

Afro-Iraqi Rituals: Stigma, Discrimination, and Resilience

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The rituals take us back to ancient history, to the past. During the ritual, we remember our people; how they used to sing and dance... I start crying because I remember my father and how he used to sit in the makeed... Rituals are in my body and soul. I feel my people in the past; how they were meeting, dancing and performing the rite.

Key Informant, "Afro-Iraqi Cultural Heritage:
Documenting, Preserving and Sharing"¹

Introduction

Afro-Iraqi people make up 5% of the Iraqi population (42 million), and Iraq has been their home since the ninth century, mostly as part of forced immigration due to the slave trade. Throughout their history, Afro-Iraqis have been subjected to oppression, racism, and discrimination. Although they are born and raised in Iraqi culture, they are pejoratively represented and treated as the "other." Their rituals—originating from various diasporic lineages—have been disparaged as barbaric and irreligious. They are on the threat of extinction, as knowledge keepers are passing away and younger generations face systemic and cultural barriers to preserving and practicing them. However, in the face of oppression, discrimination, and stigmatization, these rituals have asserted and sustained the Afro-Iraqi communal identity.²

The purpose of this article is to describe Afro-Iraqi rituals, their significance, and the challenges Afro-Iraqis face to sustaining their rituals. To do so, we have utilized research interviews with Afro-Iraqi key informants, personal interviews with Afro-Iraqi ritual practitioners, and etymological investigation of songs and names. In addition, some of our insights are based on observing the rituals and on the co-author's (Thawrah Yousif's) lived experience and knowledge as a member of the Afro-Iraqi community. Since there is no scholarship written on Afro-Iraqi rituals, this article is a first humble attempt to document these orally transmitted rituals.

¹ Key informant, interview by Thawrah Yousif Yaqoob, Basra, Iraq, August 14, 2021.

² Some of the primary data for this work was collected through a pilot study (Afro-Iraqi Cultural Heritage: Documenting, Preserving and Sharing) funded by UW-SSHRC Explore Grant. Additionally, we would like to thank the following individuals whose insight and expertise made the research possible: Janna Martin, Elham Al-Zubaidy, Isaiah Alan DuPree, and James Al-Shamma.

Who are Afro-Iraqis?

Although a suppositional genealogy linking a Black presence in Mesopotamia to modern-day Afro-Iraqis still exists,³ the more popular theory is that Afro-Iraqis were brought from Africa to Iraq throughout different eras and for different purposes. First, they were brought from Africa to Iraq as slaves during the ninth century when Baghdad was the capital during the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate (750 – 1258 CE). Second, during the Ottoman Empire and British colonization of the Arabian Gulf, the increase of demands on products such as dates and pearls in European and North American markets promoted the appetite for slave trade and labor.⁴ African slaves brought to the Arab world “were obtained through raiding villages, trickery, or exchanging slaves for goods.”⁵

Discrimination and Racism

Discrimination and racism against Afro-Iraqis in particular and Afro-Arabs in general are unfortunately rooted in Arab culture and are informed by a long history of negative representation. Iraqi society looks down upon Afro-Iraqis and portrays them and their rituals with opprobrious stereotypes. In addition to being underrepresented and underprivileged, they are called racist names and described in derogatory ways. They are portrayed as infamous entertainers with sexual prowess, irrational thinking, and bad body odor. These and other racist stereotypes have considerably impacted the Afro-Iraqi community, contributing to withdrawal from participation in community, decreased self-esteem, and lowered ambition.

Afro-Iraqi Rituals

Afro-Iraqi rituals have been maintained through orature, their transmission dependent on the private nature of the host communities. The importance of these rituals lies in their restorative power. They maintain communal identity and foster empowerment and transformation. They are held for special ceremonial purposes, such as healing spiritual illness while honoring the presence of the *Zaar*,⁶ treating a sick person or honoring a dead person or

³ See Adheed J. al-Khamisi, “Iraqiun mansiyun...al-Aqliyah alsawda fil Iraq,” *al-Hewar al-Mutamadin*, no.4962 (2015): 2-3, and Gershom Amayo, “Blacks’ Origins of Mesopotamian Civilization and Education,” *Baraton Interdisciplinary Research Journal* (2011): 72. Also, a similar claim made about the Iraqw tribe in Tanzania with a historical Cushite linkage to Iraq. See Rekdal, Ole Bjørn, “When Hypothesis Becomes Myth: The Iraqi Origin of the Iraqw,” *Ethnology* 37, no. 1 (1998): 17–38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3773846>.

⁴ Matthew S. Hopper, *Slaves of One Master: Globalization and Slavery in Arabia in the Age of Empire* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015), 8.

⁵ Rima Saban, “Encountering Domestic Slavery: A Narrative from the Arabian Gulf,” In *Slavery in the Islamic World*, ed. Mary Ann Fay (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 135.

⁶ *Zaar* (or *Zar*) refers to a visiting good/evil spirit. The *Zaar* ritual, believed to have originated in Ethiopia, is performed in North Africa and the Middle East. See Magnus E. Ukah, *Bourdieu in Africa: Exploring the Dynamics of Religious Fields* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015), 106.

their ancestors.⁷ The enactment of these rituals highlights and reaffirms the spiritual and social values of individuals and the community, and it reestablishes their harmony with the spiritual realm and with one another.

