



Traditional dance and music performed by a Kuwaiti group.

Photo by Bassam Abu Shenab

Desert music offered respite to hardy people

## Kuwaiti folk tunes echo its heritage

By Chaitali B. Roy  
Special to the Arab Times

It is not unusual to come across the sudden sound of drum beating and the echo of a sing song chant around Kuwait. Nor is it unusual to see groups of Kuwaiti men dressed in traditional attire stand in line, moving slowly to the beat of music, arms lowered and hands touching. Some of them could be playing a frame drum with bells attached on the insides, while others hold swords and sheaths, which they raise periodically.

Folk songs are a very important part of history. They tell us a great deal about people of the past-how they worked, how they entertained, and what their daily lives were like. The traditional music of Kuwait echoes its diverse heritage, a fusion of Bedouin with East African and Indian music, derived from its active trading past. The ongoing traffic of foreign traders and the journey of pearling and merchant ships to distant countries brought in foreign musical influences that affected local musical styles. It is not unusual to hear strains of Indian folk music or the beat of African drums while you listen to various work songs of Kuwait.

### Important

In the past music played an important role in relieving the tedium and hard slog of everyday life faced by people both at sea and in the desert. As sailors, pearl divers, camel herders they kept the pace of their labour through work songs. Most of these songs addressed the hardships of their life; some were songs of encouragement while others expressed love and longing for their homeland. Traditional folk music survived and flourished among the Bedouins, pearl divers, city dwellers and women. Each separate social group nurtured the musical forms

and though each subculture was distinct, none existed in isolation. They all accepted influences from each other and from neighbouring musical cultures. It was not unusual to come across the same type of song both in the desert and at sea, though with different rhythms and to the accompaniment of different musical instruments.

The Arabian Peninsula has a long history of migration and when the Utab tribe from Najd migrated to the Gulf, they carried their musical traditions. Traditional music in Kuwait can be broadly classified into music of the desert, music of the sea and urban music depending on the setting, instruments and lyrics of the songs. "The root of desert music in Kuwait is Nejd," notes Dr Lisa Urkevich, Associate Professor of musicology/ethnomusicology at the American University of Kuwait (AUK) and Division Head of Humanities and Arts Division and leading specialist in the music and artistic culture of the Arabian Peninsula.

### Dismiss

There is something about desert music that brings to mind the languorous and stately walk of the camel. Dr Urkevich cannot totally dismiss the association. "Desert music has an irregular beat and a 'camel walk type' of drag. In fact Khaleeji music is always behind the beat, if you listen carefully. What is really interesting is that the deeper you go into Najd, the delay or drag becomes more pronounced." Desert music changes as you draw closer to Kuwait, perhaps due to influences brought by traders and sailors converging on a port town, resulting in a dilution of traditional music. The first time I heard desert music, I felt it was the strangest thing I had ever heard," recalls Dr Urkevich. "I soon realized that the 'drag' is done on purpose." To find

further answers, she mounted a tape recorder on a camel and was pleasantly surprised to catch the sound of the saddle shift, when the camel moved.

### Categorize

It is not easy to categorize music in the Arabian Peninsula as names and form of music change depending on the region. "At times the same piece of music might have different rhythms. It is not unusual to come across sea songs that may share the same rhythm as desert music, as one borrows from the other." Another difficulty in classifying regional music is that names change depending on the place of performance. "For instance the dance form badawwi is known as Fares in Saudi Arabia," notes Dr Urkevich. The 'samri', 'badawwi', 'ardha', 'dosari' and 'negazi' are some popular forms of desert music in Kuwait.

The Ardha and Samri are two well known forms of Gulf Music. Dr Urkevich refers to them as 'sister dance forms' although the ardha is associated more with men while the samri is danced by both. "The ardha is a slow trip, almost like a waltz," she gesticulates. "This is the dance form where the drag beat of the

camel is noticeable." Though both dance forms originate from northern Saudi Arabia, yet there are variations in the way the dance progresses. Samri brings together poetry, music, drumming and movement, in keeping with folk music tradition. This form of music draws from a large repertoire. Dr Urkevich notes that the samri varies depending on where it is performed. "The samri is considered a macho dance in Saudi Arabia. While doing the samri men form two lines facing one another, kneeling while they perform. The dance may last for hours and the posture of sitting on one's feet can be pretty painful." The movement restricted to swaying and leaning is at times very slow, punctuated by clapping and singing, lifting and lowering of drums. It is a complex, highly stylized dance form which may take years to perfect. "At times to prove they are macho, many strap their knees, to show they are stronger," says Dr Urkevich with a smile. The dance is a show of strength, for the performers who have to lift huge drums requiring considerable effort. "Sometimes the men play for long hours resulting in bloodstained hands and knees."

