

Ayman al-Rubo: the politics of pollution

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By Magdi El Gizouli

July 16, 2012 - A frequenter of Sudanese universities, with the exception of the 'beautiful and impossible' Khartoum University, cannot miss the name of Ayman al-Rubo in rough print on cheap but countless posters next to stage names like Najat Gurza, Rasha al-Samrab, Hiba Jabra, Asha Bob, and many others. Al-Rubo holds the title of Sudan's Keyboard King and Rasta General. A talented keyboard player he invented a Sudanese brand of hip hop tuned to the wildcat lyrics born of Khartoum's underclass subculture and widely referred to as ghuna al-banat (girls' song), a term that only compares to the pejorative notion of qadi nuswan (judge of women's affairs) once employed by Sudan's cosmopolitan elite to ridicule sharia judges in the 'good old days' when their mandate was restricted to family matters.

Rubo, an ecstatic performer, and the young women singers he accompanies with his keyboard and occasionally bass guitar, since his talents are multiple, do not feature in the acknowledged inventory of Sudanese music. Their creativity is judged across the spectrum to be degenerate as expressed in the blanket term ghuna habit (degenerate/corrupt song). The parallel is compelling with President Bashir's dismissal of the protestors against his rule as 'social outcasts'. Haidar Ibrahim Ali, a prominent Sudanese sociologist and avowed critic of the National Congress Party (NCP) regime categorized the "spread of degenerate girls' songs" together with the resurgence of Zar, male singers who carry female names and illicit abortions amongst other phenomena as elements of a pathological underground culture which he described as flourishing under a hijab, i.e. hidden and covered up. This underground world, argued Ibrahim, is the complement of the official culture of exorbitant consumption masked by fetishist piety. What is dismissed, both in President Bashir's reflex and Haidar Ibrahim's critique of popular culture, occupies the position of the excremental excess that sustains the hierarchical order of the societal whole.

The ideological map shared by the NCP and many of its opponents envisions society as an organic one or a multiplicity of organic components bound by language, ethnicity and religion. In that regard the NCP's championing of Arab Moslem domination, the African identity flags carried by the insurgencies of the peripheries, and the harmonising proposals of the Khartoum establishment, i.e. a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural political order, share the same ideological coordinates. Sublated in these competing narratives is the class antagonism that constantly threatens the allegedly peaceful organic unity of the social body, be it the imagined community of pious Arab Moslems or the fantasized pre-conflict paradise of communal satisfaction and inter-communal conciliation in the peripheries. In fact, both the Islamic Movement and the liberation movements of the peripheries owe their emergence to this primary antagonism, the negative power tearing through the very formations they espouse.

In his moments of frustration President Bashir provided the anti-regime protest movement with the blue-print for the emancipatory collective. Obviously, the street anger defied the President's 'objective' social categories, the racial-ethnic-religious cartography of the country.

Neither individual agents of ethnicity nor a combination thereof of the demonstrators were rather the excess that overflows the sum. It is this extra, the part of no part, that al-Rubo and his girls approach in the eroticized fragmentary open access lyrics of 'degeneracy'. One popular tune features something like a MacMichael list of Sudanese ethnic groups in the context of the vain search for the subject supposed to provide, the lover ready to lift the shameless implorer from the agony of need to the bright lights and big city of plenty. The ambiguity of the text invites the double interpretation of the egalitarian list as a series of failed promiscuous partners or prospective grooms. Does this not mirror the political fatigue in the country expressed most aptly in Mansour Khaled's condemnation of the Sudanese elite as addicted to failure? President Bashir, I suggest, contributed the missing finale to this seemingly endless tune/list by proposing 'social outcast', a subjectivization of the enemy spread across the social corpus whatever its 'objective' disguise, to define the threatening nightly shadows that polluted the streets of al-Deim with their anger. Returning to al-Rubo and the girls, only the 'social outcast', the excess turned universal agent, will endure the tests of love. It is no coincidence, I claim, that al-Rubo's associates, fellow performers and fans call themselves 'al-khafafesh' - the bats - on Facebook.

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