

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ELAINE: And today we'll be hearing about the remarkable Sultan Seidou Njoya of Cameroun, and the important status given to theatre in Egypt by the Egyptian government.

If you had the chance to go to one of the many theatres in Cairo or elsewhere in Egypt you'd probably see the kind of play or operetta that's grown very popular there over the last seventy years. But, this is a renewal of what could be the oldest theatre art in the world, - according to people trained to read ancient manuscripts.

KAMAL HUSSIEN:

They found scripts, drama scripts, in the tombs of the Pharaohs a long time ago, about three or four thousand years ago. They used to be acted not by the people but by the priests only to the Pharaohs and we did one of these plays two or three years ago at the avant-garde theatre, the Pocket Theatre.

ELAINE: Kamal Hussien was one of the enthusiasts who breathed life into these ancient plays and allowed a twentieth century audience to watch them. He's Technical Supervisor and Director of the National Theatre Company in Egypt and when he came along to the "Arts and Africa" studio he told me something about the theatre's more recent history. It was the Syrians who reintroduced plays (and by the way actresses!) to Egypt and prepared the way for modern theatre

HUSSIEN: This theatre started with adapted plays from European plays like "Romeo and Juliet", French plays - French vaudevilles - and then in 1923 there was the first pure Egyptian troupe, it was called the Rameses Troupe, directed by Yousef Wahby, one of our greatest actors and directors in Egypt.

ELAINE: Wait a minute, what do you mean by troupe? Because troops to me mean soldiers

HUSSIEN: No, no troupe. It means theatre companies.

ELAINE: Well, what is happening to Egyptian theatre at the moment? How is it used? Is it purely entertainment?

HUSSIEN: No. The theatre now in Egypt is secured by the government.

ELAINE: Meaning it is subsidised by the government?

HUSSIEN: Yes, and the actors have their lives secure here. We pay the actors and the directors all through the year even if they don't work and if they work we give them a bonus.

ELAINE: Doesn't this mean that the government has a great deal to say about what kind of things you put on?

HUSSIEN: Yes, we must say what the governments want. We have three kinds of drama theatres: we have the National Theatre which presents repertoire and poems and big productions adapted or translated from other languages; and we have the Pocket Theatre, and we have the Modern Theatre in which we present the modern plays and the new playwrights and so on.

ELAINE: But how do you get this theatre to the people in the villages?

HUSSIEN: We have another kind of, - I don't know the correct translation in English, but I will call it the Farmers Theatre. Troupes go to the farmers in their villages and we act and produce and direct some plays for them in order to teach them good manners. And we also have during the summertime a kind of 'floating theatre'.

ELAINE: On the water you mean?

HUSSIEN: Yes, going all over the River Nile from the delta, Cairo, to Aswan. For instance, in Aswan the people go there and sit on the ground, on the grass, and see what we produce during the summertime.

ELAINE: Do you think that this educational type of theatre is much more important than pure entertainment?

HUSSIEN: Yes.

ELAINE: Does the government feel this way?

HUSSEIN: Yes.

ELAINE: But don't you feel that you would have more freedom if you weren't government subsidised? Doesn't it ever arise when a playwright would want to put on a play or something he feels is important and the government doesn't approve of? I am basically talking about censorship: what kind of censorship do you have?

HUSSEIN: As far as we don't hurt our government, our discipline then it is all right because we don't want the playwrights to be cunning and to be against our government. We are a small country and we want to be a big country so we want to stand on our feet and so on, so we don't want somebody to hurt our discipline or our country. We want to build our country.

ELAINE: Kamal Hussien, Technical Supervisor and Director of the National Theatre Company in Egypt.

MUSIC

ELAINE: That's a song recorded in Foumban, a town in north-west Cameroun and the home of the Sultans of the Bamoun people. It's a song of praise of the father of the present Sultan Seidou Njoya, a remarkable man from a remarkable family.

Cameroun has had more than its fair share of colonial regimes first the Germans, then the French and last but not least the English, - all imposing further divisions on a country that already had a great variety of people and cultures.

An Institute of Camerounian culture has recently been founded and it's been named after Sultan Seidou Njoya to acknowledge his achievements among his own people. Kong Nso Lafon has been telling me something about the influence the Sultan had in preserving Bamoun culture.

