

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Today we hear the views of a controversial African writer on an equally controversial issue.

NGUGI WA'THIONGO

If you are in doubt, you only have to open the pages of any Kenyan newspaper to the entertainment pages, the so-called foreign groups who have controlled the Kenyan National Theatre since its inception in 1952 are still performing there even now, seventeen years after Kenya's independence.

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The voice of Ngugi Wa'Thiongo, the subject of this week's programme. Ngugi Wa'thiongo is one of the most prominent of contemporary African writers. His writing has always given rise to political controversy. The novel, Petals of Blood; the play Dedan Kimathi and then his latest work, the play Ngahika Ndenda written in Kikuyu, which provoked the authorities to detain him, are examples. Ngugi still retains his Chair as Professor of African Literature at the University of Nairobi but as a result of his detention he is barred by the Kenyan authorities from teaching. Recently a student demonstration was held to restore him to his former post. For this to happen, however, he needs the permission of the Government of Kenya. In a lunch address he gave lately to the Kenya Press Club in Nairobi - his first public speech since his release from detention, the controversial writer expressed his views on an equally controversial literary issue - the choice of language in literature. Although Ngugi was specifically concerned with Kenyan Literature, what he said is equally applicable to African literature as a whole. Most African literature so far has been written in one European language or another, mainly English and French. To Ngugi Wa'Thiongo, the choice of language is of crucial importance to creative literature.

NGUGI WA'THIONGO

The choice of a language already pre-determines the answers to the most important questions for producers of imaginative literature. "For whom do I write? Who is my audience?" If you write in a foreign language, French for instance, you must have a French-speaking audience in mind. If in English, an English-speaking audience. If a Kenyan writer writes in English, no matter how radical the contents of that literature, he cannot possibly be bearing in mind the peasants and workers of Kenya.

The question of "audience" has a bearing on the next few problems for a writer: what is the subject content of my work;? From whose standpoint do I look at that content, whether I'm critical of the content or not. In other words you cannot possibly write for a peasant/worker audience - or perform to that audience, for that matter - the same things in the same way, as you would for, shall we call it, the "jet-set", or the "skylab jet set" in Africa?

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But what views do other outstanding contemporary African writers hold about the use of foreign tongues in African literature.

NGUGI WA'THIONGO

In 1963, a Nigerian critic wrote an article for "Transition Magazine", now dead, in which he argued that African literature as then understood and practiced was merely a minor appendage in the main stream of European literature. He said, "The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium of educated African writing is misdirected and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture". In other words, until these writers and their Western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration. African literature - he went on - "lacks any blood and stamina because it is severely limited to the few European-orientated college graduates in the new universities of Africa, steeped as they are in European literature and culture. The ordinary local audience with little or no education in the conventional European manner, and who constitute an overwhelming majority, has no change in participating in this kind of literature."

This article roused a lot of wrath from African writers. Wole Soyinka, one of the most prominent writers from Nigeria, and who is currently advocating Swahili as a continental language, disdainfully demanded to know what Obi Wali has done to "translate my plays or others into Ibo or whatever language he professes to speak". Chinua Achebe was later to write defiantly that he had been given the English language, and I intend to use it". Another writer, Taban Lo Liyong in his book, "The Last Word", tells us that since his father was opposed to Taban taking English at University, Taban was very happy when he received news of his father's death because, (LAUGHTER), he could now study English in freedom. (LAUGHTER) The position of most of us African writers is not very different

from that of foreign critics who commended the intelligence of Africans for choosing English as a medium of their literary productions. The fact was that none of the African writers was able to satisfactorily answer Obi Wali's challenge. But the questions he posed about the peasant audience as the only plausible source of stamina and blood for African literature are basic and primary, and Kenyan writers in particular must meet the challenge of language choice and audience before we can meaningfully talk of a Kenyan National Literature and Theatre as the two important roots of a modern Kenyan National Culture.

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Here then comes a most controversial question, to be African does literature have to be written in an African language? And if it does, how about the literature produced up to now?

NGUGI WA'THIONGO

What in fact has so far been produced by Kenyan writers in English is not - and here I'm including myself, of course, is not African literature, is it Afro-Saxon literature, part of that body of literature produced by African writers in foreign languages; like French, Portuguese Italian, Spanish, that we should correctly term Afro-European literature. Kenyan National Literature can only get its stamina and blood by utilising the rich national traditions of culture and history carried by the languages of all the Kenyan nationalities. In other words, Kenyan, modern National Literature can only grow and thrive if it reaches for its roots, the rich languages and cultures and histories of the Kenyan peasant masses who are the majority class in each of Kenya's several nationalities. Literature, as a process of linking images, utilises language and grows upon the collective experience, that is history, embodied in that language. In writing one should hear all the whisperings, all the shouting, all the crying, all the loving and all the hating of the many voices in the past, and those voices will never speak to a writer in a foreign language. For us Kenyan writers, we can no longer avoid the question, whose language or history will our literature draw upon. Foreign languages and the histories and cultures carried by those languages; we must choose. The answer in fact brings us back to the question of audience. If a Kenyan writer wants to speak to the peasants and workers then he must write in the languages they speak. For example, the one high point in terms of Kenyan national literature during the recent Mau Mau struggle, came when a section of the Kenyan peasantry created a tremendous song and poems glorifying the Kenyan peoples struggle for independence and liberation. I can also, incidentally make the point that in Kenya's history of suppression of literature - right up to the time when the British were here the only literature that has been suppressed is the literature in Kenyan languages - that is the songs and poems banned by the British in the '50's where they are written in Kenyan languages. And of course, more recently the only play to be banned by an independent Kenyan Government was written in a Kenyan language. Lastly, in making their choice Kenyan writers should remember that no foreigners, however gifted, however charitable, however well meaning - can ever develop our languages, our literature, and our theatre for us, and

that we in turn cannot develop our cultures and literature through "borrowed" tongues". Only by a return to the roots of our being in the languages and cultures of the Kenyan people can we rise to the challenge of helping in the creation of a Kenyan National Literature and culture that will be the envy of many foreigners and the pride of Kenyans.

Thank you.....(Applause).

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ngugi Wa'Thiongo. Well, one cannot help wondering if Ngahiika Ndenda and the effects of detention have transformed Ngugi Wa'Thiongo into the Kikuyu language. We'll see.

And that brings us to the end of this week's Arts and Africa. Don't forget to join us again at the same time next week. Till then, this is goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.

MUSIC - LIMPOPO