

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

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MAHONEY: Novels, poems, authors; we'll be talking mainly about books today and they'll include the known - and the unknown.

MUSIC

That creepy music is just to warn you that later on there's our first mention on 'Arts and Africa' of a book of a science fiction. It's set in the future when the world has become a museum and human beings are all living in outer space. Yes, that's right! But if you don't mind I'd like to stay right here in the present (or if I have to be exact it was a week or two ago) when Eldred Jones gave a lecture about African writers to the Royal Society of Arts (here in London). Eldred Jones is Professor of English at the University of Sierra Leone and I suppose he's one of the most respected of African critics. His audience were treated to a wide coverage of the African literary scene - past and present - and afterwards Kongnso Lafon asked what characterises their 'African-ness' is it their background?

PROFESSOR ELDRED JONES:

To take particular writers: Wole Soyinka is a Yoruba and he uses the whole traditional background of Yorubas: their mythology, their art forms, the importance of carving, all this is worked into his imagery and into his method of presentation.

Take a person like Alex La Guma, he is a South African, there is a quality in his writing that comes out of the African situation. One of Dennis Brutus's book of poems is called 'Sirens, Knuckles, Boots'. Now the boots are the boots of the police kicking people, the knuckles, and the sirens are the sirens of the police cars. You can see how apartheid gives him his imagery that is what I mean that people write out of their own environment.

KONGNSO LAFON:

Are you now saying that when if somebody picks up African writing today he could say this writing, this man comes from this area, this writer comes from this area?

- JONES: I think this is possible, yes. I think it's impossible to read Achebe and not know that he is an Ibo.
- LAFON: You said that South Africa is a special case that has to be treated on its own. I can't understand, how is that?
- JONES: Well, a lot of the literature that has come out of South Africa that I know about, this is mainly the urban non-white literature. Now if you read a West African writer - Soyinka or Ekwensi or Achebe you will find that even though some of them write about an urban setting you are always conscious of the traditional roots of the people. Now South Africa has evolved an urban culture which it seems to be almost independent of the traditional background and that is one interesting thing but I think what I really meant was that almost everything I have read is dominated by apartheid and this takes the place of mythology. Where the West Africa would use mythology and so would the East African writer apartheid seems to be a dominating image and everything seems to rise from it.
- LAFON: You comment very sympathetically that most of these African writers have had to live in exile because of certain circumstances. Do you think that leaving their countries is an asset or liability to their writing?
- JONES: Oh, I think it is a very bad thing when a writer is compelled to leave his country to write about his country from outside. Just to leave Africa for a bit, this person Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer, was very, very reluctant to leave Russia because for him Russia is part of his nature and he doesn't know what his existence would be without the continual influence of Russia, without his being able to draw from the roots of his culture.
- LAFON: Well, I can hardly see a solution. Do you think that those who remain in their own countries would be forced to modify their writing in order to stay?
- JONES: Well in some countries yes. And in some countries you couldn't possibly have your books even printed unless you wrote in a certain way, in a certain way that was approved of by the authorities. Now that is one of the reasons why so many South Africans have to leave South Africa because their books wouldn't be published there and they would have no outlet to the world if they remained in South Africa and the situation would begin to oppress it. So I just hope governments will be able to take criticism when criticism is called for.
- No society that requires people to speak in only one voice is going to last for very long. You need the clash and reconciliation of ideas in order to get progress.
- MAHONEY: It is very interesting the fact that he mentioned Alex La Guma because I did a ten minute play of his called "A Matter of Taste Taste". However just to remind who that was, it was Professor Eldred Jones being interviewed by Kongiso Lafon.

SOMALI MUSIC

MAHONEY: Music from Somalia to introduce a writer from Somalia. Now I suppose I think of publishers as people sitting at a huge desk covered in books, with more and more manuscripts coming in by every post. But I can't believe that publishers are really accustomed to getting a whole of pile of writing all in one huge bundle like this:

YUSUF D'UHUL:

There are three novels and sixteen shortish stories, and I have the manuscript for another novel which I hadn't sent but which I have with me now. I didn't have the opportunity of sending them in earlier and I am really doing something which hasn't been done before and that is dumping all these on the desk of a publisher and they are surprised about it, too.

