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“Kandakas and Meheiras”: The Emergence of Creative Citizenship and Belonging Through Women’s Music in Sudan

KATARZYNA GRABSKA
Peace Research Institute Oslo | Norway*

AZZA AHMED ABDEL AZIZ
University of Khartoum | Sudan**

ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic research and life history interviews with local and translocal women musicians in Khartoum (2018-2020), this paper reveals how, through their marked presence in the Sudanese revolution of December 2018, they have emerged as political actors and contributed to debates that recast understandings of political belonging. As a result, they have enacted diverse notions of gendered citizenship through their creative practice. These diverse women musicians, through their actions, created space for multiple subjectivities related to ideas about what belonging to the Sudanese nation meant and the symbols it evoked.

This article illustrates how the nation and the act of belonging to it are mediated through powerful feminine figures, which became even more apparent in the recent revolution in Sudan. The imagery of the nation is feminized and the protagonists of this revolution are associated with iconic historicized women: the *Kandaka* (ancient Nubian queen) and the *Meheira* (after the historical figure of Meheira bint Abboud, who was a poet and warrior). This piece explores how these emblems are interpreted and embodied in diverse ways by women musicians to enhance their feelings of belonging to the crafted nation. We examine young urban women musicians’ political roles, and how their performances have acquired political claims over time. We frame these belongings as acts of creative citizenship, beyond legal parameters, where some young women musicians emerge as actors who take particular stands in shaping political and existential belonging to Sudan through their creative musical practice.

KEYWORDS

Creative citizenship, gender, women musicians, Sudan, identity

*katgra@prio.org and **azzayacoub@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF MUSIC AND WOMEN IN NEGOTIATING THE SUDANESE NATION

> December 21, 2019. We, the authors, are attending a concert in the gardens of the National Museum in Khartoum. The crowd is filled with a predominantly intergenerational middle class Sudanese public that lighten the performance space with their mobile phones. The group that is performing includes three young women: a bass guitar player (Doa); a drum player (Awadia*); and *oud* (a classical Arabic lute player) (Menal).[1] There are also two men musicians playing the violin and the piano. The band is led by a slightly older man, the violist, and, as we later found out, was a music teacher at Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman. The crowd is moved by the music played during the 2018-2019 Sudanese revolution against the Islamist regime of Omar El Bashir. To see young women musicians with short haircuts, wearing jeans and performing on stage using instruments that were mostly historically reserved for men, is rare. Yet, the crowd reacts enthusiastically and supports them during their onstage presence. It is a moving moment when all join in singing with the musicians, *Ana Afrigi, Ana Sudani*, (I am African, I am Sudanese), which is one of the songs that gained importance during the revolutionary process. In this way, the musicians, through putting emphasis on African roots rather than Arab origins, expand the notions of belonging and being Sudanese. (Field notes, 21 December 2019)

The peaceful protests that started in Sudan in December 2018, after almost 30 years of authoritarian rule by the Islamist regime under Omar El Bashir, had opened up a space for an amalgamation of creative productivity (Hashim, 2019). This involved music in both Sudan and across the diaspora.[2] Music has always occupied a significant role in the multiple cultural expressions of the Sudanese nation. During the 2018-2019 uprising, music created a space to enact resistance and narratives of belonging, which was propelled forward by the young people and women who were portrayed as the forefront of the resistance (see Tonnessen and Al-Nagar, 2020; Abdel Aziz and Grabska 2019; Abdel Aziz, 2019a, 2019b). Diverse women seized this space to make claims for greater freedoms and liberties, including contributions to nation-building projects. Amateur women singers, as well as professional musicians in the diaspora and in Sudan, have become key voices in the message of the revolution, making visible, through musical practices, the political claims that were being made.

These young women, alongside others, engaged significantly with the feminized symbols of the Sudanese nation[3], by making references to key feminine figures, such as, *Kandaka* and *Meheira*. *Kandaka* refers to ancient Nubian queens of the Nile Valley, in the northern region of Sudan, bordering with Egypt. *Meheira* refers to the historical poet and warrior, Meheira bint Abboud, who encouraged Sudanese men to fight and expel foreign colonizers from the Turko-Egyptian invasion in 1820. The association with *Kandaka* was especially poignant and resonated with

[1]* The names of the musicians marked with an asterisk (throughout the document) are real to honor their requests. The rest have been anonymized.

[2] We do not focus on the diasporic contributions in this article.

[3] The symbolism of the homeland as the beloved woman is deeply rooted in the Sudanese collective consciousness. Its primary example is the poem by Khalil Farah, *Azza fi hawak* (in love for you, Azza), in which a women's name is sung to represent Sudan as the beloved.

images defused through social media of a young woman, Alaa Salah. In these images, she is wearing a white *tobe*[4] and reciting lyrical musical poetry in the middle of a crowd during the demonstrations in Khartoum in 2019. Her performance drew worldwide media attention and projected her into the role of the ultimate *Kandaka* and introduced this figure to the world.[5] Ultimately, Sudanese women became predominantly portrayed in local media and popular discourse as, *Kandakas* or *Meheiras*.

