

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts And Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Chewa music and drama both ancient and modern.

The Chewa people aren't confined by a national boundary. Many of them live in Malawi but there's a sizeable group in northern Mozambique and quite a number in eastern Zambia. And with a common language goes a common traditional culture.

MUSIC

Mapopa Mtonga is Chewa and he's been telling Steve Wadhams about the Chewa and especially about the Chewa secret society, the Nyau.

Women can become members of the Nyau and they provide the chorus for the dancing, but the masked solo singers and dancers are men.

MUSIC

The Nyau has it's own secret language and its ritual, masked figures that appear in human or animal form.

MUSIC

Mapopa Mtonga's a member and drummer of the Nyau society so in one sense he's a traditionalist. But when Steve met him at the University of Zambia in Lusaka (Mapopa is a Zambian Chewa) he was studying modern theatre techniques and had an up-to-date view of recent developments... How for instance, the Nyau has been transplanted from the old rural setting to an urban one.

MAPOPA MTONGA

People who have flocked from the rural areas to the towns, many of them have brought with them their traditions and during weekends for example you find these people in the various compounds. They perform freely some of their traditions from home and here we find that Nyau is one of

MAPOPA MTONGA

them. And then also because of the modern economic pressures Nyau has also been commercialised to some extent. A person who is a Nyau dancer might have his drummers, drum orchestra and the women to provide the music and people hire him with the drums and he can perform Sunday afternoon or Saturday afternoon and people will come to drink beer as well as to come and watch the Nyau. So thereby sales are being promoted for this by owners at the same time the man who is a Nyau dancer will have an extra source of income which he has gained from dancing and these performances.

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And it isn't only the setting that's up-to-date. New characters have been making their appearance inside the traditional framework, characters who've become part of the experience of city dwellers, especially people who've gone off to work in the cities and mines of South Africa and Rhodesia.

MAPOPA MTONGA

We have a character in the Nyau who is known as Serjenni. Now this Serjenni we would translate it to mean Sergeant, the Sergeant is one who has reached a certain rank either within the police forces or the army, but in this particular case the Sergeant, the Serjenni is a policeman, a white policeman who is in control of a group of black workers in one of these areas mostly in Harare, in Salisbury, Harare is a township in Salisbury. And this particular Nyau character who has to dress in a coat, he's quite tall, and he carries his whip in his hand and he imitates in mime or pantomime whipping the spectators on the stage and he also even beats the drum. So these people try to run around, they scatter and they mock him: "Yes there goes Serjenni, Sergeant from Harare, there goes the Sergeant, the Sergeant who is from Harare." So between the blacks and the whites and how they were either chased somewhere or they could be bullied by this police Sergeant who is caricatured through the Nyau.

STEVE WADHAMS

And he's not liked in the Nyau tradition, I suppose ?

MAPOPA MTONGA

Well, of course, he's not liked. Immediately the Sergeant comes on the scene you find even women, widening circle, widening the stage. They stand on the periphery because they already know that he's a fierce character, he's going to whip them. But they have made him in such a way that he's quite a tall figure because, in my mind that is an impression that compared to us most of the police have some kind of tendency to chose people who are tall who are tough who are muscular, so this particular Sergeant who is tall and tough to make his height seem

MAPOPA MTONGA

quite unnatural you know, he's above life itself, he cannot be compared to anybody living. They will make somebody quite tall by adding some kind of mask, a framework of sticks with some kind of head and hands which they dress in a coat and the man goes inside holding this framework of sticks and he is carrying a whip in one hand which is called a jambok he will go around and try to whip them, but because he's so tall he cannot even bend and beat somebody who is sitting down and they make scorn of him and they ridicule him through that way. So its a way Nyau was able to adapt the European experience or this kind of area of relationship between the European and African.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I mentioned earlier that Mapopa is a Nyau drummer. Well he learnt the music of the Nyau society in the most familar way.

MAPOPA MTONGA

I learnt drumming as some kind of spontaneous activity which most Chewa boys do learn as they grow up. My Father is a man who makes drums and from time to time, even if I was not going to the Nyau secret society myself, I used to be taken on my Mother's back to attend the dances within the village square and the drumming itself got into me. And when I went back during the period when Nyau was not practised I tried to play on the drums and eventually got caught-up with the drumming so that when I joined the Nyau secret society there wasn't so much new that I could learn in as far as drumming was concerned.

