

Arts and Africa

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody, Louis Mahoney introducing "Arts and Africa" with our very own mixture of music, poetry, painting and personalities

SIGNATURE TUNE

I've always understood that one of the important characteristics of African art, almost anywhere on the continent, is the special blending that exists between all the art forms in their many manifestations. I'd be sorry to see drama and music and dancing all being separated and catagorised as all too often happens in the western world. In fact, I'd like to think that it couldn't happen in Africa, anywhere in Africa.

But as artists of every sort become more self-aware certain complications do arise. What happens when some one - a painter, say, sees other styles and forms, goes abroad for training, becomes sophisticated?

We'll be meeting just such an artist in a minute and be hearing how he is meeting the challenge. He belongs to a group with the title "Gbakanda Tiata". And here's some of their music, traditional music from Sierra Leone.

MUSIC

Music from the "Gbakanda Tiata's" song and dance ensemble singing in traditional Sierra Leone style. The whole company is a mixture of Sierra Leonean artists, headed by the writer Yulisa Amadu Maddy. His aim in founding it was to get together a group of artists and then for them to train and work in all aspects of drama, singing, dancing and writing. In due course "Gbakanda Tiata" plan to take to the road. They want to provide a mobile theatre that can travel round the whole country and take their performances far away from the city life.

But, of course, this is where they've started with a week of entertainment in Freetown. There's a drum ballet, plenty of traditional singing, and an exhibition of paintings by Peter Karefa-Smart. Now, naturally we can't show you his paintings, but what we can do is let you hear one of his poems. Because, like other members of "Gbakanda Tiata", Peter is interested in all forms of art.

PETER KAREFA-SMART:

READS "THE POEM OF THE PAINTER"

MAHONEY: That's the first few lines of a poem that Peter Karefa-Smart has written about his work as an artist and this is how he explained the process to Roland Buck.

KAREFA-SMART: You see, when I am painting, I normally paint at nights and most people are asleep at the time I work. So it has a lot of symbolism for me to be working at night - painting and trying to understand why I have to stay so long painting, thinking out how I should apply paint on canvas etc. etc. That's the "fragmented hours" for me. I don't adjust my time span to sixty minutes, thirty minutes - if I feel like painting for twelve hours, I can paint for twelve hours. And, incidentally, when I'm painting, I'm writing - so both go hand in hand.

ROLAND BUCK:

I notice that in most of your painting, your themes are mostly based on what we see here, in the sense of Sierra Leone masks, dances, effigies of secret societies. In other paintings the theme is purely love and romance. Can you explain this?

KAREFA-SMART: Well, yes. That's a paradox between the contemporary African artist and the educated African artist which, unfortunately, I happen to be. I've been trained in the (Western) aspect - the artistic and intelligent. But I'm an African too, and I enjoy dancing, masks. I enjoy 'a good play' as it is called out here. And when I paint and when I'm in the mood, these are the things that come easily to mind.

BUCK: Is this the only form of art that you are concentrating on?

KAREFA-SMART: At the moment, yes. I might evolve out of it, but it would be the basis of all my works.

MAHONEY: When I mentioned the week of activities by the "Gbakanda Tiata" society I omitted to say that the climax of the week was an 'Open House' session on the last day when a new concept with the name Neo-non-ism was introduced and discussed. Now the philosophy of art is something I would expect to find more in Senegal, or the Ivory Coast, certainly in a francophone country rather than in a country using English. It's very interesting, however, to find this theoretical discussion taking place in Sierra Leone.

Peter Karefa-Smart has pioneered the concept, which he calls a "search for truth and actuality.....for a unity to be achieved between the artist and his works and his cultural heritage".

But let's hear how he explains Neononism to Roland Buck.

KAREFA-SMART: It's a concept I have put together out of three vital and integral parts of our society in Sierra Leone: the African part which we cannot deny; the Islamic component which is very, very strong; and the Western segment too. This three-in-one is what is called Neononism. I have a whole "something

I've written about it and on Friday I shall deliver it and, hopefully, a lot of people will have been aware of it by now to challenge me. It's going to be a give-and-take sort of thing. I'm not posing to be an authority on anything but what I've been trained to do is to sit back and analyse certain things, to understand why - like why I am nervous in front of a mic, right now. You might find traces of other people's ideas in it, but I can tell you the word, the linkage of the word, is what is new.

