

BBC AFRICAN RADIOTAPE SERVICE

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 46

(4R 50 S046P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody, Louis Mahoney introducing "Arts and Africa" which this week includes music from Kenya (and how to identify it) and we meet a modest author from the Sudan.

SIGNATURE TUNE

You know, one of the things about music in Africa is the staggering diversity you meet when you travel about: sometimes it changes even from village to village. But there's also a unity about it that can cover a whole area, in fact, a whole nation.

Someone who is fascinated by both these aspects is George Zaki. He lectures in music at Kenyatta University College, Nairobi and his students receive every encouragement to study the folk music from each part of the country. In conversation with Ahmed Salim, he mentioned one of the common factors, something to be found in Kenyan singing.

GEORGE ZAKI:

In our music we have always a leader and then a group responding. You will find this mainly in the spirituals as well - Negro spirituals. Now we sing almost in the same style: you get somebody leading and the group responds.

MUSIC

AHMED SALIM:

Now the people of Kenya have been classified linguistically: we say that this is the Bantu speaking group of people; these are the Nilotic speaking people and so on. Can one look at the whole of Kenya and classify the people musically now?

ZAKI:

I think you can, because you find that in some music the skills are not exactly the same as the others. You'll find that most of the Bantu have used, what we call, a pentatonic scale: that is a five-note scale, and you'll find that others have, what we call hexatonic and so on. And the Masai have almost all seven notes. And you'll find in Western Province, western Kenya, you'll find that they too have, what we call, a sort of diatonic scale but without the seventh note. I think that when they start performing you'll find that, even my students now have started learning to listen and say: this music comes from a certain group of people.

SALIM: Now can we illustrate that I wonder?

ZAKI: Well, we've got a Masai recording somewhere, if we could listen to that.

MUSIC

Now, that was a Masai war song which is a classic in itself. It must be sung everytime they are preparing for war, and, as you heard, you didn't hear any instruments. They usually have an instrument - a horn - which they use and that horn nobody's allowed to see until the time of the war or a very, very big ceremony. Now they did not use it there because I was not supposed to see it, I was just recording the music.

SALIM: Now, it seems, therefore, that music and singing takes place only on special occasions in the sense that it is either birth, or circumcision or death. Am I right in this?

ZAKI: Yes, we have all different classes. Actually every occasion, every specific occasion, has got its own music including beer parties, including when we are doing our cultivation or when mothers are lulling their babies we have music, and music plays a very, very important part in the life of an African.

MAHONEY: I'm glad George Zaki said "African" and not just "Kenyan". And it so happens that he and Ahmed Salim touched on so many points of interest in music from Kenya that we're hoping to include more of their conversation in a future edition of "Arts and Africa".

As an actor I know (and from bitter experience) that the first minute or two of a play, the first few lines even, can be critical in catching the attention of the audience, whether they're sitting in the theatre, or at home listening to a radio play. To give one example of the way to do it, here's part of a the opening of BBC's African Theatre production of "Station Street".

PLAY (scene from "Station Street")

"Station Street" was a prize-winning play in the BBC's African Theatre competition, with one of the judges paying the play this compliment:

"Particularly subtle, I think, is the fact that the character who doesn't even appear, namely the son who has won a scholarship to England, also becomes extremely vivid and sympathetic, simply through the way the impact of his success and his letter impinges on the other people."

Well, the author of "Station Street", Khalid Almubarak Mustafa, came along to the "Arts and Africa" studio the other day and we were particularly pleased to see him as, after several years studying drama here in England, he'll soon be returning home to the Sudan.

I've only known Khalid's work as a playwright so when we met I asked how he classified himself as a writer.

KHALID MUSTAFA:

Well, I think it would be presumptuous of me to say that I am a writer or a playwright. I like to think of myself as an aspiring writer or playwright. I think it is such a difficult thing to be, that it is something I hope to be in the future, with a lot of effort and trials and all sorts of things.

MAHONEY: You have, in fact, written a play, a very successful play, called "Station Street".

MUSTAFA: I have indeed.

MAHONEY: Do you write mainly plays or novels or short-stories?

MUSTAFA: I've written many short stories. I wrote short stories when I was younger. As an undergraduate I wrote many short stories which were published in magazines and newspapers in the Sudan. They were all in Arabic,

MAHONEY: Any specific name or topic?

MUSTAFA: I think they are probably socially conscious short stories and probably also concerned with love, as you might expect at that stage of my development.

MAHONEY: Is that why you are interested in writing plays - the love relationship between two characters?

MUSTAFA: Well, that of course, but I think that the main reason I switched from short story writing to play writing is that gradually I came to realise that the problems that I really want to discuss or handle or analyse were much more complex for a short story form. That I wanted to speak about things that would want a larger frame than the short story would provide. I have all respect for short story writing and short story writers but you have to concentrate in a short story on a small segment of life whereas if you want to treat something which is larger, which is much more complex, I don't think the short story format would provide you with the necessary scope for movement.

MAHONEY: And also, of course, the live characters in a play - the different characters that come in, incidental characters - that give the dramatic effect much more force.

MUSTAFA: Yes, quite.

MAHONEY: You said in your short stories that you wrote in Arabic. Do you find, in fact, that you do this all the time or do you switch to English?

MUSTAFA: One of the reasons for my switching to English is probably that; at earlier stages in my life my English was simply not good enough for me to feel confident that I could use the language and not be used by it.

LOUIS: How do you mean exactly: "not be used by it"?

MUSTAFA: I mean that if you don't know a language well enough then you're probably governed by your ability in the language to say things in a certain way. Whereas, if you command a language fairly well then you could play on it, as it were, you could subject it and mould it and re-shape it the way you feel you want. So it would be an instrument if you would be using it instead of it dictating what you want to say.

MAHONEY: Do you find that now you generally write, or when you are preparing to write, you generally think in English or do you think in Arabic and then translate into English?

MUSTAFA: That's an equally difficult question. I don't, in all honesty, think I would be able to answer that precisely but the first impression is that, while writing the notes in preparation for writing a play, sometimes I feel there are certain things which I had better say in English because they wouldn't be socially acceptable in Arabic.

MAHONEY: What sort of example would you give on the question of a particular taboo or particular incident where you suddenly found that you had to change from one language to the other?

MUSTAFA: Well, one example is a television play I wrote in English, which hasn't been performed yet. But one of the reasons I decided that the medium had to be English was that in it at one point which is dramatically very important, the girl in the play gets beaten-up and she bares her thighs and her arms and parts of her body to show her boyfriend what happened to her. This is the sort of thing which I wouldn't dream of seeing on a television screen in my country, because of the cultural difference mainly, and religious taboos of course.

MAHONEY: Khalid, thank you very much.

MUSTAFA: Thank you very much.

MAHONEY: Khalid Almubarak Mustafa talking about the craft of writing, as well as the art. And every writer listening knows how important they both are.

I'm proposing to end the programme with more of "Kapchinja", the Nandi song we heard at the very beginning. There'll be another edition of "Arts and Africa" next week, so till then, this is Louis Mahoney saying goodbye.

MUSIC.

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