

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. Today we take a quick personal tour through the present cultural scene in Sierra Leone, through the eyes of Roland Buck. Roland is a well known Sierra Leonean journalist and broadcaster whose activities have touched on almost every aspect of his country's art. Many ex-colonial countries seem to imitate western forms of artistic output, and do not emphasise indigenous cultural forms. Is this true of Sierra Leone? Well, when Roland was here in London, we asked him to describe the present condition of art in his country.

ROLAND BUCK

If by the arts you mean theatrical productions or poetry and literature, I would say it is rather dismal. What is flourishing these days is a lot of amateur theatrical productions; but mainly they are creole plays. Now these are usually variations on a specific theme, they talk about the man/woman situation, they talk about situations in which you have evil forces against the good. Some of these productions are parrot-like in their presentation, you don't see a fluid action, the actors just stand on stage and mouth words, but there's hardly any feeling coming across the stage. But again, one must take into consideration the fact that there are certain technical limitations. They didn't have proper production techniques, there are no good producers who would be able to guide them. I think mainly these productions are just written to put on stage for a commercial proposition. There is no in-depth approach to the whole thing at all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is this because whoever write these plays are not experienced?

ROLAND BUCK

Having a play on stage in Freetown, Sierra Leone now, is a mark of some social standing; it gives the idea that you are knowledgeable or you are a dramatist or a journalist or an author, and so it is not necessary to put serious thought into it. You and I could have a fight, or you have some family problem and you just pick up a pen and start writing about that. There is no thought in the whole thing. The whole essence is to make money.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you've got people in the universities, who are, I suppose, scholar who at some time in their career must have studied playwrighting. Why can't these people come out and write something decent?

ROLAND BUCK

The University doesn't have a faculty for that. We have the Department of African Studies at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, but they are given more to presenting plays by English writers. Occassionally they do a few things under the direction of Professor Edward Jones, things done by Chinua Achebe, a lot of Nigerian and Chanaian poets and dramatists. But, I have yet to see people from Fourah Bay College writing plays which are performed on stage. We have some good playwrights, there is a fellow called Dele Charloy he is with the Arts Department of the Ministry of Education. There is another fellow called John Kargbo, he's a journalist and he works for the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. He's done some very good plays, the last play was something to do with the Poro Society and that raised a lot of controversy. But Professor Jones at Fourah Bay College. I think, is more into the classics.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How are these plays received, the creole plays, they may not be expertly written but

ROLAND BUCK

They are extremely popular because they deal with the situations which people are familiar with, some of the titles like that "Bad Man Betteh Pas Empty Ose" or a "Wicket Fellow" is a lot better than "Empty Ose"

This is more or less saying that if a woman has no husband, or no boyfriend or no man in the house, it's a lot better to have any man there, no matter how weak the fellow is rather than living alone. And you have plays like "Witch Man, Kongosah Man, Tif Man". Between three evils, gossiping, thieving and witchcraft, which is the better? The plays just revolve around these themes and they are extremely popular because they are understood by a great majority of the people. For example there was one play which was extremely popular, called "Akunah", which tells the story of a girl of school-going age who got involved with an elderly man; she got pregnant, and now the situation developed, how she managed to get herself out of it, the influence of people preying on little girls, was very popular because it dealt with actual situations. These are the things

that have been happening in Sierra Leone, the newspapers have written about them. But you can't put a stop to these things so, by and large, these plays reflect social situations and they try to point out what is wrong and what corrective measures should be taken.

ALEX TETTEH LARTEY

So they tend to be rather didactic. Where are they plays shown?

ROLAND BUCK

We don't have major theatres as such, we use the British Council Halls, or the newly opened City Hall; we also use the Town Hall, but these are just open stages.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you have people writing poetry?

ROLAND BUCK

A few, there's a fellow who has been to London quite a number of times, Muktar Mustapha, but of late I haven't seen much of him; he hasn't written much. Poets haven't had anything published - or whatever it is they've written they keep to themselves.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how about music?

ROLAND BUCK

Dance groups, dance ensembles have emerged. Some are under the direction of the Ministry of Education or the Port Loko Teachers College. There's a Dutchman there, Cudtjoe Van Hoven, who has managed to write some of the songs and to have them performed by a choir. For example, there's this choir from the Port Loko Teachers College, they could do songs in every one of the languages, folk songs. I think what Cudtjoe Van Hoven is doing at the moment is to have them recorded and I think they are going to be published, he is working on that. But our local dance bands, apart from the fact that they are heavily into reggae music and things from the French-Caribbean Islands, they have managed to transpose some of the folk tunes, modernise them and re-arrange them and make them into dance tunes. The leader in that field is the Afro National Dance Band. Most of the other bands are playing old songs which they have been playing for the past five or six years when they come to London for the summer holidays, but I think Afro National is the leader.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH - LARTEY

A modern rendering of a traditional song in the Mende language by Afro National, who were brought up in the traditional African style of music. But are there popular musicians who have been trained in Western classical style?

