

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

BBC COPYRIGHT CONTROL

ARTS AND AFRICA

FIRST B'CAST: 27.3.87

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. A special welcome from "Arts and Africa" to everyone who's bursting to get into print. Later in the programme we have some news that may be to your advantage.

We begin today with someone whose first book created quite a stir. The author received many compliments, especially from fellow writers in Africa and beyond. That was nearly twenty years ago in 1969. Since then he seems to have slipped out of sight, at least as a literary figure. I'm talking about the author of "We Killed Mangy-Dog", a collection of short stories, but before we meet him let me give you a glimpse into his way with words. Here's how he describes that Mangy-Dog:

EXTRACT FROM "We Killed Mangy-Dog" by Luis Bernardo Honwana.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That's a translation from the original Portuguese of Luis Bernardo Honwana. There are something like one hundred and fifty million speakers of Portuguese around the world - that's a big reading public but their literature is not one that's familiar to readers of English. Honwana, for instance is only known by one book. As a film-maker and now Mozambique's Minister for Culture perhaps he doesn't have the time. Well, he's just been on a visit to London which gave Florence Akst the chance to ask him to assure his admirers that he still writes and that his writings will be translated into English.

LUIS BERNADO HONWANA

Sure, I can assure you that I continue to write but I can't assure you that my works will be translated into English. That depends on many factors but if it depends on me, of course I want to see what I write now translated into English.

FLORENCE AKST

What have you been writing? Are they all short stories? Are you a "short story man" or is that just one aspect of your literary output? And where do they appear?

HONWANA

Really I'm a "short story man" if you want to put things that way. All of

what I produce are short stories. I'm not very prolific as a writer but from time to time just to make my presence felt I publish some stories in local newspapers or Portuguese-speaking literary magazines.

AKST

The theme in the collection that was published in 1969 is the becoming of awareness of what the world is really like, particularly to young people. Has that theme been constantly with you?

HONWANA

Probably my vision is less naive. It's no longer just an attempt of witnessing, producing testimony but it is an attempt to have an opinion. Of course this opinion is offered rather than imposed because we're speaking about literature, aren't we?

AKST

As an example could you tell us a little bit about your most recent story?

HONWANA

My most recent story... well, this is not fair! (laughs) My actual story, to contradict what I've been saying, refers to the past, to a pre-independent time, and it is a story centred on a barber's shop where someone coming from Bulawayo after quite a number of years of absence has gone back to Lourence Marques. The barber doesn't recognise him but through posters, through signs on the walls, through many small details he recognises the place, he feels good to be there and he feels that he should make the barber recognise him though this might risk his mission. It was a compulsion for the repossession of his past. This person was in Mozambique for a mission... one understands that there is something to do with the liberation struggle. But still the compulsion is such that he doesn't resist. He makes himself known to the barber because there is this phenomenon of repossession of his past.

AKST

You are very highly regarded by writers of short stories. I know of several writers of short stories in English who think of you as someone whom they admire very much. When you write are you conscious of having some kind of rhythm to your prose? To me there's a certain, almost rhythmic, musical quality. Is it something you work at to get or is it quite spontaneous?

HONWANA

I hope it was spontaneous. I work on that and sometimes it comes out, sometimes it doesn't.

AKST

You recognise it?

HONWANA

Yes I do.

AKST

There's also a moral quality that interests me very much because you don't seem to make explicit judgements.

HONWANA

I don't know if nowadays I still have this gentleness. I don't know if nowadays this is still my approach to that problem.

AKST

You're more certain now and you wish me as a reader to be more aware of what you consider to be just and unjust?

HONWANA

Well probably. I'm less honest with you and this is the only thing which has happened and it is because I'm a grown-up now. I want your connivance and so I use all my ability to make sure you're going to be on my side. But, of course, I don't put strongly what is to be concluded from a certain situation because I think this is useless and it can kill the whole construction because what I think is important is the process itself. It's the voyage which we have together, myself and the reader, a voyage which might not be exactly coincidental on the way but, well, the joy is just to have this process done, and the way it is done is not so fundamental.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And for people who read Portuguese, Luis Bernado Honwana whom we've just heard talking to Florence Akst recommends the writings of two Mozambique compatriots, Mia Couto and Albino Magaia.

