

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 24

(4R 50 S024P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

ELAINE: And Elaine Caulker again saying hello everyone. Welcome to the double 'A' show - that, of course, stands for 'Arts and Africa'.

Well, the name of our programme as you all know is 'Arts and Africa' and we're going to be completely literal today and talk about art and Africa.

I have two people here with me, one is Lafon who is a student of journalism from the Cameroun and the other person is Ted Joans, a black American poet who has spent a lot of time in Africa and a lot of time with black art and black creation or whatever terms you would like to use.

So with both of you now I would like to start talking about this. Is there such a thing? What is art, in Africa? Lafon could you come in here and say something?

KONG NSO LAFON:

Yes, I really think art is a foreign word to Africans because art, to them, is what they have learnt - it is a name they have learnt from somewhere.

ELAINE: But there are people in Africa who are creating things that in any terms are considered art. Ted what do you think?

TED JOANS:

Well first of all, the creations that are done in Africa are done collectively, it is a communal thing unlike the western artist who is now at this stage in a pathological position, I mean his individualism has gone berserk. He is only concerned with self.

ELAINE: Yes. But Lafon you are from the Cameroun. This whole idea of collective art, could you say something about that?

LAFON: Collective art is one of the results of the infusion of western ideas into African art because what is now called 'art' was something like articles that Africans used to make to use in their homes it was functional really. Like if you want to take an article to the farm you make a beautiful basket and you carry it but when with the advent of Europeans they admired these things and they called them African art and that is why, as Ted was saying a minute ago, that it has become communal for in certain societies people have seen that they draw some profit from making art...

ELAINE: Is that what you meant by communal art? I don't think that is what you meant Ted?

JOANS: No, I meant something for all the people. For example the beautiful religious piece of sculpture that was stolen and brought to the United States, the Afo-A-Kan which was from your own country the Cameroun.

ELAINE: Could you talk a little bit about that because a lot of people won't know about it?

LAFON: Yes. The Afo-A-Kan is a big statue in the For Palace, the palace of the For (that is the Chief as we would normally call him) and it is supposed to keep the people in peace - to keep peace in the area, and sacrifices are offered to the statue and when the statue was stolen, by one of the princes I understand, and sold out first to Paris and then it found its way to the States, you know, the people lived in disorder. There was disharmony in the society and it is suspected that it is because of the absence of this big statue symbolizing an old chief who is an administrator or something. So that when it came back the people were quite happy and it was reported that peace had come back to the area.

JOANS: You see in the United States, the reason why it was there wasn't because of any belief in the work in the spiritual, let's say the vital forces that is in this piece of sculpture, it was only the world money market, that is the reason it has found its way into the United States. The traditional art in Africa was created for the people and also just for entertainment. All the masks in Africa are not made to say just "Boo" some of the masks are made to be laughed at: if you have seen some of the stilt dancers from the Ivory Coast all the children are rolling and they laugh and it is great fun.

LAFON: Yes. I really think that is the value of what we call now African art but with the introduction of western ideas very many people tend to make these masks now for commercial reasons and therefore that is an aspect of adulteration of African art.

ELAINE: Well we can get on to this question of commercial art because this is something that I feel personally very badly about. Because the word 'art' is a whole western concept I find that people in Africa when they think in terms of commercial art - the stuff that is made at the airport - and it really hurts me to go into African homes and see this ghastly stuff used as decoration in their homes.

JOANS: Well, I feel that because Africa is taking a big giant step a lot of the old traditions will be destroyed, lost, but I still think it will survive in a lot of places. For example a country like Mali: now Mali is developing very rapidly but the Dogon people remain the same. They have better health facilities, their children are now able to go to school to learn other ways but they still keep their traditional religion. So as long as there are people like that in Africa I feel that the art won't go commercial because people still respect it. Now many of the people who have changed over to another religion no longer respect that art so the biggest majority of dealers in West Africa that are selling authentic pieces of art are people who have succumbed to Islam and one of the big countries where all the guys are big merchants is Senegal. Senegal has no great sculpture tradition, it was completely crushed and I have never seen a Senegalese piece of sculpture.

LAFON: Ted is quite optimistic about African art not going commercial but I think I would tend to be rather more pessimistic because I see two movements. One is that African art is moving from the home to the museum and from the museum, at times, to the market. With the tourists coming into Africa they always like African traditional articles to take back home. Secondly, there is here this tendency of, say, secondary school-leavers or university graduates who tend to specialise in what we call sculpture. These are people who are making carbon copies of this traditional art that should have remained in the home. These articles have lost their functional characteristics.

