

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

AL54/5/5/1/34

BBC COPYRIGHT CONTROL

ARTS AND AFRICA

First B'cast: 21.8.83

504G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey, and I want to start off by asking you a question. Is it really possible to fall completely under the spell of a foreign culture and really appreciate it without misunderstanding it? Well our guests this week would claim that they do understand the artistic endeavours that they admire so much. They are two people, who quite independently discovered Africa as outsiders; and they've both become passionate fans of the music and dance of the cultures they came across. David Ambrose is, of course, an old friend to the programme, he's English, he's made extensive studies of North African music, and this week he talks to Florence Akst about the music of the Sufis. Barrington Anderson, on the other hand, is a newcomer to Arts and Africa, he's West Indian, but has lived in England all his life, and he's artistic director of Ekome, a group of musicians and dancers from the West Indies and West Africa, based in the United Kingdom but looking to West Africa for their inspiration. When he came to the Arts and Africa studio a few days ago he gave us a taste of the pulsating rhythms which Ekome dancers move to.

TAPE

EXTRACT - EKOME MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Barrington Anderson, welcome to the Arts and Africa studio. I'd like you to tell me something about your group, Ekome.

BARRINGTON ANDERSON

The reason why I started the group in 1977 was because there was a need in my community for some form of black self-expression. Luckily in 1974, groups like Sankofa and Dabuah came over to this country and when these groups eventually broke up, that left a lot of tutors in the country and different choreographers and master drummers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now your team is made up of a very large team of dancers and musicians, eighteen dancers and twelve musicians. Now what is its composition racially. I mean how many Africans are there in the group, and how many West Indians?

BARRINGTON ANDERSON

When we started in 1977 we had all West Indians, but we had a Ghanaian tutor called Mr. Benjamin Baidoo. Thereafter we incorporated more and more Ghanaians in the company and we can say that nearly three quarters of the people in the company are from Jamaica or the West Indian islands and a quarter of the people are from Ghana.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you are one of the dancers.

BARRINGTON ANDERSON

Yes, I'm a dancer, that's true.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How did you first get interested in dancing?

BARRINGTON ANDERSON

Well when I was about nine years old we had a group in our community called the Bristol West Indian Dance Team. And I'd been working with this company for nearly nine years at amateur level and that gave me the insight into black dance from an early age in this country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now let's come back to this West Indian/African connection. The West Indians claim that they have something in common with the Africans, but the cynic might point out that they have been away from Africa for two hundred years. The only thing they have in common is the colour of their skin. what would you say to that?

BARRINGTON ANDERSON

Well, I think that there is a real connection. I went to Cape Coast in Ghana. Again I went to Elmina Castle - as you know is a slave castle. And there you see a lot of names called Anderson. And my name is Anderson, as you know. These kinds of connections you can see in the past took place, but I could even go further, to actually say the kind of rhythm structures and the way other people display their dance gestures shows there is some kind of connection with Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You currently operate in the United Kingdom. Do you think there's a need for you to go on an African tour?

BARRINGTON ANDERSON

Well, as I mentioned, over the seven years we've been performing and perfecting our art form and actually displaying this to a wide audience in Great Britain and throughout Europe. Well, we hope that we could eventually take this art form back to Ghana and display this work or display this culture not just in Ghana but in different countries in West Africa, so that they can actually see that we have made a serious attempt to actually learn their art form and not just to present it back to them, but to make it as exciting as possible.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Barrington Anderson, thank you very much indeed and I hope you have a very successful tour of Africa.

BARRINGTON ANDERSON

Thank you.

TAPE

EXTRACT - EKOME MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Scintillating sounds of Ekome, with West Indian dancer and director, Barrington Anderson, talking about what African music and dance means to him.

David Ambrose doesn't dance to the music he comes across, he just records it. When he saw a group of dancers and musicians celebrating in the streets of Cairo, he was curious to find out what was going on, and afterwards more than happy to pass the experiences on to Florence Akst.

TAPE

EXTRACT - EGYPTIAN MUSIC

FLORENCE AKST

David Ambrose, where were you when you recorded this?

