

# Arts and Africa



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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Arts and Africa. And this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey introducing today's programme which is grounded in two recent books, both them paperbacks. The novel we'll come to later but first I'm going to pick up the one that has six stylish ladies on the cover. It's called "African Hairstyles: Styles of Yesterday and Today". Not quite a subject for Arts and Africa? Well Esi Sagay who has written the text and collected the scores of photographs has this as her opening sentence. "African hair sculpture is an art".

So, hairstyles as an art or a mere adornment? Two people better qualified than I am to express their opinions have joined me in the studio. Jerusha Castley comes from Kenya and Susan Zubairu from Nigeria. Now Jerusha, let me begin by asking you to describe for listeners who can't see you just how your hair looks today.

## JERUSHA CASTLEY

Today I have my hair plaited in long strands, you would call it cornrowing and I have beads at the end. One might say that it's a hairstyle that cannot be described as purely African. I came from Kenya about two weeks ago and when I appeared on the Voice of Kenya, they didn't want to see the beads in my hair.

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Susan, you are wearing an entirely different style altogether, nothing like Jerusha. Why is that?

## SUSAN ZUBAIRU

Well I have my hair permed and as a student I can't really afford to have it plaited in the same style as Jerusha. It really takes a lot of time and I need a lot of time to spend on my schoolwork. As such I think it's much easier to have it permed and brushed every morning.

## JERUSHA CASTLEY

It is not time alone, it's also extremely uncomfortable the first two days after you've had your hair done. The scalp has been pulled, you've been sitting for, say, up to eight hours, you don't have a good night's sleep because of the pain. It's extremely uncomfortable the first two days, I can tell you. I don't think you're missing very much. (Laughs)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, why on earth did you do it?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

Vanity I suppose! Apart from that, I think it is extremely convenient. In the mornings when I'm so rushed in getting the children ready to go to school, I don't have much time to spend on myself - apart from washing my face and brushing my teeth.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I see. How important is hair styling traditionally?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

Traditionally Kenyan women, particularly from the part of Kenya where I come from which is North Eastern province, they never plaited their hair. The women were the ones who looked after the gardens, they had to go and plant weeds and harvest, therefore they never had enough time, in fact, to spend on their hair. In Kenya what we had, particularly in my village, is women plaiting their hair before they went to bed and then they put their headscarves on and the whole idea isto make their hair more managable the following day. Hair plaiting in my village was looked upon like curlers are looked upon in the West. You don't see women walking along the streets with curlers, neither did you see women with plaited hair. But of course all that changed when hair styling came into the picture mainly from the East African coast inwards because the Swahili women became extremely good at plaiting hair.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Susan you come from West Africa. Now traditionally hair styling is very important I think, especially among the young girls.

SUSAN ZUBAIRU

Oh yes. It's very important you know. Among the young girls you are allowed to leave your hair uncovered unlike married women and young girls can always have their hair in any style, permed, woven or in thread form. Young girls do spend a lot of time on their hair in West Africa especially in Lagos. You have so many hair stylers opening in the capital because of young girls wanting to change their appearance.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Right. Jerusha back to you again.

JERUSHA CASTLEY

I have had my hair plaited for two years now, constantly, but the week that I undo it is the time that I enjoy most. Whereas this way it's as if you've put a mat on your head and it can be extremely uncomfortable.

SUSAN ZUBAIRU

Why, the, do you have it done in that style? Because it seems you are always against having your hair plaited and yet you keep it in the same style.

JERUSHA CASTLEY

Exactly as I said. First of all I think I am extremely vain; secondly it saves time; and thirdly I think it is quite attractive. (Laughs). I'm quite happy to put up with the discomfort.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well that's an interesting confession! Susan, let me ask you which part of Nigeria you come from.

SUSAN ZUBAIRU

Oh I come from the north, from Funtua, Kaduna State.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of hair styles do you have up there?

SUSAN ZUBAIRU

Oh we've got so many but the most popular ones are the Kwando style which resembles the umbrella design. It's plaited from the middle of the head coming downwards towards the face and it gives a pattern of basket or umbrella. In fact, kwando means 'basket' in Hausa. We have the Zane Yawo which is started right from the front and worked backwards. And then there is the Shiku which is another name for basket.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why is there all this talk about baskets? I suppose baskets are very popular in the north? (Laughs)

SUSAN ZUBAIRU

Oh yes. I think it's the most useful container for carrying things from the farm to the house and to the market.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now can you tell which group a woman comes from by her hair style or what part of a country she comes from? I know men also plait their hair but let's restrict it to women.

JERUSHA CASTLEY

Well, I must admit I would never be able to tell today but when I was growing up it was mainly the Swahili women from the East African coast who plaited their hair or women from Western Province from around Lake Victoria. But today hair plaiting has spread all over Kenya and it is extremely difficult for me to tell today.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have there been any profound changes from, say, the traditional hair styling methods?

SUSAN ZUBAIRU

Oh yes. Quite, really.

