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### New Bad Girls of Sudan: Women Singers in the Sudanese Diaspora

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## New Bad Girls of Sudan

ELEVEN ..... Women Singers in the Sudanese Diaspora

ANITA H. FÁBOS

S etona al-Magirus swept into the Sudan Culture and Information Center lecture hall in Cairo followed by her entourage. After a brief introduction by the center's director, she began to sing, accompanying herself on the *daloka*—a medium-size drum associated with women's performative culture in northern Sudan and, specifically, *aghānī al-banāt*, the songs sung by women that audiences associate with Sudanese wedding traditions. The large, almost entirely Sudanese audience, at that moment in the mid-1990s, expressed appreciation at hearing the familiar music associated with homeland rituals of marriage and gendered notions of traditional Sudanese culture by enthusiastically clapping and singing along.

But this performance was not simply a nostalgic act for a collection of immigrants yearning for the familiar. Nearly everyone in attendance that evening had left Sudan for Egypt under threatening circumstances created by the Islamist government that had taken over in a military coup in 1989. Some of these exiles, losers in the battle between democratic political change and fundamentalist military rule, had experienced severe violence at the hands of the regime and fled for their lives. Others had suffered harassment, threats, dismissal from employment, and other means—both bureaucratic and thuggish—to punish Sudanese men and women for their supposed transgressions. Such transgressions were defined differently for women and for men, often in accusations of immoral behavior as defined by Article 152 of the penal code, a significant tool in

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the Sudanese state's Islamic Civilization Project toolkit. Among the most severely treated by the regime were musicians, and women musicians in particular. Scores of musicians went into exile in protest and to continue their professional activities without restrictions or penalties. Setona Al-Magirus—the stage name of Fatima 'Ali Adam 'Uthman—was one of those who left her musical career in Khartoum behind to join other Sudanese in a spreading diaspora.

I focus here on the participation of a subset of Sudanese women singers outside of Sudan in the ongoing Sudanese conversation about identity and change. Women diaspora singers are at odds with the state-sponsored reorganization of Sudan's gender system, thus transgressing the borders of the Sudanese homeland and the boundaries of gender norms. Regardless of their personal preferences or complex relations with Sudan as a claim on identity, Sudanese women who perform as Sudanese-identified artists become lightning rods for those benefiting from the status quo. As such, their professional role itself is transgressive, pegged by a social, political, and legal system and its chief guardians as improper.

I introduce three contemporary diaspora women singers—Setona, Rasha, and Alsarah—whose musical participation in the complex geography of the Sudanese diaspora bridges genres, cultures, and histories. While bad girls have notably been part of the Sudanese popular music scene since its inception in the pre-independence period, the Internet and interactive social media sites in particular present opportunities for a new group of Sudanese bad girls beyond the immediate reach of the Sudanese state to participate in national conversations. Though they may not see themselves as bad girls, their Sudanese origins, global visibility, and challenges to ethnic, religious, class, and gender status quo position them as subversive in the face of state-sanctioned regulation of musical performance.

These new bad girl singers succeed a raft of celebrated women of an earlier era of Sudanese music who pushed to be included in Sudan's flourishing state-sponsored music industry and fought those who blocked women's paths to participate publicly as artists. Political conditions have meant an absence of new bad girls from the national music scene, a circumstance that has allowed the voices of diasporic singers a larger platform for their commentary and participation. The three singers have had very different exilic experiences, career paths, and relations with the Sudanese music scene—they are based in Madrid, Brooklyn, and Cairo—

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but together provide a lens on a broader debate over a Sudanese imagined community spanning the nation and its diaspora.

