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# Music in the arabian epos *Abu Zaid Al-Hilali*

**Habib Hassan Touma**

Descripción de un género musical *interpretado* por músicos nómadas en el oeste de Asia, Egipto y el norte de África, quienes recientemente recitaban de localidad en localidad la famosa epopeya árabe conocida como Sirat abu ziyad al-hilali, sirat az-zaber o assira az zahiriya y sirat'antar.

Se discuten los principales géneros y estilos de música en Egipto y se muestra dentro de qué categoría podríamos enmarcar el cantar épico en Egipto y el mundo árabe.

Posteriormente este trabajo discute la historia de los diferentes tipos de épica y muestra un análisis musical estructural del cantar épico.

**E**gypt is an Arab state and is a part of the Arab Nation. Shortly after the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the Arab 'amr ibn al-'ās conquered Egypt after a period of systematic campaigning in 640 and the phrase *allāhu akbar* (God is most great) has echoed ever since in every village and town in Egypt.

The Egyptians are extremely fond of music and distinguish among several genres of music and musical styles which have developed in rural and urban areas:

- a) Musical genres of the big towns and cities,
- b) Musical forms of the villagers and residents living outside the towns and
- c) The music of the nomads living in the desert.

From an ethnomusicological point of view we may distinguish in Egypt among two main musical categories: *urban* and *rural*. These two categories include what we would call folk, popular and art music. Urban and rural musical categories can further be classified as sacred or secular. While sacred music, instrumental or vocal, can reliably be determined through text and occasion of performance, secular music can be defined by referring to more criteria other than text and occasion. These criteria have been valid in Arabian music since the Middle Ages and have been considered by music scholars who have been writing on Arabian music ever since the eighth century. In details these are the following:

## ***1. The rank and position of a musical instrument in the society***

For example the 'ūd, a short-necked lute, is nicknamed *sulṭān al-ālāt*, the *sulṭān*, king of all instruments. It was the 'ūd that fārābī, ṣafi'uddīn, meshāqa and many other scholars and musicians played and used to illustrate the musical theory of Arabian music.

## ***2. The Education of the musician and his or her musical knowledge***

As a rule musicians of art music, sacred and secular must have completed a fundamental and systematic instruction in music theory and practice by a master, while folk musicians usually do not dispose of music theoretical knowledge and rarely take systematic instruction from a master.

### 3. *Melodic quality*

Compared with those of art music the ambitus of melodies in folk music is rather narrow and fluctuates between a fourth and an octave. In folk music whole passages are often repeated with slight changes while melodic lines in art music develop wide arcs, modulate and build to a climax.

### 4. *Individual and collective styles*

Categories of folk music are governed by a *collective* style of execution, which is bound to a specific geographical area in a country, while categories of art music are distinguished by *individual* styles in one and the same geographical area.

### 5. *Occasion of performance*

In folk music it is the event that dictates a performance in the framework of a social context; in art music it is the artist who decides whether to perform, when, what and to whom.

### 6. *Sung language*

Singers of art music sing both in classical and colloquial Arabic, while folk musicians are inclined to sing most of the time in colloquial Arabic.

These six criteria will help us much in making a division between the various musical genres in Egypt. However, a close analyses of the musical scene reveals to us that most of the musical genres are strongly interrelated and represent a *continuum* in Egyptian music. The stronger the interrelationship, the more difficult it is to classify the various musical types as belonging to one rather than to another specific genre; the less the interrelationship, the easier it is to distinguish and classify a musical type, vocal or instrumental. Nevertheless, it can be shown through analyses and comparison that these categories are based on common structural elements, namely:

*The tonal system,*

*The rhythmic-temporal organization,*

*The form building passages, and*

*The maqām-phenomenon.*

### **Epic singing**

Epic singing represents a musical genre characterizing the music in Upper Egypt. The tradition of performing the epos has been known for a long time all over Arabian West Asia. Only shortly after the end of World War I that its expansion started to decline outside the borders of Egypt. Epic singers were roaming around, not only in Egypt itself, but also in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and North Africa to recite their epics for an attentive audience. However, epic singing soon lost its social function in a society who became aware of new forms of social entertainments: radio and cinema. No doubt it is the mass



media with all its positive and negative influences on traditional music that pushed aside public recitations of romances and replaced them by radio, TV or cinema-programs. Yet these epic singers still exist and live nowadays in Upper Egypt in the Aswān and Luxor areas. Some of them have migrated to Cairo and live in the Moqāṭṭam District.

