

# BETWEEN YEMEN, SUDAN, AND BEYOND: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. NIZAR GHANEM

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It is an impossible task to distill the infinite complexities of life and living into the two-dimensional medium of writing. It only takes interviewing someone like Nizar Ghanem, a poet, musician, and physician with the family history, life experience, and encyclopaedic knowledge to be reminded of this fact. Born in Crater, Aden in 1958 as the youngest child of Munira Luqman, daughter of Muhammad 'Ali Luqman, and the renowned poet and educator Muhammad 'Abduh Ghanem, Nizar was raised in a home that was an apex of Aden's intellectual and artistic life.

Although Munira Luqman did not have a formal education due to the absence of women's education during the early twentieth century, being the daughter of the figurehead of Aden's 'enlightenment' provided an alternative sort of schooling. While growing up she met everyone from Mahatma Gandhi to Arab political reformers who were greeted by her father when passing through Aden, then one of the busiest ports in the world, that brought in as much intellectual traffic as it did shipping. Muhammad 'Abduh Ghanem hailed from a family of *sada* (pl. of *sayyid*) that traced their ancestry to Prophet Muhammad, and was a pioneering lyricist in South Arabia, coining the 'Adeni' style of colloquial song and later publishing a doctoral thesis on Sana'ani song at the University of London when Nizar was a child. Muhammad was also Director of Education in Aden during the late colonial period, the first time that position had been occupied by an Arab, and would go on to teach at the Universities of Khartoum and Sana'a. Although at the forefront of intellectual life in South Arabia, Nizar Ghanem's family legacy would grow to encompass not only all of Yemen, but also many places beyond the nation's borders, and particularly Sudan.

I met Nizar in Khartoum during March 2017 through the late Sudanese poet Muhammad Taha al-Qaddal, who invited me to perform in the Second Khartoum Festival for the Oud. Although Nizar is professionally trained as a physician with multiple qualifications in occupational and community health, he is one of the most widely cited authorities

on Yemeni music, having published many books and articles that are foundational to the work of Arab and non-Arab scholars alike. Furthermore, the reason Nizar Ghanem currently resides in Khartoum (the Huthi authorities have confiscated his home and library in Sana'a) is thanks to his extracurricular scholarly endeavours: he was granted Sudanese citizenship in honour of his book, *A Bridge of Sentiment Between Yemen and Sudan (Jisr al-Wijdan bayna al-Yaman wa-l-Sudan)*, which was inspired by the Sudanese-Yemeni cultural society he established, called 'Sumaniyya.' Having spent his young adult life in Sudan and later served as a cultural attaché for the Yemeni Embassy there, Nizar's scholarship on Yemeni music has naturally gravitated towards exploring the country's musical and literary connections to the outside world in Africa, India, Turkey, and the Gulf Arab states. This work has greatly inspired my own doctoral research, so I was eager to meet Nizar when the opportunity arose.

Continued conversations between us inspired my article for the previous issue of this Journal 'Music in Colonial Aden,'<sup>1</sup> in addition to the virtual talk I gave to the Society in December 2021 about my BYS-sponsored research at the British Library. Nizar Ghanem has also received support from the BYS over the years for the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) he established in 1992, a Free Musician's Clinic in Sana'a that later expanded to Aden, Dhamar, Ibb, and al-Shihr. In 2002, the BYS invited Nizar to give a concert in London that was a capstone for the Seminar of Arabian Studies. What follows here are excerpts from a long conversation we had about his early life, picking up on some of the themes from my recent BYS article.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: *British Yemeni Society Journal 29 (2021), 12-20*

<sup>2</sup> The interview was conducted virtually on 3 August, 2022 via Zoom



Nizar with his parents Muhammad 'Abduh Ghanem and Munira Luqman in Aden, 1990 (Illustrations courtesy of Nizar Ghanem, apart from those indicated)

**You were born during a dynamic time towards the end of the colonial era: many of the political movements of your parents' generation were coming to a head with the activities of southern Yemeni nationalists, Marxists, Nasserists, and North-South unionists. How did these varying movements play out in the musical and cultural fields?**

I can think of many examples where the weight of politics had a clear effect on musical artistry. Of course, around the decade I was born there were various musical associations appearing such as the *al-Nadwa al-Musiqa al-'Adaniyya* [The Adeni Music Club] in 1949 and its competitor, *al-Rabita al-Musiqa al-'Adaniyya* [The Adeni Music League] in 1951. My father was a centre-point between the two associations, whose members sang his poetry and featured poets like Yusif Mahiyub Sultan who would imitate his style. The establishment of these associations also coincided with that of political parties like *Rabita al-Janub al-'Arabi* [South Arabian League — SAL], which had a clear cultural agenda and later established organisations in Lahj and Abyan. The emphasis of regional political identities was also reflected in Lahji songs written by Prince Ahmad Fadhl al-'Abdali, well known as 'al-Qumandan,' and more subtly in the work of certain Hadhrami musicians. Even later in my own lifetime, Hadhrami intellectuals like the lawyer Shaykhan al-Habshi would claim that 'the South' and 'Hadhramaut' embodied distinct and separate peoples, even though he was a Ba'thist and thus supposedly an advocate of pan-Arab unification.

