

Days of Song and Dance

Written by Kay Hardy Campbell © Illustrations by Judy Laertini





*H*er dark, kohl-rimmed eyes sparkled as she stepped forward and turned slowly in place, showing off a gold-embroidered green silk bride's costume from Jaizan, her home town on Saudi Arabia's southwestern coastal plain of Tihama. A row of gold coins decorated her forehead below a jasmine-covered headdress whose scent enveloped her like a mist. Floral designs traced in henna danced on her forearms. Finishing her turn, she gazed out at the audience of women that filled the festival hall outside Riyadh during the first of three women's days at Janadriyah, Saudi Arabia's national festival of traditional culture.

The young woman from Jaizan was one of many who modeled traditional bridal costumes at the opening. Other women presented centuries-old folk songs and dances.



Stepping off the stage, she presented herself first to the event's patron, HRH Nawf bint 'Abd al-'Aziz, to give her a close look at her headdress, and then paraded through the crowd of students, homemakers, professors, writers, artists, journalists and international guests. As she approached, conversations stopped, and the only sound was the jingling of her ankle bracelets.

The young woman from Jaizan was one of many who modeled traditional bridal costumes that evening, when women from eight southwestern districts presented not only their wedding traditions, but also their centuries-old folk songs and dances, all of which are rarely heard or seen outside their home region.

Since 1985, the annual festival of Janadriyah, named for the plain where it is held some 30 kilometers (19 mi) northeast of Riyadh, has become the annual focal point of Saudi Arabia's cultural life. It attracts an estimated 1.5 million visitors, and discussions of its events appear for weeks in magazines and newspapers and on live call-in television shows. Its opening night features the "Operette," a performance of music, folk dance, poetry and narrative recitation that involves a cast of hundreds; poets, writers and intellectuals illuminate nightly literary sessions; falconers, potters, weavers, traditional tailors, woodworkers and perfumers all participate in an artisan's village, and there are horse and camel races, too.

Each year a few days of the festival are given over to the arts of Saudi women, during which programs are presented to audiences of women only. In recent years, the women's programs have focused respectively on traditions of the Najd, the central province; the Hijaz, in the west; and the Eastern Province. In 1998, they honored the women artists, poets, singers and folk dancers of 'Asir, in the southwest.

Women's songs, which are generally accompanied by multilayered drumming, are an ancient tradition of the Arabian Peninsula that continues to this day in all regions. Until now largely unknown to the outside world, this music is becoming available to a global audience, thanks in no small part to the recording and video-production

industries in the Arabian Gulf countries. In Saudi Arabia, women's folk songs are most frequently heard at women's wedding parties, and thus remain an art by and for women. At Janadriyah's women's days, folk groups from the south sang wedding songs that had rarely, if ever, been heard outside their home region. The singers were mountain shepherds, farm women of the terraced hills, and homemakers of the coastal towns. Women radio reporters taped some of their singing for broadcast on Radio Riyadh, and so, for the first time, the whole kingdom heard their voices.

Women's folk dances, too, are an age-old celebratory tradition. Like their male counterparts, Arabian women dance in groups, with occasional brief solos. The dances are performed in the context of family celebrations like weddings, religious holidays, national holidays and—more recently—school graduations. Each region, and each town within each region, has its unique dance customs, though they share other, broader traditions. For example, *al-khatwah* is a line dance popular throughout 'Asir in which the women link arms and bob to the music while shifting their weight in tiny steps, sometimes adding slight bows forward and little kicks. This dance is also performed by men, but the women's version is softer and more graceful. But not all women's dances are so: The troupe from the upland town of Mahayil, whose members donned white cotton dresses reminiscent of costumes of Sudan and Ethiopia, took the audience by storm when they began a stamping dance holding small daggers, their ankle bracelets sounding out the feverish rhythm. This dance featuring a men's weapon has its parallels in Egyptian women's cane dances and Syrian women's sword dances.

"The geography of the southern region has great variety, with its mountains, its plains, its desert, and its green-ness," said HRH Nura bint

Muhammad, one of the organizers and a former director of a women's charity in 'Asir. "These different terrains result in a variety of cultural traditions—clothing, cuisine and the folk arts. We consider it a really rich region."

