

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with "Arts and Africa", a programme that takes a special interest in traditional arts of the continent and in experimental work. Today, for a change, it's going to be a pop programme, but pop belonging to a particular group of people, the Nubians. The other week David Ambrose who's been in southern Egypt recording their music came along to the "Arts and Africa" studio and told me about these part-African and part-Arab people.

DAVID AMBROSE

They are absolutely on the boundary between the Arabic world and Black Africa. Their culture has very definitely taken something from both sides. The Egyptian Nubians are really an ethnic minority in Egypt. There's no doubt about it. Their blood is far more negro. Their language is Sudanic, it's part of the Sudanic set of languages.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And this is what David Ambrose chose as his first example of Nubian popular music.

TAPE

NUBIAN POP MUSIC

DAVID AMBROSE

Well that's pretty much pop music. The traditional Nubian music which very definitely owes a lot to Africa with its heavy reliance on drumming and call and response in the singing, tends to be played just with large skin-covered drums or with the solo tamboura. But we heard people playing with accordians and electric guitars and so on. This is the new style of music that's coming up in Nubia now.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

David met one of Nubia's best known singers at a wedding just outside Aswan. Omar was the star entertainer, singing with one of the groups and playing the lute.

TAPE

WEDDING MUSIC

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well what does he look like?

DAVID AMBROSE

Well he's a big man, he's got a frizzy afro hairstyle. He wears pretty smart clothes.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

When you talk about smart clothes, what sort of clothes? Flowing gowns?

DAVID AMBROSE

No, no western clothes. This was very noticeable, in fact. Everybody else at the wedding was wearing traditional southern Egyptian gowns and the Nubians were wearing their long white galabeyas. Omar was almost alone in wearing western style clothes. It's quite significant because he does spend quite a lot of time in Cairo. I think that that is where he makes most of his money.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You talk about a wealthy Nubian pop star. How wealthy is he? What do you mean by wealthy as compared with a pop star in Britain?

DAVID AMBROSE

It definitely doesn't compare to the excess that we associate with wealthy western pop stars, that's for sure. Omar is unusual and in some ways wealthy because he is a professional musician. But he works hard at that and he does do a lot of live performances. He is often to be found performing on a Thursday night, the traditional Muslim wedding night. In addition he performs in the Nubian clubs in Cairo, quite often on a Friday or Saturday night. But he doesn't have wonderful houses, enormous cars and the rest of it. It's only by comparison to his fellow Nubians that he has obviously got a little more money. I think that as in many countries, there's very little control over the records that are made. He records in Cairo in the recording studios and in fact I know that a lot of his admirers in Aswan have great difficulty getting hold of his tapes. They're snapped up by the Nubian community in Cairo and they never make it down to Aswan. I know that in Aswan, because it's difficult for Omar's fans to find the recordings that he makes in Cairo, they make their own. They bootleg his tapes. For instance it's absolutely common practice for everyone to have a cassette recorder and to take it along to religious festivals, weddings, wherever there's music, people are there with small tape recorders recording it, and nobody minds. But what happens afterwards is that people get these tapes copied and put them out for sale. This was certainly happening in the case of Omar. I was told that there were 15 different bootleg tapes of Omar's music in all the cassette stalls in Aswan. You could go in and order whichever one you wanted whether it was number one or number fifteen and Omar himself doesn't get a penny. But it does illustrate how popular he is and how people want to hear his music.

TAPE

NUBIAN MUSIC

DAVID AMBROSE

That was a song that Omar wrote or at least made popular. It's based on a traditional song. That would probably have been recorded at a private party. But people sing these songs on the boats on the Nile, the boatman will be bringing his boat home in the evening between the banks of the Nile and you can hear him singing this song. You'll hear them at religious festivals, on the streets when people are getting ready for wedding parties on Thursday night. The whole town comes alive with people going off to weddings. And I even heard similar quite modern Nubian pop songs being sung at schools. I went to see some school children performing in a large school concert in Asmah which is quite a long way to the north. I mean we're really out of Nubia by that time. But there is a very small Nubian community living even there. And when they were asked if they'd sing something for the school concert, they chose to sing a Nubian pop song.

TAPE

NUBIAN POP SONG SUNG BY SCHOOL CHILDREN

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Does this popularity extend beyond the boundaries of New Nubia?

DAVID AMBROSE

Well it does but I think it only goes where the Nubians go. I think this is the answer. The Nubians are proud of their culture as I said before and most of them are keen to hang on to it. Some are more interested than others in speaking in the Nubian language which is a completely separate language from Arabic. Most Nubians are bilingual and so the young ones are interested in the Nubian music and Omar is a well-known figure in Cairo but I think they're more interested in his songs when he sings in Arabic. The older people are keeping the language alive, but they're not as interested in Omar. So one can see already that in some ways the Nubian culture is being altered and eroded. There are other places where Nubian pop stars are well known, of course, like in the Sudan where there is a large Nubian population. Omar is well known and sometimes he travels to Khartoum and performs there. And there are Nubians living there who will travel into Egypt and perform in Egypt. So it's moving both ways. Then some of the performers are popular, like I said before, on the Gulf states. For instance there's a very popular man called Mohammed Wertli who is a member of the Fidjika tribe and he spends most of his time performing in Kuwait and I heard tapes among the Nubians who live in Cairo of Mohammed Wertli. He's a Nubian and yet he's popular in Kuwait but only because there's lots of Nubians working in Kuwait. The most popular of all the new breed of Nubian pop stars must be a man called Mahomet Mounir. He has a band called "Mahomet Mounir and the Jets" and they are making a very new kind of highly westernised pop music that even the Arabs in Cairo are beginning to listen to so that's the first real example you've got of the Arabs listening to a Nubian pop star.

TAPE

MAHOMET MOUNIR AND THE JETS

DAVID AMBROSE

Well yes that's the sound of Mahomet Mounir and the Jets. It's actually based on an old Nubian song. Then it was called "Asmah Cheeri To" which is Nubian for "the brown girl with the nice hair". What Mahomet Mounir has done is in order to be more commercially successful in Cairo, he's completely changed all the lyrics and made this into an Arabic song. So there's no longer any Nubian lyrics at all, and the song has a completely different meaning. It now means 'if the whole world turns round, why won't you change your mind?' But what this means is that he's going to have hopefully more success in the enormous cassette buying market in Cairo. It has a population of 12 million people and if he can break into that it's going to be very lucrative for him and he's already beginning to become quite a well-known figure. I did hear some music which I wasn't able to bring back, I heard a private tape of Mahomet Mounir singing traditional Nubian songs and I thought some of the best music that I heard whilst I was in Cairo. I think you can clearly hear that the Nubian music is gradually disappearing under the influence of the west and the Arabic lyrics. It's still just about there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well David Ambrose thank you very much for this interesting account of Nubian music and culture.

DAVID AMBROSE

Thank you, Alex.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And Nubian music's going to round off the programme. Not from the jet-setters in Cairo but music from Aswan. And when we meet next week the arts will come from other points of the compass in Africa. For now, goodbye from Alex Tetteh-Lartey.