

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of "Arts and Africa". What do we have for you today? Well, we've been to two exhibitions here in London showing very different aspects of African culture. There's been the chance to see in sequence all the films by the leading African film maker and at the Museum of Mankind (an extension of the British Museum) visitors can walk back in time to experience something of what life was like in the land of the Asante a century ago.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - "ASHANTI NTUMPANI".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I have to say that as a Ghanaian (though not an Asante) I was especially interested in the way the exhibition was laid out - there were clusters of objects in several adjoining rooms, in one there was pottery in another were ceremonial regalia, and so on. As a back drop there were huge photographs of local scenes. There were forest plants and the stems of trees and in two areas there were life-size models of buildings. One was of three huts supposedly at the edge of a village and another of the imposing front to the palace in Kumasi of the Asantehene, king of the Asante which was destroyed by the British at the turn of the century. And as I stood in front of it with the Museum's director, Malcolm McCloud a recording of the Asantehene's drummers was being played to evoke the right atmosphere.

Malcolm this is the royal palace of the Asantehene. It looks fairly modern to me.

MALCOLM McCLOUD

It looks modern but I think this is the impression you get only if you don't know the quality and the sophistication of Asante architecture. The palace was much like this in 1817 when the first drawings of it were made. It grew, the size of the courts was increased and they were made more elaborate as the nineteenth century went on.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What is the building actually made of, or was made of?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

It was made of wood and clay. There was a wooden framework and then they plastered clay over this, and then the clay was moulded into these elaborate curl designs on the front and sides of the palace. The top was painted white with white wash and the lower part was made a bright red with a special red mud which you get in certain areas of Asante. On certain days in the calendar, the king would sit in public and receive visitors, and he would give them presents of gold dust. He would sit on a chair rather like this on a mound like this, only a taller mound, surrounded by his officials.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In the forecourts?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

No, outside in the main streets of the city. There were these mounds spread around through Kumasi.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now here we are looking at the famous gold which Asante is known for. These are royal regalia.

MALCOLM McCLOUD

These are some of the most impressive things, I think, about the royal court. They used gold very, very extensively to show their status, to show their importance. The type of gold ornaments people could have, their size, their degree of elaboration, depended on what rank they were within the system of chieftship. But the thing I would point out is not simply that they had a lot of gold and they had royal goldsmiths to make it, but the quality, the finess of some of the work. If you look, for example, at these gold chains which would have been worn round a chief's neck, they are very, very delicate castings. Some of these gold beads here are very, very fine work, very intricate, very sophisticated work. I think what struck all visitors to Asante was the great skill and the delicacy of their goldsmiths.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And they look quite solid to me. Are they just platings?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

No, no, absolute solid gold all the way through, and some of them are very, very heavy of course.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well how about these helmets with gold at the top? Are they plating, have they been painted, or are they solid gold?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

No this is another technique that they used extensively which is to carve in wood and then cover the wood with a layer of thin gold foil. And this was particularly used for things like umbrella tops, like that item at the back showing five birds. These were put in the tops of the very large state umbrellas, which would be fifteen or sixteen feet in diameter, and of course you could see them from a very long way, they shone in the sunlight. They were very bright and very impressive.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You would only find them used on, say, ceremonial occasions?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

Yes. Ordinary people couldn't possess gold for ornaments. They could use and have gold dust for trading, but there was also a rule if they ever were digging or panning for gold and they found a gold nugget, that had to be surrendered to the state. (Laughter).

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now having seen the magnificent palace, let's move to the ordinary people's houses. Here in front of us is a really magnificent compound. Is this typical of the ordinary village house or would this sort of building belong to a nobleman?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

No I think this is typical of the ordinary sort of village in the bush. Almost right down to the present, neatly thatched small huts, maybe ten or twelve feet long by six or seven feet wide, with an earth floor, palm leaf and plantain leaf thatches, a little fence of canes closing off the entrance. Ordinary people build the small huts and then as their family and as their range of dependents grew, they'd expand it so that eventually you might have three or four huts forming a little compound around the central yard. These villages were placed in clearings in the dense tropical forests and, you'll remember as you came into the exhibition, we've reconstructed a piece of forest and our visitors walk through that. The other thing I think it shows is the sort of neatness, the tidyness, the prosperity of the Asante villages in the nineteenth century because all the visitors comment on that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now so much has been said about the Asantehene and the palace and these royal regalia, but very little has been said about the lives of the ordinary people, which I think would interest most people, especially me. Why is there so little about how the ordinary people live?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

