

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we talk to Daniel Kunene.

SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Daniel Kunene is a South African academic, he is a Professor of African languages and literature at the University of Wisconsin in the United States but he's also a poet. You may remember that we features his poem "Soweto" in Arts and Africa last year. On his way back from Swaziland to the United States, he came into the Arts and Africa studio to talk to me about some of his academic research projects and his poetry.

Now Daniel, what exactly are you going by way of project work ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

Well, in terms of reseach, I'm involved more with literature than languages, and as far as literature goes I research African literature written in the African languages, as well as oral African literature. I might add that my choice of emphasis rises out of the fact that all this excitement in the USA and I'm sure here too, about African literature, arises out of literature written in English and even people who profess to be actively involved with African literature do not take any trouble to correct the balance and give literature written in the African languages its due place in this whole concern.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now what exactly do you do in this research. Do you just collect examples of African literature ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

No, I do analysis of literature in the African languages. Right now I'm about to finish a project on the works of Thomas Mofolo, a Sesotho writer of early this century and one of whose works has

been translated into English, French and German etc to show just how well it's written. Now I'm treating all of his works in this project which I'm doing, which will be quite a sizeable book.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now do you limit yourself to the Southern part of the continent or do you go all over the continent ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

In terms of my research ?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes.

DANIEL KUNENE:

I stay pretty well in the Southern part because I want to be able to understand the languages and I don't understand languages beyond except purely accidentally, like Lozi in Zambia. This is closely related to Sesotho which is my mother tongue. Therefore I'm able to read literature in Lozi.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Let's go back to this poem of yours which we featured in this programme some time ago "Soweto". Why did you write it?

DANIEL KUNENE:

Well, that poem was inspired by reading of a 12 year old girl early during the Soweto uprising, who was shot by the police, and the excuse for that, was that she was looting. This absolutely rocked me, it pulled the very roots of my feelings because I couldn't understand how a 12 year old child could be shot, when in fact what is done to 12 year old children who are naughty is to spank them on their bottoms !

But here was a child shot, that was the genesis of this poem.

ALEXTETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you not think that living away from the scene you might possibly not be painting the realities of the situation ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

I don't know, I have been away from South Africa for quite some time. I've been away for close on 14 years now. Nevertheless I continue to feel it very very intimately and I don't have the feeling that I've lost touch at all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Living away from home, what's your experience. It must be very harrowing ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

Well, the experience is that of continuous hope, I'd say expectation or almost the certainty that I will get back there one day and that I suppose, is what keeps one going. I don't see myself as entirely, completely and finally exiled from my home.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

You don't think this is forlorn hope at all ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

I don't think so. I'm very intimately following the political happenings at home and in surrounding areas, and it seems to me that all the signs, including Soweto for example, are certainly, that within the foreseeable future, I shall be able to go back and re-integrate myself to my original home.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, this poem was very moving to my ears. What reception did you receive elsewhere ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

Yes, in the USA this poem received a tremendous welcome and in fact, I should say, it's strange because one of my great friends who is also a poet, but is a doctor of medicine by profession, called me after he heard it on the radio in Madison and said he cried when he heard it. To me, I was surprised to hear that, because I suppose, at that time, the only thing I talked the poem to was the microphone as we are doing now, except that you are here ! But at that time I was alone in the studio with a mike and I read it. I read it with feeling I believe, enough to carry the emotion of the poem. Nevertheless, I didn't feel moved, and when this man said he cried I didn't understand it until I read it to a live audience in Leiden Holland, I cried, the audience cried, it was quite different.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well since then you've written other poems ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

Yes I have.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I must say rather unfortunately, the situation doesn't seem to have changed since you wrote that poem ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

No it hasn't, I'll qualify that. But maybe, we should say, basically, we still have the same problems, attitudes must

have changed somewhat.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, can you read us some of the poems you've written since.

DANIEL KUNENE:

Well, maybe I should start with a Soweto related poem. I think that would be appropriate. This poem is entitled "The Laying of the Stones" and it's a poem that arises out of the fact that the custom when someone has died in your absence, a relative. In South Africa you come home, you go to the place of burial and one of the customs is to pick up a stone and lay it on the grave and this has to do with the graves of the children killed in Soweto.

POEM: "The Laying of The Stones"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I wonder what do you hope or mean to achieve by the repetition of this rather moving line "lay a stone here".

DANIEL KUNENE:

Well, first of all, let me say the number of children killed I could not write this line enough number of times to cover that. But the number of blacks killed in South Africa throughout this period of the oppression, exploitation of the blacks in all forms of violence, against the blacks, in jails etc, starvation of the children, all kinds of violence, have been innumerable. The uprising in Soweto was not just against a language that the schoolchildren didn't like. It really was a battle in the continual war against apartheid and the deprivations.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

But do you think that it is right for people who obviously know that they are going to get shot and that by getting shot they really achieve nothing. Is it right for people to go on doing that when they are defenceless. I mean, I would have expected that probably somewhere along the line you would encourage them probably to resort to some other means, than just going into the mouths of guns and getting shot down. It's a sort of death wish they are carrying out.

DANIEL KUNENE:

Yes, but on the other hand when you see that there is no other way or alternative, that all other alternatives have been tried, you see that there is only one way. Well, two alternatives if you like. One would be to accept the situation and sit back. The other would be to take the action that these children so courageously did. And I wouldn't agree that one doesn't achieve anything. I suspect that the world has just become as touched as me, for example, by Soweto. I'm sure I will have whole shelves full of

"Soweto" books, poems and things inspired by Soweto. And also on the political side, I think definitely there is a lot that's happening in the world against South Africa as a **result** of Soweto.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now you've got this other poem which I would like you to read for us.

DANIEL KUNENE:

This is "Voices" and it is again a Soweto related poem and I think it will make it's own meaning clear.

POEM: "Voices" by Daniel Kunene.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well Daniel, have you written any poems at all which don't deal with the theme of violence ?

DANIEL KUNENE:

Yes, I have written a few. I'm afraid that having lived in South Africa, and still living in it really spiritually, I can't escape writing on violence. But I do occasionally write something on the light side. Let me just read two very brief ones. The first is "Lucifer Hit by Unemployment"

POEM: "Lucifer Hit by Unemployment" - by Daniel Kunene

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What inspired that one !

DANIEL KUNENE:

Well that one, words like denigrate, well what does denigrate mean: to make black. But you know, one might actually say that this is an affirmation, also of the acceptance of black as being beautiful. Now this one was inspired by the line which appears in the bible which says "I am black but comely" and it's entitled "Confused Conjunctions".

POEM: "Confused Conjunctions" by Daniel Kunene.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What does that bit mean "black, period, comely period"

DANIEL KUNENE:

Just black and no conjunction and comely, no conjunction. Yo You see "black but comely" is consecution, but black and comely is still some kind of consecution. Black ... comely ...

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Daniel Kunene, poet and Professor of African languages and literature.

MUSIC: "Limpopo" by Jeremy Taylor.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that's all we have time for this week. Why not join me at the same time next week for more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: "Limpopo" by Jeremy Taylor.

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