

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa", and today there's lots of music - but not yet! The first person I'm going to introduce is Patrick Mweemba from Lusaka in Zambia. Only the other week on this programme a group of artists from The Gambia expressed their feelings - and the feelings of many other African artists - about the lack of response and support for their work from local people. Patrick Mweemba is a Zambian artist and his views are a further commentary on the subject.

He sculpts, he prints with a variety of techniques and he paints - mostly in watercolours. As a young man he earned his living as a bank clerk attending art classes in his spare time but he found his job too routine so ten years ago he gave it up and has been making a living as an artist ever since, though in the last few years he's been also working for the Mpapa Gallery in Lusaka. Of course Zambia has a much bigger population than The Gambia and so potentially more buyers of works of art.

At present Zambia is suffering from a chronic shortage of foreign exchange so many of the imported materials for professional artists are difficult to come by.

When Jerusha Castley visited the Mpapa Gallery to meet Patrick Mweemba and see some of his work she wondered whether it is still possible to make a living as an artist in Zambia.

PATRICK MWEEMBA

Yeh, I would say it is possible, actually, if you are only determined to do it. I have been working as a full-time artist since 1974 making paintings, prints, sculptures. I have not starved so far, up to now! Therefore I would say it is possible to make a living out of painting in Zambia.

JERUSHA CASTLEY

And who are your main customers?

MWEEMBA

Unfortunately, it's just the expatriate community who buy from me and from any other artists so far. Not many Zambians seek or patronize the art

exhibitions and so on. Of course for interest's sake some come but they never buy.

CASTLEY

Why do you think that is the case? Why do you think that fewer Zambians visit art galleries and exhibitions?

MWEEMBA

Well they actually appreciate art but why they don't buy, as many have mentioned from time to time, is because the art is just too expensive and they don't see why they should spend money on it. In other words, it seems as though they need education in culture, you know, like appreciating and supporting the work of art as this could lead to preservation of our culture. Because if the Zambians do not buy the art, and instead the work is bought by the expatriates who in the end go away with the work, how do we preserve the art, the culture in Zambia?

CASTLEY

Do you get any support as artists here in Zambia say from Ministries of Culture or Education or Social Services?

MWEEMBA

Yes a bit of it is coming in appreciation by the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Director of Cultural Services especially is quite sympathetic with the artists. He is always found at the exhibitions and he expresses a lot of concern about what the Zambian artists are doing. This is quite an encouraging thing although there is not much material help from the Government as such but, anyway, moral support is there. We just hope that in the future more substantial aid will be forthcoming to help with the artists, to keep up their work.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Patrick Mweemba talking to Jerusha Castley. And now for our music.

MUSIC: "Lambango" - Banna Konuteh

TETTEH-LARTEY

The music of Banna Konuteh, one of The Gambia's outstanding musicians and balafon players. Though he's been telling me that in his language, Manding, the instrument I know as a xylophone is called a 'bala' and the word 'balafon' has been coined by Europeans. But whatever the name, this is the sound.

MUSIC: "Lambango" - Banna Konuteh

Banna Konuteh is an experienced and much travelled musician and when he came to the "Arts and Africa" studio recently he told me about his early days.

BANNA KONUTEH

I regret, my parents never sent me to school. I did try myself to come to England to develop my music and my talents and my brain. I managed to come to London many years, I went back in 1963 and when I reached home I was still doing the same music but I had more knowledge which I am doing with African people.

I went to Dakar to see my elder brother where he was teaching people the

balafon in the School of Art. My elder brother retired and I took his place - they appointed me as a professor of balafon. I worked with them during that period. The Gambian government also wanted me back because of my talent. Then I worked with the National Theatre in Senegal where I played the balafon. I travelled with them to many places in Europe and Africa.

TETTEH-LARTEY

With that sort of experience behind him (and, as you may have already guessed, a long family musical tradition) Banna Konuteh was invited to set up a National Troupe of musicians for The Gambia. And that's what he set about doing in 1973.

KONUTEH

I took all nationalities in The Gambia: the Mandinka, the Wolof, Fula, Serhulle and Mauritanians living in The Gambia. I put them all together and was appointed as the manager of The Gambian National Troupe. I worked with The Gambian National Troupe for seven years. After seven years I retired from there and went to the government and said "I want to go on a tour of the world to see African culture and recite" and God helped me and I went to Guinea Bissau, Guinea Conakry and Mali, to the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and, of course, I went to Kinshasa (Zaire). From there I went to Zambia, Nairobi (Kenya) and from Nairobi I took a plane and came to Brussels. From Brussels I came to Paris. I had about four or five months in Paris and then I went with Alhaji Suntu Suso, Alhaji Masharin Kuyateh and Alhaji Diadiu Kuyateh to Mecca on our traditional pilgrimage. After Mecca I came back to Paris where the Arab people from Saudi Arabia regretted that unfortunately I hadn't taken my music with me to Saudi Arabia - they had much interest in my knowledge - and they came back and called me back to Saudi Arabia and I went back for another two months. Then I went to The Gambia.

TETTEH-LARTEY

The musicians who accompanied him on this visit to London were two kora players. Saiko Saho is the lead kora player with the Gambian National Troupe and Suntu Suso has played with Konuteh for many years. Here they all are, playing music for the young people to dance to after a wedding. It's called "Mamayha".

MUSIC: "Mamayha" - Suntu Suso, Saiko Saho, Banna Konuteh

TETTEH-LARTEY

The Gambian government, from the President down, take a keen interest in fostering traditional Gambian music and turned to Banna Konuteh to assist them.

KONUTEH

The minister and the government wanted to try and improve African culture in The Gambia and the playing of the kora, balafon, xhalam, sabar, Mandinka tam-tam, bugarabo. All the nationalities in The Gambia wanted to improve their culture so the Minister of Education wanted to create a post for somebody who could teach people African culture. They created the post of Assistant Education Officer to introduce local music, culture and history into The Gambia.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Are you the one appointed to this

KONUTEH

That's right.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And to give some idea of the education he can provide, Konuteh reeled off all the Gambian instruments he can play.

KONUTEH

I used to play Mandinka tam-tam that two or three people play - that's popular music in The Gambia for dancing and singing. And this balafon and the kora and the kontingo (xhalem) - they call it kontingo - you can put these together; and the dungdungo - that's also popular music for dancing and after all them we can put the balafon, the two kora - maybe make it four kora and two balafon - and two xhalem and a tammo - they're small drums..

TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it a drum, an armpit drum like the ones we see in Nigeria?

KONUTEH

Yes it's the same thing in Nigeria - a small drum with two heads. That's also traditional dancing music. If somebody has a wedding you can call these people to play.

MUSIC: "Mamayha" - Suntu Susu, Saiko Saho, Banna Konuteh

TETTEH-LARTEY

More of the wedding dance from Banna Konuteh, Suntu Suso and Saiko Saho to play us out. While from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye until we meet again next week for more "Arts and Africa". Goodbye.