

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. And in today's programme two classics of West African fiction, one new, one very long-established.

MUSIC from 'Things Fall Apart'.

With that theme music, television viewers in Nigeria have been settling down to a long-running serialised version of Chinua Achebe's famous novel "Things Fall Apart". Published back in 1958, the novel is set, of course, in Eastern Nigeria and deals with the double tragedy of Okonkwo, its hero, and his village Umuofia as white missionaries make their first incursions into a traditional Igbo society. This is not the first time the book has been filmed, and earlier this year an Igbo version was serialised on television. A director of the new English language serial for NTV, Adielia Onyedibia, has been in London completing the editing of the last few episodes and he's been talking about the project to Ben Okri, who asked him first what the main problems had been in transferring the novel to the screen.

ADIELIA ONYEDIBIA

One, the problem of putting flesh on the bones in Achebe's book; for example, we just hear that Okonkwo is a warrior and we have had to build up Okonkwo as a warrior, going a little bit further than the book. And, secondly, one had to cope with the cultural context of Igboland; a lot of people may not understand that Igboland is very vast and diverse so the problem I had was a matter of synthesis.

BEN OKRI

You talk about how vast Igboland is and how you had to flesh out the book. How much research did you have to do?

ADIELIA ONYEDIBIA

We went into several areas of Igboland and talked to some of the elders. We went to places like Ogidi, the author's homeland, and did research on greetings, for example, marriages, costuming and so many other things.

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BEN OKRI

Did you find any inaccuracies in the book that you had to correct?

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

I wouldn't like to get into that!

BEN OKRI

I thought you wouldn't! But the most important problem I would think, because 'Things Fall Apart' is so vastly read, is that of the gap between how the reader sees someone like Okonkwo and how you have to visualize him - how you have to present him. I imagine him as a very fierce, slightly humourless character.

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

Yes we've got fierceness in the man we use as Okonkwo. Peter Duchea is a broadcaster in Enugu. He had his training here in Britain, but he works with Anambra Broadcasting Services.

BEN OKRI

Now I'm going to move on to another area that you might find a little contentious. When Achebe was over here in Britain recently he hinted at a slight gap between how he sees the book and how he feels that you have interpreted it. Could that just be the writer's temperament, or is it the necessity of what you have had to do?

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

When you adapt a book you just have to take some liberties. If it is a lesser-known book you take more liberties, but if it is widely known you have got to be very careful.

BEN OKRI

So what you really mean is that the better the book the more that you are happy that the author is dead so that you can do what you want with it?

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

No I didn't say that! (Laughter) We are trying to be as close as possible to the book.

BEN OKRI

To the spirit of the book?

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

Yes.

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BEN OKRI

And from what I heard from the actuality, you caught the sonority of the idiom. How much effort did that take?

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

You see, in Igboland language is very important. We talk a lot in proverbs, as Achebe said in his book, oil with which yam is eaten. So you had to remind yourself all the time that you had to develop a certain style of language so that you don't demean the book and the personalities and the time of the story.

BEN OKRI

It's 28 years now since the book was published. What does this mean for Nigerian television that you're finally serializing one of our primal texts?

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

I think I can say this with all certainty that it is the biggest thing NTV has ever done.

BEN OKRI

How much did you spend on it for example? Are you prepared to say?

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

We are still spending.

BEN OKRI

Is it over a million yet?

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

Well, I'm not an accountant, but we spent quite a lot of money.

BEN OKRI

Do you intend to do more projects like this with other Igbo writers for example.

ADIELA ONYEDIBIA

NTV is planning a lot of things but I don't think we will just want to confine ourselves to Igbo writers. The main thing in adapting any book is the concept. Whether it is by a black man or blue man or green man, it doesn't make any difference, so long as the idea is properly explored and exposed.

MUSIC from Things Fall Apart.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Adiela Onyedibia was talking about Nigerian Television's production of "Things Fall Apart". And I certainly hope it gets a wide showing in the rest of Africa, and, indeed, outside.

