

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 100

(5R 53 S100G)

ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in this programme we'll be discussing a recent conference on African culture which was held in Accra, Ghana.

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

UNESCO - the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has started holding a series of conferences on regional culture around the world. The fourth of these conferences - on the Culture of Africa - was held recently in the Ghanaian capital, Accra. Writers and artists from about forty African countries attended the conference and the delegates also included representatives of various international bodies like PEN - the worldwide organisation of poets, playwrights, editors, essayists and novelists. Later in the programme I'll be talking to two writers about the value and relevance of such conferences to Africa. But first, let's ask one of the people who attended the conference, Peter Elstob, the international secretary of PEN to tell us what main issues were discussed in Accra.

PETER ELSTOB:

Well, the main issue really was the assertion or the search for a cultural identity. As you will undoubtedly know better than I, immediately following independence most African countries were concerned with economics, and it's only within the last five years or so that they've realised that culture is a particularly important matter and naturally, when they looked at it they realised that a great deal of damage had been done to national cultures by the idea that the European nations brought: that there was only one culture, which was their own. In their rejection of European influence and European culture in my opinion they perhaps attempted to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Whereas I couldn't agree more that a national culture is tremendously important, I think that we must all share each others culture. But one can very well understand that when the objective is to reinstate a national culture, to revive traditional values which have

been neglected, misunderstood, that it is very important. And I was a bit surprised to find that most of the discussion in the first two days, did seem to take the form of speakers repeating their condemnation of the bad effects of the colonial period, which I don't deny for a minute. I felt that for people to come from all parts of Africa, to sit down and discuss their culture it is a bit of a waste of time, to talk to each other on subjects upon which they all agree, and I did in fact, when I was allowed to, tell the Conference this.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

When they talked about the culture, do you mean they discussed the culture only in so far as it's reflected in plays, in writings generally?

ELSTOB:

No, in fact that was probably the least amount, because the culture that they felt was most important to Africa was much more the plastic arts, carving, printing of materials, the use of colours, the use of clay, music of course, and the attempts to get back to African music, and of course in the world of art to realise that Africa never pursued the illusion of attempting to produce reality, something which has only been realised in this century, the value of the understanding of abstract art and so really reading and writing and drama came fairly far down the list. I was interested in one African who told me that it's not so much there's a dearth of writers, there's a dearth of readers, and he was not talking about the degree of literacy, he was talking about the lack of reading among literate Africans who he said do their reading to pass their exams, having passed their exams confine most of their reading to keeping up in their subject and to reading the Press. I remarked there was nothing unique about that, it happens in Europe too.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

So in a way you were disappointed that this Conference didn't talk about the subject in which you are particularly interested, in which your organisation is particularly interested.

ELSTOB:

There is a natural suspicion of any European-based organisation and I sensed this when I spoke to the Conference, and I tried to allay their suspicions. If I may I did point out to them one of the articles of the Charter which PEN, with eighty centres and eight thousand writers, throughout the world, and we do have to do something concrete, every one of us has to sign a charter in which we say that we will pledge ourselves to do our utmost to dispel race, class and national hatred and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace in one world. Well I think this helped a bit. One or two people said that they thought that was well-expressed. I tried to say that really the ideals which they were talking about were really very close to our own.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And did you find there was any common identity to the culture of the African countries which attended?

ELSTOB:

Well, yes I think so. I was able to see one or two African writers that I have met at other PEN Conferences, notably Wole Soyinka who was editing "Transition" and who was in Ghana, in Accra and in State House and who played a prominent part there. I also met people of the stature of Mr. Kapa Mensch who every day put on an exhibition, either of a film or of objects illustrating aspects of mostly sub-Saharan African art and as at most of these conferences, as I'm sure you know if you've been to them, the really valuable contacts are made outside the hall, when you speak to people, when you're eating or drinking with them afterwards.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you think the Conference on the whole was successful?

ELSTOB:

Well, yes I think so. I think the reason it was successful is because it brought together people who hadn't all sat down together and made them realise that they had a common problem.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Thank you very much Peter. I have with me here two well-known African writers, first the Ghanaian Cameron Duodu and then Nuruddin Farah from Somalia. Cameron you've just heard what Peter said about the Conference. Have you any comments to make on any of the points he's raised?

