

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Today's 'Arts and Africa' begins with the news of one of the most prestigious cultural awards in Africa. The Noma Award for Publishing in Africa. The Japanese philanthropist, Shoichi Noma, established his Noma Award in 1979, open to all African writers and scholars whose work is published in Africa. On Thursday in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the judges chaired by Professor Eldred Jones announced the winners for 1985. Khalil Kamara was at the reception for 'Arts and Africa' to hear who had received the awards and here's his report from Freetown, it's read in the studio.

FIONA LEDGER

Angolan poet Antonio Jacinto is the winner of the \$3,000 Noma Prize for Publishing in Africa. Antonio Jacinto, former Minister of Education in Angola finished as winner in competition with 101 other entries. It's the first time in the history of the Award that the winner has been a poet. The volume which Antonio Jacinto submitted is a collection of poetry entitled 'Sobriviver Em Tarrafal' ('Surviving San Tiago's Tarrafal') published by the Instituto Nacional do Livro e do Disco, in Luanda Angola, last year. The jury described 'Surviving San Tiago's Tarrafal' as a chillingly appropriate title for the author's collection of poems. Jacinto served 8 years in Tarrafal prison on the Cape Verde island of San Tiago for his part in the struggle for the liberation of Angola. In a statement here, the Committee said that Jacinto's volume of poems are; "A lyric testimony to the triumph of the human spirit over tyranny, injustice, and the monotony and meanness of incarceration". The jury went on, "Antonio Jacinto communicates the strength of mind militantly intent on serving a great cause, a future humanity enjoying freedom and justice".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That report from Khalil Kamara in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

In these hard economic times in Tanzania, the capital Dar-es-Salaam is pretty shabby and rundown. But very near the centre of the city there's a splendid new building, called "Nyumba ya Sanaa".

In the early 1970's a handful of artists - just three or four - got together in Dar-es-Salaam to work as a cooperative. By the early 1980's their numbers had increased at least tenfold. Now, with considerable financial help from Norway, an even larger group of artists are splendidly housed in sumptuous premises that were opened at the end of 1983. There they have developed a remarkable community for practising and displaying the visual arts. Neville Harms heard of the development through 'Arts and Africa' and in a recent visit to Tanzania, he has been able to see Nyumba ya Sanaa for himself and to talk to some of its artists.

MUSIC - ad hoc song.

NEVILLE HARMS

Karibu Nyumba ya Sanaa sings the scratch band of musicians "Welcome to the House of Art". And indeed Nyumba ya Sanaa has an extremely friendly and welcoming atmosphere. It's a pity, perhaps, that the centre has to be surrounded by a tall wire fence with intimidating barbed wire on the top. That may keep out potential thieves but it does detract from the outside appearance of what's really a very attractive building. It's a single storey structure set in a slight hollow and though it's built mainly with modern materials its multifaceted roof of wood tiles or shingles give it a strongly African flavour. At the centre of the building is an open courtyard filled with flowers and palms and with a fountain sparkling in the sunlight. At roof level round that inner courtyard - as indeed round the edge of the roof on the outside - is an intricately moulded frieze in bas-relief. The friezes were made by two of the group's longest standing members, George Lilanga, originally a Makonde carver, and Robino Ntila, whose first talents were in drawing and painting. Robino told me that they'd been involved in more than the decoration of the building.

ROBINO NTILA

The building was designed by ourselves, we thought out what we wanted and then gave our ideas to the architect which is a British company, Covell Matthews. As for the decoration of the building, we did it ourselves as you see here. Basically the outside was done by George Lilanga and the inside, what you see, was done by myself. This decoration is telling you about life in Tanzania; there are some people chatting over there and then you can see a mama making pots and then there are two boys making fire for the local blacksmith so all this is what you can find in Tanzania.

NEVILLE HARMS

The opening to the sky ensures a light and airy environment for the artists to work in and for visitors to see their products. Because Nyumba ya Sanaa is both a workshop and a gallery, and artists and visitors intermingle freely. The building, though, provides more than working and display space. As Deo Kaffwa told me, it has provided security:

DEO KAFFWA

Since we moved into this big building we have been assured of our future because this is a permanent place. We are very optimistic for our future and the future of our children as well. At the same time it has enabled us to work more freely than before when we were renting the place.

NEVILLE HARMS

I must say that I have never ever seen an artist's workshop so clean and tidy and well organised.

DEO KAFFWA

Thank you very much.

NEVILLE HARMS

Is that because a lot of discipline is imposed on the artists?

DEO KAFFWA

Ah, yes. Most people think of an artist as a kind of rough person. Traditionally an artist has not been accorded high respect but right now it is the cause that we are trying to change.

