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The Dead End Of African Literature?

PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT ACHIEVEMENT of the last Conference of African Writers of English Expression held in Makerere College, Kampala, in June 1962, is that African literature as now defined and understood, leads nowhere.

The Conference itself marked the final climax of the attack on the Negritude school of Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire. For some time now, African writers of English expression like Ezekiel Mphahlele, Wole Soyinka, and Christopher Okigbo, have treated this kind of literature which expresses sterile concepts such as "negritude" or the "African personality"¹ with the utmost derision. One would say that negritude is now dead, judging from the confident tones of the remarks and decisions made at the Makerere conference.

Another significant event in the conference, is the tacit omission of Amos Tutuola. Not only was Tutuola, who undoubtedly is one of the most significant writers in Africa today, not present in the conference, but there was a careful exclusion of his works in the discussions of the conference. In fact, according to the Conference report, Tutuola's publishers protested at the implied questioning of their integrity in publishing this writer's works. One can guess that Tutuola received this kind of treatment partly because influential critics like Janheinz Jahn have repeatedly grouped him in the negritude school, and partly because he has gone out of line winning acclaim overseas for using that kind of English expression that is non-Ibadan, and non-Makerere.

With the now seeming defeat of the Negritude and Tutuola schools of African writing, what now represents African literature can be seen from these examples from some of the writings of the artists and critics who now dominate our literature. Una Maclean, reviewing J. P. Clark's play, *Song of A Goat*, opens in the following fashion: "The author of this poetic melodrama possibly perceives himself as some sort of Tennessee Williams of the Tropics. Suddenly the sultry symbolism of the sex war seeps through the swamps, to hang like a horrid miasma upon the polluted air . . . It is a simple and familiar tale, impotent man, ardent woman. But this eat on a hot tin roof had once known better times, for her partner had once given palpable token of his potency in siring a son."²

Christopher Okigbo in his acknowledgement prefixed to his poem, *Silences*, makes the following observations: "the author wishes to acknowledge his debt to those composers whose themes he has used or varied in certain parts of the present work. The INTROIT is a variation on a theme in Raja Ratnam's *At Eight-fifteen in the Morning*; the first three passages of the first movement are variations on a theme by Malcolm Cowley; "Sand banks sprinkled with memories" in the 4th passage of the same movement is a variation on Stéphane Mallarmé's "Au bosquet arrose d'accords" in his *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*; the 6th passage of the same movement is a variation on a theme in Rabindranath Tagore's *Stray Birds*."³

Ulli Beier, in his paper read to the Makerere conference, discussing the poetry of J. P. Clark, remarks, "John Pepper Clark is a very different poet. His background is similar to that of Okigbo . . . He studied English, and what Ezra Pound is to Okigbo, Eliot and Hopkins are to Clark. As the case of Okigbo, one finds it occasionally disturbing to recognise the 'ready made' language."⁴

What these examples clearly show is that African literature as now understood and practised, is merely a minor appendage in the main stream of European literature. Both creative writers and literary critics, read and devour European literature and critical methods. The new drama of J. P. Clark is seen in terms not only of the classical past of Aristotle and the Greeks, but in the current present of Tennessee Williams, and the Absurds, leading to such crudities as Una Maclean's comparison of the simple and child-hungry Ebere, to the sexual complications of Big Daddy's American family. In this kind of literary analysis, one just goes back to parrot Aristotle, and the current clichés of the English and American new critics.

The consequence of this kind of literature is that it lacks any blood and stamina, and has no means of self-enrichment. It is severely limited to the European-

¹Ezekiel Mphahlele *Press Report*, Conference of African Writers of English Expression, MAK/V(2), Makerere, 1962.

²Una Maclean, "Song of A Goat," *Ibadan*, October, 1962, p.28.

³Christopher Okigbo, "Silences", *Transition* 8, March, 1963, p.13.

⁴Ulli Beier, "Contemporary African Poetry in English, Conference of African Writers Report, MAK/II(4), Makerere, 1962.

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oriented, few college graduates in the new Universities of Africa, steeped as they are in European literature and culture. The ordinary local audience, with little or no education in the conventional European manner, and who constitute an overwhelming majority, has no chance of participating in this kind of literature. Less than one per cent of the Nigerian people have had access to, or ability to understand Wole Soyinka's *Dance of the Forest*. Yet, this was the play staged to celebrate their national independence, tagged on to the idiom and traditions of a foreign culture. It is no wonder, that a poet like Christopher Okigbo, so readily resorts to Mallarme's idea of an aristocratic and limited poetic community, for his impertinent remark, "I don't read my poetry to non-poets" is Mallarme in paraphrase.

The purpose of this article is not to discredit these writers who have achieved much in their individual rights within an extremely difficult and illogical situation. It is to point out that the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing, is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture. In other words, until these writers and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity, and frustration.

