

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'. This week we're going to take a look at the literary scene in Sierra Leone, starting with some good news that one of the country's veteran writers is about to have a new novel published after a gap of many years. And then going on to the not so good news, and why it is that in comparison to Nigeria, Ghana and so on, so little in the way of literary achievement comes out of Sierra Leone these days. It hasn't always been that way. A generation of writers such as Serif Easman and Welesley-Cole pioneered the way in the 1960's producing some vibrant and original works of fiction. One of these writers was William Conton, whose first novel "The African" enjoyed considerable success. Born in the Gambia and schooled in the Republic of Guinea, Dr. Conton has been involved in education, broadcasting and the theatre. His new novel, called "The Flights" is due to be published by Heinemanns Nigeria later this year, as part of a new series of popular West African fiction titled "Frontliners". In Freetown, Lansanah Kai-Whonneh spoke to William Conton and asked him how different this novel was from "The African".

WILLIAM CONTON

It's very different. "The African" was a biography. "The Flights" is a commentary on the futility of escapism; in fact it has this title partly because most of the action is set in an aeroplane and partly because its hero is somebody who runs away from problems - first in his village in West Africa, then he runs away from problems in his nation and finally he runs away from Africa altogether and goes to Europe. There he finds that the problems are worse, leading to a dramatic climax. But whereas in the case of "The African" I tried simply to paint a portrait of an individual, in this novel there is a message that if you find problems you should stay and solve them and not try to run away.

LANSANAH KAI-WHONNEH

Writing in Sierra Leone is not a prolific affair as in Ghana and Nigeria. Potential writers in Sierra Leone very often complain about difficulties. As an old hand in the domain of writing, what do you think these problems are in your opinion?

WILLIAM CONTON

There are a lot of problems in Africa which are not faced by writers in Europe or in North America. First of all, there's the problem of the multiplicity of languages which means that straight away the writer has to make a choice as to the language in which he is going to express himself. Then there is the problem of the scarcity of publishing houses. Once he has decided on his language and he has completed his work, it's much more difficult for him to find close to him a publisher than it is for an

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author in Europe or in America. Usually he has to send his work overseas and there it competes of course with the work of people from the country in which the publisher is, and competes at a disadvantage. Once he manages to get somebody to publish his work he faces a third problem, and that is a shortage of bookshops. It's not easy for him to find outlets all over his country for his work and this of course affects sales because you'd expect the citizens of his own country to be more interested in him, especially when he's a new writer, than the citizens of other countries. And yet, even those who have this interest may not know about the work because there are no bookshops near to them. There are other problems also - the paucity of libraries, the difficulty in getting people to type his work, to translate his work and to promote his work. Finally if he overcomes all these problems, there is very often the difficulty of converting his royalties, if they are published in another country like, say, Ghana or Nigeria, into his own national currency or into some other convertible currency. We are trying to solve some of these problems in Sierra Leone through the Sierra Leone Association of Writers and Illustrators. The Association, which is running workshops for writers, is trying to promote wider circulation of books and magazines, a wider establishment of bookshops and libraries and generally to help the budding as well as the established writer with the problems that I have mentioned.

LANSANAH KAI-WHONNEH

Then on that note, do you have any word of advice particularly for Sierra Leonean writers who'd like to undertake this venture so that the country can be prolific in writing just like Nigeria or like any other country in Africa.

WILLIAM CONTON

Yes, first of all be a good mixer. Mix with people. Secondly be a good traveller. Travel within your own country, within your own sub-region, West Africa, within your own continent and if you can afford it, outside. Because it is through mixing with people, through meeting people and through visiting new places that you will get ideas for your characters and your plots. My next advice would be join SLAWI because you will get quite a lot of technical help from that Association. And finally, write what you see as the truth, the truth - and I'm not talking about research work - I'm talking about the images the plots that you consider real. Don't let anybody change your work. Do it as you see fit yourself.

LANSANAH KAI-WHONNEH

Finally, Dr. Conton, what is the future of writing in Sierra Leone?

