

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of "Arts and Africa".

Today we welcome to the studio Chinweizu. Now Chinweizu is a man of many hats. Some of our Nigerian listeners will know their compatriot from his popular column "The Chinweizu Observatory" which he writes for the Lagos Vanguard, and others may know him for his time as Economy and Business Editor of the Lagos Guardian. On the other hand, some will know Chinweizu as Associate Editor of the African literary magazine "Okike", or maybe from his poems in the collection called "Energy Crisis". But Chinweizu, and I hope you'll forgive this European allusion, is truly what might be called a "Renaissance man", in that he excels in many fields and he is perhaps best known for his historical work "The West And The Rest Of Us" published in 1975, also for his literary criticism in the book he co-authored called "Towards the Decolonization of African Literature", and most recently "Decolonizing the African Mind". Well, the theme that runs through all these books is what Chinweizu sees as the political, economic and cultural exploitation of the Third World and especially Africa by the West. One critic has written that Chinweizu feels that "contemporary culture in Africa is seen to be hog-tied by the continent's political ties to the West", and he calls for a new "African modernism" that may provide a model for a new indigenous arts and literature. Now Chinweizu published last year in Nigeria a book of 49 poems and what he calls a "trptych of parables", in a volume called "Invocations and Admonitions" and this book has just been released here in Britain. It was this volume that in manuscript form won the Association of Nigerian Authors Poetry Prize in 1985.

Now Chinweizu, tell me, is this book representative of "African modernism"?

CHINWEIZU

Well it's part of the effort towards achieving an "African modernism" and as you can see from, say the title of the book, it takes on very ancient traditional African art forms and tries to express and deal with contemporary matters by utilizing the wisdom of our ancestors in those regards. Like "Invocations", you know several of the poems are said in kind of "invocation either to the gods or to the ancestors. Others are "admonitions" in the way that, if we go back to ancient Egyptian texts, we find that a lot of them are "admonitions" by the sages of the times, advising the people about various kinds of things. And these are the kinds of things that we think an "African modernism" should do - go back to the ancient tradition, resuscitate revive and utilize them to deal with contemporary matters.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And why has it become necessary for you to invoke the past? I know that it's going to serve a useful purpose, but why has it become necessary for you to do this?

CHINWEIZU

Well, part of it is, I suppose, because I'm an historian and I study the past. But I think more urgently it's the fact that the past is all we've got. If we rule it out of our consciousness that means we are like people starting from nothing and I don't believe we should throw away our heritage in that fashion. A man who throws away his heritage has thrown away everything he's got and he'll be scrambling around like a novice.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But why do you think we've lost our heritage? This is what I want to know. Is it because some people have said it or is it because you feel that we ourselves have not come up with anything reflecting our past?

CHINWEIZU

Okay. I think there are two sides to that. We have not totally lost our heritage, otherwise we can't recover it. But I think there has been this tradition, this tendency under the colonial experience, for us to belittle, ignore and shunt aside that heritage and to run after other people's traditions. For instance, when we wrote "Towards The Decolonization of African Literature" we were busy berating those who thought that the only way to go about writing literature was to emulate whatever was popular presently in the West, whether it was the Euro-modernist school, or the Romantics, or Pound and Elliot and the lot. We even found some of our compatriots trying to swear like Shakespeare! We said well look, that is silly. We should swear in the way our tradition teaches us to swear. So it is things like this, it is this historical context that makes it necessary, in my view, to stress the need to consciously recapture and reutilize the entire heritage of our past.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And in fact you've written a poem, a very short brief one, which you call "The Colonizers Logic". Perhaps you could read it for us.

CHINWEIZU

Alright. This was an attempt to capture the kind of situation, the mentality that the colonizers brought in, that some of us have taken up. It goes:

"The Colonizers Logic" a poem from "Invocations and Admonitions"
read by Chinweizu

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, well. Now is this Western domination to your way of thinking the most important theme now, the most important subject for Africa?

CHINWEIZU

It is, maybe, the second most important subject. I think the most important subject is our own recapturing of our, shall we say, confidence. Western imperialism is only relevant in so far as it is one of those forces that makes it difficult for some of us to behave in a confident manner in the contemporary world. There is Arab imperialism, there is Western imperialism and all these work against African confidence.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, it seems to me the main themes running through your poems in this book are religion and sex. Now does sex play a very important role in your life? Why do you view it as so important?

