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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of Arts and Africa.

In today's programme we will be looking at two people who have taken on attributes from societies which are not their own. One is a novelist writing about Kenya and the other is an operatic singer from Nigeria, Martha Ulaeto. Here's an example of her operatic style. She's singing "The Lord's Prayer".

GRAMS

"THE LORD'S PRAYER" - Martha Ulaeto.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Martha Ulaeto singing "The Lord's Prayer". On a recent visit to London she talked with Davina Dougan about her singing career.

DAVINA DOUGAN

Martha, you're a Nigerian opera singer, which is rather an unusual thing. Can you tell me first why you chose opera?

MARTHA ULAETO

During my days in convent school, I was brought up by missionary Reverend Mothers and Sisters and they very much encouraged classical music and, of course, opera. That's how I developed the interest and as time went on I felt it was right for me to study it formally.

DAVINA DOUGAN

How easy is it to make a career as an opera singer in Nigeria? Is that at all possible?

MARTHA ULAETO

Well at the moment no. But there are always pioneers in everything and I am one of those who believes that classical music - this really refined way of singing and performing music - is not indigenous only to Europe but we also have this refined way of performance. It's just that we haven't really followed it up by actually putting it down in black and white as in the European case of putting down music in the musical language. But we still have historical evidence of music that was performed in the courts, which I think is very much refined and somewhat akin to classical music as we know it in Western Europe.

DAVIN DOUGAN

Do you feel that you'd be able to make a living singing most of the year in Nigeria?

MARTHA ULAETO

Make a living, yes, but how much of a living is another question. You find that myself and the few other classically trained singers doing some other jobs in radio stations, television stations or as cultural officers in the Ministry of Information or something or the other to make ends meet.

DAVINA DOUGAN

Now you said earlier that you felt very much that you were one of the pioneers and that you were hoping to establish your work in opera in Nigeria as far as possible. But how relevant do you really think a medium like opera singing is for Nigerians?

MARTHA ULAETO

Well I must say first of all that opera is not the total of what I am doing. As an opera singer you also acquire the training of a leader singer, that is you sing songs in a more refined or classical way, and I think the relevance this has to the Nigerian society or environment is that we will learn or we are learning to develop our music to that refined state that can be described as classical music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Martha Ulaeto. I would never have guessed from her talking voice that she was the same person singing the operatic Lord's Prayer.

Now among the Wanga people of Western Kenya, "The Modern Common Wind" is a wind of foreboding because the phrase refers to leprosy, but people don't mention its name - they always use euphemisms. The phrase "The Modern Common Wind" is also the name of a recently published book. Here's an excerpt from it.

EXTRACT

"The Modern Common Wind" - Don Bloch.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

As you can hear the author writes as a Wanga man. Well he's waiting to talk to us now from a studio in Holland. Hello and welcome Don Bloch. Is that an African name?

DON BLOCH

No I'm afraid it's not. I come from the United States originally Alex.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now how come you assume the identity of a Kenyan narrator of the story?

DON BLOCH

That has to do with the fact that I spent about a year and a half - the most exciting time of my life - in Kenya, working with a team of Dutch anthropologists who were involved in leprosy control. While I was in Western Province, the home territory of the BaWanga I made many good friends and I came to hear their voices day and night. When I returned to Holland where I live, I wanted to write about my experiences with their voices and that's what I tried to recreate.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, I as an African can understand some of the things you were saying but in certain passages, I found some inconsistencies. You would be using a Kenyan voice and then suddenly you would make perfect descriptions which would be made only by an English writer.

DON BLOCH

If you would pause to consider, I was in a very difficult position because my concern was to tell the story of the people themselves and to try to find a language in which I could do that. Not only that but I didn't want to use a narrative voice that was a single narrative voice because the voice of my novel is the voice of the community. Different people at different times, different ages, different background, different educations. So I had to create a language that no African in the BaWanga speaks; the way that I am speaking in the book. You and I both know that. But I had to try to catch some of the rhythms, some of the beautiful figurative qualities of the language, some of the sharp qualities of observation that were characteristic of the friends that I made.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now is the story of the Tiema family one told to you, is it fiction or is it an account of an actual situation of which you had firsthand knowledge?

DON BLOCH

It's a very interesting question because in the course of that one and a half years I learned a great deal about many individuals. but the Tiema family as it appears in my novel is a figment of my imagination.

DON BLOCH

There was a mystery involved. As I got to know various leprosy patients and various people in the community, there were some figures that remained clouded in mystery, clouded in darkness, people didn't know about them. People were interested about them but they didn't know what to say and it was Asha Makokha I began to dream about above all when I came back to Holland. I began to dream about her and tried to imagine what her life must have been like, a life that had been forgotten by the people around her.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now leprosy is a very loathsome disease, we all know that. What are you trying to achieve in the book? To draw attention to the loathsomeness of the disease?

