

ABOUT THE NUWAUBIANS

Adapted from the A. Scott article in The Oxford American; see the slide show and article here <http://www.oxfordamericanmag.com/content.cfm?ArticleID=149&Entry=Extras>

As you rounded a bend in a highway in Putnam County, Georgia, the tops of the two pyramids came into view above the pine trees. One pyramid was black, and one was golden. If your car windows were rolled down, you could hear an "ummmm" from unseen speakers.

As the road made another bend, the entire complex came into view: the sphinx, the temple of the bull-god, groves of fake palm trees, 30-foot-high golden ankhs, rows of statues of animal-headed Egyptian deities, and – in some ways strangest of all, given the setting -- a billboard that said “John 3:16.”

This was Tama-Re, the compound of the cult called the United Nuwaubian Nation of Moors. These photographs were made shortly before Tama-Re was bulldozed.

The Nuwaubians are an off-shoot of the Nation of Islam. The Nuwaubians were (are?) headed by Malachi York, currently serving 135 years for child molestation.

The Nuwaubians moved to Georgia from Brooklyn in 1993. Why they moved is a mystery. One theory is that the Nation of Islam regarded York as a heretic. York needed to relocate to a place far from Nation of Islam strongholds. Putnam County, GA fit the bill.

Nuwaubian theology was in constant flux, and it grew ever more baroque over time. Although it started as a branch of Islam, it eventually incorporated elements of Native American religions, Masonic ritual, Christianity, and Judaism. However, the dominant influence was ancient Egypt.

Once they settled in Georgia, the Nuwaubians set about turning their corner of the South into a version of Egypt, but with the color scheme and impermanence of a Mardi Gras float. The garishly-painted pyramids, temples, colonnades, and statues often were made of particle board, chicken wire, and artificial stucco. Little of it would last a summer without constant up-keep.

At Nuwaubia's height, more than a hundred people lived in Tama-Re, most in mobile homes painted to resemble stone temples – as much as a mobile home can be made to resemble a stone temple. Dozens more Nuwaubians lived nearby. York himself lived in a ranch-style house that was on the land when he bought it, but which he accessorized with domes and minarets.

Not surprisingly, rural Putnam County was an uneasy host to an exotic cult, especially when the Nuwaubians declared the compound a sovereign country and began building a nightclub in violation of zoning and liquor laws. A series of confrontations with the sheriff ensued. Then, former Nuwaubians reported to the FBI that York preyed on the cult's children. Law enforcement staged a massive raid on the compound, which, remarkably, occurred without violence.

York was convicted of child molestation in 2003. The federal government seized Nuwaubia. In 2005, a real-estate developer bought the compound and demolished it. The demolition was not hard. These replicas of the millennia-old monuments of Egypt often collapsed with just a tap from a bulldozer.