### Celebrations

For both men and women folk dances are collective celebrations of important events in one's life. Men and women dance the samri differently. For women the samri is a slow dance involving considerable gliding, head movement, sideways tossing of the hair. Dressed in thobes and holding their fingers to the side of their nose with arms raised, women dance in graceful movements. The samri, as the matriarch of the Al Munayes family once shared, was held in very high regard by women especially mothers with eligible sons. "It was usual for young unmarried women to dance the

samri during celebrations. It was one way they could show off their grace, poise and beauty to mothers of prospective grooms," she recalls.

### Complement

Apart from the samri, the martial dance ardha is another folk tradition that has continued its hold over the region for centuries. The national dance of Kuwait, the ardha traces its roots to Nejd in Saudi Arabia. The region with its history of tribal infighting saw very frequent performance of the ardha the night before battle. "During that night tribesmen would get out all their armaments and weaponry and decked in their martial finery would sing and dance to instill fear and frighten their enemies preparing for the next day's battle," said Dr Urkevich painting a vivid picture of a turbulent time in history when people of the Arabian peninsula identified themselves with clans. "The ardha would be performed both before and after a battle to pump up the excitement. With the passage of time it came to be associated with grand celebrations."

Song and dance complement each other in folk music tradition. "Folk music around the world is tied to some kind of dance," notes Dr Urkevich. The badawwi is a folk tradition which is popular during weddings. "The Badawi has a distinct rhythm where women dancers charge across the room. Some people call it the female ardha or the female battle dance," she explains. During gatherings, women from a certain clan or family would declare their presence and charge towards the leading women of the other clan, extending a challenge. "It is almost like a 'come on' to which women on the other side respond to with gusto." As the dance progresses the rhythm increases. Music and dance played an important role in

social life. It is during celebrations that marriage alliances were forged. When the women got up to declare their presence, it was almost as if they were telling those on the lookout for a bride that 'this is my family, these are the women of my clan.' The samri and the badawwi both part of the same folk tradition are different in mood and rhythm. Whereas the samri is more serious, badawwi is fun. In Kuwait a variation of the samri called the khemari is popular. It is a slow dance where there is not much movement of the feet with the dancers swaying and bending slowly. "The emphasis is more on nuance," notes Dr Urkevich while making an observation about Gulf music. "All movements are measured. The extent to which the sword is lifted and turned is well planned and predetermined. "To an outsider this might not be so obvious, but every little movement and gesture is well thought out."

The Bedouin contribution to traditional Arab musical instruments include the portable rababa, the reed flute called nai, the deff, and the oud, all outcomes of a migratory life in the harshness of the desert. In Kuwait the use of instrument depends on the form of music. While singing work songs at sea, the sailors used indigenous instruments quite different from the ones used in the desert or while performing the Kuwaiti version of chamber music. Songs and dance came to be associated with rituals, with passage of rites and with life and death. It is difficult to envisage the realities of a wandering life in the desert, bereft of all that we would take for granted. It was perhaps music that gave the hardy people of an arid region a respite from the relentless barrenness of an inhospitable region where only the brave and resilient can survive.



Dr Lisa Urkevich

of the Republic of Turkey announces that the Consular section of the Embassy is open between 08:30 to 13:00 hours on working days. It will be closed on Kuwaiti official holidays and at weekends.

Regular passport holders of the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar) can obtain single or multiple entry visas valid up to three months upon their arrival at the Turkish international airports/border gates, as well as from the Consular Section of the Embassy.

Kuwaiti diplomatic and special passport holders are exempt from visa (they don't need visa) for their touristic travels to Turkey for a duration of up to 90 days.

For further information about the visa procedures, visa application forms as well as touristic, cultural and economic guides please visit the Embassy's web-page [www.turkish\\_embassy.org.kw](http://www.turkish_embassy.org.kw).

