

Sudanese Music: A Loud Voice silenced by an Inconvenient Ideology - A Historical Review¹

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Introduction

This paper sweeps through the last one and half millennium trying to trace the musical genres of the Sudan as being African in origin and how the process of Islamization and Arabization has affected it. The advent of Christianity can roughly be said to have begun around the 6th century AD. While the processes of Islamization and Arabization can also be marked with the establishment of the Black Sultanate of the Funj in 1505 AD.

Like any African society, the Sudanese communities in pre-Arab Sudan used to have their musical performances, which can be concluded in the following: 1) drums, i.e. rhythm; 2) dancing, whether rituals or for casual enjoyment; 3) musical instruments; 4) lyrics; and 5) mix of males and females with no gender segregation. The most common musical instruments are the string (such as the lyre), wind (such as the horns) and drum (such as 'dallūka') instruments, as they are found in almost all the regions (al-Daw, 1985).

Music in Pre-Arab Sudanese Communities

Music in Western Sudan

Al-Tūnusi (1965: 231-241), who visited Darfur in the first decade of the 19th century tells us how women and men sang and danced at the royal court, with most of them

¹ M. Jalal Hashim . <http://www.mjhashim.blogspot.com/> Wednesday, September 09, 2009.

under the effect of alcohol. He further gives a list of the dances in the region. He gives a detailed description of the 'shikindira' dance, which is one of the well known dances of Darfur today. In this dance, the girls and boys will form a circle with the former stooping forward fetching the ground with their hands. The boys will come at the back of the girls holding them from the waist.

Such genres have come under threat as a result of Islamization (Abduljalil & Khatir, 1977: 101). The new surge of Islamic puritans and fundamentalist began by the mid 20th century literally marauding the villages and towns preaching a strict version of Islam that does not condone of any feature of creative entertainment such as music, singing and dancing.

Music in Eastern Sudan

Eastern Sudan, though populated by many ethnic groups, is usually represented by its historical people, i.e. the Beja. More than one scholar has mentioned that it is nothing easier for the Beja person than to start singing (cf. Sanders, 1935: 214; Newbold, 1936: 140-141; Clark, 1938: 5). Ohaj, a Beja historian himself, mentions that the Beja perform in a group using the lyre to sing and dance (Ohaj, 1986: 13-17). Ibrahim (1991) also mentions that each Beja clan has its own ethnic-boundary defining tunes (agāyēb). This tune should only be played for declaring war. No one outside the clan is allowed to play this tune unless they want to announce their present within the precinct of the clan. In this case, food and drinks will be offered to the guests so as stop playing the tunes. If they keep playing it, then this will be taken as an insult and it may lead to having them killed immediately (Ibrahim, 1991).

The Music in Southern Sudan

The travelers and government officials in the time of Turco-Egyptians rule (1821-1885) recorded many aspects of music among southern Sudanese communities. Schweinfurth (1874: 413-445) tells of a performance done by Monza, king of Nyam-Nyam tribes in Equatoria. Wyndham (1937) tells of the folkloric and musical genres of the Baria, Azandi, Nuer and Dinka. In fact, music and dancing play a central role in the rites of passage and life circle in almost all tribes of southern Sudan (cf. Leinhardt, 1961).

The Music in Northern Sudan

Being indigenous of the region for thousands of years, the Nubians can be taken as representing the north. The region houses other tribes, such as the great Ja'aliyyin tribes; however, the link between them and the Nubians is very strong, bearing in mind the opinion that classifies them as Arabized Nubians (cf. Fadl, 1973: 145-154). The Nubians have their various musical folkloric genres. These varieties go

according to the inter-ethnic differentiations, such as Dongula up the region; Mahas, Sukkoud, and Halfa down the river (cf. Simon, 1980a). As they were Christians until a few centuries ago (Vantini, 1981), it is expected for music to have played a central role in their cosmology. In fact we know of some of the hymns they used to perform during the time of Christianity (cf. Griffith, 1913; Browne, 1989). Burckhardt (1978) who visited the region in 1813-4, mentions that the lyre was the only instrument he came across among the Nubians. Waddington & Hanbury (1822: 250), who visited the region with the invading Turco-Egyptian army tell us about their encounter with the kings of the Mahas. They tell in particular about the royal bards in both Nubian kingdoms of Mahas and Argo and the crucial role played by them. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that they fit into the type and style of the royal bards in other areas of Africa (cf. Mafeje, 1961). It is interesting that Lepsius (1880: 240) includes one of the songs performed to him by a Mahas royal bard. In 2001 the present writer, when doing field research among the Mahas, succeeded in identifying the same song still being enchanted. Another evidence of the African origin of musical genres and performances of the Nubian is the basic book of Musul (1974) where he cites all forms of dances, songs and musical instruments in the Sukkout region in middle Sudanese Nubia.

