



Research Report

Ritual sound and functional continuity in the Middle Nile Valley: The case of the Al-Nuba Drum from the Napatan-Meroitic periods to contemporary Sufi practice

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(Received 11 April 2026; Accepted 1 May 2026; Published 22 May 2026)

Abstract - This article examines the persistence of ritual drumming in the Middle Nile Valley through a comparative analysis of Napatan and Meroitic iconography and contemporary Sudanese Sufi practice. It focuses on the ritual drum known as Al-Nūba and explores whether its continued presence reflects functional continuity rather than direct historical transmission. Drawing on Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory and Victor Turner's theory of ritual process, the study argues that rhythm operates as a durable medium of ritual structuring across changing religious frameworks. Iconographic evidence from temple and funerary contexts in ancient Nubia reveals the recurrent depiction of solitary drummers within organized ceremonial settings. In contemporary Sudanese Sufi dhikr, the Al-Nūba drum similarly functions to regulate collective rhythm, coordinate bodily movement, and facilitate altered states of consciousness. Although the theological systems of Napatan religion and Islam are fundamentally distinct, the analysis suggests that ritual sound can persist as a functional structure embedded in cultural memory. Rather than proposing a linear historical continuity, the article advances a model of "functional persistence," in which ritual forms are reactivated and reconfigured across long-term cultural transformations. This approach contributes to broader debates on material culture, ritual performance, and cultural resilience in Northeast Africa.

Keywords: Al-Nūba, Middle Nile Valley, Ritual sound, Cultural memory, Napatan and Meroitic archaeology, Sufi dhikr, Functional continuity

To cite this article: Abdalla A.A.M. 2026. Ritual sound and functional continuity in the Middle Nile Valley: The case of the Al-Nuba Drum from the Napatan-Meroitic periods to contemporary Sufi practice *International Journal of Modern Anthropology*. 3(26): 534 – 555. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijma.v3i26.4>

Introduction

The drum is a musical instrument of the percussion family, technically classified as a membranophone because it produces sound by the vibration of a stretched membrane. It takes many different shapes, and is composed of two main parts: the frame, which is typically rigid, and the resonator, which is made of animal skin. Archaeological evidence suggests that drums have played significant functional, social, political, and ritual roles across human cultures ([Montagu 2002](#):1-8; [Calò 2009](#): 75).

Despite the limited nature of the evidence, the drum represents one of the oldest instruments in human history, archaeologically dated back to the Neolithic period ([Zhang et al. 1999](#)). It has a well-documented emotional impact and has served multiple functions, including use in warfare and early religious rites ([Rouget 1985](#): 169-171). Neurophysiological interpretations of its effects further suggest its significance in relation to experiences of the divine ([Needham 1967](#): 607; [Jackson 1968](#): 297). As an archaeologically grounded inquiry, this paper is concerned with tracing patterns of material culture and examining their functional continuity across shifting cultural and ritual contexts.

Beyond its material and emotional dimensions, ritual drumming may also be approached as a medium of cultural memory. As argued by Assmann, cultural memory is preserved and stabilized through symbolic forms and ritual repetition that endure beyond the span of communicative memory ([Assmann 2011](#): 36–44, 95–103). In this sense, ritual practice functions as a long-term carrier of collectively structured remembrance, capable of surviving political and religious transformations ([Assmann 2011](#): 128–135).

Iconographic representations are often the only available archaeological evidence for drums from ancient Sudan due to the perishable nature of these materials, which depend on organic substances such as animal skins, clay, ropes, and wood. Therefore, most of the evidence is indirect, consisting of iconographic scenes or textual references from the New Kingdom onwards, continuing into Napatan and Meroitic contexts. However, the regularity of ritual drums in the archaeological record of the Middle Nile Valley may indicate that these instruments constitute a vessel of long-term symbolic continuity.

In this sense, ritual drumming can be approached through Catherine Bell's concept of ritualization, whereby ritual is understood as a strategic mode of action that

produces and reproduces symbolic authority and social order (Bell 1992: 74–90; 205–211). The persistence of the drum across changing religious frameworks may reflect the reactivation of a ritualized structure adapted to new theological settings.

Through a comparative analysis of classical iconographic material (reliefs, pottery decorations) and contemporary ethnographic study of modern Sufi Al-Nūba practices, this article examines ritual drums in the Middle Nile Valley from the Napatan and Meroitic periods (700 B.C. to AD 350) to modern Sudanese Sufi practice. Although the Napatan-Meroitic polytheistic framework and Islamic Sufism are fundamentally different, this argument does not assume a direct historical lineage, but instead focuses on recurring ritual structures. The purpose of drumming, particularly in relation to altered states of consciousness and the form of the solitary drummer, appears to persist.