DON BLOCH

Oh not at all. Excuse me for interrupting but not at all. Leprosy is not a loathsome disease. "The Modern Common Wind", the name of the novel is trying to capture the fact that people understand today that it is no longer a special, horrifying disease. It is a communicable disease just as any other disease and can be treated quite simply if discovered in time with modern medicine. The purpose of the book is to try to destroy the stereotypes about leprosy patients, about how horrible it is, how disfiguring it is, in the West especially. To show that people with leprosy are like other people and their lives don't have to change appreciably.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When I said it was a loathsome disease, I wasn't thinking in terms of the social context, I was thinking in terms of the physical deformities. You go into very great detail about these deformities and the impression I had was one of a sort of a cringing feeling which is probably contrary to what you intended.

DON BLOCH

Certainly because before I went to Kenya, before I worked with leprosy patients I too was afraid, I wondered how I would feel. But I noticed as I got to know people, as I looked in their eyes, as I heard their voices, I began to forget they were leprosy patients, even the old-timers who were disfigured from the disease. Perhaps I've underestimated how sharply, how upsettingly it comes over on the page. My attempt is to help the reader visualise and experience the identity of the characters concerned.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now when you are describing "Camp Lepra", you are talking about these two lovers sitting down talking and inhaling putrid air and the word 'putrid' is very suggestive of something disgusting.

DON BLOCH

But you see in the past - the book falls into two sections, the past and the present - in the past, leprosy patients were confined in closed spaces. There were no medicines and it is a fact that people who knew those camps explained that to outsiders the air was horrifying. I think you will remember in the novel that when Emmanuel first arrives, he is struck very strongly by the quality of the air but as he is there, he grows used to it. He falls in love and learns to discover his happiness inside the camp which finally he leaves.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now when you are describing Marguaritte's horrible experience on waking up to find that part of her toes have been chewed up and there was a rat sitting there holding a lump in its paws, what impression were you trying to create?

DON BLOCH

This is a very realistic situation but I was trying to make clear two things. The horrifying thing about leprosy is that it means you lose feeling, that Marguaritte's toes could be gnawed off in the night without her feeling it. But more important than that, I wanted to illustrate the calm matter-of-fact way she went about treating herself, where she accepted the situation and continued with her life, taking precautions that it would never happen again.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what feeling do you have towards lepers themselves apart from..

DON BLOCH

Excuse me but that's a word I would be very careful in using. You realise that I never use the word leper in the novel. The word 'leper' is out of date. The word that is used, especially a European word, to describe people who were isolated and were shunned. The world decided to combat leprosy, the unions of all the medical associations involved in the fight against leprosy have asked the world please not to use the word 'leper' but to talk about leprosy patients.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh I see. Well the leprosy patients, what's your attitude towards them?

DON BLOCH

Through having had leprosy, through having contracted the disease, many people have learned a great deal about themselves and about the meaning of life and the importance of making the most out of their lives while it's available to them. So perhaps the most remarkable people that I have every met would be numbered among the leprosy patients who were the inspiration behind the novel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well these in your book certainly don't seem to be attractive at all. I mean you say that they try to spread the disease by leaving their spittle in the common beer bowl.

DON BLOCH

Excuse me but that was the voice of a member of the community.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes well....

DON BLOCH

Those are part of the misunderstandings that are very widespread in Africa. I was in the unique position in Kenya of living in the middle of an African family, learning to come to know the children, several of the wives, the whole community. I was listening to their stories and their attitudes towards each other as Africans, as Wanga, as Christians and I began to understand what it was I wanted to write about. The stories that are spread about leprosy patients may not have anything to do with reality about the way they behave and that's one of the things I tried to illustrate to talk about in the novel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So your aim, Don, is to make people accept leprosy patients as human beings in their communities?

DON BLOCH

Well I hoped in "The Modern Common Wind" was to let them speak for themselves, not always about their disease but to see them as human beings living a life, one part of which was their disease.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I hope that unlike me, other people who read this book will accept the leper - sorry for using that word - leprosy patients as human beings and I hope I'll come round to that view as well.

DON BLOCH

I don't know what your experience is when you were living in Kenya, in Africa whether you knew any individuals....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I come from Ghana actually. I have seen a few leprosy patients around.

DON BLOCH

You see, seeing them, especially in the cities where they've been reduced to begging is very different from getting to know them. The point of the novel is the more you get to know them, the more you appreciate their humanity and less you are afraid of the surface.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Don Bloch thank you very much indeed.

DON BLOCH

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

We're going to close today's programme with another song from Martha Ulaeto, this time a modern rendition of a traditional Nigerian song. It's called "The Ibeno Song".

Until the same time next week from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.

MUSIC

"The Ibeno Song" by Martha Ulaeto.