

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA" *ell*

No. 17

(4R 50 S017P)

## SIGNATURE TUNE:

ELAINE: Well it is me again, Elaine Caulker, and today we are going to talk about poetry, something very close to my heart. And the poetry we are going to talk about is the poetry of one man in particular, Khadambi Asalache.

I suppose for the majority of people poetry is still what the poet sings or says direct to his audience on a particular occasion. But that audience is always a very small one and if the poet is after a larger one - perhaps even an international audience - the poetry has to appear on the printed page. And if the imperfections are preserved as well as the moments of real inspiration, at least there's the satisfaction of something tangible - a book to hold between your very own hands.

"Sunset in Naivasha" is a recently published book of poems by Khadambi Asalache and the pictures of Kenya that he conveys in his poems are sharper because he is writing from a distance, from London. But not all of Asalache's poems are about Kenya and things Kenyan. One with the title "The Birth of Shaka" caught the attention of Anthony Delius, who is himself a poet. He wondered whether the poem arose out of interest in the character of the famous Zulu leader or from a wider interest Asalache has in the history of the continent.

## KHADAMBI ASALACHE:

My interest in Shaka is, as you see in the poem, based on his kind of life. Firstly, I was fascinated by the fact that the most powerful chief in the Zulu history was born illegitimate and, at the same time, I read a book which gives me a picture about his humanity. And it seems to me that there are two strands when one is looking at this one could immediately put into the picture, firstly, that someone born, someone who was rejected at the beginning - when he was young he was mistreated and his early life was quite a difficult one - I felt that the driving force which made him into a powerful chief was something which was fascinating and I couldn't resist writing a poem about it.

ANTHONY DELIUS:

Well, let's hear you read the poem.

"The Birth of Shaka" read by Khadambi Asalache

ELAINE: "The Birth of Shaka". I got a strong sense of the visual in the poem and so I was interested to discover that Khadambi Asalache first trained as an architect. As he says, the language of architecture is international but wordless. Words came later for him and they first formed themselves into a novel. "The Calabash of Life" was published in 1967 and it was about that time that Khadambi began to use poetry as a means of expression.

ASALACHE: It took me quite a while to realise that I, not so much that I could write poetry but that poetry was a medium in which I probably could express myself more fully than in any other medium.

DELIUS: Better than in painting or in building?

ASALACHE: Yes, indeed.

DELIUS: And your first sort of exercise was really a novel, wasn't it?

ASALACHE: It was a novel and it was published in 1967.

DELIUS: Was it well received?

ASALACHE: Not initially. It took, I think, about a year before anyone took notice of it but oddly enough I see that it has gone into a fifth impression so I assume that it has now received some notice in certain quarters.

DELIUS: Well that sounds very good. But you give me the impression of a man who finds himself being slowly but surely moved towards poetry all the time to writing in verse, is that so?

ASALACHE: I am not sure that I move towards the verse form but rather my disenchantment with other forms of expression and I turn to poetry as a last resort.

DELIUS: This is not a close preference. You feel you have to move to poetry to express yourself?

ASALACHE: I find that poetry does express what I want to say very clearly and, as you will probably appreciate, the difficulty that many poets go through is being able to get their verse... trying to polish their verse so to speak, being able to master the craft and it is that which now and again comes between a poet and his poetry. But I still find that it is the craft which I am still trying to struggle with now and then..

DELIUS: You want to write in English? You don't have the feeling that you would like to write in one of the African languages?

ASALACHE: I would like to write in Swahili.

DELIUS: Well they have a great literature haven't they?

ASALACHE: Yes. Swahili has quite a body of poetry.

DELIUS: You were reared in Swahili, were you? You were brought up in Swahili?

ASALACHE: Yes, and I found that the only limitation that Swahili has put to my writing and, in fact, I have tried one or two poems in Swahili is that Swahili is a conventional language and not many people apart from Shabaan Robert have been able to develop Swahili into a vehicle of literature. And most of the poetry which is written in Swahili has tended to be very formal and I find this rather inhibiting.

DELIUS: You prefer the freedom which has grown up in the English language?

ASALACHE: I would say that I prefer the freedom the English language provides rather than to say that I prefer using English because it gives me freedom.

DELIUS: Yet you use English extraordinarily well I feel to show an African mood and particularly this poem of homecoming in your book of verse called "Sunset in Maivasha". This one particularly gives me the feeling of someone coming home to Africa, coming back to his people as it were. I wonder whether you would mind reading this particular poem actually to give an impression to our listeners of what sort of poet you are and what sort of feeling lies behind you.

"The Homecoming" by Khadambi Asalache

ELAINE: "The Homecoming" from Khadambi Asalache's collection of poems, "Sunset in Naivasha". And earlier he was talking to Tony Delius.

Now some quiet music to end the programme today I think. How about 'The Snake and the Frog, let me try and say that in Swahili, 'Nyoka na Chura' with the Navongo Success Orchestra?

MUSIC - 'The Snake and the Frog'

I'll be back next week, of course, so I'm inviting you to join me then for another edition of "Arts and Africa".

Broadcasting Rights: Free for use by an broadcasting organisation outside Britain in English or in translation.

Publication Rights: Not free for use in publishing outside Britain in English or in translation.