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Interview

Cyprian Ekwensi

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Interview

Abstract

Raoul Granqvist interviewed Cyprian Ekwensi on 5 December 1981.

Cyprian Ekwensi

INTERVIEW

Raoul Granqvist interviewed Cyprian Ekwensi on 5 December 1981.

The title of your recently published book Divided We Stand puzzles me. Isn't there a contradiction in the very title?

Yes, and it is deliberate. In Nigeria, I have noticed, each time a leader tries to unite the country, to bring everybody together by force or by coercion, there is always a struggle. But then if you allow each ethnic group or each division of the country to go its own way, there is never any peace. So we stand in division. Anybody who tries to push too hard about unity will bring about conflict in this country. This is the way I see it as a writer.

So you survive by being divided?

Yes, the various groups in this country value their independence, their culture, their own ethnicity, while regarding themselves as Nigerians. But if you try to force them into one country, speaking one language, worshipping the same God, there must be struggle. So probably the time has not come when 'united we stand'. This is the time of 'divided we stand'.

When will this be?

It has to take many generations and years. Unity does not come about out of someone talking you into it. But the only way out is to opt for unity. For instance, during the war, those of us who lived on this side of the Niger believed that we were threatened by an outside force. So we united.

During the colonial struggle Nigerians believed that the colonial administration was the enemy, so we united to fight that enemy. There has to be an external unifying force which is a threat, in a way, at least it works like that. So when that comes, and if after that external threat, we do not go back to what it was before that threat, then there will be a new stage of unity and so on until you reach the ultimate when you cannot go back to the original fragments that make the nation.

Divided We Stand was written in 1969 but published as late as 1980. Why did you delay it?

I did not delay the publication of the book. This is one of the books that taught me that there is politics in publishing. The publisher who makes all his sales in Nigeria will not want to offend the Nigerian government to the extent that he is told to pack and go. At the time this book was written it was too hot, tempers were too high. I wrote it during the war. The bombing was going on. The original title was 'Africhaos', chaos in Africa (one of the sub-titles in the book). Because one of the things that stood out during the war was that the African countries were powerless to get to the truth because they were observing international conventions, and my thesis in this book is that when any African state is threatened, Africans should discard international conventions and go after peace. They did not do that in this war. What they said was that we cannot interfere in the internal affairs of Nigeria. This is the international convention. But the African should be his brother's keeper. If you are killing your brother, you will not tell me, look, this is a family matter, do not come in. I will come in to see that you do not kill your brother. But the rest of Africa did not do that. And the world body, the United Nations, trusted the OAU to do this. But they did not do it. This is why I called the book 'Africhaos'.

You dedicated the book to 'those who lost their lives in the futile struggle, and to those who have survived to rule...'. What can it tell the rulers?

The companion volume to this book is *Survive the Peace*. There you have another contradictory title. You can survive the war, but you may not survive the peace. In fact, the period immediately after the war is dangerous. War has a sort of stabilizing effect. You learn to live with it. There will be so and so many air raids a day, there will be hunger, there will be starvation, there will be shortages. And suddenly the war is over. There is no more bombing. There is no real government. There is no

order. A lot more people were killed in the three days at the end of the war than during the two and a half year's war. I do not know if you have read recently about a Japanese who had been living in the jungle somewhere and was fighting forty years after the war. He didn't know that the war was over.

So the period of recovery is not over yet? And is there 'peace'?

No, no! Those of us on this side of the Niger are still underprivileged. Take for instance communications. We do not have the same communications as the rest of the country. You can dial from Lagos to any part of the country except here. We need a lot of catching up. Some of our schools are still on desks, on the floor, under trees.

Where do you stand as author in relation to your characters? Do you feel closer to your women characters? Their portraits are in any case more sympathetic.

If it is so — and it is for you to decide — I am not conscious of it. The author is a kind of medium. He reflects the emotions, passions, philosophy of his characters. He should not corrupt what passes through him. And if there is warmth passing through him when dealing with female characters, and brutality and harshness when treating male characters, it is a true reflection of his society. The same thing happens with the mode of speech and the mode of thinking. Take for instance the main character in *Jagua Nana*. She is an illiterate woman who lives in a semiliterate society. But she deals with sophisticated people. Her style of thinking and her approach to problems should be different from, say, the university graduate's. If you look at *Iska*, you will find a girl who is young, literate, a television model. She moves with other people than *Jagua*. There must be an interplay with the author and his characters. And for it to be authentic the author has to identify with his people, that is the characters in his book.

You write a lot of children's stories. Why?

