IN his book, Re-membering Africa (2009), Kenyan literary scholar Prof Ngugi wa Thiong’o traces Ireland as the place where seeds of modern “dismembering” of a people were first sown, before making a strong case for remembering Africa. Dismemberment of Africa occurred in two stages; during slavery where the African was divided into continent and Diaspora; and during colonialism where Africa was fragmented and reconstituted into European colonies.

Prof Ngugi’s remembering is a call to reconstructing African memory which is only possible through embracing African languages. Europe shook off Latin for English, French, German, vernaculars hitherto thought to be inelegant and inadequate in communicating. Re-membering has the incidental leitmotif of “political unity” from the abashed African states into a United States of Africa with the people as the driving force as opposed to heads of state meetings at AU rendezvous.

Ireland was the first British colony. English poet Edmund Spenser whom I have quoted with alacrity ever since I read The Faerie Queen, with its duality of characterization of Queen Elizabeth and lady Gloriana, Ethipheramion and Amoretti, the love poems inspired by the poet’s fiancee Elizabeth Boyle, was in fact an imperial ideologue.

Spenser’s other work, View of the Present State of Ireland, which we encounter in Re-membering Africa, was the blueprint for colonizing Ireland and the project of erasure of Irish memory. “And therewithal would I all the Oes and Macs to their names be utterly forbidden and extinguished,” Spenser says in View. Whereas the Irish wished to retain her identity through naming as in Laura O’Connor or Donagh McDonagh, the British abrogated this naming tradition and planted in its wake a British memory on the body of the Irish, much as it would do on the body of African.

But Spenser decries English settlers in Ireland who integrate into Irish society by acquiring Irish names, “is it possible that any should so far grow out of frame that they should in so short space quite forget their country and their own names.” He finds it “unnatural that any should love another’s language than their own.” This disdainful attitude towards the subjugated was copied by other European colonizers.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the greatest living exponent of “return to African languages” says Diaspora has had to coup with linguicide (linguistic genocide), the engineered erasure of African language; whereas the continent suffers from linguifam (linguistic famine), the voluntary starving of African language by the African intelligentsia. African slaves lost the capacity to speak African languages in plantations.

Why the African writer as the keeper of communal memory does not wish to write in his own language is unfathomable for Prof Ngugi.

Re-membering Africa is a culmination of lectures Prof Ngugi wa Thiong’o gave at Harvard University, University of Cape Town, University of Nairobi, Dar Es-Salaam University and Makerere University. Each word and every statement made by a canonical writer is given an interpretive glint by the Kenyan scholar. Re-membering is illuminative, insightful and incites desires to reread texts previously read. How I wish these lectures were delivered in Gikuyu language at Harvard University or University of Cape Town, the reverberation around the world would be monumental.

One of the writers involved in the process of reclaiming African languages is Marjory Kimani, author of the novel Mucii ni Mucii (Home is Home). Marjory’s works include a basic Gikuyu-English guidebook. She is the publisher of the Gikuyu magazine, Miciiini iittu (Around Our Homes) which will be launched this Saturday at 2pm at Braeside School Theatre in Lavington, Nairobi, graced by Mohammed Mwinyipembe of Unesco and Ministry of Culture officials.