The Music in Middle Islamized and Arabized Sudan

The Funj Era (1505-182)

Middle Sudan is usually represented by the Arabised and Islamized Africans (cf. Fadl, 1973). The Funj sultanate, also called 'the Black Sultanate' was the first Islamic and Arab kingdom to have command of the middle region and other peripheral areas such as Kordufan, the east and the north. In the Funj era people were discouraged from performing music unless it was to praise Prophet Muhammad; music performers were given the derogatory name 'vagabonds' (al-Tahir, 1993). In their Prophet-praising chants, the Sufi bands employed the drums and brass percussion (cf. Simon, 1980b). However, there was a certain Sufi shaikh (Isma'il al-Daglāshi) who used to play music with 'rabbāba' (i.e. lyre) until he was nicknamed 'Ismā'īl the one with the rabbāba'. In his songs, which were a mixture of Sufism and flirtation, he used to flirt with specific known women, a matter that caused him troubles (see his biography in Wad Deif Allah, 1985). Girls of noble tribal origin, i.e. of Arabized tribes, were allowed only to sing in order to incite their people to go to war, or to mourn their dead, a brother, a father or son. Singing was left to their slaves.

The Turco-Egyptian Era (1821-1885)

The Turco-Egyptian government in Egypt invaded the Sudan primarily to procure slaves so as to recruit them in the army. The areas targeted with the slavery raids

were the south, Nuba Mountains, Ingassan and Darfur (Ibrahim, 1971: 5-22). Those enslaved soldiers were put into battalions according to their ethnic backgrounds, i.e. those of Dinka origin will form their own regiment and so on (cf. Mohamed, 1980: 15-16). Regarding the music in the middle of the Sudan, the new rule left it in its old tradition of discouraging music unless it was performed to praise prophet Muhammad. By the mid-19th century, the urban areas began growing fast with the class of ex-slaves forming a community in its own right. This community, mostly or completely detribalized, was different in so many ways than the fully tribalized sections of middle Sudan. Furthermore, it was considered as a social stigma. However, the more the government and the communities of middle Sudan indulged themselves in slavery, the more it kept growing as an urban community with clearly liberal tendencies. In 1851 James Hamilton, an English traveler, relates how he was entertained in Khartoum with a party where beautiful and young girls danced while at the back sat veiled women (1857: 323-328).

At that time the Nubians of northern Sudan, the Mahas in particular, had based themselves in and around Khartoum. Coming from an African background, with Arabization as the only way to prosper, they maintained a balance between adhering to the tradition of performing music only to praise the prophet and between the natural need to perform music for the sake of entertainment. The sons and descendants of their renowned Sufi families began performing flirting music in their youth to resort to Sufi chants when they get older. The most famous for this kind is Shaikh Mudawwi, the great grandson of the Mahasi Sufi shaikh Idris wad al-Arbāb. Shaikh Mudawwi began by composing some of the fine songs which are still being performed today. Later when he became older, he went to the hajj (pilgrimage) and thenceforth concentrated on Sufi chants and religion.

The slave-based regiments kept playing their own ethnic music, which were modified so as to serve the military marches. These songs and chants were the composite of present day marches of Sudanese military, with the lyrics of most of them well known (Jabir, n.d.). When the Turco-Egyptian regime was compelled to abandon slavery, it began recruiting soldiers with the consent of the tribal leaders. In 1858 in his visit to the Sudan the Khedive of Egypt Sa'id Pasha gave his orders to form a military musical band by recruiting youngsters from certain black tribes. Among those who were recruited was Abdullah Adlan who was the son of the leader of the Funj tribe (Bredin, 1961: 37-45). Later the Yuzbashi Abdullah became the first Maestro of the military band. The British rule in Egypt began in 1888 reorganizing the army. As part of this, they began also reorganizing the so-called Sudanese battalions, which were made of soldiers of ex-slave backgrounds.

The Mahdia Era (1885-1899)

Following a fundamentalist religious jurisprudence, the Mahdia strictly abolished music and singing (Slatin, 1898: 233). It particularly targeted the female dancers and performers, whom it flogged when caught singing (Fawzi, 1901: 170). This has led to the silencing of many female performers who only came back to singing after the defeat of the Mahdia rule; among those was the famous Sharīfa bit Bilāl (al-Tahir, 1993: 25). The only genre of music allowed to men in that time was the 'Karīr' or 'tambūr' (it has nothing to do with the musical instrument called 'tanbūr'), which is a coarse oral music made by harshly blowing guttural sound from the throat. This is an old Sudanese musical genre that signifies virility and usually performed by a group of men circling around girls who dance and sing.

The Colonial Condominium Era (1899-1956)

When the embargo on performing music was lifted, people began reviving their suppressed musical genres starting from where they were, i.e. the 'tambūr'. At that time the urban class formed by the completely detribalized communities of ex-slave backgrounds were spared the trauma of the Mahdia as they moved to Egypt and came back with the invading army. So, there were two parts of the society; 1) a suppressed part (Islamized and tribalized people of middle Sudan who do not classify themselves as blacks), and 2) non-suppressed part (Detribalized blacks who bore the stigma of slavery). The two parts were performing completely different genres of music. A little later, the suppressed part began catching up with the old traditions of musical performance, which were enriched with music and performances coming from the African tribes of the ex-slaves. Thus the suppressed parts began slowly merging artistically with the non-suppressed to give us the so-called haqība genre of song, upon which the present modern Sudanese music of middle Sudan is based. As it started from the Karīr and tambūr, an illusion was created that the pioneers and forerunners of the haqība are those who performed the Karīr and tambūr.

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