

“WEAVING NEW ROPES WHERE THE OLD ONES LEFT OFF”

KOFI AWOONOR MEMORIAL LECTURE (WRITIVISM 2018)

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The theme for this year's Writivism activities is “UnBreakable Bonds”. We hope that we are not only defining the unbreakable bonds of our shared and varied Blackness across continents but also, the unbreakable bonds between fiction and nonfiction; the unbreakable bonds across generations of African thinkers; the unbreakable bonds between art forms: literature, photography; the unbreakable bonds between the rural and the urban, the unbreakable bonds in the presentation of art: books, exhibitions, podcasts; and what holds it all together: the will, the urge, the yearning to create and imagine worlds, possibilities or really to present it as it is.

Having to speak to an audience about a great man or woman is always a daunting prospect, but when that great man is your own father, it's a whole other level of trepidation. How do I break down a colossus into soundbites? How do I distil the many lives he lived into a 30-minute speech? What part of his life do I speak about? The literary professor? The no nonsense statesman ambassador, minister and presidential advisor? The social justice warrior? Or the formidable and unrepentant respecter of tradition?

It is almost impossible, and the best way I know how to do is by the use of superfluous adjectives, which I know he would have detested.

Elegant, eloquent, savvy, a mentor, spiritual, traditional, loving brother, loyal friend, a teacher to many, a stickler for truth even when it was dangerous, a man who was never on speaking terms with falsehood, a

fighter, protector of the clan, undisputed defender of the Awoonor family, a hero, conqueror, proud son of Africa, a true Ghanaian, passionate politician, socialist, an unapologetic Nkrumahist.

No sufferer of fools, blunt and no mincer of words, for when we call a spade a spade, he would say it's a bloody shovel. A deep thinker, polyglot, humanitarian, simple but refined, sensitive, principled, health-conscious, a constant morning walker, a roaring temper when provoked. Compassionate, forgiving, a beautiful mind, intellectually curious, humble, dignified, respectful and respected. The life of the party with a wicked sense of humour, who with each smile, each witty comment, would light up a thousand rooms, a lover of good food, good drink, good conversation and of course good women, lady killer. A strict principled disciplinarian with a very low threshold for stupidity and at the same time a fun-loving father and friend. A merciless tease with loud, eye watering, belly aching laughs, but wouldn't spare you his bark when you were at fault.

My father was many things and everything at the same time, but beyond all of that, he was one of the generations of those true Pan-African citizens. People who could write a verse of poetry in the morning and pick up a gun to fight for their people in the evening. Those great men and women who ousted colonizers and dictators, while creating art that lived long after they were gone. People who exemplified the unbreakable bond of the versatile, tenacious African spirit, linked across conflict, warfare, fiction, storytelling and philosophy. Men and women who saw the future of what Africa could be and set about creating it.

Distinguished poet, novelist, literary scholar, essayist, diplomat and political activist, Kofi Awoonor grew up in a typical African community of relatives,

aunts, uncles, elders and community leaders. That close-knit community would influence his work in the future, as his Ewe heritage and preserving the culture of his people, is a running theme throughout all of his work. In that vein stories steeped in "African-ness" came to define the literature emanating from the continent between the 60s and the 80s.

He believed in the principle of continuity. In a statement from his collection of poems ***Until the Morning After***, he says "*I do not rationalize this world now, because I have returned to it, to the underlying energy that sustains it.*"

Although I grew up as the son of a prolific writer and blessed to have been surrounded by other seasoned African writers and literary giants growing up, such Kofi Anyidoho, Atukwei Okai, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Lade Worsunu et al (*the perks of being Kofi Awoonor's son*). I did not easily understand poetry when I met it on the page, even with the simplicity of style, which my father and some of his peers wrote. Their words were not always clear to me, just read it like confused grammar and it never really piqued my interest and love for poetry. However, about 15 years ago, my father taught me what he called 'a trick' to reading and understanding poetry. He taught me to read it out loud or have it read to me because, according to him, poetry is like music and it has to be read like it is being sung with a rhythm, as it is only then one can begin to imagine the poet's thoughts. With the help of my father's 'trick', I fell in love with poetry, but I never attempted to write poetry till much later in life.

