

Arts and Africa

4/7/2/20

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 26

(4R 50 S026P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

ELAINE: Hello everyone: I'm Elaine Caulker, and here ladies and gentlemen is today's guest.

Actuality

ELAINE: and we're both welcoming you to "Arts and Africa". That second welcome came from two or three hundred cowrie shells and dozens and dozens of bells. And here's the person wearing them, dancing himself almost into a trance here in the "Arts and Africa" studio.

Music on disk Ebohon chanting and dancing

ELAINE: That voice in the foreground belongs to a Nigerian Osemwegie Ebohon, but as he quickly pointed out to me he isn't only a singer!

OSEMWEGIE EBOHON:

I'm an artist, I'm a playwright, I'm a poet, I'm a historian: I have written books and published on these aspects but the greatest of all is that I am one of the foremost art collectors in my country and I own the only presently private-owned museum in my country - the Museum of Benin Arts.

ELAINE: Well, founding the Museum of Benin Arts with its own shrine, and performing and publicising rituals, might seem to most of us a full-time occupation. But as well as that long list Ebohon has an official post in Nigeria with the Mid-Western State.

EBOHON: I'm a cultural officer, of research that is, to the Mid-West government of Nigeria. Up to 1972 (December) I was a journalist and I left journalism as the Society Editor of the Nigerian Observer, Benin. Since three years ago when I took up research I have been researching into dances but that was not the beginning of my research. From 1964 when I wrote my first play in the English language I have been involved in research because all my plays are historical. And I use things for my material for these plays and hand-in-hand I also stumbled on collecting - art was also part of my props and decor for the stage when I was putting up a play.

ELAINE: Well I would just like to say right here that whether or not I believe in cult worship really didn't come into things at all. Meeting Ebohon is an experience in itself because of his tremendous enthusiasm and tremendous energy. But he also strikes me as surprisingly practical - after all, organizing a museum and all his other activities must take some doing.

Well, in spite of his reluctance to wear a label I got the distinct impression that love of drama motivates him just as much as anything. For instance, as we've just heard, putting on plays was what got him going as an art collector.

EBOHON: My first find which was ritual was in 1964 when I was looking for materials to decorate an Obason - a divinely kingship scene in a traditional play.

ELAINE: What exactly was it?

EBOHON: It was a cult bell; the bell for invoking the spirits of the departed leaders of a family.

ELAINE: And where did you find it?

EBOHON: I got it from an old man in the village who said that he wasn't sure that it would come back, maybe they would steal it so on and so forth and he made me pay for it and I did. So I put it in the sitting-room and this one started attracting other arts - I wrote some more plays and today I have over six hundred objects in my museum. For instance, I collected some charms that were used by warriors or native doctors in their own time, so if you go across my museum you will not only find bronze works or ebony works you also have combined leaves in the form of charms and so on.

ELAINE: You mean ordinary leaves?

EBOHON: Yes, ordinary leaves but they are washed and moulded into shapes and you use them for various things. For instance, if you want a tree to fall down without using the machet all you need to do is to cut from this charm, chew and spray on the roots.

ELAINE: So your museum is really involved in very definite work of the ritual - the spiritual world in fact?

EBOHON: That is in fact the second branch of the museum and it is dedicated to the Elders of the Night, the wizards and witches. If you go to a native doctor or physician and he says that your problems are caused by the night-owners (the wizards and the witches) because you have not done this to them, all you need to do is to come into my shrine and make these sacrifices. In the shrine I have three big snakes, three man-eater's. You know what man-eaters are?

ELAINE: No I don't.

EBOHON: It is like a crocodile but it is harmless and I have some tortoises, a lot of snails because these snakes and man-eaters eat a lot of snails.

ELAINE: And this is all part of your museum?

EBOHON: Yes, it is part of the museum.

ELAINE: Do you have any music associated with your museum?

EBOHON: Oh, a lot. When I started, the different gods from which I collect finds, I was also collecting their music too and where I can refine them I refine them, and compose new ones to honour them. I have been recording these with the former Phillips West Africa records.

ELAINE: Perhaps you could play us something now?

EBOHON: Yes, I have some with me in the studio now.

MUSIC

ELAINE: Is this something you composed?

