

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust



FELLOWSHIP 2007

Andy Lowings

Civil Engineer & Musician

“Exploring an ancient civilisation’s modern legacy in Africa”



Background

I am a Civil Engineer who has come to music late in life.

I live in Peterborough and my coming to spend a night alone in the Jordanian desert, tracking folk lyre players is part of a long journey, measured not just in miles.

My interest in musical instruments is centred on the historical period of the past two to five millennia. A period which started at the very beginning of recorded history, when pyramid building was commenced in Egypt, when Stonehenge was just being conceived and when the city states of Mesopotamia were developing and starting to record events employing a new skill, called writing.

Human beings move around from area to area.

Human ancestors, originating in Africa some 1.6 m years ago, have dispersed throughout the world but other more recent migrations have also taken place as we have developed into our present day form.



A lyre player in Ur 2,550 BC (British Museum)



A bedu of the Jebaliya, Sinai 2007



The Gold Lyre of Ur, Sumer recreated 2006

Perhaps there have been many such movements and the evidence seems to be confusing as to exactly from where to where, at what period and by which route, these movements took place.

Evidence has continued to be unearthed of these early times but is often given to us in minute fragments of information separated by distance of many miles from other finds, or by centuries of time. Other discoveries give a detailed snapshot of life at the time, right down to the last meal taken and even the names of the participants. It is all wildly erratic.

We infer conclusions based on our own cultural or geographical preconceptions, draw conjecture from insufficient evidence, and almost always forget that what is discovered is a tiny aspect of the times we are investigating. We cannot look at what has not been passed down to us, because it decayed away years ago so our coloured ideas are based one-sidedly on what we do find. It is a hard job.

It is as if someone in the year 5008 AD were attempting to recreate what went on in British society in 2008 from observing the funeral of someone from the 16 century AD, buried in Calais.

My particular interest in early civilisation and its uncertain movement around the world derives from the role of music, via some very early surviving musical instruments.

Consensus would have it that people wanted to sing and dance as much years ago, as they still do now.

There are a few fascinating remains of musical instruments that have been unearthed from the almost geological-past. In particular, I am interested in lyres and harps which seem to be the very earliest of all stringed instruments and which derive from this early period*.

As a harp player myself I felt an increasing need to investigate what early people thought about stringed instruments. I wanted to see what these early harps and lyres were and, specifically, how these may have metamorphosed into the various instruments played today in the world. Perhaps they are still played in some remote places, I thought?

The critical starting moment for me was to find that a treasure trove of 5,000 year old instruments had been discovered at Ur, in present day Iraq, by archaeologists in 1929. These included a magnificent harp and several lyres. This led me to consider recreating the very best of these, a gold covered lyre (recently damaged in the looting of the Baghdad museum), re-making it as a working instrument. This took place from 2003-2006.

This "Gold Lyre of Ur" now exists as an authentic and playable replica and serves as a project basis for my research into these civilisations.

As work progressed on this project it became increasingly apparent that the relevance of modern day, contemporary lyre music playing could not be ignored. Vague stories of similar lyres being played today in the world kept appearing and once investigated, I noticed strange coincidences in design and usage. And the occasional player whom I met, offered odd-sounding folk memories that seemed to connect modern instruments to perhaps those very early times.

Could it really be that an ancient civilisation at the start of human recorded history could really have left a musical legacy that still remains in the world today?

No-one seemed able to answer the question. Few had ever investigated this strange and compelling evidence.

Furthermore this topic has a political and humanitarian dimension in today's world; for these early lyres were found in Iraq and are very much the top archaeological treasures of this troubled country. Certainly a playable reconstruction of a national iconic artefact, and ideas of its possible continued existence today, transcending cultural divides, is of great interest to everyone.



The group of us involved in the background to the Gold Lyre of Ur is a widespread association and I decided to create a blog to tell them where I was and in a light-hearted manner involve them in what I was doing and where I was located within my seven week expedition. Cybercafés are located almost everywhere in the world now and it is easy to keep in touch, though always with a slow speed connection.

This still remains at www.andyexpedition.wordpress.com and has some 35 entries over seven weeks.

Since returning I have disseminated all this information by way of a CD of images and recordings and new ideas and new sources for research have been thereby opened up. All the information is still open for anyone to use.

In October 2007 I started a trip around four countries, ones that seemed most promising and likely to yield interesting musical evidence of contemporary connections to early civilisations of Mesopotamia.

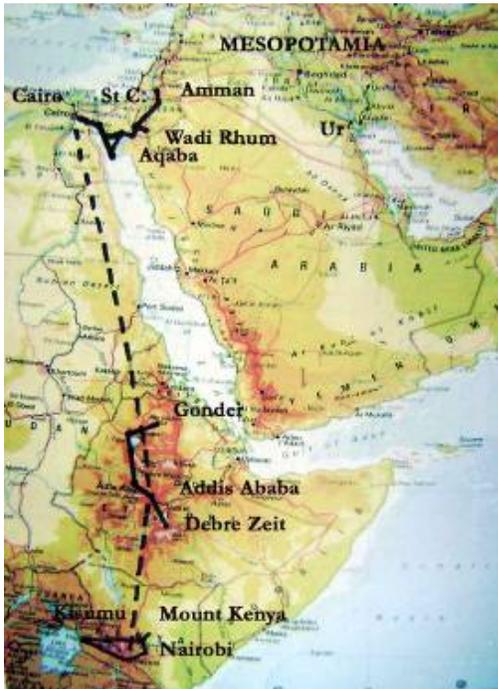
Mesopotamia is an area of the modern day Middle East roughly centred on modern day Iraq, but encompassing parts of Turkey, Iran, Syria and Lebanon. The first urban areas are supposed to have developed there and archaeological evidence shows a developing society that recorded its daily life through initially primitive writing, which became more sophisticated as time went on. Many instruments are depicted too as part of their musical life, both lyres and harps.

