

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 "Arts and Africa". And today we're spinning round the continent from Zimbabwe to Sierra Leone, with our first stop at the city of Owerri in Imo State Nigeria.

Maxwell Nwagboso is a journalist working for the Imo State newspaper but he's also been an aspiring novelist for some years. He's now enjoying the prospect of seeing his first novel in print he tells me that he's already seen the galley proofs and publication day isn't far off. Of course, as a journalist he's been working with words for many years but there's a marked difference between measuring your words in inches of column and in whole chapters. This thought led me to ask Maxwell Nwagboso what had led him to take the step towards writing fiction.

MAXWELL NWAGBOSO

Well, I wouldn't talk about stepping over because I'm still a practising journalist, but I wanted to occupy myself more fully playing on words. As a hard-bitten journalist you are a bit straight-jacketed, you are not always free to toy with ideas, philosophy, that kind of thing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But how about the language? Is it the same kind of language you are using in your novels, in your creative work, as you use in the rather factual style of journalism?

MAXWELL NWAGBOSO

I would say that the language is basic, but you have more room to play around when you are doing creative writing, I mean things that you cannot do in, say, news writing, in straight-forward journalism.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now tell me about your first book which is being printed by the African Universities Press.

MAXWELL NWAGBOSO

Yes, my first novel entitled "The Road to Damnation". It's all about the Nigerian Civil War, written from the Biafran stand-point, because I was on the Biafran side of the war. So in that book now I tried to detail the things I saw and felt during the war.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And was the "damnation", the destruction of Nigeria or the destruction of any one section of Nigeria?

MAXWELL NWAGBOSO

Not one section, everybody. I mean nobody actually won the war. We shouldn't have gone into war in the first place. So I was trying to say that what we did was a kind of road to damnation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So although you were taking a sort of partisan stand, that is from the Biafran point of view, you think what you say would be acceptable to every reader?

MAXWELL NWAGBOSO

Well, in writing "Damnation", I wrote the things I saw, the things I felt as a Biafran then, I am a Nigerian now, but you see in that war if you found yourself on the Biafran side you became a Biafran, if you found yourself on the Nigerian side automatically you become a Nigerian. I found myself on the Biafran side. I never wielded guns or anything, I was still a journalist. I found myself on that side and I believed in what we were doing. So in this book, with no holds barred, I just said what I felt as a Biafran at that time.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, Maxwell, I know that you've said that being a journalist made it natural for you to write as well, but would I be right in suggesting to you that the Biafran War actually acted as a catalyst, the immediate reason why you wrote that novel?

MAXWELL NWAGBOSO

Not really, I wouldn't buy that. I had been writing before the war, but it wasn't anything near as much as "The Road to Damnation" turned out to be. But I had been experimenting, I had been writing as a journalist before the war. But then, in a way I agree with you, I agree with you because seeing the war gave me a big theme to work on and the result is there, you know what has happened.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how about the other two?

MAXWELL NWAGBOSO

Yes, the second one, I have lived in Germany for ten years and I've tried to portray in the second one my experiences in Germany. And in the third one, it's a rather gory one, I had witnessed an execution in Owerri, Imo State, my state. They shot thirteen convicted armed robbers. I saw that, it moved me and I just felt I had to say something on that kind of theme.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And our best wishes for Maxwell Nwagboso to see all three of his novels in print before too long.

Zimbabwe is famous for its soapstone carvings - carvings not sculptures because, as the name of the stone suggests, it's soft enough to be carved with a knife blade. But, as we were hearing recently in Arts and Africa, Zimbabwean artists are finding the challenge of the hard stones that have to be chipped with a chisel and mallet more and more tempting. Amongst the most successful is Nicholas Mukomeranwa. His sculpture has been in exhibitions all over the world and museums both in Salisbury and in other capitals have bought individual works. Since he began sixteen years ago his themes - mostly human and animal - have stayed constant but his style has gradually changed and at present his themes are stated in works that look almost abstract because the lines are so simple. And the stone he works has changed too; he's now using the extremely hard serpentine for his pieces. There was an exhibition of some of his work at the Zimbabwean High Commission in London recently and it was there that Jenny Wilkin asked Nicholas Mukomeranwa about his choice of stone.

NICHOLAS MUKOMERANWA

The hard stone is always the best stone to carve because when you have got a feeling when you've got a suitable stone, even if it is hard you always try by all means to put all what you feel into the stone. And, of course, you've got to communicate with the stone in order to get over the feeling into it. You don't have to force the stone. Sometimes the stone has got a certain movement which is so very powerful that you cannot change it but to follow that movement.

JENNY WILKIN

What would you say has been the strongest influence in your work?

