

# 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 today it's going to be music all the way. Well, there will be a voice or two, one of them belonging to Hilton Fyle of "Network Africa". He's starting the ball rolling by providing an introduction to an area of West African popular music that doesn't receive very much attention internationally. The Igbo are the largest cultural group in eastern Nigeria but I'm not so sure that I'd recognize their music straight away and neither could Florence Akst who asked Hilton for some help in identifying it.

## FLORENCE AKST

What is distinctive about Igbo music?

## HILTON FYLE

I think the most distinctive element about Igbo music Florence, is the beat itself. The rhythm is different from any other rhythm in Nigeria and in fact from what we generally know as Highlife. It is described as Highlife but really the Highlife beat is usually one two, one two, one two, beat. It goes boom, boom, boom, boom. This one has a slight variation to that in that it takes in half beats. I'll play you an illustration here by a lady called Nelly Unchendu Odum who comes from the Anambra State of Nigeria where Enugu is the capital and she plays a lot of music. This tune is called 'Yeghe Yeghe'.

## TAPE

Music (Yeghe Yeghe)

## HILTON FYLE

You see the rhythm there is quite different from what we are generally used to.. I mean the ordinary West African cannot easily dance to that. They have to sit down and listen and do some practice before they can actually move and tap their feet - even other Nigerians.

FLORENCE AKST

But it sets the Igbo feet tapping?

HILTON FYLE

Oh gosh! If you played that in Enugu, Aba or in Owerri, everybody's going to jump up and dance.

FLORENCE AKST

Now what about the words? Are they contemporary? Are they traditional? What is it?

HILTON FYLE

Well I'll give you an instance. Nelly Unchendu whose tune you just heard is a very cultural oriented lady in Nigeria. She's very famous, in fact, she got the National Award not so long ago, she's a member of the Order of Niger in recognition of her contribution. She transforms eastern Nigerian folklore into lyrics for her tunes. For instance in that album which I've just played you there's a track called 'Akwa Alili' and it's a tune glorifying it in this album. Now the other theme they use is basically religious. They're very religious people in eastern Nigeria as the Pope will tell you! Here's an instance; this man is called Dan Satch Okpara. He leads a band called the Oriental Brothers International. He comes from Imo State which is just next door to Anambra State where Enugu is and here's a tune that he sung which is called, in fact the title of the album 'Chukwunwe Anyi' - I don't know if I got the pronunciation quite right but the meaning of this tune is 'The land belongs to God'.

TAPE

Music (Chukwunwe Anyi)

FLORENCE AKST

Right. Now these are Igbo songs that we've been hearing but are they representative of the whole of eastern Nigeria?

HILTON FYLE

Well I'll say fairly so. Igbo is the language of popular music of eastern Nigeria and the Igbo-speaking population of the east is very big. So obviously when people are making records they are looking towards the market, do some research and see how many records they'd sell. However not all the records are in the Igbo language. For example there is Christy Essien-Igbokwe, she comes from Calabar in Cross River State. Cross River is synonymous with the Efik language and here is a tune that she has sung in an album which is actually mixed because she does Efik songs, she does Igbo songs, she does Yoruba songs, she does English songs and in that was she tries to capture the market of the whole of Nigeria. But this is a nice tune. It is called 'Kusin Mi'. Unfortunately I don't know the meaning because I don't speak Efik.

TAPE

Music (Kusin Mi)

ALEX TETTEH-LARETY

And leaving Hilton Fyle there in eastern Nigeria, we're crossing the continent to a country facing the Indian Ocean. Kenya claims a rich variety of cultures but it's never included music amongst its exports. One Kenyan musician, very popular at home is Joseph Kamaru. When Jerusha Castley was back home in Nairobi recently she had a long chat in his music shop with Joseph Kamaru and she's been telling Florence Akst about him and his most popular recordings - like this one, 'Nairobi Iriagui Ki'.

TAPE

Music (Nairobi Iriagui Ki)

JERUSHA CASTLEY

It's interesting that he talks about Nairobi in that song. In fact he is asking; What it is in Nairobi that keeps people away from the villages? It's interesting that he talks about Nairobi because that is where he bought his first guitar at the time he was fifteen years old.

