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The s̄aqiya, the lyre, and the qas̄ida : A Sketch of the Egyptian Soundscape

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The *sāqiya*, the *lyre*, and the *qaṣīda*: A Sketch of the Egyptian Soundscape

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INTRODUCTION

The history of Egypt can be broadly divided into three greatly different periods: ancient Egypt; the Coptic period, after the birth of Christ; and the Arab and Islamic period, which began in the 7th century and continues to the present time. The splendid cultural heritage of both ancient Egypt and the Coptic period casts its light upon the Arab and Islamic period of today. As a result, contemporary Egyptian society rests upon a land containing deep historical layers. This fact makes Egypt's culture clearly different from those of other Arabian countries.

In Egypt, farmers still rely heavily on the Nile River. Along the benevolent Nile, a number of greenbelts can be found. The Nile Delta fans out at the downstream end. Once you leave the vicinity of the river, however, you find yourself in a vast, boundless desert. The large and small historical cities dotting Egypt are dependent upon the benefaction of the Nile River. On the other hand, a minority population of Bedouins (Arabian nomads) lives a quiet life in desert oases and *wādī* (watercourses that are dry except during periods of rainfall), making a living by pasturing animals and growing crops.

The society and culture of greater Egypt, which gave birth to an exalted ancient civilization, thus still breathes and develops today, blending life and death, history and the past, light and shadow.

Visitors to Egypt today can see the golden *sistrum* (an ancient Egyptian percussion instrument) and gold and silver trumpets excavated from the tomb of *Tutankhamen*, and hear instruments like those and others sculptured in reliefs on "the tomb of a royal family" still being played on city streets. *Adhān* (the Islamic call to daily prayers) resounds through the cities and *al-Qur'ān* (the Koran) is recited in the mosques. On the other hand, Coptic people pray to God in their own Christian churches. Contemporary Egyptian society continues its unceasing human dialogue, debating continuity, discontinuity, and the continuing transformation of its unique culture, evolved to suit its climate, and thus continues to fascinate visitors to this great country.

Here, in this paper, I will select some of the results of my field researches on modern Egypt's soundscape, folk music and artistic music. From these I want to

develop a sketch, focusing on the people who live in the country composed of the Nile River and its adjoining desert, and the sounds and music heard there.

1. THE *SĀQIYA* (WATERWHEEL)

1-1. The poetic charm of sounds in rural districts

The Arabic word *sāqiya* is translated as “waterwheel” in this paper, but to be more precise, it means “a wheel used for drawing water”. The *sāqiya* is installed at the top of a well, draws up the water, and delivers it to the fields. Camels, donkeys, water buffalo, or oxen are used as its source of energy. The axle of a horizontal wheel is connected to harnesses, which are in turn attached to the bodies of draft animals. Gears are used to convert the horizontal movement of the flat wheel to rotation of the vertically mounted wheel that lifts the water. When the animals walk around the *sāqiya*, water is drawn from the well.

The *sāqiya* has a long history. If you visit the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, you can see an exhibit containing a wall painting clearly depicting a *sāqiya*. This wall painting was excavated from an ancient tomb in the western suburbs of Alexandria. The date of the painting is unknown, but it is thought that it was painted during the period from the 2nd century B.C. to the 3rd century A.D. In this painting, two cows are turning the *sāqiya* and beside it, a boy is blowing a panpipe to encourage the movement of the cows.



A *sāqiya* painted on a wall (the Alexandria Greco-Roman Museum)

The *sāqiya* was born out of the wisdom of the Egyptian people. Since ancient times they have nestled close to the Nile, against the background of the vast desert. This setting has supported them in their daily lives for age upon age.

In Egypt, the *sāqiya* has been widely used, not only in villages along the Nile in Upper Egypt, but also in Nile Delta regions north of Cairo. The *sāqiya* was made of wood in ancient times, but in modern time wooden ones have been replaced by more efficient iron *sāqiya*. We can see photographs of wooden *sāqiya* at the Agricultural Museum in the city of Cairo. Wooden *sāqiya* squeak as they turn. The rhythm of a turning *sāqiya* is irregular, sometimes fast and sometimes slow, depending on the pace of the animals turning the wheel. The *sāqiya* growls, squeaking and rattling. Its growls are mixed with the sound of the drawn water coming from the well and being discharged onto the fields.

The Egyptian people dug wells everywhere, to irrigate their vast farmland. Water will spring forth if one simply digs a shallow well, if it is near the Nile or an irrigation canal led from the river. A *sāqiya* is installed atop such a well, so water can be easily provided. However, the draft animals will stop moving if they are not encouraged. For this reason, a *sāqiya* is always attended by a driver, who encourages the animals to continue to pull at the wheel. The boy blowing a panpipe, depicted on the wall painting mentioned above, is thought to be such a driver. Usually, old men or children were employed as drivers, because healthy adults were too busy with farming. The driver cannot allow the beasts to stop working, and therefore the old man or child driver sang songs, encouraging the animals to pull the *sāqiya* all day long, by lifting his voice in song. These melodies reached the adults who were working in the fields, even far from the place where the *sāqiya* was installed. They knew that water was being drawn from the well because they could hear the driver's voice, they felt reassured, and they returned again diligently to their labors.

The poetic charm of the tapestry of sound woven by the water, the *sāqiya*, and the drivers' songs were encountered everywhere in villages spreading through the greenbelt along the Nile of Upper Egypt, up until the 1960s (Koizumi 1964). Such a scene looks peaceful to travellers, and was a very natural yet indispensable part of the local people's daily lives. However, in recent years the *sāqiya* have gradually been replaced by power pumps, drawing large amounts of water in a short time. With this modernization, the soundscape of Egyptian villages has changed completely.

When we travel along roads between the fields in Upper Egypt or the Nile Delta, we often encounter an entire Egyptian family farming as a group in a large field. The family members' colorful work clothes contrast sharply with the green that stretches as far as the eye can see. Donkeys loaded high with farm produce are coming and going along the footpaths between fields. Near the irrigation canal, the motor of a pump roars loudly. A thick hose discharges a vigorous stream of water that irrigates the fields. Near by, at regular intervals, wrecked *sāqiya*, in active use until just recently, are left to rust and rot.

Of course, on rare occasions even at present, you may still see iron *sāqiya* being silently driven by animals. Iron *sāqiya*, unlike wooden ones, rotate without making any sound. However, nowadays, the sight of a *sāqiya* driven by animals has become extremely rare. The use of the *sāqiya*, which had probably continued for over 2000 years, from generation to generation and era to era, has recently come to a sudden end.

1-2. The waterwheels of al-Fayyūm

About 110 km south-south-west of Cairo, is the beautiful city of *al-Fayyūm*, which was once the setting for a motion picture. This city lies between the Nile River and Lake Qārūn. An oasis surrounds it. Lake Qārūn is a large lake that was created when the Nile flooded, long ago. It is also commonly called “the crocodile lake” because crocodiles migrated here from the Nile and took up residence. People even built a shrine where they could worship the crocodile. This oasis city, al-Fayyūm, is also the center of a grain-producing region.

Running through the center of the city is the Yusef Canal, which was dug to bring water from the Nile. A few large wooden *sāqiya* are installed in a park along the canal. Because of the abundant amount of water, the water pressure is so strong that these *sāqiya* rotate vigorously. If you close your eyes and listen to them squeaking and roaring, it seems as though a huge, mysterious monster is roaring; this evokes a terribly eerie feeling. (By the way, I recorded this sound and brought the recording back to Japan, and got some people to try to guess what sound this was. None of them gave the correct answer. It is probably not surprising that people who have not seen a *sāqiya* did not answer correctly.) Of course, the sound of water could also be heard, behind the *sāqiya*'s roar. This waterwheel park, with its many cool shade trees and restaurants, is an ideal place for the recreation and relaxation of al-Fayyūm citizens, who of course want to avoid the glare of the direct sunlight.

Why did they build such big waterwheels here in this city? Those big *sāqiya* are not put to use drawing water. If you look closely at them, you observe that the water drawn by the *sāqiya* simply flows into the canal. In other words, those *sāqiya* were obviously built only so the citizens can recall the old ones working in the fields and fondly remember the sounds they made. The sound of water and waterwheels is a sound of life that cannot be replaced by anything else, for people living next to the desert. By building these *sāqiya* in a park in the downtown area, the citizens can come to this place anytime to enjoy the sound of life. And in fact, this park is always bustling, around the clock; many people lean against the fence surrounding the waterwheels, listening attentively to their sound. When you see such a scene, you realize that they are listening to the sound of the *sāqiya* with nostalgia, enjoying it and pressing it to their hearts.

The sound of the *sāqiya* — this is surely one of the typical, historical sounds in the environment of people who have lived in the company of farmers working near the Nile River.

2. THE LYRE

2-1. *Lire* in history

It is said that in the history of music, Western Asia serves as a vast treasure-house of musical instruments. A variety of musical instruments born in this area in the past spread all over the world, riding on the flow of civilization to the East and West, and being transformed over time into various new forms. The *lyre* is one of these.

The *lyre* has an extremely special shape, from the aspect of musical instrument classification. In general, stringed instruments have a sound box that amplifies the sound produced by the vibrating strings. In the case of the *lyre*, the sound box has two curved components connected by a yoke, from which the parallel strings are stretched to the body. There are nuts on the sound box, over which the strings are laid. The player plucks the strings with the fingers to produce sound. Naturally, the *lyre*, like other musical instruments, was transformed in various ways in various times and regions, while maintaining the essential originality of its shape. The *lyres* found in the modern Middle East have a variety of shapes.

The *lyre*, having such a unique configuration, seemed to have been a very common musical instrument in the past. They were owned and played by many people. This instrument is often depicted in wall reliefs created in ancient Egypt. In Mesopotamia, some nearly undamaged *lyres* were excavated, that had been manufactured around 3000 B.C. The Old Testament says that King David of ancient Israel liked to play the *lyre* (*kinnor* in Hebrew). In fact, in ancient times in the Middle East, this instrument was frequently played during religious observances, as well as for people's enjoyment. In particular, in ancient Greece, as is generally known, this instrument was recommended to young people and frequently played as a Platonic or Apollonian instrument, and called the *lyre* or the *kithara*.

The *lyre*, which had been very popular in ancient times in the Middle East and Western Asia, seems to have disappeared for a time after the Hellenic period. The reason is that in most of Europe the *lyre* was not a native musical instrument. It was only seen depicted in paintings or mentioned in written documents as a symbolic musical instrument. In the past, the *lyre* was depicted in many paintings as the musical instrument used by David or played by angels. Nowadays, it often figures in the emblems and badges of musical institutions and musical colleges, both in the East and the West. This is probably because the *lyre* is symmetrical and thus makes a pretty design element.

However, if you travel in the Middle East today, you will see real *lyres* everywhere, and hear their unique tones. It is not an exaggeration to say that hearing music while travelling to the Middle East is sure to result in encountering *lyres*.

In the Middle East today, the *lyre* still tenaciously survives as a folk musical instrument. *Lyres* are manufactured by the players themselves, using scraps of

ordinary easily obtained materials. Thus there is no one form of *lyre* in terms of materials, size or shape, but at a glance you will know that you are looking at one, because all the instruments retain their basic and original shape, as described above. The *lyre*, which once seemed to have been forgotten, still provides its beautiful sounds as a solo instrument, as an accompaniment to singers, or as one of an ensemble of instruments throughout the Middle East, including Eastern Africa, the Sudan, Egypt, the Red Sea, and the Gulf countries (Mizuno 1996a).

2-2. The song of the *lyre* by 'Izzat Ḥajar

Looking back, I realize I heard the sound of the *lyre* for the first time in 1977, a little after the completion of the Aswan High Dam, when I visited Tushka Village in the suburbs of Aswan City to carry out research on the music of Nubian people. Thereafter, every time I visited Egypt for my field research, I always came across *lyre* players, but this first encounter with *lyre* music at Tushka Village stands out in my memory of that instrument. The fresh and vivid timbre of the instrument and the excellent technique of the player were outstanding. From any viewpoint, the tape recorded at this village can be counted as one of the best accomplishments of my fieldwork.

Tushka is the name of a village that was located at the riverside of the Nile before the construction of the Aswan High Dam. The Nubians, living in a place that was due to be submerged under the water after the completion of the dam, were



'Izzat Ḥajar playing the *ṭanbūra* (in the suburbs of Aswan City)

forced to move to the suburbs of Aswan City. They gave the name of their native village to the new place where they were forced to resettle. The new “Tushka Village” was in a corner of the desolate desert, a little bit removed from the bank of the Nile, and it consisted of a number of shacks, crowded together. A thick cloud of dust arose with the slightest wind. When I visited the house of the young man who was my guide, I found his grandfather taking a nap on the sand, with many flies swarming over his face. This new place had extremely poor surroundings, compared with the former village in the neighborhood of the Nile where they had previously lived.

In Upper Egypt, the *lyre* is called the *ṭanbūra*. When I visited this place, ‘Izzat Ḥajar, who was the most popular *ṭanbūra* player, welcomed me, together with his fellow villagers. ‘Izzat Ḥajar began to sing, while playing the *ṭanbūra*. A person with a single-sided drum sat by him and played an interlude while ‘Izzat Ḥajar sang and played. All the songs performed by ‘Izzat Ḥajar had interesting melodies of the five-note scale, with cheerful rhythms. The five-note scale is peculiar to Nubia. Here, I want to present one of the songs sung in the Kunūz dialect of the Nubian language, from the repertoire he sang for me.

I am still here, staring at you,
 Standing in the mud.
 Water soaks the trees,
 But it doesn’t reach me.
 I sit under the sun.
 There is no tree to give me shade.
 All day long, sweat pours down.
 I recall flowers in a garden —
 Smelling their fragrance while I picked them.
 Instead of buying roses in some distant place,
 Buy them from me.
 What kept her away from me?
 Goodbye, my flower.
 I am still staring at you,
 Longing to smell your fragrance.

This is a love song, but I heard it as a lament for the Nubian people, yearning for their native paradise of a village, from which they had been expelled (Mizuno 1977, 1995, 1997).

It seems that the *lyre* has sounded ceaselessly during its long history, close by the Egyptian people, playing their prayers, their sorrows, and delights. The *lyre* is a musical instrument of the past, but at the same time, it still lives. It is a rare musical instrument that is old yet new.

3. THE *QAṢĪDA*

3-1. The *qaṣīda* was handed down by the “people of poetry”

The Bedouin are called the people of poetry. They still maintain a rich world of folklore. They have a variety of songs, such as caravan songs, shepherds' songs, hunting songs, songs for giving water to animals, water-drawing songs, rowing songs, fishermen's songs, songs for the artificial fertilization of date palms, farming songs (in particular harvest songs), songs for carrying stones and cargo, and woodcutters' songs. Besides these, there are also a lot of folk and religious songs. These very artistic poems have been uninterruptedly handed down to the present generation.

In Arabian folk music, vocals predominate. You can say that there is an almost infinite number of poems being recited or sung, but one of the oldest yet most refined type of poem is the *qaṣīda*. The *qaṣīda* may be translated as a lyrical laudatory composition. They are folk poems, extremely rich in literary flavor, created by Bedouin living in the Arabian Desert. They always have a special theme, often consisting of legends or stories about particular persons or things, and are recited in a loud voice.

The roots of the *qaṣīda* lie in the *jāhiliyya* period (the time of ignorance and darkness) before the coming of Islam. In their original form, they are composed of pairs of mono-rhythmic lines. Originally, Semitic poems have the form of linked verses, as seen in the Old Testament and The Book of Psalms. The prose and poetry of the *qaṣīda* also have the so-called call-and-response or antiphonal form.

When I visited the Bedouin in tents in the Sinai Desert, I always asked them to sing *qaṣīda*. In response to my request, an old man would sing for me his favorite repertoire. Every time he finished singing one line, the audience would repeat the word at the end of the line, while studying, thinking, understanding and making agreeable responses to its moralistic or very meaningful content. It is in such moments that the Bedouin return to their traditional nature.

3-2. *qaṣīda* as popular artistic poems

Through the development and unfolding history of the Arabic people, the *qaṣīda* has changed its form and original meaning, and become diversified across various regions and times. In modern times, it has reached the level of the popular artistic poem.

Defined in the context of the modern songs of Egypt, the *qaṣīda* refers to a “lyrical laudatory composition sung in a mono-rhythmic singing style, freely improvised by the singer.” Against this formal definition a song entitled *al-Atlāl* (The Ruins) is the first to come to my mind, as sung by Umm Kulthūm.¹⁾

Umm Kulthūm was one of the best singers born in Egypt in this century. When she died in 1975 all people across the Arab world grieved and mourned. Since then, Cairo Broadcast Radio has continued to play her songs every day. This tradition continues to the present. So Umm Kulthūm continues to live in the hearts



Umm Kulthūm performs “*al-Aṭlāl*” (CD cover)

of today’s Egyptians and other Arabs. That is, she enjoys the reputation of being the “eternal Arabic singer.”

