

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. This week we mourn and celebrate a great man, Camara Laye, who died on the 4th of February, and it seems to us appropriate that we should begin our tribute with a praise song from Camara Laye's native Guinea.

GRAMS "Music from Africa"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A praise song accompanied on the kora offered today in memory of Camara Laye. We asked Jane Grant, a lecturer in African Literature and Education Officer at the Drum Arts Centre here in London, to prepare this tribute to the founding father of the French/African novel.

JANE GRANT

Camara Laye, who died in exile in Senegal on February 4th, has with good reason been called one of the fathers of African literature and he is certainly the father of the French West African novel. His first novel, L'Enfant Noir, (it was subsequently published in English under the alternative titles of The Dark Child and The African Child) was first published in 1953 only a year after Amos Tutuola's The Palm Wine Drinkard and five years before Chinua Achebe's famous Things Fall Apart. Like Tutuola's novel, L'Enfant Noir was seized on with delight by European critics. It is not hard to see why. This strongly autobiographical book tells the story of a young boy growing up in what was then French Guinea and the childhood it depicts is, superficially at least, an almost entirely idyllic one. In twelve chapters, each built around a particular event - and in a prose which is beautiful even in translation - it describes the routines of a largely traditional African childhood and it is its apparent absence of any disturbing anti-colonial element which has probably made it so popular amongst Western critics. In the opinion of William Plomer, for instance, who wrote the introduction to the English edition: 'This in some ways deceptively simple story is the work of a "dark child" uncorrupted by the complexity and dislocation of the world we know.' But if this apparent simplicity appealed to European critics, to Laye's fellow Africans it was not nearly so popular.

(cont)

JANE GRANT (cont)

Indeed some, particularly his more nationalistic confrères, saw it as a sell-out, a 'colonial pot-boiler' which totally ignored the real issues of colonial oppression. But, although one cannot deny that L'Enfant Noir does in places cross the line into sentimentality, these criticisms are hardly fair. For while this book may not make any overtly anti-colonial statement, implicitly throughout its pages is the realization that the different stages of colonial education which the boy undergoes - from the Koranic and the French elementary school in his home town of Kouroussa, to the technical college in the capital of Conakry and finally to Paris to study engineering - are as much a process of loss as gain. In fact what we are shown is a process of progressive alienation from background and roots so that the external exile in France which the boy embarks upon at the end is merely the culmination of a long process of internal exile which he has already experienced within his native land. Nowhere is this made more apparent than in the intensely moving scene at the end of the book when the boy goes with his father to tell his mother of his decision to accept the opportunity to complete his education in France. Instead of rejoicing with her son, his mother turns despairingly on both husband and son:

Extract from THE AFRICAN CHILD pub. Fontana, pp.155-7

JANE GRANT

L'Enfant Noir was written from the Paris to which its hero is inexorably drawn at the end of the book and, like much of the writing of the so-called "negritude" writers, it is imbued with nostalgia for what Laye has called elsewhere 'the timeless quality of the specific values of our (African) culture'. But if L'Enfant Noir shows a process of progressive estrangement from this culture, Laye's next novel, Le Regard du Roi, first published in 1954 and republished in English under the title The Radiance of the King, two years later, depicts a quite different process. Here, in a book whose symbolic meaning and structure has puzzled many and which no-one could call simple, Laye depicts a process not of alienation but of reintegration. Certainly its hero - this time not an African at all but a child of Europe, a young white man called Clarence alone in an African country - starts out even more alienated than the African child was to become. But while European culture and education has been the agent of the earlier hero's alienation, to Clarence African culture - and its most potent symbol, the young African King of the title - offers a chance of salvation and reintegration. This book, like Tutuola's The Palm Wine Drinkard, is cast in the classic form of a spiritual quest - a quest in which he comes to accept both the physical and spiritual side of life, to achieve a total awareness of life - and of God - in all its fullness. In a spectacular scene right at the end of the book, Clarence stands finally - naked, filthy but unashamed - in the presence of the young King:

Extract from THE RADIANCE OF THE KING pub. Fontana p 282-4

JANE GRANT

The meaning of this final scene - as indeed of the book as a whole - has aroused considerable controversy but no one, I think, would deny the importance of this book or the power of its symbolism. In the same way one cannot deny L'Enfant Noir its position as probably still the most famous - and certainly the most anthologised - African novel ever published. But sadly Laye seems, with these two books, to have exhausted most of what he had to say as a creative writer. He was to return to Guinea in 1955 and, in a book published more than ten years later, in 1966, under the title Dramouss, he picks up the hero of L'Enfant Noir at the moment of return and, in an equally strong autobiographical vein, records the impressions of that return. But although this book, which was published in English two years later as A Dream of Africa, has a few powerful scenes (perhaps most memorably towards the end, when in a long and heavily symbolic nightmare sequence he foresees the future suffering of his country) it totally lacks either the cohesion and elegaic beauty of L'Enfant Noir or the sustained symbolic power of Le Regard du Roi. Although it tells the story of return, in fact its author had already left Guinea even before it was published, driven out by profound disagreement with the Guinean government to seek a new exile in neighbouring Senegal, where he died last week at the age of only 52. Laye was to write little in his later years although he was to devote a considerable amount of time to the important task of recording the oral literature and history of West Africa. The first fruit of this side of his work - a re-telling of the work of one of the great griots of West Africa - was published in 1978 under the title Le Maitre de la Parole. And, in spite of the comparative literary silence of his later years, Laye's first two novels alone are enough to ensure that he is both mourned and celebrated today as one of Africa's truly great writers.

GRAMS: "Music from Africa"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was part of a praise song for Samori Toure, founder of a great West African Empire in the 19th Century - a suitable theme to help us celebrate, as Jane Grant said the life and work of Camara Laye who died on February the 4th. And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week. We leave you with a little more music from Guinea and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.