

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And our guests on today's programme are a sculpture from the Sudan and a film-maker from Nigeria.

SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Go past any cinema in Black Africa and the chances are that it will be advertising a film made in a non-African language. Well the first full-length feature film has been completed in Nigeria in the Yoruba language.

YORUBA MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Akereburu, an Egungun artist eloquently chanting Yoruba poetry, the language in which Ola Balogun has made a new film "AJANI OGUN". The popular idea is that if you want a really big audience for a film (or a play or a book for that matter) you have to use an international language - but Dr. Balogun, the best-known Nigerian film-maker, has already made films in the Igbo language and he questions the whole idea of the need to use English if you are making films for Africa. He explains his point of view to Henry Robbin.

DR. BALOGUN:

To be quite frank right from the start, I believe that the Nigerian film industry should primarily be in Nigerian languages, that's why my second film 'Amadi' was in Igbo, as you may recall and this film now is in Yoruba. I also have plans for other indigenous Nigerian languages. I believe that shooting in indigenous languages we are closer to the truth about the lives of our people, we're closer to the cultural setting in which they live and operate. Don't forget that 80%, at least, of the

DR. BALOGUN(cont)

population of this country does not speak English and if we were to pretend the contrary we would be running away from the truth. I believe we cannot on the one hand talk about cultural revival and all that, without going back to the basis for that revival which is our own languages, our own culture, our own world vision. That's why my film is in Yoruba.

HENRY ROBBIN:

Now you talked of 'Amadi' being in Igbo language. Are you contemplating one in Hausa ?

DR. BALOGUN

I think it is inevitable that I should make a film in Hausa. I wouldn't like to be imprisoned in any narrow categories. It does not mean all my films will be in Nigerian languages. I intend to make one or two English language films, perhaps a bit more into pidgin English than English as such, because pidgin is a Nigerian language.

HENRY ROBBIN:

And more acceptable, more widely spoken.

DR. BALOGUN:

Yes, but it has the syntax and the grammatical structure of our languages, so its Nigerian language as well and then also I intend to work outside Nigeria in other areas of West Africa and to use the languages that are spoken there.

HENRY ROBBIN:

Now let's talk about the film, the film itself "Ajani Ogun", the background to it, the personalities, the actors.

DR. BALOGUN:

Yes, "Ajani Ogun" is set in contemporary Nigerian rural background. The story of a young hunter, that's played by Adeyemi Folayan, who's popularly known as Adi Love. He's leader of a well-known Yoruba theatre folk group. The story of this young hunter who struggles to recover his father's lands from the clutches of a rich and unscrupulous local politician, who also is trying to make the hunter's sweetheart his third or fourth wife. The rich politician is played by Duro Ladipo who is very, very well known in the theatre in this country (his play Oba Koso has been to many part of the world). After many struggles and numerous adventures the young hunter and his sweetheart are re-united whilst the politician and his accomplices fall into the hands of the law. I would say at one level this film deals with the conflict between the rural poor and the newly emergent class of wealthy and unscrupulous people who dominate the country's economic and political life and at a different level it is also denouncing the corruption and the money-monger mentality which characterised this class of people. But then also it's entertainment. It's folk-lore, there's lots of music and dance and everything that really makes up for popular mass appeal.

MUSIC: YORUBA MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That isn't the bride from Ola Balgoun's forthcoming film "AJANI OGUN" but it is the traditional shanting of a Yoruba bride as she leaves her parents home to begin married life .. It must be more than a year since we saw a remarkable photograph of the Sudanese sculptor AMIR NOUR sitting beside his flock "GRAZING AT SHENDI". The picture was so attractive that we invited Amir to pay ARTS AND AFRICA a visit. Well, as he lives in the United States it has taken some while to arrange but here he is in the studio with me. Thanks for comming

Now Amir, that flock you were shepherding in the photograph, what are they ? Are they sheep, cattle or what ?

AMIR NOUR:

Well, it's actually meant to be sheep but still some people see it like sheep, some people see it like elephants crossing the Nile, and, well, you can say any herd of animals. But the idea itself came from way back when I was a kid in Shendi. We used to go out in the desert and play football and sometimes there is an old man who comes in with all the sheep and he keeps them away in the desert for the rest of the day and then in the evening he just lets them free and then they scattered all over the place. And I had that sort of image in my head and I tried to do it in sculpture so it took me ages before I came to this result of trying to work in metal and make it look like sheep,

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It looks very impresionistic and at the same time very, very natural when you come to know what is being depicted.