Ritual Sites: *Makeed*

Before exploring the theories of origins of Afro-Iraqi rituals, it is helpful to understand the locations in which they take place. Afro-Iraqi rituals are held in sacred places called *makeed*; a place for Afro-Iraqis to sustain their identity and renew their communication with divinity, ancestors, spirits, and each other. The word *makeed* is derived from the Arabic word *makeeda*, meaning plot or machination. These *makeeds* were known by the names of their owners or by titles, or the birthplace of the owner's grandfather, such as *makeed Al-Masry* and *makeed Issa ibn Ateeq*. Mullah Adnan, a *makeed* owner and practitioner of *Al Sada* ritual, defines *makeed* as “the place where the good *jinn*⁸ community plots against the evil *jinn* community and the two meet in it.”⁹ Also, the word *maidan*¹⁰ is used to refer to the spot in the *makeed* where the battle between *jinn* happens. *Makeeds* are located in distinct areas throughout the Basra governorate, including Al-Zubair district, Abi Al-Khasib district, Al-Ba’ath city area, and Old Basra, which has two localities Al-Hakaka and Al-Mjibra (fig. 1), and is arguably the most important area to people of African descent in Basra who “built squares in it to hold their rituals and beat drums throughout the night, and some of them still practice these dances.”¹¹ Al Hakaka and Al Mjibra are the two areas where Basra rituals are practiced the most due to their proximity to public transportation and local markets, but also because they have been the designated locales for these rituals for hundreds of years. Rituals only began to be practiced in the other aforementioned areas after families moved and established a *makeed* there.

⁷ The exception is the *Liwa* ritual, which is the only one associated with happy occasions.

⁸ *Jinn* refers to supernatural creatures such as spirits or demons.

⁹ Adnan Abdullah, interview by Thawrah Yousif, Basra, Iraq, November 1, 2002.

¹⁰ The word *maidan* means a battlefield.

¹¹ Ahmed Bash Aiyan, *Encyclopedia of Basra History* (Baghdad: al-Times, n.d.), 236.

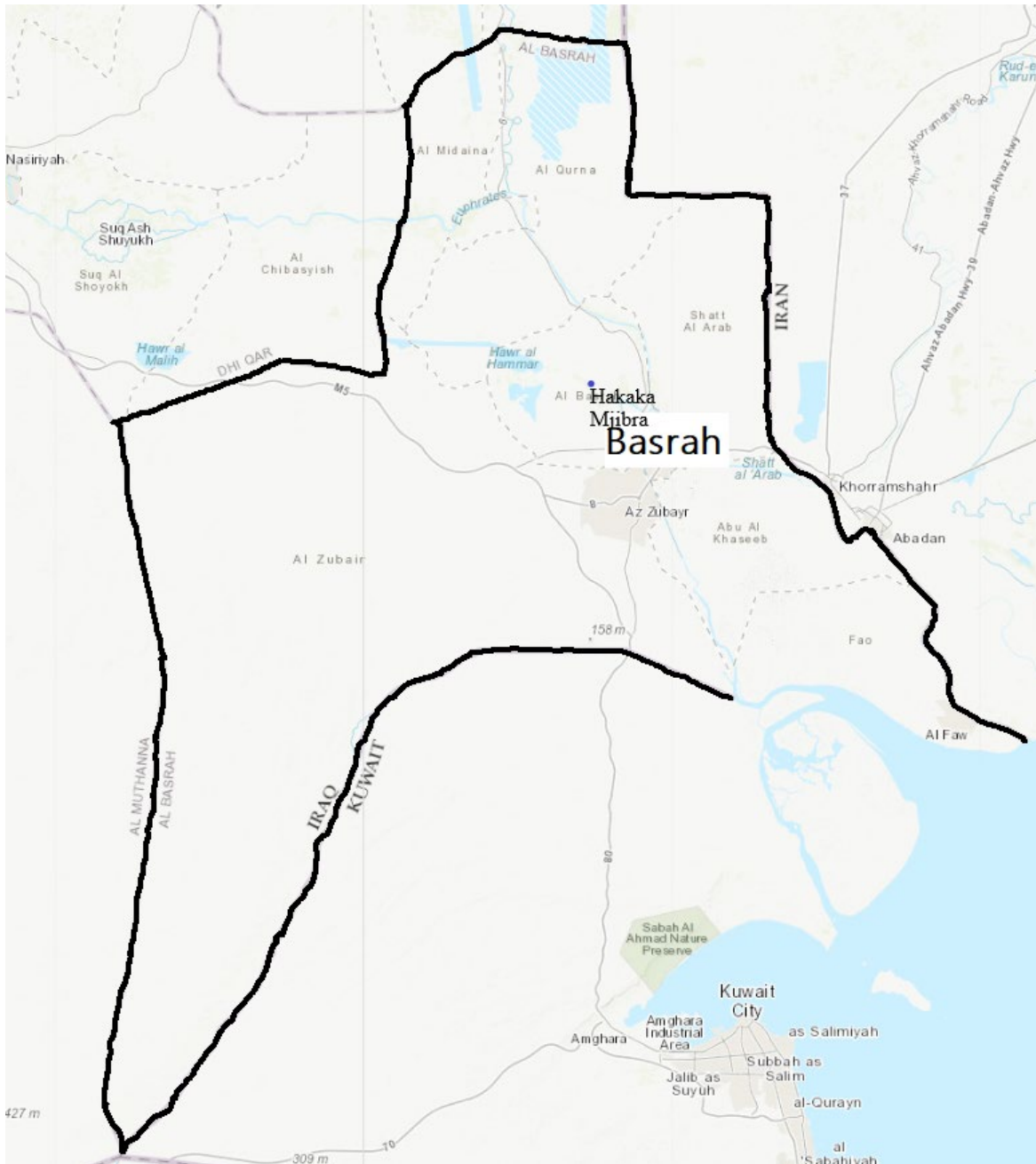


Figure 1, Map of Basra (Basrah) www.journalmap.org (the location of Hakaka and Mjibra added by authors)

