

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying "welcome" to Arts and Africa. And to begin the programme, some music from the north of the continent.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - TRADITIONAL WEDDING MUSIC.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, that's unmistakably the music of Islam - it's traditional wedding music recorded in Tunisia. And now, from the same country is music of a very different kind. It's obviously less formal in style, and in content, well, it's the very opposite of a wedding - it's the beginning of a song about a girl who, poor thing, has been jilted.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - THE JILTED GIRL.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And music from Tunisia introduces today's guest to the Arts and Africa studio. David Sweetman has been in Tunisia very recently and David, you've been telling me that love and sex and marriage get more attention as news items in Tunisia than anywhere else you've ever been. That's rather surprising.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Well, it's true. It appears in local newspapers quite a lot, usually connected with crime because they still have the system of arranged marriages. But the idea of romantic love, of individual love, is very strong amongst young people in Tunisia. They like the idea very much, particularly the girls, who don't want to have arranged marriages. Certainly, culturally, the idea of love, sex and marriage is very important in Tunisian life because the wedding ceremony is a very, very big affair. The actual ceremony is held in a vast, hired hall and a throne is created. The bride is dressed in traditional Berber dress with a great deal of very glittery jewellery and a sort of crown on her head and she is veiled at first and then ceremonially shown to the crowd. She sits in very solitary, rather rigid splendour. Her hands are beautifully decorated with henna designs as are her feet. It is very curious because people sit round a table eating and drinking while she just sits there rather rigid. But it is a very, very important event in her life and it's probably the biggest cultural event for poor people in Tunisia.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, you've really come along to tell me about the exhibition of Arabic calligraphy (or elegant, stylized writing) that you saw in Tunis.

DAVID: SWEETMAN

Yes, in Tunis itself, there are a number of private art galleries, one of the best in Tunis is Irtisem and they try to show some of the younger, more adventurous Tunisian painters. While I was there, there was an opening by a group of painters, nine or ten in all, who base their work on the idea of Arabic calligraphy. One has to know something about that to understand why that is important. Traditionally in Islam there is no figurative art. Islam forbids the representation of God's creation. Since modern times and since the influence of Europe on many of the countries of the Arabic world, this injunction by Islam has tended to be forgotten but the one form of the visual art which was always permitted, in fact encouraged by Islam, was calligraphy, Arabic writing. Because it was possible to take the most sacred of all text, the Koran and to use the actual words, the actual way you wrote the words down, to create the most beautiful images sometimes they are so involved and elaborate that you can't read what is said. But that isn't important, usually there's some clue as to which particular text it was, whether it was the call to prayer, "God is Great" or whether it was the daily prayer you say: "In the name of Allah, the merciful, the mercy-giver...". You know from some sort of clue which text was being given. The beauty of it was there. So the young painters that were there at the gallery Irtisem at this opening were all trying that and it was quite fascinating to see how some of them had taken this wonderfully expressive Arabic writing and were using it in a new tradition.

I thought that the best person there was someone called Nja Mahdaoui. The things that he was doing was absolutely original and unique, beautiful things. I talked to him about them. I felt a little bit disappointed that he tends to be more to the abstract side than to the meaning of the words. He says that he uses the shapes and the style of Arabic writing but they don't mean anything, you can't read what is there. I put it to him that, in fact, he was losing a good fifty percent of what he could have in the painting. If you're going to use calligraphy, why not have it say something? But he felt that, no, what was being said was being done visually rather than literally so one has to take that point. But I thought that Nja Mahdaoui was a painter to look out for.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now these northern African moslems, are they aware of other people farther south?

DAVID SWEETMAN

Oh absolutely. Tunis itself and the holy city of Kairouan which is further south towards black Africa, were great centres of contact between Europe and West Africa across the Sahara desert. In fact, the University of Tunis, the old University, not the modern one, was a great centre of learning for people who went down into West Africa spreading Islam and bringing back ideas and trade.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hmm. It's very interesting. I'm reminded of the late Sultan of Sokoto who considered himself nearer to the Prophet than any other person in the Islamic world.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Indeed, I've been looking at a book called 'Nigerian Weaving' and the first photograph in the book - you look at it and it really could be North Africa, even though it's northern Nigeria. One looks at the picture of people and what they're wearing, the richness of the costumes and the long flowing jubbah and turbans of different sorts. It's pure North Africa. The contact is obvious.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

