

Black journalists embracing SA's culture of celebrating ignorance



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AT THE heart of Steve Biko's political philosophy is that a sustained critique of white supremacy must always be accompanied by readiness for a sustained black self-critique. This is what Ayi Kwei Armah did when he wrote *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which made him unpopular among Africa's rulers and writers because he was hanging Africa's dirty linen in public.

It was prophetic, as country after country stumbled under the dead weight of corrupt leaders. It secured his place among African literature's canonical figures: Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

As we drove around SA recently, Armah let me in on what makes his writing powerful: "You see, the secret is I'm actually not in love with writing itself, I use it to provoke society to think about things they would rather

not think about."

Now it is my turn to raise some unpalatable questions about black journalism. I raise the questions being fully aware that there is no group of professionals more sensitive to criticism than journalists.

They take everything personally, even as they dish out criticism on a daily basis. It is a fairly commonplace double standard that we would rather not talk about.

Speaking shortly after Armah's Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) public lecture last week, Keorapetse Kgositse, the great South African intellectual known better elsewhere than in his home country, noted: "SA is about the only country I know where people can be ignorant, and still be proud of it."

Arts and Culture Minister Pallo Jordan echoed the sentiment at a dinner for Armah at Cape Town's

Centre for the Book. "The fact that there have been no ripples in the media about Ayi Kwei Armah's visit shows the extent of our ignorance about our continent."

I can perhaps understand why Renelle van Zyl, English news editor at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), who, having sent her news staff to interview Armah in Pretoria, later dropped the story from the bulletin.

Van Zyl told me she had a short bulletin because of the cricket. Even running the story on the weekend was not an option. This was not an important story, and I was free to take it up with whoever.

All the while SABC Africa was broadcasting the visit to other countries, and Carle Blanche will be broadcasting a piece to 44 countries across the continent.

Here I go again blaming white people for not valuing African history, and not looking at vanities, inanities and inadequacies of black journalistic culture. I still cannot believe that not a single black journalist has written a story about Armah.

If anything, this reflects the banality of black journalistic culture as a mere appendage of the broader white journalistic culture. It is a culture that thrives on thrills such as who will win the next Oscar or next cricket game.

Culture, history and development have no place in the vulgar competition for headlines and ratings.

It was the great novelist and playwright, Arthur Miller, who said a great newspaper is a nation speaking to itself, a mirror to society. But who shall hold up that mirror when the very people who run our newspapers know so little and put such little value on that history, especially as it is carried through the vehicle of literature?

I once asked veteran photographer Alf Khumalo for his opinion on who were the greatest writers of the 1950s, and without blinking an eye he said: "Es'kia Mphahlele and Can Themba."

As it turns out, they were both men of letters. Would it be nice if black editors and journalists were also men and women of letters, or am I merely being nostalgic about an African golden age that will never return?

Perhaps this is a generational thing. Perhaps we live in an age when people do not read anymore. Armah counsels patience.

Having lived in seclusion for the past three decades, Armah could not be the least bothered by the lack of attention. "You must educate the children, then you would not have to worry about convincing other people. It would happen naturally to them," Armah says.


But who will educate the children? He reassures me that things will change when conditions become so serious that people have to protect themselves from banality.

Perhaps then, and only then, will we turn to our literature and our history. Armah's book, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, would, of course, be required reading for such a renaissance. And so would be the rest of Armah's canon.

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