

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of "Arts and Africa" in which we'll be hearing about an exciting new building that will be going up in Lome, and about a new but already flourishing publishing enterprise in South Africa.

Pierre Goudiaby Atepa is a Senegalese architect who was trained in the United States and now runs a successful private practice in Dakar. He's also Vice-President of the Africa Union of Architects which has just been holding its second international congress in the Cameroon capital of Yaounde. Out of the 20,000 or so professionally qualified members of the Union only about 20% are in fact Africans by birth and indeed a good proportion of those are from North Africa. Pierre Goudiaby Atepa as a black African architect is something of a rarity. But it was announced recently that he was the winner of a major international design competition for an office building and exhibition centre for the ECOWAS Fund in Lome, the capital of Togo. Well just before he went off for the Union's Congress, Susan McDonald visited Pierre Goudiaby Atepa's offices in Dakar, and with the drawings in front of them she asked him to explain his approach to the design project.

PIERRE GOUDIABY ATEPA

One of the things we wanted to do was to link the people together because one of ECOWAS' functions is to bring the sixteen African countries together. That's why we had the idea of a building that looks like a bridge. And since it's going to be between two buildings that are different, it's supposed to link the two other buildings together; to the right of it is a ten-storey building, which is the BOAD building, and to the left of it you have a thirteen-storey bank; so what the design tries to do is to link these two buildings together.

SUSAN MCDONALD

I think it's a very exciting and futuristic-looking building. We also have this dome-like structure which I understand is supposed to be an upside-down calabash?



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PIERRE GOUDIABY ATEPA

Yes it is. We wanted to dedicate the building to the African woman. Actually the whole thing was designed in a plane - because most of my designs I do in planes. After visiting the site, I was coming from Lome to Dakar and I was talking to my sister in the plane and I said 'Listen, I'm going to dedicate this building to the African woman.' She thought I was kidding, but I did. After I'd designed the bridge, under it I drew two African women and in front of them there is an upside-down calabash. In my thinking, the women are contemplating the calabash after having made a very good meal and they are happy that their husbands have just eaten well and they are very proud of what they've just done. Now when I talked about this drawing with some friends one woman said 'No, you do not understand what you've done. Actually because we're on strike we've turned the calabash upside-down to say "OK if you want to eat, go turn it the other way up and do your own cooking".'

SUSAN MCDONALD

(laughter) The women's revolution.

PIERRE GOUDIABY ATEPA

Yes, the women's revolution. (laughter) It's finding its way here also.

SUSAN MCDONALD

But the dome in the foreground - this upside-down calabash - is the conference centre.

PIERRE GOUDIABY ATEPA

Yes, it's the conference centre. As you well know, ECOWAS sponsors a lot of meetings and we didn't want people who didn't have anything to do with the offices to enter the offices in order to go to a meeting; that would be a mess. So we decided to put the conference centre to the front of the building. Now to speak of the building itself again, as you can see you have very big columns at the bottom of it. There are sixteen of them and they are supposed to represent the sixteen members of ECOWAS. And inside each column - you can't see it very well - there are sixteen exhibition rooms for the sixteen states. And, even though we wanted our building to look as African as it could, we wanted to use up-to-date materials. Reflecting glass is one of them. It looks nice and it helps the air conditioning system because the sun's rays instead of getting into the building are reflected, which makes it very economical (to run).

SUSAN MCDONALD

You have won this competition now, so when should the building start being built?

PIERRE GOUDIABY ATEPA

Well that's another story. You know how all African organisations are so very complicated. You have to do drawings; have them approved; wait for a conference to approve them and wait for another conference to approve what was approved. That makes it very, very, long. But I do hope that within a year we'll start construction.

SUSAN MCDONALD

Now I think I'm right in saying you are one of the leading architects in this part of the world if not in Africa. You did your studies in the United States. Why did you pick the United States? Coming from a francophone country one would think you would go to Paris.

PIERRE GOUDIABY ATEPA

Well that's one thing about me - I always try to see what people want to do and I just do the opposite. That's probably why I win the competitions. The reason I went to the States is very simple - I saw that everyone was going to France and I thought 'Well why not change?' And that describes everything we do here in this office. We first try to think 'How would a normal architect do it?' and then we say 'OK, we'll not do it this way we'll do it the other way.' From the report I had from the competition jury, one of the reasons they picked out this design was because it was the simplest design they had.

SUSAN MCDONALD

Besides everything else you're Vice-President of the Africa Union of Architects which is holding a meeting in Yaounde, Cameroon. Can you tell me a little bit about the Africa Union of Architects?

