



Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Today in Arts and Africa festival of Ghanaian culture at London's Africa Centre. I'm Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to the celebrations.

MUSIC: African Brothers

KWESI OWUSU

I think that a lot of commentators on Ghana have stressed the economic deterioration and stagnation and so on. But what is interesting about the current situation is that despite that sort of predicament there is this new cultural renaissance which is really very interesting. And it is in spite of the difficulties that one is having that artists are drawing more and dramatists are coming forward and people are expressing themselves.

MUSIC: African Brothers

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And there's certainly no shortage of expression there from the African Brothers, the leading exponents of a unique cultural form from Ghana - The Concert Party. Kwesi Owusu one of the Festival's organisers explains.

KWESI OWUSU

The Concert Party basically is the most popular form of theatre in Ghana. Around the 1930s you had a diffusion of Ghanaian cultural forms for example Ananse stories and so on. Dramatic forms with certain cultural elements from the outside. Most importantly you had the introduction of the silent movies into the colonies. There was this man called Bob Johnson, who is supposed to be the father of the Concert Party form who actually put everything together and gave birth to this rather interesting art form. Basically the Concert Party form uses a lot of humour, dramatic forms; it uses a lot of mime and dance and so on and so it is very interesting to watch. It is part of a living tradition and really you ought to see it to believe what enjoyment you could get out of seeing it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The African Brothers are very much all rounders. They play traditional as well as Hi-life music. And they're accomplished singers and dancers as well as actors and comedians. Their production at the Africa Centre is called 'The Tragedy of Kwata' - a jubilant musical comedy about the evils of greed in society.

EXTRACT FROM 'The Tragedy of Kwata'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, for those of you who can't understand pidgin English, I'd better explain the story. One day a young hunter called Dapa gets lost in the woods and is rescued by some friendly dwarfs. They're impressed by this fine young man and agree to show him his way home, on condition that he doesn't open his hunting sack until the following day. Dapa obeys them and is amply rewarded. When he peers into his sack the next morning he finds it full of gold. Now his friend Kwata, not content with Dapa's generous offer of half the prize, decides to go in search of the dwarfs himself. He finds them and sure enough the strange sounding dwarfs offer to help him too, on condition that he doesn't peep into his hunting sack.

EXTRACT FROM 'The Tragedy of Kwata'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But Kwata does open it up. He puts in his hand and to his horror it gets stuck.

EXTRACT FROM 'The Tragedy of Kwata'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Chief is summoned and when all attempts to release Kwata's hand have failed, they have to cut it off. Such is the tragedy of Kwata. Nick Barker spoke with Nana Ampadu, the African Brothers' leader and with Malcolm Ben, a member of the group about the social role of these Concert Parties.

MALCOLM BEN

We found out early on that the Government could not take up the responsibility of disseminating news and other social concerns of the Government. So some of the Concert Parties took it upon themselves to spread the news of the social problems like greediness or some social vices. They would go to the rural areas or they would compose a story relating the bad effects of the vices - if you do this, this is what will happen in future. They would do this in the form of a play and then go to the rural areas or tour the whole country and spread the message.

NICK BARKER

Now, what sort of people take part in the performances? You have musicians, you have comics; you have actors. But they're presumably not professional are they?

MALCOLM BEN

Yes, most of them are not professional. But because this is a purely African concept, or a Ghanaian concept, it is something that is hereditary. It is passed on. Most of them become apprentices to other Concert Party actors and the skill is passed on to them. They don't have a formal education for this sort of Concert Party idea, but they have an apprenticeship which lasts about a year or two.

MUSIC: African Brothers

NICK BARKER

Now, Nana, you devised this particular Concert Party which is called 'The Tragedy of Kwata'. How did you go about it?

NANA AMPADU

I wanted to let the people know the bad effects of greediness which is being experienced in Ghana today, because everybody wants to grab what he shouldn't have. Because of this, many people have been facing a lot of troubles. So I just sat down and decided to plan a story. I drew up the story and then sang about it first. And then made records of this Concert - so it's a song. After the recording, our normal duties are to act the Concert plays to the rural folks. So that's how it is.

NICK BARKER

Have you toured with 'The Tragedy of Kwata'?

