

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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ARTS AND AFRICA

First Broadcast: 29-8-82

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hello again this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. My guest today is an American poet and historian, Dorothy Hanson. She's a constant visitor to West Africa where she's doing research into West African poetry. She's writing the biography of Africa's first major woman poet, Gladys May Casely Hayford. And her forthcoming book is a poetry anthology entitled "Africa to Me". So closely in fact does she identify with Africa, that her own poetry has been greatly influenced by the rhythm and flavour of West African verse. Dorothy Hanson welcome to Arts and Africa. Tell me how did you come to get involved with African poetry?

DOROTHY HANSON:

Well you know all my life I've been interested in Africa. I grew up in a dusty little town in Mineral Wells, Texas, but something always called me to Africa. And when my first poetry was published I received a grant and I thought here's my chance to go to Africa. So I spent a year at the University of Ghana in Legon. Then again I guess I can say that American black poetry has been a strong influence in my life, because I like the rhythms and the strength of American black poetry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

But until you began to write African poetry you had not read any African poets at all.

DOROTHY HANSON:

Oh yes I had read African poets and I'm sure they influenced me too.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well you've written some recent poetry, I think we can start this interview with a reading of some of them.

DOROTHY HANSON:

Alright, well how about "Africa to Me" since you asked what Africa is to me: "What is Africa to me, can a whitened, westerned mind ever see the statesmanship relationship between Swahili, Yoruba, Ashanti. And do the spirits in the air, the bush, the tree, speak their messages also to me? Beneath that red and sandy path, does that blood mixed with clay enter into my psyche? My brother, my sister with different skin. Auntie, Uncle we're all kin, so let us form the circle then. Our paths are raised from just one sun, they all lead back where we've all begun."

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And you have something else on the African spirit of sharing goods.

DOROTHY HANSON:

Oh yes, well I happen to believe very strongly in the unity of all races, and all nations and all people, as a matter of fact that's a belief of my religion which is the Baha'i faith. And when I was in Africa last I stayed in village compounds all through West Africa, and there I actually experienced the unity of mankind in the way it was accepted. So this little poem - well once I said in Enugu, Nigeria, I said I have a little poem about division in Africa and the gentleman who was interviewing me said 'Oh no let's not talk about division' and I said well first listen to the poem and see what you think. It says: "They'll always divide it whatever it is and each one will have his share, little black hands wait patiently in security because each one knows a share will be his. The gari is given without a thought, oranges and yams are passed around, love is given with the same pure heart - they'll always divide it and share it around. So a stranger here is in his home, everything here is divided around, in an African compound."

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well your works have been very highly praised by audiences who have heard you read, and here I have before me the comments of two critics, Nigerian critics. "I see nothing" says one "in Dorothy Hanson's poetry which would tell me that it did not come from the heart of an African."

DOROTHY HANSON:

That really surprised and pleased me, because you know I do actually believe that all human beings are brothers and sisters and that if we could only look beyond our outer differences and see the hearts that we would all know that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well in the other, the second says "I'm impressed with the music and general rhythm of Dorothy Hanson's poetry as well as the way she's caught the mood, the spirit and the general zaniness of the West African scene." Now I know that you have this faith which links you to all mankind, but there seems to be something special in the African spirit, which is appreciated by of all people Africans themselves. How do you capture this, do you live among the people first to experience what they think?

DOROTHY HANSON:

Oh yes I do, I live in African homes and I live with the people, and I try not to put barriers between me and the African people. You know, when I walk down the street, in Lagos for instance, someone will hand me an ogbaloumos so I will write a little poem about - "Eating ogbaloumos in the noon day sun, Nandi Azikwee Street you're day's half done, dancing to the music of a high life tune, I'm happy, snappy in Lagos - In Lagos city today, hey." (laughing) So it just kind of comes naturally.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well yes, it looks as if your own nature, your very nature is very much in tune with the Africans, their sort of happy heart and

DOROTHY HANSON:

Well thank you very much, I hope so.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now you are very much interested in African poetry, is there any special area where you find a special interest?

DOROTHY HANSON:

Well right now I'm writing a book about Africa's first major woman poet her name is Gladys May Casely Hayford, and she was from your country from Ghana. She lived in Sierra Leone, she came to England and went to Oxford University. She was a wonderful poet who was writing the poetry of negritude before Senghor I believe. For instance she would write things like: "The souls of black and white were made of the self same God of the self same shade. The moon laughed over one and left it white, God laughed over the other and wrapped it in night. Said he I've a mystery and none can unfold it, a breath of great power nothing can hold it, but so that he might conceal it's glow, he wrapped it in darkness that men might not know. Oh the wonderful souls of both black and white were made by one God, of one sod, on one night."

