

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

"ARTS AND AFRICA"

No. 96

(5R 53 S096G)

ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey. A family of languages and a drama festival: that's today's "Arts and Africa".

SIGNATURE TUNE

TETTEH-LARTEY:

In spite of the importance in the world today of nationalism, there's no doubt that links of culture are strong ties between people - and I'm not saying that just because I'm introducing a programme on the arts! What I mean by 'cultural links' is more than the mere exchange of performances by national dance troupes; it's more the sharing of similar attitudes to music, say, and poetry, and even attitudes to family relationships.

I suppose one of the most obvious cultural groups, with Islam as a cornerstone, is the Arab world. There's the same faith, the same or similar languages, and music that's immediately recognizable as Arabic.

ARABIC MUSIC: Ayyami

TETTEH-LARTEY:

At the recent Drama Festival in Damascus there were theatre companies from places like Egypt and Kuwait, from the host country, Syria, and, of course, from the Arab-speaking countries in North Africa. Ken Wittingham, who's joined me in the studio today, was at the Festival watching the performances. Am I right Ken?

KEN WITTINGHAM

That's right, yes.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

What was the purpose of the Festival?

WITTINGHAM:

Well really the Damascus Festival is an annual event, it started six years ago and the idea was to get the theatre groups from all these countries, the Arab-speaking countries, together. Because they're all very new in the world of theatre they don't have a very long experience and so the actors could get together with each other, exchange ideas and really learn from being together how they can develop their own theatres in their own countries. So it's a kind of get-together for artists and at the same time a Festival for the audience as well.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Is there any political basis for this so that the Arab countries will feel that they are one unit, they are one identity?

WITTINGHAM:

Well in one sense yes, but I don't really think so. I don't think that's important. In any case they feel a unity from their language as you've already said, although it's strange at the Festival because you can sit in the Festival with a Syrian audience, basically a Syrian audience, and they don't understand the Iraqi performance because the language is so strange, and they don't understand the Moroccan performance because that's another kind of Arabic, so it's very difficult. But there's an attempt, and one thing that they try to do through the Festival is to persuade all the groups to perform in a classical kind of Arabic. But me myself, I don't agree with that because by putting it in a classical language everybody understands, you destroy the real native meaning of the culture. I mean a Moroccan can't express himself except in the Moroccan language. So there are these problems with the Festival.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

But then, is there anything common to these various countries in terms of drama, upon which you could say, "Well, there is something called Arab drama".

WITTINGHAM:

I don't think so. Really they have mostly taken European drama - French drama, English drama, and have tried to adapt it to their own language, to their own situations, to make an Arab drama. But if we look at the Arab countries they really don't have any traditions of drama of any kind at all for thousands of years. So suddenly to come in the twentieth century and make drama is something very difficult, and perhaps the ones who succeeded most, or certainly showed the way in the Damascus Festival this year were the Moroccans, where they seem to have a sense of spirit and life about them on the stage that transmitted itself to the audience.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Well you say that it was not unusual for one to sit in the theatre and listen to a play, say from Morocco, and audiences from elsewhere not understanding anything that was being said. Well in that case don't you think there is an argument for the suggestion that they should use one classical form of medium, in the language?

WITTINGHAM:

There's certainly an argument, and the argument's been raging for very many years now, and each year at the Festival they have a conference running together with the Festival at which the directors and the actors and the Ministers of Culture and so on discuss the crisis and the problems and the development and so on and every year it seems to me the question is, should we be performing in classical Arabic? But really, when I think about it, the trend in most countries is to move away from a stylized language, to move to the language of the people. For instance, it's all very well for the Moroccans to go to Syria with a play in classical Arabic which everybody, the Syrians, the Iraqis, the Egyptians will all understand, but their own people back in Morocco won't understand - the peasant, the worker, the uneducated people can only understand their own language they're speaking every day, and surely it's more important for the theatre to talk to its own people than this once a year Festival where it goes and shows that we've got a good theatre.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Yes, you think in terms of national theatres rather than international?

WITTINGHAM:

I think so.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Now, was this in the form of a competition, this Festival?

WITTINGHAM:

It's not exactly a competition in that there are no prizes, but of course everyone's sitting there on the edge of their seats marking down who is good and who is bad, and at the end there's a list brought out by the critics of whom they think were the best plays.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And which country came out tops?

WITTINGHAM:

WITTINGHAM:

Morocco came out top this year, top by a long, long way because they found a play that was amusing, had some serious ideas about corruption in the courts and this kind of thing and also they did a thing that was very good because of the language problems; they used a lot of music, particularly chorus music so that the audience immediately felt at home because of the Arab music you know, which all Arabs feel this is the same feelings towards and understand.

