

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we hear about the influence of Christianity on African writing and we report on a new crafts centre in the Seychelles.

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

A familiar statement attributed to President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya among others, is that European colonisers came to Africa with a bible and took away the land, leaving Africans with just the bible and no land.

Well, it's certainly true that Christianity took hold in many parts of Africa during colonial times, mainly because of missionaries and their activities, and the Christian religion - in various forms - is still a strong influence in Africa today.

Eldred Jones, Principal and former Professor of English at Fourah Bay College, the University of Sierra Leone, has made a special study of the influence of Christianity and the language of the Bible on African literature. In Freetown, Jocelyn Roland talked to Professor Eldred Jones for Arts and Africa.

PROFESSOR JONES:

I think the influence of the English language bible and one may add, the language of the liturgy, in the 1666 prayer book, is very marked in the speech and the writing of Africans. Obviously in the sense that quite often in the use of English, they would come out with a biblical quotation, but also because when they pray, they use the syntax, sometimes the vocabulary, of the bible, and this is certainly reflected in the writing of Africans from the earliest times until now.

In the early days of Christianity, the bible was learnt by heart, and many people who went to mission schools could quote the bible in reels. They learnt whole psalms, whole chapters of the bible and this became almost part of their lives. This is reflected, sometimes deliberately, but sometimes quite unconsciously, in

in their speech. Let me give you an illustration of what I mean. There is a letter written by the Rev. Quaque in Cape Coast in 1811, which Lalage Bown quotes in her anthology "Two Centuries of African-English Prose". You'll see there are several phrases like "nothing by confusion and rumours of wars", the phrase "rumours of wars" comes from that verse in the bible "there shall be wars and rumours of wars". The phrase "jealousy, hatred and envy", you almost expect him to end "and all uncharitableness", power and authority", archaic forms like "pleaseth" etc. That's the kind of verse from the early period. You will notice that even in writings of modern Africans, Chinua Achebe for example, they use the bible or the biblical style quite often in their characterisation.

There is a very good example in Achebe's "No Longer At Ease" when the village of Nwafia takes leave of young Okonkwo, as he goes off to England to further his education. The language of the bible is obvious. The Rev. Samuel Echebe, saw in the departure of Okonkwo for his English education, as the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah, I believe. He quotes the people that walked in darkness saw a great light and when, at the end of his speech, a woman called Mary, led the villagers in prayer, the first line of her prayer was "Oh God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, the beginning and the end" etc, etc. Now that is used to characterise these people as being people who were mission trained and, that to me, typifies the way the bible has pervaded the speech habits of Africans,

T.M. Aluko in "One Man, One Matchet" also has a similar use when the Rev. Joseph Olaya preaches on the text "thou shalt have no other gods before me" and similarly his language is loaded with phrases and chunks from the bible. Wole Soyinka gives his school master Lakune and his prophet brother Jero a similiarly biblical style,

But I think even more interesting than the use of the bible in characterisation is the way, sometimes, the Bible itself has become part of the personal style of the writers themselves, so that they come out quite naturally with biblical references. There is a very good illustration in Wole Soyinka's novel "The Interpreters" where a girl Ikwená, slams a door deliberately and sends a flash of pain through the head of her boyfriend Segú, who had been lying down with a bad hangover. And immediately she becomes, in the words of Wole Soyinka, Joel. Now Joel, as you may remember, is the character in the Book of Judges who drove a tent pin through the head of Sisera. It is a very natural kind of illusion. Similarly in the same, book Wole Soyinka characterises a traffic policeman, who turns his back on the crowd pursuing a fugitive and he refuses to help the fugitive and Wole Soyinka calls him "Pontius Pilate" washing his hands in the stream of traffic. That's the kind of natural thing I mean.

You see, I've studied the work of Wole Soyinka pretty closely so my illustrations I think, will come mostly from him. If you look at some of his poems, will see that the language of these poems has been influenced by his thorough knowledge of the Bible. In one of his war Poems "Ikeja, Friday, 4 o'clock" there are a couple of lines: "let not the wasted gather up for the recurrent session leaves of lead, lusting in the sun's eclipse",

Now here, let not the wasted gather up for the recurrent session loaves of lead, is straight from the Miracle of the feeding of the 5000. Gather up the fragments, let nothing be wasted, a d loaves of lead, a parody of loaves of bread. So you see what I mean by saying that the bible has predated the writing of Africans from fairly early times to the present day.

JOCELYN ROLAND:

Professor Jones, it would seem that this influence is more marked among West African writers ?

