

# Arts and Africa

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa.

## MUSIC EXTRACT: SOUND OF AFRICA "LAMNANDI"

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A praise song from the Mpondo people of South Africa. They are Xhosa-speakers and share the rich story-telling tradition of the Xhosa. But then, show me an African who isn't a lover of stories. One of the most infectious things in the whole continent is the traditional story which gets passed on from story-teller to story-teller and from generation to generation.

Somehow the technical term "oral tradition" fails to convey any sense of what links the story-teller and the audience. But one distinguished academic who, though he isn't African, he's American, who does grasp the total experience is Harold Scheub, Professor of African Languages and Literature at the University of Wisconsin. He has spent much time in South Africa learning the languages so that he can use his scholarly skills at first hand as he gathers folk-tales on his tape recorder.

What I find interesting, listening to him talking about these stories is the similarities to the stories I know - and the differences - though it seems that the Xhosa and their neighbours have their share of ogres and giants and tricksters much as in West Africa. And I'd say that the motive for telling the stories is one that's familiar to me, too. Here's how Professor Scheub sees it.

## PROFESSOR SCHEUB

My experience has been that the oral narratives, certainly in Southern Africa, do not point morals in a kind of homiletic sense, an Aesop's fable sense so much as they enlist the emotions and feelings of the members of the audience and in the process during an actual performance, is a very exciting and electric thing. The members of the audience through the alchemy of the performance are emotionally brought into contact with their past. The images that the performer summons, if they are artistic images, are probably very, very old and very compressed and highly symbolic and here is where all the marvellous folkloristic symbolic

kind of images come from. And the performer always, I mean always, ties this in with the contemporary world so that basically in a given oral performance (and this makes no difference who's telling it whether its a hack or a great artist) the performer will always have two different categories of imageries. One of them is contemporary, it's as real as the rondavel-type home that they are sitting in, as real as that performer who's sitting up by the hearth fire, they can touch her and she can touch them; it's as real as hoeing, cultivating the maize, watching the cattle and so forth. So you get these comfortable, homely type of images and everybody knows and everybody has a basic emotional response, then you have the images of the past, the images of the art tradition itself, which are very, very old and seem to change very, very slowly. They establish the form of the tradition.

Now in Xhosa society everybody is a potential performer and everybody does, in fact, perform. Some performers, you know are only O.K., other performers are absolutely magnificent. And I just want to tell you about one performer who is very, very special to me, her name is Matutatu Zeinene (phon). She's a Xhosa and she lives about twelve miles from the Indian Ocean. She must be in her mid-seventies by now. And I'll never forget when in 1975 in July, I went to visit her. I had seen her several times before that and thought that I had collected over this period of time her complete repertoire, but she invited me to come to a story-telling session where she was going to perform a story that she said I would never have heard before. It was for some people of her own age (she was around seventy at the time) and I remember that it started at ten o'clock in the morning, which is an extraordinarily early time for a performance to begin because usually performances are in the evening although I've collected narratives at all hours of the day, but anyway it began at ten, and until that time the longest Xhosa narrative I had ever experienced was three hours long, that this particular performer had created, which is quite a sizeable performance. Consider that if Homer told the Odyssey in one sitting it would take him about twenty hours so you can imagine a three hour performance is a good size performance.

Well, she started performing a narrative at ten o'clock in the morning and then around two in the afternoon, four hours later, she wanted to break for tea. So we broke for tea for an hour or so and then she went back to the performance and picked it up again without missing a rhythm and performed for three more hours. It was a seven hour performance and it wasn't over yet. The next day the performance continued, and it continued sometimes seven hours a day sometimes three hours a day. It continued for twenty-one days. The whole performance was over a hundred hours, a hundred hours in which she performed a narrative, (and I'm not talking about a kind of picaresque I'm talking about a narrative which is tightly constructed) which has a single narrative as its backbone, but it's constructed of maybe forty different narratives and narrative segments welded together into a single unified performance. It was a magnificent epic.

Then later on in that year she performed another which she felt was related, again the same size, and later on one more, so this three

hundred hour epic she sees as The Xhosa Epic and it is a magnificent thing. She said she had heard it when she was a child, which would have been the turn of the century, and felt that she would never perform it again and with her grandchildren going to a western-style school she didn't think that they were going to continue in the oral traditions, so she wanted to perform it once more before she died and wanted me to be there so that we could put it on tape had have it for posterity. And it is something to behold, it is just a magnificent work of art.

#### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, Arts and Africa has its limitations and we could never do justice to a ten hour story, let along one that takes three hundred hours. But we were able to persuade Professor Scheub to give us his version of another, shorter Xhosa story.

