

University Report

BBC

AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

UNIVERSITY REPORT

No.93

Broadcast 26th, 28th and 30th April, 1970

NARRATOR -
JOHN BANKOLE
JONES:

As the countries of Africa slowly begin to ease out of their first decade of Independence, we are all beginning to realise that there is no longer any need for us in Sierra Leone or Tanzania or anywhere else in Africa to make a song and dance about our "african-ness" or things African, no more than a tiger needs to proclaim its stripes, or, if you like, its tigritude. Professor Edward Blyden of the University of Sierra Leone makes this point in an interview with us when he points out that the discipline of African Studies is a self-liquidating exercise. Well, we'll be talking to Professor Blyden in just a moment. After that, we will then hop over to Tanzania to see how the teaching of literature under Professor Arnold Kettle has become very African in its orientation.

Professor E.W. Blyden is so well known and so easily recognisable both by sight and sound among his academic colleagues across the continent that the name speaks for itself. At the moment, he is the Director of the Institute of African Studies at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. When I spoke to him in Freetown last February, and asked him what the general background to African Studies was, he gave me a rather surprising answer.

PROFESSOR
BLYDEN:

This is a question I have been asked at various conferences and my answer has always been the result of an American election. The Democratic Party lost the election in 1952 and Eisenhower became President. And quite a number of my very good friends whom I will not name over the air - they are very well known scholars and had been working in the State Department - and everybody remembered that he had been a professor once

upon a time, as a result of the researches they had been doing in African and the Near East Affairs. A number of them went back and these African Studies Institutes began to flourish in various centres. And, indeed, literally this is how it all sprang up until it crossed the Atlantic when the School of Oriental and African Studies had been operating for more than twenty years before that. No one had recognised it as an academic discipline before that until the American universities took it over and we began to have this new approach of looking at African Studies in terms of various disciplines: History, Political Science, Sociology - and to fill in the gaps where African materials had not been largely represented. This, I would say, is the background.

JOHN BANKOLE
JONES:

Do you think that this is a valid academic discipline?

PROFESSOR
BLYDEN:

To be honest with you, my answer would be 'yes' and 'no'. No, because you wind up developing a discipline which will cut across so many other areas - other academic disciplines within a university complex and in the light that all our efforts since the post-war era have been to develop what we call this African personality - each country wanting to develop, dig up its own past, dig up its own history, correct the record of history - it would seem to me that if you begin to take a little bit from the economic history of your country, and the geography of your country and the sociology of your country merely because you want to build up a discipline called African Studies then you defeat your own ends. And to that extent I would say 'no'. 'Yes', because we do need to build up the gap which has been left in the literature of the entire world community. And only we, as Africans, can do it. And therefore our universities and centres of learning ought to be the reservoirs in which this thing has to be built up.

JOHN BANKOLE
JONES: Well, as Head of the Department of African Studies at Fourah Bay College, the University of Sierra Leone, and bearing in mind what you have actually said, how are you structuring African Studies at the moment?

PROFESSOR
BLYDEN: At Fourah Bay, my own approach is to build up a reservoir of Sierra Leoneana. For one thing, every African Studies Institute in various countries tends to become really - let's face it - nation-centred. In other words, the Nigerians are busy building up their own culture. If you look at Ibadan, the heavy content of Yoruba History and mid-West History is there. If you go to Ghana - the same thing. And I should think that we in Sierra Leone - and this is basic to my own approach - that we need to build up those aspects of Sierra Leoneana which have been severely neglected. One area in which I am busy working, and my own special field of interest, is in our political and constitutional history. I am hoping that before too long we will be able to start a small research project on the Sierra Leone political constitutional history in order to complement the kind of work that Ibadan is doing for that section of West Africa, that Ghana is doing and that the East Africans are doing.

JOHN BANKOLE
JONES: Well, this raises a rather interesting point. What, in fact, would you say is the rationale behind Institutes or Departments of African Studies in places like Russia, the United States and Britain.

PROFESSOR
BLYDEN: I'm glad you raised this question because it is there that I think I hold one of my own personal - I hope they are not peculiar - strong views on this subject. African Studies in an American University - and God knows I have seen quite a bit of it - and I should suspect (I haven't been to the Soviet Union) - but I should suspect in countries outside of Africa that they tend to be looked upon as more of a novelty - a curiosity shop: you want to find out about circumcision of women, tattoos and cicatrice marks of the various tribes - the types of

things in which we are interested, but we don't have to go studying. But these are the kinds of things that attract and appeal to the intellectual appetite, I suspect, of your non-African audience. Now, with us, the original rationale, as I figure it out, was that we were wanting to correct the record of our history where we claim that the colonial powers had tended to be rather ungenerous - I will not say distorted, but had been rather ungenerous in their presentation of those aspects of African History where the African had featured prominently.

