

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

BBC COPYRIGHT

ARTS AND AFRICA

First B'cast: 31.1.86.

631G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello from Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's "Arts and Africa" a group of outsiders experience African culture at first hand. That can only mean that today's programme is about people enjoying themselves, and these non-African holiday-makers were shown how by their hosts.

MUSIC

"Alla l'aa Ke" - by Amadu Kanuteh.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

If you detected the sound of the kora-playing along with the chorus you've probably guessed that our programme has something to do with The Gambia. The Commonwealth Institute in London has made many imaginative attempts to introduce members of the Commonwealth to each other. Last year they arranged a musical tour of The Gambia for the Christmas holiday. It was led by Lucy Duran, Director of the British National Sound Archives, who's a musicologist with a special interest in the music of that area. Now, after what I think you're going to agree was a successful two weeks, Lucy's returned to London and she has come along to tell me about the trip and the music they all heard She's brought along her own recordings from the tour so let's begin with a little more of what we've just been listening to.

MUSIC

"Alla l'aa Ke" - by Amadu Kanuteh.

LUCY DURAN

That was a spontaneous occasion that happened in the compound of Amadu Kanuteh who's one of the best musicians from the Upper River region of The Gambia. He lives in a very big family and the whole family is musical. It was an evening just after Christmas; they started singing spontaneously and we happened to be there to witness the occasion and a very magnificent occasion it was.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Were they at all aware of your presence?

LUCY DURAN

Oh yes, they were aware of our presence and certainly I think this probably heightened the occasion for them because obviously it's much more fun to perform in front of somebody. As soon as the music was heard lots of people came along from neighbouring compounds and there were other musicians there who came from other regions of The Gambia. So a lot of money was exchanged that night, it was quite a unique occasion really.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes. Now who did your tour party consist of?

LUCY DURAN

Well it was a group of people who are all united by a common interest in two things: one, in the Commonwealth because they're all friends of the Commonwealth Institute, and secondly, they're all interested in African music. Some of them are professionally involved in music, there was a music teacher, there was a professional drummer who plays African percussion, there was a music therapist, there were a number of people who were not directly connected with music but who had been involved in performance over here in one way or another. They wanted the opportunity to hear African music in its context.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What you're saying suggests to me that there weren't many Africans in the group.

LUCY DURAN

There were two Norwegians, otherwise they were all English plus there were three West Indians; that is to say, two born in Britain but of West Indian origin and one West Indian, so it was a mainly English group.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well you say that this was a spontaneous occasion ...

LUCY DURAN

You see at Christmas time in The Gambia there is a great deal of music going on. It's not because they're Christians because as you know it's a predominantly Moslem country but people go back to their home towns and there's generally an atmosphere of merry-making. So there was a lot of spontaneous music going on. We did come across many other such occasions and one of them, for instance, was a group of Balanta musicians. The Balanta are another ethnic group in The Gambia. They play a large xylophone with about twenty-five keys.

LUCY DURAN

The xylophone is called a balo and it's played by two musicians and as you can hear from this recording I made at the time, there's a general appreciation of the music, a lot of laughter going on, there's dancing, there's clapping. Again we were able to witness this very lively event in somebody's courtyard with the sand flying around as people were dancing.

MUSIC

XYLOPHONE MUSIC PLAYED BY BALANTA MUSICIANS.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well we usually associate The Gambia with the Mandinka tradition of kora-playing and you, I know, are very keen on the kora yourself. Were there any occasions when the kora was played for you?

