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The Yemen Tihama: Trance & Dance Music from the Red Sea Coast of Arabia by Anderson Bakewell

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Jones, Andrew F. 1992. *Like a Knife: Ideology and Genre in Contemporary Chinese Popular Music*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Series.

## Audio Recording Reviews

**The Yemen Tihama: trance & dance music from the Red Sea coast of Arabia.** Recordings & texts by Anderson Bakewell. From the International Music Collection of the British Library National Sound Archive. Topic World Series, Topic Records Ltd. TSCD920. 2002. One audio CD, fifteen pages of notes (general notes, track notes, glossary), illustrations (3 photos, 3 watercolors, one sketch), map.

Broadly, the Tihama (Ar. “land descending to the sea”) is the Red Sea coastal plain of Arabia, from Aqaba to the Mandeb Straits. More typically, “Tihama” designates the southern portion of this coastal plain, a narrower strip including Tihamat ‘Asir in modern Saudi Arabia (south of Layth), and Tihamat al-Yaman, the “Yemeni Tihama.” It is the latter which is the focus of Anderson Bakewell’s remarkable musical ethnography, drawing upon a broader multi-disciplinary study of the same region (Stone 1985).

The Tihama is an Arabian-African border zone, a margin between margins, and a cultural hybrid. Yemen, marginal in the Arab world, is controlled from the San‘a’ highlands slightly east of Tihama, cool and verdant “Arabia Felix” where legitimization of political authority is symbolically rooted in ancient Sabaeen and Himyarite civilizations. Here, the dominant Zaydi sect (Shiite, yet close to conservative Saudi Islam) rejects esoteric, mystical, and ecstatic Islamic practices. San‘a’is speak of the Tihama as another world—exotic, primitive, “African”.

Perhaps it is another world by mutual agreement; Tihamis sometimes call the highlands “Yemen.” Certainly the contrast is stark, despite common nationality. Along the torrid Tihama, conical huts provide some relief from the scorching sun, though not from humidity or malaria. Yet the Tihama is not isolated. Historically active in Red Sea trade routes linking the Mediterranean, Africa, and Asia, Tihami cultural fusions reflect far-flung political, social, and mercantile interactions, especially around the Red Sea littoral and further to the Indian Ocean basin. The sea

is not a barrier, but a road upon which the Tihama has always depended economically. Here too, the dominant Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam is more tolerant of "popular" Islamic practices rejected by Zaydis, including saint visitation, music-induced trance, and self-mutilation.<sup>1</sup> The Tihama's geocultural openness has produced a unique racial and cultural hybridity. And all these characteristics are reflected in its music.

In early 1982, the Tihama Expedition set out from England, and "surveyed the wildlife, archaeology, architecture, music and ethnography on the coastal plain of North Yemen"<sup>2</sup> (Stone 1985:ix). Comprising a team of seven—including scientists, scholars, and artists—the Expedition aimed to document the interdependence of the region's natural, artifactual, social, and cultural dimensions in historical context. Eschewing modern photography, three artists accompanied the Expedition to provide more traditional documentation. A transnational tobacco company, Rothmans, supplied most of the funding. Among the Expedition's products were Anderson Bakewell's music recordings (from which the tracks comprising *The Yemen Tihama* were later extracted), and a published *Report* (Stone 1985), the basis for CD notes and source of its illustrations.

*The Yemen Tihama* thus composites two representational phases: (1) A representation of Tihama in 1982 by the Tihama Expedition, 1982-5; (2) A representation of the Tihama and the Tihama Expedition by The British Library National Sound Archive, Anderson Bakewell, and Topic Records in 2002.

(1) In concept, name, and execution, the Expedition was anachronistic, deliberately and romantically so (Stone 1985:vii). In the heyday of colonialism, the Western drive for global, political, and economic domination produced geographical "expeditions" to swiftly "explore" and document the "uncivilized" world, cloaked in ostensibly humanistic and scientific aims. Such expeditions were a tool of the colonialism that underwrote their costs. Explorers, often military men, along with attendant porters, navigators, cooks, physicians, and technicians, were frequently accompanied by an eclectic range of scholars—biologists, geographers, archaeologist, ethnographers, linguists, historians, and artists. As a model, Bakewell explicitly invokes the Arabian expedition dispatched around 1760 by Frederick V of Denmark (Stone 1985:ix). All its explorers perished except the German Carsten Niebuhr, who produced a famous travelogue (Niebuhr 1774-1778).

