

# Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

KWESI KAY:

This is Kwesi Kay welcoming you to "Arts and Africa"

SIGNATURE TUNE

This week we are going to talk about some of the best-hated people in the sphere of the Arts, the critics - and criticism. Some African writers actually believe there are too many critics and too few actual creators. Extremists even wonder whether critics are necessary at all, or question if criticism helps us get better books. So we turned to one of Africa's foremost critics, Professor Eldred Durosimi Jones of Fourah Bay College. He is also editor of the review, "African Literature Today", whose latest number is just out. We asked him "How can African criticism help now or in the future?",

ELDRED JONES:

I think African criticism, by examining carefully the works of African writers, can expose them to a wider public by highlighting the good points and, of course, showing their weaknesses, thus making them popular among the readers for whom I presume African writers write - which is presumably African readers.

The only kind of criticism that is worthwhile is searching, dispassionate, fair criticism which looks at the work with understanding and sympathy, but which does not call a bad thing good or a good thing bad.

KAY:

That was Professor Jones speaking from Sierra Leone. We'll be returning to him again, soon. But first of all I'm going to leave the talking to Anthony Delius for a bit - he's been paging through a couple of publications about books for us, including the review I've just mentioned, "African Literature Today". Tony, what have you got?

ANTHONY DELIUS:

Well, I've been going through the African Book Publishing Record (Volume 1 No. 1) and I've come across an interesting item which must mean something in the growth of the book trade in Africa - the first Nigerian detective story has just been published, Kole Omotoso's "Fella's Choice". It's issued by the Ethiope Publishing Corporation of Benin City and certainly another sign of the growing variety of books published already in Africa. Very incomplete statistics seem to indicate about a thousand books are already being published a year in Africa about the Sahara and the Zambezi River.

- KAY: The growing number of books being published in Africa and those published by African authors or on African subjects outside is giving us a problem of bulk. We obviously need the help of critics to help us sort out the good from the bad, the useful from the useless.
- DELIUS: Yes, but this immediately brings us up against another problem - for whom are we sorting these books out, and from what point of view are we making a choice. There is complaint, and one meets it often enough in "African Literature Today", that works by writers of this continent are too often judged by European literary standards and from a western point of view. The editorial, in fact, quotes an apposite African proverb which says: "Wisdom is like a goatskin bag; every man carries his own". Here is what Professor Jones has to say on the subject of point of view.
- JONES: Quite often we are reading the works of people who have used European models - the novel, for instance is a European form - and it is difficult to talk about the novel without reference to novels which have been written in that tradition. Naturally, of course, one keeps a fairly open mind and looks at the novel for what it is. The critic must have a fairly wide background of the genre - the type of work - he is criticising. Now for a work written in Africa he has to be aware of the social background, he has to be aware, for instance, of enough of the background to see whether the author has falsified the situation, or has realised it with some integrity. He must not praise simply because he is talking about the work of a fellow countryman and he must not blame simply because the work comes from a different environment.
- DELIUS: Some of the points made by Professor Jones are made again forcefully by Solomon Ogbede Iyasere, writing from California State College at the time. Kwesi reads a few lines out of his article in "African Literature Today", entitled "Africa Critics on African Literature".
- KAY: READS FROM "AFRICAN LITERATURE TODAY" Page 23.
- DELIUS: Solomon Iyasere. There is, of course, a reaction against European influences which seems to go to another extreme - that Europe's art is clapped out and needs Africa's to revive it. This sort of suggestion is - or was - made by no less a person than the President of Senegal, Leopold Senghor. Senghor says something of this sort in a much acclaimed poem. A verse of which Kwesi will now read to you.
- ASHANTI MUSIC
- KAY: READS FROM "AFRICAN LITERATURE TODAY" Page 88
- ASHANTI MUSIC
- DELIUS: Jonathan Peters quotes from this poem that Kwesi has just read to you in the course of a long article in "African Literature Today" about Senghor's Mask Poems. Further on he remarks of African dependence on rhythm.
- KAY: READS FROM "AFRICAN LITERATURE TODAY" Page 88

- DELIUS: This brings us to the question - if we manage to judge the African work without bringing in foreign views are we to judge it from a particular African viewpoint. Say for example, like Senghor's own negritude, or a particular political viewpoint like Marxism - so much favoured by many African intellectuals today? Back to Eldred Jones in Sierra Leone for an answer:
- JONES: I would advocate, not only African writers and critics, but for all writers and critics, an open-minded approach. The difficulty about starting from any kind of prescribed stand point is that you are really trying to put the work into a straight-jacket; particularly when these canons may be socio-political, they are very limiting. Marxism, for example, is a socio-political creed; negritude had also a fairly limited stand point and I think one or two works had been condemned from the negritude standpoint simply because they did not fit into certain prescribed norms. I know Camera Laye's "The African Child" was very savagely criticised because it was felt that it did not conform to what critics of the negritude school felt a work should contain.
- KAY: Well, we've had all this instruction now on how and how not critics should operate. What my mind cries out for is an actual example of what a critic regards as fascinating and authentic African writing.
- DELIUS: As it happens - anticipating such a request - I have the very thing. It comes from a discussion by Earnest Emenyonu of the work of the Igbo novelist, Flora Nwapa. He quotes this passage as representing an authentic and peculiarly African "realism". It is an account of how an Igbo woman decides to join her husband who has recently died. She comes home and calls for a meal.
- TAIWO AJAI:
- READS PASSAGE FROM "IDU" by Flora Nwapa, pp 217 -218
- DELIUS: Critics also point out weaknesses - some contend they never do anything else, which I hope we have shown you here is quite untrue. We asked Eldred Jones what were, in his mind, the common weaknesses of African writers writing in English.
- JONES: Well, there is one inevitable Achilles' heel: now not every writer suffers from it to the same degree but most of the people we are talking about now are people who are using a language which is not their own - some of them are using English, some of them are using French. Now the ability to master somebody else's language well enough to write artistically in it is not given to everyone and this is really probably where we find the greatest weaknesses in African writers. Some of them just don't say quite what they set out to say, they have got good ideas but the language problem proves insuperable and it is to the extent that a writer using a foreign language is able to do this that he is successful or not successful. This is probably, I think, the greatest potential weakness. Some writers, of course, have triumphed over this magnificently - others are still struggling with it.

DELIUS: Well, we have spoken a great deal about novels here - perhaps the most widely read of all books. But in fact is the novel the best modern form for communicating with an African audience today? "African Literature Today" contains reviews of two books just published about Wole Soyinke, Playwright, Poet and Novelist. One book is written by our Professor Jones, and the other by Gerald Moore. Mr Moore has no doubts that in present-day Africa the drama has the edge over all other forms of literary expression.

KAY: READS FROM "AFRICAN LITERATURE TODAY" page 154

MUSIC FROM SANKOFA

And so with music from Sankofa we end "Arts and Africa" for this week. And from me Kwesi Kay, it's goodbye.

MUSIC FROM SANKOFA

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