

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

NO. 219

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we're joining in a debate that's been hitting the headlines.

MUSIC

The Bembeya-Jazz National of Guinea with their prizewinning "Regard Sur Le Passe". It's a long, musical homage to the Emperor Samory who ruled over the Manding Empire a century ago. You could call "Regard Sur le Passe" an orchestral version of the traditional praise song, one of the perpetual sources of music and poetry throughout Africa. But not every poet or writer wants to sing praise: the other week in Arts and Africa, I mentioned the arrest of the Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in Nairobi and the Egyptian popular singer, Sheikh Iman. There have always been critics of regimes, of governments, of emperors, and of presidents, and this is the debate I mentioned at the beginning; have writers a political responsibility? Or, to put it in another way, should writers meddle in politics? Now I must admit that I have my own fairly strong views on the subject and I'm delighted to say that sitting with me, here in the studio, is Professor Ali Mazrui who's both a writer and a political scientist. Now Professor Mazrui, when you were an editor of "Transition" magazine I don't remember you avoiding political comment.

ALI MAZRUI

That's correct. We used to engage in a number of debates with the government of the day in Uganda and we used to provide space for major debates concerning issues important to Africa. In fact, perhaps the most extensive debate which was conducted, was the one which followed the fall of Kwame Nkrumah.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And did you fall foul of any Government establishment?

ALI MAZRUI

Yes, especially when the Editor of "Transition" was detained by the government of President Milton Obote and I protested about the detention. Then this led to periodic political confrontations between myself and President Obote, which had an effect on my position at Makerere University in Uganda and my role in Ugandan society.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

At the end of last year there was a letter in a Kenyan magazine from a reader who wanted to know why Ugandan writers, he listed a number of names, why these writers didn't criticise President Amin and his government. What sort of advice would you give to Ugandan writers?

ALI MAZRUI

People have groped for ways of criticising the situation. Some have lost their lives, and I don't mean just creative writers but even journalists. One important editor of a newspaper written in one of the indigenous languages in Luganda, a newspaper called "Muno" which used to be one of the most independent and assertive institutions in Uganda, he was discovered killed. The day I heard about it, (I was abroad), I was so shaken. It was a very symbolic event. And it happened several years ago, but it was a sign of greater and greater difficulties ahead.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you suggesting that where there's a danger that the writer will not just be imprisoned, but probably will lose his life, he should not write?

ALI MAZRUI

Now large numbers of Ugandan writers, intellectuals and scholars, are scattered round the world right now. I see them in the

United States, I see them in Canada, I see them in England, Zambia, Kenya, Tanzania. They are scattered there. Now in my case I left Uganda for reasons connected with freedom of expression, because it was quite clear that, whereas I had had problems under President Obote, under Amin those problems are compounded several times further and I had no intention of sacrificing my role, either as a teacher, or as a writer, just to remain there. So my option was exit, exit so that I could remain articulate. But other people decided to remain behind. The bulk of Ugandans are there so why leave, even if you have to shut your mouth. And then there's the third category that made their exit, but at the same time maintaining silence for the sake of those who remained behind. Each one of us has to decide for themselves what is the right answer, given intolerable political conditions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, somebody made a remark which I thought rather funny a short while ago. He said that as long as African writers wrote in English or in French or in some other foreign language, even if such writings were critical of their own governments, it wouldn't matter. But as soon as they started writing in the local language, and began to convey whatever message they had to the people directly in their own language, then there was trouble!

ALI MAZRUI

Yes. Well, the evidence on this is mixed. There are times when governments are much more sensitive to the opinion of their 'peers', that is fellow members of their 'elite', therefore, if you ridicule a leader, in the imperial language and the rulers own peers laugh at the jokes, the ruler might react strongly, precisely because it was in the 'imperial elite' language. But there are occasions when it moves in a reverse direction. It is possible that in the case of Kenya, the whole Mau Mau war before independence was a divisive factor in the Kikuyu experience and, therefore, it's feasible that a critical play, written in Kikuyu, might be interpreted by the Government as potentially divisive, because it might open up wounds among the Kikuyu people all over again.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And when you heard of James Ngugi's arrest in Kenya, what was your reaction?

