

Arts and Africa

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SIGNATURE TUNE

LOUIS MAHONEY:

Hello everybody, this is Louis Mahoney. And today it's music, dancing and international trade. It's "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

I can promise plenty of music in today's programme - music from Ghana, music from "Sankofa".

SANKOFA MUSIC

The drums and voices of a dance troupe from Ghana providing the music for a funeral dance from the Ashanti region of the country. The troupe is based in the capital, Accra, but I had the pleasure of seeing them while they were performing on stage in London.

The driving force behind Sankofa is George Kwame Dzikunu who's the choreographer and leader of Sankofa. But this word "Sankofa"? - I asked George what it meant.

GEORGE KWAME DZIKUNU:

"Sankofa" means "Go back and fetch it". In Ghana, most of the young boys and girls are trying to modify their dancing by doing pop, rock 'n' roll and all sorts of those things, and I'm trying to tell them they should go back and take what their forefathers have left behind, but doing the traditional drumming and dancing.

MAHONEY: Go back to their original African way of dancing rather than reggae? And in your group you've got how many dancers?

DZIKUNU: We've got seven girl dancers and seven boy dancers and eight drummers.

MAHONEY: So in all that's 22? And are they all from Accra?

DZIKUNU: No they are from different regions - from all the regions mixed together.

MAHONEY: And, in fact, the various dancers bring their own type of dancing?

DZIKUNU: Yes, what I do, when I need any dance, is I go to the village and see them dancing. Then I pick one person from the village who is better in the dance and I bring him or her to the group.

MAHONEY: And here's music from the eastern region, an Ewe dance called Atsiagbekor that celebrates a battle won two hundred years ago by the Anlos people.

SANKOFA MUSIC

Do you find that dancing in Africa is different from when you are dancing in London? Because, in London you've got theatres as such - huge theatres - how do you adapt to that? Does it make it difficult for you?

DZIKUNU: No, It doesn't make it difficult. What I do is, when I go in my research to the villages, I sit down as a guest and the dancers do their dance in front of me and I take myself to be the audience. So whatever they do, I copy in the same way and put it on the stage.

MAHONEY: Yes, but in Europe it is a different type of tradition in the theatre in terms of dancing. People actually go to big theatres, they sit down and they have a lot of sophisticated lighting and so on. How do your dancers fit in with this, do they find it easy or difficult?

DZIKUNU: Yes that is why, you know, back home in Ghana, we have the Arts Council of Ghana where they have people who are taught about all these things. They come to watch our rehearsals and try to put us more or less on the stage. So that, for instance coming over here we don't have too many ... difficulties.

MAHONEY: Did you have a sort of competition with other groups in Ghana - dance groups - because presumably there are a lot of dance groups in Ghana?

DZIKUNU: Yes, last year we had a competition - drumming and dancing groups - and we won the first position to represent the country in Nigeria this year.

MAHONEY: You came first?

DZIKUNU: Yes.

MAHONEY: So you are going to.....?

DZIKUNU: To Nigeria this year in November to represent our country,

MAHONEY: Oh, that's in the 2nd African and All Black Festival of the Arts?

DZIKUNU: Yes.

MAHONEY: George, thank you very much.

DZIKUNU: Thank you.

MAHONEY: And it's beginning to look as though everybody's going to be meeting up at the All Black Arts Festival in Lagos, including George Kwame Dzikunu and Ghana's Sankofa Dance Troupe.

MAHONEY: The other week, if you remember, the Nigerian sculptor Emmanuel Jegede was pointing out that works of art from Africa are sold outside the continent for very little - he gave the example of £25 for a very fine metal panel that would have taken up to a couple of months for the artist to complete. Today we thought we would talk to someone at the other end of the transaction. Kona Caulker has been to a shop selling African art in the heart of London with stocks of jewellery from Ethiopia, Makonde carvings from Tanzania, soapstone carvings..... The owner, Roy Maxham, used to live in East Africa, but now he's resident in Britain, Kona wondered how he collected the objects for sale.

ROY MAXHAM:

I deal through National Arts of Tanzania which was set up by the Tanzanian government as a co-operative type of agency, but I buy from the individual artists and then it's channelled through National Arts who package things up and arrange for payment for exporting it here.

KONA CAULKER:

And who does the pricing of your sculptures?

MAXHAM: I mark up things a standard amount on what they cost and the price for sculptures is basically fixed by National Arts in Tanzania.

CAULKER: And how much would one of those pieces cost? One of the big pieces?

MAXHAM: Well, the largest piece I have sold here has been £250.

CAULKER: That seems to me quite a lot of money. What kind of people do you get buying your stuff?

MAXHAM: Well, I don't sell many at £250, of course. The vast majority of pieces I sell are probably about £25. And I've sold to a very wide variety of people. One of the things that I've found quite pleasing is that I've sold a lot of pieces to people who've never bought an original work of art before in their lives.

CAULKER: But why African art? Do you think there's a vogue rising in England?

MAXHAM: No, I don't think there's a vogue - there's only one or two shops in London dealing in African art and there's about 10 million people in London - so it can hardly be considered a vogue. But I think there is a rising interest and people are becoming more interested especially in craft items because there is a rising interest in people in England doing their own craft things and when they see African crafts they realise how good they are whereas previously they had no point of reference.

MAHONEY: Roy Maxham doesn't seem to think that Londoners buy works of African art because it's the fashion (though I'm not so sure about that) but I do know for certain that people outside Africa don't see the same significance in the objects as we do, so, who are his customers?

MAXHAM: Well, some people are people who've lived in Africa and some people I have are regular customers who collect particular types of African art. But quite a lot of people are not particularly interested in African art, they see a thing they like it for itself. I also sell, for instance, a lot of Makonde sculpture to sculptors themselves because when sculptors see these things they are often quite amazed at the quality of the sculpting and so they buy them themselves. I do sell a lot of things to British artists.

MAHONEY: And, of course, some of the most famous European artists of this century have produced works that are very much the result of seeing African masks and sculpture for the first time.

When Kona Caulker visited the shop, most of the items for sale came from the eastern side of the continent but Roy Maxham is just as interested in getting hold of items from West Africa, especially from the Sahel.

MAXHAM: Well, I went to those countries last year - I'm thinking now of the Sahel countries Mali and Niger - and I feel that those countries have been very much uninfluenced by tourists - there's very little 'airport art' in places like that. They've relatively little industrial development and there are a great deal of craft things still being made for day to day use - things which people in this country find very attractive - whereas in the more developed African countries nowadays, like in the western world, a lot of things, plastic things, are being made in factories.

CAULKER: Who are your contacts when you go to Mali and Niger?

MAXHAM: Well I've found the most successful thing is to choose a town which is large enough to have quite a large market but not too big, not too industrialised - I try to steer away from the capitals usually - and especially in the north of Mali one has places, Mopti for instance, where the nomadic people come in once or twice a week to buy things and also to sell things and I've found that if one waits in a place like that, one sees quite a good cross-section of craft things which are available.

MAHONEY: Roy Maxham talking to Kona Caulker and touching on a highly debatable subject, and definitely a topic that will be aired again in the programme. But not by me - at least not in the near future. I'm vacating this chair for the time being and to help me on my way we're going to play another dance from Sankofa.

SANKOFA MUSIC

This dance comes from the north of Ghana from the Dagbani people, and it celebrates the birth of the prophet Mohammed. And now I have to say goodbye. Next week it'll be Kwezi Kay who'll be introducing "Arts and Africa".

SANKOFA MUSIC

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