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COSMO PIETERSE:

This week a look at Institutes of African Studies at two Universities in West Africa. Institutes or Departments of African Studies! In African Universities? Shouldn't all studies at African Universities relate to Africa, and in that sense be African Studies? Aren't Institutes of African Studies both redundant and insulting? Well in most cases, and certainly from the evidence of the work done at the various Institutes of African Studies, certainly there is vast scope for such Institutes. Because, firstly, they are interdisciplinary. They combine music, drama, literature, linguistics, history and then, also they encourage research into and thinking about areas that would otherwise have been neglected.

For instance, popular drama in Ghana. Now, recently, I have been coming across quite a bit of reference to the Concert Parties or Trios, that constitute the humorous, popular drama of Ghana. The first acquaintance I had with this form of popular theatre was in an article in the magazine "African Arts/Arts d'Afrique". The author of that article was N.K. Bame. And coincidentally enough, in Legon, Christine Oppong recently spoke for "University Report" to Mr. N.K. Bame, research fellow at the Institute of African Studies, on his research in popular theatre in Ghana.

COSMO PIETERSE:
CONT'D.

What, Christine asked Mr. Bame, would be his description of this popular theatre that he's been investigating?

MR. N.K. BAME:

Comic plays constitute the popular theatre I have been studying. The comic plays are a Ghanaian type of popular drama staged in Ghana languages, mainly Fanti and Twi by itinerant guitar bands who call themselves "Concert Parties". They describe their actors, who like the Shakespearian actors of Elizabethan England are all men, as comedians. The term "comic" has been used to describe the plays because they are generally intended to be laughter provoking.

COSMO PIETERSE:

Now this particular form of theatre, called the Concert Party or the Trios, amongst other names, seems to have been begun round about 1918. Various groups with names like "The Versatile Eight" and "The Two Bobs with their Carolina Girl" came into being between 1920 and 1930. A relatively recent, and very influential group was the Axim Trio of 1937. The casts were all male, the groups travelled all over Ghana, their kind of theatre appealed to all walks of life. Why this wide spread of this form of drama. What caused this wide appeal, or as Christine Oppong put it to Mr. Bame -

CHRISTINE OPPONG:

What kind of role do they play in Ghanaian society as regards both entertainment and social comment?

MR. N.K. BAME:

The popular appeal of this form of entertainment is very wide-spread in this country. In terms of social comment I think some portions of the plays are self criticisms of some aspects of Ghanaian social life. What I mean

MR. N.K. BAME:
CONT'D.

by self criticism here, is the way in which the comedians dramatise and exhibit on the stage. Some are ideas, some man, his habits and the way of life of Ghanaians, either indigenous or acquired, and ridicule them in the hope that they may be changed.

CHRISTINE OPPONG:

Could you give us an example of this kind of thing?

MR. N.K. BAME:

In the traditional Ghanaian society, custom demands that the kinsmen of a dead relative take good care of his children, just as they would take care of their own children. Any relative who shrinks from the responsibility or ill-treats the orphans of his dead relative invites misfortune and illness meted out by the dead relative onto himself. However, studies show that the children of the dead relatives are, in some instances, being neglected, because the successor is not fulfilling his customary obligation. When this is enacted in the plays, and the relative who has failed to discharge his obligation to the children of a dead relative is afflicted with a certain illness as it often happens in the plays, the play then helps to reinforce these changing, but nevertheless, cherished values of Ghanaians by indirectly calling for their fulfillment of these traditional social obligations.

COSMO PIETERSE:

And finally, Mr. Bame, talks to Christine Oppong in Legon about possible changes in the form of this popular drama, the Concert Party or Trio. In the past, the all male casts improvised their plays - but

MR. N.K. BAME:

I think in the near future the concert parties may include females in the group of actors. The plays are now unwritten, they may be written in future, although when that happens it will be a limitation on the ample room for improvisation which the comedians enjoy in the present form.

COSMO PIETERSE:

Mr. N.K. Bame, research fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, talking to Christine Oppong about his work on popular Ghanaian theatre.

And now to Ife in Nigeria where Akin Euba recently spoke to Professor Michael Crowder on a recent Seminar held there. The Seminar was convened by the Ife University's Department or Institute of African Studies and dealt with "Cultural Diversity and National Understanding". First, why that choice of theme?

PROFESSOR CROWDER:

Well I think the main reason that the Institute decided to hold a Conference on this particular theme, was that we've felt that a lot has been done on how far you can achieve a national understanding, a national unity, through political devices, and economic mechanisms, but very little has been done on the level in which cultural exchange, cultural policies can help achieve greater national unity and understanding. And, of course, in West African countries where the political boundaries are those laid down by the former colonial powers. These countries comprise a large number of different ethnic groups, and indeed, some people would prefer to call them different nations, which have been brought together with their different cultural heritages, and one of the real problems, as far as we can see, in achieving unity is to try and

PROFESSOR CROWDER: get understanding at the cultural level - using the
CONT'D. word cultural in a very broad sense of course.

COSMO PIETERSE: Professor Michael Crowder, Head of the Institute of
African Studies, University of Ife, Nigeria, on the
reasons for the Ife Conference theme - Cultural
Diversity and National Understanding.

