

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa". In today's programme - drama in the service of better health; a chance for brighter museums; and a film that is winning awards as it travels round the film festivals.

The forthcoming film festival in Ouagadougou will be showing the latest film by the Mali film director, Souleymane Cisse. It has the Bambara title of "Finye" which translates into English as "The Wind" and by that he implies "The Wind of Change". Cisse is one of the most highly regarded of that elite group - the film-makers of Francophone Africa - and it isn't the first time that one of his films has been shown at Ouagadougou, the capital of Upper Volta. Someone who has taken an active interest in African films and film-makers is Angela Martin and she's looking forward to her second viewing of "Finye" when she attends the Ouagadougou Festival in February.

When she came along to the "Arts and Africa" studio recently, we asked her to tell us a little about Souleymane Cisse - and about "Finye".

## ANGELA MARTIN

The story of "Finye" is about two young people who meet at high school at about the time of their final exams. The girl, Batrue (phon) is the daughter of a local government official who is extremely authoritarian and very repressive and represents a kind of westernised authority with no reference to traditional values and no sense of the future that he is creating for the young people. The boy that she meets Baa (phon) is the grandson of a man who represents the traditional source of knowledge. He has, in a sense, given in to the new order represented by Batrue's father. During the time of the exams it's very tense particularly because it's very clear that those students who pass are the children of families with a position in society and therefore it's a corrupt system where position gains success. Because Baa belongs to a less well-positioned family, he fails his exams. He is, for a while, caught up in drugs and a not very productive way of life but then gets involved in student activities against this corrupt system which is actually being made worse by Batrue's father.

ANGELA MARTIN

They are eventually arrested, Baa and Batrue, for which they suffer. It's this crisis that they get into that forces Baa's grandfather to realise that he should not give up the authority that he had and that the knowledge that he has, the traditional knowledge, is a contribution to the way that the young people will determine their own future, a future which cannot be determined by the likes of Batrue's father.

FLORENCE AKST

So it's quite a political film.

ANGELA MARTIN

It's a very political film. And an extremely courageous film for Cisse to have made because at the time that he was thinking of making it there was a lot of student protests in Mali. So it was precisely a topic that was already very important to people.

FLORENCE AKST

What was the film like? Was it in colour? Was it very professional and sophisticated or rather raw? What are his films like?

ANGELA MARTIN

The film is in colour, filmed on 16 mm and is extremely competent. Cisse is one of the two or three most important African film makers today.

FLORENCE AKST

.... and has a lot of films to his credit now?

ANGELA MARTIN

This is now his third feature. He trained for five years in Moscow as a film maker having already trained as a projectionist. When he was at school he very often played truant in order to go and watch films, he was absolutely enamored of the cinema and that's still true today. He watches every film that he can get hold of. He found the five years in Moscow extremely valuable. He made three short films while he was there including one on the comparison of traditional and modern medicine in Africa and he made his first film about a young man who was out of work. It was called "Five Days in a Life". It follows this young man around Bamako for five days.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Angela Martin talking to Florence Akst about the films of Souleymane Cisse. And we're hoping that Angela Martin will pay us a return visit when she gets back from Ouagadougou and the festival.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, does the word 'museum' conjure up a dark building with dimly lit glass cases housing dusty, sometimes unidentified bits of pottery and fragments of cloth? The last few years has seen a brightening up of the way museums display their treasures. A lot of imagination has been put into making the presentation inviting to the visitor. But so far there has been more imagination than money available. But now there is good news for museums - at least, for those in West Africa. The Ford Foundation has just made a grant of no less than \$285,000 to the London based International African Institute. The money is to be spent on a West African Museums Project under the chairmanship of Professor Ade Ajayi of Nigeria. The Institute's Honorary Director is Professor Ioan Lewis of London University and he's been telling Elizabeth Ohene about the project.

PROF. IOAN LEWIS

It is a project based in Ivory Coast funded by the Ford Foundation and designed to improve the display of the African heritage in West African museums. As you know, the West African museums vary immensely in the quality of their displays and in the resources they have to conserve their materials and to display them to the best advantage. There are lots of little local museums. There are national museums. There's a great lack of co-ordination. Frequently museum staff are not given sufficient recognition as important people in the Civil Service structure of African countries. Our project is designed to improve all that, to encourage co-operation, particularly between Anglophone and Francophone countries, also one former Portuguese colony, Guinea Bissau.

ELIZABETH OHENE

I noticed that you said the display of the museum, but I notice in your handouts that it is about the preservation of West African cultural heritage.

