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## UNIVERSITY REPORT

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NARRATOR -  
JOHN JONES:

This week most of the programme is devoted to what I hope you will agree is an absorbing discussion on African Literature between Edward Blishen and Dr Abiola Irele. However, we'll start off with a short report on yet another conference.

Around the end of each year the University of East Africa holds a Social Science Conference at one of its three colleges. The last such conference was held at Makerere College and ended on the 3rd January last. Dr Andrew Roberts of the University of Zambia attended the conference and he sent us this report.

ANDREW ROBERTS: Most Makerere students were away for the Christmas vacation. Instead, the hills swarmed with well over a hundred professors, lecturers and research students. Many of them came from the East African colleges but there were also visitors from the universities of Zambia, Malawi, Khartoum, Lovanium in Congo Kinshasa, Ibadan and Sierra Leone not to mention those from Britain and the United States. About a quarter of the participants were African. The Conference convened in five sections: Sociology (including Anthropology), Economics (including Geography), Political Science, History, and for the first time Law.

There were few obviously common themes in a motley collection of papers which ranged from "The symbolic role of cattle in Gogo religion" to "Political Futurology". Some of the most stimulating papers were not so much detailed reports on individual research projects as reflective surveys suggesting new lines of enquiry - such as the historical study of African religious systems. But there was one very general point worth noting - the extent to which scholars in different subjects were concerned with studying problems at the local level rather than on a national scale. In

part, this tendency is due simply to the growth of knowledge and more refined and exacting standards of scholarship. One fascinating example was a reassessment of the battle at Kampala in 1892 between Protestant and Catholic Baganda: this went beyond the old question whether Lugard was right to use a Maxim gun on the Protestant side and instead sought to reconstruct from eye-witness accounts how the battle was fought by the Baganda. And the microscopic approach is, of course, characteristic of the many social anthropologists who over the past twenty years have been based on the Institute of Social Research at Makerere. But the emphasis on small-scale investigations is also partly due to a growing awareness that only in this way can one begin to understand the problems of integrating the rural communities of eastern Africa in the larger economic and social structures necessary for development.

There were, in fact, few strictly anthropological papers, but there were several in other fields which bordered closely on anthropology. A lawyer argued the need to rethink anti-witchcraft legislation in East Africa; a geographer analysed market traders in Kampala; and a sociologist applied the concept of 'economic spheres' to compare a rural economy in Zambia before and after colonial rule. Specially interesting was a co-operative paper from Dar-es-Salaam, based on research by undergraduates, comparing the relative success of twelve new rural settlements in Tanzania. By contrast, the political scientists seemed more concerned to generalise on national and international problems, rather than follow up recent attempts to study East African politics at the grass roots. But the practical difficulties of political research in any depth away from the capitals hardly needs to be stressed.

JOHN JONES: That report from Dr Andrew Roberts on the University of East Africa's Social Science Conference was read for us in the studio. And while we're on the subject of conferences, you'll remember that three weeks ago

we reported on the Ife Conference on African Writing in English and that we promised you then that one of the delegates that we spoke to would be expanding on his work in University Report at a later date. Well, to-day we're fulfilling that promise. At Ife, Dr Abiola Irele presented a paper on the Criticism of Modern African Literature - the area that he is working on at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. Dr Irele is, in fact, a Nigerian who has also studied in France and in Britain.

African Literature, most will agree, is still in its formative stage. We have modern African Literature, traditional African Literature, African Literature written in French, African Literature written in English and, no doubt, there are more categories that one can think of. This, of course, makes the task of the critic, who is continually searching for an African perspective quite a formidable one, and it is, as I said, this critical aspect of African Literature that Dr Irele is concerned with. In Accra, he discussed his work and ideas with Edward Blishen and first Dr Irele explained his approach to his subject.

DR IRELE:

I see the traditional literature as a very important complement to modern African literature because we must also try and see what continuity exists between the traditional literature and the modern literature, not only because our writers usually quite consciously refer themselves to the traditional background but also because it is natural to suppose that living within the culture they would have carried over in their writings certain aspects of the traditional culture and, in this particular instance, traditional literature with which they are surrounded and this certainly would come out in certain unconscious aspects like the way of telling a story, a certain outlook in the characters, for instance - details that I couldn't possibly elaborate upon here but, I think, quite a fruitful field for study.

EDWARD BLISHEN: Details you say that you couldn't elaborate on here. I suppose, in fact, some of it is very detailed. For example, would you be looking as closely as at the characteristic phrasings, turns of phrase, and so forth?

DR IRELE: Well, certainly, that forms a part of the approach to African literature right now because the striking example is Chinua Achebe who certainly very consciously adapted English to the idiom of the Ibo people, and to a certain manner of speaking generally, and I think this is one of the most interesting aspects of African literature, but I don't think this is all. I would also take into consideration, as I said before, the way of telling a story. I mean, if you consider, for instance, that in the traditional society we have these stories that we tell, and many of us have heard them as children, it seems to me, in fact, almost inevitable that the structural pattern of these stories will affect our writers when they come to write a story, even if they are writing in English or French as the case may be. And, I feel, for instance, that in the case of the novelists, in particular, who have borrowed the novel form from the West - I feel certain influences of the traditional folk tales in their works - for instance, they do not develop the psychology of the characters to the same extent as you would find in the European novel. They rely rather on certain external aspects from which one can deduct the psychology of the characters and also on the dramatic interest of their stories. This is certainly a carry over from the traditional folk tales. This is, of course, a hypothesis which I have which has to be verified by detailed study but this is a very strong feeling I have also.