While she was alive, she sang as many as 300 songs. *al-Aṭlāl* is one of her masterpieces, with words by Ibrāhīm Nāgī and music by Riyāḍ al-Sunbāī. She first sang this song on April 8th, 1966. This was one of the epoch-making events that marked her long history as a singer. The song itself was excellent and her performance charmed the audience. The traditional *qaṣīda* sung by the Bedouin had finally borne fruit as a modern song in modern times.

At her concerts, Umm Kulthūm’s style was to repeat some of the main phrases of the lyrics many times and to pause briefly after every measure. Observing the responses of the audience indicating what they preferred, she ad-libbed, little by little improvising on the lyrics or repeating them until the audience was satisfied with her creation. Every time she reworked the lyrics, the song deepened in meaning, causing an exchange of deep feeling between the singer and the audience.

Therefore, at her concerts a 30-minute long original song, for example, might sometimes be sung for over 3 hours, if the audience's enthusiasm rose to a high pitch. It was customary that at her concerts she would keep singing a single song for several hours.

In 1977 I actually had occasion to attend a concert commemorating the 2nd anniversary of Umm Kulthūm's death, held in the large hall of the Arab Music College in Cairo. Before the opening of the concert, lengthy passages from al-Qur'ān were recited by a famous chanter, to pay tribute to the memory of Umm Kulthūm. The concert thus began and continued in a solemn atmosphere. The last singer at the concert was named Samad Muḥammad, and she sang *al-Aṭlāl* (The Ruins). She continued to sing passionately for about an hour, and it was past one o'clock in the morning, when she finished. During her performance, she made a rare mistake, probably because she was under a very great strain. After a moment, she covered her face with both hands and turned round. However, encouraged by the thunderous applause of the audience, she pulled herself together and continued to sing. The Umm Kulthūm memorial concert actually grew livelier due to this accident (Mizuno 1977/1997).

Here I present my translation of the first half of *al-Aṭlāl*, a love song written in the sonorous style of *al-fuṣḥā* (formal Arabic). In the setting of the deserted Bedouin ruins, filled with emptiness and yet the sprit of freedom, the eternity of nature and the passionate adventures of a people are sung. In its very difficult lyrics, you may conclude that the allegorical love that is celebrated in the lyrics of *al-Aṭlāl* is Egypt itself, where the singer's life has been lived, or is the all-embracing God. Such is the metaphysical character that is the essential and traditional spirit of the *qaṣīda*.

My Heart, do not ask me where my love has gone.
 It was an illusion. Now, it's gone.
 Fill my glass with wine.
 I'll empty the glass upon the ruins,
 And I'll sing my story as long as these tears flood my eyes.
 I'll sing about how love is gone,
 How mine became a story of sadness.

How can I forget anything about you?
 You seduced me with such sweet, gentle phrases.
 Your hands stretched out to me,
 A rescuer pulling a drowning person from the waves.
 Those eyes, that could make a night wanderer thirsty.
 Yet nowhere can I find those sparkling eyes today.

My friend, one day I visited a bush
 To find a bird I had wished so hard to see.

The bird made my pain vanish.
 You held back like an arrogant do-gooder.
 You acted like the Absolute.
 My passion for you flames up inside me.
 Every moment, like burning coals, my blood boils.

Make me free. Untie my hands.
 I gave you all the things I had.
 There is nothing left in my hands.
 Oh! Due to your chains, my wrists are covered with blood.
 Since you betrayed me, why should I keep my vow?
 Since you pay no regard to me, why should my promise hold?

Where is the lover who confuses my dreams?
 He has honor, power and dignity.
 He walks like an angel, with firm and steady steps,
 Beautiful and solemn.
 His fragrance, like the air on the hill
 Or like a soothing dream in the evening,
 Floats around him.

I took up three topics related to the sounds of Egypt in the past and present. The *sāqiya* is part of the soundscape; the *lyre* is an accompaniment of folklore; and the *qaṣīda* is an example of traditional artistic music. These three sound sources are just a few examples of the Egyptian soundscape and its music, which undergoes unceasing development and transformation. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a variety of sounds and forms of music are continually produced under the paradigm of times and regions. This means that the sounds of Egypt reflect the various ways in which the people lived in the past and live at present in Egypt.

NOTES

- 1) *al-aṭlāl* (The Ruins) is published by SONO CAIRO on CD and videotape. The CD number is SONO CAIRO sono 101. The videotape number is unknown. The videotape contains only the last part of the song.

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