

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, and welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey.

The Nigerian poet and novelist Gabriel Okara was recently awarded the Commonwealth Poetry prize for his collection 'A Fisherman's Invocation' made up of previously published poems, which have been written over the years.

Gabriel was trained as a bookbinder, but later went into the Civil Service. Throughout his life he has written and published many poems, but only one novel, 'The Voice', in 1964. He writes plays and other features for Nigerian radio, and is well known as a writer who uses the various written forms to experiment in styles of language. 'The Voice' which uses Ijaw speech rhythm and syntax, translated into English, is one of the most remarkable books to be published by an African writer.

Well, Gabriel came to London to receive his Commonwealth Poetry Prize, and while he was here he came to our studios.

GABRIEL OKARA

I cannot say when - which year - which month - I decided to start writing poetry. I've always been interested in poetry and literature generally, at school after reading Wordsworth's poem that birds have a life to lose, and I've personally had that sort of experience. When I was a boy a group of us went to the bushes with bows and arrows to shoot at birds and so on. Now we were underneath a tree, and up above there was a beautiful bird. And one of my colleagues wanted to shoot it and so I shook the tree and it flew away, because I didn't want it to be killed. Wordsworth's poem reminded me of that incident - so I started writing poetry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you suggesting that it was as a result of your education that you became interested in poetry, or would you say that you had a natural instinct?

GABRIEL OKARA

I liked poetry. What I am telling you is what triggered me into actual writing and not merely reading and enjoying it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When you began to write, were you conscious of form, and things like that, or did you write exactly what you felt?

GABRIEL OKARA

Well, when it comes to form, it was available to us in English classes, you know. We had to keep strictly to the beats, the meters, and the rhyming and other sorts of things. Well what I did was to try to imitate the forms of the poems that we were reading and so forth, you see.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now when did you begin to think about getting published, or did it never occur to you at all as important?

GABRIEL OKARA

Well, as a matter of fact, the sheer enjoyment - the sheer joy I derive from writing was the most important thing, I never thought that one could earn anything.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of subjects did you write about?

GABRIEL OKARA

Poetry is, essentially, a subjective sort of thing. There is always conflict - emotional conflicts, maybe love, maybe even hate - conflicts that can make one write poetry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Then you went on to be published in "Black Orpheus" which was the first medium where you could get your ideas across. You wrote a lot of poetry, but not all was published - what happened to it?

GABRIEL OKARA

I was very careless and never kept my manuscripts.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you just get a scrap of paper and jot down any ideas which come to your mind?

GABRIEL OKARA

Well, you see, I'm such a disorganised person. I'm not very methodical as some people are - I admire those people who are very methodical. But it just happens that I'm always so disorganised.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it because you write more for yourself than for the outside world - in other words, you feel an urge to write on a subject - you write and you're satisfied with it and let out an emotion - a feeling and that's that!

GABRIEL OKARA

You feel there's some sort of relief. Well, somebody told me several days ago about a Swedish poet, who, when asked "What do you do with your manuscripts?" - he said, "Well I hide them." Now that wasn't my attitude. I have friends in Enugu where I started writing and we used to read my poems. But I never kept them, as I'm so disorganised. It's very sad.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Biafran war must have had a traumatic effect on you - did it inspire you to write poetry? And if it did, what kind of poetry did you write; what feelings did you try to convey?

GABRIEL OKARA

When you are in a war situation you have a complex of emotions and attitudes, depending on the immediate circumstances. But the predominant thing you have is that instinct of self-preservation, but you will not find this instinct of self-preservation in my poetry at all. But you have emotions, conflict again; you want peace, yet there is war; you want children to live and be happy, and yet children were dying from starvation. You don't want to kill and yet people are being killed. We are in one massive emotional state that can make you go crazy. You are torn by extremes: either you want to go and fight and kill everybody or you become a total pacifist. You want to run away.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now as a poet of international stature did you find you tended to take sides?

GABRIEL OKARA

It's impossible to be impartial when you're in the midst of death. When you see children dying it's very difficult to be impartial, you begin to question, why fight? Why Kill? Why make the children suffer? You ask these questions and you find that that is in some part reflected in my war poems.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you give us an example of it?

GABRIEL OKARA

Yes, one is a very short poem - "A Cancerous Growth". It's about where I live.

GABRIEL OKARA READS HIS POEM " A CANCEROUS GROWTH" - PUBLISHED BY HEINEMANN

GABRIEL OKARA

What I'm trying to say is that nobody should have any hatred in his mind, for if you hate you are destroying yourself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Unlike other poets and writers covering the war I found that in some of your poems you expressed hope as well as seeing the disasters. In two poems of yours, one "Cross On The Moon" and the other "Rain Lullaby", you see these war planes flying, circling overhead, distributing food and other aids to the suffering.

GABRIEL OKARA

Well they came and dropped this food - that alone shows humanity. In spite of this barbarity, killing and so on, there is still hope in the world. The war is not the end of the world; its not the Dooms Day sort of thing, so there's hope, always hope, in spite of the wickedness and killing and barbarity that we see around the world even now. It's the humanity that is fundamental to the existence of man.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I would like to read a passage from "Cross On The Moon".

READS FROM CROSS ON THE MOON Published by Heinemann.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I would like to move into another sphere of writing for which you are probably not very well known, but where I think you're as substantial as you are in your poetry writing. I'm referring to the novel "The Voice", which isn't very well known. Now in this book "The Voice", what are you trying to convey?

GABRIEL OKARA

I wrote "The Voice" immediately after independence, (which is also when I wrote "The Fisherman's Invocation", the title of a poem, just after independence). Then we had our heroes, leaders in an independent period, and we had hopes - we had very rosy pictures of the future. But when we became independent we also got corruption and bribery. So it's the values of the past which the hero is searching for in the novel; those values we had traditionally; those values about goodness, about keeping to one's word without any agreement written on paper. So these are the lost values that are represented in the book.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I'm going to ask you something more about your poetry. We've probably got the impression that it's all high morality which you are concerned with. But among your poems there's one entitled "Once Upon A Time". Would you care to read us a passage or two from it and tell us why you wrote it?

GABRIEL OKARA

It's about the same values again; where you can't trust anybody any more, and where people don't say what they really mean -

GABRIEL OKARA READS "ONCE UPON A TIME" Published by Heinemann.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Splendid. Well we should expect more to come from you? Do you agree?

GABRIEL OKARA

Yes, I think so.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, we look forward very much to having more from you. Thank you very much indeed.

That's all from Arts and Africa this week, so until next week - goodbye.