

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Welcome to Arts and Africa - and a welcome to our guests in today's programme who are sitting right beside me. Today we're not going to be looking at sculpture or listening to music or hearing from a dramatist about his latest play. Instead Sheikh Gueye, Chaz Davies and I are going to be talking about some of the wider issues of the arts of Africa. Perhaps the widest of all - is there an art form common to our continent? This thought has been very much in my mind since I took a look at a new book that's just been published called 'A Cultural Atlas of Africa' which has prompted several questions in my mind which I'm going to put to our two guests.

But I'd like to begin by introducing them more fully by saying that Sheikh Gueye who comes from Senegal, is a member of a group of poets and musicians called 'African Dawn'. They're based in London but tour round performing African poetry. Chaz Davis, you may remember him - he's from Zimbabwe and he's a post-graduate student of design - has had his work exhibited and he has a particular interest in book illustration.

Now Chaz, I am turning to you first because this large format book with 222 pages is full of illustrations of one sort or another. Would you agree that the very first impression is that the book's a handsome one to look at? And may I ask, was it what you expected from the title?

CHAZ DAVIES

Yes, I think it is a handsome book and probably I didn't expect what I saw from the title. The word 'atlas' and 'culture' are strange words to put together.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about you, Sheikh?

SHEIKH GUEYE

I think I'll think on the same line because the understanding of African culture is a very complex one and it involves lots of areas of interest - in performing arts, sculpture, architecture, etc.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, this is what one would have thought isn't it? But it seems to me that the word 'culture' has been used here in the widest sense possible to include the whole of the human experience on the continent, comprising geographical experience, the political experience, the artistic experience, everything mixed together, so that gives a very wide scope in freedom of coverage to the editor or the authors.

CHAZ DAVIES

Yes, but if you want, as the book says to pursue a subject like culture, you really have to take the bull by its horns and wrestle with the topic of culture. Culture is what we exist, how we exist, what makes us exist and looking through the book I found a lot of the points are very small and very general and this does not actually encompass culture. There are smaller aspects to culture that makes culture what it is. That's what I think.

SHEIKH GUEYE

If I try and define culture I would think it is the sum total of attitudes, habits and aptitudes of people in a given community with a given mode of production. There's one element in African culture which is that Man, Nature and God co-exist in their unity, where all those forces tend to merge and realise themselves in different artistic and literary expressions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now would you consider the book a good introduction to non-Africans, also to Africans?

CHAZ DAVIES

First of all the book is very glossy and maybe it tries to cover too wide a subject. If I had to break down the book and look at the sequence in which it is written, it mainly take three parts. The first part is to do with geography, the second part is to do with culture and the third part to do with the nations. Now in the second part which has to do with the culture we have three pages on main railway lines, then three pages on religion and then three pages, possibly, on kingdoms. Now I think that if you are going to tie in something, that is possibly the wrong way to do it and that that is probably a fault I see. I don't know what you think Sheikh.

SHEIKH GUEYE

When they say that this book is designed for those who need to be better informed about this amazing continent that Africa is, you can feel the tendency towards writing for scholars, for experts, people who are in the universities or people who are not really related at all with the lives of the ordinary people. And that's why I think there is one thing basically missing which is the non-differentiation between popular African art and, say, official African art like royal art. You have some basic differences, on one hand with the material used when it's for kings it's either precious metals or durable metal whereas the popular art is basically ornamental or buildings shrines, and places of worship. So on one hand

SHEIKH GUEYE

one is dedicated to maintaining the traditional belief that the king is a divinity or a god and on the other hand one which is a protest and a consolation to that situation in African societies before an intervention in Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now with respect to the actual subjects treated, do you think that this book is retaining the kind of traditional view of Europeans and outsiders, their view of Africa, or do you think there is anything revolutionary?

SHEIKH GUEYE

There is what I term 'cultural arrogance' from some western scholars who believe basically that Europe should be the custodian of all culture. That's why I think it's important, if you look at the book, there might be a couple of African scholars who might have contributed and I think this is very revealing in a sense that our history, our culture our identity is studied by people outside those societies.

