

Arts and Africa

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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SIGNATURE TUNE

MAHONEY: Today we're taking a look at a magazine from Uganda and wall paintings in northern Nigeria.

Now hands up all those who recall with real pleasure the days they used to spend in the classroom. Well, what we'll be hearing now is for the rest of us - for people like me who enjoyed the bits in between lessons.

Extract from "A Chapter of School-Life" by Samwiri Kibina

That's just a bit from a story in the Ugandan magazine 'Nanga' and it was one of the things Swaebou Conateh (he edits his own magazine in the Gambia) talked about the Florence Akst when he came to see us recently.

FLORENCE AKST:

Swaebou Conateh, a short time ago - I think it is about six months ago - you were in the 'Arts and Africa' studio talking about your own magazine and as a magazine from Uganda has come into the 'Arts and Africa' office recently I thought it would be a good chance with you here to have a word about magazines. Remind me, what kind of audience do you hope to reach with yours?

SWAEBOU CONATEH:

The sort of audience we plan to reach with 'Ndaanan' is actually the local people but our primary objective is to provide an outlet for creative writing. You find that even though you are supposed to cater for the local audience a lot of our paper's readers are actually foreigners, especially tourists coming into the country, but still there is some distribution within the country, even though unfortunately it is somehow limited to places which are accessible by transport and so these are the people who live in Banjul and the surroundings who get the paper

AKST: You mention tourists. Does that mean that you make sure it is available at the airport and places like that?

CONATEH: Well we make it available at hotels and the main bookshops.

AKST: So you are conscious of this need to try and reach the audience as well as the writers?

CONATEH: Yes.

AKST: Now what kind of material basically do you carry?

CONATEH: The material that we carry is very wide actually. We concentrate on folk-tales, short stories, poems and we try to publish at least one play and there is a section which we call 'Other contributions' and that covers a very wide area. You find that people who want to talk about writing in general and other things related to culture and their contributions are published there in that section.

AKST: You have very kindly had a look at this magazine which has come to us from Uganda called 'Nanga' and it is published by the National Teachers College at Kyambogo I wondered, just thinking about your own content, the content in your magazine, what you felt about this magazine as somebody who would obviously be sympathetic to attempts to produce a literary magazine anywhere?

CONATEH. I was really impressed by the content, not so much with the manner of presentation, but the content is actually of very high order. Even if you look at some of the topics covered because there is one contribution there about life in a college which is rather monotonous and it is a very difficult thing for anyone to write about successfully but there is a contributor who did very well actually in presenting the sort of life that students lead in a college and the relationships they have with teachers. His style is very attractive, it makes you want to keep on reading which I think is very important for a writer. Apart from him there is another one who also wrote about a student strike and the students did this also at an educational institution, his own involvement in the strike and how the thing was solved in the end. And it showed him to be more of the hero than the Head teacher!

AKST: Who is this writer?

CONATEH: The man who wrote the story "A Chapter of School-Life" it is a very long one written by Samwiri Kibina who I suppose is one of the students at the college.

AKST: Now this sounds rather as though it's also journalism not necessarily what we would class as art, but do you feel that there is no real distinction between the two?

CONATEH: I think there is a distinction. I don't think it is journalism but I think actually he has been able to create new live characters because this is what one has to do if one wants to write successfully; you have to be able to create a human being who people can look at and feel that they really exist and this is what you find in this story.

AKST: Now you yourself are a poet and you include a lot of poetry I know in your magazine. Are there poems in the magazine 'Nanga' that you would welcome on your desk as editor?

CONATEH: Yes, there is this poem called 'Slum' which is written by Cliff Lubwa-p'Chong. It is a long poem but I think it is very interesting and I like his style, in fact it is so much like a poem I have written in Dakar and I was impressed by the sort of similarity of content between the two poems. I was also struck by the fact that he knows so much about slum-life and is able to present it graphically in the poem.

Extract from "Slum" by Cliff Lubwa-p'Chong.

MAHONEY: The beginning of Cliff Lubwa-p'Chong's poem called 'Slum'. And besides the distinction of being one of the founders of 'Nanga' back in 1967, he's also in Heinemann's 'Poems from East Africa'. I'm looking at the cover of 'Nanga' where there's a black and cream design based on the nanga musical instrument - it's a kind of harp with seven strings and it sounds like this:

MUSIC

MAHONEY: Now off to Nigeria, to the north, to take a look at the work of a Fulani artist, Musa Yola. He's taught himself to read and write and he's tried his hand at a long list of jobs - printing apprentice, policeman, carpenter, in a brewery. Perhaps that's where he got his inspiration because what he's famous for he is painting walls - not whitewashing but murals.

Mark Chollom at Ahmadu Bello University has sent us this account of the artist.

MARK CHOLLOM:

Musa Yola combines various trades for a living, but excels in one, wall-painting.

His murals which are not a traditional art and with which he seems to have began a new trend depict mainly figures, some with buildings in the background. The figures themselves give the appearance of being able to move around; and his murals are always of things that are happening at the present time. They are real life scenes of what is going on in the villages and towns. Some of these things depicted in a single mural included: chairs, flower pots, shovels, tennis bats, birds, fish, motor car, and human figures beautifully dressed in both traditional and western costumes. One of his murals is of two women who stopped to watch him at his work.

He seems to work at a considerable speed, in fact the mural he painted at Ahmadu Bello University took two days and covered a complete wall. In one compound in Mkarfi, near Zaria, he covered two walls whose total area was over 600sq. feet, and did this in only seven days! Even though part of this work is uncompleted yet the outlines of trees, pineapples, a soldier with guns, and a horse operating a local sugar-cane mill can all be seen.

MAHONEYL I'd like to take a trip along the roads around Zaria and Kano because according to Mark Chollom, as you drive along past the villages Yola's paintings flash by on the walls - they're bright and bold in red, blue, green, yellow, brown - all bright, bright colours and vivid pictures. But painting is still only one of the jobs he does for a living.

CHOLLOM: Musa Yola combines various trades for subsistence. During the farming season he engages himself as a farm labourer. As a result he moves from one village to the other either ridging, weeding or harvesting.

He also plasters walls for people on request (A trade closely connected with his wall-paintings). However, the most remarkable of his trades appears to be his wall paintings. But these paintings, unable to stand the corrosive and corrasive agents of the tropics fade within a few years. But this might be an advantage to him as patrons who have seen and admired his wrok can commission him to do other murals for them.

It is feared that his murals might be considered destructive to traditional art, because not only are more and more people inviting him to paint for them but some of this contemporary artists are copying his styles, and these too can be seen along the Zaria - Kano road.

Since the nature of his trades demands that he moves with time and space, this remarkable, ingenious and ambidexterous Nigerian artist is not easy to locate. He is always in great demand; a rare commodity.

MAHONEY: I feel Mark Chollom has painted his own picture of Musa Yola. So, keep your eyes open if you're travelling in Musa Yola's part of the world! As I mentioned he's a Fulani so we'll hear some Fulani music to end with. But join me, won't you next week for more of 'Arts and Africa'.

MUSIC

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