Literature

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The write stuff

Cassava Republic represents a refreshing face of democratic publishing.

Words by Nana Ocran.

There are endless texts, essays, features and reviews written about Fela Anikulapo Kuti, whether he’s the man as a musician, composer, human rights activist or political maverick.

All make good reading, but it’s the latest re-published biography, Fela: This Bitch of a Life, that’s created excited waves in Nigeria and beyond. Written by Dr Carlos Moor e – friend of Fela, ethnologist and political scientist – it first hit the shelves in 1982, and it’s down to a deal struck by Abuja-based publishing house Cassava Republic that a new generation will be able to dip into the life and lifestyle of one of Nigeria’s biggest musical icons.

Bibi Bakare, who founded Cassava Republic along with Jeremy Weate in 2005, is particularly pleased with the re-issue. ‘That was a real coup,’ she says. ‘I’m very excited that despite the many of the financial and distribution hurdles that no doubt plague many of Nigeria’s creative publishing houses, there are a growing number of African writers who share the same views. Privileged access seems to be the best way forward for most Nigeria-based writers, but there is a growing pool of new or emerging scribes that seem to be altering the literary status quo when it comes to their creative output.’

Bakare: ‘To name just a few, Teju Cole, Sarah Lapido Manyika, Ton Kan, Adaoe Tricia Nwaubani, Seifi Atta, Igoni Barrett, Tolu Ogunlesi, Jumoke Verissimo Fatima Akiu, Chris Abani, Chika Uwae and Lola Shoneyin are between them. And we would like to give a privileged space to African writers on our list and also direct our marketing efforts first of all to an African readership.’

Big deal: Carlos Moor e’s book is a literary coup for the Cassava Republic publishing house.

The life of a writer
Scribing from the heart.

Chris Abani

Chris Abani’s first novel about a neo-Nazi takeover of Nigeria earned him a six-month prison sentence. A second stint in gaol took place after he joined a guerilla theatre group. By his mid-twenties he was on death row for writing the play, Song of a Broken Rite. He now lives, writes and teaches in America.

Language is…

The only thing that exists. Everything exists inside of it and because of it. It is the syntax of our highest and lowest aspects.

Stories are…

The only way we have of holding love in the world and of understanding and achieving transformation and transcendence. They are the only truth there is.

Nigeria is…

The most audacious experiment in hope and the most beautiful example of what is possible in the face of all odds. It is a modern miracle and I love it.

What does Nigeria have to celebrate in its 50th year of independence?

The inescapable truth that we are locked into a common destiny.

We all feel like home is wherever our childhood was spent

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Where were you born?

In the Igbo town of Afikpo in Eastern Nigeria that has been continuously occupied for 10,000 years or so, according to archaeological digs. It has always fascinated me that I’m part of a culture that’s been evolving for that long – with the interruption that the 300 years of the slave trade brought of course.

What is your earliest memory of Nigeria?

It is odd, since I was only about two but it is my brother Mark running with me on his back as we fled prison sentence. A second stint in gaol took place after he joined a guerilla theatre group.

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Who would play the story of your life?

Oh, I don’t think anyone would be interested in that, so I don’t know. I am still trying to play myself, you know? Trying to figure out how to be the man I can be. My motto in life is simple: grow.
When and where were you born?
In Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, on the 23rd of October 1984, to a Muslim father and a Christian mother. I was born on the cusp between Libra and Scorpio; I am a Librapio. Those of Libran star signs are said to be indecisive.

Any early UK memories?
When we arrived, we stayed at a friend's place and there were only two CDs in the flat: the soundtrack to Waiting to Exhale and a Celine Dion album. We listened to those incessantly for two months, I think I fell in love with Celine. That 'If you touch me like this' song drove me to tears.

A word and graphic artist. Which comes first?
I grew up wanting to be a visual artist so chronologically, graphic came first. And these days I start writing when an image strikes me, and through the writing process I try to paint pictures with words... so across my creative process, yep, graphic.

We first heard of you through your play The 14th Tale.
Why the title and how would you describe the content?
The title was a way of referencing old work and suggesting new. My first poetry book was called The Thirteen Fairy Negro Tales. The play is a funny, mellifluous narrative about the exploits of a natural born troublemaker. It explores the legacy of mischief as a handed-down trait from my grandfather to my dad and to me.