### Sept 4

**Ukrainian Embassy announcement:** Embassy of Ukraine would like to inform that on Sept 4-5, 2008 the 8th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers for migration affairs will take place in Kiev (Ukraine). The aim of the conference is to give an

opportunity for ministers to debate and agree on policy solutions relevant to the conditions prevailing in their countries and stemming from the increasing flows of economic migrants, in particular East to West and within the Eastern region of Europe.

Except ministers of Council of Europe member states, competent for migration affairs and representatives from European Union, in conference will also participate non-member states, which have observer status in this organization. Representatives of other international governmental and non-governmental organizations are also invited.

For detailed information please contact the Embassy: 5318507 ext. 104.

### Sept 9

**Indian scholarship for PIOs/NRIs:** The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, Government of India has announced the Scholarship Programme for Diaspora Children (SPDC-2009) for the children of PIOs/NRIs to pursue undergraduate courses in several disciplines in India. The Educational Consultants India Limited (Ed.CIL), a Government of India Enterprise, has been designated as the Nodal Agency for implementation of the SPDC.

The following are the highlights of the SPDC-2009:

- 100 scholarships are being offered for undergraduate courses in several disciplines including Engineering/Architecture/Technology, Humanities/Liberal Arts, Commerce, Management — BBA/BBM, Journalism, Hotel Management, Agriculture/Animal Husbandry, sciences, law, etc.
- The programme is open only to PIOs/NRIs from the specified 40 countries, including Kuwait, having a larger concentration of Indian Diaspora.
- 50% of the scholarship would be reserved for PIOs. However, in the event of non-availability of suitable PIO candidates, the unfilled slots could be assigned to NRI candidates.

■ NRI candidates would be eligible for the grant of scholarship only if their total family income per month does not exceed an amount equivalent of \$2,250 (US dollars two thousand two hundred and fifty only).

■ Children of NRIs should have pursued at least three years education inclusive of 11th & 12th or equivalent (not beyond), in a foreign country during the last six years, and should have passed the qualifying examination abroad.

■ The last date for receipt of duly filled-in application forms in the prescribed format by Ed.CIL is Sept 9, 2008.

■ PIO/NRI students already studying in India on a self-financing basis or under any other arrangement will not be eligible under this scheme, which is open only for fresh admissions in the first semester/year of undergraduate courses.

■ Candidates would be selected on the basis of a common entrance test to be conducted by Ed.CIL on Oct 26, 2008 in Kuwait by the Embassy of India, Kuwait. Exact timings would be intimated by Ed.CIL. The candidates would also have to fulfill all the criteria prescribed for the purpose.

■ The amount of scholarship admissible would be 75% of the Institutional Economic Cost (IEC) or \$3,600 (US dollars three thousand six hundred), whichever is less. IEC

includes tuition fee, hostel fee and other institutional charges.

The announcement details, guidelines and the application form can be downloaded from the Ed.CIL websites [www.edcil.co.in](http://www.edcil.co.in); and [www.educationindia4u.nic.in](http://www.educationindia4u.nic.in).

**Korean Embassy working hours:** The working hours of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea have been changed from 08:00am - 4:00pm to 8:00am - 2:30pm effective from July 13, 2008.

**S. African Emb Ramadan timings:** During the Holy month of Ramadan, the South African Embassy will be open to the public, Sunday through Thursday from 09:00 am to 14:00 pm.

Please note that the Consular Section operation hours will be from 9:30 am to 12:30 pm, Sunday through Thursday.

**Kenyan Embassy Ramadan timings:** The Embassy of the Republic of Kenya will observe the following working hours during the Holy Month of Ramadan. Sunday to Thursday 9:00 - 3:00 pm.

Continued on Page 29

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### Sports

Continued from Page 26

6082238/ demofblbap@yahoo.com.  
Demos N. Arienda, Basketball Association of the Philippines, BAP - Commissioner/ Kuwait chapter.

Member: FIBA-International Basketball Federation, SEABA-South East Asean Basketball, POC-Philippine Olympic Committee.

**Kuwait Darts and Social League:** The Kuwait Darts and Social League, 2007-2008 season, will be starting soon. New players and teams are invited to join. Please contact Stan (tel 4847259) or one of the captains (see website <http://kd18.tripod.com>) as soon as possible to register your interest.

### Embassies

**Turkish Embassy timings:** The Embassy