

Arts and Africa

4/27 2/3/24



AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 128

(6R 53 S128G)

ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today there's music from Zambia, and news of a statue that's arousing a lot of curiosity.

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now for that statue. It's about ten inches high so I'd better call it a statuette; it's carved from a reddish brown wood and it represents a man and a woman. Pierre Kalenzaga saw the carving when it was on exhibition in New York not so long ago and, as he explains, it really provoked a lot of attention - and arguments. It was supposed to be a traditional piece of work from Mali but African art specialists have been debating with some heat whether or not it's authentic. So what's so special about the statuette? Well, when we hear Pierre's description I think some of us may want to join in the argument.

PIERRE KALENZAGA:

The two personages are facing each other in a standing position with their faces so close to each other that their noses are touching. The man's arms are slightly bent at elbow level and his hands rest gently on the lady's waist. The man's face has an intense expression, an expression of what some people have termed here as love, even passion, whereas one can almost read serenity and happy abandonment on the lady's face, whose arms are stretching gently down. Both man and woman are clothed. The male wearing a long African gown, with what appears to be embroidery on the front of the robe. His lady companion is wearing a slim, straight, one-piece tunic, which falls gently from her shoulders down to her feet. The present owner of the statuette, an art dealer from Brazil, claims to have bought it from a Frenchman who by chance unearthed it near Timbuctoo in Mali, during one of his African trips.

"It's a fake and a disgusting swindle" claimed some specialists of

African art. "Everyone knows that the whole region of Timbuctoo is Moslem-dominated and has been so for several centuries and the Moslem religion and culture does not allow any figurative representation of the human body. Has anyone ever heard of anything as unlikely as a Moslem statuette?" "Definitely a fake!" - some African students from Mali. "In our country," they say, "people just don't show their feelings in public like this, let alone express it in a sculpture. Besides, if this is a representation of a man and a woman kissing, and it looks like it", they say, "this is purely the influence of western civilization and thus cannot be termed as true traditional African art". "Heh, heh, not so fast!", say some ethnologists, supported in this by other West African students, "maybe until now we only knew one side of the art of our own continent, maybe there are many other facets to this African sculptural art, buried as they are by the centuries of colonisation. The fact that this present lost statuette was unearthed and not simply found lying about in some city is a strong indication that more serious research should be undertaken where that came from".

Finally the more scientifically minded people among the African arts and civilization specialists initiated a move tending to submit the love statuette to a carbon-dating process to determine its exact age, as it really looked old, but by then, alas, the statuette had changed hands, as a few hundred dollars did likewise, I suppose, and at the latest news the statuette is in Brazil, somewhere in the Matto Grosso forest, being the property of a proud, rich landlord. Art or fake? Masterpiece or fake? No one will ever know for sure, but for a minute, as I stood in front of the statuette when it was exhibited here, well I felt like I heard the voice of the centuries crying to me: "Son of Africa, search and search again in thy land, that thou may find signs of a past glory."

TETTEH-LARTEY:

That was Pierre Kalenzaga. And I must say I'm sorry to hear that the statuette is hidden in the jungles of Brazil. I'd like to take a look at it and decide for myself now "African" it looks. But I'm sure no-one would dispute the authenticity of this.

MUSIC: Zambian traditional music.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

A song from Zambia by Mwesa Mapoma and he'll be talking about it in a minute. Going out into the countryside recording traditional music is all part of the work Mwesa is undertaking at the University of Zambia's Institute of African Studies. When he came along to the "Arts and Africa" studio recently I got him to tell me about the sort of music he has been "harvesting" so to speak. In fact, what he had to say interested me so much that there isn't time for the whole of our conversation in today's programme. The rest of it another time, but now Mwesa Mapoma explains the work he and his colleagues are doing to preserve the music of Zambia.

