

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to 'Arts and Africa' and in today's programme we visit Botswana.

SIG.TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY

Botswana is a big area on the map but very thinly populated - perhaps that's why the country doesn't often feature in our programme. So I'm looking forward today to hearing about an aspect of the country's artistic life that's being developed at present, from Graham Mytton who's recently been spending some time in Botswana. Graham, what have you got to tell me?

MYTTON:

Well, Alex, before I tell you anything I want you to listen to a recording I made of some women singing, and behind their voices you can hear some other sounds. I wonder if you can guess what these sounds are.

MUSIC: The women of Oodi singing as they spin.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I could hear some squeaking noises there. I just don't know what the sounds are.

MYTTON:

Well, it's recorded in a room full of women spinning wool, and the noise, the mechanical noise you hear is of spinning wheels.

MUSIC: The women of Oodi singing as they spin.

MYTTON:

The room was full of these women spinning wool into yarn, and it was recorded in a village called Oodi, not very far from Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. And apart from the women you also may have heard some men in the background. They were the men who were working on the weaving looms. So the village is importing the wool, spinning it, dyeing it, weaving it,

but not only into cloth which can be made into clothes or bedcoverings, or blankets or whatever, they're also doing real art work and the art form they've chosen is tapestry, an unusual art form anywhere in Africa and very unusual in Botswana. Tapestry, as you may know, is a form of using different coloured wools in short pieces which are stitched onto a large cloth background to make pictures; rather like a carpet only the difference is that these are hung on the walls and a picture is made up out of many different coloured wools. I was very interested in seeing these tapestries, they're very large some of them, hanging up all over this large shed. There is tremendous activity, tremendous noise. I was particularly attracted though to one which was vibrant with the most bright, vivid colours. Let's hear from its creator, Esther Dintwai.

DINTWAI:

There you can see there was only a base and a sky. All these red things are the sunrise for background, some of them are lily flowers and there are some eagles down there, black and white, here is the moon and stars, they're also shining through the background.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well how big was this particular one?

MYTTON:

This particular one was about 2 metres along the floor and 4 metres up, so obviously Esther Dintwai had to be half way up it to work on it, in fact was suspended half way to the ceiling. In order to interview her I had to climb up this enormous frame with my tape recorder to talk to her.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Tarzan fashion!

MYTTON:

She, while I was interviewing her, continued to work away at this enormous tapestry which really was very lovely.

MYTTON TO DINTWAI:

When you start a tapestry like this do you think beforehand what it's going to look like or does it come out of your head as you go along?

DINTWAI:

I first think of the colours of the wool. After that I'll have to think how can I start this tapestry, can I lay it down or can I stand it up? Then I take the wool and think about it. If there are some difficulties I used to go and ask Mr. or Mrs. Gravinias, then they come and show us how to do it.

MYTTON:

How long have you been doing tapestries?

DINTWAI:

About two years now.

MYTTON:

Do you enjoy it?

DINTWAI:

I really enjoy it because I don't look in the book and just use my brain.

MYTTON:

How long does it take you to finish it?

DINTWAI:

Actually, if there are no difficulties from the tapestry I think we can finish it in 3 weeks or one month. But this one has got only as far as three weeks.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Surely, this must be a tradition in Botswana, making tapestries and things like that.

MYTTON:

Well, no it isn't. This is something quite new. It is not a local tradition, in fact there isn't much tradition of any pictorial art of this kind in the country. These people, extraordinarily enough, 2 to 3 years ago were doing nothing of the kind. The village started by the efforts of Mr. Peder Gravinus, you heard his name mentioned there by Esther, who came into this village and encouraged these people to start weaving and spinning, dyeing yarn and making various things for sale - tapestries, wall coverings, bed coverings and cloth of various descriptions. Tapestry is something quite new and something which these people have taken to very well indeed. It is quite remarkable. Esther who you heard there, she'd been doing tapestry for only 2 years and yet she's created this really magnificent work of art. I found it very impressive indeed.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Is the sale localised or are these things made for export?

