

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

NO. 77

(5R 50 S077P)

SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And if money is the root of all evil it's also the subject for "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

I suppose 'money' is one word that distinguishes modern art from traditional culture, and it does it in a more devastating way than any other. A professional artist can mean someone paid in cash - and that's quite acceptable, but 'commercial' art is not a compliment - the reverse in fact. But I don't think anyone would dispute that film-making, for example, costs money - and in large quantities. And taking even a troupe of the most traditional dancers to another country for a display of national culture costs money.

With this preamble about money you'd think that the meeting of ministers from French and English-speaking African countries recently in Sierra Leone, would be a meeting of finance ministers. In actual fact, the twenty-seven ministers were ministers of culture and the inter-African cooperation they discussed at length was cooperation in cultural development. Senegal's President Senghor was one of the first to stress that what links us all is a culture that goes back into pre-history. But this conference, a follow-up to an earlier one in Gabon, was also forward looking. That conference decided to set up an International Cultural Promotion Fund, to set up a centre to train cultural personnel, to promote 'a militant culture to allow the creative genius of the African to express and assert itself'.

TETTEH-LARTEY

ICAM is a new set of initials to me; it stands for the Institute for African and Mauritian Cultures and its Director, Dr. Basille Kossou attended the recent meeting in Freetown. Roland Buck put some questions to him on behalf of "Arts and Africa" and Dr. Kossou replied through an interpreter. What, to begin with, was the reason for this second meeting?

DR. BASILLE KOSSOU

It's meant to lay the legal foundation of those discussions in Libreville and to confirm our adherence to those resolutions and conclusions. Now this has been achieved, but we went beyond that in that a special ad hoc committee has been set up to meet, discuss and prepare a draft charter which will be taken to a meeting organised by UNESCO in Accra next October.

TETTEH-LARTEY

When Roland Buck asked Dr. Kossou to define the problems discussed by the ministers the word 'money' was bound to be mentioned, but with a whole continent represented there was an equally important debating point.

KOSSOU

Well, the problems which cultural cooperation in Africa can readily bring to mind are many, but I think they can be summarised under two main headings: namely, the basic policies, basic principles which one has to harmonise, bring together, discuss; doing this and respecting the particularities of each member country or each African country, nevertheless bringing them together for a consensus or a common objective. The other part of it - more of a financial problem, namely, what would be the budgetary appropriations to meet concrete work that has been assigned to this conference.

ROLAND BUCK

This meeting seems to be preoccupied with the harmonisation of cultural policies which is non-political and legal, rather than trying to project African culture as an entity, as part and parcel of the African personality, why is this so?

KOSSOU

For sure there is a question of harmonisation, and this harmonisation of the various cultural activities actively promotes the African culture. Definitely when you think of harmonising you think of basic policies. We mean to respect the cultural peculiarities of each country, but all the same, have a broad base, a consensus of ideas which will form the platform - a platform where this discussion will be possible. And once these discussions are on the way, you can determine concrete action.

KOSSOU

Now, as has been done in Libreville, and confirmed here, we now know that we have a common objective but which can only be met with great capital financial outlay. At this stage of the conference we don't have such financial outlay to carry out those immense cultural actions and so the conference has the result that we shall establish constant and continuous contact, relationship between the various countries, so as, while we are waiting, to have the necessary financial means to carry out those actions.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Dr. Basille Kossou, through an interpreter, at the Freetown conference of Ministers of Culture.

I wonder whether the ministers mentioned the twentieth century art of the cinema in their discussions. Dr. Ola Balogun would have wanted them to, I'm sure of that. I'll introduce him as a Nigerian filmmaker who now owns his own film production company, but he's also a university academic and he was at one time in Paris as the Nigerian Press Attache. The United States is still a Mecca for filmmakers and on a recent visit, Ola Balogun talked to Harlen Levy about his views on the importance of the cinema. It can, he believes, in the wrong hands, be a negative influence.

DR. OLA BALOGUN

The only kind of image which Africans have of Americans comes from such despicable products as "Shaft" and "Superfly" and so on. It's a kind of imagery which is very detrimental to the Afro-American people in Africa and the rest of the world and also the only kind of image Afro-Americans and Americans by and large have of Africa really still comes from the "Tarzan" type of film. So, I believe there is ample scope for the Afro-American community to become interested in financing films which would give a more equitable, a more realistic image of what their life is like, and we should also give them a better idea of what Africa is like.

