

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. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And to-day, a symposium on the study of African Art and an exhibition of modern African Art in Paris.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in and demand for courses on African Studies, both in Africa and outside. One area is, of course, the study of African Art and there is still endless discussion on how it should be studied, how it should be presented to people of different cultures. Does the word beauty for example have the same meaning in different cultures? Can an Englishman, American or Russian really understand the significance of, say, a Poro society masquerade in Sierra Leone?

During the Festival of Autumn in Paris this year, Jean Laude, Director of the Centre of Historical Research on Artistic Relations between Cultures, organised the first symposium ever to be held in Paris on the subject. Unfortunately, Monsieur Laude doesn't speak English, so we were unable to talk to him. But our Producer, Margy Brearley met some of those attending the Symposium. She talked first with Danielle Duquette from the University of Montreal, Canada, and asked her why she had come to the Symposium.

DANIELLE DUQUETTE

I came to the Symposium because I am very interested in art and in Africa. In art, because my old job used to be a drawing teacher, and then I went to Africa for three years where I was living in Dakar, Senegal, and I saw

DANIELLE DUQUETTE

a kind of statues of pieces that I couldn't see in any book published and I was very curious about that. After a while I knew that it was built in Guinea Bissau. Then when I came back I tried to do a Masters on this art and I go on with my research.

MARGY BREARLEY

What particular things are you doing research on ?

DANIELLE DUQUETTE

I am working on the sculpture. I try to begin with the sculpture and arrive at the society. Usually, you learn the society, you know: the kingship, the social administration, etc. Then you arrive at art. It is the end of your learning, it's like the end of what the society can do. I try to do the contrary, I try to learn how the sculptor cut the tree, why he uses this wood and not that one, what kinds of things he put in, on or around the piece.

MARGY BREARLEY

In your research, did you find that the artist, the sculptor, the person who made the mask, say, could say whether it was beautiful or not ?

DANIELLE DUQUETTE

Beautiful, is really an occidental notion, because it's more "useful" than "beautiful". But, you can say that when you think yourself a piece is beautiful, they think, the same piece is beautiful, because the more beautiful is the piece, the more useful it generally is. There is a coincidence between both.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An interesting point. Another person studying in Paris was Jacqueline Butler, a black American. Margy asked her if she had been interested in African studies for a long time.

JACQUELINE BUTLER

Well, the interest in African studies has developed basically since I've been in France. I had had a few courses in the States but the interest just grew bit by bit. I feel definitely if one wants to do research on any particular subject on Africa, they have to go to Africa to get the feel more of what's going on.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now, you yourself are American. Do you think that, as an American, you can get close, really, really close to another culture to really understand the significance and meaning of the art that you are studying?

JACQUELINE BUTLER

That is difficult, especially in the particular situation that I am black American, and I feel a closeness to Africa but I don't feel that I would ever really actually be able to become African and understand fully, because I was, however, born in the States and my parents were born in the States, and I have a structure and a way of looking at the world that is not at all African.

MARGY BREARLEY

But you still intend to go, but recognising these reservations ?

JACQUELINE BUTLER

Yes. I intend to go and see things and understand things as much as I possible can. But I really feel that if I could live there, say, for ten years, working on the same thing, then I could possibly say that I could actually get that close to the African culture.

MARGY BREARLEY

To get back to the Symposium, what do you think you are going to get out of it ?

JACQUELINE BUTLER

Well, as a student, I will get an idea of the openings that are available within this field of African art, and also an idea of what the experts have to say in terms of what's going on to-day in the world of African Arts.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTSY

Although the symposium was attended by about fifty people, there were only five from Africa. Many others had been invited, of course, but the fare to Paris is rather expensive these days. Raya Sawadogo, a Phd Student from Upper Volta, welcomed this exchange of ideas.

RAYA SAWADOGO

We meet people, who love African art and handicrafts. It's for us something good. Perhaps tomorrow we will talk about "beauty". It is a subject very interesting for us.

MARGY BREARLEY

Do you think there's a difference in what beauty means in different cultures?

RAYA SAWADOGO

In Africa, it is a particular problem of aesthetics. I think if you want to know what aesthetics mean in Africa, you have to live in Africa between people of this area and talk to them, live with them, discuss with them and learn the language. I think that is very important because there are terms or words we use which cannot be translated into French or English.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

More and more people are realising the importance of language for understanding all aspects of different cultures, so it's an important point Raya has made.

The Symposium lasted three days during which papers were given and discussed. At the end, there was a reception and, to the background of bottles popping, Margy asked Jacqueline Fry from Ottawa University, Canada, who's been working on African art for twenty years what had come out of the Symposium.

