

Sawt: The Art Song of Kuwait



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Presented in English
22 January 2007

Sawt (pron. SEWT, pl. aswat) literally means voice or voices, but in the past in the Arab world, sawt was used as a generic term for song. However, since the nineteenth century in Kuwait, and later in Bahrain and other areas of the peninsula, *sawt* has had yet another meaning: it is a term for a musical *genre*. This signifies that it has certain instruments or voices that are obligatory, a specific place where it is normally performed, and a standard musical structure. Once a music is categorized as an academic genre rather than just a common song it gains a unique position in music history.

Aswat, which is for solo voice with oud accompaniment is of further importance because it is the true art song of Kuwait.



Figure 1

That is to say, it is a "classical" form of music. Unlike so many other traditional forms of the region, it is not considered folk, nor is it categorized as popular. It was not devised for the desert community nor was it originally part of ancient sea music

traditions of the Gulf. *Aswat* are songs of the learned class, the educated gentleman. These pieces would be heard in a private setting with one musician on an instrument, one musician doubling as the lone singer, performing before a small group of aristocracy.

There are two primary instruments in *aswat*: the *mirwas* and the *oud*. The *mirwas* is a small hand drum constructed in India with an older variant used in Yemeni music. The Kuwaiti *mirwas* (figure 1) was no doubt adapted from the Yemeni version, which is slightly larger than the Kuwaiti *mirwas* and is held by the cords that run along the sides of the barrel. The style of playing the *mirwas* in the Arabian Gulf is unique. The left hand cups the drum from beneath in such a manner that the fingers are free to mute the lower drum head and assist in altering the rhythmic pattern. One or two fingers of the right hand play the main rhythm on the top drum membrane in coordination with the lower muting hand. The resulting

sound manifests timbral colour with syncopation and rhythmic complexity.

The main melodic instrument played in *aswat* is the *oud*, the Arabian lute. The Arab pear-shaped *oud*, usually with five courses of strings, was introduced to Kuwait with the *sawt* genre. This instrument was sometimes called *oud shami*, that is, *oud* of the Levant or Shams, although it no doubt migrated to Kuwait from Iraq in the 20th century. Before this, other types of ouds were used in Kuwait, such as Indian versions that had longer necks, smaller and narrower sound boxes, and complete bodies often made of a solid piece of wood.

Since playing the *oud* (figure 2) requires a certain level of technical mastery and a comprehension of Arab



Figure 2

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1. "Ya Rab Hal" Music Abdullah al Faraj, Lyrics Nabhan al-Yaman, Sawt Shami in 8. Yallila Dana style	رحيم يا من هو بحاي رحيم يا رب حل العقد هذا
You Merciful One, have pity on me Oh God ease this suffering	يا لله بجودك يا صمد يا عظيم تفكنا من العسر هذا
Oh generous great God Please free me from this destitution	قال الفتى قايد فلا لي غريم إلا كحيل الطرف هذا
I am weak to no one Except that one with the beautiful eyes	بين الهياكل والحلل والبريم والخجل والخلخال هذا
Among skeletons, jewels and trees Dancing in anklet bracelets	يا ليتني بوسط صدره مقيم بين النهود هذا وهذا
I want to live in her bosom Between both breasts, this and that	إن كان ما ترضى على شين ميم بأشكيك عند الرب هذا
If what satisfies you is bitter to me I will complain to God against you	كن بصدرك عنبر وحب ليم تسلب عقول الناس هذا
It seems your heart is made of stone It makes us lose our minds	

melodic modes (that is, *maqamat*), oud music is considered to have a high-art character and therefore is viewed as more sophisticated than other indigenous music like that of the sea and desert. In *aswat* the modern classical Arab instruments *kamanja* (violin) and *qanun* (plucked zither) are also often included, further contributing to *aswat's* high-art character and thus to its esteemed status in the region. Since the Arabian Gulf nations are relatively young with small populations, they have not developed grand, long-standing art forms such as one will find in the Mashrig or Maghreb (e.g., *mawshat*, *longa*, *nawba*, Iraqi *maqam*). Therefore, there is great regional pride in having helped innovate an artistic genre like sawt.



Figure 3

The texts of *aswat* are considered perhaps more thoughtful than those found in the group collective singing of the sea or desert. The lyrics are lovelorn, usually about unrequited affections, and since they also invoke God (*Allah*), from its inception *aswat* have had a type of "blues" quality, being songs with a pleading, prayer-like character. *Aswat* are strophic pieces: they are comprised of sections of music repeated each time with new words. Traditionally, there is *melisma* (many notes per syllable), but it is not extensive, and since the phrases are relatively short, the texts are lucid. Some lyrics are newly composed, but most are taken from sections of pre-existing Arabic poetry, especially from humayni poems of the Yemen.