MWESA MAPOMA:

We are involved in collecting Zambian music, traditional music, putting it on tape, classifying it and eventually we are going to be disseminating it in schools. There's going to be a teaching programme at the University, where those who are interested in the study of African music can come and learn everything about African music and we are basing our programme there on the same principle as that found in Ghana, under Professor Nketia, at the Institute of African Studies at Legon, where we have Zambians going out into the rural areas, collecting all the music that they could come across. Then documenting it in such a way that whoever wishes to listen to some music of Zambia of a particular interest, they can find it. For example we could have a piece like this which is on the music of the Kadende people which is sung by women and they just sing on the problems of social interaction.

MUSIC: Zambian Music. Women's chorus.

MAPOMA:

Well on that one you had the women who were singing about the problems of preparing tutuama, it's like, you know the stuff you make fu-fu from...

LETTEH-LARTY:

Cassava?

MAPOMA:

Cassava yes. A dirty woman with long finger nails will accumulate dirt and as she spreads the flour she contaminates the flour. It's a kind of social problem and also a problem of hygiene to some women.

We have another issue which is looking at the musical instrument. Africa, we could say, has been losing most of its musical instruments, because some of our younger people have been looking more to the west than looking inward, and we feel that our job here is going to help us to understand this important role of musical instruments in our society. And so we have ethnomusicologists going out into the villages recording either just instrumental music or any music that has got drums, and they get particulars about who made the drums, who taught people how to make drums, how to play drums, and what type of material is used in doing this. I have been working primarily among the Bemba people, but now in the last work I went to the Alenga people where I recorded a young person with his group, singing again on a topical point in the village about the Chief Chitanda and the mini-skirts, which he said when they came in they created a problem, and here is just how it sounded like.

MUSIC: Zambian Music about the mini-skirt.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The music we've heard so far seems to be purely functional. Would you agree with me there?

MAPOMA:

Well, most African music is functional. You rarely find music in an African context which is just for the sake of enjoying a sound. You will in fact, if I may just give a further example, see that even chiefs, when they are enthroned or enstooled, music is supposed to play a very important role. Some people and some chiefs become chiefs by inheriting musical instruments, inheriting musicians, and that is another functional aspect of music. As far as I know, I don't think we have any music which is purely for enjoying a sound as such.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes I was thinking more in terms of entertainment rather than merely listening to sound. You know, in a village on a Saturday night, where the people haven't got any other form of entertainment, they might meet in the square and just play to enjoy themselves.

MAPOMA:

That then goes into a different category. You have perhaps a musician who'd come out, who'd be singing to the people on particular functions, let's say singing about problems of the society in which they're living. The difficulty is that people have encountered it at a particular time. Now here most of the people are listening to one performer, but this performer is actually relating or trying to bring the people's attention to their problems through music which again becomes functional. There are two levels here, one enjoying sound as such, but at the same time having this very important aspect of the story which surrounds it, and this in fact in my area, if I may say so, that's where we found western music which has no text to it, or which is just instrumental, completely hopeless in fact we just call it a noise. Because it is not relating anything to us.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

So don't you think that there's a danger that music in this way can be used for political purposes, to instill political ideology into the community?

MAPOMA:

Oh yes. It is very well used in that way. Look at Dr. Kaunda, whenever

he goes to a rally, or any meeting, before he starts his speech he goes "(example of chant)," which is just one of those songs which he uses in "lets be united with one spirit". Everywhere he goes President Kaunda must sing that before he starts speaking. So here is an extension of using music for the political purposes and lots of songs... I remember a song we used to sing about the colonialists "Amabunu", it's now the main theme for the news at home. It goes something like.. oh I've forgotten! I'll remember it some time, I forget it! Anyway here you have a way of unifying people during the struggle through this song. Most of the whites didn't know it, it was just a song which everybody was enjoying because we marched to it, but to us we understood the message.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well, that's something most of us can remember - certainly it was a very familiar phenomenon before and at the time of independence in Ghana. As I've already said, I'll be talking to Mwesa Mapoma again in a future programme and he'll be playing us more music from Zambia. But for now, I suggest that we listen to a little more of that debate on the delicate subject of the mini-skirt while I say goodbye. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping that you'll join me next week for more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: Zambian Music on the mini-skirt.