I am very much at home with children. I come from a large family. I have a large family. I am very partial to them. I like to entertain them. And children take to me very easily. I was in the airport one day waiting for a plane and a friend of mine came in with his daughter, a girl of four.

She took to me and refused to go with her father. It became quite a scene. So I have a magnetism for them. My favourite story (from *Samankwe in the Strange Forest*, 1973) is about a young boy who plays truant at school and for the first time in his life he goes to drink palm wine and he gets very intoxicated and has strange dreams. The point of the story is that when he wakes up he is unable to distinguish the dream from the reality. At the police station they are able to convince him of the time lapses.

What novels do you write at the moment?

I have five novels in pregnancy. They are in various stages of development. I apply my mind differently. For instance, when I get an idea, I store it, I put it in the pigeon hole of that novel until I feel that it is ready to be written. Then I get out all the notes and look at them and write. And then you forget all the others. But the mind works in different directions all the time. And writing one novel your mind does not stop thinking about something else. It has happened many times that someone starts doing research on a particular subject and gets diverted by little points that interest you. You follow that point and you find it even bigger than the original thing. There is nobody who has ever written who does not have the idea that, oh, I would like to do a book on x or on y. You start building the x file and the y file right from that day, and it is there, and maybe there is one page or two pages in it. But you are simultaneously working on the z novel fully. This is the point. It is the fertility of ideas.

Which novel is uppermost in your mind?

It is a novel that will be called 'Jagua Nana's Daughter'. I was supposed to deliver it last September, but I failed. So much interest has been generated in *Jagua Nana* that a sequel was necessary. Then I have a small book called *An African Night's Entertainment* (1972). There is a story told by a story-teller which occupies the whole night, and at the end people who are supposed to be sleeping do not sleep because the story was so interesting. So I have two more: 'An African Morning's Entertainment' and 'An African Noon's Entertainment'. So I want to complete these three and I have the drafts of each of these. Then I have a novel which I call 'Daily Scrumble'. It is about the newspaper industry in Nigeria. There is still one more. It is a successor to *Motherless Baby* called 'Hundred Fathers'. Just as you have motherless babies, so you have

a boy who has a hundred fathers. Each of these five books is in a file ready to go. But I am concentrating on 'Jagua Nana's Daughter' right now.

You write in English, but to what extent do you deliberately transliterate the 'voices' you hear about you in Igboland?

For a writer to be authentic you have to have a feel for the tone of what you are writing in relation to the new language and not only just the tone or the mood but also the style of expression. That is why some of us write what you might not describe as Oxford English. It is African English. Because we have some picturesque phrases and styles that the English person does not have.

How do you transfer the Igbo way of speaking into your English?

It does not have to be through proverbs, unless the original language is the language of proverbs and riddles. But if it isn't and you try to force it to adopt them, it comes across as unconvincing. In the Igbo language, at least the older people speak in riddles and proverbs to shake up your mind so that you think. You get the meaning obliquely. That doesn't happen all the time in all the Nigerian languages. And I work on a wider canvas than most Nigerian writers. My books are based in north, east, south and west of Nigeria. I have lived all over the country. *Burning Grass* is pure Fullani. I have lived among the cattle men in the north. Their idioms and proverbs are quite different from those farther south here. You don't use them for colour's sake. They have to be authentic and real.

Have you tried to write in Igbo?

Igbo has not, like Kikuyu, overcome its development problems. There is no Igbo language. If you are going to write in Igbo, you limit your audience by writing in an African language. And then you further limit it by writing in one African dialect. Well, I am not prepared to do it in the interest of literature, I am *not* prepared to do it. I am not prepared to go to study what is the sort of Esperanto Igbo which will be accepted by university and the Minister of Education, when I can speak quite happily to my mother and she can understand me. When they have worked out what the Igbo language should be, then they can go on writing or translate my works into Igbo if they are interested.

Pidgin English is used for advertisement on radio and in newspapers. It is used to reach out to certain layers or sections in Nigerian society. Will the next step be to encourage creative writers to use it?

Is that really necessary? If someone is literate, he does not want to go and write in an illiterate language, unless he is depicting illiteracy.

Is freedom of expression complete in Nigeria today?

The fact that General Obasanjo's book¹ was published alongside with General Madiebo's book² — two generals on opposite sides of the shooting line — is a sign that Nigeria is quite tolerant. And if you read our newspapers you will find that the President is taken to task equally as the man who lost the Presidency. There is a lot of free speech, more so than in many other African countries.

NOTES

1. *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (1979).
2. *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (1980).

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