PROFESSOR JONES:

From what I've said you might think so, but in fact I think it can be illustrated equally well from the writings of some of the East African writers, Ngugi for instance in, well in almost all his novels, uses the bible for characterisation. In fact, one of his characters in the nove "A Grain of Wheat" has a bible, actually possesses a bible that he actually underlines. Kihika was continually underlining his bible and in this novel, you have several quotations from his underlined bible in the actual text. I think you can illustrate this from the work of Okot Bitek who quite often is very satirical, but you must remember that Okot himself is very well versed in theology, and therefore it is natural for him to use the bible in this way. So I think even if you go into the writings of Southern African people, the work of Thomas Mophelo, there you will find that the influence of the bible is very very marked.

JOCELYN ROLAND:

Is this influence of the English language bible still present in contemporary African writings ?

PROFESSOR JONES:

I think it is. Some of the works of Wole Soyinka which I've been quoting have been written only in the last five or so years. I think it will take a long time before this influence dies out all together because the English language bible in one form or the other is still being used in Africa and you will find that it certainly finds its way into peoples speech and so long as it does that, it provides a resdy source of reference, I think it will go on being used.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Professor Eldred Jones talking to Jocelyn Roland in Freetown about the influence of Christianity on African writing.

MUSIC: "Take Me to the Mardi Gras" by the Bob James Trio.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

As far as I know, we've never carried an item from the

Seychelles, that beautiful group of islands in the Indian Ocean which became independent from Britain in 1976. Well, the Government of the Seychelles has just opened its first National Craft Centre. This craft centre has been set up to train young people in embroidery, fabric design and other traditional skills. From Victoria, the capital of the Seychelles, Alan Hyman reports,

ALAN HYMAN:

When it became independent last year, Seychelles faced two problems. There were not enough locally made handicrafts available to satisfy the thousands of Western tourists who visit the country each year. Then there were not enough jobs for the young people who were leaving school at Christmas without having passed their exams. The Government's answer was to set up a series of national craft centres where school leavers could learn how to make the handicrafts the tourists wanted. The first centre opened early this year with two instructors and thirty-five students. In overall charge of the project is Maxime Fayon, the Permanent Secretary at the Seychelles Ministry of Education and Social Development, and he told me what subject the centre was teaching.

MAXIME FAYON:

Tailoring, cutting embroidery and crochet. We hope also to start a number of traditional Seychelles crafts. Then we are hoping also to start one on pottery. We also are hoping to start one on tie-dye, batik and silk screen printing.

ALAN HYMAN:

Can you tell us what are the traditional crafts on the Seychelles ?

MAXIME FAYON:

The traditional crafts of the Seychelles include basketry. We produce in fact, some very dainty designs in basketry and it also includes a certain amount of inexpensive personal jewellery, certain amount of weaving, making use of local fibres.

ALAN HYMAN:

And you've found the tourists are keen to buy these things ?

MAXIME FAYON:

Yes, tourists find the basketry very attractive. Actually last year we made a study and we estimated that tourists coming to the Seychelles were underspending by about a half. They could have spent twice as much in Seychelles, but they couldn't as there wasn't a sufficient range of craft objects for them to buy. We've had UNESCO supply us with sewing machines and electric irons, as to provide us with the basic equipment for the setting up of this centre. The

only other help which we have had so far is from the U.S. They supply us with a total of 20,000 US dollars to, in fact, erect a building on Prowley, , which will then function as a training centre.

ALAN HYMAN:

Do you find that young people are eager to adopt this idea of learning traditional crafts ?

MAXIME FYON:

Yes, indeed, we estimated that there are about 1000 school leavers every year on the labour market who are unemployed and who remain unemployed for 2 to 3 years.

ALAN HYMAN:

Well, 35 of those school leavers are now hard at work at the craft centre in Victoria. I visited the centre during a class and one of the instructors, Mrs. Germaine Gontier, told me what was going on.

GERMAIN GONTIER:

I'm teaching them to do dress making, embroidery, crochet, cross stitches, tie-dye, patchwork. We've made so far, two dresses, nearly completed, another two have been cut this morning and we've had a few dollies, three table runners in cross-stitches and four cushions in patchwork.

ALAN HYMAN:

Are these traditional Seychelles crafts that you are teaching the girls ?

GERMAIN GONTIER:

More or less yes because all these things we've all been told at home, that long ago it was the usual thing for all the girls to know these things. But now its been dying a bit so the Government wants to bring it back to the girls again because some of the girls can hardly even hold a needle so we are trying to teach them all these things again.

ALAN HYMAN:

This is Alan Hyman reporting for the Arts and Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that brings us to the end of this weeks programmes. Join us again for more Arts and Africa at the same time next week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: Limpopo by Jeremy Taylor