

# 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. In recent weeks we've had special programmes devoted to West African countries so this week we move East to redress the balance. This edition of Arts and Africa takes a look at Kenya. Reports have been coming in of the vibrant literary life that has sprung up in Nairobi - from book-shop poetry readings to a wave of new drama groups. Now most of the recent news from Kenya has concentrated on the world wide protest that led to the release of the playwright, Ngugi Wa Thiongo. But there are other issues that we need to know about. We asked Carmel Travers to investigate and she spoke first to Jonathon Kariara. Jonathon is the Kenyan Managing Editor of the Oxford University Press as well as being a poet in his own right so he's well qualified to describe the current literary scene.

JONATHON KARIARA

What I would think has been happening in Kenya is more emphasis on drama than on fiction and poetry. Although I think all the three are going ahead quite nicely. We complain a lot that Kenyans aren't producing enough, you know, but you look around and there has been quite a lot coming out. I was making a hurried list just this afternoon and in the last year or so we have had about four plays coming out and being performed in Nairobi. We had John Ruganda's, 'The Flood' and Sammy Gikandi has produced a play called 'The General Rises Again'. We have had a new play by Althea Kaminjolo 'High Up On The Mountain'. Quite a lot is coming out and a lot of performances are taking place. Drama is very, very active in Nairobi especially. The publishing atmosphere is not as exciting as it was in the '60's and early '70's.

CARMEL TRAVERS

Why would that be?

JONATHON KARIARA

Oh, inflation. We are all having to face inflation in all aspects of our lives and this has hit the book trade.

CARMEL TRAVERS

But what do you think would be the major stimulus now for serious literature. Obviously during the '60's it would have been Independence?

JONATHON KARIARA

I find it difficult to define that for fiction. Ngugi's latest book is in Kikuyu 'Titani Murabi Ine'. I don't know what that implies but to me it's something rather unhappy, something rather sinister because he has not only been a Kenyan writer, he has been a world writer. His arguments are quite valid and I can respect them but I don't. Now I was asked to be a pan-Africanist once, you know, I was an East African, I am a Kenyan now. I don't know if I am going to like being a Kikuyu. You know that does not seem to be the right direction that we should take.

CARMEL TRAVERS

You think that is limiting the field too much, it's going in the wrong direction?

JONATHON KARIARA

Indeed, because Ngugi stands for a hell of a lot you know, not just for the Kikuyu people, he means a lot to the people who have read him and who have respected him. Writing in Kikuyu solved one problem of writing in a foreign language but then you know, isn't that surely going backwards? They don't know that writers can quite easily give up the role that they have covered in the past, of unifying. The question of language always remains a problematic one and I don't know how that one will be solved. But in actual fact, I think most Kenyan writers are expressing themselves in English. How that will result in the future, I don't know. I don't know whether it will be each one in his own mother tongue or whether we shall go for Swahili when we can speak it properly.

CARMEL TRAVERS

Well as a poet yourself, and publisher you are really on both sides of the fence at the same time, do you think that there is a strong desire, by poets in Kenya, to be published?

JONATHON KARIARA

I do have the rather tedious duty of saying 'no' to a lot of young people, especially undergraduates at the university, who get disappointed when you point out that their stuff is rough and it needs more experience in both writing and living before it can be put in book form. But I suppose this is a typical situation anywhere in the world.

CARMEL TRAVERS

Is it possible to generalise about some of the scenes that those young people, the undergraduates from the university, are dealing with in their poetry?

JONATHON KARIARA

Oh, nearly all of them are just disgusted with what they see, corruption you know ...

CARMEL TRAVERS

They are very political poems?

JONATHON KARIARA

Political yes. Rather immature, rather easily achieved attitudes and this is what one tries to warn against. You know it's fine to feel outraged about a thing but the poetry itself sometimes tells that the person is not all that deeply involved in what is being expressed. You know, by being carelessly written. And I have always been very happy when somebody comes back with their work, and some do, after they have looked at it and possibly, sometimes agreed with you, that their feelings expressed were far too easily achieved.

CARMEL TRAVERS

What kind of restraints or constraints are there, if any, on works being published of that particular nature?

