

Sudanese Singing 1908-1958

By: El Sirr A. Gadour

Introduction: The roots of Sudanese signing and music can be traced back to the ancient Nubian Kingdoms, the Christian eras as well as the Islamic Kingdoms. The most powerful and influential of the latter flourished in the area which bears today the name "The Republic of Sudan". The area is a crucible for the fusion of musical influences emanating from the East, the West, the North and South. For ages it was at the cross-roads of caravans from the North and East heading West and South; as well as caravans (after the advent of Islam) heading East towards the Islamic holy shrines.

At the beginning of the 19th century Sudanese melodies and tunes, arising from human endeavour during agriculture, hunting and herding matured, in different ways and patterns, the most important of which were the sufi canticles, dirges, songs for weddings and festivals and the DOUBELT arts which spread among cattle herders. The modern MADIEH (praising the prophet) developed in this environment. It is different from the choral sufi canticles. A number of men excelled in madieh: Ahmed Wad Saad, Ahmed Wad Tamem, Ahmed Abu Shariah and others. Their creativity established the art of individual madieh, chanted by one person, and different from choral group "Zikr" performed by many. This mean the emergence of the individual performer in front of an audience, receiving and appreciating. A parallel development took place in the music and singing on social occasions.

During the Mahdist state another dimension was added, when Omdurman in particular witnessed the mixture of tunes and melodies of Western Sudan with those of central Sudan, especially in madieh, mahdisr mobilisation changes and the Jalalat military march music of the Mahdist revolution soldiers.

By the end of the 19th century, the main features of Sudanese national music were in place.

Beginnings of Modern Sudanese Singing

Some people, when discussing modern signing in Sudan, mention Sarour, Karouma, Al Abbadi and Khahid Farah. They seldom refer to Mohamed Wad Al Faki who is the first founder of modernising singing. When mentioned, he is seen as a historical record. So much so that he has become like a teacher at whose hands tens of high flyers have learned their craft. People remember **their** achievement but rarely refer to the teacher.

Mohamed Wad Al Faki came to the Capital in early middle age in 1908 (the same year in which Khahid Farah came as a child). At that time Omdurman, which became prominent as capital of the Mahdist state, was home to communities which represented most

Sudanese tribes. As a result tribal, ethnically-based singing was the order of the day. Each community sang the songs which they brought with them.

There was no famous singer in Omdurman; but there were many with good voices who intoned songs to accompany dancing girls in TAMBOUR (not to be confused with the musical instrument of the same name). The Jaahygin (Sheikh Mohamed Wad Al Faki's tribe) were famous for tambour.

These tambour songs were very short lines delivered by the first singer before the group join in. It is usually started when the dancer stands up and gets ready to dance. An example of the lines:

O beautiful one, draw near
Reveal your cheek's scanifications
Let my elation
Be hallucination
In love
The Sting of a scorpion
Is more bearable
Thank you disdain

We notice that these lines are similar to the song "Fireir Al Ban" which Wad Al Faki later developed in the next stage of his contributions: It says:

O listener to supplication
As I say Farewell to Um Ruaba;
Beauty is inherited not claimed,
My captive hear is asunder

Wad Al Faki's contribution was a turning point in the style of these RAMIAT as they came to be known. He was the vanguard of modern singing in Sudan, especially because many singers and poets were influenced by him.

Wad Al Faki came to Omduman from an area which has a strong musical tradition, centred around the town of Kabou-shiya which can be dubbed the capital of singing. Some believe that its name was derived form the Arabic word for "Parish" or from the word Cathedral; for it falls geographically in the region which used to be Christian, with a past traceable to the meteoritic kingdom. North of it are the remains of pyramids in "Masawarar". Fame in music and singing was associated with Kabourghiya town until recently. It was the home-town of the most famous folk singer in the twentieth century Al Jumaira Bint Al Joud who inherited the talent of singing from her mother Al Joud who was a distinguished singer at the turn of the 20th Century.

Apart from singing, the area is famous for madieh, poetry recitation over and above "duabeir" both sung and recited. Mohamed Wad Al Faki, as his family name denotes, was the son of a Koramic schoolteacher. His religious upbringing ensured a mastery of

proper reading, voice control and correct pronunciation. Another aspect which served him well was the fact that he did not belong to any of the main ethnic communities in Omdurman. This freed him from narrow identity and made him a "general" singer crossing the tribal barrier to broader national affiliation. Together with a group of singers and poets, he laid the cornerstones of national signing in Sudan, instead of tribal ethnic singing. Thus, Wad Al Faki became a star who moved with his group from one quarter of Omdurman to the next signing in festive occasions and accepted across the board in a town still marked by ethnic and regional loyalties.

