

# 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. And we begin the programme with some rousing sounds from Sierra Leone.

ACTUALITY: - Music of the Sierra Leone Dance Troupe

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

The drums of the Sierra Leone Dance Troupe - a group of musicians and dancers of all ages and from all parts of Sierra Leone. They perform regularly in the capital, Freetown, and their work brings together the diversity of dance and musical talent to be found in the country. On a recent visit to Sierra Leone, Anne Bolsover spoke with the troupe's Director and Presenter Kole Dura Suma, and asked him when the troupe was founded.

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Well the Sierra Leone Dance Troupe was founded in 1963 by the late John Akar, who thought we have a rich culture and that there were so many beautiful dances going on up country that he needed to bring these dances together and form the Sierra Leone National Dance Troupe.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

Well how did he do that? Did he go to all the provinces and collect people who were dancing in the different areas, or did he pick people in Freetown to learn the dances?

KOLE DURA SUMA:

He went to the provinces, witnessed dances done during festivals and from there he picked certain dancers, brought them to Freetown, auditioned them and, then out of this number he invited to Freetown, he selected people he thought would form a very beautiful dance ensemble.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

Are these dances very difficult to learn, because some of them look incredibly difficult.

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Yes. Some of the dances were formed by the original people who were then in the dance troupe. But since then, the dancers have lived in the cultural village and when they practice every morning, children go there and see these dances. Today most of the people in the dance troupe are children of the dancers themselves, who witnessed the practices and picked-up a little.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

So they all live together as a community.

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Oh yes, they live in the cultural village in Aberdeen.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

Are there any particular themes that run through most of the dances coming from all the different regions in Sierra Leone?

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Dances differ as you go from tribe to tribe. As you might have learnt we have the ten major tribes in the country, and each tribe really has a particular type of dance. For instance among the Mendes they have a lot of masked devils, you have the Ngoboi, the Nafale, the Faluye and a whole lot of others. And recently we were lucky to find the Ngouli, which is in itself a very unique devil.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

What's that like, tell me about it?

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Well it's a devil, it's known to be a baboon dancer. It can dance with two heads to make you feel that two people are doing the dance but really it's one person doing the dance. And it can dance with up to four heads. I find it very difficult to really explain what's going on in the dance myself.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

Is that all one dancer?

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Yes just one dancer.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

And he manages to hold four heads, maybe at the same time?

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Oh yes, he's a very old man and that's him over there (laughing)

ANNE BOLSOVER:

Tell me about some of the other dances we are going to see here tonight, perhaps in a little more detail.

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Well you'll be able to see tonight the Witchbird, which springs from a fancy devil from among the Temnes, they call the Alikali or the Jauli and it's a special masked devil that is found only within the dance troupe. You will be able to see also the Fulah dancers, you know the Fulahs are known to be perhaps the best acrobats in the country. They are herdsman and the reason why you find them in almost all West African countries is the fact that they are herdsmen and you know they have to move from place to place in search of pasture. They're known in Nigeria, you can also find them in Northern Nigeria; and in Northern Nigeria they're known to be the Fulani. Several other West African countries have the Fulahs they're very beautiful acrobats. This is just to name a few of the dancers you'll be able to see tonight.

ANNE BOLSOVER:

What are the main kind of instruments that are used, you know played with the dances.

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Mostly drums and what you call xylophone but we call them balangi, and you have the loko nkaelay, you have the mende nkaelay and you have limba nkaelay. The rest of them are just drums from different tribes. For instance the drums of Sierra Leone is a combination of the major musical instruments from the country, but what you see mostly in the drums of Sierra Leone are - drums, nkaelay and the balangi.

ACTUALITY: - Music of the Sierra Leone Dance Troupe

ANNE BOLSOVER:

What are the plans of the group for the future?

KOLE DURA SUMA:

Well there are a lot of plans, what I hope to see right now is a troupe going abroad, because although the Sierra Leone audience admires what the troupe does I think it is admired more by foreigners than by the Sierra Leoneans themselves.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Kole Dura Suma talking to Anne Bolsover about the Sierra Leone National Dance Troupe. Well many folkloric groups from Africa do of course get the chance to perform abroad. Not too long ago we heard on this programme about the success in America of the National Dance Theatre of Zaire. And more recently a Performing Arts Troupe from Lagos University in Nigeria has been tantalizing audiences in far away Mexico. They were guests at the International Arts Festival at Guanajuato. Natalie Wheen, a presenter of the World Service Arts programme "Meridien" spoke with their Director Laz Ekwueme and asked him about the aims of the troupe.

