

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 226

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today: another salvo in the debate on the role of the writer after independence; folk-tales from Namibia, and, to begin with, a song from Namibia from Jackson Kaujewa. Here he is to introduce it.

JACKSON KAUEWA

This is a song from Namibia. A song with a title which simply means: I have become a stranger in the country of my birth.

MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

Jackson Kaujewa was singing in the language of the Herero people who live in the centre of Namibia. And from the Herero and the Demara comes a folk tale that's as old as the hills and, I'd say, as topical as today's struggle for independence. It's about the Elephant and the Tortoise and goes to show how things can go wrong for someone who tries to keep possessions for himself.

THE ELEPHANT AND THE TORTOISE

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, there's a story showing justice prevailing. Here's another moral one explaining how it came to be that all people die. This one is told by people from the south of the country, by the Nama and Khoi-San.

HOW THE HARE BROUGHT DEATH TO THE WORLD

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now for some more music. This song is also from the Nama people and with all the click sounds in their language I'll leave Jackson Kaujewa to tell us the title:

KAUJEW

It's a traditional song but because of the situation in Namibia the words of the song have been changed and it's now called "Let's come together as one nation".

TETTEH-LARTEY

MUSIC

Now at this point I want to turn away from the struggle for independence to the Africa that's already independent - that's most of it I'm happy to say. A short while ago the writer and political scientist, Professor Ali Mazrui came to the 'Arts and Africa' studio to give us his views on artistic freedom and he spoke specifically about East Africa. In this further interview I put to him the point that there's been quite a crop of writers falling foul of governments and getting punished. I for one find it very difficult to determine whether the political situations give birth to the writers or whether the writers were there and made use of the political themes. Is it possible for the writer to write without mentioning politics?

PROFESSOR ALI MAZRUI

Well, it is feasible. It's just that we're passing through a period of considerable political consciousness in Africa and it certainly goes back to the two or three decades before independence and will probably continue for another two or three decades so there is above average interest in politics, above average commitment to some kind of political analysis. Now the writers inevitably drifted into that flow. Now, for awhile it looked as if political independence for the country might also result in political freedom for individuals and therefore political autonomy for artists but in fact that didn't happen. Political independence for countries, in some cases, resulted in shrinking freedom for individuals and also shrinking autonomy for artists. And so there has been a kind of defensive posture that has developed among intellectuals and writers in African conditions so we are still waiting for greater cultural freedom. We haven't achieved that yet even if we have achieved political independence.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it the responsibility or the duty of writers to fight for political independence for people other than themselves? In other words, other than for freedom of speech by writers?

MAZRUI

Well I don't think writers have a duty to be political. The issue is whether they have a right to be political if they want to be. I would insist that they should be given the right to be political - the choice to be political if they should be inclined in that direction.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, some of our listeners might say, "Well, that sort of thing is all right as long as the government of the day is a colonialist government and this country is fighting against colonialism, therefore writers have got to criticise the colonial government. But in post-independence Africa they shouldn't do anything similar."

MAZRUI

Eh ... I don't agree with that, you know. I think writers, it's true, may be engaged against colonialism, may be engaged against racism and dependency and the foreigner, but the sooner we arrive at a stage when we begin to look at our societies as entities in themselves and not just things which are manipulated by foreigners, the healthier it will be for those societies and for ourselves. Now if the societies have an intrinsic value of their own, have an independent existence of their own, they should be subject to criticism, evaluation and constant investigation by the artists, by the writers, by the journalists generally, and so arguments in Africa which reduce everything to colonialism or to relations with foreigners are depriving our societies of the gift of autonomy, of being themselves you see. And if they're autonomous entities in some respects even when they are manipulated by foreigners, those of us who are interested in conveying our views in writing should be given the option to attempt it.

Let me add one more thing - that unless we give our artists and writers the freedom to grope for insights, we won't build an independent culture of our own. We will continue to be borrowers and followers. So internal freedom to me becomes a precondition for indigenous creativity - the right to be able to produce things of our own.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Would you say then that it's fear and insecurity that makes African governments so sensitive to criticism?

MAZRUI

That is when you are being very fair to the governments and the rulers that you say, O.K. governments come and go even those that remain in power for a long time, there is a sense in which they are very fragile. But in addition, sometimes they are just vain - there's excessive vanity among those who attain the heights of power and they no longer are prepared to tolerate criticism from below. So at our most optimistic it is the fear and insecurity but there is also the sheer arrogance of regarding oneself as being beyond criticism.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Professor Ali Mazrui.

Well, Namibia has yet to gain the fruits or the responsibilities of independence. As Jackson tells us in his last song it could be a prosperous country - it has diamonds, zinc, copper and lots of other minerals.

I have to take my leave if you know so this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye while Jackson sings us to the end of the programme in the Kwanyama language of Namibia.

MUSIC.