I think there are two reasons. One is that European visitors always concentrated on their dealings with the king, the chief, with the political hierarchy, the leaders. Secondly a lot of the Asante traditions, themselves, deal with that sort of level. They don't deal with the peaceful progress of people moving through the forest, they don't deal

with farming, they don't deal with everyday crafts. But, of course, this is one of the areas which we know least about in African history and it's a great tragedy.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Asante land was right in the middle of this huge and dense forest, very tall trees. How was communication carried out? It couldn't have been easy?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

It wasn't easy. There were no wheeled vehicles because the roads were too rugged and narrow and trees would fall down across them. But, of course, people did move pretty quickly and there were staging posts, as it were, from village to village in a days journey, so communication was pretty efficient.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's amazing how they were able to marshal the soldiers together for the various battles.

MALCOLM McCLOUD

Whenever you think about them you realise they were very well organised. Now every male, within the system, knew more or less exactly where he fitted in the army. The army had a central body, a left wing and a right wing (fore) front group and a rear guard, and everyone had a position within that according to their chief or their father where they were born. So you knew exactly that you were in the left wing and you're behind so and so's group.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Marvellous.

MALCOLM McCLOUD

Wonderful.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Malcolm McCloud thank you very much.

I visited the Asante exhibition the same week that the National Film Theatre in London showed in the order they were made, five films by the Senegalese film-maker, Ousman Sembene. Between us, Suzy Benghiat and I saw all five and Suzy also went to the lecture Sembene gave after the last showing. Most of his films are set in Senegal, either during the Second World War or immediately after independence as in "Xala" or at a time in the seventeenth century when Islam and Christianity were both seeking converts. That was the theme of his latest film "Ceddo". When we were discussing the event I put it to Suzy Benghiat that all Sembene's themes were relevant to the colonial and post-colonial experience.

SUZY BENGHIAT

Yes, of course and it's not surprising if you know that he's an ex-worker. He was a docker and only made his first film when he was forty. He used to be a docker in Marseilles, a trade union organiser, and he told me he used to come to England quite often for meetings on trade union and colonial freedom questions, and he met Nenru and Nkrumah and the meetings with these people had a tremendous impact on him not only because they were fighting for the colonies but also because to him the whole philosophy is that the colonizer is also not free, so they were really fighting for everybody.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well although he deals with politics, he deals with the situation in different ways, depending on what he is attacking doesn't he?

SUZY BENGHIAT

Actually I asked him that question, and he told me that his films are political but not political in the narrow sense of the word. He said that they're political in the sense that everything is political. One of the things that is interesting for him is social conditions, and he attacks his own people because he finds that independence has not necessarily brought freedom but another kind of chance, on this I'm quoting him. He was also asked about what was termed his 'anti-Islam' stand. He denied that he is anti-Islam as he comes himself from a Moslem family, in fact his younger brother is an Imam. But what he attacks is the authoritarianism of certain aspects. His film called "Ceddo" was banned in his country, ostensibly because ex-President Senghor thought that the word "Ceddo" was spelt in the wrong way. That was the reason that was given. But obviously it was because of the pressures, according to Sembene, the pressures from Islamic Arabic countries. Somebody asked him: "How come "Ceddo" is banned, whereas "Kala", which is a very violent satire against the present bourgeoisie and big business, has not been banned?" And he said: "It hasn't been banned but it has had eleven cuts!" (Laughter) And what he says has had an effect is that the businessmen depicted now don't call themselves businessmen any more, they call themselves 'economic operators'.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In point of fact when I saw "Ceddo" I didn't think that he was attacking Islam at all. In fact, what the Imam did in "Ceddo" was, I thought, highly praiseworthy. He was very, very strict with his religious views, and in fact, he tried to reform society to go straight, although he was perhaps a bit despotic.

SUZY BENGHIAT

Oh but Ousman Sembene wouldn't agree with you because to him the Imam was imposing a culture from outside.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well he has been singularly successful in his films. He's dealt with, as we said, tradition and the impact of foreign culture which he rejects. What is he thinking of doing in the future?

SUZY BENGHIAT

Well at the moment he's working on a project he's been thinking and dreaming about for the last twenty years. It's an epic, a story of the life of a West African hero, Samore Toure who had, for seventeen years, resisted the colonial onslaught by the English, the French and the Germans. This was in the nineteenth century. It would be a very long film about six hours to be shown in two episodes. He's finished the script and he hopes to start shooting next year.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Suzy Benghiat. And with the prospect of another Sembene film on the way we come to the end of today's programme. I'll ask Mustapha Tettey-Addy to play us out on the Asante drums: meanwhile this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until this time next week. Goodbye.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - "ASHANTI NTUMPANI".