

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.

EXTRACT FROM "IN MY FATHER'S COUNTRY: A NIGERIAN JOURNEY"

(Summary of extract. Adewale Maja-Pearce explains the reason for making the journey to Nigeria. i.e. to help resolve the question of his confused identity.)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Adewale Maja-Pearce, the young Anglo-Nigerian writer reading an extract from his new book called "In My Father's Country: A Nigerian Journey". A few months ago Adewale and I discussed on this programme a book of short stories that he'd written called "Loyalties". This book is of a very different type - it's not only a travel book but also a very personal one of exploration for Adewale, who lives in Britain and who is the son of a British mother and Nigerian father. Here he talks to Tim Judah who begins by asking him about this question of loyalties and self-identification, a theme that provides the background to Adewale's lively and exciting account of his Nigerian journey.

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

One is always under this weight to define who you are, to define your allegiances. If you have a Nigerian and a British connection, because of the historical mismatch I guess, to the Africans you must define yourself as an African and reject your Europeaness, to the Europeans you must define yourself as a European and reject your Africaness, so to speak. And it's something I just won't do, I can't do.

TIM JUDAH

It's something that you came back to or return to several times in the book, but let's look at the travel side of it first of all. It's both a critical and an affectionate look at Nigeria I would have said.

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

Yes, I think you're absolutely right. I'm appalled by some of the things that go on in Nigeria, as a lot of people are, both Nigerians and non-Nigerians. Quite rightly too. The levels of corruption and brutality and so on and so forth.

TIM JUDAH

Who are you writing this book for? Are you writing it mainly for people in Britain, or for Nigerians, or for whom?

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

I hope that I'm writing it for some people in Nigeria and some people in Britain who are interested in this kind of writing, who are interested in the kinds of things I'm talking about. I know that Nigerians and British people have different perceptions of the book but I suppose both, I hope.

TIM JUDAH

What do you mean different perceptions of the book? Do you think people in Britain who read the book will be struck by certain things that Nigerians or Africans in general won't be? I'm wondering, you know, maybe an African reading this book will think - "what's this man coming from outside and he's saying well, it's very corrupt and we have all these problems but we live with this everyday and we don't really find it a problem". What would you say when people make those charges?

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

Well, you see, that's making some assumptions about what people in Nigeria do feel and do think. Because a lot of the criticisms about the water supply that doesn't work, the constant power cuts, the postal system that's broken down; the levels of corruption, the fact that even the traffic police will take five naira and let you off, conversely will bang you up in prison if you don't bribe them - these are criticisms that Nigerians make of their own society, after all, and they make them very vociferously. And their perspective is after all, why shouldn't these things work? We've earned all this money from oil, we've pumped all this money into these services, why can't we just do the job properly?

TIM JUDAH

Just travelling around the country what are some of your most enduring memories?

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

The first one, I suppose if I were going to just describe it off the top of my head to somebody, are the long distance taxi-cabs. It's an efficient way to travel through the country. It's relatively cheap, these taxis that specialise in going between towns, you know 80, 100, 200 kilometres a day and as soon as the driver is outside the city limits he just slams on the accelerator and you think you're going to die between there and the town he's going to! So I think that's the first thing, the sort of adventure and the speed, and the huge distances one was covering and the changing landscape - all that is part of the journey. The other thing is the hospitality of people that I stayed with. Only one night, I think, I spent in a hotel, otherwise I stayed with friends of friends - addresses I was given by people in Lagos.

TIM JUDAH

They were very welcoming generally, weren't they?

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

Oh yes, as soon as they heard that so-and-so had sent me, you know their house was mine. They would put themselves completely at my disposal.

TIM JUDAH

Your last book, your book of short stories was called "Loyalties" and I wonder if this wouldn't be an equally good title for this book since, as we've said, you went to Nigeria partly to see if you could resolve the dilemma of 'Nigerian or British', and I wonder if there really is an answer. What was the answer at the end of the book?

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

Well, I wrote this in the last chapter towards the end:

EXTRACT FROM "IN MY FATHER'S COUNTRY: A NIGERIAN JOURNEY"

(Summary of extract. The ambiguity of his position he began to see as a source of strength. His journey to Nigeria is a journey of self-discovery. His father leaves him a property in Lagos.)

