

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

NO: 285

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we hear about Acholi music in the Southern Sudan.

MUSIC - HUNTING SONG

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Chris Terrill is a young British Anthropologist and Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society who recently spent a year in a remote part of the Southern Sudan collecting the music of the Acholi people. Chris Terrill is writing up his material and editing his music tapes for a Doctoral Thesis for the University of Durham. But he took some time off this week to come to the 'Arts and Africa' studio to talk about some of his experiences in Southern Sudan.

MUSIC -- HUNTING SONG

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

No Chris, that sounds to me like a funeral song, a funeral dance in Ghana, or a kind of ceremonial, what was happening there?

CHRIS TERRILL

No, it was not a funeral song, this was drumming to call hunters to a hunt for elephants.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Where did you record it? In a village, in the town?

CHRIS TERRILL

No, all the time I was in the Sudan I was staying with the Acholi tribe in South East Equatoria and most of the time I stayed in a village called Farajok and there I learnt the language and lived with them, cultivated with the people and tried to live the life as much as I could. The music, we just heard, the drumming music, was, as I say, calling people to a hunt on which I went. And this was a particularly interesting hunt because not only did we manage to catch an elephant, which isn't always the case, but I found something else. After about two days trekking through the bush we came across an old hut, sort of European design. I went in and inside were hundreds of files. I looked through these and these were dated from the beginning of the century. These were old colonial files, some marked "Top Secret" and this was a real find for me because I desperately needed to know how the Acholi lived, what their life was like, and this provided me with all the information that I required. I suppose they had been put there during the Civil War when the hostilities got so great that the people moved out and they were hidden, perhaps to be regained after the war was over.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What was the reaction of the people around you when you were collecting these. Did they oppose you?

CHRIS TERRILL

They didn't oppose me. They thought I was rather mad to be interested in these strange objects, especially when I got the women to carry them back to the village! They were used to carrying water and the capture of the hunt, but coming back with files upon files on top of their heads, they weren't quite sure why they were doing it! But, I must say during my whole time in the Sudan, as happy as it was, they always regarded me as a bit of a joke. I couldn't hunt, I couldn't track animals, I couldn't dig very well. The first time I tried to use a hoe I nearly chopped my foot off! So much so, this is why they didn't make me a warrior, I was old enough to be a warrior, but they rather thought I should be a child. They made me an honorary child. At mealtimes I had to sit with the children, and at dances I had to be with the children, and it wasn't until after I left - this was after some 12 months - that they decided that they would make me a warrior, not because I had learnt to hunt, but mainly because I think they felt sorry for me.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, you must obviously have found them a very friendly people and you brought back these songs - how did you get to record particular songs? Did you request them?

CHRIS TERRILL

No. I took my recorder out with me, merely because I was interested in tribal music, but the music I recorded has become much more important to me and my work than I thought, because these people, they don't write their feelings, they don't write their histories, but they sing them. Every night around the camp fire they will sit down and observing the same rhythms and tunes every night, they'll sing different lyrics according to the feelings of whatever happened during the day. Once I learnt to manage the language, to learn the language, I was able to translate these songs and see in them a vast wealth of information comparable to my files that provided me with a great deal of very good material. Now these people, I should explain, although a tribal people, had been refugees, at least a large proportion of them had been refugees during the Sudanese Civil War and had fled to Uganda, where they lived either in settlements there or in refugee camps. Now in 1972 they returned, they were repatriated, and a period of re-integration started. These people, who had been refugees and others who had been freedom fighters, known as Anya Nya, or who had just hidden in the Sudanese bush and mountains, not true refugees. Now because of this dispersal of this length of time, their attitudes and their perceptions, their awareness, their hopes, their values had all changed and they didn't see eye to eye on repatriation, and so it was not, perhaps as happy a social environment as I might have led you to believe. Now one song I'd like you to hear is called a "Moon Song". Its a song sung by girls who when the moon is full go out and really give vent to their feelings and this song is a song about the frustrations they have with the tribal way of life. They've had a good time in Uganda and having returned, they're fed up with having to dig, having to herd cows, or weed and so they are singing here about wanting to leave the Sudan, go to Mombasa, you'll hear Mombasa and Juba and Wau, these big towns where they say in defiance of their parents "we will be prostitutes", "the tribal way of life is no good for us."

MUGGIES: ACHOLI GIRLS SINGING A MOON SONGALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

They are obviously attracted by the bright lights of large cities in Uganda, Kenya and places like that, but was life all that lovely for them? So often heard during the last regime of Idi Amin that the Acholis were being massacred?

CHRIS TERRILL

Yes, this is true and again this has come out in some of the songs that I have recorded. Life in the refugee camps wasn't that pleasant, they have been away from their relatives, their kin and they were having to mould a new life. Many of them succeeded because they had to, it was a matter of survival. And another song is a song by women singing about the miseries of the refugee camps, not being accepted by other Acholi who had lived in Uganda, the same tribe, but they wouldn't accept them, because they were refugees, but the song does go on to say that "although we were miserable and unhappy in refuge, now that we've returned we're even more miserable because our kin that we left behind will no longer accept us, they think we are traitors to have fled."

MUSIC: WOMEN SINGING ABOUT MISERIES OF LIFE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

There was a kind of foggy quality in that voice, was it deliberate or was it a bad recording?!

CHRIS TERRILL

No, that in my defence, was deliberate. The woman who was singing, who was striking her vocal cords with her thumb as she sung and singing into a big gourd to get the echoing quality.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Is that the normal way they sing?

CHRIS TERRILL

There are all sorts of ways they sing and they have all sorts of devices to change the rhythm of their voice, the effect of their voice. They also have a lot of instruments as well. I was very surprised to find a one string violin, a one stringed harp and various other very interesting instruments.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTY

Did you find any evidence of romantic life, you had a song about the hunt, you had a song about frustrations and so on, obviously you must have had some love experience?

CHRIS TERRILL

Oh yes. The tradition survives I'm happy to say and I think this comes over in the next song I'd like you to hear which is a traditional Acholi love song.

MUSIC: ACHOLI LOVE SONG

CHRIS TERRILL

Well, of course, love leads to marriage in many cases in the Acholi and the weddings are quite incredible events, there might be a party going on for many days, a lot of music, a lot of eating a lot of drinking and the atmosphere is marvellous to experience, as I did, and here now is a "wedding song", you can hear the drums and the people getting ready for the official union of the couple.

MUSIC: ACHOLI WEDDING SONG

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well there's certainly a lot of merriment in that song. Incidentally what was that sound which I heard during the "Wedding Song"?

CHRIS TERRILL

I thought you might ask! Yes, that was interesting, that was a gun shot. Now, you said that was a sound of merriment and jolly-making, in fact what happened there was an attack by a group of Acholi who had not been refugees during the war but had been Anya Nya, freedom fighters, and the wedding was between people who were refugees, and I mentioned before this idea of antagonism between the refugee and the non-refugee and this was manifesting itself out here and there was this attack, it was only a gesture really, a few gunshots, a bit of fist-fighting and nothing came of it. And in fact, the children, and the young men who were so enjoying themselves that they carried right on drumming and it continued. But this does indicate what I mentioned before about this antagonism.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A bit of historic reality isn't it, very interesting. Chris thank you very much indeed.

CHRIS TERRILL

Its a pleasure.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

British anthropologist Chris Terrill who recently spent a year in the southern Sudan collecting music of the Acholi people. And there we come to the end of "Arts and Africa" for this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and leaving you with another hunting song of the Acholi people.

MUSIC: ACHOLI HUNTING SONG

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