These early lyres date from around 2,550 years BC yet it is to be presumed that both lyres and harps were well developed by the time that depictions were made and of course they could not have evolved as fully developed instruments, without perhaps many previous generations of development, now all lost to us.

My trip essentially called for me to investigate music and to travel around and to see what instruments are played in the four countries that I visited and to make accessible this information to the wider group of musicians and artists within my project group so as to increase our knowledge of the subject.

I put this as background to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, for my application to investigate what lay on the ground, as an expedition to four specially-picked countries.

The trip



The trip October – December 2007



Leaving Heathrow

I left Heathrow for Cairo on October 18th 2007 and stayed there in the city for one week. During that time I visited the National Museum twice and looked at musical artefacts within the displays.

The musical legacy of the Egyptian civilisation is not as large as the mass of other funerary material would lead you to believe. Although full of coffins and beautiful grave goods, the museum has not a great deal of evidence of the musical tradition of the early day to day life.

I am led to believe that this is not just the fault of the museums but is actually a reflection of what has been unearthed in the past. Nevertheless, the University of Helwan has established a Department of Pharaonic Studies under Professor Khairy El Malt and is doing good work in this hitherto under-investigated area. I met their undergraduate students and also the PhD graduates who with a vibrantly young way of looking at things, were fine ambassadors of Egypt's modern future.

In the museum are several lyres in good condition and some depictions of playing techniques dating from around 1,500 BC discovered shown on temple walls at Luxor. It was possible to see close up, the original tuning-wraps and the remains of one or two broken strings on these lyres.

Made of wood, with narrow width (60mm) and wooden soundboards, the details of joints and materials were still quite evident. One of these on show was reported to be `the lyre of a Syrian businessman` of the era, an interesting connection with that era and location of Mesopotamia and its connection at the time with Egypt.

One depiction of lyre playing showed a lady strumming the strings using a large-sized plectrum whilst stopping the strings with her other hand, a technique still used today with lyres almost everywhere.



Lyre player at Luxor



Students of the Helwan University Cairo

The depictions and the real artefacts are remarkably similar in shape and size. Most noticeable was the relative thinness of the instrument, remarkable too in similar later Saxon and Viking lyres, the sound-box being barely two inches thick. Mesopotamian lyres too are all thin compared to modern instruments.

I was invited to meet the Pharaonic Music department and we discussed instruments and ideas. It was humbling to see that this was not just a one way flow of information (my way) but as I showed how to make a tuning wrap and how to tune a lyre using a wrap, it was carefully videoed and set aside for the future use in lectures for their students.

Some of their investigations concerned the analysis of pictures of Pharaonic scenes through the eyes of modern musicians and dancers, and it was remarkable what a fresh artistic eye could bring to a scene, once it was pointed out.

I was shown a collection of their reproduction instruments at the department including a collection of turtle shells awaiting being incorporated into new instruments at some point in the future.

One of their students was researching bringing such old music to life again by way of authentically researched ancient Egyptian performances, brought to a modern audience and I was showed how this took place, much as I am involved in doing myself in the UK.

We remain in contact to this day and they expressed a particular wish to know what information regarding lyres I might discover in my further trip to Ethiopia.

During my stay in Cairo I visited the instrument making area there and saw the many Ouds which have largely replaced the lyre over the centuries. Whilst there I was invited back to a musician's home and we watched a home-movie of local lyre players performing at a function.

It has always interested me in what way music is presented, and in what public context. Music is not always used in a simply light-hearted concert environment but can also be used for therapeutic, hypnotic or ceremonial uses. There is evidence of music in Sumer being used too not just as social activity but fulfilling a religious and ceremonial function.

These uses might have included the eradication of devils which were widely believed to cause mental illnesses particularly in women, a belief which still lingers on today though which is of course utterly taboo in devout Egypt. It is little referred to and one would think it has long died out under religious suppression. I felt it did not exist any longer.

So I was very surprised to see two women on the movie event clearly spontaneously collapsing in a musically induced trance, part of a lyre social evening. It was not intended that I should view such things there in Cairo and as I commented upon this, it was swiftly fast-forwarded.

I was amazed to see what I recognised as the forbidden ancient Zar ceremony apparently alive and well in the capital of Egypt in modern 2007.

I travelled by bus through Sinai via Sharm El Sheikh and arrived at Aqaba, after crossing the Red Sea by ferry from Egypt.

There exists in Aqaba, Jordan, a folk group made up of local people who have continued a tradition of lyre playing that according to them has continued as far back as anyone knows. Their instrument is called the Simsimiyah, a six stringed lyre, not unlike the pharaonic lyre I saw in the museum in Cairo. I met up with them several times and talked at length about what they knew about the musical past and I also recorded some of their music.

