An Intellectual Compass: An interview with Professor Eldred Jones

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Eldred Durosimi Jones was the first African professor of English, South of the Sahara. He is Emeritus Professor of English Language and Literature at Fourah Bay College (FBC), University of Sierra Leone, and a pioneer in the critical studies of African Literatures in English, African Linguistics, Sierra Leonian Literature and languages, including Krio. He rose through the academic ranks and by dint of hard work became a professor of English Language and Literature at Fourah Bay College and, before he retired in 1985, Principal of FBC and Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone.

Professor Jones has read extensively and travelled widely, walking along varied paths where his footprints are now firmly imprinted. He has published a number of field-defining works on Elizabethan and Jacobean Literature, Shakespeare, African Literature in English, Soyinka, the English language in West Africa, and Krio. His books include The Way to Write Successful Letters (1962), Othello’s Countrymen (1965, which won him the Criticism Prize in the first Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal in 1966), The Elizabethan Image of Africa (1971), The Writing of Wole Soyinka (1973), The Krio-English Dictionary (1980, which he co-edited with Clifford Fyle), and his most recent, his memoir, The Freetown Bond: A Life Under Two Flags (2012) written with his wife, Mrs. Marjorie Jones. He has also published over thirty articles in prestigious journals and edited numerous works, the most celebrated of which is The Bulletin of African Literature Today (now African Literature Today), which he edited for close to three decades with Professor Eustace Palmer and Mrs. Marjorie Jones. His impact as lecturer, scholar, educator, and examiner has been felt in the United States of America, The United Kingdom, Canada, Sweden, East and West Africa, and, obviously, Sierra Leone.

A distinguished scholar and thoughtful academic, Professor Jones has won many awards and honours from highly-esteemed organizations. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA) in 1972; awarded The Silver Medal by The Royal Society Of Arts UK (1974); decorated Premier Order of The Republic of Sierra Leone (MRSL) 1980; granted the Senior Citizen Award, AWOL, SL, 2001; awarded jointly with his wife Mrs. Marjorie Jones the Distinguished Africanist Award, University of Birmingham, UK 2001; nominated an Honorary Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford 2002; awarded the First International PEN Sierra Leone Chapter Award 2005; and named the First Integrity Award recipient by the Anti-Corruption Commission, SL, 2009. His zest for knowledge is further illustrated in his membership in several illustrious associations: He is a founding member of the Executive Committee of the International Shakespeare Association, UK; consultant to the Association for Commonwealth Languages and Literatures, UK; member of the West African Linguistic Society; consulting member of the Globe Playhouse Trust, UK; member of the International Institute of
Communications; consultant, Disability Issues, Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children’s Affairs, SL; member of the Advisory Boards of The Cambridge Guide to Theatre, UK; and a member of The West African Journal of Language and Literature and Criticism.

Professor Jones is a national treasure, and a proud symbol of Sierra Leone’s intellectual, educational, academic, and scholarly heritage. I had the singular honour and pleasure of conducting this interview with him on 29th November, 2012. I met him at home with his loving wife Mrs. Marjorie Jones. He and his wife have touched and transformed many lives – mine included. The daughter of the adopted son of one of his favourite aunts, I was privileged to stay with the Joneses during my undergraduate days at FBC and my early years as a lecturer in the Department of English, FBC. Mrs. Marjorie Jones, a woman of genuine substance in her own right, is Prof Jones’ soul mate and has made his world a place worth living. I am grateful to her for the biographical information on Professor Jones I have produced here.

In this interview, Prof. Jones talks about issues ranging from education, intellectual development, war literature, writers, the history of journal and publication in Sierra Leone, to his new autobiography.

Elizabeth: Once known as the “Athens of West Africa,” Sierra Leone has clearly lost her Olympian position in the annals of education excellence? How did this happen? Is it ever possible to regain those halcyon days?

Prof. Jones: Sierra Leone had its Olympian position by the simple fact that it had the first institutions of post-primary education in the whole region and students flocked to Freetown naturally from all parts and beyond. Since those days, many of those countries have set up their own institutions for the education of their young.

Is it possible to regain its pristine position? It can only do this if it develops its institutions. Sierra Leone recaptured its early position temporarily when there were problems in Rhodesia, (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa. It provided special needs. If it focuses on special areas, for example, in Agriculture and oil technology, it might regain something of its international standing.

