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COSMO PIETERSE:

This week a field of particular interest to me personally, that's literature. Literature from two points of view; namely first, the revolutionising of the literature syllabus at Makerere University, and, second on the same campus, a colloquium on black literature.

I am very intrigued by these two reports. They come from the same department of the same university, but they may indicate two quite different approaches.

First, as part of the revolution in the approach to literary studies at Makerere. Africanising the syllabus. Professor David Cook, Head of the Department of English at Makerere, initiated a thorough going change in his department some three years ago. In fact, when this revolution started in 1968 he discussed some of the then proposed changes in "University Report". The first phase of reshaping included the introduction of a significant segment of writing by African authors into the curriculum.

In many places this was strongly opposed. Elizabeth Keeble, our reporter in Kampala, asked Professor Cook why there has been this opposition.

PROFESSOR COOK:

Well there seems here to be something of a confusion between two quite different issues. I don't think any educationalist will have any difficulty in demolishing arguments against teaching either English literature

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in England, or African literature in Africa. It's basic educational theory to start from what is known, or partly known, and move to what is relatively unknown. It is more the fact that by teaching African literature in Africa we are teaching a high proportion of contemporary literature. This has really been the cause, I think, of a good deal of opposition, because even now only relatively few universities in Great Britain, for example, teach any large amount of contemporary literature. Now this is something which I've always felt fairly strongly about. One of the main arguments against teaching contemporary literature has always been, that a Department of English or Department of Literature should bring to its students only what can be attested absolutely to be a classic in its own kind. Of course contemporary literature is highly critically controversial. Some people may think very highly of a particular work, and some people may not think anything like so highly of it. So here students are thrust right into the middle of a very real debate, not as it were, a fictitious debate in which they are reassert^{ing}/judgements which have been made many times before. They are now testing their developing critical faculties on new material, and what better material could there be for this purpose than those works, which are stirring the imaginations of thousands and tens of thousands of their contemporaries.

Now if this was the only way that we used for training critical sensibility, I think it would be extremely wasteful. But on the other hand, never, in fact, to subject students to relatively untried material of this kind, seems to me to put in question the whole process that we claim to be training them in, and to doubt their ability ever to exercise their own critical faculties originally. This indeed was one of the things which I was constantly urging while I was teaching in England for the inclusion of lesser known works from other periods in British syllabuses.

PROFESSOR COOK:
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Of course I would think it a waste of time to discuss literature which was generally agreed to be of little, or no value. I have not myself found African students at all anxious, or ready to overpraise African writing. Why I would agree that there are relatively few great works by African authors, I would certainly not agree that we have any shortage of good works, or works that are worthy of serious critical attention.

COSMO PIETERSE:

Professor David Cook of Makerere University, on the reasons for adding African writing to the English literature curriculum in his department. Another aspect of Makerere's literature revolution is the adding of the dimension of world literature to courses. Apart from African writing in English, and world literature in translation, there is a specifically Ugandan literary tradition in indigenous languages. Elizabeth Keeble next asked about this matter.

ELIZABETH KEEBLE:

Two years ago you seemed to attach an enormous amount of importance to the oral literature programme, which was just beginning, can you give us an idea how this has progressed.

DAVID COOK:

Yes, the programme which was then at post-graduate level in oral literature, has indeed been very successful. We have achieved one of our principal aims in developing, through the post-graduate programme, a good deal of know how, which has enabled us to launch a full under-graduate programme also in oral literature.

Our feeling very strongly here is, that in the past, oral literature has only been studied at university level as anthropological and sociological evidence. We now feel that it is up to the Department of Literature to establish the study of oral literature,

DAVID COOK:
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as a creative art, or rather a group of creative arts, as one can't really separate oral literature from the arts of singing and dancing.

Our own students are increasingly going out in the field, collecting material in their own first languages annotating these, translating them. We do indeed regard this as an extremely exciting and vital part of our developing programme. We don't want the university to be a new section of a museum, with regard to oral literature, nor do we see ourselves as preserving something, which is dead. Oral Literature is very much alive, and we want to be involved in this activity, we want to become more aware of it, we want to enable people to cross over from the single, or perhaps in a few cases, two or three languages in which they can appreciate oral literature, and be able to see the whole pattern of oral literature in Uganda. We regard this as a major contribution to the study of Uganda by Ugandans, and Ugandan traditions by Ugandans.

COMSO PIETERSE:

Professor David Cook of Makerere University talking to Elizabeth Keeble. The oral literature programme of Professor Cook's department was only one aspect of a deep-going revolution in English studies at Makerere. In fact, so thorough was this revolution, that the erstwhile Department of English is now called the Department of Literature. The revolution is now in its second phase. This started, the second phase, in 1970. The third and last of the two year phases is to be begun in 1972. It will include a re-examination of literature examinations.