JONATHON KARIARA

Well I suppose we enjoy quite a lot of freedom. Mind you, we have had Ngugi, to mention him again, inside for one year and certainly because of his writing. So one can see that there are limits but I don't know of anybody else who has had their work stopped from publication or performance and really quite a lot of it is pretty hot stuff. And this goes for the books that are studied in secondary school, most of them are of a fairly committed kind. And that does not seem to bother anybody. I think we are, in that respect, a fairly free nation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Jonathon Kariara describing the state of Kenyan literature. I was quite surprised to hear him criticize Ngugi Wa Thiongo - the idea of local languages verses tribalization, that's something we'll have to look at more closely in the future. But what was equally interesting was the emphasis Jonathon placed on drama as Kenya's most lively literary form. One of the writers he mentioned, Althea Kaminjolo, has been a central figure in Nairobi drama. Although born in the Caribbean, Althea was brought up in Malawi and has spent the last 10 years in Kenya. Her first play 'High Up on the Mountain' was performed in Nairobi earlier this year and when she spoke to Carmel Travers she began by describing the changes in Kenya's theatrical life that have taken place during her 10 years in the country.

ALTHEA KAMINJOLO

Ten years ago, an African play, a musical, African dance performances were a rarity, now it isn't. I would say during the last seven or six or five years certainly, drama has become much more widely accepted by the indigenous people here. A lot of people who previously heard about dance and drama, for them, these things were read about or they saw them on television but they certainly wouldn't get out of their homes and come and see them. Now they are interested.

CARMEL TRAVERS

What do you think has brought about the change?

ALTHEA KAMINJOLO

Awareness I think. The university had a department of English and about six years ago some of the more brave members of the faculty decided they wanted it to be a department of literature with an accent, not on English Literature so much as in the past, but on African Literature. Then the writers began being read by the young people and being understood, being discussed and being dramatised. Most of the early plays performed in Kenya, the African plays, were dramatisations of novels rather than plays as such.

CARMEL TRAVERS

You yourself have written a play 'High Up On The Mountain' which was performed in Kenya earlier this year, in Nairobi. As a playwright, what kind of other duties did you have to carry out just to get your play performed and on stage?

ALTHEA KAMINJOLO

Quite a lot. But let me say from the beginning that I was very lucky. The first thing that I had to do was to be brave enough to ask my friends to read the play. And after I got over this hurdle, nothing was really difficult. People were enthusiastic because it was written here, it belonged here to Africa and they thought it was exciting and everyone said well we must get this play on stage. And when the time came to cast the play, the people who were asked to take part said, 'Yes, of course, when do we start?' People asked to do backstage work like lighting, there was one fellow called Phillip Chagi who spent weeks up in the loft, you know getting the lighting straight and this was for 'thank you very much'.

CARMEL TRAVERS

When you say that there are lots of exciting things happening in Nairobi at the moment, that everyone is wanting to do their own thing in the theatre, can you give me some examples of that, what kind of play are we seeing being performed now?

ALTHEA KAMINJOLO

Well a lot of new playwrights are coming up. There is a young playwright Wondaga (phonetic) who has just done apparently an educational thesis on the circumcision ceremonies of his people. And he dramatises them and puts them on stage. Then there is a young girl whose parents were rather desparate and she had to leave school and sort of fend for herself and met with all the unfortunate things that young girls on their own meet with. And they are now trying to rehabilitate this child and they have written a dramatisation of her life and they are putting it on stage, partly to raise funds to send her back to school and it's called Shelter, the group that's been formed to do this is called Shelter. And there is another group that has just started called the 'Shangari Players' and they are also very interested in people who want to write plays or have written plays but have never had them performed before, people who want to write plays, people who direct plays who are not just interested in acting themselves but in their acting and who want to learn the art of directing plays and they are being helped by the more experienced dramatists in Kenya like Mbugwa, David Rubadiri who is very, very active in the theatre in Kenya. He produced my play and he was absolutely superb as a person and as a director and John Ruganda from the University of Nairobi. These are all people who are experienced, people who have really very great minds to start off with and are capable dramatists and they are helping the younger ones, they are advising them, working side by side with them and encouraging them to bring their own ideas forward.

CARMEL TRAVERS

Do you think Kenya is evolving its own indigenous form of drama and theatre?

ALTHEA KAMINJOLO

I think they are evolving their own. Their form of drama as yet is still in its embryonic stage but is different in that they are absolutely fascinated in politics - modern politics and their own traditional ways of dealing with things, they use these as a background for all the political problems, they are facing now. They are caring more about their interpretation and whether they are getting across to their audiences and whether the audiences are with them and appreciating what they are giving them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Althea Kaminjolo talking to Carmel Travers. And that ends our special report on writing in Kenya, Arts and Africa will be back next week with more news of the cultural life of the continent. Until then it's goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, as we leave you with some traditional music of one of Kenya's people's, the Nandi.

TAPE

MUSIC OF THE NANDI PEOPLE.