Understandably, he had to rely in the beginning on what he brought with him from his homebase; but he soon sought to renew his repertoire with the help of some young men who were striving to usher in a new era, e.g.: Yousif Hasabella (nicknamed The Sultan of Lovers), Mohamed Osman Badri and Ibrahim El Abbadi. Before the arrival of Wad Al Faki to Omdurman, they used to write the ramiat (referred to above) which made them famous. An example is Yousif Hasabella's;

Eucalyptus branch
Dew-soft, bending
By Allah's, peace

This was later developed into a complete song which is considered by some to be the first ever full-length modern Sudanese song, opening with the lines:

The eucalyptus branch
Who is she, dears
I yearn for her

In this song, the chorus plays an important role by rhythmically repeating the last words in every stanza (Ya salaam).

After becoming the number one singer in Omdurman, Wad Al Faki abandoned his "regional" style and adopted a new one, steering a middle course between folk songs and the melodies of madih. This new stage showed the influence of his new Omdurman environment on him. An example can be found in the famous lines performed by the chorus before Wad Al Faki's ramiat. Many people remember it and the late singer Hassan Atiya used to sing it occasionally. It goes like this; describing the traditional dancer:

Allah Allah, O Allah's people
The goose swims, O Allah's people
With breast strokes, O Allah's people
Just like a dove, O Allah's people
Like the Governor General O Allah's people
At the Treasury Courtyard, O Allah's people
Sauntering at east, O Allah's people

This, by the chorus is followed by Wad Al Faki's "ramiat" song. An example is

The attractive one approached, swaying
Our souls are with her, enamoured
Captivated and jailed by the eyes
Tell our families not to expect
Us soon [We'll be with her a while]

Among the young men who started to write new songs for Wad Al Faki was the poet Mohammed Wad Ar Radi who developed the ramiat and gave them some cohesion and organic unity, avoiding piecemeal or disconnected presentation.

One of his most famous contributions is "Tabiq Al Boukha" which was taken up later by the old singer Abdallah Al Mahi. [It is about the traditional performed sauna of women in Sudan]. The opening stanza goes like this:

All try to reach the original gem
May you never experience what has happened to me
Torture has many facets all similar
My detractors are overjoyed
Because of my pains

Rising from the second
Sandal perfumed sauna
Dripping scented dewy drops
Drowsily asleep
Her gentle arm pulling
The sauna blanket behind
Wrapping the thin waist
Gently

In the wake of the resounding success of the new style by Wad Ar Radi, Wad Al Faki continued to present more songs by this poet. One of which is still well known today after its choice by the veteran broadcaster Salah Ahmed as a signature tune for his programme "Haqibat Al Fan" (from the bag of musical archives) in the 1950's. Most of the singers who perform old songs perform the songs of the poet Wad Ar Radi as performed by Wad Al Faki. The best features of this style - as mentioned earlier is organic unity, as the following example illustrates:

The cause of my boredom and tears
Running non-stop [Is]:
I was standing in the courtyard
Unaware
When I saw her
Passing quickly with a friend
I was disheartened

My neighbour does not know
What befell me
I stood there, forgotten

May you prosper and end my misery
May your attractions increase
I answered those who told
Me to pull myself together:
"Take it easy
They Said: Is this the way it is?
Fear Allah's wrath
My beloved neighbour"

The lines represent a unified whole in form and content; with the chorus tying the different sections together with the line:

Fear Allah
Yalla O neighbour

In this song the timing with a stick was used as a rhythmical accompaniment.

This was the second stage in the development of Mohamed Wad Al Faki. It proved the way for the birth of the modern song which has come to be known as "bag of archives" song. Many poets have contributed to this development including Al Abbadi, Abu Salah and Omer Al Banna. Some of these songs are still being performed today.

This development took place during a ten year period 1918-1918. Then another star appeared one of Mohamed Wad Al Faki's pupils called Mohamed Ahmed Sarour. The younger man accompanied his mentor for years, learning and establishing a network of contacts with younger poets. In the mean-time the social environment in Omdurman was becoming even more conducive to new styles. In the new era many of Wad Al Faki's pupils have become more famous than him. Their songs spread all over; but history will preserve his place as the real founder of the school of modern singing in Sudan.

