

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And I want to begin today's programme with a quotation that goes like this: "in many societies there's a class of forbidden topics, of illegitimate questions, of matters considered as beyond discussion".

Now there's been plenty of new lately about a variety of matters considered by governments as beyond discussion. One of the best known and most highly regarded of all African writers, the Kenyan novelist James Ngugi (he now uses his Kikuyu name of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o) was arrested by police in Nairobi days after the banning of a play of his. And now it's been reported in the Egyptian press that the singer of political songs, Sheikh Imam, has recently appeared before a superior military court together with the poet Ahmed Fuad Negm who writes the lyrics for his songs.

## MUSIC

An example of one of Sheikh Imam's songs with a political message - this one's about the fall of Saigon to the Communist forces in Vietnam in 1975.

## MUSIC

And this is how Ken Wittingham described the singer to me in an earlier edition of 'Arts and Africa'.

## KEN WITTINGHAM

Sheikh Imam's an old blind man about sixty, very frail, lives in the old part of Cairo near the bazaars, and he works together with a youngish poet who's name is Ahmed Fuad Negm. Together they sing popular songs in the traditional Egyptian folk-style, songs with a political content usually or sometimes with lyrical content, basically talking to the workers, the peasants and to the students about their problems and about things that concern them. And, of course, this kind of activity has led them into some kind of problems with the authorities from time to time

KEN WITTINGHAM

so they haven't really had the chance to be put forward on the radio in the Arab world as they might have liked but their music is very popular all over the Arab world.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Egyptian newspaper, Al Gomhouriya, says that Sheikh Imam was charged at his arrest with alleged Communist activities and the reason eventually given for Ngugi's detention by Kenyan police was that he was a threat to public security, so both of these are political charges.

Now, that piece I quoted at the beginning of the programme about forbidden topics comes from an American professor and while he makes it clear that he isn't talking exclusively about political topics, these frequently turn out to be the most sensitive issues. Every creative artist has his own motives for introducing politics into his work. To find out how one writer tackles a political theme I've been talking to the novelist and playwright David Pownall. David Pownall is English but he spent much of the 1960's and early 70's in Zambia and then Rhodesia. These two countries have provided the background for most of his writing and his new play called 'Motocar' is not only set in Rhodesia, its theme is the history of the country in the last hundred years. I put it to David Pownall that his play was obviously very, very political. Did he use the political theme to make a good play or was he trying - through the play to convey a political message ?

DAVID POWNALL

My first involvement was with this man - this character, who is a composite of three men with whom I have contact during my life in Africa and I sort of made him from different characters and personalities. All were to be tragic figures. And from that then came the place to put him and I based this on the idea that the world is mentally ill and no-one has diagnosed the problem yet and so I've placed him in a mental hospital. And then I wanted it to be in a room that could symbolise the problem - and so I put him in the linen room where there are dirty sheets and there are clean sheets - there is an old situation symbolised and a new situation which is being washed clean which is symbolised. The play really flowed from that original character into the place, from the place into the metaphor and then come the other characters and then come the dialogue. So I mean there was a basic feeling which was about the lack of understanding at any depth of what had happened in Rhodesia over the last 100 years. I wanted to get all that richness, the texture and depth, all the significance out of it through one man so he had to be hyper-intelligent. He not only had to be that, he had to be mad.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And it isn't only the chief character, Motocar, who is mad. Motocar's father, Albert, who represents the crazy, aberrant history of the nation, has a medical case history that mirrors the equally aberrant events in Rhodesia this

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

this century. In this scene Motocar and the doctor are looking at the old man's medical records.

EXTRACT FROM PLAY

Well, David, Motocar is rather a peculiar name to give to a character in the play. Has it any special significance?

DAVID POWNALL

Well the significance within the play's text itself is that the police inspector has got the name wrong because the man gave his name as Monomotapa, and it's a strange habit of Europeans or of people with different languages, if they hear a name and they can't spell it or see it - they tend to get it distorted. So he calls him Motocar - and his name is in fact Monomotapa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was going to ask you if he was really mad or if you made him appear mad because he is, as you say, three persons in one.

DAVID POWNALL

Yes. I see him as mad - you could never describe his behaviour as sane - but beneath the madness and beneath the shuttling in between characters and his schizophrenia there is an immense sanity in what he's doing and what he's saying and what he's trying to create which is this meeting and which is actually to get over to these four hospital people in the hospital exactly what has happened, and why his father was in and out of that mental hospital since 1922, and why he, himself has gone mad. But I mean he has come in from the outside after having spent about ten years as a perpetual student - he's been to Moscow, Washington, Oxford - he's very intelligent man who was sent away because he was too hot to handle at home and he's failed to do what he went away to do which was to write the true history of his people. When he comes back he's found to be mad and the people he comes back to of course are very dismayed that this brilliant man who they hoped great things for - that he would be perhaps part of the Government, part of the University is mad. I mean his mind has gone in any rational way but he still has this immense power of speech, of symbol, of metaphor, of making people understand and he asks for this visit to the mental hospital he asks for the attack, he asks that these four people be put under pressure from outside and that they must sit and listen to what he's got to say.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The play has already been performed on the stage, here in Britain and has now been produced for radio. The radio version certainly emphasises not only the political message but also the fantasy that conveys the message.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When the four hospital staff have been in the presence of Motocar for sometime in this small room the effect begins to tell. They imagine they are historical figures and begin to speak strange languages. It seemed to me that they moved from being real characters to becoming symbolic.

DAVID FOWNALL

They are symbolic in as much as they adopt other personas which is done through the same process as the apostles who received "the gift of tongues" in the Bible, and in the Bible that is to me the greatest of all miracles when twelve men were actually given the power to communicate with all the people in the world and to be all the people in the world because they could speak to them and understand them. This is what Motocar says - this is the greatest miracle in the Bible - and he forces them into this through his own kind of medicine. Now there are two kinds of medicine in the play, there is the white medicine of psychiatry and then there is the black medicine of witch-craft if you like. But they are the same thing, actually, they are both attempting to control people's minds and to explain problems that they've got. So he uses his psychiatry and they're trying to use psychiatry, and through him they are occupied by these spirits, by people like Lobengula, Moshesh, Mzilikazi, by Moffat, and they actually become these people for this period of this great indaba, this great meeting - and through them he actually tells the story of the last 100 years and the great humiliation and shame that has destroyed him and has destroyed his father.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what impression do you want the audiences to have politically, you know, after they've seen the play - in other words what message are you trying to convey to them through the play ?

DAVID FOWNALL

I'm trying to convey to them that there is no room for superficial judgements in an issue like Rhodesia that people have actually got to be able to transplant their minds into the minds of Rhodesian Africans, to make an enormous leap of imagination - and to see the last 100 years as they have seen it and not merely in terms of world politics or as Mr. Carver sees it, or as Dr. Kounda sees it, or as any world statesman sees it, but as the actual people of that nation feel and will continue to feel in the future. This is their history we are dealing with and I think this is not generally considered. This is what I'm actually asking for that people actually spend time and trouble in getting a political opinion. You don't just grab it off the nearest newstand, you think about it and you feel about it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well David, thank you very much indeed, I hope your message gets through.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The voice of Mtaya Clifford, the young Rhodesian singer,  
And from his disk "Road of Life", we're playing out the  
programme with his words "Keep Pushin' On - Keep Movin' On".  
But don't forget to come back this time next week for more  
'Arts and Africa'. For now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey  
saying goodbye.