LAZ EKWUEME:

We have in the University of Lagos a centre for cultural studies. And our objective is to promote and project Nigerian culture, and research into Nigerian culture and also culture of today's world, for performance and presentation to the public at large, and also for historical documentation. So we have what we call a Performing Arts Troupe. A core of professional actors, dancers, musicians who are hired by the University on a permanent job to do plays, play music, dance and such things. So they form the core of this group.

NATALIE WHEEN:

You don't think it's a sort of contradiction to be highly trained intellectually and musically, and technically and professionally, and work with the natural expression of your folkdancing which comes absolutely straight out of the soil. You don't think there's an immense gulf between a highly trained westernised outlook.

LAZ EKWUEME:

Not at all. Because I think the more one really has exposure, let me say that, exposure to all the cultural influences of the world, the more one can interpret ones own culture to the world at large, even to ones own people. I think it's come in very handy, especially when you're working on a stage now. For example one problem I had in this production is, the Yoruba culturally speaking have very fine dancers but each person does his own individual thing, there's uniformity in rhythm but not in movement. Now I have taken the dancers, as it were out of context, and brought some uniformity in movement for the stage presentation so that you have the spectacle of seeing four dancers doing more or less the same movement, each with his own individual nuance which still makes it personal to each. But at least there is some systematic movement and when they move around you can form a colour combination of sorts which would never have arisen in the local setting.

ACTUALITY: - Music of the Performing Arts Troupe

NATALIE WHEEN:

Can you tell me a little bit about the show itself, what it means, the story etc.

LAZ EKWUEME.

Well there's this traditional belief that some children never live their full cycle of life; they get born, they stay a while and they die only to come back maybe in the same family, maybe in another one, and be born again and run this cycle of being born and dying. And that's a traditional belief that spans perhaps the whole of the continent, but certainly throughout West Africa it's widely believed. When this obtains, the belief is that there has to be some exorcism to cut out that repetitive pattern and the child can then grow into full adult life as a normal human being. Well now this is a dramatisation, an exaggerated form of the system where a particular obunje (phon), she's sold her spirit to a very powerful spirit.

NATALIE WHEEN:

The Shangor?

LAZ EKWUEME:

Well not quite Shangor, this is the confusion that may arise when people see this. In fact Shangor is invoked in the end to fight this spirit and it is Shangor who overcomes and overpowers the spirit, and aids the final exorcism.

NATALIE WHEEN:

Now the dances we saw last night, are they traditional dances that go with this story?

LAZ EKWUEME:

Not necessarily, they are just traditional dances that are used in normal life with different types of festivals. But of course arranged for the stage, so naturally the dances have been taken out of their normal context and brought for the stage; so organised, arranged, timed and systematically produced as it were to form a story. So they are very old dances and here particularly we've tried to bring out various cultural sides of Nigeria, which as you know is a heterogeneous society.

NATALIE WHEEN:

We could see that at once because some of the costumes are from different parts of Nigeria, some of the musical instruments are from different parts of Nigeria. I think there's a danger isn't there in losing the absolute dynamic expression that each individual wants to put into this dance if you are going to choreograph it in kind of masses for export and you know folklorique. There is this great movement of folklorique dances that it all looks terribly pretty, and it's all very well organised, and it's rather like the royal ballet of Nigeria (laughing). And how have you contained within this sort of regimentation the individual spark of the creative dancer?

LAZ EKWUEME:

This is the dynamic vitality of African dances. And I use the Ibo dances as an epitomy. Ibo dances are group dances in which everybody does "the same thing", but each person is an individual and when there are thirty different dancers you can see thirty different interpretations of that one movement. And that's the dynamic vitality I think it possesses, which perhaps other folkloric dances don't as it were. So you really don't lose that individual vitality that you are thinking about, but what you gain is discipline, there's co-ordination of rhythm, time, space and sound and what's more I don't make any apologies for making adaptations of Nigerian traditional dances. If you are going to take it on a stage, out of it's context, you've got to make adaptations otherwise what's the point.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Laz Ekwueme, Director of the Performing Arts Troupe of Lagos University. And there I'm afraid we must end the programme. I hope you'll join me at the same time again next week. Till then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey in London saying goodbye.