

University Report

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COSMO PIETERSE:

This week again we report on one single subject, namely, the arts and specifically, literature. Even more minutely described by the two holders: two fellowships in Creative Writing at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda. But before the scientifically minded switch off, let's warn everybody that the discussions raise many questions. For instance - Don't Universities in Africa spend too much money on the "non-practical" areas when science and industry need developing? That question will be asked, and an answer given.

Now Makerere has a long reputation for producing a high proportion of East Africa's writers, publishers and critics - many of them, of course, developed their talents almost incidentally. But over the past few years the University's Department of Literature has made a very determined effort to specifically encourage and stimulate creative writing in practical ways. For sometime now there has been a Senior Fellow in Creative Writing, the previous Fellows were V.S. Naipul and James Ngugi - this year another breakthrough came with the appointment of a junior Fellow as well - in the shape of Mrs. Elvania Zirimu - we'll hear from her a little later. But first to Makerere's Senior Fellowship in Creative Writing this year - Robert Serumage, an economist, actor, playwright, novelist,

COSMO PIETERSE: poet, writer and critic. When he was hopping through London recently, Producer Gwyneth Henderson discussed his fellowship with him. The first matter she raised is perhaps the 64,000 dollar question:

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Robert, how can you justify the sort of money being spent on something like creative writing within the University at this stage in Uganda's development?

ROBERT SERUMAGA: Well, first of all, the University in Uganda is a quite well developed University and it's a priority in the country's educational thing, and they do read a lot of books at University you know, and somebody has got to write them, and I think that having somebody at the University actually writing, and not only that but creating a community of writers is important. You know, it is not just that he is paid to sit there and write, but he is also paid to sit there and create a community of writers, and to make students feel that they are not solitary individuals trying to put words on paper, and also to release them from their shyness. Besides that it is not just a University post, you see a Senior Fellow in Creative Writing in Makerere does not confine himself to the University, he gets writers from outside the University to involve them within the general trend of writing and to create frameworks of reference and to make ideas coherent in as far as social development is concerned.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: But nevertheless there is quite a lot of criticism going on in very many African countries at the proportion of money, within the University, that is spent on the 'arts' as opposed to perhaps more specifically practical work.

ROBERT SERUMAGA: I think the arts are very very practical things **because** without the development of the mind, in an **artistic** and aesthetic and kind of human way, I think **science** and technology is nothing. In fact, this is probably, if I may criticise as you say a lot of people criticise, this is the problem of the West in America and Europe in that their technological development has far outstripped their moral development.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: You talked a little bit about what your responsibilities are. Can you elaborate more on this - what are you actually doing?

ROBERT SERUMAGA: Well the appointment is called a Senior Fellow in Creative Writing, as you know many other Universities offer this post. What it is supposed to do for me rather is to give me as much time as possible to be able to collect my thoughts and to meet other writers and to write. But as a responsibility they way I see it, I want to get students and aspiring writers and all writers in the country together so that they feel together, that they feel they are a community, that they feel, for example, that if they are unfairly attacked they would feel there is a community of writers that support him or her. Now further than that there is a lot of getting people to write as themselves and not copying what they did in their Higher School Certificate and that sort of thing. For this reason I keep an open house at my house every Thursday from five to seven for anybody who thinks he was written one line or wants to write one to just walk in, have a beer or do something, I mean to talk, so that they can meet people. Now I have been given additional responsibilities that is, I do give one lecture a week which is really great, I mean to be able to manage, and I take the course in creative writing for the theatre you know,

ROBERT SERUMAGA: for this year in the drama school and I do organise workshops. We are organising a workshop for theatre in September in conjunction with the University of Nairobi. So in other words it is sort of really fanning up creative flames and I think the notice we've put up about our open house, at my house every Thursday, said that "every Thursday afternoon from five to seven we shall be setting a trap, and those who wish to set a trap to capture creative spirits are welcome to come and sit my and see if they can catch anything!"

COSMO PIETERSE: I almost feel invited to that open house to see if I can catch anything of the energy of Robert Serumaga, He was talking there to Gwyneth Henderson, and they'll continue their discussion after we've heard from Makerere's other fellow in literature this year. Mrs. Elvania Zirimu, teacher, broadcaster and writer, is at present Tutorial Fellow in Creative Writing. Elizabeth Keeble asked Mrs. Zirimu:

ELIZABETH KEEBLE: Before this you already held a very responsible post here in Uganda and presumably it was better paid and more permanent, what made you throw up all this for a year of writing?

ELVANIA ZIRIMU: I didn't throw it up, I am a teacher and I am a broadcaster. Yes, all this is related to my writing definitely. When I was teaching I enjoyed it very very much and I enjoyed writing, and reading what the students wrote and I was stimulated by them and I hope they were stimulated by me, and I regard this as definitely directly related to my writing. When I took up the job, well I was transferred actually, within the same Ministry from teaching to schools broadcasting and I regarded this as an integral part of me and of my ability to write because I was required not only to

ELVANIA ZIRIMU: organise broadcasts but also to write scripts in teaching English and in stories for students and so-on. Now I really do feel that as long as I had a full-time job where I owed first loyalty I really couldn't spend enough time, at least the best of my working hours were spent at other than writing, but for the first time now I can sit down in my best working hours and write.

