

# Arts and Africa

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa". And in today's programme we look at a new exhibition of Afro-Portuguese ivories and we feature a young Nigerian kora player, Tunde Jegede.

But first an interesting exhibition at the Museum of Mankind in London. It consists of a collection of ivories carved by West Africans for the Portuguese and other Europeans in West Africa. The pieces were made around the year 1500, shortly after the European voyagers sailed to the West Africa coast, in two centres - in the area that is now Sierra Leone, by the Sherbo people and in and around the city of Benin in Nigeria. The exhibition is rather special because there are only known to be about 100 to 120 such ivories in the world. Producer Anne Bolsover went to see the exhibition and spoke to Malcolm McCloud, Keeper of Ethnography at the British Museum. She first asked him if there was any major difference between these particular ivories and others carved in West Africa at that time.

## MALCOLM McCLOUD

The problem is that we don't know because no other ivories of this date have survived. They've all perished, the ones which were made for local use as it were have disappeared. These obviously tell us a great deal about African creativity about this time. Firstly they're immensely well carved, they're delicate and very beautifully done. The fineness of some of the ivory is quite astonishing, you can see through it, it's so fine. Secondly they have tremendous imaginative power. There's a curious fusion of European images and motifs and African ones in them. But somehow it's all integrated so it gives an impression of coherence and great power. If you look at the ivory hunting horns over there, they've got images on them of men hunting, of hounds, of stags which are drawn from European illustrations. But they also have curious African elements, beasts with great gaping mouths and teeth.

## ANNE BOLSOVER

Would that have been because the Portuguese asked them to put certain things in the carvings or were they just influenced?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

It's a great mystery of how these things were ordered and organised. We do not know very much about them. What we've got is a mixed bunch of material which has survived for 400, 500 years with very little accounts of how it was made, how it was ordered. I think certainly some elements were directly requested by the Portuguese who were paying for these things or ordering them. But the other combinations were much more puzzling as if the Africans had taken it upon themselves to create. I mean I think this is the most striking thing that comes out of them as a group, if you look at them, whether they're Benin or Sierra Leone ones, it's a creativity which must have its roots in African traditions which were well established by the time the Portuguese got there. I don't believe myself that this is a sort of tourist invention. I think it drew on much earlier sources or ivory carving, much earlier sources of inspiration which the Portuguese saw, realised was valuable and adapted for their own needs.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What are some of the carvings? I mean are they household items or are they just purely decorative?

MALCOLM McCLOUD

Well let's take a few examples. In this case we have tall lidded vessels. Sometimes these are thought to be salt cellars or to contain spices, for putting as a decoration in the centre of a table at a feast. This one's a splendid one because the bottom part of the vessel is composed of four carvings of Portuguese soldiers or traders looking out, and the top part which lifts off and has a container in it is a sailing vessel, a European sailing vessel with its rigging, and at the front and the back are anchors and then peeping out of the crow's nest is a little Portuguese with a pin or some sort of nautical instrument in his hand.

Next to it is the equivalent sort of vessel from Sierra Leone and that is much more African in its feel to me. The bottom of the vessel has groups of figures looking outward and it's very hard to say whether they were intended to be Portuguese and Africans, or just Africans, some of which may be wearing Portuguese sorts of clothes. The top of the vessel is decorated by crocodiles and there's a snake curling around it. And then it would probably have had other crocodiles sort of sweeping buttresses from the top down lower to that part of the lid. Now unfortunately these must have been very, very delicate carvings and they've all been broken off in the last 450 years or so.

This is one of the finest of all the lidded vessels. Again it's from Sierra Leone and again it has this wonderful combination of African and European elements. The lid shows a Madonna and Child and then beneath it there are three naked figures and then there are two dogs, clearly European in feel, lying next to them. But when you get to the lower part of the vessel, you have four snakes cascading down from the stem of the vessel and carved with tremendous skill because they're standing quite clear of the rest of it. It's a wonderful piece of carving to actually achieve that.

MALCOLM McCLOUD

As you see they're wonderfully preserved, no damage at all. You can see the eyes, the mouth, the little tongue poking out. That has escaped damage in all the trials and tribulations it's had in the last 400 to 500 years. So that's a marvellous thing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Malcolm McCloud of the Museum of Mankind.

And now to a rather special kora player. Tunde Jegede is not only a Nigerian, the kora is best known in Francophone West Africa, but he's only ten years old and probably the youngest kora player in London to have played in public. He's here in the studio today with his kora to play for us.

MUSIC

"ALLA LA KE" - TUNDE JEGEDE.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa" Tunde. Now what song have you just played for us?

TUNDE JEGEDE

This song's called "Alla La Ke". It's the story about two brothers whose father has just died. They are quarreling about who should be king and in the end the youngest one gets to the throne. The eldest one is very annoyed and is just about to go to the English authorities when someone says "Be patient". So in the end, he came to the throne and so the meaning is: God has willed it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes I see. There's an interesting story behind this isn't there? It's to do with the first person to teach you to play the kora.

TUNDE JEGEDE

Yes, well my teacher, Lucy Durran, studied under a man in Gambia called Amadu Bansang Jobarteh. His father was a patron of Fala Kora who had died and his two children were the people who were quarreling.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now it's very interesting to see a young boy like you playing the kora. Why did you decide to learn to play an instrument like that?

TUNDE JEGEDE

Well it was in the house so I played on it but I wanted to learn it properly. So I went to the Africa Centre and we went to see some drumming and then they said they had a surprise and a kora player came out and I met Lucy Durran, my teacher in London.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you're a school boy I assume.

TUNDE JEGEDE

Yeah.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What do you do at school, what kind of school do you attend?

TUNDE JEGEDE

The Purcell School of Music. It does maths, English and history as well as music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I see. What sort of music do you study there?

TUNDE JEGEDE

Classical. I play the cello.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what do the children in your school think about you playing this rather strange looking instrument?

TUNDE JEGEDE

They're not really interested in it much. They think it's a nice instrument but they don't see it as a proper instrument.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You did say that "Alla La Ke" was about the patron of your first teacher's father. Now usually the grios who are known as praise singers play the kora to tell a story, usually a traditional one, about the heroism of a ruler's ancestors. Now do they talk about other subjects as well?

TUNDE JEGEDE

Yes. Like the next song I'm going to play, "Masaane Siise". It's about two men quarreling over this woman and in the end one dies and so on the wedding day the other one died and the song means, You should make the right choice in the first place.

MUSIC

MASAANE SIISE - TUNDE JEGEDE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Tunde what do you intend to do in the future? Have you thought about it or is it too early yet?

TUNDE JEGEDE

I intend to set up a kora school because I went to Cambridge for a week and the kora player Amadu Bansang Jobarteh was a bit late, well he was three days late, and everybody was getting a bit worried, so I taught the people there. I gave them a few lessons of what I knew.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I wish you all the best and I'm sure all the listeners do the same. And that's it from "Arts and Africa" for today. And with some more kora music from Tunde Jegede, a praise song about a great warrior prince who died tragically while resting under a tree, shot with a silver arrow, this Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC

KELEFA SAANE - TUNDE JEGEDE.