CAMERON DUODU:

Well, I'm never really surprised to hear that these conferences take place under the auspices of organisations like UNESCO, and that some of us do not hear of them until they've actually taken place. It shows you how relevant UNESCO and other organisations of that sort are. Because I'm not only a writer, but I deal in the media, and I never heard anything about this until it took place. But that is only an elementary criticism. The thing that worries me most about these conferences is that it is carrying the message to the converted. The greatest amount of work that has to be done to help create a universal feeling among men, must be done in North America and Europe where very powerful media have been absolutely perverted day in day out towards just winning one image, and that image is one of the 'third world' person,

through advertisements, representation through Asian films made in Hollywood and other things, constantly awaken a certain anger in the black man fortuitously, for absolutely no purpose whatsoever, just sitting in your hotel room watching the television and there comes "Tarzan" in 1975. Now these are things that must be done because the people who are being insulted are going back home to take up important positions and you cannot wipe their background clean when they get there, suddenly they are no longer angry, they are taking decisions affecting whole countries, whole continents, but the subconscious that they've built up over the years can be forgotten now they are urbane creatures who can meet at every level with all sorts of people. Therefore holding these conferences in African countries, in third world countries seems to me to be a complete waste of time because quite clearly, from my own experience it is the exposure of the modern African to Europe and America that really is creating a lot of problems for all of us who really believe in universal humanity.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes Cameron. Peter just said that he thought trying to bring back the African to his own culture, or rather the effort by the African to remember his culture is important, but he thinks that too much emphasis is being placed on this aspect of culture. He thinks that we should concern ourselves more, or probably eventually more, with international culture. Am I right Peter?

ELSTOB:

Yes, still, stressing the importance of your own culture of course.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, what do you think about that?

DUCDU:

Well, you cannot really delineate where human beings' reactions should end and begin. The person who is reacting against centuries of being told that he has no culture, and that in order to become a human being he should embrace some other culture, is not suddenly going to say "O.K. I've had enough, five years of telling myself that I have a culture is enough, now I'm going to open my eyes". This is the whole distortion of the human spirit that the evil system I'm talking about has created. It is a complete distortion because it doesn't allow the human being himself to come through. He has been presented with a certain area of operation that really traps him and makes him very limited as a human being. This is what is wrong, and we should recognise it so that we can attack it. Once it is no longer relevant, then we no longer need to worry about it, but at the moment it is very relevant.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well Nuruddin, can I come to you? What do you think about this

issue?

NURUDDIN FARAH:

I was interested in hearing Peter make a mention of the topic which took a great deal of the time of the participants of that Conference, which is the condemnation of the colonial past, which ironically again enabled them to meet under the umbrella under which they all met in Accra. Now it so happens that often one meets one's own countrymen, the famous ones or the others outside one's own country. Usually what happens is that we meet in Europe, we meet in Moscow, we meet in say I met most of the other African writers in London, Moscow, other places. Now I think to really be able to talk about African culture one must divide Africa into certain different regions and sections, and you find for example that in north-east Africa one shares much more with say the Indian sub Continent or the Middle East, rather than with one's Kenyan neighbours. The first time I saw a West African was in 1963, but I'd seen a European when I was four years old. So unless there is this inter-communal contact between peoples of Africa and between peoples of Asia, between peoples of Europe themselves, unless we know one another first, and unless I know what the Ghanaian is up to, what the Somali is up to, we can't have a common interpretation of our own cultures that would be representative of the masses of the people in say Somalia and in Ghana. Now the ones obviously in UNESCO or any other organisation would try to put them all into one bag and see what comes out of that bag, sometimes there is chaos and sometimes there is as he said what happens outside the conference hall is very stimulating and very interesting. This was of course a matter of great pride and a tremendous help to the way the conference went, and I mean it really did have a very strongly African feeling about it because the principal representative at UNESCO was an African, and not only an African but a man who had as a boy tended his father's sheep until he was seven, eight years old, who got his baccalaureat in Paris at the age of twenty-seven and who is a man of sophistication and learning. Therefore when I heard the delegate from Malawi, for example, say: "In Malawi we do not want our youth exposed to decadent European culture and we protect them from it", Malawi Broadcasting Association broadcasts only the traditional Malawi music and we have travelling theatre companies performing only plays based on traditional folklore, it seemed to me that this is an impossible situation. You can't protect the youth from decadent European music, from pop. I mean you've got to let them listen to it and decide that they don't like it, or that they do. I may be wrong but my feeling is that you can't freeze culture.

DUODU:

Well this is the trouble with organisations like UNESCO, if I may say so, because most probably this chap who went and said that is only involved in the arts as a hureaucrat from the Ministry of Education and Culture. Well, when you get people of that sort coming to lay down the law you get this sort of thing. Well, it's all gone already but next time, and you are involved in an international organisation of writers and artists and so on, the peopl

who are creating are the people who should be brought to meet one another, instead of the bureaucrats, with all due respect, who do a lot of very good work, but after the conference it all ends up on the files.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Gentlemen: Peter Elstob, Cameron Duodu, Nuruddin Farah, thank you very much indeed.

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