The conference itself, faced with the fundamental question of defining African literature, and the problems involved for an African writing in a language that is not native to him, came very near the truth: "It was generally agreed that it is better for an African writer to think and feel in his own language and then look for an English transliteration approximating the original."⁵ This very conclusion, as naive and as misguided as it is, expresses the problem concisely and accurately, and it is from that we shall find a new direction for African literature, if we are really serious and sincere in what we are doing.

An African writer who thinks and feels in his own language *must* write in that language. The question of transliteration, whatever that means, is unwise as it is unacceptable, for the 'original' which is spoken of here, is the real stuff of literature and the imagination, and must not be discarded in favour of a *copy*, which, as the passage admits, is merely an approximation.

Of course all the old facile arguments would arise again — the multiplicity of African languages, the limitation of the audience to small patches of tribal groups, questions of orthography, and all the rest of them. Yes, but why not? I believe that every language has a right to be developed as literature. There is no part of the world where a false literary unity has been attempted in the way that we are doing today in Africa, not even in Europe. The problem has always been met by the technique of translating outstanding literary achievements into other languages, especially the more widespread and influential languages of the world.

One wonders what would have happened to English literature for instance, if writers like Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton, had neglected English, and written in Latin and Greek simply because these classical languages were the cosmopolitan languages of their times. Even though a man like Milton could write even more easily in Latin and Greek, he did his major works in his own mother tongue without playing to the gallery of international fame.

Literature after all, is the exploitation of the possibilities of language. It is the African languages that are in crying need of this kind of development, not the overworked French and English. There is, for instance, a good deal of scholarly work being done in the linguistic structure of several African languages, but there is practically no use being made of these in creative writing, simply because we are all busy fighting over the commonplaces of European literature. If linguistic science devotes so much energy and attention to African languages in spite of their tribal and limited scope, why should imaginative literature which in fact has more chances of enriching the people's culture, consider it impossible to adventure in this direction?

The criticism being done today in African writing in English and French, sounds so dull, drab, and flippant, mainly because there is no opportunity for original thinking. It is the same cliches over and over again — romantic and classic, realism, sentimentality, Victorianism, surrealism, and so on. There is no need for creative thinking in order to become a 'leading, critic or authority' in African literature. Fraser, Freud, Darwin, and Marx, are, as in European literature, the necessary reading for the acquisition of fundamental critical tools.

What I am advocating here is not easy, for it entails a good deal of hard work and hard thinking, and what is more, a necessary casting overboard of hardened debris of the overblown ego. It would force some 'leading' critics to go in for the hard school of African linguistic studies, a knowledge of some of the important African languages, before generalising and formulating all kinds of philosophical and literary theories. Literature in Africa would then become the serious business that all literature truly is, reaching out to the people for whom it is meant, and creating a true culture of the African peoples that would not rely on slogans and propaganda, nor on patronage of doubtful intentions.

The basic distinction between French and German literature for instance, is that one is written in French, and the other in German. All the other distinctions, whatever they be, are based on this fundamental fact. What therefore is now described as African literature in English and French, is a clear contradiction, and a false proposition, just as 'Italian literature in Hausa' would be.

What one would like future conferences on African literature to devote time to, is the all-important problem of African writing in African languages, and all its implications for the development of a truly African sensibility. In fact, the secondary place which African languages now occupy in our educational system would be reversed if our writers would devote their tremendous

⁵Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Press Report*, Conference of African Writers, MAK/V(2), Makerere, 1962.

gifts and ability to their own languages. Attempts have recently been made to include the study of African languages in the curriculum of some of the new African universities. This programme would certainly have no future, for all that is available even at the university level is the usual string of proverbs, a few short stories on the tortoise and the tiger, and a number of inadequate grammar books written by untrained linguists. The student of Yoruba for instance, has no play available to him in that language, for Wole Soyinka, the most gifted Nigerian playwright at the moment, does not consider Yoruba suitable for *The Lion and the Jewel* or *The Dance of the Forest*.

The main reason for the study of a language is that it contains great literature or some form of literature. This was what led scholars like Eliot and Pound to the study of oriental languages in their poetic experiments early in this century. There is little doubt that African languages would face inevitable extinction, if they do not embody some kind of intelligent literature, and the only way to hasten this, is by continuing in our present illusion that we can produce African literature in English and French.

The last junketing at Makerere was good as far as it went, but it is a little scandalous to admit that its only concrete achievement is that it gave African writers and their patrons, the opportunity to get to know one another!

Shakespeare's

JULIUS CAEZAR

translated into Swahili by

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Gabriel Okara / African Speech... English Words*

TRYING TO EXPRESS IDEAS even in one's own language is difficult because what is said or written often is not exactly what one had in mind. Between the birth of the idea and its translation into words, something is lost. The process of expression is even more difficult in the second language of one's own cultural group. I speak not of merely expressing general ideas, but of communicating an idea to the reader in the absolute or near absolute state in which it was conceived. Here, you see I am already groping for words to make you understand what I really mean as an African.

