

The Maseed and the Sheikh – An Intangible Cultural Heritage

By:

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The “maseed” is an indigenous Sudanese religious institution which represents many facets of social life in Muslim Northern Sudan. Its history goes back to the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Sufi orders ‘tariqas’ were first introduced in the Sudan. ‘Sufi Islam, compared to ‘legalistic’ Islam, deals more with aspects of good behaviour and ‘discipline of self’ of the individual and with respect to his/her relation with other people, nature and, above all, God. One has to be in conformity and peace with one’s self, others, all creatures and creator. To attain that level of peaceful co-existence one has to take a path under supervision and direction of a spiritual ‘guide’ – otherwise, he/she will be left to ‘Satan’ – the epitome of evil. Each religious order, tariqa, has a guide – Sheikh – around him gather many followers who come in search of ‘self-disciplining’ and spiritual blessing ‘baraka’ of both living and dead sheikhs. Many others come for solutions for their economic, social, health and other problems. Others, yet, come for good fortune when embarking on any new move in their lives which they are not sure about its outcome. Communal social (meetings, marriages, funerals..etc.) and spiritual (prayers, zikr – religious dancing, invocations, recital of Quran .. etc.) activities are all performed in the maseed, the religious centre where the Sheikh resides. Maseeds spread all over North Sudan, and each tariqa – or any of its branches – has its own maseed with a resident Khalifa ‘successor’ of a dead Sheikh-tombed in the maseed. The maseed is thus a cultural space where functionaries, followers, visitors and others intermix and engage in social, religious, economic and cultural interactions. They come from near and far places and have varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Though maseeds are usually

found in rural areas, it is not unusual to find them in urban areas as well. The most famous maseeds are those of Gadiiriyyah (Tairyba, Um Dabban, Kadabas, Hamad al-Nil-Omdurman), Sammaniyya (Um Marrahi, Zariba, Omdurman), Burahniyyia (Khartoum) – to name just a few. Some Sheikhs have rural and urban religious centres at the same time – though the social composition and type of services and activities of these centres might differ, according to the surrounding social milieu. Sheikh al-Bura'e is one such a glaring example of a maseed Sheikh whose huge impact on the social, moral and spiritual life in rural and urban Northern Sudan, especially among youth and women. His characters, and his maseed, are both depositories of cultural heritage and cultural production. His madeeh – religious praise songs – teachings, morals, deeds, zikr circles have attracted thousands, if not millions, of children, men and women. He has become a mythology in modern life in Sudan. In addition to verbal exchanges and communication, the media and internet have played an important role in spreading this cultural heritage in its intangible form. Musical bands, cassettes, CDs, books, images, live performances are some of the means of keeping his legacy alive. Though the maseed is the centre of all of this, nevertheless the cultural influence of the maseed and its Sheikh has spread to wider geographical and social circles in both rural and urban areas. The cultural content of this influence comprise generosity, both spirit and material (giving his time, effort, blessing, food, money, presents etc.), good example, communal concern, moral uplifting, and giving hope. This was very much needed in a situation of disintegration like the one through which Sudan was passing – a situation of famine, desertification, civil strife and wars. Sheikh al Bura'e and his maseed has contributed a lot to peaceful social co-existence through cultural means in some of the most difficult times in the history of Sudan.