

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, and welcome to "Arts and Africa" from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And our focus today is on Zimbabwe.

ZIMBABWE TRADITIONAL MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The pulsating rhythm that accompanies one of Zimbabwe's numerous traditional dance troupes. And we'll be considering the state of health of these groups later in the programme. But first the Zimbabwe International Book Fair. When the first one was held in Harare in August last year it was an instant success. Publishers from all over Africa showed off their books, booksellers and readers showed their appetite for good books, and writers showed their grasp of the burning literary issues of the moment. Immediately it was decided the Book Fair should be an annual event.

Well, the second Zimbabwe International Book Fair has just been held in Harare and from there Julie Frederikse sent us this report.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

The second Zimbabwe International Book Fair was held in the country's major bookshop in Harare, the entire top floor cleared out for the occasion. This central location, plus the fact that the Fair has gained a wider reputation, combined to attract over 15,000 people to the week-long event, well over twice the amount that attended last year. Some 150 publishers from 30 countries displayed over 10,000 books at the Fair. The number of foreign visitors was boosted by the fact that the annual conference of the International Federation of Library Associations was held in Nairobi this year and many librarians took the opportunity to visit Harare and the Book Fair. The event was not without problems, however. Many publishers complained about Zimbabwean customs barriers which taxed their imported books and prevented any books being sold at the Fair. The organisers have resolved to do something about this problem before next year's Fair.

A positive development was that several southern African publishers took the opportunity to hold a day-long meeting to set up a publishers association for members of the Southern African Development Co-ordinating Conference.

The biggest difference between this year's second annual Book Fair and last year's event, was the presence this year, of Kenya's Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

Gonzo Mzengeze is a young Zimbabwean author who has just had his first play published in Harare. For Mzengeze, the highlight of the Book Fair was his meeting with Ngugi:

GONZO MZENGEZE

I was influenced greatly by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. For instance, my play "The Honourable MP", looks at corruption in a newly independent African State. I think some of Ngugi's work, for instance "Petals of Blood", looks at that too. So we have a point of contact there. He has added a new dimension to African literature in that he has tackled serious themes and he has ventured into a dangerous area - in which case, he is a hero, definitely.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

Ngugi wa Thiong'o came to present a lecture on literacy and democracy in Africa, and to see the launch of his first book translated into Zimbabwe's major African language of shona.

NGUGI WA THIONG'O (extract from speech)

I just wanted to say thank you very much for all of you coming here to help with the launching of "Kutongwa Kwa Dedan Kimathi". I am particularly happy that this play "The trial of Dedan Kimathi" which celebrates the struggle of the Kenyan people against colonialism, has been translated into shona in a country where there have been similar struggles against colonialism. It is my hope that more works will continue to be translated. That is, more works from this country being translated into Kenyan languages, and more works from Kenyan languages being translated into Zimbabwean language. That way the cultures of the people of Zimbabwe can start having a dialogue with the Kenyan people. Thank you very much.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

Following the pattern established last year. Harare was again the venue for the award of the prestigious Noma Award for publishing in Africa. One of the winners was Kenya's Gakaara wa Wanjau who has published in his native language of kikuyu throughout his writing career and started his own kikuyu publishing venture. Gakaara's publications were banned as subversive during the Mau Mau period and he himself spent several years in detention. During that time he kept a secret prison diary, and it is this work which won him the joint Noma Award.

Noma Award committee chairman, Dr Eldred Jones, a Sierra Leonean literature professor, felt it important that the Award went to an African, writing and publishing in an African language:

DR ELDRED JONES

You've got people like Achebe and Soyinka who can do all kinds of things with English; you've got Ngugi - he can do what he likes with the English language; and in some cases you can almost see these writers extending the frontiers of the English language. But this is not the situation of every writer. Therefore, I think it's a very good thing that writers are being published in African languages.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

The other winner of the joint Noma Award has a different perspective on the

new trend towards the development of African literature in indigenous languages. Njabulo Ndebele, a South African living in exile in Lesotho, sees both political and practical problems arising from this idea of not publishing in English.

