

# 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 this week's edition two very different musicians talk about their work, their musical traditions and the pressure to 'modernise'.

MUSIC: "Sahel" by Saidou Richard

TETTEH-LARTEY

The music of Saidou Richard, the popular singer from Burkina Faso. Actually, Saidou Richard is well placed to talk about tradition and modernity since apart from being a singer he is also a World Bank official now posted in his own country - and maybe the Bank's influence has rubbed off on the way he thinks about the future of Bourkinabe music. In Ouagadougou Joan Baxter began by asking him if he thought that popular music in Burkina Faso today had any special identity or was it a big mix of influences?

SAIDOU RICHARD

Well, I would go for the second explanation, it's a big mixture of a lot of music. I would say in Burkina Faso right now you have many different types of ethnic group's music like Warba and you also have more and more Cuban music coming in and some Zairian music, so that when you go to the dancing place you can't really tell what is Burkina music out of the other music. But then there is a tendency, more and more, to have a synthesis of music and that's where in fact I've taken the way because I'm now playing a style of music called "Wenega Wara" which is, let's say, a style which combines Wenega from the Mossi plateau - which is an ethnic group here - and Wara from Oradara which is the Senoufo area.

JOAN BAXTER

What about the traditional music in what is now Burkina Faso? What are some of the traditional elements that we might find in the traditional music as it was played in the villages?

RICHARD

As you may have seen the traditional music is disappearing. Why it is disappearing is mainly because in Burkina you have 60 different ethnic groups which would bring about 60 different languages and that means 60 different types of music; 60 different types of culture and as the Minister of Culture was saying here not too long ago, 60 different nationalities in fact. That

would mean that all ethnic group musicians would be playing something relevant to their group which doesn't necessarily have a market with the other groups. That explains why French has become the language which has been chosen by the Government as a national language, but songs in French can't, in fact, compete against real French songs coming from abroad. So then we're left in a situation where the traditional musician right now can't live off his music as he used to because in a traditional setting you had a particular group of musicians whose family for two, three hundred years had all been musicians and who had the role of carrying on year after year the village traditions. In fact the musician would know all the village people by name and their history, and he would have been learning that since he was a child from his parents. He would be able to sing that and be able to translate that into music and he had a role of being what we called a "bookstore" or "library", the "bibliotheque" of the village. But now that type of art does not have an appeal any more because he would be singing in his own language and the other groups do not speak the same language so you lose 60 to 80 per cent of the sense of it. So that explains partially why most of the traditional music does not necessarily meet the needs of the younger generation which is usually more used to listening to the Voice of America or the BBC and other foreign radio stations for the latest hits and going to the bookstores to see who the new rock star on the market is.

I think what the Government could do is to encourage the producers - because we do not have enough producers and distributors of music in Burkina - to have some better quality modern music stemming from traditional music and try to compete, frankly. The world is such that you will have more and more inter-penetration so the best way is to compete.

#### BAXTER

Let's talk a little bit now about your music. It's very hard for me to pinpoint. If people asked me to label what kind of music it is, it would be very difficult. How would you describe the music that you play?

#### RICHARD

Well, you have many types of music, meaning you have a new rhythm which I was referring to at the beginning of our discussion. The rhythm is a synthesis of two rhythms, as I was saying, and that's the way I am going now. And what I'm planning to do next is to add to this some types of rock or some types of reggae - to add to it something which is not necessarily from Burkina. I think I've found some main rhythms, some synthesis of rhythm here. I'll add something which would be more linked to - I won't say international - but more linked to something where other cultures of the world would recognise themselves. Then I'll be presenting that in the next album.

MUSIC: "To Ni Nan Kelela" by Saidou Richard

#### TETTEH-LARTEY

"To Ni Nan Kelela" by Saidou Richard. We cross the continent now, to Zimbabwe, and to a very different type of music. The music of Stella Chiweshe's mbira.

MUSIC: "Kasawa" by Stella Chiweshe

TETTEH-LARTEY

The mbira - sometimes called the 'thumb-piano' is probably the best-known instrument of Central and Southern Africa. Traditionally it has been the preserve of male musicians but Stella Chiweshe has broken this custom. Now her renown has spread beyond the boundaries of her own country. Recently she has been playing here in London, but before she came Fiona Lloyd talked to her in Zimbabwe and began by asking her just how hard it had been for her as a woman to start playing the instrument.

STELLA CHIWESHE

When I first learnt mbira the people had never heard of a woman mbira player where I come from so they didn't know, they thought I'd lost my mind! It was so difficult, they couldn't teach me, so for two years I struggled to find someone who could teach me and for five years I struggled to find someone who could make an mbira for me.

FIONA LLOYD

And who did you find in the end?

CHIWESHE

In the end I found someone. He's an old man.

LLOYD

Did you have to persuade him or was he happy to help you?

CHIWESHE

He was happy, this one was happy to help me, yes. But he just said he was wasting his time but he was doing it happily. Yes.

LLOYD

Now of course, your daughter Virginia plays too doesn't she?

CHIWESHE

Yes, she plays.

LLOYD

So do you think we are getting a tradition of women mbira players in the country?

CHIWESHE

Now there are a number of us. I know of some women who play mbira now.

LLOYD

Let's look at the instrument itself for those people who maybe don't know what an mbira is. Can you describe it for us, Stella?

CHIWESHE

The keys on my mbira are 22. They are of different sizes. I play these small ones from underneath.

## ACTUALITY OF KEY PLAYING

CHIWESHE

Then to my right I play these.

## ACTUALITY OF KEY PLAYING

CHIWESHE

They are on a flat board 22 centimetres long.

LLOYD

Can you tell us a little about the songs that you play? What kind of ceremonies would they have been played at originally?

CHIWESHE

I think whenever they did something which needed music. The mbira was the only instrument they had so they could always play mbira. I cannot say "this song was played on this particular ceremony and this was played on this particular ceremony" - that I don't know. I only know the music is very old and it was played from a long time back. To tell exactly when, how and why I don't know.

LLOYD

I know you like to keep the very traditional way of playing although in Zimbabwe at the moment we have some musicians who are trying to modernise mbira music. How do you feel about that?

CHIWESHE

I don't think I could modernise a song like "Nyama ropa", not modernise it, no. I think these people who are modernising these songs have another way of thinking about them which I don't know. Maybe they are right, I don't know. Maybe I am wrong to keep it very traditional, I don't know. But I feel good about it.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Certainly Stella Chiweshe's view of music and tradition is very different from that of Saidou Richard. Well as they say in French: "Vive la Difference!".

MUSIC: "Nyama ropa" by Stella Chiweshe

TETTEH-LARTEY

That's all from this week's "Arts and Africa". We leave you with the old mbira song "Nyama ropa". Until next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.