

Ethiopian Music and Politics

Most European colonies in Africa gained independence in the early 1960s. At the time, many African leaders, inspired by thinkers like Franz Fanon, had a broad humanist vision. The phrase “African Humanism” was a particular favorite of Zambia’s President Kaunda, but the sentiment was widespread. Humanist values were clear in the original charter of the Organization of African Unity [OAU]. Adopted in 1963 in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa and primarily written by then Ethiopian Foreign Minister Ketema Yifru, the Charter began:



**Haile Selassie (I) and
Ketema Yifru (1967)**

We, the Heads of African States and Governments assembled in the City of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia,

Convinced that it is the inalienable right of all people to control their own destiny,

Conscious of the fact that freedom, equality, justice and dignity are essential objectives for the achievement of the legitimate aspirations of the African peoples,

Conscious of our responsibility to harness the natural and human resources of our continent for the total advancement of our peoples in all spheres of human endeavour,

Inspired by a common determination to promote understanding among our peoples and cooperation among our states in response to the aspirations of our peoples for brother-hood and solidarity, in a larger unity transcending ethnic and national differences,

Convinced that, in order to translate this determination into a dynamic force in the cause of human progress, conditions for peace and security must be established and maintained,

Determined to safeguard and consolidate the hard-won independence as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our states, and to fight against neocolonialism in all its forms,

Dedicated to the general progress of Africa,

Persuaded that the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the Principles of which we reaffirm our adherence, provide a solid foundation for peaceful and positive cooperation among States,

Desirous that all African States should henceforth unite so that the welfare and wellbeing of their peoples can be assured,

Resolved to reinforce the links between our states by establishing and strengthening common institutions,

Have agreed to the present Charter.

Whether the original signatories really believed in the above rhetoric is debatable. For example, the principle author, Ketema Yifru, served the dictatorship of Haile Selassie, who claimed absolute power based on his alleged descent from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and had zero respect for any sort of “Human Rights”. Yet the aspiration is clear. The leaders of African independence movements were particularly focused on “transcending ethnic and national differences”.

Yet things did not work out as the 1963 signatories had hoped. Years later, addressing the assembled ministers of the OAU, Yifru lamented.

Yifru: “We started having coup d’état here and coup d’état there. A lieutenant taking over power here. And then you say to yourself, ‘what’s going on?’ A lieutenant, or a major or a colonel for that matter replacing a certain leader, a colonel replacing ‘one leader’ or some general replacing Nkrumah and then we had a Major replacing Haile Selassie....and so, here we are as we have lost our compass, as if we have lost our objective, as if we have nothing to live for. And that is what really bothers a person like me, who was there from the beginning and still alive to witness to what depth of this attitude that Africa has come through? What happened?”

It is a much discussed question. Most Africans would cite corruption as a major weakness of most African governments. But ethnic loyalties, which can contribute to corruption when officials are more loyal to their relatives than to the people as a whole, have always been a big problem. Ethiopia is a good example. After overthrowing the ancient monarchy in 1974, Ethiopia has struggled to contain ethnic conflict.

Many Ethiopians look to musicians for inspiration. Ethiopia has a long tradition of musicians using metaphors to make political commentary.

This month we will look at Ethiopia’s musical traditions and how contemporary musicians combine ancient and modern musical styles with political messages which resonate with a wide public.

For a preview of a video we will discuss in detail check out:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/3ec4HRr6l0g?app=desktop>