The towns and districts of Rijaal al-Ma', Mahayil, Shahr, Bani Shahr, Bisha, al-Qahtan, Najran and Jaizan all sent women's dance troupes to Janadriyah. As they reflected influences from contacts with Africa, India, the deserts to the north and Yemen to the south, each troupe became a living



example of the cultural interchange that through the centuries has shaped Arabia.

To Laila Bassam, an expert on traditional costume and a professor of home economics at Riyadh Women's College, one of the most surprising performances came from a troupe from the southern Saudi coastal town of Jaizan. "I think their costumes are so different because of the sea," she said. "You see how much the sea affects people who live near it, because it gives them contact with other places? Oman and India affected us all here in Najd too, even in the names we give material." She gives

the word for Indonesian cotton, *jawa*—derived from "Java"—and that for wool: *kashmir* (from which English also takes its "cashmere").

Even some visitors from 'Asir itself were surprised at what they saw. Radio Riyadh reporter Ghada Muhammad said that although her maternal grandmother came from Tuhamat 'Asir, between Abha and Jaizan, "I never learned these traditions, because she passed away long ago. I knew some things, because when her family visited us, they always brought jasmine, jewelry, and some of the costumes as gifts. But I never really knew these traditions exactly. Now I've learned."

In few places do these traditions have more sway than in marriages. Today, even if both bride and groom have college degrees and shop in air-conditioned malls more often than open-air *suqs*, for their wedding the bride's family almost always hires a women's folk band to entertain the female wedding guests. It's an old custom, for since the early days of Islam and before, Arabian women have been celebrating weddings with song and the simple accompaniment of the frame drum (*tar*) and tambourine (*daff*). Modern wedding musicians make a good living on the wedding-party circuit, and although most are known only locally, some will venture out of town to play for brides who marry into a family from another province.

Other formal performances of women's music occur at the request of a patron who hires a folk band for a private party in her home to entertain her family and women friends. This too is an old custom that has been chronicled by Arab music historians such as 'Abu al-Faraj al-Asfahani, author of the 10th-century, 20-volume *Kitab al-Aghani (Book of Songs)*. The book describes the musical life of the two preceding centuries, including performances for well-to-do women of the Hijaz by formally trained women



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singers and instrumentalists. While the culture of high art singing ultimately moved eastward to Baghdad, then to the other capitals of the Islamic and Arab nation, both male and female musicians of the Arabian Peninsula inherited the practices of those early years.

In some ways, the basic structure

of the musical performance remains little changed. A lead singer, or *mutriba*, heads a group that usually has between 10 and 15 players as chorus and drummers, many of whom are friends and family. In addition to the *tar* in various sizes, in 'Asir both men's and women's folk bands use the *zir ardhi*,

a shallow clay drum played on the ground with a stick; the *zalafa*, a multihanded drum that looks like a spoked wheel; and the *tanaka*, an instrument fashioned from a large rectangular date or olive tin and played as a hand drum. At Janadriyah, a group from the village of Rijal al-Ma'



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added three women playing the mortar and pestle to accent the end of each rhythmic phrase.

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melody usually stays in a single *maqam* (mode or scale) and is repeated throughout a series of verses, sung in colloquial Arabic, as well as both choral and instrumental refrains. The singer embellishes the melody with modest ornamentation, if any at all. While the structure is simple, the interplay between the

melody and the layers of percussion is hypnotic. This simplicity of structure and style is in direct contrast to the highly ornamented Arab art singing that developed over centuries in the Islamic and Arab courts.

In Saudi towns and big cities, some *mutribat* play the 'ud, the fretless pre-



cursor of the Western guitar, with an occasional accompanist on violin. Today's popular wedding singers, such as Riyadh's Nura al-Jassas and Mary Said and Jiddah's Sarah Musafir, favor electronic keyboards specially designed for Arab music's quarter tones—and which often come with a special key to replicate *zagharid*, or ululation, the traditional women's trilling cry of celebration.

Other Gulf-region songstresses such as Rabab and Fattoumah record with large orchestras, release compact discs and appear in music videos produced mostly in Dubai and Kuwait. But at Janadriyah, the audience heard only the centuries-old women's folk singing that is difficult to buy in recorded form, since it is still for women only.

