DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 098 908 HE 006 101

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TITLE African Literature and the American University.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Syracuse, New York, November 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *African American Studies; *African Culture; *African Literature; *Curriculum Development; *Higher Education; Negro Culture; Negro Literature

ABSTRACT

While African literature appears to be firmly established in American colleges and universities, its expansion, and in some cases its continuance, is threatened by two factors: racialism and departmental conservatism. As demands for courses in black literature can be met by an increased supply of scholars in Afro-American literature, fewer schools see a need for anyone to teach African literature. This is made easier by the convenience of the racial label "black literature" which is used ambiguously to cover all the literature of black peoples, including African, Afro-American, and Caribbean, thus hiding cultural distinctions behind political desires. Since the parameters of a traditional department are threatened by courses such as African literature, such courses will be tolerated only as long as political necessities force departments to offer them--or until these departments come to realize a humanistic necessity. Scholars have themselves all too long ignored these problems. The formation of an association of those interested in the field will serve not only as a symbol of commitment to the discipline, but also as an effective means of pooling and channeling energies toward defining long-term aims and defending the necessity of research and teaching in African literature. (Author)

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African Literature and the American University

In a rather loose, personal way I would like to address myself to the problems of the extremely tenuous position that African literature holds in the American university, and to a step that has recently been taken towards ameliorating the situation. As much of what I will present is admittedly subjective, I hope to raise questions and precipitate discussion, having no desire to pre-empt debate with an airtight argument.

Certainly, there are many who might feel that aside from a few minor growing pains African literature is not only firmly established in the American university, but is continuing to expand in a very healthy manner. The number of colleges and universities offering courses in African literature has steadily increased over the past five or six years, a period when we have witnessed cutbacks in a great many academic areas. As of 1972 there were over eighty colleges and universities where African literature was taught in the United States, though before 1968 there were only a handful of places that offered any courses.[1] For the first time ever there is now a large number of graduate students engaged in studying African literature. Two years ago at the University of Texas alone there were five doctoral candidates doing extensive work in the area, three of whom had begun, or were about to begin, writing their dissertations on African writers. There have been several journals established in the past few years which are devoted entirely to African literature, and many others which now devote

a considerable amount of their space to the field. Moreover, publishing houses have been expanding their Africana sections, again at a time when other expenses have been cut back.[2]

My contention, however, is that any optimistic conclusions we derive from these facts are necessarily predicated on a specious stock market type of analysis. Behind this facade there are at least two major obstacles we must face if we wish to see African literature firmly established in the American university. Racialism and departmental conservatism continually work towards making it difficult to teach African literature, even obfuscating the fact that the study of this literature has academic integrity.

Most of us are well aware that the existence of courses in African literature at many of our universities is now a fact, much less because of administrative commitment to humane letters and to the ideal that any major area of human achievement is no less worthy of intensive study than any other, than to the harsh reality of student and governmental pressures to respond to the needs of minority groups. It is extremely doubtful that the universities would have ever responded to those needs were it not fc such pressure. In the mid-sixties the very foundations of our academic institutions were shaken, and the result was the relatively instant establishment of hundreds of Black studies programs across the United States.

The question of these programs is outside the range of this paper, yet while I am quite certain of the benefits they have for everyone, there is the continual danger that we could be heading for a system not unlike South Africa's program of Bantu education. Despite all these programs do for

Black and White awareness of Afro-American culture, the idea of courses simply for Blacks, about Blacks and by Blacks fits all too easily into an essentially racist social structure. All well and good that the foundations have been shaken. But unfortunately the foundations are still there.

Courses in African literature have been swept in on the coattails of Black studies programs with the result that most departments are still bound to their racism and are totally blind regarding the difference between African and Afro-American literature. The first need is always to find someone Black to teach the course, preferably an Afro-American, though an African is usually considered a good substitute. Likewise African literature is considered a reasonable substitute for Afro-American literature as both are simply Black literature. No difference is recognized for neither is seen to be literature at all, but only some vaguely defined facet of the "Black experience." Aside from the universities in large urban areas, the number of schools that feel they need specialists in both areas must still be very small. Two years ago I was in the job market myself and noticed that a common reaction from schools, which were not in areas with a high concentration of Blacks, was that they had no need for more than one or two offerings in Black literature. The chairman of the English department in one of the few schools specifically looking for someone in the area of African literature openly told me that the only reason they were even considering such an appointment was that they had an obligation to meet the needs of the Black community.