CHINWEIZU

Well, let me just ask you one question. Ninety per cent or maybe not that high, but certainly relations between men and women move the world, whether we really wish to acknowledge it or not, either in opposition or in support. And if you go through it, why do cultures spend so much energy regulating how men and women relate to one another? I think they are not foolish when they do that and if we take a look at what's going on in the world we can find that there are a lot of issues that can be approached on that level in order to give them the kind of attention we need to give to them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's just that most of the emphasis is on the, not so much the intellectual or the emotional, although you do treat those aspects, but on the purely carnal side of sex.

CHINWEIZU

Well, when the chips are down where does it all end up?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

(Laughter) Alright. Now we come to religion and you condemn Islam, you condemn Christianity and you condemn what you call Marxism, I don't know whether that's a true religion. But you reserve most of your scathing attacks for Christianity and you seem to be worried a lot mostly about the virgin birth of Christ.

CHINWEIZU

No, no, no, no. You see, when you consider the forces that have hit us, I think if you want to take them on you have to start with some of the foolish things that they say. For instance, there is a book that just came out, it's Tepilit Ole Saitoti's autobiography. He describes the time when he goes to a Christian school and they teach him the story of the virgin birth and all that and he writes in his autobiography that he didn't dare tell his father about that part of what he was taught in school because if he did his father would doubt his intelligence. So we have a religious system that comes in and expects us to take it very seriously and is full of all these funny stories, so in terms of my attitude to the various religions I think perhaps the easiest thing is to read this poem which talks about the pagans reply because I consider myself a pagan.

And let me begin with a brief note at the top. "Pagan, noun, a benighted person who prefers home-made deities and indigenous religious rights", is the definition by Ambrose Bierce. (And then another quotation: Chinweizu quotes Keorapetse Kgositsile, the South African poet.) Well this poem represents a confrontation between traditionalist African and the vendors of these alien religions, and it goes:

"The Pagan's Reply" poem from "Invocations and Admonitions"
by Chinweizu

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What you are actually urging there is for people to go back to their pagan origins but surely ideas change in the course of time and asking them to go back, isn't that just wandering down memory lane?

CHINWEIZU

No, it isn't. If you remember what Cheikh Anta Diop has told us with his researches into the origins of civilisation in ancient Egypt ...

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, could you remind our listeners who Diop actually was?

CHINWEIZU

Okay. Diop, who died last year and to whom this book of poetry is dedicated, was a seminal Senegalese physicist and Egyptologist who researched into the nature of Egyptian civilisation and its black origins and wrote several books which more people should know about. But basically what he was calling for, and which I believe we should all pay attention to, is a black renaissance. And we cannot have a renaissance of African civilisation if we do not go back to the roots of our civilisation. We must repossess the roots before we can build something new out of it. We cannot hope to build something new without that background.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now who are you writing, or who have you produced this book for, this book of poems, mainly for Africans to read, or for Europeans or for both?

CHINWEIZU

Well, you choose your primary audience. My primary audience is for the Africans. Anybody else who wants can read it, I have no objection.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The book is very broad in scope and some of the poems are really highly irreverent, as you know. Sometimes you write poetry with, as it were, your tongue in your cheek. Like for example this one entitled "Sex in Space".

CHINWEIZU

"Sex in Space" a poem from "Invocations and Admonitions"
read by Chinweizu

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

(Laughter) Well, on that very light note ...

CHINWEIZU

Even though it's about sex you don't object? (Laughter)

.../

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

No, no! (Laughter) It's not as bad as some of the others. (Laughter)
And I'm sure we can safely put that on the air. Just one more thing I
want to ask you, Chinweizu. What are you doing now?

CHINWEIZU

Well, I'm finishing up the second edition of "The West And The Rest Of Us".
I'm updating it to take into account all the many things that have happened
since it was published.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Chinweizu, thank you very much for coming to the studio today.
"Invocations and Admonitions" is published by Pero Press and costs £5 in
Britain or 5 Naira in Nigeria. It's a book which is provocative but one
which you cannot ignore. And that's the end of "Arts and Africa" for this
week. Until next week at the same time this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying
goodbye.