

# Arts and Africa

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

No. 214

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today to borrow a medical term we're looking at a double transplant.

MUSIC

The music of Africa? Most certainly. Music from Africa? Well ... not quite. The music's one hundred per cent authentic Ghanaian working song but it wasn't recorded in Accra or Kumasi but in the English country-side. Felix Cobbson is an old friend of "Arts And Africa". He's Director of Creative studies at a big school in Harlow roughly thirty miles out of London, and for all the years he's been living in Britain he's had an ambition that at last was realized a few months ago.

## FELIX COBBSON

For more than ten years this has been at the back of my mind that it would be nice and helpful if we could get a centre, which could teach the people of this country and all over the world the true life-style of the African. For so many years this has been ignored and the concept of children about the African is so shocking that if we Africans allow this sort of thing to go on then it means that our living here in Britain - we will be accepted only strangely. So this centre is going to educate the general public, it's going to educate the children, teachers, youth leaders about the life-style of the African.

MUSIC

## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, to try and show outsiders who come to one small centre what the whole of Africa is like a tall order. How can you transplant an African heart into foreign territory? Well, as you can hear, Felix Cobbson uses a lot of music for the process and as Ghanaian music is what he knows best, that is what he teaches. You can imagine the nostalgia I felt when I stayed there overnight and was woken up at six o'clock (that's very early by British standards!) by the sound of drumming, and I looked out to see someone sweeping the compound.

FELIX COBBSON

This place is an old vicarage. It's about 120 years old and I have converted it into this culture centre. But you see we don't have buildings this style at home, so the African compound is to add to what we are going to teach here really, for the students to see the background of the African. Because I don't think that we can just take them in a nice wallpapered room for them to have the idea that; this is African. No; so the creation of the African compound is to add to what we are doing here so that the students who go there will see that this is how we live. And before they come in here to learn anything we start them from the "grass roots". They've got to learn how to plant Fufu, how to grind peppers, all these things. And then the drumming and dancing will be the last thing, the history of some of our festivals, customs, all these will be part and parcel of the courses that we will be offering to the public here in Aklowa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Aklowa is the name Felix Cobbson has given to this enterprise. In spite of a bad cold in the nose (that's the penalty for living in England) I think Felix's enthusiasm comes over loud and clear. But it takes more than enthusiasm to get a centre like Aklowa 'off the ground'. It takes money.

FELIX COBBSON

Well, this is the sad story I have had no financial assistance at all from anybody. The furnishing of this place, organisation, everything, the funding has been totally on my shoulders - no where at all and now in order to have a successful operation of this centre we must have the financial backing we desperately need.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of students do you expect here ?

FELIX COBBSON

We expect teachers, youth leaders the general public in whole, anybody, its open to anyone who's interested in African culture and music. They all welcome to come in here and learn.

MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well someone who would find the music of Aklowa very familiar is Ghanaian artist, Margaret Obeng. Margaret is a painter whose training has been at school and University in Ghana, but she has a strong bias towards the European idea of art having appreciation rather than our idea of art having an active function in our society. This, too, is a sort of transplant and one which is bringing Margaret success. But to start at the beginning: how did Margaret first discover her talent ?

MARGARET OBENG

When I was in the secondary school I can't say I was so good but I liked cartooning. You see, sometimes when I see a funny thing people quarrelling or people chatting, then I sketch it. So my art master became very interested and said I should develop it. So I had to buy a sketch pad and I had to do some sketches for him to mark for me so I developed an interest, you see.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Did you find yourself sketching your school teachers, your masters in class ?

MARGARET OBENG

Some funny ones anyway!

Those were very funny. We used to have some funny ones. For instance when you go to music the music master was very interesting so I used to have my pad around to sketch him.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Were you ever caught doing a sketch of him ?

MARGARET OBENG

Anyway, no, but I think he heard I was doing that at music classes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

But Margeret Obeng took her drawings seriously enough to set such good grades in her art classes that she went on to study art at the University of Ghana, Legon. There she worked at textile design, printing and sculpture as well as painting, but painting remains her main interest.

MARGARET OBENG

I sometimes use watercolour, oil, acrylic colours, charcoal, but I did a lot of painting in oil and I think oil is my best medium.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I can also see that you've got a ...

