

# RHYTHM OF THE KINGS

Pete Lockett wanders through North Africa with a trip down the Nile



Having recently looked at the drumming traditions of North Africa and Maghreb, the time has come to look at another significant country in North Africa: Egypt. Egyptian drumming is noticeably different from that of the Maghreb and the rest of North Africa, even though similar drums and techniques are often used.

The cornerstone of Egyptian drumming is the goblet-shaped Arabian tabla (not to be confused with Indian tabla), a drum very similar to the Middle Eastern darabuka. The Arabian tabla is traditionally ceramic (high fire stoneware or low fire earthenware) and is generally thrown by the potter in two pieces. Sizes range from 12-18" in height with head sizes between 8" and 14" in diameter. Finishes vary, some being glazed, others left unglazed. Another option is to have the drum painted, but by far the most popular finish is the beautiful mosaic-type effect produced by inlaying small, coloured pieces of mother of pearl or sometimes plastic. This particular finish can be very attractive, especially on the more expensive drums where the designs can be very detailed and elaborate.

Cheaper drums have goat skin heads while the more expensive ones have fish skin. The method of affixing the skin to the drum is quite unlike any other I've come across. The skin is cut in a circular shape, big enough to come down over the side of the curved shell by about 2" -3". Around the edge of the skin is a band of cloth sewn into the head. The outer edge of this cloth has a piece of rope sewn into it. The head is then soaked and glued onto the shell, and

laced into place with thin rope which is sewn into the cloth and around the edge of the rope, linking it to another rope hoop which is affixed around a lower part of the shell and then tensioned. Because of the goblet shape of the shell, the head is tensioned securely.

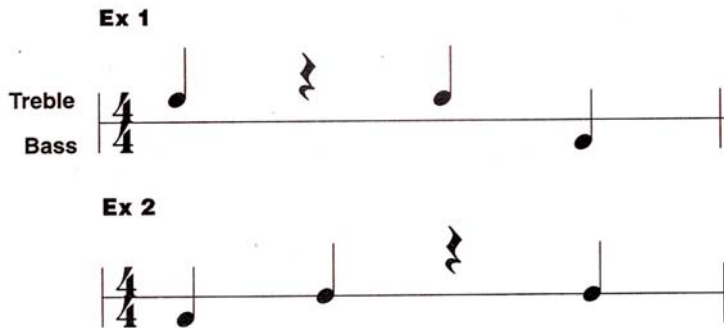
When the head is dry, the drum should be very high in pitch. This, as with all fixed and untuneable drums, is dependent upon weather and climate. This high tuning of the drums is of the utmost importance in performance. For those of you who have been to Egypt, you may well have seen a 'gaggle' of drummers outside their dressing room before a performance, huddled round, holding their drums over a fire to tune them higher. Alternatively, Egyptian percussionists often get a circular biscuit tin, install an electric light bulb inside and make holes in the top of the tin. Then, in performance, they stand the drum upside down on the hot tin to tighten the head. One thing they are very careful of is not to leave the drum on the tin for too long—it gets so hot that it can easily damage the skin. (I don't necessarily recommend this procedure as it doesn't seem all that safe to me.)

Yet another alternative is to get one of the popular aluminium bolt-tensioned drums now available. This drum features a tuneable head secured by a large metal hoop which bolts over the lip of the rim and onto the body of the drum. This style of drum comes in many different sizes, but generally the most popular size is 9" diameter by 17" high. The aluminium drums are generally not painted but instead come covered in cloth, often black in colour. The more expensive ones are decorated in the same way as the ceramic ones with mother of pearl or plastic. The higher quality ones also tend to have six tuning bolts instead of four. The rim is constructed in such a way as to keep the character of the curved edge of the tabla at the top of the drum.