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Have you met any African women poets who have actually been published?

DOROTHY HANSON:

African women poets? Yes. I've met Efua Sutherland, and I hope to meet Ama Ata Aidoo this time, she was out of the country the last time I was in Ghana. But those are the only two I've actually met who have published. Well Gladys Casely Hayford published in 1921 in the Atlantic Monthly in America. But unfortunately she died of blackwater fever while she was teaching down at Keta. And oh I've been especially drawn to Keta too - I write poems like: "I want to go to Keta where the sea breaks into land, where fortress clings to crumbling rock as waves crash up to wash away all traces of the past. I want to go to Keta where German captains married wives from Togo's Ewe stock. I want to dance the abaja (phon), I want to hear the drums, I want to watch the fury as the waves break into shore. I want to go to Keta before it's washed away."

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Do you base your poetry on rhythm or on actual song. What is your technical discipline? Do you look for background, traditional forms?

DOROTHY HANSON:

I don't think a poet, thinks what you're going to write. I'm sure that rhythm, usually rhythm in the speech, sets a poem off, and then it just starts coming from somewhere in the universe. I think poets are connected, like we're on a radio frequency - well I think artists all over the world are on radio frequencies and the message comes through. And then later of course, afterwards you go back and polish it and refine it. But that poem about Keta came just about like that. And I first read it in Keta where they're now teaching it to school children, that's in Eastern Ghana, and the people in Keta said "Oh that's just how we feel - how could you know that's just how we feel about Keta" so I was very pleased .

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well Dorothy Hanson thank you very much indeed, I wish you all the best.

DOROTHY HANSON:

Oh thank you very much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And from the poetry of Dorothy Hanson we move to Southern Sudan where a new arts magazine has recently been launched. It's called "Heritage - A Journal of Southern Sudanese Culture" and its aim, according to the editorial, is to dispel the notion that the people of the Southern Sudan are without culture or history. Though there is no overt mention of the traditional hostility between North and South in Sudan the magazine's existence is clearly a bold assertion of Southern cultural pride. Rick Wells spoke with its editor SIRR ANAI KELUELJANG and asked him about the journal's origin.

SIRR ANAI KELUELJANG

This journal was conceived a long time ago, say in 1977. By then I was still in the Department of Information. In 1979 when I was transferred to the Department of Culture, I started working on it and before it materialised I had to collect the material and to propagate the idea that there was a need for a journal of culture, where young artists and writers can assemble their works of art.

RICK WELLS

What kind of response did you have from these initial moves to bring out such a magazine?

SIRR ANAI KELUELJANG

There was a tremendous response from students in the University of Juba and from some of our officials and officers particularly Radio Juba and in the Ministry of Culture and Information and also there was a response from youth in the University of Khartoum. And when they heard this they encouraged me and they said I should press quickly to publish the journal and to see the first issue. Then after that they would decide what to do with the journal. So far I have got very encouraging comments from them, and many of them are saying that they will help to maintain it and I have already received a number of articles from them, and also some lecturers have expressed interest and some of them have offered to help in production so that the quality of the journal is improved.

RICK WELLS

Now the structure of this first edition with its balance of poetry, prose writing, book reviews, drawings, it's a fairly broad spectrum of arts. Is this something that you intend to keep up?

SIRR ANAI KELUELJANG

Yes actually we have divided this into three sections; section one is to deal with creative writing, section two is cultural discussions, section three is history and ethnography. What we intend to do is, in fact, to have a broad spectrum of the way of life of the people of Southern Sudan. We would like people who will be involved in research into such a life in the South to find a place in this journal. And also those who want to be engaged in creative writing, in fine art and something which is highly

creative will also find a place. We intend also to have transformation of traditional folklore in the South, we want to render this, we collect and render translation into English. Folk stories, folklore, folk-songs, things like this. And once this is made available - well the outside world may know what sort of life is here. Also we are intending to - maybe to write this in local Africanised Arabic - we call it Kenubi (phon) This is a version of Arabic which is not purely Arab but it is mixed with the local languages here. Maybe in the future we are going to translate this into this, using Roman script for people to read. This is the idea we are also thinking about. And it might find a place in this journal provided that translation into English is put side by side.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The editor of the new Sudanese journal "Heritage", Sirr Anai Kelueljang. And that brings to a close this week's edition of Arts and Africa. I hope you'll join me again next week. From me Alex Tetteh-Lartey goodbye.