Iconographic evidence from this period frequently depicts ritual drumming in contexts of worship and power, adorning temple walls, royal pyramids, and funerary pottery. These images often feature a solitary drummer, suggesting a specialized ritual role within Napatan and Meroitic religious practice. In later periods, the drum remains central to spiritual life in the same region, now under the name Al-Nūba, serving as a central rhythmic element in Sufi dhikr ceremonies, where its repetitive patterns are used to induce ecstatic states and facilitate spiritual engagement.

Anthropological studies have shown that rhythm in ritual contexts is structurally embedded in processes of altered states and possession, as demonstrated by Gilbert Rouget (1985: 3–10, 80–85). Such rhythmic intensification may create what Turner defines as a liminal space—a threshold state within ritual process where ordinary structures are temporarily suspended and transformative experience may occur (Turner 1969: 94–97).

Theoretical Framework:

This study adopts the concept of cultural memory as formulated by Assmann to interpret the long-term persistence of ritual drumming in the Middle Nile Valley. Assmann used this concept to describe the long-term symbolic system preserved through texts, rituals, monuments, and institutions, which transmits foundational meaning and sustains collective identity over long periods (Assmann 2011: 36–44). For Assmann, cultural memory involves the construction of a normatively charged past that provides a social

orientation and identity. Through ritual performance and repeated symbolic forms, societies create what he terms figures of memory—forms that condense and stabilize meaning across historical ruptures (Assmann 2011: 95–103). These figures do not require uninterrupted historical transmission; rather, they may persist through periodic reactivation within changing political and theological contexts (Assmann 2011:128–135).

Within this framework, Sudanese culture contexts include a wide range of symbolic practices that structure social and religious experience across generations, one well-known example is the use of the Anqareeb bed in funerary ceremonies that dates back to the Kerma period (2880.BC-1480.BC). Such practices illustrate how collective memory can be stabilized, in cultural configurations that adapt dynamically to changing contexts (Fig.1). Ritual drumming can be understood as a particularly effective medium of cultural memory, embodying both symbolic authority and mnemonic persistence. Its repetition, the specialized role of the individual drummer, and its continuity from the Napatan and Meroitic period to contemporary Sufi practices provide a unique perspective on the long-term transmission of culture in the Middle Nile Valley.



Fig. 1. Comparative example of material continuity: (a) reconstructed funerary bed from Kerma, Museum of Fine Art, Boston (MFA 40.69). (b) Contemporary Sudanese Anqareeb used in funerary contexts (Abdalla 2026).

Rouget discusses the relationship between music and altered states of consciousness, distinguishing between possession, as a broader cognitive condition (Rouget 1985: 3–23). Music operates within a symbolic framework that gives meaning to such transformations, with rhythm serving as a key component in structuring temporal and bodily perception (Rouget 1985: 80–95). Rhythmic repetition and bodily

synchronization recalibrate the relationship between the body and time. In the Sudanese Islamic Sufi context, the ritual drum Al-Nūba functions as a temporal structure organizing the transition from every day to ritual states, with rhythm acting as a mechanism of transition within ritual process that reshapes consciousness within a culturally recognized framework (Rouget 1985: 307–320).

The anthropological literature, the ritual specialist refers to the actor who holds the social authority to direct the ritual and regulate its symbolic trajectory. In Victor Turner's analysis of ritual process, this figure manages the liminal phase and ensures that transition unfolds within the cultural the cultural structure of the group (Turner 1969). In the Sudanese Sufi *dhikr* circle, ritual specialization is embodied in the figure of the shaykh, who determines the sequence of devotional chants and the gradation of their rhythmic patterns, thereby shaping the temporal flow of the gathering. The Al-Nūba drummer performs an executive role within this framework, while the Shaykh remains the primary regulator of ritual transformation. By controlling the sequence, tempo, and climactic intensity of the rhythms, he effectively regulates ritual time itself, situating the management of altered states of consciousness within a recognized symbolic authority.

The term Al-Nūba (in Arabic النوبة) in Sudan carries multiple meanings across different contexts. It refers to the ancient Nile Valley civilization associated with centers such as Napata and Meroe, designates communities in the Nuba Mountains, and in the Sufi context, denotes the ritual drum that regulates the rhythm of *dhikr*. This semantic range raises a methodological question concerning the transmission of terms and the transformation of their functions across different symbolic systems.

This study does not assume a direct historical continuity between temple drums in the Napatan-Meroitic context and the drum used in Sufi lodges, instead, it treats the relationship as a case of semantic and functional transformation, drawing on the Assmann's concept of cultural memory to examine how ritual forms may persist through processes of reinterpretation and recontextualization, without presupposing a linear evolutionary continuity.

This theoretical framework operates across three analytical levels: cultural memory as a macro perspective on long-term persistence, ritual process as a meso-level structural analysis, and rhythmic performance as a micro-level mechanism of embodied change. Together, these levels allow the study to examine continuity in functional terms without presupposing linear historical transformation.