DAVID AMBROSE

I was in downtown Cairo in a place called Zain El Abdid and there was the occasion for a Mulid which is one of the saints birthday parties that are a great source of entertainment for Egyptian people. And this was in honour of Saint Sidi Ali and so this was actually taking place in the courtyard outside Sidi Ali's Mosque in Zain El Abdid. The mosque itself is the focal point for the Zicre which is the dancing and the music that we've been listening to. But in the streets and the little alley ways approaching the mosque you can find rifle ranges and swings and cellars of sweets and food and all the paraphernalia of a fair.

FLORENCE ASKT

Do tell me more about the music itself. Was this a big band - were they professional musicians and were they professional dancers, or just local people?

DAVID AMBROSE

The dancers are the local people, the musicians are the professionals and the musicians are really quite well known in Cairo. The name of the band is The Darwish. They can be found most Friday afternoons performing in a small café behind Hussein Mosque in the centre of Cairo and so they're quite famous characters. And other musicians drop in and drop out, but the nucleus of the group is perhaps half a dozen musicians.

FLORENCE AKST

Could you tell me about the instruments? I can hear drums but I think quite small ones. You mentioned a flute.

DAVID AMBROSE

Yes. The flute is a very important part of this type of music. The Egyptian flute is usually the Salamaya. It may be the Nai, which is the long traditional flute of Egypt - possibly the oldest instrument in that part of the world. The drums are very gaily decorated. They are large tamborines covered in skin, perhaps a foot or a foot and a half in diameter and the small metal symbols round the outside are usually made from the tops of tin cans. The egg-timer shaped clay tabler is also being played.

FLORENCE AKST

So there's a more traditional drum is there, as well as the tamborine?

DAVID AMBROSE

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

And those are the three main instruments.

DAVID AMBROSE

And usually a violin and the violinist will often play soaring solos that are really very plaintive indeed, but on this occasion the violinist was taking a rather back seat and leaving it to the flute players.

TAPE

EXTRACT - EGYPTIAN MUSIC

FLORENCE AKST

What surprised me a little is that this is all happening so near a mosque and in fact we talked about the mosque being the focal point. I don't associate music with worship in Islam.

DAVID AMBROSE

No, it's quite right that this is a source of some controversy. What we're listening to is really Sufi music and The Darwish is the name of the band and that is really the Arabic for Dervish, and music has always been a very important part of the mysticism of the Sufi religion, which is itself a perfectly acceptable branch of the Islamic religion. There are Islamic fundamentalists however, who consider that music is an inappropriate form with which to worship Allah, because it's supposedly sensual and it's a pleasure, in other words. But I think that Sufis have always said that providing it is an act of worship, the music itself is an act of worship and that it encourages them to reach the necessary mental state that they wish to achieve, then they feel that music is perfectly acceptable.

FLORENCE AKST

And what does the Koran say about dancing. Because that is the root of all authority?

DAVID AMBROSE

Well, there is no injunction against music in the Koran. What has perhaps given rise to the controversy is really heresy. Some people claim that Mohammed, in his lifetime, frowned upon music and dancing. Others say that he thought it perfectly acceptable and indeed there are stories, but they're not written anywhere, but there are stories that have been passed down of Mohammed encouraging people to make music a part of their lives and I was often told when I was in Egypt that when Mohammed came to Medina in the first place after the Hegira - the flight from Mecca - he was met by women singing and dancing, and he was pleased that they met him in this way. So many people feel that music is perfectly acceptable and it's certainly not forbidden.

FLORENCE AKST

And do you think it's at all likely that the music you recorded and were hearing at this saints festival is something like the prophet himself would have heard.

DAVID AMBROSE

I think that it's very old. There's no doubt about that. The instrumentation certainly. It's very hard to say. The instruments that we have here are certainly very Egyptian. The Nai, for instance, the long flute, was found in pharonic tombs, so that had been there for a long time, and it's quite possible that people were playing this in Mohammed's time as well.

TAPE

EXTRACT - EGYPTIAN MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You've been listening to David Ambrose enthusing there to Florence Akst over Islamic music in Cairo.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Before we sign off a special message to Arts and Africa listeners, if you come across song, dance, painting or writing from another country, or even another part of your own country, and found you liked it, write to us, telling us about your experience explaining just why it was so special. Write to: Arts and Africa, BBC Bush House, London. We'll be reading out excerpts from the best of the letters we receive. And now we've come to the end of the programme. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey in London saying goodbye.

TAPE

LIMPOPO