

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. This week we have news of Tanzania, mainly about new writing in Swahili but we begin with music - this is a choir made up of workers in a shoe factory near Arusha in Northern Tanzania.

MUSIC EXTRACT - ARUSHA SHOE FACTORY CHOIR

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's appropriate that the singers there are amateurs because the arts in Tanzania have not been promoted in the form of expensive professional groups mainly used for tourist entertainment or for prestige overseas visits. In Tanzania, the arts are something essentially local in which ordinary folk can participate. Perhaps because of this lack of concern about foreign involvement, we've heard little recently about Tanzanian artists, especially writers - nothing, in fact, that can compare with the sort of exciting literary debates that we hear take place in neighbouring Kenya. When he was in Frankfurt for the International Book Fair, David Sweetman took the opportunity to talk to the General Manager of the Tanzania Publishing House, Walter Bgoya and asked him about the current writing, especially the developing role of Swahili.

WALTER BGOYA

In Tanzania the effect of colonialism on culture was not so profound perhaps as in some other areas. We already had a national language before the colonialists came. However limited it was, it was already spreading, Kiswahili was already spreading, there was already a literature in Swahili. Poetry was written and recited all along the coast and then, after Independence, the whole thrust of government and of the Ministry of Education and Culture was that Kiswahili should be the national language. It should also be the cultural language, the language of the people. I think, because of this pressure against the English and for Kiswahili, many people shy away from writing in English.

I have written some things in English but I wouldn't dare think of publishing them before I did some things in Kiswahili, quite frankly.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Traditional Swahili poetry has a very strict rhyming scheme both at the front of phrases and at the end. Does that mean that when a poet is writing in Swahili and in English he is really two poets, there is very little correspondence between the two things.

WALTER BGOYA

Yes, I would say very much so, except now there is a movement by young people, young poets writing in Kiswahili to move away from this rigid pattern of rhyme. Many of these people are already producing and we have published some poems by, especially by one poet, Morocose and another one called Tashigi. We have done already one book of poetry of theirs and we are publishing another one soon, in which they move away from the rigid pattern of classical Swahili structure. Another one is Kezilahabi also who has moved away from that and that has created tremendous literary controversy in our country and I think probably the best resolution of this, there has been the poetry of Abdulatif Abdullah who followed very much the classical pattern, it's very, very rich in vocabulary and imagery but also writes about modern subjects unlike the classical Swahili poet. There has been a lot of very bad poetry written in the newspaper, Uhuru carries a whole page every day. But quite a lot of what they say is absolute nonsense, I mean. You can occasionally run into some extremely good ones. For instance, in 1967 just after the Arusha Declaration, there were some extremely interesting poems which were written about the Declaration, immediately after and I think these have been collected in a book of poems edited by Grant Kamenju.

DAVID SWEETMAN

One thing we have heard that is happening in Nairobi is that there is a great deal of controversy amongst writers' groups so that they get together, they meet in cafes, they argue. There's one side of the line taken by Ngugi which is for writing in local languages, there's obviously the opposite side to that, one doesn't have this sense as an outsider of the same sort of creative ferment taking place in Tanzania. Is there a feeling of community, are there many writers, do they argue, do they have positions on things?

WALTER BGOYA

I think so. This controversy about poetry, I mean, this has created a tremendous uproar, fantastic discussions and debates. Many people walking from the town to the university to take part in the discussion. There is one old man, a poet himself Mzee Kandoro who has written several books of poetry and has been a very bitter critic of the new school and the discussions that have taken place have been absolutely fascinating, I mean very violent I dare say quite often. So to this extent

there is a lot of that but you have to appreciate that it is all taking place in Kiswahili. I think that's how it ought to be.

MUSIC EXTRACT - ARUSHA SHOE FACTORY CHORUS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

More music from workers from the Arusha shoe factory, a song about Tanzania's national policy of Ujamaa-rural socialism. One writer who featured prominently in Walter Bgoya's analysis of new poetry in Swahili was Kenyan Abdulatif Abdullah. Abdulatif now works for our BBC Swahili Service and David Sweetman asked him to give us his interpretation, as a poet, of the various methods of writing Swahili verse.