Methodology:

This study adopts an archaeological perspective, focusing on continuity and the functional persistence of material culture, and employs a comparative methodology grounded in iconographic analysis and contemporary ethnographic observation. The aim is to examine whether certain ritual structures and functions recur across different religious frameworks in the Middle Nile Valley. The comparison is carried out within clearly defined limits. Analogy is used here as a heuristic tool. The chronological gap between the Napatan-Meroitic period and contemporary Sufi practice—particularly the long Christian phase in between—makes it difficult to argue for uninterrupted transmission. Therefore, similarities in form or function are treated as possible instances of structural recurrence within a shared cultural landscape. The analysis does not rely on evolutionary models and does not assume cultural survival in a simplistic or linear sense.

The comparison is based on four criteria: 1) Form: this includes the physical structure of the instrument (cylindrical body, double membrane), its suspension from the shoulder, including the frequent depiction of a solitary drummer in iconographic scenes. These formal features are examined in Napatan and Meroitic temple reliefs, funerary chapels, and portable material culture, and are then compared with the characteristics of Al-Nūba in contemporary Sufi practice. 2) Context. The archaeological material places drums within temple ritual, royal ceremony, and funerary settings. In contemporary Sudanese Sufi contexts, Al-Nūba appears within dhikr gatherings inside zawiyas and open ritual spaces in addition to funereal context. The comparison focuses on the structured nature of the ritual environment in both cases rather than on theological content. (3) Function, a central focus is the use of rhythm in relation to altered states of consciousness. Drawing on anthropological literature on music and trance, the study considers whether rhythmic intensification operates in both contexts as a mechanism of ritual change. The emphasis is on functional dynamics rather than symbolic equivalence. 4) Spatial Organization Iconographic scenes often show how the drummer is positioned within a hierarchically organized composition. In Sufi dhikr, spatial arrangement is also structured: the shaykh regulates the sequence, while the drummer sustains temporal flow. The study examines how rhythm operates within organized ritual space.

The archaeological component draws on published excavation reports, temple relief documentation, funerary chapel publications, and museum collections from Napatan and Meroitic contexts. Iconographic analysis is based on close visual reading of relief composition, figure placement, and instrument morphology. The ethnographic component draws on contemporary observation of Sudanese Sufi dhikr practices and existing anthropological literature on Islamic ritual sound in Northeast Africa. Ethnography is used here to clarify how rhythm functions within ritual environments.

Archaeological evidence

New kingdom contexts

According to the iconographic evidence published to date, there are no clear representations of local ritual drums in the major Egyptian centers of Nubia during the period of Egyptian occupation. This absence should not necessarily be understood as evidence for the non-existence of such practices. Rather, it may be interpreted in light of the selective and ideologically conditioned nature of official Egyptian art, in which visual programs were structured according to specific political and symbolic considerations. It is therefore possible that local sonic or ritual practices – such as drumming – were either excluded from formal representational schemes or deemed insufficiently significant within the framework of Egyptian state ideology.

The relief from the Temple of Beit el-Wali represents one of the relatively early iconographic attestations of the cylindrical drum within a context associated with southern Nubia, incorporated into an official Egyptian decorative program. Its significance lies in the fact that it dates to the reign of Ramesses II (Nineteenth Dynasty, thirteenth century BC), thereby constituting visual evidence for the presence of percussion instruments in the Middle Nile Valley since the New Kingdom (Roeder 1938: 31–42, Pl. 9).

The Nubian tribute scene forms part of the temple's broader pictorial cycle. It depicts a procession of Nubians led by a local chief (Fig. 2), while members of the group carry long staffs and various tribute items arranged in a structured horizontal sequence that underscores the formal and ceremonial character of the event (Roeder 1938: 31–42).

At the rear of the upper register appears a figure playing a cylindrical drum suspended from his shoulder by a strap, striking it as he advances within the procession (Roeder 1938: Pl. 9). This musical element is embedded within a clearly political-ritual framework, as the tribute is visually constructed as a representation of submission and integration into the Egyptian imperial order. The presence of the drummer suggests that the procession was not merely an administrative act of resource transfer, but an organized performative event structured by rhythm, reflecting symbolic dimensions that extend beyond economic exchange to the sphere of imperial representation.



Fig. 2. Nubian tribute procession at the Temple of Beit el-Wali (reign of Ramesses II), with a shoulder-slung cylindrical drum player at the rear of the procession. After Roeder 1938, Pl. 9.
The Redrawing and treatment by Abdalla 2026

