



Egypt, Music, Dance and the Nubian Connection: Part 1 Ancient Egypt and Nubia

By Katrina Robinson

'On entering Paradise you may hear the sound of nightingales and Nubian singers' Alf Leila w'Leila (Tales of 1001 Nights)

Reading about dance in Egypt and the Mediterranean in late antiquity (see Ruth Webb's article under Information: History of the Dance) inspired me to look for some other possible influences on music and dance in ancient Egypt - the distant predecessors of the music and dance we know today. Nubia gradually became really important - as a direct influence on ancient Egyptian culture and as a corridor through which other influences travelled back and forth.

Nubia – Early Civilisations

Today Nubia is a cultural region extending from Upper Egypt into northern Sudan. In his book *Egypt and Nubia*, John Taylor defines it as 'the region between Aswan and Debba in which the Nubian languages are spoken'. In ancient times it was a much larger region, stretching up to 1,000 miles along the Nile valley, from the First Cataract of the Nile (just south of Elephantine) to south of the Sixth Cataract and present-day Khartoum in Sudan (www.sis.gov.eg/nubia). The region's rich natural resources and moister climate made parts of it more habitable than they are today and distinctive early settled cultures flourished there. Fine ceramic bowls and other objects dating from 8000 B.C. found in Neolithic Nubian sites are 3,000 years older than prehistoric finds in Egypt. Other grave goods from Nubia and Egypt, such as pottery and tools,

show trade and cross-influence between these cultures from 5,000-4,500 B.C. (Taylor). Nubia was also the birthplace of one of the earliest and most advanced urban civilisations in Africa (Quirke and Spencer, 1992). Their development can be traced from 3,100 B.C., around the same time as Egypt was unified as one land and the First Dynasty began (<http://imet.csus.edu>).

Ancient Nubia abutted Egypt's southern borders and consisted of different chiefdoms, kingdoms or larger, more powerful unified states. The two lands vied for power and control over territory and resources and the borders between them shifted north or south according to whether Egypt or Nubia dominated the region.

Location and Influence

The location of both lands gave them immense strategic and economic importance. Egypt's location led to trade, political and cultural links with the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean, North Africa, Arabia and Asia for thousands of years. Nubia's position made it the only gateway between central Africa, Egypt and the Mediterranean. As a meeting-place of many different cultures, Nubia was dynamic and changing, mixing its own culture with chosen elements from all these places (Taylor, 1991). Egypt had a lasting influence on Nubia because it ruled and exploited its southern neighbour for long periods but it is now accepted that 'Nubian culture influenced Egypt at several important periods' leading up to Nubian rule of

both lands between 747-647 B.C. (Taylor).

Economic and Political Links

Much of this cross-influence came about as a result of economic links between the two lands. Ancient Nubia's wealth and power were built on its rich natural resources, trade and industry and was vital to Egypt's economy. It was Egypt's major source of precious metals, stones and wood (gold, electrum, copper, building stone, timber for shipbuilding, semi-precious stones, ebony and ivory) and the transit route for African luxury goods such as incense, exotic animals and their skins, precious oils and resins, fans and archery bows. To control access and supply routes for these prized commodities, Egypt's rulers often expanded into and dominated Nubia. At other times Nubia was the stronger power. The changing relations between the two lands shaped the interactions between their peoples – interactions that often involved foreign workers inside Egypt and sometimes involved music and dance.

Nubian Workers in Egypt

What evidence is there for interactions between ancient Egyptians and Nubians and did any involve music and dance? The evidence comes from records of 20th century archaeological excavations (especially of the Aswan High Dam area of Lower Nubia in 1960-80 and Upper Nubian sites in present-day Sudan), studies of tomb and temple decorations and Egyptian, Greek and Roman records. I found good analyses of this evidence mainly in three books: *Egypt and Nubia* by John H. Taylor; *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt* by Stephen Quirke and Jeffrey Spencer and *Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt* by Lise Manniche.

They show that Nubia was an established source of labour for Egypt. Interactions between all foreign workers and Egyptians depended on many things – peaceful or hostile political relations, type and circumstances of work, social status, where they lived, how long they were there

and so on. In many situations cultural exchanges between them would have been limited but it is clear that Nubians worked in Egypt over millennia and had productive relations with Egyptians, from aristocrats and officials to ordinary people.

