

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Two recent events have decided this edition of "Arts and Africa": there's an exhibition of books by African authors who are all women at London's Africa Centre and we're still recovering from the musical impact of an all-women's band from Guinea, Les Amazones de Guinee.

MUSIC

Tayesala: Les Amazones de Guinee.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The band's a big one and it's been playing for a good many years. It began as Guinea's National Policewomen's Band and someone who's been brave enough to encounter so many policemen face to face is Jean-Victor Nkolo, who's a producer in our French for Africa Service. Jean-Victor, is it true that when the Les Amazones aren't playing they're working as Traffic Wardens?!!!

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Yes Alex. Les Amazones are Traffic Wardens in Guinea, in Conakry, but I've never had the luck to drive a car down there. You know that musicians in Guinea are all Civil Servants, so when you're not playing music you have to do something else and they are Traffic Wardens in their country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What's the background of the players?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Some of the players used to play traditional music although those who are younger come from a much more modern background. They play electric instruments or jazz instruments like horns, like saxaphones, but the music is always Guinean but we can feel the jazz influence and modern beat.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, talking about the individuals, what age group are they? Are they young or are there some older women among them?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

The only one who is young is Sona Diabate, who sings and who plays the rhythmic electric guitar. The others are middle-aged women to older women, fifty years old sometimes - even more - and they have been together for twentyfive years. Sona Diabate is the newcomer in the group and she is also very good because she brings a new spirit to the group.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now this particular band seems to specialise in all the rather unpopular professions like Traffic Wardens and Policemen. Are they popular as a band?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Yes they are very, very popular. They are popular in French-speaking Africa and they are also popular in other countries like Tanzania, Nigeria. They are very, very popular. And if you want to, listen to one of their tracks here and it is Sona Diabate singing for the Queen of the Amazones because they trust her a lot.

MUSIC

Mama Nyepon (Lannaya).

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well that music sounds very soft to me and very pleasant. Why do they insist on assuming this masculine identity? They talk about Les Amazones. Amazones are masculine women.

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Because the Amazones used to be an army of women warriors of the King of Benin a long time ago and the history is that they were very tough on the battleground and I think that is why they want to keep that kind of masculinity, that kind of 'machoism' in their music. But they are so nice and so gentle I can tell you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was just about to ask you, what sort of music do they specialise in?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

They play a kind of Guinean rumba but I think that it is not only the rhythm, you have to take notice of the content of the music. They speak about the emancipation of women and their fight against alcoholism and things like that. There is a message in their music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nevertheless, people enjoy it as music, as entertainment I suppose?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Yes, I think that if you enjoy something, sooner or later you'll listen to what the content says. It is not very easy for women to fight against alcohol or to fight against wives being battered for instance. So they try to make it pleasant but at the same time they try to make it cogent. That is why the music is good but the message is also strong.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You have a record to demonstrate this, haven't you?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Yes, as a matter of fact the number you are going to hear now is called Samba and it is about a man who has a very wonderful night-life but who doesn't know exactly what he is doing and the Samba is asking him to stop and try and find out exactly what he wants in life. It is sung by Sona Diabate. She is the youngest, she is small, she is thin, but what a voice!

MUSIC

Samba.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Les Amazones de Guinee with Samba. And talking to me about the band was Jean-Victor Nkolo.

Unlike musicians, the work of a writer is a solitary occupation. But once you're a celebrity, the admiration of your readers and the financial support of your publisher can compensate for all the obstacles to creative writing. However most writers don't achieve fame and have to rely on their own morale or often on their own compulsion to write. The display of books by African women writers at the exhibition I mentioned earlier reminded me forceably of what women writers on this programme have told us of their experiences.

Personal and political obstacles to achievement are often at their most daunting in South Africa. Miriam Tlali who wrote that devastating account of her working life in "Murial at the Metropolitan", provided an entirely matter-of-fact account of her beginnings as a writer. She explained that she couldn't possibly have had time to write while she was still working.