ROLAND BUCK

There used to be a fellow called Logie Wright, who's a trained musician, he used to work with the Milton Margai Teachers College, but these people do not do anything culturally, they tend to have choirs who are singing songs written by English writers, American writers or some Indian musician. You know, there is nothing Sierra Leonean as such coming from these people. There is a fellow also, who is now a lawyer, Ebun Thomas. What he is doing now is to lead the Methodist Boys High School Band, but it's a Brass Band, a marching band, they play for march pasts and funeral ceremonies and things and the tunes are all English tunes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So there's nobody following in the footsteps of great names like Scrubs?

ROLAND BUCK

Well, there's one band called "Chris During and his Republicans", they perform Creole folk tunes at wedding ceremonies and they spend most of Saturday afternoons playing at the Paramount Hotel. There's also the Rokel River Boys and Calendar and his Maringo Band. But they've been playing the same old numbers, there's nothing new coming from these people, they are now old and there are no new people coming following in their footsteps. But I think a man like Sam Campbell who is Head of the School for the Blind, has written quite a number of tunes. I think they won a competition here with the BBC "Network". They've been doing quite a lot of Creole tunes and Simla tunes and that kind of thing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about films?

ROLAND BUCK

We have no filmmakers. There was one fellow, I don't remember his name, he had something which he called "Teon Cinema". I saw this guy going around for a number of years but I never saw any films he made. We have a lot of documentaries made on Government projects, sulphur projects and things, but there are no filmmakers. Well, there are filmmakers, but they haven't doney anything creative as such.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, how about radio then?

ROLAND BUCK

Well on radio we have a drama division, which occasionally puts out plays. There was one written by Baba Jigida, which dealt with the Southern African situation, called "Den Day Pass Am Pan We, We Lay Pass Am Pan Dem". This means, "If you do it to me I am going to do it again to you". It was quite successful on stage at the Civic Hall, but on the radio I think it was badly produced, so the reaction from most of the listeners was that they only heard a lot of noise, they couldn't make out what the play was about, what the author was trying to do. I think that play was put up specifically to raise funds to aid the Zimbabwe/Sierra Leonean Friendship Society in Freetown. On state it was quite popular, and attracted quite a lot of people when it was on for a week at the Civic Hall in Freetown. Radio does a lot of productions, but the bulk of our dramatic productions are transcription things coming either from the BBC or from other radio stations, mainly plays by Nigerian writers, or Sierra Leonean writers in Britain. But mainly English productions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTSEY

And now that you've mentioned the BBC I might ask you what about our programme "Arts and Africa". How is it received?

ROLAND BUCK

Well, I would say that people who write plays or people who produce plays listen to the programme, because they draw some inspiration from it, they learn from it and people who are interested in drama in other parts of Africa listen to it. The reason is that it comes on immediately after "Focus on Africa" and people listen to "Focus". I think this is one of the main reasons. I think the programme should be expanded, that you need to deal with a lot more subjects in one programme, But even when you deal with one subject in one programme the time is insufficient.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTSEY

Well, I don't know if you can answer this question, but I'll still put it to you. What do you think can be done to encourage people to do more in the field of the Arts in Sierra Leone?

ROLAND BUCK

I think the first thing is an awareness, a consciousness of things Sierra Leonean. People have to look outwards, rather than just look within their surroundings. Situations could be developed which could appeal to a broad pan-African audience and not to just a Sierra Leonean audience. Also, we need proper training for dramatists, playwrights and producers. Occasionally there are workshops organised by the British Council and at times by the University of Sierra Leone. People go overseas on the British Technical Assistance Programme, but I think the length of time is insufficient, they run these courses for a week, four days. The opportunities are there for a technical advisor to be there to show how to make use of sounds, sound effects, lights; how to go about producing a play with the limited resources they have. It might be okay,

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you think it's the Government who should help, or people who are interested in the Arts?

ROLAND BUCK

We have a Minister of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, but the emphasis is more on tourism rather than the Arts, the vote is quite small to promote the Arts. I don't know whether anything is going to be done to help painters and sculptors and things like that. I remember Hassan Bangura, one of our most outstanding painters, wanted to go to an exhibition in Germany. He had to look out for donations - he was helped of course by the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs - but he had to look out for donations. I think the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs are doing their bit, but they haven't gone into it in a big way. They haven't looked at it as a priority. What they are looking at as a priority is to first of all develop the tourist industry and then go into sports in a big way and then maybe the Arts and culture could follow.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well they need some prodding from somebody. I do hope that something is done pretty soon. Roland, thank you very much indeed.

ROLAND BUCK

It's been a pleasure talking to you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Roland Buck giving a not too flattering description of some of the art of his country Sierra Leone. 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.

MUSIC - LIMPOPO

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