

# Arts and Africa

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## ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey; and today we go to the very frontiers of Africa, from the continent to the island of Madagascar, in ARTS AND AFRICA.

## TRADITIONAL MADAGASCAR MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

The Valiha, the national instrument of Madagascar. This piece of music goes back a hundred years or so. It's still popular today and it's used to summon the villagers to special games to celebrate the end of the harvest.

## TRADITIONAL MADAGASCAR MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, this instrument, the Valiha has altered into several versions over the years but the original bamboo instrument is still played. It's a skilled job making one - the craftsman cuts narrow strings from the outer skin of a piece of stout bamboo about a metre in length. The ends remain in the bamboo skin and they are bound down tightly to stop the strings from peeling further. When + pieces of wood are put under the strings they are raised enough for the player to pluck them and make his music.

## MADAGASCAR MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

The skill of the craftsman is present too in the poetry of Madagascar. Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo wrote in Malagasy and in French but recent translations into English are introducing him to a wider audience. Well, here's an example of his fluent and lyrical style. It's called 'Flute Players'. And here is Anthony Delius to read it.

ANTHONY DELIUS reads 'FLUTE PLAYERS'

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now as I've said, Rabearivelo wrote in the two languages of Malagasy and French. His knowledge of French literature was remarkable but he could never adjust to the pull between the two languages and cultures and shortly after the death of his favourite daughter he committed suicide. This was in 1937 when he was thirty-six years old. His life had been an unhappy one in which alcohol had featured almost as much as poetry - but his thirst for poetry was the greater. This is sequence twenty-nine from his long poem called 'Translations from the Night'.

DELIUS reads sequence XXIX from 'TRANSLATIONS FROM THE NIGHT'

TETTEH-LARTEY

There is a traditional way of exorcising the evil spirit in Madagascar. They're driven out of the body of the afflicted person by a traditional healer who is himself a musician - he often plays a violin with a drummer accompanying him. But sometimes the spirits are stubborn and the healer has to enlist the help of the entire village, with singers and acrobats joining in. Here, the flute is supposed to be the spirit speaking while the singers hurl abuse in its direction.

MADAGASCAR MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now when the ceremony is over, and that may take an entire day, the women of the village thank the intruding spirit for leaving and sing to show there are no hard feelings.

MADAGASCAR MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

From the exuberance in that recording it's something of a surprise to hear the sound of the Malagasy language. These lines are from the opening of Rabearivelo's poem 'There is a thought in the night tossed and tumbled'.

QUOTATION IN MALAGASY

TETTEH-LARTEY

And with that sound still in our ears, let's listen to the English translation of a poem that celebrates the power of reading.

DELIUS reads 'READ'

TETTEH-LARTEY

'A bird, hidden in your hands'. The power of the written word. Now let's finish the programme with Robearivelo's prose poems. This sequence reveals the poet turning to his own culture for this particular poetic form with which to express his personal dilemma.

DELIUS reads 'THERE IN THE NORTH' from 'OLD IBERIAN SONGS'

TETTEH-LARTEY

Is this really a poem, Tony? I wouldn't call it that.

DELIUS

Well it's in the form of this *hain teny*: the old traditional form of, anyway, word play that the Malagasians used many years ago. In its old and original form it was a matter of stringing together old stories, having a lot of 'wise' conversation as it were, putting together the proverbs of the village and the sort of general knowledge of the area, and putting them together in a fairly attractive way. It was somewhat looked down upon by the young people, and by the young people of today even. They'd regard this as rather villagey, rather tribal almost, and not quite the sort of thing one introduces into the poetry of a fairly advanced people. And so the poet himself seized on it, because he was in search of his own roots as it were; he wanted to get into a particular form of writing poetry which was not related to the west, or to western culture, and he wanted to sharpen it up, sharpen up Malagasy poetry and culture and use *hain teny* to do this, even if he had to advance it somewhat.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you got further examples of this?

DELIUS

Well this, actually from the 'Old Iberian Songs', will give a fair example of the way he developed it, the way he took it on, being almost a dialogue, making it a series of conversations. Not only conversations but exchanges of dialogue. Sometimes the dialogue succeeding, hasn't got very much to do with the dialogue that went before but it all falls into a general pattern as the poem completes itself and rounds itself out.

Prose poem 'THE SISTERS' from 'OLD IBERIAN SONGS'

TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you Tony Delius. Now we've been reading from translations of Robearivelo's poems called 'Translations from the Night'. The translators are John Reed and Clive Wake and the poems are published as a paper-back by Heinemann. We'll leave Madagascar (and ARTS AND AFRICA) with the music of the country sounding in our ears, while I say good-bye until this time next week.

MADAGASCAR MUSIC

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