

# 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 Arts and Africa which today has news of a fascinating traditional ceremony in Zaire and information about some modern sculpture in Nigeria. But first, Zaire and music.

MUSIC -

### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That music comes from the Wali Ritual performed by the Ikondo People who live south of Mbandaka in the deep forests that straddle the equator in Central Zaire. The music was recorded by Mr. Benoit Quersin, Curator of the music department in Zaire's National Museum. Mr. Quersin is himself a professional jazz musician and has studied anthropology and sociology. He has produced several records but it is because of his work with the National Museum that he has been able to spend many months in the interior observing ceremonies like The Wali which up to now have been little known to the outside world. On a recent visit to Kinshasa, he spoke to Carol Corrillon about his studies and began by explaining just what is the Wali.

### CAROL CORRILLON

The first daughter of the family, when she gives birth to her first child, she is supposed to be secluded for a period of about 2 years, minimum of 2 years and take care of the baby and nothing else, she has no work to do in agriculture whatever. And she has to stay and sleep with her mother and she is assisted by the younger sisters and so on. There is a lot of taboo. She must in no case eat certain kinds of food, actually the only person she can accept food from is her mother. For the whole period of 2 to 3 years she wears a little skirt and nothing else. She is painted in red with dye made with a certain kind of wood called ngola, very beautiful red. She has a special hair dressing made with a kind of glue, you know a mix of dust, of palm oil and coal. It may sound terrible but it is very beautiful.

She wears bracelets, six on the right side, five on left side and she takes care of the baby. When is the period over? Nobody knows for sure because its often postponed. I've been studying many cases where they are never ready because the ceremony is very complicated, very expensive. Every family has to contribute their highly sophisticated songs and dances which must be rehearsed. There are all kind of things they need. like in this particular case, the Wali still didn't have 2 very important items which were a pair of glasses and a watch. I said that doesn't sound very traditional to me. But this she needs for after the ceremony. She is a new woman, she comes out of seclusion no longer wearing the red skirt and she dresses like everybody else from now on. And then the big day comes and they start rehearsing every day at 5 o'clock in the morning until ten or eleven and sometimes there is another rehearsal in the afternoon. And the last rehearsal was the very day of the festival from 5 o'clock again to ten. So the thing started really at 2 o'clock with the installation of their guests who commute from villages from near by. Among the guests are all the other Wali, young women in the same process but not ready yet, some wait I think 2 years others a week or 2 weeks and everyone of these Wali enters one by one dancing but with no music, in complete silence and they enter the place doing fantastic dancing in silence. It's the first time I've seen it in my life in Africa. The big star of the event naturally is the Wali and she is usually in the centre and is heading the dancers and leading most of the songs. Then, at last, 3 or 3½ hours later, its fascinating all the time very beautiful music and then it finishes with something which is kind of hard to explain. They build a kind of construction. The last scene is when the Wali climbs to the top of the thing which is about 5 metres high. She hides in a kind of basket which is on top and the basket slides down along wires like an aeroplane and it comes down and she gets out and rushes and runs away.

#### MUSIC

#### ALEX TOTTEH-LARTEY

More music from the Wali and Mr. Benoit Quersin talking to Carol Corrillon about the ceremony performed by the Ikondo People of Central Zaïre. And from Zaïre to Nigeria and the work of sculptor Erhabor Emokpae who is known for his carved murals particularly the one in Africa House, Addis Ababa. Erhabor has just been approached by the United Africa Company about the possibility of producing some works for the new extension to the headquarters building in London. He's been making a background study for the project and he spoke to Joe Snomi who asked him what materials he most liked working with.

ERHABOR EMOKPAAE

Wood is very warm, its like a living thing like something that has lived which has produced flowers which has grown just like a human being. I find it much more satisfying to express myself in wood.

JOE SNOPI

Have you had any handicaps working say, in Africa. Or would you want to work in Europe because you have better facilities?

ERHABOR EMOKPAAE

Well, it's not very easy working in Africa for some reasons. For the use of modern tools for instance, are more readily available in Europe and you find that you can easily get a lot of tools and you can do it a lot more easily than you can do it here. But on the other hand, whereas you don't have a lot of tools here you have a lot of labour and even when you have to do some very light pieces of work you still need labour for cutting the wood, for disposing of certain parts of it, before you finally get to the finer aspects of the work which will need the artist's touch.

JOE SNOPI

You have learnt your work because you are an African, do you think, if you were a European you would do the same things?

ERHABOR EMOKPAAE

If the artist takes in the things he sees, he digests them and most of his experiences come out and form pictures or in the three dimensions. This is cultural and they have to relate very closely to the things around him. As an artist I was born in Benin, I lived in Benin for a long time before I went outside Benin City. I was exposed a good deal indeed, to a lot of wood carvings, a lot of figurines which are so abundant, you find them almost everywhere, carvings at entrances and so on and so forth and in the elementary schools in those days you would have someone who would probably have been trained in the palace as a wood carver, teaching you the basics of wood carving so you begin to develop some knowledge and some ideas and techniques of giving expression to your experiences.

JOE SNOPI

What really inspires you?

ERHABOR EMOKPAE

Inspiration, quite often comes from deep seated feelings of condition of beliefs. I have in particular, plans of my philosophy and this is the philosophy of dualism. I am a dualist by nature and I believe in the coexistence of the two principles of the positive and negatives. I believe if the artist is going to give an impression as a whole he can not do so without referring to the two halves that makes the whole. I'm saying in actual fact that you can not refer to life without referring to death, you can not talk about love without referring to hatred. You know you can not talk about ecstasy without some reference to pain, you can not talk about growth without talking about decay and these explain most of my expressions and in actual fact most of my creations are just called dialogues.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Nigerian sculptor Erhabor Emokpae giving his thoughts on Art and Life to Joe Snomi. Well that brings us to the end of Arts and Africa for this week. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey wishing you goodbye and leaving you with a little more of the music from the Wali Ritual of the Ikondo in Central Zaire.

MUSIC.