

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. The story of today's programme goes back to the Commonwealth Games at Edmonton in Canada in 1978. While these games were taking place a group of people got together, quite voluntarily, and put together the Commonwealth Arts Festival. All those taking part agreed it generated an exciting atmosphere of Pan-Commonwealth co-operation which has seldom been matched. Not only that, the various events that were held made a profit and some of that money has now been used to hold a founding conference in London on the subject of Commonwealth Arts with a view to establishing some sort of Commonwealth Arts Organisation. Obviously such an organisation will have implications for African Arts and to find out just what these are I have with me in the studio one of the African participants in the Conference: Mr. Hilary Ocholla who is the Manager of Bomas of Kenya.

HILARY OCHOLLA

The Bomas of Kenya means the villages of Kenya. In 1971 the Kenya Government, through pressure and requests from Artists, decided to establish a cultural centre and this cultural centre was named 'The Bomas of Kenya' - it means the villages of Kenya, because the people coming to it were supposed to be coming from different villages of Kenya, in a sense different tribes of Kenya. Now at this centre we started with a most popular form of performing arts - traditional dances and we've got a national dance group there composed of 66 dancers from different types in Kenya. We've also got craftsmen, woodcarvers, people painting and we've got all sorts of different forms of art, decorative arts and now we are developing also traditional drama, traditional music and we also have now in Kenya, very hotly contested annual festivals of music, drama and this brings an awareness into our people about their culture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you tell me what happened at the conference?

HILARY OCHOLLA

At the conference just concluded in London, we were trying to establish the Commonwealth Arts Organisation, establish also by election of an executive committee which we managed to conclude yesterday and we had our first meeting of the executive committee yesterday evening.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what part did you play in this whole thing? You haven't mentioned your name at all.

HILARY OCHOLLA

Well because I took a leading role since Edmonton and we didn't really want to have positions, we wanted people who have just been brought in to take it from there. We can only guide them so we find it very strange that people like myself, John McKenzie, Robert Dubberley, Jim Porter from the Commonwealth Institute, we do not take any part but wanted other people to carry on the work we started, we can always give them guidance.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What do you think will be the effect of this organisation on Africa as far as the Arts are concerned?

HILARY OCHOLLA

We in Africa, and what you sometimes call loosely third world, are very very much concerned about this organisation. We have not been able on our own to mount things like regular festivals because the cost of transporting artists from region to the other is enormous but if we had such an organisation we can attract help from bodies like the Commonwealth Foundation and many other Commonwealth Institutions that would give us assistance. Now with this we can have regular festivals and also even Pan-Commonwealth Festivals as the one we did in Edmonton. It is important because once people get together as with the Edmonton experience it's the surest way of bringing closer understanding of the Commonwealth to people. It's very effective. The politicians can go on talking at conferences, we say it. People or artists mix together with black, brown, white they live together, they exchange ideas and at the conference they understand each other much better. The main objectives of the Commonwealth Arts Organisation is to bring the artists together so that they can bring a general awareness and understanding for each other in the Commonwealth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Don't you think it would have been better if you had set up a Pan-African Organisation first. I quite agree that it is very expensive for one country to share the burden of transporting artists from place to the other but surely on a Pan-African scale this expense could be well met?

HILARY OCHOLLA

Well, we have already tried that one with FESTAC which was quite a burden on Nigeria and no other country in Africa can do what Nigeria did. It is now evident that to mount such a festival is not easy. What we in Kenya suggested was that this festival be broken up into parts so we could have the performing arts down in Ghana this year, next year we have other things like colloquium. Only one thing is impossible, only Nigeria can do it, they have got the resources they have got all the money. And now that's why we think we also in the Commonwealth, we should also have our own for our own understanding. You see the Commonwealth is a strange organisation which people outside it do not understand and so we feel that we, members of the Commonwealth should have an organisation that caters for the arts in our own Commonwealth. This of course would not prevent us from holding a Pan-African or any other world event. We have got things like festivals. We are actively reviewing how we can stage a black festival of Arts but as you know Ethiopia could have followed up FESTAC in Nigeria but this has not been possible with the political changes which are happening in Africa every other 24 hours. But we feel in the Commonwealth we have got the expertised and we have got the understanding to be able to stage our own festival and this is what we really want to do.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What would you like the organisation to do? How would you like it to set about effecting its programme?

HILARY OCHOLLA.

