

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 today we talk with a Sudanese politician who combines his professional life with literary interests.

SIG TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Sayed Jamal Mohamed Ahmed, was until recently Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Sudan. Previously he had been in education and served as ambassador in Iraq, Ethiopia and the U.K. But Sayed Ahmed is unusual in that he is also a talented writer and editor who has published a number of books including "Africa Rediscovered", "African Tales" and "On African Drama". As you know, the Sudan is a meeting place of two cultures - black African and Arabic - and it is appropriate perhaps that one of Sayed Ahmed's main concerns is to inform the Arabic world of African culture, especially writing, and vice versa. I talked with him recently when he passed through London, and I asked him what his main pre-occupations are as a writer.

SAYED JAMAL MOHAMED AHMED

As a writer, I did a lot of work on African literature and African politics in Arabic. It's a pity that you will not be able to read some of them, but I have tried my best to present Africa to the Arab world on both levels: the creative level - what poets write, what novelists write, what essayists write on one level; and also what politicians think and what politicians do.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why did you choose to write in the medium of Arabic rather than in English or French?

SAYED AHMED

Well, Arabic is my mother tongue and though I don't find it very difficult to write in English, I thought it would be a good idea if I addressed, to begin with, people immediately around me. If any of my writings are of any use, then they may be translated and address people also nearer to me. In this connection I must say that I did one or two things in English also.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now which African writers have you tried to introduce to the Arab world?

SAYED AHMED

Let me take one of my books, a specific one on African drama. In that, while reading some African plays and also watching one or two of them, I saw a thread connecting the African mind, so to speak. For instance, the way the African playwrights draw upon their mythology of the continent, draw upon the fables and tales of the continent. You will find this as far apart as Ethiopia and Nigeria. An Ethiopian playwright wrote in exactly the same vein as J.B. Clark, the very well-known Nigerian dramatist. I surveyed those two writers and also a Cameroon dramatist - five or six of them - trying to define this connecting thread. This thread is the pride an African takes in his mythology, the fact that he doesn't dismiss it as just "primitive", but as expressions of a soul that even before Africa encountered other parts of the world. That's that thread I saw. In fact I went as far as saying (perhaps I was exaggerating a little) that, if there is African unity, there is a unity of minds. And you can see that in these plays.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Which particular African authors do you consider your favourites?

SAYED AHMED

I wouldn't pick on one single person, chiefly because my taste is rather catholic. I appreciate them all. I appreciate the genre itself, the novel form and the play form. The one that came out lately in Ghana and captivated me very much indeed is "This Earth, My Brother" by Kofi Awoonor. It is not only the way he is presenting his vision of Ghana but it's also the technique of the novel which is being mastered. Africans have always been telling stories. But to bring in the new techniques of the novel, it's quite a task and I think that Kofi did it extremely well. I am only quoting one example out of many.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's interesting that you are talking about the African world and the Arab world. But some Arab countries are African.

SAYED AHMED

Indeed they are.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How do you then make this distinction? Is there anything for example, written by an Egyptian to be introduced to the black African literary world?

SAYED AHMED

Yes, I agree entirely that there are at least seven Arab countries in Africa. But, mark you, the difference is that not all readers in these countries, these Arab/African countries, read any other language than Arabic. Therefore, the media of contact with them is Arabic. Any you say: is there an Egyptian, for instance, who wrote something with an African setting, which is worth presenting also to black Africa? The answer is not that I know of. Maybe there are some but they wouldn't be the stuff that would perhaps stir me in the way that "This Earth, My Brother" stirred me. And literature is a very, very subjective thing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now shall we come back to your own writing. Tell me of the works you have written in the past.

SAYED AHMED

I am fond of one which is now out of print, not very much around. I am hoping to up-date it and get it re-published. It's a book of studies I call "Kutalaat Afrigiya" - "African Studies" - and it discusses things which were at the time, in the mid-sixties, preoccupying African minds. Things like Negritude, African personality, the philosophy of politics, and so on. The philosophy of politics, not politics in practice. About six or seven studies, longish ones, which were published in Cairo in 1968. These ones I am fond of. I would like to have another look at it and see how I was thinking at the time. It may be good for me to have a look at it too! One thing I rather like is a collection of short stories I wrote for children, all of them with an African setting, because I thought Arab children might be introduced to Africa through the story. And I have this feeling that stories and novels and poets and drama are also another way of introducing you to me and me to you. We can always exchange benefits, trade and aid, and all that kind of thing. But the meeting of minds cannot be really brought about except through this media.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When writing these short stories for the children you've talked about, what do you draw upon? What sort of stories are they?

SAYED AHMED

Yes. Some of them actually are adapted from ancient chronicles. Some of them I heard myself while travelling around in Africa. Some of them I concocted. And each of them is introduced. For instance, if I get a story from Chad, I say a few words about Chad, not to bore the child but just telling him where Chad is, who lives there, where the River Chad is, because the story takes place around that river.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

As you have already mentioned earlier on, Africa is very rich in mythology. Are some of these stories based on African mythology?

SAYED AHMED

You know, someone who specialises in comparative mythology would find that African mythology actually is related in some manner to even Greek mythology. I mean, some of the stories of the Masai, for instance, in northern Kenya, are almost the same. Not the same. They can't be the same of course because the background is different. But the narration, the characters and the way they react to things, the way they are moved into things and so on. After all you may say and I will say with you, that human beings are everywhere and therefore Ancient Greece and Ancient Africa were the same human beings and reacted to things the same way.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you cite any particular story in this book of yours which has probably gained more popularity than any other or, alternatively, of which you are most fond.

SAYED AHMED

I tell you of one, which actually gained some popularity to the extent that it was dramatized by some actors and players in Khartoum. It is called "Scheherezade". And it is a story told by a German traveller - Leo Frobenius. He was travelling in the medieval Sudan. You know, Sudan extended from the Nile to the Niger. He tells a story which is really much like "Scheherezade of a Thousand Nights". Very, very briefly, it's the story of a king and his sister, who are in the grip and prisoners, actually, of priests. As soon as the king is a little old or something, the priests saw something in the sky which told them that the king is no more and that he ought to be killed and he was killed. That's the one which was dramatised and I think it came off well in the theatre. I took it from Frobenius, who does it, of course, in about ten lines or so. I embellished it and so on and made quite a story of it and then my friends made quite a drama of it! So everyone was looting everybody else actually. I looted Frobenius and they looted me!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What are you doing at the moment? What are you writing?

SAYED AHMED

Well, at the moment, just before the Afro/Arab summit in Cairo some months ago, I started a series of articles in an Egyptian paper telling the ideas behind, not the mechanics, but the ideas that brought about the Organisation of African Unity. The ideas that were a point of friction, a point of dialogue and so on. And I see that there is some interest in writing the history of ideas that led up to the O.A.U. In response to that, I am trying to complete this, giving the portraits of people who were very important at the time and played a role in bringing out the O.A.U., and also putting forward their own ideas, not political manipulations or anything of the sort but a sort of literary history of the period. This I am hoping to finish fairly soon.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You seem to have gained a lot in your literary career through your political activities. The political activity, in other words, has contributed a lot towards your literary talent and your literary experience.

SAYED AHMED

Well, you say the reverse, because the literary inclinations help along the political profession. So you can say both actually!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

My thanks to Sayed Jamal Mohamed Ahmed. He's a fascinating man isn't he? Seriously concerned with bridging the gap between Arab and African cultures.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And there we come to the end of this week's programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying good-bye. Join us again next week for another Arts and Africa.

PLAYOUT MUSIC "Nurul Ain" by Mohammed Wardi Khartoum
