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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey; and today - Dahomey in music and writing, in 'Arts and Africa'.

MUSIQUES DAHOMEENNES

TETTEH-LARTEY

Sakara music of the Yuroba's in Dahomey; and listening with me in the 'Arts and Africa' Studio is Barry Tomalin. Barry is going to be telling me about some of the music he's encountered during his travels in Dahomey but I'd like to begin, Barry, by recalling the interview you recorded for us with the Dahomean writer Jean Pliya. Now, how would you describe him?

BARRY TOMALIN

Well, he described himself as a Geography teacher, which is what he does. He teaches geography at the University of Dahomey and he is also a novelist - he's written plays and he's written short stories which are published and he is, I think, really a man with a message - he's observing Dahomean society, making observations about it, and I think this is his great gift.

JEAN PLIYA

It is important for me because I think that if someone wants to write he never writes for those who have no possibility to write or to talk and it is why in my writing my heroes are people of low level. I have more sympathy for those people and I am not very tender for the rich people, even if they are new Engineers or Doctors. Even in our students those who want to go to the peasants. I think that the best is to make the peasants to come to your level - not always peasants are peasants and when you want to go to them, you have a nice dress you cannot understand the true problems of Rhodesians.

TOMALIN: In other words, the basic point is that you cannot save a peasant, that the initiative comes from the peasants who will bring in the bourgeoisie who sympathize with them and will crush those who don't eventually. And I think the same position is raised by you in the "Secretaire Particulair", which is about a Secretary who has a Diploma from Paris who refuses to enter into the cycle of corruption, sleeping with the 'Boss' which is prevalent in the system. She refuses to join the system and I think you suggest there that it is only by women taking the initiative, refusing to join the system that in fact they can change their situation in African society. I was very surprised by this. I would like you to say something more about it.

PLIYA: I think that our women - they are not enough active in apprise de conscience. Aware of their dignity and it is why I want to show in this drama that if our schoolgirls are conscious of their duty they come to very important things, and in our African story I am a teacher of a story and in Dahomey, Dahomey is the Kingdom of the Amazons, famous Amazons, who are women soldiers and in our story when women try to work in politics they succeed much more than men and today our women, you see for instance in writing, we have no women writers; that is very astonishing and in our political life we have not had ministers. I think it is possible to show how women can do what they can do to change the situation.

TOMALIN Do you consider yourself to be a committed writer?
From what you said it would seem so.

PLIYA: If to be committed is to translate riches, the sufferings of those who have no voice and fortune. I think that to be illiterate is a sign of affliction.

TOMALIN: Literacy is power.

PLIYA: Literacy is power.

TETTEH-LARTEY:
'Literacy is power'. Sounds like a slogan to me. Is he very fond of slogans?

TOMALIN: No, on the contrary. I think I'm the one who is using a slogan there, so perhaps I'm the one who is fond of slogans. My feeling about Pliya, and I think it comes out very clearly in this. Did I mention it, he was Minister of Education at one time. He is very concerned as is Dahomey's politics right now with this whole question of the gap between the European educated bourgeoisie and the mass of the people with their own cultural traditions, and he's concerned with the way in which this can be brought together. His special concern is with youth in Dahomey and to make youth in Dahomey aware of the issues that make up their culture, to become aware if you like in some sense of Dahomean authenticity.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

What do you mean by authenticity?

TOMALIN: Authenticity. Part of the colonial legacy in Francophone Africa is that to a far greater extent, I think it's still fair to say this, than in Francophone countries, Francophone Africans have been divorced from their culture because of the pressure they've felt on them to become part of French civilization. Therefore authenticity, if you like, in Francophone Africa is getting back to the real understanding of traditional culture, being intergrated into traditional culture.

PLIYA: Sometime ago a Student asked me - what do you think about authenticity? I tell him, if authenticity which is new ideology born in Zaire, come to us as a way, the way of the people of Zaire to promote himself - very good. If authenticity comes to us as a new ideology of impose himself for African peoples, I say that it is a new face of imperialism, cultural imperialism. Because I see that all of our young people they are crying 'authenticity, authenticity!' - but I ask them what do you know about the basics of Dahomean culture? They say 'I don't know anything'. Oh, I say you don't know anything about authenticity. Every revolution must begin with our own possibility, and I think I cannot say I am a committed writer. You can see yourself the answer in my writings.

TOMALIN: Well, Alex, you asked me a couple of minutes ago what kind of writer Pliya was. Well, I think it's very obvious that he is committed to this whole idea of regeneration of a country, I think.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, Barry, let's turn from Jean Pliya to the music of Dahomey. We heard a bit of this music at the beginning of the programme. Can you tell us something about it?

TOMALIN: Yes, I'm not a musicologist and I can't honestly say how far Dahomean music is particularly distinctive from anywhere else. I think the kind of music we're going to listen to is going to be music which is used in ceremonies, music in the fields and in which case I think everybody will understand exactly what we are talking about, and music we are going to play comes from different areas of Dahomey. And I think probably the best thing we can do is talk about it as it goes on.

MUSIQUES DAHOMEENNES

TOMALIN: This is fantastic. If you ask anyone about Dahomean music, this is what they'll play you. It's the "Tchenhoukoumen" and also its from the centre of Dahomey. It comes from the region of 'Savalou', and I would say it's probably the single most famous bit of Dahomean traditional music which you can come across. I don't know what kind of occasion you would think anyone would play it! Take a guess!

TETTEH-LARTEY:

At a night gathering?

TOMALIN: Well, in fact it would be played at a funeral. It's used for all kinds of ceremonies, marriages, but I think it's very interesting that it should be used at funerals. I have actually heard this in night clubs. A piece of traditional music enters very much into the daily life. The point is, the music just doesn't stay in the village. I think we'll have other examples of this as we go on.

MUSIQUES DAHOMEENNES

TOMALIN: Do you know what this is?

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, it sounds very much to me like music from Northern Ghana.

TOMALIN: Well, it's from Northern Dahomey. It's from the Bariba people of the North, and it's a Xylophone and it's used in fact by, I suppose you'd call them Scarecrows, wouldn't you? Watchmen who work in the fields to keep the birds off the new crops. And this is one of the things they used. Basically, it's four pieces of soft wood and it's laid across the thighs - the man may be sitting down on the ground - and he beats it with stones to make the sound and you get this rather hollow noise which frightens the birds away.

MUSIQUES DAHOMEENNES

TOMALIN: This is called a tiepore in French, and it sounds like a guitar. What it is, is a bow, like a bow and arrow with a single string, like a bow string attached between it, and a calabash resonator which is held against the chest, which acts as the resonator, and it's strummed and the man sings, and this is the idea of the travelling storyteller, and you'll find him, I suppose, in a market - you'll find him at a ceremony and he will tell tales of great deeds. This about the famous warrior "KWIGA", about whom I know absolutely nothing, and he sings and of course people will give him money. The Yowabu are in fact a small group of people who live in the very North of Dahomey in the North West. They are very much associated - two groups - the Somba people, who are very well known. I believe the President is from a Somba Group, President Kerekou, and they go from Natitingou, which is in the North West of the country, and they reach through to the Togolese border in the North.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Barry, thank you very much for what you've told us so far, but perhaps before we close off, perhaps you'll tell us a little about the last piece you have for us.

TOMALIN: Well, very quickly, it's Somba music - Somba is the Group we talked about a couple of seconds ago. It's music which is played after the harvest, in the fields, to say thanks for the harvest, the celebration of the harvest, and there it is. Harvest music from the Somba people of the North of Dahomey.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, that's all for today, so it's goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, until next week.

MUSIQUES DAHOMEENNES

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