Napatan Temple iconography

Incomplete ostrakon from limestone fragment revealed from Amun temple Sanam Abu dom dedicated to the god Amun. A ritual scene from Sanam was discovered within a temple, reflecting ceremonial practices associated with offerings. The drawing is divided into two registers: Lower register, which includes the deity's representative, priests, and drummers. The drummers, positioned at the end of the lower register, actively strike the long drums (darabukkas according to the Griffith description), highlighting their dual function; providing the auditory framework for the ritual and symbolically reinforcing the deity's presence within the temple space. Upper register shows figures are depicted bent forward in gestures of reverence, reflecting a symbolic response to the ritual and adding a layer of communal or representational participation in relation to the god (Griffith 1922:90, PL.XIX). The symbolic structure of the scene is expressed through its

hierarchical arrangement: deity, the priests, the drummers, and the participants or community, with each level representing a specific role within the ritual ([Fig. 3](#)). The drums are indeed merely musical instruments but serve as a sonic medium connecting divine authority with participants. The overall composition, with coordinated registers and movement directed toward the deity, conveys the structure of religious authority, ritual organization, and symbolic interaction between sacred power and the community within the Amun temple at Sanam. Sanam Abu Dom is considered one of the most prominent centers of Amun worship during the Napatan period, located on the opposite bank of Jebel Barkal, the symbolic center of Amun worship in Kush, reflecting both geographical and ritual integration within the sacred landscape of Napata. The site contains the remains of a large temple dedicated to the god Amun, whose architectural features and ceremonial function underscore the centrality of Amun worship. In addition, it includes an extensive non-royal cemetery, considered one of the largest known from the Napatan period, highlighting the site's religious and social significance ([Lohwasser 2010](#); [Howley 2021](#)).

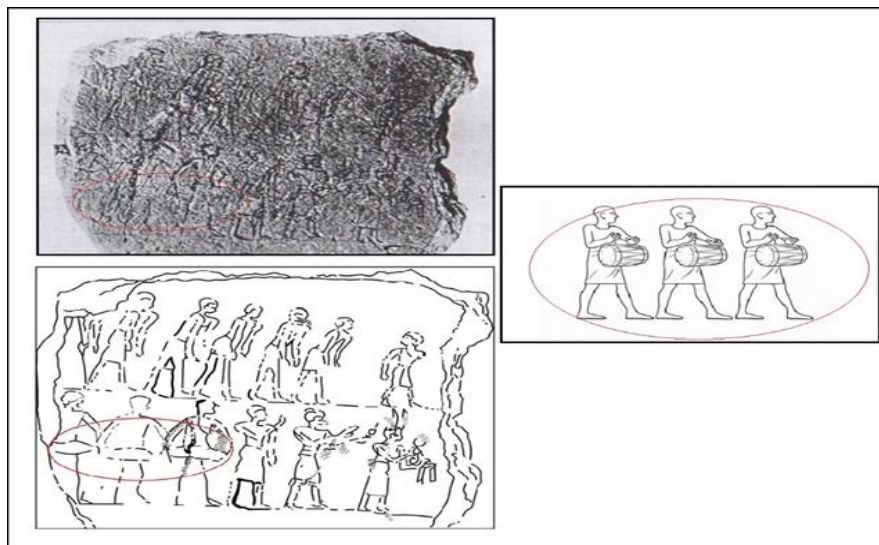


Fig. 3 Incomplete ostracon from limestone fragment from Amun temple Sanam, After Griffith, 1922:90, PL.XIX. The Redrawing and treatment by Abdalla 2026

One of the most important and unique iconographic scenes depicting the drum in a ritual context appears in what is known as the Musicians' Wall in the temple of King Taharqa at Kawa ([Macadam 1955](#): Pl. XIV). The plate depicts an organized musical scene carved on the wall of the hall, where a row of musicians appears in successive horizontal movement within a defined architectural space. The figures are arranged regularly, and

the drummers occupy a clear position within this arrangement, carrying double-skinned cylindrical drums suspended by shoulder straps, in a performance posture indicating participation within a procession (Fig. 4). The repeated presence of the drum within this scene indicates a composite sound formation within an official ritual context. The regularity of the bodies, the parallel lines, and the unified direction of movement all place the scene within the framework of a controlled ceremonial performance, in which rhythm is integrated into the very structure of temple ritual as an instrument producing a collective sonic presence within the sacred space.

The importance of this plate derives from its location within the temple of Kawa, one of the most prominent religious centers in Nubia during the Napatan period, constructed in the reign of Taharqa as part of a building program that re-established the cult of Amun beyond Gebel Barkal.

The Ancient town of Kawa represented a religious center of particular status within the network of Napatan temples, and that its architecture reflects an interaction between Egyptian tradition and its reformulation within a Nubian royal context (Welsby 1996). Accordingly, the inclusion of the drum in this space is not to be understood as a merely decorative element, but as part of an institutionalized ritual practice within a religious center that also carried a clear political dimension.

The iconographic evidence currently available for the representation of ritual drums in the Napatan temple context is more clearly associated with the monuments of Taharqa at both Sanam and Kawa. It remains uncertain whether this reflects an actual intensification of sonic ritual performance during his reign, or whether it is instead the result of uneven archaeological preservation and the unequal publication of earlier material.

