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Music and dance of a semi nomad group of fishermen in southern Sinai

Amnon Shiloah

Aspectos primordiales relativos a la variedad musical y de baile de un grupo de pescadores beduinos que ha desarrollado un repertorio en el que confluyen una pluralidad de tendencias y que han desechado aspectos desarrollados en la sociedad beduina tradicional.

Su repertorio se considera heterogéneo, en algunos aspectos ecléctico, variado, vital y rítmicamente rico.

In the desert of Sinai, over a huge area covering a surface of 17.000 Km² between the Suez canal and the Red sea, live nine tribes of Beduins who represent about eight thousand individuals. Despite certain changes that occurred in the last two or three decades, they continue to lead their life in concordance with the codes and norms of the traditional beduin society, and to cultivate the traditional types of songs and dances.

The particular group on which I like to concentrate in this presentation although lives in close contact with the former, presents distinctive traits including their music repertory. For purpose of clarification, it would be appropriate to begin with some hints about the essential characteristics of the Beduin traditional repertory of songs and dances. In accordance with the ideals that prevailed among the Beduins before the advent of Islam, poetry continues to be considered as means of artistic achievement which reflects the virtues of the society. It expresses the pleasure and rhythm of sound inherent in it and the belief in the magic power of words as well as the combinations of vocal emissions and intonations. Ornate and eloquent speech has an immediate impact on the Beduin and causes him great excitement. Considered as an extension of the recited poetry, music is, as a rule, intimately associated with it. Hence, the poet who usually combines the role of the musician and the performer constitutes an important figure. Almost every tribe has a poet of its own who enhances the evening's social gatherings; the family rejoicings and the pilgrimage to the tombs of Saints. Singing can be heard either by the lonely traveller on his camel or while watering his animals, or in the framework of social gatherings. In the latter case, the poet usually accompanies his singing on the *rabāb*-a one-stringed spike fiddle. In Sinai, the rabab is not available, consequently, the singing is not accompanied. The only instruments to be found are the flute-*shabbāba* and the single pipe double reed instrument *'uffata*, usually played by the shepherdesses.

In evening's gatherings and other festive occasions prevails a type of simple dance-songs of which the most common is the *dahiyya*. At any given moment of a gathering or a festival, the men get up and while forming a row they chant on two neighbouring sounds repeatedly: *dahiyya dahiyya* all in clapping hands rhythmically. After a short while, the poet-singer standing opposite to the row, intones in a muffled voice improvised verses. The dancers, all in clapping the rhythmic patterns of $\downarrow \downarrow \downarrow$ and singing the refrain which always overlaps the end of the short musical phrases sung by the soloist, take small steps

forward and backward. The poet do the same inversely. The melody is diatonic and evolves in the framework of a minor third plus a low subtonic.

After this schematic description, we pass to the music of the particular group, major object of this presentation. The members of this small group living mainly on fishing are considered by their fellow Beduins as marginals and non authentic Beduins; they prefer indeed the semi-urban centers to the encampments. Moreover, the sea has been for them a means of transport and communication which brought into contact with different social groups and with urban culture. As a result they developed a distinct rich and partly eclectic music repertory which constitutes a meeting place of diverse styles.

Trying to briefly characterize their music doing we may state:

1. The absence of the poetical prerogative, so essential a means in the creative process of the Beduin. In turn, the musical component is richer and more sophisticated with a special prevalence of rhythm and vivid rhythmical songs and dances emphasised by intensive clapping and drumming. This light, animated and well tempered music is performed by soloists always backed by the excited participation of the group.

2. Most of their songs and dances are accompanied by the *simsimiyya* a five-stringed lyre whose strings pass over a small movable bridge of wood that sits in the centre of the sound-board and then straight up in a fan form to the yoke where they are wound around five pegs. The instrument is held on the lap or against the hip of the player who plucks the strings with a plectrum while he sings. The tuning is diatonic. Ranging from do to sol. This range is usually paralleled in the singing. The tuning can be modified to include, if need be, microtones; yet this happens only when borrowed microtonal tunes are played on it.

The *simsimiyya* is to be found all along the shores of the Red sea where it is usually played in coffee-houses in all the coastal towns. It has a long history in the region as witness the three lyres engraved in rock near Majd Musamma (present day Saudi Arabia) dating from the third or second millennium B.C. However, the *simsimiyya* might derive actually from the Ethiopian *Kerark*.

The *simsimiyya* in its present shape can also serve as illustration to the impact of modernity and contact with urban culture. All its parts are nowadays made out of elements gathered in the waste left near oil field spots. Thus, the sound-box consists of a simple oil can; the strings are made from electric wires; the bars, joke and pegs from rough pieces of wood. The same holds true for the drum which has been simply replaced by metal or plastic jerrycan. Yet, this radical transformations should not misled us concerning the end result. On the contrary, what happens in this case shows the marvelous ability of the group to transform every borrowing in view of its integration in their particular performing style.

3. As we have already stated, the musical repertory of this group is somehow heterogenous and eclectic. It comprises in addition to indigenous features, songs and dances from the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt and other Near Eastern countries. The borrowed material has been partly absorbed through direct contact, and partly via the radio; the latter was another factor in the process of change underwent by the group.

Generally speaking, their repertory includes three major categories or types of songs and dances. The one, which is perhaps the older, involves unaccompanied simple responsorial songs and dance-songs of which some are related to fishing. This is the case of the example we shall hear in a moment. It is performed by a soloist and group with mimic gestures. The song consists of a long set of short repeated motives which sound like exhorting formulas interspersed by an identical short response sung on the same pitch; the response varies in words every now and then. The gradual excitement is marked by an emotional crescendo, distortion of the soloist's voice, occasional shouts and a very intensive clapping of the group; the clapping embodies a special concluding pattern which marks an apogée followed immediately by a new start.

The second category includes the *yamania* songs and dances which are accompanied by the *sismsimiyya*. They are considered by the members of the group as old features that originated in Yemen from which their name derive. In fact they mostly affiliate to new popular songs and dances from the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen. The *Yamania* is also said to accompany the *zar*—ceremony of exorcism which is to be found in much elaborate form in Ethiopia.

The third category illustrates the best the character of openness and eclecticism of the group. The example we shall hear is an Egyptian folk song whose words reflect social condition and criticism; it is about the rich and the poor. The refrain sung by the choir says: the rich is happy O Amir, all the worries pertain to the poor. You might recognize its melody which has been used by the French singer of Egyptian origin Dalida in a song that became a hit in the 1960's.