

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa' from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. And to begin with, here's music that is, most definitely, from the far East of Africa.

### MUSIC

The voice of Sitti Binti Saad in a historic recording, and later in the programme we'll be hearing about this singing star from the island of cloves.

The Malian novelist and playwright, Seydou Badian, has been both a doctor and a politician in his time. (He served his country as a minister under Modibo Keita until the 1968 coup d'etat which put him in prison for seven years). His works, they're all written in French, include a play about the death of Chaka, the great Zulu warrior and several novels, the latest one with the title 'Noces Sacrees' which translates roughly into 'The Sacred Betrothal'. The book is at least part, the outcome of his experience as a doctor and it made such a powerful impression on Muriel Fletcher of our French Service that we've invited her to come along and tell us about it.

## MURIEL FLETCHER

It's the story of a white, and a French man. He works in Africa - he loves it - he's been "married to the environment" in accordance and in harmony with the rest, and he has one passion. He adores masks, the real ones not the ones which have been carved for the tourists.

He's after a very special mask which is the mask of a god with horns and he would like to get one but it is very difficult. Eventually a funny character steals the mask for him and brings that mask at night. That mask is kept in the living room of that white man and it seems to be alive and the white man looks at it during the night. He can't get to sleep. He's completely fascinated and from that moment

FLETCHER

everything starts going wrong. He loses his job, he loses his sleep, he can't eat and he gets more and more fascinated by that mask. He has to go back to France and he's absolutely upset because he would like to stay in Africa, anyway he's got to go back to France, but he takes his mask with him. He goes and sees doctors who prescribe tranquilizers, all the kind of new modern medicine that should help him, and still it doesn't help him, and the white man gets worse and worse until one day a friend of his who knows Africa says: "Look, the key to your problems is in Africa, you should go back to Africa, take the mask with you and maybe you'll find the answer". So the white man goes back to Africa. The actual country is never mentioned in the book 'Noces Sacrees' but it could happen I suppose in many countries in Africa. He goes back and he meets an African doctor who is in between two worlds because his father was a nobleman of the tribe of the village where he was born but the doctor himself was in Europe; so he can't believe that a mask could make that white man sick, but he has through his feelings, to understand and admit it. He goes and sees the old witch-doctor in a village in the bush and the witch-doctor says: "Maybe I'll get the answer. Your modern medicine in the west won't help that white man, the key is in the bush. That mask's got a funny story, it was stolen, so let me think about it", and he thinks about it. The white man gets worse and worse, the doctor is very worried. Eventually the witch-doctor comes back and says: "I know where the stolen mask was taken. The spirits talk to me at night. Follow me", and they leave the town. They walk and walk several days and nights through thick bush and eventually they arrive in a little village which seems completely deserted - Deserted with one exception, there is one old man whose waiting for the doctor, the white man and the witch-doctor and he says "I was waiting for you, I was waiting for that mask, now everything can get back to normal", and from the bush at that moment some shadows come to life and start dancing and go round that white man who seems to be entranced. And he joins these shadows and dances and dances, and there are drums in the background and eventually he collapses on the ground and dies, but dying after giving back the mask which belonged to that village and which should never have left the village. Thus the white man has found peace.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Muriel you are obviously enthusiastic about the book what qualities particularly attracted you?

FLETCHER

Many qualities. Well I have lived long enough in Africa and in the West Indies to believe that the story can be true. And also, the French which the author uses is absolutely beautiful. I mean the story is very well written, it could

FLETCHER

turned into a film. I mean, you can see the way the chapters are cut in - it could be a very good film. But the choice of the words is sometimes like a song, you read it and you are in another world. You are in thick bush in Africa, you can smell the smell of the trees, you can see the sun setting on the trees, and that I adored it, I really did.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, thank you very much for telling us about it, Muriel Fletcher.

And let me repeat that 'Noces Sacrees' is by Seydou Badian. The publisher is Presence Africaine, Paris, and it costs twenty-eight French francs. Let's hope that it's translated into English in the near future.

And now from the island of Zanzibar, the voice of Sitti Binti Saad.

MUSIC

As you can probably hear her voice has been preserved on old 78 records that have suffered from the innumerable times they've been played, but I think her voice still comes through loud and clear. When she became a singer at the turn of the century it was unknown in Zanzibar for a woman to sing in public. Saeed El'Gheithy has been telling me about her career.

