

# Arts and Africa

ALS 4/5/5/3/45



AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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ARTS AND AFRICA

First B'cast: 8.11.85

619G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. Welcome to the programme which today has news of the latest development in the perennial entertainment of the travelling theatre and a chance to hear some of the earliest African music known - known to us individually, I mean - the first music we hear in our lives, the songs for babies and small children.

MUSIC

"UGANDAN LULLABY"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This lullaby comes from Uganda.

MUSIC

"UGANDAN LULLABY"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That song about a little girl was from the Acholi people of north east Uganda, and as different as possible from the style of this Ethiopian woman in Sidamo Province.

MUSIC

"ETHIOPIAN LULLABY"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When anyone mentions the Makonde people of Tanzania I immediately recall their very fine and rightly famous wood carvings. Their songs for children are just as distinctive. The Makonde live along the southern part of the Tanzanian coast and across the border in Mozambique and in Makonde culture the men share the work and the pleasure of child rearing with the women - so, naturally, they take part in the singing.

MUSIC

"TANZANIAN LULLABY"



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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The song of the Makonde mother who promises her child that she'll return quickly, when all the time she knows she'll be away for a long time. While from Ghana we have the following for a child whose mother is leaving it behind. It's sung in Ga by Florence Achema who provides her own translation.

MUSIC

"GHANAIAN LULLABY WITH TRANSLATION" sung by Florence Achema.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A touch of characterization in that Ga song/rhyme from Ghana leads me on to the subject of popular travelling theatre. In Yoruba-speaking Nigeria it's adapting itself to the present difficulties and opportunities according to Kole Omotoso who teaches at the University of Ife. He's taken part in many of the University's drama productions and he's also interested in popular theatre. He's been bringing me up-to-date on what's been happening and, for listeners outside West Africa, he explains what he means by "travelling theatre".

KOLE OMOTOSO

These are professional troupes, a kind of actor-manager organised theatres which began about 1946 and have grown into a very, very big aspect of the theatre in Nigeria - and to some extent in West Africa because they exist in Togo and they've come to Ghana. In the last few years it seemed as if there had been a fall in live theatre attendances and what these people did was to start making films of their plays. As usual the old man of Nigerian travelling theatre, Hubert Ogunde, began this process. In fact he built a whole film village from where he started making his films. Now, some of the organisational work is very interesting; he goes back to virtually using traditional forms of organisation. When they want to produce a play they would invite all the members of the other theatre groups to participate. The participation might take two, three, four weeks and each member is then paid off. Now, if you are familiar with the process in traditional society - say, you are building a house or you want to clear ground and you invite your age mates - this is the kind of management that they have been doing. This has helped, for instance, to ensure that they have the best of the actors that the country can offer them. It has also helped to limit the cost of these films. Now these films are virtually a transformation from stage to film and, therefore, anybody familiar with sophisticated film-making in Hollywood or Calcutta might not think much of them as pictures telling stories for there is still so much dependence on scenery, stationary scenery and words, but they have been very successful. When they finished shooting they travel from town to town with these films the way they used to travel from town to town with their plays and they have been very, very successful. Interestingly, one of them even does a combination of film material into live material and back to film. Now I only saw that once before, somewhere in Prague, this lantern magica where they use this combination of showing a film, performing part of it and then going back to film. And everybody, you know, the audiences in Nigeria really like this kind of film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of themes do they deal with?

KOLE OMOTOSO

Usually traditional, very, very traditional. Most of Ogunde's deal with the world of superstition, the world of witches, the world of evil spirit over which good, of course, always triumphs. But somebody like Moses Olaiya deals more with everyday comit situations: an old man who is trying to marry a sixteen year old girl, you know, the kind of traditional comical, farcical things. Sometimes he also takes on the whole question of authority. There is one of his films called "The World President" where this fellow becomes the President of the Government of the World and, of course, he uses it simply to enrich himself and kick about everybody.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is it for purely commercial, or shall we say, economic purposes, for economical reasons that the material is put on film?

KOLE OMOTOSO

It was because there was a situation of the falling of audiences at live performances. There were all sorts of social reasons for this. In Nigeria today there is a whole preponderance of armed robbery, in which case people don't want to go out at night, I mean, you don't leave your house after 7 p.m., in which case you are not going to risk because you want to have one and a half hours of watching a film, or watching a play, going out from your house and getting mugged on the way. So a film could be shown anytime. I mean it could be shown in a hall in the morning or in the afternoon so it doesn't matter at all, so there were specific reasons for these people going into film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So where you have a combination of film and actually live performance, you need a stage in the hall where this thing is going to be shown?

KOLE OMOTOSO

In that case yes. There's only one person who has been doing it and that's Moses Olaiya. Usually he does it when he comes to university audiences where of course they have a closed society and in which armed robbery is more controlled - I mean it's not that it doesn't happen but it is more controlled and it is easier to deal with.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I take it to mean then that these films are not shown in the open air where they might command larger audiences than in a hall?

KOLE OMOTOSO

There's been only one occasion for showing one of them - it had to be shown in the afternoon at the Liberty Stadium in Ibadan because there were thousands of people who wanted to see the film and the only place they could show it was in the stadium. But usually they do so many performances in an afternoon begining from about 2 p.m., onwards and people just move in, you know, to watch these plays.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kole Omotoso, providing us with an insight into how popular theatre can adapt itself to almost any situation.

And now, another Makonde song for children. Jafat Reuben who has provided the notes for the Makonde songs says that the Makonde attitude to small children isn't that they should be kept quiet but that they should be as happy as possible, all their childhood. And in this final song for today they're being encouraged "to play happily until their parents return". And Jafat Reuben points out that the equal place of menfolk in child rearing is reflected in the counterpoint their voices contribute to the song. There are plenty more children's songs from all over the continent queuing up to be heard in future "Arts and Africa's" but today's programme is nearly over so this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until this time next week to the sound of the Kibisi Singers of Dar-es-Salaam

MUSIC

"TANZANIAN LULLABY"

MUSIC

"LIMPOPO"