

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to 'Arts and Africa'. Three women in this programme at different stages in their careers. One woman an internationally famous potter and the other two just embarking on careers as musicians.

Flute playing

That was Amy Appiah and Dzifa Glikpoe playing their flutes. We'll be hearing from them later ... now for a very different sound - the potter preparing her material.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

(clay-slapping noises)

I'm just shaping it so that I've got a nice round ball which I then place on this base which is really a gourd shape or dish cut out of a gourd or calabash (as it's known in West Africa). That's placed on a ring made out of banana fibre which is used sometimes to place pots on at home, and home is Kenya. I started the base by just opening out from ~~that~~ lump of clay. I then roll out the coils and start adding the coils ~~onto~~ that wall and I'll go on adding this coil and pulling up in a very upward, pinching and pulling movement until I've got to a height that is reasonable before I start shaping and using any tools.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's Magdalene Odundo getting to grips with the un-shaped clay that goes to make her pots. Magdalene Odundo comes from Kenya and has been making ceramic pots for 10 years. She now lives in England, exhibiting both in this country and abroad. Her pots are large, polished gourd shaped works of art, statuesque in their simplicity, burnished by hand to give off a flawless sheen. She acknowledges many influences in her work, ranging from that of the ancient Greeks and the Chinese to the ceramics of the Pueblo Indians in America, but the basic method which she uses, that of coiling the clay round, building it up and pinching it out, comes from Africa. Martin Plaut spent a morning at her studio in the small village of Farnham, watching her at work.

MARTIN PLAUT

I sense this is quite different from what most potters do - most potters of course throw their pots on a wheel, you actually build them up from a ball - a base of clay itself.

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Really what I'm doing is I'm using the traditional techniques of hand-building and coiling rather than using the wheel. The coiling method I use combines a few techniques that have been gathered and learned on some of my travels in Kenya and in West Africa.

MARTIN PLAUT

Where did you go in West Africa?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

West Africa is big, you're right ... in Nigeria and Ghana.

MARTIN PLAUT

Is there a very different tradition in Nigeria and Ghana as opposed to, say Kenya?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I think there are variations because people handle coiling differently but as far as pottery techniques go, I think the spirit and the nature of coiling is the same in most parts of Africa as opposed to the coiling technique and hand-building techniques that are used in Europe.

MARTIN PLAUT

How do they differ?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I think the best way to describe how they differ is that in the hand-building techniques in Africa and to a certain extent in South America and Asia, the coils are used as a means of extending the walls of the pot rather than actually designing and limiting yourself ... you know, the western coils are usually very, very thin, long sausages and then one actually wraps them around with a preconceived form that is drawn, whereas this is much more like a sculptural means of working - the thing grows and extends and builds and there's a lot more freedom to actually change your mind if you want to.

MARTIN PLAUT

You've got a pot which is already about 6 or 8 inches high, it's obviously very rough. The actual pots when they're finished are extremely smooth, they almost glisten. How do you get it from this rough stage into the polished form that we finally see?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

From this basically rough shape where the coils are fairly thick, I'll then use gourd tools which I have, actually to pull up, to smooth the surface, but at the same time they'll be shaping and that will shape both the inside and the outside as smooth as one can do it physically with a tool. Then, later on, as the pot takes its shape and the top and bases are finished I'll actually refine the surface by taking off any blemishes that are there. I use a spoon, a nice, smooth spoon or polished pebbles to polish the surface. And that takes a very long time, because you can only polish a certain amount of surface at a time to really get a good, even polish.

MARTIN PLAUT

And this all before the firing takes place?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

All this before the firing. Once the firing is done, that's it. I can't bear the thought of doing anything else to them.

MARTIN PLAUT

What would you say are the advantages to actually doing it - why are you a ceramicist?

