

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another 'Arts and Africa', and this week we have a varied mixture ranging from the visual arts to literature.

We start with a Nigerian whose making a name for himself as a wood carver of distinction. Wood sculpture is, of course, one of Africa's principle art forms but E. Ola Odekunle has brought some new developments to the old traditions. A Methodist he was trained as a carver by one of the Church Ministers and he combined Christian themes with more traditional elements from his Oyo background.

Odekunle recently had an exhibition at London's Commonwealth Institute where I was able to talk to him. I was very interested in the practical side of his work and began by asking him what sort of wood he preferred for his carvings.

E. OLA ODEKUNLE

I use three types of wood, mahogany, teak and local wood.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I notice your work is very intricate patterns and holes, and you've got wall panels as well as solid items. How do you start work - do you start from one piece of wood or do you sometimes cut pieces and stick them together?

ODEKUNLE

No, if I want to carve even if its something like 25 images in the same groove I start on one piece and then I have to carve exactly the number of images I want to make out of it, that is why I have to harden modern tools before I begin carving this.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Can we take a look at the actual carvings you've done ? Perhaps you can explain to us what they all mean - have you any particular favourites?

ODEKUNLE

Among the ones I like most is the one I've done here - the map of Nigeria - which shows different types of people in the south, north east and west.

TETTEH-LARTEY

How long did it take to make that one ?

ODEKUNLE

I had to do the work myself without the help of any of my brothers, it takes me something like 8 weeks if I have to do everything myself. (though I have 5 brothers who help me which means I can do the rough work and they can put the finishing touches to the work).

TETTEH-LARTEY

And here is one, a panel with figures on it.

ODEKUNLE

That is a religious carving "Delivering God a message to Mary - telling her that she is going to conceive by the Holy Ghost".

TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it only wood carving you do, or do you do other forms of sculpture ?

ODEKUNLE

I only do wood carvings.

TETTEH-LARTEY

You don't intend to branch into any other form of art ?

ODEKUNLE

No, I intend to continue with wood carving as its the one I know.

TETTEH-LARTEY

E. Ols Odekunle, Nigerian wood carver talking about his work on the occasion of the opening of his exhibition in London, and now to literature. Critics and literary historians like to see themselves in terms of groups and schools it helps them to define and re-assess what is going on but so far we haven't had so many schools of writing in Africa and that was why I was interested to see the announcement of a lecture by Dr. Angus Calder who is an historian and literary critic, about what he calls the new wave of young Malawian poets.

Dr. Calder is in the studio with me now, and I will ask him to start by reading one of the poems he's got with him.

ANGUS CALDER

Yes this is "Kabula Curio Shop" by a poet called Jack Mapanje.

POETRY READING.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well we'll go into a closer analysis of the one we've just read, but I'd like to begin by asking you who these new wave poets are?

CALDER

Now let's be clear we are talking about poetry in English. There's poetry in the vernacular languages in Malawi as everywhere else in Africa, and in fact there's been an enormous amount published in the vernacular language in Malawi but so far as poetry in English is concerned this wave seems to have come up in the last ten years or so around a writers workshop at the University - a group of young poets, obviously students, lecturers at the University who don't necessarily have a single style in common but you can see points of similarity between them. Writing is in a sense much more private than one is used to. In African verses there's less than the sense of people lecturing to a great audience which one finds in say, a lot of East African verse - obviously you get this more private kind of poetry elsewhere in Africa but this group, as a whole, tends to be rather inward looking, careful in its expression, concerned to put across quietly, ironically sometimes, lyrically, thoughtful points about life in Malawi and life in general - there was an anthology which was printed by the Church of Central African Presbyterian Press in 1971 - 39 poems from Malawi - now no copy of this to my knowledge has ever been outside Malawi except in a few rare Afrikaner collections in Universities. I came across this work a year ago when I was asked to give a paper at The Centre for African Studies in Edinburgh, on Central African Literature, and wrote to a friend of mine at the University of Malawi who sent me a great quantity of mostly unpublished works - some of it published in magazines, but for the most part, unpublished - and I was impressed with the high quality of some of it and it seems a great pity that it hasn't yet found its way into print where people in other parts of Africa and the world can see it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Why do you call it new wave - what is so spectacular apart from this inward looking and private attitude which you mention, what else is there which makes it new wave?

CALDER

Well I think something which makes a contrast with East Africa

is that several of the writers seem to me to be showing concern for not precisely the tradition of writing in English but certain traditional intricacies of expression in English, not to Wole Soyinka is obviously a writer who captures the entire tradition and does what he likes with it, but more so than many good young poets in East Africa, its a more - slightly self-conscious way of handling the language but it does produce on occasion some unusual results.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Would you say because of their similarities in style you would class them as a school of poetry ?

CALDER

Yes I think a school - a movement - in the obvious sense that they are very much aware of each other and although people in other parts of the world aren't aware of them that sort of self-consciousness is characteristic of a school in literature.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Can we take the first one to begin with, this poem about the wood carving - what appeals to you particularly about it ?

CALDER

This poem gives you a vivid sense of the work which has gone into the carving, the chopping, the whittling, and such carving and such scooping, the rhythm itself is right for the process which is being described and then this gives a special force, a special punch, to the irony at the end that this carefully worked carving is "thrown carelessly into the nook of the curio shop, a lioness, broken legs, broken neck, broken udder." That's the way the tourist industry works, of course. And to say that about the tourist industry perhaps has a lot of implications, but I think its a powerful little poem.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Can we read another example here ?

CALDER

This is another one by Mapanje, and I'll say something about this first before I read it. It comes from a sequence called "Chameleon" three poems - I don't understand this poem, I have the same feeling almost as when I first opened Moore and Byers' Anthology of African verse, and first come across

I like poetry like this some people say its obscure, some people say that poetry should not be this obscure, although maybe this poem is not so obscure to somebody in Malawi who knows the local references more precisely, but to me its obscure, and I don't mind it being obscure - I think, it looks to me exciting as well as obscure. This is section three of "Chameleon", 'How The Chameleon lost It's Precious Colours'.

READ POEM .

CALDER

I'll tell you one thing about that if you don't understand it you don't know how to read it. But there's some indignation, there's some humour there, there's some element of satire there and there's a very vivid and unusual imagery "Why did I waste my song excoriating parochial squirrels for readily running messages up and down bowing perch trees..."

No I've never read anything like this before - quite what he's satirizing, what he's getting at I don't know. I hope that when I get to Malawi I'll meet him and understand more. Maybe he'll refuse to tell me!

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well at this point I must ask you what you intend to do when you get there in November as you plan too.

CALDER

I'm being sent out by the Inter-University Council to be in the University for a month. I've been asked to sort of participate in the writer's workshop. I'm convinced of the quality of Jack Mepanje, in particular. It's just not poetry that impresses me in the abstract I enjoy reading - I think other people would enjoy reading it. And I've enjoyed reading numerous poems by other writers of this "school". I hope that some of the big publishers will get interested before too long. It's been a long time though - seven or eight years this has been hovering around waiting for print.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Dr. Angus Calder thank you very much indeed and we hope to speak to you again when you come back;

CALDER

Thank you - I hope so too.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And that's it from 'Arts and Africa' for this week, and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

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