

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey bringing you another edition of "Arts and Africa".

GRAMS

DRUMS OF THE YORUBA OF NIGERIA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The relentless sound of the Yoruba drums of Nigeria. Here they are being used as sacred music by the worshippers of the great deity, Orishanla. But for one particular Nigerian artist, they provide inspiration for many of his works of art. His name is Moyo Okediji, his first major exhibition is taking place in London at the moment and we'll be hearing from him later.

TAPE

MUSIC RECORDED AT DJIBOUTI'S CULTURAL FESTIVAL

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An exotic taste of what Djibouti's recent cultural festival had to offer. The festival was combined with the country's 6th anniversary of independence, and the BBC's Programme Organiser for the African part of the French service, Jean Phillipe-Feunteun was there with his tape-recorder. He told me of the huge variety of performers, (including a troupe of dancers from the army called the Harbi Club). They all started at a local level before finalising for the festival itself.

JEAN PHILLIPE-FEUNTEUN

They had themes, dancing, music, poetry, folklore, everything. Apparently they had about one thousand applicants who were competing in different groups and I think about eight hundred were kept for the final part of the festival. So these people had been dancing you know from the previous week, every evening and when we got there on the last day, which is the only one I saw unfortunately, there were probably the best of all the groups. We had local groups, we had the people coming from a district with typical folkloric dancing, poetry, singing, music - traditional but also modern. One of the most attractive groups, actually, during that last evening was a group of young girls led by a little one who was probably no more than six or seven but she was certainly leading the dance.

TAPE

MUSIC RECORDED AT DJIBOUTI'S CULTURAL FESTIVAL

JEAN PHILLIPE-FEUNTEUN

But I would say apart from the dancing, the traditional songs extolling the virtues of the republic which you normally have in that type of cultural forum, it was a very interesting occasion because I suppose some of the dances which were performed during the whole festival would only be seen on very, very rare occasions. You had an immense variety of dancing. Some of them were fairly static, some of them were jumping. Then you had other groups which yielded the knives, the traditional long knives that the nomadic people have. Surprisingly I made that comment to one of the organisers. He said, "Yes, it's a traditional male knife but this time it's the girls who are using it to entice the warriors".

TAPE

MUSIC RECORDED AT DJIBOUTI'S CULTURAL FESTIVAL

JEAN PHILLIPE-FEUNTEUN

They have what one could call an extraordinary blend of traditional songs and modern music because this may be a field where Djibouti is not as rich as some other countries because I heard very few traditional instruments that evening. There was one old man playing a very elongated flute. There was probably some drums which we heard but very few instruments with strings. But in traditional Arabic society, one of the instruments that the people used to great advantage is their own voice. I mean sometimes it was very difficult for the organisers to stop the performance of some story tellers or singers who really had to be waved away and actually dragged away!

TAPE

MUSIC RECORDED AT DJIBOUTI'S CULTURAL FESTIVAL

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Tell us something about the Harbi music club.

JEAN PHILLIPE-FEUNTEUN

Well the Harbi music club was certainly one of the most active during that forum. It's a group, a formation which surprisingly is from the army. They have got a combination of traditional dancing - I was told they have even resuscitated some dances which go back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century. The steps and also the melody had been kept by the oral tradition which is so popular in those areas. But they also use lots of modern instruments, probably the influence of the youngsters fairly active in these groups. So you've got the combination of, I suppose, traditional song extolling the virtues of the fighters, singing the praise of the country, but also the usual electronic board which doesn't distract too much from the melody.

TAPE

MUSIC RECORDED AT DJIBOUTI'S CULTURAL FESTIVAL

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Jean Phillipe reporting on the arts in Djibouti.

Moyo Okediji is a young artist from Ife in Nigeria, his first major exhibition is being held at the Africa Centre in London. Fiona Ledger went along to talk to him about how he became an artist.

MOYO OKEDIJI

When I was younger I didn't really know much about other artists because in Ife, where I grew up, there is no gallery. The only exposure I had to art was in text books, in the Bible and maybe billboards and magazines.

FIONA LEDGER

What about traditional craftsmen from the area?

