

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ANNC. AND SIG. TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome from Alex Tetteh-Lartey and today Ethiopia presents her culture in Arts and Africa.

SIG. TUNE:

MUSIC: "Tezeta"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

A modern song called "Tezeta" but with the deep, rather melancholy strumming of the lyre in the accompaniment, unmistakably Ethiopian.

Geography and history have given Ethiopians a culture that in many ways is unlike that of the rest of the continent. Their staple food is a cereal called teff, and the national drink is a spirit made from honey. They were converted to Christianity sixteen hundred years ago, and although a large number of Ethiopians are now Muslims, the ancient Coptic Church has always played an important role in the state.

MUSIC: Ethiopian music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

A recording of part of a service held in a church in Lalibela. Churches at Lalibela are not built of stone but in stone - by cutting away at huge masses of rocks. At a recent exhibition of Ethiopian art and culture, a replica built from wood and polystyrene gave visitors an impression of the original. The exhibition was one of Ethiopia's contributions to Festac '77 and the director, Mamo Tesembe, who's also the director of the Ethiopian National Museum in Addis Ababa, took Florence Akst on a tour of the exhibits.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, we've come into, what I suppose, is a large room but it is difficult to see the extent of it because it is filled with columns,

holding up many, many arches and the arches are all brightly coloured, crosses, zig-zags marks, circles, lots of decoration in green, yellow, red with white backgrounds and between the arches, the ceilings too are decorated very vividly and brightly lit to show the examples of Ethiopian culture below. I'm going to ask the director to explain what these arches signify, whether this is something one would see if one visited Ethiopia.

MAMO TESEMBE:

This building is called Lalibela building of the medieval period in Ethiopia.

FLORENCE AKST:

So it is a copy of something that exists ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

It is a building carved out of one solid rock and this place we have 11 different types of churches. We managed to put up here in Lagos, one of the 11 churches to show the typical Ethiopian architectural motives in the 11th century.

FLORENCE AKST:

So, in fact the crosses I see are not just decoration, they do have a religious significance?

MAMO TESEMBE:

They do have the Ethiopian orthodox religious significance.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, there are a lot of exhibits that I think are probably priests robes - let's move over in that direction.

MAMO TESEMBE:

Well, the capes are fully embroidered on velvet of different colours. You see here, one of the most beautiful capes, which is used by one of the Ethiopian archbishops in the past.

FLORENCE AKST:

A tremendous amount of gold thread - I think is that the Lion of Judah ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

I wouldn't say there is a Lion of Judah here. There is the black Lion of Ethiopia here which again is also of an animal which exists the same as in Ethiopia.

FLORENCE AKST:

Good gracious, what an enormous umbrella ! Would you tell me about it ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

This is a unique umbrella, a lot larger than the usual umrellas carried by people. This type of umrella made of velvet, very bright red, on top of it with shield-like decoration made of silver, gold gilded and it has been used in Ethiopia to cover tabernacles when it goes out from the churches, out to the field, specially at the time of Epiphany.

MUSIC: Music from Ethiopia.

FLORENCE AKST:

Right, well we're coming up to a stand where there is a large book supported and it's not printed but written with an illuminated border and black and red letters which I can't read but I suspect are Amharic.

MAMO TESEMBE:

This is what we call a manuscript, written on parchment and the parchment is of goat-skin. The writing is of course the Ge'ez - this amazingly has been the Ethiopian traditional writing which survives as a unique alphabet in Africa and this of course dates back to anywhere 5th century BC, which is the servant character, from there this is the one we call Ge'ez from Ge'ez, Amharic, the Ethiopian national language has been adopted.

FLORENCE AKST:

And I see from a note beside the book, that in fact, the pages are open at some of the psalms of David?

MAMO TESEMBE:

Yes, it is used in the church for praying purposes on special holidays.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, we're moving into another room which doesn't seem to have the church influence of the last one. Here are some clothes made and exhibited. It's interesting, particularly after seeing so many gorgeous and colourful clothes, that most of these seem to be, although they have decoration added, seem to be white or cream. What sort of material are they made from?

MAMO TESEMBE:

Well, this is the typical national dress of Ethiopia with rich embroidered coloured ornaments around it called "shama" and it is purely made from cotton.

FLORENCE AKST:

Even the thick one, the thick one looks almost like wool to me?

