

# 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 discuss the state of the Nigerian film industry, with a man who has had a life-long interest in the cinema.

JOE SNOMI

As a child, I was living with an uncle, he never went to the cinema, and I said to myself "how on earth can this man exist without going to the cinema"!! It was a childhood interest and I don't think I will ever lose it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The voice of Joe Snomi, a lawyer and broadcaster from Benin in Nigeria's Bendel State, who rose to the post of Controller in the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. Before he left NBC in 1976 to go back into law practice and dabble in the film business Joe Snomi has just formed a distribution company and applied to the Federal Government for a Licence to distribute films to cinemas throughout Nigeria. I asked Joe Snomi why he'd decided to go into the film distribution side of the business now.

JOE SNOMI

The film industry in Nigeria is now taking off, but not fast enough. I want to get into film distribution as I am getting films from abroad, but after a period of time I hope to be able to distribute only Nigerian films.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now in the selection of these films, what is your standard? Do you think in terms of the artistic merit of the film or the social message?

JOE SNOMI

Well, you think of the artistic merit, but again you have to think of your audience. I also exhibit films and I show certain types of films, and people tell me, "that is where the money is - people like that type of film", and I say to them, "money is not everything". When I distribute a film I like to feel there is some quality - artistic merit - that type of thing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you also look for films with a social message?

JOE SNOMI

Yes, if I can get films with a social message, of course, why not?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What success have you had so far?

JOE SNOMI

Well I have visited a number of companies. I have discovered that some American companies have agents in Nigeria. The British companies I have seen have told me that when I obtain a distribution license, they are willing to supply me with films. They told me to let them know what category of films I require, some of them have given me catalogues of films that they have available. The advantage of coming over here, is that you can actually see the film instead of making a blind choice. In fact, I have just seen a film which I wouldn't touch - because it was a pornographic film!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I am rather surprised that the Nigerian Government allows films to be brought into the country from outside. I know that there might be some quality films among them, but I was wondering if there was enough money available to pay for this sort of thing - foreign exchange?

JOE SNOMI

What the Nigerian Government has done is to place film distribution under license. This is a method of controlling the number of foreign films that can come into the country in any one year. So I have to apply for a distribution license. I obtained the forms before I left Nigeria and I hope that I will receive a license for a certain percentage of the annual quota. I am sure that the Nigerian Government is going to decide upon a certain amount of foreign exchange to be set aside each year for the importation of foreign films, and when the applications come in they will then decide how many films each distribution company will be allowed to import.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do they subject you to the control of a censorship board?

JOE SNOMI

Yes, of course they do!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Even after you have obtained the film?

JOE SNOMI

Yes, even after you have obtained the film. They view it and see if it is suitable to be shown to the general public.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is that understood by the companies from whom you obtain the films in the first place?

JOE SNOMI

Of course. I have seen some of the contracts that are issued, and there is a clause included which says that if the film censors of the country into which you are importing the film says that the film is unsuitable for public showing, you can then return the film to the company and get back the license fee you paid for it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, inside Nigeria, where I understand you have already done some exhibiting - what sort of films have you shown so far?

JOE SNOMI

Well, I have shown mostly American produced films and also quite a number of Nigerian produced films. When I saw "quite a number", there are not too many, but I have shown the good ones.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Which ones have been outstanding? Can you name names?

JOE SNOMI

Yes, the most outstanding one, as far as I am concerned, was "Bisi - Daughter of the River", in fact it was a very good film and could stand up anywhere in the world. I have also shown a film called "Ajani Ogun", this was in Yoruba. The problem with this particular film was then when we showed it in Benin City, most of the people there don't speak Yoruba so they did not like the film. Personally, maybe because I speak Yoruba, I enjoyed it,

I thought it was quite a good film. And then I've done one called "Ajani Ogun". That was produced in Nigeria.

ALEX TETTEH-LARREY

Are there any outstanding Nigerian producers?

JOE SNOMI

Well, the name that springs to mind is Jab Adu, he is the man who produced "Bisi - Danger of the River". He has also appeared on television and I suppose because of both these things he was recently given a National Honour by the Nigerian Government in recognition of his artistic work.

ALEX TETTEH-LARREY

Well we've got a friend here, Eddie Ugbomah, who produced "The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi" and followed that up with some other film. What do you think about his work?

JOE SNOMI

I heard the interview he did with the BBC and I have also read an interview with him recently in a Nigerian newspaper. Eddie talks a lot, he really talks a lot, but his work doesn't come up to expectations. I like him! He's very hard working, very adventurous, he wants to produce films, but it isn't the right way to go about it. I would rather produce one good quality film than many bad ones. He came to me wanting me to show one of his films "The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi" and, as far as I was concerned it was popular because of his name, not the content. I saw one of his films, but I walked out after the first reel because I didn't like it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARREY

We interviewed him on 'Arts and Africa' and he complained very bitterly about the lack of support from the Federal Government -- financial support of course -- and he also said that there weren't enough professional actors in Nigeria he could use.

