

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Welcome to "Arts and Africa" and to a programme about the written word. Poetry, novels and their publishing. Perhaps I should add "their translating". This short passage is translated from the French in Aminata Sow Fall's novel, "The Beggars Strike". All the city's beggars go on strike and stop the wealthy from the absolution and obligation to give alms.

EXTRACT: "The Beggars Strike" by Aminata Sow Fall. Published by Longman's Drumbeat Series.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Producer Florence Akst had the opportunity to meet the Senegalese novelist Aminata Sow Fall recently. If I'm right, Florence, you weren't able to record an interview in English for us?

FLORENCE AKST

No, Aminata doesn't trust her English at the microphone but it was an interesting discussion and I thought I would mention the gist of what she said.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I've heard this name before, in fact on several occasions and I've wondered if Aminata was a full-time writer.

AKST

No, she has written several books but her job is quite a prestigious one - she's director within the Ministry of Culture in Senegal of their Centre for the Study of Civilisations. Through this of course she has a wealth of experience in writing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What are her other writings, novels for that matter?

AKST

Well, this is the only novel of hers that I've come across so I asked her about her work and in fact it's the second. The first one that was published has the English title "The Ghost" and then "The Beggars Strike" which in French is called "La Greve des Battus" and a third one which conjures up for me - I haven't read it - conjures up very much the culture of Senegal because it's called in English "The Call of the Arena" where the favourite sport of wrestling takes place.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I could easily identify it from the quotation we had. I noticed how French this was. I mean, here we have an expression like "How is he able to distribute them around the city" which I found very difficult to read in fact. Does she always write in French?

AKST

Yes she does. She told me that there is considerable debate in Senegal about what language writers should write in. The major language in Senegal is Wolof not French, though French is the official language. She did say that one of the difficulties of writing in a foreign language was expressing your personality fully. You can express abstract ideas but a certain warmth perhaps is lacking. And she's saying this in the context of her own books which are basically about social experience. She said that the first thing that comes into her mind when she does write a book is the idea; then the context in which the idea can be expressed; and then the characters through which she will portray the idea. And to me that was rather a French concept.

Now at the very same time that I met Aminata I also was able to record an interview with a writer from Ivory Coast, Veronique Tadjó. She teaches English at the University of Abidjan but she writes in French and she's a young writer who's just had her first book published. It's a book of poems. She's just won a literary prize with a collection she calls "Laterite". As you'd imagine she writes in French, and I asked her to read a poem from the collection first in French and then to read her own English translation.

POEM: "Decouvre Pour Elle" from a collection of poetry "Laterite" by Veronique Tadjó. Poem read in French by Veronique Tadjó.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And now for the translation.

POEM: "Decouvre Pour Elle", English translation read by Veronique Tadjó.

AKST

That's a romantic poem isn't it? It's about two people and their relationship?

VERONIQUE TADJO

Yes it's mainly about communication, not only between two lovers - it can also be about communication as a whole.

AKST

You teach English at the University of Abidjan. You're conscious then of trying to achieve communication because you're teaching what is a foreign language. What is your language background? What is your first language?

TADJO

It is French.

AKST

And do you speak an Ivory Coast language?

TADJO

Yes, my father is Agni, and I understand Agni but I cannot speak it fluently

AKST

You are writing poetry, have you tried your hand at other forms of writing?

TADJO

Yes, yes, I am trying my hand at the novel but I don't think it will be a conventional novel.

AKST

What will be unconventional about it?

TADJO

The form first because it won't be a story. Strangely enough I don't believe in stories in the sense that you cannot say "this is the beginning" and "this is the end". I think that life is more about "flashes".

AKST

So it's going to be more like a film or television play in which you have short scenes?

TADJO

That's it, that's exactly it. It will be made of short scenes rather than a continuous story.

AKST

And will there be narration linking these scenes?

TADJO

It's narration, it's prose and poetry.....

AKST

And characters?

TADJO

Yes and characters.

AKST

And action?

TADJO

And action as well, yes. I'm trying to render the true aspect of life - whether that is possible - in the sense that we think as well as we act and all this comes together.

AKST

I have very strongly the impression that in Senegal there is a tremendous amount of writing being done. Here in Britain I don't get the same impression of Ivory Coast. Is that right or is it just that the titles and the authors are not known here?

