

# 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', and this week we look at a substance that seems to excite people everywhere - Gold - this precious metal has not merely been a stimulation to man's greed but also to some of his finer creative instincts.

Two exhibitions are currently running in London which feature gold - "The Gold of El Dorado" at The Royal Academy which shows a stupendous array of precious objects made by the Indians of Columbia in South America and "Ashanti Gold-Weights" at the Museum of Mankind.

Bernard Bumpus lived and worked in Ghana for 13 years six of them in Ashanti itself where his interest in the Gold Weights and the stories and proverbs that they represented was first established. We asked him to go to both exhibitions and to give us a personal view - Bernard Bumpus.

## BERNARD BUMPUS

There are many weights showing people, stylised certainly but created with a marvellous deftness and economy. There are chiefs with their regalia, Europeans, distinguished by their large projecting noses women about their domestic work and several representations of two proverbial old men Adu and Amoaka who met after not having seen each other for many years. They clearly had some amusing stories to tell and one weight depicts each bent backwards. In the other exhibition "The Gold of El Dorado" the main attraction is real gold, there are no less than 580 pieces, as well as ceramics and archaeological material. Gold was extensively mined in Columbia from 400 AD until the Spanish conquest. It was so common that in some places even the poorest people used gold plates and dishes. Part of the exhibition is devoted to Lake Guatavita, near Bogota, and its surroundings. It was from this lake that the legend of El Dorado, or the gilded man, originated. It seems that when a new ruler was appointed, he was taken on a raft to the centre of the lake. There he was stripped naked, plastered with a sticky earth and covered all over with gold dust. After this he made a large

offering of gold and emeralds to the lake god, as did his elders who were on the raft with him and the people who were watching the ceremony from the shore. All threw their gifts into the lake.

The gold objects in the exhibition include ornaments of many kinds - nose decorations, earrings, breastplates, finger rings, pendants.

Ashanti is situated in the forest belt of Ghana, the country that used to be known as the Gold Coast. For three hundred years gold was the standard currency in Ashanti, used for every day trading as well as for other purposes.

Gold dust was weighed out with simple scales held in the hand, the values of the currency being determined by weights of different sizes. Nearly every family had its own scales and weights. Some of these weights were geometric, circles, triangles, pyramids, and so on. But many more were made in the form of people, animals, fruits, birds, insects, fish and all manner of everyday objects. These were skillfully made in brass by professional metal workers using the lost wax method. They provided the craftsmen with endless opportunities to represent everyday scenes and objects. Several hundreds of these weights are on show in the exhibition together with storage boxes, scales and other equipment.

The Ashanti have always been famous for their proverbs so naturally many of the weights were designed to illustrate proverbs. One popular weight shows two crocodiles, with heads and tails at right angles to each other but with only one stomach. The proverb gently takes to task those families in which the members fight with each other - to no good purpose. Two mouths but only one belly - the family. There are also numbers of small figures of men and women and, of course, gods, many of outstanding quality. These articles were either made by beating the gold into thin sheets or by using the lost wax method as did the Ashanti with their gold weights. There are other points of resemblance too. Some of the Colombian decoration is strikingly similar to that from Ashanti. The Toucan bird which appears so often on the proverb weights was used in Columbia for pendants, or on ceremonial staffs. There are leopards, too, with a clear resemblance to those from Ashanti. Even some human faces, stylised and mask like, might have been made on either side of the Atlantic. It is a pity that there are no records of any Colombian Indian proverbs. If there had been comparisons would be very interesting. But, as the Ashantis say regret are vain.

#### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Bernard Bumpus talking about two exhibitions, "The Gold of El Dorado" and "Ashanti Gold-Weights". And now to drama. Every year the BBC African Service has a season of plays entitled African Theatre, and this year two of the authors are Hassan Jomo with his play "Down At Harar", and Alem Mezgebe with "The Hyena Of Gedem Sefer" - they are here with me today.

#### ALEM MEZGEBE

This is my first radio play in Britain. I had one which was broadcast by a German radio station in 1969 and it was called "The Heart Of The Maiden". It is about the innocence of love in a young girl.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Most of the time you treat your themes in a humorous satirical manner - do you find it is the easiest medium for you the happiest?

MEZGEBE

Well I think you have to make people laugh when you want to educate them because if you write something very serious you strengthen all kinds of funny ideas people have about their lives, about the life of the community, about society. The problem in Africa is we don't laugh at ourselves and I think its high time now to laugh at ourselves to look at what we are doing. And there are many things that are wrong in Africa at this present time, if we take, as I said earlier, things seriously. Then we know what is happening in Uganda and in Ethiopia and other places.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Your themes are preoccupied mainly with dictators and tyranny in general and you set your scene in Ethiopia in this play we are going to talk about I find it difficult not to draw parallels between them and the real people in that part of the world or indeed in any part of Africa.

MEZGEBE

Well you see the problem there is that when individuals detach themselves from a society and become special human beings thats a very big problem so its up to the writer to depict what kind of image they have when people look at them - that's my mission as a writer.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Let's listen to this extract from your play.

EXTRACT FROM AFRICAN THEATRE PRODUCTION OF "THE HYENA OF GEDAM SEFER".

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I can't help laughing Alem - what are you trying to depict them?

MEZGEBE

Well this is a very interesting part you chose Alex because it is between two meetings, one is a ritual, more or less because its a public meeting, and then there is an appointment for another meeting at nine-o'clock the next morning which is going to be private and then they will decide on the fate and life of other people. Its a transition between two evils, one is in public the other is corruption of the ideas which they preach in public, so it comes between the two, as you have heard they see slogans, but the slogans were there before, it means that they never notice the problems of the people who they are supposed to lead. And then "The Hyena of Gedam Sefer", the Chairman of the Urban Dwellers Association, is embarrassed so he has to find a

way of capitalising on that situation to make himself more and more brutal because he feels he was humiliated and then other people have to pay for that humiliation.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Hassan, over to you now, is this your first play for radio?

HASSAN JAMA

Yes it is my first play of any kind actually. I was busy writing other things like novels that nobody wanted and film scripts that nobody wanted either.

LAUGHTER.

TETTEH-LARTEY

You weren't quite sure whether or not anybody would want this particular play of yours?

JAMA

Well somebody has taken it - its going out on the BC.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, unlike Alem, you take a more serious view of your subject which is politics - between East and West, I think, as applies in Africa, am I correct?

JAMA

Yes. I see the relationship between the Super Powers and Third World countries as a very interesting one and I see that relationship as perhaps the most important and unresolved problem in the world today.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you treating it as a theme in itself or by itself or are you in this play of yours thinking of the actual situation as it exists in Somalia?

JAMA

Well I try to do both and I don't know whether I've succeeded but I've tried to do both in this play. In this play I'm dealing with the Russian experience in Somalia and the Ethiopian expectations of the Russian at that point in time. You see we had a coup d'etat in Somalia in 1969 and they called it revolution. They invited in the Russians as their socialist comrades and we found that revolution and the Russian dimension in that revolution a very frustrating experience as comes out in the play. Here we have in 1976/77 the Russians kicked out of Somalia and the Ethiopians inviting the Russians with open hands as we did in 1969. Its in many ways a repetition of history.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I think at this point we will listen to an extract of the play.

EXTRACT FROM AFRICAN THEATRE PRODUCTION OF "DAWN AT HARAR".

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Hassan there's a lot of satire there. Well its nice to see the two of you from contending countries getting on so well together. Thank you very much Alem Mezgebe and Hassan Jama. And that's it from 'Arts and Africa' for this week and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey its goodbye.