

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. The sorrows of exile and the pleasures of a sculptor's workshop, in today's "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

With me in the studio today is Julian Marshall and between us on the table is a piece of sculpture. Julian, would you like to have a go at telling listeners what this piece of carving looks like?

JULIAN MARSHALL:

It stands about four inches off the ground. It's in the shape of a half sphere, one side is rounded and the other side is flat. And on that flat side there is what represents a face which is in fact the title of the sculpture. It's carved in soapstone.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well can I interrupt you there? I don't want you to whet the appetite of our listeners any further.

Now, having roused everybody's curiosity I'm going to ask you to come back later in the programme to tell us the whole story behind this one carving. Just now I want to turn to a sombre subject. South Africa's policy of racial discrimination has led to restrictions and censorship that make life for her writers very difficult indeed. Many of them are in exile in distant countries and continents. Recently a group of artists and writers now in exile met in Holland under the auspices of a Dutch Cultural Foundation. The only South African to attend who is still resident in South Africa was the poet Adam Small.

In this jargon of apartheid he is labelled as "coloured" - that means he's of mixed blood - so he doesn't enjoy the benefits of belonging to a white minority. I asked him to tell me about the idea behind the gathering in Holland.

ADAM SMALL:

The idea was very simply to get together as many as possible of South African artists who had left the country long ago, some very long ago, people in exile and also a number of Dutch artists, for interchanging personalities, art ideas, and also of course for talking about politics and in general the things back home.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Who are some of the people you have met there who might be well-known to us?

SMALL:

Alex Laguma was there. This was a very interesting encounter for me, also it was moving. Motsisi Kunene who finds himself at the moment in Los Angeles in the United States came over.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

It seems to me that this was a very grim conference with everybody being conscious of the clouds of apartheid.

SMALL:

No, no, no. I think it is very important for people who live in exile, not only in exile outside the country but also in a real sense exile in the country, that they can laugh at the situation back home, that they can laugh at their situation here, laugh at the situation they find themselves in at the moment. Simply because I am still at home I was the only one there still at home, everybody else had not been home for a long time.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well it must have been easier for them to attend the conference than for you who have come right out of the country to attend such a conference. Surely the authorities must have been aware of the type of things which were going to be discussed there?

SMALL:

It is very difficult to know for whom really it was most difficult - the artists in exile or for myself. It is difficult for me in a very

immediate sense also in a physical sense at home.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now, tell me something about the works of some of these exiles you've met at the conference. They've been out of the country for a very long time, probably they've lost touch with reality at home. Do you find this reflected in their works, or do you find they write realistically about things that are actually happening?

SMALL:

I think one finds that they are very concerned about the fact that, as Alex Paguma put it, "their fund of memory is drying up." And very movingly he wrote on a little piece of paper for me which I hope I can take home with me safely, "hoping to see you back home soon".

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you find that they keep brooding over what they're missing?

SMALL:

Yes, they do. They have an identity crisis and I should say that they're living an identity crisis all the time, but so am I, I'm living an identity crisis at home. I understand that there is a deep bitterness with so many of them in Europe and other parts of the world, there is the very same bitterness lying in my heart. But again it is a bitterness which functions differently. I am right there in that situation, they are outside, and well, it was not so easy sometimes even for myself and them to connect.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The poet Adam Small reminding us of the penalties that face the committed writer - and not only in South Africa.

Rhodesia doesn't often provide us with stories that show a flowering of African art, but Julian Marshall has just come back from a visit not only bringing that attractive piece of sculpture we were looking at but also the story of a group of sculptors working harmoniously and creatively together. Well Julian, is this piece typical?

JULIAN MARSHALL:

It's very typical of all the artists working in this particular community, the Tengenenge community, in so far as they work in this stone which I was saying is called soapstone. In appearance very dull grey in colour, very easy to work with, very soft and you put oil or vaseline on it when you have finished the sculpture and it brings

out all these wonderful colours. This particular one is dark, almost translucent green and flecked with whites and greys and blacks and in its design it's typical of the work of all these artists in so far as it represents a departure from airport art and it conveys something rather more abstract, rather more enigmatic and I think perhaps something rather more African.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's very handsomely executed. It looks to me rather like Humpty Dumpty or the face of the sun! Now what do you think about the group?

MARSHALL:

I was unable to visit the community itself but I went to the outlet that they have in the centre of Salisbury, the art gallery, where they have at least four or five of the artists working there and they were turning out pieces by the day, by the week, some of them small some of them as small as this, three or four inches, some of them towering three or four feet. There was even one piece that was about ten feet high and represented a hippopotamus.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

I see. Now are they internationally recognised?

