

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

"Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey introducing another programme on the major conference called "New Writing in Africa" that has recently taken place here in London under the joint auspices of the Commonwealth Institute and the Africa Centre. The Conference had its practical aspects and those are the ones that we'll be hearing about today and for any aspiring writers listening I'd suggest that you get a sheet of paper and pencil ready for an address that we'll be hearing later on.

In an earlier programme on the Conference we mentioned that there were workshops held on practical subjects. One of them was on the very subject of workshops - writers workshops. I know they appear in many countries but in such a variety of forms that it's impossible to generalise. To find out what the contributors had to say about them I turned to Pat Haward and Jack Mapanje. Pat Haward has worked in Africa for some years in this field and the poet Jack Mapanje teaches literature at the University of Malawi. They began by giving a list of the countries represented in the workshop.

JACK MAPANJE

Ghana, Nigeria,

PAT HAWARD

Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone,

JACK MAPANJE

Malawi. So there's a varied number of writers workshops throughout Africa and there is no general notion of a writers workshop.

PAT HAWARD

But your workshop started in the University, yes?

JACK MAPANJE

Yes. We started as early as 1970 and this workshop started after

students and staff of English Literature discovered that there was a need for a country like Malawi to have writers of its own. So people who had never written, some who had written only one poem or one story, gathered together and decided they were going to form a little association - very informally - to discuss and to encourage themselves to write. What happens is that members who are interested in writing and who would like to discuss their work come together and probably find out what happens after that.

PAT HAWARD

I was interested that you meet every week during term time whereas in Ghana the big programme they had there had regional meetings perhaps once a month, but they had a festival, or a gathering, each year when the different schools and colleges in the regional groups brought the best of their work to an annual workshop.

JACK MAPANJE

Ghana is not the only example we've had in this workshop. We've had the Tanzanian experience....

PAT HAWARD

They advertised, in fact, in the paper to get those people in.

JACK MAPANJE

Yes, that's right. These were advertised in the papers and anybody who wanted to go into these workshops to start writing in Kiswahili had the opportunity to write in Kiswahili.

PAT HAWARD

Yes. The thing that interested me, too, in all of them was that the writers who come are willing to subject themselves to criticism.

JACK MAPANJE

Yes. In fact, in actual workshops this is a crucial point, because some people are not willing and others are deliberately notorious in getting others to cry or weep and they're too critical about a piece of work from a writer who is only beginning. But the other point was the South African experience which I thought was nice....

PAT HAWARD

But there was a difference wasn't there, too, between what you might call 'performance' work - such as theatre workshops - and some of the poetry workshops?

JACK MAPANJE

And there is theatre for development and workshops for the purposes of development. Malawi University is doing a lot of this - where plays are either improvised or deliberately written for the purposes of development and getting the masses involved at the creation level as well as performance level.

PAT HAWARD

The other thing we haven't mentioned is the question of publication, and obviously people who are writing long for publication. On the other hand, writing isn't always at the early stage ready for full, if you like, print. The cyclostyled version is what you've used.

JACK MAPANJE

Yes, publication is a very important thing. Every writer, especially younger writers, would like to publish. So that whether it is on a broadsheet, or two pages of cyclostyled paper, or actual print. Part of the ethos of workshops is - can you find a publisher?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Easier said than done. That was Jack Mapanje and Pat Howard.

Publishing was a subject of considerable attention and some surprising news from the British publisher Heinemann broke during the Conference. Their African subsidiaries in Nairobi and Lagos and above all their rightly famous African Writers Series have made them one of the foremost publishers of African fiction written in English.

The news was surprising and discouraging. The African Writers Series could soon become a shadow of its former self. Copies of books on their back list should remain available and they hope to publish paperback editions of novels and other writings first published in hardback by other publishing houses. New titles may continue to be published by the Nigerian and Kenyan subsidiaries. But all this doesn't add up to anything like an image of expansion - on the contrary. And James Currey the Series editor is leaving Heinemann.

With all the restrictions on publishing at home and abroad I was interested to hear about a Writers Handbook that the Conference organisers are compiling. James Gibbs, who's encouraged a variety of African writing, is a prime mover in this project and he told me that they envisage a simple publication in a form that can be updated from time to time and modestly priced. He stressed that it wouldn't be a manual but a source of information for budding young writers who want to get into print. I asked him what were the chief problems faced by aspiring writers these days.

