

Arcadia— or the Modern World

In the studios of the Transcription Centre, London, Lewis Nkosi discussed his book *HOME AND EXILE* (Longmans) with Jeannette Macaulay, Sierra Leonian post-graduate student of African literature, and John Nagenda, Ugandan writer, with Dennis Duerden of the Transcription Centre in the chair.

Will Africa resolve the contradiction between humane African values and the quest for power in the world?

DUERDEN:

Lewis, on Page 94 of your book you write: "Before Africans can make a contribution to World Civilisation, it seems to me axiomatic that they must achieve self-confidence and self-respect and that this confidence can only be achieved through economic and political power." Now it seems to me that there is a conflict in the book—a conflict between the writer who wants to affirm an African set of moral values and the African leader who is striving to make Africa politically and economically powerful, and comparable to the other powerful blocs in the world.

NKOSI:

I think what I am insisting upon is self-knowledge. I don't think that it is possible for anybody to grow up and be a universal being without having known something about himself, and how he is situated in his own particular heritage, and traditional experience. When he has done this, then he is in a better position to select those values which seem to be relevant to the way he can order his own life. But I don't think it's possible (to a very great extent) to do this until the African States have acquired enough power not to be intimidated by the complex experiences of the European races that have colonised and subjugated them. But I consider African literature as the arm of the African revolution; I think the two go together. This is why I insist that the African writers, at least, should be aware of the colonial heritage and how it affects their position in the world.

NAGENDA:

Now, if I can make a very tentative suggestion, it is that, if we concentrate on economic power before we have gone back and found out what we really are, we run the risk of forgetting about our past. I suggest that Africa should realize that it has a long way to catch up economically with the West, but economics shouldn't be a priority. Our priorities should be to re-establish our own African positions. After we are quite sure about that and can't be confused, we then can pick up the race for economic power.

MACAULAY:

I think John is working on a fallacy which is that you can concentrate on one thing and neglect the other. I am sure that an African Government has to do its utmost to catch up in the economic race, and get financial independence. It's essential. But I think it can at the same time develop a cultural independence. The two go together and they are interdependent.

NKOSI:

I think that there is an inherent contradiction between one's dedication to certain humane African values, and a dedication to the acquisition of power. As one understands the history of modern European technology, one of the basic factors of that development lay in the puritanical ethic, which insisted on the value of work. Now, on the other hand, Africa wasn't a technological continent, and our values were quite different. We worked when we were hungry; we went hunting and so forth. So we don't feel this guilt about, for example, not going to work if we're satisfied everybody's having plenty, not to the extent for instance that my wife—who is English—feels guilty about not going to school if she's slightly sick. Now this seems to me to be an inherent contradic-

tion. Because if you're going to acquire power, and achieve this economic status, sooner or later you're going to have to tell the Africans that it's good to work simply because work is good. Otherwise you're not going to be able to push them to a position where they're going to be able to work hard enough in order to save.

MACAULAY:

I don't think that there is a contradiction. This business of technological development is coming. Whether we like it or not, people are going to have to work harder.

DUERDEN:

In fact this contradiction comes out strongly in Lewis's book. In talking about South Africa he says "In no time we learned that we had not suspected. That many white South Africans, despite their wealth and privilege, envied us the Township for what they supposed to be its vivid colour, its extravagant if precarious life. We on the other hand had envied them the White suburb for what we considered its discipline and control, its sense of orderliness and thrift." And he goes on to say: "Passion and craft, instinct for life, and passion for technology, Europe and Africa; how these things would have found a perfect wedding in South Africa." So obviously this idea of an antimony of opposites is very central to Lewis's thinking. Now what I would like to ask is how Lewis thinks this sort of puritanical tradition became a part of the European? It seems to me that it has in fact only become part of the European tradition during the last three or four hundred years. Professor Gellner, in a recent book has written that two or three hundred years ago Europe was a vast concentration camp; that only a very few people in Europe were able to count on survival from day to day, and that the greater number of us were very lucky if we found enough food to eat, if we were not killed in some violent way. And in fact it is only during the last 50 years or so that Europeans have had any sort of sense of security at all. And I think that the reason why Europeans feel so guilty about work is, like a poor man, who has once been terribly poor and is now rich, he's always frightened that he might be poor again. This technological revolution has taken place very recently and in the memories of all of us has left a memory of what it was like to be poor and insecure and to live from day to day.

