

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa". The tribulations of present-day Ethiopia mask the country's spectacular heritage. There's a heroic history stretching back to the legend of the Queen of Sheba. The larger than life emperors and chiefs of the nineteenth century could also be regarded as legendary - if it weren't for the reliable evidence. You only have to think of the decisive victory over the invading Italians by the Emperor Menelik at the battle of Adowa in 1896. Then there's the Ethiopian Orthodox Church preserved unchanged for the past fifteen hundred years. The Revolution has taken from the Church the vast tracts of land it owned but the ancient ceremonials, the Church language and its music have survived.

MUSIC

SINGING PRECEEDING MASS

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Just as the story of the Queen of Sheba meeting King Solomon in Jerusalem comes directly from the Old Testament so does the custom of the priests dancing before the tabernacle in churches. That's a direct reference to King David praising the Lord in that manner in the Bible.

MUSIC

PRIESTS DANCING

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That music conjures up robed priests with their splendid crimson velvet sunshades and their interlaced processional crosses. This music, by contrast, is secular and sings the praises of Menelik who, in 1887 united a turbulent land and formed an empire based on a new capital, Addis Ababa.

MUSIC

INCITEMENT INTO BATTLE.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Songs like this one that tell of brave deeds and fierce warriors who through the telling cease to be men and become giants were all part of the education of the contemporary playwright, Tsegaye Gabre Medhin. Tsegaye has been in London lecturing on a subject dear to his heart - the cultural expressions that he believes link traditional Ethiopian worship, language and even dress with those of ancient Egypt. When Florence Akst met Tsegaye she found it difficult to know which of his many abilities she would ask him about - he's not only an historian and playwright but also a theatre director and a poet who writes in both Amharic and in English. Poetry was his first love but within two or three years of composing his first poem, he had written his first play. It could hardly be called a mature work - not when we learn how old he was at the time.

TSEGAYE GABRE MEDHIN

Eleven years old I was when I started scribbling my first small plays. But earlier, since I was eight and nine I have tried to write some rhymes.

FLORENCE AKST

So always, right from the time you could write at all?

MEDHIN

From the beginning, because I have been influenced by teachers who had to come from other parts of the country and stay in my father's place. They were priests so they spoke about letters, about work, about lines and rhymes so I picked it up from that.

FLORENCE

Where were you brought up? What part of the country?

MEDHIN

In the suburb of a small village called Ambo, west of Addis Ababa.

FLORENCE

And what is your first language?

MEDHIN

My first language is the Oromo language and I mix it with Amharic because at home I spoke Amharic, but outside with the shepherds I spoke Oromo. And in the village I spoke Oromo. But since my mother's family is a family of priests who came to my father's part of the country from Ankobar they started to teach me the alphabet in Ge'ez and then the verbs in Ge'ez.

FLORENCE

Now Ge'ez is the language of the church.

MEDHIN

It is.

FLORENCE

And it's a precursor of Amharic, am I right?

MEDHIN

It is of Amharic, of Tigre of Tigrinya.

FLORENCE

It's the mother language from which the others have come?

MEDHIN

Yes.

FLORENCE

So that right from your earliest days you were surrounded by people interested in language and literature, and in theology probably. You've written a number of plays. How do they come from this background? Are they now modern stories or do they have roots in the past?

MEDHIN

You see in the country where my grand-aunt stayed, she being an Oromo woman, had all the traditional, the proverbial systems of the old Gondar system. Now my mother on the other hand who comes from a priestly family had stories to tell about the life and priesthood of the Menelik background.

FLORENCE

The Emperor Menelik?

MEDHIN

The Emperor Menelik. Then my father who from the age of eight had served in the court of Menelik and who came back, having accumulated so much of the background of the chiefs and the dukes and the counts and their achievements had a fund of stories which he told to people who came to visit. So there is the church on the one hand, the traditional Oromo system from my grand-aunt, and my mother who was a highly expressive person in the Amharic language, she is full of proverbs. So it is this combination.

