

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today I'm starting the programme with some questions - Is what you say the same thing as how you say it? Or is there any difference? Is it possible to make a distinction between the medium and the message? For example, how is a carving affected by the wood used? And to what extent is a painting determined by the paint used? What bearing does the instrument have on the nature of the tune?

Today in Arts and Africa we'll be hearing from two men, each with strong views on the medium he uses to get his message across. For Nadir Tharani the medium is mud.

## NADIR THARANI

Mud is actually one of the oldest building materials besides sticks and grass and stone. Mud has been around since civilization or human beings began.

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The voice of Tanzanian architect Nadir Tharani. Mud is popular as a building medium in many parts of Africa, because it's cheap and traditional. But in modern architecture it's been sadly neglected - modern architects are trained to use modern materials; bricks and concrete, less beautiful in Nadir Tharani's opinion, more expensive. Speaking here to Deborah Pugh he explains how the beauty of mud, the smooth shapes it creates, recommends it as a medium for building.

## NADIR THARANI

Well anyone who likes curves is bound to like mud since it's such a sensuous material; its sensuality can only be described if one looks at it, or through photographs; it is very difficult to explain it in words. One gets this gradation of light and shade and pools of darkness and pools of light. It can also be used, it has been used, to form things like seating; in fact, perhaps one doesn't need any other furniture. You can have a house where everything is made out of mud.

DEBORAH PUGH

When people build their houses, do they ever think about the colour of the house that's going to be, or do they paint them?

NADIR THARANI

In Tanzania itself they don't really colour the mud, neither do they paint the mud. But in other parts of Africa, for example in northern Nigeria or in Sudan or in South Africa, they do paint the mud various colours out of vegetable dyes. Some do use different types of mud, but because it can be painted there is no real need to find different colours of the soil.

DEBORAH PUGH

But in your opinion is enough being done to ensure that the traditional forms of architecture using mud are continuing in use in Tanzania?

NADIR THARANI

Simply the answer is no. But in a way it's a very difficult question, because on one hand you have the people who actually use the mud houses and they prefer permanence, that is their priority, so they prefer corrugated sheet made out of steel or aluminium. The government agencies come along also with plans which are usually rectangular plans as model houses, and therefore the peasants usually follow them. And one can debate whether it's someone's innate sensuality which has to be expressed or someone's aesthetic taste. I mean, we find curves sensuous but this is not necessarily so. Some peoples, or some cultures, or some art periods even in western Europe, have found that sharp edges or sharp angles can be made to feel sensuous by the way they are juxtaposed.

DEBORAH PUGH

Why is it, though, that government architects haven't responded to the traditions in Tanzania of circular housing and actually planned new housing estates in the urban centres with these traditional forms in mind?

NADIR THARANI

Basically because they are bad architects. There are very few Tanzanian architects and a lot of the models, for example, models of hospitals, schools, community centres, or houses, have been designed by foreigners. There was aid, especially Swedish aid available, so you'd have architects coming over from Sweden, and there was Polish aid, there was Bulgarian aid, and their designs were copied into little hand-books, and field workers, Tanzanian technicians are sent out putting up buildings to these designs all over Tanzania. So basically it's one model which is spreading out from the capital, which some guy must have done in one morning, and it's changing the whole appearance of Tanzania in the rural countryside.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now to our next guest - he's a musicologist, a composer and a musician.

MUSIC - NANA DANSO

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The cool sounds of Nana Danso Abiang recorded there in Germany. Last week he came to the Arts and Africa studio to talk to me about his work. Well Nana Danso in the piece we've just heard you have used the piano, which is a western instrument and its playing something that has a very Ghanaian, very African feel to it. Why did you mix the medium of the piano with classical, what we would call classical Ghanaian music.

NANA DANSO

Well on the piano I'm using I in fact adapted the Dagarti (phon) style of playing the xylophone to the piano, so that the piano is playing within the pentatonic scale.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What does that mean, I don't understand it?

NANA DANSO

What it means is that a pentatonic scale is a scale within which there are five notes to the octave and this is a type of scale that is used in the northern part of Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Right, now why did you choose to use the piano in this sense?

NANA DANSO

Well I use the piano because I'm in Europe and unfortunately I'm unable to come along with some of the musicians who usually play the xylophone with me, and so this led me to the quest of new solutions vis-a-vis how to adapt African idiomatic style to western instruments.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There were other instruments in that song as well. What were they?

NANA DANSO

Yes, those other instruments, in fact, I wrote this music for a quintet, that is an Atentabeng (phon) which is a traditional flute I'm using, a Western transverse flute, a piano and a tabla, which is an Indian percussion instrument. I also have a percussionist who played assorted rattles mostly and produced effects on very little instruments like rattles, bells, etc.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well now, of course, you have had western training in all its various forms. Has that helped you to develop this African classical style?

NANO DANSO

Well of course it has because, first of all, I've been trained to write, to understand the basics of music and I've been trained to be able to analyse music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you tried to use these African instruments to play other kinds of music?

NANA DANSO

Yes I have, although some of our instruments are limited. When the Atentabeng (phon) was introduced in 1982 as a chromatic instrument, I tried to play jazz items. One of the jazz items that I played was "Take Five" by Dave Brubeck.

MUSIC - TAKE FIVE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nana, you are using another African instrument there, I guess?

NANA DANSO

Yes I used rattles, assorted percussion, because while one player was playing the Tabla, there was another percussionist who was playing all sorts of percussion, rattles, gongs, bells etc.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I think it was beautiful, it was so soothing.

NANA DANSO

It makes the music different from what Brubeck recorded.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, lovely. Now I understand that you are thinking of assembling a pan-African orchestra to play African music, pan-African music?

NANA DANSO

Yes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

With different instruments?

NANA DANSO

Yes, it was after a study I conducted you know, to give birth to the first black orchestra composed of one hundred and eight musicians, divided into four sections. We have, for example, the Atentabeng (phon) in C, we have the Atentabeng in B flat, we have the Oduruja (phon) in F, we have the Oduruja in B flat, which in fact form a very interesting mix. We also have melodic instruments like the Dagarti xylophone, we have the flute, we have so many melodic instruments.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you interested just in the melodic and harmony aspect of the orchestra? Is that why you've assembled so many instruments?

NANO DANSO

That plays a very important role. You see the westerners have always considered African music to be purely percussive music, which is, in fact, not true; there are several areas in Africa where melody is very important, and I blend the two. Percussion is very important in my music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now isn't the number of so many instruments, one hundred and eight, going to make even more complicated the rhythm section of African music which is already a very very complicated, intricate thing?

NANA DANSO

Well if the orchestra is composed of one hundred and eight people it doesn't mean that each individual is playing a different thing. You can have four people playing one thing, you can have two people playing another pattern, you can have six people playing something else and so it doesn't make it complicated.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Nana how far have you gone beyond the merely paper feasibility study?

NANA DANSO

Well I have, in fact, been playing with a traditional ensemble of about twenty five pieces, and we've been trying to do something. It's been working quite well and I hope that in the near future this small ensemble that I've put together will inspire other people to get into the feel.....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

To form the pan-African orchestra?

NANA DANSO

Exactly.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I hope so to. We are now going to end with some more of your music. What is it going to be?

NANA DANSO

Well the next item is called "Hexatonic Organisation".

MUSIC - HEXATONIC ORGANISATION

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nana Danso once again thank you very much indeed.

NANA DANSO

I also thank you very much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying a Happy New Year to all our listeners. Join me again next week for another edition of Arts and Africa.