

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

No. 68

(5R 50 S068P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to the news, views and personalities of "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

Today the news is of a new novel from a Malawi writer; and the personality? .....well, he's a South African musician,

MUSIC FROM "BROTHERHOOD OF BREATH

A mix of sounds from the "Brotherhood of Breath", a jazz combination with a South African leader, Chris McGregor. He prefers playing to talking but we have a bit of both a little later on.

And in an equally vigorous style, here are some lines from a new novel that's just come our way.

EXTRACT FROM "THE DETAINEE" BY LEGSON KAYIRA p. 172

Now Napolo, whom we've just met waking up in a mortuary, is the creation of the Malawi novelist, Legson Kayira; he's the hero of Legson's latest work, "The Detainee". (And if Legson Kayira is a familiar name, let me remind you of his best-known work, his autobiography, "I Will Try".) Kona Caulker has been discussing "The Detainee" with the author and she began with that scene in the mortuary.

KONA CAULKER:

This is a very, very traumatic closing to your book. Could you tell me some more about the situation that leads up to Napolo, this man, finding himself in a mortuary?

LEGSON KAYIRA:

Yes, this man has gone through what is, from his point of view, the worst kind of experience, having been detained and somehow mysteriously released as it were, but not quite released in the sense that he is thrown into the river, and he manages to get out of this situation, runs, and of course, collapses on the way and he is taken to this place presumed dead. But, of course, he wakes up the next morning, alive.

CAULKER:

Alive, Well you say he had been detained, is he a political person in any way, Napolo?

KAYIRA: Well he isn't. In fact if anything he is a very simple villager who has absolutely nothing to do with politics of any kind, but because of the system anybody who either is ignorant or doesn't know what is happening they are taken to be political, and that's what happened to him.

CAULKER: Well let's talk about Napolo. He is a simple man from a village caught up in events that he doesn't understand, as must happen to many, many people and he is very, very naive but at the same time very shrewd as a person. How did you build this person up, is he real for you?

KAYIRA: Well yes, I would say although naive he does have some sort of what you might call native wit, and in this case I was thinking mainly of my own grandfather and I have used the same chap in most of my other writing. My grandfather is a fairly wise old man I think who would probably behave in the same sort of way, if he found himself in that sort of situation.

CAULKER: Do you find that the people you write about tend to be people from your childhood rather than people you are involved with now?

KAYIRA: Oh yes, they are all from my childhood, which is why I think I usually feel much at home when writing if I'm writing about a village, and of course it has to be village that I know about. In this case my own village at home.

CAULKER: What's the name of your village?

KAYIRA: It's a small village called Mpale in the hills of the northern part of Malawi.

CAULKER: You haven't been in Malawi for a long time. In fact how many years ago did you leave?

KAYIRA: Well, I would say that in the past seventeen years I have been there for a total of two months.

CAULKER: And how does it feel writing a lot of novels about a place you haven't been to for seventeen years? Where do you get your ideas and descriptions from?

KAYIRA: I think this is say, from my childhood, and the author is probably my way of expressing my home-sickness.

CAULKER: Could you tell me a bit more about your home-sickness?

KAYIRA: Well, as I have just said I haven't been home now, in fact the last time I went home was in 1967. So the best I can do really is more or less to relive my past from my childhood as it were.

CAULKER: On paper?

KAYIRA: On paper.

CAULKER: There's one passage in this book particularly when I was reading, just made me very, very homesick and that's the passage when you're writing about the market-place.

That's full of homesickness for me.

KAYIRA: Well it is for me too.

CAULKER: When you start writing a book, or particularly when you started this one, "The Detainee", did you have any idea where your story was going to go? Is that the kind of writer you are?

KAYIRA: Well, no, I don't. In this particular book Napolo, someone who is ill, wanted to go and see a doctor, that's how it started. But then it became quite obvious that if I was going to have this story set in a particular era of particular time, this is what would happen. Now assuming I had decided to set the story let's say thirty years ago, forty years ago, then the chances are it would probably be quite different to what it is.

CAULKER: Do you enjoy being a writer?

KAYIRA: I enjoy writing, when I am actually writing I enjoy that part, yes. Although I think nowadays that I'll probably stop writing because I think that the thing that will make me happier would be if I became a farmer. I think I'll enjoy farming.

