

# Arts and Africa

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## ARTS AND AFRICA

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### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa which this week covers quite a large geographic spread and has some good news and bad news. The bad news comes from the Sudan with some disturbing reports about the persecution of poets and other people involved in the arts. Ahmed Rajab who is the African researcher for Index on Censorship is here to report. Ahmed.....

### AHMED RAJAB

Ever since the military coup of 1969 which brought into power President Ja'ffar Numeiry, the situation of the arts in the Sudan has become increasingly critical, with performing artists finding it difficult to operate without government support. With the absence of a tolerated opposition, the only means of expressing non-conformist ideas has been through the performing arts. But innovative playwrights have been banned, poets have been locked away in prisons, and publishing has become hazardous for anyone who dares to be critical of the regime. Censors for the Security Department now operate even inside private presses. But Sudanese artists do not necessarily have to express dissident views to get into trouble. Whenever there has been a popular uprising in the country, the performing artists have become convenient whipping boys for the regime. More recently, after the demonstrations and strikes of late last year, at least three poets were arrested and six lecturers in drama and the arts lost their jobs. The arrests of the poets have been made under security laws which prohibit any activities outside the framework of the ruling Sudanese Socialist Union, the only legal political party in the country. The detained poets and the dismissed cultural activists do have in common their involvement with the cultural movement ABAD AMAK, a non-sectarian group named after the ancient god Abad Amak, who is the symbol of the Great Nubian era. The movement was founded in 1966 with the aim of fighting against 'colonial tendencies' in Sudanese literature. But Abad Amak was banned by the Numeiry regime in 1971. During its five years of legality, the movement published the influential journal 'Abad Amak' and several other periodicals. The arrested poets, all in their 30's, are: Mahgoub Sharif; Hashim Sidiq al Malik; Hashim Sidiq al Malik and Kamal El Guzuli. Mahgoub Sharif has already published one collection of poems, AL ATFAL WAL ASAKIR (Children and Soldiers),

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and at the time of his arrest he was preparing the publication of his second volume. Hasim Sidiq al Malik, who is also a lecturer at the Institute of Music and Drama in Khartoum, has published two collections of poems, KALM LIL HAWA (Averse to Her) and JAWAB AL MUSAJJAL LIL BALAD (A registered Letter to the Homeland). He is also known for three plays: NABTA HABIB'TI (Nabta: My Love) which is about the ancient Nabta kingdom of northern Sudan at the time of Egypt's pharaohs. His second play was Al Haraz wal Matar, and his third play is GEM'R EL HAM (Train of Worries). All three plays of El Malik contain allegorical references to present-day conditions in the Sudan. At the time of El Malik's arrest, a production of Al Haraz wal Matar was attracting large audiences in Khartoum, after its first performance had provoked a demonstration. The third detained poet, Kamal el Guzuli, is also an international lawyer but is mostly known in Sudanese intellectual circles as the author of a collection of patriotic poems. All the three poets have been imprisoned at least twice before.

Although no specific charges have been levelled against the arrested poets, it is known that during police interrogations they were questioned intensely about their writings.

Best known of the six lecturers (also in their thirties and who were dismissed from the Institute of Music and Drama) is Osman Nusairi, a poet, playwright and lawyer. He was a founding member of the London based Pan African Association of Writers and Journalists and has had two plays broadcast on the BBC's 'African Theatre' programme. Nusairi was a lecturer in drama at the Institute. The other five are: Muhammad Shaddad, a lecturer in fine art; Fatah al Rahman Abdel Aziz, a lecturer in drama and art history; Omar el Khazin, a lecturer in music; Omar Sir Khatim, a lecturer in drama who has written some sketches for a play, and Ma'mun Zarrouq, also a lecturer in drama, who recently produced a number of plays by African playwrights, including the Nigerian Wole Soyinka. The six lecturers were dismissed after they refused to organise a special concert for President Numeiry during the busy examination period. Their request for a postponement was considered to be an anti-government gesture.

#### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ahmed Rajab of Index on Censorship reporting on the situation in the Sudan. And now for some good news and some music.

GRAMS: Pata, Pata by Osibisa

#### ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Osibisa's new record, Pata, Pata, which has just been issued, so we thought we would take this opportunity to look at one of Africa's most popular groups. Paul Wade went to a recent concert by the group and in the interval he asked Mac Tonto, the group's trumpeter, what was the origin of the name Osibisa.

#### MAC TONTO

It's Akan, a very old, old name. It means criss-cross rhythms that explode with happiness.