MARSHALL:

Well they certainly have individual sculptors, and particularly Henry, who was the sculptor who did this piece, they certainly have exhibited abroad, in South Africa, they've had exhibitions in Canada and in certain parts of Europe, and wherever they have gone they have received acclaim from the critics.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Who is the founder of the group?

MARSHALL:

A man called Tom Blomefield who is a farmer in an area called Sipolilo which is in the north eastern part of Rhodesia, and he was growing maize, tobacco which is what most farmers do in that part of the world, and how the community actually began was the question I put to Tom Blomefield.

TOM BLOMEFIELD:

One day an African came to me and said, "Right on your farm there is

a terrific mountain of black serpentine stone". This is just at the top of the Tengenenge river. Tengenenge means "to begin". It's the old African name for that particular part of the world, "the beginning", and so we took some of these stones and we made some tools out of old broken hoes and things like that, and old files, and started chipping away at the stone. It turned out to be very, very good sculptor's material. As a matter of fact that head over there is one of the sculptures I did in the first week with this African Crispin, just showing me how to use the tools. That actually is a portrait of Lemon Moses who was at that time the gardener. And Lemon was stung by some bees. He ran away from these bees and joined us and so he started sculpting as well. Well Lemon Moses was born in Malawi. He'd been working on the farm as a builder and a brickmaker and a contractor generally, as a gardener cum general handyman, and I'd known him for a long time. While we were sitting there, I started sculpting a portrait of Lemon and then Lemon Moses started doing a sculpture himself. Local Africans were amazed to see us making sculptures out of stone, because most of the sculpture is done in wood here. They didn't think you could do anything with stone. Anyhow they came in, the local chief came in, his family, and all the migrant workers, the cooks started himself, the builder's wife started, her name was Kalela and later on those people were to have their sculptures exhibited in a museum of modern art in South Africa.

MARSHALL:

So these people didn't know they were artists at the time?

BLOMEFIELD:

None of us knew it. All of us were self-taught and we used our own ideas and when we started up we thought the best thing would be that we would do whatever we thought, and not copy from books and we wouldn't criticise or condemn each others work. This was the Tengenenge idea.

MARSHALL:

Do you find it difficult in Rhodesia itself to gain acceptance for African sculptures, because I remember vaguely one Rhodesian Front member of Parliament being quite amazed at what he described as "These abortions" actually being able to be sold in museums and galleries in Europe.

BLOMEFIELD:

Well you know there's sculpture and there's sculpture. For instance some of the sculpture is very grotesque, some of it is based on folklore and sort of spirit ancestor worship brings in pictures, depicts people with spirits and things like that. But I wouldn't say that our sculptures are so descriptive.

MARSHALL:

Do you think that your sculptures have an individual style?

BLOMEFIELD:

I'd say very definitely yes because the whole spirit of Tengenenge, Tengenenge was in the area of a particular chief and this chief gave his blessing to this particular operation and so they felt somehow that the whole spirit of the thing was right.

MARSHALL:

What about your fellow white farmers? Didn't they think you were a bit crazy throwing up your farming, throwing in your hand with something like sculpting?

BLOMEFIELD:

You know they've always thought I've been crazy. After I'd been sculpting for about five or six years it was difficult going during the sanctions, I decided to give up the farming altogether so that I could devote my entire energy into the sculpting community.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Julian, Tengenenge sounds a very happy place and quite free of political tensions and pressures?

MARSHALL:

Alex, that's quite true in many respects, in the day to day working lives of the artists, but where a problem starts is in the effect of United Nations sanctions on Rhodesia and in trying to export those works of art from the country and give them the sort of distribution and the sort of coverage that I certainly think they deserve and particularly the work of the outstanding sculptor, Henry. And it is a problem that Tom Blomefield is aware of and which he explained to me.

BLOMEFIELD:

I sent some sculptures by Henry over to America and these were seized by the American customs and so we always had doubts as to whether we'd ever be able to have a proper exhibition over there, and to mount an exhibition over in Europe. I believe that this sculpture of Henry which is like a light under a bushel, should be in museums and galleries all over the world, but I can't afford to take it over and then possibly have the thing done by the sanctions. The artists

really have suffered as a result of that.

MARSHALL:

So you feel that sanctions ironically are thwarting the ambitions of what you consider to be a promising African artist?

BLOMEFIELD:

Definitely, because it means that there would be free movement of exhibitions out there, there wouldn't be fear of confiscation. It's been a big handicap to the artist.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Thanks a lot Julian for bringing this lovely piece of sculpture from Rhodesia.

MARSHALL:

Thank you Alex.

MUSIC: Kwanongoma College Music. "Cham'tengure".

TETTEH-LARTEY:

A Shona song from Rhodesia that we've played before, "Cham'tengure", and before those wagon wheels carry me away, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye, let's meet again next week for more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: Kwanongoma College Music. "Cham'tengure".