

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ANNOUNCEMENT AND SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with our second on the spot report from FESTAC.

SIGNATURE TUNE:

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Some of the music from FESTAC which we're playing you courtesy of the Broadcasting Organisations of Nigeria. And in today's programme we'll be hearing about "Politicos" a play from Cameroun which is being performed at FESTAC and hearing the Vocal Ensemble from Togo and talking to its director. But first let's hear Florence Akst direct from Lagos. Mike Popham asked Florence just what's been happening.

FLORENCE AKST:

FESTAC has been an enormous overwhelming event and for people taking part in it, it is difficult to believe that anything else is happening in the world. You could be in three places at once because the programme is enormous. Let me explain that things start at 9.0 in the morning, often go on 'till 1 in the morning so it's quite a long space of time and there can be three or four events happening simultaneously, perhaps two things here at the National Theatre and another a couple of miles away at the sports stadium. The sports stadium now has two of its areas turned into a theatre and a music area. Another event could be happening at the National Museum and at the big public square which is also a race track down town Lagos, it has big bands playing, exhibitions etc. So wherever you are you wish you could be somewhere else as well. Probably the most lasting experience for the participants is living in the FESTAC village which is about three miles away, beyond the outskirts of Lagos. It has been specially built and it is certainly no village, believe me, it is quite a town. Enormous blocks of flats, separate houses, roads have been built, shops have been set up. There are, I think, 11 restaurants if not more, you find post offices, banks and all the facilities. Here the groups spend most of their time when they are not actually performing at events. Often entertaining themselves and their neighbours. Getting to know people from various parts of the continent and beyond and there is a tremendous vitality there in spite of the

fact that accommodation wasn't perfect to start with. There were a lot of things not quite ready but these are being seen to fast.

MIKE POPHAM:

What specifically has stood out in what you see ?

FLORENCE AKST:

Two things do stand out. One is that there was a tremendous political overtone to everything, particularly the liberation struggles going on. So many events, for instance the drama and poetry mention the struggles in South Africa, economic independence, still hasn't been achieved. So that, although this is an Arts Festival, it isn't only an Arts Festival. The other thing is that everybody understands the rhythm that everyone else plays and dances. If the costumes are different, if the language is different, if the dance is different, certainly the rhythm of Africa has come out loud and clear.

ALEX TETTEH--LARTEY:

Florence Akst talking to producer Mike Popham from the National Theatre in Lagos where many of the top events at FESTAC are taking place. Now one of them has been the play "Politicos" performed in French by a company of actors from Cameroun. You can guess from its title what it's all about. After the performance Florence asked Peter Essoka of Radio Cameroun just what aspect of politics the play concentrated on.

PETER ESSOKA:

For quite some time, since independence, African politics has always depended a little bit on self interest and that is where the writer Mr. Umlba Invina (phon) decided to get his inspiration. Now "Politicos" is the name also of the principal character of the play. He is an illiterate but very ambitious. He wants to get himself known and he claims of course to the villagers that he is very well known by many people in the big cities and that he could represent them in the municipal council. Well, instead of going on like that he decides to go back to get approval by corruption, bribery. Unfortunately "Politicos" himself forgets that he himself had not fulfilled civil obligations, that he was a tax defaulter and ended up with a prison term.

FLORENCE AKST:

So instead of getting into the council .....

PETER ESSOKA:

..... the municipal council, he got into jail.

FLORENCE AKST:

Now, I know so little French, I really didn't follow the dialogue. I must admit that, but knowing the story before I went I could understand what was happening on stage and I was very very impressed by the standard of acting, particularly

the actor who was clowning. He really brought the house down and he seemed to have extremely long arms and legs which he used enormously to amuse us all.

PETER ESSOKA:

Yes, you see the group that acted "Politicos" is a combination of all dramatic groups, so that we could call it, sort of a "national" group. They got the best actors from each group and they made them rehearse "Politicos". I think the gentleman that took the part of Politicos is the man I think you are referring to because he was quite a good jester and I would say he played his part well and he has also written one or two plays and he acts them always in the same manner. So he almost takes up the part of the clown.

FLORENCE AKST:

I wonder if you could tell me whether this sort of play with this sort of edge to it, because it wasn't all amusing, there were some very serious comments underneath it all, is traditional or current in Cameroun or is it the first time you've seen this sort of play ?

PETER ESSOKA:

It's not the first time. You see, to a certain degree, they allow people who are inspired to do certain things. Although once in a while there is some control over a number of things. I know some of the plays have been censored and put off being shown. But a play like "Politicos" is very teaching and it would have been necessary for a good number of people to watch that particular play specially. I could even make reference to the situation in Nigeria where they are going for local council elections. It could teach them certain things and it could avoid some of the things that prevailed in "Politicos".

