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Abstract

By the early 1960's it was obvious that all of Africa would shortly be free of colonial domination. The British and the French had withdrawn; the Spanish seemed hardly aware of their small territories; and cracks were already showing in the Portuguese regime, which was having to contend with an increasingly severe independence struggle in Angola and Mozambique. A few thorns remained to be plucked from the colonial flesh, Rhodesia being the most awkward, and only the ingenuous would claim that all vestiges of European authority vanished with the lowering of flags. A new Africa had emerged, however. Were the former imperial capitals to forget about it all, retaining only statues and anthems as relics of their domain, or would a practical means be found of continuing the associations with Africa by educational and cultural contact?

ALASTAIR NIVEN

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The Africa Centre was a response to a felt need for such contact to be

maintained. President Kaunda of Zambia opened it in 1964, thus establishing from the start its informal relationship with African governments. This now extends to financial assistance from several governments, official visits to the Centre by ministers of African governments, and the use of the premises by embassies for social gatherings or cultural displays. But it was also realised from the start that, though the Africa Centre would attempt to be a focal-point for African affairs in London, it could not be a political institution and it could not be the 'front' for any party or national point of view. If that ever became the case it would lose credibility with all the Africans who did not share whatever view the Centre was supporting.

The result of this independence today is that the Africa Centre has become the natural place in London for people interested in Africa to get together amicably. Ethiopian actually talks to Somali on the premises; Ugandan exiles and Malawi dissidents feel at home here, yet the governments of these countries do not regard the Centre as a hotbed of fermenting revolution. People from all parts of Africa use the Centre for its social facilities, its educational programme and its information services. British people are welcome to it as a place to discover more about Africa.

In fourteen years the Africa Centre has become best-known for its programme of events and for its restaurant. The latter, called *The Calabash*, is open to the general public and under its Senegalese chef Paolo Diop serves the only authentic African food in London. It is recommended in the food guides of Britain and offers reasonably priced dishes from all parts of the continent, served in a pleasantly informal (some would say too much so) atmosphere. Try it the next time you are hungry in London. It is open Monday to Friday at lunch and in the evenings until after 10.30 p.m., and on Saturday evenings too.

Registered with the Department of Education and Science as an educational institution the Africa Centre offers an extensive programme of courses, lectures, panel discussions, films, plays and exhibitions. Here you can learn Arabic or Swahili (at times other languages too). You can try out your skill in African dance, be part of an African drama workshop, take a seminar course in African literature or follow a summer programme in Development Studies, during which the economic and agrarian problems of modern Africa are intensively analysed.

At least twice a week there is a lecture or some kind of discussion on an aspect of African life. It could be a demonstration of African drum-playing, a talk on wildlife in Zaire, a tribute to an African writer or a debate on the Eritrean question. The programme is totally versatile, the only condition being that the speakers know what they talk about. We give platforms to both African and British politicians. We have poetry readings (Dennis Brutus was with us the day before I wrote this article). We also have lunchtime talks to mark

whatever aspect of African life is currently hot news. Thus Lord Fenner Brockway was speaking about Jomo Kenyatta at the Centre whilst Mzee's funeral took place in Nairobi. We had a Palestinian response to the Camp David talks within days – for Egypt is part of Africa. We were the first place to give an opportunity for the Zimbabwe political leaders to speak when they fled from Ian Smith. These are recent examples of a policy which the Centre has always attempted – to be alert in the face of changing Africa.

Films are held at the Africa Centre on Thursday evenings, either African in topic or directed by an African. We normally have an exhibition of paintings by an African artist on show in the main hall and in its gallery. I hope to encourage young African artists to hold their first exhibitions at the Centre. We are regularly used by Heinemann, Rex Collings and other publishers for book launches. The new African Poetry Prize is being introduced from the Africa Centre. The list of activities is very long, even without mentioning the countless occasions in the year when African organizations in London hire the place for dances or discothèques. The Centre is also available for hire to non-African concerns as long as there is no more appropriate competition.

I paint a picture of a thriving institution, a small part of Africa in the heart of London. Mostly this is fair, but the Africa Centre, being an independent voluntary organization, is not well endowed. You can become a member of the Centre for £5 a year (£2.50 to students, £25 for corporate membership), so that's one source of income. We own the valuable freehold of the property, letting some of it to the Africa Educational Trust and some to the Fund for Research and Investment in the Development of Africa (FRIDA), who also lease a shop on the premises selling Africana. We receive some government grants and we have donations from businesses and trusts. But the Centre could do with more money to develop all the projects I hope to see off the ground during my tenure as Director-General.

We intend introducing more courses, especially non-academic ones for people who would like to know more about African life – perhaps because they are going on holiday there or because their company is becoming increasingly involved in Africa. Tourism and business orientation courses are a ripe field to cultivate. But our duty is just as much to Africans coming to London. We therefore need to publicise ourselves better, in Africa before people leave home as well as in London itself, for where else is a Hausa-speaker, for example, likely to find a congenial atmosphere the moment he arrives in England?

We shall be starting an Africa Centre journal, introducing a theatre company, and organizing conferences on trade unionism in Africa (jointly organized with the British Trade Union Movement) and on many other topics. We will have closer contact with schools and teachers, inviting them to the Centre where we have the first stages of a Resource Centre and also visiting

them to speak on African topics. There is no shortage of imagination or enthusiasm at the Centre, only funds and hence hands to carry out some of our more elaborate desires.

The Africa Centre welcomes all visitors to its eighteenth-century building at 38 King Street, Covent Garden, London W.C.2 (telephone 01-836-1973). Though much of the work goes on in seminars or at desks, you will sense the convivial atmosphere when you come and you may recognize that the modest efforts made by this Centre are in their way a contribution to the multi-racial society that Britain is becoming and which so many prophets say is doomed to disharmony. In turn it is a part of Africa's self-development. Its appeal is on these two fronts and I certainly can think of no place at which I would rather be working.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Mark O'Connor, Australian poet; *Randolph Stow*, Australian poet and novelist; *Vibeke Stenderup*, research librarian, State Library, University of Aarhus; *Kirsten Holst Petersen*, teaches at University of Aarhus; *Felix Mathale*, Malawian poet; *Jack Mapanje*, Malawian poet; *Bernth Lindfors*, editor *Research in African Literature*, University of Texas at Austin; *Okot p'Bitek*, Ugandan poet, teaches at University of Nairobi; *Terry Goldie*, teaches at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada; *Robert Fraser*, reviews editor *West Africa* magazine; *Nissim Ezekiel*, Indian poet; *Yasmine Gooneratne*, teaches at Macquarie University, N.S.W.; *Dorothy Livesay*, Canadian poet; *Michael Ayodele*, Nigerian artist (he is a Yoruba who studied under Twin Seven Seven and now lives in Zaria, Northern Nigeria); *Sven Poulsen*, Danish journalist and author of several books on Africa; *Jeanne Delbaere*, teaches at Free University of Brussels; *Christine Pagnouille*, teaches at University of Liège; *Alan Lawson*, teaches at University of Queensland; *Peter Alcock*, teaches at Massey University, New Zealand; *Johannes Riis*, teaches at University of Aarhus; *Erik Arne Hansen*, teaches at University of Aarhus; *Jørn Carlsen*, teaches at University of Aarhus; *Nelson Wattie*, teaches at University of Cologne; *Alastair Niven*, Director Africa Centre, London.