

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we hear how drought has influenced poetry in Somalia.

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now earlier this year, the Environment Review Unit of the International African Institute published an emergency report on the effects of the drought on Somalia. Well, apart from giving a detailed account of the extent of the drought and describing what relief measures have been taken in the country, the report also included a fascinating account by Professor Andrzejewski of London's School of Oriental and African Studies on images of drought in Somali literature. As you probably know, Somali poetry was part of an exclusively oral tradition until 1973 when the Somali language was given a written script for the first time, as Christopher Mann, a young South African poet now teaching in Swaziland explains.

CHRISTOPHER MANN:

Somalia is a country, as somebody said, which moved from a pre-technological society to a technological society in a very short time, and through the wisdom of the people there, the change did not destroy the culture. So you had the extraordinary change from nomadic people with a long tradition of rhetorical speech and poems becoming nomadic people who use the radio to communicate that culture: in other words that the technology did not bring a new culture as much as it continued an old one and perhaps strengthened it.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And of course Somali radio has played a big part in broadcasting poems about the drought and prayers for rain - some of which haven't been heard for 20 years or more. Well, with me in the

TETTEH-LARTEY:
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studio is Abde Salaam Mohammed, a young Somali poet, who's going to read us a few poems about how drought affects the Somali poetry. We're all ears Abde.

ABDE SALAAM MOHAMMED:

I think of all natural disasters the drought is the worst in the Somali context because the country is almost semi-arid, and in that case there are constant droughts which re-occur in cycles - as a result of that Somalis usually reflect drought in their poetry. There aren't poems which are specifically dealing with drought all the time but there are sometimes some. However it is mostly reflected in poems which are dealing with that subject, so I will read one in which a poet is sending a mission to some Somali people during the years when there was a resistance against the British occupation there between 1905 to 1920. The mission was going through a drought stricken area, and the man who is sending the mission, the leader of the resistance, is bestowing upon the mission his blessings, and the part which is dealing with the drought goes this way.

POEM READ IN SOMALI & AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now you have published a poem of your own on the same subject haven't you?

ABDE SALAAM:

Yes in a recent publication which was dealing with the Somali drought which occurred between November '73 to May '74 and I shall read that to you now.

ABDE SALAAM'S POEM IN SOMALI WITH ENGLISH TRANSLATION.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well this drought is obviously a very serious problem, you tell me that the latest one took a heavy toll of live-stock and human life. Now obviously then this is something which the people have to live with. From the points you have raised so far, you just give us a sort of description of the drought. One would have thought that this being such a serious subject it would give rise to some exhortation to the people - you see by the poets so they can bear with what is happening to them - or at least some philosophical lesson drawn from this situation.

ABDE SALAAM:

Yes there are, in fact, religious poems which are dealing with the drought and during the drought periods, religious men usually give solace to the people by reciting lethogies in Arabic, but also in Somali as well, so some religious men composed poems which would act both as a soothing for the people whose hearts are low and also are addressed to God in order to give rain to the people, and I shall read one like that for you.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes fine.

ABDE SALAM:

POEM IN SOMALI THEN TRANSLATED IN ENGLISH

TETTEH-LARTEY:

This is very interesting poetry, who would read it? Is it the intellectuals in the cities? Obviously this affects mostly I should think the villagers who rear livestock.

ABDE SALAM:

Yes well immediately it would affect the rural people, the nomads, but it would also affect the towns people, because in the Somali situation the towns as in many other parts of the world particularly in the developing countries, the town and the rural areas are interconnected, in that most of the towns in fact have all the trade which comes from the nomads, the livestock trade particularly, therefore if the droughts strikes and many livestock die, it would affect also the lives of the people in towns. And the other thing is as far as the literary appreciation goes, it's appreciated both by the people in the rural communities and also by the people in urban centres, because the language is in Somali, imagery is something which all the Somalis whether they are in rural areas or in the town do understand, and therefore I think both of them would appreciate, and both of them would see the plight which is being expressed in these poems.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, it's interesting, I noticed that there was very little artificial imagery. Most of the language comes straight from the heart as it were. But then how do you get across to the villagers. Are they all able to read Somali?

ABDE SALAM:

Yes, since Somali script has not been invented before 1972, the main media to transmit the poetry was through the radio. All Somalis speak the same language so all of them would understand and appreciate the poems, but I think the kind of transmission which could reach a large public, and which was used very effectively was the radio rather than a written medium which can only be understood by the few who can read.

TETTEH;LARTEY:

Is this poetry also being introduced into the schools?

ABDE SALAM:

Yes, now they have introduced this poetry to the schools and in fact some of the children did recite traditionally, they used to come out the children in the schools, because it is regarded that if children and women would come out and pray for rain God

ABDE SALAAM:
(cont)

would have mercy, and all these people were not yet hardened I suppose, therefore it was being used - children would come out and they would recite 'Allah' - O God bring rain to us, O God bring rain to us, and in fact this poem which I read, the last one I read was being broadcast on Radio Mogadishu or Radio Hargeisa in 1969 during the drought here.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well that is extremely interesting. The poetry therefore is utilitarian in that sense - it's put to practical use.

ABDE SALAAM:

Yes, indeed it is, yes.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And it forms part of the lives of the people?

ABDE SALAAM:

Yes, yes.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well nothing could be more appropriate, I consider poetry a living thing. Well thank you very much Abde Salaam Mohammed, he was talking about how drought has influenced poetry in Somalia. And that's all for this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye for now and hoping that you'll be listening again next week for more ARTS AND AFRICA.

TAPE: PLAYOUT SOMALI MUSIC

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