EBOHON: What happens is that two things are involved there. You find divination, a high priest, predicts for you but before he starts predicting especially when someone is sick he must be given a type of music to inspire him, so the song I composed is: "The trouble that is worrying this man leave him because he will be useful to this village or town in the future. We beg you in the name of the gods of the night" so that is what the music is about.

ELAINE: Well there's more music coming in a moment - the piece that Ebohon plays when he wants actually to go into a trance. He'd brought along a recording of it to the studio so I really had great hopes that all of us here would be able to witness the happening. As I've said, he'd made a point of bringing one of the cult costumes (by-the-way, he hadn't walked through the streets of London in it but brought all his gear in a bag and changed here) and believe me judging from the effects of the inhabitants of Bush House it is just as well that he did because London would have come very definitely to a standstill.

Well, there was the music and the costume, so how about the trance? You can hear the result for yourself in a minute or two, but what I still hadn't found out was what made him feel so devoted to a way of life that a lot of Africans think is really old-fashioned and out-of-date.

EBOHON: When I started collecting materials to decorate the satge I was always getting more involved and more involved and so I decided to start getting initiated so I could get enough from these cults, there are over nineteen secret traditional cults and so that is why you see I am dressing like a high priest.

ELAINE: You are wearing a white tunic and the main thing that I can notice is millions of cowrie shells everywhere and you have got a white hat on, with cowrie shells and red pieces of material on it.

EBOHON: Those are charms.

Actuality (jingle of shells and bells)

ELAINE: Could you tell me again why you are wearing this costume?

EBOHON: The reason is this very costume is for the cult of the sea. The giver of children and wealth.

ELAINE: What is the name of the god?

EBOHON: Olukun. There are several priests and priestesses, in fact, the highest priestess to Olukun I am working on her for the 2nd World Black Festival. So the cowries signify wealth and the white cloth signifies purity and sovereignty of that very god.

ELAINE: Now you are deeply involved in this but you perform a lot, you are talking about state performances and performances at the Black African Festival in Lagos so in fact, this is not just a spiritual thing for you, you do use it, you are showing it to the outside world.

EBOHON: Oh yes, because after the 1897 fall of the Benin kingdom there was a decline in the worship of gods and we have just entered the state of awareness. And before five years back we were doing it as a form of drama or sort of concert. What I am trying to do now is to bring it out in its natural form.

ELAINE: Do you believe really that you are going to have re-birth of this culture? Will you actually get people interested enough in what you are doing and it is going to be a living thing again and not something that happened...

EBOHON: In fact, you would be surprised that people have come from Greece, America, here and there visiting my shrine and taking them to see some of my research dance groups. For instance, several Americans were in Benin last November and I took them to one of my research dance groups and I got one of the American ladies to be involved spiritually. She danced, only that after the possession when she came back to normal she was very tired.

ELAINE: Now you were telling me about a piece of music earlier that you composed to appease the gods. Could we hear a little bit of that and could you tell our listeners why you came to compose this piece of music?

EBOHON: What would be interesting there is that I may even, when I am telling you what it is, move my legs because whenever I hear it I am always interested...

ELAINE: That would be great.

EBOHON: ...I will be doing some minor demonstrations.

Recorded music

EBOHON: When I started this research some years ago I started receiving some bullets from priests and priestesses and even the gods themselves.

ELAINE: What do you mean by bullets, real bullets?

EBOHON: Not real bullets: I was getting challenges. For instance at times I would fall sick when I am writing a play or when I have composed a new poem so I consulted some native doctors who told me that what I was revealing is forbidden. So I asked what I could do to appease them because these things are fast dying away. I am giving them publicity as I don't want these things to die so that we can hand them over to generations to come. I have composed some poems and songs in their honour.

You might be interested if I just give you a minor demonstration on how...

ELAINE: Are you going to dance? That's great!

Recorded with studio chanting by Ebohon.

ELAINE: Well a cult priest here in the studio, performing in front of the microphone. Not something that happens every week in 'Arts and Africa'! but when it does it is really great. And that meeting with Ebohon from Benin, Nigeria brings me to the end of my stint as presenter of the programme. Louis Mahoney's going to be in this seat next week, so please join him for another session of 'Arts and Africa'.

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