

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

pp 2-3

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with an edition of Arts and Africa in which we hear about a traditional Art form, some modern protest verse and a new film from Nigeria. But first, the past and something that has fascinated people in all parts of the world - Gold. We've heard before, on Arts and Africa, about the famous Ashanti Gold Weights, the beautiful miniature figurines cast in brass that were used to weigh gold but we thought it would be interesting to find out more about the technical aspects of the Gold Weight system. Florence Akst talked to Malcolm McCloud, the Director of London's Museum of Mankind who explained how measurements were taken.

MALCOLM McCLOUD

The weight system seems to be a mixture of Islamic and European units and obviously the Islamic influence comes on the trans-Saharan trade and the European on the coastal trade, the seaborne trade. The earliest ones were probably very simple little discs and circular weights. The later ones get more and more elaborate, they are cast by the lost wax process in a vast range of animals, images of people doing things with household utensils, axes, pots, people cutting trees down to get palm wine out, they carry palm wine on their heads, fighting, blowing horns. They show enormous imaginative variety, very beautiful and these were used, or many of them were used, for weighing gold dust, you know, in a little set of pans. There are accounts of the king having a special set of weights which were gold, but that was really just a piece of ostentation, if it existed at all.

FLORENCE AKST

What about the trade to and from the North? Does this go back before colonial times? Who was trading with who?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

There was a long trade route or series of trade routes that went across the Sahara, and then went down into the forest zone. You had chariots going quite a long way down in the Sahara. Down that route to the South, came many things, physical things and more imponderable things: Islamic influences certainly knowledge of various sorts I am sure

metal casting and metal goods, made up goods like brass bowls, cloth and then, of course, at each point or at each sort of knot on that route, you have the little local trading set-ups developing, specialised products building up and you get trading town inhabited by local people and long distance traders. Obviously, this gold was obtained by mining, by taxing, by tribute by payment, a great deal must have accumulated around the kings and at a later date in West Africa, it's quite clear that the demand for gold both by the cross-Saharan land trade and eventually the seaborne European trade, helps to develop kingdoms, helps kingdoms to start and to become more complex. Because local rulers could use the gold trade and gold mining and gold panning to secure power for themselves.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Malcolm McCloud, Director of the Museum of Mankind talking to Florence Akst about the Ashanti Gold Weights and here is some music from Ashanti.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - MUSIC FROM ASHANTI.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

These are the ceremonial drums of the Asantehene, the king of Asante.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - MUSIC FROM ASHANTI.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now to poetry. One of the best collections of black verse in English has long been the anthology: "You Better Believe it" which Penguin Books brought out in 1973. One of the African writers who featured in that anthology was Sierra Leonean Mukhtarr Mustapha. Here he is reading one of his poems.

MUKHTARR MUSTAPHA

POETRY EXTRACT

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mukhtarr Mustapha reading one of his poems. Well, Mukhtarr was always a traveller and he has spent some time in America as he explained to David Sweetman.

MUKHTARR MUSTAPHA

I left Sierra Leone because I saw myself as a writer who ought to contribute to the total awareness of ones people. Then it became very impossible to operate within that particular terrain because one was dealing with productions, with plays that didn't fully meet with the approval of the authorities so one had to make a break and to say well if you are going to live with the situation of the poets and of the playwrights and you could also experience the level of domestication not only

of the culture but of the economics and you could see dislocation of human factors which after all must always present the bowels of ones poetry. So I said to myself 'I will not make peace with silence and I will not go into this bag that says quietism should permit you to survive', so I left.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Do you think there is any division between your life as a political writer opposed to certain things you see happening in your own country and your life as a creative artist, as a poet? Do you think that poetry is a valid medium for expressing what you want to say about the political situation that you see?

MUKHTARR MUSTAPHA

I do believe that poetry has a direct frontal impact to go into the bowels at the guts-level, and be able to compress it and say 'this is what is going on on the four or five lines' you could telegraph it with speed and you could capture the imagination of people. It is possible to have these images focused on particular targets. That you could be able to do within a very short time.

DAVID SWEETMAN

What have you been doing since then?