FLORENCE AKST:

But unlike many of the productions at the Festival here in Lagos, you are not aware that you are being given a lesson, you are just aware that you are being very very grandly entertained by professionals.

PETER ESSOKA:

I think so, and even back home people always talk about "Politicos" and they give it as a sort of pointer to politicians for the way they have to behave and it also points out the moral of the people. For instance, Politicos who takes upon himself to corrupt people. They say, if corruption should be the major thing in getting an appointment or a post somewhere then the society can't work well and I think the President of the country has always preached against that.

FLORENCE AKST:

Also the dancing and the other elements, the baffoonery were very well integrated. I suppose that is because it was given a village setting.

PETER ESSOKA:

Yes, I think so. There were about three varieties of dancers

in the play and one of them comes from the Bassa area, the other from the Ewondo area and one from the Douala area. It was just a mixture of a number of things. Picking up something from all parts of the country. Politics itself, although the setting was in a particular village, in the south-centre of the country.

ALEXTETTEH-LARTEY:

Peter Essoka of Radio Cameroun talking about the Camerounian play "Politicos" which has been performed at the National Theatre in Lagos.

MUSIC: Togo Extract.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

Some of the intriguing and original music performed at FESTAC by the Vocal Ensemble of Togo. Formed two years ago with direct encouragement from the Togo Ministry of Culture in Lome, the Vocal Ensemble has as its Musical Director Ocloo Ekeu, a former professor of music. Florence asked Ocloo Ekeu what the Vocal Ensemble tries to put over with its combination of music, dance and drama.

OCLOO EKUE:

In our music, we try to explain to our people our proverbs. We can say our music is a kind of literature which is sung.

FLORENCE AKST:

And the way you sung it is the traditional way, not a new way ?

OCLOO EKUE:

Yes, the way we sing it is the traditional way and we don't sing it like a church choir. We sing it and we express it either with hands or some with movement.

FLORENCE AKST:

Yes, I do remember that everyone was moving very gracefully with very gentle movement expressing the words. But the close harmony of the voices sounded a little like hymns.

OCLOO EKUE:

Yes, this is the new idea. First of all one should remember that I myself have got my information in Europe and people in Togo have been colonised first by the Germans and later on by the French. Some have got a background of European music which people still like very much. So I think personally that if you have to progress in music in Africa, and especially in Togo, in Lome, we are having to leave aside totally European music. So that our music will progress.

FLORENCE AKST:

And this manner of singing is something that you have devised yourself. This is not something which is generally done in Togo ?

OCLOO EKUE:

No, it is not generally done. It is my idea.

FLORENCE AKST:

Do you take the choir out of the city into the countryside because it's different sort of music for people in the country. Do they like it as well or do they find it very strange ?

OCLOO EKUE:

I think people like this kind of music very much. We put it on television, we take it to the villages. Once we come to the village, people come around us because they hear in our new music, their old music. That is what amuses them very much.

FLORENCE AKST:

You have built it on a traditional foundation and you have used traditional proverbs as well you were saying. What sort of proverbs ? What sort of old stories do you use ?

OCLOO EKUE:

For instance, we speak about a bat. You say a bat flies high but it doesn't reach the sun, That is a proverb in our villages which means that you can be so ambitious but you won't reach perfection in this world. We also say common proverbs, rain comes after beautiful times.

FLORENCE AKST:

And what language do you sing in ?

OCLOO EKUE:

We sing in all the languages, all the dialects of Togo. We sing for instance, in Ewe which is the main language, we sing in kabre which is the language of the President and we sing in bassa which is very very poetical. We sing in English too and in French and in German also.

FLORENCE AKST:

I was interested in the very slight musical accompaniment. There was a heavy musical accompaniment. I think just calabashes, bells, that was all wasn't it ?

OCLOO EKUE:

Yes, that was all and from time to time we also use guitar that's all we use. We want the people to hear clearly the

the melody from their own music to attack them and we want to offer the chance to express it with movement. So I think all the three things together catch them, catch the people very much.

MUSIC: Togo Music.

ALEXTETTEH-LARTEY:

Ocloo Ekue, director of the Togo Vocal Ensemble talking to Florence in Lagos.

MUSIC: African Drumming Music.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY:

And that brings us to the end of our second on the spot report from FESTAC. We hope you enjoyed the programme. Don't forget to tune in again next week for more ARTS and AFRICA from FESTAC. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC: African Drumming Music as playout.

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