NARRATOR -
JOHN BANKOLE
JONES:

Professor Edward Wilmot Blyden III.

Most African universities, in establishing English Literature departments, are beginning to cast aside the format developed by their English counterparts. The universities are now structuring the teaching of literature in an African context with a relevance to African development and African needs.

Arnold Kettle is the Professor of Literature at the University College of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania. It was two years ago when he discussed the problems of teaching literature in Africa on University Report. And to-day, with two years' experience of teaching Literature in Africa behind him, he continues that discussion. In Dar-es-Salaam, John Carthew asked Professor Kettle what changes had taken place in the way in which Literature is taught at the University there

PROFESSOR
KETTLE:

I'd say that what we have been concentratin; on in the last couple of years in our method of teaching is all the time to relate all the literature that we teach very much to the whole social and economic background out of which it has emerged, in the hope that in this way we'll give our students a sense of the role and value of imaginative literature in different contexts, so that, among other things, they can decide for themselves which of the roles, which of the values,

is most relevant to their own context. For instance, we have given up, in the poetry course, which we run for our students in their third year - we've given up any attempt to cover the major figures of English poetry. What I've been doing for the last two years is to start with a general consideration of a number of different English poems, but then, towards the end of the first term, to raise with the students - "Well, this is all very well, but what do we mean by poetry?" And I then ask them, during their first vacation, to find, translate and write about a poem in their own first language. Well now, the interesting thing about this isn't only that they find it interesting in itself, but that it alters their whole attitude towards poetry, and, incidentally, makes them write a good deal better than they've been doing before because they feel much more on top of the subject. And it alters their attitude towards poetry because they no longer think of poetry as something formal which they get out of books, but of something which has some closeness to actual people's living.

JOHN CARTHEW: In a sense, in that response you've answered the next question I was going to ask which is this - moving from what literature is taught in Dar to how literature is taught in Dar. Clearly, how poetry is taught is intimately related to the poetry which is taught. But what about the other aspects of the literature syllabus?

PROFESSOR KETTLE: Well, of course, there is a great more African Literature taught now than there used to be. We have two whole courses on African Literature. We teach very little straight English Literature in the sense of attempting to cover exhaustively any period or any author. When we teach the novel, for instance, we read the novels in English, but many of the novels that we read weren't originally written in English at all. We use translations, and we try to range over as wide a field as we can, and next year, for instance, we are trying to introduce examples of Asian, South American literature and Caribbean literature to our students in order to get

away from the sort of idea that English Literature has something special about it as far as they are concerned. On the other hand, of course, English Literature is bound to have something a bit special about it as long as you are reading in English. One can't get away from this - this is a language problem, and you can't separate the language problem of the African countries from the literature problem.

JOHN CARTHEW: On the other hand, presumably when students go out to do the field work you were describing in poetry they would be faced with languages very different from English. How far are they able to relate the local languages which they find in the field to the work that they are doing in English in the Department during their terms.

PROFESSOR
KETTLE:

Well, I think this depends on the way they come to see Literature. If they see Literature as many students do - as simply set books in an examination - but in so far as they come to see Literature as part of people's discovery of what the world's like - of what they feel about the world and about organising their feelings and thoughts in the best way, then, of course, it is relevant to them and they find out unexpected closeness, unexpected things to move them in Literature which, before, they simply couldn't, in the nature of things, be aware of because so much of the literature they read couldn't, by the nature of things, touch them very closely.

JOHN CARTHEW: On the other hand, one does find that Shakespeare continues to be a very popular subject for study in the Literature Department. How do you explain that?

PROFESSOR
KETTLE:

Because Shakespeare's so good. It's really as simple as that. And the students will respond to good literature wherever it is written. I think there's a difference between the general priorities which, for reasons of cultural development and policy, one gives in a syllabus, and the actual value of particular books.

JOHN CARTHEW: Could you just enlarge on the question of value and relevance?

PROFESSOR
KETTLE:

I think this is a very difficult problem, especially for the outsider. It's very easy for a British person, especially a fairly experienced teacher, to sit down and decide what he thinks Africans ought to find most relevant. But it isn't for him to do so. This is something which Africans themselves have to decide on the basis of their experience. And there aren't any short cuts in this way. It's no good, I think, our imagining that people from outside expect that teachers can come in and, on the basis of some above-the-struggle theory, decide what is relevant. It's a complex question which Africans have to find out for themselves, making, no doubt, their own mistakes, making their own experiments, but guided by their increasing sense of self-confidence and identity. And this is the basic thing about education in Africa at the moment - this sense, which Africans demand, and rightly demand, to feel self confident both for themselves, their culture and their future.

NARRATOR -
JOHN BANKOLE
JONES:

Professor Arnold Kettle was talking to John Carthew about the teaching of Literature at Dar just before he returned to England to take up an appointment in the Open University.