

# Arts and Africa

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ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to Arts and Africa and to the people who make this music.

MUSIC: Dogon drumming music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Drumming by the Dogon people of Mali. The Dogon live close to the Upper Volta border with Mali on a plateau that has steep cliffs to protect it from the vast plain below. Generally speaking, they don't herd cattle as their neighbours do, but grow cereal crops, especially millet and fonio. In the recent drought in the Sahel they have suffered as much as anyone and their art, based on their religious beliefs, has grown out of their dependence on the vital annual rains.

I had the opportunity to learn more about the Dogon and to see pictures of their carvings when I met Hans Guggenheim, who has visited them many times and lived there for long periods. Hans Guggenheim is an American academic and, as I soon found out, he's a great admirer of Dogon art.

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

If we think of the great mask of the Dogon, I'll show you a picture of it - it is a head, represents a head, large protruding mouth and large eyes, and although you don't see it on this particular piece, there is, above the head, an undulating shape 30ft long, an enormous serpent like figure, that represents the great serpent "the lebe", ancestor of the Dogon. It is a wonderful figure when you see it carried at night in a Dogon village on the cliffs against the plain, the moonlight falling on it, a man staggering under the tremendous weight of this sculpture and as it arrives, the sound of the bull roar, wee, wee and the moment that sound is heard, the women of the village, who have been attending the funeral and dancing disappear. All the children disappear too, as they are scared, they are not permitted to see the mask because the great mask implies the idea of death. At the beginning, the Dogon tell

us, a man did not die, but turned into a serpent and at that moment, when the elder was turning into a serpent, the young men of the village came dancing down the hills and they were wearing the skirts, red skirts and the masks stolen from the women, because at that time, women, not men, ruled Dogon society and the elders of the village said "what have you done, you have not asked me, the elder, and you have insulted me". And so, because he broke the tradition against speech he fell down and died. The young men ran into the village and asked the old men of the village what to do, and the old men said "go and carve a great mask" and it is that great mask that is carved every 60 years by the Dogon to celebrate "sighi"(phonetic) and the soul, the life force of the serpent of that ancestor of the Dogon, entered into that great mask.

So when we look at that great mask, we have the idea not only of death, but of life, of continuity, the undulating form of the serpent, which also is water which is rebirth and all those symbols, all those ideas are here, and the Dogon think of it and see it. When you see it, the mask, being brought in, the young men of the village, the ones who have not yet been initiated, avert their eyes and look across the plain and only a few, the elders who are initiated, see the great mask. It is a very powerful sight, very different from seeing a sculpture here in a museum, collected as it were, like a specimen, with the loss of meaning.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

What was quite fascinating was the traditional interest the Dogon people have in our solar system and what they can observe in the night sky. This music accompanies the dancer who's wearing one of these long, long masks and spinning round as do the heavenly bodies. The dance, it's called the Sirigue Dance, represents the creation of the universe along a divine axis.

MUSIC: Chant des guerisseurs by the Dogon.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that great shout at the end comes from the audience who are celebrating all the natural wonders of creation. Dogon art is based on the same concepts as their dances. For example, Hans Guggenheim showed me a photograph of the interior of a remarkable cave in one of their cliffs, so remarkable that I asked him to describe it for us.

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

It's a cave that shows a spiral and you see two circles, one circling round the other. The spiral on the one hand represents the grain fonio, an ancient grain that is very small, it was the small and heaviest element in the universe and it exploded and created the universe of the Dogon. It burst into symbols, as it were, along a spiral path.

And on the other hand it represents, here we see a star sirius surrounded by a satellite, and the Dogon discovered that almost before we did.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's amazing.

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

Yes, its absolutely amazing how they were able to work out a scientific solution that only now we are able to see with our telescopes. And the Dogon see it from the village of Yougadgo (?), from a sacred place there in one of the caves and the elders every 60 years see it and this relates back to the sighi (phonetic), because whenever the stars appear, the satellite appears, the sighi (phonetic) is celebrated. There are profound meanings to this constellation.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I must say, I found it moving to learn how much Dogon people know about astronomy and how they have integrated it into their culture and one day I'd like to find out more about it.

