

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today we talk to one of South Africa's greatest writers, Ezekiel Mphahlele.

MUSIC "Perefere," by Malomba, from LP: "Rhythm of Resistance - Music of Black South Africa."

TETTEH-LARTEY

Born in 1919, Ezekiel Mphahlele grew up in Pretoria where he was educated at the University of South Africa. He was one of the teachers who resigned his post when the South African Government introduced the Bantu Education System. He later became one of the star writers on Drum magazine in its heyday in the mid 50's. Leaving South Africa, he moved to Nigeria where he taught for four years at the University of Ibadan. In 1966 while in self-imposed exile he was listed under South Africa's Suppression of Communism Act, which meant that his books were banned in the Republic and he could not be quoted there. While living and working in Zambia he had the distinction of being nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature. In recent years he has taught in the United States at the Universities of Denver and Pennsylvania. He has published a novel "The Wanderers", several collections of short stories and many highly acclaimed critical essays on African literature. Last year Professor Mphahlele made an unexpected decision - he decided to return to South Africa after twenty years of exile despite the fact that he and his writings were still banned there. Not unexpectedly perhaps, the South African Government refused him permission to take up an appointment at the all black college, The University of the North at Turfloop. Ezekiel Mphahlele worked for some months as a Schools Inspector in the non-independent Bantustan of Lebowa until his 12 year banning order was lifted under South Africa's Internal Security Act towards the end of 1978. Since the restrictions on him were lifted, Professor Mphahlele has conducted several writer's Workshops in Soweto and recently taken up an appointment at the University of the Witwatersrand

in Johannesburg where Jean Marquard talked to him for 'Arts and Africa'. She asked Ezekiel Mphahlele first why he had decided to return to South Africa after 20 years of exile abroad.

EZEKIEL MPHAHLELE

There's something mystical about it. I have a very strong attachment to my ancestors and I felt that if there was a place to come back to this should be it. There was always a kind of pull this country had through my travels, in spite of whatever work was going on. I kept feeling that this is where I must come back to. The other thing, also, has to do with my writing, I felt as long as I resisted becoming involved in the American thing, also, has to do with my writing. I felt as long as I resisted becoming involved in the American thing and becoming part of it, I was always going to be writing about South Africa, but as long as I stayed out of South Africa, it was going to be less and less authentic, so I decided I must come back to the setting and get the feel of 'place' again. This is the kind of thing that has always haunted me, just a sense of 'place,' I wanted that very badly and I wasn't finding it anywhere else outside South Africa.

MARQUARD

How did you feel when you arrived back, you had been away for twenty years ?

MPHAHLELE

That's right, yes.

MARQUARD

Did you notice any changes in the country?

MPHAHLELE

Yes, I noticed a lot of changes. Most of the changes for the worse. Particularly living conditions. I found Soweto was a real great big slum, in a sense it wasn't when I was still here, because I lived there. Other things also, I felt the tension had aggravated and the detentions also had grown worse, the suffering had grown worse. That I felt was poignantly when I came back. I noticed as you move about town - this is another aspect of the changes - there are more Africans now in town, moving in the city, than there were before, because people go into the shops and mix, its not like in the old days where you had segregated counters and so on. Pretoria, the same thing, I found the same thing too, Pretoria used to be has always been a tough Jim Crow town. The pavements were segregated practically just by social custom, but you don't find that any longer, changes like those, having moved away for 20 years I kept feeling that somewhere along the line things can be manipulated so that suffering is less, but I didn't find that at all. I find there is just so much suffering.

MARQUARD

And did you find it easy to make contact with people, ordinary people? Did you still have a lot of personal friends in the country after 20 years ?

MPHAHLELE

Yes, many personal friends. I still had many personal friends. Contact was very easy. I just seemed to slip back into position. When I arrived here - first went to the North, 50 kilometres South East of Pietersburg, this is where I spent seven years of my boyhood, where I was looking after cattle and goats which is what I recount in "Down Second Avenue", and it brought back to me that feeling, I was back on ground that was very familiar, and I just seemed to hear the old echoes that I used to hear when I was a boy. And the people around are very rural and it was easy for me to establish contact with them and speak my language with them.

