

# Arts and Africa

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## "ARTS AND AFRICA"

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### ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

#### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to "Arts and Africa" and today there's news of an invasion - by musical instruments.

MUSIC: Islamic Music - Ethiopian one-stringed fiddle.

#### TETTEH-LARTEY:

The sound of an Ethiopian one-stringed fiddle and recorded, let me assure you, in Ethiopia by that indefatigable collector of African music and musical instruments, Jean Jenkins. It's in honour of the big Islamic festival that's being held in London at present that Jean has mounted an exhibition of instruments from many parts of the world which, she is convinced, are Islamic in origin. And when I found out that some of the instruments are familiar ones from Africa I paid her a visit to find out about her theories. I began by being a bit sceptical, so when she played me the Ethiopian music we've just heard I asked whether she thought that this very piece had been influenced by the religion of Islam. I soon discovered, perhaps put of my scepticism, that I hadn't been listening carefully enough to her explanation!

#### JEAN JENKINS:

Well, that's exactly what I did not claim! What I said was that when instruments originated in certain places, which today are Islamic in origin, that the people from those places took with them when they went proselytising for their new religion, when they went trading, when they went on their wars of conquest, they took with them naturally enough their own style of music and their own musical instruments. And this particular style of musical instrument, which incidentally can still be heard all over the desert played by the Bedouin, is a very simple, usually square or diamond shaped or sometimes round sound-box and then it's got a long neck which sticks through usually so as to make a spike fiddle. Then it has one horse-hair string and

you play it with the side of your fingers against the string so that you're playing in harmonics and this style of playing which you can hear in West Africa, you can hear it in East Africa, you can hear it in Yugoslavia, you can hear it in the central asian Soviet area, you can hear it in China, you can hear it in Indonesia, all of that has been influenced by these Muslims who came bringing their instruments with them and they got sometimes absorbed into the culture that they found and sometimes they introduced a new kind of musical culture, but nevertheless the instruments there and it was brought in by Muslims.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now it's very difficult to persuade anybody for example an Ethiopian if we come to talk about that piece of music, that the instruments used in that piece of music did not originate in Ethiopia.

JENKINS:

I know it. And if you tried to tell somebody that an oboe didn't originate in Europe they won't believe you either. But nevertheless, all those reed instruments came from Islamic sources, whether they happen to be the oboes or the single reed instruments. Perhaps it might be interesting for you to hear a good example from Italy of one of these shawms or oboes playing with the bagpipes.

MUSIC: Italian bagpipes.

JENKINS:

The bagpipes, which everyone thinks of as being Scottish instruments, also are Islamic in origin and they came up across north Africa in with the Moors into Spain. Now you know Spain was for about eight centuries an Arab country so of course all the instruments were there, they had a very highly developed musical culture in Spain and the music of course and the instruments went from Spain into France, up the coast, some of them came to England, some of them came to Ireland, the bagpipes even went as far as Scotland.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Quite. Now would I be right to say that it's only the reed instruments that you associate with Islam, or are there any other instruments?

JENKINS:

No, these are the fiddles, all the fiddles, that's another type and you have a certain type of a flute, it's a straight flute and it's simplest of all to make, it's just got a sharp edge but it's the most difficult of all to play well. That only is found in Islamic areas

and it's one of the few instruments that's also used for religious ceremonies because in the religion of Islam people are seeking direct contact with Allah and so they get it very often, particularly the Dervish sect and the Sufi sect, they get it through trance, so a lot of the music uses either drums or special means of breathing in and out hard in order to induce trance so that they can have direct contact. These are all types of instruments which are specifically Islamic.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

This is all very interesting. In fact I was going to ask you if the reed had any religious significance in particular.

JENKINS:

The reed or the bow is just incidental. It so happens that reeds existed just as the lyres, you know the things which look like triangles. Those instruments happen to have been invented five, three, thousand years ago in various places, but those places were Islamic very early on, by the eight century they were Islamic you see, so it's those instruments that got transported with the traders

and with the warriors and so on. It doesn't mean necessarily that they have anything to do whatsoever with religion, any more than the trumpets do, they have a lot to do with war.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And you have an example of a piece of music which has no religious connotation to illustrate this.