In this paper, we reflect on the role of some young Sudanese women musicians who participated in the 2018/19 revolution. We conducted fieldwork for this research between 2018 and 2020,[6] and our analysis is focused on that specific historical moment of the revolution (see coda). At the same time, we also acknowledge the fluidity of the situation in Sudan and the ongoing changing political context. Our focus is also limited to women musicians performing mainly in Khartoum (see below). We acknowledge that this analysis presents a partial and particular perspective but is important from the stance of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). Given the involvement of these women in transgressing some gender and generational norms within Sudanese music, we felt it pivotal to reflect on their specific contributions to build on the literature of the role of gender in music (Herndon and Ziegler, 1990; Koskoff, 2000; Magowan and Wrazen, 2013). In addition, our findings refer to the debates on the political potential that music practice offers to individuals and communities for resisting, remembering and developing political strategies (Kaiser, 2006; Puig, 2006; Brenner, 2018, Hernandez, 2010; Aterianus-Owanga and Guedj, 2014).

In what follows, we examine how women's musical performances have made political claims over time. This is part of wider debates on musical production as a site of gender power dynamics. We reflect on how these women laid claims to images of powerful icons (*Meheira* and *Kandaka*) and reworked those images to produce their own narratives about the political roles and importance of women. As in many other countries, music in Sudan has played a significant role in shaping national and social identities and has been the site of political reclamations (Al Sanousi, 2014) and love of the motherland (see footnote 3). In this process of political awakening, the young women in our study were negotiating political belonging through creative practice.

We draw on the concept of citizenship and belonging from the work of Isin and Nielsen. In the social sciences, citizenship is treated primarily as a 'status' linked to a legalized belonging. In their 2008 book, *Acts of Citizenship*, Isin and Nielsen depart from such a view and describe citizenship as an act regardless of political status. We share this conceptualization of citizenship as it enables us to rethink 'who' can be a citizen based on "collective and individual deeds that rupture socio-historical patterns" (Isin and Nielsen, 2008, p. 13).

This approach enables a view of music practice and performance as acts of citizenship, an idea similarly explored by Aoileann Ní Mhurchú (2016). Analyzing the experiences of young migrants in Ireland and their engagement with hip-hop

[4] A large piece of cloth worn over clothing to cover the entire body and loosely placed on the head, a traditional attire worn by many Sudanese women.

[5] Alaa was selected on the request of the French president Macron as part of the delegation attending the Paris conference in May 2020 by being framed as the figure of the brave Sudanese woman embodied in the figure of the *Kandaka*.

[6] Follow-up research conducted in 2022.

and vernacular languages, she argues that their practices do not correspond to conventional categories of belonging based on language use, ethnicity, or nationality. Instead they are better described as processes facilitating "creative hybrid refashioning of self" (2016, p. 163) through which political identities and relations of belonging are renegotiated. A focus on performative dimensions of citizenship pays attention to the meaning that informs these practices and expands the idea of musical acts as everyday politics (Riley et al., 2010). This focus connects with the concept of belonging which Yuval-Davis (2006) describes as emotional attachment", a "feeling at home" and a "feeling safe" (197). Music is full of emotions, and it is quite possible to feel 'at home' and even 'safe' when performing certain musical genres. At the same time, these performances stand in friction with codified forms of "national culture" (Ó Briain, 2018).

In this article, we are inspired by the idea of acts of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008), and Nira Yuval Davis's (1997) construction of nationhood. We align these ideas to notions of 'manhood' and womanhood', as well as the role of gender relations in shaping the ideas of nationalist politics. We build on these concepts to problematize the notion of citizenship as being limited to legal affiliation. Also, we show how women's musical performances and production are highly gendered and related to processes such as the internalization, negotiation, and/or transgression of patriarchal norms (Grabska and Abdel Aziz 2019; Abdel Aziz, 2019a). We argue that these acts contribute to the definition of what we frame as *creative citizenship* that recasts and expands avenues of political participation for women through their musical production and practice.

MEETING THE MUSICIANS AND COLLABORATIVE SENSE-MAKING

The musicians we selected for this study validates the methodological stance of acknowledging situatedness of knowledge and partiality of knowing (Haraway, 1998) in this context. Most of the women musicians we present in this article were born in Khartoum, and, are to varying degrees, still connected to the city. We also interviewed some translocal (bridging and engaging with different spaces) Sudanese musicians, either living abroad and/or performing across different geographical locations. This reflects the multilevel aspect of music production and practice, at the local level (Khartoum), the translocal and the transnational (across borders), all of which can be found in Khartoum. The musicians were either middle class or lower middle class, but they all came from educated backgrounds having attended university. Importantly, most of the young women had studied at Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman, a leading institution for promoting women's education in Sudan. Most of them had attended a music class and joined a music band at the university. They were between 20 and 30 years of age. Some were from more privileged families and had studied abroad or had lived there with their families. It is noteworthy that the styles of music performed by our interlocutors were drawn primarily from the dominant, *haqiba*, a contemporary Sudanese genre of music, and, *aghani banat* (girls' music), which is a sub-genre of contemporary music (Yassin, 2012). Western influenced melodies, especially jazz and hip-hop, were also popular artistic choices.

