

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS IN AFRICA

No. 250P

PP 3-5

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is 'Arts and Africa', and this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you once again to our weekly look at the creative life of the continent. Participants from thirteen countries overseas recently finished a British Council Course on 'bookselling' in London. They have had the chance to work for a time with British booksellers and have attended lectures and discussions where they have had ample opportunity to put forward the problems of the book trade that they find in their various countries. Anne Bolsover met Clara Barabojik, who manages the University Bookshop in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania and Frank Ule, Area Manager of Challenge Bookshop, Kaduna, Nigeria. She first asked Clara Barabojik about the main problems in bookselling in Tanzania.

CLARA BARABOJIK

We have to order four months ahead. We start our new term in July, and we have to start ordering in December.

ANNE BOLSOVER

You must find this very frustrating. Why does it take so long for the books to come?

BARABOJIK

Mainly it's transport, and sometimes we have delays: maybe there's some credit or misunderstandings between the company and the publisher.

BOLSOVER

Is there a good relationship between the African booksellers and the publishers?

BARABOJIK

No, I wouldn't say, there is so much antagonism; but sometimes there are delays which you can't help, sometimes payments are delayed, and sometimes we are given short credit terms. Say, if a publisher gives you 2 months to pay for his books, you are getting your books in 3 months, and you won't pay until you have received the goods, so by the time you pay it's already about 4 months - so publishers get somehow annoyed and stop supplies.

BOLSOVER

How do you pick out books for the University Bookshop, and how do you know what to stock? Are you given a list by the departments of set texts?

BARABOJIK

We send forms to lecturers, and they fill in the forms, which books they want, and it's on the basis of the forms and the lecturers' choices that we order.

BOLSOVER

Do you find the system works well, or do you find that lecturers order far too many books for the students and you have a big backlog that are not sold?

BARABOJIK

Oh yes, in many cases lecturers order more than they need, and it is even worse when they order a book and then leave. When I ring up the lecturer who comes he may not prescribe the same book, so we get overstocks, that's the problem.

BOLSOVER

Apart from the usual textbooks, do you stock the bookshop with foreign literature or African literature?

BARABOJIK

It depends. They are setting foreign literature, which sells, but mainly we sell African writers. We have so many series of African writers' books.

BOLSOVER

Do you find there's a demand for books? I know you're on a university campus so that naturally puts up the demand, but you must know about bookselling in Africa as a whole.

BARABOJIK

Generally there's a good demand. We sell to the university students, but we also sell to the community, and to other institutions in the whole country.

BOLSOVER

Do you find there are good relations between booksellers in Tanzania, say, and booksellers in another African country like Nigeria?

BARABOJIK

Oh yes, we do order books from Nigeria because Nigeria, I think, has a good literature for other African countries. I should say most of the writers come from Nigeria, so if it happens that the book is published in Nigeria, you get it from there.

BOLSOVER

Now how soon can you get it? Is there still a delay on that book?

BARABOJIK

Oh, that is a problem - the transport problem is even worse. If you need a book from Nigeria I think you could get six months to reach you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Frank Ule explained to Anne why books, even by African writers, have to be printed overseas.

FRANK ULE

It's because we lack printing presses and so on, and I hope in future that our government will help to get a press, or help publishers to obtain their own press and print all these books in Nigeria.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What do you see as the main problems for the bookseller in Nigeria?

ULE

Well, one of the problems is that of getting books in time. About 95% of our books have come from overseas, here. We order from America, U.K. and so on, and it's due to freight problems, transportation and so on. It takes six months, one year, and so on before they get there and this creates a lot of problems. At times we used to disappoint our customers. I would like the bookselling in Nigeria to improve as what we've seen here. There are big shops here handling all sorts of books, and you go in there and you will not be disappointed. They have all sorts of books to make sure you find what you want; so I would like Nigeria to grow up to that standard of having all the books.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Anne Bolsover talking to Frank Ule, Area Manager of Challenge Bookshop in Kaduna, Nigeria. Andre Brink, the Afrikaans novelist, was recently in London where he addressed a meeting organised by Index on Censorship. Censorship is of course a subject very real to any writer working in South Africa. Professor Brink lectures at Rhodes University, Grahamestown, South Africa and is a close friend of the imprisoned Afrikaans poet Breyten Breytenbach. This seemed like a classic opportunity to speak to a man close to that sad and enigmatic character. Why did Breytenbach return to South Africa in 1975 after years of self-imposed exile? And why did he make it so obvious that he was promptly arrested? And why, given his years of struggle against the tyranny of apartheid did he suddenly break down and confess and ask for forgiveness? In other words, what sort of man is Breyten Breytenbach?