WILLIAM CONTON

I think the problems I've mentioned are going to be with us for a long time because the shortage of foreign exchange for one is not visibly getting better and it's at the root of a lot of our problems - shortages of bookshops, libraries, newsprint and publishing houses - but gradually working together through an Association like SLAWI we'll be able to reduce the impact of these shortcomings on the work of writers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Sierra Leonean novelist William Conton. So why is there such a dearth of new work coming out of Sierra Leone? What has happened over the last ten years, for example, that has caused the flow of talent to dry up? Well, I'm pleased to have here in the studio, a young Sierra Leonean writer, Kwame 'Kumale' Fitzjohn, who I hope will shed some light on these questions. Kwame, why is it that we hear so little about the literary scene in Sierra Leone these days?

KWAME FITZJOHN

Well, as Mr. Conton spelt out earlier on, one of the problems is publishing. We have had a lot of writers even earlier than the time of people like Conton, Wellesley-Cole and Abioseh Nicol who belong to the middle school of writers in Sierra Leone. We can go back to the era of the Casely-Hayfords. Right now, in fact, we have many different and varied problems and what I could say is that this issue of censorship, for instance, on plays in Sierra Leone is a very thorny problem in the country right now because it has inhibited the creativity of the playwrights. There is no spontaneity in their works any more. There is also censorship of journalism in the country. So perhaps the next thing they will want to do, if they want to continue is to censor the dance and the fashion. More or less, it will amount to a suffocation of the art in the country itself. However, there has sprung up a new breed of writers like Dominic Ofori whom you may know won an Arts and Africa award a few years ago, and Njieba (phon.) who also studied at Fourah Bay College. Syl Cheney-Coker, the celebrated Sierra Leonean poet, is also working on a novel.

ALEX TETTEH LARTEY

Now all these people you've mentioned, these young writers, are they in Sierra Leone or are they abroad?

KWAME FITZJOHN

Quite a number of them, the majority, are abroad - I must say in self-exile unfortunately. This happened during the last government you know. Now there is what is called the 'New Order' in Sierra Leone. These writers left during the 'Old Order'. One or two of them have come back during the New Order and looked and gone back again - maybe they're making up their minds you know. It's too early yet to say what is going to happen during this probably transition period.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Apart from the difficulties of finance and getting publishing houses and so on, do you think there is anything wrong with the writers themselves?

KWAME FITZJOHN

Well, I wouldn't say so as such. I think there is something wrong with the society. There are so many budding writers right now in Sierra Leone. Of course the government has a lot to do in terms of directing the cultural affairs of the nation, you see. It has to stimulate, it has to give it funds and it has to provide an environment where the artist can create. We need patrons to come up, you know, and sponsor writers for their training. Right now, most of these writers are amateurs; they cannot make a living out of their writing. Symposium and seminars, forums and book festivals are arranged from time to time by SLAWI - the Sierra Leone Association of Writers and Illustrators of which I was Vice-President for a year - but over and above this we have to improve the indigenous languages of the country. These things should be arranged by the major companies like BWIRI (phon,) the oil and tobacco company (they do these things from time to time but we should have more of these things). Rich patrons should come up and sponsor the writers. The government should look into the issue of trying to set up a school of journalism, a school of fine arts, you know. These are burning problems in the society right now and I think we ought to take a serious look at them.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kwame you yourself are in America at the moment. Why did you leave Sierra Leone?

KWAME FITZJOHN

Well I haven't left Sierra Leone, I would say. It just happens that America is my base right now. And I'm in America this time because I've gone there to ... I'm in search of technology, capital and skills.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What so far has been the impact of your stay in America?

KWAME FITZJOHN

What I could say is that since I went to America I've suffered from a kind of culture shock. My writing has not been as prolific since I went to the States as when I was in Sierra Leone. Probably it's taking some time to seep in, as you might say. I've written for that whole year I was there a single poem, which encompasses the entire society I would say.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you have a poem here to read to us. What is it called?

POEM - 'This is America' read by author Kwame Fitzjohn

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kwame 'Kumale' Fitzjohn, thank you very much indeed. And that's all from 'Arts and Africa' for this week. So from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey until the same time next week it's goodbye.

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