MIRIAM TLALI

Perhaps I would never have written that book if I had not been forced to stay at home. You see my mother-in-law became very ill with a terminal disease so I had to nurse her. It was during that time that my husband got hold of an old, old typewriter, about forty years old, which was almost going to pieces and I started typing my experiences. Partly, it gave me some form of relief. Things were really very bad for us. I feel we had to write about ourselves, to put them down for posterity.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And if the South African experience is an extreme one - Miriam Tlali has seen her book, successful abroad, banned in her own country - I detect a similar tone of voice from the Egyptian writer Alifa Rifaat whose subjects of sex, marriage, Islam and death have made some Egyptians look askance at her novels.

ALIFA RIFAAT

As far as men are concerned I have had a lot of encouragement particularly from writers, and therefore colleagues in my field. The men who have opposed me have naturally been men from my family. On the other hand there's been the response from the women. One is from the woman in the street who has read my stories and has found in them reflected her own experience, and the concensus is that I have been very brave. On the other hand women writers have commented to me that they wish that they too could have written as I did but they were afraid. And I suppose that my suffering became a sickness and in a form of cartharsis I had to write, and I feel that if I had not written I would have become much sicker.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Compared to Alifa Rifaat and Miriam Tlali, Flora Nwapa in Nigeria wasn't tested in the same fires of social or official disapproval. She seems to have begun writing as a storyteller, rather than a message-carrier.

FLORA NWAPA

Now my mother used to sew when we were very small children and many women used to come to her and bring materials for her to make for them. Sometimes my mother would ask me to come and turn the handle of the machine for her and while I was doing this those women came and told her stories about their life - about their husbands, about the debts they owed to certain people and all the rest of it. Now I would listen and be quite captivated by these stories.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And when she came to write, it wasn't a message or a plot that got her going but her best-known character, Efuru.

FLORA NWAPA

I started writing about the kind of life we lived in a mission school near Port Harcourt and then suddenly this idea of this woman in my first novel "Efuru" came to me. Then I started writing about her and her problems and her everyday life and since after that I haven't actually stopped.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I know that there are many male writers who fail to create convincing female characters but there are several like Ekwensi and Ngugi who've succeeded, and especially Nurrudin Farah and Mongo Beti who've championed women in their novels. But it does seem equally hard, if not harder, for women to write about men, so what Bessie Head, who lives in Botswana, had to say about the hero of her first novel "Maru" is really interesting.

BESSIE HEAD

People said to me I just couldn't create a female vehicle for the novel and I'm thinking of the character after whom the book is named "Maru", a sort of part male, part female character. A male so feminine in his tenderesses and unpredictabilities with peculiar mannerisms and habits, for whom my insights that I gained into racialism were so powerful I needed a masculine form. But

this fascinating, shadowy, tender sort of semi-mystical male was so attractive that he was the great idol for my women fans. And yet he comes from the struggle to create a vehicle for ideas that were too powerful for me to express as a female author.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And following these efforts of self-expression are the entirely practical ones of getting published. Flora Nwapa and her fellow Nigerian Buchi Emecheta both rolled up their sleeves, so to speak, and founded their own publishing companies.

But most women writers in Africa don't have the chance to publish themselves. Bertha Msora from Zimbabwe who began by winning a play-writing contest must be speaking for the majority when she says:

BERTHA MSORA

Our major problem as women is creating the time to write. Secondly, there seems to be a lack of awareness of opportunities that exist in the field of writing. Possibly the publishers themselves have got to expose themselves more to people. And the other thing that might help is having more contests, more workshops, because what we have observed so far is that some of our wishes tend to be expressed either by males or outsiders, foreigners, but I've got a feeling that we can do it better ourselves because we do understand our situation better.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And who am I to gainsay that? We've been hearing from Bertha Msora, Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Alifa Rifaat and Miriam Tlali. And we're going to hear from Les Amazones de Guinee again. But not before I've reminded everyone that "Arts and Africa" will be back at this time next week. And this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey who'll be waiting to greet you then. For now, goodbye.

MUSIC

Mama Nyepon (Lannaya)