

Arts and Africa

BBC

AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 137

(6R 53 S 137 G)

ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to a programme that looks forward to a new folk museum and remembers the music of Alick Nkhata, in "Arts and Africa"

SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

There can't be too many capital cities in Africa that don't by this time boast a museum of national culture. They're an attraction for tourists and other visitors from abroad, and they preserve and advertise the nation's heritage for the people of that particular country.

Well, in Sierra Leone there's a different idea afoot. They have a National Museum in Freetown, but the much smaller regional centre of Taiama has set its sights on a folk museum. It will be about and for the Kpa-Mende people who live in the southern part of the country. George Goba, Registrar of Njala University College and a Kpa-Mende himself, is Chairman of the Museum Committee and Jocelyn Roland asked him why the people of the Taiama area need a museum of their own:

GEORGE GOBA:

We want to see what really makes us what we are, what makes us tick in a way. The people are made up of their own culture. If we don't show what we are made of, what we have, we're going to lose our identity and we don't want to do that. Let me begin by saying the area is a cultural centre of Kpa-Mende the Taiama area. I am sure you've heard about the Wunde secret society. This is the heart-beat of Mende culture and its seat is right in Taiama. If we have anything to show to the world about what we are, it has to originate out of this area. We hope we can show symbols, mind you symbols of the Wunde society and the other secret societies in the area.

ROLAND BUCK:

Can you give us a little bit of history on the art and culture of the Kpa-Mende relative to Sierra Leone ?

GEORGE GOBA:

Yes, our people for one thing used to be warriors, so they have, what I think you might call, articles of war and this can show that they were good craftsmen. There are some villages where the people live like they used to live fifty to one hundred years ago and we want to go into these villages. I have a research team now going out from village to village trying to get some of these things together.

ROLAND BUCK:

Mr. Goba, could you just briefly tell us how these arts and culture of the Kpa-Mende is going to be reflected in the artifacts and the objects of art which will be on display in the museum?

GEORGE GOBA:

We intend to display art works, both ancient and modern. We intend to display paintings and drawings, culture, work implements, cookware, pottery, musical instruments, warfare instruments, hunting equipment, fishing, weaving, even dyeing, you know, that tie-dyeing is becoming quite popular in Sierra Leone and it is very very prevalent in this area. On a much more advanced scale would be displays of historical documents, church records, school records, photographs, travel history, records. The museum would be a centre for these people to come and really see what they have and what makes them what they are.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

George Goba talking to Jocelyn Roland. And I, for one, wish them success with the project.

And now, the melodious (and for Zambian listeners the nostalgic) music of Alick Nkhata.

MUSIC : "Shalapo" by Alick Nkhata

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

This is the sound that swept through the airwaves of Zambia in the late 1940's and the early fifties. Alick Nkhata called this number "Shalapo" and Mwesa Mapoma, a fellow Zambian musician and admirer, has chosen the recording as a starting point for a conversation with Florence Akst, about the man, but more especially, about his music.

MUSIC: "Shalapo" by Alick Nkhata.

MWESA MAPOMA:

Alick Nkhata - I would at the moment call him a legend in his own way, in the way he has inspired many people in music and especially the culture of music, part of what is "Shalapo" in which he uses a piano and an organ with Dick Sapper, that's the man who joined him.

FLORENCE AKST:

We've been talking in the past tense. When was this phase ?

MWESA MAPOMA:

One could go back in to the 1940's, the latter part of 1940 because Alick Nkhata really hit the limelight when they introduced a very cheap radio which we nicknamed "Saucepan" radio in Zambia and this was intended for use by the Africans. Immediately after that Alick Nkhata came in as one of the most influential musicians and from then he went on composing up until the late 1960's when he retired from government and is now a farmer somewhere.

FLORENCE AKST:

Was there a golden period that you can distinguish ?