Elizabeth: If you were to propose a definition of Sierra Leone Studies, what would that definition be? Or: What would your answer be if you were asked to propose a definition and brief history of the field of Sierra Leone Studies?

Prof. Jones: Sierra Leone did at one time have a journal of exactly that title, which published articles on Language, Literature, History, Sociology and similar matters. Not very much was published in the scientific areas, but it touched on things like the natural resources of the country.

There are two periods of Sierra Leone Studies. It however seems to have broken down after its initial era, the 1920s. The second era, the 1940s, has now passed
once more into history. That Journal illustrates what this sort of periodical can do for its country.

Sierra Leone Studies could be launched on any of these particular genres, just as the Sierra Leone Language Journal, which became The West Africa Language Journal.

Elizabeth: The multiplicity of languages in Africa has always been a challenge for the African writer who, oftentimes, has been forced as it were to write in the language of the colonizer. Indeed, this language question was the thematic focus of the 17th issue of African Literature Today which you co-edited with Eustace Palmer and Marjorie Jones. In a small country like Sierra Leone where well over ten languages are spoken, what is the role of indigenous languages and Krio in the production and promotion of literature, culture, and national unity?

Prof. Jones: I think it was quite sensible and certainly useful that various colonized areas in Africa adopted the metropolitan Language of English, French and Portuguese to give a kind of national identity which at the same time linked the particular country with the rest of the world. This however militated against the development of the indigenous Languages. To apply that to Sierra Leone, we have a number of indigenous languages and have developed a national lingua franca, Krio, which make most Sierra Leoneans at least bilingual and many multilingual.

There is a danger that the indigenous languages may be neglected because of the predominance of English and possibly Krio. But indigenous languages have a place, since the culture of a people is embedded in its language. Therefore, indigenous languages should be developed so that the culture should be represented in its own language and Sierra Leone must continue its tradition of bilingualism and multilingualism in its citizens.

Elizabeth: In issue 20 of African Literature Today, “New Trends and Generations”, you noted: “War is another phenomenon that produces a sufficient change in focus to mark new trends and schools of literature.” Sierra Leone Studies today is clearly marked by the decade-old war and the traumas it engendered. How does war, in terms of its impact on the development of Sierra Leone literature in particular and Sierra Leone Studies in general, compare to other events in the country’s history such as British colonization and self-rule from 1961 to the end of the 80s?

Prof. Jones: War generally concentrates the mind. It forces people to reflect on their history and make them try to learn the reasons for the traumatic events which so destabilized their countries. Thus, for example, the Biafran war produced a spate of fiction and historical writing. And the Sierra Leonean civil war is producing a
similar kind of writing. For example, Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen & Me* and Ibrahim Abdullah’s *Democracy and Terror* are both on the Sierra Leone civil war. War can galvanize people into the reflective type of literature.

Colonialism similarly had a traumatic effect on indigenous civilizations and produced a spate of Literature, prime among which is Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* which shows the effect of the clash of British civilization with Ibo culture.

Much of African fiction is the result of this clash of civilizations. It has influenced Sierra Leonean writing as well. Paul Conton’s *The Price of Liberty* and Yema Lucilda Hunter’s *The Road to Freedom* belong to this group. William Conton’s (Paul Conton’s father) *The African* was a similar reaction to colonialism and Apartheid.

Elizabeth: Sierra Leonean literature has lagged behind literatures from many other African countries. What, in your view, has been responsible for the paucity of literary production and recognition and how could the situation be remedied?

Prof. Jones: In an article for *The Times* of London, I illustrated the fact that Sierra Leoneans were quite prolific in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. But what they produced were academic texts in History, Law and through journalism, many aspects of life. *The Sierra Leone Weekly News* is a good illustration of the kind of journal which often rose to the heights of literature but which did not produce much in the way of fiction.

More recently, many Sierra Leoneans have written fiction with distinction; Syl Cheney-Coker’s *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*, Aminatta Forna’s *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, Delia Jarrett-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen & Me*, Paul Conton’s *The Price of Liberty*, have all won international prizes for their fiction. Poets like Kosonike Koso-Thomas, in *Poetic Reflections*, Syl Cheney-Coker’s four volumes of poetry, Gbanahom Hallowell, in *Manscape in the Sierra*; Oumar Farouk Sesay in *Salute to the Remains of a Peasant* and a large number of published and unpublished Sierra Leoneans have kept up a tradition of poetry heralded by such earlier writers as Jacob Stanley Davies, Crispin George and Delphine King.

