

Arts and Africa

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to "ARTS AND AFRICA". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and today we present a programme of traditional music and dance from Kenya.

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Recently, a group of dancers and musicians from Bomas - a cultural centre in Nairobi - left Kenya for the first time to perform in Britain. Bomas exists to preserve and promote interest in traditional Kenyan music and dance and dancers - who are all professionals and who come from many different parts of Kenya, give daily performances at home in a large circular theatre. Thirty-one dancers from the troupe have just been touring Britain, performing to large and appreciative audiences at this year's ROYAL AGRICULTURAL SHOW and at London's COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE. Neville Harms spoke to the Manager of the group, HILARY OCHOLLA - a Luo - and to one of the dancers - JOHN MATHINGE - a Kikuyu. Neville first asked Hilary how the dancers were originally recruited:-

HILARY OCHOLLA:

One had to be less than 22 years of age, nice appearance, able to sing and also to play at least one musical instrument.

NEVILLE HARMS:

And was this an easy task?

OCHOLLA:

It was very difficult because we had vacancies for 30 only but the applicants turned out with 3,000. Now the auditioning took quite a long time.

NEVILLE HARMS:

And did you, in fact, go round the country looking?

OCHOLLA:

We advertised all over Kenya and then we had young boys and girls really who became interested, who came in. Now we only went to the country and we wanted now to get the actual music and the dances to teach these new incoming young men.

HARMS:

Part of the idea of the group is that everyone should do each others dances?

OCHOLLA:

Exactly. Different provinces of Kenya, different tribes. But we would end up with having a very voluminous dance troupe if you had each tribe dancing his own dance. So we chose people on the understanding that they will be able to learn other tribal dances. So, in this way, we started the six month training period, but, fortunately, after three months started keeping up very well. This was a long training session; the whole day, sometimes as far as 8 pm at night. It was in music, music-writing, singing, drumming, playing the instruments, and then they started taking an interest in each particular instrument. Now, when somebody did best we encouraged him to continue on that instrument, or sometimes we shifted them. Until now we have got a dance troupe of 64, composed of different Kenyan tribes.

HARMS:

Were there any big difficulties in a person from one part of the country learning a style of dancing that was completely alien to him?

OCHOLLA:

In fact, we had some people of those selected who could not do beyond their tribal dance and then, of course, we had to take them out.

HARMS:

That must have been a blow for them.

OCHOLLA:

Yes. And then most of them were very keen to learn, but, you see, there are some people who can't go beyond a point so we started weeding them out that way.

HARMS:

What kind of sort of basis do you operate on? I know you do daily performances in Nairobi at a sort of cultural centre.

OCHOLLA:

It is called BOMLS of Kenya, which is a subsidiary of the Kenya Tourist Development Corporation, this is fully financed by the Government, through the Kenya Tourist Development Corporation and the purpose is to do all the Kenyan dances and preserve them. We also have traditional

OCHOLLA:
cont/d

villages in our establishment. Most of these dances sometimes we do with a background of the particular tribal home. Our main objective is to see that our cultural dances and customs are preserved and in fact the largest number of people who come to our shows are the local people, the Kenya Africans because people live very far, let's say you come from Scotland, just as far as somebody come from Niada, come from Nairobi, not many people can travel to these places now they have a chance to see them in our establishment. We know our tribes but I may not know their dances; we can dance in their home district. Now these Apapas that Bomas was created to make each person know what the fellow - or what his neighbour is doing as far as culture and art is concerned.

ALEX:
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John Mathinge was one of the first professional dancers to be taken on 3 years ago and now he helps train other - less experienced - members of the troupe. Did he - as a Kikuyu - find it difficult to learn dances from other parts of Kenya - like the Samburu dance for instance?

JOHN MATHINGE:

At first, I had, you know, quite a great difficulty in learning some of the tribal instruments, playing some musical dances, but since I had that interest with me, I found that I could catch up very, very easily.

HARMS:

What was the nature of the difficulty?

MATHINGE:

Let's say in the dances themselves, the steps themselves of some tribes, you know like, let's say, like the Zamburu you know where they have to move the top of their body, maybe the head movement which is not very, very normal with the other tribes in Kenya, usually the movement works downwards which is simpler for me because I started this when I was young. So I found the Zakburu to be a little bit hard for me to learn although I'm still trying.

HARMS:

And do you think you've got to grips with it now?

MATHINGE:

Well, some of them are coming up pretty well.

KIKUYU DANCE

MATHINGE:

The warriors come in and they are met and welcomed by their village women who, you know, are willing eagerly to welcome them home and find out what has happened. But when they hear their songs they come from far. They know that those songs denote defeat, you know, that they have succeeded in their war. They come in and they also decide to sing a song for them and dance for them, so they dance and then the men decide to join in because now it's a happy occasion.

ALEX:

Well, most of the meaning of that Kikuyu dance seems to have been conveyed in the words. Was this the case in Luo dances as well Hilary?

OCHOLLA:

In most Luo dances there is an expression of praise, most of them are praising or mourning. Only two types of dancing, there was, as I said, so there was one for praising and the other one is for mourning. They express them in words, the dance and also the music.

HARMS:

Now as far as the music is concerned the outstanding musical instrument of the Luo is the sort of harp: the Nyatiti.

OCHOLLA:

What is called Nyatiti has got 8 strings and this is the main musical instrument.

THE NYATITI: (LUO DANCE)

HARMS:

The instrument that was featured in this piece is a sort of woodwind instrument isn't it - a reed instrument.

OCHOLLA:

It's a wood and reed instrument. The bell horn is made of wood and this reed inside produces the different tones to trap the air.

JOHN:

So that it goes into a jet and produces sound that is - which is amplified by the shape of the instrument.

HARMS:

I suppose the nearest equivalent in western instruments is the clarinet or the oboe. Is it a very difficult instrument to play?

OCHOLLA:

It is very, very difficult because you have to use quite a lot of breath and also the finger movement has to be very quick, just like playing other instrument like a guitar or other flutes in that you have to shift your fingers and, at the same time, using a lot of breath, too so that you produce some sound.

HARMS:

Are there still many people in Kenya who can play this instrument?

MATHINGE:

Yes, especially from the coast and from Kanyada.

OCHOLLA:

Was it from the Digo tribe and the Oiriama. They are very good in instruments and as well as drumming. All our drummers, most of them come from the Oiriama tribe; they adapt the drumming of any other tribe in Kenya. We have tried many times; the Guiamas always excel.

HARMS:

Let's hear some Giriama drumming.

GIRIAMA DRUMMING

ALEX:

The Giriama wedding dance. We have been listening to Neville Harms talking to Hilary Ocholla and John Mathinge. And with that performance by the musicians and dancers from the Bomas cultural centre in Kenya who have just been touring Britain. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye for now - and hoping you'll be listening again next week for more 'Arts and Africa'.

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