JACQUELINE FRY

I think the confusion was very positive, because we had different experiments, different levels of knowledge, but some of the fundamental problems were the same. First, do we have the right of presenting non-western art? What are the criteria of presenting these arts which belong to another culture? What do we know really about this culture? And what is the best way of being right about the real feelings of the people who are artists, producing these arts?

MARGY BREARLEY

Do you think it is possible for a westerner to really get into another culture, which is different from his or hers?

JACQUELINE FRY

I don't really think it's really possible, but I think we can first be respectful, which is the first step. Secondly, we can try to know deeply, and then we can be very, very close.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The reception was also the moment for the opening of an exhibition of contemporary African Art from Malagasy, Togo, Cameroon, Upper Volta, Senegal and Mauritius. Ekue Adamah from Togo was one of the exhibitors and earlier in the afternoon Margy talked with him about his work, starting with a painting entitled "Hausa".

EKUE ADAMAH

It is really a portrait of "Hausa" person. You can notice on his head a small cap. I try to lay emphasis on the main features with newspapers and what I can find in the natural.

MARGY BREARLEY

It's very gay and there's a lot of angularity, there's a lot of squares and interesting shapes about it, aren't there? Now, I really like this one over here. It looks like a lot of cow bells, but I think it's got much more significance than that, hasn't it?

EKUE ADAMAH

Yes, exactly, that is it. I call it "Men In Action". The action is agricultural work and it's about how men in Africa try to play music to accompany work in the fields. That can recall to us the origin of work songs.

MARGY BREARLEY

Can you play it for us ?

EKUE ADAMAH

Oh, I can try!

MUSIC OF COW BELLS

MARGY BREARLEY

Thanks very much indeed. Now, there's also this one over here in front of me, which is a wooden carving, fairly abstract. One of the things I really like about it is that there are these little pieces of French money stuck in it. Why did you put those in there ?

EKUE ADAMAH

First of all, may I say, the title of this sculpture is "Treize Janvier", which is the date of the liberation of our country. Then I ask myself if indeed we are really liberated. This piece of French money put in the hollow represents the big, big hollow because of our economic problem, because all our capital and all our projects are funded by the West. That is to say,

EKUE ADAMAH

we have still a long way to go to our liberation.

MARGY BREARLEY

Are you mainly a sculptor, would you say?

EKUE ADAMAH

Not exactly, because I don't like the way people try to put a label on people, on artists to say that "this is a painter", "this is a sculptor". In art, painting and carving are the same because we try to mean the same thing - which is Art.

MARGY BREARLEY

But do you like to work best in paper or paint or wood ?

EKUE ADAMAH

No. I don't have a preference. I don't have a choice. I try only to mean what I am feeling. This can be in wood, or in iron or in oil.

MARGY BREARLEY

Your paintings and your carvings obviously are very "African" in some of the shapes and forms. Is there any one theme that runs through all of them?

EKUE ADAMAH

No. The main problem for me is that, firstly, when you look at me, you notice that I'm not a white man, I am a black man. But I don't try to tell people that I am a black man. I am brown, I am beautiful. No I want to say that my origin is African. I can't ignore it.

MARGY BREARLEY

How is it that you started to be an artist?

EKUE ADAMAH

First of all, I have to express what I want - that is in my childhood. Then, when I come to primary school, I have to improve it, to improve it until now I am at University.

MARGY BREARLEY

You are attending University in Paris, doing your Phd.

EKUE ADAMAH

Yes, exactly.

MARGY BREARLEY

What's the topic of your Phd?

EKUE ADAMAH

To study the problem of aesthetical aspects of contemporary arts in Africa.

MARGY BREARLEY

And do you find time to do your studies and to do your artistic work ?!

EKUE ADAMAH

Yes, it seems to be included good in my life.

MARGY BREARLEY

And what do you think of this Festival d'Automne?

EKUE ADAMAH

I can say that it is a good opportunity because a black man can bring something good of Humanity. Each time society tries to help black people in France or elsewhere, maybe to show what they have to say, or what they have to paint or to express, I say it is a good occasion.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And let's hope there will be more opportunities for Africans to present their cultures, as was offered by the Festival of Autumn in Paris.

SIG. MUSIC OF Jeremy Taylor "Limpopo"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And so we come to the end of this week's programme. It's goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey. I hope you will join us again next week for another "Arts and Africa".

SIG. MUSIC OF Jeremy Taylor "Limpopo".