

# 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. Our signature music is particularly appropriate for today's programme. It's Gambian kora music and we've just had a rare chance to hear it performed in Britain.

## TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - Kora Music.

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A taste of some of the melodic kora music performed by three of the most outstanding Mandinke musicians from the Gambia at the Commonwealth Institute here in London. The three men are 'Griot' - master musicians who perform a vital function in their community as oral historians. Through their music they keep alive the traditions and folklores of the Mandinke people. Their main instrument is the kora. It's a type of harp which has no less than 21 strings. Anne Bolsover spoke to Lucy Duran, a kora expert from the British Institute of Recorded Sound and asked her to explain what the instrument looked like.

## LUCY DURAN

It has a very big resonator which is made out of a big gourd dried in the sun and then a tall neck that stands about three feet high. The neck is what the strings are attached to. They are sort of leather tuning rings up the neck and the strings fit around these tuning rings. You push the rings up or down to make the note go higher or lower and it has a sort of wide bridge. That's its really unique feature. There is no other instrument in the world which is quite like it. It has a wide bridge which stands up from the resonator and divides the twenty one strings into two parallel rows. That's the really unusual feature of the kora. It's played just with the thumbs and the first fingers of both hands. One would think the range of possibilities was quite limited but, in fact, as you have heard, it's capable of a very virtuoso technique.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What do you think are the main characteristics of Mandinke kora music?

LUCY DURAN

Well there are various styles of kora playing and if you're talking about Bai Konte's style, which is the style that is played on the coast today, melodically it's rather, I suppose one might compare it to blues or funk or something of that sort. It's very lively, very syncopated, very rhythmic, almost sort of dance-like the melodies. At the same time it's very ornate so there are the two sides to it. I mean basically the music follows a pattern of theme and variation. There's a short theme which forms the basis for improvised variation. In that respect, it's a bit like jazz. You have your theme which is stated several times and then you go off into variations.

ANNE BOLSOVER

The Mandinke kora players have been talked of as oral historians. How are they this? What exactly are they singing about?

LUCY DURAN

Well a lot of their songs are about events in Mandinke history and rulers and fighters in Mandinke history. The music is one of the main forms in which history has been passed down, in fact. So they are the people who retain Mandinke history. They're genealogists, they know the genealogies of all the ruling families in Mandinke society. They know the people who founded the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century. They recite his epic, the epic of Soundiata Keita who founded the Mali Empire. They relate the origins of the kora, who first popularized it, where it started, how it spread from one country to another among Mandinke people. All the stories of the early twentieth century period, the period when there was a break down of traditional Mandinke society due to the British colonial administration. So really they are the people who know all about Mandinke history. It's fair to describe them as oral historians. They are also entertainers, they are much more than just historians.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How did the kora come to the Mandinke?

LUCY DURAN

Well originally the Mandinke had two older instruments. Originally they played the xylophone, that was way back in Soundiata Keita's time. Then later on they had an instrument which is called the kontingo which is like a small lute with five strings. The kora itself, evolved out of similar but less sophisticated instruments, a variety of which are played in that area by other peoples. It evolved something like two hundred and fifty years ago because the Scots traveller, Mungo Park, visited West Africa at the end of the eighteenth century and wrote about the kora. He described it as one of the instruments played by the chief's musician and he describes it as a harp with eighteen strings. Well nowadays it has acquired only three more strings. So we're pretty safe to

LUCY DURAN

say that it's been in its present form for at least two hundred years and probably longer.

ANNE BOLSOVER

How are kora players and kora music regarded in West Africa when so many people are looking to more modern music or highlife or juju, things like that which are totally different?

LUCY DURAN

Well I think there's room for both of them. I think the kora plays a very important, if not vital role in present day Mandinke society. I think it will be a while before that changes. I mean as far as I can see it's very, very much there to stay. The musical idiom is changing. It is becoming more modern but the role of the kora player remains more or less as it was, as it has been for the last hundred years or so. So I think there are plenty of people who like pop music and yet those same people also appreciate kora music.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - Kora Music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Dembo Konte, a Mandinke kora player performing especially for Arts and Africa. And from music we go to an important literary event - the first International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books; an occasion which has drawn black writers and publishers from many parts of the world. Amongst them was Kole Omotoso, the Nigerian poet and novelist. He has already had two novels published in the Heinemann Africa Series, "The Edifice" and "The Combat", and he told us about his new book "Memories of our Recent Boom" which will be in the bookshops soon.

KOLE OMOTOSO

The novel is called "Memories of Our Recent Boom". I completed it in '79 when I was in Barbados in the West Indies. It is mainly to document, fictionally, what I consider is a passing phase of Nigerian life. The sudden boom, the sudden prosperity for a few people, and the implications for the society. It is the story of two brothers, a story of a family really, but mainly two brothers, their success, their financial success, the ease with which they succeeded, their attempt to re-integrate into their village life and the realisation that ultimately they have been irrelevant to the life of the village. My intention is to ensure that by the time the reader has finished reading the book, he can say to himself that that is the kind of person I don't want to be. It is a futherance of that kind of presentation. I'm saying this because one of the readers was rather disappointed that the character was negative towards the end, that he is irrelevant, he oppresses his own people, he exploits them. And I say: "Yes, that's exactly what I want to say. That's what I've been trying to say". In depicting characters, it is to depict them in such a way that the reader says: "No, this is not a person I want to be" or "I don't admire this person".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

One of the events organised in conjunction with the Book Fair was a special meeting of black critics and writers. Amongst the many issues discussed was one perhaps unfashionable view raised by Omotoso himself. He put forward an argument in defence of European languages in contemporary African literature.

KOLE OMOTOSO

I was making a case for writing in the so-called foreign languages in Africa. The case is one that I think needs to be made. Language is a uniting aspect of nation building. It can also be a divisive aspect of nation building. My theme is that I think it is necessary for African writers, African educationalists, African publishers or people who are involved in publishing in Africa, to recognise the fact that these languages, these European languages have, to some extent, been domesticated in Africa. Now they are, in fact, the only languages that cut across the nationalities in African countries. To that extent they can be used positively and they have been used positively. My example, of course, is the Portuguese freedom fighters. In fact, they came from different parts of Africa and they used the same language as the Portuguese have used for five hundred years to fight the Portuguese in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau. I'm saying this because one gets worried that people think that there must be just one way i.e. you must use Yoruba or Kikuya or Wolof alone. There is no reason why those languages can not be developed at the same time as French, English, Portuguese, Spanish are developing. Because language is not static. I mean I'm worried that people will then go and say: "Oh we must turn our backs on such and such a language". These languages have been with us but we have had the capability of changing them. Maybe coming from a society like Nigeria where some examples of what can be called Nigerian English is easier for me than say for someone who comes from Kenya where there was a localised and stationed colonial system whereby the colonisers are there as part and parcel of the population. So the case I was making was really that we must recognise the capability of the European languages in Africa to express us.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Nigerian poet and novelist Kole Omotoso. And there I'm afraid we must end the programme. So until the same time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey in London saying goodbye.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - "LIMPOPO"