaming. They are an argument against treating renaming as a technical fix that can be implemented at the level of the label alone. The work is relational before it is textual, and where the relations do not yet exist, the honest response is to record the uncertainty rather than to supply a confident name.

Institutional and Geopolitical Constraints

Decolonial curatorial work does not proceed in a vacuum, and it is chastening to observe how quickly it can be arrested by forces entirely external to the museum. Recent tensions between the United States and South Africa have slowed institutional collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution, collaboration that had appeared promising for advancing precisely the kind of nomenclature work described above. Exchange programmes, shared cataloguing initiatives and the slow business of building trust between institutions depend on diplomatic and funding conditions over which practitioners exercise no control. African cultural heritage work remains entangled with international politics, funding dependencies and power asymmetries that exceed any individual institution's capacity to manage.

The constraint is not only geopolitical. The colonial legacy in African museums is carried by architecture, which organises the visitor's movement and the object's visibility according to nineteenth-century assumptions; by organisational structures, which distribute authority between curatorial, conservation and education functions in inherited ways; by funding models, which favour projects legible to northern donors; by relationships with government and international partners, which set the terms on which collections may be studied or moved; and by staff training, which is still overwhelmingly conducted within Western museological traditions, so that the professional formation of African heritage workers reproduces the very framework they are asked to critique.

This is the context in which restitution debates unfold. Sarr and Savoy (2018) made the case for the return of African cultural heritage held in French collections, and their report reframed restitution as a question of relational ethics rather than of legal title. The nomenclature question sits alongside restitution rather than beneath it. Objects that remain in northern collections, and objects that are returned, are equally subject to the descriptive regimes under which they are held, and a returned object catalogued under a colonial descriptor has been moved without being renamed.

Linguistic Contradiction and Personal Complicity

I write this essay in English, not in an indigenous South African language. I think, read and often dream in the language of my colonisers. This is not a rhetorical confession offered to establish credibility before proceeding as before. It is the central difficulty of the position from which I write, and any argument I make about the restoration of indigenous names must be read through it.

The pressures that produce this contradiction are structural rather than individual. The academy rewards publication in English-language journals with international circulation, and national research funding formulae in South Africa attach value to outputs that appear in accredited venues, the overwhelming majority of which publish in English. Grant funding favours

research presented in colonial languages, since review panels are assembled on the assumption that English is the working language of scholarship. Professional advancement depends on fluency in Western theoretical vocabularies, so that a researcher's capacity to be heard is conditioned on her competence in precisely the idiom whose dominance she may wish to contest. Conferences, including the one at which this paper was presented, operate in English as a matter of course.

Ngũgĩ's response to an equivalent set of pressures was to write his creative work in Gikuyu and to accept the professional costs that followed, including a substantially narrowed initial readership and a dependence on translation for international circulation (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986, 2012). His choice challenges scholars to identify the points at which we might refuse to participate in our own linguistic colonisation. It does not, however, license the conclusion that individual choice is sufficient. A curator who writes labels in isiZulu within an institution whose database, funding cycle and reporting requirements operate in English has not transformed the institution; she has added a layer of translation to it. Fabian's (1983) analysis of how anthropological writing consigned its subjects to a time other than the observer's is instructive here, because it demonstrates that a discipline's most consequential assumptions are lodged in its conventions of expression rather than in its explicit claims.

What I take from Ngũgĩ, then, is neither absolution nor a directive to abandon English tomorrow. It is a requirement to keep the contradiction visible: to name the language I am writing in as a choice with costs, to resist describing partial measures as completed decolonisation, and to work towards structural changes in cataloguing standards, funding criteria and professional training that would make a different choice available to practitioners who come after me.

Intergenerational Responsibility

Remembering who we are as African intellectuals is not an exercise in nostalgia. It creates the conditions under which futures can be reimagined, and it makes it possible to address inherited pain rather than to transmit it unexamined. Three commitments follow from the argument advanced here.

The first concerns objects as memory. The collections held in African and northern museums are not inert material awaiting interpretation. They are repositories of ancestral connection and of the knowledge systems that colonialism sought to render obsolete, and the terms under which they are described determine whether that knowledge is legible to the communities from which the objects came. The second concerns continental solidarity. The histories of disruption and post-independence disappointment that Ngũgĩ chronicles in Kenya find their counterparts in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, and the fragmentation of African scholarship into national containers serves the same centralising logic that Ngũgĩ identified. Nomenclature standards developed collaboratively across African institutions would carry an authority that no single national museum can generate alone.

The third concerns reconnection with the diaspora. Museum collections in Europe and North America hold objects that are, for diaspora communities, among the few available material links to specific African histories. Those collections can function as bridges, but only if African and diaspora voices are centred in the descriptive work rather than consulted after the catalogue has been written. The sequence matters. Consultation that follows description confirms decisions already made; description that follows relationship is a different practice altogether.

Conclusion

Renaming African objects with their indigenous names is more than a technical correction to the historical record. It constitutes epistemic justice, in that it restores to African languages the authority to describe African material culture; cultural restoration, in that it reconnects objects with the systems of meaning in which they were made; and political resistance, in that it refuses the assumption that European vocabularies are the natural medium of scholarly precision. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insight that language is the keeper of memory holds in the collection store as fully as it does in the novel.

The essay has also insisted on the limits of this claim. Renaming requires relationships with custodian communities that many institutions have not built, infrastructure that most collection management systems do not provide, and a resolution of authority questions that no curator can supply alone. It proceeds under geopolitical and funding conditions that practitioners do not control. And it is undertaken, in my case and in many others, by researchers whose own working language is the one whose dominance is in question. These limits do not invalidate the work. They specify it, and they identify where effort is most usefully directed: towards cataloguing standards that accommodate multiple names and record their provenance, towards professional training in African languages for heritage workers, and towards collaborative frameworks that treat African institutions as centres rather than as peripheries.

Wherever we are, and whatever corner of the institution we occupy, we must redefine ourselves without permitting erasure through the loss of our African languages. The horizon of this work is an Africa that speaks, thinks and creates on its own terms, and museums that can describe what they hold in the languages of those who made it.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the Chief Albert Luthuli Research Chair under the leadership of Professor Puleng Segalo at the University of South Africa for supporting this research and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art for hosting me through the African Museology Exchange Programme, with particular thanks to colleagues in the conservation and collections teams whose generosity shaped my thinking. I am grateful to Dr Lwanga Songsore for helping me at the inception of this research, which has since become the conference presentation and this article, and to participants at the European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026 for questions that sharpened this argument.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Claude, a generative AI assistant developed by Anthropic, was used during the preparation of this manuscript. Its use was limited to assisting with the structuring of the argument, drafting prose from the author's conference presentation and research notes, and refining language for clarity and formatting compliance. All ideas, arguments, positional claims, professional observations, source selections and conclusions are the author's own, derived from her research and practice, and every AI-assisted passage was reviewed, verified and revised by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

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