

# Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hello from Alex Tetteh-Lartey: a sculptor from Liberia and a film from Senegal - that's today's "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

Now whenever we have mentioned the art of the cinema in the programme we have ended up discussing the films made by Sembene Ousmane. He is, without doubt, the best known of African film-makers, and the most prolific. A new film from Sembene is an event and the event has just taken place in Dakar, Senegal.

XYLOPHONE MUSIC

The Senegalese xylophone, not perhaps, as well known as the other national instrument, the kora, but part of the indigenous music of the country that Sembene uses consistently as part of the sound-track of his films. But if you have had the chance to see "The Money Order" or "The Black Girl" you will know that the subject matter is far from traditional; it is bang up-to-date. And his latest production, I gather, is no exception.

Nichole Mejigbodo a writer on films and film-making has recently stated (while discussing films from francophone countries) that:

"The cinema is no longer a pastime or a method of dulling people's sensitivity .... It is a weapon of propaganda and knowledge, used for the benefit of the people to denounce parasites, the corrupt and decadent bourgeoisie, and the continuing foreign manipulation of the economy and culture of a country."

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, how does Sembene fit into that definition? Neville Harms has been in Dakar recently and when he heard that the new Sembene film called "Xala" was on show he went along to the cinema; and he has been giving me his impressions.

NEVILLE HARMS:

Really it is about corruption; it is an attack on corruption and on snobbery. It concerns a minister - a tall, elderly man, who is, at the beginning of the film, just in the process of taking a second wife. He has got one wife - a quiet, middle-aged, sound, solid, sensible woman, a rather traditionalist woman because she is prepared to accept that the husband is entitled to take a second wife. Now the daughter, who is a young, progressive woman thinks it is disgraceful and she is perhaps one of the few characters that Sembene really identifies with and I really think this represents his attitude. The minister feels that he has got to have a second, young, attractive wife as a status symbol and there is a big wedding ceremony and it is a very extravagant wedding ceremony - very French, a grand affair, champagne and all that sort of thing.

And then, when it comes to the bed-room scene, it turns out that the husband, a minister cannot perform any longer. He appears to be impotent - the word is "xala" which means impotence. He then goes through the whole range of processes to try to regain his virility and eventually he is going right down to the traditional medicine man in the village. There is a very funny scene where he is getting the medicine - paying extravagantly for it and eventually he is cured and regains his virility.

While this is happening, you see him engaged in business affairs - corrupt business affairs and at the very moment he regains his virility, he is thrown out of the Chamber of Commerce in the town because he has, in fact, gone bankrupt and is unable to pay his debts. So you have got this ironic situation. At the very height of his great achievement sexually, this terrible fall.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

What has been the reaction to the film so far?

HARMS: Well, when I saw it the reaction was incredible! It is a very funny film and it got a tremendous audience response from the people that were in the cinema. The cinema was packed. Now it has had a rather strong government response to the extent that the Senegalese government insisted on a certain number of cuts before the film was shown. Apparently, there is a scene in the Cabinet Room, where the Cabinet is coming in for a formal meeting round the Cabinet table.

HARMS: On each table there is a neat, black briefcase on the table and as one man, the members of the Cabinet each open up the briefcase. You see the look of surprise and delight on their faces; their eyes go wide open and there are big smiles. Apparently, the camera then cuts to show what is inside the briefcases, (of course, the briefcases are all stacked with bank-notes). Now this, I am told, the Senegalese government insisted should be cut, but I think most people quite easily understood that these faces were wreathed in smiles because there were some very nice "goodies" inside those briefcases.

TETTEH-LARTY:

As a matter of interest, is this film in black and white or in colour?

HARMS: No, it is in colour, set mostly in and around Dakar. Sembene is very good at the long shot, of getting the sweep of the grand, government limousines sweeping around the city. He has also got these marvellous scenes of beggars. There is a small band of a dozen or fifteen beggars who are maimed - who have got one leg or one arm, an eye missing and twisted faces - and they rush around the town. They keep appearing throughout the film and this sort of counterpoints or sets off this high-living - obviously the moral is that this is what is happening to the common people. But Sembene never makes these people an object of great sympathy but they are an object of great humour and they go galloping around the screen and there are some very funny scenes with these terrible maimed and crippled people and it's a substantial feat of the art of the cinema. It is brilliantly done.

TETTEH-LARTY:

Now you mentioned cripples rushing about and galloping about, may I ask you what the standard of acting is like?

HARMS: The standard of acting is extremely high, but most of the people appearing in the film are not professional actors. I mean these cripples are obviously cripples and beggars that Sembene picked up around the streets of Dakar.

TETTEH-LARTY:

And very well aware if what the whole thing was about?