MUSIC

MAPOPA MTONGA

We have basically four drums. First we have the Master drum which is known as the Mbalule and then we have three other accompanying drums the first accompanying drum is called Mbichembiche or Mbitimbite the second accompanying drum is called Khonda and then the third is Kelemu or Sampingo.

STEVE WADHAMS

The Master drum is the one that dictates the rhythm, is it?

MAPOPA MTONGA

Yes, the Master drum is the one which dictates the rhythm and also it's the drum which controls the dance and it's the drum which provides a communication-link between the Master dancer, the musicians and the drummer himself.

STEVE WADHAMS

So that's the important position ?

MAPOPA MTONGA

Yes.

STEVE WADHAMS

Is there a particular rhythm that you could demonstrate that would give us an idea of the Mbalule.

MAPOPA MTONGA

One of the Mbalule drums goes like this.

DEMONSTRATES.

STEVE WADHAMS

What does that mean to you ?

MAPOPA MTONGA

Well, this in actual fact doesn't mean anything in the sense that I cannot describe it except in my mind I have some kind of visual image of a particular dance and I've just played this drum to suit this particular dance. In fact, it coincides with the steps if it's shuffling steps, if it leaps, if it's gyrations or if it's spinning around, if it's tumbling and falling. All that kind of thing. The drum I have just demonstrated does that but it's just an aspect of one of the many types of dance styles within the Nyau.

STEVE WADHAMS

Perhaps you could tell me more about those dance styles. What sort of styles are they? What sort of rituals are involved ?

MAPOPA MTONGA

Well, the Nyau has human characters, and it also has animal characters. Human characters are ones that we can distinguish only by the mask. Only their face and the head is covered in a mask, but the body form is still that of a human being, even if they wear some other kind of costume. But in the animal characters the outside appearance is a representation of some animal; it could be the elephant, tortoise, a giraffe, a horse. Now these large, or life-size quadrupeds are dance by the head of a man entering one of them, and then he has either to dance by imitating the way that animal runs, the way that animal stalks game, the way that animal who enters somebody's field eats crops and all that sort of thing. The dance style itself would depend upon what kind of character has been featured.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

These days we're all battered by the impact of other people's cultures and even people intent on preserving a pure, traditional form often find that they're losing the struggle. Mapopa believes that the Nyau society is resilient enough to out these outside influences to good use.

MAPOPA MTONGA

The Nyau have survived modernisation, organisation or more or less to say, colonialism which was one of the early influences on the Nyau. From the early periods we will find out from the oral records and the historical facts that people have written, there is mention of the struggle between the Nyau secret societies and the colonial authorities and also the missionaries like the Roman Catholic Church, The Universities Mission to Central Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church and many others. So that you find amongst the Nyau characters now somebody who is called Maria, and the Yoseph and these two characters are featured side by side in most of the performances, and the woman Maria can be seen sometimes with a baby doll who represent Jesus.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Survival by adaptation! But does Mapopa mean the Nyau is losing its power amongst Chewa people in the towns and cities ?

MAPOPA MTONGA

The Nyau has power amongst members who live in towns, in the sense that though people still guard the same secrets I think what they are trying to expose is only the dance aspect of the Nyau. And somebody who wears a mask and who performs, who dances in public, all that they see is the outward forms and thereafter he is able to take off the mask as you do in a village. Still more we could say that because Nyau is being used outside the original "ritual" context though it's just being used for entertainment we could say well may it has lost to that extent but some of the secrets are still kept, still gathered.

STEVE WADHAMS

So as far as you are concerned the Nyauis still pretty powerful then ?

MAPOPA MTONGA

Yes, the Nyau is still very powerful. In fact one of the things that we modern African theatre artists are thinking is to try and improve our modern theatre experience by taking it as much away as possible from the European point of view to the real African point of view and bring in this idiom of traditional African

MAPOPA MTONGA

theatre and marry to two and see that we could create a powerful indigenous theatre for our country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In today's programme Mapopa Mtonga has been talking about the Nyau secret society of the Chewa people, so here's more of their music to end with. The Chewa women from Malawi singing the Sanje. But for now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.