They were in no doubt whatsoever that their instrument is `of the sea`. Fishermen would always have a Simsimiya with them on any boat. In fact it would be unlucky not to have one aboard they reported.

“Our family names are those of other players elsewhere in the seaports around the Red Sea. You will find this instrument around the coast as far as Yemen, Oman, into the Arabian Gulf up as far as Bahrain. Dhows regularly trade there and down to Port Sudan and beyond into East Africa on the other side of the Red Sea”, they added.

It is for them a seaborne instrument and I have to re-assess if the movement of the lyre into Africa came by way of the sea, or by way of the Nile as I had always understood. Its connection to the discovery of the lyres in Ur in Sumer (a 2,550 BC year old city, at the time on the coast of the Arabian Gulf) left me wondering if these finds were connected to the sea also.

Mr Al Gharabi, the group's director explained to me his own ideas about musical movements. ***“Bear in mind a tune can move quickly around the whole world. I teach you today and you will show someone else tomorrow and so it will move on and on. Even in the past this would have happened with instruments as well”***.

Time and again I discussed the origins of their instrument and they always came back to saying that it came ***“from the sea”***. Even today lyre playing in Aqaba is confined to the tiny part of the country which abuts the sea. Elsewhere in central Jordan, though geographically closer to the location of Mesopotamia, I was to find that it does not exist at all.

It was my first lesson into researching musical movements, that I must not look “Eurocentrically”...with world maps based on London, but imagine what these people consider their neighbourhood, and to which direction they would themselves relate. I should have considered more that in a part of the world that is warm, and with fertile sheltered coastline adjacent to an arid desert region, that the sea would provide the means to travel. Ur in Sumer was on the seashore in 2550 BC. It could have been connected directly only by way of sea passage by easy winds to these people in Aqaba and their relations along the wider Red Sea coast.

They showed me their techniques of using the left hand to `stop` the strings ringing whilst the remaining strings were allowed to ring out. Rhythm was important and the group had a troupe of hand-clappers who are part of an art-form itself developed to a high degree in the Arab world.

Syncopated clapping is fun too and the leader would shout out something like “galloping horse” and the team would instantly change to another style, ending perfectly, with a climactic united crash of palms.



Abdullah plays his Simsimiyah in the café at Aqaba



Rhythmic clapping from the supporters

A main part of all the tunes was the song. After the required lyre introduction the song would begin, usually a song about the sea.

***Yallah! Aqaba!
Bride of the Gulf.***

***The Red Sea is the man
and Aqaba you are the woman
your gardens are cool
and your groves are beautiful.***

***Yallah! Aqaba!
Bride of the Gulf..***

I went on to Amman inland past ruins of Petra, part of a lost civilisation that came and went but which was of the classical world not so far away in Greece and Rome. In Amman is a striking Roman amphitheatre. In Wadi Rum in the desert there are writings on the rock from 2,000 years ago, some still undeciphered, and I slept overnight in the sand there with just a bottle of water, and a raven above me for company on the cliffs. I saw writing and hieroglyphs and ancient scratchings even a game indented in the sand, with pebbles left where the victor had placed all the captured men to one side. But I saw there no lyre playing amongst the Bedouin as I had perhaps hoped for, which might connect Mesopotamia with today through the ages.

I have learnt now modern inhabitants of the Middle East may not be those of the long past. One naturally assumes this to be the case that Bedu tribes have been there for ever but it is yet another commonly held mistake, as I was to discover later.

“The Rababa is our instrument” I was constantly told. And the single stringed violin was brought out and shown to me.

It seemed an odd choice of construction, just to utilise one string I thought, yet I was to see this instrument throughout my trip and am told it exists even as far east as China. But its simplicity belies its sophistication, evocative of the plaintiveness of the human voice and endless eternity. The lesson that this instrument taught me is that the `number of strings` does not equate to the `complexity of the produced music`; important to investigating the lyre and its few strings of similar-sounding range.



Two Rababas in the main street of Amman



I slept the night alone in the Jordanian desert

I returned to Cairo, for my onward journey to East Africa, via the direct route across Sinai, through the mountains rather than around the coast-road.

This whole region is one of famous human movements. This was the route taken by the Jews moving out of Egypt to their promised land and this was the place where Moses ascended the mountain to speak to God himself. And more recently it was part of Turkey, then Israel, and is now part of Egypt.

I stayed near St Catherine's monastery, a place which has existed in relative isolation since the 6th century and most likely for a lot longer. It is an island of Christianity within what is now a Muslim country and serves to remind us that at one apostolic time this whole area was Christian and that churches and monasteries existed right the way through the entire area, including of course Saudi Arabia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt.

I was highly surprised to find that the local bedouin play a Simsimiya lyre. My pharaonic lyre was repeatedly taken, discussed, handed around and played by the local people there. I was introduced to a member of the Al Jebalya tribe one evening who played his lyre to me. Constructed out of an empty petrol tin can of perhaps First World War vintage it had a nailed on cross-bar, wire strings and was simple and functional if at the expense of beauty.

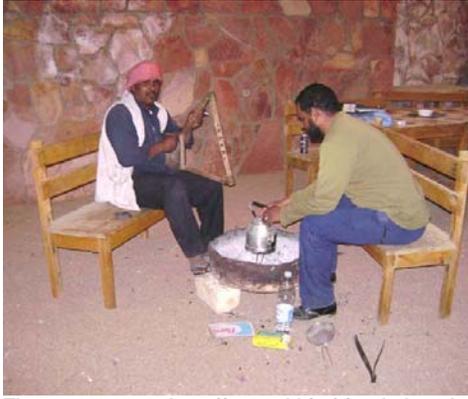


A lyre of the Jebalya in Sinai

The strings of this lyre were (unusually) run around the back of the square yoke and tensioned by the use of tuning pegs knocked into the cross bar. The Jebalyah tribe are the settled and allocated historical protectors of the St Catherine area and declare themselves as rather separate from the other local bedouin in Sinai. They are reported to have been brought there at the start of the monastery creation "from Romania" I was told, and have remained there though now assimilated by intermarriage into the other tribes.

It is also reported (in another version of the story) that they were brought there by the Orthodox Church, which at that time meant Greece, from abroad. I never saw or heard of any other Bedouin tribes playing lyres and wondered if this might have even been a legacy of the Greek lyre playing that might have been re-imported back to the Middle East area with the Jebalyah, by way of the monastery.

It would be an interesting aspect of research. The movement of the Lyre in Greece of course is a separate and interesting subject of conjecture.



The manager made coffee and his friend played



Shaban Saladya Eid Al Shashi (The Falcon) plays on Mount Sinai

St Catherine's Monastery has the largest collection of early religious manuscripts second after the Vatican. Over 4,000 of them, in many dozens of languages. I was allowed into the museum but access to the scriptorium is difficult. I wondered if there were any references to early lyres within the content there.

I made a detour into the city of Suez before returning to Cairo. Along with Port Said and Alexandria it is reputed to be the home of the Simsimiya lyre within Egypt. All of these are located along the canal and when I asked why, I was always told again that it is an instrument of the sea. There I met Captain Gazali and his team of elderly, well-spoken and academic friends who spent time with me talking about the history of the lyre, their music and words of songs that he had written for it.

The Simsimiyah is not just an instrument but is a vehicle for social comment. Serious poems were stacked up throughout the shop, and awards and books were set upon piles of newspaper cuttings of musical events now long in the past. Suez has its own radio station and lyre music and songs are regularly featured there. Captain Gazali's lyrics were about conflict, not surprising as his life had covered some three wars in Suez. He grieved still for his team of soldiers killed in 1967 in the shelling of Suez, poignantly pointing out the personalities of his young troupe to me in the photographs.



The wall of Cpt Gazali's shop



A Sudanese lady playing the Lyre



An old Egyptian Lyre

He showed me his collection of Simsimiyas which were exactly the same as those called Kras that I was to see elsewhere in my journey. On his wall he had pictures of a woman playing the lyre in Sudan, a country I wanted to investigate but which I was sadly too dangerous to visit. The

similarities in the two instruments were undeniable, but so was the similarity to instruments of Ethiopia and Kenya, I was to find out, as I progressed on my journey.

Captain Gazali wrote in Arabic in his book of poetry, proudly presented to me as I left
"..For Mr Andy trying to find a common language of music".

I revisited the Department of Pharaonic Music before I left and discussed more about tying up research material and perhaps even having a joint concert at some time in the future, before heading off to the airport for what is one of the most unknown and most exciting countries for me: Ethiopia.

I landed in Addis Ababa at midnight and stayed at the French Institute for Ethiopian Research a little out of the city.

Ethiopia is a relatively unknown country to many ordinary English people. It has never been colonised for any length of time and so has had little cultural connection with Europe. It is a large island of Christianity that has remained untouched by Islam to the north, east, and west, or by sub Saharan African countries to the south. After the Middle East I found it markedly different, with a more carefree life where both sexes mingled, still with a degree of conservatism but liberated and vibrant. Ethiopians feel themselves separate, and not truly African in any of the ways in which say, Kenyans would regard themselves.



Ethiopia.. a country unknown to ordinary people

Ethiopia connects itself historically and surprisingly, with of all places Israel. At any time the story of the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon in Israel and delivering herself of a son by him, who then became the first in the line of the throne of Ethiopia, King Menelik 1st, can be recited by pretty much anyone. Not a story, but a real fact, they will remind you.

Solomon of course was the son of David. King Menelik was certainly a real person though the Queen of Sheba's existence is thought to be less clear and the dates of this supposed liaison are not in agreement. Nevertheless there are some odd connections not the least that a whole section of Ethiopian society considered themselves Jewish until taken away in a famous mass emigration between the years 1977-85. Churches there are based on the Solomonic temple design, many of them dating back to at least the 6th century.

The lyre itself according to legend was brought from Israel with the Ark of the Covenant in the tenth century BC where it had been given to David by God. It is now divided into the religious and secular sides of the same instrument, the Beganna and the Kra.

One of these, the Beganna particularly interested me as it bears distinct similarity in many respects to the Lyre of Ur found in Sumer and if connections are supposed to ancient Israel, then this is particularly interesting, Israel not being impossibly distant from Sumer. It is popularly called the Harp of David throughout Ethiopia. though their interpretation of `harp` would mean `Beganna. Just

as our English bible writes dulcimer, psaltery and viol, when these instruments were unknown in biblical times.