Theories of Origin

There are two predominant theories concerning the origins of the rituals. The first contends that they originated in Africa, and the second, that they emerged locally in the area around Basra. According to the first theory, Kenya is the origin of the *Engaruka*, *Chitanga*, *Wogendo*, and *Liwa*.¹² The name of *Angaruka* ritual could also be associated with Engaruka, the

¹² Um Hamdi (Owner of makeed Sheikh Qamar), interview by Thawrah Yousif, Basra, Iraq, October 1, 2002.

town situated in the Great Rift Valley of northern Tanzania in the Arusha province. Salah Moneka¹³ states that in this ritual, “Afro-Iraqis use drums like tall drums, a *surnay*¹⁴ and a big conch shell to blow.”¹⁵ As for the *Chitanga*¹⁶ ritual, which is also a name of drum used in Afro-Iraqi rituals, it may come from Chitonga, a Bantu language primarily spoken by the Tonga people in Zambia and Zimbabwe. In this ritual, Afro-Iraqis celebrate their connection with Simba.¹⁷ Far from its origins in African culture and the legend of Sundiata Keita, the founder of the medieval kingdom of Mali¹⁸, Simba represents Ali bin Abi Talib, the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law, who is considered to be the bravest and most virtuous man in Islam—especially for Shia Muslims—after the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁹ This may indicate the influence of Islamic culture on African rituals in Iraq.

With the exception of Liwa, those rituals are no longer practiced because of the death of their knowledge keepers, ritual practitioners, and makeed owners. Most of their songs are not in the Arabic language, and no one from the new generation understands them anymore²⁰. According to Najim Abood, the owner of the biggest makeed in Basra, makeed Al-Masry, some of those rituals such as Engaruka, Chitanga, Wogendo are no longer performed because of “the death of the great sheikhs who were overseeing the establishment of it; or, that it is performed, but within very narrow limits, which does not give others the opportunity to watch it or listen to its songs, so it seems strange to them and is not currently understood.”²¹ Some families reserve the practice of these rituals strictly for family members.

In Kenya, specifically the coastal region of Zanzibar and Mombasa, these rituals are thought to have “their roots in the Mombasa tribes, and songs are used to preserve the coastal identity of these tribes.”²² These rituals could have been transported during the slave trade either by way of the Red Sea, then the Arabian Peninsula, then to Basra, or across the Arabian Sea, then the Arabian Gulf, then to Basra. These rituals also spread to the Arabian Peninsula during the first era of the Abbasid Caliphate by merchants or East Africans ensnared in the Arab slave trade. When enslaved Kenyans were brought to Basra, they formed spiritual communities and practiced their rituals, which they sustained in bondage through orature.²³

¹³ Makeed Wanika is a keeper and ritual practitioner.

¹⁴ “Double-reeded aerophone with six sound holes.” See Lisa Urkevich, *Music and Traditions of the Arabian Peninsula* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 141.

¹⁵ Salah Moneka, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Toronto, Canada, October 2, 2022.

¹⁶ Another spelling is *Chechanga*.

¹⁷ *Simba* means “lion” in Swahili.

¹⁸ See National Geographic Society, “Sundiata Keita”, *National Geographic*, May 20, 2022. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/sundiata-keita>

¹⁹ Salah Moneka, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Toronto, Canada, October 2, 2022.

²⁰ The language identified so far in the songs is a mix of Swahili and Arabic. Both authors are working on identifying the language of the other songs and translating them into English and Arabic.

²¹ Najim Abood, interview by Thawrah Yousif, Basra, Iraq, September 19, 2002.

²² Um Hamdi (Owner of makeed Sheikh Qamar), interview by Thawrah Yousif, Basra, Iraq, October 1, 2002.

²³ Thawrah Yousif, *Jamaliyat al-Tawthif lil Tuqoos al-Sha'biyah fil Ardh al-Masrahi* (Basra: Dar al-Funoon wal Adab, 2015), 56.