KONG NSO LAFON:

He's lived through the colonial days and what is typical about him is that he was able to resist the influence of the western civilisation and was able to keep his people aware of what they have, what they possess and what they could be able to do with what they have.

ELAINE: Well, before we go into exactly what he did, let us talk about the Cameroun. Could you describe it a bit for me?

- LAFON: Well, there are about 130 different tribes. You can have as many languages as there are villages but basically they are the Bantu, the semi-Bantu and the semi-Sudanic cultures. The handicraft varies from pottery to woodcarving and up in the north particularly bronze work.
- ELAINE: Well if you say that the whole sort of cultural life of the Cameroun is so diverse how did this man manage to put it all together?
- LAFON: It is just that Seidou Njoya is an educated man and he was able to see very quickly the use of art in the society.
- ELAINE: And what exactly is Bamoun art?
- LAFON: Well, I mentioned bronze work.
- ELAINE: Is it bronzes of chiefs, or of utensils? What kind of bronze is it?
- LAFON: It varies from little objects like necklaces, bracelets, to statues of chiefs and woodcarvings of the late chiefs. If I could just mention an example, when I visited Foumban, the principal town, I visited the museum which was instituted by Njoya. He asked his people to collect all these art objects they had been able to make; there is his throne which is carved by some of the palace sculptors and you can see that a large bit of wood has been carved into two statues on both ends and designs which marked the dignity of the palace. It is that type of art which the man saw early enough to be able to tell the people to keep them. Right now it varies from articles woven from raffia palm, or necklaces people wear, pottery; and this art has come to portray the Bamoun people themselves. The musical instruments are just the same.
- ELAINE: Could we hear some now?
- LAFON: Yes the song of the young men in Bamoun.
- MUSIC
- LAFON: Well, that is one of the popular dances of the Bamoun people.
- ELAINE: Is this your tribe by-the-way?

LAFON: Well, they are neighbours and historically and culturally we are related. This is the type of music they dance to normally and as I was saying, the functional art begins from little things, like musical instruments, up to things that can be exported like woven cloth. And actually now in Foumban you have a handicraft village where you have these bronze works, you have woodcarvings, you have cloth being weaved and almost anything that the people can make.

ELAINE: I seem to feel that the minute an art becomes conscious it loses a lot of the innocence in fact which makes it so beautiful, which makes it art. Do you think that this is happening in the Cameroun?

LAFON: Well in the particular case of Foumban I don't think it affects, say the fact that people are conscious does not reduce the value of their art. Njoya, if I can say so, he has so much authority that if he tells you to preserve this art you feel as though you are doing a national duty, to preserve it you are keeping within the orders of the Sultan and I think this is what made Foumban art to be what it is because when the Sultan said: "Well, give me this type of object", the sculptors would immediately set down to work and in a few days they would bring it to him and he would say: "Well, keep it in the museum" and I think this is how he came to preserve the art and build up this museum and give the people more incentive to preserve their art.

ELAINE: Yes, but you know he is still a total mystery to me. I can't imagine him at all. Could you tell me some more about him? How did he do what he did, specially during colonial times?

LAFON: Well, it is quite a mixture of obstinacy and foresight. In colonial days, as I mentioned, the Germans came first. Maybe the Germans might have brought a book or something that he could read and so he might have read this book and said: "Well, why can't I write a book?" He is quite an adventurous person, full of reason and again foresight, so he said: "Why can't I institute something like that for my people?" and he set down to work and he has been able to produce a Bamoun alphabet and he has written Bamoun and this Bamoun is being taught in Foumban right now. He even went to the extent of saying: "If I can invent this writing, why can't I print it?" and he went to the extent of letting his sculptors and people design the letters and he set up a Gutenberg-type of printing press and the remains of which are still in his museum now.

ELAINE: You were saying something about an institute. Could you tell me about that?

LAFON: Yes. The Institute came as the initiative of the History Department of the Cameroun University. So much in search of national identity they thought the lesson should be learnt from the work done by the Sultan of Foumban, Njoya, and they came to set up an institute which is called Njoya's Institute and this will be the springboard for promotion of art and culture in Cameroun and some liaison point for African art and culture too.

ELAINE: Kong Nso Lafon talking about the influence of one man on the culture of a whole nation.

MUSIC

ELAINE: A Bamoun song of victory. This battle these warriors are singing about took place in the eighteen nineties. but let's look forward to next week when I will be back with another edition of "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC

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