ALI MAZRUI

Well, I was certainly profoundly disturbed. It's true that other people had been detained before in Kenya. They were politicians very often, they were leaders of parties, parliamentarians. But here there was a person who was not political, in the direct activist sense, but he was political in the sense of interpretation, of looking at political phenomena and giving it a literary and cultural meaning. So it was a different event from what had happened before and, therefore, it implied a kind of worsening of the situation in Kenya and that made me very sad.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You think this might have something to do with the fact that he has openly expressed a certain amount of sympathy for the Soviet system?

ALI MAZRUI

Well, our President Mzee Kenyatta himself, was in the Soviet Union way back in the 1930's and, in fact, when he was being tried by the British on charges of founding the Mau Mau, the old ghost that Kenyatta had been in the Soviet Union, under Stalin in those days, was resurrected to cast doubt on his sincerity, integrity and the degree to which he was a 'safe' citizen. So I would have thought under President Kenyatta's presidency, somebody who simply admired the Soviet Union or had been there, should not automatically be assumed to be subversive to Kenyan interests, since there is such a distinguished precedent. Secondly the issue of whether as a Marxist, he is dangerous? Now I think until now the Kenyan situation has been afraid of the Chinese brand of Marxism, and in fact our laws concerning control of literature, some of them refer not to the title of a book or an author, but to whether the book was published in China or not. The third issue is whether Ngugi is just a radical critic. Now I think that that point may be worrying some members of the government much more than the other two.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now finally Professor Mazrui, how do you assess Ngugi as a writer?

ALI MAZRUI

I have mixed feelings about the trend towards greater politicisation. First there was a sense of underdevelopment, then there was in "A Grain of Wheat" a sense of substance and fulfillment that was beginning to reveal greater complexity in the writer. "Petals of Blood" is a complex work, but there is a sense in which the

factor of teaching and of criticising is perhaps too strong. He's no doubt one of the great writers we have in Africa at the moment, and certainly the most important in East Africa and we test our achievements to some extent when we write novels in relation to what Ngugi has attempted before. He deserves, therefore, to be still around, writing, and that requires freedom and sense of autonomy.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much indeed Professor Mazrui. And that final question is the very one I put to the South Africa writer and critic Lewis Nkosi when he came in to talk about Ngugi. What did he consider James Ngugi's position in contemporary African writing?

LEWIS NKOSI

Well, first of all I must say that he has changed his name from James to Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, which indicates a major shift in his own thinking and consciousness. I think that Ngugi is perhaps one of a dozen or so African novelists who have earned an international reputation. He has reclaimed a certain territory for African fiction from areas that usually were treated by anthropologists and African historians - Ngugi has tried to investigate past African history and contemporary history in terms of the novel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And he seems to be very much interested in politics as a theme. Has he always written on politics?

LEWIS NKOSI

Well, there are various themes that Ngugi has been preoccupied with, but it would be fair to say that all of them are more or less concerned with politics. There is, for instance, the theme of the clash between the old and the new Africa, then there is the conflict between Christianity and the traditionalists, but I think he has been all along been concerned with the struggle for land, the land is one of the key characters in Ngugi's novels and in that sense he has been very much anti-colonialist, and in these days you would probably say he is also anti-imperialist.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you made this point, you remind me of the play he wrote on Dedan Kemathi, which made quite an impact and it looks as if the latest play he's written "I'll Marry When I Want To" has got him into trouble?

LEWIS NKOSI:

Yes. I think myself that the reason for him being imprisoned after the production of this play is not that he is saying anything different from, say, the novel, "Petals of Blood", but he has been writing, with Micere Githane Mugo in Kikuyu. He took this play to the countryside, which means that he made certain thoughts, sentiments, that the people must have sensed, available to them in a language that they could understand.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what was the message which he was putting across in "Petals of Blood" and in "I'll Marry When I Want To"?

LEWIS NKOSI

He is saying that it is no longer a question of black against white, but that some African people have joined in the exploitation of the masses of the people, and that they are in collusion with foreign capital in extracting profit from African societies and that, therefore, they should be seen as part and parcel of that exploitation even if they are Africans themselves.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And what was your reaction immediately upon hearing the news of the arrest?

LEWIS NKOSI

First of all, I had been expecting this for some time and I have seen this before, being a South African. Writers in South Africa are always being jailed, being detained, and I was depressed that it was an African government taking the measures against Ngugi. And what are his crimes? His crime after all is simply that he has written certain things and he has produced a play.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The views of Lewis Nkosi.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Bembeya Jazz-National, saying goodbye on behalf of me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and of "Arts and Africa". See you next week. Goodbye.

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