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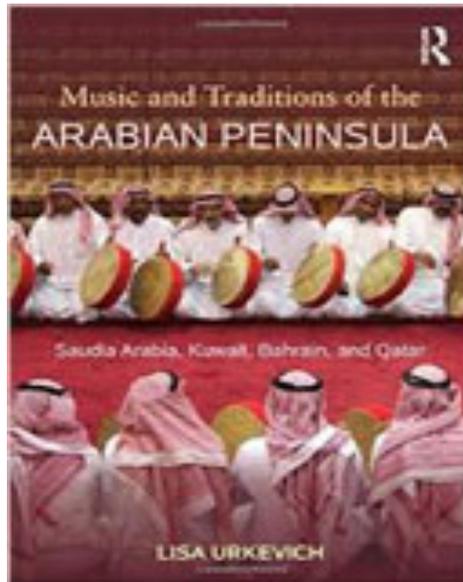


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**Music and Traditions of the Arabian Peninsula:  
Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar**

**By:** Lisa Urkevich

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**Review by**

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This timely monograph, ethnographically collected and written by Lisa Urkevich who enjoys a long experience in researching and teaching in the Arabian Peninsula, provides a vivid cross-cultural study of music and performance arts performed in various Arabian societies including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar. The author defines her approach by stating that she does not seek to write an academic research that concentrates on processes and values with a western anthropological perspective; rather, she seeks to introduce Arabian Peninsula musical arts and locate them into historical and social contexts.

Social contexts of Bedouin, rural, and urban communities are highlighted as shown in the author's statement that the music people perform depends on the communities to which they belong. Within the Arabian Gulf context, musical arts are divided into those of the land, such as Bedouin (*badū*) and urban or settled communities (*hadar*) and those of the sea, such as pearlers and fishermen. In addition to the traditional-folk music and performance of Arabian Gulf societies, commercial and popular music heard on the radio of these societies is considered *khalīji*. For instance, a person from the Najd in Saudi Arabia might enjoy a combination of current *hadar*, *badū* and commercial arts.

As Urkevich points out, people of the northern Gulf nations are viewed as cultural kin, and a large number of them stem from shared tribes. These nations are also united

by common seafaring traditions. Traditional-folk art, considered pure art (*fann al-asīl*), is performed along with modern and commercial arts due to the impact of shared heritage genres. For example, many commercial songs are considered by Saudi and Gulf elders as associated with traditional arts. Saudi artists incorporate more frame drums (*tīrān*) as found in the Najd. Emirati produced *khalīji* songs, the most prevalent in the early twenty-first century, include a *bandari* rhythm similar to that of southern Iran across the sea.

The book, including an introduction, contains 19 chapters divided into two parts. Part I, encompassing eight chapters (2-9), discusses the music and performance arts in the Najd and Upper Gulf Region. Part II, consisting of 10 chapters (10-19), focuses on the Hijaz and Southwest Region.

In Part I, the author addresses Bedouin and non-Bedouin music and performance arts in the Najd and Upper Gulf Region. She points out that traditional *nabati* poetry, commemorating particular events related to tribal territories, watering holes, grievances, chivalry, and battles, is the dominant form of all Bedouin artistic expression. Bedouin musical genres and solo arts, including *rebāba*, are found in the Najd and Upper Gulf.

Many Bedouin collective arts, such as *'arda*, *razīf* and *dahha*, are presently performed for weddings, private celebrations and national festivities. The author pays attention to Bedouin women's music, songs and dance associated with both collective and solo arts performed mainly in traditional wedding celebrations. In addition, female drumming bands (*taggāgāt*), basically slaves, immigrants, or descendants of immigrants hired for celebrating weddings and other social occasions, are also discussed. With reference to the non-Bedouin Gulf arts, there are four divisions with cross-cultural significance: land, sea, city (*ūd*, *maqām*-based), and incoming arts, including *laywa* (African origin), *tanbūra* (African origin), *habān* or *jirba* (bagpipe music of Persian origin) and *zār* or *sāmri* (African origin) associated with exorcism of spirit possession. These multiple traditional arts that have roots outside the Upper Gulf cultures are considered part of local heritage. The author indicates that some arts such as *sāmri*, are used exclusively by urbanites (*hadar*), while other arts, such as *'arda*, a battle genre, are performed by both Bedouin (*badū*) and *hadar*. She also maintained that sea arts are deeply ingrained in the cultures of the Upper Gulf notwithstanding the rapid decline in sea life caused by the development of the cultured pearl and discovery of oil.

In Part II, the author tackles the music and traditions of the Hijaz and Southwest Region. She argues that the most prevalent arts are those linked to specific villages or towns. The arts are performed by peoples of mixed heritage and enjoyed by all settled communities.

The relationship between traditional forms of arts prevalent in great cities such as Makkah, Medinah and Tā'if is addressed. For instance, Urkevich recounts that some of the most distinguished arts of Makkah and Medinah have originally been from Tā'if. Throughout the Hijaz, Tā'if is associated with *majrūr*, a folk art with dance, performed by both men and women. Another example is *dāna*, a predominant art-music category of the Hijaz that was created in Mekkah from where it spread to other cities. Moreover, the most celebrated Saudi artists such as Muhammad 'Abdu and 'Abdul Majīd 'Abdullah, among others, developed their skills in large Hijazi cities or Tā'if. However, the author argues, "for centuries cities like Mekkah and Medinah had a musical life that rivaled or even surpassed those of Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad" (p. 220). Such a statement seems not to be founded on historical evidence. Singing or

chanting and poetry recitation performed in Mekkah and Medinah may have competed with those of Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad, but not music.

The author argues that the geographic location of certain communities has played a critical role in the development of certain forms of music. For example, because Bīsha is located at a place where the Asīr, Najd, and the Hijaz meet, it developed musical characteristics contingent on *tār* (frame drum) not found in the Asīr highlands. Another example is that Nijrāni collective arts such as *zāmil* and *gezawi* are regional versions of the same forms found in the Asīr.

However, the author claims that because of the Empty Quarter and the twenty-first century royal governance, the music and cultures of the southern nations of the UAE, Oman, and the Yemen are somewhat different from those of Saudi and the Upper Gulf societies. This line of argument does not explain the fact that in addition to immigrants and slaves, many dominant tribes of the Upper and Lower-southern nations of the Gulf traveled across the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf — regardless of the Empty Quarter — and shared certain forms of music performance and traditions. Moreover, the Jīzān, located in the southern most Saudi province, borders the Yemen and, historically, have shared culture and traditional arts.

Urkevich's work enjoys significant features. In addition to English transliteration and translation of Arabic terms, this guidebook provides original Arabic script of poetry and songs. Although the author is not a native Arabic speaker, she pays particular attention to the meaning of Arabic terms. Furthermore, the book encloses commentary 'Boxes' (displaying Gulf arts and traditional genres), an appendix, a glossary (explaining key Arabic terminologies), black & white images and color photos, and an audio CD containing 31 examples of group and solo songs and music. There is also an extensive bibliography.

One of the most significant aspects of this monograph is that it provides information of relevance to researchers or scholars. In the meantime, it can be used as an introductory text for graduate and undergraduate students. Taken as a whole, the book is a fine ethnomusical collection and a welcome contribution to the scholarship of the Middle East, in general, and the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf societies, in particular.



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