

# 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 Arts and Africa. And this week we're travelling far outside Africa for our first item - to Helsinki, capital of Finland in order to meet Bernard Kiyenze from Tanzania. He has some strong opinions on the subject of design and before we hear his point of view I'm going to suggest that everyone listening looks around them for a moment. How many objects in the room (or wherever you're listening) - and I mean the furniture, the utensils or equipment, even the room itself - are of African design and how many non-African?

Bernard Kiyenze is a designer in the Research Section of Tanzania's Ministry of Information and Culture and he's been one of only four people from Africa at a big, international event called "Design '81". There, industrial, graphic and interior designers have been meeting to exchange ideas. Bernard presented a paper about design in Tanzania but, as he told Donald Fields afterwards, on the whole designers from the developed world did most of the talking and very little of the listening. If only African countries would recognize the potential of their indigenous designs he believes that they too could speak up with just as much authority. And he gave the Tanzanian ceramic industry as an example.

## BERNARD KIYENZE

We have our traditional ceramics and given proper encouragement they could actually develop their own indigenous designs. Already there are people doing this in the northern part of Tanzania and some parts of the rural areas. They are doing this without very much foreign inputs either in terms of designs or in terms of tools. This is actually what I mean, so when I am talking so much about indigenous design development in my paper, what I'm actually saying is that there is a tendency for example, in Tanzania which is a small-scale industrial development programme to rely more heavily on foreign inputs, be it in terms of design or in terms of technology or in terms of foreign exports. Now this actually is contrary to what the whole programme is all about because the idea is to concentrate on small-scale industrial development using local resources like skills and local materials and trying to mobilize the local population in the rural areas particularly where 87% of Tanzanians are still living, so that they can use their own abilities, to develop some productive activities in order to enhance the capacity of the rural economy.

DONALD FIELDS

Isn't it the fact that countries like West Germany, Japan, Sweden and Denmark are exporting design technologies which are not very appropriate to your conditions or environment? Is this really due, do you think, to lack of communication?

BERNARD KIYENZE

Well, I think there is what one could call vested interests either on the part of the policy-makers in Tanzania and, of course, on the part of developing countries. One can easily understand the situation. They are willing to provide the idea, any kind of idea provided that underdeveloped countries are able to accept it so I would think that the fault lies mostly on the part of the policy-making bodies in Tanzania. Their problem actually arises because there is no systematic study of the local conditions that are undertaken before any kind of technological design export is made. As a result you find that most of these technologies or designs which are sent to underdeveloped countries, they don't fit into the local setting.

DONALD FIELDS

In Tanzania, do you have sufficient designers of your own who are attuned to local conditions and can really get among the people and encourage the sort of craft industries that you have been talking about?

BERNARD KIYENZE

Yes we do. We have a very good number of designers but they are not actually known. It's very difficult for anybody to tell you how many we have because after all we do not have a specific association in which you can bring together all the designers so that they can express their ideas and try to discuss ways of developing their abilities. We do have a good number of designers. It's just that they are not well mobilized.

DONALD FIELDS

Do you think some organisation could encourage greater co-operation between the countries of Africa in this field?

BERNARD KIYENZE

Yes I think that these international organisations like I.F.I. (International Federation of Designers), ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) and S.I.A.D. (Society of Industrial Artists and Designers) they could help developing countries to form some kind of association or organisation which could bring together all the designers enlisting every developing country and then try to form an organisation for designers in certain parts of Africa, maybe on a regional basis, so that the designers would be able to have an organisation through which they can express their needs, their interests, you know their training requirements and all these kind of things.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Designers of Africa, unite! That was Bernard Kiyenze putting forward the idea from Finland. And our next subject, I'd say, lends strength to Bernard's argument that indigenous design is worth serious attention. But first, a little music.

MUSIC

GELEDE MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Gelede music recorded at a Gelede masquerade at Ife in Nigeria. This is one of the many masquerades performed all over southern Nigeria. They're put on for various social events - funerals, for example - or just for entertainment. In some of them the performers wear masks, or raffia skirts or tie-dyed cloth, but there's one sort of masquerade the Okakagbe, that has, within the past few years, come up with an entirely new design for its costumes. They're decorated with applique work - that's a technique of sewing onto material shaped pieces of brightly-coloured cloth to build up a picture or pattern. Someone who's taken a great interest in what she sees as the evolution of traditional designs is Marie-Therese Brincard. In her gallery at the African/American Institute in New York there's been an exhibition of some of these Okakagbe costumes and when she showed Anne Bolsover round she introduced her to some of the main characters.

