

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we're visiting the half remembered land of childhood.

MUSIC: CHILDREN'S SINGING GAME

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Children have a culture all of their own - that's if they're lucky enough to be given time to themselves. Life may be serious - boys may be out herding, fending off wild animals and responsible for strays, but if there's another child of a similar age somehow there's always a response. It could be a fight of course, or like this sort of 'duet' from Uganda between herdboys calling across a valley to each other, it can be a gentler communication.

MUSIC: MAN SINGING

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But most of the time childhood is a robust, earthy experience. These Wolof-speaking children are playing their game in Senegal.

MUSIC: SENEGALESE CHILDREN SINGING

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And it's these special singing games that I'm specially interested in today.

MUSIC: SENEGALESE CHILDREN SINGING

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now unfortunately those recordings from the BBC archives don't give any details of which games those children are playing but I do know that this next example is a counting song - or rather two counting songs. They're sung by Nsenga children from around Petauke in Zambia, near the Cabora Bassa dam and the Mozambique border.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now with me in the studio is another one time child Jean-Victor Nkolo from Cameroon. I don't remember any counting song in Ga. Do you know any from your part of the world, Cameroon?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Yes, I can remember one or two of these very old songs, but the point of the song is precisely that you cannot remember them very well, it's always something which is very remote, but still they are always there with you.....until your death sometimes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you remember what game those particular songs we are talking about accompanied?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

All kinds of games really. I think I remember most of all, and this is going to sound a bit unusual, I remember most the song which was sung by the girls, because my twin sister was part of a group of girls and they used to sing some of these songs. She used to get angry because of one of the words - she thought they were saying something nasty about her. Some of these songs actually don't have a specific meaning, that is why most of the time the children themselves invent any meaning they want into these words. And as she used to get angry and I was her twin brother I used to stand by just in case there was any trouble. So I can remember the song which went like this.

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO SINGS SONG

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Now when they reached 'aloallowaye' (phon) she thought that they were saying something about her and she was very, very angry.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well perhaps, for the benefit of our listeners, you could give us the meaning of just a short part of this song.

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

Actually the song had some strange words. I think it's a mixture of different local tribal languages and it does not have any specific meaning. It has some kind of repetitive function which helps the children, I think, to repeat some of the games and, in a sense, it didn't mean anything specifically, but the girls used to sing that so they could chose the 'odd man out' and point to a certain girl for a certain task and things like that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you think any of these songs were, apart from entertainment purposes, also for educational purposes? Did people learn anything from them?

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

I think so. I think that the children first learned how to behave among themselves. I think that the main function for them was for these children to live a social life among children. They were not taught specially by the adults how to behave or how to sing them but I'm sure that, for instance, for small tasks to be done at home some of these songs were useful in a sense because the purpose was to keep the children in a good mood. When they had these songs everything seemed to go smoothly.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now I don't remember that any song taught me anything at all! Most of the songs I remember were songs just for entertainment purposes. There's a very popular song from Ghana, it goes like this, you might have heard it:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY SINGING GHANAIAAN SONGALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now I don't know what the origin of the song was or what language it's in, it doesn't mean anything to me, but all I do know is we used to pass some stones around on the ground. We sat down in a circle, and it went like this as one boy or girl passed the stone to the next we sang.....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY SINGING GHANAIAAN SONGALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

.....and it went round and round and round, and at the end of it that was that.

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

But the repetitive function in itself in the song, I think, has some kind of educational background, because although you may think today that the song didn't teach anything to you, maybe it gave you the ability to wait for your own turn and then to socialise with the others, and that might be a very important function indeed. And I think that as children were singing somewhere, I'm sure that adult people were listening very carefully and were monitoring, in a sense, to see if everything was going right, because sometimes small fights or small jokes always started in these kind of situations.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, well, I remember another song about the moon, perhaps I could say that I learnt something from this particular song. It went like this.....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY SINGING CHILDREN'S SONGALEX TETTEH LARTEY

Chochobe (phon) referred to the moon, that's the Ga name for the moon, and the moon answers....."I'm going to Komite (phon) that's the name of a boy; Komite's mother's kitchen. What are you going to do there? I'm going to eat the entrails of a fish?" And then something rather naughty! But I think here the children looked at the moon which was immediately over and above them, under which they were playing, and I think they wondered about the direction of the moon. Very often when the clouds passed across the moon, the moon seemed to go in the opposite direction, actually running, and the

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY CONID

children were asking the moon where she was going. So I think there was something educational in that one.

JEAN-VICTOR NKOLO

It is also something which I think is very cultural. You see, all these things about songs really comes from the oral culture. Maybe they were not meant to teach something specific but the mythology is there, the relationship you have to have between yourself and the world and the forest and the darkness and the shadows and the others, I think it is there in those songs. They teach you that the world is there surrounding you and you are just part of a very big rhythm, a very big part of the creation and I think that those songs were also not meant to say that but they did.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you very much Jean-Victor Nkolo for coming along to Arts and Africa. And now a chance to read a passage from one of the great books about an African childhood. Let me read what the young Wole Soyinka used to get up to.

EXTRACT FROM AKE BY WOLE SOYINKA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was from Wole Soyinka's autobiography "Ake". Girls don't have the same freedom but even in learning to pound the yams or the mealie-meal they seize the chance to enjoy themselves. Like these girls in Zambia.

MUSIC: ZAMBIAN GIRLS SINGING

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

If anyone recognises the games we've been listening to and would like to tell us how they're played and which children play them we'd like to hear from you. Our address is "Arts and Africa", BBC, Bush House, London .

In the last moments of today's "Arts and Africa" the adult world is going to intrude as usual. The Mapoma Brothers took this children's action game from Zambia and gave it an international audience. Here's their version of "Shikiti, Shikiti". While for now it's goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye.

MUSIC: SHIKITI, SHIKITI