

# University Report

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

## UNIVERSITY REPORT

No.95

Broadcast 10th, 12th and 14th May, 1970

NARRATOR -  
JOHN BANKOLE  
JONES:

This week from Ghana atomic energy, and what the University at Legon is doing on the radio-isotope front, and one of East Africa's most prominent authors discusses ways in which he's been helping young writers of the future.

James Ngugi, the author of "A Grain of Wheat", "Weep Not Child" and so on, needs no introduction as a writer, or indeed in his other cloak as a University teacher. But in April this year he undertook the direction of a short course that was something of a departure for him. On behalf of the English Department at Makerere University College, Mr Ngugi organised and ran a week long "Writers' Workshop" under the auspices of the Extra-Mural Department. The course was intended for budding writers from East Africa - students, schoolchildren, and, in fact, anyone who could prove their commitment to writing. To help him, Mr Ngugi had a galaxy of well-known names - the Malawian author and teacher David Rubadiri, Ugandan writers Okello Occuli and Robert Serumaga, and academics like Pio Zirimu and Professor Ali Mazrui.

Well, all these people, apart from being well-known, are also well known to have strong ideas too, and this reminded our reporter in Kampala, Liz Keeble, of a point that was raised in University Report from London about a year ago when we talked to Makerere's Professor of English, David Cook, who had then just organised a similar workshop at the University of Zambia. Professor Cook expressed a concern that it could be all too easy for the director and lecturers in these

circumstances to impose their own ideas on budding writers rather than encouraging individual talents. So, when Liz talked to James Ngugi she asked him first whether he had started off with similar fears too.

JAMES NGUGI: Yes. I had similar fears myself. But not only myself - I think a lot of other participants, especially from Nairobi, were having similar fears. What we did not want to do in our workshop was tell the young writers how to write and what to write. Rather, the workshop was meant as a way of bringing various young writers from both Kenya and Uganda and Tanzania to discuss their oral work together. Or rather, what we were trying to do is give them an opportunity to talk shop for as long as they liked. Of course the idea was that we would be able - or rather, the Workshop would be - to stimulate writers so they would leave the Workshop really excited about writing, so that they would feel that they wanted to write more and more. This was really our aim. We did discover, in fact, that it was not the formal sessions which were really very exciting - or rather, these were not the things which actually excited the young writers - but the informal meetings behind corners. We found, similarly, that young writers would stop one another in the corridors of the department, at the places where they were staying, and try to read their poems to one another. Again, the typing room, or rather office which we used, was full of people coming in and out trying to type their work so that they could pass this around, you know, to the other participants. I think this was the most exciting thing.

ELIZABETH  
KEEBLE: Who backed this scheme, and how did you arrange the formal sessions?

JAMES NGUGI: The money for the Workshop was given by the East African Literature Bureau who, incidentally, have done a tremendous job of trying to encourage young people to

write, especially young people in schools and at the University Colleges of East Africa. But the actual organisation was done by myself on behalf of the English Department. But I didn't do it alone. There were other people who put in a lot of hard work. The formal sessions were not all that formal anyway because I myself believe in letting things drift - so that the actual formal sessions were very loose indeed, organised very loosely, so that the workshop participants could make the Workshop go in any direction they actually wished it to go. And this often they did. Some of the formal sessions, you know, we'd scrub out completely because there was no room for them. But I'd like to mention one very exciting evening we had and this was the poetry reading evening. I myself am one of the people who believe that poetry can only be appreciated fully if it is read in public and read aloud. On this occasion, we had a Ugandan drink called Amala which is drunk with straws from a common pot, and we had other drinks around. We had asked people to come with their drums, with their guitars, with every musical instrument they could get hold of. And again this particular poetry reading evening was not arranged formally, although we had told people to bring their own poems. We just arranged to let the evening drift, and it drifted very very well indeed. People were very very excited, people were vying with one another as to who could go on the floor and read, you know, his own poetry against a background of drums and guitars and other instruments. For me, it was very very exciting trying to marry poetry with music from the musical instruments.

ELIZABETH  
KEEBLE:

Did you give the young writers ideas how to publicise themselves as writers, and how to get their material published?

JAMES NGUGI: We did. We had representatives from publishers. Again, what we tried to encourage was for people to be talking informally to some of these publishers, to show them their manuscripts again informally.