Soldiers, Traders, Labourers, Servants, Policemen

Nubian peoples played an important role in ancient Egypt's economy from the Old Kingdom onward. Here are a few examples of their occupations, which we can assume involved some contacts with Egyptians.

Nubian mercenaries served regularly in the Egyptian army. An early 6th dynasty campaign report c.2280 B.C. shows that men from five different Nubian peoples were recruited into the huge army assembled for Pepy 1 (www.sis.gov.eg/nubia). Another example from a later period of instability in Egypt (c.2181-1991 B.C.) sees different Nubian groups travelling north to sell their services as mercenaries and then serving very effectively in Egyptian campaigns (Taylor p.17).

Nubian traders were always needed by Egypt and in times of strict border controls, between c.2181-2125 for example, they were the only Nubians allowed into the country (Taylor, p.18). Egyptian pharaohs frequently acquired Nubian labourers and sometimes slaves to work on monumental projects or as servants. Slavery was rare in Egypt at all periods and restricted mainly to foreigners captured in battle abroad (Quirke and Spencer, 1992, p.25). The 7,000 Nubians captured by fourth dynasty pharaoh Snefru (along with 200,000 cattle) while crushing a revolt were deported to Egypt to work on royal building sites soon after 2613 B.C. We can assume they met other labourers there, both Egyptian and foreign.

Many Medjay Nubians, fierce warriors belonging to a nomadic desert people, served in the Egyptian police force: they were so established in this role that the word 'medjay' became the

ancient Egyptian term for policeman (www.sis.gov.eg/nubia).

Relations with Nubians were also productive at higher levels of Egyptian society. Provincial governors and expedition leaders generally tried to keep good relations with powerful Nubian chieftains from whom they traded cattle.

In these capacities Nubians became an established presence in ancient Egypt and offered opportunities for formal and informal contacts with Egyptians over a long period.

Links involving Music and Dance

Although foreigners were essential to their economy, Egyptians generally had little respect for their cultures. However, Egyptians introduced useful, novelty or interesting aspects of foreign cultures into their own from time to time. Here are two examples of foreigners brought into the country specifically to take part in temple ritual. Sixth dynasty records tell us that the boy-king Pepy II waited eagerly for a 'dancing dwarf' (possibly a pygmy) to arrive at court to take part in 'dances for the gods' around 2200-2181 B.C. Pepy's governor Harkhuf, responsible for delivering the dwarf safely, wrote in his autobiography 'My master desires to see this dwarf more than the products of Sinai or Punt!' (Taylor, p.16). Pygmies from central Africa became important in religious rituals in Egypt and were sought after for this purpose, passing through the Nubian 'corridor' to Egypt along with many other people and goods, from Punt and elsewhere (www.sis.gov.eg/nubia). We do not know whether the pygmies danced a strict repertoire of movements in the rituals they took part in or if there was room for them to make individual interpretations or contributions to the proceedings.

Military Labour, Music and Dance

Foreign workers – both from Nubia and further afield - took their own music and dance traditions into Egypt and are a very interesting link between the two cultures. The evidence suggests that Nubian military labour in particular had

a lasting influence on music and possibly dance in ancient Egypt. Nubians were renowned for their superb skill as bowmen – Egyptians called Nubia 'Ta Sety', 'Land of the Bow', at one time - and Nubian archers were a key part of the military capabilities of many Egyptian dynasties. Incidentally, excavations of graves and settlements of the 2181-1991 B.C. period show that some of these soldiers settled in Upper Egypt (Taylor, p.17) where we can assume they interacted with ordinary Egyptians in the course of their daily lives.

Drums, Trumpets and Dancers

Music was important in the Egyptian army during training, formal parades and military campaigns. Nubian soldiers were regularly accompanied on campaigns by bands and dancers. The barrel-shaped drums and trumpets that featured in these bands are interesting in several ways. First, barrel-drums were most likely introduced from Nubia and the south into Egypt, where they became 'the archetypal military instrument' (Manniche, 1991, pp.74-5). Secondly, perhaps partly as a result of the Nubians' skill with both types of musical instruments, the Egyptians were the first to realise that the rallying rhythms of drums and the loud, clear, clarion sounds of trumpets made them the best instruments for military bands. This tradition continues to the present day in Egypt and worldwide (Manniche, p.83).

