

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today, Africa's museums, monuments and traditional artefacts.

MUSIC

Most countries in Africa have a Museum, in which examples of the country's culture and history are displayed. As archaeologists continue to unearth remains of early settlements, there is an increasing demand for more sophisticated techniques for the preservation of such artefacts. Patrick Bulenzi from Uganda is in charge of UNESCO's programme of Museums and Monuments in Africa, and Margy Brearley, our Producer, asked him first what his job entailed.

PATRICK BULENZI

That means executing projects submitted to UNESCO by the member States. For example, if an African country wants a fellowship in Museology, they apply to UNESCO.

MARGY BREARLEY

Do you in fact have many applications from Africa, from people who want to come and study?

PATRICK BULENZI

We have quite a number.

MARGY BREARLEY

And from all over the continent or one particular area more than another?

PATRICK BULENZI

There are a few countries whichever apply for fellowships for their Museum staff, partly because they have got more important things to spend their money on, and partly because they prefer to send their trainees through bi-lateral agreements with other foreign countries. I also examine requests where member States require

PATRICK BULENZI

consultants to help their National Museums or to help set-up conservation laboratories at their National Museums. I am also responsible for examining requests for equipment for National Museums.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Patrick is also Projects Officer for other schemes funded by organisations like the United Nations Development Programme, such as one in Ethiopia.

PATRICK BULENZI

It is about the preservation of monuments on the historical road from Addis Abba to Lake Tana and to certain historical towns in Northern Ethiopia.

MARGY BREARLEY

Are they being preserved or are they being affected by the war going on in Eritrea?

PATRICK BULENZI

I am sorry to say that the work is not progressing as it should because of the war. But we have our staff who are still continuing to preserve monuments in areas which are not affected by the war, and also, the Ethiopian Government is interested in seeing that the work on preservation of these monuments continues.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The UNDP is also sponsoring a project for a museum of Black Art and Black Civilisation to be constructed in Senegal, and another project in Senegal, financed by a loan from the World Bank, has been set up to preserve the island of Gorée - the island from which slaves were shipped off to the Americas in earlier centuries. Not only preserving the place where the slaves were, but also the whole traditional architecture on the island to see that modern buildings are not constructed on the island to spoil the historical nature of the island.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Recently, UNESCO held their nineteenth General Conference in Nairobi, and Patrick Bulenzi was there.

PATRICK BULENZI

I went for two points. The first one was to organise a preliminary meeting for the establishment of an organisation for museums, monuments and sites of Africa, which is going to be named UNSA. And secondly, to see colleagues in the museum field from all over Africa.

MARGY BREARLEY

What were some of the resolutions that were passed at that meeting ?

PATRICK BULENZI

There was one which concerns East African Cultural Heritage - that was, for the preservation and presentation of the cultural heritage of Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There are an increasing number of archaeological sites which are being excavated in Africa, and some Governments are seriously concerned about them.

PATRICK BULENZI

For example, in Uganda the Government is interested in preserving the 13th Century historical site called Bigo Bya Mugenyi through international solidarity.

MARGY BREARLEY

Can you describe this particular site to me ?

PATRICK BULENZI

This is a series of earthworks, which were constructed about 13-14th Century. There are ditches which run for about 10 kilometres in all, and some of them are as deep as 6 metres in solid rock. I happen to have been one of the people, who excavated there in 1960, and we found plenty of pottery, ivory, beads, bones and some iron objects.

MARGY BREARLEY

What kind of things were you able to find out about the people who lived there at that time, through this discovery ?

PATRICK BULENZI

Well, the type of earthenware they were using is different from what we use to-day, and some of the things they were using are no longer to be seen to-day. Like certain types of stone objects, for example, which I think were used by Stone-Age man and are no longer in use to-day.

MARGY BREARLEY

Could you tell anything about their funeral rights for example ? Were there any funerals, any tombs discovered?

PATRICK BULENZI

Unfortunately we never came across any remains of humans, so it is very difficult to tell whether there were burials

PATRICK BULENZI

on the site.

MARGY BREARLEY

Do you think that particular site was a town ?

PATRICK BULENZI

I think that it had ceremonial value and it was a big village.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now how do you go about preserving those artefacts ?

PATRICK BULENZI

Well, the first thing is that most of the materials were removed and sent for dating purposes, and then returned to the National Museum. Now through the international campaign, it is hoped that the site will be preserved for tourists and school-children, for example, so that people can learn on the spot about the life in the ancient times.