MARQUARD

And what is your language ?

MPHAHLELE

Sotho, north Sotho. My wife and I have been speaking So ho at home.

MARQUARD

I see.

MPHAHLELE

Yes, our children, of course, grew up speaking English abroad and they were all born except the three, the first three were born here, but they grew up abroad so they all speak English.

MARQUARD

And your children, you think, will make their home in America ?

MPHAHLELE

They will, I think. Yes they will.

MARQUARD

And when you first arrived, you had a position as an Education Officer in Lebowa?

MPHAHLELE

That's right, yes.

MARQUARD

And at this time you were a listed person, which meant that you could not be quoted or published and that your work was banned. Now this banning has been lifted, can you think of any reason why you should now be regarded as a desirable citizen ?

MPHAHLELE

I don't know why, their behaviour is so erratic. They are never consistent, you never know why they do one thing and don't do another. I can't really attribute it to anything at all, except just change, maybe. But, for one thing my lawyer put in a petition to be unlisted and the Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand also wrote a letter to the Minister of Justice, because there was a possibility that I could be employed at the University here, and maybe between the two of them they were able to manage something.

MARQUARD

And now this makes quite a material difference to you, does it?

MPHAHLELE

A tremendous difference to me. Now I can publish, although I'm still subject like everyone else to the publications and entertainments Act, and whatever it lays down as being obscene, undesirable etc., etc. I certainly feel freer now, I can speak up in print without fearing any repercussions.

MARQUARD

Now at the moment you are a Senior Research Fellow in African Studies Unit, the African Studies Institute at Wits. What sort of contribution do you think you might make ?

MPHAHLELE

Well, to begin with, as you probably remember back in '77, I applied to be Professor of English at the University of the North, and, although the Council unanimously appointed me, the Minister of Education turned it down and vetoed the appointment. So there I was, which is why I went into education and became an Education Officer. I didn't feel in my element there at all, so I jumped at this offer. I feel, as a Research Institute, it does give me an opportunity to do the kind of research that I've always wanted to do. I want to collect oral poetry and translate it into English, particularly in the Northern languages, Venda, Sotho and Tsonga, and it will give me a base and also, it gets me back to the classroom, where I will be teaching African Literature and I'll be also involved in comparative literature, teaching.

MARQUARD

Now Ezekiel, most of the students that you will be teaching will be white students, is that right ?

MPHAHLELE

That's right. Yes.

MARQUARD

How do you feel about this ?

MPHAHLELE

At first, I felt my position was not morally defensible at all, teaching in an institution where I was faced with a dominant numbers of whites, but I felt also, at the same time that I could make a compromise, which is, that if it is a research job, I will therefore continue to be in contact with African students and also African teachers and so on.

MARQUARD

Do you think that you will stay in South Africa, whatever happens?

MPHAHLELE

I will, whatever happens.

MARQUARD

You are going to stay forever ?

MPHAHLELE

I am going to stay here.

MARQUARD

Are you going to die here ?

MPHAHLELE

Yes, I am going to die here. I'm not going to move out at all.

MARQUARD

Even if you are subject to all sorts of bad treatments?

MPHAHLELE

If, yes, I would hope not. I would hope not, because well, if it became unbearable, I might possibly think of going out again. But I would hope that it wouldn't come to that point at all.

MARQUARD

And your wife feels the same ?

MPHAHLELE

My wife feels the same, yes.

MARQUARD

Could I ask you to read to us. Perhaps you could start with a poem that you've written recently, that's not yet been published ?

MPH HLELE

All right. This poem, I simply call it "Death", is a variation on a theme by John Keats, based on the sonnet, "When I Have Fears That I may cease To Be", and he is worried about certain things and I am worried about others and I turn over this a lot of times and this also is inspired by my observation of the way people grow old in the United States, and how they are abandoned, or shoved into nursing homes and things like that and always living in fear.

POETRY READING: "DEATH" by Ezekiel Mphahlele, unpublished.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ezekiel Mphahlele in Johannesburg. And two new books by him are to be published shortly. "Chirundu", a novel set in Zambia, and an essay "Exile And Return".

And that's all from 'Arts and Africa' for this week. Don't forget to join us again at the same time next week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.