The Ethiopian church is Orthodox and has its own bible which refers to the "harp" 12 times. As the English bible talks of the harp of David, so the Ethiopian bible talks of the Beganna of David. It is referred to in Genesis, and as this instrument was certainly not a harp (in the modern sense of what a European might consider to be a classical or Celtic harp) it is most likely to be a lyre and if you consider this to be a Beganna, as they do, then this dates it from at least around 3,800 BC!

I visited the National Museum and was allowed to photograph the entire collection. Stringed instruments seemed to be all either kra-like or versions of the Begana, (but there too was a single stringed violin that I was to see again everywhere.)



Three Kras at the National Museum Addis Ababa



A Beganna

Kras have five strings. They are variously shaped but are not unlike those I had seen in Egypt. They are the recreational instrument of the two, though thought of as the `devil's instrument` I was told, whilst the Beganna was termed the `instrument of God` and is used in religious events. Though religious, the Beganna is never actually played inside a church.

The Beganna is highly venerated and is reputed to have soothing powers. It produces deep mystical rumbling tones from its 10 coarse strings which are thickly plaited sheep gut, covered in raw ox fat and conditioned with raw garlic! The yoke represents God above everything, and the sound box represents the womb of Mary giving birth to sound. Ten strings (representing the Ten Commandments) are adjusted by way of levers at the top yoke some three feet above the bridge. This bridge is made wide and table-like, over which the strings run rattling and buzzing on it as they are plucked. A correctly adjusted buzz-sound is achieved by moving a leather section up and down on the table until the desired amount of buzz is obtained. A goat skin `soundboard` is stretched over a hollow wooden bowl and the two arms are decorated with carved patterns. Cross motifs are often incorporated in the instrument. Mine was given a coat of varnish before being presented to me.

It took a week to make.

I took lessons whilst I stayed in Addis Ababa from Alemu Aga the most celebrated contemporary player of the Begana. Alemu is a fount of knowledge and my first lesson was about respect for the traditions of the instrument and how, and when, it should be played. Although very restricted in tonality its effect is more transcendental, he explained, turning thoughts towards higher matters. Under no circumstances should I ever play jazz, use inappropriate lyrics or consider to attempt modern `fusions`. Interestingly it has been famously played by women in the past. It was interesting that these restrictions clearly are so important, and I had to ask myself if these strictures had resulted in its very survival in such a pure and unchanged state. The ceremonial use of a lyre in the life of a royal court in Sumer was, too, a strange parallel to the ceremonial use of a similar looking (and similar sounding) instrument of today.



The ceremonial Zar Lyre from Sudan



Beganna from Ur in Amharic

The connection with ancient Israel was not the only connection of the Beganna to the Mesopotamian lyre. The arms of both the Ethiopian and Sumerian lyre are decorated, the yoke is round, there are levers and it is a highly stylised instrument. These decorations also exist in the Sudanese version of the Zar Lyre displayed at the Horniman Museum in London.



A modern Beganna from Ethiopia



similar detail 2,550 BC

One day I found Alemu notating down the 12 references for me to the `harp` in the Amharic version of the Bible, the earliest one being Genesis 4:21

“David took the Beganna and played it with his hand; so Saul was refreshed and was well and the evil spirit departed from him.”

Another I liked a lot as a player myself but which I had never heard, spoke of “a cunning player on the harp”! Except of course this was more exactly translated for me as

“..A cunning player on the Beganna”

On my investigations about lyres throughout East Africa, I came across variations of the number of strings in apparently similar instruments. I felt personally that this was a natural thing and not really indicative of a huge differentiation. After all, violins, harps and guitars all have versions with more or less strings but which do not detract from their basic identity as separate instruments. Begannas have traditionally 10 strings yet mostly only five of them are actually used.

The way of playing a beganna is to support the instrument vertically holding it with your hand whilst playing with the other hand. Fingers press down on the strings much like piano keys, coming to rest on the string beneath the played string. The deep-voiced effect is as much percussive as

melodic but it certainly conveys a reverential tonality, and a low-voiced, almost whispering, song completes the aura of strangeness.



Mr Sissi adjusts my new Beganna



The hand playing position

Time and again I would bring up the history of the Beganna and be told of its far distant past in Israel being brought back there by sea.

Ethiopia feels itself an individual country that looks eastwards towards the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Although now disconnected from the ocean by Eritrea, civilisation and conflicts arrived via that way and its early times are connected with the Yemen and Saudi Arabia in their pre-Islamic past rather than with Kenya and even Sudan to the west and north.

I had imagined that the River Nile would provide the natural link between Sub-Saharan Africa and the wider Middle East, but I learnt during my trip that the Nile is not a good means of communication and although possible to move that way it was never the `motorway` into Africa that I had thought it to be in the past.

If the Beganna is the instrument of God, then the Kra is the instrument of the devil. I was told that this was given to man to create carnal desires and seduce. It is said that it is the instrument of `love songs and of "nightclubs"`.

So as part of my research I was forced to investigate the other side of Ethiopian culture, and I spent some dedicated time finding out where this might be found!

I was taken to "Jod Abyssinia" and there was entertained by a troupe of energetic musicians and dancers who played all night. Playing only traditional Ethiopian instruments, dances from amongst the 86 separate language groups of Ethiopia were put on and hard working musicians and singers accompanied. To get me into the mood a traditional dinner-plate of chunks of raw ox-meat complete with yellow fat attached was set in front of me. The butcher's shop, which is often attached to an Ethiopian nightclub, was visible through a window and the carcass and butcher stood by, in case I wanted another plateful.

