

Asia Madani's final show was in Egypt at the Chill O'posite Music Festival on the 19th of January, 2025. Asia and her band played four sets of drums simultaneously while a small stringed instrument called the *tambour* floated above them, creating a unique mixture of traditional music and modern upbeat rhythms. Those who stood danced, and those who sat swayed, the music constantly changing as the band switched between instruments. Laughter, familiar tunes, and slang filled the air, making it feel less like Egypt and more like a family gathering in Sudan. I watched the audience through a screen as the camera panned, realizing after a moment that my face held the same wistful expression as a few of them. I suspected we all felt the subtle familiarity in the atmosphere, momentarily transported back to Sudan, where war made gatherings like this impossible. As political tensions mounted in Sudan, artists like Asia Madani became crucial voices in preserving cultural heritage while advocating for freedom. Through her art, Asia fostered a deep connection with the country, and it extended beyond music through her consistent political activism and advocacy, making her a symbol of a Sudan free of war and tyranny. Her recent passing marks a profound loss not only for Sudan's musical scene but also for its political landscape and fight for justice.

Asia was born as Asia Mousa Abdullah, but she decided early in her career to create a stage name that was a subtle nod to her city in Eastern Sudan, Wad Madani. This decision continued a long Sudanese tradition of female singers replacing their last names with the name of their city of origin as a sign of pride and recognition of their neighborhoods. Leaving Madani at eighteen might have distanced Asia from Sudan geographically, but not inwardly. In Egypt, she quickly established herself as more than just a musician but as an activist challenging the oppressive political regime she left behind. She remained invested in Sudanese culture and politics, often taking a strong stance on social issues. "I never fully left Sudan," she told Scene Noise in an interview from March 2018. "But I needed to find a bigger, more welcoming place, with better outlets, where I can offer my music. In Sudan, the freedom to express yourself is very limited." During this time, Omar Al-Bashir's dictatorial government continued restricting freedom of expression, creating harsh policies that monitored and targeted those who criticized the government. A grim example of his restrictive policies is the Public Order Law that required citizens to dress modestly, often harshly targeting women and young men in public. Through her Facebook page, Asia commented on this, stating that the law was humiliating to Sudanese women and all citizens. She often utilized her online platforms to call for the end of Al-Bashir's tyrannical rule, constantly advocating for the dismantlement of the highly dictatorial regime that had ruled the country for over thirty years. Her definitive political stance faced a lot of criticism and pushback, getting to the point where critics questioned her Sudanese heritage online. Undeterred, she remained politically active, supporting the Sudanese cause at a time when artists chose to stay silent about politics.

In Egypt, Asia's songs showcased resistance through music, using her rhythms to span Sudan's regions. The song *G'bal Al Nuba* paid tribute to the underrepresented Nuba Mountains in

Western Sudan, where she used the *al gar'aa* instrument for authentic regional sounds. Meanwhile, she showcased Eastern Sudanese music through songs like Al Zoul, which was performed on the region's *dalouka* drum. Utilizing various instruments and sounds, Asia's songs remained musically and dialectically enshrined in her Sudanese identity. "People used to tell me, Asia, if you want to sing in Egypt, you have to sing in an Egyptian dialect/accent," She said in an interview with Scene Noise, "and I love to listen to Egyptian songs, but I don't like singing them because I feel dishonest." With Sudanese culture deep-rooted in her music, Asia wrote songs like Wad Alnil, or Son of the Nile, where she sang: *My love is the Nile and he's beautiful. My love is a cause, my love is native, my love is an identity.* This song celebrated Sudan's most prized natural resource, the River Nile, and metaphorically presented it as a lover while also connecting the Sudanese identity to the constant political struggle for freedom. Though Sudan was central to Asia's music, her compositions consistently found a global audience. She blended traditional folklore with contemporary beats, appealing to both older and younger generations, regardless of geography. In 2015, Asia joined The Nile Project, a collective of musicians from the Nile basin countries, and staged shows in America, Europe, and Africa, successfully establishing her music internationally, which was and still is borderless.

