

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Today in 'Arts and Africa' we have an opportunity to meet a writer whose first book was very warmly received both in Zimbabwe, the authors home country, and internationally.

Before we hear about what he's writing these days I'd like to read a paragraph from Shimmer Chinodya's book first published four years ago, 'Dew in the Morning'. It's a collection of anecdotes of life in a Shona village seen through the eyes of a growing boy. This episode is about a servant girl called 'Cheru'.

Alex Tetteh-Lartey reads an extract from 'Dew in the Morning'.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Fiona Lloyd has been asking Shimmer Chinodya about his development as a writer. They were talking in Harare where he now lives but Chinodya is grateful to have been brought up in a village that inspired 'Dew in the Morning' which he would describe in this way.

SHIMMER CHINODYA

It's more or less a record, with some fictional distortion, it is more or less a record of the life my family lived in the country.

FIONA LLOYD

It has very day-to-day experiences of the people in that area, doesn't it?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

Yes, in fact when I was writing it I really didn't have any ideas about novels as such, I think all I had in mind was to put it down - it was just a record.

FIONA LLOYD

Do you think every writer really starts off in that way by writing an autobiography?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

Most people I know do, I think. I think it is a good thing in that you learn to discipline yourself and your familiar ground. All the problems you have are to do with style rather than subject matter.

FIONA LLOYD

The next thing that you published in Zimbabwe was 'Farayi's Girls' - am I right? What was that about?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

(Laughter) I'm still not sure what I think about that book. It was really meant to be about growing up and like it says at the back of the book, "it sums up the joys and pain and problems of growing up".

FIONA LLOYD

So again, quite autobiographical?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

Well not quite so much as 'Dew in the Morning'. I think there was more editing and more distorting in 'Farayi's Girls'.

FIONA LLOYD

You went to university here in Zimbabwe and you studied English Literature. Some writers have found that that's been a kind of mixed blessing in their lives, in that studying other great literatures of the world can almost act as brakes on your own writer's flow. Did you find that?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

I'm not sure. I like the idea that I did literature and that I got to know what other people are writing about and at least I can now go about my writing knowing what other people have done. It also exposed me to a great number of books and writers.

FIONA LLOYD

So you would say it was rather an enriching experience rather than a distorting one or a negative one?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

I think one would have to be careful, though, not to pay too much attention to critical theories and that sort of thing and just go ahead and do what you want to do.

FIONA LLOYD

Now, you choose to write in English - why is that?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

Well, we were brought up to believe English was the language and, whether that's okay or not, I think for me it is too late to talk about that. I sometimes wish I could write in Shona.

FIONA LLOYD

Do you feel that in some ways you are experimenting with English, in the way you and other writers of Africa are using the English language is in fact quite different from the way English born writers would be using it?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

Oh definitely. Even more so now. I'm finding I am unhappy when my English is English. In all the writing I have been doing lately I am trying to make it different, I am always looking for ways to make it mine, to make it particularly unique and Zimbabwean as much as possible.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Since his first two publications Shimmer Chinodya has spent a year at the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of Iowa in the United States. That experience has given him the chance to see Africa from the outside, it's given him the experience of homesickness and, he says, working so closely with so many other young writers has made him more self critical and he claims to be almost ruthless when he revises what he now writes. And what he is now writing is his third novel called 'Danger My Son' - at least that's the provisional title. Again it's autobiographical and set in the 1960's but this time he's planning a work on a large scale with a much tougher core.

SHIMMER CHINODYA

The heart of the book is about the war and someone who goes off to war and then comes back and tries to fit in. You could say it is about the generations of people in Rhodesia and Zimbabwe.

FIONA LLOYD

And the extract we are going to hear, where does that come in the book?

SHIMMER CHINODYA

This comes about a third of the way into the book. It's about our parents, I would think, in the 1960's and some of the experiences of people during that time.

FIONA LLOYD

Well Shimmer thank you very much for talking to us, and we look forward now to listening to the extract from your novel.

Shimmer Chinodya reads an extract from his book 'Danger My Son'.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Shimmer Chinodya talking to Fiona Lloyd. And if you'd like to read the rest of 'Dew in the Morning' it's published in paperback by Mambo press of Zimbabwe.

The Dapper foundation is a new name to me but Susan MacDonald in Paris has been finding out about the foundation which was set up as recently as 1983. The aim is to preserve and study pre-colonial African art. Those sort of intentions put me on my guard: the approach could be very academic, it could be patronising - "Primitive" is a favourite work. Well, the Dapper foundation has made public its attitude by putting on in Paris no fewer than three exhibitions and Susan MacDonald has been to all of them for 'Arts and Africa'.

SUSAN MACDONALD

The first is at the museum of decorative art which is part of the Louvre museum. At the entrance to the exhibition is an inscription:

'The history of Art is comparable to that of Literature. Both are made up of continuity and change, never progress'.

The room contains a fascinating selection of 17th century African masks and statues mostly from West, Equatorial and Central Africa. Each one is a masterpiece. There are the small Fang statues of women with their expressions of innocence and wonder; tall powerful fetish statues from the Congo and Zaire, and strangely quiet, solemn, long-faced Dogon figures. Perhaps the most forceful statue in the room is a tall, spare, metal figure of the Benin King, Bele, representing the god Ogun - god of metal and war. It is an extraordinary work of art not only for its power but also for the grace and mastery of its lines.

There is very little information on each work of art, they are there to speak for themselves. And interspersed amongst them are one or two pieces which come from another age and another country. The message is clear: firstly that all art is intertwined throughout the centuries and secondly that the incredible balance of line, form and emotion in African art was and is a world force from a purely aesthetic view point and the word 'primitive' in the derogatory sense has no place in this reality

The other two exhibitions are at the Dapper Foundation itself. The first is based on the Dutchman Olfert Dapper's enormous book called 'The Description of Africa' which he published in 1668. Although he never went to Africa himself he based his work on information received from traders and sailors whom he met who were highly familiar with the continent. Dapper's book describes the splendours of the kingdoms of Loango and Benin. There are etchings on display showing the way the people lived in the 17th century and together with the etchings are a small selection of superb, contemporary trumpets, embroidered cloth, statues and carvings from the two kingdoms. The third exhibition is a display of some 60 Kota shrine figures these are composed above all of a huge disc-like face and two expressive eyes. They are created by detailed work in bronze and copper overlaid on wood. To see this collection of copper figures all together, and it is, I'm told, the first time that such an exhibition has been mounted, is to appreciate the diversity of the stylistic faces. Some have only a suggestion of a nose and mouth while in others they are quite prominent. This is the first time that the Dapper Foundation has mounted a series of exhibitions and their initiative in putting African art in its rightful perspective is done with courage and sensitivity.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Susan MacDonald was reporting on African art exhibitions in Paris organised by the Dapper Foundation. And what I would very much like to hear is that these exhibitions would be on show in Africa and not only in the countries the works originally come from either.

Next week at the same time I'll be introducing more of the arts of Africa. I hope you'll join me. But today's programme has come to an end so goodbye for now from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.