CHAZ DAVIES

What I want to add to that is that all these books that we have on African art seem to do the same thing, grab a whole lot of art pieces that are in famous museums and put them in this book. If anyone attempts to do a book like this, the failing is actually, by not grasping the actual roots of the situation to ask an African, to say: "OK, go about making a sculpture. For instance, what are the thoughts behind making the sculpture, what are the underlying decisions behind everything you do" and document that and by documenting that you are actually giving an insight into culture as opposed to pictorial image of what you think the culture is.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

As a point of fact on this very issue one of the writers talking about the masks and things like that which are very largely featured, says that we don't really know what the intention is behind the making of masks. Then, unfortunately, it doesn't go on to talk any further, it doesn't try to suggest what the intention might be or what attempts have been made to find out what the intentions are. It just goes on straight away to describe the masks.

CHAZ DAVIES

Of course. And more than that these are all design decisions, these are all cultural decisions and these are all part of the philosophy which people love and this is all culture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well we have, more or less, adversely criticised the book up to this point. I am sure there are other subjects very well treated which you found very absorbing. Chaz....

CHAZ DAVIES

I wouldn't say absorbing, I would use the words 'pleasing to look at'. I think the maps and the colour illustrations and some of the photographs are very interesting and I would think as a reference book it probably works well if you want to know how many people live in Nigeria, how many religions you have in Nigeria, what it looks like, the geographical regions ... I would probably even say maybe that this book should have been called an African encyclopedia as opposed to a cultural atlas. I don't know what you think Sheikh.

SHEIKH GUEYE

Yes, because the title is very ambitious and there are some items missing like tales, legends, myths, etc., poetical items, lullabies, songs, recitations and functional items which people develop and know how to conduct ones behaviour towards a neighbour...

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, I agree with you completely there. I think there is a glaring omission of literature. The book hardly talks about African literature. Well, in discussing the book we've been talking about the diversity of African culture but do you think there is anything which can be described as common to all African peoples, a culture common to all of us?

SHEIKH GUEYE

Yes, I think there is such a thing called African culture. There are features we share together. I've just mentioned two like African dances, for example. What are the basic characteristics of African dances? That's one. The fact that dances imitate or mimic animals; there is an avoidance of bodily contact; that the dancer does not fight his weight, he accepts it because of the horizontal structures people are used to; there is the fluid steps as opposed to the erect gait of a European dancer; there is concentration upon movement outward from the pelvic region which people in other societies find rude or shrewd. There is another one about the conception people have of themselves in society. I talked earlier on about man, nature and god living together, dwelling together and this results in the fact that we have some tales, for example in Senegal, about cosmology, the origin of man, how there is the sun and the stars, which stretch further down into Upper Volta, to Gabon which are very much the same. So we can talk about an African culture or literature but the reality has changed and people in a given area have developed certain aspects of that commonness which are Senegalese particularities of African culture and that is true for the rest of the continent.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How about you Chaz?

CHAZ DAVIES

How I can add to this is that if we look historically further back at our ancestors before any form of colonialism had come onto the mainland, we find that many of our ancestors especially like in Southern Africa were nomadic and by being nomadic moved with no boundaries and we stopped, we stayed, we forged iron, we passed on this knowledge across these links, actually passed knowledge all the way through and therefore if we can look at our language and identify even amongst the three of us, there are very many words which we have in common with each other and these are common links which over time have had boundaries imposed on them but we are still existing in this common feature together.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And I think we could also mention the functional attitude of all Africans to art and our general attitude to religion as a way of life and not something abstract.

CHAZ DAVIES

Yes, because if we consider even the fact that if I look at the way you live in your particular village and I translated it into my situation I find that we have many things in common. As for some of our tales, we have very much in common. We all know that we have the same tales - we might change sometimes the animals, some of the spirits around but they are very similar and therefore I can probably relate to you and it will look easier by this underlying link which we probably all understand.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So we can say that there is something that can be described as the African personality?

CHAZ DAVIES

Yes I think so.

SHEIKH GUEYE

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well thank you Sheikh Gueye and Chaz Davies for your contributions. Now the book we have been discussing is "A Cultural Atlas of Africa", it's edited by Jocelyn Murray, published by Phaidon Press and selling at £17.95 in the United Kingdom. Well here we are at the end of another programme but of course I'll be back next week to take another look at the arts of Africa. As we listen to a song calling for the rains to come, a song of the Tswana people of Botswana, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.