CAULKER: Would you like to go back to do it in Malawi?

KAYIRA: Yes that's what I'm hoping to do.

CAULKER: Really?

KAYIRA: Yes, yes.

CAULKER: So, in fact, writing is something you do because you want to, not because you have to, not because there's some urge in you that makes you?

KAYIRA: Well no it isn't that I have to, no no. Well for one thing I have never farmed at all, this is just some idea I have in my mind, so the chances are probably that next year instead of actually farming, I'll probably write a book on farming!

CAULKER: So you want to hear the rain birds singing and you can start your hoeing.

KAYIRA: Yes.

CAULKER: Like Napolo.

KAYIRA: That's it, yes.

CAULKER: Just to end, can we go back to the work you're on at the moment. I read it here on the back of your book, but I'm not sure of the pronunciation. You're doing work now on a historical novel on the Chilembwe Rising, is that right?

KAYIRA: Yes.

CAULKER: The Chilembwe Rising. Could you tell me a bit about this work you're involved in now?

KAYIRA: This is a historical novel, set in Nyasaland as it was then called, in just before 1915, that's when the uprising took place, and it was an essentially economic uprising as opposed to say political. It was to some extent political but essentially economic.

CAULKER: And, what are you doing, using a lot of research?

KAYIRA: Oh yes, I have done quite a bit of reading on that, quite a bit of research. In fact I have done double the research because I wrote the book, then lost it, the wind blew it into the sea, so I had to start from the beginning again.

CAULKER: How far had you gone when the wind blew it into the sea?

KAYIRA: Oh I had almost finished it, and I lost everything.

CAULKER: You say it so casually!

KAYIRA: Well, yes, there was nothing more I could do about it, you see when the book is lost there's no use jumping up and screaming. The best thing to do is to start the book again, that that's what I did.

TETPEH-LARTEY:

That persistent writer is Legson Kayira. Earlier in his conversation with Kona Caulker he was talking about his latest novel, "The Detainee", published in paperback by Heinemann in their African Writers Series, priced 75 pence.

MUSIC FROM "BROTHERHOOD OF BREATH"

The opening of "Tunji's Song" by Tunji Oyelana played by the Brotherhood of Breath, a group that includes a number of well-known South African musicians - Louis Moholo, Kongezi Feza, Dudu Pukwana.....quite a formidable array of names, and Chris McGregor also from South Africa who's been talking to Julian Marshall about the brotherhood he finds in music.

CHRIS MCGREGOR:

I like the immediacy of music, I like the speed with which music communicates. I think that's very much a part of our spiritual and cultural life, and I think it's the most important contribution to that spiritual and cultural life. You make things concrete by discussing them, it might actually have very little to do with what's really important in music which after all is what it communicates spiritually.

JULIAN MARSHALL:

But you don't feel that you as a white South African, the fact that you play with black South Africans needs explaining in a way.

MCGREGOR: It's very easily explained in the fact that I grew up in South Africa among the black South Africans, and that, for me, communication with black people in South Africa was, if you like, easiest with music. Easier with music than with language, because obviously we would have language problems, but if we understood the same moves musically there is no problem of

communication whatsoever. But that posits that there is a difference and what I reach for always is the fact that basically human beings can always communicate if they have the will.

MARSHALL: You were telling me earlier that culture is very much a part of everyday life amongst Africans in South Africa, and that what you do is merely perhaps an extension of that. Is it that much more difficult to continue as a musician out of that sort of environment?

McGREGOR: I don't find it very difficult to continue as a musician. I mean I would find it very difficult to do something else I think. Besides being born in South Africa, I'm a citizen of the world in a way. I think we all are these days. And a musician's "thing" anyway is to make his environment musical. But, of course, I feel the lack of music in the air, in the people that you feel so strongly in South Africa, or that I feel so strongly in South Africa. In that sense I do feel an exile, my heart longs for my boyhood environment.

TETTEH-LARTEY: Chris McGregor, another voice far from home.

Well, that's it for today. I'll say goodbye, to the sound of the Brotherhood of Breath with Dudu Pulwana in the foreground, and hope that you'll be tuning in next week for more of "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC FROM THE "BROTHERHOOD OF BREATH"

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