

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE N6.769 (SP 50 S069G)

ALEX TETTEH - Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to "Arts and Africa"
LARTEY and a special welcome to today's guest.

TAPE SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX Our guest is a writer of distinction, someone with an
international reputation. Here is a passage from
his new book.

READER "In 1962 I published an essay, "Where Angels Fear to
Tread", in which I suggested that the European critic
of African literature must cultivate the habit of
humility appropriate to his limited experience of the
African world and purged of the superiority and
arrogance which history so insidiously makes him
heir to. That article though couched in very moderate
terms, won for me quite a few bitter enemies".

ALEX A few lines from an essay called 'Colonialist Criticism'
in a collection with the title "Morning Yet on Creation
Day", (that's quite a title!). The writer of these essays
is none other than Chinua Achebe so they're bound to be
read eagerly by a great number of people. His short
stories and his poetry have gained him a lot of attention
but he is first of all a novelist and already his first
and best known novel - "Things Fall Apart" - is a set book
for school and college examinations in company with the
older classics. And now a new book, a collection of
essays.

Now when I opened the covers I wondered whether I should
find new thoughts, new departures: but no, it's a
selection from writings, mostly of the 1960's, that
appeared in journals, including, naturally, 'Transition';
letters from the columns of 'The Times' of London and the
'Daily Times' of Lagos. The list of contents reveals the
subject matter: 'Thoughts on the African Novel',
'Language and the Destiny of Man', 'Where Angels Fear to
Tread' and, as we've already heard, 'Colonialist Criticism'.
Here are some lines from it:

READER "One feels the necessity to deal with some basic issues
raised by a certain specious criticism which flourishes
in African literature today and which derives from the
same basic attitude and assumption as colonialism itself
and so merits the name 'colonialist'. This attitude and
assumption was crystallised in Albert Schweitzer's immortal
dictum in the heyday of colonialism: The African is
indeed my brother, but my junior brother.

(continued)

READER CONT: "The latter-day colonialist critic, equally given to big-brother arrogance, sees the African writer as a somewhat unfinished European who with patient guidance will grow up one day and write like every other European, but meanwhile must be humble, must learn all he can and while at it give due credit to his teachers in the form of either direct praise or, even better since praise sometimes goes bad and becomes embarrassing, manifest self-contempt".

ALEX Well there's every evidence to show that Achebe has never practiced feigned humility and there's plenty robust writing within "Morning Yet on Creation Day" whether the author is addressing an audience inside or outside Africa. And I expect that people attending the lectures he has just been giving in Scotland (where he received an award as a novelist with an international reputation) were treated to the same direct manner. While he was in Britain Florence Akst talked to Chinua Achebe on behalf of 'Arts and Africa' about "Morning Yet on Creation Day" and especially about the opening essay on colonialist criticism. Is it really worth the effort and energy he uses to attack what, after all, is by now a spent force?

TAPE AKST/ACHEBE

CHINUA ACHEBE It is not a spent force, I think colonial criticism in African literature is in fact a new force not at all spent. I don't think it will be anything like as powerful as colonialism itself, but we don't have the time really can't afford to spend even a year wasting our time on that kind of thing, and I thought I should draw attention to it.

FLORENCE AKST What is prevalent throughout the book is your own personal criticism of what you, as I understand it, think of as a search for universality amongst African writers. Isn't this rather a criticism of African writers who want to write as Europeans, rather than universality? After all, is it possible for an African writer to appeal to the whole of Africa?

ACHEBE Yes, you are actually quite right. When I use the word 'universal or 'universalistic' I'm only using it as a joke because it is not really universal, it is merely an attempt to impose a narrow European kind of concept on the literature

AKST And it is quite possible for something that is specifically African also in that case to be universal?

ACHEBE Oh absolutely! This is the point, this is precisely the point that you don't have to go out of your way to achieve the universal. Any important and true and good story is universal in my definition.

AKST And so in this case it is the universal quality in a writer that would make him popular to people within Africa, but outside his own culture?

ACHEBE Yes, yes. As soon as you are able to respond to something which is outside of your immediate environment then I think you can say that this is universal. When I pick up an Eskimo poem and read it and it says something to me, that man or whoever composed it has achieved the universal even though he is talking about Eskimo experiences.

AKST And coming back to the African continent; is it possible for a writer to appeal to people throughout the continent but not beyond it?

ACHEBE I see it like concentric circles: you have the nearest to you, the people who get most out of what you're saying; another circle who get something but not quite as much and so on, and if you're any good you can find somebody who will say: oh yes, you know I get something out of this even if it is not much.