MAMO TESEMBE:

Part of the edge decoration is wool of course, but the rest of it is cotton and I'm sure you've seen Ethiopian ladies wearing it around here.

FLORENCE AKST:

And they look very glamorous wearing them too !

MUSIC: Ethiopian music.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, we come through another section of the exhibition and round yet more corners. Here we are in a small room with a bamboo roof, white-washed walls and what I suspect, are domestic implements. Would you like to tell me what this is ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

This building exists in the Northern part of Ethiopia, called The Tigre house. It is a kitchen in which you see all sorts of house utensils. You see things made of pottery, clay oven

FLORENCE AKST:

The hole is for the

MAMO TESEMBE:

..... for the fire in which we bake our national food, the so-called injera - this injera is made of very fine grain particles called 'teff' a very rare grain, only found in Ethiopia.

FLORENCE AKST:

And you make bread with it do you ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

Yes, we make a big, very thin bread which is similar to a pancake.

FLORENCE AKST:

The window openings have vessels in them there are some made of hide, there are woven dishes. That's a gourd over there I suppose, a water flask, no it's an animal skin I think, that black one.

MAMO TESEMBE:

Yes, that is a very thick hippopotamus skin, and is water tight.

FLORENCE AKST:

Yes, and I see a pestle and mortar over there ready for someone to grind. But what is quite startling when you turn this corner and see the kitchen, is the covering on the floor. There is a

a skin a large one, I can see it has come off an animal. It must be I suppose, six feet long and on it there's a picture painted, a picture of some faces, and particularly the head and shoulders entirely of a man, who has wide staring eyes, a white beard, he's holding a book. What is this ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

Well, this is a cow hide, stretched when it was wet. Two types of different people were painted on it, the one in front is Abraham and the other one on the left is Isaac. You see the material used to paint these, everything is local pigment and it is here lying on the floor because the kitchen is the most important room since we do get our things cooked in there.

MUSIC: Ethiopian music.

FLORENCE AKST:

We've seen a great stretch of Ethiopian history right up to the present because you do have a room of contemporary art and as well as that you go right back to the past, as far back as anybody can remember. Shall we go in that direction now ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST:

Well, we've come to a section called "Africa and the Origin of Man". It's not only Ethiopian, but there is a large Ethiopian presentation here and it's showing how the earliest remains of mankind, bones, fossils, have been found in East Africa and Ethiopia and here is a splendid glass case which looks as if it should hold jewels. But in fact there are just some old bones lying about, whose are they ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

Well, this is a skeleton of a lady discovered in 1975, in the Northern part of Ethiopia at a place called Hadama. The name given by the scientists to this complete skull of a lady is called Lucy.

FLORENCE AKST:

Lucy ! So she already has a name has she ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

She has already got the name, but I don't know, maybe in Ethiopian language we are going to call her Ikancho.

FLORENCE AKST:

And she's an old lady ?

MAMO TESEMBE:

She's three million years old, but that doesn't mean she was old at the time.

FLORENCE AKST:

Now there aren't many bones but people, the scientists can tell the sex and the sort of creature that these bones made up and this is just one evidence of a room with a lot of skulls staring at us with open eye sockets, a lot of pictures showing artists ideas about what early man looked like when he first started walking upright and Ethiopia has got quite a contribution here.

MAMO TESEMBE:

Yes, this exhibition on original man consists of three countries, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, organised by the International Festival Secretariat to show the birth place of man, that it was in East Africa, or in Africa in general. And you see the different kinds of fossils, which all dates back to over 2 million years ago. They are categorised into 3 different species. One is the so-called austrelopithicus or Africanus, and then the middle man or half-ape half-man, from there the Homo-Sapiens.

FLORENCE AKST:

And you've forgotten one variety which is walking about looking at the exhibitions and I'M glad to see so many of us here.

MAMO TESEMBE:

Well, I haven't forgotten them because they belong to the Homo-Sapiens!

FLORENCE AKST:

I stand corrected indeed, thank you very much for taking us on this tour.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And taking Florence Akst round the Ethiopian National Exhibition during Festac in Lagos, was the director, Mamo Tesembe. Now after all the traditional Ethiopian music that we've heard in the prog, let's end with something up-to-date.

MUSIC: Ethiopian music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

In a moment, Seyfu Johannes with "Mela Mela", but for now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: Mela Mela by Seyfu Johannes.

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