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Author

Jahn, Janheinz

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JANHEINZ JAHN

[In March 1972, Professor Janheinz Jahn, the distinguished Africanist, gave a lecture at UCLA on "How African literature can decolonize African minds" under the auspices of the African Studies Center. After the lecture, Professor Jahn kindly agreed to meet with members of the Ufahamu editorial board for what proved to be a most lively and stimulating discussion. For purely technical reasons we have had to present an edited transcript of that discussion in the format of an interview, one that cannot convey the extremely genial and give-and-take atmosphere of that meeting. Areas covered included language of expression, Negritude, critical theory and methodology, African cinema, and teaching African literature in universities.

Professor Jahn hardly needs any introduction to the student of African literature and culture. His monumental work in the area of African literary history and bibliography has made him a truly international scholar. We have had to hold over from last year this transcript of our meeting with him because we had plans then for a special number devoted to African literature, which is what this issue is all about. We wish to record our thanks to Professor Jahn. Ed. note]

QUESTION: During your lecture this morning, you discussed the role of African literature in the process of decolonizing the African mind, and you raised the whole question of how authentic African literature can be. I think you also acknowledged that part of the critique of African literature, at least in some quarters, is that people tend to see it as really an offshoot of European literature. Do you consider this point valid; and if you do, is there any particular way African literature can develop which will give it a greater measure of authenticity and make it simply African literature and not an extension of English or French literature?

ANSWER: I would say that African literature in our time has already developed its own unique features; it is a historical development which has started and which will go on. It is only from a perspective outside Africa that this problem

arises. The African writers themselves want to be African, and I think that even those of them who have chosen to write in a European language have developed their own means of expressing themselves and their Africanness adequately.

There are many African writers who write in both languages, in the language of their mother and in a European language. There are also those who write in an African language and then translate their own works into a foreign language for purposes of reaching a wider audience. I don't think the critic should exert any influence in the matter, because if we force a writer into a mode of expression he does not want we simply hurt him. The African writer who expresses himself in an African language knows why he does so; he probably wants to convey his message to his non-literate audience, for example. But African writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka who use English as their mode of expression know how to express their Africanness in English, and I would say almost as well as they could have done in their own language.

QUESTION: I am thinking of someone like Amos Tutuola. You had something rather interesting to say about him in Muntu where you described his writings as a typical example of the new African literature. In fact, I think you were even more laudatory than that. You called his style the purest expression of neo-African prose. Wouldn't you agree that his is a case of a genuine vision almost stifled by the burden of a foreign medium? In other words, don't you think that Tutuola might have been a better artist if he had expressed himself in Yoruba?

ANSWER: I doubt that Tutuola would have been a better artist if he had expressed himself in another way. But let me put it this way. When I wrote Muntu in 1957, Tutuola was the only modern Nigerian writer of significance to have emerged. Writers like Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara and Chinua Achebe appeared later. At the time, Tutuola's work seemed like something novel; and it was not known to me that quite a lot of his type of work had already been done, even better, by another Nigerian writer, Daniel Fagunwa, who wrote in Yoruba and who enormously influenced Tutuola. Tutuola has even copied Fagunwa, perhaps not very well and often to the point of plagiarism, and his ultimate sources are those of Yoruba tradition used by Fagunwa. I don't want to contradict what I wrote in Muntu but I think we now have to look at it in another perspective. Tutuola had very little formal education, and we have to admire him for the way he managed to express himself despite his

limited English vocabulary. Although a number of writers have since improved on his methods, he did introduce us to something original and very African.

QUESTION: One other aspect of the language problem is the fear expressed by some people that even where a writer thinks he can comfortably express himself in any of the foreign languages, the point still remains that these languages are foreign and carry the nuances of alien cultures and the echoes of their literatures. This is probably why a common type of African literary criticism is concerned with the search for lines borrowed from foreign authors. Now, don't you think that this sort of thing will continue to happen for as long as these languages are used? Secondly, if an African writer is really interested in reaching the common masses, the ordinary people, how do you think he can help in decolonizing the African mentality if he continues to use a foreign medium?

ANSWER: Let me take your second question first. The problems for the African masses are not those of decolonization, because, let's face it, they have never been colonized. Their spirit has not been colonized, never even been touched! If you believe that a majority of the African peoples in the countrysides have been colonized, then you are wrong. Decolonization is necessary for those Africans educated overseas and by missionaries. Those who have not been educated in this sense, and who have remained faithful to their traditions, need no decolonization simply because, in keeping with their own value system, they have consistently considered all European ways of doing things wrong.

About the matter of choice of language, we have to understand that the choice of English or French by these writers, very often, is not a free one. They are forced into it by circumstances. Imagine a country like the Ivory Coast where four and a half million people speak sixty different languages. If a writer wrote in his own language, how would he reach the other fifty-nine groups? So, he is forced to use French.