Nigeria's independence seems close to your heart. How has it manifested in your work?
It has been manifest in my most recent play 'Untitled', which questions Nigeria's identity and its duplicity. The story is of twin boys separated at birth. One grows up in a village surrounded by forest, the other in a city of concrete hills. It begins and climaxes on Nigeria's Independence Day and asks what must happen for the country to progress.

When would you say you first found your public voice?
I'd say I found early inflections of my voice in Dublin in 1999. I lived there for three years. At the time I was studying classical poetry, but after school, I'd clothe myself in Walkmans and mini-discs, learning the finer points of hip-hop. My voice strengthened in 2002 when I discovered poets including Ainsley Burrows and Saul Williams.

You have a roll-call of impressive clients. What did you do on the BBC Politics Show?
The weight of importance lies not with clients, but with those I have met through clients. My most magical moments have been in dingy studio apartments, squat houses, waterlogged festival fields, deserted bookstores and once on a route 343 bus from London Bridge to New Cross Gate. For the BBC, I was commissioned to write about the African Diaspora.

"Experimental" is a word that's been used about your work. Would you say you're a fearless performer?
More often that not, I stand on stage, in one spot, wave my hands about a bit and speak. At other times, my work is read from pages. What I do is as clear and old as language itself. It might be considered 'experimental' because of its simplicity: in a world of patterned kaleidoscopic checkered shirts, the plain white one glows.

When was the last time you went back to Nigeria?
I haven't been back since I left; the summer of 1996.

What are your favourite memories of Nigeria?
When I was a snot-nosed knucklehead, I visited Yankari Game Reserve. There's a spring and natural swimming pool running through the place and regardless of the season it is always, always the right temperature for skinny dipping. Also, boarding school was a blast. I was once chased through the forest by a crazed French teacher wielding a big stick. Good times.

What do you think Nigeria should be celebrating in its 50th year of independence?
Our natural innovation, resilience and vitality for life. Our notoriety as well as the notorious amongst us. With us you get both sides of the coin, the Yin and the Yang. We should celebrate our consistency in breaking and redefining the moulds the western world casts for the word 'African'. And we celebrate our successful reclamation of jollof rice from the Ghanaians.

Nigeria is...

Language is...
A way of calling the world into being, of widening our grasp of reality, moulding it as a sculptor does clay and growing ourselves exponentially. At its simplest, it is a way of being free.
Your impact as a writer and young influential voice of Nigeria is huge. Does the knowledge of this ever affect your creative output?

No. For me, to write is to inhabit an intense, small, closed space. It is really lovely to have a Nigerian readership but I don’t think about my ‘impact’, such as it is, while writing, otherwise I would censor myself. My focus always is to speak my truth, to tell the stories I want to tell as honestly as I can, even if it means causing offence or bringing discomfort.

Which one of your written characters would you say most closely resembles you?

All of my characters are versions of me, I think. The character Amaka in *Purple Hibiscus* and Kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are the characters I most admire.

When you write do you have a specific audience in mind?

No. I think having a specific audience in mind would lead to unintended self-censorship. If anything, I write the kind of fiction I like to read and so in a way my audience is myself. While editing, I might make certain ‘administrative’ changes – such as agreeing to a glossary for the Chinese edition – but in general I don’t think of an audience when I write.

Do you keep any reviews that feel special to you?

I don’t read reviews. I read two when my first novel came out and discovered that I needed to avoid them, in order to keep my sanity. The problem with reviews is not only how incredibly subjective they are, but that if you believe the good, you are obliged to believe the bad as well. What I do find special are the responses of ordinary readers, people who e-mail to tell me personal stories about how my work has been meaningful to them. I also treasure the comments of the people who read my work in manuscript form and tell me what they liked and didn’t like: my father, a few close friends and, my favourite so far, the quote from Chinua Achebe after he read *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Your collection of stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck* are beautifully crafted. Is there an inner sculptor or visual artist in you?

We’ve never seen an unflattering picture of you. Do you use any stylists or have any favourite designers?