Beginnings:

Simultaneous to the activities of Wad Al Faki, the musical scene in Sudan witnessed other far-reaching factors.

Official music was being played since the early years of the century, in public squares on British and Egyptian occasions. It was also played publicly on other occasions like the Birth of Prophet Mohamed's procession, the eve of Eidul Fitr at the end of Ramadan and Easter holidays. The musical companies were military, part of the British and Egyptian forces. The most famous was the Scottish company with its distinctive bag-pipe music.

These military musicians wrote down and played Sudanese music and transformed some local folk music into military march music. One of these was March 14G which adapted a well known folk song. Another was March Shulkawi No 1, adapted from the songs of the Shilluk ethnic group.

Moreover, military companies involved many Sudanese in the writing and playing of music. These in turn taught others who played leading roles in non-military music.

The most famous of these was Khabil Farah who used to live in "ar Tirs" quarter in Southern Khartoum, near the living quarters of senior Egyptian employees. Some of these played the lut (Oud) and taught Khahil Farah. He also listened to Egyptian songs from the new "phonograph". Others who followed a similar path were Abdul Qadi Suleiman, the pioneering musician who taught many singers including the "Prince of Oud", Hassan Atiya. There was also Abdul Qadir's brother Hassam.

All this should be set against the background of the musical, theatrical and general artistic activities of Arab and European communities. The Greek, Italian, English, Jewish and Armenian communities; as well as the Egyptian and Syrian communities.

By the 1930's, the Sudanese capital was well acquainted with records of music and the phonograph. The number of educated people had increased and several musical companies mushroomed, the most famous of which was the Gordon Memorial College Musical company. One of its members, Mohamed Adam Adham (who went on to become a famous physician and politician) wrote a piece of music which is arguable the first Sudanese musical composition, called the Adhamiya. It is still played to this day.

Haqibat Al Fan (Bag of Archives)

With the end of the 1920;s the stage was set for the birth of modern singing in Sudan. School leavers increased in numbers, college graduates, police and military graduates were numerous. Hararat As Sudan appeared as the first Sudanese newspaper and published articles by Sudanese writers as well as poems. Siddiq Farid formed a theatre company performing "Salahuddin Al Ayyoub!" (Saladin) and other plays.

In music the new songs were maturing and spreading. As for the name Haqibrat Al Fam, it was coined in the early fifties to describe an earlier stage. Ahmed Mohamed Saleh, who presented a programme for Radio about music began to collect and broadcast old songs which he kept in a brief case (bag) in his office. When he decided to devote a whole programme to these songs, he selected them out of the "bag" archive.

No doubt Mohamed Wad Al Faki was the father of the modern song. Equally true is the statement that Ibrahim Al Abbadi, the poet, was the man who took the process one step forward; by encouraging Sarour, the most talented pupil of Wad Al Faki and writing poetry for him, like "Alam Al Buaad" and "Zan Al Uzaz" and other songs.

Al Abbadi called for a meeting in 1923 bringing together songwriters and singers. He then published a collection of lyrics marking the new style. He was a versatile man, who wrote for the theatre (Al Mak Nimir was performed in 1937). The veteran Wad Ar Radi was also around together with names like Omar Al Banna, Saleh Abdns Sid, Yousif Hasab-allah, Burham, Ali Ash Shaidi, Beshir Ar Rubatabi and not least the singer Abdul Karim Abdalla (known as Karouma).

The poets writing for Haqibar Al Fan never wandered away from the roots of madieh. They were influenced by Sheikh Mohamed Abu Shariah (who lived in both the Mahdist state and the Anglo Egyptian Condominium) and adhered strictly to rhyme in his poetry. Often the last three letters rhymed in his lines, as in:

I have entertained a human being (Insana)
With an eye which is not sleepy (Nasana)
She gave me water form a cup (Kisana)
And covered me with a green garment (Tailasana)
And said to me: Forget me not (Tansana)
Come on, it is almost night (Amsana)

They tried to emulate this (excessive) style. Al Abbadi wrote:

O my angel, my difficult circumstances ('Asieba)
Stand between us, through no fault of mine (Seiba)
She said: Listen to some true words (musieba)
Every person finds his own share (Nasieba)

The same influence can be seen in the ending of poems. In madieh the end was usually a supplication in praise of prophet Mohamed. Wad Tamiem says:

My prayers are complete
Combined and comprehensive
From me, Wad Tamiem
To the meeting eye
And the giving hand

Another example is from Wad Saad:

My prayers resound as long as
Pilgrims jostled in Mecca
In honour of [Allah and] the prophet
Hoping that I Wad Saad attain Salvation.

