

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, a Malawian playwright and the connection between music and development in Nigeria.

SIG. TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Chris Kamlongera from Malawi is studying African drama at Leeds University in the North of England. Two of the plays he has written "Love Potion" and "Graveyards" are included in a book, entitled "Nine Malawian Plays", published recently in Blantyre, Malawi's capital. Peter Barsby visited Chris in Leeds for "Arts and Africa" and first asked him how he came to write his plays.

CHRIS KAMLONGERA

"Love Potion" was initially part of an exercise in a creative writing course which I was doing as part of my degree and when I wrote it, my tutor thought it was good and as it happened at the time the BBC was running a competition for playwriting in Africa. So I sent it over and it got short-listed. In 1973, in December, it was broadcast by the BBC. That was the beginning of "Love Potion".

PETER BARSBY

What about the other one, "Graveyards"?

CHRIS KAMLONGERA

"Graveyards" I wrote when I was teaching in a Secondary School. I was teaching English as well as a vernacular language, Chichewa. Part of my involvement in teaching Chichewa was to get down to our traditional life with the students. At one time, I asked them to look for myths in the villages where they came from and one of the students came up with a myth which was trying to explain how graveyards come to be treated the way they are. I thought it was a brilliant story, and gave me enough plot for a play.

PETER BARSBY

Can you give me a quick run down on what "Graveyards" is about, and how it progresses?

CHRIS KAMLONGERA

"Graveyards" is about a Chief who has a daughter growing into her twenties and he is getting concerned because no boy seems to love her and nobody is coming to him to ask for her hand in marriage. So he calls in somebody from outside the village. Well, the chap, who comes along, happens not to know anything about the traditional life of this particular village. He is given a plot next to a graveyard and he thinks that it's bushy and all dirty. He thinks he should clean it but, by doing that, he tampers with the ancestral links which exist in the village and the spirits of this village get angry and unleash a plague in the village which results in the death of many people.

PETER BARSBY

Can you tell me why you write in English, when the opportunity is there to write in your own language?

CHRIS KAMLONGERA

I suppose I was introduced to writing in English in the first place but I'm growing to believe now that the best thing for me to do is to write in my own vernacular language, which I hope I'll do. I have tried some poetry in my own language. I haven't shown it to anybody as yet because I don't think it's good enough!

PETER BARSBY

What about the Western influence? Here you are in Britain studying, in fact, studying African Drama on a course, and I wonder just how much the English influence and Western influence has on you as a writer? Do you in fact find it difficult to settle down and be Africa, living and working in England?

CHRIS KAMLONGERA

Yes, since I came here, which is two years ago, I have not been

able to write something original. All I've managed to do is to revise plays which I started writing back home. Of course, with the critical eye of somebody here, I have been shaping my work. But otherwise, being away from home I feel sort of castrated, if I may use the term. Here, it's very industrialized. The immediate surrounding is totally different from my immediate surrounding back home, so that my imagery is dry, I'd say. I can't draw on things out here for stories, which are supposed to take place back home. I suppose I could do it if I had enough time to sit quietly and concentrate quite a lot.

PETER BARSBY

If you think it's had a bad effect on your opportunities to write good African drama, what about the chance to go the other way and to bring your African influences into Western drama?

CHRIS KAMLONGERA

I'll answer that out of my own experience. Last year, we produced "Graveyards" here in the University of Leeds and on talking to some people who saw it, they thought it fascinating. But they couldn't understand the concepts I was dealing with. Now this to me outrightly showed a problem area for an African writer, trying to reach an English audience. You have that barrier between you and, you know, I don't think I'm capable of breaking it. There might be some other African writers who are more experienced who can do that, but I don't think as yet that I am. I'd like to write in my own language, I must be honest!

PETER BARSBY

But how much of an audience is there for African drama in the dialects? One does have the problem of not being able to put it on elsewhere than in your own country, in your own territory.

CHRIS KAMLONGERA

Well, maybe I'm lucky in that I come from an area which has that particular vernacular language as a national language, which is widely used, not only in Malawi but in Zambia and Rhodesia. But I suppose the main thing for a writer is to get across to his immediate surroundings. I don't think for me it's a good objective to think of an international audience, particularly in terms of drama. I'll be satisfied if my people are happy with what I write. I'm interested in Malawi, so my plays will first of all start for Malawi.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Chris Kamlongera thank you. We wish you luck with your writing.

