

# Arts and Africa

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## ARTS AND AFRICA

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### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another Arts and Africa and this week we look at Cameroon, and to be more specific at Bamenda, the English-speaking part of the North-West province. Bamenda is famous for its traditional arts and its Museum, opened in 1959 near a bustling market area, shows how these arts have developed over the years. Anne Bolsover visited the Museum and spoke to one of its Curators, Samuel Inshaw, who first took her round an exhibition of objects in the Fon's Palace. The Fons, who still rule today, are the traditional chiefs of large parts of the Province.

### SAMUEL INSHAW

These statues, which you are seeing naked, they called them in their own language, "azinshindaz" meaning slaves in those days. Since the Fon is liable to have more than 50 wives, in order that these azinshindaz should not go after the wives they castrated them, therefore, you see them like that and you see the Fon smoking. On the left hand side you see a pipe, on the right hand side you see a drinking cup and as he sits, on top of where he places his legs, is an elephant tusk and the skin of the tiger, which was dignity. And here you have the Fon's throne, its the only thing used by the Fon and no other person sits on it.

### ANNE BOLSOVER

What is it made of?

### SAMUEL INSHAW

Its made of wood. And here you see a leopard, which signifies the nobility of the Fon. Here you have the wooden gong, here you have the iron gong.

### ANNE BOLSOVER

What would they be used for?

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SAMUEL INSHAW

Its a musical instrument. So too with these other musical instruments: here you have the drum, here is the talking drum, here's one that in those days you sent messages.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Can you show me how it sounds?

SOUND EFFECT OF TALKING DRUM

ANNE BOLSOVER

And how do they send messages?

SAMUEL INSHAW

Certain people who have studied the rhythm of the drum and how they can talk, they build a platform and this drum is kept on top and a man goes up, so the nearest village can always understand them and as the man knocks it, it sends out a message and the message is understood by the receiving person over there. There you have a messenger, they call it "Nkoh".

ANNE BOLSOVER

Can you describe the statue?

SAMUEL INSHAW

The statue as you see, the costume is made of feathers, five feathers, the coloured ones are all dyed and this is just a head mask, the spear indicates the messenger of the town. Those are the old pipes used by the Fon in those days.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What kind of things do they smoke? Do they smoke tobacco?

SAMUEL INSHAW

They used tobacco, they called it "Panan", its a native tobacco, they planted it themselves and they harvested it, dried it and they use it.

ANNE BOLSOVER

And what are they made of?

SAMUEL INSHAW

The pipes, these are made of brass, we have some here made of clay, and here you have a type which is a twin pipe, this was only used by a mother who delivered twins, and here we have drinking cups, which are being only used by the nobles.

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ANNE BOLSOVER

They are horn shaped?

SAMUEL INSHAW

They are made of cow horns. This is of buffalo, well carved as it is. And we have this glass piece, they came all the way from Portugal in those days from the Portuguese, they brought them here during their trading. Here you have ivory bracelets.

ANNE BOLSOVER

When the country was colonised were many of the crafts taken by the Germans, French and British?

SAMUEL INSHAW

Before we came to realise the importance of these antiquities they were all taken away by the Europeans.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Have you got them back now?

SAMUEL INSHAW

No we haven't got any back, it is said that Bamenda is struggling to get some back, but we believe that in future they shall be returned.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well let's hope so, Samuel Inshaw, of the Bamenda Museum. Bamenda is not only famous for its historical art objects, but for its arts and crafts of today and there is a thriving Traditional Handicraft Co-operative which attracts visitors from all over the world. Anne Bolsover asked Joseph Ato Lamhte, Manager of the Co-operative to explain how it functions.

JOSEPH ATO LAMHTE

The artists are working in their own time at locations selected by them, of course the co-operative is trying to group them together for efficient work and efficient control. The artists are not all the time trained by the co-operatives, some of them are gifted in their art and the work of the co-operative is to up-date and up-grade the quality and the style and the finishing touches of the crafts they produce. Of course, we are now helping the craftsmen to pass on their knowledge to the younger generation and we are doing this in a new project we have just started called "training for younger school leavers", these school leavers are

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recruited by the co-operative and we pay them, we group them in various locations and give them shelter and training in production of various crafts. If they are keen on the work they go back to join other craftsmen on the production and they continue to learn that way.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What are the typical kind of crafts of the Bamenda Region?

JOSEPH ATC LAMHTE

I think that we have a variety of over 600 different crafts, anything from wood carving, basket making, bark weaving, fibre work, pottery, its a very wide variety.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What are the most popular things that are made, say a wood-carver, what kind of things would he carve?

JOSEPH ATC LAMHTE

Tools, masks, wooden pots. simple white-wood items and we are trying to include some modern crafts now, such as white-wood vases, goblets, ladles and wall placques.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Are many of these crafts symbolic?

JOSEPH ATC LAMHTE

They all have a traditional meaning in them and an instructional meaning, the meaning has gone down in history right from the fore-fathers right from the middle-ages I would say, and we have tried to make some modifications in them so the old art and the new art are trying to meet somewhere without losing their culture and the tradition of the people.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Tell me about say one object where the old art and the new art are merging together?

