

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 220

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, with today's guest from Sierra Leone and the music of Malawi.

MUSIC.

This number's called 'Ukwati Woyera', the group is the Kamwendo Brothers and they're on the Nzeru label. We'll be hearing about this new Malawi recording company later in the programme.

But now for our guest. For some people the name William Conton means the author of that popular novel of the 1950's 'The African'. For others, it brings back memories of the class room, of history lessons and school textbooks, author - William Conton, because he's an educationist and historian as well as a novelist. His text books on West African history were amongst the first to be written by an African with the events seen through African eyes, and about the whole area - not just the coastal regions best known to Europeans.

When Margy Brearley met William Conton recently it was at the giant UNESCO building in Paris where he now works. For 'Arts and Africa' Margy was interested most of all in his creative writing and his present situation as an African in Europe was the very one he had used in his first book 'The African'.

The hero, like William Conton himself comes from Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, and, like Conton, goes to study at a British University. There the similarity ends for in the story the hero meets and wants to marry a white South African girl whose brother prevents the marriage. Much later he finds himself saving the life of the brother, who, until that moment, had inspired him only with thoughts of revenge.

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Margy Brearley invited William Conton to talk about the issues he was dealing with in 'The African'.

WILLIAM CONTON:

It's a very racist story if you like - racist in the sense that it centres on the conflict between the races - not racist in the sense that it tries to project an image of one race as superior to the other.

MARGY BREARLEY

Is this a theme that you feel very strongly about ?

WILLIAM CONTON:

Yes, yes. I felt more strongly about it at the time I wrote the book than I do now. I've discovered since that many of the values which are important in life are shared across the races, but at the time I did feel strongly about it.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now you yourself also studied in Europe, in England. Is this book to an extent an autobiographical book ?

WILLIAM CONTON

More in its ideas than in the events. But I think it is inevitable, especially in a first novel, that the writer should put into the mouth of his hero many of his own ideas - but the things that happened to him didn't happen to me.

MARGY BREARLEY

In the book you must express some of the reactions of the person whose been studying abroad to his home when he gets back. What were the kind of things that come out in the book which you particularly noticed when you went back home?

WILLIAM CONTON

Well, there's first of all the feeling of relief at being once more amongst people that one knows, one is related to, and with whom its easy to communicate, however well one knows English. There is also - and this happened to me as well as to the hero of the book - a certain disillusionment because when away from African politics I built up many ideas, which I found later on were completely fanciful, as to the extent to which idealism inspires politicians and I found that this was far from being general. In fact, it was very difficult to find any idealism, and cynicism was much more current and not only amongst politicians, so those two impressions, one of relief and one of disillusionment are the ones that struck me most forcibly when I first went back and I think I bring them out in the reactions of the hero when he got back.

MARGY BREARLEY

The theme of the person who doesn't know quite where he belongs - to Europe or to Africa - he's been away from Africa studying, is very prevalent in a lot of African writing especially I think in the 1950's and 60's. Do you feel as if the mood has changed now? Do you think people who are writing now - other African writers - yourself also - are you more preoccupied now with other themes?

WILLIAM CONTON

Yes. There was a whole flood of books around this theme of uprooted people, Africans, but now I think it's changing and there's more concentration on what happens amongst Africans themselves at home than what happens to them when they leave their country and then come back.

MARGY BREARLEY

As an African writer are you very concerned about the part of being a novelist which is the person who tells a story and entertains, or are you concerned in communicating either political, philosophical, psychological ideas and attitudes more? I mean, do you see the novel as having other roles than being just a means through which to tell a story?

WILLIAM CONTON

Yes. In this I've changed. First I saw it as a vehicle for ideas, propaganda if you like, frankly, but now I think I would prefer - as far as my second novel is concerned - that it should simply tell a story. This is my aim anyway.

MARGY BREARLEY

Whenever I meet a writer I am always interested to know what kinds of influences there have been on the person. It is possible for you to say who were the other writers that you read, maybe before you started writing yourself, that had a strong influence on you?

WILLIAM CONTON

Yes. The early Nigerian writers influenced me very strongly, particularly Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi. I was also very impressed by Camara Laye.

MARGY BREARLEY

By what in particular?

WILLIAM CONTON

"The Radiance Of The King", and "The Dark Child". Laye was on the staff of a school in Accra for a short while and I got to know him personally, so I read these two books "The Radiance Of The King", and "The Dark Child", and his power of imagery struck me very strongly indeed. It is one of the things that

WILLIAM CONTON

leads me to regard now the novel as more useful in just telling a story including the depicting of images that goes with the telling of a story rather than simply transmitting the ideas and philosophy of the author.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This interest in the craft of writing, in the telling of the story rather than in the message, introduced the name of Amos Tutuola into the interview. Margy Brearley wondered what was William Conton's attitude to one of the first West African writers to write in Pidgin English.

