

Arts and Africa

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody. This is Louis Mahoney introducing music from Guinea and Senegal and a look at the art of the short story - in fact, it's time for "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

If you're a regular listener to the programme (and I hope you are) the sound of the kora that introduces "Arts and Africa" will be familiar. The 'homeland' of the kora is the Senegal - Guinea - the Mali part of West Africa (and, of course, in the Gambia, too). People outside Africa sometimes call it the African guitar - except that it has twenty-one strings, a huge, round gourd as a sounding board, and to my ears, is twice as lovely to listen to. But I must admit that the kora and the guitar sound good together, especially when the human voice joins them.

MUSIC

Now that music crosses international boundaries. The singer (who was also playing the guitar) is Mamadou Seck from Guinea, and the kora is being played by Boubacar Diabate who's famous for his kora-playing at home in Senegal. Their musical background is a traditional one but somehow they've added a certain sophistication to the sound without, to my ears at any rate, without losing any respect for the music.

The first piece was called "Alpha-Yaya". This next one has the title "Diouana".

MUSIC

Boubacar Diabate playing the kora with the singer and guitarist Mamadou Seck. And if we have time later on perhaps we can hear them singing together.

It isn't often that we can include the voice of a francophone writer in "Arts and Africa" but today we're doubly lucky - we've an interview with the writer who's been called 'Dahomey's foremost man of letters', and we can give you a taste of his work a page, translated into English, from one of his short stories; here's Paul Kode to read it for us.

SHORT STORY EXTRACT

That's from "The Man Who Had Given Everything", a short story by Jean Pliya. Jean Pliya hasn't made his reputation as a writer by his short stories alone - he's also written several plays as well. But when Barry Tomalin was chatting to Pliya about his work he suggested that the dramatic form doesn't come so naturally: that, to be blunt, he feels more at home with the short story.

JEAN PLIYA:

You are right when you say that in the short-story I am fully myself. Because in the short story, the size of the story is not too big and I think that the the way I follow is linear and in drama, it is not the same manner.

You must know that I also like much poetry. But I don't like to write poetry, I prefer to make my prose writing poetical rather than writing poetry. For myself, I'm not sure that when someone in Africa wants to reach people, or half-literate people, I am not sure at all that poetry is useful.

MAHONEY: Well, I'm not so sure that usefulness is the main purpose of poetry. But Jean Pliya is best-known for his prose, so let's keep to that!

Now, there's no doubt in my mind that Africa's the richest continent of the world, as far as the art of story-telling is concerned. All that oral literature, the stories I heard when I was a boy (you know what I mean, I'm sure you heard them too)- all that story-telling must have an effect on modern writers.

That's exactly what one of the critics has been saying, and Barry Tomalin quoted him to Jean Pliya

BARRY TOMALIN:

Adrian Roscoe, who's an English critic of West African literature, once said that the short story was a more logical development of the oral tradition in African and that, in fact, most writers should, in fact, be writing short stories because their novels were, in fact, glorified short stories. What do you think of this opinion?

PLIYA: I think that the first part of your observation is true. In Africa, when we were little boys, we remembered that we heard these sort of...(in French we say 'contes')...tales. And I think that the most famous literature, oral literature, in Africa is born from tales. But, for myself, why I chose the short story is because Africans today don't like to read books that are too big. On the other hand, when I try to write short stories, it is very easy for me maintain contact with the tradition of tales.

MAHONEY: I gather that Jean Pliya is a university lecturer - which isn't surprising. What does surprise me is that he lectures Geography, not literature, at the University of Dhomey. Pliya's considered a 'socially conscious' writer by a lot of people. Perhaps knowing about geography helps him to understand the economic problems, and it's the south of the country, the part where there's the biggest difference in income, that he writes about.

PLIYA: It is here that the struggle for life is much stronger...

TOMALIN: And that the differences between the types of people are bigger. Because it is in the south that you have the big towns with the bourgeois side-by-side with the peasants. And this is one of the things that is perhaps most interesting to me in your short stories: this gap and this conflict which you see between classes in Dahomey which is very clear. In "The Red Car", for instance, the little boy is unhappy because he has left his house, he has nothing, but when he sees the bright shops and when he sees the people buying the present, his unhappiness turns to hatred.

PLIYA: Almost.

TOMALIN: Almost hatred. In other words you have this movement: when he realises his position there is an immediate class conflict. He realises his interest. Is this, in fact, central to your work?

PLIYA: Yes, it is. First, I want to say that it is logical - the logic of my observations. You have asked me whether class conflict is central to my writings. I think it is true. You can see the class conflict in "L'homme qui a tous donne".

TOMALIN: This is the example that I wanted to bring out. For me this is your most interesting story. It is about an engineer who gives a peasant some money to pay a bill which he can't pay and you bring out very strongly the idea of the peasant, Theogbaye, as a man who has always been exploited. He's been exploited under the Kings of Abomey; he's been exploited under colonialism; and he is still being exploited in independent Africa.

But then Theogbaye insists on the traditional ritual of reciprocity. He gives, first of all, the chicken and then the goat and finally he offers his daughter. Now, the first time the engineer is happy but the second time he is a little bit annoyed, he wants to keep his distance from Theogbaye and Theogbaye keeps coming to the house. And when Theogbaye brings his girl and suggests the the girl should add herself to the household of the engineer, the engineer and his wife laugh - which, to me, is a symbol of the distance that the engineer has travelled from the peasant's life. Then he explains to the peasant, he says: "You must organise yourselves" and the peasant finally understands what the engineer is saying and he says: "Come to our village" and then you say "The Engineer couldn't understand this peasant, who had now become lucid as a judge" and immediately he tries to distance himself.

This, to me, is the perfect observation of the dilemma of the bourgeois in an African society: the fact that he sympathises with the aspirations of the peasant and yet can do nothing, and wants to do nothing, to change his privileged position.

PLIYA: Exactly, you are right in the very clever analysis of this short story. What you have seen in this short story, I continue to observe in our actual societies in Africa.

MAHONEY: Jean Pliya talking to Barry Tomalin. And, by-the-way, the quotation from the short story earlier on was from a collection of stories by Jean Pliya with the title "The Fetish Tree" and they are all translated by Wendy Charles.

MAHONEY: And here we are at the end of another programme. This is Louis Mahoney saying: hope you'll join me next week for another edition of "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC.

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