

Arts and Africa

BBC AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

BBC COPYRIGHT

ARTS AND AFRICA

First B'cast: 11.04.86

641G

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey. Life is hard for so many people these days that I want to begin today's "Arts and Africa" with this cheerful - I could even call it boisterous - music.

MUSIC

MUSIQUES ETHIOPIENNES - Tej beit song

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The accordion belongs to an Ethiopian musician who was playing, along with a drummer, in one of the many bars in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Abbaba, that sells the local brew called teg.

MUSIC

MUSIQUES ETHIOPIENNES - Tej beit song.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, I get the strong impression that everyone was having a good time. And if the bar girls and the tej beit customers were dancing that could account for that not very musical clatter. This recording was made in the days when Ethiopians could sing on the theme: "There is much food but no love". I doubt that you can hear that said very often today when drought has led to famine in very large areas of the country.

But even in the desperate situation that so many Ethiopians face, there's still music to be heard. Chris Terrill isn't long back from an extensive tour of Ethiopia and neighbouring countries where Ethiopians have sought refuge. Chris, I would expect to hear nothing but babies crying. But you've come back with recordings of music-making.

CHRIS TERRILL

Absolutely Alex. I expected crying and sounds of misery, but wherever I went somebody, somewhere was singing. Just listen to this song first of all.

MUSIC

Traditional song from Wollo.

CHRIS TERRILL

Now that song I recorded in the far west of Ethiopia at a place called Asosa. Now this is a place where a lot of people from Wollo, that's way up in the north of Ethiopia which has been terribly affected by the drought and the famine, have been taken to and they're trying to resettle these people and start a new life. This is a traditional song from Wollo and I wondered whether this was a song of happiness because they've been resettled and they've got a new life, or perhaps one of home-sickness, thinking back to their land up north. But as soon as they'd finished that, they went straight into another song, which again was a traditional song from Wollo, which, I was told, was a love song. This one.

MUSIC

Traditional love song from Wollo.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well the first one actually sounded to me like a farming song with the clash of digging tools, you know.

CHRIS TERRILL

Yes, that could well have been.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, there was joy in it. I mean in all of Africa when people are farming you hear them singing happy songs. I was saying at the beginning I thought I would hear babies crying. Were there no babies? Or if there were babies you say, were they well-fed and did they look happy?

CHRIS TERRILL

Well, I went to the north, a place called Sokota which is devastated by drought and there were babies who weren't happy and they were crying continuously. But in Arose in the resettlement area, where the babies and the children have been fed for about a year now, they were in a much better condition altogether - both in their bodies and in their minds. And indeed I visited a feeding centre there where there were crying babies and what you would expect. But outside the older brothers and sisters of the babies being fed, got bored with waiting because they suddenly broke into a sort of impromptu song and dance routine, so I went straight out there and had a good listen.

MUSIC

Ethiopian children singing.

CHRIS TERRILL

So you see those are happy children. I think you'll have to agree, they've had their problems - they probably still do have problems - but they sing. And they dance.

The little boy incidentally you heard there, the soloist if you like, was very ill. I think he'd suffered from polio and certainly malnutrition and he was bent double. He wasn't able to straighten his back, but you could tell from his voice that there was a spirit there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

I'd never have guessed that there was anything wrong with him. He sounded very healthy.

CHRIS TERRILL

But then, when they'd finished this song, they started dancing. I mean a very rigorous dance, a very energetic dance and this little boy, although he was very badly deformed, danced as best he could and the other children actually helped him in the dance. It's a communal dance. Then it got a bit difficult for me, 'cos I was trying to record with my tape recorder and my microphone and I was having to follow them around the compound. They didn't know what on earth I was doing. But anyway, this is what I recorded.

MUSIC

Ethiopian children singing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Yes, I was actually about to ask you if they knew what you were doing and therefore put on a performance for you?

