

# Arts and Africa

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## ARTS AND AFRICA

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### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of 'Arts and Africa'. The recent Commonwealth Symposium in Edmonton, Canada produced one remarkable reaction. The sculpture of two figures by Zambian: Berlings Lengani Kaunda provoked angry press reaction when it was described as controversial and offensive. The sculptured group seemed to consist of a man seated on the head of a woman. The piece, three metres high, along with the other international entries, was in Canada became part of a travelling exhibition, but the controversy followed Berlings Kaunda back to Zambia and in Lusaka our Correspondent Ceciwa Khonje spoke to him and asked him if it was true that the group represented a man seated on the head of a woman.

### BERLINGS LENGANI KAUNDA

I don't know really. Maybe an experience which I had while working on the sculptures could explain this. One day I was busy chipping on this piece of wood and as it was taking shape some lady came to me, and said "Ah - here is another male chauvinist". So I said "Why did you say that?" and she said "Why is the man sitting on her", I said "Who told you the man is sitting on her", and she said "There he is sitting on her you're just one of those male chauvinists". I said to her, "Would you say the same thing when you look at the building, at a house, in relationship to the four walls and the roof that the four walls are supporting". I started chipping away and then she left. After some days she showed up again and said, "I think I agree with you today I look at it differently I think the man is not sitting on her but rather the woman is supporting the man - and without woman the man would fall". Then she gave me a beautiful lecture on how she really saw this sculpture, actually the other day she was just down hearted and then she saw something else and this is the whole thing about sculpture - each day depending upon your mood or temperament - you can have a certain perception, there's just not one interpretation you can see different things from the same art object.

KHONJE

But I understand that the Chairman of this Sculpture Symposium Mr. Bill McMullen had been reported as finding it difficult to find a permanent home for this piece of art - why is that so ?

KAUNDA

This has something to do with the way I presented the whole thing. Like here you have two figures - the female figure in a kneeling position and the male figure meant as if he's emerging from the female figure and I think some people may find my work erotic, and it's that that really has made a few people in Edmonton society re-act against it as being offensive.

KHONJE

How do you feel about the public reaction to your work. Do you still feel it's subject to interpretation?

KAUNDA

Yes. Its another interpretation - to me I look at it as positive reaction because this is what art is all about, the artist enjoys the freedom of expression, art without freedom of expression becomes meaningless as creative activity and I would hate to function as an artist within certain paradimes which most certain societies tend to establish - I had the same sort of reaction even in my own African environment where people would feel uncomfortable with truth - this is what is happening today, people find themselves uncomfortable about truth, about love, and beauty, and yet there's so much talk about violence, war and all that in all the media, even private talk, people spend a lot of time talking about violence, war, crime, but about beautiful things love, beauty, and what have you, they feel uncomfortable about truth about themselves, humanity. Many people tend to look at one side of life the horrific and the ugly side of it and I find it rather unfortunate - I think we should look at both sides of life.

KHONJE

I remember, before you left for Canada you were very enthusiastic about portraying the correct image of an African artist - the clothes you would wear there while working, the traditional tools you would use and the general surroundings of your working area to resemble as much as possible a typical village scene. How did that side of things go?

KAUNDA

Afterwards I thought maybe I shouldn't try and build a cocoon around me, barricade myself from a natural Edmonton environment.

KHONJE

How would you describe your overall experience in the Symposium in Canada?

KAUNDA

I think it was very successful to begin with, the idea was a brilliant one, and it was very successful in that the learning situation that the Symposium provided for the participants, to see people from different cultures work together and to see their different approaches to different media, and even be exposed to an international public it was a moment when you had people from all parts of the world looking at artists at work and getting their comments, it was really a tremendous learning opportunity.

KHONJE

How do you feel about leaving your three metres statue in Edmonton? When you have to part with something you've created obviously you love this when it emerges out of the wood which started off as just a plain plank of wood and then you create this beautiful finished statue and then you have to leave it ?