LUCY DURAN

Oh many, many, many. I mean, that was our main perspective I think although we were lucky and we heard other musical traditions as well. But wherever we went we were accompanied by kora musicians. There was one in particular who is called Dembu Konteh and not only did he play the kora to us all the time as we were driving up the countryside in a bus or as we were sitting waiting for a meal to be produced or whatever, he was also magnificently hospitable. He received us in his house and helped us around all the time. We were very lucky in that we stayed in the houses of kora-players and so very often in the evenings as we finished supper and we were sitting around the compound, then the musicians would play for us and one such memorable performance was by a group of three of my favourite musicians - Dembu Konteh who I just mentioned, Saihu Saho who is a marvellous kora-player, absolutely superb and with them was Efri Mbye who is actually a Wolof singer and here they were performing a Mandinka tune called "Unity Africa" but he's singing in Wolof and he's paying tribute to the Sene-Gambian Confederation.

MUSIC

"UNITY AFRICA" - by Dembu Konteh, Saihu Saho and Efri Mbye.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

My memory of The Gambia, and I was restricted on my visit to Banjul which was then called Bathurst, is one of The Gambia as rather colonial. We heard colonial music played by the police band and we heard some Latin American music but this all sounds very, very traditional and very relaxed so you were rather luckier than me. Did you find this music quite common-place?

LUCY DURAN

Yes, there's a lot of it around but you have to know where to find it. This was precisely why I thought of the idea of leading a music study tour because there's great potential in getting an insight into another country through its music because it takes you away from just the sort of normal tourist areas and it leads you into people's homes and it leads you into a number of situations which otherwise you probably wouldn't have occasion to see.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How wide was the area of the country you toured?

LUCY DURAN

We travelled through the whole of The Gambia right up to the eastern-most point. We stayed in Basse for four days and then we went up to Garowal which is a very beautiful Sarahulley village right on the Senegalese border. For that matter we also made a trip down into Casamance which is southern Senegal. So we really saw a lot outside just the tourist areas. there are tourists, I know there are tourists, who would like to see a bit more of inland Gambia. They are missing all the beauty of the countryside and the beautiful up river towns like Bansang and Basse and the hills and they're missing the wonderful Gambian hospitality and they're missing all that marvellous music we've just been listening to.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Lucy, you mention hospitality. How did you experience this hospitality at first hand?

LUCY DURAN

Well we were invited into people's compounds. We were given lavish meals in people's compounds and we actually stayed in their houses as well. We spent several nights up river staying in the compound of Amadu Kanuteh and some other places. So the people on the tour were sleeping in rooms on straw mattresses underneath mosquito netting and they were eating out of a communal bowl with their hands. They were eating the local food. They enjoyed it, it was one of the things they most enjoyed of all because that's how you begin to get a feeling for a country when you're actually staying in people's houses and eating their food.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Was it all traditional music you heard?

LUCY DURAN

It was mostly traditional but we were lucky in that at Christmas time there were a number of visiting pop groups from Senegal who were performing. Of course Youssou Ndour is very famous and we went to hear him on Christmas Day, but the evening before we went to see a group called Baaba Maal. Well, the singer is called Baaba Maal and he's originally from Guinea and now lives in Senegal and that was another marvellous occasion because not only is he a marvellous musician, he has a very striking voice and an interesting style, but it was wonderful to see the audience. there were many Fulas, there were some Mauritians with their long robes and turbans and there were women dressed in the most magnificent damask and so on. It was very exciting to see the dancing which is very lively and great fun.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well perhaps you could give us an example from the popular music which you heard.

LUCY DURAN

I think my favourite was Baaba Maal. Here's a song of his which is called "Waraa" which is from a published cassette that I actually got hold of in France. It's got a very haunting lyrical quality and it's based very much on the Fula tradition.

MUSIC

"WARAA" by Baaba Maal.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Baaba Maal providing a delightful mixture of ancient and modern to round off Lucy Duran's musical tour of The Gambia. The Commonwealth Institute sponsored the event and I'd like them to know that there's a lot more music waiting to seize the imagination of interested and sympathetic visitors any time they want to follow up that original idea.

Baaba Maal's going to play us out so this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey quickly saying goodbye. But I'll be waiting to greet you with more Arts and Africa this time next week.

MUSIC

"WARAA" by Baaba Maal.