“Bad-girlness” is a useful perspective from which to view contemporary politics in Sudan for a number of reasons. In her analysis of the genesis of the Islamist state in the 1980s, Hale (1996) demonstrates the hegemonic male positioning of women in both left-wing and Islamist revolutionary movements. In the post-independence social and political transformation of Sudan that lasted from the mid-1950s to the 1990s, Hale and other scholars of the Sudanese state (Ali 2004; Bernal 1997; Willemse 2007) note women’s robust participation in Sudanese politics, the co-opting of this participation by powerful patriarchal interests, and a restructuring of women’s public roles in the years following the Islamist takeover of the state in 1989. Women who departed from the cultural and social script laid out by the Islamist movement, for example, have been labeled “bad” not only on the grounds of religious morality, but also—building upon earlier tropes of femininity as incorporating propriety (Fábos 2010), gender complementarity (Boddy 1989), and whiteness (Fábos 2012)—of ethnic nationalism.

### **Musicians and Morality: Transgressing the Social Order**

The association of musical expression with transgression of social and gender rules is not new and certainly not limited to Sudan or other societies in the Arab world. “In many countries, and in different historical periods,” asserts Karin van Nieuwkerk, “entertainers have been held in low esteem” (1995, 3). Explanations for the low status of music and dance include the opposition of some religions to worldly pleasures, the performative display of bodies, particularly female bodies, as immoral or sexualized, and the peripatetic nature of many entertainers serving the cyclical needs of settled communities for weddings and other celebrations (Berland 1983; van Nieuwkerk 1995). In societies where women’s public roles are circumscribed, female performers—whose professions fall outside social norms for women’s activities and who may display their bodies through their art—transgress the gender as well as social order and thus frequently incite repression.

In Sudan the variety of cultural practices, musical styles, and gender norms makes it impossible to generalize about the status of musicians, but I focus here on recorded popular music with high production values

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that is marketed globally and to a largely urban audience in northern Sudan. Ambivalence toward musical expression and women's voices is evident in the national discourse, as women's public role in musical culture has ebbed and flowed over the decades since independence. Since the early twentieth-century inception of Sudan as a national project, musicians have had an association with nationalist struggles and protests. From the 1960s through the 1980s, a small number of women singers took to the public stage. Peter Verney names three: "Demurely echoing the rise of the 1960s girl groups in the West, a few female duos rose to local popularity including Sunai Kordofani, Sunai el Nagam and Sunai el Samar" (1999, 676).

In the mid- to late 1980s, however, women performers were increasingly censured as a result of the rising tide of political and social conservatism that accompanied Sudan's emerging Islamist power brokers, the influence of Wahhabi Islam via returning migrant men, and the rekindling of the war with South Sudanese rebels. These along with other economic and political pressures brought a military coup in 1989 and new forms of social control, including robust regulation of women's bodies, behaviors, and roles. Women and men singers and musicians experienced a backlash associated with the gendered policing of morality. In 2012, even as the beloved anticolonial icon Hawa al-Tagtaga was being honored by President Omar al-Bashir for her performance for Sudanese troops while wrapped in the national flag on the day of Sudan's independence nearly six decades earlier, "a group of Salafi clerics visited Insaf Medani, the Hawa incarnate crowned as the contemporary 'queen of the *daloka*,' at her home in Khartoum North, advising her to stop *ḥarām* singing and dedicate her talent to the recitation of *ḥalāl* hymns" (El Gizouli 2012). The bold performer Hanan Bulu-bulu (Sudan's Madonna), who scandalized and delighted Sudanese society in the 1980s, was banned from performing, beaten up, and insulted for her "half-Ethiopian" heritage—a euphemism for licentious behavior (Verney 1999?).<sup>1</sup>

Musicians were among the first to be targeted by Sudan's Islamist regime after it seized power in a military coup in 1989; they were accused of promoting inappropriate comportment such as mixed-gender dancing and expressing political opposition through lyrics. Scores went into exile to protest and to continue their professions. In 1991 the singer and band-leader Yousef El-Mousely set up a recording studio in Cairo where musicians could produce music banned in Sudan, but Egypt's tough immigration policies led him and thousands of others in exile to move farther

along migration routes to more stable situations in asylum-granting countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

