

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

pp. 3-5

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

NO. 80

(5R 50 S080P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and today - news of a hit play from Kenya and music from Sierra Leone.

SIGNATURE TUNE

In a recent programme we were being told that Kenyan drama wasn't developing as vigorously as some people would like. One playwright, mentioned as an exception, was Kenneth Watene and later in the programme he'll be talking about his most popular play to date - "Dedan Kimathi". But let's begin with music, not from Kenya but from the Northern Province of Sierra Leone.

MUSIC FROM SIERRA LEONE

The origins of music, just like other forms of language, recede further into the past the more the scholars research into the roots of a culture. A Dutch music teacher and musicologist who's spent many years studying the music of Sierra Leone, admits this. Other African sources have undoubtedly influenced the music of the nation - but it isn't easy to decide how.

CUTDJOE VAN HOVEN

I think some of the string instruments may have been brought into Sierra Leone by travelling Mandinka musicians from Guinea and Senegal and the Gambia, but I mean other string instruments for instance in the South, the Mende string instruments, would not be connected I think with any influx from the North. There may be connections with Liberian music in the East among the Kissi musicians and also the Mende. But rather we could say it is the Liberians who have influenced the Sierra Leonians, I wouldn't dare to say.

MUSIC FROM SIERRA LEONE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The kind of xylophone playing here is called a balangi. The recording is one of many made by Cutdjoe Van Hoven, whom we've already heard. She's been telling Roland Buck how these particular instruments were being played in that circumcision song.

CUTDJOE VAN HOVEN

There are four balangi and they are arranged in such a way that the small ends of the first and second balangi meet and the big ends of the third and fourth balangi meet. Now the small end of a balangi is the end from which you get the high notes and the big end is the end from which you get the low notes so some of these players have the high notes under their left hand and the others have the high notes under their right hand. It seems to be an arrangement which is also found as far away as Mozambique with the Chopi musicians there - they arrange their balangi in the same way.

ROLAND BUCK

Would you say then there has been some interchange of people between two countries or an interchange of cultures?

CUTDJOE VAN HOVEN

It is possible that different people in different places invent the same things independently. It is also possible that there has been direct or indirect contact between them but I just do not know.

ROLAND BUCK

Would you say that indigenous musicians in Sierra Leone have a natural ability to compose and re-arrange their songs in order to present it to an audience that it would appeal to?

CUTDJOE VAN HOVEN

Oh, certainly, very much so, yes. New songs are being composed every day and as you say they arrange them and re-arrange them for presentation to the audience of the day. That certainly is true.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

One of the characteristics that Cutdjoe Van Hoven has found in many parts of the country over the dozen or so years that she has been making these field recordings, is the special, high-pitched singing of the men. Those were men's voices earlier on, by the way, and this, too, is an all-male group singing a Mende song from the Southern Province. It tells of the rush to the famous Sierra Leonean diamond fields and of the promiscuity of the 'ladies' living in the area!

MUSIC FROM SIERRA LEONE

ROLAND BUCK

What do you see as the future for indigenous music in Sierra Leone? Is it going through a developmental phase now, or is it stagnant?

CUTDJOE VAN HOVEN

No, music is never stagnant - it always develops, but indeed there would be this danger of the Sierra Leone music being watered down and swamped by outside influences if steps were not taken to get more of it into schools and colleges. I think if we can achieve that in a reasonably short time we shall see that Sierra Leone music will not only survive but also develop further.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An up-to-date development, perhaps one that was in Cutdjoe Van Hoven's mind. A local dance band 'Orchestre Muyeï' using typically Sierra Leonean rhythms, although their instruments are western.

MUSIC FROM SIERRA LEONE

It's two decades since Mau Mau guerillas were fighting the British in Kenya. One of the leaders was 'Dedan Kimathi' and he is the subject of a play with the same name that's been attracting really big audiences in Nairobi. Its author, Kenneth Watene, has been talking about it to Paul Toulmin-Rothe. A political play in verse - how would that sound?