#### PROFESSOR SCHEUB

This will be very, very brief so I'll certainly not be able to illustrate the beauties and the complexities of the tradition and nor is my telling going to do that. But at least it will give you an idea of how performers, for example, use repetition, patterning in narratives and also how they set about eliciting emotional responses from the members of an audience. This performance has to do with a mother and her children and, therefore elicits all of those emotions that we normally associate with a mother and her love for her children; and an indescribable creature who threatens this mother and her children and thereby calls forth all of the emotions that are associated with that. In Xhosa society when a women gives birth to a child it's an exogamous society so she usually lives away from home with her husband and when she gives birth to her first child she will, what the Xhosa say, "repeat the way" which means she'll take her child and she'll go home, to her home of birth and there will be a great celebration and gifts will be given and feasts and so forth, will be had.

This mother has twins and so she sets off one day to take her twins to her home. Her husband cannot accompany her, he's got to keep the farm going and so she sets off by herself and it's a long distance between her home of marriage and her home of birth. She's walking across the veldt and she's got a lot of meat and food with her, too, so that they will have enough food on the way, on this long trip to her home. And as they are walking across the veldt, way off in the distance she sees a cloud of smoke, a column of smoke and it keeps coming closer and closer to her and she's getting a little bit anxious and she pulls her children closer to her and hurries across the veldt and the column of smoke gets closer and closer and suddenly it stops in front of her and confronts her. The smoke clears away and here is a dreadful-looking monster, and it looks at her and all it says is: "Khomote khomote" she looks at it and says: "khomote khomote? What do you mean, I don't understand what you mean, what do you want?" It looks at her and says: "Khomote, khomote", she says: "Khomote khomote? I don't know what you want, but here", and she takes some of the meat from her back and she throws the meat to the beast, grabs her children and hurries on the way. The beast takes the meat and shoves it into its mouth and chews it, "Chomp, chomp". She's now seen the nature of the beast and she's running with her children, crying a little bit now, her home still far in the distance. And again she looks behind her, again

she sees the cloud of smoke, and again the confrontation, and again the words "Khomote khomote". "Khomote khomote?" She says, "What can I do?" And again she takes the food that's on her back and throws it to this beast and grabs her children and hurries on her way and the beast takes the food and eats it, "Chomp chomp". The mother grabs her children, hurrying along the way and again the cloud of smoke and again the confrontation. and again the words "Khomote, khomote". And the mother doesn't know what to do and she says: "Khomote, khomote? I have nothing left to give you," and it only looks at her and says: "Khomote, khomote". So this time the mother takes her clothes off and now she's completely naked, takes her children and hurries on her way, looking behind her with great anxiety way off in a distance on top of a ridge she can see her home. Again the cloud of smoke and again the confrontation and again the words; "Khomote, khomote", and the mother says: "Khomote, khomote? There's nothing left, I have nothing left to give you, can't you see I'm naked?" And it only looks at her and says: "Khomote, khomote". So the mother takes the clothing off her children and throws the clothing of her children to this beast grabs her children, now all three of them naked, and hurrys across the veldt, stumbling, crying, trying desperately to get to her home, and the beast takes the clothing and shoves it into its mouth, "Chomp, chomp". And she hurries along the way, and again the cloud of smoke and again the confrontation and again it says: "Khomote, khomote", the mother weeping, frightened now, says: "Khomote, khomote? There's nothing I have left, you see me here before you naked, with my children naked, I have nothing to give you". And the beast only looks at her and says: "Khomote, khomote". So the mother now takes one of her children and throws her child to the beast, grabs her other child into her arms and crying hysterically, hurries along her way. The beast takes the child and shoves the child into its mouth. "Chomp chomp", chews the child up and the mother now hurrying along the way, crawling up this ridge, can see the homestead in the distance, she can see the people moving around, she's crying, screaming and here comes the cloud of smoke, and again the confrontation and again the words: "Khomote, khomote". The mother now desperate takes her other child and throws her child to the beast, clambering up the hill. And the beast takes the remaining child, throws it into its mouth and chews it, "chomp, chomp". And the mother now hurrying desperately to get to her home and again the cloud of smoke and again the confrontation and the story comes to an end.

And we know, of course, how it's going to end. Anyway now in a simple little narrative like that a gifted performer will take the emotion and will tie these together through this repeated form, with this dreadful mysterious, this 'out there' kind of feeling about this mysterious being who cannot even be described, who's ancient and from the oral tradition. O.K., and the narrative has the effect of routing these two emotions and welding them together, unifying them into a form. Now look, wouldn't it be a dreadful thing to say that what that story means is that a mother loves her children, or that a mother shouldn't run with her children across the veldt by herself, or anything like that? Maybe all of that is true, but that's not what the narrative is about. The narrative is about the emotions that are called forth by the performer and then worked together, worked up to a form through the repetition of the performance.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, first of all I'd like to congratulate Harold Scheub for his performance as a story-teller as well as for his analysis. But I have to confess that I don't know how the story about the 'Khomote' should end, though I could give a guess. If anyone listening does know or would like to suggest what they think happens to end the story we'd be delighted to hear from you....and if it's a really imaginative conclusion then we could share it with other listeners to Arts and Africa.

And to inspire us, here's more Xhosa music. This song is called "Mangebeza", and so for the time being it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey until next week. Goodbye.