A new novel from West Africa, which promises to become a classic, has begun its life outside. Just published in London is "Search Sweet Country" by the Ghanaian writer Kojo Laing. Although Laing has had quite a number of poems published in the past, this is his first novel. It's certainly an ambitious novel and not at all a conventional or predictable one. It's set in the Ghana of the 1970's and although it has a wealth of vivid characters and handles many contemporary Ghanaian themes - the clash, for instance, between tradition and progress, corruption in politics, the tribulations of sex, love and marriage - there isn't any central plot or story-line. Indeed, with it's rich use of imagery and word-play, it has more of the characteristics of a poem than a simple story-telling novel. When I talked to Kojo Laing he told me what he was trying to do in "Search Sweet Country".

KOJO LAING

It is basically about the attempt to create a new type of spiritual consciousness for Ghana if I may say so, and this is basically what the book is about - a new world for Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I would call that the theme of the novel. But it doesn't have a conventional plot does it?

KOJO LAING

Well there is a thread of plot going through, I think. But, you know, my main interest is the type of characters that I created and the type of world view they present in their inter-relationships. I find that much more important than a normal or a traditional plot.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I only raise the matter because in the publicity material on the cover of the book it is suggested that the illegal importation of horses is a central plot in the book, and I don't find that sufficiently established.

KOJO LAING

I think you are absolutely right. You know some critics have picked on that incident. This particular incident doesn't touch other characters in the book. You are the first person to say that actually!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now about the language. I was fascinated by the language. I don't think I have read any book using language in this particular way and I thought it was something innovative. You know the way you make inanimate things tangible and intangible things living.

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KOJO LAING

You've got it absolutely right, in the sense that in my poetry I have a temperamental preference for the concrete as opposed to the abstract, and I feel that this is the contribution that both Ghanaian culture and myself, humbly, have to offer.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You've just mentioned something which I would like to come back to about poetry. But in your novel you make all things intertwine - everything seems to merge into the other and into the universe as a whole. What's the idea behind it?

KOJO LAING

In my teens and then in my early 20's I did believe that the world had to be a whole and that there was only an artificial distinction between the abstract and the concrete, the inner and the outer, the whole and the fragment. And this has been transmuted into the novel from the poetry. I think that we are more inclusive in the way we look at our world, and I think this is the unique contribution that Ghanaians can make. And I think there are various ways in which it can come out, through philosophy, even through economics and politics.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now I said I was coming back to this question of poetry. Do you think the poetic language, which I think you use in this novel, is an appropriate form to be used in the novel?

KOJO LAING

I think my problem was to have the type of language I wanted and yet at the same time, one, to make the characters live through it and, two, to make development possible. And if it looks poetic, I think that is incidental to my main concern, because I certainly do not write poetry in this fashion - it is different.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's just that you use so much imagery. Imagery is more allied to poetry than to prose.

KOJO LAING

Well it depends. I think maybe there's a relationship between the use of imagery that I present in the book and our culture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can you select a passage for the benefit of our listeners?

KOJO LAING

Yes. If we could look at the first page.
Reads an extract from "Search Sweet Country".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now in the book also you use a lot of references to local things, especially Ghanaian foods and so on, and then you also have local jokes, contemporary jokes, and so on. As a Ghanaian I could understand a lot of these references, but how would somebody from another country get the gist, the humour which is buried in these references?

KOJO LAING

Personally, I believe that our way of life is rich enough, important enough, broad enough, for us to deal with it in our most natural way. With a composite work of art you cannot spend half the time explaining to an audience. I think I have reached out to the reader in the sense that I have tried to not only instruct but entertain. There are quite a few jokes, there are a few plays on words and things like that and they don't all have a purely Ghanaian reference, you see. So I do hope that those non-Ghanaians will also find it quite entertaining - that aspect apart from the art.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kojo Laing and his novel "Search Sweet Country" is published by William Heinemann at £10.95 in Britain. And that's all in today's "Arts and Africa". Let's end with some music from a new record that I hope we'll be able to look at sometime in the future. It's from Guinea by Jali Musa Jawara. Till next week it's goodbye from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey.