

A SHORT FIELDWORK REPORT ON THE NUBA MOUNTAINS

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Abstract

This is a review on a fieldwork undertaken among the Nymang ethnic community residing on the legendary Nuba Mountains of southern Kordofan, Sudan, in 2005. It is a result of participatory observation, and the view taken on it is retrospective. The author was able to study the social and cultural life, rituals, taboos, musical traditions, and many more, which are discussed in detail in a later book, thanks to her Sudanese hosts. The description carried out in the writing reflects personal perspectives as a human being, a woman, and a complete stranger entering an unknown and distant world. Indeed, it must have been one of the best experiences the author had in her nearly 3 decades of scholarly experience.

Keywords

Sudan, Nuba Mountains, Fieldwork, Nymang people, Musical life

THE PLACE

This fieldwork undertaken by the author was part of a journey of research of 6 months in East Africa carried out in early 2005. The Republic of Sudan was one of the five historically linked East African countries selected for an ethnomusicological field research on various musical instruments. The main aim of the research is the assessment of aerophones (blowing music instruments) that have not been given due scholarly attention in African music research to date, contrary to membranophones that mostly represent this continent.

Sudan is among the largest countries in Africa with ancient history and antique civilization, bountiful culture, and miscellaneous people. The story of the Nile Valley reveals that the lands to the south of Egypt, generally called Nubia, are bound to an ancient history that predates Egypt. It is the place where the Blue and White Niles meet to form the famous river Nile running through Egypt. Nevertheless, for many, Sudan is just another part of the world's hidden history that still needs to be investigated in many ways. Sudan is moreover a home to the oldest recorded religion, a place with kingship, and a political system that has continuously brought peace and harmony to its people in the course of more than 3000 years. Today, Sudan is among the largest African countries rich in oil and plentiful other natural resources. It is also important to note that Sudan is culturally split between the Arab African North and the African South, hence reflecting extremely different worlds and also connecting to various communities and their worlds. Like the diverse people's groups and cultures, the bountiful musical traditions are also great assets of this country. Nevertheless, the musical landscape has largely remained overlooked by the scholarly world, especially regarding their instrumental music.

THE TASK

The fieldwork and the research outcome described in a work that was published later give particular attention to the Nuba Mountains (Teffera, 2022), a region endowed with colorful musical traditions that have been handed down from one generation to the next over several centuries. The Nuba Mountains, located in the southern Kordofan region, are the residential area of a variety of communities; among them is the Nymang, an agricultural and semipastoralist community. They inhabit a number of villages located in close proximity. In particular, the five villages Nitill, Kurmutti, Kellara, Tunir, and Sellara have to be mentioned as part of the settlement area, whereas the major research work on the select musical instruments was carried out in Kurmutti and Kellara.

The music-related observation and data collection were accompanied by personal experiences that were of the same importance to the later publication made by a complete stranger and a 'lonesome

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wanderer' who set feet in an entirely unknown universe. In particular, challenges and benefits were the encounters as a female researcher who was part of the discussions on gender equity. Such activities of researching did not always correspond to the given social structure and the traditional female roles in most parts of Sudan. Unlike the traditional role of women observed in Sudan, a female scholar intending to undertake field research in remote regions equipped with recording devices was unusual for my contacts both individually and institutionally. Therefore, at times, it was vital to convince people about the aims and goals of the research and the strong will to discover historical connections to different areas.

Before having been able to make the long journey to the Nuba Mountains, several tiresome and seemingly endless administrative processes had to be accomplished in the Sudanese Capital, Khartoum.²



Five-stringed kunang, Kurmuti village, Kordofan, Sudan; Photo: T. Teffera 14th April, 2006.

Regarding a fruitful research outcome, it was imperative to be acquainted to the Nymang community and perceive the learnt and adapted behavior, mentality, rituals, and religious beliefs that were in general shared during everyday life. The stay in the desert region of the Nuba Mountains was quite challenging. Yet, it was among the highly instructive experiences and success stories that could be encountered during different fieldworks in various regions of East Africa. In addition, it is filled with unforgettable memories that have been thoroughly highlighted in the final report. The research studies and observations focused not only on the existing musical practices but also on getting a holistic overview about the localities and the people inhabiting them. Even if the main intention is to collect music and music-related information, no researcher will be successful without the given society as a whole since music making has its own time and space in the life cycle. That is why a community and the respective environment must be given priority in the first place. The methodology of a participatory observation is crucial in order to understand the existing musical culture, the repertoire, musical instruments, body movements, dance, gender and age in relation to music, the role of functional and nonfunctional songs and their meaning, instrumental pieces, types of private or communal events accompanied by music, the role of musicians, and many others.

THE FACIT

The final report of the experiences made and published independently is informative and multifaceted since it entails different topics that are not exclusively related to technical and specific musical subject matters as elucidated earlier. One excellent outcome is the open availability of audiovisual recordings made and the possibility to further discuss the research, for example, about some parts of the repertoire for the kunang lyre of the Nymang people (<https://www.academia.edu/video/jyab6j>) or the special features of some iconic sound producing ensembles of the Nymang people as videotaped during the time of research in early 2005 (<https://www.academia.edu/video/IDVqNj>). Consequently, it is hoped that the readers will enjoy these audiovisual and written results. Interestingly, the demand for in-depth studies in this regard increased only after 15 years. In other words, there is hope in many ways for each and every step during any fieldwork.

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