In early 1955 when Farid al-Atrash performed in Aden, the Marxist activist 'Abdallah BaDhib criticised Farid al-Atrash's presence as a 'fallacious move' towards women's liberation.<sup>3</sup> According to his Marxist views, western dress and belly dancing were not the stuff of a true women's revolution. You know, Farid al-Atrash caused a hell of a stir. Even June Knox-Mawer in *The Sultans Come to Tea* (1961) mentions how her husband, then a judge in Aden, witnessed a peak in divorces because so many Adeni women insisted on seeing their 'Casanova,' al-Atrash. Farid's visit from Egypt took place three years after Nasser's revolu-



Nizar (far right) with the famous Hadhrami lyricist and poet, Husayn Abu Bakr al-Mihdhar (second from left) in Hadhramaut, 1993



Nizar performs for the British Yemeni Society in London, 2002 (courtesy of Paul Hughes-Smith)

<sup>3</sup> Farid al-Atrash was a Syrian singer and oud player based in Cairo who became one of the most famous musicians of the mid-twentieth century Arab world



Muhammad 'Ali Luqman (right) and Muhammad 'Abduh Ghanem (left) in Aden



Nizar (second from left) and his siblings, Qais, 'Azza, Shihab, and Isam, on a panel commemorating their father in Sana'a, 1998



Nizar's father, Muhammad 'Abduh Ghanem, playing the oud in London, 1986

tion, so there were clear pan-Arab implications to his popularity. But BaDhib was of a minority opinion that Farid's performances did not represent the true proletariat and that it was an elite bourgeois affair. True liberation would be a grassroots movement. In any case, Farid al-Atrash remained incredibly popular throughout all of Yemen, especially due to the popularity of his movies. I even named my first born son, Farid, after him.

On the other hand, musicians like Muhammad Murshid Naji were criticised for not being Adeni enough.<sup>4</sup> It was said that he was singing too much Sana'ani music. In the first edition of his book, *Our Popular Songs (Aghanina al-Sha'biyya)* published in 1959, Naji responded that music from the North was a part of a shared Yemeni heritage, unlike the Egyptian and Indian songs many Adenis would perform. He was responding as a political activist that believed in a single united Yemen, which was the call of the *Jabha al-Wataniyya al-Muttahida* [United National Front] party established in 1955 in opposition to the SAL and the Aden Association, the latter the brainchild of my maternal grandfather, Muhammad 'Ali Luqman. Naji still had great respect for Adeni musicians, including Khalil Muhammad Khalil who was heavily influenced by Egyptian and Indian music.<sup>5</sup> I knew Muhammad Murshid Naji well and he would visit me frequently at my home in Sana'a. He told me he loved my father's poetry, and wanted to sing poems written by me, but I do not write poetry for songs.

### **How did the socialist political agenda of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) affect the Adeni music scene established during the late colonial period?**

In the PDRY they thought about everything ideologically. I remember when president Salim Rubai' 'Ali (Salmin) came to power in 1969 two years after independence. He began his regime by canceling the broadcast of Khalil Muhammad Khalil's song *The Red Rose (al-Warda al-Hamra)*, which was a nice Adeni love song. At first, Salmin demanded that Khalil change the song's main lyric to say 'the red star' instead of 'the red rose.' When Khalil told the president that the song would no longer make sense and perhaps another poem could better articulate socialist sentiments, Salmin retorted, 'get out! Don't educate me, you agent of imperialism!' My brother Isam Ghanem discussed this exchange in his book, *Beer Poetry in Yemen, 1945-1989* published in 1989 in London by Arthur Probsthain. This reflects how during

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Murshid Naji was a well-known musician in Aden since the 1950s, and later throughout all of Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula. He authored a number of books on the history of Yemeni music. See: Adel Aulaqi, 'Mohammad Murshed Naji: A Major Yemeni Musician,' *BYSJ 21* (2013): 40-46

<sup>5</sup> Khalil Muhammad Khalil is known as the father of modern Adeni musical composition since 1949

the early years of the PDRY, the songs of many artists who represented the 'Adeni' style were banned because the authorities had a grudge against them. At the same time, the state propagated Lahji music and artists, including Muhammad Muhsin Atrash because he wrote revolutionary songs.

