

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today's programme ranges from theatre to ceramics to poetry.

This is our first opportunity (and one we could not miss) to add our compliments to those Africa is paying to one of its foremost men of letters - the poet, Leopold Sedar Senghor. In 1980 he was acclaimed for retiring gracefully from the office of President of Senegal. 1983 has seen Senghor acclaimed for a life that has been committed to poetry as well as politics. He has been elected in Paris to the French Academie. There's no equivalent in the English-speaking world so we've invited Murielle Fletcher of the BBC's French for Africa Service to come along and explain the significance of the honour that's been paid to Senghor.

Murielle, welcome to "Arts and Africa". Before we talk about Leopold Sedar Senghor and his poetry could you put me in the picture - what is the Academie Francaise and why is it such a special achievement for Senghor to become a member?

MURIELLE FLETCHER

Well, it is an achievement and the French Academy, the Academie Francaise as you just said, is something quite extraordinary. It was founded a long time ago, in 1635 to be exact, by one of the French kings, Louis XIII, to preserve the purity and the beauty of the French language. So in 1635 the first forty Academicians were elected amongst poets, writers and the like and they were to be called 'Immortals'. That's true - I mean their names always stay in French literature. So on one side you have these forty Immortals who are very old with white beards, they were elected rather late in life, who meet regularly to study the French dictionary and they discuss for ages the definition of a word or, for instance, of a new word. They also have a duty to give Academy awards to writers.

Some old Immortals die, never mind how immortal they are, and when they die they have to be replaced. The case of Senghor is quite extraordinary because he is the first black man who entered the French Academy. Some of the Immortals were not wild about his entry because he is more Senegalese than French, but they kept in mind that he took active part in French politics before the independence of Senegal. He was a member of the National Assembly before Senegal became independent. But Senghor has been elected an Immortal because of his writing. He is

FLETCHER

one of the finest poets today and he has done a lot to try to make a sort of marriage between French literature and French-speaking literature from Africa. His poems are absolutely beautiful. What is important to note as well is that sometimes he introduces into his works some African words because he couldn't find the right word in French.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I had always thought that he was irretrievably French but I heard your remark that he was more Senegalese than French so I suppose I can take comfort. Thank you very much Murielle Fletcher.

Let's pause now and pay another tribute - not to a person but to an everyday African craft which sometimes produces objects worthy to be regarded as works of art. Some of the most beautiful, significant and ancient pieces of ceramic to have survived to the present day are on exhibition in Washington D.C. at the National Museum of African Art. The eighty or so items come from all over the continent and they're all made in the traditional hand moulding method, often heavily decorated. Mark Tran was shown round by Edward Lifschitz, one of the organizers of the exhibition.

EDWARD LIFSCHITZ

The show is divided between functional things and what we've called "special use ceramic forms" and those include things used for ritual, for funerary situations and just to display the prestige or richness of an individual person.

MARK TRAN

Could you tell us something about these particular objects in front of us now?

LIFSCHITZ

Well, this particular case has several figures and some pots as well. What we have here is a male seated with his knees beneath him holding a basket of some sort on his lap. He's a bearded man. This is an object that comes from the Gené culture in Mali, we think that these are dated from around 1500 AD or so. What's unique about it is that the object is made of terracotta, of ceramic, it's been fired. And once an object of this sort is fired it cannot revert to its original clay form, the crystalline structure of the material changes during the firing and so because objects like this survive they are things which tell us about the historical record. That's what this case is trying to communicate.

TRAN

So what does this particular figure tell us about the period?

LIFSCHITZ

Well, it tells us that this man was probably an elite person; he wears a beard; he was probably a person of certain status; he seems to wear an amulet or necklace around his neck, probably for protection and, in fact, we think that he may represent a guardian figure that was

LIFSCHITZ

placed into the subterranean levels of a house that was being built.

TRAN

Right now we're standing in front of several large pots. Now what were they used for?

LIFSCHITZ

Well, these large pots are big and they are heavy and they are functional things meant for storing liquids in, usually beer or water or sometimes dry materials as well. But they are status indicators as well because they also express the fact that a person was able to buy a specially decorated pot. Some of the decorations on these include different animal figures, sometimes rather abstract human forms and, in addition, one special pot here has the scarification patterns that you might find on a woman's abdomen and that pot was probably used to contain beer, millet beer, which would have been brewed by women. So it has its relationship to female things.

TRAN

Here we have a different type of ceramics, they're mostly human forms either heads or whole figures. What's the function of these items here?