Form his essay titled "**Out of Africa**" found in the 2006 published collection of essays "**the African Predicament**" Kofi Awoonor explained how he fully embraced his path as a poet and writer that sprung from an invitation, he

received to read some of his few published pieces. An invitation that came in the nick of time when he was going through some of life's challenges striving to survive and feed his family. A dire situation he found himself in after a year of pursuing a master's degree in the UK, which came about as a means of escape, after fleeing Ghana at the beginning of the fall of 1967, a regime change that saw the overthrow of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. A necessity, he endured to avoid being severely punished for being one of Nkrumah's blue-eyed boys holding the high office of boss of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation.

He writes "my poetry had ever been my first love. I was too involved in the process of growth and maturation to acquire the air of importance which some of my writer friends had assumed. I was young, reckless and at times utterly unpredictable." "my reading was at the Y in New York city. But my official host...had informed me that my first assignment was to participate in a world poetry conference at the State University of New York at Stony Brook on Long Island."

"The international poetry festival was a fiesta of indescribable variety of people, never-ending booze sessions and of tedious orgies of exhibitionism and literary gluttony". Sounds like fun doesn't it. "What remains most memorable with me was the panel discussion in the afternoon...When Louis Simpson came to me in a state of mild agitation and asked me whether my English was good enough to enable me participate in the panel discussion. I remember very distinctly saying to him that I would try. As he walked away not terribly sure what he had let himself into by inviting this nice young man from Africa who did not seem to understand even his question. I tell you this particular story because after my presentation, the then dean of the faculty of humanities sent someone to tell me he wanted to offer me a job teaching in Stony Brook.

The alternation between doubt and enthusiasm remains one of Americas innocent virtues." Kofi Awoonor's presentation that afternoon was one of a somber sad political statement. The Biafran-Nigerian war was raging and a few months before he left London for the United States, news had come through that one of the most accomplished young poets of Nigeria, Christopher Okigbo had been killed in action. Kofi Awoonor had come to know Chris, JP Clark, Soyinka and Chinua Achebe rather well since the African writer's conference held in the summer of 1962 here in Kampala, Uganda.

After the January 1966 coup in Nigeria, Chris and JP were in Accra where they had come to persuade Ifeajuna, one of the officers involved in the Lagos end of the operation, who was then in hiding, to return home to Lagos. General Ironsi was then in power and they had brought assurances from the military junta that usurped his and Nzeogwu's coup that they would come to no harm. They met and drank for hours, this was in 1966 before the Ghana coup. These young men were enthusiastic about a new Nigeria. Biafran secession was still a year away. And in 1967 Chris was killed in action, in the uniform of a Biafran major.

This coupled with the fact that "a lot of young African writers from various countries of Africa were fleeing our homelands into exile" at the time ignited Awoonor's presentation that afternoon which went something like this;

"What is the relationship between politics and poetry," he asks? "for us the question may be purely academic. We will not die because we have written a bad verse, nor will our good verse redeem the commitments made for a fuller life for our people. And when the chips come down, the

poet is first and foremost a man responsive to the agony of his fellow men. Some will say fine, then let not a poet sacrifice his life in a political cause.

How can he not? Must he live and watch from his vantage point and collect material for great elegies and panegyrics? To what purpose is his life if it is dedicated to the pursuit and practice of poetry, while his fellowmen die in an unequal fight against tyranny, malnutrition and ignorance? If he is not a poet who chooses the path of survival in the face of struggle for the cause he believes, let him not write one more word so long as he lives. Every sound he makes, every line he pens, after his humiliating retreat from the inner call of his conscience to action in the name of what is right will constitute a gigantic falsehood, a calculated insult to his fellowmen. And he cannot seek umbrage in cynicism, the weapon worn so valiantly by many phony poets and writers, nor in belief that it is his right to live while others die, his right to continue to write when his comrades fall in their nobility of choice on behalf of what they believe is true."

