

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In today's programme a new type of traditional music from South Africa drawing on musical instruments from all over the Continent and an innovative approach to traditional story-telling by the Tiv people of Eastern Nigeria. I am Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and welcome to Arts and Africa.

EXTRACT from the performance of 'Kwagh-Hir' by the Benue State Performing Arts Company

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Four drummers, a chorus of six women and two dancers weave their way onto the stage of London's Commonwealth Institute.

EXTRACT from the performance of 'Kwagh-Hir' (as above)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's the start of the first ever performance in Britain of 'Kwagh-Hir' - village theatre story-telling by the Tiv people of Nigeria. As the performers take up their positions they're suddenly joined by a two-foot tall puppet of a smoking man, perched on a large wooden box which glides onto the stage. The puppeteer concealed in the box quickly gets to work. As if by magic the carved figure raises his pipe to his mouth and exhales a great puff of smoke. It's the start of an evening devoted to spectacular trickery. One by one, a bewildering variety of puppets make their entrance and perform their feats. We see Mammy Wata, a West African mermaid swimming around a magic lake, a ceremonial hare performing a marriage ceremony, a group of puppet drummers - even puppets of dancing police-women, and an armed robber being executed by two soldiers.

EXTRACT from the performance of 'Kwagh-Hir' depicting the execution

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Added to this amazing spectacle there are also hugh dancing masquerades one of them, a 15 ffoot long monster resembling a moving haystack actually gobbles up the youngest member of the troop, a six year old boy.

EXTRACT from the performance of 'Kwagh-Hir'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Try as she may the boy's poor mother is unable to save him. The bloated monster lumbers off stage. To find out the history of this unique form of African Drama, Nick Barker spoke to Michael Etherton, an African Theatre specialist, and asked him about the origins of 'Kwagh-Hir'.

MICHAEL ETHEERTON

Well, it's very interesting, according to Iorwuese Hagher who's done some extensive research on this, the 'Kwagh-Hir' developed in about 1960 although, I would hasten to add it is a fully indigenous rural art form owing nothing whatsoever to Western culture, at all, in any way. It was developed by one person, Adikpo Shongo who dreamed one night a mystical dream when he was told by the spirits to construct these puppets. I think, according to Hagher again, that the probably development of them is a result of the Tiv riots. The Tiv Riots occurred in the latter years of - in the earlier years, and also in the latter years of the colonial period - largely a result of an attempt by the British to impose indirect rule on the Tiv who had a much more egalitarian society than other groups in Nigeria for whom perhaps indirect rule seemed more appropriate. And the young people, the young men amongst the Tivs - for the Tivs have an age-grade society - rebelled and there were quite extensive riots in which they attacked the representatives of the colonial authorities. These puppet performances were done in the context of the Tiv world view, which involved spirits, or fairies, which might be called metaphysical beings, although for the Tivs they constituted a reality - the idea was to use these metaphorically in performance not 'affectively', but to actually destroy them, or to show them capable of being destroyed. So the young people were engaging through art in a challenge to, if you like, the spiritual authority of their rulers.

NICK BARKER

Now, to what extent is 'Kwagh-Hir' innovative - in that it actually combines a number of different aspects of performance doesn't it? We have singing; we have dancing; we have drumming. They were all put together. Was this in fact an innovation when it emerged in the early 60s?

MICHAEL ETHEERTON

Probably I think the putting together is the innovation, although the Tiv have a very very rich song tradition and dance tradition, and not all eclipsed by any of the great religions that have penetrated into Africa. But putting them together with the masquerades and puppets, in an evening's entertainment, rather than as an affective masquerade - I think that was innovative.

NICK BARKER

Now, to what extent was the spectacle that we saw on the stage of London's Commonwealth Institute - to what extent is that different from the way it would be performed on home territory in Benue State?

MICHAEL ETHEERTON

Well, to my way of thinking - fundamentally quite different. The Kwagh-Hir that I've seen in Tiv land has been competitive. That seems to me to be its essence. One village group competes against another village group. I think that's the essential point of Kwagh-Hir. The reason why it achieves such a high technical excellence is because so much of the clan, or village pride is tied up in the troupe, and in the desire to win. The way

in which this is accomplished is to advertise each event in a night of performance - to say 'we are now going to show you an aeroplane landing'; 'we are now going to show you a public execution', and then to do it. And to do it so convincingly that the judges, which will be drawn from both villages, will say 'Well, they really did it -they really convinced us that that was what we were looking at.'