MARIE-THERESE BRINCARD

She is Ancient Mother, and to show her role in the society and in the village she is here represented with a monumental head dress with eight figures topping her head dress. She is also shown to be venerable and respectable because she has flat and long breasts. Her costume is very elaborate and one of the most important patterns here is the eight star motif which was put into vigour by Lawrence Ajeneko (phon). It is interesting to see how, in those costumes which certainly derive from an ancient tradition yet because of the new technique which is also applied but also in the patterns that Lawrence Ajeneko has introduced make them quite remarkable. Ancient Mother is proceeded, or with, what is so called Little One, which, of course, shows her primary function of fertility. What is interesting to see is that during the masquerade yet Mother and Little One are going to get into a dancing contrast and they're going to be facing each other.

Little One is quite marvellous and has a little wig which is covered with yarn and also has pins. The pins here is to show the evolution of this masquerade which is adopting contemporary ideas. A pin is something that is used for the diapers and therefore has become an ornament to the wig of the child. Each character in this Okakagbe masquerade is identified with a positively valued attribute such as wisdom, wealth and beauty. Here we are going to be looking at the mythical bush monster who is the visual and symbolic compliment to the Ancient Mother in the Okakagbe masquerade. He wears a mask featuring broad horns of the buffalo or bush cow to which antelope horns are also attached. The bush monster costume is made from natural materials such as raffia grasses contrast with the cloth applique costumes of the other dancers.

MARIE-THERESE BRINCARD

One of his functions is to act as a crowd control or preventing the audience from encroaching on the dancers space. The bush monster and the Ancient Mother are the two most powerful figures in the masquerade. They balance male and female forces. The bush monster represents the potentially threatening chaos of the bush while the Ancient Mother symbolises civilisation. Although the symbolism of the Okakagbe masquerade is understood by its audience, today the performance is chiefly appreciated as an entertainment.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But appearance isn't everything. If it's an entertainment, what about the dancing? That's what Anne Bolsover wanted to know.

MARIE-THERESE BRINCARD

The emphasis on the Okakagbe dance seems to be on an extremely rapid, complex stepping pattern. The costumes are particularly suited to the movements of the dancers because fitting snugly, they expose the contours of the body and visually enhance every nuance of step and rhythm. Seated ankle rattles enrich the music and emphasise the dancers rhythm ~~virtuosity~~. Most masqueraders carry at least one or more often two small whisks in their hands which they flick throughout the performance.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Is the only type of music these bells and the whisks?

MARIE-THERESE BRINCARD

Yes they do not use any kind of drumming for example as you would see in other types of masquerades. Here you really have a close association between the noise produced by the leaping and the steps going along with the bells. So everything is, in a way, carried by the dancer and spilled out, in a way, by the dancer himself and not using any other exterior musical instruments.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How are people chosen to take part in the masquerade?

MARIE-THERESE BRINCARD

First of all, all the people in the masquerade are men who are wearing, in most cases, costumes of women. They are chosen in terms of their rank so Ancient Mother has to be somebody very important in the village. Little One, of course, as his name indicates is going to be a youngster. There is another character called the Owner of the House, that is going to be somebody who has a certain kind of wealth and that's how they are chosen to perform in the masquerade.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Marie-Therese Brincard of New York's African/American Institute. And while we're on the subject of what I certainly think of as a dramatic form I'd like to draw everybody's attention to this year's season of the BBC's African Theatre. The first play won't be broadcast until November but already the production team is preparing for this popular annual event. And for those of you who've got an idea for a thirty-minute play in your head, and only need an excuse to set it down on paper, or for others who may have a play already written but not yet produced, here's an opportunity to have it considered for broadcasting. If any of you have a play which you think might be suitable, please send it off immediately. Remember, each play must be thirty minutes long - that is about thirty pages of foolscap paper. And the subject? Well, it can be about anything at all. Just as long as it's of relevance to Africa. The address is: African Theatre, BBC Bush House, London. That's African Theatre, BBC Bush House, London.

Now I haven't forgotten that the Okakagbe Masquerades don't have any drumming but we're not that far removed from them in all their applique finery when we listen to some more of that Gelede masquerade.

MUSIC

GELEDE MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And as we come to the end of this week's Arts and Africa, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey hoping to meet you again at this time next week, for now it's goodbye.

MUSIC

GELEDE MUSIC.