

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC

Traditional music from Morocco.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The music comes from Morocco and later in today's programme we'll be hearing the news that it heralds. But our chief guest is an artist, not a musician - or should I say he's a cartoonist. And if you think that cartoons are only amusing or only political then you'd have to think again after a visit to an exhibition of cartoons by Ghanatta just as I've had to. That nom de plume reveals straight away the homeland and the subject matter. Ghanatta (or Yaw Boakye as he's really called) uses his brush and his pen to draw a personal view of life in Ghana and the rest of Africa. Some of his work is definitely political - his portrayal, for instance, of South Africa as a black vulture with its beak padlocked and hatching a brood of white babies - but I found his other cartoons even more interesting and arresting.

Ghanatta saw his first cartoon in print in 1954. That was the year he enrolled on a correspondence course in Press Art with the London College of Art. Two years later he received his diploma. That was exactly thirty years ago.

GHANATTA

Fortunately for me Ghana was about to have its independence and as a cartoonist I started straight away to come out with some cartoons in the Accra evening news. At that time it was just a handout and I started some cartoon strips in it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well weren't you scared that you were entering into a mine field? Politics is a very difficult area and that you might be stepping on people's toes?

GHANATTA

Well my enthusiasm towards Ghana's coming independence was really great and I was a follower of the CPP and so I didn't so much think about any difficulties.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The exhibition I saw at the Africa Centre is quite spectacular, I don't think I have seen any works of art of that nature before. Did you step out of the cartoon field into this particular field or do you consider that it is in the same form as a cartoon?

GHANATTA

Yes, I consider these pictures in the same form as cartoons but this time I have gone off a little by bringing out cartoons supported by the African myths based on our folklore and other stories. Looking at these cartoons you can see that a lot of them have been based on stories told when we were young. When I started my cartooning I didn't use these stories I just followed the trends which of course came from Britain and other places, now I am basing my cartoons on the beliefs of my people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So they are more timeless than, say, the feature cartoons in newspapers. The figures I found very scary. They are not the sort of figures you find in ordinary cartoons. You hardly see anybody with a normal neck; their necks are longer than even a giraffes's and very long and twisted in all sorts of shapes and forms. You hardly see a proper human face; human beings have the faces of birds. For example, you find that somebodies toes are like a mortar. That is why I said these were quite different from the normal cartoons. Why don't you give them normal human faces?

GHANATTA

Our stories are always intertwined with animals, birds and all that and in this case I am not dressing birds or animals in human attire but I combine both the features of animals and humans to portray an idea - that this world is one, that human beings cannot live without trees or rivers or birds and all that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But these have ugly sides to them. For example, you find people being stretched and somebody in a very twisted form, legs stretched out and neck stretched out being used as a catapult by somebody else. Or you find a Nigerian girl with her tummy in the shape of a pot and somebody is stirring some food inside it and she's almost screaming with pain. These surely are not normal things?

GHANATTA

Yes, if you go into the stories about witchcraft, the girls in a family who are not having children, it is said that their wombs have been turned into cooking pots where they cook all sorts of food by witchcraft and by doing this they will never have the chance to bring forth. They go round to juju men and to other areas and they are told these things and they believe them and they go on trying to find a way to get a child and this is the way, as they see it, that I've portrayed in the cartoon form.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now some of the figures, too, are ordinary people, ordinary people plying their trade - the man who sells kenke or somebody else who washes clothes in Nigeria. You show her wringing out a cloth that she has just washed but then the cloth turns into a human being whose body has been twisted and the tongue is hanging out and he's in great pain. Nobody would normally think that a washer-woman would be so cruel as to twist people like that but there you have an additional criticism of her and that is that she squeezes money out of people.

GHANATTA

Yes, that trade is so fabulous that in that area no other washer-man or washer-woman will have the chance to get all that she gets. She has so many customers that she's always able to squeeze the last out of you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

By her excellence?

GHANATTA

Well no one can say. Not exactly by her excellence. The work could be crude, it wouldn't be so good, but still you have to go to her.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it because she is using some magical influence on people?

GHANATTA

This is how the story goes, that is why I am trying to portray it. I am doing all this because people only say it, no one just puts these things on paper, either in writing or in cartoon forms.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, one thing also struck me which also made me very uneasy about some of these drawings. They might be quite harmless but I still felt very uneasy: people sitting down and their toes grow into roots or their bodies, as in one example, of the old lady whose body turns into that of a millipede, then her breasts turn into tentacles and that sort of thing. Are you trying to say that there is an ugly side to every human being? Or is it just, once again, something in the form of a myth.

GHANATTA

Mostly they are in the forms of a myth. We always say in our mythical thoughts that men can turn into other things and in actual fact that happens in these stories. In my own village there was an old man who gave me this facial mark he was over 100 years and he wouldn't die, we were told that when he was young he went to the northern part of Ghana and made a juju and swallowed a stone and until this stone came out the man will never die. When I went to the village some time back and asked about him I understand that he had been buried somehow because he just wouldn't die. (laughter) And this is the way I can portray him.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Finally can I ask you about your method, your use of black and white. Why don't you paint in colour, is there a special reason?

GHANATTA

Well black and white are always good for newspaper reproduction, that is the reason why I am mostly contented with black and white. To come by the materials, the black ink and the paper, it was really very difficult. In fact, if you look at the work very well you can see that some had very nice brush work whilst others had very crude brush work because at the beginning the brush was good but as I went on working it became old and I couldn't have any other brush to buy. And as for the ink, well I had to ask two people on two occasions coming to London to buy me a little bottle of Indian ink which I couldn't find over here. Now things are improving and I hope very soon such things will be available.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well with all the difficulties you worked under you have produced something which I find quite extraordinary. It is fantastic.

GHANATTA

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I was talking to Yaw Boakye, alias Ghanatta. Those of you who have read the novels of the Nigerian Amos Tutuola will, I'm sure, see in Ghanatta's drawing a visual equivalent.

MUSIC

Traditional music from Morocco.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The applause for those Moroccan performers came from an audience at a cultural festival way back in 1969 in Algiers. Now there's news of an international music festival planned for this year in Morocco, for Marrakesh in July. Less traditional and more popular. One of the organisers, Hayat Hammon-Tahra, has been telling me about their plans so far.

HAYAT HAMMON-TAHRA

We have participants from Africa, of course, as Morocco is an African country, and mainly from Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria, Zaire, Egypt, Tunisia and many, many other African countries.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Any outstanding names among them?

HAYAT HAMMON-TAHRA

Yes like Fela, Osibisa, Salam and actually it is only a preliminary programme.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now who can use the opportunity to come to this festival?

HAYAT HAMMON-TAHRA

It is open to everybody provided that the music is contemporary and modern. Mainly we insist on young people - I mean it is a promotion for young people - but we also have many stars. For spectators it's open to everybody and for this reason we have arranged special rates in hotels, food and transport inside Morocco. For instance, there is something like a 50% discount in hotels in Marrakesh during the period of the festival.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The festival lasts from the 4th to the 13th July - just in time for King Hassan's birthday and the place? Marrakesh in the Grand Atlas mountains. Which gives me the opportunity to round off today's programme with some lively music from the Berber people who live high up in these mountains. Whether they'll feature in this year's festival I don't know.

Next week at this time I'll be here to present more of the arts of Africa. For now it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.