

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to Arts and Africa. This week we look at an almost forgotten culture - an African culture - but one that many thought was lost. Now most people, if asked, would include North Africa - Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, in the Arab World. Certainly, Arabic appears to be the common language of the region, as Islam is the religious faith that unites the Mahgreb, the 'West', to Arabia itself. But recent events have shown that many of the people of North Africa, especially in Algeria, do not consider themselves as Arabized as outsiders think. They are, they claim, Berber - by race and language. Certainly, the Berbers have occupied the North African strip for perhaps 4,000 years. At one time they spread as far as the Canary Islands and Cameroon. But it has long been an assumption that the spread of Islam in the 7th century obliterated their culture. Well, not so, for now there is a resurgence of the Berber language. It has continued to thrive especially in Algeria, in that part of the country called Kabylia known in French as the 'Grand Kabyle', 'Petit Kabyle', and the Aures mountains. It's language that finds its main outlet in song.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - ACAWI

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Acawi by the Berber singer Idir, one of the most popular balladeers in North Africa. We on Arts and Africa, decided that we should find out more about the Berber, their language and music and so we turned to a North African student here in London, Ali Mohand, and asked him to tell us how this once forgotten culture had survived. David Sweetman spoke to him about the music of Idir and the Berber language. He began by asking him if the language was only spoken in country districts.

ALI MOHAND

If you take the case of the immigrant, the Kabyle immigrant in France, for example, their children speak Kabyle and they don't speak Arabic. Why? because the life was very hard for them and the only thing they really didn't want to lose was a certain identity through the language. So I'm not sure that the city really did kill the language. And I'll give you another example. If you go to Relizane a very small village you find that the father, because he had to work, (they are peasants in this village), because they had to work and they lived all their life working outside, they don't speak Berber but the wives speak Berber. So you find that what is interesting here is that the women are really the cradle of the culture and maybe that's why in his record, one of the songs has been devoted to women.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - WELTMA

ALI MOHAND

First he criticizes the situation in which women have been put, I mean a sort of domination by man and that the only right she has is just to shut up. And that is really something I felt as a Kabyle. According to my family, was the fact that most of the time when I was in Algeria, I spent most of the time with women. Because of education, the man is too busy, he is working, he has to survive. Whereas the only contact you have is also with women. I felt that the only cradle of the culture is the women.

DAVID SWEETMAN

But is this a criticism say of Arabic culture which tends to confine women to the house, is this saying that in Berber culture it is different?

ALI MOHAND

Ah, yes. I think that's fundamental especially in the rural areas. If you go to Kabylia, the first thing you notice is that you can find women walking in the paths, in the forests, in the mountains without having their faces hidden. They're not confined to the home, whereas in the city, that is the case.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Let's look a little bit at the idea of Berber culture. We are saying that it is a surviving language, it survives in many different ways and in different places, even in France. Is it a written language?

ALI MOHAND

No. It's mostly an oral tradition. And that's a problem of the Berber. It's an oral tradition, already in the 19th century there remained only a few men who could tell a lot of poems, Berber poems. And Maolaud Mammeri in his collection included a few documents he found through very old people. When he was young he was very interested in that. And he used to listen to these old people telling stories and saying poems and at that stage in his mind, he remembered all that.

DAVID SWEETMAN

So we have poetry, the oral tradition of poetry having survived. What other manifestations of Berber culture are there?

ALI MOHAND

Songs. That's maybe the strength of Idir, of Ait men Guellet or Gjamel Allem also to some extent but I really think the strongest singer is Idir. Ait men Guellet also when he sings for example, his song about the wasp which is keeping house with the bee and he says "What will happen to the honey". In fact, the only thing that remains is only the songs and the poetry. Poetry less and less, so the only thing is the song.

DAVID SWEETMAN

What sort of subject matter do you find in Berber poetry and Berber songs?

ALI MOHAND

The poetry, if you go on the basis of Mammeri's book, the main subjects you find are war but also Islam. You find also Mohalage (phon) he used to go from Kabylia and walk in the whole of Algeria. He was revolted by the fact that the Berber are now more and more kept aside in the whole history of this country. And he said something like 'You will not get me'. And here in this song it comes back, this attitude, 'I want to be alone get rid of me, I want to be alone, I don't do any politics'.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Which song is that. That's called ...