NICK BARKER

Now, do the crowds play any other role apart from passing judgement on the quality of puppets that they see?

MICHAEL ETHERTON

It's an evening of entertainment. You sit around under the Baobab trees; it's very beautiful; the space is cleared - it's in the centre of the village usually. The host village sets itself out to provide beer; and to provide sweetmeats and so on for the visitors. There's a very festive atmosphere. Everybody's pleased to be there. The children are tremendously excited, I mean they race around with the high spirits of children and when the actual performance takes place - or each event takes place the crowd are extremely attentive, very critical, I felt when I was there.

NICK BARKER

There are also two other central figures in the performance aren't there? There's the elderly man who dances with two spears. And there's also the younger female dancer. What's their role in the overall performance?

MICHAEL ETHERTON

Infact, the key person is the one that comes on and announces what the puppets are going to do. The man with the spear that we saw in the London performance, I have a feeling that he would be the person that would light the show, because the Kwagh-Hir is lit by a very small wood fire, beside which is an enormous pile of dried long grass. And as each show comes on this dancer will take two mighty handfuls of grass and put them in the fire, and they will blaze up and then he will actually dance around the carton - the box - or dance around the masquerade and light it. It's very spectacular.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Michael Etherton talking to Nick Barker about the Tiv drama Kwagh-Hir. And now for a sound that's taking the townships of South Africa by storm.

MUSIC _ 'Amampondo'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Skulumaye! performed by a new band from the Cape township of Langa 'Amampondo'. Amampondo has turned its back on the music of the West and is busy exploring, not just the traditional music of South Africa, but musical instruments from all over the Continent. After a concert in Capetown, Gill Garb spoke to a member of the band, Dizu Plaatjies, about their music.

DIZU PLAATJIES

This music that we play is the music that brings back the culture of the African people. Most people are lost about their culture - especially

we blacks - we don't know which direction to in, because most people now do not know what culture is. By playing this music we are trying to bring back the culture and try and work with the children and to teach them the traditional African Music.

GILL GARB

You're very young Dizu, yourself, and I don't know if you were brought up in Cape town, in an urban city. How did you learn traditional African music?

DIZU PLAATJIES

My father was born in a place called Luka Seki, that is in Transkei, in Pondo land. So our tribe used to sing each and every time so that is where I started to hear people singing and all that. In fact I was born here in Cape town and I grew up in Cape town, but most of the time I was in Transkei learning about my culture.

GILL GARB

What about the other members of the group. How did you all come together as a group?

DIZU PLAATJIES

I saw them play in an African open-air festival that was arranged by Tima Tana, the musician from Cape town. He went to Zimbabwe to study about African traditional music - so when he came back we organised all the musicians of Langa - they were playing all the traditional African instruments western drums and all that.

GILL GARB

And did you form that band immediately after that?

DIZU PLAATJIES

Yes, after that I knew that when Tima Tana left the country no-body would encourage the people about that music. My aim was to play the African traditional music with African traditional instruments - no Western music you know.

GILL GARB

And within this traditional music are there other elements either from West Africa or from jazz?

DIZU PLAATJIES

Yes, we have instruments here that come from all the way from Uganda. That is something that is called Akadinda. Here in South Africa it is made by Professor Andrew Tracy of Grahamstown. His father was the first man to record on that instrument in African. Then we have the Chopi xylophone which is made by the Chopi people from Mozambique, and we have the Mbira played by the Shona people in Zimbabwe, and we have cow bells from Ghana, we've got cow bells which we've collected in Gaberone; we've got drums which come from all over Africa and Nigeria, Gabone, all over.

GILL GARB

And just one last question Dizu. Tell me where do you see yourself fitting into the whole South African picture today, because blacks generally have to fight very hard for their culture to be recognised here. Do you feel that 'Amampondo' has a role in this?

DIZU PLAATJIES

If people can just recognise what the culture is I think they will know which way to go. But for them I think it is to go back to Transkei - no matter what Transkei is. They must go to Transkei - in Transkei that is where our culture is. We are living in towns who know nothing about culture. If a boy goes to circumcision we have to go to the people who are from Transkei because we Cape town people cannot make our own culture for ourselves. So we have to talk to those people. Those people must bear in mind that they are living in Africa - they must know what the culture is; they must know our culture.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Dizu Plaatjies, a member of the new South African band 'Amampondo'. And to the sound of their township jive 'Bhaqanga' it is goodbye from Alex Tetteh-lartey.

MUSIC - 'Amampondo'