### **Regulating Women Musicians**

The Sudanese state now regulates and polices the public behavior of women living in Sudan through the 1983 Penal Code and 1991 Criminal Act, both of which are part of a trend in some Muslim countries to re-Islamize previously secular legal systems by introducing Islamic criminal offenses and sanctions in their codified laws (Sidahmed 2001, 188). Women singers of popular music have struggled to overcome not only their association with slave-origin musicians but also Sudanese notions of gender impropriety including performing in public spaces. As a result of ongoing government surveillance and raids on public and private performance spaces—for example, the 2009 arrest and punishment of Lubna Hussein and twelve others for the “indecent” of wearing trousers in a nightclub—women’s public musical performance is very much sanitized and tamed. Even private weddings are subject to state policy requiring permission papers for wedding parties, an 11 p.m. cutoff time for the festivities, and the prohibition of mixed-gender dancing. Furthermore, broadcasts of Sudanese culture, like those on the state-regulated Blue Nile TV channel, constrain performers’ depictions of the sensual bridal dance tradition to modest movements.

The Sudanese state’s regulatory control of women’s bodies in the realm of musical performance has its supporters in Sudan and the diaspora. The Internet has served as a site for monitoring, harassment, and abuse along gender and racial lines in accordance with the hierarchies of power maintained by Sudan’s dominant Arab Muslim elite (Wureta and Fábos 2012). Despite attempts by guardians of the status quo to bully their fellow Sudanese, alternative visions of Sudanese identity have emerged, and creative new artists have flourished beyond the reach of the state. As the career trajectories of Rasha, Alsarah, and Setona illustrate, the widening of Sudanese cultural and gender discourse to include singers who identify as Sudanese but who do not live in Sudan has made it more difficult to police the behavior of women singers who transgress Sudanese cultural norms.

### Breaking Bad—Three Women Singers in the Sudanese Diaspora

Women and men continue to make music in a variety of private or underground settings in Sudan, but the risk of arrest or violence is great (Canada 2014).<sup>2</sup> Away from these direct threats, women singers like Rasha, AlSarah, and Setona have the freedom to sing what they choose and participate in the political debate over Sudan's future. The public personas of these women have made their accomplishments—whether celebrated or denigrated—visible within national borders and beyond.

In the early 1990s, growing militarization and Islamization prompted each singer to leave the country. Setona and Rasha both headed to Cairo, while the somewhat younger AlSarah was taken to Yemen by her parents. Setona found an audience for her folk-style music and henna art among a significant community of recent Sudanese exiles as well as older Sudanese immigrant communities in Egypt. Her musical and entrepreneurial abilities brought her to the attention of international music promoters, and she released her first “world music” album,<sup>3</sup> *Tarig Sudan* (The way of Sudan), in 1998. Rasha moved from Cairo to Spain in the mid-1990s and developed a musical style that incorporates Sudanese musical expression, Spanish and jazz influences, and her own acoustic arrangements. Her first album, *Sudaniyat*, was released in 1997 to international acclaim. AlSarah's family moved to the United States in the mid-1990s; AlSarah studied ethnomusicology, and in 2010, enriched by the vibrant musical scene in New York, she founded her own group, the Nubatones.

Broadly speaking, Setona specializes in what the music industry describes in a rather scattershot way as folk, international, world, African traditions, East African, and/or Sudanese, but her Sudanese audiences most appreciate *aghānī al-banāt*. Women performers of *aghānī al-banāt* in northern and central Sudan have a history of providing social commentary—sometimes quite saucy—on Sudanese gender, class, and other hierarchies (Malik 2010). These performers—*ghannānat*—have been largely excluded by the Sudanese popular music industry due to their gendered association with the work of former slaves. As a popular singer in Sudan, Setona appealed to Sudanese pride in and nostalgia for an authentic culture, but she did not have a significant recording career until after her move to Cairo. Before becoming known for their Sudanese music, Rasha and AlSarah worked with African and Middle Eastern roots music groups.