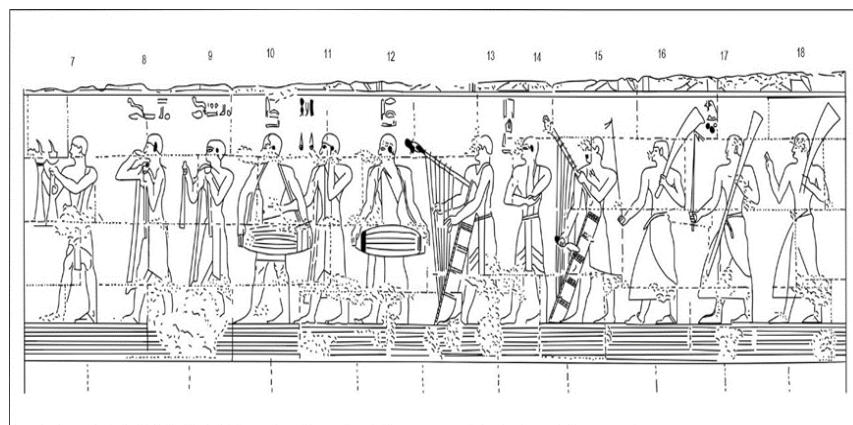


Fig. 4. Musicians' Wall in the temple of Taharqa at Kawa. After Macadam, 1955: Pl. XIV. Redrawing by Abdalla 2026.

Meroitic funerary contexts

The second drum comes from the east wall of the first pylon of Beg. N. 11 (Meroe North, Pyramid no. 11). It is published by [Chapman \(1952\)](#) and is indicated in the attached screenshot. A scene on the south side of the east wall of the chapel forecourt of Beg N.11 related to Queen Sbanakdakheto depicts a row of women carrying palm fronds, while another central figure stand plying a cylindrical drum suspended from the shoulder (Figure 5), within a funerary ritual context ([Chapman and Dunham 1952:pl.8B](#)).

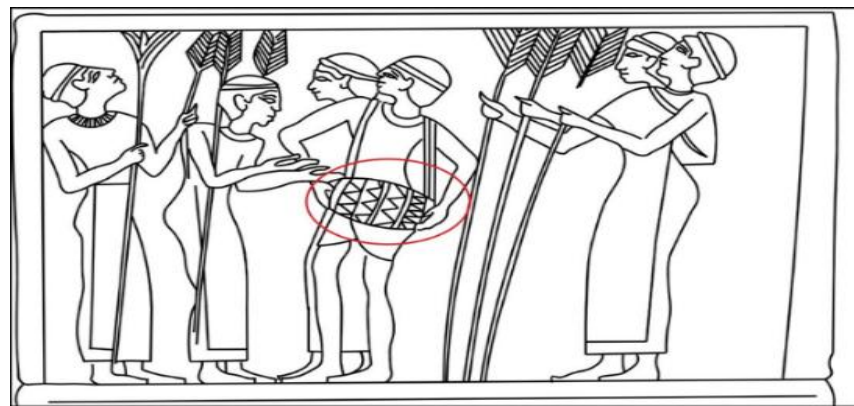


Fig. 5. Scene shows a central figure stand plying a cylindrical drum suspended from the shoulder. Beg. N. 11. After Chapman and Dunham, 1952:pl.8B. Redrawing by Abdalla 2026.

A painted pottery cup excavated by Gustave Garstang at Meroe in 1913 and now preserved in the Louvre (E.1138) provides a rare visual record of early Sudan rhythmic practice. The cup, a small vertical cylinder approximately 11 cm high and 8.5 cm in diameter, is about two-thirds preserved and depicts a lively scene of men dancing ([Kendall 1989: 658–659](#)). One fully preserved figure, shown frontally, beats a horizontally suspended two-sided drum (*daluka*) at waist level, while four other men move around the vessel, interacting with objects such as a large water jar and a wine amphora. The figures wear short loincloths and long belts, with tightly curled hair and headbands, and two display stubbly beards, consistent with Middle Kingdom Nubian dress (Yellin & Vercoutter, as cited in [Kendall 1989](#)). The contorted posture of one dancer, chest thrust forward and head thrown back, clearly represents a specific dance movement, and the drummer's stance is remarkably similar to that of contemporary Sudanese Sufi drummers ([Fig. 6](#)). While this cup offers important insight into early Nubian rhythmic practices and the symbolic role of the drum in structuring communal

movement, its broader context remains limited. The absence of associated stratigraphic or textual data restricts interpretive certainty, yet it provides an early visual analogue for understanding the functional and symbolic continuity of percussion in later ritual settings, including Sufi dhikr circles, where the drum continues to organize movement, time, and collective attention.



Fig. 6. Scene on pottery cup from Meroitic Town, Louver (E.1138)
 Website link: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010009825> .
 Redrawing by Abdalla 2026

The absence of ritual drumming in Christian Nubia

The archaeological and iconographic record of Christian Nubia provides a substantial corpus of ecclesiastical wall paintings and liturgical contexts from major centers such as Faras Cathedral and Old Dongola. These murals depict a wide range of religious figures, including Christ, the Virgin Mary, archangels, saints, bishops, and Nubian rulers, often accompanied by inscriptions in Greek, Coptic, or Old Nubian (Michałowski 1974: 15–32; Welsby 2002: 136–145). Despite the richness of this visual material, musical instruments are notably absent from the known iconographic programs of Nubian churches. In particular, percussion instruments such as drums—frequently depicted in

earlier Napatan and Meroitic contexts—do not appear in the currently published corpus of Christian Nubian wall paintings or liturgical imagery (Godlewski 2013: 159–174). This observation forms an important descriptive starting point for examining the transformation of ritual sound in the Middle Nile Valley.