Well, we've been talking about space; let's talk about time - your own particular history. You are conscious of having messages for your readership. Have your messages changed over the years?

ACHEBE I believe very much that any important work of art carries a message; I mean any important work of art says something or does something to you when you see it or view it or read it or hear it. It does something to your life. This is the message I'm talking about. If it doesn't do that it is no good, I mean there is no point in talking about it. Now the message doesn't have to be one thing it can't in fact be one thing. If you are sending a message day after day, you will become very boring. So again if you are good I think your message will be altering.

AKST Well I'd like to talk a bit about language because a great deal of your comment in "Morning Yet on Creation Day" is about language, and in fact there is one place where you've introduced me to the creation myth of the Wapangwa people of Tanzania and I'd like at this point to stop so that we can listen to it.

READER "The sky was large white and very clear. It was empty; there were no stars and no moon; only a tree stood in the air and there was wind. This tree fed on the atmosphere and ants lived on it. Wind, tree, ants, and atmosphere were controlled by the power of the Word, but the Word was not something that could be seen. It was a force that enabled one thing to create another."

AKST Now you quote this in your plea for the preservation of the purity of language; what do you think is the greatest enemy to the purity of language that affects African writers in English?

ACHEBE There are many aspects of it. One is, shall we start from the most obvious, incompetence, just not being prepared to use the language carefully as you ought to. I think that is one danger. I don't think this is only African writers, I think this is a common problem, as society becomes more complex this respect for language seems to suffer. You see there is, when I use truth for instance, truthfulness; there is a kind of truthfulness of art which is different from the truthfulness of everyday life. Somebody says: Yes, but there is also a connection between the two, the integrity of the artist and the integrity of an individual and I think this kind of truth is easier when people live in small communities. When something happens they are in a position to understand it. Now if you live in a complex society, in an empire, you can't possibly know all that is going on and therefore the danger of losing truth is greater.

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AKST Well, can that be true for the use of English in Africa? Isn't this one of the drawbacks of using a language that is for most people a second language.

ACHEBE What is happening is that English is there in Africa. I mean it isn't introduced there by the writers, English is used spoken as a language by Africans. You are bound to have literature in that language. Where it is used a certain period of time has to pass before a language becomes domesticated. It is not going to be English like you use in England or in America because it's in a different environment. I think literary people and writers are going to reflect the way English is being domesticated in Africa in many ways. And it is not going to be just one style, you already have the difference between a Soyinka and, shall we say, Tutuola, basically from within the same African culture and yet they are using the English language in very different ways presenting two maybe two extremes of use of this language in Nigeria and they are many, many variations inbetween.

AKST Another variation that's going to appear soon is the emergence of writers that have not had the colonial experience, because so many African countries (Nigeria one of them) are reaching a point of post-independence when the new writers are going to be born after independence without the colonial experiences to draw on for creative writing. How do you see the new writers developing?

ACHEBE Yes, in a way it is a kind of formal independence and the basic problem of control from our side is still very much so if one is prepared to look, to look, for it. This is not to say that nothing has changed. I think even from year to year things are changing and that new writers will obviously bring their own new perceptions. They are also different people so they should bring in their own peculiar personalities, so I expect that new writing will be different from my writing or Tutuola's writing but I am not expecting that this difference to be total.

AKST And you're not expecting the new writer to feel deprived because he hasn't had.....

ACHEBE A major theme to work on? No.

AKST And something to resist or to sharpen his wits against?

ACHEBE No, there is plenty to resist; there is a lot to resist.

AKST And a last question. The title of the book, "Morning Yet on Creation day"; it is a splendid title, where does it come from?

ACHEBE It comes from my head, it's my anxiety that one should not think that anything is finally formed. You sometimes encounter people, critics and others, who talk as though these were finished forms, and that all that we have to do is copy what other people have done and I'm saying that in the world of art, in creation, it is still very early morning.

ALEX Our guest today has been Chinua Achebe, and he was talking to Florence Akst about his newly published book, a collection of essays entitled "Morning Yet on Creation Day". It's published by Heinemann at £3.00 with a paperback edition at £1.50.

There's a certain morning brightness in this Ibo song from the Steve Rhodes-Voices and it sounds about right to me for the close of today's programme. Of course I'll be back next week with more 'Arts and Africa', so from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.

TAPE STEVE RHODES VOICES
Ibo song

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