As for the rite of *Nuban*, it is believed to have its origin in southern Egypt, specifically the Nubia region, transported to Basra by way of the two previously mentioned routes and actors. The *Hubboush* ritual hails from Abyssinia. The word *Hubboush* is derived from the word *Habasha* (Abyssinia). With the transfer of these rituals to Basra came their intermingling with the city's local heritage and customs, including singing in the Arabic language.²⁴

Regarding *Al Liwa*,²⁵ there is a disagreement among scholars and Afro-Arab ritual practitioners on the name and origin of this ritual. It is worth noting that the Liwa, like many other rituals, has been stripped of its ritualistic aspect and has become a musical art form practiced in several Arab countries. While some believe that Liwa was named after its creator (Liwa) from Bloush family in Basra, others believe that Liwa is the name of the creator of the dance in Mombasa, Kenya. In *Music and Traditions of the Arabian Peninsula*, Lisa Urkevich states that “East African slaves and immigrants, specifically those from Kenya, Tanzania, and South Somalia, introduced it [Liwa] to the region.”²⁶ Moreover, Liwa is attributed to the Kenyan Luo group, among which the practice is called the Kiluo dance.²⁷ Other scholars indicate that since the word *liwa* means a “drink” or “to drink” in Swahili, it here refers to *al-mjimbi* drink which is a type of alcoholic drinks used in the Mombasa and Nuban Zaar rituals.”²⁸

We have also found a piece of evidence in one of the ritual popular songs called “Winin Obeid”, translated as “Obeid’s Wail”. Obeid is the co-author Yaqoob’s grandfather. Obeid was a dark, tall, and slim man. He fell in love with Hamida al-Safra. She was half white, half Black, or mixed race, called *emwalid*. Obeid was crazy about her, spending all his time waiting on the house roof to get a glimpse of her. Hamida’s family was rich. Her father was a white man whose feudal family owned Hamida’s mother. Hamida’s parents fell in love and got married and gave birth to Hamida. Obeid stopped going out with his friends, and instead, spent his evenings on the house roof waiting for Hamida. One evening, Hamida passed by the house with a white man, but she could not even look at Obeid. He jumped from his place like a madman and tore his clothes apart. His friends saw what happened and started singing, “Listen to Obeid’s wailing on the roof...he fell in love with the emwalid and tore apart his clothes, O Mombasi, trust in Allah.” Many people sing this song but they don’t know the words and story behind it.

Liwa, claimed to originate from East Africa, is the most flexible and joyful of the rituals, and the uninitiated are permitted to witness it because it does not induce a trance-like state. Its cheerful melodies and distinct speed and lightness can be heard in Iraqi popular music, which is

²⁴ Yousif, *Jamaliyat*, 57.

²⁵ It is also spelled as *Laywa*.

²⁶ Lisa Urkevich, *Music and Traditions of the Arabian Peninsula* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 138.

²⁷ Khalid Khalifa, “Aalat al-Surney fil Hadharat al-Qadima,” *Al-Thaqafa al-Shabiya*, no.17, (2012): 123.

²⁸ Khalid Khalifa, “Aalat al-Surney,” 123.

called *hywa*. *Hywa* was introduced to Iraqi music in 1970s through Firqat al-Basra lil Funoon al-Shabiya.²⁹

The second theory argues that the origin of many of these rituals, especially *Al Sada* and *Al Waya*, are local, and refer to "the period of Sufism and the dhikr, as the ritual in them depends on religious singing in the colloquial dialect or poems in classical Arabic."³⁰ Both *Al Waya* and *Al Sada* are not part of the African heritage but they are in fact a newer rituals which began during a period of Sufism, whose largest schools were located in Basra. Basra was one of the first centers for Sufi and mystic movements led by prominent figures like al-Hassan al-Basri (d. 728 CE) and Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (d. 801 CE). During the 14th and 15th century, new schools and orders of Sufism called *Tariqa* emerged, such as *al-Rifa'yya*,³¹ *al-Qadiriyya*,³² and *Suhrawardiyya*.³³ Sufi tariqa is practiced in spaces called *takiya*. Most *takiya* are located in close proximity to the Afro-Iraqi communities in Basra and thus rituals like *Al-Sada*³⁴ might originate from that environment and era. The ritual of *Al Sada*, practiced in makeed Wanika, utilizes Sufi poems; lightweight drums are used as well as the same tambourines used in Sufi dhikr circles. *Al Waya*, a Sufi *Qadri* ritual, is celebrated in makeed Sultan in al-Hakaka, which also uses Middle Eastern tambourines, a cylindrical double-skinned drum, *musunda/msondo*,³⁵ *batu* and *surnay*.³⁶ The use of *daf*, a Middle Eastern tambourine, could imply that it is a Sufi ritual, since in African rituals drums are usually used instead.

Music and Instruments

The musical aspect of the Afro-Iraqi ritual is essential to its perceived effectiveness. It "attracts the spirits and lures the participants into dancing."³⁷ The Nuban ritual is an example of this, given the inclusion of the *tanbura*³⁸, a harp-like stringed instrument that is considered the one essential instrument for the ritual. Most rituals begin with a slow rhythm. The beginning of the rite of *Al Nuban* may seem melancholy as a result of the *tanbura*, which has a deep and somber timbre.

²⁹ Basra Troupe for Folk Arts.

³⁰ Abdul-Razzaq Abdul-Jalil, interview by Thawrah Yousif, Basra, Iraq, December 1, 2002. Abdul Razzaq (known as Mulla Aboudi), the author of the Qadiriyyah order (named after Abdul Qadir al-Kilani) and owner of makeed Wanika

³¹ Founded by Sayyed Ahmed al-Rifa'i.

³² Founded by Sheikh Abdul Qadir al-Kilani.

³³ Ali al-Husseini, "Al-Turq al-Sufiyya fil Basra: Tarikh wa Asma wa Shawahid," in *Al-Tasawif al-Mu'asir* (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 2011), 5.

³⁴ The name is derived from Sayyed Ahmed al-Rifa'i, founder of Rifa'yya Tariqa.

³⁵ A Swahili drum, slightly tapered, one-ended drum used in places like Zanzibar.

³⁶ Salah Moneka, Interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Toronto, Canada, October 2, 2022.

³⁷ Hager El Hadidi, *Zar: Spirit Possession, Music, and Healing Rituals in Egypt* (Cairo: AUC Press, 2016), 2.

³⁸ The other spelling is *tamboura*.



Figure 2, Tanbura and drums (photograph by authors, Basra, February 10, 2021)

Drums are African in origin which include, among others, *maruas*,³⁹ *msondo*, and *chechanga*.⁴⁰ Musical instruments used in Basra rituals are made of organic materials. The tanbura is fashioned from the trunk of perennial trees and the pick, called *silah*,⁴¹ is made from the horn of a bull. The exterior of the tanbura is covered with cowhide and the strings are made from a cow's small intestine. The drums are made from cowhide, and sometimes the wooden drum is replaced by a light metal bowl due to the scarcity of old trees in Basra. As for the *manjoor*, it is made from a thick piece of cloth covered in sheep hooves, worn around the hip, and played in syncopation with the drums. All the musical instruments are placed in front of the musicians. In addition to the drums, tanbura and manjoor, there are the surnay, and the batu or *tanaka*, "a foot-long rectangular metal ...played with two bamboo sticks and provides a steady rhythm that is always a little behind the beat."⁴²

Customs and Preparations

Afro-Iraqi rituals adhere to specific customs for preparation and invitations. There are two kinds of invitations: those for a wedding or a birthday, and those for rituals. For the former, either an oral invitation is extended or a card is sent. For the latter, incense are wrapped in a small white handkerchief and sent to *dasateers*.⁴³ The incense, believed to be the spiritual food for jinn and the purifier for the body to be inhabited by the spirits, vary according to the ritual. In invitations to the Nuban rite, Javanese incense are sent; for Al Sada, Indian dry wood incense are chosen. Some incense are associated with certain makeed, such as *Al Shayeb* incense, which is specific to makeed Abu Nazim, and another called *Mani Mani* which is tied to makeed Wanika.

³⁹ A small cylindrical double-skinned originally used by African slave pearl divers in Arabian Sea. See Hopper, *Slaves of One Master*, 90.

⁴⁰ It is similar to *msondo* but smaller, slung over the shoulder and held to the side of the performer's body by a shoulder strap.

⁴¹ *Silah* means a weapon.

⁴² Hopper, *Slaves*, 140

⁴³ *Dasateers* refer to those who were formerly possessed and knowledge keepers. It also means good jinn.

When the incense are delivered to the invited families, their attendance is mandatory, or they must send a representative in their absence, preferably a son or daughter.

The owners of the *makeed* clean it before the arrival of the invitees, cover the ground with area rugs, then inspect the ritual tools. The ritual tools are multiple small glass vessels containing olive oil, chicken eggs, rose water, a censer, thick baked beans molded into a stick, and two types of coffee: bitter Arabic coffee and sweet coffee, which is mixed with a combination of syrup mixed and ginger.

The Ceremony

The sequence of events at the gathering is typically as follows: the playing of music as guests enter and take their place, followed by dancing, and finally the possession ritual. When the musicians sit in preparation for the ritual, invitees are then permitted to enter the *makeed*, where they must remove their shoes at the door and walk directly towards the musicians to greet them and bless the *tanbura* instrument before sitting. The men sit behind the musicians and the women sit to their left. Then a boy or girl carries the censer and rose water, perfuming the guests with incense and sprinkling rose water on their heads as an act of hospitality. During the dance, everyone forms two lines facing each other, men on one side and women the other, after which everyone merges to form one circle. Most of the ceremonies feature co-ed dancing; the one exception is the *Al Sada* ritual in which male and female participants are separated.

Al Nuban Ritual

We use *Al Nuban* as an example here because it is the only ritual that has survived in its entirety and is still practiced by most Black people in Iraq. This ritual is unique in that it is the only one in which a *Chawush*, which translates as a sergeant or person who gives orders, facilitates the ritual.⁴⁴ The *Chawush* is often a woman who has various responsibilities, both before and during the ritual. She supervises the preparation of coffee and incense and shows people to their seats. She may educate the community about their traditions and ancestors.

⁴⁴ Other rituals do not require a facilitator (*Chawush*) because they are celebrated in small places with small crowds.



Figure 3, Manjoor with sheep hooves (Photograph by authors, Basra, February 10, 2021)

The Chawush is the caller of the ceremony and marks the beginning of the dance, the second event of the gathering, by calling out loudly, “*Germa*,”⁴⁵ a non-Arabic word commanding those present to be silent and listen. Everyone participates in the dance, including men, women, and children.



Figure 4, Nuban Rite (Photograph by authors, Basra, February 10, 2021)

Al Nuban starts when the Chawush brings the bitter coffee pot, the jug of sweet coffee, eggs, olive oil, and incense, placing everything in front of the tanbura. An egg is placed inside the tanbura to honor the instrument and its invisible spirit guardian *al-irbeed*,⁴⁶ who sleeps inside the tanbura and eats the egg. Several eggs are cracked in different corners of the madeed to honor and bless the place.

