

University Report

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

2/5/72
pp 1-11

"UNIVERSITY REPORT"

No. 192

Broadcast 19th, 21st, 22nd & 23rd March, 1972

GWYNETH HENDERSON: In today's "University Report" some news of cheap new teaching aids for electrical engineers, but first I've said more than once, I think, one of the most exciting things about "University Report" is the people I meet, and when I went along to talk to today's United Kingdom visitor, I was so excited I wasn't at all sure I'd remember how to turn on the recording machine. I'm talking about the author of 'Things Fall Apart', 'Arrow of God', 'A Man of the People' etc. etc. - of course Chinua Achebe, perhaps the best known African writer of all since 'Things Fall Apart' alone has been brought by something like 2 million people. Well Mr. Achebe is now an academic too, although I'm not sure he would approve of the term. He is on the staff of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, his fellowship needless to say is in literature. Now Nsukka was, of course, closed during the Civil War in Nigeria and suffered considerable damage to, and reports on how reconstruction is going are fairly conflicting. So before discussing his own work I asked Mr. Achebe how reconstruction is going at Nsukka.

CHINUA ACHEBE: Well it's going very very slowly I think, but it is going. Money is rather short, but there are more students now and we are getting more teaching staff, so things are beginning to pick up, but slowly.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Have there been many changes in the structure of Nsukka?

CHINUA ACHEBE: Not yet, but there is a lot of discussion going on at the moment about real fundamental restructuring. There is an argument as to whether we should transform the whole thing into the Oxford system of colleges, this seems to be the official wish at the moment, and there is a considerable dissent I think about this, but no structural, physical changes have taken place because we are very short of money.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: One of the things that I've noticed over the last three years has been people's desire to get rid of, particularly in a subject like literature and language, the word 'English' in the name of a department. Now Nsukka has kept this and its department is indeed called the Department of English, what about this sort of question, are people at Nsukka interested in this yet?

CHINUA ACHEBE: Well again I think probably the answer is that when one has come out of a very difficult period, as we have done, one wants to keep things as they are. You don't want to introduce too many changes at once, but I have heard people discuss this and I think probably this will come too, I mean to change the name to literature, because its easier then to handle all kinds of literature - African, American, English and so-on.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: As far as you yourself are concerned in the Institute of African Studies, I mean you are first and foremost regarded throughout the world as a creative writer. What in fact are you doing now?

CHINUA ACHEBE: Well I'm doing a certain amount of creative writing. I'm supposed to be doing some research too, but research in a fairly free and easy sense you see. At the moment, because of lack of money, there isn't very much field work going on anywhere, but what I'm doing is more in the line of a literary magazine which I'm editing in the Institute: It's called 'Okike' and I'm trying to discover new writers and new lines of writing, and trying to create a platform for criticism of a kind that would be useful for directing African literature in the future.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: How do you teach creative writing, how do you discover creative writers?

CHINUA ACHEBE: I don't think there is any particular way. Some people send in manuscripts. I don't know that you can really teach it, I don't teach any creative writing in the university, in fact I'm hardly in evidence in the teaching of English. I am thinking of writers outside the university rather than within the university, using this medium because there are no, well there are really, not other places for them to go to. I mean if a young poet in Lagos or in Nairobi wants to publish one poem or wants an opinion there is really nowhere for him to go.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Can I ask you a general question. There has been such a burst of popularity, or if you like, just because it has become fashionable, in African Literature, do you think that now this term "African" Literature has any meaning considering it appears to take in folklore, the tradition, things like Onitsha market stuff and so-on. How do you see the position in the future?

- CHINUA ACHEBE: It's difficult to say, but I see the point you're making. I've always felt that this name was a kind of temporary descriptive name because there wasn't enough of the material. This is what I've always thought and I felt that when there was enough of the material some other more exact names would be found like 'Nigerian Literature', 'Ibo Literature', 'Yoruba Literature', 'Swahili Literature' or 'Kenya Literature' or whatever you see. And I think the time is probably coming when this will begin to happen, because it is a question of finding that a particular term no longer explains what you want to say, then you look for something else. But at the moment it seems to be adequate because the volume of the writing is fairly small.
- GWYNETH HENDERSON: Do you not think that the use of this term has in fact done some disservice to the cause, if you like, of African writing simply because it has been used to include everything, and as far as the rest of the world is concerned that includes your own, say 'Things Fall Apart', plus traditional Swahili poems in translation or whatever, plus the very political writings.
- CHINUA ACHEBE: Yes it is possible that some disservice may have been done to it, but I don't think it is fatal. I think ultimately any piece of work will be judged on its own terms in its own right ultimately. At the moment I think what this term does is to draw attention to a body of writing which is not very well known at the moment. It contains all types and all qualities perhaps, and I think it's probably done more good.
- GWYNETH HENDERSON: How do you see the position of, since we are going to use the term, "African Literature" in a world literature in universities, in schools and colleges in other parts of the world?
- CHINUA ACHEBE: I think what will happen is that once people are aware that there is writing from Africa, and there is a particular place where you can get it to begin with, then it will be up to them to select what they want and I should hope teach it as literature. I'm not saying that one can dissociate literature from its environment, I think it is a futile kind of a wish. I mean I know people say 'I don't want to be called an African writer' I think this is carrying it to a rather absurd extent. But I think once you know that there is something, some writing from a particular place, then you should be able to evaluate what you like and what you don't like and so-on, and look at it as literature coming from Africa.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: One of the criticisms that has been made is that because perhaps people disregarded Africa for so long all of a sudden they are too interested and a lot of books are getting published that are sub-standard and if it wasn't for the fact that they were written by Africans they wouldn't be published at all. Do you think this is widely true?