I’ve seen many unflattering pictures of myself. I don’t have stylists. I have a clear sense of what I like and what works for me. I dislike fashion – the idea of what one should and should not wear determined by somebody else – but I do like style; the idea of looking the best one can, but in an individual way. I own and love Jewel by Lisa for her femininity. I love Deola Sagoe’s ambitious and structured clothes but don’t own any. Above all, my tailor Razak in Lagos is the absolute best.

Which three words adequately describe your character?

My character changes quite a bit. It depends on the time of the month.

Politics and feminism seem close to your heart. Do you feel optimistic about the influence that women can have on Nigeria’s political future?

Women in different parts of Nigeria had quite a bit of political influence in the past. The situation today could be better but I am generally optimistic. The most important change women of the present generation can make is to raise their children differently, to raise daughters who are encouraged to conquer the world rather than encouraged to merely find a husband. To raise sons who see women as true equals and who don’t have fragile egos.

What or where is your favourite place in Nigeria?

The lovely campus of the University of Ife. My hometown, Abba in Anambra State. And Lagos, when it isn’t raining.

Nigeria is…

A country with a sort of counter-intuitive confidence. It doesn’t try hard to make you love it but when you fall, you fall really hard. It’s a place of exuberant possibility, a place of both cynicism and hope, a place where people are both watchful and warm-hearted.
Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani

Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani, author of the acclaimed novel *I Do Not Come to You By Chance*, shares her thoughts on the country at 50, the publishing industry and surviving Nigeria with a sense of humour.

Which part of Nigeria are you from?
I’m from Umuahia, Abia State.

Where do you call home?
Home is inside me, I can live anywhere. I grew up in Abia State, went to university in Ibadan, work in Lagos, live in Abuja. I don’t attach too much importance to locations.

What’s your impression of how the outside world views Nigerians?
I don’t care. I use this analogy: If a fat person complains that people are calling them fat, I’ll ask are you worried because you’re fat or because people are calling you fat? If it’s the former, go on a diet.

And how Nigerians view themselves?
I think we lack insight. We haven’t taken responsibility to sit down and understand the causes of our problems. I’m not sure the average Nigerian knows who he is as such.

What inspired your op-ed piece about the Nigerian uproar over the BBC documentary *Welcome to Lagos*?
You can’t be angry with the BBC for doing a documentary about something that actually exists. They didn’t cook it up. They’re highlighting a major issue, poverty and slums, but nobody’s concerned about that. In fact the Nigerian High Commissioner from the UK went as far as saying the BBC should do another documentary. It didn’t occur to him to face the problem instead.

You’ve got an ironic outlook in your writing. Is it essential to have irony or at least humour to survive in Nigeria?
It definitely helps. And when people ask if we have anything to celebrate at 50, at least we can say we’ve survived. In addition, we’re celebrating the hope we have for the future. Being able to laugh at our condition has been a helpful defence mechanism but we should go beyond the humour now. I don’t think we should spend the next 50 years laughing.

What did winning the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize mean to you?
Obviously it’s always exciting to win but really life is beyond the prize. I get excited just by messages and emails from people around the world telling me they’ve enjoyed my book or that they’re studying it in their courses. Unfortunately, in Nigeria a book’s success has been tied to its prizes. I wanted to be one of the first African writers to be successful without winning a prize. But looking back I’m glad I won because, as my publisher suggested, the Nigerian will not respect your book if it hasn’t been anointed by some Western body.

What other goals do you have in mind?
I would like my writing to take off in a direction that is unpredictable. That’s why I was excited about Uwem Akpan, the Nigerian author chosen by Oprah’s Book Club. I think that will help Nigerians see that even if you don’t win the Booker, you can be successful. Obviously I have more books in me, not necessarily fiction and not necessarily like my first book. I don’t have a master’s in creative writing so I’m not shackled by the need to write novel after novel. I would love to own my own publishing house in Nigeria.

How do you see the publishing industry in Nigeria developing?
Publishers like Cassava Republic and Farafina are doing a great job in terms of pushing Nigerian authors. But the first thing we need to sort out is distribution. For example my book is only available in Port Harcourt, Lagos, Abuja and Ibadan; meanwhile in the city where I grew up my parents can’t find a copy.

Author! Author!
A writer with far-reaching goals.