MARGARET OBENG

... two techniques of painting...

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes.

MARGARET OBENG

Yes, I use both brush and knife. But I'm very fast at

MARGARET OBENG

knives because when you are using knives you don't have to be so realistic. You see, you apply the colour thick on the canvass but with brush work you have to be very cool not to spoil some edges but knife work it very swift.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now why do you select your subjects - do you do imaginative painting , do you do realistic painting ?

MARGARET OBENG

What I like best is imaginative. You see even if I see any funny side or any interesting thing I sketch it then leave some of the things I feel aren't necessary out, then perhaps bring my own idea into it, then paint.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you've got a few examples of your paintings here. Perhaps you could tell us a little about them ? Here we have a group of women gossiping - yes, you call them "Gossip".

MARGARET OBENG

The painting is called "Gossip".

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

There is one woman there with two fingers pulling her eyes wide. What is she saying to the rest ?

MARGARET OBENG

I painted it sometime in 1975. There was a story in Ghana that - you know there were rumours - whenever you shook hands with a person, I mean a male counterpart, then you lose your vital organ. So you have to carry a charcoal in your pocket or a red hanky in your pocket. I was then at the University and we were hearing this rumour that they'd caught somebody and the person had been sent to the Police Station. But I didn't see any of that happening so I imagine some women gossiping - you see - the woman in blue she says she saw the person who had lost the vital organ and just look at her eyes expressing surprise!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh yes you bring that out very very very well.

MARGARET OBENG

And you could see that this woman can gossip. Look, I think she was plaiting her hair and she didn't finish and she just went out to listen to what was happening. A real gossip.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You seem to be very keen on the female figure. You've got lots of paintings on a nude female.

MARGARET OBENG

Yes. Anyway these models help us to develop our imaginative drawings. You see, for instance if I want to paint any interesting thing - if I don't know the figures or forms of the human figure I can't develop it. So this is a study of human figures for us to develop our imaginative drawings. We have a lot of models in the University so that we can do figures sketches. Sometimes we take only the head, then we study the facial expressions, sometimes we take the hands or the feet.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do you have male models as well as female models ?

MARGARET OBENG

We have only one model, but we have over twenty female models.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why is that ? Is it because there are more men in your class than women that you have more women female models ?

MARGARET OBENG

The models are not only in the Painting section. We have models in the Sculpture Department, Graphic Design Department and Pointing as well,, but overall we have only one male model. Well, the male model came to my class on two occasions, but he couldn't stand it, I was the only girl in the class anyway, but I could see that he wasn't feeling easy, you see, so I asked my Lecturer and he said that I should understand him because men are not stationary so - well - this is it!

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what fascinates me is how, at all, you are able to capture the resemblance of any person ? What do you look for when you are painting, say, a face ? Do you look for any outstanding facial marks or any outstanding features ?

MARGARET OBENG

Yes. Most Ghanaians have tribal marks. Some have some marks around the cheeks, and you see there are different types of eyes, even the eye-balls they have differences, the nose, so you have to be very particular if you want to get the actual face of the person. That takes a long time anyway. If I want to get your natural face I would have to take time to know - to study it very well - and this involves a lot of sketches.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A few weeks ago Jimoh Buraimoh was telling us about his bead paintings. Margaret Obeng uses beads in some of her pictures - she calls the pictures 'collages' - and one of the collages she showed me was very Ghanaian indeed.

MARGARET OBENG

This is called "Sankofa". You know in Akan we have a proverb that means for instance you are husband and wife and you quarrel, if you go back to beg, although you are on the wrong side, if you go back to beg your husband, there is nothing wrong with it. It's just to forget about everything and then everything goes on well. So I based this sort of work on this proverb. You could say that this Sankofa bird, the bird can turn its head towards its back to touch the tail, so it just occurred to me to get some beads from the market then I arranged them. I got some yellow beads, red, green, blue, I used green for the leaves down here and then some yellow and red for the flowers on which the bird is standing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It really was very attractive. I've been talking to Margaret Obeng. And as I say goodbye for this week here are Felix Cobbson's musicians spreading the arts of Africa abroad. But now, from Alex Tetteh-Lartey, goodbye.