But I don't want to give the impression that their art is only bizarre. There is more orthodox sculpture and I asked Hans Guggenheim about one piece that had drawn my attention.

There is also this very beautiful figure of a head, artistically done, most wonderfully done I thought, with a long beard. What material was that made of ?

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

That's a wood sculpture, it's a 16th century, very very ancient wood sculpture. It's a smithy that's represented here, marvellous thin defined features, the eyes are so expressive, the dignity of their person is so so overwhelming and you see the man, the smith, carrying over his shoulder, the staff of the smith, the hooked staff. You see a spiral engraved on his shoulder and on the back, and he's wearing something to protect him against the other gods who threw fire at him because he descended from the sky bringing fire and iron tools and he had stole it from the heavenly forge. So they threw these things at him but he descended and brought man the iron tools and grain. So this is the figure of the smith.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

It's amazingly like Greek mythology isn't it. The mythology of man stealing fire or some creature stealing fire from the Gods and bringing it to man, quite incredible.

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

Yes, it is very similar, maybe we should say that Roman mythology is similar to the Dogon mythology.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Quite (giggle laugh !)

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

Permit me to reverse it .....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now are the Dogon craftsmen sophisticated ?

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

Well, don't you think so ?

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I know they do these things, what I am wondering is whether they produce art as a matter of necessity, as a reflection of life around them, there is drought, therefore the fear of death. And then there is a concern about life. Now do they produce these things as a matter of ritual or necessity or do they also appreciate what they have done after they have produced it ?

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

Yes, I think they very much appreciate it. They think of themselves as great artists. You remember I showed you that beautiful door that a friend of mine in the village had carved. He told me that he didn't have to sign it, that no one else could carve such fine lines. Well, he knew he was a great craftsman, he knows he's a great artist. There's no doubt about that.

MUSIC: Pilage du mil du Dogon

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

This music accompanies a very special ceremony when some of the harvest of millet is pounded to provide beer for the village headman and religious leader. Only young people are qualified to take part and you can hear the force that the young men put into wielding the pestles.

MUSIC: Pilage du mil du Dogon.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Perhaps it is because the Dogon have captured the imagination of Hans Guggenheim, that he has taken a practical interest in the problems that they face as farmers. After the severe

drought of recent years, they need to conserve water and make their granaries even more secure. Dr. Guggenheim recalled that traditionally, in the centre of every granary that's built, there's a small altar and on it is placed a bowl of water as an offering to Nommo, the God of Water. Now he is helping the Dogon to put their myths into a practical use.

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

My work among the Dogon revolves round trying to provide water for them water storage and water for drinking purposes because there is a dire need for water. This need is expressed in their art, in the figure of Nommo, who brings water so that is what I'm concerned with. I build dams with them and I built these sort of water granaries which I showed you. The structure is of a traditional granary which we converted into a water storage system and you saw how the Dogon had carved a beautiful door for that structure and how, in that door, they commemorated the events that led to building, the sacrifice that was made and the divination ceremony that was made and all those things are carved into that door and they are placed into the building.

The building is a traditional mud/brick structure but it is lined with cement and the water is simply brought in from the roof. So that is the kind of thing I do with them. I help them build drains, not that they don't know how to do it, but sometimes they cannot afford to get the materials and then together we try to work out solutions to the problems.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I wonder when, after they have got water, probably there won't be the generation in their art. Because it looks as if a lot of their art expresses figures in prayer, prayer for rain, prayer for this and that. Probably it will have an adverse effect on them.

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

I don't think so. I don't think they will ever have enough water ever. They need a great deal.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Thank you very much Dr. Guggenheim.

HANS GUGGENHEIM:

You are very welcome. Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

I'm just beginning to realise that we haven't been hearing the voices of the Dogon women which is a sad error on my part. So I'm going to end the programme with one of their songs. I find this one very attractive - not least because of the baby who obviously doesn't.

And now, to the sound of women's voices (and the baby's)

this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: Les Bogons.

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