

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa.

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey bringing you a new sound from Nigeria; it comes on Sonny Otis' latest album. A new sound, but a traditional song, sung in the Idoma language of central Nigeria: Children are singing "Wicked old woman, if you want to make a meal of your flies, eat them by yourself, leave us little children alone".

GRAMS

SONNY OTI

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And that was a track from Sonny Otis' latest album. The album's called "Nigeria Go Survive". And surviving is something that Nigerian author, Buchi Emecheta is very good at: She came to the United Kingdom in 1962 unknown and jobless with five children. Today with thirteen books to her credit, she's more than surviving. She's not only writing her own books, she's also publishing them, and the first novel to be published by her publishing company, Ogwugwu Afor, has just come out, it's called "The Rape of Shavi". It's the tale of European and African culture meeting head-on and clashing. A group of Britons set off in an aeroplane from an aerodrome somewhere in England in order to escape an impending nuclear holocaust; they crash land in an isolated African community - they encounter results in misunderstandings, bitterness and prejudice. That very briefly is the story of the Rape of Shavi.

Fiona Ledger talked to Buch Emecheta about the blend of fantasy and realism which characterises the book.

FIONA LEDGER

Buchi I remember you once said to me that you're a writer who has no imagination and you always have to work with facts, I remember you saying that. And now you've written a book which seems to me to be a work of imagination. You've got six adults, two children, they're escaping a nuclear holocaust, they're going off in a plane and they land in remote African society.

BUCHI EMECHETA

Well yes maybe I've grown since you last interviewed me. I think I'm beginning to run out of facts which I had so now I take bits of facts from newspapers of what is happening around me and I build them up with my imagination to create a novel.

FIONA LEDGER

Is it fair to say that it's a work of fantasy and imagination, this novel do you think?

BUCHI EMECHETA

Yes, that's why it's set in an imaginary country. The only real country there is Britain, the others are all imaginary and I've taken people from different parts of the world and brought them together in this drought-ridden area in the Sahara.

FIONA LEDGER

I wondered when I read it why you needed to have such a dramatic context to portray a clash of cultures?

BUCHI EMECHETA

Well don't forget that a few years ago I went back to Nigeria. When I was in Nigeria, to me Nigeria was still like Shavi. And it only seems to me like yesterday when I went back and there was the sharp difference, 18 years is a long time to be away. I haven't been home during that time.

FIONA LEDGER

Can we go onto the characters? I found that this group of people, these six adults who set off to escape the holocaust, I found them on the whole rather unsympathetic and unattractive characters. They seem to be not only ignorant but hostile to this foreign culture which is set in sub-Saharan Africa.

BUCHI EMECHETA

Yes because you are surrounded by people like that. If you take people like the doctor for instance who thinks that she is a very, very civilized doctor...

FIONA LEDGER

....that's Ida, the gynecologist?

BUCHI EMECHETA

Yes, then you find that once faced with relatives, she hasn't prepared her mind for it. But in the western world she would say: "Oh I am a very liberated woman, I can't stand this". But now faced with this situation you find that she really can't cope with it herself. Another example in the book is when she is faced with abortion by herself,

BUCH EMECHETA

when she had to commit that abortion....

FIONA LEDGER

That's when she comes back to the U.K?

BUCHI EMECHETA

Yes, when she comes back to civilization, you know the U.K. and you find that she wants to commit this abortion, you know about this baby, and still inside her there is this lingering doubt, has she done the right thing and all my friends here in the U.K, it's not that they are ignorant, but they have been brought up in such a way to think that theirs is the only right way and if you bring something else they are not quite prepared for it. Inside them you can see the dark written on everybody's face.

FIONA LEDGER

But the Danish technician, Ronje? I found him a very unpleasant character, he's almost a parody of white racism.

BUCHI EMECHETA

That is the way I see the horrible, there are many people like this, you can see the youthful enthusiasm with national front, which I still had. We didn't really believe that it started with Rastafarians, they started together and such a group of intellectuals just start up a project like this and use it to their own purpose.

FIONA LEDGER

And yet he flies off, he leaves the U.K. in this aeroplane to make this great escape with a woman like Andrea who's been involved in all sorts of nuclear protests, someone whom you feel is a genuine idealist, someone who really cares about mankind.

BUCHI EMECHETA

Yes, she is, don't forget that what brought them together originally was the fact that they could fly and they wanted to escape.

FIONA LEDGER

Frightened?

BUCHI EMECHETA

They were frightened. But what each individual person was doing in his own private life was quite completely different. But this act, this project brought them all together and then during the flight each character started folding into herself or himself.

