

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa which this week looks at 2 different uses of the English language and also hears about some fascinating village crafts that date back almost 4 thousand years. But first English or rather an adaptation of the language used in many parts of West Africa - pidgin. The pidgin English spoken in Cameroon is particularly rich in imagery as you can hear from this translation of Shakespeare's famous speech from Hamlet 'To be or not to be'.....

TAPE

EXTRACT OF A SPEECH FROM 'HAMLET' READ IN PIDGIN

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Ralph Awa who is head of the English Department at the Sacred Heart College in the North West Province of Cameroon. The fact that the country has had German and French as well as English influences may account for the richness of the language. Ralph Awa spoke to Gareth Armstrong and explained to him the origin of the word 'Kasingu' which we heard in the translation from Hamlet and which is apparently related to the German word for Emperor - Kaiser.

RALPH AWA

Kaisi is the local pronunciation for Kaiser and by this the people meant that they used the skin of animals made into whips, to whip people and therefore it was Kasingo meaning Kaiser's skin or the skin that was used to enforce Kaiser's will.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ralph Awa talking to Gareth Armstrong. But it seems that more than just European influences have been brought to bear on pidgin, witness the origin of the word itself.

RALPH AWA

Pidgin comes from the Chinese meaning business. It is the business language of West Africa and I presume that those scholars who are linguists use this term because it does fulfil the role of a business language.

GARETH ARMSTRONG

And can you tell me which language has influenced it most would you say?

RALPH AWA

Well, I would say English has influenced it most because although no reference grammar has been constructed, and no standard orthography, English words feature most and under closer observation will reveal that it is some kind of sub-standard English although people don't accept that. But its vocabulary and spelling is basically English.

GARETH ARMSTRONG

It is obviously a very lively language and one which moves and grows. Is it only used verbally or is there any sort of literary tradition attached to it?

RALPH AWA

Recently it has had the New Testament translated into it. Practically all religious instruction in the areas where it is spoken, is given in it since the bulk of churchgoers, and illiterate or partially literate but one cannot follow advance studies in it from the lack of a properly constructed grammar.

GARETH ARMSTRONG

When Cameroon was a German territory, I wonder what the Germans attitude was to the "natives" speaking in this semi-English pidgin?

RALPH AWA

The Germans were very few on the Cameroon scene during the colonial period and they represented 2 groups. First there were the traders, that's the farmers who operated plantations, and the administrators. They didn't mix with the Cameroon society and they were certainly not great people for communicating on social levels or on social terms with the "native" people. If they left any linguistic influence it must be very, very limited. It does exist but as I say it is very small.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTSEY

Gareth Armstrong talking to Ralph Awa of Cameroon about the pidgin spoken in his country. And now to a fascinating exhibition, here in London entitled 'People of the Nile' which presents village crafts and technologies from Egypt. It has been organised by Dr. Amr El Baghdadi. Although Dr. Baghdadi is a specialist in computers, he is intrigued by the way some of these crafts have survived since the days of the Pharaohs and yet still have a valuable role to play in village life today. Suzi Benghiat went along to the exhibition and asked Dr. Baghdadi to describe the crafts on show.

DR. BAGHDADI

If you look up on the walls you will find that they are covered with various tapestries which are very colourful as they represent scenes from everyday life. The things that they are familiar with, you can even see them, a plough and cotton gathering up there so it is really things that they are very familiar with. They don't try to copy ideas from magazines or whatever.

SUZI BENGHIAT

And they are mainly done by young girls?

DR. BAGHDADI

Well, young girls, young boys, elderly girls, and elderly boys and even grown-ups because it is something that has lasted for many years and it has been in families for a long time. The interesting thing is the type of loom that they use, you can see it on some of the graves that belong to the ancient Egyptians, It is almost the same technique as it was.

SUZI BENGHIAT

And they look very simple. You've got some models here.

DR. BAGHDADI

We've got some models representing the vertical loom. We have a model also representing the Bedouin loom, this is one of the earliest and simple types of loom. It is a horizontal one and the heddle itself, is based on 2 pieces of rock which the Bedouin lady moves as she continues to weave her piece of tapestry. Now the tapestry that Bedouin women make, are carpet like, they put them on beds, they use them to reinforce tents and various other things.

SUZI BENGHIAT

And the designs are sort of long vertical bands, is there a reason for that because the loom works this way?

DR. BAGHDADI

There is, because the Bedouins travel a lot and the type of loom that they use, they can put it into one bundle and carry it with them on camel backs or donkey backs so in fact it produces a very narrow strip and therefore all the tapestries that belong to the Bedouins are very, very narrow and they produce very long narrow strips and they sew them together to form a wide tapestry that they can place in their tent or on top of the tent sometimes.

SUZI BENGHIAT

You've also got there, a kind of machine for paper making.

DR. BAGHDADI

We've been trying to follow the making of papyrus as the ancient Egyptians used to make it because it was interesting to find, today, that some parts or some villages near Cairo, re-started the process of making papyrus and papyrus is very difficult to find in Egypt now. It used to be available in large quantities at swamps and in marshes near many villages. It's mainly used today, by artists who paint on it as it is very good material, it takes any type of ink, paint, printing or whatever process. You can even wash it and re-use it again. That's what the ancient Egyptians used to do.

SUZI BENGHIAT

I see you've sold quite a lot of your tapestries. Did you have enough?

DR. BAGHDADI

Well, in fact we only had a few here. We don't have anything to replace these but this was really a test. We know quite a few families in Egypt who produce these tapestries and we would definitely like to create a market for them provided that we don't turn them into mass producing families.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Suzi Benghiat talking to Dr. Amr El Baghdadi about the exhibition 'People of the Nile'. And finally we return to the English language with poetry from Uganda. Regular listeners will be familiar with the name of Cliff Lubwa p'Chong the Ugandan actor and playwright. Today we look at his work as a poet. Born in 1946 in Gulu in Northern Uganda, Cliff p'Chong read Literature at Makerere University and now teaches at the National Teachers College. He left Uganda in 1977 after the killing of archbishop Janaani Luwum and returned after the fall of Idi Amin in June 1979. In 1977 he wrote this poem, which he reads for us 'The Condemned Cell' which depicts the entire population of Uganda as prisoners, 'The Condemned Cell',.....

TAPE

THE CONDEMNED CELL

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Not all of Cliff Lubwa p'Chong's poetry is concerned with the terrors of the Amin era. Another preoccupation is the trials of women as in this poem 'Blessed are You' which deals with prostitution and which is written in the form of 'The Sermon on the Mount'.

TAPE

BLESSED ARE YOU

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Tragedy also entered Cliff p'Chong's life last year. He had married Elvania Zirimu who worked with Uganda's National Theatre. Elvania was the widow of Pio Zirimu but she was killed in a car accident shortly after her wedding to Cliff. This last extract is part of a long poem 'A Scar in the Mind' which deals with that sad event.

TAPE

EXTRACT FROM 'A SCAR IN THE MIND'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Cliff Lubwa p'Chong with 3 of his poems. And that's it from Arts and Africa this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.