Christian liturgy in Nubia appears to have been structured primarily around vocal performance rather than instrumental accompaniment. Studies of early Christian liturgical traditions indicate that sacred sound was typically produced through chant, recitation of scripture, and hymnody rather than through musical instruments (McKinnon 1998: 3–18). Although direct liturgical descriptions from Nubia remain limited, the broader Eastern Christian context suggests that the human voice played a central role in structuring ritual sound within church settings.

Al-Nūba in modern Sudanese Sufi practice

The Nūba is a ritual drum used within Sufi practices in Sudan, accompanying collective dhikr sessions in various orders such as the Qadiriyya order and Sammaniyya order (Trimingham 1949). It is a circular frame drum, typically fitted with one or two sturdy animal skins, often goat skin, chosen for its durability. In some rituals, the drum may be carried on the shoulder, and it is played either by hand or with a short stick according to a repeating rhythmic pattern. The Nuba's sound serves to structure the collective rhythm of the ritual circle, coordinating participants' movements and accompanying the progression of the dhikr within the ritual space (Maruyama 2015). In Sudanese Sufi practice, the term Al-Nūba carries two meanings, the first to the drum itself, and the second to the rhythmic ritual performance in which the drum plays a central role (Fig. 7).

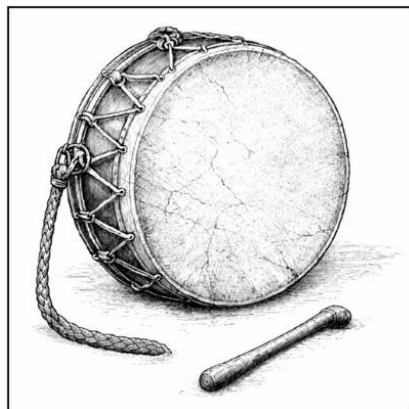


Fig. 7. Illustrative drawing of the ritual drum Al-Nūba, Drawn by Abdalla. 2026

Building on the understanding that Al-Nūba, in addition to being a drum, represents a ritual practice within a Sufi context, the Zawiya in Sudan emerges as the religious and social unit in which this practice is organized. The Zawiya brings together devotion, instruction, and the reproduction of spiritual authority, within which dhikr constitutes a central ritual practice. Typically performed in collective settings, dhikr involves the rhythmic repetition of litanies and divine names, often structured in organized circles under the guidance of a shaykh (Fig. 8). These gatherings provide the immediate ritual context in which practices such as the Nūba are enacted. The Zawiya also extends beyond ritual functions to include hospitality, mediation, and local social support, reflecting its integration into the community. Its organization typically centers on the authority of the shaykh or his successor. In this sense, the Zawiya operates as an intermediary space where religious and social functions intersect within the Sudanese context (McHugh 1994; Tirmingham 1971).



Fig. 8. Dhikr circle during Eid al-Fitr.2026, celebration at the Masid of Shaykh Abdullah- (Al Azzazi, Sudan) showing coordinated collective movement structured by rhythm. Captured from publicly available video of a Sufi ritual gathering used for Academic analysis by Abdalla 2026

Within the ritual setting, the Nūba can be understood as structuring the rhythmic dimension of collective performance, contributing to the regulation of tempo and the coordination of participants. Its repetitive sonic patterns support the gradual intensification of effective states, particularly within dhikr gatherings. In this sense, rhythm combines being an accompanying element and a means of organizing ritual

temporality and embodied experience (Fig. 9). These dynamics reflect the broader role of repetition and coordinated movement in shaping Sufi devotional practice (Bashir 2011).



Fig. 9. (a and b) Dhikr performance at the Masjid of Shaykh Abdullah- Al Azzazi, Sudan: (a) the Shaykh the dhikr circle and regulating tempo and guiding collective movement. (b) Al-Nuba drummer positioned at the center of the ritual space, sustaining the rhythmic structure. Captured from publicly available video of a Sufi ritual gathering used for Academic analysis by Abdalla 2026. (c) The annual visit of sheikh Al-Tayeb Adam from Kosti to Al-Sabunabi, 2017. .Photograph by Husham Ahmed

Centered on the shaykh, who guides the progression of dhikr and regulates its tempo. Participants assume differentiated roles within this framework, including vocal leaders and rhythmic contributors, whose coordinated actions sustain the collective act. Chanting and rhythmic elements are organized in relation to the unfolding of the ritual sequence, ensuring coherence between vocal expressions, bodily movement, and sonic patterns. Rhythmic accompaniment, including drumming, operates within this structure to support coordination and intensification. Such arrangements reflect broader patterns in the organization of Sufi ritual performance (Bashir 2011; Duek 2016; During 1999). Based on the author's field observations, these roles may vary in local contexts to include

specialized drummers performance differentiated rhythmic functions. This variation relates to distinct drumming techniques shaped by the norms of each Zawiya, and may differ of dhikr, and the tempo of performance. Differences are also evident between dhikr setting, calls to gather, and funeral processions associated with deceased Sheikhs (Sufi spiritual guide).

