

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

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TAPE: SIG TUNE

ALEX: Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa - our weekly look at the creative life of the Continent. And this week we take a look at two aspects of African textile design, and we'll be separating them with a very pleasant interlude from one of Southern Africa's leading singers, Matiwane Manana. Both our textile items come from recent exhibitions in London. The first one is the presentation of a major collection of historical textiles at London's Museum of Mankind. These come from all parts of the Continent and include such different items as berber dresses from North Africa and shrouds from Madagascar. While many of the cloths are highly decorated robes part of the royal and chiefly regalia of the West African states, many other pieces are utilitarian and domestic. Now most of them come from the Museum of Mankind's own collection though where that is weak, they are supplemented by borrowing from other museums. But the exhibition isn't merely a collection of materials - it also includes working examples of the looms on which the cloths were woven and photographs of the weavers at work. David Sweetman spoke to John Mack, the Assistant in the Department of Ethnography, one of the organisers of the exhibition, who explained just what it was that the exhibition hoped to achieve.

J. MACK: To explain in simple terms how the weaving process operates is not at all an easy task. Whether we've succeeded in doing that I don't know. But clearly the simplest way of understanding the weaving process is actually to watch someone weaving or to do it yourself. We obviously, being a museum, can't cope with that, so what we've tried to do is to put out examples of the looms, mounted exactly the way one would see them in Africa in the process of being operated. I think the division that we've made between the looms is that sort, to be slightly technical that has two heddles and produces, on the whole, a narrow strip of cloth, and to distinguish that from one which has one heddle, and produces, by and large, a broad cloth. I think that's about the most, at its basic, of the technological division of the looms I've found on the continent.

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DAVID: In basic sexist terms, we always think of food and clothing as being the province of women, though we shouldn't - but what surprised me, was, that although this was the case in West Africa, where most of the weaving seems to be done by women, in fact in Eastern Africa it is done by men.

J. MACK: Well, the first thing to say is that that's not quite true of West Africa. What is true is that where both men and women weave, in any society it seems to be the case that they weave on different looms - that if you have what I call the double heddle loom, and the single heddle loom both being used in the same culture, then men will use one and that's invariably the narrow strip double heddle loom and women will use the other. Where one only gets one person weaving, then that's not of course a problem. In East Africa it seems to be largely men then if one goes to Madagascar and includes that as part of the East African cultural scene, though I mean its cultural influences lie with S.E. Asia as much as anywhere, but you will find that women weave there - women used to weave traditionally in Sudan and so on. I think the point is that where men weave, it's often as professional weavers; women are never professional weavers. Where women weave, it's really just as a part-time activity where men are otherwise engaged in the other activities you mentioned.

DAVID: Why separate looms though?

J. MACK: I don't think one can give an adequate answer to that. It is a complicated historical matter, I think, to try and work out such things. One could certainly produce hypotheses about it but I am reluctant to do so, because I don't think any of them at this stage in time can be substantiated. I mean there certainly is reason to think or it has in the past been suggested that the narrow strip double heddle loom emanates from the different upright single heddle loom, but it would be extremely difficult to trace that, I think.

DAVID: The African cloth that's best known was tie-dye from West Africa. What things do you expect that people who come to this exhibition are going to find the most entertaining and most visually stimulating apart from that?

J. MACK: Apart from that, I think my own view is that the interest of the cloth lies partly in its use and if one thinks that we've got on exhibition things like quilted horse armour about a quarter of an inch thick with elaborate patchworked triangles in many colours, with gold foil and all the rest of it, I think that's a magnificent object and the curiosity of it is the fact that it was used traditionally in the Southern Sahara region where one might think the heat might be an impediment to its use, but clearly not so. I think it's objects such as that which are not only visually exciting but have an interesting cultural and historical background to them which I would hope would attract their fair share of attention. It's simply a question, I think, of equalising, balancing up as it were, the public impression

of African materials which as you say is very largely West African - Nigerian and Ghana based. And I hope people would see that visually exciting, technically complicated, pieces of work are produced on a very wide basis.

ALEX: John Mack, one of the organisers of African Textiles, the exhibition at London's Museum of Mankind. And now for our musical interlude - a song that's been sent to us by one of Southern Africa's leading singers - Matiwane Manana. Born and brought up in South Africa, Matiwane now lives in Swaziland though he is a frequent traveller, having studied for a time in West Germany and appeared in concerts in America with Harry Belafonte and Miriam Makeba. This song 'A Simple Life' has been specially written for us by Matiwane.