ARABIC MUSIC: Ayyami

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Music from the prize-winning country at the Festival - Morocco. And telling me about the festival was Ken Wittingham.

Another cultural group, but they're certainly not as well-known as the Arabs, are the Cushitic peoples. And if the name 'Cushitic' is new to you, as it is to me, don't be surprised. Large groups of people in Somalia, for instance - have been given this 'umbrella' name by scholars, and quite recently.

They speak similar languages and it's this family of languages that brought together academics from different parts of the world to a conference in Paris not long ago. One of the observers at the conference was Abdulahi Haji and as he pointed out, there was plenty of discussion about research on the culture, the history and the languages of the Cushitic people but very little mention of who they are. And he put it to Dr. G. Andrzejewski of London University that the conference could have been 'flogging a dead horse'.

ANDRZEJEWSKI:

Actually we were not flogging a dead horse, I think there was not even a suspicion of any kind of death or even sleep or anything like that! In fact the discussions were very lively and I would like to mention one point that we actually resolved, it was a very strange achievement in fact at an academic conference, that we resolved the problem of what Cushitic languages are, and consequently who Cushitic people are. That it was thanks to Professor Tubiana who put forward various ideas which were to a very large extent his. The idea is this: that we know, it is absolutely certain, even the speakers of these languages know, that there's a very close relationship between Oromos and the Somalis and the Affars and the Agaws and the Saho. There's no doubt whatsoever; if you travel in these areas you know. No Somali would doubt that the Oroma are their brothers. I mean if someone greets you as "Akaam Jirtaa" (phonetically) "How are you?" a Somali would understand because the root 'jir' means 'to be'. "How are you?" and so on, it's the same. And also the method of numeration; various other things point very clearly, e.g., the way verbs are conjugated, it points beyond any doubt that there is a common origin. Now Professor Tubiana put forward a very good suggestion: Let's consider this group of languages which we call Cushitic, and which anyway is a foreign name which scholars invented to cover this

area; if we call these people Cushitic then any nation which shows in its language resemblances which are beyond the possibility of accidental resemblances, are also Cushitic. And this was a solution which I think is not surprising that it comes from a French scholar because this idea Decartes actually put forward in relation to geometry, that if we start at the right point of reference we can find any place in the world.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Dr. Andrzejewski talked to the conference about the literature created by people speaking Cushitic languages (that's oral literature) and so did scholars from Cushitic-speaking East Africa.

ANDRZEJEWSKI:

I was particularly gratified that we had two very interesting contributions from Mr. Salah Daral from the Sudan, who talked about the poetry of the Beja people, who are the Cushitic people of the Sudan, and which shows very striking characteristics and with the Somali poetry, that it seems that among the Beja it is the central point in the national culture and also there was a very interesting paper by Atol Saifu on the Oromo poetry, and Oromo as you know is the largest Cushitic language on the parallel with Somali in the number of speakers

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And here are a few lines of Somali poetry - some famous lines that describe a whirlwind in the desert - by the revered Somali poet Mohammed Abdulle Hassan.

"Saha Kaay" by Said Mahommed Abdulle Hassan. An extract.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

The sound of one Cushitic language - Somali - in a common Cushitic art form - poetry.

I was surprised to find that the official language of Ethiopia, Amharic (which geographically speaking is in the Cushitic heartland) isn't Cushitic. But that's by the way. What scholars at the conference were stressing was how important a family of languages can be. Here's Professor Tubiana of France.

PROFESSOR TUBIANA:

A language is a sort of shape, outside shape of the whole of the culture. Language, as is well-known now, is an instrument of communication, language 'carries information' as we say now in modern terms. Well, since language carries information it must carry the whole of the information available in the society that uses it and we can find when we study history that language, to use another technical term, is co-extensive to culture, that is to say that when the society progresses or regresses language progresses

or regresses.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

And if anyone is still wondering what motivates the specialists attending the conference, Dr. Andrzejewski supplies both the question and the answer.

ANDRZEJEWSKI:

Someone may ask the very simple question: why do you worry about the Cushitic people, why not someone else? I think it's a matter of division of labour. Scholarship, academic pursuits are related to a study of mankind. Really, as scholars we are devoted to the study of the language and culture in societies of the world and this is an area which was previously very much neglected. One of the objects of this symposium was to revive interest or to shall we say invite attention, especially from the centres of learning in Africa from the Cushitic region, from the speakers of the Cushitic languages, from the people who live these cultures in their ordinary lives, and also to attract other scholars from all over the world, because scholarship is something international which we all share and which is motivated by this great interest in the human mind, in the human achievements, human language of the whole family of man.

TETTEH-LARTEY:

Dr. Andrzejewski.

And with that report from France, we've come to an end for today. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and I'll be back next week at this time for another edition of "Arts and Africa".

ARABIC MUSIC

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