Lyres in the form of Ethiopian kras are still very much the popular instrument there. Now electrified and played exactly the same in both Ethiopia and Eritrea they performed a strange sounding medley of songs which I recorded there and then. Once more this was accompanied by the single stringed violin called the "Mashinko", along with flute and drums.

I made trips out to Debre Zeit and for a week up to the Simian Mountains of Ethiopia, to where the tarmac road stopped long before and I was told that local music was still played. But the devout Beganna was just not to be found, although the single stringed violin was heard in local bars as part of the traditional Azmari culture of traditional minstrel playing.

Picking on the innocent and wealthy members of the audience the players make up spontaneous verses about one's various attributes, to the great mirth of the assembly. It was a great moment to be part of a history of this fine art that goes back to antiquity and I recorded this too for my future interest, as to what made them all laugh so much, at me.

Aside from learning about music, my time in Ethiopia was a wider education to me.

I could not but help but be aware of the environmental pressures and the huge divides of wealth within society there. Population pressures and simple things like obtaining food, health-care and clean water were clearly evident, and brought my English ideas of what is important, into stark focus.

The life expectancy of Ethiopians is amongst the lowest in the world. Being long past this age myself, I felt my privilege heavily. I was looked after everywhere and was treated with politeness and high regard.

The bus broke down with its third puncture, in the north of Ethiopia and I saw the driver bow his head, silently crushed, as he looked for a way to make-do, with just four remaining bald tyres for the long journey, in the darkness ahead.

I left the capital in the very early morning mist and saw the hundreds of sleeping bodies covered with plastic in isolated corners of pavements, here and there, on my way to the airport.

Life is not easy for many people

I landed in Nairobi, Kenya, in the heart of Africa two hours later; to meet lyre players there and immediately found myself in true Africa, one of grassland and windswept flat-topped thorn trees.



Kenyan Nyatitits at the National Theatre Nairobi

I think that my preconception of national boundaries representing the people within them had by now taken a new and enlightened turn.

Ethiopia where I had just come from, has some 70 individual ethnic groups, with their own languages, Kenya has some 42. And it was a constant theme of my trip that I was learning some bit of one language or another, for seven weeks. Yet I came to realise that this was also going on with everyone else when I travelled. Even local people were confused with how to get things done. Communication was hard for them too.

But another lesson of my trip, was my preconception that a national boundary, or even a religion, could really mean anything of importance when looking at the far archaeological past. It was out of the framework. Even language is no indication of origin, though many like to hold on to it as evidence. I was advised, too, that folk memory is proven to be notoriously unreliable.

Movements of people and their musical instruments transcend all modern borders. And so my first reaction in Kenya was the odd discovery that many of Ethiopia's instruments were still apparent in the cultural life of Kenya too !

Their Kra, Nyatiti and Obokanu, although often with different names were still recognisable as their other cousins in Ethiopia, Egypt and even Jordan. For there too was the single-stringed violin instrument again, one that I had seen played in Amman high street.

The cultural life of Nairobi is centred very much on the National Theatre and Cultural Centre. There I found myself in the middle of the finals of the National Competition of Music and Dancing. Taking place over six days, the gardens were full of singing groups, gospel singers, warriors, dancers, ladies groups, itinerant musicians of all sorts assembling, making and selling music and to be judged before their own people. Over time I was able to talk and discover what the history of the lyre meant to these groups. Indeed, we remain in contact to this day.

Musical traditional life in Kenya from the past is kept alive I soon learnt by the Luo people rather than the other large majority Kikuyu community. As I talked more, I learnt that the various tribes are all very different. It is a huge complexity of language, customs, geography and history. Nothing prepared me for the enormity of trying in a short time to understand the mass of information bombarding me.

I was taken under the wing of the Lyre players who assembled regularly for discussions and impromptu sessions of music. I put to them, why do they play the Lyre which is found all the way far to the north even as far as Egypt. Their reply was always the same
“Because we Luo come from the north!”

Delving deeper one arrives at a dead end of folk knowledge about 750 years ago around the borders of Sudan and Egypt, but what they told me does seem to be realistic. The language of Sudanese Luo is similar (as too is neighbouring Ugandan Luo). We came along the Nile here and settled around the shores of Lake Victoria, they told me. Some of us think we were in Egypt at some time in the long past. They proudly told me of black Pharaohs and Sudanese invasions of Egypt recently borne out by DNA analysis by archaeologists. Nubians were well known in Egypt.

Some told me of past similarities between their folk art and hieroglyphic writing and then we would often move to pure speculation dressed up as fact, and then politics would enter too. Colonialism and falsehoods of all kinds would enter the conversation. By then there would be, of course, not the slightest evidence for any of it.

Their most important lyre is the Nyatiti. A hollowed out block of wood covered with skin and decorated with colours. Six strings are held on to the yoke with the usual wrappings of cloth or fibre. The instrument is played under the arm facing forwards on the ground with an accompaniment of ankle bells keeping the beat, something I had seen in Ethiopia also.