Clearly, there is some Yemen link to Kuwaiti *aswat*. The Kuwaiti drum, the *mirwas*, has the same name and is similar to the Yemen drum, and *aswat* lyrics are borrowed

from the works of Yemeni poets or often use a Yemeni poetic form. But, Kuwaiti *aswat* are uniquely different and indigenous to Kuwait. There is no sound quite like that of Kuwait that originates in the Yemen or elsewhere.



Figure 4

In the Arab world, music is often categorized by its rhythmic mode rather than its melodies or formal structure. This is similar to practices in Latin American countries, where there are genres like the *Samba*, *Cha Cha*, *Tango*, *Rumba*. These are both the names of dances and the names of specific rhythms that are repeated throughout a piece. *Aswat* of today are also designated by predominant rhythms and are identified by these three modes: *Shami* in 8, *Arabi* in 6, and *Khayyali* 12/8 compound.

Although not long after its inception *aswat* was adopted by the sea community and was performed as a robust celebratory music with hand clapping and dance, it was originally meant as a more subtle chamber music, performed in a clear structured order as a musical suite. One would begin an *aswat* evening with a type of song called *estimah*, which means "listen." The name no doubt comes from the function: hearing an *estimah* indicates all are to end their conversations; they are to "listen," become quiet in preparation for the coming *aswat* performances. There is no drum in *estimah* so it is not an imposing announcement for those socialising. The form is simpler than that of *aswat*, likely because it does have a functional or even "background music" quality. All surviving *estimah*

2. "Inna Hindun" Music and lyrics Abdullah al Faraj. Estim' a song-type of sawt family, no percussion	إن هند يرق منها الحيا ليس إلى من البهاء أن حيا
Hind, her face is so sweet It is lovely that she is here	رب هب لي من الجلادة صبيرا وإذن من لذنك هب لي وليا
Oh God, provide me with patience And support me in all you can	لاتذرنني إلى الكأبة والوجد إلهي أهيم فرد خليا
Don't leave me, Oh God, to desolation and grief Wandering aimlessly without a lover	كيف أنسى كلامها اليوم لا نابذتنني في مكان قصيا
How could I forget her words today When we talked in a remote corner	عاتبتني فأوسعتني عتابا فكأنني أتيت شيئا فريا
She reproached me over and over again, torturing me As if I had done something wrong	ذات طرف كأنها النجم هند ووشاح إذا إنبري كالقريا
Hind! She has eyes like shining stars And, framed with a scarf, a face of luster.	

are composed by Abdullah Al Faraj. After an *estimah* was performed, there would be a series of *aswat*, alternating between *Shami* and *Arabi* rhythmic modes, and then the suite would usually end with a lone *sawt Khayyali* (*Khayyali* traditionally only exists in Kuwait) and then a final type of song - form called *Kitam* (i.e., conclusion).

Sawt was invented by the Kuwaiti Abdullah Al Faraj, born in 1836 in Kuwait and died 1901 in Basra, Iraq at the home of his patron. Al Faraj's lineage stems from the famous Al Dawassar tribe of Wadi Al Dawassar, from the settlement of Nazwa of the southern Najd region of today's Saudi Arabia (south of Riyadh). In the late seventeenth century, Al-Faraj's ancestors immigrated to the Arabian Gulf coast, and eventually his father settled in Qatar where the elder Al Faraj and his brother owned a large sailing ship, trading with India. The family then moved to Muscat (today's Oman) and then later to Kuwait where Abdullah Al Faraj was born.

At some point in his childhood, Abdullah and his family settled in Mumbai (Bombay), India. It was here that his father amassed a huge fortune. As a wealthy child, Al Faraj travelled throughout India and was exposed to a variety of subcultures. He was given an exceptional formal education in the sciences and literature, art, drawing and music. He loved to read and especially enjoyed the creative arts which fit well with his romantic, imaginative character. He learned Urdu and Indian languages at schools and was taught Arabic by private tutors, many of whom were from Yemen. There was a huge Yemeni population in India at the time—in fact, some accounts say at one point the entire army of Mumbai was comprised of Yemenis. Abdullah Al Faraj's father made sure the boy was exposed to Arab culture, largely through Yemenis. It is believed that the Yemenis taught Al Faraj about classic Arabic poetry, how to play the *oud* and introduced him to Arab *maqamat* (melodic mode) and other characteristics of Arab music.