SAEED EL'GHEITHY

She was the first lady singer to sing in public, and she possessed a rather incredible voice and even in those days when we had so many singers nobody really did surpass her.

TETTEH-LARTEY

You talk about "in those days", when did she live ?

EL'GHEITHY

Well we haven't got the exact date but she lived sometime from 1885 up to 1954.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And when did she begin to sing ? At what age?

EL'GHEITHY

Again we don't have the exact year, but she began to sing at a very, very early age through the rituals and other traditional ceremonies that a girl is supposed to take part in, and this is where she actually started her career.

TETTEH-LARTEY

How was she discovered? There are lots of women who do these things every day.

EL'GHEITHY

Well I need to say something about her upbringing first. Sitti grew up in a family whose occupation was mainly pottery. They were making earthenware things, and Sitti would be sent out by her parents to sell these things, and on the streets like any other seller she would need to attract customers. So she would do what we would call in English "hawk her wares" with a street cry, and people heard her voice and many of the early musicians or early singing groups that were in Zanzibar were very much attracted by her voice and this is actually how she really built up her career as a singer.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Was she one of many or was she completely outstanding ?

EL'GHEITHY

Yes, she was a most remarkable singer, particularly at that time. I doesn't mean that we didn't have any other singers but she was really exceptional. Most of these women singers were almost hidden, but she was the one who sang in public, also her voice was particularly good.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Are women noted for singing ?

EL'GHEITHY

Yes, well a notable feature about women singing in Zanzibar is what we call in English ululation. You see, this is craftily done by rolling their tongues and screaming from the throat, and Sitti also possessed this remarkable feature.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of songs did she sing ?

EL'GHEITHY

Well they varied. She was in many ways a very traditional woman so she sang traditional songs, romantic songs, and she also followed the trends, the daily activities of society so her singing was quite varied.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Did she record her songs? In other words did she sing especially for recording companies or did she record in public?

EL'GHEITHY

Oh, she first started out singing in her own home, and then later she met people who had already found their singing group and she was almost like a star in that group. In many wedding ceremonies she was invited to take part and she was an indispensable entertainer at many of the sort of royal functions or important functions in Zanzibar. The Sultan had a special liking for her and at many of these royal conventions she was invited to sing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Did she perform only in Zanzibar or outside as well ?

EL'GHEITHY

Oh no, her voice took her to many different parts of the world, particularly Asia she once was in India;; to Cairo and also to other neighbouring African countries like Zaire and also to West Africa she went there once.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, you say she sang all sorts of songs, covering all sorts of activities, can you give us an example of one of these activities ?

EL'GHEITHY

Yes, let's start with the tradition, this is a song called "Tatrene Waganga" which is mainly sung during the visit to Mzimu, and Mzimu is usually a cave or a tree which is inhabited by the spirits. For example, in the New Year's celebration people go there and offer gifts to these places and before they enter they have to call the spirit and Sitti one time sang this song also congratulating the spirit as well as calling it. It's like a tribute to the spirit, and it's also used in exorcism, for example. We have this believe of people possessed by spirits and this kind of song that Sitti sang is also sung on these occasions.

MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY

Saeed, during the playing of that song I saw you were really moved! Unfortunately I couldn't make anything of it - what moved you so much ?

EL'GHEITHY

Well, because it reminds me of that sort of - if I can call it, the melodious days of my upbringing in Zanzibar really, and this is very, very representative of our tradition.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What other songs does she sing - of what type ?

EL'GHEITHY

As I said she also sang romantic songs, but I think another important aspect also which really influenced her fame and popularity is her ability to sing in any language. For example you could read any song to Sitti in Arabic or presumably in Japanese or any other language and she would repeat it with a perfect intonation. Usually, as I said, they were very romantic but she would sing them precisely. After all, Sitti was illiterate, she had never been educated in a western sense, but she learnt through hearing and once she heard a song she practiced herself. She would repeat it several times and sing it very well.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Saeed El'Gheithy talking to me about Sitti Binti Saad. The song I'd like to end with is another of her Swahili songs. The title "Kweli Umeshughulika" means "Are you really busy?"

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye while I let Sitti have the last word as she wonders why her lover has stopped writing to her. Is there, she asks, a scarcity of writing paper or stationery in the shops?

MUSIC