

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ANNC AND SIG TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to Arts and Africa. Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today, the charms of the cora, a puppet exhibition and the discovery of African instruments by young French children - all from Paris!

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The melodious sounds of the cora, which were heard in Paris in September as part of the Festival of Autumn. A team of four musicians from Mali played and Margy Brearley, our producer, went along to hear them. She's in the studio with me now. Margy, what was it like ?

MARGY BREARLEY

Well, Alex, it really was one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen. The concert took place in the Bouffles du Nord Theatre which structually is like a regular theatre with tiers, but which had been left uncared for until recently, so that it looked a little bit like a Roman ruin. Very magical. On the ground, there were two cream carpets and the two cora players, Sidiki Diabate and Batourou Sekou, dressed in deep purple boubous sat on them in the traditional way to play their coras. I mean, that in itself was stunning, but then against this grey but impressive background, there emerged one after the other from the wings, the two singers, Miriam Kouyate and Wande Kouyate and they looked so magnificent in boubous and different colours, which they changed as the evening went on. They sang to the

MARGY BREARLEY

audience who were held absolutely spellbound - perhaps, I should say, particularly the men!

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, the people certainly seemed to have enjoyed it all.

MARGY BREARLEY

They certainly did and it wasn't only by clapping that they showed so. As the evening progressed and the hypnotic charms of these lovely ladies began to work, the men in the audience showed their appreciation in another way; franc notes began to "waft" their way down from the dress circle, ten francs, twenty francs, even one hundred franc notes! As a result, more and more praises were sung in the direction of those admirers, I think you'd have loved it. Alex!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I might have loved the praise. I'm not so sure about having to part with a hundred franc note for it. That's about twelve pounds! Anyway Margy wasn't the only one to enjoy it.

VOX POP

MARGY BREARLEY

Can you think what you thought about the music?

MAN: I think its very interesting music. For me that's very deep music. I don't like to give money just like that.

MARGY: You don't like it, but it's very traditional isn't it ?

MAN: No, it's very traditional.

MARGY: It's a way of expressing appreciation.

MAN: Yes, that's it. But the music's very...

MARGY: It gives you a good feeling ?

MAN: Yes, really.

MARGY: Can you tell me what you thought of it.

MAN (2) Oh, yes, it was fantastic, it was very cosmic for me. It was just like the African sun up in the skies!

MAN (3) It was a way for the French people to know what's happening about the music in Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Sidiki, Batourou, Miriam and Wande, thank you. And now, we cross Paris to the Musée de L'Homme, the anthropological museum where an exhibition of thirty-six African puppets was mounted as part of the Festival. Margy talked with Bongasu Taula-Kishani from the Cameroon, a journalist with the magazine Présence Africaine, and asked him where the dolls came from.

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

Most of them come from West Africa, mainly from Nigeria, Mali, Zaire, Camerouns, and most West African countries.

MARGY BREARLEY

They are basically made of wood, aren't they ?

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

Yes, they are basically made of wood, but there is a display, too, of tin, and sometimes cloth, which is locally made.

MARGY BREARLEY

That the country cloth ?

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

Yes, country cloth, mostly out of cotton; also certain locally produced things like rope which are used for these puppets.

MARGY BREARLEY

A lot of the figures are in fact of human figures, aren't they ?

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

One would say that they are human figures and there are also animal figures. There is one of the crocodile, which comes from Mali and which could depict more than just a crocodile. It could also depict the people's belief on what the crocodile stands for, meaning their religious beliefs as well as their whole way of seeing the world.

MARGY BREARLEY

A lot of the puppets seem to be fairly plain in design. These two here from the Congo are far more decorative.

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

Yes, they are not only decorative. We would like to call them more noble. As you can see, there is a contrast there between a man and a woman, and the woman is marked out by the beads she has around her neck, and the display

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

of the white colour with the black and something that formally would have been the red, but it's now faded. You can see that all this goes to mark the nobility of the puppet.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now what functions do the dolls have in the societies in Africa.

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

Well, there are many functions. They could be religious and entertainment functions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How could you tell their different functions, Margy, in the exhibition?