KAUNDA

You do feel a great attachment, I felt like leaving some part of me behind and I feel the urge to visit Edmonton again just to look at it again. It just boils down to saying once the art object is finished it no longer remains the artist's property. The artist actually works for the people, and that sooner or later for some reason or other the work has to go to the public - you don't create and hide your works away from the public, and I'm so happy to hear that this piece in Edmonton will be a travelling exhibit every six months, and be exposed to the public and to anyone visiting Edmonton.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Ceciwa Khonje talking to Zambian sculptor Berlings Kaunda and still with art we go to West Africa, and to a film made by David Heathcote who has been reading in art history for the last eleven years at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. David Heathcote's film is entitled "Hausa Art In Northern Nigeria", and Amobi Modu asked him why he had decided to make it.

DAVID HEATHCOTE

Well I made the film at the time when I was planning an exhibition in London of Hausa art that was going to be held at the Commonwealth Institute in 1976, and I decided that a film would be a good thing to go along with this. Partly because the art of the Hausa is not particularly well known and any kind of visual background would be useful and I wanted to cover something of the same ground as the

exhibition covered. That is to say there were several sections: leather work; basketry; pottery; embroidery and so on, and I was very keen to record a moving record of these things to show how they were made. One can show slides, one can take still photographs but of course in a film you capture certain things which are not possible to capture in still photography.

AMOBI MODU

How did you determine what to film and what not to ?

HEATHCOTE

Well I made a list of the different things which I had actually collected for the exhibition and I went to see the craftsmen I knew in Northern Nigeria and took as much as I could of each of these sections and then I simply cut it down when all the film was developed - it just fell into place. I won't say naturally, it was hard work editing, but it more-or-less fell into place.

MODU

Could you describe the actual making of it, was it difficult ?

HEATHCOTE

It was difficult in some respects. Where one had a public audience - for instance in the dye-pits this is a public place and there are a lot of people, particularly children, going backwards and forwards through the dye working area, and it was very difficult to control the crowd. Where we could get away into a compound it was much easier and where possible I tried to persuade craftsmen to take me into the compound if they were working out of the compounds. In some cases this was a bit difficult because they were very shy of taking me into a private area, but once we could get away from the streets it was comparatively easy.

MODU

Who were the people who encouraged artists ?

HEATHCOTE

Everybody really, its been partly something which has been encouraged by money, wealthy traders, rulers, religious leaders and so on have bought embroidered clothing as a matter of course. Its not been something which has been so much a luxury and something to be preserved in museums and private houses as a thing of everyday life, and art is made and it's discarded and replaced, and I think this is one of the African elements about Hausa art, that it is not a thing which you preserve very carefully it is something that is continually changing.

MODU

Would you say then that Hausa art is something which is beginning to die out or rather is it evolving, is it developing, adopting new influences and changing ?

HEATHCOTE

Yes it is. For instance, the women have started embroidering pillowcases and bedcovers recently, and they've brought in the most extraordinary, delightful and very charming designs, things like birds and donkeys and crocodiles and so on, into their embroidery, which is something I still think will take a long time for the men to do. There certainly have been changes and more in some respects than others - the wall decorations, that's one area where there have been very rapid changes, for the moment it would appear that wall decoration is almost dying out - to something that has happened in the last few years. Some areas are very traditional others are less so.

MODU

Has the western influence been particularly strong in Hausaland, has it affected art a great deal ?

HEATHCOTE

Yes, western influence has affected Hausaland through, of course, technology so that things like enamel basins, metal ware in general, even leather work has been affected by import of material, factory produced cloth has almost completely replaced handwoven cloth. Whether in fact the change is going to be complete, whether the western influence is going to be overwhelming in any specific sphere I don't know it could well be, there's still a lot of pottery made, a fair amount of leather work but I mentioned weaving that's disappearing but there's still a great deal of embroidery and the Nigerians as a whole are very fond of their national dress and I think they are very unlikely to give up hand-embroidered caps or gowns.

MODU

This is your first film ?

HEATHCOTE

Yes, I made it purely as an amateur, I suppose I can consider I was very lucky that it was successful.

MODU

David, thank you very much.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Amobi Modu talking to David Heathcote art historian at the University of Zaria about his film on Hausa art and that's it from 'Arts and Africa' for this week and its me Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.