There is more than a little patronage here both towards the literature and the Black community. As long as the "obligation" to teach a subject is directed along racial lines we will have a form of academic charity -- and

such charity could never exist where equality is recognized. From this perspective African literature is reduced to an object, a piece of inexpensive clothing to dress the "culturally deprived." Yet who indeed are the "culturally deprived," from our perspective, if not those of any color who know nothing or little of the rich literatures of Africa? The idea that African literature speaks only, or even mainly to Blacks, is outrageous. By this line of reasoning we would have to cut out most of our courses on Dostoyevsky as we have only a small Russian audience in the U.S. -- and, of course, we would cut out all our courses on Homer as there are not any ancient Greeks around. Lurking just behind these overt feelings of a racial audience are the insidiously covert feelings of a racist society, where feelings of inferiority and superiority are linked to people no less than to literature.

Although it is often convenient to speak of African and Afro-American literature as Black literature, we do both literatures a disservice by placing them together. Putting both under a single label aids in supporting the racial biases of those who see the literatures only in terms of courses that had to be conceded to the hoardes of so-called "culturally deprived" students who threatened to lock up the administration building. With respect to African literature the racial label is also misleading, and even inaccurate. There are whites and Asians who are African writers, and works by William Plomer, Alan Paton, and Nadine Gordimer often are, and should be considered along with Black writers in courses in African literature.

In a recent review-article of Ezekiel Mphahlele's Voices in the Whirlwind Addison Gayle implies that all Black literature can be seen in terms of a single Black Aesthetic.[3] Attacking Mphahlele's assertion that one must be

alive to the diversities as well as the parallels in the Black world, that one "cannot afford to skip the specifics," he tries in an often patronizing way to picture Mphahlele as a South African James Baldwin caught in the snares of a seemingly beautiful, but diseased woman, the West. Gayle would have his reader believe that the works of the African as well as Afro-American writer "are directed to the total Black man, wherever he may be; that only such Black men can understand their works; that they are the originators of a unique literary movement, one which argues man's commitment to man instead of to art, and, finally, that there is a greater degree of tenderness and humaneness in those who never wrecked havoc upon two-thirds of the world than those who did."[4] This lofty rhetoric, however, is shrouded in an incredible veil of ignorance. Where Gayle argues from Fanon he is on solid ground. But Fanon knew little about African literature and even less about traditional Africa. Skipping the specifics, Gayle himself does not indicate that he has read any African writers -- not even the other works of Mphahlele -- let alone give any sign that he understands them, except, perhaps, through some kind of osmosis from the "total Black man" whoever he may be.

Anyone who has read extensively in African and Afro-American literature must necessarily be aware of numerous sound, though often general, comparisons that can be made stylistically between the literatures. Furthermore, both Africans and Afro-Americans have experienced much the same agony from Western colonialism. This, however, is no less true of Third World people of other races whose literatures are not included in the so-called Black Aesthetic. What all this comes down to is the fact that the student who wishes to get beyond the initial impact of reading a work by an Amos Tutuola or a Wole Soyinka will have to do some homework that can be by turns both

exciting and arduous. Moreover, this homework will not suffice when he then turns to the Caribbean or the Afro-American writer. It may not even suffice when he turns from Soyinka to Kofi Awoonor, from Yorubaland to Eweland.

I hesitate in moving to the sensitive question of the racial bias in employment, the question of who should teach African literature, for it brings me directly to the uncomfortable position of defending or attacking my own self-interests. The impotence and anger I continually felt when confronted by the prejudice of those in a position to hire me when I was in the job market is perhaps small in comparison with that which Blacks have had to experience in seeking employment in this country. There are now quotas which, at least with regard to the universities, governmental agencies such as H.E.W. are now enforcing. For the first time Blacks are finding it easier than whites to secure university positions, but certainly it will still take a good while for white hegemony to be broken.

