

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 Miriam Tlali a new South African novelist we hear about Okot P'Bitek's latest book, and Alex Haley author of 'Roots', sets up the African Roots Award.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The International African Institute has just announced a new annual award known as the African Roots Award to be sponsored jointly by the Africana Publishing Company: The British publishing firm Hutchinson; and Alex Haley's Roots Foundation. I asked Djibril Diallo from Senegal who is on the staff of the International African Institute what the African Roots Award will consist of.

DJIBRIL DIALLO

The Award consists of a Gold Medal and a cash prize of £500 offered to the best contribution towards the strengthening of the links between the peoples of Africa and people of African descent elsewhere in the world. Entries may include historical research on African cultural and linguistic survivals in the New World as well as works which present and interpret African societies and civilisation to a general public outside Africa. The African Roots Award is mostly designed to encourage young people into writing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you only want published works or do you also accept manuscripts as yet unpublished?

DJIBRIL DIALLO

We accept unpublished works and works accepted for publication since January 1978.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about films, you also accept films?

DJIBRIL DIALLO

Yes, we do accept films - and in this case we would like to have about 5 copies of the synopsis.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Who are the judges?

DJIBRIL DIALLO

The Judges include the Director and the Consultative Directors of the Institute who include Professor Ali Mazrui, the well known Kenyan Political Scientist now in the United States.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Djibril Diallo of the International African Institute talking about the New African Roots Award. And the address to write to about the details of the Award is: The International African Institute, 210 High Holborn, London WC1V 7BW, England.

MUSIC:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Okoto p'Bitek the famous Ugandan poet is perhaps best known as the author of the "Song of Lawino". In an early essay of his "The Future of Vernacular Literature", he said "The vast majority of our people in the countryside have a full-blooded literary culture - so deep, so vivid and so alive that for the moment the very little written stuff appears almost irrelevant!" Its on these terms that he justifies "Hare and Hornbill", his newly published collection of traditional African stories. Neither Okoto p'Bitek himself or the publishers, Heinemann make it clear where these stories originate - but it seems likely that they come from Kenya and Uganda. Here's Neville Grant with an assessment of "Hare and Hornbill".

NEVILLE GRANT

Hare and Hornbill contains 32 stories. 19 of these are animal stories, with such well-known heroes or anti-heroes of oral African literature as Hare, Tortoise, Hyena and Spider. The other stories

are the usual mixed-bag of legends, myths, fantasies etc. The story which lends its title to the book - "Hare and Hornbill", is quite well known: our two friends decide to fly up to Skyland to seek their brides. Before they leave, Hornbill complains of diarrhoea, and Hare thoughtfully offers him a cork for his rear passage. In Skyland, Hornbill is a good deal more successful than Hare in obtaining new wives, and at last, in desperation, Hare removes the cork..... I won't go on in case I give something away!

This book comes at an opportune time. There has recently been a great resurgence of interest in traditional oral literature, particularly in Kenya and Uganda. And this is to be thoroughly welcomed. As Okot p'Bitek says in his introduction, many of the older collections of folk tales suffer from several defects; frequently they are unreliable shadows of the original, mainly because of the linguistic or technical inadequacies of the collectors, who were usually Europeans with an often imperfect command of the language of the story-teller. In addition, the stories were told under ludicrously artificial conditions. Instead of the lively, responsive, indeed often participatory 'audience', the story teller might be faced by an earnest ethnographer armed with note-book and pencil, and, in more recent times, a tape-recorder. Often too, the informant chosen by the researcher was also unreliable.

Okot rightly considers that much more care should be exercised in tracing stories to their source, and checking their provenance. I think that it is a great pity that he himself does not practise what he preaches in this collection: none of the sources of any of these stories are cited - not even the language of the original. Nevertheless he is right to demand a more exacting and scholarly approach to this very fascinating area of African literature. In this he echoes Ruth Finnegan, who in her book "Oral Literature in Africa" suggests that 'What is really needed by now is less emphasis on collecting more and more texts and much more on rigorous and explicit standards in recording and translating.' Let us hope that it is this last task that the writer will now direct his attentions to.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Neville Grant talking about Okoto p'Bitek's new collection of traditional stories published in the Heinemann African Writer's series.

