

Arts and Africa

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And today, the story of a musical phenomenon in "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE:

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And as music is the main subject of today's programme, let's begin with an internationally known voice.

Here's Myriam Makeba.

MUSIC: "Pata Pata" by Myriam Makeba.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well as you can hear, "Pata Pata" has a western-style backing. Since she's made her home in Guinea, Myriam Makeba has changed her style of music. Later in the programme Pierre Kalenzaga will be talking about this change and, about musical developments in Guinea generally. Pierre, by-the-way, doesn't come from Guinea himself, he's from Upper Volta, and that's the setting for our first guest. "Blueprint Africa" is the BBC programme on the uses of technology in developing the continent, but for once we're going to touch on the subject in this programme because one scheme has been recorded for the future not only in official reports but also by an artist.

Edna Lumb is an English painter who was invited to spend some time in Upper Volta, way out in the countryside, where a water conservation scheme was being constructed, and she's been explaining to Florence Akst her contribution as an artist.

EDNA LUMB:

I was sent with the idea that I would produce a graphic record of what was going on in that part of the country. Mainly a sort of on-site record of how the machines were working, what they were doing, the general atmosphere, and I felt quite confident really from my experience in working in other industrial fields, that there would be something there which would excite me. In fact I found it very, very exciting indeed. It was quite easy to see how I'd be able to make a complete record, in that what I wanted to do was to paint the machines, I wanted to paint the people operating the machines, I wanted to paint what the machines were doing, and how they were doing this, the damn construction. I wanted to paint the background of this particular part of the country, so that I painted the villages and the villagers, and the machines when they were broken down and the machines when they were working, and generally in pictures made a sort of complete survey of the atmosphere and the activity and the population.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well how easy is it to paint so near a construction project?

LUMB:

Well my greatest problem, as far as painting was concerned, was the dust, and the heat. But the dust particularly, because I discovered, I've never discovered it before, but if you get dust mixed with paint you get a sort of granulation on the paper, the paint seems to adhere to the paper, but in fact when it dries it comes off in little dots. Now this is fine if the little dots happen to be in the right place, but it can be very, very difficult and also absolutely impossible to have sketch books at a damn site without keeping them very firmly closed together and wrapped in plastic when you weren't using them.

AKST:

Now what has your art to do with modern technology? Surely there's no link at all between art and science?

LUMB:

Oh yes, I think there is because I think my records, as far as, well don't let's call them records, let's say my personal interpretation of what's going on in some modern plant gets over to the public the atmosphere, the excitement, the strength, the drama of the situation, in a far, far more positive way than a series of photographs would, because a series of photographs cannot eliminate anything, it takes in everything. But an artist can feel the thing. It does excite me, I feel that it gets over a message to people that they just

miss, and this has been proved by the people who've seen the work I've done.

AKST:

So with so many projects of various sorts all over the continent of Africa, are you saying that you think that other countries could usefully and profitably suggest to their own artists to go to a project and do something similar?

LUMB:

Oh yes, I definitely think so. I mean I've done it already with mills and machinery. The same thing applies in every country that there is a great potential for the artist.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Edna Lumb with a challenge to our artists and if some officials in charge of the exciting and dramatic construction projects are listening, as I hope, perhaps they would like to give it some thought.

Now for some music.

MUSIC: "Regard Sur le Passe" by the Bembeya Jazz National.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The Bembeya Jazz National of Guinea with a short passage from their disc "Regard Sur le Passe". It tells the story of the Emperor Samory who a hundred years ago created an empire that stretched from Sierra Leone and Liberia to Upper Volta. It's an example of the music that's giving Guinea a reputation throughout French-speaking West Africa for exciting musical innovation. Here's Pierre Kalenzaga to tell us how this has come about.

PIERRE KALENZAGA:

In 1960 when most French-speaking African states, hardly independent, were still looking for their cultural identities, the state of Guinea had already made a definite choice in that respect. In fact, Guinea was the first state in French-speaking West Africa to come up with the idea of 'authenticity' in the African arts and way of life. Guineans were the first to state clearly and unequivocally that independence should mean also being independent culturally. They then took steps to achieve this in one of the most sensitive areas of African art - the field of modern African music.

At that time in most other French-speaking capitals of Africa, people

were singing and dancing "a la mode de Paris", which is the Parisian way. In a ballroom, concert hall, or on the radio, most songs or tunes were French, and of course all discs available at that time were made in Paris. The only other kind of music appreciated was the Latin American or so-called Afro-Cuban music, which hit the rest of the French-speaking Africa after transiting either through Senegal or the then Congo-Leopoldville, now Zaire.

But in Guinea things were totally different. It is said that President Ahmed Sekou Toure himself, Head of State of Guinea, gave the order that only African music played by musicians and artists of Guinea, could be broadcast on the Guinean radio. This measure paid dividends. It encouraged the country's musicians to play more and record discs, and the tastes of the public also underwent a change and they were leaning more and more towards the real African music. As the years went by the search for authenticity brought into the Guinean bands some traditional African instruments such as the kora, as well as the core of traditional wind and percussion instruments. The secret of a Guinean band's success is in the blending of these instruments with the modern ones, such as the trumpet and electric guitars, during the performance. In other words, thanks to this blending, they have succeeded in recreating the traditional African music atmosphere in a modern environmental set-up. It is precisely because, or should we say thanks to, this, that one of the best bands of the country, the Bembeya Jazz National of Guinea, won the silver medal at the 1968 African Art Festival in Algiers with a tune created in honour of, and recounting, the life of the Alamy Samory Toure, Emperor of the then Mali, who refused to submit to the colonial power, France, and defeated seven French generals in battles on the African land in the nineteenth century. The following is an extract of this hymn to Emperor Samory. Notice how the traditional and modern instruments blend harmoniously.

MUSIC: "Regard Sur le Passe" by the Bembeya Jazz National.

KALENZAGA:

Pivi and his Balladins, Traore Kelitigi and his Tambourinis, the Orchestra of Kankan, etc., etc. Those are the names of some of the most successful bands in Guinea and in French-speaking West Africa in general. One name which should be mentioned also is that of Myriam Makeba, who is now a citizen and artist of Guinea. Rather than bringing to the Guineans the musical knowledge she has acquired as a truly renowned international artist, she found that instead she had to learn from them. The success of Makeba was based on the international appeal of her songs, like "Pata Pata", which although basically African, were more western in their expression and rhythm. Now Myriam Makeba is truly an African artist. Nowadays she sings songs which are little understood in Europe, but precisely because they're really authentic Guinean songs, African songs. This is Myriam Makeba singing one of her now Guinean/African songs, entitled "Amanpondo".

MUSIC: "Amanpondo" by Myriam Makeba.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The 'African' voice, as Pierre Kalenzaga describes it, of Myriam Makeba in "Amanpondo". I'm going to say goodbye now so that her voice, so much better than mine, can end the programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping to meet you next week for more "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC: "Amanpondo" by Myriam Makeba.

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