Abdullah's father died around 1854, when Abdullah was 18 years old and the youth was left with enough wealth to have lasted well over a lifetime. However, the young man disdained money and regularly gave it away or squandered it, so that within 3 years, he had spent his father's entire fortune. At this point Al Faraj returned to Kuwait: he was about 21 years old. While Kuwait remained his primary home for the rest of his life, he travelled frequently to Basra and Bahrain, since he relied on patrons from these neighbouring lands, along with Kuwaiti ones, in order to survive.

Although Abdullah Al Faraj is the greatest figure in the history of Kuwaiti music, he was also considered one of the most learned men of his time and place and one of the finest poets in the history of Kuwait. He was gifted as a writer of Nabati poetry, a vernacular form with a colloquial style common to the Saudi Najd region. Indeed, Al Faraj is one of few literate men of his era to compose in this Bedouin style. Despite being raised in India, his ability to write Nabati so well attests to his understanding and appreciation of Kuwaiti and Arabian culture throughout his life. Al Faraj also wrote poems in a more classical style, a parlance not understood by all, and it was the more classical texts that he used for his *aswat*.

From various accounts, we know that Abdullah Al Faraj was known for his extraordinary character, more so than for his extraordinary appearance. He was short, stocky; he never wore an *igal* (black head band) with his *gutra* (Arabian head scarf). He supposedly looked like someone named Mohammed Shaheen, who was an important figure in Kuwaiti commerce in the first part of the 20th century. Al Faraj would talk and laugh at the same time. He was known to fall in love often, and thus, he readily poured his emotions into his songs. The incredible stories of his generosity and carelessness with money are legion.

He was a colourful character, warm and accepting of others. In Kuwait he was known by many, and the gatherings he would have at his *diwaniya* (meeting place attached to a home), at which there was "no immoral behavior" (i.e., no alcoholic drinking), would bring together a variety of guests from different backgrounds, including upper classes, sometimes lower classes, music and poetry aficionados, and those of assorted ethnicities and cultures. His own diverse roots along with his welcoming personality helped him make strong friendships among Kuwaitis in regional lands.



Figure 5

One of his major contributions was that he changed the perception of music among the aristocracy. Before Abdullah Al Faraj, conservative society disapproved of music and viewed it as an inferior amusement, a low-class entertainment for parties. But Al Faraj changed this conception, at least concerning some *genres*. As a well educated and respected man, he showed that music was more than a lowly diversion, a mere device for dancing and parties. By composing music and lyrics, fostering and supporting musicians, and daily championing the value of the songs, he compelled others



Figure: 6

to appreciate that music could be an art form for the more thoughtful, intellectual being. Al Faraj instilled in others an admiration for music and an understanding that it could be a noble cultural contribution in line with highly esteemed Arabic poetic forms of the day.

Abdullah al Faraj had many students who he introduced to *aswat* and who carried on the tradition. However, his primary disciple was Ibrahim bin Yacoub, followed by the brothers Khalid (d. 1925) and Yusuf Al Bakr (1875-1955), who themselves taught a large generation of *aswat* musicians. These included an important group in the late 1920s and 1930s of five musical artists (figure 3), all who went by the same last name, "Al Kuwaiti:" Saud Al Kuwaiti, Mahmoud Al Kuwaiti (figure 4), Abdulatif Al Kuwaiti (1904-75), Salih Al Kuwaiti (1908-86) and his brother Daud (1910-1976).

During the hey day of the genre, the Al Kuwaiti *aswat* masters often worked alongside great Bahraini *aswat* musicians, including (figure 5) Mohamed Fares (1895-1947), Mohamed Zuwayid and Dahi bin Walid. The Bahrain contribution to *aswat* should not be overlooked: Bahraini musicians were extremely talented and played a major role in helping to spread the art form throughout the Gulf, in developing the character of *sawt* in general, and in introducing Bahraini style modifications. But the lead innovator, Abdullah Al Faraj, and his primary followers were Kuwaiti, and over the decades *sawt* has thrived in Kuwait and maintained its Kuwaiti stylized characteristics.

This genre, one of the most important of the Arabian Gulf, stands as perhaps the finest urban musical offering in the region. *Sawt*: the art song of Kuwait.

Figure 1: A Kuwaiti mirwas

Figure 2: Traditional Oud

Figure 3: A 1920s music ensemble

Figure 4: Abdulatif and Mahmoud Al Kuwaiti

Figure 5: Mohamed Fares

Figure 6: AUK musicians

[Editor's Note: Three musicians from American University of Kuwait (figure 6) joined Dr. Urkevich for the lecture, demonstrating the instruments and styles that make up *Aswat*.]