Nubian military drummers and trumpeters are depicted in 17th and 18th dynasty texts and tomb paintings (c.1650-1285 B.C.). By then they were a familiar presence in Egypt and as renowned for their prowess as the Nubian archers. Sometimes their energetic playing and rhythms inspired fellow soldiers to jump up and dance as well 'showing there was room for improvisation among the rank and file on special occasions' (Manniche, p.75). Nubian dancers are often shown alongside Nubian musicians in military parades such as the one depicted in the tomb of Thanuny, a soldiers' commander under Thutmose IV (1400-

1390 B.C.), while a group of Nubians in a foreign tribute procession to Thutmose included a trumpeter, drummer and dancers (tomb of Haremhab, colleague of Thanuny; p.82).

These examples show formal Nubian influences on military music in ancient Egypt and suggest many opportunities for more informal interactions with Egyptian soldiers - and informal contacts can lead to influences on popular culture.

Festivals and Processions

As well as playing a key role in military campaigns and parades, Nubian military musicians and dancers also took part in more peaceful public occasions in Egypt, such as processions and important religious festivals, where soldiers not only kept the crowds of spectators in order but also entertained them. Drummers were often 'joined by other performers on rhythmical instruments or even by soldiers clapping their hands' (p.81), painting a picture of spontaneous exuberance at these open-air events.

Religious festivals, with their huge processions, were enormously popular public entertainments marking key points throughout the year. One example is the annual religious Feast of Opet, a three- to four-week festival linking the renewal of the pharaoh's power and the flooding of the Nile. Military and sacred music, gymnastics and dancing were combined in this spectacular, noisy and uninhibited popular event. Opet Feasts in the 18th dynasty are depicted on the walls of buildings erected by Queen Hatshepsut (1479-1457 B.C.) and on the walls of Tutankhamun's Luxor temple colonnade (1336-1327 B.C.). One of the Nubian drummers there is shown with 'jingles' round his ankles (p.70) which would no doubt shake in time to his rhythmic playing and movement. A little later, Nubian drummers in a hunting procession seem to be drumming and dancing at the same time (Armant temple, probably around 1294-1279 B.C.; p.82).

In conservative societies like ancient Egypt, traditions like those described above tended to change only slowly. Lise Manniche tells us that military music probably changed little during the Amarna Period (c.1352-1323 B.C.). Later, in the 20th dynasty reign of Ramses III (c.1184-1153 B.C) it was still the custom to have military music from drums and trumpets in many local religious festivals around Thebes, a religious centre for about 1000 years (pp.72, 82).

The record of Nubian archers, military musicians and dancers in Egypt from 2182 B.C. onward, shows they were an established presence for well over 1000 years and participated in a range of military, public, religious and aristocratic events. In these contexts their rhythms, trumpet riffs and vibrant dances must have been a familiar excitement for both ordinary and wealthy Egyptians. The evidence speaks of formal Nubian influences on Egyptian military bands in terms of their instrumentation, traditions and practice and it is hard to resist the idea of informal influences on soldiers as they joined in impromptu dancing to irresistible Nubian drum rhythms. It is not possible to assess Nubian influences on the music and dance of ordinary Egyptians but it is reasonable to think that some Nubian elements were absorbed over time into the popular repertoire of rhythm and movement because they were a customary feature of so many festivals and celebrations for so long.

Female Musicians and Dancers

So far we have learnt about Nubian male musicians and dancers in Egypt in public contexts. What about the private sphere? Secular music, singing and dance were much loved by ancient Egyptians and were their main forms of entertainment. Decorations in the tombs of wealthy and important Egyptians, from the Old to New Kingdoms, show how much these activities were valued as essential and delightful parts of both life and the afterlife. The famous banquet scenes in a number of 18th dynasty tombs show

in beautiful detail what the perfect party and its entertainments were like for wealthy households (the Theban tomb of Nebamun, c.1400 B.C. is especially well known).

As in Nebamun's tomb, many of the musicians and dancers shown in tomb decorations from the Old Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom are women. In the New Kingdom they are shown playing a range of string, wind and percussion instruments, singing, clapping and performing a range of movements. Female Nubian musicians and dancers are often among them, clearly identified by a special hairstyle and darker skin colouring, as in a famous image from the 18th dynasty tomb of Djoserkaresonb at Thebes which shows a small Nubian dancer performing with female Egyptian musicians (Manniche, p.42).