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All three have received attention from world music promoters while continuing to appeal to audiences inside Sudan and in the Sudanese diaspora.<sup>4</sup>

These women's music cannot easily be classified as a single genre. All three sing mainly in Arabic and publicly acknowledge their origins and links to Sudan. They also rely on some elements of traditional Sudanese music, such as the pentatonic modal scale and rhythms common to the musical traditions of northern Sudan, and Sudanese instruments (bongos and the *darabukka*, a type of drum) and the oud. The northern Sudanese female folk tradition of *aghānī al-banāt* is a consistent musical and philosophical influence in all three women's work. While Setona exclusively sings *aghānī al-banāt*, Rasha and Alsarah are inspired by other musical influences as well—Rasha by the music of Spain and Alsarah by a broad array of East African and other genres.

Representing different musical generations, the artistic output of Setona, Rasha, and Alsarah has helped to provide a point of reference for diaspora Sudanese coming to terms with mobile lives and fluid notions of belonging. All three are popular within and outside Sudan and thus play a bridging role through their recordings, live performances, and Internet presence. In terms of mapping the three singers' careers and genres against a Sudanese diaspora timeline, Setona had the longest presence in Sudan and only came to the attention of the international world music industry after many years as a well-established professional. Rasha, who also started her career in Sudan, nevertheless was quite young when she moved to Spain and developed a new approach to Sudanese musical expression as a singer-songwriter. Alsarah's career has taken shape entirely outside of Sudan, and she describes her music as belonging to the genre of East African retro pop. This rough map of the singers' border- and boundary-crossing decisions illustrates the interplay of Sudanese diaspora movements and musical expression and sets out the parameters within which their innovations, entrepreneurial practices, and identity stances have been judged by their Sudanese listeners inside and outside of Sudan as acceptable or transgressive.

### Giving Voice to Political Convictions

In Sudanese exile politics, opposition discourse shares many of the same racialized and gendered assumptions about the nation that the regime in power holds (Ali 2015). The music making of Setona, Rasha, and Alsarah,



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on the other hand, builds on a tradition of political and social engagement in Sudanese women's music to reflect an alternative and even transformative politics. The significance of this discourse is evident in the ways in which voices of the status quo engage it critically through social media.

Within Sudan, women musicians have long used song to share analyses of political, economic, and social events and processes. As a politically and socially marginalized group, women have historically been absent from public discourse, but women's private gatherings, including the elements of weddings that are typically segregated, have offered a critical space for expressing views not found in the mainstream. The genre of *aghānī al-banāt* in particular is associated with Sudanese women descended from slaves and hence has a particular racialized, gendered connotation (Malik 2010, Westende 2009). Malik explains, "Despite being labeled as 'loose' and 'bad' singing, *aghānī al-banāt* provided a discursive space through which the Sudanese women voiced their alternative narratives of social and gender relations. The songs offered both a framework of negotiating the existing relations as well as a dream of improvement" (2010, 3).

Apart from *aghānī al-banāt*, women singers of popular music in Sudan today primarily perform songs or poetry written by men (Fábos and Alsarrah 2016). Sudanese media outlets now present *aghānī al-banāt* as a Sudanese folk tradition, but the lyrics are also written by men. The clothing and dance movements of the performers are constrained, Malik finds, to "conform with what the government perceives as an 'ideal' image for the Sudanese woman performer in the media" (2010, 141). These co-opted and sanitized public performances are a world away from the *aghānī al-banāt* that Sudanese women continue to perform in private.

Beyond the constraints of the Sudanese state and the government-controlled media, women in the diaspora use the space of exile to publicly transgress the cultural and political barriers through their music. Alsarrah has given voice to Sudanese women's experiences and cultural expression through her performances of traditional genres such as *aghānī al-banāt* and songs of return in a new transnational context, thereby making an important statement about the worth of women's music to a global public.<sup>5</sup> She also articulates a deep respect for people experiencing structural violence: "I sing about migration, voluntary and forced, I sing about people the world likes to ignore except when speaking of them in the past, and I sing about what it means to yearn for home. I also sing about survival and love and joy, which is how people continue despite policies that change the course of their existence" (in Hansen and Obling, 2013).

