

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

pp 3-6

ARTS AND AFRICA

No.224P

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with a programme that includes a very personal commitment to drama from South Africa.

One of the glossiest magazines and one that people always stop to look at when they come to the 'Arts and Africa' office has a name rather like the programme. It's called 'African Arts' and is published by the African Studies Center at the University of California in Los Angeles. It contains scholarly articles on dances, drama, weaving, sculpture, some fine photographs (many of them are in colour) and advertisements from American art galleries that have works of African art for sale.

Now the scandal of the fetish, the Afo-Kon, which mysteriously disappeared from its shrine in northern Cameroon and later was found in an American art gallery was very much in mind when I met the editor of 'African Arts'. The owner of the gallery, by the way, did return the statue to its rightful home in Cameroon when it was traced to his gallery. But I didn't broach this subject straightaway when I was talking to John Povey, the Editor. Instead, I began by asking about the attitude of so many people who have made a study of African art. Don't they still have rather a patronizing approach?

JOHN POVEY

No, I don't think they do. Perhaps partly this is the attitude which "African Arts" has both reflected and perhaps even created - because the days of patronizing about African art are dead just as they are about Africa in general and consequently they are written in tones of respect and admiration. I'm not sure sometimes that we don't serve a useful purpose in Africa with this tone of respect and admiration because I would think that a number of Africans are still, regrettably, at the stage of that old patronizing attitude which they

JOHN POVEY

inherited with colonialism and think their own art is slightly, what shall we say, primitive.

TETTEH-LARTEY

You mention this word - I was going to ask you what it really means? African art has been described as primitive art. What connotations does it have?

POVEY

Well the connotations are very obvious and very unpleasant. But the question really is, can one make a distinction between art? We're inclined to think not. One of the reasons that 'primitive' has continued, I think, is partly that it's been very difficult to think of another word. We've gone into 'ethnic arts' and 'cultural arts' and things like this. Maybe we don't need a word at all. But there does seem to be a discrimination to be made not in the context of the word 'primitive', between the art of non-literate peoples whose art is very much more a function of their society and I think we could obviously name the - I mean the American Indian is a classic example of a very similar kind of art - and this is to some extent different from the "put it on the wall and worship it", of the European mode where art is almost defiantly non-utilitarian.

TETTEH-LARTEY

As you say, you would now talk about the African artist as producing something which is utilitarian - but at the same time he's got a social function to perform - I mean we don't see art as something to be admired just at a distance but it's something which must play a part in our social life. Do you think that the African artist should continue to play this role?

POVEY

My feeling is that it's going to prove impossible. I regret that, but it seems to me that the tradition which gave birth to this art, the traditional arts, is changing so rapidly - I mean the association with traditional religion, for example, is I think declining and therefore the art that goes with it declines and that the modern artist has great difficulty in finding some appropriate role because he doesn't have a social part of the community. He's often been educated at the Slade School of Art, in London, and he inherits not only the techniques in the media but also the attitudes to art, and so a lot of the major modern artists in Africa are in fact curiously isolated, painting their pictures in oil and acrylic, often selling them to Europeans, and really looking for a role for themselves as artists in new Africa. I don't know that it's been really discovered yet.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now John there are a lot of advertisements in the magazine by art galleries advertising their works of art. Where do they get these works of art from ?

POVEY

That's a painful question and I like to feel that I can simply say they are honest men and got it honestly. There have been occasional outrages - you may remember the Afo-Kon situation and the return of the stolen piece. What seems to be happening is that most African countries are really being quite cautious about letting material out of Africa. Now the inspection process is very severe for anything that is substantial and worthwhile so consequently galleries are in fact revolving material which has been out of Africa for a considerable period. It is a questionable issue - there's the implication of the exploitation of Africa - but I think it would be to the loss of Africa if its art was not fairly broadly displayed. It would only encourage the looting of it. But the fact that across the world this art can be confronted by people seems to me to be a very benevolent action.

TETTEH-LARTEY

John Povey, Editor of 'African Arts'. And I wonder whether most dancers and sculptures and other artists are really losing touch with the traditions that have always inspired them.

Now someone who's consciously returned to her roots for inspiration as a playwright is Fatima Dike. Fatima was born and brought up in Cape Town in South Africa and the plays she's written so far have both been set in a land where dramatic conflicts are not hard to find. But confrontation hasn't been her chosen theme. Her first play, "The Sacrifice of Kreli", was recently performed at the Space Theatre in Cape Town and when Stephen Gray talked to her for this programme Fatima Dike told him how she'd come to write it.