Over the years a good many manuscripts have been fired at me by would-be authors from every part of Africa. As presenter of "Arts and Africa" I suppose I'm an obvious target. Up to now I've sent them back with a note of encouragement. Today I've more to offer. "A Handbook for African Writers" has recently been published. It's the outcome of a writer's conference in London a couple of years ago. It's been compiled and edited by James Gibbs who joined me in the studio the other day together with the Nigerian novelist and journalist, Eddie Iroh who wrote "Forty-eight Guns for the General". Who had James Gibbs in mind, I wondered, when he was preparing the Handbook?

JAMES GIBBS

I think I had anyone in mind who's written a poem or a short story; anybody who's started to write creatively and wants to get his work to a larger audience.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Would you advise him to send his short story, his poems, to a magazine or straight to a publisher?

GIBBS

I think he should start off with a magazine. I think he should start off with a school or college magazine. I think he might then go on to a local or national newspaper and in the book I've listed as many literary magazines as I've been able to find.

EDDIE IROH

But aren't we assuming, James, that the young writer is either writing short stories or poems because this is about the only thing you can squeeze into a magazine. Suppose it's somebody who thinks his ability lies in the area of the novel and wants to go straight ahead and have a crack at it?

GIBBS

I would suggest that it might be a good idea to start with short stories and looking at the experience of people like Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebi, Wole Soyinka, we find that their first work was in the short story form. They tried themselves out, they gained skills and they had the satisfaction of being published. Then they could gather themselves for the major work that a novel represents. As you know, a novel represents a tremendous amount of hard work. You invest your time, your effort, your money in it and if at the end you're just left with a manuscript that nobody will publish you inevitably feel depressed.

IROH

I do agree with you to some extent but I'm worried that we could encourage people to think that anybody can, in fact, write a short story and if you can write a good short story then you can be a good novelist. I'm afraid I don't agree. I, in fact, would take evidence from the book itself from the piece by Adewale Maja-Pearce which deals with starting out. He went through his own experience where he tried a straight attempt at writing a novel. He wrote about five novels but he didn't feel he was into what he really could do. He'd tried a short story and he was lucky to be published once. In the final analysis he decided that neither the novel nor the short story was for him. He moved on to an entirely different type of writing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Eddie, we're now talking about people who are ambitious to write. How about those who have actually had some work or other published, say in a small way, and want to break into the big time. Do you think this handbook is going to be useful for some people?

IROH

Oh there is something for everybody I would say. The value of this book is that it should provide the confidence which is lacking among young writers who see a creative conspiracy against them by older and more established writers and believe that they can't make it. It does also deal with newer, more modern aspects of the book trade - the negative aspects one might say, like piracy. I think there is something to say here for the established writer in the area of copyright because that is important; and the whole question of the relationship between the writer and the publisher and a certain interest by the writer in the relationship between the publisher and the market because that is an ever-changing area.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I thought perhaps the most interesting thing about this handbook was the fact that the budding writers are given very different types of information - all sorts of information - about the actual technique of writing, who to contact, who to have the book published by. Then it goes into the financial aspects of all types of publishing. I thought this was really useful. I think a little bit of ambition wouldn't be out of place: to be famous and get some money out of writing. I think that is what young people usually come up with first.

GIBBS

The idea of breaking into the "big time" - an expression you used earlier on Alex - might give people the impression there is a lot of money to be made out of writing. As it is, very few African writers make much money out of their work. Very few of them could even consider living by their

pen. I think Peter Abrahams was the first African who managed to live by his pen. The big time is very difficult to get into. But I hope that as people prise the door open, they will talk to others who have had their work published and learn from mistakes, learn the lessons that older people have learnt and be very careful about copyright regulations and about the contracts that they sign. I hope that they will make sure they're getting a really very good deal. They shouldn't allow themselves to be pushed around. They should stick up for their rights and they should know what their rights are as writers.

TETTEH-LARTEY

A very useful piece of advice. Eddie Iroh and James Gibbs thank you very much indeed.

"A Handbook for African Writers" compiled and edited by James Gibbs is published by Hans Zell as a reference book and costs £25.00. But there are copies available for free distribution through the Commonwealth Institute in London to African libraries and institutions. So there may be a library near you that has a copy or could get one for you to borrow.

Some music from Mozambique to end the programme. Carlos Hlongo with "Tipondo". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey inviting you to join me again next week. For now, goodbye.