

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, - welcome to Arts and Africa and this week we'll be taking a look at a comedy play, written in Nigerian pidgin, which was recently performed at the Africa Centre in London. But first to Rhodesia, or the Zimbabwe that is to be. Any country trying to unite itself after so many years of strife must have a strong idea of the social philosophy it wishes to follow, and certainly Robert Mugabe has attempted to express his hopes and wishes clearly. Well, a book has just been published by the well-known Rhodesian academic Dr. Stanlake Samkange, and his wife Tommie Marie - suggesting that the philosophy of Hunhuism or Ubuntuism should be followed, - drawing on the traditions of the Bantu. Julian Marshall asked Dr. Samkange how he would define Hunhuism or Ubuntuism.

DR. STANLAKE SAMKANGE

It's the essence of being a Bantu. But still there is a great deal more than just the essence of being a Bantu. It is the attitude of the Bantu, and their political, social and cultural philosophy. I believe they are distinguished by their own peculiar attitude toward life and something that motivates them and something which they would rather die than do. When a person says, "this is not Hunhuism", he is really telling you that, "I am not prepared to do this because if I did it, I would be false to myself".

JULIAN MARSHALL

The general thrust of this book is the way in which these qualities that you have been talking about have been submerged by external philosophies, external cultural influences. Where do you feel the loss has been greatest?

DR. STANLAKE SAMKANGE

The loss has been great in many aspects, in politics, in economics, in our social attitudes and this is what we have tried to indicate in the book. That European forms, or foreign forms are not necessarily better than the European forms. All we say is that before we discard our own forms, let us look at them again in the light of present day circumstances.

JULIAN MARSHALL

But are you arguing for a complete return to indigenous culture?

DR. STANLAKE SAMKANGE

That would be impossible, we are living in the jet age. Our philosophy was evolved over thousands of years and we can't say, let's go back to that. We have to adapt ourselves, but in adapting ourselves to new situations, we are saying, let us not discard the good things that are in our culture.

JULIAN MARSHALL

What are those good things about the culture that you feel ought to be maintained?

DR. STANLAKE SAMKANGE

Take for instance our attitude to old people. Now the Western practice is to build old people's homes, and you put your father and your mother in there until they die. Well death under such circumstances is different from our own attitude in African culture. The old people lived with their grandchildren; there was always someone around to look after them. I think that is a much better approach than the Western one. Also, the much maligned extended family, it has its own advantages. There are admittedly difficulties in modern day societies but by and large, the extended family is not a bad thing, there are a lot of good things in it. There are always certain people in the family who will ensure that your children know certain things, and that they have got the correct attitude towards certain people. You don't have to tell them that yourselves. It is a communal effort in the raising of human beings.

JULIAN MARSHALL

You told me earlier on that we are now living in the jet age. You don't feel you are trying to set the clock back in any way?

DR. STANLAKE SAMKANGE

No I would be a fool to do such a thing. You can never set the clock back, but in going forward you do not lose everything that is best that you have done in the past. There is no question. You cannot fight the march of history and the march of progress; you can't.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Julian Marshall talking to Dr. Stanlake Samkange. Within the last few weeks, a play called 'Poor Man Dey Suffer' was performed at the Africa Centre here in London. It's written in pidgin by a young Nigerian, Rufus Oshayomi, who is teaching drama and dance at various colleges and schools in association with the Commonwealth Institute. The play is based on an old story of 2 poor people who are each given a wish by the Angel of God; the poor man chooses something really insignificant, which annoys his nagging wife so much, that she wishes for her husband's death. But all turns out well, as the man eventually tricks Death, or Die as he is known - and changes everything to his own advantage. Well, Rufus Oshayomi, and his co-star - Marianne Di Marco, came into the studio and spoke to Stuart Sutton-Jones about the play.

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

Ise means a poor man, and he is a poor man: Aso means a nagging woman. Both of them are married and they rent a house from their landlord in the play. They are living together with poverty and sufferings of their heads. Then the angel of God comes down and offers them each a wish, to use the magical power to ask for anything they want in this world.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

What do you ask for?