David Sweetman thank you very much. And this leads directly into our next item which comes from Kano in northern Nigeria. One of the ancient cities of West Africa and nowadays a great centre for Hausa-speaking people, Kano has been celebrated for centuries for the beautiful blue of its indigo-dyed cloth. When Anne Bolsover was in Kano earlier this year she discovered not only that the city's museum was being refurbished but that the museum building is itself a museum piece. It stands with its Hausa horns of clay, decorating the edge of the roof, just across the busy road from the Emir's palace. And it was inside the museum that Anne talked to John Lavers, who teaches History at Bayero University in Kano, about his interest in the Museum. Kano people call it Gidan Makima which means Makima's house.

JOHN LAVERS

Gidan Makima is supposed to have been built in the late fifteenth century even before the Emir's palace. Indeed there are stories that the emir of the time, the king of the time, lived in this house before his own palace was completed. The Makima is one of the leading traditional title-holders and when it was decided to open a museum in Kano city, part of his official residence was given to, or loaned perhaps is a better term, to Federal Antiquities and it was restored and it's a very fine example of traditional architecture with superb domed roofs, etc.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Although Gidan Makima is more or less empty at present, waiting for its new acquisitions to be displayed, it already does contain some splendid objects. John Lavers describes the first thing that a visitor to the museum notices once their eyes become accustomed to the cool, dim interior.

JOHN LAVERS

In the entrance room to Gidan Makima there are a number of metal doors that were removed in the 1950's when the museum was opened, from the city gates. Many of them have just been discarded and left by the side of the road. One of the most interesting is the gate from Kofar Waika which has an iron plaque on it which consists mainly of an Arabic charm. But it gives the name of the particular ruler in the early eighteenth century who had it fixed to the gate and this is almost certainly the earliest public inscription in the whole of Nigeria.

ANNE BOLSOVER

The museum standing empty at the moment. You've just got the buildings, so what is going to be exhibited there when it finally opens again?

JOHN LAVERS

Well, it's hoped that we will be able to have displays representative of the whole country as in the Museums of Unity elsewhere in the country. This is really essential for teaching purposes which is the main point of a museum. But also we hope to have a more representative display of material from Kano and from the other emirates that make up Kano State and, of course, Kano being a great industrial centre for many centuries, representative displays of Kano industrial products, photographs of the industries at the present time and material, wherever possible, from the past. There will also, of course, be material representing the Islamic tradition of scholarship. Kano was a great centre of learning. It's rather difficult to display this but calligraphy is an art form and we hope to have some examples of Kano writings, examples of Kano calligraphy. There are Korans that have been associated with families of leading scholars and well-known people. It might be possible at least to have photographs of these for display.

ANNE BOLSOVER

What is Kano particularly famous for that will be on show at the museum?

JOHN LAVERS

Well it has always been associated with iron workings, smithing. The original inhabitants are supposed, according to legend, to have been blacksmiths. But Kano has been most famous for cloth, dyed cloth in particular and this has been exported for a very long period of time. We know that in the eighteenth century, southern Libya, southern Algeria, most of Niger, parts of Chad and Mali were receiving cloth from Kano, and the dyeing industry both within the city and within the neighbouring towns has always been of great importance. You could almost say that there was a small industrial revolution in the seventeenth and eighteenth century when there was a technological response to the increased demands. Instead of dyeing in small little pots, as was common in so many parts of West Africa, huge pots were made holding many hundreds of gallons of dye and it was found that there was a by-product from this and it could be turned into a waterproof cement and somebody made the very clever leap from dye pots to just lining the pits in which the pots has rested with this water-proof cement.

ANNE BOLSOVER

Are the dyes natural dyes?

JOHN LAVERS

Traditionally indigo is used. It's still grown but they supplement it with modern dyes. They strengthen it which speeds up the process.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A happy blend of tradition and good business. But as John Lavers explained to Anne Bolsover, the Harmattan wind blowing the desert dust south from the Sahara is the great enemy. Every show-case must be absolutely dust-proof before precious exhibits can be put in them so, with refurbishing and the Harmattan to contend with, the date for the re-opening of Gidan Makima has yet to be announced. I'm sure, that unlike that jilted girl from Tunisia, the date will be fixed and honoured.

And with her plight being described by what I can only call some very cheerful young men I'll take my leave for today. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until this time next week. Goodbye.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - THE JILTED GIRL.