The drum pictured in this article is a bolt-tensioned aluminium drum with mother of pearl and plastic inlay and a plastic head. It is a slightly larger drum and has six tensioning bolts. The origins of the Arabian tabla almost certainly date back to the Persian drum called the zarb (as is also true for the Turkish darabuka). This drum really is the mother of all the Middle Eastern 'goblet' drums. The zarb is a wooden drum with a head on one end, and although goblet shaped, it is a lot more 'square' in its general appearance. The zarb really is the most complex of this whole family of drums and involves a very elusive 'finger snapping' technique. This is similar to the 'snapping' found on the Middle Eastern darabuka or dumbek. It's interesting to note that this technique is not found at all on Egyptian/Arabian tabla. I would put this down mainly to the rounded edge of the drum; with the edge being round it's very difficult to get into a good position to execute the finger snap, although I'm sure there are many Egyptian percussionists out there who would not necessarily agree with this. Anyway, it is this finger snapping style which really distinguishes Egyptian tabla from Turkish darabuka playing.

The drum can be played either sitting down or standing up. For the sitting down position the drum is supported on the thigh with the arm coming round over the top to hold it in place and be in a position to hit the skin over the top of the drum. The other hand, meanwhile, is free-floating and comes round the front of the drum to strike. The standing position is identical except that the leg which supports the drum is raised by putting the foot on a box. This puts the thigh in the correct position to support the drum securely. Turkish percussionists also adopt this stance as well as the less elegant playing position of holding the drum between the legs whilst sitting.





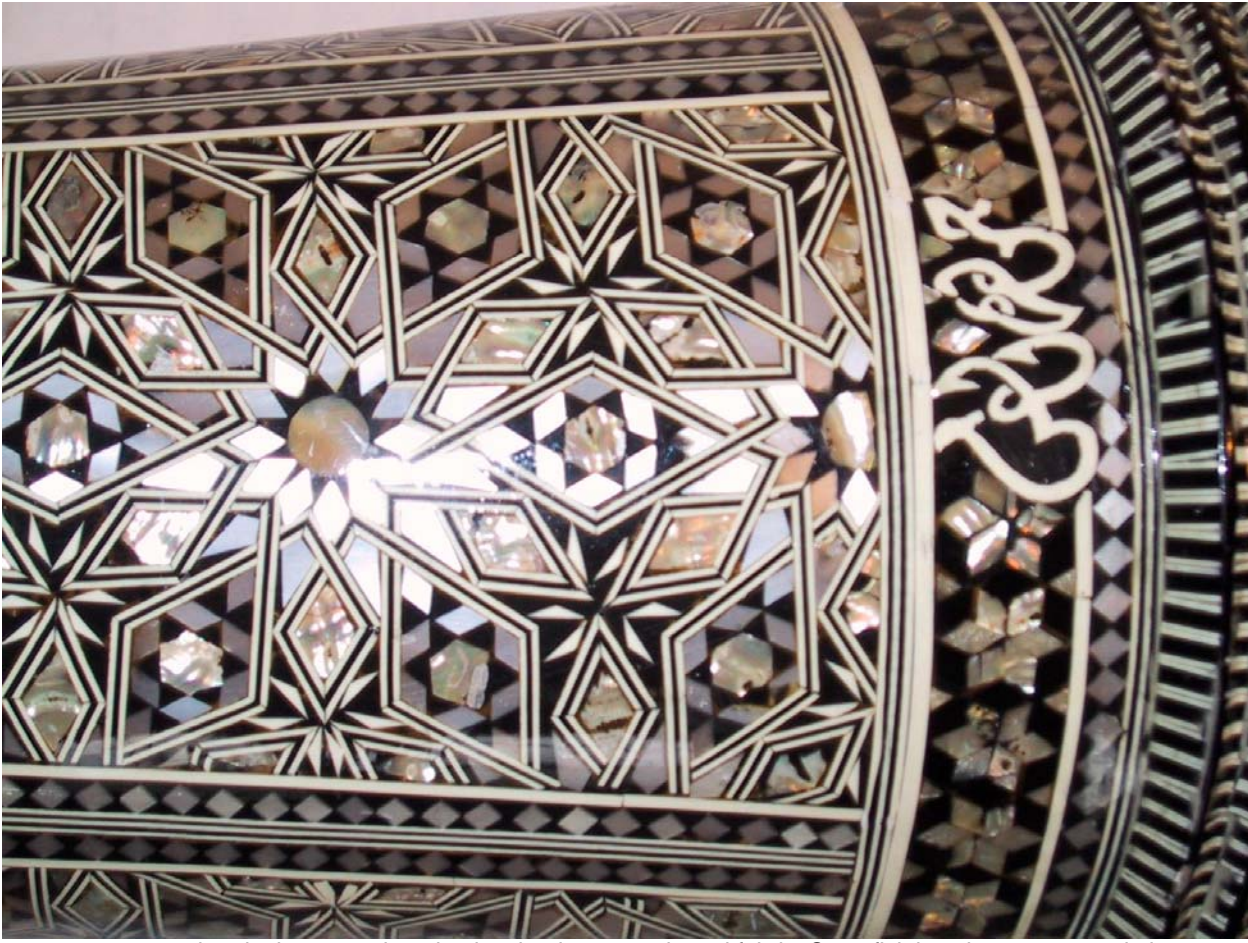
The playing technique of the Arabian tabla involves the open bass tone in the middle of the drum (the 'dum' sound), the high-pitched rim sound (the 'tek' sound), and the slap stroke. There are also variations on these sounds executed by muting etc.. The technique also involves very fast rolls and ruffs using all the fingers of both hands.