Without arguing against the continued necessity of quotas and the pressure they put on the system to offer equal employment opportunities, I would submit that our departments have simply taken the path of least resistence and used the quotas to reinforce rather than break down their racial structures. Blacks, for the most part, seem to be hired to teach in Black studies areas. At an English department meeting at the University of Texas a professor jokingly offered the suggestion that the department hire a Black Chicano woman to teach ethnic and woman's literature. The "joke," however, is in bad taste as it is such an accurate reflection of reality. A few years ago at the Modern Language Association Meeting, I spoke with two Blacks who were looking for positions, one in Renaissance

and the other in Romantic literature. The most common question that was asked them in their interviews was whether they would be interested in teaching Black literature. The very least one can say about such a question is that it is predicated on the assumption that Black literature, unlike all other literary study, requires no rigorous training, that a person's color is sufficient indication of interest and ability. The chairman of one English department, apparently assuming I had to be Black because of my interest in African literature, called and offered me a job without even interviewing me. We talked for about an hour and at the end of our conversation I realized the man was upset about something. A few days later when I called back to ask some more questions, he retracted the offer saying that there was a lot of racial tension at the university, so they could not hire anyone white for the position. In a letter to last September's MLA Newsletter (5, No.4) Bernth Lindfors has argued that we are now witnessing a new racism.[4] I would disagree only with his use of the adjective "new." As the irony of the above chairman's racial assumption so pointedly reveals, the old racial biases are the ones still very much operative.

It is difficult to isolate and pinpoint the specific problems that African literature must face in the American university as the racial factor is so intextricatly tied to the intransigent conservatism of the departments in which we must teach. For example, African literature is often taught in English departments that tend to view English literature solely in terms of the literature of Great Britain and the United States. Not only does this exclude most Third World literatures written in English, but also the literatures of Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, interests in folklore, popular culture, comparative literature, sociolinguistics,

and so on, are at best tolerated as faddish concerns marginal to the great cultural nexus found in the best of American and British letters.

The cultural elitism and ethnocentric bias of our departments, their dogged belief in Arnold's philosophy about the best cultures and the best of culture, is an incredible anachronism we have been forced to live with. Despite the apparent changes and contortions many departments are going through to accomodate the pressures for change, I can see nothing that indicates any willingness to face the fundamental contradictions. What does one do with a bastard child like comparative literature? Bounce him around from the German department to the French, English and Russian departments? What if one even has the opportunity to teach a comparative course in World literature? There is now one fairly good text, the Norton anthology of World Masterpieces. But even here the bias is revealed as the selections are all from Western literature.

A few of the larger universities have established departments or programs in African literature, but this is hardly a solution for most of the smaller schools. On the other hand to offer courses in Francophone African literature in the French department, Anglophone literature in the English department, and perhaps ignore traditional vernacular literatures is to continue to conform to Western colonial mentality. Granted, there are ways, often very simple ones, to get around such problems, but makeshift solutions inevitably lead to more problems. What we need to confront is the fact that the parameters of traditional departments can hardly be bent to include courses in Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in such a way that they will be no less important than courses on Joseph Conrad or James Joyce.

Some may disagree with much of what I have said so far, thinking that I have taken a rather alarmist position. Certainly I have almost no available hard statistical facts to back up my contentions, and pressed for concrete examples, I would have to rely almost entirely on personal experiences. But there can be little disagreement over the fact that African literature has been introduced into the American University with attendant problems concerning its place and its importance. As scholars in the field we have a responsibility to carefully examine, and where possible offer solutions to these problems.

Perhaps the ultimate solutions should be to follow the way of several African universities and do away with our parochial departments, establishing more catholic and humanistic departments of language and literature in which newer areas of study could be introduced without the more established areas feeling threatened. However, the mechanisms of any institution are geared against change, especially one this radical, and few of us are in positions of influence let alone in positions where we could actually effect such change.