QUESTION: I was also thinking of the prospect of utilizing an African language, such as Swahili which is spoken and understood by a majority of the people in Tanzania, as the national language.

ANSWER: You see, the problem is not that easy. In most of these countries there are some big languages (in terms of

population) and a number of small ones. When you start making one of the big languages the official language of the country you begin to invite a lot of trouble, because you then give privileges to those who already speak the language; and the rest of the people could conceivably be frustrated to a point the State considers dangerous to its very existence. With a language like English or French, everybody starts from a common disadvantage. While it sounds unfortunate, it seems to me that the use of a foreign neutral language should be seen as a practical compromise. Swahili is something of a fortunate exception. It was already, for a certain part of Africa, an acceptable lingua franca, a kind of general language. No people gained any undue privileges by using it.

Again, in spite of what I said earlier about a writer being compelled by circumstances to use English or French, there are indications that a thriving literature in a widely-spoken indigenous language can co-exist with the national literature in one of the foreign languages. Yoruba, for instance, which is spoken in Nigeria by about twelve million people, has a vigorous literature as well as a theater; and the same writers who write in English often write in Yoruba as well. You know that Wole Soyinka writes fluently in both languages. He translated the famous Yoruba writer, D.O. Fagunwa, into English. So, there is really no reason why people should not express themselves in an African language if the audience is large enough. It's done in Anglophone African but not yet in Francophone Africa, and I have been trying to encourage some of my friends over there to do something about it. There is still the old French conception that there is only one language in the world, French, and all the other people are speaking only *dialects*, not languages.

Let me say something here which might bring some people springing from their seats. I believe that there is a good chance for pidgin English and pidgin French. They already exist as languages of general communication, and have even been used by writers. They are more widely used than either English or French, not just by an elitist section of the community, by most of the people. On the condition that they are allowed to change, it seems to me that both English and French have the chance of ultimately becoming African languages. Here in America, for instance, you know that American English is not quite the same kind of English spoken in England. Just as the Americans have moulded English for their own purposes, the Africans can, in time,

develop English as a medium for effectively expressing things very African.

I think the writers should be allowed to experiment with forms and media. I have made this very suggestion of pidgin to some French-speaking Africans, and Frenchmen always get up and say: Now, do you suggest we pidginize this beautiful French language and destroy it in the process? And my answer has always been: Well, Dear Sir, what do you think Cicero would have said some thousands of years ago if he had heard you were going to create this 'beautiful' French language? What you are speaking, this 'beautiful' French, is no more than pidgin Latin! The poets and the writers are just the people to create the languages of the future, and rather than legislate to them we should encourage them to experiment.

See what Gabriel Okara has done in his novel, *The Voice*. He has transliterated his material from his native Ijaw into English - idiom to idiom, image to image - and the result is that not only the Ijaw, but also the Igbo, the Yoruba and the Ibibio understand precisely what he means to communicate. That is one possibility, out of many, and I would like to defend all possibilities. You see, Africa is a continent where there is a permanent revolution, and while I like to be on the side of the African I don't think I am in favor of a so-called traditionalism. If a writer in an African community would want to shut his ears against international influences, I would regard that as silly. All societies change, and we have to be on the side of change.

QUESTION: Mr. Jahn, considering the apparent revival of interest in Negritude, do you see the possibility of negritude developing into an aesthetic concept, or do you think it will simply fade away as a movement in history?

*ANSWER: Negritude was an important epoch in the history of African literature. There was a creative period which we can date from 1937 with *Pigments* by Leon Damas up to the appearance of Senghor's anthology in 1948 and his volume of poetry, *Ethiopique*. After this creative period, came the second period of negritude, one you might call the ideological period. From the earlier group of writers emerged an ideology, a doctrine, which a number of Francophone writers adopted as the motive force in their novels and plays - between 1950 and 1960. It was from this ideological period that negritude developed a political dimension; and it seems*

to me that it was when it did this that it began to invite varying and conflicting interpretations.

You know that a whole modern Nigerian literature has developed, from about 1962, in a presumed antagonism towards negritude. But I have a feeling that the generation of writers emerging in Nigeria after the sixties could well be the sons of the negritude writers. And it was natural that they should fight against those father figures, a kind of psychological revolt, whereas in actual fact they were really fulfilling the concept of negritude. The negritude writers had proclaimed: 'Back to the sources.' Well, who was going back to the sources? Even while they objected to the theory and the doctrinaire approach, those Nigerian writers were in practice doing what the earlier writers had tried to but couldn't achieve.

QUESTION: Do you see any thematic or other similarities between the works of writers South of the Sahara and those of their counterparts in the North?