JAMES GIBBS

We're going to be concerned with the mechanics of starting and organising a writers group; preparing a typescript; finding a publisher or publication that will select your material. What we hope to do is to suggest alternative methods of publication and to share examples of small groups that have got together and established their own publication.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, another thing that writers worry about is how much they are going to make from their books, because they want to earn their livelihood by writing.

JAMES GIBBS

There are a number of African writers who have made their living from their pen. I think Peter Abrahams was the first one, and Camara Laye was able to do the same thing. Many writers think that as soon as they're published the money is going to start pouring in. They even run up bills in anticipation of the vast windfall that they are going to collect. In fact, they make very little or perhaps even nothing. So we're hoping to get some information from writers about how much they earn from their writing. I think this will be pretty discouraging, but on the other hand there are examples of people who have triumphed, who have made money out of their books. I'm thinking, for example, of the Liberian writer, Bai T Moore. He wrote his first story, based on an actual incidence, called "Murder in the Cassava Patch". He then made mimeographed copies which he sold on the street and sold to friends. He made enough money from selling these to send the manuscript off to Holland and to have two and a half thousand copies printed. Back in Liberia he was able to go on selling these, more or less from door to door, but then the Ministry of Education accepted the book and put it on to their school syllabus and so the bulk of the print run was taken up by the Ministry of Education. I don't know how much he made, but clearly this is a success story.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, recently the United Nations discussed the question of royalties for African artists. Are you going to advise these writers on the newest or the most up-to-date position in the light of what the United Nations has published?

JAMES GIBBS

Yes, we hope to do so. We want to get as much up-to-date information as we possibly can, both from international organisations like UNESCO and from the listeners to this programme and from the delegates to this Conference. If we get a good deal of information - up-to-date and accurate, with addresses and details - we'll be able to put it into the handbook and then this will be shared around, distributed widely I hope, throughout Africa. So I would encourage all those who are listening to this programme to send in any information that they have and also, at this stage, any questions that they have so that we can deal with them, or include them, in the handbook.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

One problem I can foresee is with regard to publishers. An effort is being made now to divert writers to African publishers. Now, how are you going to recommend to these writers whom they should approach for publication?

JAMES GIBBS

Well, my own feeling would be that we would probably recommend that African writers first of all approach a local publisher - somebody they know, somebody they trust, somebody whose work they've seen on the bookshelves near to them - so that they are first published locally. But we would hope to include in the handbook information about contracts: how to read a contract; how to know that you can sell your rights for sale in, say, Kenya or Zimbabwe, to one publishing house, and then, perhaps later, sell other publishing houses the publishing rights for other areas. So I hope that the vast number

of new publishing houses that are emerging in Africa - often struggling, often with great difficulty - that these will draw to them many of the local writers and that the pattern will change. Achebes will not have to go to London to be published. And this is something that Ngugi has stressed very strongly at this Conference: that the immediate audience is the most important one. Communicate with the people in your immediate environment; perhaps in their own language, almost certainly in their own language. Of course, one must remember that most young writers don't start with a full novel. They start with perhaps a short story or a poem, and for them a journal or a publication either in their own country, a neighbouring country, or perhaps outside Africa, is the first place that they go to for publication. We would include a list of magazines and publications which are of interest to African writers in our handbook.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Who, are writers with opinions on what you are doing to address these contributions to?

JAMES GIBBS

Yes, they should send them, please, to:

Handbook for African Writers,
Education Department,
The Commonwealth Institute,
Kensington High Street,
London W8

And I should at this point stress that addresses are very important. I was in a publisher's office recently and he pointed to a cupboard in which he had a large number of manuscripts which he had been unable to return. He had sent them back to the address that was given and they were returned to him by the post office in the country to which he had sent them: "Addressee Unknown" or "Address Unknown". I must stress to all those who are thinking of writing that it is very important to have a safe and secure address through which they can be contacted.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And, of course, if they are rejected by a publisher and their script is returned they can try some other publisher, you never know.

JAMES GIBBS

You never know. I think the record is one hundred and five rejections. So most writers have got a long way to go before they beat one hundred and five.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

James Gibbs. And I'd like to add one more piece of advice: always keep a copy of any work you send for consideration. Just in case.

And let me repeat the address for anyone that wants to send in information or suggestions to James so that the handbook can be as helpful to as many writers as possible. The address is:

Handbook for African Writers,
Education Department,
The Commonwealth Institute,
Kensington High Street,
London W8.

Let's hope the handbook doesn't take a hundred and five submissions before it finds a publisher. And we'll certainly be letting listeners to "Arts and Africa" know when it becomes available. Next week I'll be back with more news and views on the arts of Africa. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.