We focus on Khartoum as a fieldwork site for two reasons. First, because Khartoum (as the capital) is the most prolific site of professional music production in Sudan. Second, other regions lack the resources that are necessary to contribute to the development of a music industry. This situation has delayed their artistic production and rendered it less visible in the Sudanese and global music scenes. We explore the question of whether the categories of *Kandakas* and *Meheiras* speak to the

breadth of the selected Sudanese women's experiences and positionalities on the local and the transnational levels. We examine whether they are exclusionary because they are associated with the dominant Nile valley culture of Sudan and, by virtue of this, excludes women from other regions as well as marginalized groups (Elamin and Ismail, 2019). Through this analysis, we interrogate whether these categories – through musical practice and production – transcend regional anchors and offer a more encompassing Sudanese gendered national identity for all. In this sense, we place the mobile nature of creative practice as a central research question, and thus, enlarge our understanding of creative practices and their role in political and social belonging both locally and translocally (Grabska and Fanjoy, 2015).

We also focus on Khartoum for reasons related to our positionality as researchers. We met in Khartoum in 2015 and have been following the cultural scene in the city since then. As a pair of UK-trained women anthropologists (one Polish and one Sudanese-British) with long-standing experience in Sudan, we decided to place the focus of our research on Sudanese women musicians in Khartoum and the local and translocal music produced. Our interest in the project came from sharing both research and cultural interests throughout our parallel stay in Khartoum (2014-2016) and subsequent collaborative research (2016-ongoing). We attended many cultural performances, including the first concert of, *Salute Yal Banoot*, an all-women's group, organized and hosted at the Goethe Institute of Khartoum in June 2015. We were intrigued by the presence of young women in the Sudanese music scene who were visibly contesting to varying degrees musical genres, barriers and identities.

We started with a commitment to reflexive collaborative sense making and collaborative production of knowledge. This commitment is derived from Kasia Grabska's s interests and convictions as a feminist anthropologist working with feminist methodologies (Grabska, 2022). We wished to gain deeper insights into the meanings of creative processes (music and performance) and their practical expressions (claims and practice of citizenship and belonging) by reversing the 'gaze'.[7] In this way, we opened up our understanding to the negotiated knowledge of the people whose practice we were studying. Instead of conducting interviews, we engaged in conversation with the musicians and jointly negotiated and discussed meanings and interpretations (see Passerini, 2018). We met women musicians organically, by attending concerts, listening to music online, and through references from people we knew in Khartoum's art and music scene. Most of the conversations with Khartoum-based musicians (sixteen women and three men) were carried out in tandem, and some of these conversations were with music bands (both all-women as well as mixed). We met several times with all research participants. Our research also included onsite and digital ethnography, and included attending live or online performances, rehearsals, and music classes.

To gain a wider historical perspective of women's participation in music in Sudan, we also conversed with music professors at the Music and Drama Institute in Khartoum and the Music department at the Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman. In addition, we interviewed representatives of the Goethe Institute and

[7] The pitfall of a process of objectivation which contributes to reifying identities through its reliance on tropes for identification purposes or its reliance on glorifying symbols to account for societal manifestations. This occurred frequently through the Western gaze directed at the revolution which contributed to the elevation of Sudanese women however it flattened the complexity of individual life stories and differences that existed among them.

the Global World Academy who were involved in the training and promotion of women's music in Khartoum (SAMA programme). We followed musicians and observed their work on Facebook and other digital platforms. We also analyzed some of their lyrics to reflect on their emergence as political actors on the public stage and how their contestations and practice of citizenship and belonging were enacted through music. The material presented here attempts to engage in collective sense making based on the diverse experiences that we describe and analyze.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MUSICAL PRODUCTION AND WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The presence of women in the current Sudanese music scene needs to be briefly contextualized. Historically, women have had a significant place in musical production in Sudan according to different genres: *hamasa*,(a genre of songs encouraging men to go to war - Meheira bint Aboud was emblematic of this in the sung poetry she composed), *sayra* (songs for men at their weddings en route to the bride's home), *manaha* (bereavement songs) and *hakamat women's performances* (predominantly Baggara women in Western Sudan – Kordofan and Darfur - encouraging men to valiantly engage in conflict) (Sikainga, 2011). Moreover, the different musical genres that have characterized Sudanese music have been valued differently depending on its place of origin in a vast country marked by cultural diversity and deep inequalities (Al Rassa online blog accessed May 2021). The cultural hegemony of Khartoum (Wani, 2006) is reflected in the domination of *haqiba* (Grabska and Abdel Aziz, 2019) and the Sudanese contemporary music that followed it. This Omdurman-centered line of musical tradition would become hegemonic in Sudan.[8]

From the 1960s through the 1980s, many women became luminaries in the Sudanese music scene. This includes all-women groups such as Thunai Al Nagam and El Balabil, singer and dancer Hanan Bulubulu, and the women in the Igd Al Jalad group (namely Hawa al Mansouri on piano and keyboards and Manal Badreldin who sang alongside men). In the 1960s, Zakia Abul Gassim Abu Bakr emerged as the first professional Sudanese woman guitarist who broke gender norms with her instrument and by performing on stage with her husband (Ahmed Sharhabila renowned jazz musician). Hence, the women in Sudan's music scene today are only the latest political expression in a long continuum of women musicians enacting gendered citizenship (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Brigadier Omar El Bashir came to power in 1989 and was backed by Islamists and this transition deeply affected the music scene in Sudan. However, this was only the latest act in a gradual political silencing of women. In 1983, president Nimeiry imposed Sharia law, which led to the closing of music clubs and jazz performances. Many musicians went into exile as a result and the once-popular music spots in Khartoum shut their doors and diverse genres of Sudanese music (jazz, contemporary, *haqiba*) became more difficult to hear. Between 1990 -1994, Sudan's Music and Drama Institute was closed after its establishment in 1969, only to be reopened once the state had ensured that major opposing voices were no longer present.

[8] Omdurman is one of the three cities that make up Greater Khartoum alongside Khartoum and Khartoum North (Bahri) it is widely considered more authentically Sudanese through a historical legacy of resisting colonial occupation.

The introduction of Sharia Law paved the way for the legally imposed Public Order Law of 1996 that mandated strict rules for women's dress code and public appearance. These laws shaped Sudan's public domain into strictly regulated gender relations based on social control by policing women's bodies in the service of political governance. Gender norms and ideologies that strengthened men's positions as guardians of women were enforced in a larger project to recast Sudan as an Islamic state (Al-Qaddal, 2018). Thus, today we see that Sudan is largely characterized by hierarchal and patrilineal structures that facilitate the exclusion of women from the public domain. In this period of Islamist rule (1989-2019), women's efforts to have public roles were limited and in the music world, they were relegated to performing in the private sphere (at weddings, for example) (Fábos, 2017).

The Islamist state revised customs and societal norms to silence women and framed their voices as, *awra* (*sawt al maraa awra* which means the voice of a woman is shameful), a negative branding that became more intense in the 1990s when Salafi Islamic teachings gained currency in Sudan.[9] With the state repression being stronger than ever, women musicians in Sudan found some outlets in State-approved channels. For example, the Islamist state allowed militarized Islamist women (Akhwat Nusaiba) to bolster its governance through rhythmic poetry performances. It thereby spread voices that praised the Islamist project. This praise was also marked in the songs broadcasted during the television programme, *Sahat Al Fida.* Through a call for jihad (against armed forces in Southern Sudan) included in melodies and musical compositions, these songs at times encouraged and at other times coerced young men to join the Popular Defense Forces (Difaa al Shaabi) with the goal to enflame the civil war against Southern Sudan.

While the Islamist state repressed the public domain for music and women's involvement, it also, ironically, invested heavily in musical production in mid-2000 to broaden its reach to the Sudanese population. The regime had recognized the power of music and women's voices and attempted to use these as a political tool. This tactic revealed the regime's inner contradictions, failing to impose Islamic law based on jurisprudence (*fiqh)* sharia and Islamic legal precepts consistently. The state created a variant of Islam that was not *Salafi*, (austere i.e., rejecting of music) yet it was successful in establishing its authoritarian grip on artistic expression to serve only as inspiration for governing the Sudanese nation according to its own version of Islamic modalities of governance. Thus, the state now had control over which music was deemed good or immoral and who was allowed to perform this music publicly.

Debates about the political role of women in shaping the ideas of gendered citizenship are highly relevant to the Islamist 'Civilizational Project' in Sudan (Abusharaf, 2002; Hale, 2003; Nageeb, 2004). Women musicians played a key role in shaping debates about 'good' Sudanese girls (*banat nas* – daughters of respectable people) that highlights links between gender identities, respectability, class, and belonging. These women and their performances deepen our understanding of the gendered nature of statecraft, diverse forms of citizenship and their particular manifestation in Sudan. These performances also gave us an insight into how these concepts were being questioned by women musicians.

[9] These teachings were averse to Sufi practices of *madih* (chants in praise of the prophet mainly reserved to men in public) and Republican Party practices that allowed women to practice *inshad* (praise of the essence of God alongside men in public).

While Sudanese women musicians have a long history in Sudan, only some women were known to have written politically marked lyrics (e.g., Asha al Falatiya and Hawa al Tagtaga). The (re)emergence of women onto the music scene during the 2018-2019 uprising, performing music with open political agendas, demonstrates the shifting gender power relations. It further contributes to processes through the power of women to, over time, destabilize entrenched gender norms. The fact that women became political through music was especially important because they were doing so in a sphere governed by practices that had placed men at the forefront of musical production and performance in Sudan.

At this point, it is important to remember the idea from El Said et al. (2015) that reminds us the political is not limited to "reforms towards procedural democracy but radical socio-political transformations" (p. 2).[10] The forms of creative practice by Sudanese musicians presented in this article resonate deeply with those words. The participation of diverse women as agents in the revolutions of the Arab Spring demonstrate that such forms of participation "should also be considered political in that it challenges the constructions of gender that underpin claims for and the exercise of political activity" (El Said et al., 2015, p. 8).

'THE VOICE OF A WOMAN IS A REVOLUTION': PUBLIC MANIFESTATIONS OF POLITICAL AWAKENING

In late December 2019, we were walking the streets of the sit-in site in Khartoum where the revolution took place and we noticed a mural on a wall near the military garrison that was painted during a three month sit-in earlier that year (Figure 1).

Figure 1, Photo: Kasia Grabska, Khartoum, December, 2019.

That sit-in (April to June 2019) inspired a wealth of political art that had come to symbolize the victory of peaceful demonstrations against the El Bashir's Islamist regime. People called for freedom, peace and justice and a proliferation of slogans was a defining feature of the sit-in atmosphere. People woke up after uncomfortable sleep on the pavement and were greeted by a now famous anthem, *Sabah al Kheir* (Good morning), which was sung and recorded by Mahdiya.[11] Mahdiya was in her mid-twenties, educated at Ahfad, and hailed from a lower-middle class family in

[10] See Abdel Aziz, Ahmed, Azza and Aroob Alfaki (2021).

