UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

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SPEECH BY VICE CHANCELLOR, PROF. PETER M.F. MBITHI DURING A PUBLIC LECTURE BY PROF. NGUGI WA THIONG’O ON JUNE 11, 2015 AT 2.00 P.M. IN TAIFA HALL
Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology

Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology

Cabinet Secretary, Ministry of Sports, Culture and the Arts

Our distinguished guest today, Prof. Ngugi wa Thiong’o

Deputy Vice-Chancellors

College Principals

Dean and Directors
Staff and students

Distinguished guests from afar and near

Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me much pleasure to stand here today as the Vice-Chancellor of this prestigious university from where our distinguished guest, Professor Ngugi wa Thiong’o can trace his roots to scholarly excellence.

This indeed is a true testimony to our vision “A World Class University Committed to Scholarly Excellence. I have no doubt therefore in my mind to tell you
Professor, welcome to the University of Nairobi, your home.

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel most privileged to host this Public Lecture by one of our most celebrated sons, or should I say elder now; Professor Ngugi wa Thiong’o, welcome back home, the place where you started your illustrious career. We feel honoured that you will indeed speak to us today about “Nurturing Literature in Africa,” a topic that addresses one of our immediate needs in this country: that of artistic creativity and cultural identity.

This lecture will hopefully recast in the public debate about who we are, how we become who we are and
what do we hope our children and grandchildren to be. Art and culture, as we all appreciate, are key elements that define humanity. When I say, “I am Peter Mulwa Felix Mbithi,” I am proclaiming my creation as well. I am demanding that I be recognized as a product of the many cultures, places, people, climates, languages etc that I have interacted with up to the moment of this articulation. I am saying that I have been made by association with all these elements but most significantly, by the people I grew up with, went to school with, played games with, my parents, teachers, students, colleagues here at the university, my family among
many others. In other words, to use the major claim of Ubuntu, ‘I am because you are.’

Culture, whatever way you wish to define it, plays a most important role in this process of becoming. To read is to encounter the author or storyteller. The more books you read the bigger the community of fellow human beings you enter. By reading we know the world and those who populate it. So, *Weep Not, Child* brings back to us a moment in the life of this country that is increasingly being forgotten. *Weep Not, Child* isn’t just about displacement, destitution, violence, death and despair. It is also a story about how people cope with tragedy. How did colonized Kenyans live from day to day in the face of
repression and oppression? What did they do to make the days, weeks, months, years, bearable? What can we learn from the story Ngugi tells in *Weep Not, Child* that can help us overcome the malevolence that stalks our society today?

There is no distinction between the threats of global terrorism that we have to live with today and the terror of the colonial time. Whether one is talking about colonialism or today’s terrorism, the aim of the perpetrators of the violence remains one: to dehumanize us. And this is why literature is so important in life, especially today.
Literature teaches us about us and others. By reading other people’s stories, we begin to know them, their cultures, behaviors, environments and worldviews. Through literature, we learn to see from the perspective of the other; to sympathize with the fate of fellow human beings or as Prof. Ngugi would put it, we begin to de-colonize our minds and move the centre of human concern from the self to the community. In this way human progress becomes possible because we are able to understand the good in others, as well as know the bad.

If we know the good in others, it should be possible to then pursue common good as well as common goods. In other words, the ethical individual will
appreciate the sense in equitable sharing of common wealth, which naturally produces a commonwealth. This to say, we cannot talk about a united and peaceful Kenya if we are not ready to share public resources among all of us. If there are too many children amongst us weeping, we shall have failed to produce an egalitarian society, free of diseases, illiteracy and poverty, as the founders of this nation believed we should do. I have no doubt, therefore, that literature can play a very important role in reminding us about the national aspirations to be a people united in diversity, a people who are responsible not just for those from our immediate families and community but also to the country and
humanity, a people who find joy in the happiness of others but are also ready to empathise with and help those amongst us afflicted by disease, illiteracy, poverty, violence or death.

I wish all of you all an enjoyable time at the University of Nairobi.
You are always welcome to this university at all times as we continue a tradition for which the University of Nairobi has been reknown, a tradition of engagement in public debates on matters of national importance, such as this one today.

Thank you.

PETER M.F. MBITHI, PhD,EBS
VICE-CHANCELLOR
AND
PROFESSOR OF VETERINARY SURGERY