

AN INTERVIEW WITH CYPRIAN EKWENSI

Enugu, March 15, 1980

NOTE ON CYPRIAN EKWENSI

With *People of the City* (1954) Cyprian EKWENSI wrote the first West African novel. In spite of this unique position EKWENSI has not enjoyed the reputation of a man like Chinua ACHEBE. Many critics find that he does not concentrate on the art of writing, which is true to a large extent. EKWENSI nonetheless remains a serious author and he is particularly remarkable in his interviews.

He is well known as a city novelist as *People of the City* and *Jagua Nana* (1961) portray the city dwellers and deal with their problems. Among his other novels, one has to mention *Burning Grass* (1962), *Beautiful Feathers* (1963), *Iska* (1966), *Survive the Peace* (1976), as its title suggests, deals with the Nigerian civil war.

EKWENSI is a prolific writer because in addition to these major novels, he has published short stories, books for children; he has also contributed a number of articles to some magazines.

NOTE ON THE CONTRIBUTOR

Dr. B. NGANGA who is currently Assistant Professor of English at Marien NGOUABI University, Brazzaville, People's Republic of the Congo, wrote a PhD dissertation on Joseph Conrad. He has written a number of articles on African literature with a special interest on Cyprian EKWENSI. He has lately developed an interest on the teaching of English in the Congo. He is Vice-President of WAMLA (West African Modern Languages Association).

B. Nganga: There is a lot of moralizing in your books. Do you consider this one of your duties as a writer?

C. Ekwensi: Yes. The duty of the writer is to give the reader something such as a new vision of life, a scale of values in the changing world.

B. N.: Very recently you said to the *Daily Times* that the moral decadence must come and that there is no way of stopping it. Is it a form of resignation?

C. E.: No. Actually it is a realistic approach to the cycle of history. We should be able to control it to avoid too much damage.

B. N.: Do you consider yourself an observer or a social reformer?

C. E.: Not as a social reformer but rather as a projectionist who sees what is happening for the audience to view and form its own conclusion. By the way, a new novel of mine, *Divided We Stand* is to be published very soon by Fourth Dimension. It is about Nigeria in the middle of the war: Nigeria is a divided country but she is forced to union. Even in a family, there are differences of temperament, of perspective. What is important is to accommodate these differences. Every member of a family has got his/her own temperament. This does not prevent them from living together.

B. N.: Coming back to your recent interview with the *Daily Times* you said that the African woman has never suffered what one might call cultural slavery. Can you tell me more about this?

C. E.: The woman has always had dignity in the African culture. You take the marriage system for instance: bride-price is a kind of insurance against unnecessary divorce; it helps the stability of the family. *I stand by that idea* and I need to be disapproved. Even where Chaka the Zulu is concerned, there was some power in the hands of his wife. It's the Westerners who have enslaved the woman. I find it disgraceful for the British to have waited until now to have a woman as Prime Minister.

B. N.: Speaking of Jagua Nana, you said that if you had to portray her or rather her daughter, she would be a highly educated girl who would be an independent operator. Do you consider yourself a feminist?

C. E.: No. It's up to the women to fight for their own rights, if necessary. I am neither anti-feminist nor fanatically pro-feminist.

B. N.: If so, why are so many of your female characters prostitutes with a few exceptions such as Chief Mrs Jolomi? Or does it mean that, given their circumstances, they couldn't have had other activities?

C. E.: Such was the situation in the 1950's and the 1960's. Explosion in education has come now. The women are thinking of their economic emancipation and they are facing a revolution within themselves. A novella entitled *Motherless Baby* is due to appear in October 1980. It tells the story of a young girl who gets pregnant and abandons her baby in a motherless children's home and goes to be educated. When she makes it, she gets married and then finds it

impossible to have another child. Life is not simple arithmetics, you see! This young woman who is in quest of economic independence throws away her emotional satisfaction.

B. N.: Why doesn't one have dignified mothers in your previous novels?

C. E.: You see, the characters and the cultural background interplay. *Burning Grass*, for instance, shows an interplay of values because of the nomadic and natural setting. Conversely, *Beautiful Feathers* is a novel with an international setting (African Unity). The characters are different because of the cultural environment in which they find themselves. Characters in the novel must be positive and contribute something. One should not deal with those who don't play an important part.

B. N.: By the way, can one say that Jagua Nana is more sinned against than sinning, that she is a victim of the circumstances?

C. E.: A Revered Father expressed such a view. Jagua has maternal and wifely instinct. It is a given society that makes a prostitute. It must be in a city with industrialization, because of anonymity. The city belongs to no one. The only people who would have saved her (Jagua) would have been her parents who, coming from Ogabu, could have told her: "We don't like what you're doing now. Come back home". One therefore has to go back to the upbringing.

B. N.: Jagua Nana is said to resemble Defoe's *Moll Flanders* or Zola's *Nana*. Is there any truth about that?

C. E.: There is no truth in it at all. Two nights ago only did I hear of Zola's *Nana*; that was on the TV in New York. I had never heard of it before. Similarly I never read *Moll Flanders*. There is no influence at all.

B. N.: You are known first of all as the city novelist. You've often referred to it as a "cinema show", as a place which eats many people. Surely this is a negative view. Is there any special reason why you insist on describing the city?