"We sing this when we go out with the herds in the early morning," said a shepherd from the mountainous region of Qahtan, as she sat straight-backed in her chair backstage before her performance. Her hair was tied in a braid that fell down her back, and she casually passed around her black-and-silver face mask. Then she took a deep breath and began a melody as long as a line of poetry. It skipped up by thirds to a high point, then back down to the low end of her vocal range before ending on the base note, or tonic. Each time she repeated it, the tune seemed to explore the levels of the terraced hills she saw when she sang it at dawn, its notes echoing across the valley.

The musicians learn from each other or are self-taught. As among folk musicians everywhere, the skills tend to run in families. "I'm the leader of the troupe from Shahrān and I'm from Shahrān myself," explained Ji'shah 'Abdallah, a mother of five. "This is the first time I have taken part in the festival. It's a spectacular event. I've been playing music for 20 years. I learned *dugg* (percussion) and the *tar* (frame drum) from the others in the group. I taught myself how to sing."

"This is the most requested instrument of the south, the *tanaka*," said a young drummer from Qahtan, Nuha 'Abd al-Rahman, as she held up a rectangular date tin, open at one end, its sides perforated. She was wearing the traditional black, fitted dress of

embroidered cotton worn by the entire group from Qahtan. “Few people play this. A lot of drummers play the *tar*, and *tubul* (cylindrical clay drums), but this is rare. You take a date or olive tin and put holes in it like this.” When she started to strike it with her hand, playing its snare-drum like tones in the *khatwah*’s catchy 4/4 rhythm, four ladies stood up, joined arms and began to dance.

A few minutes later when the Qahtani shepherd sang on stage, without a microphone, there was no doubt her full voice would easily carry across a *wadi* or two, as she held the high notes in suspension to maximize the distance the notes could echo.

Meanwhile, the troupe from Bishah, a town on the edge of the desert that

ened their long hair and swung it from side to side as they hopped. This distinctive women’s dance movement, found in many parts of the Arabian Peninsula, is known as *al-na’ish*, or “the hair toss.” It is seen as far north as Kuwait and is believed to have originated among the Bedouin. The audience cheered loudest for dancers with waist-length tresses that flew out in a



the edges of their *abayas* in time to the drumming.

After the traditional folk groups finished their presentations, a group of girls from Riyadh, some as young as five years old, performed modern interpretations of ‘Asiri dances, choreographed by a young secondary-school administrator. The formal choreography blended traditional movements with modern dance, and they even included dancing with swords to mimic the men’s sword dance, *al-ardha*, and a few moments of especially difficult “hair tosses” executed in figure-eight patterns.

Meanwhile, outside the performance hall on the festival grounds, hundreds of women

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stretches northeastward to Riyadh, sat patiently outside in the spring sunshine listening, waiting to go on next. Their brilliant red dresses and black headscarves were reminiscent of the Bedouin. “Every year during the holiday in [the month of] Rabi’ al-Awwal, we have huge celebrations in Khamis Mushayt. We perform everything there,” explained Umm Fahad, leader of the group. Her troupe of a dozen members occasionally travels as far as Jiddah for parties. She laughed when I asked how she learned her art, her gold-and-turquoise nose post gleaming against her dark skin. “I learned the old songs, *al-turath al-awwal* [“the old traditions”], from my mother and aunts and I prefer them. My girls here in the group,” she said, calling over her teenaged daughter Salwa and a niece, “they like the new songs.”

At last the women from Bishah danced onto the stage in a tight-knit group to a pounding 6/8 rhythm, carrying the town flag. Some of them loos-



spectacular arc around their heads, pulsing with the rhythm. The Bishah dancers so stirred the audience that many stood up to clap, whistle and encourage them, sometimes waving

streamed in and out through the gates. “Fresh dates, fresh dates here!” called out women staffing the stall of the Nadheed factory, where they also gave away t-shirts. Another booth sold fresh *falafil* (fried bean patties). Women by the hundreds visited the stalls of the traditional craftsmen in the artisan’s village, for in such places it is traditional that men and women can mix. Under a full-sized replica of an ‘Asiri stone fort, dozens of other women set up shop to sell their craft goods, just as they do on market days in towns and villages all over the country. Umm ‘Abd Allah and her two daughters from Abha sold traditional silver jewelry as they had for the past four years at Janadriyah.