There are at least three complete epic poems known in Egypt:

*The abū-zaīd epos, sīrat abū-zaīd al-ḥilālī, the life of abū zaīd,*

*The aḡ-ḡāher epos, as-sīra aḡ-ḡahiriyya the life of aḡ-ḡaher,*

*The 'antar epos, sīrat 'antar, the life of 'antar.*

The complete recitation of *abū zaīd al ḥilālī* epos needs some ninety evenings. It is performed to the accompaniment of the fiddle, *rabāba* or to the accompaniment of a frame drum *mazhar*. The ambitus of the recited melodic passages is rather narrow. The structure depends on the musicianship of the singer who in the first line gives much importance to the textual content. He either simply declaims, recites emphatically or sings elaborately. When singing, the epos singers limit themselves to a narrow ambitus of a fourth, fifth or sixth, which they apply to one or more elements in an episode of the epos and thus achieve a dramatic contrast. It is not the narrow ambitus, however, that characterizes epic singing; it is the emphasis on specific tones or intervals within the narrow ambitus which is of a decisive importance. The emphasis on a certain tone or structural interval within a fourth or a fifth depends in the first line on the intervallic distances of the chosen ambitus of the recitation which is most of the time a segment of a *maqām-row*, i.e. of a mode of a *maqām*. A *maqām*, an improvisatory process in Arabian music, is determined by two primary factors: space (tonal) and time (temporal). The tonal-spatial component is organized, molded and emphasized to such a degree that it represents the essential and decisive factor in the *maqām*; whereas the temporal aspect is not subject to a definite or recurring form of organization.

Thus the epic singer recites his story by utilizing a single segment of a *maqām-row*. In opposition to the systematic *maqām* representation, where the temporal organization is free, epic singing does apply temporal organized melodic structures and in the course of the performance vary from measured to unmeasured melodic passages, whereby the tonal-spatial organization of the melodic line is strictly respected within the limits of the chosen segment of the *maqām-row*. Therewith the notes of a *maqām-row* or a segment thereof are governed by a hierarchy which predetermines which note or structural intervals are to be accented or elaborated. Thus an epic singer is bound to regard the hierarchy of notes of the *maqām-row* or a segment thereof he is utilizing for his recitation. And it is precisely this fact that explains to us why a recitation is centered on (d) for example and not on (e), or on the interval (d-f) and not (e-f). However, epic singing does not represent a complete systematic realization of a *maqām*. It is more or less a *composition* of the epic singer himself which he molds within the traditionally and orally transmitted rules of the *maqām*-phenomenon. The style of rendering the singing is bound to the collective rural style of singing and making music in Upper Egypt. Further more we notice that in epic singing the melodic line of the recitation is governed by a characteristic temporal-rhythmic or-



ganization which in the course of the lengthy recitation changes to rigidly measured melodic line.

The following example depicts an excerpt from the *abū-zaʿīd al-hilālī* epos. The excerpt is based on a segment of the *maqām*-row of *bayātī* which has the following notes: d e f g a b-flat d' (d-e =  $\pm 151$  Cents); (e-f =  $\pm 165$  Cents). The hierarchy of the notes in *bayātī* gives the tones (d), (f), (g), (a) and (d') great importance and the interval (d-f) is the characteristic interval of this *maqām*. The *maqām* nucleus, containing a minor third and a major second, i.e. (d-f-g) is based on the Arab *maqām bayātī*.