MAHONEY: I bet! That sounds like a case where I can really use the word 'prolific'. And this prolific writer (he's the author of that science fiction book I was talking about earlier) this writer is Yusuf D'uhul who came into the 'Arts and Africa' studio on his way to the publishers to discuss the possibility of printing some, at least, out of that long list. When Florence Akst talked to Yusuf D'uhul about his very first novel she wondered whether it was autobiographical - after all, so many first novels are about the author's personal experiences.

D'UHUL: Well, I think it's true to this extent. This one I wrote was quite a lot autobiographical, yes.

FLORENCE AKST:

And would your friends recognise you and your life when they have a chance to read it?

D'UHUL: Well, the main background of my life is there but most of it is fiction and one trouble I foresee is that many of my friends will assume this to be true about me.

AKST: Is it generally speaking firmly rooted in Somalia?

D'UHUL: Well, let us say two of the novels one of them is only set in Somalia but really the leading characters are Americans - American women for that matter - so really I don't know what is Somalian about it. I have really done this because my belief is that literature is really world-wide, there isn't really very much difference between various human beings that is what I believe really. And that is why I wrote this novel to go really to the most difficult part about it and not only the leading role is for an American woman but the other part is for a Chinese man. - a Chinese Communist man, at that. So really it is the farthest away from Somalia and Africa.

AKST: Did you choose this because it was a challenge, these characters or because it fitted naturally into what you were trying to do?

D'UHUL: Well I have written this after I had written two novels about Somalia and about Somali background some short stories and I thought that I would do something rather out of the way from Somalia and that was the reason. And again as I believe this is really a human experience which is the same and this is what is at the back of my mind all the time.

AKST: Now I was wondering whether you were going to tell us something about science fiction. Is it true that you have written one novel which is science fiction?

D'UHUL: Yes, that is true.

AKST: Well surely that is rather unusual in Somalia, in Somalian literature, isn't it.

D'UHUL: Very much so, and this is what the publishers tell me that this is the first science fiction novel they have heard of from Africa.

AKST: And this is a fantasy is it?

D'UHUL: Yes, it is. It is a view of the world in year 3,000 when the pygmies would have taken over.

AKST: And does Somalia exist then? Is it recognisably Africa as it is today with the different nations and the different countries?

D'UHUL: Oh no, no. It is in outer space it has nothing to do with Africa or this world. The whole world is a museum by then there is no Somalia, no Africa, no Europe for that matter, nothing really.

AKST: Now I gather from what you told me before we came to the studio that you started life as a lawyer.

D'UHUL: Yes, that's right.

AKST: Now how did it happen that being a busy lawyer you found time to write four novels, sixteen short stories.

D'UHUL: Well I wasn't busy when I wrote those because I got into a personal situation where I was idle for more than three years and I really wanted to do some writing, some serious writing as I thought and before I never had a chance because as a lawyer I was so busy making money and that sort of thing. Then this three years idleness was thrust on me and so I took the opportunity to do what I really wanted to do.

AKST: Now I have been assuming right from the start that your writing has been in English as you are getting it printed by an English publisher.

D'UHUL: Oh yes that is so.

AKST: Now that Somalia has its own script would you be tempted to write in Somali?

D'UHUL: Well, I don't think so because there is very much market for fiction in Somalia and moreover I want to reach the world and my view is really that human beings are one and this difference of culture are only minor and therefore I will go on writing in English, I think.

AKST: And in that case you have no ambitions to be labelled an African writer?

D'UHUL: Well really I don't believe in these labels. By being African is just perhaps slightly different and takes me out of the huge meal of other writers but I really do not believe that there is such a thing as an African writer.

MAHONEY: Yes, well, I'm not too sure whether I can agree with Yusuf I'uhul. It all seems to be contrary to what Eldred Jones was saying at the beginning of the programme. But the only thing that all of us can do is wait for these novels and short stories to see the light of day, then we'll have a chance to decide for ourselves. I'm standing by for a chance to read the one about the American woman and the Chinese man in a Somali setting.

But there's only a week to wait for the next edition of 'Arts and Africa'. And this is Louis Mahoney saying 'see you then'.

MUSIC.

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