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

This is one of the poems by Mwinyihatibu Mohamed Amiri a Tanzanian poet. The first verse says:

EXTRACT FROM SWAHILI POEM

DAVID SWEETMAN

When was it written?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

The book itself was published in 1977.

DAVID SWEETMAN

So that's a poem written in modern times but in a strictly classical form?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

Yes.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Actually the thing that struck me on listening to it was that the first three lines of the stanza, the lines rhymed at the end, they ended on a 'u' sound, but not on the fourth line. Is that a strict classical form?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

Well it is regarded as the best way of composing such poems in such a form. Because in Swahili poetry we have so many forms, in fact, myself, I know about seventeen forms.

DAVID SWEETMAN

That is to say different combinations of where the line.....

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

.....of where the line should take place.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Why, in terms of the emotion that might be created or whatever, does a poet wish to write in this particular form?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

Because Swahili poetry started as oral poetry and, therefore, it started as song. In many African songs you find this rhyming. I think there is this impact, if you have a verse which rhymes and the rhyme recurs, I think it has a certain impact for a listener or for a reader.

DAVID SWEETMAN

For someone writing in this strictly classical form, what about the subject matter, the thing written about, is there any limitation on that? Do classical writers feel they cannot write about some things but must write about other things?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

No. Most of the poetry which is written now is written in the classical form. It discusses the day to day activities that are happening in our country: political, economic, social. So I don't think that there is that problem as far as Swahili poetry is concerned. Although there are some younger poets, especially in Tanzania, who thought that these rules, sort of, confined them, they don't give them the freedom to express themselves, they find it so difficult to express themselves within these strict poetic rules. So they have tended to go out of these rules in order to be free in their expression but, I must emphasise here, that this is a very small percentage, I wouldn't even regard it as two percent of the Swahili poets, and mostly they are those who have had a university education, and, therefore, have outside influences, for instance, European influences. from reading American or European poets.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Let's hear one of the modern poems, the free verse ones, I think that would be interesting, have you got a short one so that you can read all of it?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

This is called Wimbo wa Kurguni and is by Euphrase Keziâhahi also a Tanzanian poet.

READING OF POEM IN SWAHILI

DAVID SWEETMAN

That's a poem about football.

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

Yes, it's about football. But I don't think that he was talking about football as such, he just used football as an image, he was talking about something else, talking about the confusion which is in our society, especially the political and economic confusion which is there now, that being in such a society is just like being on a football pitch with so many players on it, running after each other, or running after the ball, and then he says, there is no goal keeper in one of the goal mouths, and the football which is used in that game is not a football as such, but is a brick, so instead of the players kicking the football they are kicking the brick, they are hurting their own feet. It doesn't rhyme, for instance, the first lines end with the syllable "I" ("E" in Swahili) and then the second line ends with "lie" the third line ends with "R" the fourth with "ja" so there is no rhyme at all.

DAVID SWEETMAN

And even though this is in a form that you yourself don't write in, being a classical poet, do you enjoy this sort of poetry?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

To be frank, I don't really (laughter) I don't although I might appreciate the image used, but still the form itself, the way it was structured doesn't appeal to me at all.

DAVID SWEETMAN

What is it that's missing? Music?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

Yes, the music of the words and the music, I should say mostly the music of how the words have been arranged that's missing in it.

DAVID SWEETMAN

What in a sense you're saying is, you don't think it's poetry?

ABDULATIF ABDULLAH

Well I wouldn't go that far, but to my own understanding it isn't, but to others it is poetry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Abdulatif Abdullah talking to David Sweetman. And that's it for Arts and Africa for this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and leaving you with more music from the Arusha worker's choir.

MUSIC EXTRACT - ARUSHA SHOE FACTORY CHOIR