LIFSCHITZ

Well, these objects, most of them created by women, are really memorial portraits, in a sense, of deceased people. They're used in funeral ceremonies for the deceased person sometimes as much as a year after the person has died and after those ceremonies in which they're usually swaddled in cloth and they are the central focus of the ceremony, after those ceremonies they're usually placed in a memorial precinct or taken out near the grave. They're left there on the ground, libations are poured to them and food is left for them - occasionally sacrifices - their way of communicating with the deceased person. And it's interesting that ceramics is earthenware. In a sense it is the connection point since the deceased person is, of course, buried in the earth.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Edward Lifschitz in Washington talking to Mark Tran.

A Theatre Company from South Africa is touring Great Britain. It's called the Soyikwa African Theatre Company and with their names being so alike they've dedicated their work to the Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka. I'm not sure if he's had an opportunity to see either of the plays they are putting on in the United Kingdom. One of them is called 'Pula' which means 'rain'.

MUSIC

SOYIKWA AFRICAN THEATRE COMPANY

TETTEH-LARTEY

As the song from the show indicates, it's as much about the

TETTEH-LARTEY

absence of rain as about rain and the well-being it brings. In song, dance and mime, as well as in dialogue, 'Pula' conveys the impressions of a man leaving the drought-stricken countryside in the Republic of South Africa, seeking work in the city, and, disillusioned, returning to his rural origins. There are four actors in the company, Ronnie Mkhwanazi, Danny Moitse, David Sebe and Makarious Sebe, and they told Mark Ralph-Bowman about their show, about the realities of drought for country folk and the reception that awaits them in the cities.

SOYIKWA MEMBER

Well, you thought you ran away from the drought which is a natural thing for the rural areas. You go to the industrial areas looking for a job but you'll always find the policeman waiting for you. Then he'll start asking you 'Pass'. You don't have it so you've got to spend some 'cosy' nights in a very 'cosy' cell. It's not very cosy, of course, it is very cold, you know, and very itchy.

SOYIKWA MEMBER

And then, now that your parent is someone who belongs to the Homelands, your citizenship is now in the Homelands and you find that in the Homelands you don't have anyone you know, you haven't even been in the Homelands.

MARK RALPH-BOWMAN

Why did you choose to do this play now? Does it have anything to do with the drought that is affecting South Africa at the moment or is that coincidence?

SOYIKWA MEMBER

Today there is the drought. I will give an example: my father had something like eighteen cows and today they are all dead because of the drought. So that is what make us to come to work on "Pula".

SOYIKWA MEMBER

But then of course "Pula" is rain and it's life. "Pula" is freedom and when it starts raining people get food, people feel free and when it rains real hard then it means more life, you know, and when it stops raining people harvest, people eat, people enjoy their fruits of rain, everybody is having a satisfied stomach.

RALPH-BOWMAN

I wonder if I could turn now from "Pula" to talk more about your theatre technique. It's very physical, you do a lot through mime, through gesture, through body movement, through physical images. Is there any reason for this? Do you work on this very consciously?

SOYIKWA MEMBER

Well I think maybe it's a traditional thing, you know, or maybe it's a cultural thing with the African people. They like to try to express themselves with physical rhythms and it's been a tradition in a way which we cannot escape.

SOYIKWA MEMBER

Except that we do have drama workshops whereby we just get into the individual self, try to find out more deeply the inner feeling of each and every actor within the group.

RALPH-BOWMAN

So you're definitely consciously putting together traditional South African forms with the western tradition of workshops and Stanislavsky's methods and all that?

SOYIKWA MEMBER

That's right.

RALPH-BOWMAN

In South Africa where do you perform?

SOYIKWA MEMBER

We perform in community halls in the Township. These halls are run by the Administration Boards and all that and they sometimes hassle you about performers' permits and all that because its their people who give the go ahead - you know, censorship. You'll find there is a guy who's just working on the Administration Board, he's never been involved in the arts in all his life but now he's been given the authority to censor a script. I mean that's real funny. I mean this guy knows nothing about all these things, he's been placed there as an authority so then when he says "Yes" then you can perform. When he says "No" you cannot perform.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Members of the Soyikwa African Theatre Company talking to Mark Ralph-Bowman about their show, "Pula". Their other production, "Imbumba", a more directly political work and it's also full of music and it's with a song from "Imbumba" that we end today's "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping you'll join me at the same time next week. For now it's goodbye.

MUSIC

SOYIKWA AFRICAN THEATRE COMPANY