

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another fifteen minutes of "Arts and Africa". Regular listeners to the programme will have noticed that we spend a great deal of time talking directly to Africa's artists. We try to find out how they tick, how they develop their creative skills, and of course how their work reflects the society from which it emerges.

Well today's guest, though a playwright himself, devotes most of his time to the practical problems of art and culture in his society. He's Asiedu Yirenkyi, Ghana's Secretary for Culture and Tourism. And along with other members of Ghana's Peoples National Defence Council, he's attempting to overhaul not just the political economy of Ghana but also it's national culture. Schools, theatres and churches - even the laws affecting inheritance and traditional marriage have come under the scrutiny of the Government.

Asiedu Yirenkyi, welcome to Arts and Africa. It's quite clear that your Government believes that cultural change is inseparable from political change. Now we'll come to that shortly. But do you really think a nation's culture can be changed from the top, by the State? For a start it looks to me as if the critical state of Ghana's economy is forcing people to survive, now how do they find time to be interested in culture?

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

I think we are looking at culture as a performance here. When we look at culture now we are looking at it as a totality of our way of life. It includes methods of agriculture; the way we build our houses; the way we think; the way we survive even in the face of hardships. We are not seeing culture as a performance, but as a totality of how we can bring our peoples' mind back into the society and help them survive within the society.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I'll come back to this interesting and very important point later. Meanwhile, you are trying to revive traditional culture. Let's look at in detail some of the institutions you are trying to revive. You are not establishing any new institutions?

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

No, we are using the old institutions, brushing them up and one of the institutions that I can mention here is the Arts Council of Ghana. Now the Arts Council of Ghana is the Government body set up to promote the Arts. But it looks as if before we took over, the word 'promotion' had never been defined by the Arts Council itself. They hardly understood what was meant by 'promotion'. We are now educating them and broadening their concepts of promotion to include the idea of putting up theatres because you can't promote when you haven't got the facilities to promote. We are also looking at the administrative infra-structure itself. Now the structure that we met in the old system was intended to favour the administration, or the bureaucracy, so the Council, instead of promoting the artists, were promoting accountants and executive secretaries. Their life styles were assured and whilst the Government was subsidising the operations of the Council, they really did not have to worry about whether they promoted the Arts or not. So you can see that in spite of the fact that there have been quite a number of Ghanaian artists internationally recognised, there is not one of them, like Efua Sutherland, Joe de Graft, Kofi Awoonor, none of them were really promoted by the Arts Council. Now E T Mensah is again an example. It's always the artist who has to find his way on his own. The Arts Council didn't discover anybody. We are drawing up a new structure which is intended to introduce a kind of Congress. An annual Congress where artists or arts associations will elect their own secretary and the Government will then take up the salary of this secretary. Of course if it fails and that person fails to do his work within the year, in the next election there is the possibility that he will be thrown out. So we are democratising; bringing them up to date. We have also realised that quite a number, because of the economic constraints, of our traditional festivals have been dying out, so we have moved in cultural officers to re-organise these traditional annual festivals, and we have now five or six of these experiments and you can see that the whole festival is changing because now it is not being organised by Chiefs, but by cultural officers and they are bringing schools to compete for cups in the same way as is done in soccer.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You mention the schools which I am very interested in. What specifically are you doing there to make the children who are old enough interested in the culture of their country? What are you doing to help them to do this?

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

We have started a process of re-writing our text books. This was going to be started at the pre-school age, but unfortunately we had the problem with the universities then, and so we decided to go back and look at the problems of the universities first before we go back,

otherwise we would by now be starting right from scratch getting the new text books that will reflect our realities in society. We want the children to learn about our Chiefs, about what goes on in the courts; what is available in our environment, in fact surround the whole environment of the classroom with our environment. When we were children we were reading Kweisi Ama which was much closer to our culture, but immediately after Independence we started reading about Jane and John. Our children started reading Jane and John books. We will have to go back and modify these text books. So the children will benefit a little. By doing this we are not really shutting the children out. We will allow some of the foreign literature that is relevant to us, so the children will not really be isolated because that is not really the intention.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What are you doing to help theatre?

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

We have had a number of theatre structures which we abandoned. They were abandoned after 1966. Theatre doesn't cost us any foreign exchange so this year for example we are trying to complete theatres in four regions, the eastern region; the northern region, the upper region and the upper west. This would be a 1984 project. In 1985 we intend to move into other regions. Now, we want to look at the regional theatres first. At the same time we are also moving our cultural infra-structure from the regional capitals to the district capitals so as to extend our facilities to a greater number of people. Now we will have to complete these by '86 or '87 before we come to Accra to think about the idea of a National Theatre because a National Theatre tends to be the highest cultural point - it is not just a building people look at with pride - it tends to be very expensive and must be done well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, when you talk about taking theatre to the countryside - have you considered the medium of communication that you are going to use? I mean, the people in the rural areas might not understand English.

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

No, they don't use English. It is very simple - they use the local language.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So in other words you are going to encourage people to write in the local languages for example.

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

Yes, it is part of the educational policy. Every Ghanaian should learn one language other than his mother tongue. The performances are always going to be in the local language. Luckily most Ghanaians are literate in Akan. This is not to say the Akans want to dominate, but the fact is that when the Akan language is used it probably goes

a little further.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now I understand that you are introducing new copyright laws to protect musicians and writers.

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

Yes, we've just had the final draft of a copyright law which will protect both foreign artists in Ghana and Ghanaian artists in Ghana. Now so far as you know we have this nasty history of most of our genuine artists and musicians dying very poor - E K Nyame is one of them, Kwame Okai as I'm speaking now has had a stroke. The ministry is now moving to try and rehabilitate him. Now what I feel about these artists is that they are not interested in charity - they are interested in making a living from what they produce. As a result we need a new law that will protect them against piracy. Right now one of the most lucrative trades in Ghana is to get a few recording machines and pirate someone's hit. A tape recorder shop of this nature makes more money than the musician and we are reversing this to ensure that creativity blossoms and the artist can live by his art and therefore probably find more time to create more. One of the present problems is the problem of setting up a recording industry and as you notice most of the Highlife musicians have been drifting to Britain because there is no recording company in the country. But we are negotiating with a number of foreign countries to set up a sensitive, up-to-date recording company in the country, in the hope of developing the Highlife music to international standards.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, what help are you giving to writers?
For publication of their books and publishers as it were.

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

We are looking at the idea of publishing from a Ghanaian publishing company which has just been re-equipped. It is now well equipped with paper, newsprint, everything. Next to getting Ghana's publishing going, we have also instituted annual awards, for the best writers, the best live bands etc. We have just gone through the first of such awards in February, and we intend to make it an annual affair so people will be encouraged. And it's always backed by cash awards. It's not that much, but a beginning must be made somewhere.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, you were talking about the individual and the value you place on the individual as a person. Do you think he should have freedom of expression even if whatever he says is unpalatable to the Government?

ASIEDU YIRENKYI

We are not really stifling creativity. So far we have not had any trouble with artists. In fact if there is any support for the revolution it is among our artists. Musicians, artists, they are the people who really are moving. Probably because they're artists and they're far ahead of most people. So as far as artists are concerned we have not had any problems at all with them.

There has not been an occasion where an artist has come out and criticise the Government or anything. But if it does come up my ministry will protect such an artist because we believe in that freedom of expression.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Asiedu Yirenkyi thank you very much indeed. And there I'm afraid we must end this edition of Arts and Africa. Till next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.