In Sudan, 2018 started with the whispers of a revolution that had been steadily simmering since 2013. Protests reignited across the country as living conditions worsened and attacks on civilians intensified. What began as scattered demonstrations eventually evolved into one large, peaceful sit-in led by the youth in front of the military headquarters. By early 2019, the people of Sudan succeeded in toppling Al-Bashir, who had ruled for over thirty years. This moment marked a turning point in Sudan's history, the sit-in becoming not only a space of resistance but also a bustling symbol of a different future. Art was essential to the revolution, with graffiti, murals, poetry, and music marking every corner of the sit-in. With the site becoming an art hub, the protesters built a stage in the center, and artists turned revolutionary chants into songs. Though initially unable to be physically present during the sit-in, Asia supported the movement through her music and activism. She would chant *Madaniya* at her shows, a revolutionary slogan signifying the struggle for civilian rule that persisted even after Al-Bashir's arrest. By May of 2019, Asia finally went to Khartoum to perform at the sit-in. She was greeted by hundreds of fans at the airport, and unable to resist, Asia pulled out a drum and chanted the revolution's slogan along with the crowd: *Just fall, that is all.*

One month later, the Khartoum massacre occurred, resulting in thousands of deaths and widespread sexual violence. It still stands as the darkest chapter in Sudanese history. In response to this brutality, Asia wrote on her Facebook page: "The enemy kills a revolutionary, and the earth grows a thousand revolutionaries. Oh, pride of the soul, if we die, we will fight from the graves." While her social media activism reached many, it was through her music that Asia found her most powerful voice of resistance because it combined her artistic expression with her firm political convictions. She created the melody for the song *Matgoly Way*, which was written

by Rabbah Al-Siddiq Al-Mahdi. *Matgoly Way* translates from Arabic to *Do Not Say 'Way'*, which is a cry out in despair. Asia performed this piece herself, dedicating it to all the women who suffered during and in the aftermath of the revolution. In the song, she says: *Don't cry out that desperate cry that tears my heart. God, when will the meeting be so my tears can end? So Azza's dignity won't be needlessly humiliated.* The song uses the name *Azza* as a personification of Sudan, paying homage to *Azza Fi Hawak*, a Sudanese national patriotic song performed in 1974. In *Matgoly Way*, the tragedy of the massacre transcends the individual women to become a violation of Sudan itself, implying that the entire nation was wounded through these acts of violence. Asia's composition of the song contained a calming, lullaby-like quality, the melody flowing like a gentle stream of comfort, promising better times. She successfully transformed collective grief into a cry for justice, documenting atrocity while consoling victims and their families.

Throughout the subsequent years, even as international media attention on Sudan faded, Asia remained a consistent voice of resistance. She continued to criticize political figures like Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, the head of the Rapid Support Forces, and expressed her support for the protests that occurred in the following year against the transitional government's continuous delay of free and fair elections. She repeatedly emphasized that the revolution remained unfinished, despite facing heavy censorship from the government. Two years later, in April of 2023, the war in Sudan erupted when the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary turned militia, attacked Khartoum in an attempt to take it from Sudan's national army. By December of the same year, the RSF captured Wad Madani, Asia Madani's city, unleashing unprecedented violence on the citizens who had no opportunity to escape. Murder, systemic sexual violence, and plunder characterized the militia's occupation of Madani. This was a deeply saddening event to Asia, who was scarred by the violations in her city. A few days before her death, Asia wrote on her Facebook page: "Until now, I am surprised how, ethnically, politically, or otherwise, a normal human being could support the Rapid Support Forces. [...] I come from the streets of Sudan, a part of the marches, sit-ins, and real struggles, which are not dependent on anything other than the streets that do not betray." Despite the cruel hopelessness of war, Asia remained loyal to the unfulfilled target of the revolution: freedom for all.