

En Route

Everything is local, not only in Africa

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There is always a tension between the local and the global, and all levels in-between. It is said that all politics is local. In Pakistan, with the general elections around the corner, that should be a worry for many politicians in the ruling parties. Prices on consumer goods have gone through the roof in recent years. Yes, it is possible to argue that this is caused partly by the international financial crisis and recession, although it is mainly in the West. In Pakistan, prices on some staple food items have gone up by fifty percent or more in a few years. Consumers will not accept the international excuse.

Politicians should remember that in the end we all feel closest to ourselves, our family, friends, workmates, and neighbours in our own village or town. In American politics, the party in opposition always asks: are you better off now than you were at the previous election? Of course, they only ask that question if things have gotten worse, and they only think of monetary issues. But the world and our lives are much more than money. That is what I want to focus on in this article, with some lessons from great African writers.

In literature, language, handicrafts and other cultural fields, it is also quite clear that “everything is local”. Take, for example, the fact that all over the world dialects change for every forty kilometers or so, even less. Sub-groups within cities may have their own slang and jargon; people “across the river” may have a lot of different vocabulary and grammar; and age groups and social classes may have their own way of speaking. Much of it is so because we want to identify with our own group and those nearest and dearest.

In literature, it is what appeals to the individual reader that decides a writer’s popularity. Stories must be written in a form and with a content that makes it possible to identify with the characters. In poetry, the style, language and elegance are even more important, and they must touch the strings of the heart of the reader or, the listener, if the poetry is read aloud (as it often should be).

Below, I shall discuss a few issues in literature, with emphasis on the local aspects. I shall mention a few great African writers who have had to struggle with the local and global issues, or indigenous and colonial issues. They know that most issues are local, yet, with important foreign and international dynamic impulses. It is probably essential that impulses from abroad, or from a country’s centre, come from the bottom-up, not being forced from outside.

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) passed away a few weeks ago. He was sometimes referred to as the ‘father of African literature’. But he wrote in English, not in the Ibo language, his mother tongue used in south-eastern Nigeria where he grew up. He was criticized for that, but argued that English was a unifying language in the country, and used in many other African countries and further a field. The borders of African states are not natural borders and many countries have several languages, and dozens of dialects that are so different that they may well be seen as different languages, or different versions of one language. In Pakistan, it is only a minority of some ten million that have Urdu as their mother tongue; there are at least half a dozen major languages spoken by tens of millions each, and many smaller languages, which are as distinct and unique. Pakistan uses Urdu and English as unifying languages. But maybe the many local languages need to be protected and given prominence, not at the expense of Urdu and English, but alongside those languages. In Europe, every country has one or more languages.

Chinua Achebe’s debut book from 1958 “Things Fall Apart” remained his highest acclaimed book. The book is about the tension between the local and the foreign, and the value and respect we should have for both. Chinua Achebe was a product of his traditional upbringing, his missionary and colonial education, and the exciting time leading to Nigeria’s independence in 1960. Alas, in the late 1960s, the three-year Biafra War turned ethnic and religious groups against each other. Being an Ibo, Achebe sided with Biafra and was for a

short time an ambassador for that break-away land, which soon became re-integrated in Nigeria's fold. Since most of the oil is in Biafra they could not run away from the rest of Africa's most populous country.

On the other side of the continent, Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o is a giant in literature. His early books, "Weep Not Child" (1964) and "The River Between" (1965) are acclaimed works on reading lists of secondary schools. They are about the local culture. Achebe met him early and was excited by his works and helped him publish his first book internationally. Yet, Ngugi wa Thiong'o came to disagree with Achebe's use of English. He himself began using Swahili, which is a unifying language in several countries in East Africa. But he went further, notably to his mother tongue of Gikuyu, spoken by the country's largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu, living near the capital Nairobi, and around Mount Kenya. Ngugi's family had been active in Kenya's movement for independence, gained in 1963. Ngugi abandoned English, Christianity and his given name James. In his literature, he emphasizes the value of the local culture. His theatre play "I Marry When I Want" (1977) was written and performed in Gikuyu. If it had been written in English, he would probably have gotten away with it, but since it was in a language the masses could understand, it was banned and the regime detained the author. Later, while in exile, mostly in America, he has continued focusing on the language and cultural issues in literary and academic works, including in "Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature" (1986).

Before my first international assignment for UNESCO, I had the pleasure of chairing the guest lecture Ngugi wa Thiong'o gave at the University of Oslo in 1984. He was already in exile and I remember I was a bit worried because I was going to be based in Kenya, but I had no problems at all. And in Nairobi, Kenya, a centre in so many fields, I had the opportunity to attend a seminar at Serena Hotel with a contemporary of the two mentioned giants, notably Wole Soyinka (born 1934), the first African to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature (1986). Much of his acceptance speech was about Nelson Mandela, who was still imprisoned by the apartheid regime of South Africa. Although Soyinka is a highly political writer and speaker, he is also a very poetic and artistic soul. He writes in English.

I began my article today writing about the importance of the local issues in Pakistan's general election planned for 11 May. But we should also note that there are foreign issues of great importance, such as the 'war on terror', the relations with neighbours, the only superpower America, and so on. Voters may be concerned also about such issues as far as they influence their local lives.

The three great African writers I have mentioned have had political opinions and principles through their careers; they have had values and advice to their readers. Chinua Achebe took up corruption in his second book, "No Longer at Ease", where an idealistic young man becomes a corrupt civil servant, in charge of scholarships. Ngugi wa Thiong'o from Kenya is probably the most radical political writer of the three, drawing attention to the colonial era and the post-independence regimes as well as neo-colonialism today.

All three writers want to go back to the local cultures before the massive foreign influence, but not in a naïve way. Wole Soyinka, for example, says that the colour of the one who wears the oppressive boot is irrelevant. Chinua Achebe, the greatest story teller of the three, cherishes the local culture in all his books, but he kept writing in English, and he also values the foreign, especially British and American, impulses.

A columnist in International Herald Tribune on 27 March 2013 began his article about Chinua Achebe, the literary giant and gentle rebel, referring to Achebe's story about having grown up under an ancient pear tree. The tree had deep roots in the soil of the land. It gave shade, fruits, firewood, and it could be used for children's play, old men's talks, and women's food preparation and tea parties. It even gave cash income to the owner.

In the same way, in our everyday lives, as in politics, we should build our foundation on our own principles, on the local and indigenous culture, with openness to the outside world. Human beings are the same everywhere, but we have had different roads through history. Everything is local, not only in Africa - and Asia - but everything is also more than local.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from research, diplomacy and development aid.