

Arts and Africa

ALS4/S/S/2/49

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

COPYRIGHT CONTROL

ARTS AND AFRICA

FIRST BROADCAST: 2.12.84

571 G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to "Arts and Africa". The other day I went along to see an exhibition of paintings and sculpture from East Africa. I found it extremely attractive and one of its attractions was its diversity - not only the different materials the artists had used but the different cultures that had influenced them. More about the exhibition later in the programme. But the same diversity has made its mark on the music of East Africa as well as on the art. Along the coast, coast, centuries of trading with Arabs and Indians and people from the eastern Mediterranean have introduced cultures that have mingled with the local African ones. Ta'arab music, for instance, that's played in Zanzibar, is performed by people of mainland, African descent even though the music itself has been strongly influenced by Egyptian and Indian music.

MUSIC: Ta'arab music from Zanzibar (violin)

TETTEH-LARTEY

The violin player is Abbas Machano. He's an Officer for Music in the Ministry of Culture and a celebrated performer of Ta'arab music. Sometimes Ta'arab is just instrumental and sometimes it's vocal with love songs as a favourite, sometimes the songs are political. But you don't dance to Ta'arab music you sit and listen to it.

MUSIC: Ta'arab music (violin)

TETTEH-LARTEY

The violin isn't the only European instrument used for Ta'arab. People along the coast and in Zanzibar seem to take up any stringed instrument that comes their way - cellos, double basses, the guitar, the oudh and for rhythm a small drum called the dufu like a tambourine. But the most impressive instrument is the ganoon. It can have as many as seventy-two strings. It's basically an Egyptian instrument and the one Abbas Machano is going to play was made in Cairo.

MUSIC: Ta'arab music (ganoon)

TETTEH-LARTEY

Abbas Machano playing the ganoon and setting the scene for paintings of the Indian Ocean that were amongst those on show at the Sanaa exhibition of East African art at the Commonwealth Institute here in London. The works came from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and were accompanied by their three selectors. One of them was the artist Elimo Njau who was born in Tanzania and runs the Paa Ya Paa Gallery in Nairobi, Kenya. When I went to see him at the Institute's art gallery I found myself surrounded by paintings some by Elimo Njau himself, as well as sculpture and batiks.

Well Elimo, the first impression I have of this gallery - this wonderful thing - is of a very well-lit place and lights shining on very brilliant paintings all around. I was also impressed, when I first came in, by the vast variety of selections you have - of carvings, paintings, all sorts of sculpture. What are you aiming to do by this exhibition?

ELIMO NJAU

Well, we are really grateful for your rich comment. It's a reflection of your response to the East African wealth in creativity. There are exhibits from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and they're part of our celebration of twenty-five years of creative growth in the visual and plastic arts. You will see the result of things that have grown from the soil: the wood carvings, the clay sculpture, the stone sculpture from Kisi in Kenya, wood from Tanzania, batiks from Uganda, oil paintings and woodcuts also, etchings You find that all this is part of our "new wave". When people talk about drought and a lot of the sad things in Africa we are trying to bring out the positive effect of it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well what you said shows that your description of the exhibition as "an explosion of art in East Africa" is very, very, apt. Now is there any unity of purpose in the arts of these three countries? Is that why you've selected those very countries?

NJAU

I think we were the original group which broke up but now through a lot of hardship and some good things we have been brought together again. We are happy to see that the ties of Makerere University College and the University Colleges of Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam have resulted in the production of these works. We are very, very, happy particularly with Makerere University which actually 'fathered' or 'mothered' most of these. This being the first major exhibition of its kind with the rural aspect, the new ideas of socialism in Tanzania - you can see them at work - in contrast with the urban areas; and the Ugandan contribution, especially the batiks which come mainly from Uganda, so you find, therefore, all there is. There is a lot of similarity. It is difficult for anybody, unless he is told, to say exactly which country they come from.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Precisely. To me it all seems to be a mixture of various things and I could never make up my mind whether there was any special subjects you were trying to cover. There's everything to me, there's everything here. Now, how did you come to make the actual selections? Did you go round these three countries?

NJAU

There were three selectors: One was Fatma Abdullah for Tanzania, myself for Kenya and Mr Buluma for Uganda; and then we had an overall centre - the Paa Ya Paa Gallery in Nairobi to which all of them were brought, and the majority of them were brought to London after we had had a preview with the British Council in Nairobi.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Some of these individual works are really splendid. For example, there's this clay model of a head which looks to me as if it was made out of suede leather. And it's so skilfully done.

NJAU

Yes. It's by a young man from Mombassa, Henry Oddiwuor Dullo, who is very, very, clever and he calls it "Optimism and Ideology" but for me it's a beautiful clay bust of somebody looking ahead, perhaps with hope, which is a good thing these days. It has been fired but the fact that it has a "leather" look is his technique. Of course, you may now be criticising it aesthetically (laughter) because clay is clay.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh! But I think it's beautiful. He's able to achieve this "Leather" look from clay. It's something really marvellous and the expression on the face - the stern expression - he's really looking at something. It's really marvellous.

Thank you very much Elimo. I've really enjoyed this exhibition and I'm sure everybody who comes will have the same impression.

NJAU

You give it wings to reach as many people from West Africa and all parts of Africa as possible.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I was talking there to Elimo Njau. And as we were leaving I was particularly struck by the painting in water colours of a wrestling match in a village compound. You could see the villagers - the men, women and children - sitting in a group and watching two men, one trying to throw the other on the ground and the other resisting as hard as he could. And it was all so informal with beautiful colours and so natural that it reminded me of Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" and perhaps that's what the artist had in mind. It was by the Kenyan painter, Daniel Njoroge and was one of many fine pictures in the Sanaa Exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute in London.

And to stay by the Indian Ocean until the end of the programme here's Abbas Machano playing the ganoon.

MUSIC: Ta'arab music (ganoon)

TETTEH-LARTEY

There'll be more "Arts and Africa" at this time next week. For now it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.