[11] We met Mahdiya at a music camp organized by the World Music Academy and the Goethe Institute in Khartoum in October 2019.

Khartoum. Her song helped raise morale among the protestors and inspired their strength to maintain the sit-in, a zone that was alive and full of human bodies.

Over the first year of the revolution, the music public scene became, to some extent, a place for women musicians (singers and instrumentalists) to voice and develop their political claims. Those claims were sometimes made through acts of defiance directed towards patriarchal structures and often supported by men. Throughout the protests on the streets of Khartoum, numerous women and men musicians performed and encouraged people to claim their rights and continue the struggle. Yousra, a 22-year old woman and *oud* player, performed and sang on the streets with her music teacher who is the leader of a mixed (women and men) band. Coming from a lower-middle class family in Bahri, (Khartoum North) and educated at Ahfad University, she did not express her political engagements in our conversation. Instead, she focused on the social challenges of being a woman musician in a conservative society. Yet, when her teacher and mentor encouraged her to accompany him on the streets in Omdurman in May 2019, she complied. In this situation, her political awareness and claims were being facilitated by a man, who helped her manifest her political convictions within the public domain. Despite socially restricted access, women arrived in unexpected numbers and contributed to a counter narrative within a context that sought to reduce their impact within the Sudanese musical landscape. They enacted the slogan brandished during the revolutionary movement: "A voice of a woman is a revolution".

We noticed that most of the young women musicians we spoke to, by their own accounts, had not been politically engaged before the revolution. Some were involved in music projects that were political in claiming gender and social equality, and were, among other variables, influenced by Sudanese categorizations and understandings of race. *Salute Yal Banoot*, an all women group, came together with the African-American feminist jazz musician, Akua Naru*, at the *Yalla Khartoum* workshop organized by the Goethe Institute in 2015. One of their first hits was, *African Girl*.[12] Through the training offered by the Institute, *Salute Yal Banoot* placed themselves on the music scene as young African feminist musicians.[13] The process of becoming empowered musicians led the members of the group to finish writing, *Ya Watani* (Oh My Country), which they performed on the streets of the sit-in (near the Armed Forces headquarters). The group performed their songs in this public space, received support from the demonstrators, and were vocal and active on social media (Facebook and Instagram posts). Through such acts, as well as deliberating writing revolutionary music, the band became part of the political dialogue about a unified Sudanese national identity that accepted the diversity of its population and recognized this as an asset. Through the revolution, all women musicians in our research embraced political contestation in their musical practice, as well as in their private lives.

Salute Yal Banoot's emerging political stance was exemplified during a performance of this song during a concert in Kuwait in March 2019. Invited to play by the Sudanese embassy, the more politically-active members of the band persuaded the other members to seize this moment and wear white *tobes* when they

[12] We thank an anonymous reviewer for signaling this event.

[13] This involved taking distance from Northern Sudanese notions of being Arab by some from this region and the articulation of being Sudanese as sufficient to overcome historical injustices based on localized understandings of racialized identifications. This introduces the polemical issue of negotiating Sudan's fractured identity as Afro or Arab or a mixture (see Casciarri et al, 2020).

performed, *Ya Watani*. This took place in front of the Sudanese officials against whom they were protesting. "We had to do something. We could not just say that nothing is going on in our country when there were people dying on the streets in Khartoum during our concert in Kuwait", said the guitarist, singer and a co-author of the song. Their performance was a sign of political awakening and an act of political activism for the band. Their actions spoke directly to 'who' can be a citizen based on 'collective and individual deeds that rupture socio-historical patterns' (Isin and Nielsen, 2008, p. 13). These young women created this 'rupture' through the use of their gendered voices and gendered bodies in a public space with music that encouraged political, social and cultural belonging.

REVOLUTION: THE KANDAKA RISING LIKE A PHOENIX FROM THE ASHES
REWORKINGS OF KANDAKAS, MEHEIRAS AND TRANSLOCAL BELONGINGS

The presence of women in a political space, described above, captured the public imagination and became a topic of interest in the global media, which framed Sudanese women as Nubian queens, called *Kandakas*.[14] Under the brutal backlash of security forces, revolutionaries were killed and, because more men were killed than women, martyrdom *(shahid*) became the domain of men (although some women were included in these discussions). For example, a popular song during the revolution by Awadia Azab went, "My son is a martyr and my daughter a *Kandaka"*. Lines like this clearly delineate the values associated with women's and men's roles in the revolution.

Azab and other artists collectively generated a narrative about the *Kandaka*. This narrative shifted her legendary presence as a trope for the revolution, to a symbol in the processes of creative citizenship that allowed for multiple subjectivities and senses of belonging to the Sudanese nation. This representation of the *Kandaka* framed Sudanese women through an allusion to Nubian queens of yore (even though the term itself is non-inclusive to many Sudanese women). Before the revolution, the *Kandaka* figure had been subjected to a subtle 'configuration of the erasure'[15] in Sudanese history that had occupied these lands before the advent of Islam (and Arab influences). The *Kandaka* existed in the collective consciousness as an ethereal undefined figure. In our discussion as researchers, Azza (author), as a Sudanese, recalled the lyrics of a popular wedding song that accompanied bridal dances, *"al Kandaka sidi sidi laraka"*, without understanding them. In most cases, these lyrics remained unintelligible to Azza and were repeated in the guise of folkloric terminology.