Raymond Sarif Easmon, perhaps better known for his plays *The New Patriot* and *Dear Parent & Ogre*, also wrote *The Burnt Out Marriage, The Feud and Other Stories*, and volumes of unpublished prose.

I give a list of recent Sierra Leonean writing of various genres with which I have been personally associated, but there are many more of which I am not even aware.
Elizabeth: What is your assessment of Sierra Leonean literature yesterday and today? Could you speculate about its prospects for the future?

Prof. Jones: I have mentioned the Sierra Leonean writers in my answer to the previous question.

There are all the signs that Sierra Leonean writing has a very good future. One impediment however is the lack of local publishing facilities as it is not easy for new writers to catch the attention of overseas publishers. What is badly needed is local access to publication in order to encourage the spread of the tradition of writing, out of which the international stars would emerge.

Elizabeth: There have been journals in the past that focused on Sierra Leone studies: Journal of Sierra Leone Studies, Fourah Bay College Studies in Language and Literature, Africana Research Bulletin, for example. Which ones were you involved with? Can you provide a brief history of scholarly journals in Sierra Leone? Can you venture an explanation as to why journals of this nature have not been sustainable?

Prof. Jones: In the 1950s I wrote articles on Krio in Sierra Leone Studies. I also contributed to the later journals: The Sierra Leone Language Journal, The West African Language Journal, The Africana Research Bulletin and The Aureol Review. An interesting illustration of the way journals rise and fall is The Aureol Review which was itself inspired by that briefly famous Ghanaian journal, The Legon Observer. It had a promising start but soon succumbed to the uncertainties of local publication and circulation. Other journals from Fourah Bay College include The Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion which had an international circulation under the editorship of Prof. Harry Sawyer, but again ceased because of the difficulties of printing and circulation.

Elizabeth: On the other hand, you were the founder and, along with Marjorie Jones your wife, the editor for 35 years of the journal African Literature Today. That journal is still thriving and in circulation today. Why?

Prof. Jones: Well (he laughs) African Literature Today is a very interesting example of a journal which grew out of a local publication, Bulletin of African Literature Today, a humble mimeographed publication which might have gone the way of other struggling local journals. It however received the attention of an international publisher, Heinemann Educational Books, which gave it a more reliable base and the resulting continuity. It now flourishes under the publishing imprint of James Currey, one of the original members of Heinemann, who supported its foundation.
Elizabeth: What are your thoughts about the scope and focus of the newly founded *Research in Sierra Leone Studies (RISLS): Weave*? Do you have words of wisdom for its editorial team and readers?

Prof. Jones: Yes, I must first congratulate the founders of *Weave*, particularly because they have chosen the electronic method of publication which gives it instant international circulation. This e-journal should liberate Sierra Leonean scholars into international scholarship.

How will it be sustained? Even electronic productions and transmissions involve time, technology and its attendant costs. Unless this is put on a sound basis, you risk the fate of print journals.

Elizabeth: Finally, in your forthcoming autobiography *The Freetown Bond: A Life Under Two Flags*, written with Marjorie Jones, you present a vivid recollection growing up in Freetown in the latter days of British colonial rule in Sierra Leone. The book also deals with the ways you and Marjorie experienced life in Sierra Leone gripped by civil war. Why did you divide your life experiences into these two historical moments? What lessons if any would you want Sierra Leoneans to take away from your book?

Prof. Jones: We did not legislate the historical and other incidences in our lives. We were born into colonialism and emerged into independence, which tragically involved a civil war which we endured and miraculously survived without leaving Sierra Leone as scores of Sierra Leoneans were forced to do. We even made our own weak contribution to the resumption of democratic government by our membership of independent mediation committee (INAMEC). All this we achieved by accommodating ourselves in a positive way to prevailing circumstances.

This book is an attempt to review my life against the social and political institutions of my time – religion, education, politics, family life, etc. It is as much of the institutions as of myself and those who helped to make me. Readers should first of all enjoy the book if they can, and make the resulting comparisons with things as they are now and as they were, over the period of close to a century, about which I have written.

Elizabeth: Thank you very much Professor Jones for granting the first interview that will be published in the inaugural edition of *Research in Sierra Leone Studies (RISLS): Weave*. We look forward to your future contributions to the journal.

Prof. Jones: Thank you very much Mrs. Elizabeth Kamara, it is always a pleasure to speak with you.
Notes
1. This interview was conducted before the book was published. (Editor).

Works Cited