Music and dance were also an important part of funerary rituals and Nubians were involved in these too. A young Nubian girl playing a splendid lyre is shown taking part in a funeral banquet for Kynebo, an official during the reign of Ramses VIII (c.1129-1126 B.C.). She and her colleagues, who are singing, playing music and performing elegant movements, are the tomb owner's daughters or 'songstresses of Amun'. Incidentally, their song accompanies a jumping dance illustrated over 1000 years earlier (p.53). This beautiful 20th dynasty painting, of a procession of young women in transparent garments, wearing jewellery, flowers and garlands, has a joyful quality to it in keeping with celebrating the soul's passage to the afterlife (p.52).

Nubian women were also among the professional dancers and singers on the staff of Egyptian temples, with duties to perform at many religious feasts and festivals, including the Feast of Opet (Griffiths, 1898, in Spencer, 2003, p.117).

Unfortunately, the status of female musicians in tomb decorations is not always clear. Many of them, like those on the walls of Kynebu's tomb (now unfortunately destroyed), were mem-

bers of the aristocratic family itself. As daughters or female relatives of the tomb owner they were taking part in important funeral rituals for their father or close male relative. At this level of society playing musical instruments was considered an accomplishment and girls would have learned to play at the organised 'music schools' with music masters that many wealthy households had for this purpose. Other women in the procession could well have been professional musicians and dancers who specialised in taking part in funerary ritual.

In some tomb decorations female clothing suggests royal status at court. In others the ladies of the household make music in the women's quarters but there are no firm clues to their status here because they are all dressed similarly. Daughters are often shown entertaining their aristocratic parents musically. Other female musicians and dancers in secular entertainments were probably professionals. So were temple musicians and dancers, who probably had an elevated status in accordance with the religious nature of their work.

There is another factor to consider here. The children of Nubian leaders were sometimes sent to Egypt to be educated at court and 'Egyptianised' so they could pass on Egyptian values when they went back home (Quirke and Spencer). They lived with aristocratic Egyptian families, but again it is impossible to determine their real positions in these households.

At the very least, these images of female Nubian musicians and dancers show they had roles in temples as well as some of the wealthiest households in Egypt. This is another avenue through which personal exchanges and cross-influence could flow between these cultures in the areas of music and dance.

The next section gives some examples of foreign influences on musical instruments and practice in ancient Egypt, with some interesting references to Nubia.

Tracing Influences and Changes

Although change is slow in conservative traditional societies, it does happen. Tomb and temple decorations record some of these changes because of their 'magical' purpose to recreate in the afterlife the exact details of everyday Egyptian life – and probably Egyptian life at its very best. Carvers and painters worked to very strict rules of how things should be depicted but were very accurate observers of people and their activities. The sheer number and variety of reliefs and paintings they made over the millennia show in vibrant and subtle detail just how important music and dance were in ancient Egyptian leisure, religion and ritual (see Patricia Spencer's article, also under Information: History of the Dance) and contain many clues to the developments that took place in them.

In Music . . .

The images of musicians in particular are so detailed that they show us clearly what their instruments were like. They also allow us to identify where these instruments came from originally, when they were introduced into Egypt and when they became a customary part of Egyptian ensembles. The lute, for instance, was an 18th dynasty introduction from Babylonia. Variant forms of the lyre came from Asia, probably brought to Egypt 'by Bedouin tribesmen and other travellers'. The oboe was introduced from Sumeria by 1550 B.C., replacing 'the clarinet in banquet ensembles', while darabukka-type drums probably arrived with artisans from Phoenicia and Canaan (Manniche, pp.37-9, 47, 48, 75 and ch.3). As mentioned earlier, barrel-drums probably came from Nubia and the south.

In one very unusual case, an Egyptian woman plays a barrel-shaped drum – usually the preserve of Nubian military musicians - but there are no other known instances of this. Details of the tomb are lost but it is known to belong to a Theban official, most likely of the mid-18th dynasty (c.1430 B.C.). Fortunately its decorations were copied

in the mid-19th century by a German Egyptologist (Manniche, p.54).

To give just one more of many examples, a completely new type of ensemble was invented by King Akhenaten (1352-1336 B.C.) who was responsible for far-reaching innovations that affected all aspects of Egyptian rule and religion. Reliefs on the walls of chapels he built at Karnak show an uncommonly large group of male Egyptian musicians playing in the royal palace. They were clapping and chanting and were accompanied by a barrel-shaped drum. This was unusual in two ways. First, this instrument was normally played by soldiers in outdoor processions and associated particularly with Nubians. Secondly, bringing it deep inside the private domains of the palace was a completely new departure from previous practice (Manniche, p.89).

