

Arts and Africa

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ELAINE: Although there are many more months in 1974 our spies tell us that throughout Africa preparations have already begun for the 1975 Black and All Africa Arts Festival. And not only in Africa. Here in Britain there's a Festival Committee organising a contribution for Black people in the United Kingdom. Later in the year they'll be putting on a mini-festival to try out likely performers and we're hoping to have a report on them on "Arts and Africa" when the time comes.

The same idea has just been put into practice in Sierra Leone and Roland Buck has made some recordings specially for us during Freetown's week-long cultural festival.

But at this point let's find out from the host country, Nigeria, how truly international the Festival is going to be. I have with me in the studio Olu Adebajo, Head of the Publicity Department at the International Secretariat in Lagos. Olu Adebajo do you know of other countries holding these pre-festival festivals if you see what I mean?

OLU ADEBAJO:

Yes, according to the programme of the International Festival Committee all countries, all those split into states, are expecting to hold their own mini-festivals. These festivals are designed to achieve two things: first, to have a festival feeling all over the place; secondly to offer the opportunity to select the national contingents to come to Lagos.

ELAINE: Is Lagos going to be the only centre?

ADEBAJO: Lagos is going to be the main venue but there is one major event, the durbar, which is going to be held in Kaduna in northern Nigeria. The durbar is a spectacle of horses, thousands of them with their horsemen colourfully dressed charging forward and displaying their skill at riding. You will find three thousand horses charging forward for a distance of 300 - 600 metres and all their columns not mixing, not falling down and going right in front of the special visitors stage and standing at attention, stopping and then rising up with their horses - all the horses

ADEBANJO: rising up to the heavens - and this is a great spectacle of (contd.) horsemanship and skill at riding horses.

ELAINE: That sounds incredible, all those horses, but the whole plan for me is really amazing. Tell me, whose idea was it to put this festival together?

ADEBANJO: Well this is the second festival, as you know. The first festival was held in Dakar, Senegal in 1966 and at that festival President Senghor did invite Nigeria to host the second festival five years later but because of our local troubles in Nigeria around that time Nigeria couldn't possibly be holding a big festival. Since the Nigerian government did accept we thought that it might be better to improve on the structure of the first festival so this second festival has not really been organised by Nigeria but by an international festival committee which has brought into its membership representatives of governments and leading artists all over the world. So we now have an International Festival Committee which is headed by Chief Enahoro and we have representatives of the fourteen zones.

ELAINE: Could you give me some names of them?

ADEBANJO: Yes, these zones include North America where we have Ossie Davies as a representative, Brazil where we have Dr Alakiga, Caribbean where we have Miss Shirley Field who is the only woman member of the Festival Committee and she represents the Caribbean zone.

ELAINE: Well, I feeling particularly happy because you mentioned the fact that there is a woman in this festival but I am going to move on to another point. I noticed that there is a kind of element of competition and this seems strange to me in a cultural festival, How can you decide?

ADEBANJO: I must admit that the competitive element in this festival has raised some questions but I want to emphasise that there are very, very few subjects which would be competitive, in fact, I wouldn't be surprised if there were more than two or three. The purpose of this is to encourage young artists who can come all the way to Lagos from Brazil, South Africa or from New Guinea and later they'll be awarded a certificate or diploma and we would hope that these might encourage other unknown artists.

ELAINE: Well, talking about artists I want to ask you one last question. Is there going to be some kind of definite symbol or anthem or something to commemorate this whole thing?

ADEBANJO: So far we have an emblem worn by one of the ancient Obas of Benin. You see, the mask seems to symbolize every African art, there is scarcely any African society which doesn't have a mask of some form or other - of wood or ivory or anything. So we have this as a symbol and then we have a flag which is designed to reflect black and gold with the symbol in the centre meaning that the black would represent the African and black culture, the gold will represent two things: firstly, the wealth of the areas represented at the festival, and also the non-blacks contributing in this festival and so we have to bring them into the symbol of the festival.

ELAINE: Black and gold, I like that. Thank you very much and I hope that later on as the Festival draws nearer maybe we can talk some more about what is happening.

ADEBANJO: Thank you very much.

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ELAINE: Maringa music - that tantalizing blend of West African High-life and West Indian calypso: This fusion of rhythms has been the speciality of Ebenezer Calender and his band and they featured maringa music in the all-night vigil that preceded the formal opening of the Freetown Festival.

The festival itself was primarily musical - though there was an exhibition of paintings and Roland Buck had the chance to talk to one of the artists, Peter Karefa-Smart. He asked him what he was trying to say in his paintings.