MUSIC:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Miriam Tlali. A South African writer whose first novel "Muriel At Metropolian" is soon to be published by Longmans. Miriam Tlali lives in Soweto and says she writes about people and their lives there, partly to educate outsiders but also because she feels she must. Although her work is far from political many people in South Africa obviously see it as such. Its perhaps to escape some of

the pressures of life in Johannesburg that Miriam now does a lot of her writing in neighbouring Lesotho. Miriam Tlali recently spent some time at the world famous Iowa writers workshop in the United States. and when she passed through London on her way back to Africa Hugh Prysor-Jones asked Miriam when she first started writing.

MIRIAM TLALI

I first started in 1968.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

And when was your first book published - in that year?

MIRIAM TLALI

No, in 1975. I couldn't get publishers for it. It was rejected by many publishers.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

And this, I presume was not for artistic reasons?

MIRIAM TLALI

No I don't think so. It was mainly because of the content of the matter. They kept telling me nobody would buy that book.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

Now what do you write about - I know that most novels are said to be autobiographical, but how much of that is in your own work?

MIRIAM TLALI

It is really based on my experiences when I worked at a shop dealing in radios and household appliances.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

What exactly were you doing - were you selling stuff over the counter or ordering or what?

MIRIAM TLALI

I was working as a typist clerk - to be a sort of relief filling in for the shortage of staff among the whites.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

I see. This was skilled work. Was there friction then with unskilled white people who perhaps felt you shouldn't be doing such a responsible job?

MIRIAM TLALI

Yes, there was a lot of friction.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

And is this the sort of thing that your book was made out of?

MIRIAM TLALI

Yes. Mainly yes. I was actually between two fires. It was clashes with the whites on the one side because of the type of work I do, and on the other side with my own people because they mistook me for someone who is prepared to try and get as much money as possible out of them. At one time, for instance, I was threatened with the possibility of losing my work unless I kept my mouth shut. I didn't say anything about the Higher Purchase Act and the rights of the customer.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

Now what was this you had to keep quiet about?

MIRIAM TLALI

About, for instance, explaining to them they could get part of the interest they had paid in if within a certain period they paid up on their accounts.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

I see, if they paid it up quickly they paid less money.

MIRIAM TLALI

Yes - it should be credited back to them.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

Well I think that description really fails to do justice to your book - so what I'd like to do now is to ask you to read us a short chapter - I believe its the shortest, but lets hear it from your own mouth.

BOOK EXTRACT

MIRIAM TLALI

The character like Agrippa he's a tragic character really, his home life has gone to pieces because of the kind of work he does but anyway he manages to make everybody love him. Whenever he appears its amusing.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

There are obviously plenty of interesting characters floating around, and the ideas of working at a radio store might'nt perhaps conjure up in readers just how colourful the scene is. Presumably there's much more where this came from. Perhaps I could ask you what your plans are for the future in terms of writing?

MIRIAM TLALI

Yes, I intend to write as much as I can. There's so much interest about what is going on in Soweto or in South Africa and my publisher and I thought I should interview as many people as I can in Soweto especially, to find out how they work, how they feel and that kind of thing. I have written some stories about the conflict between the young people and their parents. I've written a story, "The Point of No Return", where the younger people feel the older generation are more apathetic and they accept their lot. Apart from writing I am still employed by a firm in Johannesburg, in advertising.

HUGH PRYSOR-JONES

Would you like to write full-time?

MIRIAM TLALI

Yes I would like to write full-time. Now that there are so many prospects - so much encouragement from people all around I think I'll be able to do that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Miriam Tlali, new South African novelist talking to Hugh Prysor-Jones.

MUSIC:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And with that music from the soundtrack of "Rhythm of Resistance" a film about the present day black music scene in South Africa we come to the end of this week's programme. Don't forget to join us again at the same time next week for more 'Arts and Africa'. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC:

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