Of course Bakewell *et al* were not serving a colonial government; they neither had to travel for weeks on end nor risk their lives. Their conception of "Expedition"—entailing multidisciplinary conservation of an endangered heritage (Stone 1985:6)—implicitly constitutes a valuable

critique of modern society, the disciplinary boundaries of its scholarship, and the relative lack of collaboration among its scholars (at least in the humanities).

But adopting the colonial metaphor and practice of “expedition” is not without its dangers. Ethnomusicologically, it appears to have resulted in an emphasis upon the local, traditional, spiritual, or “exotic,” and an underestimation of musical links to Yemen and the Arab world. The relatively rapid trek precluded in-depth participant-observation. Though the paintings and sketches of musicians and instruments are indeed beautiful, a romantic nostalgia for the pre-modern as intrinsically more human (informing both the Expedition’s methods and selection of research subjects) tends to “Orientalize” the Tihama by implicitly valorizing its pre-modern condition.<sup>3</sup>

Thankfully for us, Bakewell did not apply the same anti-modernist logic to music recording itself. On the contrary, he invested in top-notch audio equipment, and must have used it effectively, for the results are marvelous to hear.

(2) In collaboration with Topic Records, the British Library National Sound Archive is to be commended for publishing selections from Bakewell’s annotated Tihama field recordings, making portions of this invaluable music documentation commercially available for the first time. Notes include general background on the Tihama and its music, watercolors and sketches of several instruments, a glossary of instruments, and track notes.<sup>4</sup> But while this content is copied nearly verbatim from Expedition materials, new problems of representation nevertheless arise, via labeling, selection, emphasis, and repackaging.

Tihami musical categories include improvisatory poetry (*mawwal*) accompanied by flute (*shabbaba*); popular art music centered on colloquial poems (*humayni*) with ‘ud or orchestral accompaniment performed by the *fannan* (artist); and *tibbal* music of the professional itinerant musician (*mutabbil*), performed at festivals and religious rituals. *Tibbal*, featuring complex polyrhythmic drumming and often pentatonic, is ritually employed to induce trance. The *Yemen Tihama* emphasizes *tibbal* and its Afro-Arabian character.

Paralleling this musical hybrid is an intriguing social one. While tribesmen (*qabili*) may perform melodic instruments, drumming is performed only by the “*akhdam*” (“servants”), also called “*habashi*” (Ethiopian), existing outside the tribal structure. Socially and economically marginalized like the Gypsies of Europe, the *akhdam*—renowned as itinerant entertainers, fortunetellers, and

magicians—are generally associated with Africa, though there is no proof of their origins.

The fifteen tracks exemplify the following stylistic-situational types, suggesting a wide range of musical connections reflecting the Tihama's rich history of cultural exchange, all serving as a useful reminder of the constant tension between national boundaries and transnational culture.

- (1) Double clarinet (*mizmar*) and percussion (*tabla*, *marfa'*), performed by itinerant professional musicians, for dance (#9), perhaps at a wedding (#1). Similar music is common throughout the Middle East and North Africa, though the percussion here is perhaps more intensively polyrhythmic.
- (2) Polyrhythmic, layered drumming, strongly evocative of sub-Saharan African styles. Some genres are entertainment (#3), while others are incorporated in religious ceremonies (below).
- (3) Popular songs accompanied on the box lyre (*simsimiyya*) (#4,8), a style typical of the Red Sea area. The first track is attributed to an Ottoman sultan, while the latter ("Indian film song") illustrates more recent music media connections abroad.
- (4) Drum and flute (*qasaba* or *shabbaba*) music, accompanying dance (#5) and performed at the market by itinerant musicians (#14).
- (5) *Zar* (spirit appeasement trance ritual) music, featuring the bowl lyre (*tumbara*) and pentatonic melodies (#2,6), with polyrhythmic drumming on track #10. Often supposed to have originated in the Sudan, the *zar* with lyre (*tambura* in Egypt) is common around the Red Sea region, though commonly condemned as un-Islamic.
- (6) Muslim saint festival ritual music, featuring polyphonic percussion on *marfa'*, *mishkal*, *sahfa*, and *tabla* (#7,11,12,13,15). Similar musical occasions exist throughout the Islamic world; this music resembles that of certain Arab-African brotherhoods, such as *Qadiris* from Senegal.