COSMO PIETERSE: What discontinuity there has been in Mrs. Zirimu's life, is in her writing schedule and habits: inspiration and ideas come in the very early mornings: beofre, the writing had to be done then also; now it is done in the normal morning working time. Now she also has time for many contacts at the University, or rather:

ELVANIA ZIRIMU: Actually, I wouldn't say in the University only as such, because although I am working in the University, I think my contacts are all round. Fortunately for me I don't have a rigid sort of teaching time-table, I am hardly asked to do any duties as such, but with the contacts I have well lets start perhaps with some of the people within the Department of Literature. Many of them are close friends of mine and colleagues because we have this drama group the 'Ngoma Players' and through it I feel that I have perhaps a lot of my inspirations and through this group, it isn't just based in the University, it contains people who are working in banks , in corporations, other other offices and so-on, and this is really an organ of my expression as much as what I write on paper.

ELIZABETH KEEBLE: And finally, what do you think will come out of this year in the way or writing, for yourself and for other people?

ELVANIA ZIRIMU:

Well let's say first of all two things. One is to be able to put what I had already written, but had left in an unrepresentable state, to be able to put this, to smooth it out and put in in such a way that perhaps it can be read outside my immediate circle of friends. Secondly there are other things which are occurring to me all the time that I'm thinking out and have never been able to work out at a stretch. The third thing is, particularly in the case of plays, to be able to work with other people who are working in the field of drama, to try out our plays both in acting and in seeing how the audience receives them. I think this is very important, because, in fact, I hate writing one play and then going on to the next before I've seen the play I've finished produced and seen how the audience reacts to it. Quite often, I have found that, in fact, the actors, as they go along, create it so that I can see what is ridiculous, what works and what doesn't work. But I am not sticking to plays alone, now and then I write a poem. The other thing is I am really pushing myself to work on, I suppose, what one would call a novel, I don't know if it will turn out a novel, this is the hardest part of what I am doing at the moment because I feel there is something there which I want to say but I haven't yet found a way of really saying it and I don't yet know what will emerge.

COSMO PIETERSE:

Mrs. Elvania Zirimu, at present Tutorial Fellow in Creative Writing at Makerere University, Kampala, talking to Elizabeth Keeble about the value of the fellowship in her own writing. And now back to Robert Serumaga who was ebulliently expressive when Gwyneth Henderson asked him:

GWYNETH HENDERSON: How useful is this time being to you, can you judge yet?

ROBERT SERUMAGA: It is being very useful because I have spent a hell of a lot of time sort of sitting around and trying to write sometimes, trying to think and work out things, and perhaps sitting in a bus park and listening to the way people talk and the ideas and their stream of thought for example which is very important, the illogicalities which are what make people tick, you know, the way the conversation flows. I took it up in December, I've completed one play and I am writing another and then there is another book for which I've already signed a contract which should be finished, I hope, by December and at the same time it helps me to run Theatre Limited. For example, we are doing this play now in Kampala in August, we hope to do it in Nairobi in September and we have an invitation to go to Manila to perform at the Afro-Asian and Latin-American Festival there. If I was tied down to a kind of 'a nose in the grindstone' job I wouldn't be able to do all this. Of course, I have got other responsibilities within the society. You see the advertisement which was put out specifically said that 'at the end of the period of your appointment the University will not request you to submit anything', and I think this is the way it should be. But for me I feel it is useful because it helps me to write and it has helped me to meet a lot of young people who want to write. I've got heaps of scripts from people to read and give back when I can.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: As far as actually teaching is concerned, do you think, in fact, this sort of post that you've got is a better idea than having somebody trying to teach people, to write within the normal academic context of a lecturer or a professor or whatever?

ROBERT SERUMAGA: Well now I'm not at all looking down my nose at lecturers and professors and academicians in the English language, but I think that they are so strung up in all these critical things they read from books and have learnt over the years and been experienced in and completely got themselves tied up in, that it might be slightly difficult to teach a young man to write. First of all, I don't think you can teach anybody to write, all I think you can do is to try and release as much of what is inside him as possible, and then you can teach him about other people's things, what they have written and what forms they used, and I think academicians would also tend to make him stick to those forms when he wants to do something else. I mean I suppose if Michelangelo went to Africa to teach sculpture Makonde carving may not have happened and I think this is something that one has got to be very careful about. I think that a creative writer who is not very steeped in academic literary education can probably release the creative spirit in another person much more easily than somebody else. I also think that the time is coming when something like a course in creative writing might be a very good idea, not a course in the sense of teaching but a continuity of this kind of thing.

COSMO PIETERSE: Robert Serumaga talking to Gwyneth Henderson about the scope of work encompassed by a Fellowship in Creative Writing. There is, though, a long list of academically trained writers I could trade with him if he insists. But that is where we must leave it this time.

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