

# Arts and Africa

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"ARTS AND AFRICA"

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SIGNATURE TUNE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Hello and welcome to "Arts and Africa". This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey inviting you to take a radio view of the sights and sounds of Africa.

SIGNATURE TUNE

A radio view? Well, that just means that we'll be inviting you to see in your mind's eye the elaborate and beautiful picture from Ethiopia that a couple of guests to the programme will be discussing later.

But we're beginning with music from Kenya, from a place that is literally on the very edge of the continent - or off the edge if you like - music from the island of Patta.

SIYU MUSIC

A band was playing music of a kind that traditionally belongs to the town of Siyu; and as Siyu is about as far east as you can go on Kenyan soil, I thought I could hear Asiain sounds amongst the very African rhythms. Now, all the music we'll be playing today was recorded for "Arts and Africa" by Paul Toulmin, who's been visiting that part of the world. So let Paul set the scene for us.

PAUL TOULMIN-ROTHE:

Siyu town, in Patta Island off the north coast of Kenya, not far from the holiday resort of Lamu, is famous for a number of things including a beautiful ruined mosque dating from the early sixteenth century, a number of early tombs and an early nineteenth century fort. All of these relics date from the time when Siyu was one of the biggest and most important towns on the east coast of Africa. Those days were long ago, and later Siyu lost its importance and dwindled to a mere village with a few hundred mud huts surrounded by the ruins of their golden age.

Today, however, Siyu is experiencing something of a renaissance: its population has increased, some of the arts and crafts for which it was formerly famous have been revived and its people are taking a new interest in the town's distinguished history. One of the signs of the new life which is slowly but surely creeping back into Siyu is the popularity of two social and musical clubs of a kind which existed in many East African coast towns till only about 70 or 80 years ago. Everyone in Siyu is a fervent supporter of one or other of these two associations which are nominally football clubs but which in practice exist more as social groupings and for the performance of the wonderful traditional music of the Swahili coast.

## SIYU MUSIC

TETTEH-LARTEY: This particular Siyu band has the splendid title of The New Kenya One Band and Paul Toulmin-Rothe was evidently very impressed when he saw it in action.

TOULMIN-ROTHER: It was a wonderful experience. The band consists of only five players but all of them are virtuosos on their particular instruments. Three of the players are drummers but it seems almost a pity to use the simple word drum for such beautifully made and subtle instruments. One of the New Kenya One's drums - you can hear its deep tone clearly on the recording I made - is famous for many miles around and when played by an expert, makes a wonderful resonant sound which puts the timpani of western symphony orchestras to shame. The fourth of the percussion instruments in the band is a kind of cymbal which gives a characteristically oriental sound to the band. And the fifth and most wonderful instrument of all is a zumari which looks and sounds much like the chanter on a set of bagpipes. This is the same kind of double-reeded conical wood wind instrument from which the oboe and the bassoon of the west have been developed.

But the instruments, as you can hear, are not everything in the performance: just as important are the voices of the male and female choruses which intone in a kind of chant.

## SIYA MUSIC

When I was watching them, the men were all dressed in kanzus, which are a kind of full-length white shirt reaching to the ground with traditional muslim embroidered caps on their head. As they sang they swayed in a kind of dance and almost seemed to be lost in a trance.

Behind them was a line of women also singing the vocal chant and punctuating the music with bangs on hollow logs which make a sound something like xylophones. It's rather unusual for women to take part in performances of this kind on the east African coast, where, of course, most of the people are muslims. But the people of Siyu are very advanced in this respect and women play an important role in the functions of the club.

TETTEH-LARTEY: And making that visit on behalf of "Arts and Africa" to Siyu on the Kenyan coast was Paul Toulmin-Rothe.

The story of the Queen of Sheba, from a beautiful and wealthy land far to the south of Egypt, and her journey in biblical times to visit King Solomon in his palace in Jerusalem remains a popular legend; especially in Ethiopia, where Solomon and Sheba are thought of as the legendary founders of the Ethiopian dynasty. Their story is often told in a series of pictures, all painted on a single piece of cloth or parchment. The material is divided up into squares and each square shows a further episode in the story. And to help people understand what is happening from one picture to the next, there's often a caption written underneath.

The other day, a particularly fine example was brought into the studio. Girma Asfaw examined it and explained some of the implications to Clive Jordan. Clive had to admit that until he saw this kind he had associated the pictorial form of storytelling with the comics he read as a boy.

CLIVE JORDAN:

Well, I suppose my first introduction to the sequence story in pictures was the "Captain Marvel" comics of my youth. And then I graduated to slightly more serious forms of art - although I wouldn't want to knock Captain Marvel - and I was particularly glad to go to Ethiopia just before Christmas and look at the traditional art there, and also to see the magnificent art treasures in the Ethiopian Art exhibition in Paris.