"I must have said something like this that day" he writes. "And coming as I did after an array of poets proclaiming their own secret individual truths, propounding their own fantastic alibis for noninvolvement and inaction, I sounded like the original father of wisdom and commonsense. I received an enthusiastic ovation and a job offer to teach at Stony Brook." And it was at this moment Kofi Awoonor rediscovered his first love, Poetry.

Kofi Awoonor's own poetry as always had as its ancestor the Ewe oral poetry. Coming from an oral culture, the poetry of my people, the Ewe's of West Africa exists only in performance. It is realized through the mouths of the poets or *henewo*, the mothers of song, who embody the men and women in embellished language loaded with colorful explosive images,

elaborate musical and tonal variations, and fantastic vocal modulation, the very heartbeat of the Ewe people. Oral poetry has always been committed poetry. Its commitment was to celebration, joy, to sorrow and pain. It was to censure and praise, to the very survival of the group. It was to gods, deities and the ancestors, to the work of medicine, healing and cure, to divination and search for harmony in the group, to individual happiness and success, to work and play, to old age and youth, to birth and death to men and gods, and through them to the Supreme Creator. Poets are public men and women, singers and bearers of terrible truths. In their mouths are fashioned the fires of our tribal desires, our agonies and our aspirations towards what is good and divine. The orality of this poetry enhances its integrity beyond that of privately accessible art and pushes it into the frontiers of the public communal and folk memory. But the burden of this oral poetry still remains with the poet, who is the clear-eyed one, almost priestly in his divine attachment to the world, driven on by the thousand demons of ennui, existing invariably on the boundary of his community as a precondition for his possessing the poetic prescience and genius. It is he who, like the priest of the shrines, expresses the deepest and most private personality of his people.

Drawing from his culture, heritage and background coupled with being exposed to the native poetry and poetry reading American style, Kofi Awoonor like most of his peers of that era possessed a formidable weapon. Village boys and girls who had been exposed and groomed with the traditional culture, rich language and oral mastery coupled with western education and further exposure to a variety of cultures. They had the best of both worlds. Awoonor shares a story on of his essays titled **“On the road”** were he writes. “My first encounter with poetry reading American style was in June 1968 at the Y.....the reading was sensational. With me on the

same bill were the Polish poet Herbert, the French Marxist poet Guillevic and the south American poet Niconor Para. The other poets included Zulfikar Ghose, the Indo-Pakistani poet. It was a truly international affair with me being the inevitable representative of Africa! The audience was wonderfully urban, attentive and extremely appreciative. The reading itself was aglow with enormous international comradeship, a pleasant evening of backslapping and polite mutual admiration. It was not important whether the poems read were obtuse, esoteric or downright horrors. It was irrelevant whether the audience understood or made no sense of what we read. We were as poets an extension of that spirit of international togetherness that was part of our times. Poetry has bridged the barriers of language, country and race. And here we were, brown men, black men and white men making joyful noises unto peace, love and brotherhood. And we the practicing poets of the world were being asked to read, and we had nothing to lose but our voices."

It is evident that Kofi Awoonor and most of his peers drew inspiration from what was their legacy, their heritage and their roots. Which was evident in their writing, their way of life and their poetry. I am often asked the question, "How would you want your father to be remembered?" I want him to be remembered as exactly who he was and the principles he stood for, and that's how he would want to be remembered. A glowing tribute to Kofi Awoonor any day would be for writers, particularly African writers of our generation and generations to come to tap into their history, heritage and what is truly our legacy. That is Kofi Awoonor, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi waThiong'o and all African writer's past and present. Draw inspiration from their words and refer to their work. It is our heritage, our history and our legacy, for it is our purpose to weave the new ropes from where they have left off. For that is our purpose, our promise of hope,

that we may have a deeper understanding of who we are. So that, "when the final night falls on us, as it fell on our fathers and mothers, we too shall also retire to a modest home, earth-sure, secure that we have done our duty by our people." Thank you.