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

Well I had a tree in my backyard with oranges and people were coming to steal the oranges every time, and I was actually arguing with my wife when the angel of God came. He gave me the power to ask for something I want and at that particular moment I wanted to stop people from coming in to steal my oranges; I mean it's what I have really lived for. You see, when I left home in the morning I saw two of the oranges were ripe. When I came back, my wife said there is nothing in the house to eat and I was going to the backyard to pluck one and the only 2 red ones are gone. I was actually asking who the hell comes to steal them, and she was telling me she doesn't know and I shouldn't be bothering her about my oranges. That's how it begins.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

And that's what we are going to hear now?

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

Yes.

TAPE

Extract from 'Poor Man Dey Suffer'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, after complaining that someone is stealing his ripe oranges, Ise wishes that he could capture whoever is taking them. But this does not please his wife, Aso.

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

My wife says; "Look what kind of crazy man are you? With all the good things in the world, is that all you can ask?" And she thinks that the best thing she can do is to ask for my death. But at the end I use my power to capture the angel of death. Because I asked for a power to trap anybody who touched my orange tree and I trap the Die and I force him to make a promise that he will never kill me. And my name is Poor and my wife is Nagging, yet I can use my power to achieve these things.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

So in the play, you are the poor man, and Marianne played the nagging wife?

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

The nagging wife yes. And actually it took me some time to find somebody like her because I always find it difficult to actually find somebody who can communicate my own idea to the audience.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

You mean you took a long time to find someone like Marianne who can nag, but who can also nag in pidgin?

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

Yes; I mean it was a big opportunity to really get somebody like Marianne to carry out my own thought.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

How did you meet up with Rufus, Marianne?

MARIANNE DI MARCO

A friend of mine told me that somebody was looking for an actress who could speak pidgin English.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

How come you can speak pidgin?

MARIANNE DI MARCO

Well I'm Nigerian, and I spent my life up till I was a teenager in Lagos, and it doesn't really take much to get back into it again.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

Did you find that the sort of pidgin that Rufus was asking you to speak was different from the pidgin you knew when you were a teenager?

MARIANNE

Yes. Pidgin is ever changing, an ever developing kind of language, and while I was there there was always new words and phrases being introduced. Now after a gap of a few years, to see Rufus's pidgin I can see that there are lots of phrases which are now in vogue which weren't there at all when I was in Nigeria.

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

Also, because you are from Bendel state

MARIANNE DI MARCO

Yes, the pidgin changes from each region of Nigeria.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

You make the play sound very serious with a serious theme. You are poor and everything is very unfortunate, death comes down and so forth. In fact it's an incredibly funny play. When I was there in the African Centre, everybody was almost hysterical with laughter.

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

It looks funny on stage but, the way things are going in this world you can slap somebody and still be laughing. I mean the way the government is controlling everybody and the way things are going. I mean, we are being cheated and we know we are being cheated, but when people laugh we sort of forget it. I think when things are really really hard, the best thing is to put it across in a simple way.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

Why did you write it in pidgin and put it on in England. Not many people in England speak pidgin.

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

Well they should; I mean they have to start somewhere.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

So is there a message for a British audience; is that what you are saying?

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

Yes. Some people think that English, French, German are the only things you can communicate in. But in Nigeria there are a lot of people who speak pidgin and they have never been outside the country. Also for people in London, the play is very, very simple. I mean everyone can pick it up after 4 or 5 words.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

Now you have written several plays. Have they all been in pidgin and have they all had a social message?

RUFUS ORISHAYOMI

I wrote one for people working in the factory, and I called it 'E no going happen to me' and I have written another one in Zaria when I was teaching at Ahmadu Bello. I wrote all of them in pidgin, because Nigeria has a vast and diverse population, but we are so carried away by neglecting our own people, by neglecting our own language. Also the way I have been speaking people might say "that guy sounds illiterate", because I can't communicate very well in a foreign language. I call English a foreign language. If I am speaking pidgin, I bet you I would do better.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Stuart Sutton-Jones speaking to Marianne Di Marco and Rufus Orishayomi. And that's all for Arts and Africa for this week, but we'll be back with another edition of Arts and Africa in 7 days time - so from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, goodbye.