ANSWER: To the point of their common anti-colonialist stage, yes. They have had historical themes in common. Again, when you have to teach in a university you will probably find that treating the writers as a group may become a classroom convenience. But except for this, I would say that North Africa has built a slightly different literary tradition from a background that is different from that in the South. And, in any case, writers generally don't like to be grouped and I think they are right.

Mind you, I am not saying that they have absolutely nothing in common even now. Of course, they share a number of concerns. But in terms of degree they really don't have much in common. Take what happened at the Algiers Festival, for instance. For the first time, the poor Algerians were seeing girls from black Africa dancing in the streets. And they were just shocked, plain shocked! They had never seen anything like that before. Their own women and daughters are generally closeted at home and are never allowed out. And standing there with their eyes popping out, were these Algerian gentlemen watching those young and supple girls dancing almost naked. How could they understand? For them, France has always been much nearer. No, they don't have too many things in common; and giving them the same critical treatment merely falsifies the picture.

QUESTION: Talking about grouping literature, there are some students of African literature who think that Black African literature and Caribbean literature should be seen as a single unit or as two sides of the same coin. Granting the earlier Negritude connection - Césaire, Senghor, and the others - do you think that such a grouping is still valid?

ANSWER: I think it depends on how one wishes to look at it. One can certainly find justification for using terms like Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean, and so on. In fact, for obvious reasons of history, I would accept a grouping across the ocean as being more meaningful and defensible than one across the desert. You know about the enormous exchange of ideas and people over centuries between North America and the Caribbean on the one hand and Africa on the other. But having said that, I should go on to point out that for practical reasons such a grouping is becoming more and more difficult. In the past, there was only a small quantity of literature involved and you could easily take in the whole thing at a glance. I did it myself in my first bibliography (published in German in 1966) which included works from Africa, the Caribbean, and North and South America. My new bibliography, however, excludes all the American side because the bulk of literature from Africa alone is so enormous that you cannot get it all in one volume. Even for teaching, if we can overcome the temptations of ideology, I do not see how a professor can cover the whole range and still make a good job of it. Still, I am interested, and I go on collecting Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American literature.

I remember that in the past, part of the justification for making this grouping was the need for establishing a link between the United States and Africa, for demonstrating an African background in the Afro-American sub-culture. But today the situation has changed considerably. Awareness of the fact has been established beyond reasonable doubt, and I think we have to begin to consider the practicality of this grouping.

QUESTION: Don't you think there is a contradiction in what you are now saying about the practical need for handling the entire field in manageable bits and what you said earlier in your lecture concerning the teaching of African literature in American and European universities? As I recall, you took exception to the splitting of African literature between the English and French departments.

ANSWER: No, I think that's a different thing. What I object to is the violation of even the basic thematic and geographical links simply on the basis of language. In most departments of English, you are taught the literature of Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone and East Africa. Then in the French departments you have the literature of Francophone Africa where the intention is always to see what French influences have gone in there. And meanwhile, the literature in the African languages is left in the hands of linguists who are not competent in literature at all. I think there is something wrong with the whole approach and I would recommend the establishment of a department of African Literature where the subject can be studied in its proper perspective.

QUESTION: Is it not the same thing in most African universities?

ANSWER: Unfortunately, yes; but the situation has been steadily improving. For instance, at the Universities of Ife, Nigeria, and Legon, Ghana, they are going very deep into African literature, and trying to build a bridge between Anglophone and Francophone literature. It's the same thing in Yaounde, Cameroons, where African literature is, in fact, mandatory on every student who wants to be a teacher. The healthy idea is that if somebody wants to teach in a Cameroonian school he should know something of the literature of the people. Recently, I visited Nairobi and met three famous African writers, James Ngugi, Ali Mazuri, and Taban Lo Liyong, who were instrumental in the abolition of the department of English, creating instead a department of Literature where African literature is at center stage. It's all very novel and exciting! In Germany, Germanic literature is at the center of literary studies. So is it in England, France, and elsewhere. Why not in Africa?

QUESTION: The point has been made that, quite often, critics of African literature do not take a serious enough critical stance to be able to make a proper distinction between good African writing and bad African writing, and to establish what is good or bad in the African context. People who say this argue that African literature should not be judged according to the old standards of English or French literature, and that a new body of criticism has to be built to deal adequately with what should be seen as a different literary tradition. What are your views about this?

ANSWER: I think the first problem is: should African literature be judged by its intrinsic quality, or should it be treated differently from other kinds of literature? I would say yes to the first proposition. A bad writer should be called a bad writer, and a good writer should be called a good writer whether or not he is an African. That is the first thing. The second problem is to find out what constitutes good or bad, the yardstick for measurement. Here, I would have to admit that the criteria of excellence should derive from a knowledge of African cultures. This means that the good critic of African literature is not necessarily someone who is a specialist in classical, English or French literature. He should know something of African thinking and African cultures as a necessary background upon which to base his assessment of the literature.

