Ardah: A Kuwaiti Presentation of a Saudi Genre

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Introduction

‘Ardah is the national male folk song and dance of Saudi Arabia, but it is also significant in countries throughout the Gulf where it maintains its special patriotic and cultural role. The primary function today of ‘ardah, a communal sword song-dance, is to commemorate heritage, encourage kinship, and promote state solidarity. Considered a noble and dignified art, ‘ardah is regularly performed by the king, crown prince or leading dignitaries alongside men of a locale. It provides a cultural marker at the end or beginning of an important occasion and thus is danced at weddings, birth celebrations, graduations festivities, national proceedings, and any event deemed of significance by a societal group. Indeed, at the most elite festivities held by the leading families of countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, it is considered quite aristocratic to have an ‘ardah band outside performing, swords flashing in Arabian pride, as the guests enter (later, the male guests themselves will join in). But even in the most modest villages, ‘ardah is esteemed, and in certain regions performing ‘ardah is a weekly community occurrence (Gründ, 26).

The appellation ‘ardah comes from the root “‘ardh” meaning “show” or “parade” and applies to the original function of the dance, that is, to prepare one for battle. ‘Ar- 
dah initially preceded warfare and served to display weaponry, physical prowess, and the numerical strength of a group. There are many types of battle dances throughout Arabia that might go by the generic term “‘ardah,” but these regional styles will usually have qualifiers or specific names, for instance, in the Baha region of the Hijaz mountains of Saudi Arabia, the battle dance is known as la’ab (play), or in the Jizan southern sector of the Kingdom, it is called assaf (row or line), and in the United Arab Emirates, the fighting dance is ‘ayyalah or ‘ayyalah al ‘ardah. These regional battle offerings have unique rhythmic modes, instrumentation, dance movements, and melodic patterns that differ from ‘ardah of Saudi Arabia. Standard Saudi ‘ardah comes from the harsh central region of the country known as the Najd. Najdi ‘ardah is the most frequently seen, publicly displayed musical event in Saudi Arabia, and because of the size and significance of the Kingdom in relationship to her neighbors, Najdi ‘ardah has become well known throughout the Gulf. Thus, the term ‘ardah in a broad sense is reserved for the song-dance of the Najd, although when performed, it might be referred to as ‘ardah Najdiah or desert ‘ardah (‘ardah bahriya).

Strict Wahhabi/Salafism of the region traditionally shunned public music and dance, however, ‘ardah has been permitted because of its militaristic components and its close association with the royal family: it is the dance of the king and of his kin. The Al Sa’ud have long sought ways to encourage a connection between themselves and the several non-related tribes of such a large land, and ‘ardah has been able to serve to some extent

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as a tool of unity, as one is encouraged and welcomed to dance it, regardless of one’s cultural roots. It is considered a national symbol of Al Sa‘ud patriotism.

**Description**

The performance of desert Najdi ‘ardah is not complicated although it does require a great deal of strength and stamina. While carrying swords or daggers, and sometimes guns, participants stand shoulder to shoulder in two facing lines or in a circle, smoothly rocking their torsos, stepping side to side, or front to back, rhythmically moving their weapons up and down. Sword movement is important, and while the swords are in the up position, participants sometimes shake them quickly—thus rattling their sabers. Usually when one row of men is raising their weapons high, the other row will rest the swords on their shoulders or alter their step and place their armaments across the back of their necks horizontally. During the lengthy performances that can last for hours, dancers will often break from the ranks momentarily to execute more elaborate acrobatic moves. The state flag is always in a visible position, and especially later in the dance, the flag is draped across the shoulders of the dancers or if present, of the king, dignitaries, or members of the royal family (Urkevich, 22:385).

Patriotic or militarily rousing lyrics that accompany ‘ardah are of the vernacular poetry of Arabia, i.e., nabati. The text is presented by one or two poet-singers who call out a line to a row of participants, who then repeat the lyrics. The poet then moves to the other line and dictates text to them. If there is a second poet he stands by the second rank of men and may improvise a new verse in the same rhyme scheme as the first poet. This antiphonal pattern continues throughout. The primary poet will either newly invent
lyrics that fit the occasion or sing the short pre-written ‘ardah songs, that are held in some esteem, as the text are never changed.

