

Nubians use hip-hop to preserve culture

Saturday 24 June 2006

June 23, 2006 (NAIROBI) - On a recent night in downtown Nairobi, beneath a nightclub's orange neon lights and spinning disco ball, dozens of descendants of Africa's ancient Nubian tribe gathered in full regalia to perform traditional music.

But the crowd, who turned out in force for Nubian Night, was not there just for a glimpse into the past. About an hour into the concert, the vibe switched from plaintive drumming and chanting to loud, explosive hip-hop.

The concert was designed for Nubians in Kenya - there are believed to be 200,000 of them here - to keep their traditions alive and relevant by fusing them with modern sensibilities.

"In every community, the culture is getting lost," said Yousof Noah, a 26-year-old rapper who helped organize the concert. "I grew up in this community so I have the knowledge of traditional music. But I just combined it with the music of the younger people, hip-hop."

Nubians came to Kenya from Egypt and Sudan after serving with the British Army in the King's African Rifles regiment during World War I. The British then settled them in what is now a sprawling Nairobi slum, Kibera, a maze of dwellings topped by rusting iron roofs. Noah lives in Kibera.

"I am using my popularity. All the youth, they listen to me," said Noah, who goes by the name Refigah, the Nubian word for friend, and performs in Arabic with a bit of Swahili.

Many reminders of the ancient civilization of Nubia - located in today's Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan - were nearly lost with the construction of Egypt's Aswan High Dam, which was completed in 1971 about 425 miles south of Cairo. The dam forced tens of thousands of Nubians to leave the land that now lies under the dam's huge reservoir.

Incorporating traditional beliefs into modern music isn't new - Beninese singer Angelique Kidjo has been incorporating traditional African sounds into her music for years, and Muslim musicians such as the group Native Deen from the Washington, D.C., area, or Capital D from Chicago have espoused traditional Islamic messages.

The Nubian Night performers, some of whom were Muslim, didn't carry a religious message - the concert was held at a bar with free-flowing alcohol, which is forbidden under Islam, and one performer was trailed by three scantily clad women while audience members hooted and handed him money.

Noah is Muslim, but knows not all Nubians are, and said the raucous atmosphere of Nubian Night was just part of melding old and new traditions. "I don't drink alcohol and all that, but I don't have any problem with" performing in a bar, he said.

(AP)