But isn't this almost a direct contradiction in terms.
Doesn't cultural diversity make national understanding
so much more difficult. And this is the question that
Akin Euba raised with Professor Michael Crowder.

AKIN EUBA: What problems are posed by cultural diversity in regard
to national understanding?

PROFESSOR CROWDER: Well, I think there are very many. The very fact that
people tend, in any country, to look with a certain
amount of, not suspicion, but caution with regard to
people who have a different culture, religion, or habits
from themselves. And I think that in a country like
Nigeria which, in sense, has only been made a country
within sixty years in its present geopolitical frame-
work, there is quite a lot of caution about different
groups, and this often boils down to, not political
rivalry but sheer cultural differences. And very
often this sort of suspicion and the misunderstandings
that take place, I think, is the lack of knowledge of
one group for another's culture, and that these sort of
barriers that exist often be broken down, I think, by
educating people, by giving them information about each
other.

PROFESSOR CROWDER:
CONT'D.

One thinks, for instance, take a history text book about a country like Nigeria. Should that text book be used in say, one particular state primary school, should it only concentrate on the element of the ethnic groups in that state's role in Nigerian history, or should the school child be taught parallel the histories of all the groups of the nation. Obviously, if they are brought up with knowledge of the history of everyone comprising the nation they are going to have more understanding of their fellow Nigerians, than if they tend to concentrate on just their ethnic group, or the group of ethnic peoples within their own state. That is one example.

I think another obvious question is the difference in religion. For instance, in Nigeria, you have a large group of Moslems, you have a large group of Christians and quite a number of people who still adhere to their traditional religions, and they tend to look with a lack of understanding on each other, and I think if in the schools, instead of just having in the Christian schools, bible knowledge, one taught then what Islam was about, perhaps there would be greater understanding. Indeed they would begin to see the common elements between the two religions.

AKIN EUBA:

Has very much been done in this regard in Nigeria?
I mean on the question of historical studies?

PROFESSOR CROWDER:

Well perhaps we might take the question a different way. How far has any African country really taken concrete steps to use culture as a tool to achieve greater national understanding. I think an obvious example of a country which takes this sort of problem very seriously, is Senegal which, of course, we invited down here to our Festival of the Arts which was running concurrently with the Conference on Cultural Diversity

PROFESSOR CROWDER:
CONT'D.

and National Understanding. There, I think, because they have a very culturally oriented President, he has seen that you can not only cross the internal frontiers between different ethnic groups within Senegal, but you can cross some of the frontiers that exist as barriers to the Pan-African ideal or inter-African understanding through culture. And, I think, we probably felt after the visit of the Senegalese here, that one had got to understand their attitudes, and a lot of the Shibboleths about how the Senegalese are really black Frenchmen, as so many Nigerians and Englishmen have often chosen to believe, certainly these disappeared as a result of actual human contact.

In Nigeria itself, I think it's only just recently, that one begins to sense that the Government is seeing, that culture is not only an element in the life of a nation, but that it can, if properly used, bring about greater contact between peoples. You saw the way the military government, immediately after the war, with all its other problems, during the tenth anniversary celebrations, put up a very large amount of money for an all-Nigerian Festival of the Arts in which each State participated. And I think it was very impressive that the East Central State which has just come out of secession won the inter-state traditional dancing competition. I think very often you come to respect people when you see their abilities in the cultural field.

COSMO PIETERSE:

And finally the last question Akin Euba put to Professor Crowder concerned a country's economic health and cultural wealth. Can African countries afford to spend thousands of pounds on art and art cultural shows?

PROFESSOR CROWDER: Well I think one can approach this at two levels. First of all, I think, the life of people is not just production. There is always a need for entertainment, and I think all people have a desire for entertainment, not only just at the so-called "pop" level, but at the intellectual level. I think at the second level, if one accepts that/^{not only} culture for culture's sake, but if one accepts that culture can be used as a tool for promoting national understanding, then I think this is very economically worthwhile.

Perhaps if, under the British, there has been less emphasis on maintaining traditional authorities, and traditional political units under the system of indirect rule, perhaps there might not have been the tension between the peoples. Because as in a place like Senegal, it might have been more homogeneity and if one had had that, one might never have had this war, which, of course, was an economic burden of enormous proportions.

Now if one way of avoiding situations in the future is conceded to be promoting understanding through cultural contact, cultural exchange, then I would have thought African governments were very wise to pursue such goals. After all, a very large amount of money is spent by all governments on Ministries of Culture or Ministries of Information. I think what we are trying to do in this conference was to see how best this money could be spent to achieve, not only the development of culture, but the use of culture for promoting greater understanding. Taking it beyond just the frontiers of particular countries, I think it is true that African countries like Senegal and Guinea and Sierra Leone have seen that by sending your dance troupe or national ballet or theatre abroad you begin to get people to see

PROFESSOR CROWDER:
CONT'D.

much more of what your country is like, and what your people are like, than perhaps the occasional visit of a minister. I mean one politician merely communicates with his fellow politicians in the country he is visiting.

COSMO PIETERSE:

Professor Michael Crowder of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ife, Nigeria. And that is most likely the last time we'll hear from Professor Crowder from Ife as he is due, next academic year, to move north to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His post in Ife, we understand, will be taken by Professor Ulli Beier. And with that it's, until next week, goodbye from University Report and from me Cosmo Pieterse.