NAJDI ‘ARDAH LYRICS:

O Allah, we shall obey Your will
As we hear about the news of the impending battle

Our Sheikh enabled us with his fortitude
To accept difficult times and give thanks to God

Our opponent is a confused one
And doesn’t know about our cleverness

We move with the desert wadi [dry riverbed]
Like rain water moved by the wind

We come from behind the great sands
And are winners with the highest success

In Najdi ‘ardah costume is important and many wear both a leather belt around the waist and cross-belts over the chest displaying an impressive arsenal that might include bullets, daggers, guns, and swords. Dancers, especially those who flank the flag bearer, are also outfitted with robes, many ornate, that call to mind the dress of warriors from the past. The percussionists usually wear beautifully embroidered jackets or vests that flash as they move. Likewise, the drums themselves are decorated: glued around the outside wooden rim is felt, traditionally green, the color of the Saudi state flag and of the robes of the Prophet Mohammed. Also attached to the frame are several colorful wool tassels known as danadish, raith, or kathl (Saleem, 104).

The primary instruments are two types of drums, both double headed, held by handles, and played with sticks. The large drums are known as takhmir (Photo 1).
Their weight is born by the left hand, although sometimes a shoulder strap is added, while the drum is struck with a thick stick held in the right. The smaller drums, known as tathliith or mithlath (Photo 2), have a relatively longer handle and, since they are an important part of the drummer’s dance, are most always adorned with tassels (the larger takhmir may or may not have tassels). While playing the tathliith drummers will move their bodies in unison fluidly, lowering their instruments down and forward, then jump up a few times, squat on the floor, and get to their feet again, lift their instep, bend their knees. This is all done to the ‘ardah beat that is in a somewhat slow and deliberate tempo, and always in a stately triple meter--thus, the name of the drum mithlath, a word that indicates “triple.” This rhythmic mode is of the same family as that of samri, another famous Najdi genre, with its similar dignified triple metric pattern. The takhmir and tathliith drums, when sounding simultaneously, produce a polyrhythm, and this, accompanied by the Najdi performance practice of intentionally playing behind the beat, manifest a rhythmic pull, a delay, giving the whole performance an irregular, uneven feel. This type of drag beat, heard throughout Arabia, can be attributed to the asymmetrical rhythm of a walking camel’s gait.

‘Ardah drumming forces could include as few as a handful of men, or well over a dozen, depending on the quantity of participants dancing. There is no set number of dancers: sometimes thousands of men perform. All males present at a social performance are welcome or expected to participate, if even for a short time. It is considered quite rude for a guest not to dance ‘ardah, especially when specifically invited to do so.
History

The long history of battle chants in Arabia has accompanied the pervasive existence of a martial environment. For centuries, because of a lack of vital resources and the dire shortage of material goods, intense inter-group competition was common and thus the on-going practice emerged where one group would invade a neighboring Bedouin camp or oasis settlement in order to capture animals and booty. Such was followed by inevitable counter-raids and sometimes unfortunate tribal feuds. Fighting was frequent and served to dispel the abject poverty of brutal desert life along with alleviating boredom (Habib, 14). War songs emerged from the practice of men loudly shouting martial cries in order to unsettle the enemy. From this custom, more formalized chants developed that were sung on horse or camel back, and sometimes frame drums were added to the musical charge.

‘Ardah, which was the next step in the continuum of war chants, was initially performed in the camp before a coming battle. The lengthy performances were to incite the fighters and strengthen their resolution, prepare the community for combat, both physically and mentally, and raise morale. From various firsthand accounts, such as those of General Aqil ibn Dhifallah Al Qawa’i and Ahmed Al Washmi, we know that in the early 20th century, if King Abdul Aziz Ibn Al Saud, the first king of Saudi Arabia, decided to initiate an attack, he would first assign drummers and town criers to go throughout districts and oases noting the time and place that all were to gather for battle. On the designated date, when the citizens were usually reminded again by more drumming, men of each area would come into their main alleyways or mahfal (town center) and begin performing ‘ardah. A poet-singer would be raised on the shoulders of two men and loudly sing a hurab, a short militaristic solo, no more than three verses, that would commence the actual group performance. Then the men, brandishing whatever weapon they could find, would parade and sing, moving towards the place where they would meet King Abdul Aziz, which was usually next to his command center. From there they would go off to the attack site. (Jamal, 49-50; 63). Following the battle, on their way back to the village, if they were victorious, ‘ardah was also performed. Likewise, anytime a message arrived at a settlement stating that the king and his men had defeated an enemy, ‘ardah was offered as well.