During the revolution, *Meheira* and *Kandaka* were recast as objects of representation for young women musicians. As signifiers, these historical figures emerged as evidence that revolution is fluid, which employs and transforms classical symbols according to its temporal concerns and parameters. These signs come to mean different things for different people. This process highlights how

[14] The picture became of Alaa Salah as the ultimate Kandaka was widely publicized in multiple international media outlets see: BBC Arabic with captioning the picture statue of liberty and the Sudanese *Kandaka* 9th April 2018, cover of the Washington post 10th April 2019, Libération 12th April 2019 announcing the 2nd Arab Spring in Algeria and Sudan and portraying this image on its cover, the Guardian 24th April 2019, displayed on the placards of commemorations of Labour day in Stockholm (Sweden) on the 1st of May 2019.

[15] Erasure was performed by the Islamist regime when it dismantled statues and symbols of historical figures across the landscape of Khartoum. This was continued after the dismantlement of the sit-in that marked the success of the revolution in ousting El Bashir, including the erasure of mural on the walls of the sit-in by the military after the massacres of the 3rd of June.

young women interpreted these historical figures in ways related to present day conditions during the revolution.

Heba Altayeb* (early 30s) is an Ahfad graduate and manages the *Salute Yal Banoot* band. She shared her connection with the *Kandaka* and *Meheira*:

> Meheira was a warrior, not a queen. She was a normal girl, not a queen deploying her availed forces and official power. She is a stronger woman for me. The Kandaka is overrated, and people don't know what she really represents. They don't know the meaning. In order to find out about the Kandaka Amani Renas, I had to conduct my own research. (Interview December 2019, Khartoum)

As a Sudanese person, Azza was aware that Meheira hailed from the Shayqiya ethnic group, a fact that was widely documented. However, in the context of the revolution, none of the musicians we spoke with mentioned this ethnic membership. Meheira's identity was glossed over, indicating that bodily morphology and physical resemblances were markers of proximity between diverse Sudanese women rather than differences of ethnicity. For Heba, the Kandaka also did not resonate in real terms: "Amani Renas (*Kandaka*) is not a Kandaka in the collective imagination of the Sudanese people", but she also added, Meheira was "in our history books. Heba's attachment to this latter figure is interesting, yet she does not mention the fact that the regime allowed *Meheira* in the books and erased *Kandaka*.

The salience of *Meheira* in our research is noteworthy. When we, as researchers, introduced her as an example of the *hamasa* genre, a women teacher at the Institute of Music and Drama referred to her as a legacy in Sudanese music. *Meheira* is the real historical figure that comes to personify the brave Sudanese woman (Elamin and Ismail, 2019).

Furthermore, she often represents the nation of Sudan, *Miherat al Sudan* (also a name sung to represent Sudan). Thus, Sudanese nationhood is relayed through the feminine representation in the works of men poets and performers. Yet, in our fieldwork, *Kandaka* figure was referred to more often. Miriam, a translocal young rapper and hip-hop artist, explained to us that she had seen the word sporadically before the revolution but only realized its significance, as the site of a great civilization, during the revolution. She expressed a need to educate herself through research.

Miriam's need is important because it sets up a negotiation between academic knowledge and other ways of knowing. Her embodied ways of knowing, through musical performance, were more salient than reading history books to understand the importance of "being a *Kandaka*". This is confirmed by the fact that she is drawn to this figure in her capacity as an artist. She is in dialogue with art forms that make this icon real and inspirational for her as a woman musician. Miriam was vaguely familiar with the iconic figure of *Kandaka* through the *Kandaka Kronicles* (Instagram page) before the revolution, but this page takes on more power for her after the term is popularized. She told us: "This page is created by a Sudanese artist, Yasmin Al Sadig, she is a visual artist and makes beautiful collage pieces-that are very feminist and very rooted in Nubian history".

Miriam exemplifies a different version of a young Sudanese musician. She is a translocal artist of mixed origins (Egyptian-Iranian-Sudanese ethnically and American by nationality) who lived in the US from the age of one to ten and studied at university and graduate school (in Holland and the UK, respectively). While she is strongly committed to being Sudanese (she clarifies that it is the part of her

identity that most resonates with her despite her mixed cultural heritage) and the promotion of Sudanese music production, she identifies herself as a musician and a hip-hop artist, whose inspiration comes from other genres of music rather than classical Sudanese rhythms and history. Through music practice and production, including her work as a member of the *249 Experience* (a rap and hip-hop album produced by a circle of Sudanese artists), she is working through her own political trajectory. Additionally, in her other songs, she works through her personal cultural belonging. In all her music production, she combines elements of a complex identity in her songs and performances.

Miriam's case places the nuances between the translocal and the diasporic in dialogue. She personifies the translocal as the possibility of being Westernized (i.e., sartorial choices and fashion choices, communication in English since she spoke poor Arabic) while inhabiting the local setting of Sudan. The fact that she is a translocal artist, rather than a diasporic one, (always transnational and navigating physical distances, borders, distinct territories and temporalities) manifests itself in her musical collaborations with UK and US-based Sudanese diasporic artists. However, it also refers to her mixed heritage in her songs, and how she adapts her performances and outfits for the specific venues in which she performs. These differences, between the translocal and diasporic, culminate in musical productions that voice divergent expressions of crucial engagements with Sudan and other locations around the globe.