CHINUA ACHEBE: No, I don't think it is widely true. I think some books have been published which are not very good and some that are perhaps of an indifferent quality, but I do not think that this is such a major tragedy as some people try to make out. I think if you take anybody's writing that is published anywhere you will find writing that is not very good, sort of mediocre writing in American, English or what have you, and I don't think that there is more of that in African literature than in other literature. And in any case I think it helps evaluation if everything is not quite a masterpiece - this is good.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: One of the other criticisms perhaps that has been made is that the majority of African literature is in some way literature of protest about change or about the effects of colonialism or whatever. Do you see a time coming in the near future when people will stop being obsessed in this way?

CHINUA ACHEBE: I think when the time comes for people to stop they will stop. There is some kind of, you know it is like the alarm system in a cock for instance that crows in the morning, I mean there is something what makes it want to crow at a particular time, it's not something you wish away, I mean the time comes when it feels it's dawn and has to make this noise, it's in its nature. When the dawn is past it no longer makes this particular kind of noise. I think this same kind of thing can be said of writing. If there is no real need for anybody to protest then I don't think they will protest, I think it is as simple as that, but if the need is there then you will find this protest. It doesn't mean that every protest is good literature, but I don't think we should be over concerned about this problem because we have to work out certain things from our system and as I said when the world gets better some other form, mark you it's a question of some other form of protest because it seems to be that protest is at the very root of writing. You may not be protesting about the racial issues but maybe something else, we cannot really expect the time when all conflicts will be resolved. So I, in short, I think that one already notices this, that the kind of tone and content of literature from Africa is changing just as the situation in Africa is changing, so I don't think we should worry about it, I think it will take care of itself as long as you have sensitive writers. We're not concerned about bad writers, I mean a bad writer may be repeating what other people did but this is neither here nor there.

GWYNETH HENDERSON: Chinua Achebe, now on the staff of the Institute of African Studies of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Mr. Achebe was in fact in London to attend the celebrations for the publication of his new book, a collection of his short stories written over many years. The collection takes its title from the newest of the stories 'Girls at War'. It's published by Heinemann Educational Books and it is incidentally the 100th title in their African Writer's Series, and it costs in the United Kingdom thirty pence and twenty-five pence elsewhere. I must say I enjoyed 'Girls at War' very much, partly because the stories were written over a long period of time so one gets the feeling of completeness that is rare in collections of short stories. Now you may remember last week a lecturer in the Department of English, Mr. P. Wilson at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone talking about their research into finding new sources of electricity, and Mr. Wilson said then that much of what they were doing won't take effect for a long time. Well it seems they have done and are doing something else which has an immediate effect. They are producing teaching aids for their own students, using linear and non-linear integrated circuits. Roland Buck asked Mr. Wilson to explain what it's all about.

MR. P. WILSON: It's basically an attempt to save money. Teaching aids tend to be rather expensive. For instance Phillips has a whole set of teaching aids, and various other American firms which have teaching aids, which come out to thousands and thousands of dollars if you buy the whole set. So we're trying to produce rather cheaper devices using modern integrated circuits, the latest thing in solid state electronics, which are relatively cheap actually, to produce things like harmonic analysers for prices of about \$ 20 as compared with \$250 for the manufactured products. This gives our students a chance to build these teaching aids, which is an education for them, and it also saves us some money.

ROLAND BUCK: Are these aids going to be used in schools, colleges?

MR. P. WILSON: They could be used in schools, certainly, if there was a school with a vigorous physics department that was prepared to approach us. We'd be very interested to help, certainly.

ROLAND BUCK: How long do you think that this particular project would take to complete and yield positive results?

MR. P. WILSON: Well, we already have some teaching aids in use, which are being built by project students basically, and they're working very well indeed. They really are quite an interesting solution to the problem of visu-

MR. P. WILSON:
(CONT'D.)

alising electronic processes, which African students tend to have difficulty with. I don't know why this is, but the mechanical engineering and civil engineering appears to be more concrete to them, whereas electrical engineering presents some conceptual difficulties. So we're trying to overcome this in the African context with use of these teaching aids.

GWYNETH HENDERSON:

Mr. P. Wilson, lecturer in electrical engineering, Department of Engineering, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierral Leone was talking there to Roland Buck.

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