The images also tell us who played the instruments (men or women) and on what occasions. Experts are able to trace subtle changes in the instruments themselves as well as changes in musical practice, including how the instruments were held and how they were played. Lise Manniche tells us that Nubian military drummers for instance, held their barrel-drums in a different way from Egyptian musicians, illustrating a different playing style.

Tomb decorations from various periods show a number of different techniques for playing the lyre – techniques that came from outside Egypt. In one case a technique is recognised as being the same as one used in modern African folk music (p.48). Whether this technique was brought into or came out of Egypt, it had to pass through Nubia.

In Dance . . .

In dance things are different. While the contexts in which dance took place are clear (Patricia Spencer covers this and more in her 2003 article on dance in ancient Egypt) it is much harder to track foreign influences on dance and changes in movement types. Irena Lexova's 1935 booklet is a key collection of images here. It is not

fanciful to think, but impossible to prove, that the sounds of musical instruments absorbed into Egyptian military and secular ensembles from elsewhere had some influence on both the form and quality of movements danced to them. We can assume that foreign dancers brought different movements to Egypt and this was probably one of their attractions. Nubian dancers would almost certainly have brought a more southerly 'African' use of the body and movement repertoire with them – look at the two military dancers from Haremheb's tomb. Could such movements have inspired others to mimic them on informal occasions like the many festivals attended by the general public? It would not be remarkable if ordinary Egyptians, who involved music and dance in many social celebrations of their own and often hired travelling performers for such occasions, were agents for dynamic change in the music and dance of ancient Egyptian popular culture.

In terms of understanding the movements themselves, as well as movement repertoires and sequences, it is even harder to trace developments. Movements are dynamic and three-dimensional but are represented in reliefs and paintings as two-dimensional frozen images of a split second of action. What comes before the frozen movement and what does it become? What follows it? How much did movement repertoires differ for the various contexts in which dance took place? The very strict 'canon' or set of artistic conventions governing all representations in ancient Egypt means that the movements we see might just be 'visual symbols' stating that dance was part of the proceedings. The movements shown might be the only ones considered appropriate for the occasion being depicted and perhaps not even very representative of dance at the time. Patricia Spencer also looks at this and other issues in her 2003 article.

These images were seen by only a few ancient Egyptians – the artisans who

made them, family members, priests, temple employees and officials – but they would automatically be able to interpret and flesh them out completely. They would understand their significance and 'meaning' and the images would convey dance on a particular occasion, whether formal or informal, in all its dynamism and totality, as it would have been in daily life and custom. Obviously we cannot do this.

What we can do is glimpse more joyful, exuberant and spontaneous images of dance in ancient Egypt to help flesh out our own understanding of how people experienced it. Occasionally the more relaxed artistic styles that went with periods of political weakness depict movements and body relationships between dancers much more freely, conveying a real pleasure in dance. This is the case with the animated and uninhibited pair dancers moving together and linking hands joyfully on the walls of Intef's tomb c. 1795-1550 B.C. (Spencer, 2003, pp.114, 115). Later, the more expressive artistic style of the powerful New Kingdom lets us appreciate the dynamic curving movements, close body relations and enthusiastic engagement of the two dancers in Nebamun's 18th dynasty banquet scene, c.1400 B.C.

What does the Evidence Show?

I think we can be certain that there were long, significant and varied contacts between Nubian and Egyptian cultures in the realms of music and dance in both male and female traditions. These contacts were direct – as a result of many Nubians living, working and settling in Egypt over long periods. Their familiar presence there provided varied opportunities for interactions with Egyptians in different walks of life. Nubian music and dance became popular and customary features of Egyptian life and culture – and popularity and custom are part of the process of absorbing new influences and making them part of one's own culture and traditions.

The examples I have described also show that Nubia was of crucial importance in shaping Egyptian culture over the millenia as a corridor or channel through which influences flowed back and forth between Egypt, tropical Africa and elsewhere – with important impacts on music in particular.

Part 2 of this article will look at Nubia's importance in more modern times, again as a direct influence on Egyptian culture and as a 'cultural corridor' for other influences. Ancient Nubian culture was always distinctive and had an enduring and proud quality. Like Egyptian culture it was dynamic, absorbing and transforming many outside elements into its own unique form of expression or 'voice'. I will look for ways in which this Nubian 'voice' has played a role in the development of today's rural and urban 'folk' music and dance in Egypt by influencing some of

the important traditions that underlay them.

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