ANDRE BRINK

I'm perhaps in a rather difficult position to judge objectively because we're closer than brothers, and so I tend to judge him rather subjectively because I love him enormously. I think to say that he's a poet is not to simply designate his career but to say something about the man. He tries to live his fantasies in everyday life. And I think it placed an almost unbearable strain on him to live as an exile in Paris. Yearning back for the country which he loved as a country apart from the abhorrent politics and knowing that he was absolutely barred from ever returning with his wife, and obviously he wouldn't return without her. And because he was something of a name in the world of exiles in Paris, exiles with all sorts of causes, from all over the world, came to him and used his name whenever they needed a name. More often than not he would respond to that because it gave him a sense of belonging, of being able to do something and to counter this sort of impotence in which the role of an exile had thrust him. And I think that was basically what prompted this bizarre adventure, plunging back into South Africa in this strange disguise, at the same time meeting his friends quite openly; playing all sorts of roles simultaneously and becoming the victim of it. It was, I think, on the

whole an effort to prove his utter sincerity.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Why was he exiled in the first place? I don't know the details.

BRINK

He wasn't forced into exile like so many others. He simply went as a student to have a look at the world. But after he'd fallen in love with the Vietnamese girl he eventually married, he discovered - he hadn't even been consciously aware of it beforehand, that it would cause any legal problems for him - but once he'd married her and started thinking in terms of coming back and showing his wife to his parents he suddenly discovered that he wasn't allowed to take her back.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Is he a man of stable character? It all sounds so odd - a man living in fantasy in this manner.

BRINK

I think if you compare him to some of the really great figures in the history of the South African struggle, say people like Mandela or Sobokwe or Bram Fischer - and there is a total difference. These people were absolutely committed Marxists, who went into it open-eyed, who'd weighed all the odds, who knew what they were letting themselves in for, who knew that if they got caught this and this were the likely consequence of it, and they were prepared to accept it. But Breyten wasn't. He impulsively jumped into it, hoping that something spectacular would happen much as the British romantics at the time of the French Revolution felt about the Revolution. And of course when it backfired he was left totally flabbergasted: he didn't know how to extricate himself from it. And I think his first thought was that he'd caused a lot of trouble to several other people and he wanted them to be let off the hook as easily as possible, which I see as the main reason for recanting and for apologising to Vorster in the dock. Also of course he was advised to do so by the Security Police and by his own legal advisers, who said that if he did that he would get a minimum sentence, and all his accomplices would be allowed to go scot-free, they wouldn't be charged - which happened in fact, but of course in his case he got a very severe sentence, not the minimum one. And that was followed then of course two years later by that absolutely surrealist second trial when they accused him of wanting to escape, which to a certain extent may have been based on a very real desire. I think any prisoner who finds himself in prison spends most of his time making plans about escaping. But these plans were so far-fetched - and one must always bear in mind that Breyten has an enormous, exuberant sense of humour - and he may have taken this young guard, this young warder, seriously for a while or at times, hoping against all hope that something might come of it. But I think for the most time he'd seen right through this guy and he wanted to play the fool with him, to make believe, to turn poetry into a real-life play, as it were. Because these far-fetched plans about Russian U-boats coming to Robbin Island, and Robbin Island being hollow at the bottom -- oh the most bizarre aspects of it -- I can't for a moment think that even Breyten himself, as a poet, and a man with a weird and wonderful fantasy, could for a moment have thought, could have taken it seriously.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you suggest that one of the possible reasons why he went back to South Africa was that he wanted to escape from his own friends?

BRINK

That is what - I sincerely thought that at the time when I wrote this particular article to which you are referring. I'm not quite sure that that may have been the reason. I think it may have contributed to it. Not perhaps escaping in the sense that he was actually threatened, but escaping from this dilemma in which he found himself of being approached from all sides for help, and feeling that he wasn't able to do enough, and wanting to prove to them that he was sincere - wanting to prove to himself that he was sincere and that he could do something if he really wanted to. And with, as became clear in the court, with his marriage being threatened by his political activities, finding himself in a situation where his private life and his public life were in conflict and just wanting to resolve it all in one mighty bound, as it were, as in some of those old periodicals' serial stories.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well in South Africa when they give you a sentence they literally mean what they say. There's no remission for good conduct.

BRINK

There's no remission for political sentences, no.

TETTEH-LARTEY

So I assume he's going to serve his full nine years.

BRINK

Yes, that certainly seems to be the case, and the Minister has taken a very, very hard line to any approaches so far. Even Dr. Chris Barnard had the presumption to -- I think he did it in all, sort of, innocence of heart, as part of his whole opportunistic approach to life -- to go to the Minister and ask for a remission but even he was turned away.

TETTEH-LARTEY

When he comes out eventually what do you think he's going to do, what line do you think he's going to take?

BRINK

Again, he's a poet, and he may come out with a quite incredible image or a rhyme or something which nobody has anticipated.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Professor Andre Brink talking about his impressions of his friend, the poet, Breyten Breytenbach. And that's all from 'Arts and Africa' for this week, and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.