Before beginning any healing ritual, *elimdhaif*, the person for whom the ritual is held, undergoes two stages: the first is *tabiyat*, which includes establishing the appropriate ritual in accordance with the person’s ailment or disease. This stage requires the person to take a piece of their clothing and spend the night in the place of the ritual. The second phase consists of anointing, in which medicine prepared from a mixture of herbs for the *elimdhaif*, is applied to the body over the course of three days. The mixture of herbs is contingent upon the type of disease, as not all herbs are suitable for all diseases.

⁴⁵ The authors could not identify the origin of or the language of the word *germa*.

⁴⁶ A big black snake.

The Chawush stands in front of the tanbura and calls, once again, “Germa”, to silence those present, then summons the attendees to sit in a U or L shape. Men are seated on the right and women on the left, with sons and daughters behind the elders. Once the dance starts, there is no gender or age segregation since all the community members celebrate together in the same place. The elimdhaif sits in the maidan and the spiritual elders surround them, placing thick sticks in front of them, as a symbol of their status in the rite. One of the sticks, called *toothiay*, is also used as a cane by the manjoor player, as well as to punish those who disrespect the ritual.

Next, the Chawush calls out, “Gahwa – qad mur” and “Qad huloo.” *Qad* means a coffee pot. *Gahwa* is a word for coffee in the Iraqi colloquial dialect, and *qad mur* and *qad hulu* refers to bitter and sweet coffee, respectively. The Chawush then says, “Allah Wahid”⁴⁷ followed by a strum of the tanbura; then, this is repeated three times. The Chawush then addresses the Zaar, which occupies the elimdhaif’s body, asking whether they are content with the ceremony preparations, as provided for the elimdhaif. Through a gesture or orally, the Zaar responds with yes and drinks bitter then sweet coffee. Later, coffee is distributed to the attendees, starting with the bitter brew, followed by the sweet. The coffee is used to commemorate those who were touched by the Zaar.

Once the coffee is finished, the tanbura begins playing and the Zaar listens to the tanbura. When the tune pleases the Zaar, the elimdhaif stands up in the maidan, and drums begin accompanying the tanbura. The Zaar begins to dance, and the dasateers join the elimdhaif. Then, the other celebrants join the dance in an orchestrated, ceremonial manner around elimdhaif. The Zaar’s dance is ecstatic and varies frantically depending on the Zaar type, and can include jumping on one leg and acrobatics. When the dance heightens, the Zaar’s identity merges with that of the elimdhaif, giving complete agency to the spirit to become an embodied presence in the living community. At this moment, the felt experience of copresence between both the elimdhaif and the Zaar and between the Zaar and the other celebrants reinforces the Afro-Iraqi religious and spiritual sense of community since, to use Beliso-De Jesús’ postulation, “an embodied epistemology of copresence enables unification.”⁴⁸

When the elimdhaif’s movements slow down, the attendees sense that the Zaar is fulfilled and ready to leave. Several attendees come forward to catch the elimdhaif, who is thrown down when the Zaar exits the body. This does not mean that Zaar spirit is exorcized. The Zaar’s possession “is a permanent state ...Zaar spirits are not only alien outsiders to the participants, but also human doubles or spirit familiars assigned to each person.”⁴⁹ It is “some kind of an inner

⁴⁷ “God is One.”

⁴⁸ Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, “Santeria Copresence and the Making of African Diaspora Bodies,” *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2014): 503–526.

⁴⁹ El Hadidi, *Zar*, 1.

self and an alien self.”⁵⁰ However, when the Zaar leaves the body, it makes the elimdhaif unconscious, so rosewater is sprayed on them to revive them. The rosewater symbolizes the “Prophet Muhammad’s sweat.” The elimdhaif, feeling empowered by the possession, blesses the rosewater, which is given to sick attendees who will either drink or shower with it. The attendees come forward to receive a blessing from the elimdhaif. Meanwhile, some attendees are sprayed with rosewater at the end of the ceremony as a blessing.



Figure 5, Nuban Rite (Photograph by authors, Basra, February 10, 2021)

Afro-Iraqis have confidence in the efficacy of their ceremonies to heal spiritual illness and connect to their ancestors, who reside in the African motherland. Abu Hussein, an al-Masri makeed member, conveys in an interview that, in the rituals, “we remember our roots, our ancestors, we feel them with us, we smell their scent... Sometimes I feel alone in this society, but when I see my loved ones and friends coming from different parts of Iraq to celebrate with us these rituals, I regain my strength and confidence.”⁵¹ As for the healing aspect, Um Duaa, one of the makeed’s elders, adds that, “when I enter the makeed, I feel spiritual comfort. I feel I am supported by my people.”⁵² Partaking in the rituals promotes hope and wellbeing among its community members. Salwa, an assistant at one of the makeeds confirms, “When I feel upset or hesitant about something, I go to the makeed and after the ritual I feel motivated, enthusiastic and hopeful.”⁵³

Ritual Performance: Challenges and Resilience

In Iraq, Afro-Iraqi rituals are stigmatized as barbaric, irreligious, evil, and disparaged as “voodoo.” They are perceived as such partly because of Iraqis’ unwillingness to understand these rituals, and partly because of the culturally rooted stereotypical image of Black people as barbarian, animals, and irrational beings. Also, for the common Iraqi observer whose gaze is

⁵⁰ El Hadidi, *Zar*, 1.

⁵¹ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, August 13, 2021.

⁵² Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, August 14, 2021.