The women’s festival also included evening events in Riyadh. Princess Nawf was the patron of an evening of poetry at King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Library that featured Saudi women poets reading their work—poems dealing both with social issues

and with the same inner reflection that poets engage in worldwide.

At the campus of Riyadh's King Sa'ud University, women also ran evening panel discussions about social issues. One concerning changes in the family drew an especially large crowd. Najaat (her first name), a teacher from Riyadh, said that Janadriyah "is the greatest opportunity during the year to meet so many women writers, intellectuals, journalists and visitors. Of all of Janadriyah, I love the open debate the most, because it is a dialogue that we think about a lot. Saudi women are gaining skills, experiences and superior qualifications, and society cannot do without them. Society should know about them."

"The attendance at the cultural evenings is really amazing," pointed out poet Huda al-Daghfag, who also writes for national and international magazines. "You'll notice there's not an empty chair. It shows that Saudi women are very thirsty for ideas," she said. "Most of the women attending are housewives. Often you see mothers with their daughters next to them. They want their daughters to hear about these issues."

"Janadriyah has generated much interest on the popular and the official level. It crystallizes the rising interest among Saudis in all aspects of folk culture and traditional life," said folklore expert Sa'ad Sawayan, who wrote his doctoral thesis on Arabia's folk *nabati* poetry and is considered its leading proponent in Saudi Arabia today. He is also heading the compilation of a 15-volume encyclopedia of traditional Saudi culture. "We want to maintain a continuity between the past and the present," he said.

"I think there is no pleasure equal to that of seeing traditional performances, for example of seeing people in traditional costumes, even their traditional way of sitting and walking, body language and gestures. All these things are very interesting to watch and study. Though we are interested in studying the moon and the stars, maybe it is even more important to study ourselves, to study our planet, and to study what is on earth. Those

things are more immediate, relevant and important for our survival and well-being," he adds.

"Janadriyah helps the new generations to understand cultural heritage, how our society was in the past for our fathers and grandfathers," said writer Jahayir al-Masayid during one of the festival's evening discussions. She spoke quietly, occasionally running her fingers along the long scarf at her neck. "We are a developing society, and we are still advancing one step at a time. In recent years we have been



able to take giant leaps. These leaps need a generation that understands what we were in the recent past. Janadriyah responds to the questions, 'What were we in the recent past?' 'How did our fathers and grandfathers live?' And 'How can we benefit from the future, and meet it?'

"The importance of Janadriyah is two-fold, both domestic and international," she continued. "First, it allows us to display our heritage on the national stage. Then the cultural and intellectual discussions allow us to shed light on the most important issues that we want to discuss,

whether they be social, intellectual or humanitarian issues. On the international level, Janadriyah has enabled us to build a bridge between our society and other societies. Our visitors from abroad see the progress we have made. At Janadriyah they also see that there are people who think, speak and discuss and have their own independent opinions, and who can study, become doctors, intellectuals or writers. And women too can become writers, and teachers. This is important, because people outside don't know what is happening here at all. We can build a bridge between our country and the rest of the world.

"Another point," she continued, "is that it has helped us here to be open to other cultures, and this is important. Not only do people learn about us, we also get to know others' ideas. Our ideas, methods and points of view might differ, but this does not destroy the nature of friendship. On the contrary, it helps our society develop and flourish."

At the next Janadriyah, there will be special programs from all four major regions of the country. The women organizers hope that once again the festival hall will fill for several days with women and their traditions, with the scents of incense and jasmine, with the sounds of multilayered drumming and of women's voices raised in song and *zagharid*, all in loving recreation and living invitation to the world of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers. 🌐



Former *Saudi Gazette* and *Arab News* writer **Kay Hardy Campbell** lives near Boston, where she studies classical Arab music and helps direct the annual Arabic Music Retreat.

She recently wrote the script for *Shoma*, a dance-theater production based on a Bedouin folktale.



Watercolor artist **Judy Laertini** attended the Alberta [Canada] College of Art. She lives in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, where she teaches drawing and watercolor through the Dhahran Art Group.



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