NICHOLAS MUKOMERANWA

The spiritual side of our culture and also, particularly for myself, I think each individual has a spirit which looks after him, a sort of guardian angel, you may call it a guardian angel, and also I like to portray a mother and child. The reason could be that I lost my mother when I was very young but I can feel that she is around, although I cannot see her, but I can feel her with all her love trying to protect me from all the troubles. Most of my sculptures are mostly influenced by that. Of course, there are other influences like ancestral spirits and also tribal dancing and many others like witchcraft. There are so many spiritual and traditional things that we do.

JENNY WILKIN

You obviously have a great love for the work that you have done. Do you find it very difficult to part with it?

NICHOLAS MUKOMERANWA

Something that comes from your heart into the stone, it's something which you can feel, so you love it, you like it, so when you sell it, or when I part with it, always I'm very much interested to know the people who are going to take the sculpture, because I feel that they are going to take part of me. In most cases I always say please look after this sculpture work because it's part of, it's part of me.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nicholas Mukomeranwa explaining his work as a sculptor to Jenny Wilkin.

MUSIC EXTRACT - DRUMS OF SIERRA LEONE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Drums of the National Dance Troupe of Sierra Leone. We've had the pleasure of hearing them before in Arts and Africa but today we've the opportunity of hearing about them. On a recent trip to the capital, Freetown, David Sweetman met the Troupe's manager, Peter Karifa Smart, of Sierra Leone's Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs, who told him how the National Dance Troupe came into existence.

PETER KARIFA SMART

After independence we were invited to take part in New York's World Fair in 1963 and the late Prime Minister, Sir Milton Margai called the late John Akar who was then Director of Broadcasting, to put together something that was authentic and indigenous from Sierra Leone. Mr. Akar went around the country selecting the artists and put the Troupe together.

DAVID SWEETMAN

So it isn't really one group at all, is it? It's composed of many different things?

PETER KARIFA SMART

Yes, fourteen major tribes in Sierra Leone. We tried to get every tribe represented.

DAVID SWEETMAN

And how can you possibly represent so many things in one go?

PETER KARIFA SMART

By selective pruning. They tell us that a new art has developed in this area, we scout the area, we see what it is all about and we compare it with what we have in the Troupe. If we find it's stronger than what we have, or better than what we have, we try to get it involved with us.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Are there problems with putting together performances which, after all, when they are in their true state might go on all day and all night, are there difficulties about presenting that as a show?

PETER KARIFA SMART

Yes, usually when they come into the Troupe they're not used to performing in the time span we use, two hours or three hours as the case may be. They're used to performing for the whole night or two or three days continuously. So we have a little bit of a problem with them cutting down on the energy levels that they have. But when they understand it's no problem at all, because they are professionals.

DAVID SWEETMAN

How many people are there in the group?

PETER KARIFA SMART

Eighty six.

DAVID SWEETMAN

And do people from one ethnic group perform the dances and songs of a different group or do they just do their own music and dance?

PETER KARIFA SMART

No, they intermingle a lot. As you saw today, we have very young girls and very young boys, we try to catch them that early so that they can come in and get involved in each and every tribe that's represented in the Troupe. When you come in, that's one of the criteria we look for. If you cannot adjust within the village, as the set-up is, we cannot have you because we want somebody who is versatile enough to be able to drum a Timne beat, to be able to drum a Mende beat, because when we perform our effective strength is thirty seven, so if you are not versatile enough, not flexible enough to give and take from other tribes you have no place in the Troupe.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Now there has been some criticism, hasn't there, in the local press here of just that: the fact that people are doing adapted versions for audiences not in Africa, of music and dance which isn't really their own, and the criticism is that far from preserving the indigenous culture of Sierra Leone that it just makes a hotch-potch of it. Do you agree with any of that criticism?

PETER KARIFA SMART

I don't agree with the criticism in that we are making a hotch-potch of Sierra Leone culture. They've been saying that the Troupe is monotonous, in the sense that what we have is traditional. It's authentic, it's indigenous, we have to keep some of these things as they are, for us to pass it on as it was passed on to us. I've been with the Troupe for five years and the Troupe has been in formation twenty four years, so for me to come in now and just modernise the Troupe for modernity's sake is nonsense, it's meaningless to my job, to the essence of the Troupe. As a matter of fact, our local courses which are very much alive, which everybody takes part in, have this monotony that they are talking about. If you see an Ogea performance, the songs are the same today, the songs are the same tomorrow, the songs are the same the next tomorrow. There might be a new addition because of an event that's happened, but this is the continuity that we have to have.

MUSIC EXTRACT - DRUMS OF SIERRA LEONE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And while we listen to the musical evidence of the continuity that Peter Karifa Smart was describing let me add that there's also the prospect of a new development - the blueprint has been drawn up for a major Arts Centre for Freetown with schools of music and dance as well as performance areas and an artisans village. And, of course, we'll have more news of Arts and Africa this time next week. For now, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC EXTRACT - DRUMS OF SIERRA LEONE