Discussion

This study approaches the problem at the level of ritual structure and function by focusing on how similar ritual formations appear— particularly the use of collective experience and presence of specialized drummer—across different religious frameworks. In this context, the similarities between ancient and modern practices can be understood as an example of functional persistence within a shared cultural landscape shaped by long-term processes of transformation and reinterpretation. This pattern of persistence may also be approached through what can be described "ritual devotion" that is, a form of collective engagement with the sacred, which appears in recurring patterns of engagement and withdrawal within different religious settings, whether, temple, church, or Zawiya, and contributes to the stabilization of cultural memory. The following discussion is guided by how material forms—such as the Al-Nuba drum—persist not merely as symbolic objects, but as functional elements that traverse different ritual and cultural settings.

In addition to structural comparison, Sufi ritual practice in Sudan can also be understood as a process of local adaptation, where familiar sensory and material elements are integrated into an Islamic devotional framework. Within many dhikr settings, the use of rhythm, bodily coordination, and elements such as incense or distinctive dress are not seen as external additions, but as part of a coherent ritual system. Rather than indicating direct historical survival, such features may reflect processes of reinterpretation through which locally embedded forms are reorganized within new religious contexts. Contemporary interpretations of the term Al-Nuba among the Sudanese Sufi practitioners provide further insight into how the practice is locally understood. Informal conversations with participants suggest that the term associated with a Nubian region and its cultural identity reflecting a retrospective attribution of origin. While such interpretations cannot be treated as historical evidence, they highlight the ways in which ritual practices are embodied within broader narratives of identity and cultural memory in contemporary Sudanese contexts.

The iconographic representations of drummers in classical period contexts (Napatan and Meroe), when viewed from the perspective of the archaeology of sound, suggest structured ritual soundscapes rather than simple depictions of musical activity (Scarre & Lawson 2006). The repeated presence of drums in temple and funerary scenes shows that rhythm functioned as a central element in ritual performance, in terms of organizing the movement of the participants, coordinating their actions, and marking moments of transition within the ritual process. In this sense, the drummer can be understood as a part of a system in which sound, space, and ritual action are closely connected. These observations therefore point to repeated and embedded sonic practices within the ritual environment.

This study relies on combining iconographic evidence from the classical periods with ethnographic observations of contemporary Sufi rituals, with aim of providing a clearer understanding of the functions of rhythm from a functional perspective, without relying on strong assumptions about individual experiences of participants in the archaeological iconographic scenes.

The repeated depictions of drummers in temples and burial contexts suggest that rhythm accompanied transitional moments, whether funerary or royal, in line with the concept of the “transition mechanism” discussed by Turner (1969). In contrast, rhythm in Sufi practice is used to shape states of ecstasy and facilitate forms of spiritual transition or collective experience, as Rouget (1985) emphasizes its role in organizing the group experience through sound and rhythm.

Rhythm also plays a role in structuring time during ritual, marking moments of change and organizing participants’ actions, as seen in contemporary collective Sufi practices. Furthermore, it contributes to coordinating bodies and creating a unified group experience, contributing to a sense of collective cohesion. These three aspects can be used to develop an interpretive approach to understanding its role in classical contexts.

The iconographic scenes of the Classical periods depict drummers as a recurring element within ritual compositions, and this repetition indicates their role as part of the structure of ritual performance. In Meroitic contexts, the drummer is often shown in a defined position within the scene, whether at the end of processions or within a hierarchical arrangement that reflects an internal organization of performance, suggesting role linked to regulating rhythm within an ordered framework.

In contrast, in contemporary Sufi practice, the Nūba drummer appears in defined positions within the ritual circle, either standing at its center or moving alongside the shaykh as he circulates within it. In processional contexts, the drummer may take a position at the rear or within the middle of the group, reflecting structured placement within the collective arrangement and a role in organizing rhythm and guiding group performance (Trimingham 1971). This role operates within a sequence governed by the authority of the shaykh, placing the drummer within an organized system of functional relations (Turner 1969).

