

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 another edition of Arts and Africa.

MUSIC - Jula Faso played on the Kora by Amadou Bansang Jobarteh.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Those very familiar with our signature tune will notice that it sounds slightly different today. But maybe you can't figure out exactly why. Well, there is a good reason. Our regular tune is Jula Faso played on the Kora by Amadou Bansang Jobarteh. Since he was in London recently we asked him to play it again and that is what we have just heard. The Kora is of course that large 21 stringed instrument that comes from West Africa - and particularly the Gambia and Mali.

Amadou Bansang Jobarteh is one of its most famous exponents. He is from the Gambia but his parents came from Mali where he still has well known musical relations. In the old days Kora players would roam the whole of the region with members of their families playing for patrons wherever they could find them and this still happens to a certain extent today. But for the very famous like Amadou Bansang the world has opened up and he was in Britain recently to give some concerts and to participate in a film. Britain was only a stop though on his way back to the Gambia from Seattle on the American Pacific Coast. There for the last six months he was playing, teaching and recording, an exhausting schedule for a man well into his 70's though when we met him he was showing no signs of flagging. Well as I say, Amadou Bansang is famous for his Kora playing and we'll be hearing more of his music later on. But as an old man now who was born when his father was already in his 70's Amadou Bansang Jobarteh is also a man with a fund of valuable memories. Tim Judah went to meet him and he began to commit some of his fascinating stories to tape. On hand to translate from Mandinka was Amadou's long time friend and pupil Lucy Duran of the British National Sound Archives. Amadou Bansang Jobarteh began by telling them the story about a name sake of his - Chief and Patron Bakari Jobarteh.

AMADOU BANSANG JOBARTEH in Mandinka ...

LUCY DURAN (Translating)

He is telling a story of a chief called Bakari Jobarteh who lived in the earlier part of the century in Gambia. The story is to illustrate the effect that music can have on a patron. The way that a musician works in traditional Mandinka society is that he goes to a patron and that he plays music for him and then the patron loves the music so much and the musician is praising the patron so much that the patron is capable of giving him all kinds of incredible gifts. So the story that he has just related is that this musician who is called Wandifeng who is now dead, went to Bakari Jobarteh and he played him a song which was in praise of this chief and he played and played and it was so incredibly beautiful that Bakari Jobarteh, the Patron and Chief, took a gun and said that he was going to shoot himself. The musician said "Look don't shoot yourself, if you have nothing to give me then never mind because if you shoot yourself - you know it is the Europeans who are ruling us now and if they hear that you shot yourself because of music they are going to put a stop to music completely". And then Bakari Jobarteh said "no it is not that I have nothing to give you, I have cattle to give you, I have cloth to give you, I have money to give you and I can give you all kinds of things but your tune is so beautiful that I should be giving you slaves. I should be giving you slaves and you know that the Europeans have put a stop to slaves so I can't give you slaves and that is why I want to kill myself."

TIM JUDAH

When was that, what date roughly?

Lucy Duran asks Amadou Bansang Jobarteh then translates
(this happens throughout the programme)

LUCY DURAN

Before the Second World War anyway. Amadou remembers when Bakari Jobarteh the Chief died but he doesn't remember exactly when this happened, but certainly before the Second World War. His son is still Chief, Bakari Jobarteh's son.

TIM JUDAH

Does he still patronise Kora players?

LUCY DURAN

Absolutely, he says the last time he went to see him he gave him a bull.

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MUSIC - Amadou Bansang Jobarteh plays Nya Wuleng on the Kora.

AMADOU BANSANG JOBARTEH

Nya Wuleng ... a tune for Musa Molloh.

LUCY DURAN

That's a tune for Musa Molloh the last King of The Gambia.

TIM JUDAH

The man who died in 1931.

LUCY DURAN

That's right, yes.

TIM JUDAH

What does the name mean?

LUCY DURAN

Nya Wuleng - it means red eyes. The meaning of that is that it is a tune which should only be played for someone who's eyes go red when they are in a difficult situation. Metaphorically that refers to their bravery, someone who is so brave that when he is in battle his eyes go red with anger.

TIM JUDAH

Did you ever meet Molloh?

AMADOU BANSANG JOBARTEH

Hah, yes!

MUSIC - Amadou Bansang Jobarteh plays Allah Lake on the Kora.

AMADOU BANSANG JOBARTEH in Mandinka

LUCY DURAN (translating)

Musa Molloh had been famous for his bravery, in fact for his ruthlessness which is why he was very unpopular with the British. So the British captured him and took him to Sierra Leone and according to oral tradition, what happened then was that they gave him an injection because they were so terrified of him and the injection paralysed him. So the time when Amadou was a little boy he found Musa Molloh completely paralysed lying on a mat

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on the ground in front of his house. But he said that when Musa Molloh talked in spite of the fact that he was paralysed, his voice was so lively that you would feel like saying to him, "come on, get up, let's go!".

TIM JUDAH

Were you scared of him if you were a little boy?

LUCY DURAN (translating)

He says of course he was frightened of him because he had a reputation of being someone who killed people. Even though he was lying there he still had that power about him, in fact, Amadou's own father was captured by Musa Molloh and nearly killed by him. So Amadou nearly doesn't exist because that was before he was born! The reason why he wanted to kill Amadou's father was because his own younger brother who was called Dansang, Musa Molloh and Dansang had the same father, now he was very jealous of Dansang.

TIM JUDAH

Dansang was Amadou's father's patron?

LUCY DURAN

That's right, one of his patrons, and Amadou's father used to go and sing for Dansang and Musa Molloh was wildly jealous of his younger brother so then of course he wanted not just to kill Dansang the younger brother but he wanted also to kill the musician who sang for him. So he laid a trap for Dansang, he said to Dansang let's forget everything, let's forget the war and the fighting that is between us and you come to me and we'll make peace. When Dansang came he cut off his head, and captured Amadou's father. Amadou said that every day he was killing one person or another, Amadou's father's real patron got wind of the fact that Amadou's father had been captured and was going to be killed, so he sent two of his friends to intervene - they were both great traders. These two men went up to Musa Molloh and said, look this musician had done absolutely nothing to you, he is a musician and you have to free him - it is better for you to kill us than to kill this musician. And Musa Molloh said "the truth of the matter is I wouldn't mind leaving him but I have sworn that if I don't kill him I will eat a certain bird, which is called a Ouiah and this is a way of saying that once they have sworn that they have to absolutely do whatever it is that they have sworn. It would be a great shame on them if they didn't. These two traders said to him that it was not worth eating the bird to go back on what you have sworn you must just release this musician for the sake of Falai Kora, Falai Kora was in fact his brother-in-law and so he said "in that case because you have intervened I will release Jali Filli, Amadou's father."

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TIM JUDAH

Did he eat the bird?

AMADOU BANSANG JOBARTEH (In Mandinka)

LUCY DURAN

No he didn't! (laughter)

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The Gambian Kora player Amadou Bansang Jobarteh talking there to Tim Judah and Lucy Duran. That's it for another week from Arts and Africa this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye, and leaving you with Jobarteh's rendition of Tabara.