FIONA LEDGER

Now turning to the characters among the people of Shavi, the priest, Koku, he wasn't a particularly attractive character, I thought

FIONA LEDGER

you were having a dig at him, he seems almost a charlatan?

BUCHI EMECHETA

Yes, what I did was to create a black Enoch Powell, that's what his name means, Koku.

FIONA LEDGER

I see.

BUCHI EMECHETA

Well it's the way we pronounce Enoch.

FIONA LEDGER

In what way is he a black Enoch Powell?

BUCHI EMECHETA

Well I think, when people in this society start reading this book they will see what a black Enoch Powell can do.

FIONA LEDGER

A false prophet?

BUCHI EMECHETA

A false prophet who, if you remember, one of the things he said was that he started shouting: "Rub him with blood", in one of his prophecies, that's a speech from Enoch Powell, you know he started with "The Tiber will flow with blood" so what I have done is to create an Enoch Powell and put him in Shavi.

FIONA LEDGER

So you've got a British right wing politician?

BUCHI EMECHETA

Yes, that's what I've done. If you say the name Koku, it's the way we'd say Enoch.

FIONA LEDGER

So you're really concentrating on him, it's not an attack though on African religious institutions?

BUCHI EMECHETA

Oh, no, no, it's an attack which I have taken, this is an imaginary place and I've taken imaginary people, but this one I've taken Enoch Powell and given him a black face to see what harm he can do in a place like that.

FIONA LEDGER

A final question, the story first starts in Shavi and then we go to the U.K. where the group of people are about to set off in their plane because they are escaping from this impending nuclear holocaust and it never takes place, why didn't it take place?

BUCHI EMECHETA

You see I feel that's why I believe in God, I'm very optimistic on that level, that however much the Russians fight, something is always going to happen. You remember when I came to this country they were saying, it's armageddon, you know the Cuban crisis, and then a few months ago you remember the Korean crisis, and people were saying we're all going to die now but something always happens. So because of that I feel maybe it's a vain hope, but I don't feel that something will happen that will let this beautiful world go up in smoke, however much human beings try to do that it will never happen. That's my hope because I don't see any other way of keeping sane.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Buchi Emecheta, talking there to Fiona Ledger.

When is a kanga not a kanga? You appear to use a kanga to adapt it to all sorts of different uses, as blinds and screens, and you also have used a kanga in the large bed spreads which I saw and which were very pretty, most of them at least. You say that the kanga design is traditional or are they your own ideas?

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

No, if you remember the exhibition is called "Traditional cloth with new function". It has never been used like that and that's my aim, I want to introduce it as a bedspread and blinds and screens, because people don't use them like that, I hope the exhibition will open peoples eyes back home that they can use them as bedspreads, blinds or screens.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But the kanga is a special thing?

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's very very valuable. You seem to be using it for all kinds of things?

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

No, I chose the bedspreads and blinds and screens, these are the things people use mainly in the bedroom, I mean the place that is most used is the bedroom.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You want to retain the original place they are used?

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

Exactly, yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You say also that the kanga, those who originally ordered the kanga usually write words or ask you to write words on it, and yet you are now using it as a bedspread for just anybody. How do you get this private feeling?

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

You see originally kangas never had any words, I mean this only started about a hundred years ago people started writing. It wasn't in Latin letters it was in Arabic, but originally there was never any message on the kanga, this was just something that happened within 50 or 60 years.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I see, in other words one particular bedspread with the map of Africa in the centre which was extremely attractive, I noticed that instead of having trees printed there, you actually cut out the edges of the leaves and so on and the mountains and all that and then you stuck them very beautifully. Can you tell us about that particular kanga, that particular bedspread?

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

Well the Afro Shirazi party is the party of Zanzibar, the national party of Zanzibar after the revolution, before the revolution when we joined with the mainland we jointed the party as well, now instead we call it CCN, Chama Cha Mapiduzi, but that is praising the Afro Shirazi party who has worked so hard to get its roof over our heads, that's the people praising the Afro Shirazi party.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What are the words?

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

The words are Afro Shirazi Imefanya Kazi Kutupatia Malazi.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And Farouque who do you hope will be the buyers of your bedspreads and screens and blinds?

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

In England and also back home because as I said before, I want people to realise there's a lot to be done with kangas.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Farouque I hope that the idea of the kanga will now catch on very much soon in Britain.

FAROUQUE ABDILLAH

I hope so.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Farouque Abdillah. Let's end the programme with some more music from Sonny Oti. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey leaving you with the title track of Sonny Oti's album, Nigeria Go Survive. Join me next week, for now it's goodbye from London.

GRAMS

"AFRICA GO SURVIVE" - Sonny Oti.