WILLIAM CONTON

His book "The Palm-Wine Drinkard". I remember it but I didn't like it. I didn't like it because I felt that he betrayed, in a way, the need for a writer to be a craftsman also. He wrote vividly, but he wrote in ungrammatical English. I know this is very controversial but I feel that writing should be regarded as a craft with a certain technique, and with rules which should be mastered before one starts to produce anything, and he hadn't done this. Some people find this an attraction in his writing, especially "My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts" which he wrote after "The Palm-Wine Drinkard". I found it a distraction to come across, to constantly come across, wrong spellings, bad grammar and so on.

MARGY BREARLEY

With your own technique it's interesting to follow that up. Say, one of your novels is set in Freetown, when you are describing the language of a particular person would you use Pidgin English, Krio, or would you want to stick particularly to strict English English?

WILLIAM CONTON

I would use English, but certain words and expressions in Krio, I might introduce them into the text where it seems to me essential in order to show that the speaker concerned was deeply moved at the time. Because at such times people do tend to use their mother-tongue rather than an acquired tongue. But I would then translate, if necessary, the phrase or sentence concerned into English. But normally, even in Freetown, in a Freetown setting I would use English except for these special occasions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

William Conton talking to Margy Brearley. And I'm glad to be able to say that we can look forward to another novel from him quite soon.

MUSIC.

'Kudala Kwa Malawi', Robert Fumulani and the Likubula River Jazz Band. They were one of the very first Malawi groups to appear on the Nzeru Label. This recording company was set

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up about a year ago in Malawi with the aim of promoting modern music and encouraging the country's musicians. They've been using the studios of the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation though they hope to have their own eventually. The Government of Malawi is behind the new venture as Peter Cram found out on a recent visit to Blantyre, and he explained to Florence Akst how the company found their very first artists.

PETER CRAM

They started off by holding a competition for groups within the country to see what talent there was available and they had 30 people entering for the competition, and although they were only offering as prizes 4 recording contracts they had decided to record 28 of the people who entered that competition.

FLORENCE AKST

When you say people, you mean groups, not just singles ?

PETER CRAM

28 of the group that entered that competition - they are going to make records.

FLORENCE AKST

Well, that's obviously a great encouragement. What sort of groups are they ? Are they all the straightforward pop music that you would expect, with probably the influence from Zairian music, or is there a wide disparity ?

PETER CRAM

There is quite a range. There were some solo singers and quite a few different instrumentalists, somebody playing a banjo, singing groups, so there was choral music, dance music and some that is very close to the folk music.

FLORENCE AKST

So in fact they're going to include traditional music as well as contemporary music, are they ?

PETER CRAM

They won't be including any of the basic traditional music.

FLORENCE AKST

Is Nzeru a commercial undertaking, or how is it sponsored ? How has it got off the ground ?

PETER CRAM

It is a commercial undertaking. It's a company - and it's wholly owned by the Government under a development scheme that the Government put forward. And the Government control only really extends as far as the fact that the censorship

PETER CRAM

board has to approve all the discs that are sold in the country anyway. That applies to the Nzeru records and it applies to ones from other countries before they can be sold.

FLORENCE AKST

It doesn't sound very good commercial practice to me to make a record and then find that perhaps it's censored and people aren't allowed to play it. How do they get round this ?

PETER CRAM

The censorship board is actually present at the recordings of Nzeru records. As far as the other ones imported from other countries are concerned, the company has to submit them to the censorship board before its allowed to sell them.

FLORENCE AKST

I suppose the censorship is primarily interested in the actual music content ?

PETER CRAM

It's for the lyrics.

FLORENCE AKST

So what sort of lyrics does the censorship pass ?

PETER CRAM

The tendency for the songs is that they are about the country - they are songs about Malawi and they tend to be very happy, positive songs about what a good state the country is in.

FLORENCE AKST

Does this appear to be a spontaneous subject or is it something that is entirely Government inspired ?

PETER CRAM

It seems to be spontaneous. Quite a lot of folk-music which is sung in the villages which isn't ever intended for any commercial outlet is of the same kind of import.

FLORENCE AKST

And is it music that you actually heard as you were moving around Malawi or is it still in the stage of being an unknown quantity that has to be sold ?

PETER CRAM

No, it's very popular within the country - I heard it played on the radio, I heard people playing it on their record-players. They are very enthusiastic about having their own music.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

More from Robert Fumulani and the Likhubula River Jazz Band. And this number is called 'Mlomo', which I think means mouth. So I'll take the hint and keep quiet after I've said goodbye until next week from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye.