

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 52

(4R 50 S052P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody, this is Louis Mahoney with a special welcome to you from "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

I'm taking my cue for today's programme from that cora music that starts us off every week. You'll have heard me say more than once that that delicious music is very much the music of my own home country - the Gambia. I'll grant you that it isn't the biggest country on the continent but I believe we have more than our fair share of music, dance and drama. And who better to talk about it than my guest from Banjul, Gambia's Chief Education Officer who's also a prolific playwright - and, by-the-way, he's my old school-master.

Ah, those school days, and those special occasions when we boys had to march while the band played. So why don't we begin with a special Gambian march - "March Banjul", composed by Bandmaster E.S. Nicol of the Gambia Police Force.

MUSIC BY THE GAMBIA POLICE FORCE

I turn from such stirring stuff which reminds me of Empire Day, to my guest Mr Gabriel Roberts. Gabriel, you are a dramatist, tell us about your work as a dramatist.

GABRIEL ROBERTS:

Well, I have written quite a few: "The Gambian Myth" which I think is the most striking of all the plays I have written; you have one "The Trial of Busumbala"; the "Manijaro in Britain"; "Manijaro Returns Home"; "Manijaro Outwitted".

MAHONEY:

That's quite a few. Now, "The Trial of Busumbala" was, in fact, one of the plays that we did in the BBC's "African Theatre" which was quite successful. Could you tell us briefly how you set about writing it?

ROBERTS:

Well, this came out of the circumstances I found myself in in Georgetown. There I was headmaster of the secondary boarding school in Georgetown and I used to hear quite a number of people tuning their radios very loudly and this infuriated me - because, although they were enjoying their music, they were disturbing me. And I found it extremely difficult to work under those circumstances. So I thought

I might do something about it, so I set about writing this "Trial of Busumbala" which, as you know, is about a radio set that was stolen and which the counsel for the defence tried to prove that it was not theft.

MAHONEY: Here is an extract from the famous trial - "The Trial of Busumbala".

EXTRACT FROM "THE TRIAL OF BUSUMBALA".

That was from "The Trial of Busumbla" and, believe it or not, I played the Prosecution Counsel in that.

Turning from the writing to the acting of plays, Cabriel can you tell me of your own ventures in this field? Now you, yourself, run a drama group.

ROBERTS: The principal group I ran, - I ran quite a few groups - was the Reform Youth Club.

MAHONEY: Who are they?

ROBERTS: They are a group of young men and women who have come together first to study plays in a playreading group and they thought it would be a good thing to create some entertainment in the Gambia. You know, one of the things we lack in the Gambia is theatre facilities, or other facilities for entertainment, so the entertainment we can produce - they are probably the only ones we can have in the Gambia. So they came together and they asked me to be their patron and producer and director - which I accepted very gladly. And we started - first they were interested in my plays so we started by producing my plays but in order to have some variety we went out to produce other plays like Sarif Easmon or Lewis Nkosi or even some English writers.

MAHONEY: Would you say that some of these people would then develop into, perhaps, a National Theatre?

ROBERTS: Yes, we certainly were hoping that this would - we are hoping - that this would be the eventual outcome, to have a National Theatre.

MAHONEY: But you do have a National Dance Troupe, as opposed to a National Theatre?

ROBERTS: Yes, The striking difference between the Reform Youth Club activities and the activities of the National Dance Troupe is that whereas the Reform Youth Club are concerned with the production of plays in English, the National Dance Troupe are concentrating on the indigenous culture and using the local languages in both the dancing and the drama that is produced.

It has a much longer history than last year. We took part in the first Negro Arts Festival which was held in Dakar in 1966 and we had a National Troupe that went to perform in Dakar. When we returned from the festival, it withered away and we had to revive it last year to celebrate our First National Festival of Art and Culture.

MAHONEY: Do these groups play to tourists? Apparently there's a booming tourist industry in Gambia. Do they, in fact, play to tourists to show what Gambian culture is?

ROBERTS: Yes, I think the tourists are exploiting this: they go by the backdoor and get splinter groups to play at hotels for groups of tourists. We are trying to do something about this because very often the people they gather around to play for them, do not portray the genuine Gambian culture.

MAHONEY: The Gambia also has some excellent practitioners of the more popular kind of music whether it's pure or mixed: the Aligators and the Super Eagles. Let's listen to the Super Eagles for a little while.

MUSIC BY THE SUPER EAGLES.

Something however that the National Troupe is more likely to be doing is a performance of "Trawalleh Lia". Here you'll hear the very popular singer Efrey MBye and lead drummer Lamin NYang. In this song, the singer is giving advice especially to women folk that the precious time most women and girls spend going in and out of offices, workshops and shops asking for favours, begging for money, would have been more worth while if spent on domestic work.

"TRAWALLEH LIA" - TRADITIONAL GAMBIAN MUSIC.

"Trawalleh Lia", from a disk of a wide variety of Gambian music, specially brought together by Oussou Ndiaye who's called it, naturally, "Musiki Gambia".

Now the quality of our national performance is often compared with that of our neighbours. Now Gabriel, do you think that our national performance compares with that of our neighbours?

ROBERTS: Well, we didn't do very badly at the Dakar Festival - in fact we did very well indeed. We had a performance attended by the two Presidents: President Jawara and President Senghor - a gala performance they called it and it was very well received.

I think that if you compared the Dance Troupe of the Gambia, Senegal, Guinea there might be a lot of similarities but if you go outside that group - to Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria - they are very different. But we certainly have something to contribute, to show to the world from that area.

MAHONEY: They might be different, but in what way are they different?

ROBERTS: Well, I have observed some of the dance troupes: in Sierra Leone, in Ghana and Nigeria. There is more ballet in our own National Troupe performance than in Ghana, Nigeria or Sierra Leone. The tunes also are different: the basic instrument in our own National Troupe is the cora.

MAHONEY: Thank you Gabriel for coming along to our 'Arts and Africa' studio. My best wishes to relatives and friends and bon voyage on your travels back home.

Now what better moment to listen to Gambian coras and singers combined.

CORA MUSIC

And here we come to the end of another "Arts and Africa"
and I'll join our cora players to wish you everything of
the best for the future.

CORA MUSIC.

BROADCASTING RIGHTS: FREE FOR USE BY
ANY BROADCASTING ORGANISATION OUTSIDE
BRITAIN IN ENGLISH OR IN TRANSLATION.

PUBLICATION RIGHTS: NOT FREE FOR USE
IN PUBLISHING OUTSIDE BRITAIN IN
ENGLISH OR IN TRANSLATION.