Other popular and prominent drums in Egypt include the req and the def, both of which could be considered as frame drums. To the layperson the req could be described as a tambourine, particularly in the hands of an expert such as Glen Velez. The drum is generally around 7" in diameter with a shell depth of about 2". The outside of the shell is inlaid with mother of pearl in the same fashion as the Arabian tabla, and the skin is usually glued-on fish skin (cheaper drums can have goat skin fitted). There are five sets of thick double jingles, each approximately 2" in diameter and made from brass. These tend to make the better quality drums quite heavy

The drum is held in a vice-like grip with the left hand. The thumb rests against one of the back sets of jingles while the fingers come round the front to strike either the head or one of the front jingles. This is a complex playing position and cannot be explained easily. As far as basic sounds go, we have the same as on the Arabian tabla, namely the 'dum', 'tek' and slap strokes. The art of skilful req playing lies in mastering the elaborate rhythms and decorations represented on the jingles. This is particularly exciting when short, quick ruffs are introduced into the rhythmic fray.

The def is basically a simple single-headed frame drum used for playing skeletal supporting rhythms. The drums are generally made from bent wood and goat skin, come in different sizes, and are usually sold as families of four different sizes. Many people in Egypt are superstitious about 'def families' and feel it is important to treat them with respect and not split them up. Drums are important in many cultures for their spirituality; and the Egyptians are no exception. As with the req, the def is held with a vice-like grip, but without the aid of the jingle. The main bulk of the rhythmic work is carried out by the right hand, with the left hand sometimes elaborating the shape with some grace notes, etc. The repertoire of sounds is the same as the other drums, namely 'dum', 'tek' and slap.

The other common supporting rhythmic instrument is sagat - or finger cymbals as they're called in English- These small but thick cymbals come in sets of four and are used two in each hand. On each cymbal there's an elastic hoop which is used to fix them to the thumbs and fingers of each hand. Enough said, apart from the fact that simple



supporting rhythms are played to inspire the general tonal fabric. Superficial as they may sound, they are a particularly effective inclusion in any percussionist's setup.

Rhythmically, it is interesting to note how the phraseology of Egyptian rhythms differs from that of the Maghreb. A lot of the grooves from the Maghreb are structured with the bass drum falling off the beat as in Ex. 1.

The way we listen to music here could easily lead us to misinterpret the placement of the rhythm and hear it as it is in example 2.

One of the significant things about Egyptian drumming and rhythms — as separate from the Maghreb and North African rhythms — is that they adopt this later interpretation. A lot of the rhythms from Egypt involve bass patterns starting from, and revolving around the first beat as in Ex. 2.

The rhythms from Egypt are very intricate and delicate and are well worth some of your time. Pass on your thoughts to me at [www.petelockett.com](http://www.petelockett.com)



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