

Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with Arts and Africa. This week we hear from a place as far away from Africa as it's possible to be and yet still part of Africa - the Comoro Islands. The four islands lie out in the Indian Ocean, 500 kilometres west of Northern Madagascar with whom they share a history of racial diversity, of people from East Asia mixing with Africans and Arabs who settled later. The people of the Comoros have strong cultural links with Zanzibar and the East coast of Africa - the language Kicomoro is similar to Kiswahili and, of course, there is the strong tie of Islam. This Comorian song is used to celebrate the end of the pilgrimage to Mecca.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - "SHIGOMA"

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An islamic song from the Comoros. Here with me today is Network Africa producer, Roger Ketskemety who recently visited the islands. There's been quite a lot of happenings there and I'm very confused - I just want a brief description of the background.

ROGER KETSKEMETY

Well, when the islands wanted independence the three main islands, that's Grande Comore as it was then called, Anjouan and Moheli, all voted to be completely independent from France but the island of Mayotte wanted to stay part of France. The three main islands went ahead, voted and became the Islamic Republic of the Comoros. Mayotte, now called Maore, is still under the influence of France. At the moment, the President in the Comoros is President Abdallah. He was President originally, he was then ousted by President Ali Soilih. Ali Soilih started a campaign of trying to get the Comoros not to be quite so Islamic as they were and people were saying there was a lot of persecution. Many people left the main island, Ngazidja, which then was called Grande Comore and the capital of the Comoros is on that island, called Moroni. Abdallah at that time was in exile, he arranged for mercenaries to get him back into power and the OAU were so incensed that the new government under Abdallah, decided that the mercenaries had to go. Some of them left, although there are still mercenaries there. I, myself, saw quite a few and now it is the Islamic Republic of the Comoros under President Abdallah.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, how strong is the influence of Islam in the place?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

The Islamic influence is very strong indeed. There's virtually very little education except for primary school level and most of it is done at koranic schools.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Have you got any more songs for us?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

Yes, I've got plenty of songs here. The next one here is very much an Islamic song again. It's called 'Mala' and it's sung to mark the new year on the Islamic calendar. For us this is 1980 but in the Comoros, it is 1441. The song says that everybody is happy throughout the world as a new era starts and the song is very popular in the island of Mwali which was called Moheli. So here then is the song 'Mala'.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - 'MALA'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

How did you come to record this particular one? In what particular place was it being played?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

Well, it was being played in the island of Mwali. I went across there from the main island, from Moroni by boat, it took about four hours to get there. Luckily I had someone with me who could translate what was going on. Everybody speaks French throughout the islands but, in fact, the Comoro language is a blend of Swahili and Arabic.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What is being done about it to make it, say, the main language in which education and literature and theatre and things like that are done?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

Well this does not happen, in fact, because the official language is French and the other official language is Arabic and there is practically no literature whatsoever, as far as I can see.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And there's no theatre at all?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

I didn't see any theatre as such but what I did see going around were buildings that looked like half finished concrete structures. You get one end that is enclosed and then it continues, pillars going up and beams across as if they'd forgotten to put the rest of the roof on. In fact, this is deliberate because that is a small theatre. On the left hand side, which is enclosed, there is a sort of high concrete platform and on top of that, musicians and people perform and the audience is in the open part.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Can we have a little more music from you?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

Okay, well this other piece of music is called 'Massama' and it's from Maore which used to be called Mayotte which the other islands are still trying to get back as a complete unit. With this song, the whole village joins in and again this is part of the celebrations to mark the Islamic year.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - 'MASSAMA'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Roger, are there any cultural links, at all, with neighbouring Zanzibar or the island of Madagascar?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

Well as far as I know there have certainly been cultural links with Zanzibar. A lot of the music, for instance, is very similar to the kind of music you would hear in Zanzibar. I'm told this, not having been to Zanzibar myself, so I'm not too sure. The orchestras, for instance, with the traditional music are called tarab orchestra. If you hear violins and so on, they have musical instruments which look rather like violins, sort of a stringed instrument. I'm not really sure if I've got any here on the next piece of music which I've got now which is called 'Bomo' and this comes from the town of Wala on Mwali where I visited. It is performed usually or sung after 3 o'clock prayers and it's also played on festive occasions such as marriage. The dancers move left and right, left and right and then they turn right around and they improvise all the time according to the rhythm of this song, 'Bomo'.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - 'BOMO'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What were the instruments involved there?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

Well the high pitched instrument that we heard which sounds like a sort of snake charmer's flute, in fact, is a wooden flute which the man playing has in one side of his mouth and the other side is puffed right out blowing very, very hard into this thing. And all the time he is writhing about, moving to the rhythm of the drums which you just heard in the background and the women are ululating in the background. It's fascinating to watch and extremely difficult to describe again.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

From the account you've given Roger, it looks as if every hour of the day is filled with music on the island, everybody seems to be happy, chanting something or celebrating something and yet, in spite of all this, there is all this political turmoil. How do you reconcile the two?

ROGER KETSKEMETI

Well, I don't really know what they've got to celebrate about because they are desperately poor, there's forty percent unemployment on the islands, there's virtually no education. People who are lucky enough to work, get paid so little that they can barely afford to eat, although everybody looked very healthy to me. I think it's a case where people are very poor but the only thing they can do is sing and dance about it and hope that things are going to get better. The people themselves appear to be quite well dressed. I expected, this being an Islamic country, that the women would be dressed in black with their faces veiled. I saw just a few ladies like that but mostly they wear, especially up in the hills, brightly coloured kangas or shawls wrapped round them. They are covered from head to toe mind you, but with brightly coloured shawls around them. In fact, talking about women, the next song I recorded is called 'Tari' and it comes from the island of Nzouani which used to be called Anjouan. Anjouan is reputedly the most beautiful of all the four islands because right in the middle there are huge fields with fantastic flowers from which they make perfume. Now this song, 'Tari' is sung and danced by women in the evening at around 8 o'clock. They line up in two rows and each woman carries a flower or a handkerchief and the idea is that they set off from one end of the town and they make for the public square or the main square right in the centre of the town. Now it takes them a very long time to get there because they dance two steps forward and one step back, two steps forward and one step backward. Now the dance can also be done by men only if men dance it, they carry a sword.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - 'TARI'

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well Roger thank you very much indeed. This is the end of Arts and Africa for this week and this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye. But before we end the programme altogether, we'll ask Roger to give us a song.

ROGER KETSKEMETY

Well, finally let's play out with a song called 'Biaia' which is common to all the four islands and is considered a sort of national dance of the Comoros. Now the actions with this particular song are so varied, it's impossible to explain how it's danced, everyone seems to be doing his own thing: jumping, writhing, turning, arms flailing. The dance starts slowly, everybody in a circle, they bend down and hold their knees, they stand up and sit down. Some of the people were even dancing on their hands.

TAPE

MUSIC EXTRACT - 'BIAIA'.