

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 237

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey to 'Arts and Africa'. And we start off with a look at what can be a controversial subject - Africa's crafts. Weaving, carving, modelling, pottery making, are practised all over the continent and along with the dance are often thought of as one of Africa's major contributors to mankind's cultural heritage. Unfortunately, the craftwork that we most often see now-a-days is mass produced airport art made for tourists and bearing little resemblance to true village crafts. Recently a new store, FRIDA, opened in London. It has two large halls stacked with craftwork from all over the developing world. Hillary Pucksley is a buyer for the company and she often visits Africa. Now Hillary what is FRIDA.

HILLARY PUCKSLEY

FRIDA stands for The Fund for Research and Investment for the Development of Africa - that's a charitable organisation amongst whose aims is the marketing of work from small villages craft co-operatives and so on in Africa.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What parts of Africa have you been to so far to buy goods?

PUCKSLEY

I went on a trip in February and March of this year to Nigeria, the Ivory Coats, Mali and Senegal and hope to be going again later this year to different countries.

TETTEH-LARTEY

When you enter into a country and you're going to buy these things do you go to the capital cities, do you go to the villages, do you go to special shops or do you work on a governmental level?

PUCKSLEY

Well we order some things from England, here, and very often it is from Government marketing organisations, but when we set off on a trip to buy ourselves its just a question of arriving in the city and finding out where the best sources and the best crafts are. Very often that's a large city market or perhaps a Sunday market slightly outside in the country, very rarely do we buy from formally set-up organisations. In Kano we bought most of our things from the old city market - which is a very exotic place and we made one trip out to a Sunday market.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Upon hearing that, one naturally thinks, probably the sort of things you buy are the things meant for tourists which probably don't represent the true village craft.

PUCKSLEY

Yes, well its very difficult to draw the line between what is airport art and what is true craft that is still used in the country, its just a question of being able to judge what things are likely to have been made and decorated for the local people's enjoyment, and what things have been made for tourists. Undoubtably you will see in our shops some things that might be considered as airport, but I hope that a lot of them are, weaving and pottery and carved calabashes and so on that are still used by people at village level.

TETTEH-LARTEY

When you go to buy these things do you go alone or do you have somebody to help you make a judgement ?

PUCKSLEY

Well, the first trip I went on I went with a colleague from work, another young lady who used to work for Botswana Craft, the government marketing organisation in Botswana. She was very used to going off into the Kalahari buying baskets and bushmen's spears and goodness knows what there, and so she could help me with dealing with the traders themselves and knowing how to bargain and so on. I'm very fond of crafts myself and I think if you visited my home you'd see that it was almost a replica of the shop with one of every nice item there.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you go for modern things - things only newly made, and if you go to the markets to buy these its obviously, they can't be probably of long standing - if you see what I mean!

PUCKSLEY

Yes, I see exactly what you mean, its a very good point. No, we like everything we buy to be newly made so that we are in fact encouraging crafts that are still being produced. We would indeed run into problems if we were trying to export antiquities. Some countries have very strict regulations, quite rightly, about the export of antiquities. Nigeria, in particular, Mali also that we visited. So we hope that we're sort of encouraging the continuation of living crafts. A lot of the things we've bought we actually saw

being made. We saw calabashes being carved in Nigeria and in Mali where the country's very remote and there are large import taxes. Things like hand-weaving go on on a large scale now in Benaco we saw lots and lots of weavers operating double-head looms on the sides of the streets there, so we were buying things being made here and now as was our intention.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Don't you think there's a danger that when things are produced on a mass scale - I mean the government gets to know that you are interested in that kind of craft they are likely to establish something specifically to cater for your demands and therefore you're not likely to get things of quality - true quality.

PUCKSLEY

Again you've put your finger on another problem that we can come across quite a lot - in that case I think the buyers have a responsibility to make sure that they are choosing - that they know the crafts well and that they are choosing the best of them - I think Botswana craft that I mentioned before has succeeded quite well by introducing its baskets in particular to high quality outlets who won't accept anything other than the best quality, consequently the quality of all baskets made in Botswana is rising, a fact which is a very nice state of affairs though its not the case in every country.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now with the demand for craft from Africa these days many African countries and governments have become very suspicious of Europeans coming there and buying things and taking things out of the country - have you found any difficulties in your way trying to buy these things in Africa ?

PUCKSLEY

Yes, indeed. I've found several difficulties. In Nigeria we packed up our goods and left them with a freight Agent to be despatched off to England, we checked beforehand we didn't need an Antiquities Certificate because as I said all the crafts were newly made, but we learnt when we got back that things had to be carried all the way from Kano to Sokoto to be inspected by a museum there and then sent back to Kano, and then despatched to England, so they had a very long and arduous journey out of Nigeria - I think that was the only major difficulty we met, I think its a pity because as I say these crafts are being sold at a shop whose profits will ultimately be convenanted back to a charity and the money will go back into projects in Africa so we have fairly altruistic aims and it would be nice to meet a little co-operation along the way.