HARMS: It seemed to me. Absolutely.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Neville Harms talking about Sembene Ousmane's new film "Xala". And it will be nice to think that audiences elsewhere in West Africa, and beyond, will have the opportunity to see the film - with English subtitles if necessary!

XYLOPHONE MUSIC

I am delighted to say that we have now had our first Liberian contributor in the "Arts and Africa" studio. Vahnjah Richards has an interest in nearly all the visual arts (and crafts for that matter) but first and foremost he is a sculptor.

For someone who went as a boy, to Industrial School to study carpentry I am interested to learn that Vahnjah Richards is now Acting Chairman in the University of Liberia's department of Arts and Crafts and also a member of the Sculpture Unit belonging to the Ministry of Public Works. Florence Akst wanted to know how Industrial School training could lead to a career in sculpting?

VAHNJAH RICHARDS:

I found myself exposed to many things. I was exposed to the blacksmith's shop. I used to go in there making things. Then we had a carver who was doing traditional carving and I used to go down there and do some carvings and finally I found myself doing better in the carving than even in carpentry. Of course, it was kind of difficult to keep me away from the area so finally the man who was in charge of both the carpentry and carving shop said that I could go ahead and start doing it. Of course this was as my hobby because carving was not then offered as a required course. But I did graduate from the school as a carpenter.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And now, the qualified carpenter - a few years later, of course, is one of the two artists in the rare, if not unique position of being an official government sculptor. Well, how does a government use their talents?

RICHARDS: Well, we do gifts for the President, for the heads of state when they are visiting. We do some things that are required for some of the public buildings when it is necessary, but I think the main idea here is that this is a very new era in Liberia - and I would say "new" for us artists to live professionally by art, doing it from day to day for the buying public. So I think the government is very nice to have us employed as government artists. And we have another sculptor, who is Emmanuel Eskine - he and I are down at the Ministry of Public Works.

FLORENCE AKST:

I have not visited Monrovia myself, but I gather if I had the opportunity, I would see some of your works on display there.

RICHARDS: Oh definitely! In fact, when I first got back home, my first attempt was to do murals in the Trophy Room of the Executive Mansion - the late President Tubman had me to do those. Now, in my work I always try to depict the life of our people - the life of Liberia, the life of Africa, in sometimes maybe an abstract way or in a semi-realistic way, but not purely realistic, because, African art as we know, is simple it gives you an idea of what is happening more-or-less rather than being very realistic or very anatomical.

AKST: Of all the works that are on display, which is the one you would most like me to see?

RICHARDS: Well, I would say that you would see the one in the Ducor Palace, then I have seven large murals on the True Whig Party building - it is the building of the national party. I have seven large concrete murals on the outside - about 32 feet tall and 7 feet wide and I have a mural on the J. F. Kennedy Hospital. This depicts the evolution of medical care in Liberia, where I start from the soothsayer, or witch-doctor you might call him, right up to the operation-table.

AKST: And you use a variety of means. You mentioned concrete, you mentioned wood and metal and pottery. The work you have been describing is all on a very big scale.

RICHARDS: Oh yes, a very big scale. The one for the E. J. Roye - the concrete mural, was kind of hectic for me in the beginning. I was almost stuck, did not know which way to go, so it was just at the last moment that I got the idea of working directly and I just cast my concrete and started cutting out figures directly with the ideas I had in mind and I was able to do one mural in one day.

AKST: You mean you were cutting out concrete?

RICHARDS: Yes, in the raw. The concrete was not thoroughly dry and I just cut out my figures and I was able to do one figure a day.

AKST: Is this a technique that has been used before?

RICHARDS: Oh no, it was just something that popped up all of a sudden. I do not know how it came about, but it was just something that saved my neck for a while.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

One of his first important successes came with a sculpture that has the title "The Lovers". This, by the way, was worked in metal.

RICHARDS: I got the idea, when I was in school, at the Art Institute of Chicago. I had an instructor called, Mr. Weiner and I went into his locker once and I saw this carved snake - it was an African carved snake. And I said to him, "Mr. Weiner, do you like snakes?" He said, "No, but I got married!" So, from this I took off the idea and as you look at this, they are very simple in form because they are long, longated metal pieces, no face, just the form of a head and the form of a body ending down like a snake. So, I got the idea that this was Adam and Eve, you might call it, because Eve deceived Adam in the Garden and all this kind of thing. So, I made the form of a woman with a tail wrapped around Adam and I also called it "The Lovers" because they are chained together, there is no question of them breaking apart. This was, in fact, my first metal piece that I did and it was highly appreciated and even though it had a real story behind it, it was very abstract, very simple.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The Liberian sculptor Vahnjah Richards talking to us when he came to Britain to attend a meeting of the World Crafts Council.

And Vahnjah Richards brings the programme to a close. But there will be another edition next week and I hope you will join me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, then for more "Arts and Africa".

XYLOPHONE MUSIC

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