

Sudanese Industrial Sound: Sonic Labour in a Truck Workshop

Valerie Hänsch

Take a second, turn on your speakers and tune in to the sonic experience of beats, steel and manual work to explore the audible expression of embodied practice.



[Watch video here](#)

Going back: I shot the scenes of this short video during a team research project (2006–2008) on the work and history of truck modification in urban industrial areas of the Sudan. In the 1960s, the flourishing automobile industry made for growing truck exports overseas. The imported Bedford TJ truck increasingly populated roads and truck workshops sprang up along roads, especially in former British dominions. Perhaps the best known and most visible truck modifications are the ornately decorated Bedford trucks of Pakistan (Elias 2011).

While their painted decorations and the meanings of their symbols certainly attract and deserve attention, the aim of this anthropological research project was different. We asked about the knowledge, technological appropriation, creativity and skilled practice of Sudanese craftsmen who deconstruct the Bedford trucks and rebuild

them completely. To be able to grasp complex work processes and the interaction between humans, tools and materials, we employed collaborative audiovisual research methods. In the workshops, I filmed the various technologies and practices of the craftsmen. I edited short segments of the footage, which we watched and discussed together with the respective craftsmen. This method of video elicitation offered an outstanding opportunity for shared knowledge production of both the performative workflow and technical expertise. The footage provided material for a rough cut, which we used for discussion with the craftsmen and which later resulted in a feature-length documentary (Hänsch 2009).

Truck modification at roadsides: After the English 6-ton Bedford lorry had arrived in the Sudan in the 1960s, local craftsmen – seeing that it would not meet the country’s requirements – started to modify the vehicle to make it fit for off-road driving. Among other adjustments, the craftsmen increased the payload from six tons up to nine tons. The largely roadless deserts of Sudan are still these trucks’ natural habitat. Commuting between urban and rural areas, the lorry reliably supplies the hinterland with goods and connects people with each other. From the reinforcement of the chassis to the construction of a new body, the Sudanese “art of truck modding” has developed through time into a unique craft tradition (Beck 2009). Blacksmiths, carpenters and mechanics across the Sudan are involved in the trade and they regularly succeed in reanimating completely run-down lorries, making them into Sudanese “Iron brides” (Hänsch 2009). The trade is organised through kinship ties and social relations

*Still from the film Sifinja-
The Iron Bride*
Photo: Valerie Hänsch,
2009.



A lorry under construction, workshop in Port Sudan
Photo: Kurt Beck, 2008.



Last works on the lorry, workshop in Shendi
Photo: Kurt Beck, 2007.

between masters and apprentices. We followed the craft's traditions through the social networks of workshops in the north, west and east of Sudan.

Sonic labour: Manual labour and rhythm are fundamentally connected. The experience of work rhythms, German scholar Karl Bücher argued in his classical study *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (1899), facilitates coordination between workers and imbues arduous work with meaning.¹ For example, engaging with the material, the rhythm and the sound of forging direct the workflow, the bodies' performance and the coordination between blacksmiths. While forging, the sound of the metal also guides the strength of the punch. As part of their situated knowledge, experienced blacksmiths feel the shaping of the iron with the hammer and they also evaluate the sound of the metal. The sound of forging also provides the opportunity for playful rhythmisation of work. When we met the master craftsman Abd al-Ghani in his lorry blacksmith workshop in 2008, he demonstrated how he and his crew sometimes create rhythms by hammering specific patterns of beats to animate and cheer them in their forging.

We spent several days in Abd al-Ghani's workshop in the industrial area of El-Obeid in Western Sudan. At the end of the 1950s, Abd al-Ghani started to work as an apprentice in a blacksmith workshop. He then worked for various blacksmiths until he opened his own workshop which specialised in the repair and maintenance of trucks. Together with his two sons, several apprentices and employed blacksmiths, he reinforces the chassis and constructs new iron bodies for Bedford lorries.

When we discussed a different version of the short video with Abd al-Ghani, he commented on the patterns of beats: "The rhythm we create with the hammer is like music for us. Every blacksmith's workshop has it. You hear it like music in your heart and it gives you enthusiasm for the work. If you forge with the big hammer, it gives you zeal." Such playful sonic rhythmisation conjures up the mood to perform strenuous work; it creates the courage to work hard for hours in the heat of the day.

Abd al-Ghani called the various types of rhythms *naqrasha*. For instance, two craftsmen forging one piece together transform the usual even two-beat rhythm into a 2/4 tempo. Another type of rhythm is created when one smith sets the pace with his beats and guides the direction and steady movement of the other's hammer. Thereby, the one with the small hammer does not forge the piece itself but strikes the anvil and holds the piece. He is leading with his small hammer the action of the other craftsman, who forges the piece with the big hammer. While forging together, the metric cycle spans from three to six beats, which corresponds to the staff notation of 6/8 and 12/8 respectively. According to Rainer Polak, this metric pattern is characteristic for Sub-Saharan music (Polak 2010, see also Locke 2010). Together the craftsmen master a high degree of rhythmicity both in regularity and in the patterned contrasts. The different types of hammers and works contribute to the metallic timbres. Abd al-Ghani or his sons usually beat the leading hammer and the employed smiths or apprentices forge the piece with the big hammer. It is the created rhythm that supports control of and immersion into work and keeps up the workflow. In this way, sonic labour is playful rhythmisation that provides both enthusiasm for arduous work and steady bodily movement and concerted coordination.

This kind of ‘musicking’ can be found in many other instances of manual labour in Africa and elsewhere. For example, Ghanaian postal workers turned the tedious task of cancelling stamps into a meaningful and enjoyable practice by creating musical patterns: they drummed sounds and whistled melodies (Koetting 1992, cited in Titon 1996: 8-9). Blacksmiths in Mali created rhythms that resemble standard drumbeats played by musicians in the region; to become a competent smith, Patrick McNaughton argues, means to be able to “play” the rhythms with the hammer and the bellow (McNaughton 1988: 25). Abd al-Ghani is not a musician; he is a blacksmith who masters his work and its rhythms. These are “the rhythms we learned from the old craftsmen of the old days”, Abd al-Ghani told us. “It is their tradition. We also call it *tantana* [jingling].”

In the short video, I have mixed and remixed different types and episodes of ‘musical’ forging in Abd al-Ghani’s workshop into a web of Sudanese industrial sound.

With the boom in new infrastructural projects since the early 2000s, tarmac roads have been built through the deserts of the Sudan and new MAN and Mercedes trucks are being imported. The craftsmen have started to modify these trucks as well. But the old Bedford lorry continues to be the mainstay in the circulation of goods and people on off-road desert tracks. As Ammar, a lorry craftsman in Northern Sudan said about the lorry: “It will never die!” The craftsmen’s work keeps it running.

Notes:

¹ *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (Work and Rhythm) has not been translated into English. For a discussion of Bücher’s study and approach see Gregor Dobler (2016) and Gerd Spittler (2008).

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