**Your family was representative of the elite Adeni class who were targeted by PDRY policies and these 'grudges.' How did this affect everyone?**

The situation was difficult not only for us but for many others who eventually left South Yemen. At this time, there was a growing diaspora of the South's intelligentsia, including much of my extended family, in the Gulf and North Yemen. I think this brain drain contributed to Aden's decline as a regional cultural and economic hub. Even the former prime minister of North Yemen 'Abd al-Karim al-Iryani claimed that sixty to seventy percent of the North's infrastructure and human resource development during the 1970s was thanks to the work and labour of migrants from the South. 'Abdallah BaDhib, who I think by then had become the PDRY's minister of culture, was a family friend and would frequent our home in Aden for lunch. He would privately complain to my father how he felt that many in the government did not have any clue how to establish a true proletariat state. He perhaps had a deeper understanding of things; even Marx and Engels themselves admitted in their correspondence that the historical situations that gave rise to industrial capitalism in Europe did not necessarily apply elsewhere. I think most people who worked in the PDRY government would admit now that they were wrong about many things.

By 1972, my family began to leave Aden. My brothers, sisters, and father had all received degrees in England. Then working as a consultant for the courts, my brother Isam began to have an unsteady relationship with the South Yemeni president. In a police state, the slightest infractions would gather lots of attention. My family had a sense that eventually it would become impossible to leave, and even at my school, I felt like I was in the Omar Sharif movie *Doctor Zhivago*, with eyes and spies everywhere! Many of my classmates came from rural areas and families that were given nationalised homes that were formerly owned by Adenis. They thought they were in paradise.

Isam eventually fled to the North along with my mother, who was allowed free passage as a woman. My father stayed in London after a medical procedure there and my brother Shihab stayed in Iraq on his way back from a visit to North Korea. My sister 'Azza left with her husband Dr. Abu Bakr al-Qir-

bi (former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Yemen) to study in London on scholarship. As for me, I was temporarily sent to Lebanon. I had just turned fourteen. We were not allowed to take any money out of the country, so my mother gave me Shihab's jacket and sewed around five hundred dollars into it. I was so frightened at the airport because security caught an Indian man in front of me trying to smuggle gold in his eye patch! Thankfully, they didn't discover my money. I wore that coat for months after to keep the cash close to me.

Being in Lebanon was very difficult as I was separated from my family and living in a boarding school. But the country had so much to offer from food, fun, and cinemas. I also experienced for the first time male-female integration (other than my previous brief stay in Kilburn, London when my father was getting his PhD). I learned French and became exposed to so many new ideas reading the newspapers there, and even saw Farid al-Atrash play live in Aley. But I had become a burden to my father who was facing serious financial difficulties and ended up working as a salesman at his brother's Seiko watch shop in Djibouti. It was the only job he could find. So after one year in Lebanon he moved me to Kuwait and put me in boarding school there. But when my mother visited me she saw that everyone I was living with was much older than me, she sent me back to Lebanon for another year to complete the ninth grade. During my stay in Lebanon 1972-74 the political junta in Aden aided by leftists from Lebanon and Palestine managed to assassinate three opposing Yemeni politicians in Lebanon.<sup>6</sup>



<sup>6</sup> See the BBC World Service's recent documentary by Mai Noman 'Who killed my grandfather?' on the assassination in Beirut of North Yemen's former Foreign Minister Mohamed Noman in 1974. Available as a film on YouTube and as radio broadcast on BBC Sounds

The Adeni Music Club's record label, Kayaphon. This recording features a song written by Nizar's father called 'Eye Talk' (*Kalam al-Ayn*), c.1950s. (courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara)

**Some readers may be familiar with the historic influence of Sudanese education on South Yemen, but may be surprised to hear that Sudan became a refuge for your family because of your father's work as an educator. How did this happen?**

Around the time after I moved back to Lebanon, Professor Abdullah El Tayyib, who was the vice chancellor at the University of Khartoum, was prompted by R. B. Serjeant to get in touch with my father, who had earlier cultivated a friendship with Serjeant in Aden. Serjeant knew that my father, a graduate of the American University of Beirut and the University of London, had become a victim of circumstances at the time, and persuaded El Tayyib to offer him a position as visiting professor at Khartoum. So, in 1974 my parents and I moved to Sudan.

