

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming everyone to 'Arts and Africa' and to another visit to the island of Madagascar. Madagascar lies, for some sixteen hundred kilometres, along the coast of Mozambique but although it's only four hundred or so kilometres from the mainland of Africa most of the people who've settled there haven't come from Africa but from the more distant parts of the Indian Ocean - from Arabia, from India and many from as far away as Indonesia. The geography is as diverse as the people - there are rain forests, high mountains, fertile plateaux and, in the south, desert. And all this is represented in a large and detailed exhibition of the origins and the arts of the Malagasy people that's on show in London at the Museum of Mankind. 'Island of the Ancestors' is the title of the exhibition. John Mack of the Museum of Mankind has worked closely with the Museum of the University of Madagascar to collect and display a remarkable wealth of material. And when I visited the exhibition, he explained who the ancestors were - the sailors and traders who'd arrived over the centuries from the eastern rim of the Indian Ocean, together with, of course later arrivals from the African continent. Malagasy people call their island a 'melting pot' because so many peoples and cultures have chosen the island for their home. Over the centuries the island has moulded many of them into a Malagasy way of life, and of death, that's an amalgam of their many heritages. And I'm recalling now the photograph of a tomb with its dome and inscription in Arabic, that clearly illustrates an Islamic past; although the words were not Islamic, nor the person buried a Moslem. Each community on the island has its own funeral practices, and walking round the exhibition with John Mack I sensed the spirits of the ancestors that permeate Malagasy life. And this, he told me, was very much an aim of the exhibition.

JOHN MACK

The second part of the exhibition deals with the question 'What's the significance of the ancestors for the Malagasy?'. In other words, it deals with the way in which the ancestors influence everyday life and it deals specifically with how people, when they die become ancestors; that is, it deals with funerary practice.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well John, now we have come to this rectangular wooden frame here with figures standing at the corners. What is this?

JOHN MACK

It's a tomb, Alex, from western Madagascar, which is a place where funerary sculpture is practised and carried out. But the purpose of these figures is not to act as guardians, or indeed to be portraits of the people buried in the tomb or anything of that sort. What it really represents is the ancestors reborn. You notice the figures don't wear clothes, and nakedness, of course, is something associated with children and with birth, or in this case rebirth. So what in fact they represent is the idea of the rebirth of the dead - not as spirits so much but as ancestors, a particular class of spirit, to whom the Malagasy owe considerable respect and allegiance.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

These figures, there are three humans and then there is this bird-like looking creature. What does that represent?

JOHN MACK

Well the bird represents the status of the dead emerged from the tomb as spirits, in order to be reborn in the heavens but located physically in the tombs. So, it's all part of this whole symbolism which is, in fact, about the process of creating ancestors.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, this tomb is entirely different from the one we saw before, where the Moslem-looking man was standing at the entrance. Do the two of them represent two ways of burial?

JOHN MACK

Yes, they do indeed. I think that's a very good and important question. The Malagasy have, as I say, very considerable respect for the ancestors but there's a lot of different ways of making ancestors and lots of different ways of presenting tombs. Over here, to give you a third example if I might, you'll see a lot of funerary cloth. Now this is from central Madagascar and the tradition here is that the dead are buried very quickly after death. The body is then exhumed at a later date, and then reburied. It is this second stage which could be said to mark the end of mourning. For the Malagasy, what it marks is the rebirth of the ancestors, the rebirth of the dead that is now as an ancestor, and this is rather specific to one part of Madagascar. But it shows some of the range of funerary practice that you find throughout the island.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Among these cloths, some are very bright-coloured, very beautifully designed, rather like the rich kente cloth of Ghana. And others are rather dull-looking, looking like mourning clothes. Why are they so beautiful?

JOHN MACK

Well, if you look at the tombs, for example in these photographs, you'll see that they are very richly decorated compared with some of the houses that can be seen. The answer is that, for the Malagasy, the clothing of the living and indeed the house in which people live are both temporary. Once an ancestor, he or she is placed in a very elaborate, concrete or cement tomb in modern times - or a stone tomb traditionally - which is meant to last and endure because the idea is that the ancestors will go on forever, but we live out our span in a rather temporary

fashion. The cloth also reflects that because it's very beautiful and ornate, whereas the people tend to wear rather duller clothes and be rather less elaborately attired. The word for 'cloth' in the Malagasy is 'lamba mena'. 'Lamba mena' literally means 'red cloth'. Well, you'll notice some of these cloths are red, and indeed the ones in silk are particularly so. They are the much more colourful ones. The other ones are made out of bark, but they are still called 'lamba mena' even though they are not red. The point here is that it doesn't mean literally that these should be red cloths, but rather that they're colourful cloths as opposed to the white and duller colours that the people tend to wear.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And John, who is this man sitting near to what look like roots to me? There's a plate to his left with a spoon in it. What is he doing with those seeds?

