

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 25

(4R 50 S025P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

ELAINE: Now, I wonder just how many people are going to recognise this sentence I'm going to read? Here it comes: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond."

It's the opening of one of the most popular of all African novels - Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart". And that first page really has the reader hooked, it hooked me anyway.

One thing that's always struck me about "Things Fall Apart" is the number of scenes that I can actually see in my mind's eye. There is the fight, of course, the scene when the missionaries arrive, and the most important one where Ekwefi follows her daughter never endingly through the dark, dark forest.

Well, there's more than a possibility that we'll be watching these very scenes one day in the cinema as Frances Oladile, a film producer from Nigeria has just finished making a film based on Achebe's book. The film's already had its premiere - not, I'm afraid to say in Nigeria, but in the United States, in Atlanta Georgia. Well it was given all the razzmatazz of a gala first night and Chinua Achebe was there himself, but he wasn't saying anything. However, Francis Oladile was, and he explained why he'd decided to try and take "Things Fall Apart" off the printed page and put it on film.

FRANCIS OLADILE:

It's a very outstanding piece of literature that has gone round the world. It has been translated into seventeen languages, it is used by many African Studies departments in various universities around the world. Coming onto the theme of the book we have a better and greater understanding of the things we read about but without the opportunity to have the slightest idea of what it looks like.

ELAINE: With a book as well-known as "Things Fall Apart" you're taking a risk when you hope that actors can become such well-known characters as Okonkwo, for example. But anyway it's good news that African films are being made - by Africans - because, up to now, the film industry has been really limited. Bob Evans who was in Atlanta for the premiere got Francis Oladile to give his opinion on film-making in Africa.

OLADILE: It's at the very beginning. There is no history of motion picture industry in Africa when you talk in terms of production. Africa has been exposed in the cinema industry strictly from the point of people bringing finished films to be shown in Africa. The production aspect of the film industry is a new experience and that is where we are at now - building a foundation for the motion-picture industry. But what is so very special about what we are trying to do there is our willingness to work with people outside Africa so that the world can benefit through better understanding of the human situation.

BOB EVANS: What would you say as to the environment in Africa for the new young film-maker?

OLADILE: I think he must feel for whatever he decides to do or what he does. You have to have a feel for it.

EVANS: Do you think there is a great deal of potential for the future development...

OLADILE: The potential is unlimited, very much so.

EVANS: What sort of market do you hope there may be for your film in Africa itself?

OLADILE: Like I was talking to a friend just a few minutes ago, you don't make a film for Africa as such. You make a film for cinema-goers wherever you can find them so I expect cinema-goers in America, in England, in Russia, everywhere we can find them to have a look at "Things Fall Apart".

EVANS: It'll be great if it does get shown round the world but I'd be even happier if I felt sure that it was going to be shown where it most belongs. And I don't just mean in Nigeria but everywhere in Africa. I'm sure in Freetown there'd be a big audience for it and I'd like to know it was on in Nairobi and Lusaka and everywhere so let's wish "Things Fall Apart" the best of luck.

ELAINE: The other thing you need (besides luck, I mean) if you want to make a film, is money, and most of this money came from America. Amongst the Americans involved was Fern Mosk a Hollywood film writer. Her job was to select the bits of dialogue from the book that could be given to the actors, so she was on location in Nigeria for the filming. Her Hollywood experience however hadn't prepared her for the hazards of filming on the African continent!

FERN MOSK: We had one occasion where we were shooting on a day which turned out to be a sacred ceremonial day and the chief of the village approached one of our people and asked us to stop shooting. To stop shooting would cost the company a tremendous amount of money as you well know and we struggled around with this thing and we finally said: "Give us another hour" and he wasn't too happy about this and all of a sudden we heard drums. You have never heard such drums in your life and there was just no way, I mean we had to stop - they knew exactly how to make us stop.

EVANS: You have recorded some of those drums in the third reel!

DRUMMING

ELAINE: There's a sort of magic that turns personal experience into fiction - into a novel. But the personal experience is usually the raw material for the writer to work on so it isn't often that a writer of one race successfully portrays a character of a different one. A novelist who's attempting to do just this is Jack Cope, a white South African writer. He came to the 'Arts and Africa' studio recently and told me about some of the characters he's drawn.