JOE SNOMI

He shouldn't ask for highly professional people in the first place. It is true that there are some good actors in Nigeria, if you wanted to use them. He complained to me that when he mentioned this to them, they said, "oh well, they are going to be famous, so they ask for the moon". This I think is wrong. Here you are - this is a new industry in the country; what I would say is that you should take part because this will then give you exposure and from there, you can go on to something bigger. Eddie hasn't got that type of money to pay large salaries so I sympathise with him. Now, talking about the Federal Government, you know I am not so sure that the Federal

Government should pump money into the film industry as such. You see the moment they do they will want to control it, and so when people talk about the Federal Government giving money, I said to myself "if the Federal Government gives this money, the Federal Government will want to control you - are you prepared to undergo this control?" They have Ministries of Information in different states, these have backed a few films. Ola Balogun, he is also a good producer, one of his latest films, which I have not yet seen, people say its "Roots" reversed. You've heard about "Roots" and I didn't see that film so I can't say very much about it but knowing Ola Balogun - for instance the film "Ajani Ogun" that I talked about was one of his productions - knowing him as I do, I think it will be a good film. But some writers, there were some arguments, some people said it wasn't good that it was based on "Roots". He argued that it was not based on "Roots", that he had conceived this film before he had heard of "Roots" and I am inclined to believe him because "Roots" is very much the same thing and I know he's been talking about this film before now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of things attract the audience?

JOE SNOMI:

Well, I must say, in Nigeria its wild fighting, in fact, this is why the Chinese Kung Fu thing is very, very popular. Really if you go to a cinema where they are showing these Chinese films, they are packed. But there is another cinema in Benin which shows really good artistic films and its usually packed full too.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about the contemporary social scene, there's a lot of violence in Lagos. Is that the sort of thing that would attract people or would, say, society go for the cultrual, traditional things.

JOE SNOMI

Well, the cultural, for instance, "Bisi - Daughter of the River" is purely cultural, well, there was some violence in it, but that was not the attractive thing, you know. In fact there is a film produced by the Minister of Information in Benin, because its based on a Benin King. When it was shown in Benin the cinema was packed full, so this type of thing, it was in English, the film was made in English, the hall was packed full.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are there many films made in the various dialects?

JOE SNOMI:

Well, the only ones I've know are in Yoruba there's another one called "Ija Ominira", that again was produced in Yoruba and I hear it really went down very well in Lagos. Outside Lagos - well outside a Yoruba speaking area I should say, I don't think it went down well. There has been one again by Ola Balogun, this was in Ibo, that in an Ibo speaking area went down very well, but in non-Ibo speaking area, no! So this language problem is there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now these people who make the films must have a source of funds from somewhere?

JOE SNOMI

Yes, Ola Balogun, I don't know how he got his funds, but Jab Adu, when he made "Bisi - Daughter of the River" was backed by some very wealthy Nigerian. I think he had a fairly free hand to do what he did. The problem in Nigeria now is that some of these businessmen can't see how they can recoup their money if they invest it in films, so they are very wary about it, but as time goes on, if with the success of "Bisi - Daughter of the River" somebody else invests in another film and that's a success, this is what usually happens, somebody goes into one field, it becomes popular, "ah", everybody says there must be money in this.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have there been any Nigerian films shown at the recent festivals held in Africa and elsewhere?

JOE SNOMI

Not that I know of. I know Eddie said that he was going to enter one of his films even before he produced it!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There are so many great writers in Nigeria, novelists, poets, dramatists, I wonder why no single producer has taken the opportunity to produce a film on a play by Wole Soyinka, for example.

JOE SNOMI

The point is that the film industry in Nigeria is still very much in its infancy, and people I don't think, want to go into that aspect of it. They would rather have their own ideas and write it themselves. But as time goes on I think it will happen.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you yourself any longterm ambitions to enter into film production?

JOE SNOMI

Yes. That is my ultimate aim. Having worked in broadcasting I think it is only natural that one would like to go into that type of thing, that's my ultimate aim, but again finance!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, I know. But what you are doing now is building up a little fortune, so that one day you can branch into this?! Joe Snomi thank you very much, I wish you all the best in whatever you do.

JOE SNOMI

Thank you very much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Joe Snomi, a lawyer and broadcaster from Nigeria's Bendel State who has just formed his own film distribution company in Benin. 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.

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