⁵³ Key informant, virtual interview by Amir Al-Azraki, July 2, 2021.

filtered through the traditional mind/body and soul/body dualism,⁵⁴ “an excess of embodied practices” in the Afro-Iraqi rituals would be interpreted as lacking “interiority, intentionality, discipline, and morality” and “a sign of not having ‘real’ religion and lacking in humanity.”⁵⁵ On the contrary, in a recent pilot research study, a key informant underlines the importance of these rituals saying that they “take us back to ancient history, to the past. During the ritual, we remember our people; how they used to sing and dance...Rituals are in my body and soul. I feel my people in the past; how they were meeting, dancing and performing the rite.”⁵⁶ Seeing them through the lens of body/mind dualism depreciates the participants’ experience and ignores the fact shown by recent studies on how the body “is engaged in generating religious knowledge, spiritual ideas, alternative states of reality, mystic experiences, and in “knowing” the divine”, and in producing “knowledge of the past and thus become a locus of collective memory.”⁵⁷ In the rituals, a key informant states, “I feel my people in the past how they were meeting, dancing and performing the duty.”⁵⁸ Another key informant expresses that in the makeed, “we have memories. They remind us with somebody who used to attend the ritual.”⁵⁹

From a conservative Islamic perspective, in addition to being recognized as an alien superstition and *bid’a*,⁶⁰ these rituals are considered *shirk*⁶¹ due to the belief in the supernatural mediation or intercession between Muslims and God.⁶² On the other hand, *Ashura* rituals, practiced by Shia majority in Iraq and perceived as *bid’a* by the Sunni majority in the Arab world,⁶³ are not viewed as barbaric or irreligious in Iraq, even though they share some aspects with Afro-Iraqi rituals such as embodied performances and a belief in intercession. These annual rituals include such activities, among others, as weeping and chest beating, self-flagellation, street processions, and re-enactments of the Battle of Karbala. In some of these performances, participants experience physical pain due to flagellation or chest beating. For Shia Muslims, by commemorating, sharing, and feeling the pain and suffering of Hussein and his family, they are seeking, among other purposes, *thawab*⁶⁴ and *shafa’a*.⁶⁵ While the intercessors in Afro-Iraqi rituals are supernatural beings such as invisible jinn, in Shia rituals intercessors are Prophet Muhammad’s family, who are visible and considered to be higher in status than jinn. Also,

⁵⁴ Iraqis often believe in an ontological hierarchy of the rational/spiritual/internal over the physical/material/external.

⁵⁵ Yolanda Covington-Ward and Jeanette A. Jouili, *Embodying Black Religions in Africa and Its Diasporas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 22.

⁵⁶ Key informant, virtual interview by Amir Al-Azraki, July 2, 2021.

⁵⁷ Covington-Ward and Jouili, *Embodying Black Religions*, 29.

⁵⁸ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, August 17, 2021.

⁵⁹ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, July 15, 2021.

⁶⁰ Non-Islamic innovation.

⁶¹ Sin of idolatry or polytheism in Islam.

⁶² El Hadidi, *Zar*, 40.

⁶³ Public performances commemorating the tragic death of Prophet Muhammad’s grandson Hussein ibn Ali and some of his family and companions, and the subsequent humiliating captivity of his family at the hands of Yazid ibn Mu’awiya.

⁶⁴ God’s reward.

⁶⁵ Intercession.

unlike the narrative of Hussein's death that is well-preserved and maintained through observances and books, Afro-Iraqi narrative, history, and heritage are unfortunately neither preserved nor celebrated.

In 2021, coauthor Amir Al-Azraki was the principal investigator of a pilot study⁶⁶ to learn about the undocumented heritage of the Afro-Iraqi community, challenges Afro-Iraqis encounter to living out and passing on their heritage, and future directions for documenting, preserving, and sharing Afro-Iraqi heritage. Key informants agreed that their community maintains solidarity in keeping their heritage alive but faces challenges to passing on that heritage. Some strengths and challenges are internal to the Afro-Iraqi community—most significantly, many of the rituals, songs, and associated language⁶⁷ are being forgotten—but the community is still practicing parts of its heritage and some young people are invested in learning it. There are also external threats to the continuation of the Afro-Iraqi heritage, namely the stigmatization of its rituals in Iraqi society and the absence of state and international support.

While key informants explained that the young and old still gather to practice Afro-Iraqi rituals, much has already been lost. The most practiced ritual is the Nuban, while others are rarely enacted. A key informant reflected, “Now, only the Nuban is present a lot because the rest of rituals have almost disappeared... Almost no one knows about the other rituals, neither the poems nor the rhythms.”⁶⁸ The songs in the rituals are in Swahili, which a key informant recalled was spoken by his grandparents, but the language was not learned by him or his parents. The key informants explained that they know ritual songs by heart, but they do not know the meaning of the words. While the meaning is not known, the songs still evoke emotions, as a key informant described, “When they bring a sick person to play a specific song for him, a sad or happy song, we feel the words from the way of singing.”⁶⁹ Key informants lamented that previous generations did not write down the meaning of the words to the songs.

Although young people are eager to learn their heritage, some key informants reported that young people do not receive enough support to maintain and preserve it. Fewer Afro-Iraqis today can play the musical instruments of the rituals when compared to previous generations. When asked what prevents young people from learning to play the tanbura, key informants responded that young people lack time to practice and there is not enough encouragement from society. In addition, current generations may have less knowledge of the principles of and belief in the rituals, which are key to their very existence. As one key informant explained, “If there is no belief, there is no purpose of playing the music or doing ritual.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ The study is titled “Afro-Iraqi Cultural Heritage: Documenting, Preserving and Sharing.” It was funded by the University of Waterloo- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council- Explore Grant.