HARLEN LEVY

In other words, Afro-American businesses would be the ones who would be doing a lot of the financing.

BALOGUN

I see them as one possible source of finance. In fact, in Los Angeles, I found that the film has been made from the play "River Niger" which is going to star James L. Jones and Cecily Tyson is being financed by a group of black businessmen from Louisiana. Similarly, Ossie Davies' most recent film called "Countdown in Kusini", which was partly shot in Nigeria, was financed by black American women.

TETTEH-LARTEY

The financing and distribution of a film depends largely on other people and we've been hearing where Ola Balogun is looking for support. But the quality of a film is the filmmaker's responsibility alone, so Harlen Levy asked a direct question.

LEVY What do you think is your best film?

BALOGUN It's a difficult question you ask, but if you mean by 'best film', the one which I believe I have gone furthest in exploring an artistic and cinematographic concept, I would say it is one of my short documentaries called "Owama". It is a film about the new year festival in a village in Nigeria; it's what I would call a dialogue between the villagers and the gods, which I attempted to render in audio-visual terms in that film. I don't know whether I am wholly successful, but it is the film that gives me the least pain to watch.

LEVY Is there an African film style different from a Western style and how would you characterize it?

BALOGUN The question you ask is very topical. There should be an African film style different from the Western film style, but whether a film style has already established itself is another question, but the cinema has not come to a country devoid of plastic and artistic traditions in Africa. The wealth of our artistic background, of our socio-cultural heritage in the field of plastic art does not need to be repeated and I would say that once the new generation of African filmmakers really makes the connection between a complete mastery of the cinematographic instrument and an adaptation of that instrument to the peculiar sensitivity and plastic heritage of the black peoples and something new would have appeared in the film industry.

LEVY Are you currently working on any film projects?

BALOGUN Certainly, I would say that my next feature can be characterized as an analysis of the generation crisis - a generation of idealistic people who have assimilated influences from both their society and the Western World and who are in a position to see some of the mistakes that have been made by the present leadership, but do not actually have the means to change things politically yet.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Earlier on Dr. Kossou was talking in international terms, and one of the barriers to inter-African contacts has been the tremendous varieties of languages we speak. What language does Dr. Balogun use in his films?

BALOGUN They are done according to the background of the story and where the action takes place. My most recent feature is in a Nigerian language, it's called 'Amadi' in Ebo, because the action takes place in Eboland. For me it's ridiculous to find villagers who are speaking English or French or Russian in an African village - it's done in the local language and wherever I have scripts where the action is taking place in a village, or in a rural context, let's say, in an African society, it would be in the local language there.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Perhaps you've had the chance to see one of Ola Balogun's films - "Amadi" or "Alpha" perhaps - and they are going to be distributed more widely soon. But recognizing the restrictions surrounding an African filmmaker, Harlen Levy wondered how Balogun assessed his own contribution to his art.

BALOGUN What I have tried to do in Nigeria at least, is to demonstrate to our people that we can make films; that we have the material in our culture, in our local life, from which films can be made; and that we can master the techniques of filmmaking - and actually make the films ourselves. So there is no justification for all the excuses that are given for the non-existence of a film industry.

LEVY How long do you think it will take before there is such an industry?

BALOGUN I think within the next five years in a country like Nigeria the basis of a film industry will have been established. Senegal already has a well established film industry - about ten features are coming out of Senegal every year and that's encouraging. And I see that within a decade at the most, there will be an African film industry which would begin to compete on fairly equal terms with film industries in some other parts of the world. Perhaps not on the same terms as Hollywood or the major other film industries, but at least there would be something viable with capable technicians and experienced filmmakers handling it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And I for one, am going to look forward to that prediction from Ola Balogun coming true. And in that interview from the United States he was talking to Harlen Levy.

ETHIOPIAN MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

This music sounds as though it could have come from the soundtrack of a film from Ethiopia. "Mela Mela" it is called and the voice of the singer, Seyfu Yohannes ends the programme. More next week of course when I'll be introducing another edition of "Arts and Africa".

ETHIOPIAN 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