

MIND SCIENCE & SOCIAL JUSTICE



Understanding what happens at an unconscious level is critical in our efforts to promote social justice and inclusion.

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Transcending Borders Through Music with The Nile Project

Interview by Eلسadig Eلسheikh

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A group of artists and musicians from seven Nile Basin countries transformed the renowned Zellerbach Hall on the UC Berkeley campus into a joyous space celebrating solidarity and compassion in February 2015 by performing original arrangements of music from their countries of origin. These eleven artists are part of **The Nile Project**, and their residency project at UC Berkeley was co-sponsored by Cal Performances and the Haas Institute.

The Nile Project was created for the purpose of using the performing arts as a tool for transforming disputes and suspicion into meaningful understanding, and to advance sustainability efforts of the Nile Basin's natural habitats and resources. The project was founded four years ago by **Mina Girgis**, an Egyptian ethnomusicologist, and **Meklit Hadero**, an Ethiopian-American singer, who were both aware of the political antagonism that once nearly brought their two countries to war over issues related to water rights and accessibility. The Nile Project's musical works address paradox of plenty and the environmental challenges that sit at the core of potential conflicts in the Nile Basin.

Following the Nile Project's sold-out performances, **Eلسadig Eلسheikh** from the Haas Institute sat down with **Al Sarah**, the Sudanese lead singer and a songwriter, to discuss the importance of music, history and culture in matters of identity and social progress.

Your music touches and is influenced by a diverse genre of music styles, from Nubian music to Sudanese traditional folk to nomadic reflective musical tunes. What is the driving force behind it?

My life is my driving force. I am a global child, a global immigrant, and I think that my identity as an immigrant is one of the main identities I have. I am a woman. I am black. I am African. I am Sudanese. That's a permanent part of my makeup now.

I moved from Sudan to Yemen to the US and I've traveled in between. I don't only listen to African music—I listen to music from everywhere. There's no reason to not let that come into the music as long as you're conscious of it.

Why it is important for you to produce music that challenges the familiar and revives the forgotten?

I'm both fascinated by traditions and at the same time, I reject the notion of needing to conform. I started moving around since I was a kid, so the question of "who are you" has always been on the forefront of my mind.

That kind of complexity gave me a fascination to come back to Sudan. I went to different Zār houses and recorded things. I've always felt like I've never understood the overall identity in Sudan; it never seemed to leave room

for most of the people in Sudan, me included. I was always told that because of the way I am as a person that made me not Sudanese. But then I noticed that they said that about literally everybody. Then I thought it was really easy to not be Sudanese, so it must be really hard to be Sudanese.

For me, traditional music and modern music aren't different from each other at all. They're the same thing. Traditional music was music that was modern in the past, and it was really good and stuck around. New forms and new genres are born, so different things are moved to the periphery and are called traditional after 100 or 200 years. Once I really started to process that and understand that, I wanted to make music that told my story.

It's about wanting to tell my own story through my own words. In music, what makes somebody else's voice more legitimate than mine? That's a question that I think is relevant in all of Sudan. That's why I always insist that I'm a Sudanese musician. Just because I don't look like something you understand doesn't mean I'm not there. I was born Sudanese, I'm going to die Sudanese. All in between is a navigation of identity.

To say that Sudanese is any one identity is why we are at war. Once you say to people that you can only be one way, you're not leaving room for indi-



viduality. That's why people resort to tribalism—to protect a part of them that doesn't fit into the overall umbrella.

Your song *Fugu: Shams Alhurria (Wake Up: Freedom Sun)* tackles some of the pressing concerns of your generation. Tell us more about the role of the arts and artists in social justice.

I think one of the main roles of the artist is to be as truthful as possible and to almost act like a mirror to society. I always seek honesty in my work, and when I wrote *Fugu*, it was a wake-up cry—not to imply that there aren't others doing something, but a cry to the rest who aren't even seeing the problems.

Sometimes my sheer existence on stage is a form of resistance for me. When I move and dance on stage, I break every rule of what Sudanese people tell me I can or can't do. In the beginning of my career, I struggled with the idea of calling myself a Sudanese musician because I couldn't see a space for what I wanted to do inside Sudanese music. Everyone I met did not give me that space, did not give me that permission, which is why I ended up working with non-Sudanese musicians.

What lived experience influences you when you create music?

Struggling a lot as the outsider. I spent a majority of my life as the outsider and was very uncomfortable for a very long time, but then I just became used to it after a while. And I think because when you're the outsider, you almost feel a little bit on display. I spent a lot

of energy when I was younger trying to hide and protect myself from the stares. It's amazing how people stare in every country. So you're kind of on display all the time, and when

you're trying to speak, it feels like a performance art sometimes, especially when you're grasping for words and grasping at a language you're still not familiar with. At a certain point, I remember making a choice to no longer hide and celebrate my weirdness.

From the perspective of someone who lives in the US, do you think we need to be in total solidarity with African people, or to "save" them?

I don't think you can save anyone. If someone is not actively participating

of what a people are, because there's no really unified idea of what they are. The idea is to listen, to watch, hopefully to go there personally, and to try to understand where you fit in, where you can help. The world of social justice and aid is very full of righteous-seeming people that are doing very egotistical things on the underside. If you're going to help, be aware of why you're helping.

Why did you join The Nile Project?

Part of what I love about the Nile Project is that as a concept, it's very holistic. It's not just about making music together. It's all about the idea of looking at the way we treat the environment, the way we share our resources—or don't—and why. There's a distinct need for unification in Africa, and it has been here for a long time. If we're going to move toward a Pan-Eastern African community, the first step is to get to know each other, to respect each other's culture, to learn

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in their own saving, you can't save them. It has to be a collaborative process. They have to say, "I'm really interested in changing the ground level of reality, and I need some help." That's when someone from the outside's time to come in, and ask, "How can I help you? What do you need, not what do I think you need? What do you want? What can I provide you that's plausible, and what can I provide you that's more about long-term sustainability than short-term aid?"

The band-aid solution doesn't work. It's not a sustainable way of being, because we're treating symptoms, not treating problems. I think the role of everyone on the outside is total solidarity and actual listening, not romanticizing, not projecting your own concept

about each other's music and way of living. Making the genuine effort to do it shows respect. That's a step forward.

What's the next step?

Continuing this work together. What we're doing musically is part of that overall concept of the Nile Project. Once I leave the Nile Project or others move on, the relationship established is still communal. This is now part of my musical family, my global family. I have friends in Uganda, I have friends in Kenya, I have friends in Ethiopia, that's the amazing part. You're working with people who are changing your mind and are coming at this in the same way I'm coming at this: with an open mind, an open heart, and a desire to learn about each other. ■