MARGY BREARLEY

Well, it wasn't easy at all. There were a series of photographs which helped to put the actual puppets displayed into some kind of perspective. One for example showed a man from Mali with a square drawn out in front of him and attached to his big toe on either foot was a piece of string which passed through two puppets and the puppets were balanced within the square on the ground and the man was divining with them - so the puppets were serving a purely religious function. Another photograph was called "Christmas Eve in Guinea", and it showed a group of children dancing through the streets of Conakry, one of them waving a puppet held in his hand. So that it was completely out in the open and part of the games of the children. A third photograph from Mali, however, depicted what seemed to be a kind of "theatre with significance". A canoe was floating near the land and on it was a canopy, above which puppets acted out a story. The audience themselves were on the shore and couldn't see the people who were manipulating the puppets from behind the canopy. Now, this seemed to combine both functions and I asked Bongasu what sorts of topics would be the subjects of such performance.

BONGASUG TAULA-KISHANI

The type of topic they would tackle here would be general in the sense that it could cover political topics, it can also cover religious topics, it can cover social problems within the society. Because these who act and display these puppets know the society and discuss with the society for the needs of this society.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now, in contrast to the canoe picture, here is a photograph of a doll performing behind a piece of local country cloth and that's been suspended between two houses. There's a sense though that the world of the audience is very much separate from the world of the performers.

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

Yes, well, the fact that the cloth is attached between two houses shows the separation which exists between those who are initiated in this display of the puppet and those who are not initiated. It shows you that this puppet directly touches the society, because puppet-making in Africa is a right of few, those who know the mechanism of it. This limited number varies from one society to the other. In one society, with this type of puppet, it would only be the elders who would know very much about it. In another society with this type of puppet would be limited to the young people.

MARGY BREARLEY

So it's a kind of secret society?

BONGASU TAULA-KISHANI

Yes, it depends on the quality or the style of the puppet.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Such exhibitions seem an excellent idea to me, but Bongasu felt there was a need for more explanation about the puppets.

BONGASU TAULA -KISHANI

The problem is that, once displayed like this, there is an element of cultural exchange that is achieved. But, there is also an element of misunderstanding in that from the name "puppets", we tend to situate these articles of art and these religious articles within a society that is not their home society, namely within a European society and to judge them on the merits of European values, which I think may be at times very mistaken.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An interesting point. Bongasu, thank you.

MUSIC Children playing instruments.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Not quite the authentic version, but a courageous attempt by a group of young French school children on a visit to the Galerie Sonore, where there are one thousand six hundred instruments from Africa and Asia "to see and touch". The gallery was started in 1973 and runs a regular programme for school children. It was included in the Festival programme as a parallel activity which was helping to promote an awareness of African music. Margy talked with Bertrand Nzoutani from the Congo, one of the African tutors and asked him about the work of the Gallery.

BERTRAND NZOUTANI

We have here for the children many instruments from Africa. When the children come here, we present an instrument and we play a little for the sound. The children learn the sound and we present many instruments and after the children can play.

MARGY BREARLEY

They must have a very good time, I should think?! They enjoy playing, don't they?

BERTRAND NZOUTANI

Yes, it is very, very good when they play.

MARGY BREARLEY

Can you show me some of the different sounds?

BERTRAND NZOUTANI

Here we have little instrument. The name of this instrument is Sanza and we present this instrument to the children and we play a little.

MUSIC

And now I play instrument called Sinbi from Mali.

MUSIC PLAYED

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Bertrand, thank you. You can hear the enthusiasm of the children as they learn a new song.

MUSIC of children

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Little Emmanuelle Jolie was at the gallery and Margy asked her how old she was.

EMANUELLE JOLIE

Nine years old.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now what have you enjoyed so far? Which instruments do you like best?

EMANUELLE JOLIE

The drum and the cora.

MARGY BREARLEY

Is this the first time you've heard African instruments?

EMANUELLE JOLIE

Oh no, my Mother has some drums.

MARGY BREARLEY

Would you like to go to Africa now?

EMANUELLE JOLIE

Or, I go when I was a little girl.

MARGY BREARLEY

Where did you go?

EMANUELLE JOLIE

I don't know, because...

MARGY BREARLEY

You were a little baby?! Well I hope you enjoy the rest of your visit here. Thank you for talking to us.

EMANUELLE JOLIE

Thanks.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

We end this week's programme with the music from the Congolese Kodja Group, of which Bertrand Nzoutani was a founder member. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying good-bye. Join us again next week for another Arts and Africa.