Our third respondent, Narimane*, found inspiration in the *Kandaka*. She is a young guitarist who is a granddaughter of Zakia Abu Algassim Abubakr, the first Sudanese woman guitarist. In our conversations, Narimane only alluded to *Kandaka*. In this context, it is revealing that her fiancé is Nubian while she is not (this may have influenced her sole reference to powerful women, *Kandanas*, who are associated with Nubian origin). To paraphrase Yuval-Davis, in this instance we see how nationhood and the act of belonging to a nation are narrated through the powerful feminine figure, and become an emblem of Sudanese nationhood. Yet each of these women musicians give a different interpretation of *Kandaka* and *Meheira* based on their own personal trajectory.

WOMEN MUSICIANS, POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTS AND BANAT NAS (GOOD GIRLS)

As we have shown in the previous section, *Kandakas* and *Meheiras* are inspirations for their own lived political engagements. Yet, they are still representations that illustrate the nature of the revolution and how it is in constant negotiation with prevailing gender norms that are based on Islam. While the Sudanese have rejected political Islam, images of people praying *en masse* during the sit-in are abound on social media. These images illustrate that the practice of Islam remains robust. Images of Coptic[16] Sudanese protecting fellow Muslim citizens proliferate (see figure 2). The message is that Sudan is predominantly Muslim but is open to the differences between members of its diverse population.

[16] Coptic Sudanese refer to an orthodox church based in Alexandria, Egypt.

Figure 2: Copts protecting Muslims praying at sit-in. Author unknown 2019 (widely diffused on social media).

The video music track of the song, *Madaniya, huria wa salam* (written by Bushra Ibrahim and performed by Ahmed Amin) show *Kandakas* wearing white traditional *tobes* with a man's hand placing the white cloth on a women's head. One of the lines in the *Meheriat al Sudan* music video (sung by a man and a woman) says, "The volcano erupted through the light of science and faith". In the video, we see a visual depiction of the Koran; Sufis clad in green participating in the revolution; men prostrating themselves in prayer; revolutionary veiled girls or wearing *tobes*; brides wearing their gold jewelry; women ululating to encourage all people to go out to the streets; and the image of Alaa Salah and Nefertiti (the pharaonic queen). In both narratives, the values of respectability dominate and gendered norms are still being negotiated.

Notwithstanding, some change has been accomplished through the increased visibility of women musicians. However, despite coming from different backgrounds and performing different genres, they still need to be *banat nas* (daughters of respectable people). Some young women musicians expand the boundaries of belonging through music by playing instruments that are considered male, such as percussion or electric guitars. Miriam clearly indicated to us that she did not gain her musical aptitude from any Sudanese musical influences and that she was a hip-hop artist performing predominantly with men. She said she found all-girl bands 'cool' but she did not want that separation for herself. For her, the quality of her music was more important than being given favors as a girl-band member. Through this outside influence (or perhaps in spite of it), she can still be a Sudanese musician who is part of the musical tradition. Moreover, she can evoke Sudanese experiences and/or refer to Sudan as she does in the album, *249 Experience,* and in her performance at the Coptic Club in Khartoum in November 2019.

The use of English profanity would be seen as offensive and not in line with the status of *banat nas,* (who come from respectable and morally sound families). The profanity was just filler to place her within the urban hip-hop culture from the West. Yet, these words were salient since their rejection was also reinforced by her grandmother's Egyptian heritage which shares notions of 'Arab' respectability. These notions are generally favored through prevailing moral codes within conservative parts of societies designated as 'Arab' or bearing strong influences of

Arab traditions. Miriam felt that her use of profanity did not make her any less respectable as a Sudanese young woman even though close family members, notably her mother, wanted her to refrain from using them.

For young women musicians, music gradually allowed a counter narrative to emerge and gave them access to an alternative world. Music was a way to transgress certain societal norms and allowed them to make wider political claims through their performances and onstage personas. Some young women cut their hair or even shaved it, which is very daring in the Sudanese context since it defied conservative Islamic ideals. Consequently, this pointed to engagements with liberal or left-leaning secular social influences, destabilizing the images of classical norms of hegemonic northern Sudanese beauty standards (Abdel Aziz, 2020).

Others navigated conservative behavior by keeping their scarves loose while on stage. The 22-year old *oud* player loosened her scarf while performing in the mixed band and during her solo performances. She kept her scarf to maintain an image of, in her own words, a "normal conservative Sudanese young woman" and to respect her mother's wishes. These words indicate how she attempted to find a balance between respecting societal gender and generational norms while performing with an *oud*.[17] This musician also performed traditional Sudanese music for 'expatriates' (affluent individuals working as diplomats, UN agencies, International NGOs) with her scarf often on her shoulders. Hence, she engaged with a different cosmopolitan presence in Sudan and expanded her spatial horizons while negotiating her status as a culturally-accepted woman musician.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have traced the ways some young and educated urban women musicians emerged as political actors on the music scene during the latest Sudanese revolution in Khartoum. They captured the powerful historical figures of *Kandakas* and *Meheiras* and reworked them through their own engagements, demonstrating a diversity of political, social and identity claims being made by contemporary Sudanese women. What emerges is that women musicians in Khartoum, through music practice and performance, have contributed to the recasting of political participation through *creative citizenship*. Different individuals who created music were claiming a stake to Sudan through creative musical endeavors and their personal trajectories.