Poets, writing lyrical poetry borrowed this style; but replaced the religious ending with a message to the beloved. This is how Abu Salah put it:

As long as rain fell
I'll water your quarter
And smell your perfume,
As long as poets wrote in praise
Of your attraction
I'll send my salvation
To your beauty O spoiled one
With my veneration

Sayyid Abdul Aziz contributed the following example:

As long as a singer sang
(in Arabic or another tongue)
I greet you.
As long as a stranger yearned
For homeland
I greet you
The henna dye on your fingers like the line of a vein
Hoping that you accepted me
O Queen, daughter of a Sultan.

The influence of madieh was not only felt in poetry. It left its mark on the melodies too. Most of the first modern Haqibar songs borrowed madieh melodies. Some have become very famous, others less so. An example is the Sufi chant:

"Allah the Great, has no partner
Has no equal. Allah"

Along the melody of these lines Abu Salah wrote:

"Wasp Al Khuntaila", Omer
Al Banna wrote "AlMafi Wizeina", Al Abbadi wrote
"Addawi Jabienna", Wad Ar Radi wrote "Tieh Yittaka"
Sayed Abdul Aziz wrote
"Safwat Jamalik" to put the melody of "Busna Ar Rasool Yassien".

Another madieh melody (which was less wide-spread) was also used extensively. It said:

O pilgrims on the way to Medina
Convey a thousand greetings
To the prophet

It later provided the mould for the most famous songs.

We can thus say that the national song continued to be closely linked to the madieh in words and melodies.

A significant point of departure from this pattern was provided by Abdul Kariem (Karouma) who broke away providing new melodies and songs [which are wholly secular]. He co-operated in this with the poet Mohamed Beshir Atiq.

The success of the new songs was boosted by the introduction of records in the 1930's. From 1924 until 1940 the pioneers recorded hundreds of songs for Abdalla Al Mahi, Al Fadil Ahmed, Mohamed Ahmed Savour, Al Ameen Burhan Abdul Karim (Karouma) and Ibrahim Abdul Jalil.

Women too contributed. Fatima Khamees, Um Al Hassan Al Shargiya ayd Mahala Al Abbadiya.

The phonograph spread in homes and cafes. By the 1940's the Omduman born song had already reached most other urban centres, helped by the tours of singers. The great Sudanese leader, Abdur Rahman Al Mahdi, said about the doyen of Sudanese singing, Haj Mohamed Ahmed Sarour, that he had become a leader in his field because he moved singing from tribal, ethnic, to national expression.

The next stage in the history of singing in Sudan came in the 1940's as a direct result of the second world war. Apart from the role of Omdurman Radio in mobilisation and counter-news, singers and musicians were introduced, including some who soon became household names through radio, like Ahmed al Mustafa, Hassan Atya, Ibrahim Al Kashif, Ismail Abdul Mennen and others. These had access to the public not in festivals and private occasions but in and through a studio for broadcasting and recording; with microphones which boosted their voices. The need for the chorus was reduced and a more intimate individual style developed.

In this respect Ismael Abdul Queen was a pioneer who strived to adapt to the new conditions and desert the old style. He was followed by a poet-singer called Ahmed Ibrahim Falah. But both were soon overtaken by Ibrahim Alkashif who became known as the "Father of modern singing". Al Kashif began to sing under the influence of Haj Mohamed Ahmed Sarour and relied on what Karouma had started, but he renewed singing in three main facets:

A: He was accompanied regularly by a musical group which replaced the chorus of old.

B: He introduced new melodies.

C: He introduced new musical expressions to emphasise the meaning of words.

Landmark songs like "Fishshati" - "Allayle" "Rihla", "Ar Rihla Fishambat", "Al Mugran Fis Sabah" put him in a category of his own. He dominated the scene for almost twenty years until independence and two years after that (1958). He influenced a younger generation who, in turn, struck their own way to usher in another stage. Mohamed Wardi, Abdul Karim Al Kabli, Salah Mustafa, Salah Ibn Al Badia and others represent the current stage of music and singing in Sudan. They are all still active.