

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of "Arts and Africa".

The evening air is warm, the crowds are gathering. Food sellers are doing a brisk trade. There is expectation in the air. The Nsaka is about to begin! Yes, we're in Zambia - on the copperbelt. But I've said enough. Let's leave it to our hosts, Makooka Savi, Chairman of the Ndola Theatre Club and Fiona Ledger to tell us more and to set the scene.

FIONA LEDGER

We're standing here on this rather nice evening in the compound for the Nsaka evening. Can you tell something about what this is all about?

MAKOOKA SAVI

The Nsaka evening is all about the African customs in regard to how people sit down and discuss plays, do this and that in the aspect of them depicting either the harvest or any situation which has a bearing, possibly to traditional wars.

FIONA LEDGER

So these were traditional, regular meetings were they?

MAKOOKA SAVI

It was a regular meeting. In any case I wouldn't even call it a regular meeting. It was an ongoing thing. Most men kept up at Nsaka and it was their usual meeting place.

FIONA LEDGER

Was there only men or did women come along too?

MAKOOKA SAVI

Women could only come when there was need for them to join the men.

FIONA LEDGER

When would that be?

MAKOOKA SAVI

Sometimes when women brought in food or there was an important discussion affecting the village.

FIONA LEDGER

Is this a Zambian thing or something just peculiar to the Copperbelt?

MAKOOKA SAVI

It is a Zambian thing and Nsaka is a Bemba name.

FIONA LEDGER

Now what are we doing tonight because we've got the theatre club involved? Can you tell me something about the kind of things we'll be seeing.

MAKOOKA SAVI

Tonight we shall have traditional dancers who are going to dance before us and the Ndola Theatre Club who also put up an excerpt from Shaka Zulu and then an excerpt from "The Prodigal Son in Reverse" which is written by me.

FIONA LEDGER

Shaka Zulu is, of course, the famous Zulu king.

MAKOOKA SAVI

That's right but the version we are working on tonight is that written by a Zambian. But in total it's the all best on what Shaka, the great Zulu warrior did.

TAPE

EXTRACT - Shaka Zulu.

FIONA LEDGER

Now you mention that you're a playwright yourself. Can you tell me something about the excerpt from your production, "The Prodigal Son in Reverse".

MAKOOKA SAVI

"The Prodigal Son in Reverse" is a play which is written about an African who, instead of the child leaving home in the usual biblical manner, this child was chased by his parents for him to bring in wealth from towns.

FIONA LEDGER

What, are they getting fed up with him being at home then?

MAKOOKA SAVI

Possibly. The father was eager to get the rewards from town like other parents were doing. But in this particular part, it's the father talking to the mother, his wife, and they're discussing the food stuffs. And you know the man in question was one time a white man's domestic servant. Now he claims that he knows the white man's food so well as compared to an African and he boasts over eating raw lettuce, half cooked eggs and all without vomiting.

FIONA LEDGER

Meanwhile his son is being sent off to the city to make his fortune. Does he manage to do this?

MAKOOKA SAVI

He never did. He ended up landing into a group of thieves and finally the chap was arrested.

TAPE

EXCERPT - "The Prodigal Son in Reverse"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Makooka Savi, Chairman of the Ndola Theatre Club there.

Another guest at the Nsaka evening was theatre critic of the copper belt's popular newspaper "The Mining Mirror", Hammington Lintini. Zambia has both a professional and amateur theatre which contribute to the cultural life of the nation. But Fiona asked him to what extent is Zambia moving towards the creation of an identifiable national theatre?

HAMMINGTON LINTINI

The only way you can come up with a national theatre is to integrate various aspects of life, depicted on the stage, depicted in song, depicted in what I call the 'performing arts' and there's no better stage really, no better forum than the amateur theatre in which to get all these things across to the people.

FIONA LEDGER

Okay. Let me pin you down then. When it came to Independence, surely a lot of the plays that have been performed before were very British in their character. What happened in terms of the kind of plays that were being written after independence?

HAMMINGTON LINTINI

I must confess we are actually lagging as far as the new playwrights, indigenous playwrights are concerned but we do have quite good playwrights who are coming up. I have in mind Dixon Mwansa who wrote "The Cell" and "The Cell" was, in fact, staged in Canada in 1980. It did pretty well in the TAZ festival in 1980. Now "The Cell" has been produced several times in various forms and at various theatre clubs in Lusaka, on the copper belt and elsewhere. Now it's people like Dixon Mwansa that I have in mind who help bring up and encourage aspiring playwrights.