MUKHTARR MUSTAPHA

Well what transpired is that these works have now been put onto the stage, into the theatre, it is a form that is very very delicate so in as much as one hasn't abandoned it, one has now put it on the closest scrutiny to see where it is going and how it could be translated. How it could become a popular means for expressing oneself because in the final analysis, the music, the painting, the poetry belongs in the same house.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mukhtarr Mustapha talking to David Sweetman. And now to a film called 'The Mask' produced by Nigerian, Eddie Ugbomah, which was recently previewed in London. Stuart Sutton-Jones watched the film and is here to tell us about it.

STUART SUTTON-JONES

'The Mask' is Eddie Ugbomah's fourth film, and his most ambitious so far. It's set in Lagos and London and tells the story of Major Obi, of the Nigerian Security Services, who is secretly sent to London to recapture an old Nigerian relic, the mask of Queen Adesua of Benin, which had been taken by the English in 1815. The mask in question was in fact sold in auction earlier this year in London bought by the Nigerians, and so returned to Nigeria. But Eddie's film was finished last year, and tells us his ideas for returning the mask to its home. On instructions from the President himself, Obi is to travel to London, break into the British Museum and return home with the mask. But in view of diplomatic relations and all that, if he gets caught, then its a case of, "well, we've never heard of this Major Obi". However, being a sort of

mixture of James Bond, Superfly and John Shaft, Obi is a match for all that befalls him on his mission, and that's a great deal. He hires some mercenaries in London to execute the robbery, and makes plans to doublecross them just as they make plans to doublecross him; he gets caught by the police and M.I.5., gets rescued by several unexplained accomplices, gets followed by an amazing number of women, and makes love to most of them, leaves a trail of corpses in his wake which makes the Nigerian civil war look like a childrens party, gets the mask and, laughing happily, he is last seen driving into London airport, obviously on the way out of a successful mission, although its not explained how he intends to get the mask past the customs. Now, it all sounds pretty ridiculous and so it is, but no more so than most Kung Fu or British horror movies. What is different is the quality of the film making.

Eddie Ugbomah is obviously paying the penalty for being an independent film maker. The handout on the film circulated at the London preview said that the film was produced, written, directed and it starred the one and only Eddie Ugbomah. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that he was working the cameras as well. But very few people can do so much and maintain a professional standard in all departments, and it must be that much harder to do so in a country without a developed film industry. The Mask is not a good film, although it is worthy of mention as the work of a filmic entrepreneur. The writing and acting are weak, and the storyline has so many holes in it as to be totally confusing in parts. Also the technical aspects of the film leave a lot to be redone. In the earlier scenes which were filmed in Lagos, the voice track was out of synchronisation with the vision to a great degree. The reason, according to Eddie, was that the film editor in London was not a Nigerian and so did not know how Nigerians spoke English. But the same fault was apparent when the film was first put together last year and shown to a few people on videocassette, which means there has been ample time to correct the problem. A lot of the continuity is also very poor, with actors doing different things when the camera changes, and so on. But as I said, the film has been put together, virtually singlehanded, by a sort of filmic entrepreneur hoping to help fill the accum left by the Nigerian Government's ban on the importation of foreign films. There are very few independent producers in Nigeria, and no matter what the quality of their product so far, they should be encouraged with funds, so that, if they cannot manage to handle every aspect of the filmmaking themselves, as Eddie Ugbomah obviously cannot, then they will be in a position to buy in the necessary specialist expertise; first rate scriptwriters and actors, talented directors and film editors. This would leave people like Eddie the space to concentrate their energies on organising the resources of production, something he obviously does have the ability to do. Eddie Ugbomah complains bitterly of the lack of official Nigerian interest shown in his films, both in Nigeria and also from High Commissions abroad. It should be obvious that without encouragement, nobody will begin making films, and so the development of a true industry, with self recognised standards, will be delayed. However, 'The Mask' is scheduled to open in Lagos, in four cinemas, on the 29th August, playing in conjunction with Eddie's fifth film which he is presently cutting called 'Oil Boom'. We wish him well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Stuart Sutton-Jones reviewing Eddie Ugbomah's 'The Mask'. And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week and we leave you with a little more Ashanti music. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.