MARGY BREARLEY

Are there many other examples similar to that settlement in East Africa or any other parts of Africa.

PATRICK BULENZI

Well, there are quite a number of sites, some of which I haven't visited, for example, the Zimbabwe ruins. There are a number of sites in Kenya and Tanzania and many of them are even older, like Oldulval Gorge in Tanzania, or Olorgesailie, in Kenya, where a lot of ancient stuff has been found relating to early man.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now, perhaps we could turn to Museums, which are the official buildings, in which a lot of artefacts and goods are preserved all over the world. There must be many extra problems, I would think, in Africa. I'm thinking of the difficulties of climate. When I was in Sierra Leone, there was a Museum in Freetown and a lot of the materials were knawed by termites and insects. What are the difficulties faced in conserving the artefacts when they've once been put in a museum.

PATRICK BULENZI

Well, I think there are a number of problems. The first one is that everything costs money and sometimes Governments are not eager to give more money for conservation purposes or for seeing that museums are well staffed with the necessary equipment. There is also the question of training museum personnel, the local people. Very often you find that a person, who is looking after the objects, has only got a secondary

PATRICK BULENZI

school education and is not a specialist in conservation methods, so that, when it comes to looking after the stuff properly, he or she is not capable of doing a good job.

MARGY BREARLEY

So these UNESCO Fellowships in fact have a very important role in that sense.

PATRICK BULENZI

Yes, certainly.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now how do people in the Museum go about collecting new material to add to their collections ?

PATRICK BULENZI

Well, it depends on the policy of the Government. In many countries you find that the Government is quite keen to see that the artefacts are well preserved, well documented, well collected. They've got legislation about these objects, so that, in many countries you cannot come out with an old piece of art without a licence. Where you have this things are all right, but if you don't, then there is the problem of important material leaving the country, because foreigners come into the country and realise the importance and then take it out.

MARGY BREARLEY

And this leads one to think about this question of all the artefacts that have left Africa through the period of colonisation. Do you have strong feelings about this ? What do you think should happen to some of the objects, which are in the Musée de l'Homme here in Paris or the Museum of Mankind in London ?

PATRICK BULENZI

Well, I think that it is fair that big museums in the world, like the British Museum, should continue to keep the material from other countries. It is also fair to say that they seem to have the best conditions of keeping this material. I would disagree with a move to return all this material to the African countries, merely because they belong to these countries, because in many cases you find that the conditions of preservation and conservation are not ideal. By returning material to African countries, you may be contributing to their destruction, due to the fact that there are different climate conditions. The fact that these items have been kept outside out of the tropical region for a long time, might mean that once you've returned them to areas where there is no air-conditioning, where the climatic conditions are different, it might result in destroying this material.

PATRICK BULENZI

I think that we must have distinction between really important material - for example, there are these ivory objects from Nigeria which are unique, which are not only important to the people of the country but they are important to the whole world - and objects of little value, where sometimes you find that there are other reproductions in the country. Not everything should be returned to the country.

MARGY BREARLEY

Now are Museums popular in Africa? Do people like going to their local Museum?

PATRICK BULENZI

I think it depends on the country. For example, in my own country the Museum is regarded as a place of ghosts!! And some people go there just because they don't have anything else to do. Others go there because they know that there is an exhibition or because they are going to learn about a particular subject. Take for example the Museum of Niamey in Niger, where even from eight or nine o'clock in the morning you find the school children coming to the Museum because they enjoy it. It is so well-organised that it will attract anybody.

MARGY BREARLEY

Also I thought the National Museum in Dar-es-Salaam was very nice. Personally I like Museums not to be too big, because otherwise I can't take in everything that there is, and that seemed quite compact. I mean, I think this brings us, too, to the question of importance of the way a museum displays its goods. The mask in Africa doesn't belong on a wall of a museum really it belongs in a situation for a particular social or religious ceremony, where something is happening and someone is dancing. It's part and parcel of the whole masquerade. It must be very important how these objects are actually displayed in the Museum.

PATRICK BULENZI

Certainly, and not only displaying but also I would also say it is important to put life into a Museum. You get Museums where dancers come and give live performances. Sometimes you get Natural History exhibitions on live animals or snakes and I think this is an added attraction.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I think we will all agree with Patrick that Museums should not be only places of education, but of fun as well. Patrick Bulenzi, thank you.

MUSIC

And so we come to the end of this week's programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye. Join me again next week for another "Arts and Africa".

MUSIC "Linpopo" by Jeremy Taylor.