But in the meantime, still at Makerere, there was a stimulating colloquium on black literature. It was organised by Pio Zirimu, lecturer in the Department of Literature, and lasted for three days. And going

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back to oral literature their first session was devoted to a discussion of precisely that.

Of course "oral literature" is an awkward phrase, and Pio Zirimu had, in fact, a new word for the concept.

PIO ZIRIMU:

The new term that has been coined is 'orature'. This didn't occur at this conference, it had already emerged in my vocabulary, associated with ^{the} other term 'oracy', and it is all based really on a parallel comparison with literal, literature, literacy and so-on. So that we have oral, orature, oracy to correspond with the other terms. They seem to me useful terms rather than have 'oral literature'. Incidentally, I might add, that perhaps oral literature can be considered orature which has been written down, which is not the same thing, as when it is in the original. Or, of course, literature which is then rendered in the oral medium, again which is different.

COSMO PIETERSE:

ORATURE - a nice and necessary neologism, I enjoy using it.

Mr. Zirimu then dealt with the other six sessions of the colloquium on black writing.

PIO ZIRIMU:

We then on Saturday had four sessions, the first one was the broadest, and perhaps the weakest, in the sessions. It was on literature, both in vernacular languages, and in foreign languages. Now the vernacular languages; we understood this to include not only our own African indigenous languages, but also from the States for example, ghetto language, and from the Carribean patois or various forms of non-standard English that exist there. Of course some others have Yoruba which is still spoken in some parts of the

PIO ZIRIMU:
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Caribbean. . . And we saw that people should, perhaps do have, means of communication in their vernaculars whatever they may be, and that standard English is very foreign to people who are supposed to be native speakers of English.

We considered both the literature that has been produced in Africa, and in the States, and in the Caribbean, and perhaps other areas as well. We then went on to consider what appears to be a particular phenomenon of black-writing which is the biographical element. We considered both biography - straight biography, which I prefer to call hetrobiography - and autobiography in dealing with the term biography. This was based on an observation that the biographical elements seem to be, particularly the autobiographical elements are particularly dominant in black literature: and we're again looking at reasons for this phenomenon; and whether it was, in fact, peculiar only to black writing. We then considered what has come to be a critical term, 'protest literature', and I think we did in discussion, arrive at the conclusion that the label 'protest literature' was not particularly useful. We then went on to consider the basis for the concept of a black literature and creature we might as well say. The Sunday session was perhaps the culmination: this was the concept of a black aesthetics, in verbal arts, and arts in general. Then this ran into a final summing-up session, people who proposed recommendations and so on which hadn't yet been tidied up into a presentable form.

ELIZABETH KEEBLE: There were, I believe, people taking sides, as it were, on the dominant themes. Would you like to tell us about the things that emerged?

PIO ZIRIMU: One thing that occurs to me immediately is of an institutional nature, one person held at several sessions that we shouldn't have departments of literature whose business is to teach and study literature. This was controversial. But I think more seriously the suggestion which was being made, and I think we took it seriously, was that the

PIO ZIRIHU:
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departments of literature should be organising festivals of arts, of the verbal arts, and allowing for a greater scope for the creation of literature, not just criticising literature. I think this was the positive contribution of that. An attendant recommendation to this was that, particularly in the field of orature, or oral literature, or if you want the verbal arts that where we are, for example, say at Makerere, we should get the experts in our various indigenous oratures, and bring them on campus to actually teach. These are the people who actually know, are rooted in the various traditions. Now this again was controversial, We believe that there are people who study these literatures at as it were, second remove: they may belong to the particular culture, but they are not perhaps professional performers themselves, but they have had the professional training in literature and can get into this. They also have the critical tools to deal with this kind of literature, so there is a controversial area here.

The other controversial aspect was on the function of literature really. What is literature for? Is it to contemplate beauty? Is it manifest beauty for its own sake? Or is literature to be used as a tool of liberation as somebody put it. I think that the strong suggestion was that nothing less than revolutionary literature should be taught in any of our departments. But somebody else said that there are certain things about even the 'black world', however depressed and exploited we may be, which cannot easily fall into revolution and protest and so on.

Now one final thing I want to say, is that, it seemed to be agreed that there is a way in which black people perceive beauty in nature and also beauty in art. And the way they conceive what successful artistic expression is, for example, participation rather than alienation.

Now another final thing I want to say is that, the colloquium seemed to the participants to be valuable, and that we ought to have more and perhaps invite more people, more disciplines, for a bigger occasion, and get really to the bottom of these things.

COSMO PIETERSE: Well if Pio Zirimu and his colleagues at Makerere are to organise another session on black literature, with the same representative elements from the United States of America and Caribbean. I, for one, would like to be there to look into some of the questions raised.

In any case you can be sure that we'll be reporting on such future colloquia. But for now that's about it, so as usual, until the next time, it's goodbye from me Cosmo Pieterse