Yulisa Amadu Maddy (1936-2014): An Appreciation

By Professor Eustace Palmer

The recent passing on March 16 of Yulisa Amadu Maddy means that Sierra Leone has lost one of its brightest literary stars. Moreover, his death is a great loss to African literature and culture as a whole. Born in 1936, Maddy belonged to that new breed of Sierra Leonean writers, including Lemuel Johnson, Gaston Bart-Williams and Syl Cheney-Coker, that took Sierra Leonean literature, almost kicking and screaming, into the mainstream of modern African literature. Unlike their predecessors like Delphine King, Abioseh Nicol and Raymond Sarif Easmon, these writers were young men who had reached their young manhood during the heyday of African nationalism and were therefore much more aware of the implications of racism and colonialism. Where their predecessors had been privileged elitist scholarship boys who looked toward Britain, the former colonizing power, almost with a feeling of nostalgia that influenced their styles, attitudes and themes, and had, generally led a fairly cushioned existence, and could accommodate themselves easily to a Western kind of lifestyle, the new breed of writers, though largely educated in the Western world, had to struggle against heavy odds, were aware of the hostilities, including racism, that could be directed against people from the former colonies in particular, and Africa in general, following the collapse of empire, but also of the strains and stresses inherent in contemporary African life. Instead of glorying in the previous connection with Britain and the West, they saw the glaring hypocrisies and animosities that often fuelled Western attitudes towards Africa, and those who were creoles were forced to examine quite brutally the implications of their Creole ancestry in particular, and slavery, in general. It is not insignificant that Maddy changed his name from Pat Maddy to Yulisa Amadu Maddy.

Yulissa Amadu Maddy attended the St. Edwards secondary school in Freetown, and at the age of 22 he proceeded to France and then to Britain. He never went to university, but, because of an early interest in drama and the theater, he went instead to the then very well-known Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama where he honed his burgeoning dramatic skills. This was the famous period that saw the rise of avant-garde theater, and the plays of people like Osborne and Wesker that were to have such a profound impact on British and even African theater; Wole Soyinka was an apprentice at the Royal Court theater in London at this time. It was a great period to be a student of drama in Britain, and Maddy made full use of his opportunities and became a very professional man of the theater who, unlike his important Sierra Leonean predecessor in the field of Sierra Leonean drama, Sarif Easmon, acquired a profound
knowledge of what the stage was capable of, what worked and did not work, and the innovations that could be made. Even while still in Britain he started broadcasting, and writing and directing radio plays. Some of his early plays were not only broadcast on the BBC’s African service, but were eventually published in the ground-breaking *Obasai and Other Plays* by Heinemann in 1968. He thus became extremely well-known as a leading African dramatist. The very titles of his plays demonstrated his African consciousness: *Alla Gbah, Yon Kon, Obasai, Ghana Bendu*. There were further elements that showed he was prepared to make a clean break from the past in so far as Sierra Leonean drama was concerned. Where his noted predecessor, Sarif Easmon, took his characters from members of the elite and generally reflected the attitudes of the elite, Maddy took his from the masses: thieves, drop-outs, street corner boys, gang members, prostitutes, and pimps. Where Easmon’s characters used language that some might say was stilted and almost Victorian, the language of Maddy’s characters, even when they used English, was down to earth, almost obscene, and brutal, and showed that he was trying to reflect the rhythms of ordinary African speech. Maddy’s dramatic techniques, unlike Easmon’s, also showed that he was aware of innovations in the theater and knew what would succeed. It was also clear that Maddy was out to shock the Creoles out of their pompousness and feelings of superiority. Where Easmon reveled in his membership of the Creole aristocracy, Maddy could hardly let slip an opportunity to expose Creole complacency, religious hypocrisy, snobbery and class-consciousness. A new force had clearly arrived in Sierra Leonean theater.

This became obvious when Maddy returned to Sierra Leone in 1968 as Head of Drama on Radio Sierra Leone. It was obvious that he was out to revolutionize Sierra Leonean drama which up to that time had consisted of the staging of prim British comedies of manners at the British Council for the benefit of a largely middle class audience. Maddy gave tremendous encouragement to the new wave of Sierra Leonean dramatists, like Dele Charley, who were now writing plays in Krio, and opening up the theater to the masses, even those who were illiterate. In 1969, he himself founded the Gbakanda Afrikan Tiata Company; the name itself is extremely significant. For a while, he was also involved with the Sierra Leonean national dance troupe.

Maddy’s importance went beyond that of actor and dramatist. In 1973 Heinemann published his novel *No Past, No Present, No Future* which was received with great acclaim and was recognized as the most important Sierra Leonean novel published up to that time. As is the case with his plays, the characters are drawn from ordinary life. The plot concerns the activities of three young Sierra Leonean males, all drop-outs from secondary school, who make their way to Europe and try to carve niches for themselves in oppressive and often hostile environments. This work is also significant because it was one of the first African novels to handle the topic of male homosexuality, a topic that was then taboo not only in literary works but in society as a whole.

Because of the brutal honesty of his work; his penchant for shocking people, especially those in authority; his concern for the down-trodden and his hatred for the inequities in society; Maddy could not retain his positions in Sierra Leone for long and spent years of his life in exile. For a while, he was Director of the Zambian national Dance Troupe which he took to the
World’s Fair in Montreal in 1970. Although not a university graduate, his competence in the field of drama was recognized by academic appointments in universities in Nigeria, and he recently spent several years in the United States where, in 2005, he was one of the keynote speakers at the annual conference of the African Literature Association. On returning to Sierra Leone his contribution to African culture as a whole was rewarded by an academic appointment at the newly upgraded Milton Margai College of Education. His death is a great loss. May he rest in peace.