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TALKING POINT

In Search of African Writers

The desire in people to plan their own education, their cultural institutions and so on - in short, the desire for self-determination - has become an obvious corollary to political independence. This is why, so soon after "Uhuru", the Kenya Government has become sharply aware of the irrelevancies in the educational system the country has inherited, and has instituted a commission to find out how the system can be made relevant to the needs of Kenya.

No doubt a great number of changes are being recommended. These will certainly be found to reflect a new overall outlook among our people. One direction in this new thinking will indicate the place African culture should take in the curriculum of the future, and vice versa. For, while education is the vehicle of culture, and makes its continuity possible, the character of a culture in turn nourishes the content and techniques of education.

There is a good deal of foggy thinking in people who like to talk of the "African Personality" as something that can only be understood in terms of those traditional elements in our cultures they are eager to see "preserved" or "conserved". This notion not only conjures up the uninspiring image of canned peaches or pickled mangoes or stuffed exhibits in a glass cage, but also dangerously suggests that the impact of an aggressive Western culture on us does not help define African culture. For instance, some of the new elements that the African has absorbed from outside are painting (as the expression of an individual rather than a group attitude), creative writing and the techniques of theatre. These media are no less part of our culture simply because they are not part of our tradition. The fact that the idioms of our music have been popularised by new instruments and stage performance does not make such music less African.

We now have a growing volume of African writing in English and French. We have also seen the emergence of school "readers" in various vernacular languages, such as have been published by the Literature Bureaux of East and Central Africa and the missionary presses of South Africa. The latter have been even more enterprising because they have published novels and poetry in Sotho, Xhosa and Zulu which have become classics in their own right, and are for a general readership. What requires a conscious drive in East Africa at this stage is the production of English literature - novels, short stories, poetry, one-act plays - for use in secondary school.

It is pathetic to watch African children plough through the novels of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Walter Scott and so on, before they have acquired the tools of language to help them project their minds into an alien culture: it is difficult enough with a good knowledge of English to do this. It means that the African child is being initiated into English literature virtually with a whip; and the spectre of exams is the main spur, rather than the desire to reach out to such wider horizons and deeper depths of human experience as make the great literature of the world.

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We are now generally agreed that African literature in English is part of English literature, and that in French, part of French literature, inasmuch as American or Indian or Australian writing is part of English literature. Each of these rivers, as it were, sweeps its cres and debris and mud into the rich and large pool of English literature. So why should African writing in the metropolitan languages not be taught in our schools? Our children can only grasp the assumptions by which literature in general operates in its social function when they have, in the first tender years at least of secondary school, been made to begin on home ground - with literature that has been created out of an African experience.

Last year, the Congress for Cultural Freedom in Paris (which promoted the birth of three centres in Nigeria and Chemchemi) organized a conference in Dakar (Senegal) and subsequently another in Freetown (Sierra Leone) to discuss the introduction of African literature in French and English into the secondary school and university curricula. The Freetown get-together set up an African Literature Association (Secretariat at Fourah Bay College, Freetown) which would watch and report on progress in teaching of African literature in school and university. The conference deemed this a matter of great urgency. Universities and secondary schools, Ministries of Education and examination councils in Africa were to be acquainted with the conference's recommendations and asked to assist in popularising the works of African writers.

Now another flank to this campaign consists of the overseas publishers who have, happily, become alive to the importance of existing African literature and are now willing to seek out potential African writers to publish them. Three years ago we could not have said to the African literary apprentice as we do in 1964: "Write, there are publishers at your doorstep waiting to consider your work."

Furthermore, Africans no longer need to sweat over a piece of writing in the dim flickering light of the candle somewhere in the towns and villages, producing a manuscript that will never be looked at by someone who could help with criticism. We may burn with the urge to find the tongue to express our thoughts and feelings, but we need no longer pour these out just for the sake of wallowing in the puddles of our own vanity because we know they will never be looked at by anybody else. Chemchemi, through its writers' workshop, receives manuscripts from members and gives critical remarks and guidance on them. We offer for publication any that we find good enough.

There are several anthologies of African writing being published these days, and more are being planned, for use in secondary school and for the general readership:

- ✓ (a) In print: Commonwealth Short Stories by Brownlee and Rose (Nelsons, for schools); West African Narrative by Paul Edwards (Nelsons, for schools); Reflections by Frances Ademola (African Universities Press, Lagos, for schools); African Verse, by John Reed and Clive Wake (Heinemanns, for schools); Modern Poetry from Africa by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Penguin, for schools and general readership).
- (b) In the press and near publication: Modern African Stories by Ellis Komey and Ezekiel Mphahlele (Faber & Faber, general readership); African Short Stories by Neville Denny (Nelsons, for schools).
- (c) Being compiled: African Short Stories by Richard Rive (Heinemanns, for schools); African Short Stories by Robin Fawcett, for schools, with East African background; Modern African Writing by Ezekiel Mphahlele (Penguin).

Outside anthologies, several novels are being published by African Universities Press in Lagos; by Heinemanns in their series of "New African Writing". Nelsons have now announced that they will consider any prose manuscripts suitable for use by pupils in the first three years of secondary school. They want to produce "readers" for these grades. A manuscript may be one long story of 30,000 words, or three or four stories, totalling 30,000 words, with one central character. Again Chemchemi will be glad to see manuscripts from members (in and outside Nairobi) and to help put such material in good shape for publication as merits it.

Mbari Publications in Ibadan also produce good African writing and want more for general readership.

More good news has reached us, which is that Andre Deutsch, one of the notable British publishing houses, is one of the promoters of an indigenous publishing company being launched in Nairobi. It was Andre Deutsch who promoted African Universities Press in Lagos.

An indigenous publishing house suggests an answer to one of the questions about the content and style of African literature. The writer may have something important to say, but it may not necessarily move an audience outside his own culture. He may have an original if unconventional style, but may ruin all this in attempt to sound respectable and to please an overseas publisher who in turn must keep in mind the interests of his readership - a largely English-speaking audience. This is ruinous for a writer.

Peter Ruoro

We are proud to announce that a short story by Peter Ruoro of Thika High School has been published in Kenya Weekly News (3rd July, 1964) and that the same journal has accepted two more of Ruoro's. We have read and criticised these stories and suggested ways of improving them. There has been constant correspondence between Mr. Ruoro and us at Chemchemi about his stories, and we are happy for him.

To Members of the Writers' Workshop

We should like to announce to all members of the writers' workshop that we shall resume our weekly meetings on October 13 (Tuesday). Here is the timetable. Any other member of Chemchemi is welcome to join this series. All meetings to begin at 5.15 p.m. in the Conference Room of our new premises at Jeevanjee Street, off Haile Selassie Avenue.

- October 13: AFRICAN LITERATURE, by Edgar Wright, lecturer in English at the University College, Nairobi.
- October 20: THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION FROM THE VERNACULAR INTO ENGLISH AND THEIR RELATION TO CREATIVE WRITING, by John Sharman, a publishers' representative.
- October 27: THE AFRICAN WRITER: WHAT TRADITION? by Joseph Kariuki, poet, member of Executive Committee, Chemchemi Cultural Centre, and instructor for Shell Co.
- November 3: THE LANGUAGE OF AFRICAN LITERATURE, by Ezekiel Mphahlele, Director, Chemchemi Cultural Centre.

African Heritage

We viewed an interesting film, African Heritage, in Church House on August 28. This was made available to Chemchemi members and shown by Caltex Oil Ltd., who made it. Music, dancing, art and craftwork were well documented, and a lively discussion followed.