JOHN MACK

Yes, they are seeds and roots, you're quite right. The word for such a person in Malagasy is 'ombiasy' and that means really a diviner or a healer. And what he is doing, in fact, is dispensing medicines, as we might say. This is done by mixing up the substances in a plate with water and these are then given to the patient. However, the important thing is that this won't work unless he makes the invocation to the clan ancestors over the medicines, because it is their intervention that makes the medicines work.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

John, we are now in one section of the exhibition which features an old woman under a house that is high-lifted up, in fact on stilts I think. She seems to be weaving something and in the background there's a whole tropical rain forest.

JOHN MACK

Yes, she's actually weaving beneath a granary and the granary is for keeping rice in. Malagasy eat vast amounts of rice.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And what is this on the right hand side?

JOHN MACK

Yes, this is an ancestral shrine. This is from eastern Madagascar, where the main forests are, and in this region the tradition is to bury people way off in the forests - possibly in caves a long way off - so you don't actually go there very often. And the ancestors are honoured in the village itself by the creation of one of these shrines, before which all manner of ceremonial and sacrifice take place. It is at these shrines that the skulls of the sacrificed animals are left, thereby honouring the ancestors.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It is interesting the way you talk of honouring, because people do not usually talk about ancestor-worship in Africa. I thought perhaps that this was actual worshipping rather than honouring as such.

JOHN MACK

I always feel that that's a very debased way of describing something which in fact is a matter of respect, a matter of giving honour, a matter of recording your own clan background and where you came from. And to put it in terms of a debased sort

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of religion does no kind of justice to what is in fact a very sophisticated set of ideas in my view.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And how often does this honouring take place in the sacrifice?

JOHN MACK

It can take place more or less every year. Indeed, in some places it would be associated, for example, with circumcision which might be a yearly event, or it might be a seven-yearly event. But there are all sorts of occasions on which sacrifice might be appropriate, for example before tilling the rice fields in the early part of the year. I think in the background here, you can actually hear a recording that I made in Madagascar of someone making an invocation to the ancestors before one of these very shrines, just before a sacrifice was to take place.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

John, so it means that each time there is a sacrifice, the skull is left on top of the pole.

JOHN MACK

Yes, that's right, though of course sometimes they fall down, and as you can see there is one that's fallen down in this reconstruction of the tomb. The point there is that actually, if that should happen, or indeed even if the funerary or commemorative pole itself should fall down, it is not actually touched. It is assumed that it has happened because the ancestors wanted it to happen because this is their place and not your place. What happens is that at a later stage, another pole might well be reconstructed and further skulls will be put upon it as the opportunity for sacrifice arises. But you certainly do not go and touch it at all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And I understand you don't even mention the names of the ancestors.

JOHN MACK

The names of the ancestors are not mentioned except during a sacrifice. That's the only time it is done. In Madagascar, it's disrespectful to people who are your peers to mention them by name. However, at sacrifice you are actually summoning them to come for a specific event. It points out the significance of sacrifice, that this is the only occasion on which you would do it. And interestingly, in the recording you've just heard, you won't hear the sounds of the names of the ancestors because it is forbidden to record that on a tape recorder.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Before we leave this village, I see that all the houses are built on stilts. Why is that?

JOHN MACK

Because it rains so much.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And so there's a lot of marshland.

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JOHN MACK

Exactly. It's very muddy, and the wood would rot if it were on anything other than stilts.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The music of George Norbert and L'Honore Rosa completes our tour of the Museum of Mankind's Malagasy exhibition: 'Island of the Ancestors'. John Mack, who mounted the exhibition, was our guide, and we were accompanied by the recorded sounds of the island. The title of that accordion music from Madagascar is 'Bonne Annee Amin ny Tanana'. Next week, I'll be here at the same time with more 'Arts and Africa'. Until we meet then, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.