PETER KAREFA-SMART:

I'm not trying to say anything really. I'm trying to catch the eye. If you are an artist you are supposed to be able to see and if you are a patron of the arts you are supposed to face the canvas, allow your mind and your eyes to be captured by the canvas, and then you can start to understand. In a way, I think I got over this because most people refused to respect the space that the canvas took and if you respect that you would be able to see what I was doing. A lot of people said that I was doing a lot of abstract work but unfortunately to say many people came who were not sophisticated, who were illiterate came and told me exactly what I was doing. I remember I had a very small canvas that had a bull on it and a fellow came and he told me: "Look, I know what you are doing there, you are trying to capture (he didn't say capture but he said) you are trying to get in oil an image of what you call an" you know the head, and that was what I was trying to do as a matter of fact and that is the name of the painting.

BUCK: How are they related to the culture of Sierra Leone?

KAREFA?SMART:

I am a Sierra Leonean. Anything I do comes out of my cultural background - I grew up in Sierra Leone I have been exposed to a lot of things in Sierra Leone. Even my colours which most people tell me in the States is my strong point because I am used to seeing things bright, in the United States things are really gloomy and dull, but over here we have bright colours, we have bright creatures and bright people.

ELAINE: I agree with him but I gather that the bright people at the Festival were not only from Sierra Leone. Liberia, for instance was represented by their 'Kede Kede' dancers.

They seem to have made quite an impression on Roland who's sent us this picture of them listen: "Young, ochre-painted girls, heavily weighed down by piles of thin, silver wires, with hundreds of minute bells and cowrie shells, and dancing in an unusually slow and sleepy-eyed manner, quite unlike an African".

And what really stuns me is the news that during the festival, dancers and musicians from various secret sects who normally only perform on special occasions and in enclosed places danced in front of everyone. I wonder whether they'll be performing in Nigeria next year.

MUSIC

That well-known Sierra Leonean playwright, Amadu Yulisa Maddy, who's also an author and actor has been heavily involved in the festival. One afternoon was devoted to songs he had composed as part of a Krio operetta with the title 'Put For Me'. It's a lampoon on the immorality of taking and giving bribes and from the song we've just heard you may have caught the idea just from the gusto of the singing.

Well he not only deals in satire but is also one of the Cultural Officers that has helped the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs organize the festival so Roland directed a question on the coverage of the festival to him.

AMADU YULISA MADDY:

We are just going to do one week which we call the National Cultural Week which was more song and dance work than artists, painting or literature.

BUCK: Do you think this represented or reflected totally the culture of Sierra Leone?

MADDY: No, not in its entirety. You must accept that some of us the professionals within the Ministry, are new in the Ministry and these ideas of having a cultural festival for a whole week was more or less impromptu. Next year if we do have a cultural week we wouldn't make the mistakes we have made and we would not be limited to just dancing.

- BUCK: This is supposed to be in preparation for the 1975 Lagos All Black Festival. What do you think we should do at the Festival? And do you think we have enough material to be able to represent and reflect the culture of Sierra Leone adequately?
- MADDY: This is the main reason why I came back to Sierra Leone because I was an expert on the committee in London on drama and I thought I have given quite a lot to other countries so I might as well come and help Sierra Leone prepare for that Festival. I think and I honestly believe that we have more than enough to go to that Festival and win prizes after prizes. Again this would depend on where our priorities lie. If somebody who doesn't know the arts is going to be playing the God Almighty then obviously we don't stand a chance of showing our national prowess in the arts.
- BUCK: Are there any obstacles and how can they be overcome?
- MADDY: They can be overcome if one's opinion, the artist's opinion, is respected, if they are not pressurised. This is the stalemate, this is the stumbling-block. The artist is not allowed to work as an artist, he is forced to work as a civil servant and therefore he cannot move his left foot or his right foot because he might be doing the wrong thing.
- BUCK: What is the solution then for artistic expression, free artistic expression in Sierra Leone?
- MADDY: I think the artist should be prepared to work if necessary to fight. When I say 'fight' I mean to depict Sierra Leone as he sees it and be honest with his work and in time people will begin to recognise their mistakes and acknowledge the artist for what he is worth. You see it is difficult to get the community to accept something when you have not provided it for them, but even when you do provide it for them sometimes they refuse it and so you push and push and push and this is what the artist should do in Sierra Leone, they should be pushful.
- ELAINE: Amadu Yulisa Maddy talking to Roland Buck. We're ending with some more music from the operetta and so from me Elaine Caulker it's goodbye. I hope it's been as much of a pleasure for you as it's been for me and that you'll all join me next week for another edition of "Arts and Africa".

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