MWESA MAPOMA:

Yes, I think immediately after 1950, 1953 I should say, Alick Nkhata with his quartette came up with some very interesting compositions and I should say that most of the time Alick Nkhata had been looking at the problems of the society in which we are and that is why you find that most of his songs have been on social problems and also trying to show the difficulties which people in towns are facing, those who come into town from the rural area, their problems. These have been the themes, which he worked with and that is why for example a song, "Abanakashi Munjunji", meaning 'women along the line of rail', he tries to show how they are trying to adjust to problems of the urban areas and I think it would be good to listen to "Abanakashi Munjunji".

MUSIC: Abanakashi Munjanji" by Alick Nkhata.

MWESA MAPOMA

This music which Alick Nkhata was playing was greatly influenced by the cowboys. You know in the 1940's the mining companies started showing films to Africans and some of the films that were very popular were cowboy films, especially ones in which you had people like Gene Autrey singing along, and those greatly influenced a number of musicians and Alick Nkhata was the first person to pick it up, and going to South Africa, where he worked for some time with Huga Tracey, that again gave him a chance of seeing the type of music that was going on in South Africa, because that's where we had most of the jazz type of music coming from South Africa into Zambia, whereas, let me digress just a little, Congolese type music was coming from Zaire, coming into Zambia and his exposure to that of South Africa made him have this kind of very interesting flavour, if I may call it, which he combines the old and the new to come with things like "Shalapo", "Abanakashi Munjuji" and "Maliya". "Maliya" is again a social song, He says "Maria, you are a woman in town, come with me to Maliya. Maliya was an eating house where people went to eat, and he felt that this girl he was chatting up should come with him to the Maliya. So let's just listen to "Maliya" and see how he uses his guitar.

MUSIC: Maliya by Alick Nkhaka

FLORENCE AKST:

You say that he tackles social problems, the social problems of of that day, anyway. His music doesn't sound mournful, it doesn't sound solemn at all.

MWESA MAPOMA:

No, it doesn't. It's an interesting thing in that the way Alick uses the guitar is reflective of the way society looks at some of the problems. If you remember sometime in one of our discussions which we had, not on the radio but which we had sometime in your office, about Igomba (phonetically), those royal musicians, their music isn't sorrowful at all but in fact it's full of jokes but through this they portray their activities of the people in society and the problems which are going on. In fact it's a kind of satire which a number of people don't understand unless those who are very much involved, with, let's say, the Bemba. This is another thing I should mention. It is interesting that Alick Nkhata has sung most of his songs in Bemba yet he was living in an area which was primarily controlled and my suspicion has been that Alick Nkhata was exploiting this freedom which Igomba (phonetically) have among the Bemba people of singing about anything and at the same time, knowing that nobody can bring any charges against him and I think this is why he decided to use Bemba language for most of his compositions because of this kind of immunity which the musicians have within the Bemba structure.

FLORENCE AKST:

I am hoping that you will come back another day and tell us more about him. What shall we close with for the time being ?

MWESA MAPOMA:

I think we should close with "Abalumendo" which means, some young people have not sense up there. When they see a "kapmeta" which means a girl who paints her lips, their hearts go boom, bitty, boom, bitty, boom boom and they stop thinking and just go haywire and follow the girls around and I think this is up to now - going on throughout the world. You can't leave the skirt alone !!

MUSIC: Abalumendo" by Alick Nkhata.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

"Leave that skirt alone!" That's Mwesa Mapoma's racy translation of this Alick Nkhata number and it's not bad advice with which to end the programme! There'll be more Alick Nkhata in a future "Arts and Africa" but for now from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.

MUSIC: Abalumendo by Alick Nkhata.

BROADCASTING RIGHTS: FREE FOR USE
IN BROADCASTING OUTSIDE BRITAIN IN
ENGLISH OR TRANSLATION.

PUBLICATION RIGHTS: NOT FREE FOR
USE IN PUBLISHING OUTSIDE BRITAIN IN
ENGLISH OR TRANSLATION.