The recitation begins with an unmeasured introduction for solo *rabāba* from 0':00" to 0':33" in which the *bayātī* nucleus is elaborated (d-f-g); thereafter follows the instrumental introduction from 0':33" up to 2':40' emphasizing the notes (d, f, g), the interval (d-f) and (f-d), while utilizing a measured melody of four time units. From 2':40" up to 4':25" the recitation is based on eight time units, namely that of the *maṣmūdī*, where the structural interval of *bayātī* (d-f) and (f-d) are elaborated. From 4':25" up to 5':02" the notes (f), (a) and the tonal space (f-a) and (a-f) are accented to a measured accompaniment of two time units. From 5':02" to 5':31" the note (f) is emphasized. From 5':31 to 6':34" the following notes are emphasized: (a), (g) and the interval (f-e) after which the structural interval (f-a) and (a-f) are accented; at this point the artist ends this excerpt of the epos.

## The Epos

*abū zaʿīd al-hilālī* is the name of a hero of the *banū-hilāl* tribe, lit. The sons of *hilāl*. *banū-hilāl* was an Arab tribe originally of Najd who settled during the first half of the 11th century in Upper Egypt. They were known as a troublesome Arab tribe. In 1052 they were instigated to move westward where they ravaged North Africa for years. *banū-hilāl* and *banū Sulaym* settled in the Egyptian Delta at the time of the Fatimid caliph, *Mustaʿīn* (1036 - 94) and were a threat to peace and order in the country. Induced by the promise of rich booty, they were encouraged to invade the *maḡreb*. In 1052 their number was estimated at about 50,000 warriors, when conquered Qairawan and Mahdiyya in Tunisia, Algeria and reached Morocco. They played a major role in arabizing the *maḡreb* and spreading the Arab language among the Berber of North Africa. It is the history of the movements of *banū-hilāl* and their military conquests or rather exploits, which provided the historical background of the celebrated epic *ṣīrat abū-zaʿīd al-hilālī* or simply *ṣīrat banī hilāl*.

*abū-zaʿīd*, also known as *barakāt*, was an Arab of the tribe *banī hilāl*. His father, the Emir *Rizq*, though married to ten wives, had only obtained two daughters and one son born without arms or legs. His eleventh wife however, the princess *Khadrāh* a daughter of a Meccan *sherīf* was expecting a baby. Emir *Rizq* rejoiced and expected the child to be a son, invited the Emir of the *zaḡābeh* tribe together with his family and tribe to honor with their presence the birth of the child. But while princess *Khadrāh* was pregnant she saw once together with the wife of King *Sarḥan* and other females, a black bird attack and kill a numerous flock of birds, *Khadrāh* was so astonished that she earnestly prayed that she get



a son as strong as that bird even though the son should be black. Her wish was fulfilled and she gave birth to a black boy. Emir *rizq* could not believe this to be his son. Upbraided by his friends *rizq* put his wife and the son away, so that his tribe *might not* be held in dishonor. *She* left therefore with the child for Mecca. On the way, Prince *faḍl ibn beṣam*, chief of the *zahlan* tribe, met her and heard her story and decided to protect her. Prince *faḍl* thus adopted her son and brought him up with his two sons and *barakāt* showed promise of becoming a hero. It happened when the son *barakāt* was only eleven years old and asked his father for a horse that Prince *faḍl* answered him *Good morning, my son, and dearer than my son* that *barakāt* came to know the truth from his mother, who told him that this chief was his uncle and that his father was dead. This is the beginning of the epos of *abū zaīd*; it retells the heroic deeds of *abū zaīd al-hilālī* in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia.

*The Dream of Saḍdā.* Shamandī Tawfiq, rabābah, Maḥjūb Mabruk, mazhar

0:00"

0:33"

2:40"

baqūl āmin bi rabbak wi ruslihi

4:25"

baḍdi qūlī fi-ṣlāti-zzīn ... saḍdah qāyima min  
in-nūm bint az-zinātī khalīfah tiqūl labūhā  
yā būyā fassir lī ḥilmī mn-līl raḥbān!

5:33"

iḥlimti saḥīnah shāyīnhā rbʿat infār, iḥlimti  
wajnit khidūdī itharraku yamīn wishmāl.

6:34"

win-kān ʿalā-saḥīnah yā bintī dan-naḥsh  
bzātū!