NJABULO NDEBELE

In our particular situation in South Africa most people read a variety of things that are written in English, and publishing in the indigenous languages has been associated with state control. Presses like Ravan press and maybe Skotaville, and writers of course, still have an enormous task trying to remove from African indigenous writing the stigma that is attached to it because of the generally reactionary, conservative nature of the writing. Secondly, there is the problem that if I write in Zulu at this point in time, there must be simultaneous translations in Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa, Venda, and so on. All these people are to be found in the reef and there are millions of them; but the vast majority of them can read English. So what should I do? So the use of English at this particular point in time is a historic necessity. We can only continue to write in English while stressing the importance of the indigenous language in the second instance.

JULIE FREDERIKSE

The organisers and contributors to this year's Book Fair have already begun making arrangements for the third annual Zimbabwean International Book Fair which will focus on children's literature and African women's writing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That report was from Julie Frederikse in Harare. Whatever happened, by the way, to the old Ife Book Fair? It certainly seems to have been upstaged.

When Zimbabwe gained its independence from white rule, a flood-gate of creative activity was opened; we've often heard in "Arts and Africa" from Zimbabwean novelists and poets and painters and dramatists, many of them using the guerrilla struggle itself as the raw material of their work. But what about the traditional arts of the village? In particular that most democratic of art forms, dance. Well, among the groups performing at the African Music Village organised in London by the Commonwealth Institute was a dance ensemble from Zimbabwe called Bikita Chinyamvera.

ZIMBABWE TRADITIONAL MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

After their performance Nick Owen talked to the man looking after the dancers in London, Basil Chidyamatamba. He's Performing Arts Co-ordinator in Harare and Nick asked him about the range of the dances they performed.

BASIL CHIDYAMATAMBA

The dances may be about hunting, growing crops - where you see them carrying baskets and sowing seeds - or they may just be about paying spiritual homage to their elders, their Chief. They also perform general ceremonial exhibition dances; such as when boys try to impress girls and girls try to impress boys.

NICK OWEN

Are this particular group from one particular area in Zimbabwe?

BASIL CHIDYAMATAMBA

Oh no! These people, although I said they come from Chikuku village in South-East Zimbabwe, are actually based in the capital city of Harare. They are all working-class people. They meet at weekends when there is nothing to do. All the people from one area come together and form singing and dancing groups. It is part of my work to identify these groups and to form well established arts organisations for dancers, choirs etc. I would say Harare has over 70 traditional song and dance groups and about 15 folk singing choirs which sing traditional folk songs.

NICK OWEN

How has independence affected the development of the indigenous arts in Zimbabwe?

BASIL CHIDYAMATAMBA

I think the independence of the country has helped greatly. People now identify themselves as belonging to Zimbabwe; they now identify their own culture which was suppressed by the colonialists. It was very difficult during the previous regime; when any prominence of traditional culture was always suppressed - it was said to be anti-government in that they thought these people who paid a lot of homage to their own culture would one day rise up and overtake them. And indeed we did that. And this is the background of the Chimarenga songs which were used during the liberation struggle. Today we are now able to identify with all the various elements of our culture. I think it has boosted the morale of everybody; there is self-identity and confidence.

NICK OWEN

What do you think you and the members of the group can learn from other groups that you see here?

BASIL CHIDYAMATAMBA

We can learn their dances and their music. The workshops that are held here in the Village on music, have assisted us to identify ourselves and to learn that we are not only part and parcel of the Zimbabwean nation but that we are part and parcel of the whole world. We are people, we exist in a cultural world, if you understand.

NICK OWEN

Have you seen anything you particularly identify with from other groups, where there are similarities? And have you seen anything particularly unusual in terms of their musical cultures?

BASIL CHIDYAMATAMBA

From the training I've had in my music research and studies I think there's not much difference in African music. There is always some connection; for instance, as between Zimbabwean music and the music from Gambia, the rhythm is the same, and the call and response type of music - that is another connection. I could close my eyes and say that music is not from Gambia, O.K., it's from "such and such", it "rings a bell". Some of the music, however, is different. In Zimbabwe for example, we don't have any friction drums (Ed. he means variable pitch drums) which the Nigerians use, drums with strings which are pulled and

where the tension of the membrane, the drum skin itself, is controlled.

NICK OWEN

Talking drums.

BASIL CHIDYAMATAMBA

That's right. To me that's something new. But the music played on those drums rings a bell!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Basil Chidyamatamba from Zimbabwe. And this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey ending this edition of "Arts and Africa" with some more of that Zimbabwean music to dance to. Till next week, goodbye.