FATIMA DIKE

"Sacrifice of Kreli" was conceived through two articles in The Daily Despatch of 1890, where the King, Kreli of the Gcalekas, was interviewed, and the play tells the story of the fate of the Gcalekas after the Ninth Frontier War, or as it is well-known in South Africa, the Ninth Kaffir War. When the war broke out the dispute was over cattle, which the British claimed that the Gcalekas had stolen from them. And they demanded that the Gcalekas should bring those cattle back, and war broke out between the two nations. Kreli led an army of twelve thousand warriors against the British army. At one stage the war got so heavy that

DIKE

there were only three soldiers left to look after the Castle in Cape Town; all the men were sent out to go and fight this one tribe in the Eastern Cape.

Now the play takes place seven years after the end of the Ninth Frontier War, when these men are getting restless. The warriors are split into two groups: one side is led by the divine Mlanjeni, the other side is led by the praise - singer Mpelesi, and the men claim that the divine Mlanjeni is a false prophet and he must be killed. So Mlanjeni is punished. They take his body and they wrap it up in the skin of the bull which was slaughtered that morning for the sacrifice. They sew him up in the skin and they lay him out in the veld for three days and three nights and through the heat of the sun the skin shrinks and crushes him. After three days they open the skin and they find that Mlanjeni's body is crushed, but Mlanjeni is still alive and he has a message for his people from the ancestors which said: there is a way out.

Now, what made me write this play is that one day I woke up and realised that there were eighteen million black people in this country who had no past, because whatever past we had as a nation was oral history - it was not written down; and it was wiped out by the written history which the white people in South Africa had written against what we had to say. And when I discovered this I realised that here was a part of my history, my past. From then onwards I felt that if I had a past, a present, I could also have a future.

STEPHEN GRAY

You made the show a real ritual of theatre. Now how consciously was that planned ?

DIKE

I had to go back into time. I spent a lot of time with diviners or so-called witchdoctors, and I wanted to know about the black god called Qamatha, and how the people worshipped Qamatha. And I got all this information from elderly people and diviners. Then I went back and read a book by Tiyo Soga; who was also in fact involved in the play - about black customs and rituals and with that I got a lot of tribal music from the men in the cast, because fortunately in Cape Town they still stick to the old custom of circumcision whereby a lot of tribal songs are sung - during that ritual. That's how the play was put together.

STEPHEN GRAY

The script of "The Sacrifice of Kreli" is coming out in book form in a collection of plays. Do you feel that on the page it will have lost something?

DIKE

No. I'll tell you what happened when I was writing the play. The play was meant to be written in Xhosa. But I did not want to write for one particular audience; I wanted to write for everybody. And I had to use English as a medium. Now if I'd used straight English it would have lost all the richness that the play had in text form. So what I did I wrote the play in poetic verse in Xhosa, and then I would do literal translations directly from Xhosa into English, so as to keep the rhythms of Xhosa in English.

GRAY

Do you have a plan for an ideal South African play ?

DIKE

At the moment I'm thinking of my third play, which is called "The Glass House". This is a play about two women - one black, one white. The white girl comes from a rich family, and the black girl comes from a middle-class black family. And I want to show - portray the two cultures meeting and clashing, and how two people can become friends under the circumstances that are in South Africa at the moment. Now we have a problem here in that a lot of the people in our white society sympathise a lot with black people, but there is one thing that they tend to forget - that the black pain can only be experienced by the black man. They can accompany us on our journey as far as the door, but they cannot cross the threshold which is the pain of being black.

GRAY

Do you feel that your drama is a gesture of defiance of this, having the good things of life and culture withheld from you ?

DIKE

I do not feel in any way that I am deprived of anything. I have my writing - nobody can ever take my writing away from me; I've got that. And I wouldn't like to exchange what I have now for what the other side has, because I don't think it's very, very nice. But I think the kind of experience that we as black people are going through

DIKE

has helped to strengthen us a lot, because one needs a lot of patience. And I think that by what I'm doing I'm proving to the white society here that I am better than they are. I'm not prepared to turn around and stab them in the back; I'm prepared to accept them, and show them exactly what humanity's about.

MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

Fatima Dike talking about her plays to Stephen Grey. And you may like to know that "The Sacrifice of Kreli" is about to be published in South Africa by Ad Donker in an anthology of plays.

And now here's Miriam Makeba to tell us more about her 'Brand New Day', while from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye until this time next week. Goodbye.

MUSIC.