

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

ALEX:

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with another edition of 'Arts and Africa', our regular look at the cultural life of the continent. Now we are all familiar with Makonde sculptors on Benin bronzes. In fact we can probably associate most parts of Africa with a particular art-form. But I for one found it difficult to connect anything with the Cameroons. I now know why. It seems that the majority of art works from the Cameroon Grass-lands are to be found in Germany which was, of course, the colonial power in that part of the world up to the First World War. Since the end of the Second World War the West German Government has spent a great deal of money re-housing its major art collections and the Cameroon Grass-lands collection is now magnificently displayed at the Dahlem Museum in West Berlin. This, of course, means that very few people and certainly very few people from Africa can get to see it. Considering the importance of the collection I find it regrettable, but in order to give you a taste of the splendour of Cameroon's past we asked writer Patti Baker to talk to the Curator of the collection Dr. Angelika Rumpf. Patti began by asking Dr. Rumpf when the collection was formed.

DR. ANGELIKA RUMPF

The largest number were collected between 1889 until 1914. The sculptures represented in this exhibition depict the relationship between art and leadership: the over-riding consideration is the conferring of the prestige on the owner. This throne was presented to Kaiser Wilhelm the 2nd. Behind the actual seat there are two figures who are highly ranked persons holding a circular drinking horn in his right hand, the other holding in both hands, a bowl. On the bench itself one sees a whole line of crowded figures most probably depicting the people and on the side there are the well known spider motifs, the spider being also a royal animal, and on the throne you recognise many snakes.

PATTI BAKER

Where did the material for the throne come from ?

RUMPF

The Grassland area was trading with the north, most probably with Hausa and Fulba.

BAKER

Next to the throne there are some very tall pipes. What are they made of and what were they used for?

RUMPF

This particular pipe with fully-shaped figures along the stand, is attributed to a king - as he was only allowed such decorations.

BAKER

And this was a pipe used for smoking tobacco.

RUMPF

Considering the size of it it is only a royal implement, one of the possessions of royalty in the palace and given as an order for a highly ranking person, or in this case to a representative of the colonial power.

BAKER

On the wall in this collection is a depiction of the alphabet made up by King N'Joya. Can you tell us something about that?

RUMPF

Sultan N'Joya, living from 1876 to 1933, realised that in order to preserve some of the heritage of the Bamo people, despite the heavy inroads of both European and Islamic culture, an alphabet was necessary. His initial attempts in glyph pictorial form. This was finalised in 1916. The final linguist approach was the same as the Phoenicians, who invented the modern alphabet; the use of sound instead of a pictorial representation to convey an idea. Schools were started and at one time there were over 600 individuals trained in the teaching of this script.

BAKER

Are there any other major collections of Cameroonian art in Germany?

RUMPF

There are many collections of Cameroon Grassland work in Germany. There is a large and well-known collection in the Linden Museum at Stuttgart and another in Frankfurt am Main. The Frankfurt collection contains the royal stool of the Fon with a standing male figure, originating possibly from 1830. Many of the kings and chiefs in the Grassland have personal collections which are part of their palaces. These could be really termed as museums.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Patti Baker talking to Dr. Angelika Rumpf at the Dahlem Museum about their collection of Cameroonian art. And so to a friend of 'Arts and Africa', Ghanaian poetess Adzo Thomas. You may remember that Adzo

was interviewed on 'Arts and Africa' last year. She teaches drama to children in Accra, and in between that and her married life spends as much of her time as possible writing the lively, free-wheeling poems that we heard when we first met her. When she came in I asked her what she had been doing since we last met.

ADZO THOMAS

When I got back home I continued with my job teaching drama, but I've also been writing a few poems and one short play for the children to perform.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Would you like to read us some of the poems you've written?

THOMAS

Yes, I've got some here. The first one goes with a song.

POEM

TETTEH-LARTEY

Does the singing give you the inspiration?

THOMAS

I'm very sensitive and all I have to do is sing and sing.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Also you sing the songs in Ewe.

THOMAS

Yes, they are all in Ewe.

TETTEH-LARTEY

But yet you write in English. Do you find that you can't quite adjust to the way you feel in Ewe - that is in the songs -- to the way you write poetry in English, or doesn't it matter to you at all.

THOMAS

It doesn't matter much - I write more in English because you get a lot of people listening to you when you write in English than if you write in Ewe - anyway I wish I could write in Ewe. When I'm writing I don't think about Ewe and English. I just go on and write, but what I've found out is that I write in English because there are many more people to read your poems.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what poem have you got there for us?

THOMAS

This is about men, especially about Ghanaian men - I think they feel that they can just go and take a woman and do anything with her, and when it's over that's the end. 'Don't Play Those Songs For Me.'

POEM

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well it looks to me as if this maiden has been jilted from what you've just read - she's feeling very sad - rejecting the happy music played by the record player. So she's fallen into the trap after all. I'm not so sure it only applies to Ghanaian: it seems to be true of men in general. (laughter) You've got another poem here I can see.

THOMAS

This one is about Ghana. It's called 'Duel of Eating'. In fact before you eat properly in Ghana you've got to fight for it. So I went to the market and bought a packet of Omo for one cedi and then I came home and I was complaining bitterly - I was very angry. Then suddenly I was just smiling because I thought of other people with their problems; and then from there I started writing and produced this one.

POEM

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Adzo, thank you very much indeed. Let's hope you produce more poetry of this type.

THOMAS

Thank you so much for inviting me.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Adzo Thomas the Ghanaian poet, and that's all from 'Arts and Africa', and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.