NEVILLE HARMS

Deo Kaffwa, though an artist himself, has as his main responsibility the marketing of Nyumba ya Sanaa's products. And that represents a very wide range of arts and crafts - paintings and prints on paper, carvings, hand-printed textiles, screen prints, batiks; they're prepared to try their hand at almost anything. As I said, George Lilanga, who's something of a father-figure in the group, started off as a wood carver. He's a Makonde from Southern Tanzania and his carving was entirely in that tradition of grotesque, fantastical figures from the world of spirits and demons. And he hasn't abandoned that world. But he's now working in other media. On display was a marvellous series of pictures in ink and brightly coloured crayon, pictures of twisted, distorted supernatural beings, that contrive at the same time to be wonderfully funny, satires of human failings and foibles. And George also produces highly accomplished etchings printed from a copper plate.

GEORGE LILANGE

(In Swahili)

NEVILLE HARMS

George doesn't speak English but from what he said in Swahili I learned that he's even contemplating trying to do prints in several colours. Robino Ntila has also moved on from painting and printing with wood-cuts to etching. He showed me for instance some very stylised animal pictures, a buffalo, a hippo, a languid leopard all in monochrome blue ink. It's the very difficulty of doing good etchings that attracts Robino.

ROBINO NTILA

I like it because you don't work direct, you work on copper plate and then you have to paint and I like that challenge. Sometimes you can work on the plate and the plate can look marvellous, very nice, very beautiful but when you paint it you are not happy with the outcome and sometimes you can work on the plate and not be happy with the result but when you print it, it is so nice - so I like not to work direct but to challenge my mind.

NEVILLE HARMS

Besides extending the range of their own work the experienced members of the group serve as guides and teachers of the new recruits. Every year a number of school-leavers are taken on, the only requirement being a sign of some talent and a willingness to pull their weight in a co-operative enterprise. I should add that they also take on a number of disabled youngsters. Mathias Kirumbi is able-bodied and came a year ago from a school in Morogoro. He works just on batik.

MATHIAS KIRUMBI

First of all I didn't have an idea of batik but I learnt it here and now I know a little bit about how to make batik and also I learnt where batik comes from - in Africa and Europe. So I studied all of these things and now I am working on batik.

NEVILLE HARMS

And do you hope that you'll perhaps branch out to work in some other medium, carving for instance?

MATHIAS KIRUMBI

Yes I like to do so but it depends on the time.

NEVILLE HARMS

But time can be found for relaxation, for fun, like making music with a couple of borrowed guitars, two or three rough-looking drums, and small heap of twisted scrap metal.

MUSIC

NEVILLE HARMS

Deo Kaffwa told me how the band came to be formed.

DEO KAFFWA

It is funny, when I start talking about the band. They are youngsters who came to work as artists and craft people; they were people who said they liked football, people who said they liked netball, others said they like music; others said they liked table-tennis then we started the football and people went to their football ground, the netball went to their side and the band also formed their band and that is how it started.

MUSIC

NEVILLE HARMS

But Nyumba ya Sanaa has to earn its own living and in charge of marketing, Deo has a heavy responsibility to keep the place solvent.

DEO KAFFWA

We do sell a lot but the thing is that we want to make sure that we satisfy the customer with the quality each time we send the order. We try to make sure we have a small profit in it. We don't want to get 100% profit as the other shops are doing in town, we want to charge reasonable prices and retain a certain profit which will enable us to

pay thoroughly for our use here.

NEVILLE HARMS

Does an artist whose work sells very well, like George Lilange, make more than someone who has just come in?

DEO KAFFWA

This is a very good thing about this place. The artists do not demand more. Besides having George who is a good artist we have someone who is doing gardening, we have someone who is cleaning, someone in the office working at accounts, therefore George has to pay the salaries of all these people through his art work. Luckily they have been accepting the fixed salary that we have been giving them but whenever possible we do provide incentives.

NEVILLE HARMS

All very much, it seems, in the spirit of Nyerere-style socialism which is not too easy to find in present-day Tanzania. But what effect does all this have on the creativity of the artists? Isn't there a risk that all this living and working together might stifle individual expression and lead to dull uniformity of style - a sort of superior airport art? Well on the contrary, Robino Ntila says, there's a valuable stimulus in working with other artists.

ROBINO NTILA

Yes, just by looking at what the other artist is doing it is like an unspoken exchange going through our heads. You see someone is making something new and you say also that you think you have to make something new in another way, not copying the other. Really everyone uses his own ideas and his own style.

NEVILLE HARMS

And from what I saw there's no doubt that the communal approach not only fosters a great deal of experiment among the artists at Nyumbaya Sanaa but also generates very considerable joy in their work.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Neville Harms on a visit to 'Nyumba ya Sanaa' in Dar-es-Salaam. Next week at this time I'll bring you more news and views of the arts of Africa. For now, from Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.