

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 274

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and today we speak to a poet and sculptor who has recently been released from prison in Swaziland.

MUSIC - "Perefere"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

On the 7th April, 1978 Pitika Ntuli, a 36 year old South African artist, sculptor and poet, who had been living and working in exile in Swaziland since 1963 was arrested under Swaziland's anti-terrorism law and detained in the maximum security death cells of the Matsapa Central Prison. Ntuli and another South African exile, the novelist Daniel Mdluli, were among a group of 13 South African refugees detained as prohibited immigrants by the Swazi authorities. The refugees were arrested as a result of a split among exiled members of the PAC, the Pan-Africanist Congress of South Africa, a Liberation Movement which is banned in South Africa.

Pitika Ntuli was formerly artistic Chairman of the PAC in Nigeria. In Swaziland he established an art workshop for musicians, poets and visual artists. His work has been exhibited at several galleries and cultural centres in New York and was shown at FESTAC in Nigeria. Now while in prison Pitika Ntuli did soap and bread sculptures and continued writing. Two manuscripts of a novel and poems which he wrote in prison were confiscated by the Swazi prison authorities. I asked Pitika Ntuli what conditions were like in solitary confinement.

PITIKA NTULI

Most of the time there was no exercise, no reading material, no visitors. All you had to do was stay up in the cell all by yourself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How long were you there for?

PITIKA NTULI

I was in for 242 days.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And what attempt did you make to get the charges made against you?

PITIKA NTULI

We wrote a petition to the King, to the Prime Minister, to Mr. Hartling, the Head of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, but we just got no response or feed-back from any of these people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I understand that when you were in detention you tried to while away the time writing poetry and making soap sculpture.

PITIKA NTULI

Yes, what happened was that that too was not allowed. But then having lived in the country for so long I managed to smuggle some piece and pen and using toilet rolls, and then I was given soap to wash and I used the soap in order to keep my mind and my balance together. So, I had to get this bar of soap and use my nails, and I have brought this piece of soap here to show you how the whole thing went about. The bar of soap was about 3 inches high by an inch thick, so I was supposed to use it for about 3 weeks or so.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But if you make something, say a figure out of it would you have to destroy it to make another one?

PITIKA NTULI

Yes I would destroy it to make another one.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And then the thing would be getting smaller and smaller and smaller?

PITIKA NTULI

Yes. But the whole exercise was to do something to keep my creative abilities intact. At sometime when I got bread then I would just compress the bread and make small sculptures out of bread. And when I got hungry then I would eat my sculptures. And, ironically, in my case a month before my detention, I had an exhibition of my sculptures and the sculptures of the people who worked in a workshop that I had organised and financed, and got the poets who were there to read the poetry for the school kids and other people, and the headline in the newspaper was 'The Arts that makes Swazis proud that they are Swazis', and they say 'Oh this is a brain child of Pitika'. Well, I ended up eating my sculptures in prison!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, what sort of sculptures did you do, what medium do you work in, wood, clay?

PITIKA NTULI

Wood, stone, clay, bone and steel, just whatever medium is there. Hence, it became not very difficult to use bread and soap.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, demonstrate to me how you were able to make this sculpture from soap.

PITIKA NTULI

Yes, well as you can see there is a groove here. As you can see the shape of the head, it's Africa in itself, and the face is sort of grotesque. Now with these long nails that I have here you can see how easily the soap comes off. It just peels off. And then for these eyes, then I just dug through you know open. And then cut across to make up the mouth. So, with more patient development you see the whole picture coming out clearly. So, right here now by the base, then I had to rub these against the wall in order to get some form of smoothness. But then being soap, as you can see, when one puts the water in it then you just wash, and then the shiny effect emerges out of this piece of soap.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you kept some of these models with you?

PITIKA NTULI

They were confiscated in prison. The one that came out - the one I am just showing you now - came out when a journalist was released three months before us.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why did they decide to confiscate something you made from soap? Did they give you any reason?

PITIKA NTULI

Not at all. You see the problem is that the prison authorities themselves gave us an impression that they just did not know why we were kept there and they did not know whether by letting the soap they were doing right or wrong. There was just near anarchy.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You also had some of your poetry seized in prison.

PITIKA NTULI

Yes, I had some poetry seized in prison, but some of it was smuggled out.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But officially - what they seized officially - has not been returned to you?

PITIKA NTULI

No, they haven't.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of poetry did you write?

PITIKA NTULI

It was mostly poetry about the situation in which I found myself in in that prison, and also thinking back at my people across the border who are in a larger prison than I am. South Africa is in fact a concentration camp. So, it is poems you know such as those that I write. For instance, what happened was that here in this solitary confinement I am sleeping with grey blankets, grey drab blankets manufactured in South Africa, and here is this ever-burning bulb that is over there also made over in South Africa staring up at me. It is that. You can just imagine in the dead of night you are alone in the prison cell and it is quiet, and there are people who are ready to be executed any day, and they are in the other block, and as these people are sitting there holding their conversations with their God, or someone, while he sleeps and maybe gets a nightmare imagines the final moment when the noose just ties around the neck, and the person just simply screams. I was writing about the eerie noises that come through the corridor ransacking my sleep and causing me to feel cold and sweat at the same time in this narrow cell.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Pitika you have got a sample of this poetry you have just talked about here?

PITIKA NTULI

Yes, it is just rough, I am still going to tie it up. Just called 'Thoughts on This Ever Burning Light'.

POEM

PITIKA NTULI

Now, you see so many things come back now crowding my mind. For instance, 2 weeks before I was released my father and mother came to see me. My mother is a bit deaf now because of old age, and I had to speak to her through a phone and the reception was very bad. I had to plead with the authorities to allow me to talk to my mother, and the occasion was that my elder brother had just passed away in South Africa, so they just came over to tell me after the funeral. And then I had to write a poem. The poem is just entitled simply 'My Brother'.

POEM

PITIKA NTULI

As soon as I heard that my brother had died again another incident came over to me when a priest came to the condemned cells and he felt that we were really going to the gallows. In his concern he came full of fervour preaching, asking us to accept the ticket of God, that through the ticket of Christianity you shall enter into God. "Forget your girlfriends, forget your wives, forget your riches, forget everything for soon we shall say 'Ash to ashes and dust to dust!'" He buried us. A symbolic burial. I can laugh in retrospect, but at that moment, there was no laughter in my lungs. After the priest came, sitting again, spending another night in the condemned cell, the burning bulb which was ever there tormented me, I had to burst out again. I kept awake, I did not know how long because my clock had been taken away from me, everything had been taken away. Then the whole memory of this admission to prison kept on coming now.

POEM

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Pitika Ntuli, a South African exile poet, artist and sculptor who has recently been released from prison in Swaziland, reading some of his poems composed in prison.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

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

MUSIC

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