One of the forms of painting I came across in Ethiopia was exactly this sort of comic-strip story and we're very lucky to have an example of this in the studio in front of us. Girma, you're looking at it as well as me, and although as a foreigner to this tradition, I can see immediately the visual appeal of the story: I can see the colour; I can see the liveliness of the line drawing; but I wonder if you can perhaps say what the story is about.

GIRMA ASFAW:

Basically, it appears to be the story of the Queen Azeb which in Gurs means the Queen of the South. I wouldn't probably compare it with the comic strip of Captain Marvel - it's much more interesting and probably has much more aesthetic value than Captain Marvel!

JORDAN: But that is the Queen of Sheba isn't it? Queen Azeb. But this story of the Queen of Sheba meeting King Solomon - in my visits to the art shops in Addis Ababa - did seem to be far and away the most popular one. But there, I must say it was depicted much more crudely than here: one did indeed see the King and Queen lying down in bed together which we can't actually see in this painting anywhere, can we?

ASFAW: I think it is much more beautifully and colourfully depicted. For example, the beginning of the frames shows a serpent drinking water out of a river. A lady goes and washes herself in the river and for some reason or another she has a child which is half a serpent and half man.

JORDAN: It is rather beautifully done, rather quaintly done as well. Because when the mother has the child, the child is sitting in her lap and there she is sitting in her white robes being admired by a group of courtiers, but around her feet is coiled the snake.

ASFAW: I think also, the fact that is explained in, for want of a better word, in "cartoon style", makes it even more interesting.

JORDAN: That you've got the words underneath, you mean?

ASFAW: Yes, exactly.

JORDAN: We've been talking about quaintness and charm, but I wouldn't like to criticise this style of painting for, like yourself, I find considerable appeal in it. If we look at that third frame: how simple that is. Because after the serpent has drunk in the water and contaminated it, we see the woman, the mother-to-be, going to the river and we can assume she is washing (indeed, I know that is the case because you told me that from the caption underneath) but all we can see in fact is the back view of a crouching woman.

After this story of the snake we have a group of people who plot to poison the snake. They have apparently been paying some kind of tribute to this serpent and they do so by feeding it animals and the first time that this crops up in the narrative story here in the pictures all you see is the snake's head coming out of a hole in a rock or a tree or something and this poor animal is offered to the snake.

ASFAW: Yes, and this apparently went on for about 40 years, paying tribute to the snake, according to the caption. But notice also, the people who are praying. I think that the faces, the expression on their faces, is much more pictorial, much more realistic. It depicts fear of the snake, if you notice their eyes for example, even the child's eyes on the back of the mother.

JORDAN: Yes, this group of people crouching at the base of this place where the snake has its den. Indeed, they do look very startled and I think one of the great qualities which this unknown artist has got is that when he gets a group of people together we really do have a feeling of their common sentiment.

ASFAW: Even after the snake has been killed by Angabo - supposed to be the legendary king of Ethiopia - you can see a certain amount of pride in the face of Angabo who is holding the sword with which he has killed the snake.

JORDAN: So, what connection is there between that part of the story and this familiar story of the meeting of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon?

ASFAW: I don't think there is any connection, in fact, except it would refer to the legend that the serpent was worshipped in the kingdom that was supposed to have been dreamed of by the Queen of Sheba. And the fact that Angabo is also supposed to be a legendary king of Ethiopia who takes over from the serpent and to all intents and purposes was in any case the ruler. This is the only connection, but from the pictures one can surmise I suppose that Angabo is the father of the legendary Queen of Sheba.

JORDAN: So in these last ten frames we are on much more familiar ground: the story of the Queen of Sheba?

ASFAW: I think so, yes.

JORDAN: But her followers seem really to have been Christians - because in another panel, there, we see two of them setting out to take a message to King Solomon who is somewhere over the sea - they are paddling away like mad in a boat and one of them is holding a cross.

ASFAW: It's not really a cross. The letter is in a sort of split stick where it can be noticed that the messenger is carrying an urgent message of some sort or another.

JORDAN: Well, it's a fascinating glimpse into the way an artist has seen the past but is this story form still used nowadays?

ASFAW: Commercially, it is used very much indeed. But I think in certain cases probably in churches as well it can be used and it has been known to be used.

TETTEH-LARTEY: So, the serpent, King Angabo, the Queen of Sheba, King Solomon all in one picture. And, talking about it were Girma Asfaw and Clive Jordan.

And here we've come to the end of the programme, but before the New Kenya One Band plays us out, I'd like to invite you to join me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, next week for more "Arts and Africa".

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