MOYO OKEDIJI

Yes, but it wasn't really considered art. It was so religious that you weren't even allowed to really look at it as art. But eventually, when I got into the University and I started studying art more seriously, I found out that actually there is a lot of art from my background and I started studying African art more fully.

FIONA LEDGER

What's your attitude to the role of art in society? Is it something just to entertain or does it have, for you, a profound religious significance?

MOYO OKEDIJI

Now I don't consider myself particularly religious. I think art is just one of the other things people do just like some people can dance, some people are lawyers. They are artists to try and make society look more interesting.

FIONA LEDGER

So you see yourself as doing a job in society?

MOYO OKEDIJI

I think so.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Moyo Okediji's down to earth attitude about art is reflected in his work. He uses a wide variety of materials, whatever is handy - glue, clay, biro and file paper. Two major themes are women, as lovers and mothers, and musicians. Here he is describing one of several drummer paintings to Fiona in the gallery of the Africa Centre.

MOYO OKEDIJI

The title is Kannango Drummer. Kannango is a form of musical instrument that is used mainly in the Northern part of Nigeria. It seems related to the Yoruba drum. But Yoruba instruments usually have only one drum. In Kannango they can combine two or three drums and that fascinates me very much. That's why you have three drums there, a man playing three talking drums.

FIONA LEDGER

And his audience in the background?

MOYO OKEDIJI

Yes, there are some people watching.

FIONA LEDGER

There's a strange kind of quality to this painting. What kind of technique have you used here?

MOYO OKEDIJI

First I took two pieces of paper glued together so that I can get a thick layer of paper. Then I used a biro to draw on the paper. Then I used some markers to highlight some areas and to make some thick outlines. Then I used what I call flower colours. I got some flowers, boiled them and got the colours out and I used the flowers to work on the paper. by that time it has become quite wet. Then I begin to scrape the paper to get some light areas.

FIONA LEDGER

So you've got a sort of smudged effect where it's been wet and then it's scraped as well.

MOYO OKEDIJI

Right.

FIONA LEDGER

Let's move on to here. We've got two drawings in biro. Describe the first one to me.

MOYO OKEDIJI

There is a man and a woman. The two of them have been drinking.

FIONA LEDGER

Are they intoxicated?

MOYO OKEDIJI

Maybe intoxicated by the moment of love.

FIONA LEDGER

They're in love?

MOYO OKEDIJI

I think so.

FIONA LEDGER

Now these two. We have a man and a woman. It's less relaxed, this drawing.

MOYO OKEDIJI

Right. Well the man is kind of tense and the man is trying to look at his own past.

FIONA LEDGER

He regrets does he?

MOYO OKEDIJI

So to say, he regrets about his own life. He is trying to relate it to the moment.

FIONA LEDGER

And he's hanging his head down and smoking a cigarette isn't he?

MOYO OKEDIJI

Yes, that's right.

FIONA LEDGER

She's looking away and has a more serene look on her face.

MOYO OKEDIJI

She has a bottle of beer.

FIONA LEDGER

But he's the worrier?

MOYO OKEDIJI

He seems to be worried. Women seem more relaxed and more able to deal with tension I think.

FIONA LEDGER

Can you describe this large substantial painting here?

MOYO OKEDIJI

Oh, this is a man playing the guitar. The colours are essentially brown with some highlights and black outlines. It has cloth pasted on it as appliqué and it has beads strung on the neck. The colours were made with clay mixed with glue and the cloth is mainly from Nigerian 'tiedye'. The man is sitting down on a stall and he has a drum at his feet and he's strumming the guitar.

FIONA LEDGER

There's letters on the guitar. What do they say?

MOYO OKEDIJI

The writing means 'it's time for dancing'.

FIONA LEDGER

So he's an entertainer is he?

MOYO OKEDIJI

Yes. Right.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Moyo Okediji talking there to Fiona Ledger about his work. When he gets back to Nigeria he'll be supervising another exhibition. This time at the National Gallery in Lagos.

And that brings us to the end of this week's edition of Arts and Africa. Join me again at the same time next week. Meanwhile it's goodbye from me, Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Goodbye.