

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

## ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 253P

### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of 'Arts and Africa'. This week we are not looking at any particular art form. Instead we are going to keep you up-to-date with two major events. Firstly, the Arts Council of Great Britain is preparing a major exhibition of contemporary African arts to be held in London in 1982.

The organisers of this event are John Mapondera, Executive Director of Drum Art Centre in London and Guy Brett former art critic of The Times newspaper. The two of them are with me in the studio. I would like to ask you first, John, why you have decided to open this exhibition ?

### JOHN MAPONDERA

The idea of the exhibition emerged at the same time as we were talking about the Festival of World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture which took place in Lagos last year; but with all the changes which took place it wasn't possible to do it immediately after the Festival but the idea however is to show something of the essence of African contemporary expression through the arts - and you notice I use the word the arts rather than through arts.

### TETTEH-LARTEY

Guy I think at this point I'll come over to you. How did you become interested in this exhibition?

### GUY BRETT

Well I think the point of this exhibition and why it seems particularly interesting to make an exhibition of African art of this kind in London is to try to fulfil the function to show people in Britain and Europe the arts in Africa in such a way that the people can understand African expression not seen and interpreted through European eyes but as Africans themselves see it and as they feel about it and the value they give to it.

To do that we would use film sound tape, slides and also we hope to have live performances taking place as part of this exhibition.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Where do you expect to collect these art forms from - which part of Africa ?

GUY BRETT

This exhibition is not an exhibition limited to national countries or even to the continent of Africa, its an exhibition with certain themes and certain cultural theme which we think are very interesting themes and it's open to both artists inside and outside of Africa.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, John Maponders and Guy Brett thank you very much indeed, and I hope that any artists who are listening in will get in touch with you.

And now to the major event of the moment the 20th Assembly of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation which is meeting in Paris. This event has given commentators a chance to reflect on the past achievements and future activities of this major world body. Mr. Richard Hoggart has recently given up the post of Assistant Director General of UNESCO and has just published a book about his experiences "An Idea And It's Servants" which is published by Chatto and Windus".

David Sweetman asked Mr. Hoggart whether he had enjoyed his time as a major international civil servant?

RICHARD HOGGART

In a mixed sort of way. I did enjoy it enormously and, as I say in the book, I wouldn't have missed it for anything but I came away quite happily - I suppose I could have stayed, I didn't even enquire - I felt that five years and a bit was perfectly o.k.

DAVID SWEETMAN

The image that we have from outside of most of United Nations Organisations is that they are monster bureaucracies and very difficult to move on various things - would that be the correct impression for UNESCO ?

HOGGART

Its reasonable. All big bureaucracies especially where they are in areas where they are not strictly accessible, i.e. culture, arts, education, that type of thing are inherently self-validating, self-justifying and very much dedicated, unless they watch very carefully to their own continuance so that the work itself tended to take far too little of the time and there was far too much time being scrutinised and protecting yourself.

SWEETMAN

I think people in the West don't pay much attention to UNESCO. One often hears that people in the Third World are rather appreciative of it - some of the projects it does - particularly in Africa.

HOGGART

There are for example a range of Institutions of Higher Education in Africa which would never have existed without UNESCO. Its been a great support in helping to establish communication systems - some of its efforts particularly in radio for instance - because television is so expensive - those efforts are first rate. There was for example a scheme for a kind of communal radio in Senegal which still survives and has been a great success and has been a model. Much of its social science work in Africa has been very helpful for example, one of them that was getting underway when I arrived was a scheme to help women in Upper Volta in the smaller, remoter villages to break out of the enclosed lower form of life they had been given by giving them various kinds of training and experience so that they could feel that they had a skill of their own. I could go on. The major scheme which UNESCO has operated throughout the world, but particularly in Africa, and Asia, was the big literacy scheme. That ran into difficulties because they found that quite soon that if you make people literate but there is no substructure within the society for them to exercise their literacy such as that exists in daily newspapers they become illiterate within two years so then they invented a thing called Functional Literacy related to occupations which the people would have, such as literacy in relation to farming, agriculture, homekeeping and so on and so forth. Then there are the ones which particularly made me enthusiastic - that is to say, all the work they are doing to help African cultures survive. Because as you know, far better than I do, and I suppose most people listening to this programme know better than I do the cultures of Africa are often, though complex and rich and long standing, very often not written down. They are held in the heads of people, and so we were forever trying to help the new African states to capture, before it was too late, their own cultures helping them buy jeeps to get recording equipment to train people how to handle it, to set-up institutes for the capturing of the old traditions. Then we had a chain of things around the world, to do with the training of museum curators and keepers and we had one in Africa which concentrated on the problems of keep artefacts in hot and humid climates, in Jos in Nigeria. Then there are the ancient monuments in Africa. They can all go to UNESCO and ask for money. Science in Africa is being developed quite strongly by UNESCO. You might say why isn't it easier to do it bilaterally? Why should we bother with multi-national agencies. I think the developing nations, whilst they would be very glad and are glad to have bilateral aid financially I think they prefer UNESCO as an addition and even probably might be happier if they got more from UNESCO and less bilaterally. I think the reason for that is very simple. Bilateral aid tends to come with strings from the giving nation and international aid doesn't.