Photo 3. King Abdul Aziz Ibn Sa’ud in 1910
(photo taken in Kuwait by Cpt. William Shakespeare).
After 1932 when Abdul Aziz Ibn Al Sa'ud finally unified neighboring sectors into a kingdom, the function of ‘ardah changed: it is now a staple of peacetime and not primarily a prelude for fighting. Therefore, there have been modifications. For instance, today the swords are often not made of the heavy metal of the past, but are lighter, some merely props only used for the dance. The outer fancy dress is now a costume and never worn in private life. More frequently, in order to assist in holding the large drum for such a long period of time, a strap is added to the takhmir that wraps around the performer’s neck or shoulder. The text in many cases has shifted, from that which was to incite battle to that which boasts about a people and nation. But these changes are not significant, as the dance has maintained to a great deal its battle spirit. Najdi ‘ardah is still very physically demanding, rousing, and has the ability to invoke a kind of collective trance or inspiration. Performing it is still a true act of masculine solidarity.

**Kuwait presentations of ‘ardah**

In the early 18th century when desert clans left central Arabia and settled along the Gulf, they took Najdi ‘ardah with them. The ruling families of Qatar (Al Thani) of Bahrain (Al Khalifa), of Kuwait, (Al Sabah), all hail from the Najd—indeed, the dominant clans of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain are all “cousins,” that is, from the same confederation of tribes, the ‘Anizzah. Thus, these Gulf nations share cultural connections with central Arabia, and would understandably maintain and foster such an important art form as ‘ardah as they developed their new states.
In Kuwait, two types of ‘ardah have flourished: ‘ardah Najdia (desert ‘ardah) and a variant known as ‘ardah bahriya (sea ‘ardah). Desert ‘ardah in Kuwait is fairly different from that seen in Saudi Arabia. For instance, there are no costumes or ornate dress, as men wear their daily white dishdash (robe) normally with a white ghutra (head scarf; Gulf Arabians tend to wear white head scarves, while daily-wear Saudi headscarves are usually red checkered). The primary dancers have no weapons and they will keep their arms largely lowered, touching or holding hands, slightly bending up and down at the elbow in unison to the beat of the music while rocking back and forth. Often just a few men who stand outside of the ranks will actually have swords, and they will perform with both the sword and its sheath, with a walking dance-step, moving their arms in a stylized fashion—one item in each hand, alternating up and down, or crossing the sheath in front of the sword to create a rifle-shooting type of position. In the Najd, dancing with the sheath is not common, while in Kuwait, since almost no one wears a belt during ‘ardah, it is understandable that one dances with the sheath: it cannot be attached to the waist of the performer so is held in the hand 1.

1. In certain areas of Kuwait, like the town of Jahra which has strong Najdi roots, and among some Kuwaiti families with Bedouin ancestry, one will see a type of desert ‘ardah that blends both Kuwaiti and Najdi characteristics. In this kind of dance, some participants may wear colorful vests and men of the ranks might wield swords in a Najdi style, but Kuwaiti drums are still played and the acrobatic moves remain limited or in a Kuwaiti fashion.
Less frequently there are gunmen, *al-sibha*, that surround the participants, holding their weapons in a horizontal position across the shoulders, or pointing them up or down.

In Kuwait, the *tathlith* and *takmir* drums are not used. Sea frame drums, *tarat* (sing. *tar*), with only one head, played by hand not with a stick, provide the higher pitched percussion sound. *Tarat*, in the Nadj, are a staple of desert music and come in a variety of sizes, ranging from 31 to 62 cms diameter, and are grouped in sets that include 3 or 6 different sized drums. These *tarat* are common in Saudi Arabia for various kinds of desert music, but they are not used for *‘ardah*. Kuwaiti frame drums differ from Najdi in that they are all of the same size (ca 45 cms in diameter) and have camel bells, called *barasheem*, attached to the inside of the frame—such bells became common around 1950.
The established method for performing Kuwaiti tarat is with an underhanded grip, and the musician strikes the drum inward, toward himself. This is the opposite of Najdi tar playing that calls for an over-handed hold, where the strike is high, loud, with an outward or vertical impact.