TETTEH-LARTEY

The things you sell in your shop are certainly very, very beautifully made, now what sort of people come to buy them ?

PUCKSLEY

Oh, a very wide cross section of people, we hope to sell crafts that everybody can afford, we sell bead necklaces for well under £1 and bracelets and things like that which people come in their lunch hour and might pick-up, and students. And we also sell very highly expensive, very beautiful tapestries tie-dye work, bronze castings and so on which would be bought obviously by more wealthy people. Tourist very often buy them. And another large section of people we have visiting our shop are Africans in London who come in and exclaim - they're really surprised to see such things in a shop. We've found in our travels in fact that a lot of the things that we wanted to buy were not recognised as being of any worth by a lot of the people we came across.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Hillary you say the profits made from the sale of these goods go back to help develop Africa. What exactly is the money used for ?

PUCKSLEY

The money is used in the project work of the Charity which is concerned with labour intensive industry, very often based on crafts in several of the poorest of African countries. We're at present involved in setting-up a marketing organisation for crafts in Lesotho and we have some other work going on to do with leather in Upper Volta, so its a diversity of Africa's poorest countries.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Hillary, thank you very much indeed. I'm sure that when people have heard about what you are actually doing they will be more willing to help you when you go back to Africa next time.

PUCKSLEY

That will be very nice.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you Hillary,

And from traditional crafts to a modern one - the craft of film maker. You may remember that earlier this year I talked to Eddie Ugbomah the Nigerian film director about his film "The Rise And Fall Of Doctor Oyenusi". Now Eddie's in London again to put the finishing touches to his second film "The Boy Is Good". He's here with me today. Eddie what sort of reception did your first film "Dr. Oyenusi" get?

EDDIE UGBOMAH

The reception was fantastic.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I suppose as a result of that you've been encouraged to make this one?

UGBOMAH

Exactly. Well I think I'm the first person ever to have made two films in a year in Africa. Feature films. When I'm determined to do something I just go ahead and do it. I've made up my mind to set-up a film industry in Nigeria because its been over 11 - 8 years, the Government's been rumouring we're going to have a film industry - we're going to have a film industry, but I think, if I could start a film industry - because I'm determined to go ahead and make films.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What is the theme of this film ?

UGBOMAH

Well its simple. I'll give you a little story about it. It's just based on the life of Africans that have stayed too long in Europe. They find themselves strange in their own country its very frustrating for you to have spent about 10 or 12, 16 years in Europe or in the States and get back to your own country and you are a total stranger after bragging to your friends I'm going back home, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that, and when you get home find you're a total stranger, and also you haven't got a Godfather in the whole world you feel strange in your country as if it were a result of something bad. It's just a message and a warning to our country, to our leaders today and the future leaders that we've got to look around and "pay attention" to our voice so that they can come home and settle peacefully.

TETTEH-LARTEY

In your film "The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi", you found great difficulty in getting experienced actors so you had to go to amateurs and college students. Did you use the same cast this time?

UGBOMAH

Well this time it will be far better because I used an experienced Director who wrote "Black Joy", and worked with "Black Joy". I got him from here. But unfortunately due to so called "red tapes" and "protocols" here in the Embassy I couldn't get all the artists I wanted from here to go to Nigeria to do the film, so I had to rely again on our semi-pros in Nigeria to do the film. But it is far better camera work and far better acting.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you take part in it yourself again ?

UGBOMAH

I'm the star!

TETTEH-LARTEY

Eddie it is well-known in French speaking African films are very, very popular, and yet in English speaking Africa we don't find

film-makers making use of this great opportunity why do you think this is so?

UGBOMAH

Well there are so many complications involved, and so many stumbling blocks. For a start in the whole of Nigeria there are no filming equipments, to make a film in Nigeria equipments alone would cost 90,000 Naira, then to get artists it would cost about 100,000 Naira and you have to bring it to Europe to process, dub and do everything so there's a lot of headache. People don't have the guts to invest one Naira today and get two Naira tomorrow, so there's a big market. Take for instance, Nigeria, they've got over 80 million people and all I need is 1 million Naira to see my film at one Naira each so everything will gross a million. But then the Government who won't finance me who won't give me any encouragement takes 60% of my money, so if you look at this you don't want to make films the whole markets saturated with Indian and Chinese films, these are the markets which I'm trying to cut out - but then when you want to cut it out you're out on your neck so you don't want to continue unless you are determined to go forward, so you go ahead!

TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you Eddie, and good luck to your new film. Well that's it from 'Arts and Africa' for today. I'll be back next week, so from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.