MUSIC

DR. PAUL RICHARDS

Developing countries have not got resources to waste. When your're poor, you need to make everything count. Whereas music

and things like that can be very good for entertainment purposes, you often find that in developing countries, people are very anxious to use their musicians directly for development efforts.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Dr. Paul Richards, Lecturer in Geography at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. During the seven years he lived in Nigeria, Dr. Richards collected songs, which belong in genre to the discotheque world world, but whose content concerns important questions about development.

DR. PAUL RICHARDS:

In the past, of course, African musicians were very much aware of social and political trends in their societies and, of course they all the time commented on what was happening and they found that their art form was developing with the country or with the State itself. And in the modern world, sometimes this element of relevance in music has been lost for commercial purposes. People have tended to follow Western models, singing about love and things of that kind. But when you get down to it in the rural areas, the real issues are to do with food supply, getting the community mobilised to improve its own standard of living, self-help development schemes, things of this kind. Now these are the issues that ought to be increasingly featured in the musical efforts of African bands.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

But it's not only live bands that bring music to the people. There are also gramophone records which are "big business". Do they not reach people more in the urban areas than in the rural areas?

DR. PAUL RICHARDS:

To some extent, though the radio is very widely distributed in Africa and it reaches into the remotest corners of the rural area. So recorded music broadcast over the radio can reach a large number of people. It's certainly true that the record industries are basically out to make a profit but in many cases we see the artists themselves taking more control over their own material and trying to sing about issues which are relevant to development and in some cases we also see examples of the Government stepping in and commissioning records for specific purposes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Does this music have any influence?

DR. PAUL RICHARDS:

Well, yes, I think it does have influence, because of course people absorb influences from music of this kind. They absorb

them much more readily than they would from perhaps a serious talk on the radio or a long article in the newspaper. The Nigerian Government at the moment has a programme to try and influence people to grow more food, called "Operation Feed the Nation" which is all about this programme. Once this programme matures, then we may be able to look and assess how effective this musical input has been.

MUSIC

DR. PAUL RICHARDS:

Now of course, these songs are not propaganda in the direct sense. But the interesting thing is that the singers are both looking at a difficult situation and they are trying to analyse it. It's this idea of analysing things which I find so important, because if young people are to try and think about development, then first of all they've got to have a clear understanding of what the development problem is. Now we've got one or two other songs here, which go further. They're not just talking about food supply to urban areas but they're talking about the whole problem of the way some regions develop and other regions get left behind. Just not to leave out the European or Western musicians, I thought it would be interesting at this stage to include a song by Gospel Oak, called "Big Fat White Man", which is about the influence if you like of multi-national companies or the influence of Western capital in the third world. It's interesting because it's a very humorous song and I think that humour is one of the great weapons of the musicians. He gets over lots of points that couldn't be put over in print or in plain words because he makes you laugh. When you've laughed, you sit back and you think, "now is that really true or not?" I think in some cases you come away having learned a lesson and you then are ready to do something about it.

MUSIC

DR. PAUL RICHARDS:

This last example is perhaps the most interesting of all. It's a song called "Which way Africa?". Well, really it's a poem of that title by Shegrun Shufowote who speaks over the music of Tunji Olan and his band. The speaker poses the problem "Which way Africa?" And he then starts to talk about the real issues of development; the imbalance between rural and urban development, for example; food supplies going down, but at the same time people going to the cities; young people especially haven't found any alternative employment in many cases. So he says: "we've got to face up to this, we've got to decide where we are going and make our own decisions". I don't think music in development could be used to pose answers. I think the importance of music in development is that the singers get people thinking about the right questions. I would think that

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we are going to see a lot more in terms of African musicians putting a real effort behind this kind of analysis, because, after all, they are the poets, the philosophers, the thinkers of traditional Africa and the modern musician still inherits this mantle.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Serious questions put in a rhythmical way! My thanks to Dr. Paul Richards.

SIG TUNE "LIMPOPO"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

So we come to the end of our programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying good-bye. Join us again at the same time next week for another "Arts and Africa".

PLAYOUT MUSIC