⁶⁷ Some of those songs are in Swahili or Arabic, or mixture of both.

⁶⁸ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, July 26, 2021.

⁶⁹ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, July 2, 2021.

⁷⁰ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, August 14, 2021

While these challenges are significant to the survival of the Afro-Iraqi heritage, young Afro-Iraqis also carry a great strength in the continuation of their heritage. Many key informants reported young people learn the tradition from their parents and/or from the larger Afro-Iraqi community and are still practicing it. A key informant explained:

My daughters learned on their own, I did not teach them. They used to participate in popular bands. I have a 3-year-old granddaughter who sings, dances, and plays... Every time an eye is closed [a death], another opens to replace it. God willing, the heritage will continue.⁷¹

The external threats to the continuation of Afro-Iraqi heritage hint at why young Afro-Iraqis may not be getting the support they need to preserve and share their heritage. All key informants reported that the Afro-Iraqi rituals are stigmatized by Iraqi society and thus must be concealed from the public. Key informants described how Iraqi society views their rituals as crazy, hysterical, insane, mad, and pagan. Iraqi society misunderstands the rituals as breaking the divine law of Islam, but according to key informants, many of the rituals are done in remembrance of Allah and do not contradict the religion. As a key informant explained, “Black people are faithful Muslims.”⁷² As a result of society’s stigma, Afro-Iraqis experience bullying and mockery. To avoid further backlash, the Afro-Iraqi community keeps its rituals concealed and young Afro-Iraqis may assimilate to avoid bullying.

A few key informants talked about discrimination and lack of support from the state. Some informants were diplomatic in their response to questions about challenges. The research team reflected that they might not have felt safe disclosing mistreatment by the state and the controlling religious and political groups in the southern part of Iraq. It is noteworthy that a key informant reported that the government evicted their community from the land in the 1960s and “demolished [Afro-Iraqi] houses and shops... [because] the state needed the area.”⁷³ Another key informant explained that the Afro-Iraqi tradition is “becoming extinct because no care or attention is given to it... by authorities [or] international organizations.”⁷⁴

Conclusions

Despite the stigma, oppression, and risks, some rituals have resisted disappearance and survived due to the fervent belief of Afro-Iraqis in their powerful role in the community. Afro-Iraqis do not refrain from practicing their rituals, and this is because they are the glue that sustains their communal identity, maintains their social well-being, and connects them to their

⁷¹ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, July 15, 2021.

⁷² Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, August 17, 2021.

⁷³ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, August 14, 2021.

⁷⁴ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, August 17, 2021.

roots in Africa. In addition to freeing themselves from the internalized stigma caused by the surrounding discriminatory atmosphere, practicing the rituals is an expression of the Afro-Iraqi collective identity as Iraqis with African heritage. At the makeed, they feel a connection to their late relatives and their African roots. It provides a sacred gathering and social space within which multiple generations may support one another in grief and joy.

The rituals connect the Afro-Iraqi community to their ancestors and the past. A key informant explained, “for each ritual, we have memories. They remind us of somebody who used to attend the ritual.”⁷⁵ Rituals evoke many emotions from joy to sorrow. Through ritual, Afro-Iraqis honor their ancestors, from whom they may have inherited Zaar. A key informant explained that those who have inherited the Zaar of his grandfather are present at the ritual and “when the poem of my grandfather is sung, all cry specifically when they play tanbura and call for coffee.”⁷⁶ This indicates how these rituals are used as practices to actively restore relationships to ancestors. Some rituals also function to provide healing to those sick from a spiritual illness. The rituals provide healing from spiritual illness while honoring the presence of the Zaar. Through these embodied practices like Zaar possession ceremony, the participants “employ their bodies to self-cultivate, transform, remold, perfect, and heal their selves and realize various kinds of religious selves.”⁷⁷

There is an urgency to document the Afro-Iraqi heritage, as the oral tradition kept by Afro-Iraqi elders is passing away. Afro-Iraqi culture in southern Iraq, with its roots in the African Diaspora, has adapted to the socio-political and religious context of Basra in unique ways. Future research on documenting this endangered heritage could be conducted through, for instance, investigating linkages of Afro-Iraqi songs, music, and dance to their possible origins in Africa. As the Afro-Iraqi heritage is documented, Iraqi society will gain greater understanding of how Afro-Iraqis have contributed to and shaped Iraqi culture, as evidenced by the incorporation of the Liwa⁷⁸ ritual into the Iraqi arts scene. The biased misrepresentation of Afro-Iraqis needs to be challenged with authentic representation as a basis to celebrate and advocate for this misunderstood community, educate white Iraqis on the lived experiences of Afro-Iraqis, and increase global awareness of this unique culture. Documenting this heritage will be an important step toward promoting increased awareness of and appreciation for the Afro-Arab population more broadly.

⁷⁵ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, July 2, 2021.

⁷⁶ Key informant, interview by Amir Al-Azraki, Basra, Iraq, July 26, 2021.

⁷⁷ Covington-Ward and Jouili, *Embodying Black Religions*, 9.

⁷⁸ Referred to as *hywa* in music.

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