NANA AMPADU

Yes, mainly in the northern part of Ghana.

NICK BARKER

How did the people in the villages respond?

NANA AMPADU

Very well. Quite remarkable. They like it because it teaches them something - not to be greedy. Everybody knows that this thing is going on in the country - the greediness. Everybody wants to grab, grab, grabbing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Nana Ampadu and Malcolm Ben of the African Brothers. As part of the celebrations at the Africa Centre there is also an exhibition of contemporary Ghanaian Art. And rarely has the gallery dazzled with such colour and excitement. There are the famous crowd pictures painted with thick impasto by Ghana's leading artist, Ablade Glover. There are superbly executed water-colours by Aswusu Dartey, depicting beaches and stormy seas during the rainy season. There are experimental abstract paintings as well as highly political scraperboard etchings illustrating Ghana's recent struggles. My favourite picture was one of some fishermen hauling in their boats. It's an extraordinary mixture of paint and collage, and the artist, John Bainstil has painstakingly fixed certain materials to the canvas to make it more lifelike. Emmanuel Gawuga who

EMMANUEL GAWUGA

Well, he's trying to give us a true impression of what one sees on the beaches in Ghana. It gives a very true picture of what happens. One sees a lot of beach houses like these with rusty aluminium, or rusty iron roofing sheets. The painter is trying to give us that solid effect. He really actually sprinkled some sand over a glued surface to give it that sandy beach effect. I think that he has done very well to give us this feel. Anyone who has been to any of the beaches in Ghana, will certainly see that he has given a true representation of what really pertains in Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It really is a wonderful picture and if I didn't have to spend so much money maintaining my car which always seems to need some new attention, I would have bought it. With all the talent represented in the exhibition one wonders how the pictures were chosen. Nick Barker asked Emmanuel about the selection.

EMMANUEL GAWUGA

Well, the invitation came in quite late. We have an association called the Association of Ghanaian Artists and under the auspices of this Association we have all the artists registered. So after going through and considering the space available here, which we were informed about in the letter, we selected those works which represented the artists' style. We know their style from previous exhibitions.

NICK BARKER

Now, at a time when it is difficult enough to get a bar of soap in Ghana, one assumes that artists are having great problems in getting hold of artists' materials. What's life like for Ghanaian painters and sculptors at the moment?

EMMANUEL GAWUGA

Well, it's true that the economic situation is quite hard, but then the artist still expresses himself in whatever medium is available. I myself am a painter, basically, and when I find the going really tough I try other materials. But all the same I still express myself. Artists are political commentators sometimes, depending on the situation the subject matter tells what they have - but they are very innovative as far as materials are concerned.

NICK BARKER

Certainly, there is a great deal of innovation representative within this show, but I was quite intrigued that given that Ghana is going through an intensely political period, the work represented in this show is by and large not that political, is it?

EMMANUEL GAWUGA

Well, the artists are free to express themselves in any form, so one can see that even from the colour scheme and all that here the African does like a lot of very bright colours, but psychologically bright colours depict the state of the mind, and if it is a joyous situation the colours tell.

NICK BARKER

So the general message of the show is one of celebration and enthusiasm?

EMMANUEL GAWUGA

Well, it may be just accidental, but then we are not very particular as to screening and getting the right impression to give to the outside World. It was just a question of random selection based on style and not subject matter. Not what would give the outside World the image we would want to promote about the situation in the country. No, not at all.

NICK BARKER

Emmanuel would you say that the visual arts are going through a particularly strong period in Ghana today? Is this work fairly typical of the standards of the past or is it unusually rich?

EMMANUEL GAWUGA

It's unusually rich. I think I would straight away attribute this to the dynamism of our present Secretary for the Association of Artists, Mr B V Owusu, who is working very hard to pull artists together and he is actually doing everything possible to enable the artists to work despite the difficulties of getting materials etc. He is trying to find a way of resolving this problem, and if that is done the artist will feel very free to express himself. I think the artists are among one of the happiest lot considering the various associations we have under the Arts Council of Ghana. One would think they are about the most progressive lot, not only the happiest lot, but the most progressive.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And on that 'happy and progressive' note, we come to the end of this week's programme. To the sound of the African Brothers, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.