ELIZABETH  
KEEBLE:

Do you plan to follow up the work that is being done during this week by, for example, criticising any work that the writers will do when they return home?

JAMES NGUGI: I myself, am not actually following up what they will be doing, unless, of course, they produce something and send it to me in my private capacity of James Ngugi - in any case, I have been doing this kind of work for quite a long time. But, you know, the idea of the Workshop was to show us all that we all had problems of our own, you know, that nobody could really satisfactorily deal with another person's problems. I gave them as an example myself who have been unable to write for the last three years. And, of course, they laughed. Later, they started attacking me from left and right. And this made me really feel guilty, and I just felt I could go back to my desk and start writing. This was really the idea - to show that all of us had common kind of problems, and that nobody - no other person - whether he's been writing for years or whether he's just started writing - can actually answer, let's say, my problem for me. So too, we are hoping that people will go on writing. Of course, there are one or two offshoots from the Workshop. For instance, two of the participants - one, Roderick Roberts from Tanzania, and Raf Bitamazira also - apparently were so excited that they want to compile a kind of cyclostyled booklet of the material presented in the Workshop and pass it on to all the other participants. They also want to start a kind of literary bulletin which they can keep on passing from hand to hand, sending it to all the other participants. The East African Literary Bureau is also hoping to

follow up a lot of these participants by sending them letters, asking them whether they could see their manuscripts whenever they are ready, and that kind of thing. So I am myself rather encouraged by these offshoots of the Workshop.

NARRATOR -  
JOHN BANKOLE  
JONES:

James Ngugi was talking to Liz Keeble in Kampala.

And now on to a topic that's frequently been a subject for controversy - the use of atomic power in Africa. Now I have to admit I find it still very difficult to remember all the peaceful and useful things atomic power can be used for - somehow it is always associated for me with massive death and destruction. However, atomic power does have very many important peaceful uses and, as such, can play a very important role in our developing countries. But, against that, the setting up and maintenance of full-scale atomic reactors is inordinately expensive. In Ghana, for instance, the initial intention, under ex-President Nkrumah, was to build an atomic reactor, but in 1966/67 the National Liberation Council scrapped the project. In spite of this, however, the Ghana Atomic Energy Commission is still very much a going concern, and, amongst other things, has an active National Centre for Radio-Isotope Applications.

But what is a radio-isotope? Well, many elements exist in radioactive forms as well as normal forms - and it is the radioactive forms that are called radioisotopes. They occur naturally and can also be produced by taking the normal varieties of the elements concerned and irradiating them in an atomic reactor. They have now made themselves indispensable in many branches of science - for example, in Medicine there's the well-known use of the radio-active isotope of cobalt to treat some cancers. Then, radio-isotopes are used a great deal as tracer elements in scientific research.

But what does a Centre for radio-isotope applications actually do? From Accra, the Head of the Ghana Centre, Dr B.W. Garbrah explains.

DR GARBRAH: The work of the Centre covers three broad areas. The first one is the provision of services. For example, the Centre supplies the films worn by persons occupationally exposed to the hazards of ionizing radiations. It also processes these films to make sure that the workers haven't taken doses higher than the maximum permissible doses. The Centre also undertakes to repair electronic equipment used by institutions applying the techniques of radio-isotopes. The Centre also organises vacation courses for various grades of personnel. It also provides radio-isotopes for all institutions which apply radio-isotope techniques either in agriculture, medicine or industry. So much for the provision of services. The second one deals with co-operation with other institutions which are interested in radio-isotope work. For example, there are quite a number of institutions in Ghana which already apply radio-isotopes in their work and what we do is to try and co-operate with them. For example, we are trying to co-operate with one hospital in work involving the study the involvement of venereal diseases, kidney diseases in hypertension cases in Ghana. This is the kind of co-operation which we are carrying on with other institutions. The third work concerns work which we actually do at without the involvement of other institutions. For example, we are studying the best conditions under which certain food crops in Ghana absorb certain nutrients from the soil. We are also building what is called a whole body counter at the Centre. This counter is one which can determine the total radioactivity in a human being. And when this is done it will be possible for some doctors to examine certain disorders. For example, it will be used to study the uptake of