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

I think it is the thing that I know best to do at the moment, that I can honestly go out and say: "Well, I'm having an exhibition and I'm selling wares of objects that I have made and spent an honest amount of time making the pieces". But the other thing is that it is a very, very rewarding means of working - working with clay is just so rewarding to me. One's lucky that one's making things or objects that creatively are ones own ideas rather than actually being determined by somebody else. Nobody asks me about the particular shapes they want - I decide. But at the same time those of us involved in work like **this** are actually fulfilling a market, an area that has for a long **time** been the main concern of sculptures and painters, where **paintings** were bought to be put on the wall and a ceramic was bought **only** as far as it was antiquity, and it actually was valued only in terms of its monetary value, whereas I hope people buy my work because they like it and because they enjoy actually handling it and looking at it.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What a refreshing idea she has. Magdalene Odundo, talking there about the art of making beautiful pots.

The flute players who you heard at the beginning of the programme, Amy Appiah and Dzifa Glikpoe, gained their formal training in drama. They are now members of the Abibigromma Theatre Company attached to the department of performing arts at Legon University, Accra.

Fiona Ledger met them in Edinburgh where the company was performing at the Festival. For the past two years playing music has been a consuming passion for these two women. Their favourite instrument: the Atenteben or flute. The theme of the song: a small bird has lost its mother and flies backwards and forwards looking for her.

Flute music.

FIONA LEDGER

Thanks very much - that was lovely. Dzifa, Amy, how long have you been playing the flute - did you both start to learn at the same time?

DZIFA GLIKPOE

Yes we started at the same time.

FIONA LEDGER

And did you decide to do it together just for fun - or how did it come about?

AMY APPIAH

We had a musician in the group so he decided to teach us a couple of songs and then we got the flutes and he started teaching us.

FIONA LEDGER

That's when you were group 'Abibigromma'?

AMY APPIAH

Yes, Abibigromma.

FIONA LEDGER

And had you done any music playing before at all?

AMY APPIAH

No, not at all.

FIONA LEDGER

Dzifa, is it quite rare for women to play instruments in Ghana?

DZIFA GLIKPOE

Yes, it's rare. In fact, in some ethnic groups women are not allowed to play drums, but in Abibigromma we play drums, we play flute, we do everything that men do.

FIONA LEDGER

And the reason for them not being allowed to play - is it considered taboo or bad luck or what?

DZIFA GLIKPOE

In some places it's taboo.

FIONA LEDGER

Have you met any resistance at all to the fact that you are musicians? I mean, your friends and your family, do they say: "Ooh, that's not really what a woman should do?"

AMY APPIAH

No, they are quite impressed.

FIONA LEDGER

And you play not just flute, but other instruments as well.

AMY APPIAH

Yes, the drums and the rattle, the bell.

FIONA LEDGER

Is the flute, would you say the flute is your favourite instrument?

AMY APPIAH

Yes, it is.

FIONA LEDGER

Why do you think that is?

AMY APPIAH

Well it's because you get very few people - very few women - playing the flutes. In some places you can get the women playing the drums but it's very unusual to find them playing the flute.

FIONA LEDGER

Do you think you're going to learn other instruments as well, Dzifa?

DZIFA GLIKPOE

Yes. I'm very fascinated by the drums.

FIONA LEDGER

And you're doing drumming already, but you want to do more?

DZIFA GLIKPOE

I want to do more. I can do a few, but I want to learn more of it.

FIONA LEDGER

And are the men prepared to give you all their secrets?

DZIFA GLIKPOE

Yes, they do. If one thing we do in Abibigromma is that we have musicians, we have people who majored in dance, we have people who majored in drama, but we are trying to make musicians out of the dancers, make actors out of the musicians and that kind of thing. So we all learn each others field.

FIONA LEDGER

So you are all very versatile.

DZIFA GLIKPOE

Yes.

FIONA LEDGER

Perhaps we could hear another song from you now if you are ready. What are we going to listen to now?

AMY APPIAH

Adam.

DZIFA GLIKPOE

This is from the biblical story of Adam and Eve when God tells Adam not to eat the fruit in the garden and the snake deceives them into eating it.

Flute music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Amy Appiah and Dzifa Glikpoe playing their Atenteben and we end this programme with sounds which should inspire both of them to perservere with their flute and drumming. Here's Ghanas top master drummer Mustapha Tettey Addy. Join us again next week, for now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.