In Chicago at this year's Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association the most logical step towards considering, and possibly effecting, changes important to those interested in African literature was taken, namely the formation of an African Literature Association (A.L.A.). Rather than continuing to allow ourselves to be carried along by the contingencies of our institutions we can, as a group, gather facts and make rational decisions about where and what our future is going to be.

Many of us already meet annually at the African Studies Association Meeting, at the American Folklore Society Meeting, at the Modern Language

Association Meeting, and at numerous smaller conventions, but none of these meetings serves to bring together in any organized way those of us specifically concerned with African literature. The A.S.A., for example, no longer even has a literature committee.

I would not advocate disaffiliating ourselves as individuals from any of these organizations, especially the A.S.A. whose services have been invaluable in aiding the study of African literature. But an independent A.L.A. should be able to go a lot further in enabling us to channel our energies as a group and clearly establishing the discipline as a necessary and vital segment of literary study in the American university. Granted, the prospect of having one more annual meeting, when there are already more conferences every year than a scholar can attend, might lessen the appeal of any new organization. This, however, is simply a matter of considering our own individual priorities.

Aside from an annual meeting, the association can make it easier to organize special conferences on teaching and research in African literature and keep scholars in close contact through a regular newsletter. The first A.L.A. Newsletter was published in December and contains information about the founding of the Association, forthcoming conferences and African writers who are now in the United States. Subsequent issues should aid in the gathering of facts we so desperately need, facts relating to the present status of African literature in the university and the present employment situation and future prospects for the new Ph.D.'s in the area. Moreover it should help augment the collecting of bibliographical data that is already being done by the MLA.

Though all of this could have been done within existing organizations, it clearly has not been done. We are a diverse group of scholars comprising folklorists, historians, anthropologists, linguists, and several renegades from English and French departments. In the intense pursuit of our own interests, no less than in the compartmentalization by which we have allowed ourselves to be victimized, we have failed too often to look for connections in our work and define common goals. At the expense of being repetitious the argument for a strong A.L.A. can be capsulized by looking at the organization's potential functions in working to achieve those common goals. It seems to me there are essentially five functions:

(1) Setting up lines of communication among all who have an interest in the oral and written literatures of Africa. These lines should extend not merely across academic disciplines, but also across educational levels from elementary through university.

(2) Co-ordinating bibliographical work and centralizing information on archives and research activities.

(3) Gathering information on academic and non-academic employment possibilities.

(4) Arranging for an annual meeting and smaller seminars and workshops.

(5) Serving as a symbol of our commitment to the discipline. In the two months the A.L.A. has existed it has gained more than seventy members. While I am confident that the organization will continue to grow, we are now large enough in numbers to find such a symbol in an association, but also small enough to work together as humanistic scholars without succumbing to the impersonal lack of humanity that seems the bane of so many scholarly organizations.

As racialist notions about the field, feelings regarding African literature as something novel, and many of the other problems we face as teachers and scholars are directly tied to racism in society, it is imperative that the A.L.A. make its political position clear. In Chicago the new organization decided that the formulation of a position paper would have highest priority among business to be attended to at the inaugural meeting planned for Austin, Texas on March 22, 1975. It is, moreover, fitting that this meeting will coincide with the anniversary of Sharpeville, a reminder of what we as scholars, no less than as private citizens, must work against.

NOTES

[1]This is a rough extimate obtained by counting the number of schools which have listed courses in Research in African Literatures. As this includes only those places that responded to the questionnaire that R.A.L. sent out, the figure could be much higher. See Susan Kerr, "The Present Status of the Teaching of African Literature," R.A.L. 2, No. 1 (1971), 51-58, and Richard Priebe, "Courses in African Literature and Folklore," R.A.L. 3, No. 1 (1972), 75-78.

[2]There is, however, increasing evidence that the boom in Africana is now over. See "Spring Publishing 1974: The Outlook is Dismal," Africa Report, 19, No. 1 (1974), 48-50.

[3]"Under Western Eyes," Black World 22, No. 9 (1973), 40-48.

[4]Ibid., p. 45.