Well we have given it some guidelines and main objectives. We want them to encourage and foster all matters pertaining to Arts in the Commonwealth, see how exhibitions can be done, what help the artists need. Some want to increase their knowhow and exchange information between the artists of the Commonwealth. We want to do it in a very modest way to start with and then build on from there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mr. Ocholla, thank you very much indeed. And we will be looking at future developments for this Commonwealth Arts Organisation. And from Hilary Ocholla of Kenya we move west to neighbouring Uganda and to one of that country's most outstanding writers - Okot P'Bitek. Okot is well known as the author of such books as the 'Hare and the Hornbill'. Following the overthrow of the Amin regime Okot has now returned to Kampala where he is deeply involved in the setting up of the new National Cultural Centre which will be opened shortly. He talked to Christobel King and gave her his impressions of the Centre's role.

OKOT P'BITEK

First of all you have Kampala with a lot of hills. On top of these hills you have some of Africa's most important buildings, the University and Mulago. You have all the big churches and the mosques and so on and so forth, but if you look round you find that they are all having a centre and this is what we are. This centre is the place from which Ugandan culture will thrive and entertain the city, the nation, the world.

CHRISTOBEL KING

So you have got all kinds of Ugandan artists brought together. What sort of things are you running?

OKOT P'BITEK

Well what are we not running? I mean we have 3 major sections. We have the administration which looks after the estate and things you know all the dirty work and feeding us and giving us a little drink now and then. And then you have the second very large section which you call the creative sector and this includes the art exhibitions, book exhibitions, the dances. First of all the Ugandan dances and then other dances. You have the music sector concentrating first and foremost on Ugandan music but also looking at other people and so on and so forth. You have poetry sessions, you have children's sessions and the children are coming up with writings, with their own music and so on and so forth. Then, the puppet theatre.

CHRISTOBEL KING

The other problem for Ugandans is that they can't buy your books because there are so few books to be bought in Kampala.

OKOT P'BITEK

Yes, this is true, I bought all my 14 titles, actual copies, here to Kampala and I have given them out to publishers here in Kampala to rush them out. We have also a scheme for the Ugandan books which were published in Nairobi by the East African Literature Bureau, to be bought back here very urgently and published.

CHRISTOBEL KING

And how soon is that going to be published?

OKOT P'BITEK

Well you can never tell. You didn't know for instance that 'Song of Lapwino' took ten years? You didn't know that! Ten whole years and sometimes they get lost and then found again.

CHRISTOBEL KING

Well I hope your new work isn't going to take that long.

OKOT P'BITEK

No it is not. Incidentally at the centre too we have the writers 'Uganda Pen'. This is the writer's union which is going to be changed very soon to the 'International Pen' so that Ugandan writers may be in touch with international writers.

CHRISTOBEL KING

Because isolation has been one of the problems for them?

OKOT P'BITEK

Yes.

CHRISTOBEL KING

How about you now you have come back, do you find that this is a good place to write, you feel that it is the right atmosphere?

OKOT P'BITEK

Yes oh yes very much so because writing really for me is a festival and the festival you have with friends you know and it is most exciting because all my friends are here and whenever there is a little line or two we share it immediately you know. This is most encouraging. Quite a lot of people have come back you know actors, painters, writers and so on and university teachers. Some have not yet come, some are finishing their contracts but I also know that some people do not want to come back at this particular time, either because they do not feel very easy with the present regime or some other reason. But at the same time I think it is not the right thing to say that all Ugandans must come back because Uganda has also to contribute to the services in other parts of the world. We have received a lot of help from outside, we should also give help and that's why I think some of us are very proud.

CHRISTOBEL KING

What about the situation for writers at the moment, do you feel that there are a lot of problems in the country, do you think that possibly a lot of people are discouraged at the moment?

OKOT P'BITEK

Oh, no no. In fact I am very surprised at the number of manuscripts. I find it hard to work in my office, everybody's coming with their manuscripts "Can you read this for me", but in any case the background is ideal to capture the reign of Amin and also look forward and say what kind of society we want, and put this in our writings.

CHRISTOBEL KING

So you feel very optimistic about the future?

OKOT P'BITEK

I am most optimistic. We are going to start making films. There was a play last night which you should have seen 'The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin'.

CHRISTOBEL KING

On the television?

OKOT P'BITEK

Yes, and we're going to film it very soon.

CHRISTOBEL KING

So everything is happening?

OKOT P'BITEK

I think so.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Okot P'Bitek talking to Christobel King. And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey its good-bye.