

# 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 another edition of Arts and Africa. In today's programme we hear from the South African photographer, Peter Magubane, about his new collection of photographs "Black Child". And from Zimbabwe, the poet Musaemura Zimunya talks about the state of fiction in his country. It's perhaps curious that the intense politicization that accompanied Zimbabwe's liberation struggle hasn't, so far, been matched in the field of creative literature. Certainly there've been some fine Zimbabwean novels - Mungoshi's "Waiting for Rain" and Marechera's "The House of Hunger" immediately spring to mind - but compared to the output of other African countries, Zimbabwean literature has appeared decidedly unhealthy perhaps this could be linked to the lateness of her independence. One man who's particularly interested in the state of Zimbabwean fiction is the poet and academic Musaemura Zimunya. And talking to Florence Akst in his garden in Harare he told her about his collection of essays on the subject shortly to be published.

## MUSAEMURA ZIMUNYA

It's going to be called "Those years of Drought and Hunger". Because in it I develop the thesis that the characteristic, the major characteristic of Zimbabwean fiction up to the time of independence is drought and hunger. There was something common in the people's subconscious so that if we take it now in the context of Zimbabwean fiction, we will find that from the very first novelist who is Samkange we have a concern about a prophecy that was made by a prime inspiration in Zimbabwean history and he was called a spirit medium but in his own way he stands beyond and he means something beyond a spirit medium, because he's the spirit of revolution and uprisings, a symbol of freedom, the fight for freedom and liberation. So his prophesy before he was killed by Lobengula, the Matebele king, was that there would be drought and hunger in the land for as long as the people without the knees, that is the whites, ruled the land between the Limpopo and the Zambezi. And, incidentally, Samkange's 'On Trial for My Country', starts off almost with that sort of prophesy as it were, now apart from him there are writers like Mungoshi, who's titles speak volumes, like "Coming of the dry season", like "Waiting for the rain", and recently there was Marechera's "House of Hunger".

FLORENCE AKST

So the prophesy has run true?

MUSAEMURA ZIMUNYA

In symbolic terms the drought and the hunger were the cultural crisis which we have experienced over the years, the lack of belief and conviction, which arose out of the destruction of the traditional religion, the traditional custom, the traditional culture as it were, it's still going on to-date.

FLORENCE AKST

Does that mean that independence has not brought a change in the Zimbabwean novel or do you expect there to be a change in the future?

MUSAEMURA ZIMUNYA

Well I don't think it is hazardous to guess that although there might be some hic-ups about the drought and the hunger, perhaps there will be more conviction in terms of, a people havin' a grasp of their fate, of their history, and the freedom to determine the direction they would like to take.

FLORENCE AKST

And this will be turned into literature?

MUSAEMURA ZIMUNYA

And this literature which will come, no doubt will probably follow the same trend as has happened in the rest of Africa. We will complain about neo-colonialism, we'll complain about blood-sucking of Africans by Africans, we'll protest about corruption on the whole, but as I say, the concern about spiritual deprivation which was characteristic of those days when we were still under the regime will probably suffer a big dent now, as it were.

FLORENCE AKST

Is there going to be a particular Zimbabwean characteristic, if the previous one of deprivation disappears? Will the Zimbabwean writing become like any other sort of African writing?

MUSAEMURA ZIMUNYA

So far I would say that, as I say, the dominant image was one of drought and hunger over a long period. Running parallel to that is also a sort of individualism, a concern with the individual which you won't find in many African novels at all. I would refer you here to Marechere in "The House of Hunger" where he's totally anarchic, there is no superior force at all except the individual who is the writer, and not much more or much less. So you find

that there is something about Zimbabwean fiction as I say, which is very, very individualistic. "Waiting for the Rain" itself, which is a book by Mungoshi you may know about. That one is also individualistic because there is a character there whom the missionaries have decided to send overseas. He goes back to his country to bid farewell to the family on the occasion of the family farewell. All the skeletons come out of the cupboard; there is a belief in the families past ancestors and the family will insist that the farewell be ceremonial, in which case, a witch doctor is called in to analyse in his vision the future of the family and the future of the boy who is going to leave for overseas. But the point about his boy, who is going to leave for overseas, is that he doesn't believe in the superstition, and if anything he actually wishes he were a different race from being black. I think that we might see more of that sort of problem here in Zimbabwe even after independence, because as I say the strength of alienation in those books I have already referred to is such that one can only conclude that it's not a one-off situation, as it were, it's something that's likely to come up again, because it's just too solid, it's just too recurrent among writers of such different temperament, this is what I mean by saying, perhaps this sense of alienation and individualism will come again in the Zimbabwean fiction as derivation.

#### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Zimbabwean academic and poet Musaemura Zimunya. And from Zimbabwe we move to South Africa and the publication of "Black Child", the latest collection of photographs by Peter Magubane. Magubane you probably need no reminding is one of the few African photographers to have gained a truly international reputation. South Africa's only major black news photographer, his fate has been a predictable one. Arrests, banning orders, and solitary confinement have all come his way. Now if you're wondering why the fuss over a few photos, then think for a moment about Soweto. What immediately springs to mind ten to one the picture had its origin in Magubane's camera. Mark Ralph-Bowman asked him what lay behind his new collection "Black Child".

#### PETER MAGUBANE

Well this was based on The Year of the Child. I started working on this in 1979, even though some of the pictures were collections that I had from 1976, during the riots 1977/78, but that just came into the pattern of The Year of the Child, so I thought it was a good topic and I tried to capitalise on that, because children, in fact, are my best subjects. When I started photography I spent most of my time photographing children. The Exhibition I had in Johannesburg was a great success, even though the management of the Carlton Centre where I was exhibiting felt that other pictures which depicted the scenes in South Africa, for instance, the farm labour, child farm labour, the 76 riots, a black mother giving birth, were not the kind of pictures one had to exhibit, and my argument was that this is one exhibition, it cannot be divided; they wanted to divide the exhibition, I said it cannot be divided; the exhibition is based on the black child from birth to the age of twenty one or death, and this is how the book came about.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

Do you think that photographs in general, your photographs in particular, actually do anything, or do photographs achieve things that other visual arts can't achieve?

PETER MAGUBANE

Well I think they certainly do, in the case of some of my pictures and some of my colleagues pictures. For instance, I can quote one instance, there was a sign which was outside a holiday resort which said: "No blacks and no dogs allowed", and I photographed that sign, and we published it. After a few months, the sign was removed, because someone in the, whatever department, asked these people to remove it. Pictures mean more than writing. I have been able to depict scenes which it would take you, perhaps months and months to write about. Just one picture and people believe, whereas if it is writing people still question whether this is a thumbsuck or not.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Peter Magubane and before we end let me briefly remind you of our special Jubilee Art Competition. The theme is "Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation" and we very much hope you are all going to submit a picture. For an entry form which contains all the conditions and rules, you should write to Arts and Africa, Jubilee Art Competition, Bush House, London. I very much hope you'll join us again at the same time next week. Till then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

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