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*Silt*, the debut album she recorded with the Nubatones in 2014, is built around Nubian “songs of return.” In the 1960s nearly a million Nubian people on either side of the Egyptian-Sudanese border were forced to relocate when their ancestral land was flooded by the damming the Nile River at Aswan. In Egypt and Sudan, Nubian identity has been subsumed into the broader national project; the Sudanese state has long suppressed the teaching of Nubian languages and in 2007 violently put down a demonstration by Nubian villagers protesting the planned damming of the Nile farther upstream (Asanzi 2015). Through her insistence on singing these songs of return AlSarah not only taps into her own ethnic heritage and chides powerful states for repressing minorities but does so to a global audience.

Rasha, on the other hand, has been publicly committed to social issues and used her position as an internationally recognized musician to speak out for the rights of refugees, women, and Sudanese youth. Through benefit concerts, visits to refugee camps, and her own musical platforms, she has had an active humanitarian presence since the early 2000s. Rasha has also taken a foray into pointed political critique about war and militarization in Sudan. Her 2001 album *Let Me Be* includes the single “Your Bloody Kingdom,” which combines spoken-word Sudanese Arabic commentary about how Sudan has lost its way, while the English chorus demands “freedom to be myself.” In a short biography in a festival program she explains, “I tried to give a message in that song, to talk about what’s going on in Sudan, in my way. I’m not a political person at all, but at the same time, I couldn’t just make love songs, like most of the Sudanese songs. So I was trying to talk about the situation in Sudan, all this war in the 20th century” (DEMWE 2008, 9).

Setona, Rasha, and AlSarah engage directly with Sudanese politics to different degrees. While Setona’s political sensibilities are less apparent in her songs, Rasha and AlSarah are outspoken about countering abuses of power that they link to the military government. The lyrics of AlSarah’s song “Vote,” which incorporate rapping in English by the rapper Oddisee into her mostly Arabic-language song, extol the virtues of democracy and participation for all of Sudan’s people (“get outside your house and stand / right next to your brother man / whether he from north or south / it’s not about your color or religion”) while offering a blistering criticism of the Islamist regime. Addressing the “long bearded and the faked prayer and lies,” she says, “the country is waiting to be rescued.” In *La Sudan Ma’alesh*, Rasha similarly offers hope for the future of Sudan and a return to the

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Sudanese homeland for the yearning *ghurba* (diaspora). She addresses Sudan as the beloved whose sons will return from abroad, then goes on to lament the young people who have died in war and the misery their loss has caused their mothers. The sentiments expressed in both of these songs point to diaspora engagement with Sudanese politics and public critique that is beyond the reach of singers within Sudan.

The significance of Setona's, Rasha's, and Alsarah's diaspora participation in conversations about national politics and identity is evident in their contentious reception by Sudanese audiences who use their performances to express anxieties surrounding race, gender, and national identity. In his profile of Setona (1998) Hassan notes Setona's appeal to a Western world music crowd based on stereotypical ideas of African-ness. YouTube comments on the singers' music videos from viewers residing in Sudan and the diaspora who identify as Muslim, Arabic-speaking Sudanese demonstrate a range of stances regarding Sudanese identity.<sup>6</sup> While two-thirds of the comments express approval, support, and appreciation for the songs and performers, the remainder range from disapproving to harsh and insulting.

