

1979

## Interview with Kofi Awoonor

Kofi Awoonor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Awoonor, Kofi, Interview with Kofi Awoonor, *Kunapipi*, 1(2), 1979.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol1/iss2/11>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Interview with Kofi Awoonor

### Abstract

The University of Texas, Austin, 31 January 1978. Interview conducted, transcribed and edited by Ian H. Munro, Department of English, William Jewell College, Liberty, Missouri, and Wayne Kamin, Department of English, The University of Texas at Austin.

In a speech a decade ago in Stockholm, Wole Soyinka argued that the African writer had failed to respond to the 'political moment' of his society, because he has been 'without vision'. Do you feel that this situation, if Soyinka's assessment was correct, has changed over the past decade?

# Kofi Awoonor

---

## INTERVIEW

The University of Texas, Austin, 31 January 1978. Interview conducted, transcribed and edited by Ian H. Munro, Department of English, William Jewell College, Liberty, Missouri, and Wayne Kamin, Department of English, The University of Texas at Austin.

*In a speech a decade ago in Stockholm, Wole Soyinka argued that the African writer had failed to respond to the 'political moment' of his society, because he has been 'without vision'. Do you feel that this situation, if Soyinka's assessment was correct, has changed over the past decade?*

We are now getting to the eye of the storm; the Independence movement is over and done with. Wole had seen at close quarters the deterioration of the political process in Nigeria. He was making the statement in 1967; in 1965 there was the great crisis in the Western region, with Akintola and so on, and Wole addressed himself to this particular state of confusion through plays like *Before the Blackout*. He more or less placed himself in confrontation with that situation, more so than any other writer anywhere in Africa at that particular time where situations had not deteriorated as much as they had in Nigeria. Nigeria was more critical, much more exaggerated because of its peculiar, volatile context and size.

The experimentations in Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah and subsequently in Guinea and the failures they quickly ended in showed the weakness of taking immediate ideological positions in Africa without the creation of what I would call the infrastructures for building a socialist base. I know the situation in Ghana best, and we, the writers, were not overly concerned with the process, we were not very much involved in the process of this construction and indulged in the rearguard thing. The great themes were the themes of the clash of cultures, which everybody flogged to death. But the context has changed, with Biafra, with commitments by the writers and a kind of immediate situation of development whether one agrees with it or not. The example of Okigbo, a very eloquent example, became dramatized in the condition of Wole Soyinka when he was arrested by the Federal Government.

We are now confronting the question of the failure of the political dreams and the aftermath of that failure, where the details of the questions of freedom and liberty and human dignity and equity are now obvious for us to address ourselves to in literature whilst for the South Africans, of course, one may say that this is postponed. After liberation then they will begin that real human question, sans race. We are not talking about race. We are talking about people dying in jail in Kenya or Ghana, or being clubbed in

the streets of Accra by people who are very identifiable. They are one of us. They are brothers.

That is where real literature begins, this is my contention. The real writing has begun north of the Zambezi in the post-Independence era. We have exhausted the question of how sad we are because we are kin and look at what they reduce us to in spirit, whimpering inertia, dribbling at the mouth and saying, 'Oh, things have fallen apart!' That is over. Like Négritude before it, it established a dialogue. Now we have entered a new period of monologue, in which the self-search is something that has to be made.

I invest the total failure of all the experiments in Africa, in all the different parts of Africa, with the lack of domestication of the so-called intelligentsia. The African intelligentsia, unlike its counterpart in, say China or Japan, has not yet domesticated itself, has not yet transferred its intellectual scope and grasp of things into real terms of its own and its society's existence and the sort of dynamics that organize that society. I believe that social transformations, the total changes of political and economic arrangements, have always been carried out by the intelligentsia and they become the storehouse because they possess the knowledge. That knowledge, of course, cannot be utilized if their class interests do not become interchangeable with, exchange with, the larger mass of the people. And when these two class interests coincide then revolutions come about. We have not yet done the critical thinking on whether the general failure of the African intelligentsia who have been produced by Western contact over the past hundred years is that it has not really done any serious thinking.

But I find the kind of frenetic dash into the rural country to pick up folk tales rather backward glancing and almost reactionary in the political sense, because it becomes a very artificial process. The member of the intelligentsia who does this acquires material he has picked up without understanding, and without applying his own power of *transforming* that particular aesthetic form into an instrument of change. The people in the village have told us

stories and told them over and over again, but the story doesn't stop there. This is where I see the writer as mythmaker, accepting the fact that the mythmaking process itself is a dynamic process. Soyinka does that in *The Interpreters*, but what is wrought there is perhaps a personal, agonized kind of vision. It has not been transferred into the larger issues of the society in the way in which perhaps Alejo Carpentier does in *The Lost Steps* or Garcia Marquez in *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.

The privileged position that I occupy as an educated person, the exposure I've had (and I'm not talking personally about myself but about intellectuals in general) presupposes a greater degree of responsibility in the business of social transformation than just understanding what the people want, because I suspect that people may not actually know what they want. For example, the Buganda, who are or have been conditioned by autocracy. Now if they do not have a reference so far as the word 'freedom' is concerned then my duty, as someone who has had a greater access to a greater amount of experience exterior to his own limited scope, is to do much more than just say, 'What does he want and I will try to give it to him'.