FLORENCE

So if I saw a performance of one of your plays, would it be a traditional story, would it be traditional characters, would it be about the old days, or would there be something very modern about it, perhaps even revolutionary?

MEDHIN

Historical, traditional characters, giants who have been responsible for the formation of a new Ethiopia. I've been brought up looking to them because my father spoke about these giants all the time.

FLORENCE

What sort of characters? Menelik is one of the most famous of the emperors, were there other characters too?

MEDHIN

His generals, the people who come from the part where my father came from, the Ambo Mecha area, the people like Habte-Giorghis, people like Balcha, people like Fitawari Gebremariam, Fitawari Ibsa. He spoke about these people who come from Wollo, the chieftains who came about controlling Gondar later on. He talked about this a lot.

FLORENCE

It is your love of poetry do you think that makes you want to write about characters that are larger than life, that you don't want to write about something small and cramped but the big experiences?

MEDHIN

Poetically interpreting, poetically expressing the stories which I have accumulated from my father and his friends because I have always seen them as big, great giants and then not much has been said about them so I think I have learnt in my capacity as a poet to express their characteristics.

FLORENCE

And also you think it's important that younger people in Ethiopia now learn about this heritage of the characters that formed their past?

MEDHIN

This is why I did a play for example a historic say like Tewdros?

FLORENCE

That is the Emperor Theodore, known as Tewdros?

MEDHIN

Yes.

FLORENCE

With people clamouring to come and see it?

MEDHIN

People are constantly coming.

FLORENCE

Because they already knew the story?

MEDHIN

It ran for two years and people come, grandfathers come, grand children ...

FLORENCE

Are these plays long verse plays, plays in poetry, or are they actions with lots of movement on the stage?

MEDHIN

There's lots of action, lots of movement but above all they are soliloquies, poetic soliloquies.

FLORENCE

Soliloquies, statements of faith in poetry. So you have poetry and you have movement and you have colour?

MEDHIN

We have colour, we have music, we have traditional costumes. The background is set to remind people of the original areas.

FLORENCE

And where in Ethiopia are these plays performed? Basically in Addis Ababa I suppose?

MEDHIN

Basically in Addis Ababa, in the National Theatre and in the City Hall mostly. They travel sometimes to the provincial towns too.

ALEX

Tsegaye Gabre Medhin has been very successful as a translator into Amharic of the plays of Shakespeare - some of the plays, and it comes as no surprise to learn which ones he's chosen.

MEDHIN

I have translated the bigger classical heroes of Shakespeare like Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, King Lear.

FLORENCE

And of those, which is the character and the play which means most to you?

MEDHIN

To me Hamlet, to the Ethiopian audience to my own surprise it is Othello.

FLORENCE

So Othello is what appeals to the audience? You've had a great success with it, tell me how long has it run?

MEDHIN

Over two years.

FLORENCE

More than two years. Is it a familiar story?

MEDHIN

The key as I understand it is the church background of the Ethiopian peoples, ecclesiastical court-intrigue of the cloak and the poison in the dagger and the royalty conflict of the chieftains and the power game. One of the things that fascinated me is when an elderly lady came up after the play and said: "Well, it's very well the way you have presented it to us but why in the name of God did you have to say that Iago is a foreigner? Why did you give him the the name Iago? This man is Ethiopian." Because the characters Shakespeare creates are royalty, chieftains, kingdom, church. This is what these classics are all about. The same characters would come out of the Ethiopian background.

ALEX

The Ethiopian audience are certainly knowledgeable. The translator, playwright and poet, Tsegaye Gabre Medhin.

Our closing music comes from Gondar, the ancient capital of Ethiopia. To the accompaniment of a kerar or a lyre here's a charming love song. The soloist is called Taitu Kassa. I'll quickly leave the stage and make room for her so until this time next week this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC

ETHIOPIAN MUSIC