QUESTION: *Would the logic of what you are saying not be that this kind of criticism can only come from Africans themselves?*

ANSWER: To some extent, yes; but not necessarily. You see, the situation is not as clear-cut as that, because to be an African is not necessarily to qualify as a good critic of African literature. We would agree, wouldn't we, that your position as a critic can be enhanced by a knowledge of the writer's society of origin. But I would also argue that the more societies and the more writers you know about the better your critical position becomes. Criticism, you know, depends a lot on the comparative approach. Now, if we had African critics who are really qualified to talk authoritatively about the different African writers, a genuine tradition of literary criticism can grow from them. Unfortunately, at the moment and for a number of reasons, there are not many African critics of that calibre. There are, of course, some very good ones, Abiola Irele, for instance, who have had the chance to overcome the language barrier in Africa and come to grips with the literatures of the various parts of the continent. But the general situation is that a critic knows the literature of his own country, and no more.

To be fair to them, one of the factors responsible for this situation is something over which they have little or no control - the great difficulty of travelling from one African country to another, which minimizes the necessary contact among writers and critics from different parts of the continent. Either they get no passport or visa or their money is worthless once they cross the border. There are some Ghanaian friends of mine who have told me that

they can travel anywhere with a Ghanaian passport but not with the cedi. So, you have to have a foreign bank account to be able to move. Some of these practical difficulties lead to the fact that many African critics are still limited in their critical range.

It is here that a European like myself operates from a vantage position. I can go almost wherever I want. Except in a few States, I hardly need a visa to go into most countries; my German passport is enough. Let me give you an idea of what I mean. In the Spring of 1970 there was a Theatre Festival in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. For the first time, a Nigerian play was being presented - *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka. It was, of course, presented in its French version and was an enormous success. The audience was completely surprised, and the students were shocked. Nothing like that had happened before in French. About two weeks later, a discussion took place, but not one Nigerian was allowed to come in for a number of different reasons. I had to represent Nigeria in the Ivory Coast. Then in August of the same year, there was another Festival, this time in Ife, Nigeria. Angered by what had happened in the Ivory Coast, the Nigerians did not allow any Ivorian to participate in the Festival. Again, I had to stand in for the missing contingent. So you see, I am forced into this position of maintaining contact with all sides because of the chances I have. But I think it's very wrong and unfortunate.

Another critical handicap is that in most cases Africans do not have the opportunity of learning the languages spoken in other parts of the continent. In Francophone Africa, for instance, people have very little chance of learning to speak sufficient English as to be able to communicate effectively, and vice versa. I agree with you that it would be desirable for Africans to take a commanding position in the criticism of their literature; I am only pointing out the problems as I see them now.

QUESTION: One other point that has been made by some people concerns the notion that poetry is a more aristocratic form of literature than, say, the novel or the drama, a notion which leads them to suspect that as African writers strive towards a more authentic form of expression, one that can ensure enough audience participation, the most vigorous literary activity is likely to take the line of the theatre. On this line of reasoning, some people have gone on to suggest that, perhaps, the cinema is likely to be

the most effective African art form. There is Ousmane Sembene, for instance, who has been a novelist but who seems to be moving more and more into film production. Do you see this tendency towards the visual media as a sort of indiotment on the elitist audiences of written literature?

ANSWER: That may well be. To begin with, I do not accept the notion that poetry is a more noble form of literature. It all depends, of course, on what you mean by 'aristocratic.' I think that, ultimately, how effective or durable a work is depends on the ability and achievement of the artist. I do not think that poetry will decline in impact because, after all, it has always been one of the traditional forms of expression in Africa.

About the cinema, the point is that the new African film is a very expensive form, even though there have been many excellent attempts. You mentioned Ousmane Sembene. For whom are his films made? Not for an African audience! The African masses have had no chance of seeing these films partly because the cinema industry is in the hands of Lebanese entrepreneurs and other businessmen who just try to get the cheapest Indian and Hollywood films to saturate the African market. The African films made by Africans are not shown in the normal cinema houses. They are for the occasional film festivals or for the clubs of intellectuals. I think it's very unfortunate, to say the least. But it's an illusion to think that at the moment the film has a chance as a medium through which the African artist can reach his audience.

UFAHAMU: *Professor Jahn, thank you very much.*

JAHN: I thank you very much for this fascinating discussion. When I started this thing, I just wanted to translate a few Francophone African poems into German, and then I found that it was not going to be possible without some knowledge of Africa. So, I started reading the works of famous anthropologists but found that they did not answer my basic enquiry as to how Africans think. Finally, I set out to find out for myself. I am glad that the subject which fascinates me fascinates you in the same way.