Quotation from "Dedan Kimathi" by Kenneth Watene.

PAUL TOULMIN-ROTHER

Kenneth, that excerpt from your play "Dedan Kimathi" which we have just heard read by Stephen Mwenese. Where does that come in the play and what does it mean? And can you say something about who Dedan Kimathi was?

KENNETH WATENE

Well, he was a leader of the forest fighters during the Mau Mau uprising, and he was supposed to be rather a magnetic man. A man who kind of lead people with spirit rather than, you know, military leadership although he is supposed to have been trained in military and guerilla warfare. It is said that during his last days there were only a few people with him then because he knew that he was being hunted down - there was a lot of pressure on his mind

KENNETH WATENE (continued)

and I thought that at that moment he must have tried to tell his people what it was all about - why they were fighting - what they were hoping for, and you know their reward when independence came, and that is what the excerpt is about.

PAUL TOULMIN-ROTHE

Your play "Dedan Kimathi" was very successful. It was packed every night for its fairly long run. And I notice that it wasn't only Africans who were packing the theatre, it was also Europeans and Asians. Why do you think that is?

KENNETH WATENE

I think the main reason for this was, and is still, that Kimathi is a very controversial figure. There is a large group of people who hate him because they feel he was a symbol of killing and murder. Then after Independence a lot of people made a hero of him and when I saw this I thought this a very good theme.

PAUL TOULMIN-ROTHE

Do you bring out the opposing contradictory characteristics of Dedan Kimathi in the same man in your play?

KENNETH WATENE

Yes I do, and as a matter of fact I have been subject to a lot of attack and criticism in that I have made him too much of a man, instead of carving him as an indestructible, infallible hero. Therefore I presented all the possible conflicts. I mean things like killing, things like suspicion, all the human weaknesses and I think this is why there has been a lot of controversy about the play.

PAUL TOULMIN-ROTHE

I'd like to talk to you, Kenneth, about the technical structure of your play. First of all, obviously it's in English. Secondly, you are using a kind of free blank verse of a traditional sort in English plays. Why did you choose that language and that style to write in?

KENNETH WATENE

The main thing here is that when you are starting to write you want to reach to a sizable audience and the readership in East Africa is mainly in English language and so you feel that if you write in English language you will get to more people, perhaps to people who hold the reins of power and through that maybe if you have a message to give it might be heard. The reason why I wrote it in verse was that our, my tribe, the language is very poetic - it's when people speak seriously - they speak in verse and so what I do when I write such a thing, I think of them speaking and then I translate it into English and it comes out in free verse.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kenneth Watene talking to Paul Toulmin-Rothe. And as a postscript to the interview, Paul raised the subject of the lack of a forceful theatre in Kenya at present. How did Kenneth see the situation?

KENNETH WATENE

I think there is so much drama, so much happening in Africa and I think that is why so far theatre has not been successful because theatre with Africans is something that is spontaneously commentating on the current society. And I feel that people are afraid, perhaps, that they may comment too harshly, but I think this is what it is all about. With our traditional artistes and actors they comment - they say, this is this, and that is that, and therefore theatre becomes living and current and I think this is another reason why people responded to Kimathi. But anyway, that is what I intend to do. I intend to continue writing on such themes, and themes that are on people's minds.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And if you can't visit Nairobi to see a performance of "Dedan Kimathi" there'll be another chance at the end of the year in Lagos for the play has been selected as an entry by Kenya to the All Black Arts Festival.

Time now to say goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Hope you'll join me this time next week for more 'Arts and Africa' but for now, here's the 'Orchestre Muyeii' to play us out.

MUSIC FROM SIERRA LEONE.

BROADCASTING RIGHTS: FREE FOR USE
BY ANY BROADCASTING ORGANISATION
OUTSIDE BRITAIN IN ENGLISH OR IN
TRANSLATION.

PUBLICATION RIGHTS: NOT FREE
FOR USE IN PUBLISHING OUTSIDE
BRITAIN IN ENGLISH OR IN
TRANSLATION