TADJO

Yes I think that is just because our writers are not known. Because there is a lot of work being done in the Ivory Coast and it's very active. In fact we had this gathering of Senegalese and Ivorian writers in Abidjan and they even came to the conclusion that there was much more going on in the Ivory Coast in terms of creativity than in Senegal.

AKST

This is a recent development?

TADJO

Very recent, yes.

AKST

Traditionally the balance has been the other way?

TADJO

That is very true. But it is seen that the new generation, the new writers, are really being very creative in the Ivory Coast.

AKST

And are there a couple or three fellow writers you would like to mention so that we can look out for their books?

TADJO

Yes I can mention Bernard Zadi who is a playwright; I can mention also Jean Marie Adiaffi who is a poet; we have Noel Ebony as well who is a journalist and is also a writer. They are being very, very, creative.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Florence was talking to Veronique Tadjjo.

And now to publishing in English. I've news for all our book-hungry listeners who heard me say in an earlier programme that a dark cloud hung over the future of well-known paperbacks published by Heinemann - their African Writers Series. To get to the truth of the matter we've invited the one person who knows the full story to come in and tell us what really is to happen to those familiar orange-backed books whose authors have ranged from Achebe to Zwelonke. The editor of African Writers Series was James Currey and he's sitting opposite me right now. So James, there's only one question really, isn't there? Is this the end of Heinemann's African Writers Series.

JAMES CURREY

No! The backlist exists, it has 250 titles for people to choose from. The question is: what is going to happen on new writing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What actually has happened?

CURREY

The owner of the Heinemann group was taken over and the new company BTR - British Tyre and Rubber - put considerable pressure on their individual companies to increase their profitability.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Does that suggest then that you weren't making profits?

CURREY

Oh no, the African Writers Series is a profitable series but the profitability gave us the freedom to add, at the height of the Series, twenty-two titles in a single year, and very regularly fourteen or fifteen titles a year.

TETTEH-LARTEY

So how do they expect you to make more profit than before?

CURREY

They basically say "just publish the profitable titles". The African Writers Series has always been adventurous, it's always encouraged new writing. That's been done by taking risks. And as everybody knows it's paid off in both financial ways and in terms of the prestige of Heinemann.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And what do people like Chinua Achebe think about what has happened?

CURREY

He's expressed particular concern because he always - he of course was the founding editor of the Series and his "Things Fall Apart" was the famous number one title in the whole Series and got it off to a marvellous start - He always encouraged us to take risks, to try new writers. He just feels that this mere trickle of the occasional title isn't really encouraging African writing which one has expected in the past from the African Writers Series.

TETTEH-LARTEY

James, have there been objections from people other than Chinua?

CURREY

Oh yes, particularly from Heinemann companies in Africa. We've just had a visit in London, a very, very, supportive visit, from Henry Chakava, Managing Director of Heinemann Educational Books East Africa in Nairobi; and Aig Higo, the Managing Director and Chairman of Heinemann Educational Books Nigeria.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now this is all very bleak news on the whole, but what should new writers do? Are you going to suggest that they shouldn't submit manuscripts to Heinemann any more?

CURREY

I think they should continue to. I think the pressure should be kept up on Heinemann, on the new management at Heinemann, to make them realise just what an important Series this is. And of course one of the important things is to submit the manuscripts to the companies in Africa.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you give budding writers any encouraging news?

CURREY

Oh yes! There's been tremendous support from William Heinemann, the original Heinemann company from which everyone else has grown, and they want to make a very positive contribution of publishing three or four titles a year in hardback for the market particularly in America and Britain. But of course they will first and foremost be looking at the established writers.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And what is going to be your role in this future possibility?

CURREY

I'm discussing at the moment an appointment as a consultant and I hope that this is going to be mutually beneficial to William Heinemann,

myself and also, of course, to the future of African writing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well James, what has happened to the Heinemann's African Writers Series is nothing to gloat over, but as it's said, there's always a silver lining to any cloud. Is publishing by African publishing houses going to benefit from Heinemann's loss?

CURREY

Quite frankly I don't think so because Heinemann has provided international publication for books which have been published locally. Henry Chakava is Ngugi's publisher in East Africa.. He's the original publisher of Ngugi, he sub-contracts the rights to Heinemann in London. I also think I must mention again the importance of the role of the Heinemann African companies, and I think, actually, that they will be originating more publishing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

James Currey, thank you very much for coming along to tell us the Heinemann story so far.

Next week at this time there'll be more news and views of the arts of Africa. Meanwhile this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.