MYTTON:

Oh, these things are made for anybody who'll buy them. They are rather expensive - 700 or 800 rand for this particular tapestry. That is something like £400 but obviously the market is either commercial companies who want to adorn the walls of their offices with these things or very rich people and it must be admitted, mainly from South Africa, rich white people who want to spend their money on this kind of thing.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, Esther says it takes about 2 - 3 weeks to make one tapestry. How many do they produce within that time? I mean do they employ a number of people who produce say about three or four?

MYTTON:

No. One person works on one tapestry until she's finished it. I was particularly interested to see the way they worked as well. What was most impressive was there was no plan beforehand. These tapesters go ahead and create this picture as they go along. The profits all go to the village, the village is a co-operative society and the money is used for development in the village.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, what sort of people are they? What sort of people are employed? Do they have any particular qualifications, any specialised skills?

MYTTON:

None whatsoever. They come from all backgrounds. Of course many people in Botswana earn their living from the land, mainly from cattle ranching, but many of the husbands of the women working were in other jobs, one was a policeman. In fact the next lady I spoke to - Mrs. Joyce Nkwe, her husband is a policeman and she was creating another enormous tapestry which told the story of...well let Mrs. Joyce Nkwe tell the story.

NKWE:

The story is about a young man who suffered from his brother's jealousy. It is that some time there were two brothers, Masil (phon.) and Masiluon (phon.). They went out for a hunt and when they were in the bush, they sat down and Masil told his younger brother to take the left track and that he would take the right track. Masil told his younger brother to take the left track and that he would take the right track. Masil went on and on and found nothing. Masiluon at length up a hill found three clay pots turned upside down.

MYTTON:

I can see those on the left hand side down in the corner.

NKWE:

Yes. And then he was curious to know what was inside. He turned the first one - nothing. The second one - and there was nothing too. And when he turned the third one, there sprang out an old lady - very angry and said: "Why do you uncover me? Cover me at once." And then Masiluon was frightened, he ran out and then the old woman chased him.

MYTTON:

That's the old lady with the stick there?

NKWE:

Yes. And then he ran and climbed up a tree. The old woman had a long, long, nail and then she wanted to cut the tree with her nail. And then Masil came with two dogs. The two dogs killed the old woman.

MYTTON:

There's the old woman there being....

NKWE:

...lying down.

MYTTON:

Ah yes, and this is where she is being bitten by the dogs.

NKWE:

Yes. And then they were watching the old lady. The nail was growing longer and longer. Out of it came a woman and some children. The woman talked to Masiluon, "Hello husband. You have helped us." And the children said to Masiluon, "Hello father." (laughs) Out of the nail also came the cattle and the goats and all that were Masiluon's property. And then they decided to go home and the children said that they were thirsty. They went to the well and then when it was Masiluon's turn, his brother pushed him into the well and then turned to the lady and said "Now you are my wife, these are my cattle, goats and my children. Let's go home."

MYTTON:

I see. Where did you get that story from?

NKWE:

I just remembered it in my head. You know, it is an old tale.

MYTTON:

It's an old traditional tale is it?

NKWE:

Yes.

MYTTON:

Does it have some special meaning? This story about somebody with a long fingernail?

NKWE:

well, I don't know, but when we are young we are always told such stories. We just sit by the fire and then the old people tell us the story, or other children who have heard about the story before, tell us the story.

MYTTON:

You remember it from when you were a child? This story?

NKWE:

Yes, yes.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

These people, these weavers come from all walks of life. How are they selected in the first place?

MYTTON:

Well, the Swedish volunteer I told you about before, Peder Gravinius, takes people in to see if they have the abilities that are necessary for the various skills. So some become spinners, some become weavers, some become dyers, some tapesters. There are some, of course, who can't do any of these things and they are politely told that there is no place for them in the village. There are plenty of other things to be done in the village, of course. The village has its own farm, it has its buildings to be put up, repairs to be made. It is a self-contained village with its own thriving, or soon-to-be thriving cottage industry. That's the idea.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Since they have no qualifications whatever, if they are able to do these things within a year or two, they must be very quick learners. You said the teacher told you that these people are not really taught in the normal sense of the word, though they've got this instinct for weaving.