Josef plays his Nyatiti lyre for me

Songs were composed for all occasions and I was told of one elderly man who claimed he had over 2,000 tunes in his head. I spent some time looking for him to no avail. A newspaper article written about the 70 year old said that no one had recorded any of the tunes and that they all would die with him. It was a poignant interview where he pointed out that nowadays no Nyatiti player would attend the hospital for a birth or for a circumcision. It is rapidly going from popular culture and the reasons of new politics and poverty of Africa, started to become apparent to me. I went to the National Museum of Kenya and found only a depleted collection of a few references on Kenyan instruments. Mostly only magazines and poor quality books seemed to be left.

I was told that huge amounts of the heritage of the country had been exported by collectors. An entire heritage collection had been impounded at the airport and was said to still be there, remaining for over a decade.

I took an overnight train to Kisumu from Nairobi in order to see the Luo homeland itself beside Lake Victoria, in the far west of Kenya. The carriages crawled slowly through the Kibera slum, the largest in Africa, in the gloom of paraffin lamps lighting huts and the gaunt faces of people inside, just a few inches away from the train windows.

Kisumu was in a state of excitement about forthcoming elections and the smiling face of President Kibaki was everywhere, though universally disliked there in Luoland. Nyatiti players were there of course and always adulated for their promotion of the local culture. I stopped one day on the main high street, scene of later riots that I watched on television back in England. On the corner, a single-string violin was being played to a crowd of watchers. I asked if I might record one or two of his tunes and heard the crowd roar with approval at the politics of his anti-President Kibaki songs.

“Just imagine if Kibaki gets in again” he sang to much laughter (a prescient lyric in view of later developments). I was told that these folk singers, representing popular opinion and comic satire have in the past been rounded up and shot.

I quizzed the players about the direction of their musical past and they again pointed north, never southwards, saying always Uganda and Sudan was the way north, but interestingly never ever Ethiopia which lies more correctly northwards.



Paolo Kandeli without his Litungu lyre in Nanyuki



The weekly train waiting at Mount Kenya 8 am Sunday.

I travelled northwards to the Mount Kenya region and was lucky enough to be directed to another lyre player, a blind man sitting there in the market place where he would sing for cents and twigs of qat.

Wherever I went crowds would assemble and I would choose an interpreter to help me obtain more information about what I needed. This time I was told that Paolo Kandeli came from the border of Ethiopia far to the north and could sing in several dialects with his Litungu lyre.

I recorded several tunes but wondered where his lyre was? After thirty years of playing it had apparently been stolen a week before, by street children, from this blind man. His instrument was one I knew of, a rare example of an instrument spanning the border of two countries. He came from the remote Turkana region of Kenya and his recording of a love song in Turkana remains as yet untranslated. I paid him for this. He came back later to tell me that he had given half to his mother but had bought this too, and opened his dirty bag to proudly show me a tiny new transistor radio.

When I arrived back in Nairobi and before I left, I commissioned a new Chimonge lyre to be built for him and it was presented to him, on behalf of the **Winston Churchill Memorial Trust**, on Christmas Eve 2007. In Nairobi, The Daily Nation took up this human interest story too and I am told that Paolo now retains increased celebrity status as a result.

It would be a marvellous idea to record a simple CD of his music, for him to sell, which would assure his long term safe future if not survival, in Nanyuki.

The Litungu instrument maker also played for me his own Luya version of a lyre called a Chimonge



Jackson Inqosi with his Chimonge



Paolo feels his new Litungu

There remained one aspect of my entire expedition ending in Kenya that remained unfulfilled until the end. Large-scale lyres like the one that had started me on this path, such as that one found in Iraq in 1929 seemed to have a few unusual close cousins in the world even today. I had learnt about some of the Beganna in Ethiopia but my reason for coming especially to Kenya was to see the semi-mythical instrument the Obokanu.

Legend has it that to play the biggest Obokanu, one must first dig a hole in the ground for it to sit in.

One evening at the Kenya Cultural Centre I noticed a strange looking massive instrument on the ground. I asked about it and found, suddenly, that this was the very yeti of my trip. An Obokanu as played by the Kisii people of West Kenya.

Scouts were dispatched and the player appeared and we shook hands.

Nothing could have been more of a surprise than when he said he would indeed play it for me and he then tipped it up, over his head and played it,

Upside down!

Without even a bridge it was a great strange sound. Percussive, slightly melodic, and rattlingly unusual.

It was one of the single most exciting moments of my trip and I took a shaking picture of that moment in the darkness at the end of my expedition.



He slung it over his head



Grande Master Mess plays the Obokanu in Kisii dress.

"It is ceremonial" he said, and I asked him what was he singing about and where does it come from?

"I'm singing about the need for people to be educated and to study hard and not be lazy. It comes from the north!"

Conclusion

I felt at the start of my Fellowship Expedition that I would like to show how that I would be discovering many new and unknown facts, and prove provenance and historical connections between hitherto unconnected regions. And like many a person before me, I set off imagining it would be an easy trip of recording an unfolding story, meeting local people and making connections.

The reality is that Africa is a huge, huge place. People are diverse, languages are forever changing and music can move between continents in only a matter of years. People there have recorded little of their past and always the truth is mixed with speculation, their feelings of ethnic importance, legend and often simple falsehoods. And a short trip of 7 weeks only scratches the surface. It is an impossible task that cannot be finished. Unlikely ever to be proven.

