

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and I'm going to begin today's programme by reading a passage from a short story entitled "Koya".

EXTRACT - KOYA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

"Koya" is from a collection of short stories that's just been published and I find the book particularly interesting because they're by a Sierra Leonean writer. When you consider that Sierra Leone provide English-speaking Africa with its first university college (that was nearly a hundred and fifty years ago) and is the home of many writers, it strikes me as strange that so few of them write fiction. The author of "Koya" is one of the exceptions and we'll be meeting him later in the programme.

As I've said, there are plenty of Sierra Leonean writers of the non-fiction sort and, indeed, another recently published book has gained a lot of attention. It's "The History of Sierra Leone" by Dr. C. Magbaily Fyle of the Department of History at Fourah Bay College at the University of Sierra Leone. Dr. Fyle says he's called the book "An Introduction" because although it's detailed enough for university students he doesn't mean it to be so academic that it would be too difficult for other readers. It covers a wide time-span - from the fourteenth century to the present day - and it differs from other histories, as Dr. Fyle explained to David Sweetman in other ways.

IP. C. FYLE

I think the major thing that the book claims to have done is that it tries to give enough focus to the history of the provinces, vis-a-vis Freetown, or the Western Area or as it was called the nineteenth century, Sierra Leone. That was Sierra Leone, the Western Area or it was called the Krio Domain. Most earlier histories have tended to give greater emphasis to the Western Area, to the Freetown colony and this has tended to cloud the contribution of the rest of Sierra Leone, the much greater area of Sierra Leone, to its history and therefore this book tries to redress that imbalance. It also gives greater attention to economic and cultural history which has also been greatly neglected especially for the period before colonial rule. These are the areas of strength of the book, I believe, from what I have done.

DAVID SWEETMAN

It's also, am I right in saying, the first history of Sierra Leone by a Sierra Leonean?

DR. C. FYLE

It's the first history of Sierra Leone by a Sierra Leonean in this century.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Were there many tricky areas, were there many areas you felt: I'd better walk a little bit carefully here because people are still very sensitive about these subjects?

DR. C. FYLE

Yes. One of the major areas of interest is the relationship between the provinces and the Western Area and this has been given a sort of distorted view hitherto. One of the greatest contributions of history is towards national integration and what this book has tried to do is to bring this into greater focus so that one would be able to understand more clearly what the relationship between the provinces and the colony is. So this is a very sensitive area especially in terms of the development of politics in the twentieth century towards independence. Again another sensitive area is the area of pre-independence, immediately pre-independence and post-independence politics. Now, of course, in part of that area one is talking about people who are now living and were actively engaged in politics and so it's a rather sensitive area. But then also with considerations of history, one tends to be rather cautious because one does not have enough perspective or hindsight to talk about more current development which the historian often needs in order to be able to look at these things after they have happened. So in such areas, partly because they are sensitive and partly because of historical requirement, one has to tread very cautiously.

DAVID SWEETMAN

What areas do you think at this moment are still vague in the study of Sierra Leone? What areas do you think there will be some need for more research and that some day someone will come along and rewrite your book and fill in those gaps? When you were writing it, did you feel there were some areas where there just wasn't information available?

DR. C. FYLE

Yes. Some of the areas of culture history proved rather difficult especially in the pre-colonial period. One might also talk about regional areas. For example the history of the Kono, the Kono people of Sierra Leone. It's heavily under-represented and so is the history of the Kissi. But then also labour history is not very well done in Sierra Leone, not much work has been done on it, on agricultural history and of course being a primarily agricultural country, one has to consider this as a very significant area. Then, hopefully, what I have tried to do is to bring together what is available at present and this represents the state of research as of now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And "The History of Sierra Leone" by Dr. C. Magbaily Fyle is published in paperback by Evans Brothers at a price in Britain of £2.00.

Our next author, Redmond Sarif Easmon, has dropped his first name to publish as R. Sarif Easmon. But he's exclusively a writer of fiction. He has a couple of plays to his credit but it is novels that he writes in profusion. But somehow the enthusiasm of the readers who consider manuscripts for publishing houses has seldom been matched by an offer to publish. So the appearance of a collection of his short stories in Longman's Drumbeat Series is very welcome. The collection takes its title from the first story - "The Feud" and the passage I read at the beginning of the programme comes from another of the stories.

