

# Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everyone. Yes, this is Louis Mahoney, so stay tuned for another "Arts and Africa" programme.

Today's programme is about drama - traditional and modern; in Kenya, Somalia and Nigeria. And if we're going to be hearing people talking about drama and the theatre, I think we ought to begin with a little bit of the real thing. Here's a scene (well, it's so short that I think I ought to call it a conversation and not a scene) and it's from a radio play written and played by Nigerian broadcasters in the BBC's Hausa Service. And if I tell you what's happening, I don't think you'll find it too difficult to follow.

Well. There's this man; you'll hear him going into a club where he meets his friend (and his friend's girlfriend). He has to pass on a bit of gossip, you know - male talk, without her understanding. That's the problem. Of course, she's dying of curiosity and when the men won't tell her who they're talking about, she says that women are much better at talking in 'code', so to say. And she gives an example!

HAUSA PLAY

And that, to my ears, is an up-to-date play.

But in most countries, side-by-side with the modern theatre there's traditional drama. And usually there's lots of music to go with it.

MUSIC

That, for instance, is music of the Gelede cult, belonging to the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria.

But up in the north of Nigeria, at the University of Ahmadu Bello, they are trying to make sure that at least some of the folk-drama of that area is written down and preserved for the future. And what with the rate of change in the world today, there's no time to be lost.

MAHONEY: Alton Kumalo is a black South African actor who's spent most of his professional life in the British theatre - in fact we were both members of the Royal Shakespeare Company - so he was keen to find out from Omer Ladan of Amadu Bello's Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies, whether writing down and organising this sort of drama was all on the credit side - all gain and no loss.

OMER LADAN:

I think in the long run it will gain. Because if we allow it to go at the rate it has been going all the traditional aspects of performances and plays will disappear and we'll simply be saddled with what the west can offer us in terms of films and television.

ALTON KUMALO:

It's a combination of both really. What about if you are doing a play that lasts about an hour or more? Do they just go ahead or do they have a break and then start again, or do they just continue?

LADAN: Well, traditional theatre, traditional drama, knows no intervals. The play can go on for almost a day or two days, seven days, and people will simply come in and go as they like.

KUMALO: This sounds very good and I think it's exciting stuff. But it would appear that you are talking about unscripted plays. I mean an unscripted play couldn't go on for a day, even for three hours, you have to start and stop. It's got to be organised.

LADAN: Obviously it's got to be organised and it is one area in which I am particularly interested, in my department at the Amadu Bello Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies. We are as a research unit required to research into Nigerian culture and write it in forms of plays for performance either by the Centre or by any other groups that happen to be around.

You might ask: why script the traditional plays? Well, plays have been scripted all over the world and I see no reason why in Nigeria we can't have scripted plays, traditional plays for posterity.

KUMALO: Indeed, indeed. I think it's a very unique position to be in - to try and preserve, as you say yourself, our own cultural things. I think there is a danger, though, in the history of most of the African things we have done, with all due respect, to what we remember. In most unscripted things it cannot be repeated by someone who may come after you. I mean, I am talking in terms now of a culture which will last, a culture to be shared. I think that if I don't see my father doing traditional things he could have been a wonderful speaker and if there is nothing put down when I come I miss out in terms that nothing is passed on. One cannot really deny the influence of the rest of the Western world in terms of limiting things and I think in terms of

KUMALO: some day it might be necessary to take things from Nigeria to other parts of the world. This is why one needs to organise things. Do you think this is a loss as well?

LADAN: It is not a loss, I think that it doesn't have to continue for ever, no. And I think a lot depends on the dramatist, the playwright to organise and cut down to the proper limits of, say, a play two hours or two-and-a-half hours or three hours and because we are now in the modern age, before we never considered what time mattered, but now Western technology, Western science, materialism and whatnot have taken over and so therefore we have had to cut down and cut down to fit.

KUMALO: Absolutely. Well Omar, don't cut down too much. We might lose a lot!