CHRIS TERRILL

I don't know Alex. I think probably there is a bit of that. But on the other hand I was there for such a long time that I soon blended into the back-ground and this is purely spontaneous singing and dancing and I'm sure they would do it whether I was there or not. But you know, it struck me then, when I was in Ethiopia, which has got its problems, goodness knows, with the drought and the famine that we know so much about, but song and dance seem to come out of the worst situations. I remember, when I was in Nairobi in fact, I came across some Ethiopians there and they were refugees, they were far away from their home-land. They sang but it wasn't spontaneous singing so much, they made the conscious effort to get together and sing traditional songs for themselves because they were homesick, but also specifically for their children because they were frightened that their children were going to lose their culture, the Ethiopian culture. So they would sing regularly three or four times a week and the children would be made to sit and listen and learn the songs and in Nairobi I recorded some of these songs being sung to the children.

MUSIC

Ethiopians singing in Nairobi.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well there was a peculiar sound there which sounded rather modern, like an electric guitar.

CHRIS TERRILL

It was. That was exactly it. There's an electric guitar there which is not a traditional Ethiopian instrument. So that's already something new that's crept into the Ethiopian music being sung in Nairobi. In fact, they're very keen on modern percussion drums and guitars.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That's a little strange that even the refugees they should carry along with them all these instruments.

CHRIS TERRILL

Well, they do. They're quite simple instruments and they make them wherever they are. And they would perform also in their traditional costumes and they would make a very conscious effort to keep it traditional.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You not only went to Ethiopia, but to the neighbouring countries. I suppose Sudan was one of them?

CHRIS TERRILL

Yes, I spent some time in Sudan which is also, as you know, severely affected by drought, just like Ethiopia. I've been in Sudan before and I went back to a place called El O Beid, which is in Kordofan in western Sudan. I was so pleased to find that these people are picking up again in health and certainly in spirit. There are still problems, certainly, but you know I heard once again the singing and I went to the feeding centre in El O Beid where they're still feeding the undernourished children and when I got there the children were very excited by this stranger coming in from outside to see them and I was told that they were going to sing me a song of welcome to Sudan.

MUSIC

Sudanese children singing a song of welcome.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's always pleasant to hear the voices of children, especially when they're singing in a completely uninhibited manner. Whatever comes to them they just sing it.

CHRIS TERRILL

They don't care do they? They don't care. But its particularly refreshing because these are children that are, or have been, famine victims and here they are, happy and singing. That was a song sung for me and it was 'set up', if you like. But I crept up on them later on when they were singing a favourite song among Sudanese children, particularly in Kordofan in the west.

MUSIC

Sudanese children singing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The next one you have for us I think I've heard a bit of it, not the whole lot, but it sounded rather mournful to me. You tell me whether it is mournful actually.

CHRIS TERRILL

Well the next song is quite different from what we've heard. Again out of tragedy, whether it be drought, famine or war, songs are still sung but sometimes as an expression of what's being felt and this certainly happens in southern Sudan where I've been regularly. One woman I came across in a village in south east Equatoria, had her husband in Uganda somewhere, she didn't know where, and she sang a very mournful song which was translated for me. She was singing "If only I had a telephone. That's all I need because at least then I could talk to my husband who I haven't seen for two years". Now there are no telephones in this part of Sudan, there's no hope that she'd ever have a telephone, but somehow it seemed to help to sing about the prospect of a telephone and that way I suppose feel a little bit closer to her husband. But this is the song and, as you say, mournful.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Chris, before we hear the actual music I'll take this opportunity to thank you, very much.

MUSIC

Sudanese woman singing.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Chris Terrill of the BBC African Service and I like the sound of the bleating goat in the background! Our closing music looks forward to a time of plentiful harvest. It's a working song of the Maji people from the western part of Ethiopia and before it begins this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey inviting you to join me next week for "Arts and Africa". Goodbye.

MUSIC

Maji (Ethiopia) Harvest Song.