When David Sweetman met Sarif Easmon in Freetown earlier this year he learnt that writing comes second to Easmon's profession as a doctor, a profession that's been practised in the family for several generations. Perhaps it's his intimate knowledge of the human condition that gives the stories in the collection an unusual tenderness. David Sweetman had been reading some of them just before his meeting with Sarif Easmon.

DAVID SWEETMAN

I must say I've been reading through the stories and they strike me as different from many things that we get from writers in Africa for two reasons. Firstly you write about things that are not just African. You set some of your stories in Europe.

SARIF EASMON

That's right.

DAVID SWEETMAN

And you also seem very strangely, for someone who has been brought up in an English-speaking African country, to be very much pre-occupied with French-speaking Africa, even with France itself. Is that correct?

SARIF EASMON

Well, I must confess that I'm Francophile. But that doesn't mean, that has not de-Africanised me, I think it has given it a much wider outlook I think than the average African writer.

DAVID SWEETMAN

There is also something else that comes through and that is that you write with a very formal sort of prose. You write a very correct, I hesitate to use the word but perhaps you won't be offended if I say, slightly old-fashioned sort of English. Now I think you do it intentionally. I mean, you obviously do it intentionally. Are you a little bit impatient of modern ways of writing?

SARIF EASMON

I would look at it this way probably. Modern ways of writing lacks poetry, that's what has gone out of modern writing.

DAVID SWEETMAN

You seem to be, in some of the things you say, critical of what we call African writing. Is that true?

SARIF EASMON

There are so many different kinds of African writing, as you know. Something that people have to get accustomed to is that in everyone of the ex-British African countries there are different standards and so the type of English written and spoken is different. And then, I suppose, I have read widely. I'll show you what I am reading at the present time.

DAVID SWEETMAN

"The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" by Gibbon. (Laughs) There is Augustan prose! If you'll excuse me looking at your desk I see in front of you you're reading "The Leopard" by Giuseppe de Lamodusa and John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men". That's a pretty wide selection of books.

SARIF EASMON

Yes, I've read very widely through my life, I am very fond of literature.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

We've heard Sarif Easmon expressing his love of France and things French and several of his short stories are set in France. Two consecutive ones are called "First Night in Paris" and "Last Night in Paris" (they're both about a couple on their honeymoon) and I'd like to read a passage that I think captures the love interest that is a continuing theme, and the tenderness for objects as well as people that I mentioned earlier.

EXTRACT - "LAST NIGHT IN PARIS".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well perhaps it was this passage that was in David Sweetman's mind when he asked Sarif Easmon to what extent the events in his works were based on his personal experiences.

SARIF EASMON

Out of these short stories, very little. Actually, in the first Parisian one, "First Night in Paris" the only thing that is based on actual experience was the camera obscura scene. That actually happened when my wife and I visited Paris for the first time. And the second Parisian one, it was true, this scene about the hawkers, the peddlars. That was true but the ending wasn't so happy because my wife did not get her fruit. (Laughs)

DAVID SWEETMAN

Most African writers, this is a generalisation but I think not far from the truth, are deeply involved in politics and write about them. You, as far as I can gather, do not. Is that true?

SARIF EASMON

No. Actually none of the African writers have been more involved in politics than I have. I was detained for some months in 1970. I have been taking part in politics for about fifteen years. In fact, I was one of the people who helped to get you British out of this country. (Laughs).

DAVID SWEETMAN

Well done! (Laughs) Is there any influence of the fact that you're a doctor, that you're a medical man in your writing. Has that had any effect?

SARIF EASMON

Oh yes, the observation through medical training, you're observing people all the time.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

R. Sarif Easmon's book, "The Feud" is published by Longmans in paperback in their Drumbeat Series, price £1.75 in the U.K. And I understand that among the many full-length novels still in manuscript are a couple that do have some prospect of appearing in print. So I, for one, will be looking out for "A Plague of Diamonds" and "The Art of Losing Empires" before too long.

And we stay in Sierra Leone for our closing music. The drums of the Sierra Leone National Dance Troupe are going to play us out while I thank you for joining me for Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC

NATIONAL DANCE TROUPE.