

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 another edition of Arts and Africa. This week we hear about the fate of local publishing houses in Kenya, we have news of Ngugi wa'Thiongo, and we hear about a new novel from Nigeria.

First Kenya: Bernth Lindfors is an African literature specialist who taught for a time in East Africa and now lectures at the University of Texas in America. He has just returned from a visit to Kenya where he renewed old acquaintances and took a look at what is happening on the writing and publishing scene since his last visit there in 1978. David Sweetman spoke to Bernth Lindfors when he stopped over in London on his way back to America. They talked about the current fate of the small local publishing houses that had sprung up when Bernth was in Nairobi in 1976. He describes the atmosphere of those days.

BERNTH LINDFORS

There was a great deal of excitement in the publishing world, a great deal of popular literature being produced, both by local houses, some of which were Government financed, some of which were started by local entrepreneurs and by some of the major multi-national companies too, that were trying to get into the popular publishing scene. There seemed to be a great deal going on at that time, a lot of new writers being published, a lot of literature on the streets, a lot available. When I went back in 1978 there was far less. Some of the publishing of that sort had stopped and by 1980, this year, the situation looked even more depressing in some senses. Some of these publishers are maybe rebounding now and may make a new start but, by and large, the effervescence one saw in the mid 1970's is no longer there.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Could I ask is this because of financial problems?

BERNTH LINDFORS

Yes, it's partly a financial problem but its partly a political problem too, with Uganda under Idi Amin it was very difficult for publishers to send books into the country, to actually sell books in Uganda, then the border was closed between Kenya and Tanzania and all the Kenyan publishing houses were effected by that, they could no longer ship to that market, so there was a constriction of the market, publishers found they were catering only to Kenya and not to all of East Africa.

DAVID SWEETMAN

But is there any sense in which these small publishing houses have been effected by the fact that someone like Ngugi wa'Thiongo was arrested for going directly to people, to a particular section of the Kenyan population by speaking in their own language. Is there any feeling of fear that popular publishing might in some way provoke the Government?

BERNTH LINDFORS

No I don't think popular publishing has been effected that way. There's a curious anomaly in the East African literary scene, the Nairobi literary scene, in that there seems to be a greater fear of the spoken word than of the written word. For example, the play for which Ngugi was detained, (presumably was detained, the Kenyan Government has never explained exactly why he was arrested and kept for nearly a year in prison) but the play that seems to have been the cause for his detention has recently been published by Heinemann East Africa in Kikuyu. A novel by Ngugi has also been published in Kikuyu, so there seems to be no censorship on the scene. That is books are permitted, the works circulate, but there seems to be a fear of the spoken word. For example, Ngugi has not been restored to his university position, yet he's been out of detention for a year and a half.

DAVID SWEETMAN

What are the main divisions that you've come across within Kenyan literary life. I heard recently that there had been some sort of writers workshop at Elimo Njau's Paa ya Paa Art Gallery, in which there was a certain amount of to and fro criticism between different groups. What are these groups?

BERNTH LINDFORS

The seminar you are referring to was to be sponsored by the Goethe Institute, the German cultural Centre in Nairobi, and some Kenyan writers and scholars did not want to be associated with it and made public statements to this effect, including Ngugi wa'Thiongo, who first found himself listed on the programme without having been formally invited to participate and he resented that. He also made some statements about foreign tutelage being unnecessary in the Kenyan context. So there are a group of writers and scholars and academics who support Ngugi in this position and there are others who took part in the workshop and have been trying to stimulate local literary activity using the sponsorship, not only of the Germans but the French or any other cultural organisation that may be in the country.

DAVID SWEETMAN

What about, in absolutely practical terms, getting writing across and so on, is it a publishing problem do you think, is it a case that the Government should, perhaps, have grants and things that would help writers to survive as writers, what could be done in a very direct way to help people who are struggling at the moment?

BERNTH LINDFORS

Well I think perhaps more Government support, particularly in the area of publications, journals especially. A few years ago there were many literary journals in East Africa some of the most exciting ones were coming from that area: 'Transition' or 'The East Africa Journal' and then university publications. Many of these have been dormant in recent years, partly because the Kenyan Literature Bureau which was supporting their publication was being re-organised, it used to be the East African Literature Bureau, but with the break-up of the East African Community each country was nationalising that bureau. Now that the Kenya Bureau exists, perhaps it should be urged to support local writers in this way. Recently the Cabinet was re-shuffled in Kenya and a Minister of

Culture was appointed and perhaps this is his portfolio, he's made public statements that he wants to stimulate the arts in Kenya and wants to get a film industry going, for example, I think this will be very good. So the quiescent period we're in now I think from 1976 to 1980, especially the impact that something like the detention of Ngugi had at the time, I think that may have been a phase that the East African literary scene was passing through and perhaps we'll see more things emerge in the future. But I think it's very important for Ngugi to get re-instated at the University then we'll have a free literary atmosphere.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Do you think there's a sense in which the Government of Kenya thinks its burnt its fingers over the Ngugi case, and that they are not likely to do something like that again?

