

# Arts and Africa

ALT 4/5/5/1/38

**BBC** AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

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ARTS AND AFRICA

First B'cast: 27.11.83.

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa. I'm Alex Tetteh-Lartey - I'm your host for the next fifteen minutes and our first stop is Somalia, put on your dancing shoes for some Somali rock and roll.

GRAMS

SOMALI ROCK AND ROLL MUSIC - Anagu Raaci Mayno

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Anagu Raaci Mayno rocking round the Horn. Somalia isn't exactly in the vanguard of modern music, but in the film world, it's beginning to make a name for itself. For the second time in two years last month the capital of Somalia, Mogadishu was the venue for a major film conference. The Mogadishu Pan-African Film Symposium (MOGPAFIS) for short. Although there's plenty of talent about, Africa's film scene has its problems. Dominated by French and Arab speaking film makers, cold-shouldered by the West, short of money and technical expertise - these are the factors which are being debated at the moment. So where does Somalia stand in all this?

Somali culture is Muslim, but not Arab. The people use a language not spoken anywhere else in Africa...a unique country in many ways. Mike Howes is someone with long standing connections with Somalia; his organisation, British Films Ltd., has played a major role supporting the development of the Somali film industry, and he's here with me now.

Welcome Mike to "Arts and Africa". Can I start by asking you why Somalia has started hosting a biennial film festival, after all we've already got two well established, major film festivals taking place each year in Upper Volta and Tunisia?

MIKE HOWES

I think perhaps there are two reasons for this. One of which is that Somalia has a developing film industry and MOGPAFIS, the film symposium is an expression of this. And the second is that the two film symposiums that already exist within Africa serve extremely well the north African countries in Carthage and also the mainly francophone and West African countries in Ouagadougou. It was felt very strongly that the interests of East and Central African film makers would be served by starting a third symposium.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well one can see the connection between Upper Volta and Tunisia with regard to francophone Africa, but it's difficult to see the same relationship between Somalia and Anglophone.

MIKE HOWES

No, that's quite right. Indeed Somalia's organisers at MOGPAFIS would consider that Somalia is a very neutral country as far as language is concerned. It is, of course, centred in a part of Africa where English is a second language. On the other hand the official second language of Somalia is Arabic and since one of the aims of MOGPAFIS is, in fact, to....

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Incidentally that's the name of the conference.

MIKE HOWES

.....MOGPAFIS, the Mogadishu Pan African Film Symposium, yes. And therefore in terms of its language, it was felt that occupying a position in the East of Africa, it would serve very well the countries of East and Central Africa while at the same time certainly the South of Somalia, having been under Italian domination, has no particular connections with the English whatsoever.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of countries, then, does Somalia expect to be represented at its festival? Will the French or francophone African countries be excluded necessarily?

MIKE HOWES

Certainly not. The aim of MOGPAFIS is, in fact, to include all African and indeed Arab film makers as well. At the recent MOGPAFIS, there were 32 countries represented by 65 delegates, both African and Arab. That is apart from the people from Europe and America who have connections with African cinema. And the aim is not, by any means, to exclude delegates who otherwise might go to Ouagadougou in Upper Volta and Carthage in Tunisia, but indeed to bring in the film makers and film administrators from East and Central Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now never before have I heard about this Somali film industry. What is it like?

MIKE HOWES

Somalia is a very interesting and a very typical example of developing film industry in Africa. It started with small begin about ten years ago and although there have been one or two private feature films made over the years, the real thrust of development of Somali film making has been done by the Somali film agency under the auspices of the Ministry of Information and it's really under this organisation that film making has developed recently.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Is there anything new they are experimenting with or are they just following what the rest of Africa has been doing?

MIKE HOWES

I think the hopes and aspirations of any country would, in fact, be to represent that country's culture within the films that it makes. Indeed at this moment there is a film being made about Saeed Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, the nationalist and spiritual leader who started the anti-colonial movement at the beginning of this century.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Do the films have audiences outside Somalia or are they mainly restricted to the country?

MIKE HOWES

The very few feature films that have been made in Somalia have largely been shown in that country. However, under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, many of the documentary films made are, in fact, shown outside either through embassies or shown at the United Nations or perhaps shown in one of the major aid-granting organisations or other international institutions.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And does the film industry enjoy good relationships with Western countries?

MIKE HOWES

Very much indeed. In fact the organisers of the Somali film industry make a point of travelling extensively in Africa particularly, but also outside as well, in order that they can share the experiences of African film makers and film makers outside.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And what's the general theme of these films? Are they entertaining films or do they stick to traditional sort of didactic subjects?