MAHONEY: Following what Omer Ladan has been telling Alton Kumalo, perhaps it's only coincidence that this morning I picked up a new book, a printed version of play by the Somali poet and dramatist, Hassan Sheikh Mumin. Somali as a written language is only one year old, so this attractive English version is, in fact, a translation of a tape recording of a performance at the National Theatre in Mogadishu. The English title is "Leopard Among the Women" and I'm hoping that we can have a good, long look at it in a later programme. (But I thought I'd just mention it now.)

One theatre company, however, that's been out and about in Kenya, travelling round the country in the last few months has been a company from the Department of Literature at the University of Nairobi. In charge of the company has been the dramatist, John Ruganda and Ahmed Salim talked to him about the tour.

JOHN RUCANDA:

Drama should be produced, should be theatricalised if you want. There is no need for somebody to read a particular play script and hope that you have finished it and understood everything. There is an extra level and this level is the performance level and we are tying this up with our own traditional aspects, that is the performing arts, oral literature, proverbs, tales and so on, so it is part and parcel of the whole thing that we are trying to do really, revolutionising the department not only in terms of utilising oral texts but also doing what drama should do - entertain, let it be experimented upon and so on.

MAHONEY: The plays taken on tour were mostly in English. Up to now, that's been Kenya's official language but, naturally, the further you get from the capital, the less likely you are to have an audience that understands English. So, as John Ruganda explained to Ahmed Salim, the company have made sure that they can offer Swahili plays as well as English ones.

RUGANDA: We are laying emphasis on Swahili because as the President of this country said, Swahili is very, very important and also we know that to a certain extent, Swahili literature has been neglected. Fortunately we have got two very good Swahili scripts, one by Abraham Hussein called "Wakati Ukuta" and another one by Tenina Ihando from Dar-es-Salaam called "Heshima Yangu". We are really stressing these, they are

RUGANDA: the only two we could get, the others are plays by two Kenyans, two Ugandans, and so on.

AHMED SALIM:

The others are in English?

RUGANDA: Yes, the others are in English.

SALIM: Now, John, you have embarked on this particular mission tour with very little financial assistance, say, from the government, from the University or even from private firms. Now, the actors and actresses themselves seem also to be financing their way through the tour and you are charging nothing, I gather, during the tour, everybody is going to see the performance free. Now, if this is going to be a permanent feature, a permanent cultural feature in the country, won't you have to think in terms of establishing some kind of fund or source of income? In other words, what happens in the future?

RUGANDA: I think the important thing really is to start. Once a project has been started and people feel or see that it is worthwhile then it is easy to get money but it is much more difficult to start begging for money or looking for funds if people don't know how you are going to use these funds, or whether the product is worthwhile or not. In theory they might think that it is worthwhile but they want to see the response from the audience and the response from various quarters so that they say "Right, we are prepared to give you some money". I am sure that next year it will be easier to raise funds assuming that the project is going to be very successful and I think, I have no doubt, that it is going to be successful.

But at the same time I feel that the University will definitely (perhaps when we start a Department of Theatre Arts here in Nairobi) make this one of the regular activities of the Department, taking the theatre round Kenya and possibly even East Africa. And we shouldn't forget here that places like Makerere always had this kind of project and I believe this is the 10th year.

MAHCNEY: That's very interesting but what about the actors? I have a professional interest and I'll confess to it straight away, but it is one aspect that hasn't been mentioned so far. It turns out, however, that the touring company from the University of Nairobi does include some experienced actors in the group - in fact, John Ruganda has a high opinion of the standard of acting in Kenya, but openings in the modern theatre can be few and far between - even for people with special training.

RUGANDA: We definitely have a number of very good actors and actresses within this country but I am going to have to cater for the people who have to be trained, what happens afterwards? Are they going to sit back and wait for some character who comes from Hollywood to film something in Kenya and they will get a few coins here, and then what do we want them to do afterwards?

RUGANDA: I believe that when the Theatre Department is established and schools are encouraged to take drama and theatre much more seriously these people who will be trained in acting, in directing and perhaps in writing can be a service to the schools and so on.

MAHONEY: That was John Ruganda talking to Ahmed Salim.

MUSIC

Some theatre music to end with. "Umbatha" is a Zulu version of Shakespeare's play MacBeth and here, from the Natal Theatre workshop production, are the foot-thudding warriors. London live theatre! And, for that matter, "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC

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