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

I hadn't expected him to leave me a property when he died. I thought when I broke with his country I broke with him. I don't think he consciously knew I would - but who knows how these things work themselves out, and he did leave me a property in Lagos and it is a symbol of my connection, an enduring symbol.

TIM JUDAH

Do you think one day you might go and live there?

ADEWALE MAJA-PEARCE

Oh most certainly. Definitely, definitely! My five year plan - (laughter) - I shall go in five years for five years!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Adewale Maja-Pearce talking about his new book: "In My Father's Country: A Nigerian Journey", published by Heinemann at a price of £11.95 in the United Kingdom.

MUSIC: BIRTH OF GHANA BY LORD KITCHENER AND HIS CALYPSO ALL STARS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Lord Kitchener and his Calypso All Stars with "The Birth of Ghana" which he recorded in London just before Ghana's independence. But Lord Kitchener was from Trinidad in the West Indies, although as a Ghanaian I must say that the music has a more than familiar air to it. In fact, the 1950's were an incredibly fruitful time for music in West Africa, (one only has to think of E.T.Mensah for example) and also in the West Indies. But in London interesting things were happening. The musicians from both West Africa and the West Indies were meeting and influencing each other. Now John Cowley has been studying these influences and has come into the studio to talk to me about them. John, that record really brings back to me some wonderful memories of Ghana in the 1950's, during which time calypsos were as popular as the local highlife.

JOHN COWLEY

Yes, of course and not only in Ghana but Nigeria and Sierra Leone too; on occasions you couldn't separate the two types in fact, as the next example by Ebenezer Calender and his Maringar Band will show.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Calender comes from Sierra Leone.

MUSIC: "FIRE, FIRE" BY EBENEZER CALENDER AND HIS MARINGAR BAND

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was one of the most popular records going in West Africa in the 50's. I remember very well everybody in the streets was dancing to this and it was really incredible!

JOHN COWLEY

Well, of course, not only was it taken up in West Africa by West African musicians but in London there were West Indians who made another record of it for the West African market.

MUSIC: "FIRE, FIRE" SHAKE KEANE AND MIKE MCKENZIE'S ALL STARS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I find it difficult to imagine the West Indians making this record for the West African market. Did they think it would be more appealing than the original?

JOHN COWLEY

I don't know. I think perhaps there was some experimentation going on in London. They heard the West African records and they knew that West Indian records, or records by West Indians, were popular in West Africa, so why not try a West African calypso as opposed to a West Indian calypso. The performer we just heard was from St. Vincent - Ellsworth Shakespeare or Shake Keane as he was known with Mike McKenzie who was from Guyana. I don't know who the rest of the personnel were.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well if they had tried it in the, say a calypso form, I would have understood it, but they seem to be playing the highlife rhythm which is nowhere near the original to me.

JOHN COWLEY

No, but the fascinating thing is that it was tried and this was one of the records which I put together on two compilations of black music in Britain in the early 1950's.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The calypsos, as I said, were very very popular in West Africa and apart from "The Birth of Ghana" there were many other really wonderful records from Lord Kitchener.

JOHN COWLEY

Yes, well "Nora" we're going to hear later on. This clearly starts off before the War but certainly immediately after the Second World War when Berto Pasuka's "Ballets Negres" a mixed dance group was started and had Ambrose Campbell the Nigerian highlife performer and his West African Rhythm Brothers playing the music and one of the dancers was later the Nigerian highlife star Bobby Benson. Kitchener and Lord Beginner came to London in 1948 and then Guy Warren came from Ghana and played with Kenny Grahams' Afro-Cubists, that was a London band. There was an intermixing between the West Indians and the West Africans and indeed the British musicians themselves, in London during that early 1950's period and it was a very very fruitful interchange.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And who was influencing whom at the time?

JOHN COWLEY

I think they were influencing each other.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, John, we've been talking about the influences between West Indian musicians and West African musicians in the immediate post-war era. Are these influences still going on?

JOHN COWLEY

Indeed, I've got a record compiled from 45's of reggae made in I think Sierra Leone. Soul music I believe is very big in Africa and being made in versions in Africa itself and the influence both North American and European and vice versa can be traced right the way from South Africa all the way up the continent from the turn of the century, if not before.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

John Cowley thank you very much. And that's it for "Arts and Africa" for this week. Next week at the same time we'll be back with more of the arts of Africa. Until then I leave you with the music "Nora Nora" by Lord Kitchener. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: "NORA, NORA" BY LORD KITCHENER