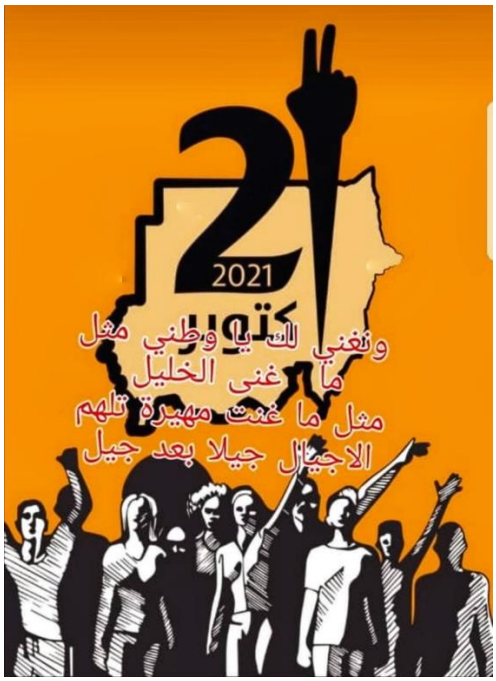
The visible and vocally-present role of young women musicians during the revolution and their direct engagement with political issues, emerges as a counter-narrative (through creative and embodied practice) against the manipulation of the Islamist state prior to the revolution. In this context, the symbols of *Kandaka* and *Meheira* convey different meanings for the young women musicians. Both figures are (re)interpreted and embodied in diverse ways to enhance belonging to the crafted nation. Through their music and performance, sometimes consciously articulated and sometimes offering only hints, young women musicians interrogate and contest Sudanese identity manifestations of class, translocalism, transnationalism, religion, ethnic origins. In this way, they also bring to light their political claims.

[17] The *oud* is an instrument played mostly by men. Asma Hamza Bashir became the first formally trained woman oud performer in 1946.

CODA

The transition period that began in August 2019, after the June 3 massacre, was fraught with tension. Political actors representing the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) were unable to agree with their government partners in the military. These tensions led to the formation of two governments (both led by Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok) but the ideological strife between the diverse factions continued and was compounded by a serious blockade in the port in Eastern Sudan by groups sympathetic to the old regime. In mid-October, 2021, partisans of the old Islamist regime supported by the military contingent within government and external actors, staged a sit-in in front of the presidential palace. On the anniversary of the October 21, 1964 revolution, a million-person march took place confirming the values of revolution: freedom, peace and justice. The record of this event represents the salience of the nation, its integrity and the will to safeguard these virtues by evoking the role of *Meheira* and echoing her voice, through time, in the construction of an on-going nationalist project.

Figure 3: Social media poster by the artist and graphic designer Abdulrahman Noureldin Madani who prepared it as an engagement with the revolutionary process. – the caption says: *"And I sing to you my homeland (ya watani) as Khalil sang. As Meheira sang, inspiring generation after generation".*



The Arabic inscription was added to the original image by other revolutionaries who were given access to it by the artist. The artist allowed them to use his art, as they saw fit, in support of an ongoing revolutionary process.

To avoid relinquishing power, the leading military generals overthrew the transitional government through a coup on October 25th, 2021. Since that date, peaceful demonstrations have been met with brutal force, with many people dying as a result. The rapes that some women were subjected to on December 30th, 2021, elicited a public response of support with revolutionaries chanting, "Azza you are unflinching, you are honour" (*inti al thabat wa al sharaf*). On one hand, this statement clearly conflates Sudanese women, with lofty sacrifices and suffering that ensure the integrity of the motherland/homeland. On the other, the statement molds them all into the symbolic 'Azza'. In this way, sacrifice and nation become almost

one entity. This fusion is created by the formation of an intersubjective space of experiencing belonging to Sudan, which the processes of revolution have set into motion and of which the musicians presented in this piece form a part.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Katarzyna (Kasia) Grabska is a feminist anthropologist and a senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute, Oslo, Norway. Her current research focuses on artistic practice in conflict and exile settings. She has also researched on issue of gender, youth, access to rights for refugees, and social transformations in the contexts of displacement, war and forced migration. Kasia works with visual media, feminist methodologies, collaborative and transformative methodologies. In her commitment to engaged and co-creative knowledge production and sharing, she often collaborates with artists and engages with art-based research to understand issues of civic engagement, social justice, belonging, displacement, mobilities and identities. She is also a film-maker.

Azza Ahmed Abdel Aziz holds a PhD from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. She is a social and medical anthropologist, affiliated with the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Khartoum. Azza's research as a social and medical anthropologist has explored cultural understandings of health and well-being, which largely feature an exploration of the interface between such understandings and biomedical configurations of health. Her work pivots on how different individuals and groups access health and understand well-being on a continuum ranging from therapeutics based on cultural beliefs, sensory experience, bodily memory and those based on scientific epistemologies and biomedicine. She has in-depth experience working on these issues among individuals and groups whose lives have been subject to experiences of movement/migration, both in the UK and in Sudan. Furthermore, she has focused on the problematic of the diversity of Sudanese identities from the vantage point of the social and the political, to elucidate how it impacts processes of exclusion, marginalization, difference, belonging and becoming. More recently she has been working on the role of women in the Sudanese revolution of December 2018: their avenues of political participation during the transitional period, as well as how music and art are pathways in the quest for the construction of healthier modes of national identities.

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