

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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First broadcast: 7.11.82.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa". And today we look at the performing arts of Uganda - storytelling, music and dance through the eyes of one man who has been actively involved in them all his life. He's Basil Wanzira formerly director of the National Dance Troupe of Uganda, he is now Lecturer in Music, Dance and Drama at Makerere University. He is in London at the moment to give a series of lectures on the performing arts at London's Africa Centre and he's here in our studio today. Basil Wanzira welcome to "Arts and Africa". Tell us about the performing arts in your country.

BASIL WANZIRA

The music and dance in Uganda is based on everyday life. That is we perform or we dance because maybe a child is being born today. We will sing, we will dance, we will dramatise because a child is being named. Maybe a child has grown and now he's fourteen years old and we are going to initiate him, in other words we are going to give him a new stage of life. That is he is going to be made into a man. Girls similarly are going to be made into woman at the age of 16, 17, 18 before 19 or before 20. Now there is a lot of music there. The music continues to play a role in our life cycle as you would say. This is today, not yesterday. A lot of people assume that this is not what we're doing today. But this is our life. So you continue the story, you have been initiated into a man, what happens? They give you a girl. Now when they give you a girl, the courting ceremony is music again. If you went to Uganda, say in north Uganda you would find these people, the Acholi, dancing the lacaraka dance. Tin...Tri...etc (phon). This is a dance for courting. You are looking out for which girl you're going to be taking out. And so you court when you're given a girl and you marry this music. Marriage ceremony takes place. There is a lot of music that is going on there and it continues in your own life style, because there's working music, fishing music, harvesting music, beer party music and soon you're old and your age is getting much closer to the end of your life. When you pass away, when you die, we believe that you don't die in African society, in Uganda in particular. You don't actually die, because the next day they are going to name you when someone else is born. So there is music there, we celebrate music. So you can see that music and dance is part of our own everyday life. It's not separated.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now there are other forms of performing arts in Uganda, say the art of storytelling about which I think you have a lot to say.

BASIL WANZIRA

This actually is one of the important issues that we have. Today we believe that the art of storytelling is so important because through storytelling we are able to learn the stories or the origin of our ethnic groups. In other words it is through these stories that have become legends. And today you can fall back and say "Oh, this is the beginning of such and such an ethnic group". Now again these stories are divided up into various sectors. One, for instance, would be stories for children, for babysitting at home, stories meant to be told to elders by elders at their own gathering of different age groups. So storytelling has become so important the government, today, the Ministry of Education, has included storytelling on the timetable. You are able to have a 30 minute period of storytelling to encourage our children to increase their vocabulary in language. Their personality, for instance, is actually developed through storytelling.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Although the stories belong to various ethnic groups and are I suppose as different sometimes, use of them is being made nationally to create a sort of national identity among Ugandans. Is that correct?

BASIL WANZIRA

What really has happened is that at the time of Independence, if you take it back to 1962, a lot of music, that is Ugandan music and dance and traditional stories were not as popular or were not included in our learning curriculum. After that independence national dance troupes were formed, not only in Uganda but in a lot of other independence countries. The national troupes were formed to promote, preserve, and actually develop their cultural heritage. This, in Uganda, brought a lot of different ethnic groups, 33 ethnic groups in Uganda, each of them with a role to play. In other words they were all brought together and this in my mind is a very great unifying factor. If you are going to understand someone, you have to understand the culture of that particular individual. Now the moment you know his or her culture, then you know that you are going to get on together. So they brought all these different ethnic groups to form what you would call a national dance troupe, the Heartbeat of Africa Troupe.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you've mentioned the role played by the voice in storytelling, for example on the radio, how about other forms of storytelling, say by drummers and other traditional entities.

BASIL WANZIRA

A lot of our musicians, take for instance the tube fiddlers or the tube fiddle players, this is a string instrument which is quite common in Uganda. Now these normally play a series of stories which actually are in their form a musical story. In other words you are not sitting down and listening to a story but you are actually dancing to a story that is being sung through the instrument. This is very, very common indeed and, of course, again apart from just using this kind of story form in schools, we do invite the experts, the traditional musicians, into schools to teach our children how to play these musical instruments and how they can build up on the story.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now the drummer, or rather the drum, is a very important instrument in African music, in African culture as a whole. Is there any special significance of the drum in Ugandan culture?