BERNTH LINDFORS

To some extent, although when Ngugi was released he was released with all other political detainees, he wasn't singled out for special treatment, the thing that's special about his case now is that most of the ex-detainees have been re-absorbed in the society, a few of them, in fact, are M.P.'s but Ngugi doesn't have his job back yet. Questions are being raised in Parliament and also in the press about why this is so. I think eventually it will be a great embarrassment to the Kenyan Government that their best known writer and most prominent novelist in the country is not at work teaching students at the University.

DAVID SWEETMAN

You said earlier on that "we suppose" that the reason why he was arrested was because he had produced a play at village level in Kikuyu. And as you said the Government has never given a reason. Do you think that there is perhaps another reason, this maybe why he hasn't been reinstated at the University?

BERNTH LINDFORS

If there is another reason, I don't know it and the people I spoke to in Kenya don't know it. It's presumed that it was the play. He had published, of course, a very powerful protest novel, 'Petals of Blood' a half-year before the play, but this book was launched by Mwai Kibaki a Minister at that time who's currently vice-president of the country.

DAVID SWEETMAN

As you said yourself, there's no evidence that the government cares at all about printed books?

BERNTH LINDFORS

There doesn't seem to be any indication that they are upset about Ngugi's Kikuyu works.

DAVID SWEETMAN

In a sense what you are saying is that to all the evidence we have and to all opinion it is a mystery as to why Ngugi has not been re-instated?

BERNTH LINDFORS

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So a mystery there left in the balance by Bernth Lindfors who was talking to David Sweetman. David has also been talking to a young writer from Nigeria, Ben Okri who has just had his first novel 'Flowers and Shadows' published by Longman in the 'Drumbeat' series. 'Flowers and Shadows' tells the story of Jeffia Okwe who is forced to come to terms with the corruption of Nigerian society and in particular the sins of his father Jonan a ruthless businessman corrupted by ambition. When David Sweetman spoke to Ben Okri he asked him whether his comments were purely fictional or whether, in fact, he was critical of actual Nigerian society.

BEN OKRI

It's critical even though at the end the book achieves a kind of reconciliation, but it's a private reconciliation set against the backdrop, the corruption which I criticise very much.

DAVID SWEETMAN

You are yourself a young Nigerian, you are only 21 and I believe you wrote the book when you were, what, 17?

BEN OKRI

Yes, I wrote the first draft when I was 17.

DAVID SWEETMAN

How personal are the experiences mentioned in this book?

BEN OKRI

Well that's one thing I am very pleased about, that nothing in the book is autobiographical, I imagined everything. The emotions that fed the characters, that fed the prose, that fed the movement of the book are very much personal, but none of it is directly autobiographical.

DAVID SWEETMAN

In a sense you seem to be writing for young urban people, don't you, whereas there was a previous generation of African writers who tried to write about the lost African past, the rural life of Africa in order to give back to Africans a sense of dignity that may have been lost because of the colonial experience. You don't seem concerned about that, you seem to be trying to get through to young city dwellers, is that right?

BEN OKRI

Well the simple fact is that at the time that they wrote those books we were very much in the throes of independence and it was very necessary then. I think we are confronted now with our own problems, our own contradictions, the fact that our independence and today's progress is fraudulent, and that is why writers address themselves to today's problems. In Kenya Major Mwangi, in Ghana the chap who wrote the 'Gab Boys' and today myself and Festus Iyiere, the problems today are not anymore the the problems of dignity or the colonial past, I think it's gone beyond that.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Are you angry about the situation that you see?

BEN OKRI

I am not necessarily angry, but I have a sense of futility, the situation is larger than any of us, it is ingrowing very much in our whole psyche. When I wrote 'Flowers and Shadows' I was very much trying to write close to the idiom of the time and write as clearly and as illusively as possible.

DAVID SWEETMAN

There's a move in East Africa largely begun by Ngugi wa'Thiongo for people to write in local languages. Is there any such move in West Africa like that.

BEN OKRI

Yes a couple of people are writing plays and short stories and novels in native language, but the simple problem is that in a place like Nigeria we've got over fifty different languages and my language is a minority language and if I write in Orobo I'd be speaking to only about 10,000 people, if I am speaking to them at all, and added to that is the simple problem that I cannot write in Orobo.

DAVID SWEETMAN

This book is now appearing, right, its brand new! What are you working on next?

BEN OKRI

Currently I am working on my London novel, because at this moment I am obsessed by lost generations, by lost I mean lost in the sense of our cultural heritage, lost in the sense of our place where we find ourselves. We are very much adrift and I find this lostness in profusion in London.

DAVID SWEETMAN

You mean not just amongst black people here, but you mean amongst everybody?

BEN OKRI

Amongst everybody yes, and I think this is very much a generation and an age of loss and its a theme that people have explored in their own ways, but I want to explore it from the African psyche and I think it's the worm nigling at the very dead centre of our consciousness today.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ben Okri talking about his first novel 'Flowers and Shadows' just published in the Longman 'Drumbeat' series. And that's it for Arts and Africa for this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey its goodbye.