However, when Kuwaitis perform desert 'ardah, which is sometimes called 'ardah Najdia in Kuwait, the performers will, in homage to the Najd, hold the tars with an over-handed grip, in the male Najdi manner. It is of note however, that though Kuwaitis use this hold, their performance technique is far less aggressive than that of the Najd, where the drum is regularly elevated, often above the head, and is struck in a, loud, forceful manner. Kuwaiti tarat are usually kept at midlevel, no higher than the chest, and are played with much less vigor.

The second drum-type used in Kuwait in desert 'ardah is a double-headed membraneophone called mithraath bahriya or unseefi or nafisi. This is a variation of the Najdi tathlith. Like many tathlith, this drum is ca 34 cms in diameter, double headed, however, it has a slightly wider rim than the tathlith. There are often two or three mithraath that do not play in unison, but rather in an interlocking rhythm, one accompanying the tarat: thus musically, they have a duel function of both a takhmir and tathlith. What is interesting about the mithraath compared to the tathlith, is it is not held by a handle, but rather by a strap which winds around the upper arm, making the weight much more bearable than that of the tathlith. In addition, it is played above the head at times and the performer may move and dance somewhat, but it is seldom held very high and the drummer never engages in acrobatic jumping and turning as is seen among the percussionists of central Saudi Arabia.
Sea ‘ardah like that of Kuwait is seen in Bahrain and Qatar and the east coast of Saudi Arabia, but with local variations. In Kuwait, sea ‘ardah is performed equally as often as desert ‘ardah. Again, like the Kuwaiti desert style, there is no colorful dress or costumes, the drums have no ornaments, the percussionists do no indulge in large movements, and in sea ‘ardah, weapons are almost never present, not even among periphery dancers. Sea ‘ardah drums include a tabl bahri (sea drum), which is a large double-headed barrel drum with a wooden body that traditionally came from India. It is carried over the shoulder slung by a strap, one head played with a stick, the other head played by hand. This is the standard bass drum of all eastern Gulf music and is the drum that was taken aboard the pearl diving and merchant vessels in the age before oil wealth. It is a heavy and calls for some strength in order to wield and perform, but it arguably less awkward to manipulate than the Najdi takhmīr, where the entire weight of the drum is normally born by one’s left hand.

In sea ‘ardah the higher pitched drum sound is produced by frame drums, that is, tarat, the same used in Kuwaiti desert ‘ardah. But here, since this is “sea” music, there is no need to pay respects to the Najd, so the conventional underhanded sea grip is used, rather than the over-handed Najdi hold. The Kuwaiti sea tar grip is more common worldwide for frame drumming and is the same employed by sea musicians throughout the Gulf, as well as by female tarat players in Saudi Arabia. It permits for more freedom of technique than the male Saudi style, but it is clearly far less aggressive and physical ².

² Along with standard sea ‘ardah there is an offshoot form known as ‘ardah Al Ameeriah, heard in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and eastern Saudi Arabia. This style includes pairs of small hand cymbals, known as twysat, that were common instruments on the pearl diving and merchant ships of the past. They add an idiophone “sea” sound color to this land genre, ‘ardah.
Melodies of Kuwaiti 'ardah, whether desert or sea, vary slightly from what one will hear in the Najd, having local characteristics. Likewise, texts are reflective of the region, but they are still of the nabati poetic genre and recall state solidarity and camaraderie.
KUWAITI SEA ‘ARDAH:

We protect our home from aggressors
We burn with fire whoever attacks us
This has been our custom for years
Our enemy cannot sleep soundly at night
All the Sabahs [ruling family of Kuwait] and their people are One
They answer their leader's call
You’ll find among us fierce protectors of our nation
Jabir bu Mubarak [Kuwaiti Sheikh], Blessed is the one on his side

TRANSLITERATION:

Badār min dunak narud al mo’tadin
Walli yijina bikhatānib la zāh
Hādīḥi ‘awāydna ‘alā tul al sinin
Hadiblyn bel la’il nawmahu ma hannāh
Kul al sabāh wa sha’bahum mutakāfīn
Li wa sawt al kā’id yulabuna al nidāh
Jidu minnā ,hāmi al watan dhīrh al yamin
Jābir abu mubārak wa sa’ad minho ma’āh

The nationalistic element of ‘ardah remains strong in Kuwait beyond lyrics. The Kuwaiti flag is usually present for both sea and desert ‘ardah. Moreover, if a royal or statesman is at the event, he will dance and assume a central role.

The performance of ‘ardah in Kuwait, although fairly frequent, is not as often as it is in the Najd where it might be a weekly, community occurrence. Also, performances themselves will not last for hours, as they do in the Najd, but often around 30 minutes. The tempo of ‘ardah in Kuwait tends to be faster than that of Saudi Arabia, which is true of most desert music in Kuwait (like samri). This is no doubt a reflection of the lifestyle, which is more fast-paced and westernized in the Gulf region. The rhythmic modes are slightly different also. Najd and Kuwaiti forms both maintain a deliberate triple meter with polyrhythm, but the specific patterns vary, often related to the idiosyncrasies of the drum. For instance, in sea ‘ardah the tabl bahri often sounds a 16th rest, 16th-8th note combination from high to low that is a staple of sea shanties and a natural move for a barrel drummer.

Conclusion

As is the case in Saudi Arabia, both Kuwaiti sea and desert ‘ardah show a sense of nationalism and community; the genre maintains its noble, heroic character, the flag is present and leading dignitaries dance and sing. ‘Ardah is performed for special occasions, both personal and state, and serves as an esteemed cultural ritual. The most noticeable difference is that ‘ardah in Kuwait clearly lacks both the spectacle and machismo that is found in the Najd. Indeed, there are rarely colorful robes or coats or vests in the performance to remind one of the soldiers of the past. In Kuwaiti sea ‘ardah the men wear no belts of bullets across their chests, no weapons around their waists, they
carry no swords or guns, their hands are completely empty. And in desert 'ardah the few weapons that are present are almost always brandished outside of the main group, displayed unthreateningly. The Kuwaiti manifestation, with the ranks of dancers, singing, rocking, lightly touching hands or arms, is a pleasant one of brotherhood and heritage, but a show of military strength and great physical agility is lacking.

The Najd of Saudi Arabia has a long history of constant warfare, raids, violence. An appreciation of battle and rigorous military willpower is part of the cultural legacy, as is a respect of Spartan Bedouin life. Moreover, the Najd is the birthplace of Wahhabi/Salafism, and thus historically Najdis have adjusted to daily rituals of religious discipline, restraint, and obedience. Traditionally, acquiring self-control is more esteemed than acquiring comfort. Thus, it is understandable that the endurance and grit needed for lengthy performances of Najdi 'ardah are well valued in such a culture. There is deep respect for the athleticism and virility demonstrated through the dance. Indeed, in the past and even today, in order to help choose a worthy mate, women discreetly watched the men performing, from tents, cars or buildings, in order to assess their masculinity. (And the men, aware of the audience, have been eager to demonstrate their physical skills, fortitude and competence with the sword.) Other men observe 'ardah performance with pride in the technique and skill of their fellow countrymen.

Kuwait on the other hand is a nation of the sea with a mercantile economy and little history of fighting. Kuwaiti traditions involve pearl diving, fishing, international trade, a commercial market. Machismo is not as central to Kuwaiti history as it has been to that of the Najd, and this is manifest in the 'ardah performances of Kuwait and other Gulf countries. There is a dearth of physicality with the drumming techniques, dance steps, lack of weapons. There is a stark difference in showmanship and the aggressiveness factor. Although Kuwaitis have been involved in several battles, indeed in the early 20th century they fought alongside King Abdul Aziz Ibn Al Sa’ud and helped him retake his Najdi land, their history is not as ensconced in warfare as that of central Arabia. So for instance, military costumes of the Najd or a certain prowess with weapons is less familiar to Kuwait.

Still, Kuwait has great respect for its heritage and vast appreciation for the Kuwaiti styles of 'ardah. Women still admire men who dance it, parents are proud to hear their sons sing 'ardah in celebration. And in performing Kuwaiti 'ardah, Kuwaitis pay respect to their own traditions while also remembering their Najdi roots.

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