AMIR NOUR:

You see when you look at animals in the desert from say about 2 or 3 miles away, you don't see details, you just see them as shapes. But at the same time what gives it that naturalistic feeling is the roundness of it, just like humps, and that's how you see them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes.

AMIR NOUR:

I made it out of stainless steel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now you live in probably the most modern of modern cities, Chicago. Now how do you, are you able at the same time to make sculptures out of pastoral scenes like this ?

AMIR NOUR:

Well you see, what I found that when I am away from the Sudan, I have a nostalgia for the type of life we have there. It is a

AMIR NOUR (cont):

very natural feeling because you miss the Sudan in that type of atmosphere and so you think about what you miss and how could you put it in art, and things like that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now that you mention your nostalgic feeling for the Sudan probably this is the best time for you to tell us a little about yourself.

AMIR NOUR:

Well, I studied art in the Art school in Khartoum, then I was selected to stay there to teach art, then after a time I was sent to England on a scholarship. Then I went back to Sudan and I taught in the Art school in the sculptural department and I headed the sculptural department for about 2 years, then after that I came here to England where I went to the Royal College of Art for a postgraduate course and from here I went straight to America to Yale University and then from Yale University I went to Chicago where I teach now in a college which is absolutely a very good place because it's mainly a black college which gave me another experience to add to my African heritage.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY :

Now I can see other examples of your sculpture. Here is something which to me looks like an earthworm. It may well be a snake, I don't know.

AMIR NOUR:

Well, it's called a serpent, which is a snake and it's made out of steel and to make it less shiny and so that it can absorb the light rather than reflect it. I had to tumble the metal about 8 times.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What does that mean ?

AMIR NOUR:

I took it to a company where they put it with some grains of sand and they roll it around in a big machine and that gives a sort of dull finish. A finish that will absorb the light rather than reflect it. But also it gives it a sensual feeling which you see you find in a snake, and that movement.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

There's another interesting figure here. It looks to me like the figure of a woman carrying a water gourd or something. Is that it ?

AMIR NOUR:

Yes, I call this "Return from the Nile". It's a woman carrying a jar coming back from the Nile with water in it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's very very pretty indeed especially

AMIR NOUR:

Thank you very much

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Lower down here, where you've slid all these rather difficult pieces into each other. It's amazing how you managed to do a complicated thing like that.

AMIR NOUR:

Well, you see, let me tell you a little about it. I made this in wax

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I see.

AMIR NOUR:

.... you see, like I did the top part, the pot. I made a part in plaster then I made a mould out of the plaster and from the mould I sort of melted the wax and poured it in the mould to get this shape. Then after I made the whole thing I took it to a foundry where it was cast in bronze.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

How about this one ? Are these egg-shells cut into halves ?

AMIR NOUR:

No, you see when you walk in the market anywhere in Africa you see people selling gourds and calabashes, things like that. They are very inspiring because they are pure form and sculpture to me is pure form. Some Western writers always accuse the African artist of not being able to do abstract or perhaps when they do abstract they copy Western art, but it is not true. There is abstract in traditional African art as well as in the shapes of objects that we use.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you also make sculptures of objects you see around in Chicago or do you concentrate only on forms in Africa ?

AMIR NOUR:

No, well you see human experience is the same, whether it is in Chicago or in Africa, and I'm not trying to be sort of intentionally attracted by Africa. No, I was brought up in an African country but I had my education in the West, and, of course, these melt together. I would say it's just like Africa today, it's a mixture of both. Maybe one day we will come out with something that can be completely pure modern African thinking.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

No, I think I rather like the marriage of the two cultures which you

are using at the moment. Have you held any exhibitions of your works ?

AMIR NOUR:

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Public exhibitions I mean ?

AMIR NOUR:

Yes, I did. The recent one was in the Museum of Art, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the United States of America. It is one of the very modern museums one of the most prominent.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What was the public reaction ?

AMIR NOUR:

Well I think it was very good. Some people enjoyed it and they said they have never seen such a thing before, and that's very good.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you plan to make exhibitions in Africa of your work ?

AMIR NOUR:

Well if got asked, yes I would, because you know I cannot afford dragging the work back from Chicago to Africa. It's up to the African countries to ask me. I think it's about time they supported African artists perhaps put a little bit of money in Art so that they can have artists producing and exhibiting in Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Thank you very much Amir. It's been a pleasure talking to you. And remembering that the first item which we discussed with Amir was about a flock grazing, here's some pastoral music from the Sudan to end the programme. This is me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, saying goodbye for now, until we meet next time for more "Arts and Africa".

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