

# Arts and Africa

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

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

Twenty years ago, if you had asked regular novel readers in Britain what African writers they'd heard of, you could be pretty sure that on the very short list they would have come up with, there would have been the name of Amos Tutuola from Nigeria. Tutuola's first book, "The Palm Wine Drinkard", which was published as early as 1952, gained an extraordinary reputation in Britain and the United States. It was a weird story full of monsters and ghosts and supernatural events, and in spite of the peculiar English it was written in, which looked like a very unsophisticated translation of the author's mother tongue, Yoruba, the book was hailed in many quarters as a work of naive genius. A short extract will give you the flavour of "The Palm Wine Drinkard".

## EXTRACT

"The Palm Wine Drinkard"

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, although Tutuola produced several similar stories in the 1950's and '60's none of them made the impact of "The Palm Wine Drinkard", and for some fourteen years Tutuola went silent. And let it be said, his worth as a novelist was not universally accepted. Many critics in Africa saw him as an uneducated story teller living in the world of the past who was being patronised by the colonial masters. In post-Independence Nigeria these critics weren't sorry to see Tutuola's name disappear from the scene.

But then in 1981 Tutuola resurfaced with the publication of a new novel "The Witch Herbalist of the Remote Town". Though it was written and punctuated a bit more conventionally it was again pre-occupied with legend, folklore and the supernatural.

## EXTRACT

"The Witch Herbalist of the Remote Town".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, "The Witch Herbalist of the Remote Town" certainly revived interest in Amos Tutuola, and at the end of last year he was invited to a writers' workshop in the United States. On his way back home, just before Christmas, he stopped off in London and for the first time visited his publishers, Faber and Faber. Well I was delighted to have the opportunity to talk to Amos Tutuola in the Arts and Africa studio, and I asked him first about the impact his books have had in Nigeria.

AMOS TUTUOLA

What I've observed since the book has been published is that most young people who did not pay heed to the Yoruba tribal customs have now changed their minds and at home several of them have become writers even though they are not yet known to the world.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you have worked as a farmer, as a blacksmith, a storekeeper in fact you've been a jack-of-all-trades.

AMOS TUTUOLA

Of course, of course.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Did you find it necessary to be able to live, to work as these things?

AMOS TUTUOLA

Although I was once a blacksmith I left the job immediately after World War II when I jumped into clerical life. Then I have took up another job, farming. I am now working under myself and have much time to do this and that. And the, after farming I write. I left government work voluntarily because I wanted to concentrate on my writing and to be able to go wherever I wish to go.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, when your book "The Palm Wine Drinkard" came out in the early 1950's I remember there was a storm of protest, especially from the Africans who thought you were pandering to or satisfying the prejudices of the Europeans, the white man, about the African, because, at that time the Africans were becoming politically conscious about independence. They thought the black man had been so looked down upon for so long that he must be 'brought upwards' and you seemed to be doing the opposite. You remember those days very well - what did you feel?

AMOS TUTUOLA

Well, when you know that you're doing something that in the present or in the future will probably be useful to other people you don't mind whether they criticize you. Sooner or later people will realize what you do so I was happy then as they criticized me.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

They were not criticizing your work as a literary work, they were talking about you as a political person.

AMOS TUTUOLA

Ah well, I don't think so. I did not take it so,

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, your work is full of mystery and myth - of magic and obviously you pay a lot of attention as you've said already to Yoruba legends. Now, do you believe in ghosts and spirits?

AMOS TUTUOLA

Well, I do. Ghosts and spirits are so, just like human beings. I think the people of the past lived with something. We do believe that ghosts or spirits exist even up to the present day - unless someone will tell you a lie.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And also, I find that people in your books are always getting scared. They have nightmares, you know - the horrible ~~dreams~~ you have and then you wake up afraid. You make use of a lot of that sort of thing. Are you trying to scare your readers or are you describing the sort of things you experience?

AMOS TUTUOLA

Um, well. I don't try and scare my readers. I tell what I've heard from old people who have experienced those things. That's all,

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I see. So in your stories you say you are making use of traditional tales.

AMOS TUTUOLA

Oh yes! I use folk materials in my stories - Yoruba folk tales, Yoruba customs, Yoruba religion, Yoruba beliefs and the Yoruba proverbs.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So you're not interested in modern....

AMOS TUTUOLA

....in modern days? No, I do not! I'm not interested in these modern days.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Who not?

AMOS TUTUOLA

Well, it's too advanced you know.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

For you? (Laughter) Do your Yoruba readers recognize some of the incidents?

AMOS TUTUOLA

Why not? If I tell lies they will know.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So, how much of your own imagination do you use in your story line?

AMOS TUTUOLA

You know, what I say before I describe something - that is my imagination or my own idea. For example, the lady who followed the complete gentleman. That is a folk tale, it is a thing that I know. I have learned it and I know it so immediately I start, I can write straight away what I want.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And although your stories come from folk tales, do you have a moral, a lesson in each of them to teach people?

AMOS TUTUOLA

Ah yes. When we say: take everything - that's moral in my culture. Or that beautiful lady who follows the Palm Wine Drinkard, her father advises her to marry but she refused. She disobeyed her father and followed the Complete Gentleman who afterwards changed into a skull. that's the punishment she received.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's a lesson to young ladies that they must listen to their parents.

AMOS TUTUOLA

Mercifully she escaped but she received a lot of punishment. That's the moral of the tale there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, I want to ask you how much you are influenced by the mask? A lot of your characters seem to me to be an embodiment of the Yoruba mask. I'll take "The Witch Herbalist of the Remote Village" for example: You describe this crazy, removable-headed wild man and he goes spinning round and round and round and then you have this squatting man of the jungle with his fat stomach. They look like masks, you see, into which you have put life.

AMOS TUTUOLA

Hum! That's a difficult one to answer. I tell the story according to what I've heard from the old people and that is what they have seen or dealt with in the past days. Well, you know the way of their lives in those days was different from these days.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A lot of people will regard you as the father figure of Nigerian literature. Are you content to be regarded as that? Are you still writing very actively?

AMOS TUTUOLA

I doubt take myself as a father figure and I don't expect the people of Nigeria to take me as a father figure. What I am after is to see that my culture is still alive.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What are your plans for the future? I notice you have recently written a play which is a new thing altogether for you. Is this a new direction in which you are moving or will you continue to write novels?

AMOS TUTUOLA

I'll continue to write novels. That play I've taken from "The Palm Wine Drinkard" which I just adapted into a play as a trial, that's all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you beginning or in the middle of writing another novel?

AMOS TUTUOLA

No, no. Before I left Nigeria I was going from one village to another, collecting my material from the old people. It's very difficult to get it from them. You know, someone will tell you to come, let's say, by next week. I travel by car for a long time in the bush and when I get there on the appointed day they say: "Did I promise you to come....?" (Laughter) "I am not well now. Come next Thursday." Immediately you leave there he has forgotten so one has to be very patient with them. (laughter)

ALEX THETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Amos Tutuola, thank you very much. I very much look forward to whatever you're going to write next.

AMOS TUTUOLA

Thank you, thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And on that happy note we come to the end of this edition of "Arts and Africa". Join me again next week. For now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.