FIONA LEDGER

Because at the moment you are performing plays from all over Africa, are you?

HAMMINGTON LINTINI

Yes we are. We actually cut across both Africa and Europe. I mean we have had such productions as Wole Soyinka's "The Trials of Brother Jero" and then the Kenyan playwright Ngugi wa Thiongo with his play "The Trial of Dedan Kimathi". We have had recitals from various African plays and poems. But at the same time you can not run away from the fact that we are, after all, influenced by British cultural life as it were.

FIONA LEDGER

Hamington I'm going to ask you to be a bit of a prophet. What direction do you see the amateur theatre scene going in over the next few years?

HAMMINGTON LINTINI

I would love to believe strongly that there's a lot of room for integration, probably in about five or ten years from now we'll probably seriously be thinking about a professional theatre.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hamington Lintini of the 'Mining Mirror' talking there to Fiona Ledger about popular theatre in Zambia.

Well one man who knows a great deal about popular theatre in Nigeria is Segun Oyekunle whose play "Blood No Be Water" was broadcast last year as part of our African Theatre Season. The play was written in Nigerian pidgin. Here's a taste to refresh your memory. Mama Maria, a rice seller, has tracked down three motor mechanics who have changed site and they're talking about her daughter.

TAPE

EXTRACT - "Blood No Be Water" Segun Oyekunle.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Segun Oyekunle has just published another play "Katakata for Sofahead" again written in pidgin and he found time recently to take a break from his film studies to talk to David Stephens. Segun wants the film and theatre world to recognise the importance of pidgin and David asked him whether there was a danger of his work not being taken seriously.

SEGUN OYEKUNLE

That danger obviously occurs. I mean people would immediately think maybe it's because I can't write English, that's why he's using pidgin. But it's even more difficult to write in pidgin than in English

DAVID STEPHENS

Why is that? Why is it more difficult?

SEGUN OYEKUNLE

Because, one, as somebody who is supposed to be an educated man who has been using English for the past...I mean all my life I've been writing in English. The attempt to commit the colloquial to the written is more demanding than using the more standardized form.

DAVID STEPHENS

Is there a danger that plays written in pidgin English, novels written in pidgin English will turn arts, in Nigeria, inward rather than opening them up to a wider audience?

SEGUN OYEKUNLE

When you look at the reading population, the reading audience, those who are likely to read a play or a novel whether in pidgin or in English, I would think the chances of it being read is very strong simply because pidgin itself has not been ostracised from those who are actually interested in drama. The problem has been with those who are controlling our educational system and those who derive certain prides, certain status and prestige from that system.

DAVID STEPHENS

I mean it's been said that your plays are a bridge between... or they are bridging the gap rather between popular and elite theatre in Nigeria. Now is that working? Is the gap being bridged?

SEGUN OYEKUNLE

No, this is an attempt to do that. In fact there is a very strong threat to elitist theatre in Nigeria right now. I'm saying this for the first time in a battle between elite theatre and popular theatre for an audience, the popular theatre has been winning. The elite theatre has not been able to go beyond the university walls. We made some attempts, in Zaria, to take some of my pidgin plays into Sabon Gari, into villages and the response was terrific. Also the popular theatre, itself, is in trouble because in Nigeria today the leaders in popular theatre are even abandoning popular theatre and going into film. The doyen of popular theatre in Nigeria, Herbert Ogunde is now a film producer. Film production is full time.

DAVID STEPHENS

Now you're a film maker as well. Are you abandoning popular theatre?

SEGUN OYEKUNLE

Well the difference is that I'm still writing. I have not had a professional theatre. I've never had one. Most of the theatre work I have done, had been experimental and amateur.

DAVID STEPHENS

Looking to the future, are you going to keep with pidgin in film making and in play writing?

SEGUN OYEKUNLE

Oh yes?

DAVID STEPHENS

Does it have a future?

SEGUN OYEKUNLE

A very strong future, it does.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Segun Oyekunle, film producer and playwright talking there to David Stephens.

That's all for this week's edition of "Arts and Africa" and this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

TAPE

CLOSING SIG. - "Limpopo" - Jeremy Taylor.