JACK COPE: Well they vary tremendously. My short stories for instance deal with anyone from a lion-hunter to a witch-doctor in an old Zulu society and so on. I should say my characters would reflect South African society in which whites are one-fifth and blacks are, say, three-fifths and the mixed race are another fifth so my main interest is in the majority of the people.

ELAINE: So the majority of the people you are writing about are obviously not white. (You will forgive me if I keep using these terms but it is easier for me). So it means that you are writing largely about black people or about coloured people?

COPE: I should think so, yes.

- ELAINE: And how do black South African writers look on you. Don't they find you incredibly arrogant writing about black people?
- COPE: I don't think so and they sometimes say I am white but I have a black heart or something like that, it is a joke. I was brought up in Natal among the Zulu people.
- ELAINE: Did you get involved with their customs and their rituals and things like that?
- COPE: Not involved as a Zulu would be of course but I have sometimes been called a Zulu writer.
- ELAINE: And black people also accept you as a black writer.
- COPE: I think they just accept you as a writer and in South Africa there is tremendous admiration for people who are writers and poets.
- ELAINE: Have you got any work that you are doing at the moment?
- COPE: Yes I am on a novel, my eighth novel. The central character is a man called Max who is of Zulu origin and who has been brought up by his mother who is a trained nursing sister, in the western tradition. She wants to bring him up as a westerner and this brings in all the aspects of the clash of cultures, the clash of interests, the bitterness of racialism and persecution and the deprivation of privileges and so on. It is the most difficult thing I have ever tackled, I will say that.
- ELAINE: Now, besides the novel 'Max' Jack Cope is busy as editor of a poetry series. One name in particular, that of Jennifer Davids, came up in our conversation and when I saw her book of poems I was struck by one that was dedicated to Chief Albert Luthuli, the Nobel Peace Prize winner. I'm going to read this poem but before I do, I must point out that Albert Luthuli is an old man with failing sight who met his death when he was walking along a railway track and was struck down by a train. This comes into the poem.
- "FOR ALBERT LUTHULI" by Jennifer Davids
- ELAINE: "For Albert Luthuli" is from the Collected poems of Jennifer Davids edited by Jack Cope and one of the series called "Mantis Poets". Jack Cope had this to say about 'Mantis Poets' in general.
- COPE: In South Africa it is rather difficult for poets in the English language to get their work published in volume form. In Afrikaans there is a very different situation where the young poets are immediately snapped up by publishers, they get published before they are ready, so I am editor of a literary magazine in English and Afrikaans and I set up this series of poets to give the English poets a chance and to get their books into volume form. There is absolutely no basis of choice except quality. We just take the poets who we think are the best writers in South Africa and we have got a list of about twenty to twenty-five which we hope to bring out.

ELAINE: Now tell me something about Jennifer Davids.

COPE: She is a young teacher who was trained in Capetown.

ELAINE: Is she white South African?

COPE: She is a coloured girl. She has published quite a lot of poems in magazine form and this is her first volume which has been very highly praised, it has only been out a couple of months, and I think it will make a big name for her.

ELAINE: And you were telling me something about the fact that she gets really incensed when she is classified as any kind of poet.

COPE: Yes, I think it comes out of this feeling that she doesn't want to be patronised. There is a feeling especially among the liberals that they over-praise a person as a kind of reflex of their own guilt. Jennifer wants to be taken, judged and criticised purely as a poet, not as a woman poet or a coloured poet or a black poet or anything like that.

ELAINE: And I respect Jennifer Davids for being a poet first and making all the other attributes secondary. Here she is, as a poet, describing the areas around Capetown where the blacks have to live - the black locations - and the title is 'Location Fires'.

"LOCATION FIRES" by Jennifer Davids

ELAINE: Jennifer David's poem 'Location Fires'. But no more from me; we're at the end of the programme, so I am going to leave you in the care of Dudu Pukwana and 'Spear' with a track from their L.P. 'In The Townships' I'll say: see you next week, and goodbye.

MUSIC

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