PROF. IOAN LEWIS

Sure.

ELIZABETH OHENE

And I meant to ask, for example, do you believe that museums really are the places where cultural heritage is preserved?

PROF. IOAN LEWIS

Well of course African culture continues outside them. But at the same time there are material objects, particularly art objects, which can be preserved in museums. Of course we have a marvellous display of the West African heritage more particularly the Nigerian heritage at the moment in London which has attracted a great deal of attention at the British Academy of Arts. There is an absolutely unique exhibition of early Nigerian art objects which has attracted the attention, quite rightly, of the art critics of Europe.

ELIZABETH OHENE

I see. But is it going to have anything at all to do with trying to recover the treasures of West Africa that are in many British museums and private collections? Has this project got anything at all to do with that?

PROF. IOAN LEWIS

Of course the issue that you raise is a very important one. But we would like to approach that issue as part of this project concerned in attempting to improve the current security over art collections in West Africa and other African countries for that matter. That's to say we would like to improve existing museum security not only in public museums but also private collections. And we would like to contribute to a public awareness and consciousness about the importance of countries preserving their artistic cultural heritage.

ELIZABETH OHENE

Are you planning on putting on display things like old combs and chipped pieces of utensils? Is that the kind of thing that you are trying to discover and display better?

PROF. IOAN LEWIS

What we are trying to do is to help departments of museums and antiquities in West Africa to display the resources that they have at present, to preserve them, to display them more adequately, to catalogue them properly, to collaborate with their colleagues in neighbouring countries, to exchange information, to have meetings, to have networks, to have workshops, to have research seminars. We would like to help to improve the custody and display of the cultural heritage.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Prof. Ioan Lewis and the West African Museums Project.

Over the years we've been hearing of many theatre ventures in different parts of the Continent that have seen themselves as part of the development effort in education, agriculture and medicine. The account we're going to hear now is different in an important respect. It's taking part in South Africa and the prime mover has been Barney Simon. You may remember his name as director of the outstandingly successful play "Woza Albert" and he's also a television director. Some years ago he got to know the staff at a mission hospital very well, for while he was working on a book with one of their black patients, he also lent a hand helping out in the hospital. This experience opened his eyes to the barrier that existed between nurses and their patients, nurses who have been professionally trained by white doctors. And in South Africa a lack of other opportunities means that black girls may take up nursing as a career without feeling it their true vocation. Barney Simon wanted to find a way of helping the nurses who had received an alien training to communicate more effectively with their patients.

BARNEY SIMON

They're trained by white doctors to behave like white nurses in a white situation. So in the country districts where there is a great need for health education, I mean the infant mortality rate is very high, you find that there was often a great hostility between the indigenous people and the nurses. And in time I began to run workshops for the nurses. I made up a list, like on a Monday night you could do ballroom dancing, Tuesday you could do embroidery and Wednesday, if you wanted, you could come and do health education with Barney! And we did awareness exercises and discussions. I encourage them to dialogue in the vernacular which I have an understanding of but which I'm not fluent in. So I was really a catalyst. In time they began to really become aware of their situation as black women rather than as these white-trained nurses. I got them to go out to the villages incognito, out of uniform, to begin to look at the people with new eyes. They were quite delighted with themselves and each other. And then to watch the games children play, listen to the songs children sing, people sing, listen to the discussions in the shebeens, the stores, the buses and bit by bit they came back with information. Then they began to understand what the people felt they needed, not what they should feel they need, but what they do feel they need. They began a vocabulary of communication based on that, based on the reality of the people rather than on the reality of the doctors and nurses.

FLORENCE AKST

Now, did they act this out in front of you?

BARNEY SIMON

Well no. What would happen then was I would then get them to write songs to traditional melodies which would deal with subjects like breast feeding, diarrhoea, tuberculosis, the growing of food, nutrition, anything that they felt was right for the community. They would also improvise plays and sometimes you would ride to do a concert somewhere and they'd see houses with small windows and in ten minutes they would have composed, with harmonies, a song about the need for air and light. You would have a group of people in a field and then they would perform a play on, say, breastfeeding and a song which punctuated and underlined the play. The people would join in and sing and dance with the nurses instead of being lectured by them.

FLORENCE AKST

And what parts of South Africa did you go to?

BARNEY SIMON

Well I worked largely in Zululand and largely in the Transkei but I've gone to various hospitals. Maybe a church group will ask me to do a workshop with nuns, high school students, social workers, nurses in a squatter camp. It's really wonderful. It's some of the most exciting theatre I've ever been involved with.