BASIL WANZIRA

Oh yes, yes. The drum, I am glad you say it plays a very important role in the entire African society. In Uganda, different ethnic groups have drums that have a particular role to play. In other words, today the drum is able to tell you what sort of function is taking place at that time. In other words when you play the drum you can announce to the rest of the people in the village that in this village the beer is ready. Bully,...bully...bully ...etc (phon). You know "The Beer is ready, come and drink".

EXTRACT - DRUMMING.

BASIL WANZIRA

Now that, in one of the ethnic languages, would be bull...bully...bully... meaning "Bring your container, the beer is ready". Similarly you can tell the people in the village: "My friends, today, we are wedding, there is a wedding ceremony here, come". Dubi...dubi...dubi...dubi... etc (phon).

EXTRACT - DRUMMING.

BASIL WANZIRA

Now someone hearing this with the understanding of the same ethnic group that we have, would know that that drum is for nothing else other than the wedding ceremony music. People hearing that from the same culture are likely to know that that is a wedding ceremony. They couldn't mistake it. Similarly you could inform the people in that village from the top hill that someone has passed away in this particular village, someone has died, an elder has died, please come and pay the last respects. Dum...dubi...dum...dum...dubi etc (phon).

EXTRACT - DRUMMING.

BASIL WANZIRA

Now this saying: "Do Magoto getila" (phon). "Magoto" meaning old age, "getila" - has swept away. So old age has carried one of our members of society, so please come and pay your last respects. That is a message that would be passed to that particular ethnic group and they would know. So to me, much as you say, a drum is a very significant instrument and it is so part of our life that we never part with it. You always find it there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you are giving a lecture also entitled "The Role of Musical Instruments in African Society with Particular Reference to Ugandan Society."

BASIL WANZIRA

Yes, now what is most interesting here is that in each of our African societies you find that the rattles, or the shakers, play that role of magical performances. Now, for instance you have the rattles that play the role of healing. If someone should fall sick in the village usually instead of taking this individual to the hospital, they might call a healer or they might call what we call a village doctor to examine and play these rattles, have a chant and eventually what is going to happen is that we are likely to be told by the ancestors that "I think this person has been attacked by the ancestors" and if you slaughter a cow or a goat or a sheep or whatever, a bird or chicken, then this person will be cured. But then there is this music that goes on which actually by the end of the performance the person will be cured.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I wonder what magical quality, what special quality there is about the rattle which summons the ancestors.

BASIL WANZIRA

I feel in my experience and also in the analyses of the interviews that I have heard, the elders seem to say that the rattles, the sharp sound that the rattle has, that has a psychological influence, or a psychological attachment onto the brain of the sick. You know it has a magical performance which much as we know that magic cannot be interpreted, I think it has that magical influence on the human nature so much so that you psychologically get cured.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are there any other instruments used on special magical occasions?

BASIL WANZIRA

Yes, yes. The kind of instruments that are used for magical performances tend to be very high and very sharp sounds. Now we have drums that have been specifically tuned, for instance, to induce man and woman to produce children and the kind of drumming that they do is so fast, it's so sharp that this induces you, and suddenly you have children. Even when a woman has been barren for the last 10 or 20 years. When this drum is played I can tell you, give it 3 months and she'll be pregnant.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Basil Wanzira thank you very much indeed.

BASIL WANZIRA

Alex, thanks very much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Basil Wanzira, lecturer in Music, Dance and Drama at Makerere University. And I'm afraid that's all we have time for today. So let's play out with some more drumming from Basil Wanzira. It's from a marriage ceremony and the bride is saying her last words to her father before she is taken away to join the groom. And I'm also going away but I'll be back with you at the same time next week. Meanwhile this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey in London saying goodbye.

EXTRACT - DRUMMING.