

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa".

A short while ago Lucy Duran of the British National Sound Archives and Farah Eissa Mohammed came along to join me in a discussion on current popular music in the Sudan. While they were here we also recorded them talking about Sudan's traditional music. Farah Eissa has a professional interest in traditional music as he's Tape Librarian in the University of Khartoum's Institute of African and Asian Studies. And he brought along some music from his tape library for us to hear.

SUDANESE MUSIC: Rebaba (Nubian)

TETTEH-LARTEY

Lucy Duran and Farah Eissa, I would like to welcome you to "Arts and Africa". Lucy, I'll begin with you. What were you doing in Sudan?

LUCY DURAN

I was invited by the Ford Foundation to visit the Institute of African and Asian Studies which is at the University of Khartoum because they have a sound archive of regional folk music and folk poetry and folklore from the Sudan. And I think they thought that I might be able to help in some way set up the sound archives there.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And during your visit you met Farah of course?

LUCY DURAN

That's right. Farah is the Tape Librarian there and with the grant from the Ford Foundation they have been able to buy new equipment for recording in the field and for processing the recordings in the studio. So Farah has been very much involved in day-to-day use of the sound archive by the students in the Department of Folklore at the University.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Farah, this is the appropriate moment to turn to you. Now tell me what actually happens at the Institute?

FARAH EISSA MOHAMMED

We collect the traditional music, stories and folk poetry from the field and we deposit this in our Sound Library for the purposes of study by the students of our Institute.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now here of course we are concentrating on the music rather than the folklore and the poetry. Now, it's a very complex country, Sudan.

MOHAMMED

Yes this is true.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Can we therefore talk validly about Sudanese music?

MOHAMMED

As you say Sudan is a very large area. They say that it is one million square miles. Inside this large area there are about four hundred different tribes. Accordingly their music should be different. The type of music in the southern part of Sudan you can call "African Style" while in the northern part you find the music there may be related to "Egyptian style" or Arabic in general.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now the music we've just heard, which part of the country does that belong to?

MOHAMMED

This is from northern Sudan - the Nubian tribes. They reside in the northern province of the Sudan which is close to Egypt.

TETTEH-LARTEY

What sort of music is it?

MOHAMMED

The instrument used is called a 'rebaba' in some parts of the Sudan. In this area of northern Sudan it is called 'kisir' in the language of the Nubian.

DURAN

It's a lyre which is very much like the ancient Greek lyre, and the interesting thing is that it survives only in Egypt and Sudan and some parts of Ethiopia. It has five strings which are tuned to a pentatonic scale and basically you strum with the right hand and you stop with the left hand the strings that you don't want to hear. So you're just left with two or three strings that are open, ringing out.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Was that actual clapping accompanying that instrument?

DURAN

That's clapping and foot stamping as well. And it's a love song, just a love song.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Is that typical of the Sudan or are there other types of music?

MOHAMMED

Yes, this is typical, this rebaba. It is found in the northern part and also in the eastern part as well as in the Kordofan area in the western part of Sudan.

The next piece is a 'daluka'. This instrument, daluka, is a drum, a clay drum. Goat leather or sheep leather is used....

DURAN

As a skinhead.

MOHAMMED

Yes..... to cover the pottery frame, and it is used all over the country especially where the Arabic language is spoken.

SUDANESE MUSIC: Daluka

TETTEH-LARTEY

Was this played at a festival or privately, in a village or in a town?

MOHAMMED

In both. Although the towns have somewhat defected to the new modern mode and this Kemanja - what do you call it in English?

DURAN

Violin?

MOHAMMED

Violin. This is a tendency in the towns and cities. But also they use this traditional instrument.

TETTEH-LARTEY

And they will play at a festival I suppose?

DURAN

Certainly at weddings you'll find the daluka.

MOHAMMED

Yes, you'll see this especially at weddings.

DURAN

And the daluka can also be played by women, although that one was played by men, and it's considered another one of the typically Sudanese instruments.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I suppose when it's women who play it will be much more delicate.

DURAN

Oh no, don't believe it!

MOHAMMED

The next example is of 'kerir'. This is used by the Hamar, a tribe in the western Sudan, specifically in Kordofan area. They are using only their voices from inside the throat and they are clapping their hands and stamping their feet on the ground. This is one of the special types of singing. Although some other tribes in the area use instruments, this tribe, the Hamar, never use instruments.

SUDANESE MUSIC: Kerir (Hamar)

TETTEH-LARTEY

That's a very weird and very fascinating sound. Are they at a wedding?

MOHAMMED

Maybe a wedding or a circumcision of boys.

Now we move to the southern part of the country where we find the tribe of Keraish. They use this instrument and singing.

DURAN

This is xylophone music and it's very typically African as opposed to the first two examples we heard which were very Arabic-sounding, I think. But this illustrates the difference between the northern styles which are more Arabic and the southern styles which are far closer to what people think of as the African sound.

SUDANESE MUSIC: Xylophone (Keraish)

TETTEH-LARTEY

Well I can't let that piece of music go without commenting. I'm really surprised that you call this African rather than Arabic. You call the others Arabic but this sounds to me very much like the sort of music you hear in northern Ghana and we tend to associate them with the Hausas and therefore with the Arabs.

DURAN

Well I beg to differ. I don't think it does at all. All xylophones sound alike just because of the way that they're made but as far as the actual music goes I don't think that you can say that that is in any way Arabic. I mean we're talking about the part of the Sudan which is on the border with Uganda - is that right?

MOHAMMED

Yes.

DURAN

And of course in Uganda there is a very strong xylophone tradition.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now of the examples we have had so far, Farah, it's only in one instance that you've said that women could also play a particular instrument, the.....

DURAN

Daluka.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Daluka, yes. Would I be correct to say that most music is played by men in the Sudan?

MOHAMMED

Yes, but it is only on this rebaba and other stringed instruments that women are not used to playing, but women play all the drums.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Have women also their own type of music, that is, something exclusively theirs?

DURAN

The Sar.

MOHAMMED

Sar is a custom in which a specific type of singing and music instrument is used.

DURAN

But it's women isn't it? The Sar is women?.

MOHAMMED

Yes it's women.

DURAN

It's a sort of spirit possession ceremony. It's usually held for healing. If someone isn't well then they'll organise this ceremony.

TETTEH-LARTEY

Now Farah, is it your intention at the Institute to preserve these recordings for posterity? Is tradition really dying?

MOHAMMED

Not dying really, because even in the town or the city of Khartoum itself you'll find people appreciate this traditional music and songs. But the change is taking place day after day in the countryside and it is for this reason, not because it's dying, that the people reject it. Because in the countryside the mass media, especially the radio, began to change the style of singing: new words, some sophisticated way of singing. Whenever we collect the traditional ones they will be more pure and more traditional than if we collect them after ten years or so.

TETTEH-LARTEY

I can quite understand it.

And taking part in that discussion were Farah Eissa Mohammed and Lucy Duran.

Now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and hoping that you'll join me for more "Arts and Africa" at the same time next week. Goodbye.