JOSEPH ATC LAMHTE

Look at this stool. Now, a wooden stool carved by one of our traditional men formerly used to represent just an animal, but now we include other animals which are not found in the olden days because this tradition is that a stool which has a creature carved on it is symbolic of a traditional power where the Fon sits on a living thing, meaning that he is a greater power so now we include other

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animals not particularly the old animals which used to be typical of the north west province and other parts of Cameroon, we are now including animals that are not even in the north west province, we are trying to give the animals a better shape and we are trying to give the colouring a good one, we try even to stain some of the wood, these are some of the aspects, say in carving, wood carving which are merging into the modern traditions.

ALEX TETTEN-LARTEY

Joseph Ato Lamhte, Manager of Bamenda's Traditional Handicraft Co-operative explaining how the traditional and modern merge in Bamenda's crafts.

But what about the artists who work for the Co-operative? Anne Bolsover visited some of them in their tiny open air workshop. They were making bronze and brass objects - masks, statues and pipes. As they could only speak pidgin English, Joseph Lamhte explained their work.

JOSEPH ATO LAMHTE

What the members are doing here is that they are producing bronze or brass items by the process we call "bronze casting", that is the lost wax method, first you get soil, special soil and you mix this with cow dung to give it some texture, then you use this soil to form it into the object, just to give it a slight shape of the object you want to produce, dry it up, when it is dry you get wax, then this wax is lightly melted and moulded over the form which you have prepared with the soil, and get it well shaped, after you get more soil again, put it over this wax in the same shape, after putting on the wax and then the next layer of soil, they provide a connection between the outside, externally, a direct connection that goes down right to the wax, this is going to help them to put on a layer of crude brass, this brass will then be covered up again when it is subjected to intensive heat, the brass melts, when the brass melts and the wax melts, the wax has the tendency of vanishing into the air when it melts, leaving a hollow round the form, this is replaced by wax, and when it has been properly melted and replaces this air, which was formerly occupied by wax the producer takes this out of the furnace and leaves it to cool a little, cracks the soil out of it and you have the form of a bronze. And when the brass which has been produced is properly cooled, he then uses a file, to file it and give it a shining colour and to give it a last finishing touch, of course, it is not everything that is filed, sometimes filed items are discoloured, to look black, to have a dark colour, of course, after the filing to give it a smooth shape you use some sandpaper to sandpaper everything down and you have a good shining and fine colouring.

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ANNE BOLSOVER

Now to produce this fine object right through the stages, how many men does it take and how long does it take?

JOSEPH ATO LAMHTE

It could take one man, but it could take a number of people most of the time it depends on the size of the article and it depends on the co-operation between the craftsmen. If they decide to produce one item then one man could be occupied with one of the processes and another man with another process, but generally each craftsman works on his individual item, although they work in a group each of them has his own craft he wants to produce.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Another member of the Co-operative is woodcarver Jock Summer. He carves wooden objects such as stools, and masks, but his speciality is carving large wall plaques, consisting of a number of panels, which together tell a story. He explained the stages of his work to Anne Bolsover.

JOCK SUMMER

From the beginning I use Aroco, I have to do the drying first, then from the drying I use line chisel to put the line, to form a line, then from the line I use my mortice to dig the background, then from digging the background I smoothen the background to make the pattern which I am trying to produce. Then I form the man using my one inch chisel, the small line chisel to decorate the person and when I decorate the person I colour the frame of the plaque, then I put the background, then I sandpaper it and polish it.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How long did it take you to learn to do this beautiful carving?

JOCK SUMMER

Well it took me about five years to do it.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How did you learn? Did you work with someone who was already doing it?

JOCK SUMMER

Yes. I learnt this with my brother, he started teaching from drawing, then from drawing I practiced how to draw it on the plaque and dig it and try to form it by myself that took me about a year, before I was able to do a plaque like this one.

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ANNE BOLSOVER

Any of the scenes that you put on, do they have symbolic meanings?

JOCK SUMMER

Yes. Like this which we are talking about, this a kitchen scene, you get the mother who is cooking the soup, then the father who is making a story with the mother and drinking.

ANNE BOLSOVER

And what's this one?

JOCK SUMMER

You have the Palace, this is the chief, he is trying to give the Fon some wine to drink, then the Fon is warning him to take care not to throw it on his legs. This one is a place, as I call it in my simple way, "a Njunga House", you have a lady, then you have a man who is already drunk, then you have a lady who is also drinking, this is a vision, as I call it, of trying to give them music in order to make them enjoy themselves.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Woodcarver Jock Summer talking to Anne Bolsover. And lets take Jock's advice and enjoy ourselves with some music as we come to the end of this week's Arts and Africa. Here's a famous Cameroon musician Tala Andre Marie with 'Badinko', and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.

MUSIC: BADINKO BY TALA ANDRE MARIE