Technically, the recordings are superb—clear and well-balanced. While texts provide much general background, more track-specific information—some readily available in the *Report*—would have been extremely helpful. In particular, lyrics (with English translations) should have been included. The *Report's* musician profiles, glossary, and detailed

maps (keyed to tracks) would also have been valuable. The ethnomusicologist might have appreciated more systematic stylistic, organological, and philological analyses supporting claims of cross-regional influences. The absence of bibliographic and discographic references, abundant in the *Report*, is regrettable; even the *Report* itself is not mentioned.

Emphasis upon *tibbal* music and its Africanness (though most Yemeni music features complex percussion [Elsner 2002]), together with neglect of *mawwal*, *humayni*, and other popular urban genres, may overestimate the cultural disconnection between the Tihama and other areas of Yemen. Notes likewise emphasize contrasts—in dialect, skin color, and Islamic practices—though saint veneration is common elsewhere in Yemen, especially in Hadramawt.

The CD contains new photographs, most dramatically the cover shot: a close-up of a dark-skinned man wearing a skullcap, his mouth full of writhing snakes. Selections of tracks, title, notes, and image conform (intentionally or not) to the “world music” market, where “exotic” symbols—of magic, healing, ecstasy, spirituality, percussion, and black Africa—are highly valued. The subtitle descriptor “trance and dance music” appears also shaped (consciously or not) by aesthetics of the contemporary “dance” music scene, whose discourse is likewise permeated by metaphors of socio-cultural otherness (“tribal,” “primitive,” “jungle,” “trance,” “ecstasy”).

Editorial decisions comprising selection, emphasis and repackaging tend excessively to exoticize the Tihama, downplaying continuities with Yemen and the Arab world. All this would be far less objectionable if a broader selection of Tihama recordings, perhaps supplemented with more recent fieldwork there, were also scheduled for release in this series. One can only hope that this might be the case. As it stands, *The Yemen Tihama* is nevertheless a great scholarly resource for the little-known music of this area, providing a wonderful example of how musical and social identities are complexly layered by geographical, economic, and political factors.

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### Notes

1. This complex resembles that of Egypt, perhaps because the Egyptian Ayyubids ruled Tihama in the 13th century, and established the basis for its subsequent stability and efflorescence under the Rasulids.

2. Until the 1990 reunification of North and South Yemen, the Yemeni Tihama lay nearly entirely within North Yemen, the Yemeni Arab Republic.
3. The *Report* approvingly invokes “the grand Orientalist Art tradition that brought the exoticism of the East to an avid 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe” (Stone 1985:viii).
4. The *tabla* drum on p. 8 has been (inadvertently?) rotated 90° clockwise.

### References

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 2002 Rhythmic structure and drum improvisation in Yemen. In *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music Volume 6: The Middle East*. editors Virginia Danielson, Scott Marcus, and Dwight Reynolds, 93-106. New York: Routledge.
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**South of the Clouds: Instrumental Music of Yunnan.** Vols. 1-2. Four compact discs compiled from field recordings of Zhang Xingrong: 76.02 min.; 74.41 min.; 79.41 min.; 69.08 min. Two booklets by Zhang Xingrong with Helen Rees and Jack Body, 30 pages and 30 pages. Bibliography, discography, and videography. Photos by Zhang Xingrong and Li Wei. Ode Record Company Ltd. Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand, 2003.

This anthology of four CDs presents a fascinating and challenging sampler for adventurous tourists, music lovers, and ethnomusicologists. A compilation of 153 tracks of music performed by twenty-nine ethnic minority groups living in Yunnan province in southwest China, the CDs capture a wealth of timbres, tones, rhythms, sound structures, and music performance techniques that will fascinate all who like world music. Similarly, the booklets provide a compendium of ethnographic details that will intrigue all who are curious about cow-leg lutes or pregnant legends. One of the recorded pieces, “Yifengshu” (A letter; CD 2, Track 8) alludes to the story that the wife of a Pumi ruler informed a Naxi king, her father, that her husband was going to attack (Vol. 1, p.19). For its presentation of