MIKE HOWES

The documentaries are mainly for information purposes either for health or information or political films and, in fact, it's something of a departure that the Somali film film agency has undertaken this enormous production of this feature film.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mike Howes thank you very much indeed.

MIKE HOWES

Thank you.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now you may remember that in August this year we did a special report on the Zimbabwean Book Fair, the first Pan African bookfair ever to be held in Africa. It provided a meeting point for French speaking and English speaking writers from all over the continent. But it was also an opportunity for publishers to assess the huge range of talent around and consider ways of improving marketing and distribution of books within the African continent as well as outside it. And it was a publisher, David Martin, incidentally one of the fair's main organisers who ended our special edition on the bookfair with some stern words of warning.

DAVID MARTIN

African authors must stop going first of all to European and North American publishers. They must support their African publishing industry. They must bring books to them. Now a particular African publishing house may not be very good about exports, it may not have sufficient world contacts to export well. But it can then make a sub-lease arrangement with a publisher in Europe or North America and let them do the world distribution. But when you make that sub-lease agreement, it means that you're bringing foreign currency back into that given African country. Africa shouldn't continue for ever to be a dumping ground for books from Europe and North America, it could become a book exporter, it could become a foreign currency factor.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

David Martin, Chairman of the Zimbabwe Publishing House. Generating money in the African publishing industry by making use of the marketing outlets of developed countries is his message and I'm joined in the studio now by somebody who is aiming to do just that... Louis Taussig whose company Leishman and Taussig specialise in distributing African books. Welcome Louis - you heard what David Martin said, does your company fit in with that sub-leasing scheme he mentioned?

LOUIS TAUSSIG

I think it fits in very well. I think our aims are compatible with his. I support his motion that he's putting forward that African authors should generate foreign currency for their countries, but I think the important point that needs to be made is the impressive number of publications that are coming out in Africa, and one can't possibly hope that all the books being published, that sub-leasing arrangements can be found for them immediately. Therefore, we can fit in very well because we want to bring as many publications to Europe and to the United Kingdom from Africa as possible.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

In the first place, where are you based?

LOUIS TAUSSIG

We're based in Northampton in the Midlands in the UK, but we spend a great deal of time travelling. We're trying to establish as many contacts as possible, not only with booksellers but also with libraries, both university libraries and municipal libraries.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And how long have you been operating for?

LOUIS TAUSSIG

We've been operating now for six months. Most of the first three months were spent in Africa establishing contacts with publishers and government agencies and it's only over the last two and a half to three months that we've actually seriously started to develop our market in the United Kingdom and we hope early next year to begin to make contacts in Europe as well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now what, exactly, is the nature of your business? Are you a trading house?

LOUIS TAUSSIG

Well we are a trading house but our overriding aim is to try and gain and give as much exposure to African publishers as possible and we hope to earn a living from that.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Your concentration, therefore, is on books?

LOUIS TAUSSIG

Our concentration is not only on books, it's also on pamphlets, on government statistics, on maps and prints.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Oh I see. Now are you interested in Anglophone and francophone books or are you interested in all kinds of books published in Africa?

LOUIS TAUSSIG

We're interested in all sorts of books published in black Africa. We're not interested in the main in South Africa apart from a very reputable, radical publisher there called Raven Press, but we are interested in both Anglophone and Francophone and Portuguese-speaking Africa. We hope, over the next year, to develop contacts in Francophone and Portuguese-speaking Africa.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Where do you hope to distribute these books? In what parts of the world?

LOUIS TAUSSIG

Well as I said, at the moment it's mainly in the United Kingdom, but we hope soon to establish contacts in Europe and possibly in North America, Canada and the United States some time next years.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Louis, how can any interested and probably listening publishers in Africa, contact you?

LOUIS TAUSSIG

Well they can contact us at our Northampton address and we'd be very pleased to hear from them. We have plans, at the moment to visit Africa at least twice next year and as soon as we know our itinerary, we will be contacting publishing houses in those countries. The service we would like to offer, as I said, in general is to give as much exposure to their publications as possible. We feel that the scope of the market for African publications in the United Kingdom still can be tapped a great deal further than it has been to this point in time.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And your company is Leishman and Taussig in Northampton, United Kingdom. Now anyone seeking more information about Louis Taussig's company should write to Arts and Africa, BBC African Service, Bush House, London.

Let's end with more modern music from Somalia, a song called "Alaf" by Osman Mohad. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Join me again next week, until then goodbye.

GRAMS

"ALAF" - Osman Mohad.