**It must have been difficult moving between many different places at such a young age. Did finding some stability in Sudan offer you the opportunity to pursue your passion for music?**

All this moving around required me to constantly make new friends and learn all these different dialects. After mastering Lebanese, I had to learn Sudanese. I was also exposed to many different musical tastes between Yemen, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Sudan, and of course, in all Arab countries Egyptian music was playing in the background. At our new home in Khartoum, I would often hear my father playing the oud, so I eventually asked him to teach me. The first thing he tried to teach me was a Sana'ani song, but I couldn't figure it out because I hadn't heard much

Sana'ani music at that point. My father told me, 'music is time,' and that singing would help me learn, so I started to learn some of his 'Adeni' songs that I was more familiar with.

My father was also very busy teaching Arabic literature at the University, so I tapped into the two main Sudanese musical currents at the time: one was the local Arabic songs in the pentatonic [five-note scale] style and the other Western pop music, which was artists like Diana Ross, ABBA, Mary Hopkins, Tom Jones, the Bee Gees, and Bob Marley. This was generally called 'jazz' in Sudan, but it is pop, not jazz. Black American music in particular had political significance at the time for people who wanted to identify with pan-Africanism instead of pan-Arabism. I remember when Bob Marley died in the early 1980s they had a funeral for him near my house. Everyone had dreadlocks and instead of reading the *fatiha* they sang his songs. I went to a Catholic high school and many of my classmates played what they called 'jazz.'

I also remember listening to Sudanese singers like Abu 'Araki al-Bakhit and the late Zaydan al-Ibrahim. I only had to open my window to hear Ahmad Mustafa who lived just down the street.<sup>7</sup> He would play the oud and sing on his back porch, and I always used to get my kite stuck in his garden. He was a great musical inspiration for me.

**So you eventually went back to Yemen in 1985, but you didn't end up settling in your hometown of Aden but in Sana'a where you stayed until the recent war broke out. The history of North and South is fraught with divisions, but it strikes me that these do not entirely define your experience. After all, you are someone who has gone on to promote public health, education, and the arts throughout all of Yemen.**

I always knew that I wanted to do something for Yemen despite my newly established roots in Sudan. I felt I had been disconnected for too long. After university, I moved to Dubai for one year. I had family there who had become citizens, so I briefly worked as a medical officer. Perhaps because of my father, both North and South were always my *raison d'être*, so in 1985 I moved to Sana'a. Although my father wasn't involved in politics, he always advocated for a cultural unity between North and South. This is particularly visible in his theatrical plays about famous Yemeni historical figures and in his book on Sana'ani music. My mother was more skeptical, and seemed to question whether or not Sana'a could ever be a 'home.'

Anyway, I joined the army and eventually became first lieutenant. While serving I also received a British Council scholarship to get an MSc in occupational medicine from the University of London. But after returning I left the army and moved back to Aden, partly out of nostalgia. I also witnessed a lot of corruption in the military and wanted to promote occupational medicine, which I couldn't in the



Seal for Nizar's Sudanese-Yemeni cultural society, 'Sumaniyya' or the 'Sumaniyyun'.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Bakhit, al-Ibrahim, and Mustafa are all Khartoum-based artists who were important to the development of contemporary and modern music in Sudan.

North. After unification I eventually left the practice and started teaching, but in 1992 I started the Free Musician's and Creatives Clinic in Sana'a. You know, I wrote to the American Performing Arts Medicine Society, and I think this clinic was one of the first in the world specifically dedicated to both the physical and psychological dimensions of performing arts medicine. The first British performing arts medicine service was established two years after I established the clinic in Yemen, so you could say I was ahead of my time! Sadly, the Huthis have closed the clinic in Sana'a, but the branch in al-Shihr continued until recently with support from the Friends of Hadhramaut and especially the Qu'ayti and Ingrams families.

### Recent Activities and Future Plans

Nizar later received a PhD in Occupational Health from Sana'a University in 2011 with a dissertation on the association between obsessive-compulsive disorder and occupational performance. He has continued to promote public health and the arts as a university professor, civic activist, and cultural scholar. The recent war in Yemen has led him back to his second home country of Sudan. He teaches at the Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman and is waiting for his daughter Afnan to finish her degree in medicine. His eldest daughter Shayma has been living in Birmingham for several years now, so he wishes to find a way to settle down in 2023 in the UK, or elsewhere with his wife and daughters due to the continued political instability and war rampant in his two home countries. He is currently completing a manuscript about African influences in Yemeni music building on his previous book, *Afro-Yemeni Dances*.



At the Free Clinic for Musicians and Creatives with Yemen's minister of culture, Yahya al-'Irshi, and the head of Sana'a University, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Maqalih in Sana'a, 1992



With recent Master's graduates at Ahfad University, Omdurman, 2015



Nizar with his son, Farid, and grandson, Ghanem in Dubai, 2022



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