And the evidence is fast disappearing too. I was never far from the new tyrannies of the mobile phone, and the internet; and traditional habits of music and dress are fast being lost. In a generation little will be left compared to even today.

The countries I visited are relishing the western way with even more enthusiasm than we are ourselves. They are disposing of their indigenous cultures into a dusty corner thinking that it will all survive there by itself but not noticing that it needs using, and cultivating to stay alive. On my journey I was often aware that even my interest in their own past was viewed as something quaintly eccentric. And I felt that much is lost to us already.

However, there do still remain these tantalising bits of evidence pointing to what I was looking for, even today.

Is it possible that these musical instruments connect these countries together over a period of several millennia? Could the musician in Turkana north Kenya and similar musicians in Ethiopia be somehow connected to a long gone civilisation in the modern Middle East? And they themselves say it is perhaps true.

Finally, one must ask the question, if it is not true, then why do these instruments not appear elsewhere in the world? There is no apparent legacy existing in say Nigeria or China but only in these geographically associated regions within easy means of communication.

I returned to the UK feeling like many other fellows, that there was vast unfinished business and how a return trip would be so valuable, but also feeling confident that I was now more acquainted with the facts.

Now at last I am in a position to better direct my project about the long distant past of humanity within Mesopotamia, home of three major religions, and thereby to bring to life something that connects us all, even today.

For people have wanted to dance and play music, as much then, as now. And doubtless they will in the future too.

Andy Lowings

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Contact details

www.lyre-of-ur.com

15 Church St NORTHBOROUGH Peterborough PE6 9BN

Tel 0044 (0)1733 253068

andy_lowings@hotmail.com

Musical clips and more photographs of the trip are available on request

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and all the itinerant and mostly unrecognised musicians who understood what the purpose was in my trip and assisted me through giving me their information and sharing their music.

Technical

I used an EDIROL RO9 digital sound recorder to capture music and voices. An extra 2 GB memory card provided me with space for around 1 ½ hours of above-CD-quality recording. I took about 120 separate recordings varying from a few seconds to five minutes or more. The device is cigarette box-sized and uses two simple rechargeable batteries and could even help create a high quality CD in very short time without the need for a studio [see report].

I use it with an editing programme called `Cool Edit Pro`. The EDIROL RO9 costs around £275.

I used a Sony Cyber-shot digital camera to take photos, with two extra memory cards allowing me to take around 400 shots. These I brought back to the UK before downloading as I found creating a CD is not easy in Africa. I took no computer along, on grounds of weight and of security.

I took a moderately large backpack and also a day-pack for my own pharaonic lyre and for day to day technical equipment. My lyre was made and given to me by Jon Letcher of Silver Spear instruments. It opened up interest, there on the ground when language was a problem. It was covered in a protective blanket, which served as a cover when I had to sleep in various obscure places.

I took a box of instrument pictures and CDs of pieces of music to give away as I travelled, which were always much sought after.

Personal

I took doxycyclene anti-malaria tablets only in Kenya and had also a large but simple supply of remedies with me. These were a great success as they came in use both for me, but also to give away to those in obvious need of medicines. I was sick only one time in Egypt for 36 hours.

I wore a money belt all the time with my valuables inside. It was a reliable, easy and recommended thing to use though I never got anything stolen, or was robbed, or saw any violence of any kind in my seven week trip.

I carried a UK mobile phone always, though I found that there is much advantage to having a cheap local phone as local contacts frequently like to use these even in apparently obscure countries.

I found that it was often easier to move around with the help of a modestly paid guide. They made the trip more profitable and interesting. With a guide I became less conspicuous and was able to take local transport with confidence as well as becoming a part of day to day life rather than always being an outsider.

My flights were arranged by Market Deeping Travel and all worked perfectly, though I would urge re-confirming all flights taken outside UK even more than once. It is essential.

I arranged an initial hotel only in each country and had one or two contacts in each place there to meet me. Beyond that, I felt that I would go where research would be best rewarded, where options would be largest and this was, in retrospect, undoubtedly the best line to take.

***footnote**

Early lyres share the common characteristics of all modern lyres. That is:-

*They have limited number of strings varying from 5 to 11.

*All have a top bar or `yoke` which is parallel to the bridge, so making the strings largely the same length. This has the effect (strange to our modern ideas of varying pitch melodic music) of restricting the instrument to having similar pitch notes, important to what music can be played upon a lyre.

*The top yoke is round in shape so that a length of material-wrapping can be wound around it. The string is tied on to the end of this material and the whole bundle can be twisted around and the string tightened up. The tension of the string holds the wrap on to the yoke but it can be simply adjusted at any time. Sometimes lengths of wood are inserted into the wrapping, to act as leverage on the whole wrapping to assist in tuning the string. Modern guitar machine heads are sometimes used nowadays.

* The sound box can be either flat, or box-like, or is round like a shell, using a gourd or hollow wooden bowl to create resonance below the strings.

* Strings are strummed using a plectrum, or single strings can just be plucked to create sound.

* The smaller instruments are played faced downwards so that the strings are parallel to the ground like a guitar, rather than a harp having vertical strings.

* One hand can `stop` strings by placing the fingers on the unused strings, both to create percussion and to allow the strum to create only the desired, `unstopped`, notes.