(cont)

PAUL WADE

We've had a lot of letters saying: "We haven't heard about Osibisa, what's going on? We haven't heard any records by them....." Have you just been touring and not making records? What's happening?

MAC TONTO

We've been going on the road and recording and all that, so we needed time to bring something big out, and now we are back.

PAUL WADE

You're back with a song that I first heard, I daren't really mention it, but it was twenty years ago I saw Miriam Makeba in concert singing Pata, Pata, but it doesn't sound like your Pata, Pata.

MAC TONTO

Yeah, well it's a modern Pata, Pata; that was twenty years ago, her's has feeling in the head, but this has got a beat you know.

PAUL WADE

The flip side is an Osibisa special though.

MAC TONTO

Yeah, Jumbo, yeah, that's acoustic, no European instrument, like the man in the jungle coming, you know, that's Jumbo.

GRAMS: Jumb by Osibisa

PAUL WADE

Would you say in fact that your music has changed at all over the last ten years?

MAC TONTO

No, not in the last ten years. When we did Music a Gong Gong, disco wssn't around by then but Music a Gong Gong - one was going to the club and dancing to it in the same time that is around today, and if we've changed at all, just the modern sound of today, but the rhythm is the same, and the riffs of the horns is the same thing.

PAUL WADE

Having been together now for this long, and having as it were been given a new lease of life with a new single, what's the next thing that you're aiming to do, you must have ambitions left, you haven't toured everywhere in the world, you haven't made the ultimate LP, what are you aiming for?

(cont)

MAC TONTO

We're aiming for a big album, then a film, a major film.

ALPH TETTEH-LARTAY

Mac Tonto who as a trumpeter with Osibisa. An Osibisa film? That's something to really look forward to. The group's latest record is only going to be released in Africa, and Paul Wade asked the group's lead guitarist, Kaki Bannerman, what sort of music would be on it.

KAKI BANNERMAN

It's about the most African of our albums to date. For the first time we have all the new members of the band playing in the album.

PAUL WADE

Tell us about the album.

KAKI BANNERMAN

We've got a new rhythm guitarist, he's from Zimbabwe, so for a start he brings in a bit of East African vibes. And then the guitarist, he used to be with a band, he's from the Cameroon, and a new lead guitarist.

PAUL WADE

You say that the guy from Zimbabwe brought in East African vibes. What does that mean? What does it sound like, what is it when he starts playing, what do you think - gosh, that's a new way of playing something and you join in with it?

KAKI BANNERMAN

When he starts playing you immediately say to yourself ... ah, that's what I've been looking for all this time, there's something I know is part of me which I can think of, which I hardly can bring out in musical form.

PAUL WADE

And the new Cameroonian member? Does he add an extra dimension to the group do you think?

KAKI BANNERMAN

Yes, he also adds a new dimension. People go on about a type of rhythm, we're most of us Ghanaian as you know, but his rhythm is slightly different. But it all comes together.

PAUL WADE

Are you always remembering perhaps tunes that you used to play as a kid in Ghana, and occasionally someone says ... that's a tune I remember, and then you start putting that together.

PAUL WADE

Are you always remembering tunes that you used to play as a kid in Ghana, and occasionally someone say's...That's a tune I remember... and then you start putting that together?

KAKI BANNERMAN

We sometimes adapt on the old folk tunes you know. Igobi, actually is an adaptation of an old folk tune. Some of the other tunes are, but we do change the lyrics of them. But we found that the basic folk tunes that we had when we were kids always came up somehow.

PAUL WADE

Do you actually go back and consciously look for new numbers at home?

KAKI BANNERMAN

Well, most of the time not, because when you start playing, all the powers of influence work. The old folk tunes are what really wake you up I think, that's what is our foundation. So we don't really have to look for them, they are always there when we try to make music. But when we feel like we must just play a bit of tribute to our background, then we consciously go for it sometimes.

PAUL WADE

As one of the newest members of the group, what was the hard thing that you found joining in with this group which is the world's number one African band? What was it like joining these people who are so well-known?

KAKI BANNERMAN

Before I joined the band I had myself been playing a bit of the music, because I was with other bands, and we were supposed to play a bit of this. So it was not so hard at that point. But coming in and really having to fit it together was really difficult for about two weeks. Not in terms of the music itself, but trying to feel it as a body, a unit, that was the difficult thing. I don't know how I worked it out, but after about two weeks I had just managed to get on with it you know, we'd think about it, we are like brothers.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Kaki Bannerman of Osibisa talking to Paul Wade. And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week. We leave you with a track from 'African Flight', Africa we Go Go, and from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey, it's goodbye.

GRAMS

Africa we Go Go