FLORENCE AKST

He's a man of middle age now, I assume. Has he been popular for a very long time?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

Yes because he's been in the music business for over twenty years now.

FLORENCE AKST

And has he been a popular artist all that time or has he just become popular?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

He has been popular particularly among the Kikuyu because a lot of his earlier songs were sung in Kikuyu and he takes the traditional ways of life and blends them into music.

FLORENCE AKST

Does he only sing in Kikuyu or does he use the more general language of Kiswahili?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

He does use Kiswahili quite a lot now - much more now than he used to do in the sixties when he produced his first music.

FLORENCE AKST

What sort of standing does he have in the country?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

He is one of the few musicians who looks back to his own cultural background and tries to put across cultural messages in music form. And to show how popular he is he was invited to accompany the President of Japan and after that he produced a record talking about the trip to Japan. What popularised the trip to Japan is his record - not so much because of what the record said but because of the beat

FLORENCE AKST

Well I'm sorry that we can't hear it today but our only copy isn't a very good one and it would be a shame for listeners to hear less than the best. Travelling with the President is quite an achievement. Has he come from a wealthy home, what was his background?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

On the contrary he comes from a very humble background with very little formal education. He left school very early on. In fact, when I met him in Nairobi, he told me about his early beginnings as a musician.

JOSEPH KAMARU

I was interested with music let's say from 1965 that's when I bought my own guitar, a box guitar, at the price of 30 Kenyan shillings but before then, let's say when I was about 10 or 12, I had been staying with my grandmum and she used to tell me the proverbs of Kikuyu and other old customs. The proverbs, those I learnt from my grandmum I usually use them on my compositions and that's why most people who understand my tribe they became very interested to know why and how I composed my songs which are very understandable to their young people.

TAPE

Music (Celina Hingura Murango)

JOSEPH KAMARU

First of all I have to get the idea, I have to find out the idea which can be marketed in the country. When I get the idea I have to ask myself whether this idea is for old men, I mean old aged or middle aged or young boys or girls. Automatically the middle aged are very many so I usually try to get the idea for them, the composition is for the middle aged. Once I get the tune I write the composition, I call my musicians, we practise together. Then after practising, let's say for a month, we go to the studio and record the song.

FLORENCE AKST

He sounds a really good business man and aware of his market there. But can I just say how much I liked the start of that song, the way the guy knocks on the door and calls out for Celina. Is he asking her to wake up or get ready?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

He is asking her to open the door for him. Now the point about Celina is she used to sing with him.

FLORENCE AKST

A real person?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

She is a real person and I discovered that she, in fact, has set up her own retail business now and her own source of music is mainly from Kamaru, her singing partner in earlier times.

FLORENCE AKST

How profitable is the business of making records in Kenya?

JERUSHA CASTLEY

In Kenya today the musicians do not have any copyright as such therefore there is a lot of pirating. Records are taken out and sold elsewhere in Tanzania, in Zaire, in Central and West Africa. Therefore although the music business brings fame I tend to think it doesn't bring as much money. In fact Kamaru told me what happens to the records he produces.

JOSEPH KAMARU

I can give you an example, if you come to my shop and you buy Kamaru records or any other musicians' records you can go with that record, let's say to Zambia, then you can duplicate that music and sell it there. You can find a record in Zambia, let's say with the blue coloured label sung by Kamaru, the same title, the same singer and the same time you can find that record in Kenya with let's say with a white label or a red label with the same music.

JERUSHA CASTLEY

It was interesting to find out that a lot of Kenyan musicians do not have the official support that other musicians, say from Tanzania or from Zaire, have and I understand that they would like to get this kind of support because as Kamaru claims himself, if the Kenyan musicians get this official support .....

JOSEPH KAMARU

Then the Kenyan music or the Kenyan culture can be exported just like coffee, tea or some other things.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Talking with and about Joseph Kamaru has been Jerusha Castley. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye until next week. Back to you now, Joseph Kamaru.

TAPE

Music (Mitugo)