This comparison suggests that the presence of the drummer in both contexts is linked to a specific ritual role within an organized structure, where position and function are clearly defined. A degree of stability in this role can be noted across different contexts, supporting an interpretation based on functional persistence within ritual practice. When viewed against the earlier archaeological record of the Middle Nile Valley, the absence of drums in Christian Nubian contexts becomes particularly noticeable. Ritual drums appear repeatedly in Napatan and Meroitic iconography, in both temple and funerary contexts, as part of structured ceremonial performances. By contrast, the extensive corpus of Christian Nubian wall paintings at sites such as Faras Cathedral and Old Dongola does not include representations of percussion instruments within church imagery (Michałowski 1974:15–32; Welsby 2002: 136–145). This contrast suggests a transformation in the nature of ritual sound between the classical and Christian periods in the Middle Nile Valley.

Evidence from the Christian contexts suggests a shift in rhythmic expression. For example, the dance scene in the Kom H Monastery in Old Dongola depicts groups engaged in singing and coordinated movement, accompanied by light percussion instruments such as sticks and rattles, while the drum is absent (Van Gerven Oei 2017:117–120). This reflects a reconfiguration of rhythmic media, where heavy drums are excluded while other forms of rhythm remain acceptable within the religious framework (Fig. 6).

The Christian period can be understood as a stage in which the ritual soundscape was reconfigured rather than completely interrupted. Core elements such as rhythmic organization and coordination of group performance continue, but through lighter sonic instruments, preserving the functional role of the ritual without the traditional drums.

A brief comparison with the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church shows that the marginalization of drums in Christian Nubia cannot be explained as a general feature of Christian ritual. In the Ethiopian case, drums form part of the liturgical performance, accompanying chant and movement, within a tradition that incorporated and integrated local musical practice into the ritual framework ([Shelemay 1986](#)). This contrast suggests that the absence of drums in Nubian evidence reflects specific historical and liturgical configurations, likely shaped by Byzantine-oriented norms, rather than a universal Christian prohibition of percussion.

Ethnoarchaeological comparison is used in this study as an interpretive tool to assist in reading certain aspects of ritual performance in Meroitic scenes. [Kendall \(1989\)](#) draws on ethnographic observations from Nubian communities to interpret representations of dance and music in Meroitic art, noting the relationship between bodily movement and rhythm within these scenes. This approach helps to clarify how body and sound interact within ritual action.

The use of comparison in the present study remains within interpretive limits and does not assume a direct historical continuity between Meroitic and modern practices. The similarity between dance accompanied by drums in Meroitic scenes and dance accompanied by al-nūba in Sufi dhikr can be approached as a convergence in performative structure, where body and rhythm operate together within ritual settings. This convergence suggests that the relationship between bodily movement and rhythm forms a ritual unit that appears in different religious contexts, where rhythm organizes and coordinates collective movement. Such observations support a functional reading of the archaeological evidence without relying on assumptions of direct historical continuity.

Iconographic scenes from the classical periods indicate that the drum was carried on the shoulder during performance, allowing the drummer to move within the ritual space while maintaining rhythmic continuity. A comparable pattern appears in contemporary Sufi practice, where the Al-Nūba drum is carried in a similar way, enabling the performer to move within the ritual circle or accompany processions while sustaining the rhythm.

From an archaeological standpoint, the Al-Nūba drum can be understood as a material form whose continuity lies not only in its physical structure, but in the persistence of its functional role within collective rhythmic performance.

In some earlier studies, this type of drum has been described using terms such as “darbuka” (Griffith 1922:90, PL.XIX) or “daluka” (Macadam 1955 79, pl. XIVb; Kendall 1989: 659; Welsby 1996: 56). These labels, however, do not accurately correspond to the form represented in the iconographic record, particularly in relation to the structure of the instrument and the method of carrying it on the shoulder. This makes it necessary to rely on the formal analysis of the instrument as depicted in the archaeological evidence, rather than applying later ethnographic terminology.

The form of the instrument is directly related to its function within the ritual setting, as it allows the combination of bodily movement and rhythmic continuity within a structured performance. In this sense, the recurrence of this form can be understood in relation to the practical requirements of ritual performance, where form serves function, without implying direct historical continuity.

Taken together, the comparison between archaeological iconography and contemporary Sufi practice suggests that the persistence of ritual drumming in the Middle Nile Valley is best understood in functional rather than genealogical terms. The recurrence of rhythmic structuring, the regulated role of the drummer, and the integration of sound within organized ritual space point to a relatively durable pattern of ritual practice that has been continuously reconfigured across changing religious frameworks. This perspective allows for continuity to be recognized without assuming direct historical transmission, emphasizing the adaptive capacity of ritual forms within long-term cultural processes. By foregrounding material culture and its functional persistence, this study contributes to a broader archaeological understanding of how cultural forms endure, adapt, and acquire new meanings without losing their structural roles.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges Giovanni Ruffini (Fairfield University, USA), Angelika Lohwasser (University of Munster, Germany), Stewart Tyson Smith (University of California, Santa Barbara, USA), Dobrochna Zielinska (University of Warsaw, Poland), and Henry Cosmo Bishop (British Museum, UK) for their valuable support, including the of references, visual materials, and scholarly discussions on iconographic evidence, which contributed significantly to the development of this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

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