ELAINE: There is one question I would like to put to both of you and this is an experience I had personally. In Nigeria, in Ife you obviously you have all the famous Ife bronzes and I travelled 200 miles to go and see these bronzes (mind you, from a purely western point of view because I learnt to appreciate African art in Europe, which is amazing but I did) I went there with a lot of Dahomeians to see this stuff and I was appalled at the time, this was about two years ago now, that the Dahomeians were not in the least bit interested in fact they were completely bored when we went into this museum and for me there were all these beautiful pieces of Ife, the faces, the Ife masks. Is there any movement towards people beginning to realise: "Ah that's another tribe but that's another tribe but that's great" rather than purely functional: "My ceremony, my..."

JOANS: I think it will come by education. I think that through schooling that will happen and I feel that first of all Africa is the second largest continent in the world and it is a vast place and the OAU and many other organisations are

JOANS: trying to get Africa together so we can learn about each
(contd.) other.

LAFON: Yes, I think that even with education the appreciation of art, the aesthetics of art would still be upset certain Africans. Personally I studied art but I find it difficult to sit down and look at an object of art and appreciate the aesthetics of it. Being an article I have lived with I've seen it all my life and the only difference if I see an article from Ghana, from Togo, from Mali is that I see it in different shapes and I think: "Well, those are marvellous people they are able to change the faces so they can frighten me more, so I can laugh more!"

ELAINE: Isn't that all that is important?

LAFON: Oh it is important because that is the function of the art, that is why it was made to frighten, why it was made to please and that is how I see it but I don't go into finding out how many strokes the sculptor made, how many lines he gave on the jaw, why his eyes are too open - that is what we call aesthetics of art. That is why...

JOANS: Bravo, brother bravo.

LAFON: I found it difficult for a long time to appreciate art in such a way.

ELAINE: Well can we stop this discussion there. I am sorry that we have to stop. Ted Jones and Lafon thank you very much.

JOANS: It was a pleasure.

LAFON: Thank you.

MUSIC

ELAINE: This music is not from black Africa it is played here by the Moroccan Broadcasting Orchestra and it is another point of view in the argument about the meaning of that small word 'art'.

Now in parts of the continent where Arabic culture predominates art is certainly recognised as having a separate entity. As well as the culture that's part of everyday life, there are plenty of entertainers who are professional musicians and professional writers and actors. If you remember a few programmes ago Kamel Hossien, Director of the National Theatre Company of Egypt was telling us about the theatres and troupes of actors in his own country. But he's also watched the development of drama and the theatre in other parts of North Africa.

KAMEL HUSSIEN:

In Libya there is a theatre starting there. We send directors and teachers and actors to build a new theatre in Libya and Libyans come to Cairo to study the theatre. In Tunisia there is a good theatre there, I have visited Tunisia. In Algeria as well there is a very good promising theatre and when I visit Algeria I found that in every village in a small village there is a small theatre. In Morocco, as well in Rabat and Casablanca and Fez and Meknes there are many theatres there. There is a kind of National Theatre there and I know I can mention one of the promising and good directors in Morocco called Tayib Sadik, he is a very good director and I know him very well.

ELAINE: Recently there was a festival in Rabat, wasn't there?

HUSSIEN: Yes. Egypt was there, Tunisia, Libya, Morocco and Syria and Lebanon, Kuwait and Iraq and it was for about ten days. Every country from north Africa, from the Arab states, presented a play and they produced their plays in Rabat and Casablanca. Egypt presented a play called "My Love Shamina". It is about Palestine and so on, it is a fantastic play. It truly a fantastic play.

ELAINE: Was there a discussion about the theatre or just performing?

HUSSIEN: Oh yes, of course, after every performance there was a discussion to criticise the play. And this festival is held every two years and they discuss what we do about the future theatre, about playwrights and about actors and directors and so on. We talk about all the branches of the theatre.

ELAINE: Do you have any contact with Black Africa, theatre-wise in Egypt?

HUSSIEN: No, until this moment we haven't got any contact with African theatre and that is very bad. I know that in Sudan, where there is the theatre as well, there is a National Theatre there but I do not know if there is one in Sierra Leone, or Liberia and so on. We must know and I invite any African actor or director to visit Cairo to see and join our companies and we will send them to our companies, we will send them anything they like.

ELAINE: Well that invitation came from Kamel Hussien, Technical Supervisor and Director of Egypt's National Theatre and I really would be delighted if I discovered that it did lead to an exchange of theatre people and theatre ideas. Now if a company arrived in East Africa, for instance, they might well be met by a Song of Welcome like this one, sung in Luganda. And just to be contrary it is also my cue to say goodbye and see you next week for another edition of "Arts and Africa"

MUSIC