JENKINS:

Certainly. I told you about the Italian bagpipes and shawm, that's one. I can play you the long trumpets of the Hausa. It was a recording I took many years ago on a very bad machine, but nevertheless it's the type which you still hear.

MUSIC: Hausa trumpets.

JENKINS:

I could also play you a sort of oboe which you would get in Niger for example, together with the big drums, which are also a specific type of Islamic drum.

MUSIC: Islamic drums.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now when the Islamic colonises or proselytises, or whatever you call them came to a country and they introduced these instruments, how came it that the people of that country adopted the instrument?

JENKINS:

Well they didn't adopt the ones they didn't want. That's mainly the thing. When you found certain instruments, particularly ones which carried very well in the open air, they just adopted them. I mean for example everyone plays the sansa in west Africa and east Africa, and so on, it doesn't mean that they drop the sansa, not at all, but the sansa is a very nice instrument for love songs and is a gentle instrument, but if you want a sort of a wild war-like instrument you want trumpets or shawm, these oboe things, they make a lot of noise and the kettle-drums make a lot of noise too. So they adopted those. They adopted the fiddles because they are good for singing ballads against. In some places, such as Tanzania and Uganda, they still use the little zithers or they use the harps. But in other places they have adopted this one-string fiddle, whether it happens to be in Greece or Yugoslavia or whether it happens to be in Ethiopia or the goge of Nigeria or the goge of Niger, it's exactly the same instrument.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now these instruments were made from particular raw materials. If those raw materials did not exist in the country where they had been introduced how could the locals make them?

JENKINS:

You'd be surprised. If they didn't have the wood they made them out of calabash, if they didn't have the calabash they made them out of whatever else happened to be there; even leather, and nowadays I found it was very interesting I see them made out of pudding basins, oh yes, and they make a very good sound too! I see them made out of oil tins, you can make a fine fiddle using an oil tin for a resonator. I'll show you one in this exhibition. It sounds very good too. It's where there's a lack of a certain instrument that people adopt it where they've got their own and they don't need it they don't adopt it. It's as simple as that.

MUSIC: Drums and pipes.

JENKINS:

What you just heard then was recorded in the court of the Sultan of Dosso in Niger and he has an orchestra of his own and every Thursday night and Friday morning there is this orchestra which has the large

drums, the straight-sided ones which are called tabon and which are Islamic in origin, and these oboes, or shawms in fact, which are double reed instruments and have a piercing sound that carries throughout the whole of the outdoors you see and gathers all the people together. And it's quite interesting that throughout the whole of the Islamic world this is the outdoor processional music, where it happens to be for war or for festivity or wedding. It's always the same group of people, the musicians you see, the shawms and the drums which gather the people together, And when you hear it you I'm sure will think that it's the Hausa or Fulani or something like that, or Ibariba because it's absolutely typical of them, but it's typical of Samarkand or Bokhara or Afghanistan, wherever you are that Islam is practised because it's one of the things for which there was a real slot for the music to drop into. They wanted some sort of loud outdoor music and this certainly is that par excellence.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's very difficult to separate the religion from the culture of the people who play this kind of music. Why is it that other people in the country don't take easily to these Islamic instruments?

JENKINS:

Well if you mean in say the southern part of Ghana or Nigeria or some place like that, well myself, and I can't prove it to you but I only think that where you have a very active kind of musical life anyhow, when you have a terrific series of drums, where you've got a terrific series of rhythm instruments, and where the music tends to be very alive, then why should you bother adopting anybody else's. You've got a good lively one of your own. You'll only adopt something that you feel a need for.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Have you got any other piece of music from some other part of Africa you could play us out on?

JENKINS:

In point of fact I've got hundreds, but nevertheless what I'd like to play you out on is a piece of music from the Bene Amir people who are nomads on the borders of Sudan and Eritrea and this is played on an instrument which they call the rababa or sometimes tambura. But it's one of the oldest instruments in the world. It's got five or six strings, a little round sound-box and two arms with a cross-bar and it's an instrument which you find on seals from Mesopotamia, a good five thousand years ago so it's a really old instrument, and it's a charming instrument as well.

MUSIC: Rababa music.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Our thanks to Jean Jenkins for it's time for me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, to say goodbye for today. Hope you'll join me this time next week for more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: Rababa music.

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