NKOSI:

Well, I tend to question that postulate. For one thing I think that most sociologists who have written on work, and have enquired into this phenomenon of European puritanism and its association with the industrial revolution agree that it begins to be a factor during the industrial revolution, which is relatively late in European history. But I think that the central point that they make is that it has become institutionalised so that you do not even think about whether you're going to be hungry tomorrow. What you do feel—and this is due partly to the Christian religion and the values of the Christian faith—what you do feel is that sloth is bad in itself and that to work purifies the soul.

DUERDEN:

May it not be that it will have to become institutionalised in Africa? It may be that before Africa reaches this technological stage, it will have to have its own puritans.

of industrialisation will uproot it. It's life-force, it's not anything being imposed from outside.

DUERDEN:

It does seem to me that in some ways, you're simply playing along with the European myth of Africa — that European idea of an African who represents the "before time," the time when everybody was able to have this imaginative response to the world — a sort of lost Arcadia, in which everyone was able to have an imaginative response to the world. I would like someone to prove to me that the African is, in fact, different from the Rumanian peasant, or the Bulgarian peasant or the Greek peasant.

NKOSI:

Let's not get bogged down in this question of race. I think that one's reaction to, say, geography — to the elements and so forth — can shape the way he adapts to that particular area of the world. This does not, in any sense, mean that he doesn't bleed exactly the same way as a European. But I think what is important is that he develops certain institutions, which make the development of that people very continuous in a certain direction. For example, when we say that an African's attitude to sex is different to a European's, we're not in any way talking, as many people seem to think, of biological performance — that the African has a better biological performance than the European, although the attitudes may affect the biological performance. What we are saying is that an African, for instance, might be freer in his expression of sex, and that this might be a happier attitude than a European one.

DUERDEN:

But you're still, it seems to me, producing the Arcadia of the 18th Century poet. But you can't claim Arcadia is a specifically African experience. Anyone who is trying to obtain political and economic power is bound to lose his Arcadia. I don't see any way out of this.

NAGENDA:

There seems to me a really desperate point at stake here. And this is that whether we like it or not, unless something is done about it, today's Africa is moving along the same path. And that unless we do something about it, we are going to lose what we have — we are going to get to where America has got, if one wants industrial and technological progress, and we are going to rue the day we even started out on this road. ●

NKOSI:

Well this is exactly what I suggested in the book without saying whether I approved of it or not. I was saying that in Senghor, for instance, there is obviously a kind of split and precisely what we are talking about is at work there. That in order to industrialise very quickly, he has to tell the people that they have got to work and that work is good and so forth. In fact he's got to make them puritan — he's got to teach them the values of thrift. And at the same time, in his creative moments, when he's being the poet (and lets not forget that the poet in fact, in European culture, has always been against this kind of drive for power and acquisitive values) he is also making a critique of the very values that he is trying to inculcate in his people. And I see a contradiction there, I must admit. It seems to me that the value of the poet is to question the acquisition of power. Even if survival depends upon it.

DUERDEN:

The terrifying thing is that Africa is perhaps only a terribly small part of the world's history. I think that what one feels is that we're all being dragged along in the wake of some juggernaut. In a sense the European intellectual identifies himself with the African and with this sort of feeling that there was a time when it was possible for everybody to sit still and contemplate. This I think is the dilemma.

NKOSI:

Not only that, Dennis. I think that the most advanced countries — that is, industrially advanced countries in the West — are beginning to doubt the ultimate values of a number of institutions by which they live, especially in America. There is obviously a crisis there of people who seek not only to have money but to enjoy money. And the question is, how to enjoy it. It seems that during the rat-race to get at the goods that they have been trying to get at, something was lost along the line. And now there is a sort of turning inward — an effort to find out what can be salvaged from this hulk that is called the modern man. This is precisely the reason why a number of them are turning towards the so-called primitive people and trying to assess the value of their institutions and finding out what they could be taught by these people. But again, there is a sort of possibility that the European people have now described a complete circle, because they're now getting to a stage where they don't have to work again. And this is the moment when they'll have to deal with their personalities in a kind of vacuum. They won't have props like going to work from 9 till 5. They'll have to do something about life, they'll have to define what their existence is about. The problem with Africa is whether we can keep what we have without going through the same.

MACAULAY:

People have criticised Senghor about this, when he talks about the African feeling for, and almost unity with, the cosmos and phenomena that in European life have been explained by science, and thus have no more meaning. I think that that's what the African has — the African sees a meaning in every little thing. It is that poetic experience that is part of our everyday lives we've got to keep in spite of technological advance, and I think we will keep it because it's so much a part of our tradition, that no amount

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