EDWARD BLISHEN: But even at this half stage of your research, what you have discovered, or what you are beginning to feel about it, must, I suppose, affect your teaching of Modern African Literature too?

DR IRELE:

Yes, certainly. Well, I try to put Modern African Literature in an African perspective. My feeling is that modern African literature, being written mainly in the European languages, one has to look for what is the distinctive quality of this new literature and the obvious answer seems to me to be the African-ness of this literature - and this is what I am looking for personally, being an African myself, I suppose this is the most natural way for me to look at modern African literature. So it is important, I think, to look at this literature this way because its only right to legitimacy, if you care to put it this way, is its African-ness.

EDWARD BLISHEN: Now I suppose some people might say - I was reading not long ago Janheinz Jahn's "History of African Literature" where he's pursuing a similar sort of line - in a sense he's trying to identify with Africanism, isn't he, and the African-ness of writings by Africans who found themselves in various parts of the world? I suppose some critics might say "Are there not dangers at this particular moment when modern African literature is in a very formative stage of imposing, perhaps too strongly, this kind of academic standard, this kind of academic self-consciousness"?

DR IRELE:

Well, there is that danger. I would like very much to avoid any sort of imposition of rigid categories and so on. I think nothing can replace the sort of immediate response to the work of art and to literature, in particular. I would very much like, therefore, to avoid generalisations and so on. I'd prefer, in class, to work by close examination of the texts, but even then one has to bring to one's feeling for the literature, one's response to it, one has to bring something particular and in the case of the African student who is reading an African novel for instance he must be able to recognise something in it which appeals to him in an immediate way - which appeals to him also as something from his own background with which he can identify. This is very important if you are going to

have any sort of African literature at all - if it's going to have any sort of permanent root in Africa because we certainly need to build up a public also for this literature which is at the moment on the fringe. It is important therefore to bring this out in the teaching as well - to relate what the African writer is trying to do to the experience of the African reader and this, I think, should be the main business of criticism of modern African literature right now because this criticism must really now start from an African point of view in order to be able to really render a true account, I think, of the African writer's enterprise.

EDWARD BLISHEN: So really you would say, I suppose, that criticism is itself in a formative stage and needs to be formed?

DR IRELE: Certainly. This is true. What we have done so far is simply more or less to impose on to the works of African writers the skills we've acquired by analysing and meditating upon European works. This is certainly not negligible. After all is said and done there's a certain basic response to literature in any language in any country in the world which any kind of literary criticism should help to foster. However, I believe that in this particular case there are specific problems which also have to be tackled and these problems create specific difficulties in any approach to African literature which have to be looked at and to be solved.

EDWARD BLISHEN: Now in your work - not in this particular field that you are concerned with now - but in your studies in Paris and so on - I suppose there aren't many people who have studied the English and French African writing - most people seem to be critics of Anglophone or critics of Francophone literature - and so you must have some answers, or some beginnings of answers to some of the famous questions about the differences between the Anglophone and Francophone literatures. Do you believe, for example, are you coming to believe that the differences in the quality of colonisation of the English territories and the French territories was decisive in forming the nature of the modern writing - or was it national differences?

DR IRELE:

Well, there are two things to be taken into consideration here. Certainly, the nature of the colonial experience has had an influence in creating these differences. There are certain differences - I think they are over-emphasised, but we can't get round the fact that there are certain differences. The colonial experience has certainly had an influence there, but I think the more fundamental issue is that of the respective metropolitan traditions - the tradition in English literature which has had an influence on the English speaking writers on the one hand, and on the other hand the French tradition - a certain way of looking at things, a certain way of expressing things which is also imposed by the language which the writer is using. I think this is more important, in fact, than the kind of colonial experience which our writers went through. As far as these differences are concerned, as I said, I think they are possibly exaggerated because I can see some affinities between our writers across the language barrier.. I think it's quite easy to relate the work of the late Christopher Okigbo to what Senghor has been trying to do in French whereas Okigbo has been writing in English, and it must not be forgotten as well that the kind of influences which French literature exerted upon English literature in modern times through people like T.S.Eliot has passed on, in fact, to some of our modern African writers in English so that they do, in that respect, have a certain amount of common ground.

Finally, I would like to say that the two sets of writers have a common intention - to express something out of their own world and on that ground I would even say that these differences really seem to me not to matter very much. I think the controversy about the rejection of negritude by the English speaking African writers - that controversy seems to me to revolve largely around a misunderstanding.

NARRATOR -  
JOHN JONES:

Edward Blishen and Dr Abiola Irele.

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