

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Welcome to 'Arts and Africa'. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and in today's programme we take a look at Ethiopian culture after the 1974 revolution.

MUSIC - "THOSE WERE THE DAYS" Sung by TILAHUN GESSESSE.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A traditional Ethiopian song called - in English - "Those Were The Days" performed by members of an Ethiopian cultural troupe which has recently been on tour in England. When the seven members of the Ethiopian troupe came into the "Arts and Africa" studio, I asked their spokesman Getachew Abdi - was it truly a national group or was it just made up of musicians, singers and dancers from the capital Addis Ababa?

GETACHEW ABDI

A selection of artists from different parts of musical groups in the country, especially Addis Ababa. But we've selected the best and most effective for the particular programme from six government and musical organisations from Addis Ababa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of performance do they give?

GETACHEW ABDI

Well, they do folk dances and music, traditional and patriotic song, and of course, revolutionary songs. And when we say patriotic songs, they sing how they like their "mother-land", their country, and how their fathers and forefathers have been

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keeping their country's integrity and freedom. They appreciate the heroism and the patriotic feeling of the Ethiopian people and the nature of Ethiopia itself.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What other subjects do you sing about in these cultural songs? I know that in other parts of Africa people often sing about social problems. These songs give advice to school girls - for instance - do people sing about that?

GETACHEW ABDI

In fact the content of the folksongs usually deal with some kind of social problems, sometimes a joke and sometimes a serious social problem, and comedy and some forms are just expressed directly.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

If I went to Ethiopia and I went to see a typical performance would I find one in any village or any town or just in the capital, Addis Ababa?

GETACHEW ABDI

You can find in any region and zone of the country youngsters, girls and boys, just singing and dancing - you can find any place, especially in Addis Ababa. People are trying to express themselves, their wishes and their feelings towards their country. It's five years since the revolution, we've had a lot of problems and we try to surmount the actual problems of the country, and after this people are just celebrating - singing their feelings and their wishes for the future.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Are these Ethiopian singers and dancers professional or do they just do it in their spare time?

GETACHEW ABDI

We have both. We have professional singers and at the same time we have amateurs. Sometimes people invite amateur singers and musicians, especially youngsters, to perform at festivals.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

So when these people go on stage for a performance, I presume they wear pretty colourful costumes?

GETACHEW ABDI

Yes. That is the most attractive thing about Ethiopia and about Africa in general, the attractive colours and decorative masks.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What about the musicians? What sort of instruments do they play to accompany the singers?

GETACHEW ABDI

We have different kinds of musical instruments in different regions of the country - but the most popular music instruments are the Kora, that's a sort of guitar, and we have flutes, drums, which are typically African - and a lot of other instruments.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, you have brought along to the 'Arts and Africa' studio one of Ethiopia's most famous singers - his name is Tilahun Gessesse. Can you tell us a bit about him?

GETACHEW ABDI

Well, Tilahun Gessesse has been singing for more than twenty years in the country and during these twenty years he's been the most celebrated singer in Ethiopia - and this is his first visit to London - he is famous in many other countries especially in Africa and the Sudan.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, it is easy for someone not to like Ethiopian music as it does not necessarily fall within the mainstream of popular music as we know it. The language is not one that we can readily understand. But what is it about Ethiopian music that you think appeals to people internationally?

GETACHEW ABDI

Well really its a very hard question to answer, but I will try. As you know, Ethiopian music is typically traditional. But in some large towns in the country we use some European instruments, for example, saxophones, trumpets, violins and pianos, and so on. There are many records recorded with Ethiopian-type instruments. So I can say we have both, we have the traditional, which is fine for Ethiopian ears, and we have modern songs, which have an international feeling.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, we are not going to pause here to listen to a traditional song sung by Tilahun Gessesse with a flute accompaniment - its called - in English - "I Love My Country".

MUSIC - I LOVE MY COUNTRY sung by Tilahun Gessesse.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was a traditional Ethiopian song called "I Love My Country!" Now, turning to the dance side of your repertoire. When the troupe performs cultural dances in Ethiopia, are these dances pure and simple, or do you perform dances in the form of plays as well?

GETACHEW ABDI

We show the dances, the folk dances, in the form of performance. These performances are related and connected with the psychology of the people and the objective of the country and with the future of the country, so I think we have already decided to make this kind of performance an occasion as we have to say a lot in a short time to our public.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Why did you consider it necessary to come over here at all?

GETACHEW ABDI

Actually, the Ethiopian Embassy in London invited us to come and perform, and also other progressive comrades here invited us, so that we may reflect the on-going revolution of our country. So that they may have a real picture of our society, and our aims for the future.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is this a propaganda exercise? From what you are saying I guess its political?

GETACHEW ABDI

Actually we use both. We try to demonstrate our rich cultural heritage, and the political side of our country, of which the Popular Ethiopian Revolution is just practising in Ethiopia for a good future for the whole of society and for freedom.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I find it difficult to imagine what you really portray. Ethiopia has been a monarchy for thousands of years - the revolution has only been a few years old - so do I take it that you mean most of what you show actually describes your country in monarchical terms?

GETACHEW ABDI

Not exactly. In fact the contrary. Our cultural performances are taken from the experience of the last five years. As you have already said, the monarchy no longer exists in Ethiopia and the new system, or the new struggle for making a new society, is really inter-related with our cultural campaign because, as you know, culture and politics are inter-related. So we are reflecting the struggle of the Ethiopian people and their past history and their cultural attitudes and we are combining this with actual thoughts of our society, about their struggle, their heroism and their love for their country - patriotism. So we put all these things together and try to reflect the reality and objectives of our country.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Did you form this group to show the outside world what Ethiopia is like or do you also perform for people inside the country?

GETACHEW ABDI

No, we do both. We perform in the country - this group in particular has been around the different administrative regions in Ethiopia and we have just arranged another programme outside the country so that we can make ourselves really clear to the outside world that we are also a peace-loving people and that we are also struggling for a better life, to change a bad system and make a better one for a good future life.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And how has the reception been for you in Ethiopia?

GETACHEW ABDI

It's hot! Not only our group, but we have a lot of cultural groups travelling around Ethiopia, and they are welcomed by all the people, especially our music, dances and also painting. They are really effective with the people, they are really doing a good service to the people.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Getachew Abdi, spokesman for the seven members of the Ethiopian cultural troupe which has recently been performing in London. And that's all from "Arts and Africa" for this week. Until then this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and leaving you with more of that traditional Ethiopian song you heard at the beginning called - in English - "Those Were the Days", sung by Tilahun Gessesse.

MUSIC: THOSE WERE THE DAYS