C. E.: No, except that all my life I have lived in cities. One must write from experience. Take Enugu: there is more interaction between the village and Enugu than, say, Lagos. Now I'm going to write of such cities as Enugu. Experience is a sort of catalyst, but it is not totally necessary. Otherwise I would not have written *The Passport of Mallam Ilia* as I have never been to Mecca and as I am not a Muslim.

B. N.: Practically no city dweller emerges a very successful character. Most

of them are either crooks or corrupt politicians etc... And yet the city is said to be a place for opportunities. Can one conclude that to enjoy these opportunities, one has to be dishonest?

C. E.: Yes and no. The old world is run on the basis of club membership; unless you belong there you can't go up the social ladder. Take the Ufemfo Society: if you don't do what is prescribed you get nothing. The city dwellers have no choice and due to economic pressure they manage to hush their conscience.

B. N.: Most of these city dwellers go regularly to the village — Jagua's case is the most remarkable of all. Is there any reason why it is so? If you had to write another book about the city, would the situation be the same?

C. E.: It would. No real African can forget his home: he's thinking of going home some day. This is how our culture is; we are always going back to drink on our fountains. We now know that roots are most valuable. The family tree is of the greatest importance if one wants to find oneself in perspective to life.

B. N.: The village is in constant opposition with the city. The village appears to be a refuge, a better place than the city; as such it stands for tradition. Do you consider yourself a traditionalist or a modernist?

C. E.: I consider myself a modernist with the highest respect for traditions, those traditions which can survive. Tradition can't survive in the modern world without a combination of modernism. The western modernist churches, for instance were too inflexible; as a result one witnessed the apparition of African churches, spiritual churches, because they agree with the African traditions.

B. N.: Is it possible to say that contemporary Africans are influenced by both tradition and modernism and that it can't be otherwise?

C. E.: It can't be otherwise.

B. N.: Although politics is not your favourite theme, you nonetheless devote much space to it particularly in *Beautiful Feathers* and *Iska*. You seem rather pessimistic about politicians. Does this mean that Africa won't be saved by them or that the right type of politicians is yet to come?

C. E.: There are two groups of politicians, those of colonial Africa and those of independent Africa. The politicians did a lot of good for Africa, chiefly in colonial times with the liberation movements: they had national considerations.

The problem began when they took over to rule; they were motivated by selfish considerations (envy, jealousy, discrimination, etc—...). That's why I am pessimistic. The first group had a wider vision.

B. N.: The way you describe the Minister of Consolation in *Beautiful Feathers* seems to imply that you do not take politicians seriously. Is there any truth in such an impression?

C. E.: It is true. Politicians are clowns... I'm sorry. In the first Republic particularly, they were clowns.

B. N.: *Survive the Peace* has a different setting from that of the previous novels. Is it simply due to the theme — the civil war — or does it indicate a change in your preoccupations?

C. E.: There is a slight misunderstanding. If I had to write *People of the New City*, it would be the city of the 80's and not that of the 60's. *Survive the Peace* came out of kwashiorkor, mercenaries, refugee camps. Each new creation is unique in terms of the story, the characters, the setting, the issues at stake. *Survive the Peace* is the war novel.

B. N.: Isn't Odugo's death unfortunate?

C. E.: Indeed it is. Odugo survived everything else; there were a lot of useless war victims because there was no law, no order at checkpoints for instance. You see, a Nsukka Professor who had survived the war was killed by who nobody knows. I try in my novels to be as close to truth as I can. In other words the possible is what I go after. To come back to Odugo, his death was the kind of things that could have happened.

B. N.: There is an Igbo saying at the beginning of Book II of *Survive the Peace*, "Agaracha must come back". What does it mean?

C. E.: This is a sort of cynical statement against women who felt that they could survive only with the people in power (soldiers etc...). It can be explained as follows: you may go round, when you've finished going round you must come back. In other words whatever you do, home is best.

B. N.: Can you tell me what the impact of the civil war is on the Nigerians in general or the Easterners in particular, ten years after it ended?

C. E.: The war left the Easterners as runners-up. All the industries are in the

North and the West which have more educational and military possibilities. In every field, the East is the disadvantaged part of the country. There are more medical and communication facilities in the North and the West. In a word, the Easterners are frustrated.

B. N.: There are not many proverbs in your books. Is it due to the fact that most of them are based in towns? Is it what you meant when you said to the *Daily Times* that you don't believe in transplanting traditional culture where it doesn't belong?

C. E.: Precisely! Compare *Burning Grass* and *An African Night's Entertainment* on the one hand and *Jagua Nana* and *People of the City* on the other. It's all a question of imagery: the images are different. Proverbs would be out of context in the city. The novel should not superimpose anything; it should reflect the subject.

B. N.: Can you tell me which of your books you like most? And why?

C. E.: It is *The Passport of Mallam Ilia* because I can read it in one hour and I wonder how I came to write it, having never been to Mecca.

B. N.: Which is your most autobiographical book?

C. E.: *Survive the Peace*. In terms of experience I myself was in charge of the Biafra Radio. It is also in the sense of first-hand experience as I was personally involved.

B. N.: How long have you been back to private business? Is it pharmacy or publishing?

C. E.: Since October 1979 I've been back to pharmacy and writing. You know, civil service is time-consuming. Just imagine that in five months I was able to write two books. Isn't it fantastic?