BUCK: You seem to have left out our traditional African religion and Christianity in this concept.

KAREFA-SMART: Well, it's embracing. When I talk about the communal and traditional African way of life, it means that everything African is covered.

BUCK: Now, we are going to talk about "Antalla, comme aussi" (phon.) Can you tell us what that painting is about?

KAREFA-SMART: "Antalla, comme aussi" -This is what you asked me about before - the masks and the dance. This is what, really, Neononism is all about. I see Christians, I see Muslims, I see ordinary Africans, no religious prefixes or concepts, behind masks and "Antalla comme aussi" is something like this.

MAHONEY: There was much more poetry during the week's activities and some of it had drumming and other music as accompaniment, But what about opportunities for publishing poetry? Well, this is yet another aspect of the group's activities as Peter explained.

KAREFA-SMART: Hopefully, we're trying to get a publishing house. Like, Tuesday night we're having a poetry reading and Syl Cheyney--Coker, the poet, shall be sharing it at occasion. And we're coming out with an anthology called "The Poetry of Neononism" and we have about eight poets that we shall be publishing. And, hopefully, this will start up a publishing industry for local Sierra Leonean writing and, hopefully, I might have my stuff published by our own publishing house.

MAHONEY: Peter Karefa-Smart. And now I'd like you to listen to a poem we've read before in "Arts and Africa". It isn't difficult to decide this poet's nationality.

ANTHONY DELIUS:

READS "THE SOUNDS BEGIN AGAIN" BY DENNIS BRUTUS

MAHONEY: The poetry of Dennis Brutus, the South African poet. Dennis Brutus was one of the subjects of a conversation that Anthony Delius had with Professor Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre of the University of Grenoble in France. It's gratifying, isn't it, that a Frenchman should take a great interest in African poetry written in English. But after meeting Dennis Brutus Professor Alvarez-Pereyre began to study his poetry and that of fellow Africans in considerable depth. This is what Dennis Brutus told him of his early days.

JACQUES ALVAREZ-PEREYRE:

He was brought up in a family who were extremely interested in poetry and, strangley enough, for a coloured man, in the English language. And his mother used to read poems to him and read stories of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and so on. That was a thing in which he was immersed from the very beginning.

DELIUS: Of course his public career is pretty well-known, I should think: how he actually began to agitate against the government in South Africa because of its racist policies; and then how he was shot in the stomach, wasn't he, and put into jail. It was out of that jail sentence that he spent in South Africa, that some of his best-known poetry comes, isn't it?

ALVAREZ-PEREYRE: Yes, well before that, he had sent to Central Africa, for the Mbari Competition, a group of poems which were published under the title "Sirens Knuckles And Boots". And then when he came to England he published "Letter to Martha and Other Poems", some of which he had written in Robben Island or in the prison where he was jailed.

DELIUS: Of course, it's part of a long series, isn't it? it's called.....I believe the word "lust" comes into it....

ALVAREZ-PEREYRE: Yes, all his poems have now been published in one single volume which is called "The Simple Lust". I think it is Heinemann who has published it. But he actually published quite a few poems - discarded a lot of them because he has always been striving to put poetry before propaganda. Actually he did say once that if a poem carried too much, or even a minor part, of propaganda, it was not considered to be good poetry.

I think, for me, the achievement of Dennis Brutus is that, being in a way, linked - practically everyday since he left South Africa and even when living in South Africa - linked with the continuous commitment, he could afford to speak of something else in his poetry or something which had a background of oppression, racialism and so on. Some of his better poems are - for instance I am thinking of "Night Song", "City" which is absolutely beautiful - where the love of the woman, the woman he loved and the love for the country he loved, merge without being distinguishable from one another.

DELIUS: But, of course, a great deal of his commitment does come out in his poetry. But you don't think it's any the less poetry for that?

ALVAREZ-PEREYRE: I would say that I find in Dennis Brutus, the best type of wedding, of marriage between commitment and poetry.

MAHONEY: "Poetry before propaganda". That remark should set African poets talking and arguing. That, by-the-way, was only part of a much longer conversation that we recorded between Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre and Anthony Delius, and if poetry's your interest, I'd make sure you tune into the rest of it in a later programme.

For now, we're returning to the music of "Gbakanda Tiata"
as I say goodbye ~ see you next week for another "Arts and
Africa".

MUSIC OF "Gbakanda Tiata"

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