PIERRE GOUDIABY ATEPA

Yes it's an organisation that wants to bring all the Africa architects together - not African, Africa - because a lot of the architects that work in Africa are non-Africans and we did not want to exclude them. We need their co-operation. And we wanted to have an organisation that would bring all the architects working in Africa together. And this is the second world congress. Henry Szentoggo of Uganda, who is the President, has asked that the theme of the Congress be 'Shelter in Africa' - shelter for all in Africa, - in preparation of the 'World Year of Shelter' which is 1987, I think. And among other things we'll be talking about this ambition of ours to build a trilingual school of architecture. We want to build an all-African centre in which people will find everything that has to deal with African architecture - in the past, today, and in the future.

SUSAN MCDONALD

Do you think that African architecture, sub-Saharan African architecture, is flourishing, or do you think there's too much outside influence - let's say Arab influence and European influence - on the sort of buildings that are going up at the moment?

PIERRE GOUDIABY ATEPA

My personal opinion is that things are going very fast. They didn't until very recently. For example, I was the first Senegalese architect to start working in Senegal. That was ten years ago. Now what people are seeing is the result of what we've been doing, myself and my colleagues, for the past six or seven years. I do believe that in the coming years indigenous influence in the buildings will be much more felt. If other countries follow what is going on in Senegal, I am sure that in years to come buildings will not look like they looked before.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Pierre Goudiaby Atepa talking to Susan McDonald in Dakar and I'll be looking forward to seeing the progress of his new building in Lome.

In recent years black writing in South Africa has gone from strength to strength, and since the end of 1982 it's had an additional stimulus from the existence of a vigorous new publishing house. It's called Skotaville and it was set up in Braamfontein after a decision in January 1982 by the African Writers Association that a publishing House was needed not only for black writers but run by blacks themselves. Well with me is Jaki Seroke who is one of the directors of Skotaville.

Jaki, what's the origin of the name?

JAKI SEROKE

Skotaville is named after Mveli Skota who was born in 1983. He was one of the pioneers of black publishing in South Africa. He published for the first time in 1930 a 'Who's Who in Africa', covering southern Africa and other parts of the African continent. His efforts although they were frustrated - he died in 1976 - were realised amongst us, the new generation, as a great effort, and so we named our publishing house after him.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I see from the list of writers that you publish, that you have quite an impressive array of writers.

JAKI SEROKE

Yes, a lot of people are writing in South Africa. There's a lot of energy on that score. When we started publishing on our own we felt that we would cover both un-established and established writers, not only in the literary field but also in areas like Bishop Tutu's for instance, who has recently won the Nobel Peace Prize. He is definitely one of our major authors in the publishing house. When we published his book last year he actually gave us a pat on the back and said 'You are doing a great job for the nation'. But we said 'No! We think you are doing a great job, a much bigger task than us'.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And what new authors have you had so far?

JAKE SEROKE

There is Chibeya, who I think is a promising poet, and Don Mattera who was banned for eight and a half years and we've published his poetry collection called "Azanian Love Song" - it's doing quite well - and several others.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Where does your emphasis lie, - in the literary field or in general publishing of writers?

JAKI SEROKE

We have a motto that our publishing house is for nation building, so that we are covering all aspects that affect black life in South Africa.

And when we decided to establish the publishing house we felt that it should be a co-operative so that we should accommodate on a personal level, non-patronisingly, the works of black writers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There is another publishing house, Ravan Press, don't they do just what you are trying to do?

JAKI SEROKE

Not exactly because in this context Ravan Press is a white establishment. Most of us have published with Ravan Press for instance, but it will be good to have a new publishing house that is independent from Ravan Press perhaps to cover the whole progressive line of publishing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's been said that you're seeking the interest of black African writers by setting up your publishing house. Now amongst those interests is obviously a financial interest. How are you able to compete with the white houses?

JAKI SEROKE

Ours is non-commercial and non-profit making. What we are aiming to do is to create a community of publishing that will stand on its own but have great historical importance in the nation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But surely people who have been established for some years as writers will expect to earn a livelihood from their writing?

JAKI SEROKE

That's right. We do provide royalties like other establishments in publishing, but this is done on a closer level with the writers in that the writer is able to give his commitment to the publishing house at the same time.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you've said that one of your aims is to produce work that reflects more accurately the aspirations of the black community. Aren't you likely to attract censorship from the Government for that reason?

JAKI SEROKE

Well censorship is something that we meet from day to day. If you'd lived in South Africa you'd know that all the laws that have been made are aimed at oppressing the black person. But I don't think that would be cause for us to be paranoid.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Jaki Seroke, thank you very much indeed and good luck to your Skotaville Publishing House.

JAKI SEROKE

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that brings us to the end of this week's programme. I'll be back at the same time next week but for the time being this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.