SWEETMAN

All the things you've mentioned in relation to Africa have been educational, scientific at that level or have been to do with the past.

Is UNESCO able to encourage the creative arts of a continent like Africa ?

HOGGART

Yes they do a great deal in what's called a wrap around phrase "cultural development" and that, in fact, is concerned with - focuses upon - and increased the appreciation of the arts and, in particular, the supporter artists and creative artists. That is being done in a typical way by UNESCO by them having, every 18 months or 2 years, a continental conference on the theme. And they had the one in Africa, I think, in Accra a couple of years ago, and the whole aim and purpose of that was to help to sketch for Africa, as a whole an agreed programme which would collect together all the African Ministers of Culture in the arts, an agreed programme for artistic development and for their proper support of the artists. So a good deal is being done with that.

SWEETMAN

What would you like to see UNESCO do if suddenly there you are - a magic wand - you had total control ?

HOGGART

I would like it to get back its moral courage in facing the deeply political issues which it increasingly has to face.

SWEETMAN

This is something you mention in your book. The political side of it may come as a shock to some people who think of education, science, culture, perhaps wrongly, as being somehow removed from the in-fighting of the United Nations proper, you obviously don't think that ?

HOGGART

No. You couldn't last long in UNESCO thinking that. The harsh reality of the day would tell you. It would be nice to think that the political side is handled at the UN in New York and that UNESCO being devoted to beauty and truth and the arts could keep out of it, but everything in the last resort is political. Within a week of my arrival I was visited by an Ambassador from a country - I better not name - who said that we had published a book of translations into English from his language of the works of a certain poet and that this was a political act and that he wanted the book withdrawn. And I discovered that the point was that the poet concerned had in fact collaborated during the war in some way and the Ambassador told me quite bluntly that he no longer exists - he's out of our encyclopaedias and therefore you cannot publish a book of him - I've foreshortened a longish interview - and I told him in the politiest way to "get stuffed" and he was extremely surprised and said I would go and see the Director General as though that would make me grovel - withdraw the book - so I said you can go and see (I was fresh from England) The Director General, Harold Wilson, Ted Heath and Jeremy Thorpe! And he looked at me with total astonishment because he couldn't understand an international civil servant could say that to an Ambassador. And then his face cracked and he laughed like mad "it is the British sense of humour", and from that moment

on we were all right but the book was not withdrawn.

SWEETMAN

You are very critical in this book of the then Director-General Rene Maheu, you use words like, favouritism, snobbery, was he really suitable to head such an organisation.

HOGGART

Well - As I say ricochet - he had some immense qualities, he had great intellectual force, he cared deeply what the Organisation was about, he knew how to pilot the most complicated ship through very stormy waters, in some way, but then he'd throw the whole thing away by one perverse wilful act. So depending on how I feel - if I think about some other people I saw, he shines as a man who had at least moral courage, and then I think about the things he did realise that he left an Organisation which was fearful underneath - he over centralises on his own personality.

SWEETMAN

We now have Senegalese Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow. You in fact resigned after M'Bow became Director-General.

HOGGART

Well it wasn't anything very grand - I was due out and M'Bow asked me to stay another six months because by then I was, I think, the most experienced of the Assistant Director-Generals, and I said I would stay another six months but it was just after that that the famous Israel-Arab Resolutions were passed which did a great deal of damage to the Organisation's intellectual credibility and it was my duty because two of the three resolutions were in the sphere of my competence, as they say. It was my duty to write a Memorandum to the Director-General about what followed and about what action we might do to recover the lost ground, and I did that and I had no response to it and I was given to understand again by gossip that he got the impression that I was acting on orders from the British Foreign Office and therefore anything I said was tainted. So after three months of that I sent him a very polite note - I deliberately played it very low key and said look I think it's better if I just go back to England - there's a job waiting for me - there wasn't a job, there was a Fellowship waiting for me - and we parted - he wrote me a courteous note back, but yes, I went three months early.

SWEETMAN

Summing up, if one can sum-up such an experience - what you're really saying is UNESCO is "flawed but nevertheless worthwhile".

HOGGART

Yes, if I had to qualify it "very flawed but nevertheless just worthwhile"!

SWEETMAN

Richard Hoggart, thank you very much indeed.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was David Sweetman talking to Richard Hoggart about the work of UNESCO and that's it from 'Arts and Africa' and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

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