Comments cluster around a few key themes—the singers' racial and ethnic heritage, their gendered appearance and comportment, and their "Sudanese-ness"—in essence, their perceived right to represent Sudan through music and words to the world. Comments about the singers' hair (calls for singers to control their hair or expressions of appreciation of "natural" hair) join the drumbeat of anxiety about whether African-ness is a part of Sudanese national identity. On Rasha's video performance of "La Sudan Ma'alesh," one commenter says, "Anyway, you don't even look like a Sudanese woman. Whatever you say or whatever you do, a woman like you doesn't mean anything to us. I hope your background is not Sudanese and I hope that you never go back again to Sudan because you do not belong to us. We are not proud that a woman who looks like you to be Sudanese. We are very happy with our government. Fuck you."<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, comments on singers' clothing, such as exhortations to wear a head covering, are sometimes linked to criticism of the performers for their inauthenticity, living in the West, and comporting themselves incorrectly according to Sudanese traditions of religiously inspired modesty. Doubts about the origins of the singers or requests that they drop the claim that their music has anything to do with Sudanese traditions are extensions of this trope.

## Conclusion

Salah Hassan has asserted that “acting as a female musician in the public has never lost its connotation of indecency in Sudanese society” (1998, 1). The new bad girl musicians of the Sudanese diaspora raise their voices in a context of shifting patterns of global migration, national integration policies and the dispersal of families, contemporary expressions of supposed Islamic authenticity and anti-Muslim sentiments in the West, and gender and generational tensions among refugee and migrant Sudanese. Performers like AlSarah, Rasha, and Setona use a world music stage to comment on gender and racial hierarchies, chide Sudanese powerbrokers about their transgressions, and encourage a more inclusive and just society. Their gendered transgressions are made more feasible from their positions outside of Sudan, since the Sudanese diaspora is not as readily regulated. The multisited diasporic discourse and the expansion of the public domain due to the Internet allow for the voices of Sudan’s bad girl singers to be heard despite ongoing government regulation and patriarchal resistance to ideas of gender and racial equality inside Sudan.

## Notes

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1. The pejorative term *habasha* for a woman of Ethiopian or Eritrean descent stems from a presumed connection between prostitution and migrants to Sudan from these countries.

2. The youth movement Girifna (We Are Fed Up) uses songs, poetry, and “flash mobilizations,” among other strategies, to voice its opposition to the ruling National Congress Party and has seen its members subjected to security crackdowns.

3. Originally a marketing category for non-Western traditional music, “world music” encompasses many different styles, largely drawn from non-Western traditions but also fusion music that incorporates multiple traditions. There has been significant criticism of the catch-all term “world music” even by those who work within the industry. The music journalist Anastasia Tsioulcas writes (2014), “It smacks of all

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kinds of loaded issues, from cultural colonialism to questions about what's 'authentic' and what isn't (and who might get to police such inquiries), and forces an incredible array of styles that don't have anything in common under the label of 'exotic Other.'"

4. For more on the world music industry and its relation to Sudanese singers in the diaspora, see Fábos and AlSarah 2016.

5. The performance of "Habibi Safr Mini" by AlSarah and Nahid Abunama-Elgadi, followed by a description of the genre by AlSarah, can be watched on YouTube, posted by Porto Franco Records on July 19, 2012, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPOnonHh6a4>. An arrangement of "Habibi Ta'al" performed by AlSarah and the Nubatones from their debut album, *Silt*, preceded by an explanation by AlSarah, can be watched on YouTube, posted by "The Root" on June 22, 2016, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OycgeosMqE&list=PLpjteAL-JeqKqQf4bxzJv1QNzfORGsavu&index=7>.

6. I rely on usernames, photos, biosketches, and use of Sudanese colloquial Arabic to determine which commenters identify as such. I collected complete sets of uploaded performances for the three profiled singers, eliminated videos with fewer than five comments, and captured and coded the associated comments and interactions for each remaining song, for a total of fifteen videos and 648 comments. I used the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti to analyze the resulting text for recurring themes. For methodological dilemmas related to research with virtual communities, see Murphy et al. 2014. Despite these problems, such communities are key to understanding how diasporic communities stay in touch and make meaning of their predicament and shifting identities, and as such they cannot be ignored.

7. In my field notes. The article and comment, like several online materials about Rasha, have been removed.

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