ALI MOHAND

That's called Muhend nney.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT 'MUHEND NNEY'

DAVID SWEETMAN

So it is in effect protest poetry and protest song on behalf of Berber culture.

ALI MOHAND

On behalf of Berber culture. That's true. But it's clear at the level of the song. It's less clear at the level of the poetry because of history. Before 1962 it was one destiny - Algerians first, Berber and Arabs, and it's true that we had a common enemy. Whereas now it's a sort of revolt, a very pacific revolt, expressed specifically through songs. I understand that they don't want to leave Idir to go through to Kabylia.

DAVID SWEETMAN

You mean he's not allowed to sing in Kabylia?

ALI MOHAND

No, because it could create a lot of problems.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Ali Mohand emphasizing the key problem for the Berber language - the opposition of the Algerian government to its use. The French colonialists tried to use Berber as a means of splintering the local population - the people of Kabylia, the French argued, were a separate, unique people. However, the Berber-speaking did not accept these French overtures and were always part of the united front that liberated the country. But in 1963, an attempt was made to create a separate Kabylia - but this was however, hurriedly suppressed. Since then, the government in Algiers has been afraid of any resurgence of Berber separatism that might weaken its hold over the country. The crux of the problem is that the Berber language has increasingly come to be seen as an outlet for local frustrations, a development that has made singers like Idir symbols for the rumbling discontent that many people feel despite the liberalisation that the new president, Chadli Benjeddid, claims to have implemented. The trouble came to a head in May of this year when Maolaud Mammeri was banned from giving a lecture at Tizi Ouzou University in the Kabylia whereupon the students went on strike and twenty-one were subsequently imprisoned some for up to 8 years. Ali Mohand describes what happened.

ALI MOHAND

First Maolaud Mammeri received a call by somebody saying that it was the head of the University. He asked the head of the University and told him 'Is it you who told me not to go to this conference?' and the head of the University said 'No, it wasn't me'. And then the authorities made it clear to him. They told him not to go to the conference. So the students, because it wasn't the first case, they revolted and they went on strike and did some pacific demonstrations and then they withdrew to the university to sing. They staged another protest in the university just singing. Then the authorities sent the police to repress this demonstration.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Tell me, surely the way it sounds, things are going to get worse and worse aren't they?

ALI MOHAND

Well Bererhi, the Minister of Higher Education, promised that they would have a lecture on the Berber language at Algiers University and also in Tizi Ouzou. So after that the president, in his speech a few weeks ago, said that our language is still Arabic and that we have to flourish Arabic and cultivate Arabic so it seems that there is a contradiction between what the president says and what the Minister says.

DAVID SWEETMAN

But you don't see then Berber replacing Arabic or French or anything like that? You merely want the modest right to speak and use and hear the language?

ALI MOHAND

And flourish it at the University. You know, take Arabic - who in Algiers speaks the real Arabic, the classical Arabic? That's another point. We are speaking a dialect of Arabic. You know I have so many problems here in England when I meet a Syrian and talk to him in Arabic. I have a lot of problems because I don't speak the real Arabic. I agree with the idea of developing Arabic because you know there are a lot of students who have problems. My sister in my family, she speaks more Arabic than French now. There a contradiction is introduced at the level of the family. But it shouldn't be seen as a contradiction. There is still a lot to do in order not only to flourish Arabic but French and also English, why not Berber? If we do it with English, if we introduce English at the level of the studies in Algeria, why don't we do it with Berber? I mean it's obvious.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, it may be obvious to Ali Mohand but it's certainly less so to the government of Chadli Benjeddid. Some concessions have been made but as long as the Berber language is seen as a means of opposition to an overall lack of freedom in the country, it is unlikely that the government will treat this once-forgotten culture as anything but something to be resisted. And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye and leaving you with a final song from the Berber singer, Idir.

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MUSIC EXTRACT - IDIR.