

Achebe Lauds Poets

BY GORDON KENDO

THE writer in the Third World needs a lot of talent to be able to channel his creativity to a social task. This was said by Professor Chinua Achebe during a public address in Taifa Hall of the University of Nairobi.

He paid tribute to Christopher Okigbo his countryman poet who dropped the pen in favour of the gun during the Nigerian Biafra civil war. He also recalled Agostinho Neto, the president cum-poet of Angola.

A poet, said Achebe, must be seen to be active not merely writing for writings own sake. He has to be meaningfully involved with the society.

Achebe underscored the inevitable clash between the poet and the emperor. The poet and the emperor have a problematic relationship that is difficult to resolve. The emperor is concerned with the status quo and the maintenance of prevailing power structures. The poet is a humanist struggling against the status quo in order to change the human condition. He is an idealist and has different agenda from the emperor.

Achebe cited Agostinho Netos' poems as carrying a freedom message. The poems some of which appear in *When Bullets Begin To Flower*, edited by Margret Dickson and published by E.A.P.H. (1972) inspired soldiers against Portuguese colonialism in Angola and Mozambique.

The writer has a voice that go beyond the clan. His voice is a property of the neighbourhood. The writer has a national mission said Achebe.

He made extensive reference to his latest novel *Anthills of the Savannah* in order to portray the poet as a spokesman of a larger entity. Further examples came from Puerto Rican poets and their struggle against colonialism.

The poet has multiple values but finally settles down to foreground



Prof. Achebe disparity between the "poet" and "Emperor"
those dearest to his immediate circumstances, said Achebe.

The novelist said, African Literature, of which he is a foundation layer, has the responsibility of defending African cultures and histories against denigration and colonial biases.

Chinua Achebe who has consistently written for adult readers confirmed his desire to write for children. He described foreign books for children as "beautifully packaged poison" that would ruin the young minds of the African child, finding his way about his world.

Chinua Achebe has already written three books for children: *The Flute*, *The Drum* and *How the Leopard Got its Claws*.

Responding to questions from audience, Achebe reiterated his earlier statements on the language of African Literature. "We cannot wake up and pass resolutions against foreign languages" he said, Africa has no lingua franca that can unify its people. Using multiple mother tongues will not serve African people, he argued.

Chinua Achebe was in Kenya last week as a visitor of his publishers, Heinemann Kenya Ltd.