It seems to me as if the kind of peculiarity which emerges in the context of the African writer when you place him in comparison to other writers from other places, the American writer for example, is defined by the kind of history through which he has come and by the relentless need to expend energy in order to forge a viable *alternative* society to the one that has somehow, by the very nature of colonialism, survived. I see him here in the same context as writers in Franco's Spain or the writers who are still involved in the struggle for so-called 'human rights' in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, in Chile and so on. His historical conditions dictate a certain urgency which is intensified by the deterioration of the hasty political arrangements within which as a writer, mythmaker or visionary he is expected to function. And I think this is where the question becomes more urgent so far as he's concerned than perhaps in the case of other writers, say American

or British writers, who are not confronting this human dilemma as artists.

*One problem in the development of African writing has been the dominance of foreign critics and presses. Are they still controlling the direction that African literature might take in the future?*

Your question brings up a good point about theme and subject matter, because in the earlier writing we tended to be addressing the 'Other'. Most of the early writers did confess that if they were addressing the African they were also addressing the European who might read the story. And this is very much part of the question of the clash of cultures. As we go beyond that question we are coming to themes that are more and more directed towards the inner personality of that African condition. So therefore there is no need to talk to the Other, the European reader and critic. Also more and more Africans are reading African writing; it's getting into the schools, but of course not to the exclusion of the outside reader who is also being brought in out of his world into a new reality, the world of African literature. In the schools of America the subject has received some real attention. The African writer has by that process been brought into a community of world writing and world concern and therefore his particular problems have been universalized and placed within a wider world context.

So from the pure point of view of the politics of publishing the question is fairly irrelevant whether an African writer gets published in London or in Lagos. But the sociology of the writing will demand that perhaps more work should be done in African publishing in Africa itself than has been done so far, even if this requires government support.

The African Literature Bureau of Ghana has done a tremendous amount of publishing in the local languages, and also Ghana State Publishing, which began with so-called 'bread and butter' things but is slowly beginning to do the creative work. It has a

terrible problem with bureaucracy. People have complained of sending manuscripts there, and they have been accepted three years after. When they are published there have been very bad proofreaders, some of them just boys. But the consciousness is there, although one had hoped for it to be liberated from the bureaucracy. I personally would like very much to go into publishing just for the sheer thrill of finding new manuscripts and publishing and launching them. I don't know about the economics of it!

*Is the recent arrest of Ngugi wa Thiong'o in Kenya a sign that the African writer will be subject to increased censorship and even imprisonment for his work? (Ngugi wa Thiong'o was under arrest at the time of this interview. Ed.).*

In a weekly review from Nairobi there was another review of the play which Ngugi co-authored and which had landed him in jail. I haven't seen the play, but just from the evidence that this man produces the critique was being made of the play that Ngugi attacks the Christian religion and views it as an original kind of evil. The critic was saying this is wrong, because human institutions of any kind, including Christianity, cannot, *per se*, be charged with being based on evil. I don't know whether this is what Ngugi said in this play, but he could be angering more than just the church authorities. He could be angering the people who uphold the moral position of religion in society, and could also be accused of being an atheist.

In Ghana, the ruling body has at its disposal, and I'm sure it is true of Nigeria, a lot of very highly trained and educated people. I remember when I appeared before a board of investigators that was interviewing me, everybody there confessed to having read my novel. Then they started a quiz. The chairman was a graduate of Legon and had taken advanced degrees at the University of Bordeaux.

What I'm saying is that in Ghana the people who do the hatch-



et work, the dirty backroom work, as in many of the efficient totalitarian regimes the world has known, are becoming very well trained. And when the people upstairs themselves have become very efficient and very highly trained so will the systems of repression.

But to return to Ngugi. His preoccupations or ideology aren't the subjects of his novel, *Petals of Blood*, nor of his play. The play does not set itself up to promulgate an ideological doctrine or position, but can be read or seen as such by those who are unalterably opposed to any form of socialism in Kenya. Disguise, irony, paradox have always been literary instruments, and I don't think they will vanish. In the name of being bold and attacking the problem headlong, I think there is still an intrinsic quality in the use of disguise and paradox. We have to accept that as part and parcel of the aesthetics of all literature.

The references can be very direct and obvious. When I was doing my own field work on folk tales an old man told me a story of the deer-woman and the hunter. He went into the bush and saw this beautiful deer. As he aimed, the deer turned around and looked at him, and he said 'Oh, you are so beautiful. I wish I had a woman like you'. And the deer said, 'If I turn into a woman will you marry me?' He said, 'Yes'. She said, 'You wouldn't insult me about when I was a deer?' He said, 'No'.

So the pact was made, and the hunter married her. She turned into a beautiful woman. He brought her home and they lived very happily until the hunter married another wife to whom he secretly told the secret of this woman's real origin. A fight broke out one day, and the other woman insulted her deer origin. So she went into the rafters of the building, took down her deer outfit, and as she went out was singing a song.

The hunter came back and said, 'Where is my wife?' The other woman told him she had gone to the bush, and he rushed back into the bush and saw the deer up on the hill. But she had left her children behind. They are part of the human family.

And the old man said to me, 'Well you know, so-and-so's family

is descended from that deer woman. But don't say it, because they don't like to be reminded of that'. Here reality and fiction have become one. There is nothing here that we can refer to as a social sanction; it's a reinforcing story about the relations between man and the animals. A writer can use the same degrees of subtlety, the same ingredients of subtlety that are available in as complex a structure as the folk tale.