TAPE: A SIMPLE LIFE

ALEX: Matiwane Manana singing his composition 'A Simple Life' with some unidentified youthful assistance. And so to our second item on African textiles - though this time we take a look at the subject not from a historical point of view, for interesting though they were, many of the items in the Museum of Mankind exhibition represent techniques that are no longer practised in Africa. This is far from the case with an exhibition at London's Africa Centre which has given those of us here a chance to see the work of Sierra Leonian Mrs Kadiatu Kamara, usually known as Mama Khadi. Although married to a Sierra Leone businessman and therefore part of the urban environment, Mama Khadi is nevertheless one of the foremost exponents of the traditional art of dyeing in Sierra Leone, known as gara. The exhibition in London was organised by Rosalind Shaw who until recently, was working as an anthropologist in Sierra Leone. David Sweetman spoke to her and began by getting her to explain just what gara is.

R. SHAW: It's dyed cloth, dyed by the resist technique, either by first sewing or tying the cloth in different shapes and patterns or by using wax, using the batik method.

DAVID: Is there any difference between this technique, and as far as you know the sort of dyeing techniques they used in other parts of West Africa? Is there anything unique about gara?

R. SHAW: No, in fact gara is just the Sierra Leone name for it which is of Mandinka origin.

DAVID: Does much of this go on? Is it a very popular art form?

R. SHAW: Yes, it's very very widespread in Sierra Leone. It's one of the most highly prized skills a woman can have in Sierra Leone - it's a woman's craft, not a man's craft.

- DAVID: One thing I noticed was that the things were made up into clothes. One thing I did wonder about - that is are the cloths dyed first and then cut and sewn into clothes, or do the dye ready-made clothes?
- R. SHAW: They're first dyed and then made into clothes but Mama Khadi does dye things, knowing that they will be made into clothes, so that she can dye them in appropriate patterns so that she uses different techniques if she is going to dye a skirt for instance.
- DAVID: What are the techniques that are used? How are the various differences in the patterns brought about?
- R. SHAW: Basically by using different methods of tying: there are many different ways of tying and sewing it. And different stamps used.
- DAVID: These are ready made and print the wax are they?
- R. SHAW: That's right - these are stamps carved by wood carvers or carpenters. Another very traditional old method is scattered candles and what happens here is that the wax is made by melting candles and a broom is dipped in the hot wax - it has to be very hot and then scattered over a piece of cloth which is then dyed and of course leaves this pattern where the wax has been scattered behind. This is very beautiful and can be repeated many times with different dyes - different colours and it's this kind of method that Mama Khadi has reintroduced into the gara scene in Sierra Leone - these more traditional methods were dying out and especially the use of traditional dyes such as indigo and kohl which of course are natural dyes.
- DAVID: I was going to say - how traditional is the work and how creative is it? How much when confronted with a piece of plain cloth would Mama Khadi start out to create a work of art and how much of it would be conditioned by the fact that there is always a certain way of doing things?
- R. SHAW: She does, both basically. She has reintroduced the traditional methods, and she is also one of Freetown's main innovators in gara dyeing.
- DAVID: Is there a sense of there being a community of artists working on this? Do people get together, do they look at each other's work? Do they compare notes? Would one gara dyer go to an exhibition by another and say oh you know that's amazing what you're doing there. Do they in fact think of themselves as artists?
- R. SHAW: Styles do disseminate very widely mainly because there is a lot of mobility in Sierra Leone, people travel a lot and traders, wandering traders carry gara all over the country. Mama Khadi's gara goes to markets all over the country and styles are disseminated through these methods.

ALEX: Rosalind Shaw talking to David Sweetman about the work of the Sierra Leonian dyer, Mama Khadi. Now one of the most peculiar things about gara dyeing is the considerable amount of expense in setting up the equipment particularly in buying the hand carved blocks for the batik dyeing and given the low profit-margin that such works bring in Sierra Leone, it's obvious that this work must be a labour of love. And that's it for Arts and Africa for this week. And I leave you with another piece of music from Matiwane Manana.

TAPE: MATIWANE MANANA'S MUSIC