"Once an African, always an African; it will show in whatever you write" says one school of thought. This implies that there is no need for an African writer to exert a conscious effort to make his writing African through the use of words or the construction of sentences. Equally it seems to say that the turns of phrase, the nuances and the imagery which abound in African languages, thinking, and culture are not worth letting the world know about.

As a writer who believes in the utilisation of African ideas, African philosophy and African folk-lore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as his medium of expression. I have endeavoured in my words to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions. For, from a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people.

In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first, but I had to learn. I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. I found it a fascinating exercise.

Some words and expressions are still relevant to the present day life of the world, while others are rooted in the legends and tales of a far-gone day. Take the expression "he is timid" for example. The equivalent in Ijaw is "he has no chest" or "he has no shadow". Now a person without a chest in the physical sense can only mean a human that does not exist. The idea becomes clearer in the second translation. A person who does not cast a shadow of course does not exist. All this

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means is that a timid person is not fit to live. Here, perhaps, we are hearing the echoes of the battles in those days when the strong and the brave lived. But is this not true of the world today?

In parting with a friend at night a true Ijaw would say, "May we live to see ourselves tomorrow". This again is reminiscent of the days when one went about with the danger of death from wild beasts or hostile animals dogging one's steps. But has the world we live in changed so much? On the other hand, how could an Ijaw born and bred in England, France or the United States write, "May we live to see ourselves tomorrow" instead of "Goodnight"? And if he wrote "Goodnight", would he be expressing an Ijaw thought? Is it only the colour of one's skin that makes one an African?

In the Ibo language they say something like, "May dawn come", or "May it dawn". Once again it is a wish or a prayer. Isn't the grave sometimes likened to an endless night and is it not only the dead that go to the grave? The Ibos sometimes lighten this sombre thought with the expression, "You sleep like a rat while I sleep like a lizard." Because it is thought that rats never sleep, while lizards are heavy sleepers, this never fails to produce peals of laughter.

Why should I not use the poetic and beautiful, "May we live to see ourselves tomorrow" or, "May it dawn", instead of "Goodnight"? If I were writing a

dialogue between two friends, one about to leave after visiting the other at night, I would do it this way:

"Are you getting up now?" said Otutu as he saw his friend heaving himself up with his two hands gripping the arms of the chair he was sitting on.

"Yes I am about walking now. The night has gone far", Beni his friend said, for he was a very fat man.

"May we live to see ourselves tomorrow", Otutu said after seeing his friend to the door.

"May we live to see ourselves tomorrow", his friend also said and walked panting into the night.

What emerges from the examples I have given is that a writer can use the idioms of his own language in a way that is understandable in English. If he uses their English equivalents, he would not be expressing African ideas and thoughts, but English ones.

Some may regard this way of writing in English as a desecration of the language. This is of course not true. Living languages grow like living things, and English is far from a dead language. There are American, West Indian, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand versions of English. All of them add life and vigour to the language while reflecting their own respective cultures. Why shouldn't there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way?

Ezekiel Mphahlele

African Literature And Universities

A REPORT ON TWO CONFERENCES TO DISCUSS AFRICAN LITERATURE AND THE UNIVERSITY CURRICULUM

TWO CONFERENCES were held at the Faculté des Lettres of Dakar University, Senegal, and Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone respectively during March 26 — April 9, 1963. Both had been called to discuss the integration of African literature in French (Dakar) and English (Freetown) in university and pre-university teaching syllabuses. The two conferences were sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Paris, and called by the Continuation Committee for Inter-University Co-operation in Africa which had been set up at a seminar held at Freetown in 1961, from the theme of which the committee takes its name. Dr. Davidson Nicol, Principal of Fourah Bay is its chairman.

At Dakar were represented the host university itself, the universities of Grenoble (France), Lovanium (Congo), Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa), Ghana and Nigeria and Ecole Normale de Brazzaville (Congo). Four Senegalese writers were also present: Cheikh Hamidou Kane (novelist); Sembene Ousmane (novelist); Ousmane Soce Diop (novelist), Birago Diop

(poet); also Camara Laye (Guinean novelist), and the Congolese poet, Tchicaya U'Tamsi. President Sedar Senghor opened the conference.

Much time was taken up with papers on one aspect and another of the content of African French writing. It was decided to set up a *Centre de Documentation* at Lovanium University to do research into African literature and to guide teachers in the choice of authors for study. It was felt that African literature should be studied under a chair of comparative literature or African studies, and that it would be premature to award a *Certificat de littérature* or *Certificat d'histoire littéraire Africaine*. One felt that the tendency throughout was to place an emphasis on what one might call the sociology of African writing rather than talk about it as *literature*. Indeed the speakers defined this trend in no uncertain terms in their literary criticism. What was not discussed at all, and which most probably decided the conference to place the study of African literature outside French literature was the fact that the French