JERUSHA CASTLEY

These days you use what they call hair 'extensions'. Now if you looked at my hair, you could not tell whether it is all my own or whether I have some ... extensions. I hate to use the words 'artificial hair'. (Laughs) But really today women are going to great lengths to find synthetic material that looks closest to their hair. They blend their hair with this but traditionally those things never existed, in Kenya at least.

SUSAN ZUBAIRU

Oh they do exist in Nigeria in the north but they come from natural sources, not synthetic as we have them today.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When we look at this book, "African Hairstyles", we've got such a bewildering variety of hairstyles and they're so complicated. A lot of time has been spent on this sort of thing and a lot of money I suppose. It seems to me to be all vanity really. I mean, if the women did it for their men then, yes, I would be more for it.

JERUSHA CASTLEY

I beg your pardon! They could do it to please themselves you know.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ah, but that would be vain wouldn't it to spend all this time and money?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

What's wrong with being vain? Men must have their own ways of being vain. If I'm doing something to myself either to my hair or the clothes I'm wearing, it's because I feel good in them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it an attempt to express ones self as an African rather than say a copycat of the European?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

I think so. When I was growing up everything that was vaguely attractive was suppressed by the missionaries. Most of the schools were missionary schools and young women weren't allowed to experiment with what was traditionally a way of life but now today in Kenya you find all kinds of hairstyles and they've gone back to traditional methods. If you parted your hair this way, today they do the same thing but they add other things to it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, what do you think of the book on the whole?

SUSAN ZUBAIRU

I think the book is quite original. There are very few books on African hairstyles and I think most African women would like to have this as a copy, you know.

JERUSHA CASTLEY

I think so, too. I mean it's the first time I've seen African hairstyles collected and put into a book. African hairdressers are going to love the book.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I think the photographs are really staggering. Jerusha Castley and Susan Zubairu thank you both very much. The book, by the way, is published by Heinemann at £4.50. Its title once again is "African Hairstyles" and it's by Esi Sagay.

The same publishers 18 months ago brought out a novel by an unknown Kenyan writer, Thomas Akare. It's about the shanty towns of Nairobi and it's called simply "The Slums". It's a vivid, angry account of the daily life of a young man called Eddy whose life is hard and frustrating. Here's a passage that gives some idea of Akare's style. Eddy is on his way to town to go to the cinema and familiar sights trigger off this reaction.

TAPE

AKARE READINGS - "THE SLUMS"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The author himself grew up in such slums and he still lives in one of the shanty towns. Richard Vaughan asked him what started him writing his novel.

THOMAS AKARE

Well, after reading some other books, mainly by people of Kenya here, well I got a bit bored with theirs. They used to come out and of course their stories were very much based on one single theme which was of Mau Mau. So after going through so many I decided to try my hand and so that's how I came to produce "The Slums".

RICHARD VAUGHAN

And what's the basic difference between your book and the other books which have been produced about the Mau Mau?

THOMAS AKARE

The difference is that mine is based on the social life where after the promises which we used to be given during our school-time was that out of school there is somehow no hardship in getting employment, which is not true. So, because I went through that life, that's what forced me to produce "The Slums".

RICHARD VAUGHAN

Now where is "The Slums" actually based? Is it exclusively in Nairobi?

THOMAS AKARE

Well, "The Slums" is based of course on the life of Nairobi, in an old estate which is Pumwani or Majengo with the life there which other authors of Kenya have never gone through, so that's why I produced it having Eddy himself to be the main character in the book.

RICHARD VAUGHAN

There seems to be at the end no hope for any kind of change. The book seems basically to be a simple despair at poverty and its causes. But you don't offer anything as an alternative. Would you say that's true?

THOMAS AKARE

It is true yes. But then to others I leave it to them to read and understand or conclude by themselves.

RICHARD VAUGHAN

But you wouldn't call yourself a Socialist?

THOMAS AKARE

Well I am a Socialist but not politically, just a socialist in life.

RICHARD VAUGHAN

Can you describe to me what the message of "The Slums" is to the people who read it?

THOMAS AKARE

The really inside feelings of the slumers is how the common man's feeling is never told. Here the slums of Nairobi are very much hidden to tourists because somehow to the authorities it will be somewhat demoting the fame of the country to outsiders. The message there is as I've just told it to whoever, will have the book and to those who have read it so I think they will understand it and then they can just say; "So even in Nairobi, there are slums". Now whoever they are, reading "The Slums", I think they must be asking themselves "Who is this nut, whoever he is?" Because I've revealed some shameless deeds of the country by the authorities.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thomas Akare talking about his novel "The Slums" to Richard Vaughan. And here in the same mood is Maisha Ni Maisha by The Black Devils Band.

GRAMS

MAISHA NI MAISHA - THE BLACK DEVILS BAND.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Meanwhile this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping you'll join me for more Arts and Africa at this time next week, but for now saying goodbye.

GRAMS

MAISHA NI MAISHA - THE BLACK DEVILS BAND.