Egypt's Pop-Music Clashes and the "World-Crossing" Destinies of Muhammad Ali

Street Musicians

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It is the first night of the feast following the holy month of Ramadan (Eïd al-Fitr),

in Sa'ad as-Sawa' café on Mohamed Ali Street and the musicians feel nervous. Only

some of them have worked in the last weeks. Because there are no street weddings during

the month of Ramadan, opportunities to play and perform are few and far between.

Usually, there are numerous weddings during the Eïd so everyone can expect to go back

home with some money in his pocket (between 5 and 30 US dollars according to the

instrument played and to the circumstances).[1] But now, it is six o'clock in the afternoon

and no one has been hired in advance to perform at a wedding tonight. Morsi, the singer,

keeps pacing, traversing the same hundred steps in his very tight costume and his new

haircut. He is ready to go entertain at any wedding feast in Cairo. Mahmud, the urg

player (electric piano) is getting nervous and he calls out to Morsi, "If you get anything,

I'm with you." But by nightfall, anxiety lifts among the musician's cafés of Muhammad

Ali Street, minibuses and taxis fills the street, and musicians disperse throughout Cairo's

neighborhoods to entertain at wedding feasts.

The "suq al-Musiqiyyin" (the musicians' market) in Cairo refers to the social

space of popular-class (sha'bi) urban music, the live music played at weddings but also at

mulids (sufi saint's festival). This is a vernacular genre that is defined in a distinctive

realm of musical training, social affiliations, and professional practices. These musicians

of the suq have developed a specific urban subculture concentrated in a few cafés of

Mohamed Ali Street, formerly the old prestigious center of Egyptian music during its golden age in the twentieth century. Yet, these musicians are now quite stigmatized by the rest of Cairo inhabitants as a group of outsiders with very low social status. And the music they perform circulates at the "bottom" of the market through cheap audio tape sales. This artistic form is linked to an old urban culture combined with some rural musical influences dominant in the Cairo of the popular classes, in the dense neighborhoods of the old town and in newer sprawling informal districts.

This market of musicians is not only composed of specific urban places but also of a system of relationships and interactions that define it professionally, reproducing certain trades, skills and economic interests. It is also an urban culture, or subculture, anchored in urban spaces like Mohamed Ali Street, in places where the wedding ceremonies are organized, and on stages where musicians play. This world of street weddings and <u>mouleds</u> represents an "endogenous" culture developed through its own training networks and professional musical practices. These networks depend neither on the international Arabic showbiz market nor on the Egyptian government's validation which prefers to select different kinds of regional and popular music for integration into "official" Egyptian folklore. Institutions of the Ministry of Culture such as <u>Al-hay'at al-'Ama li-qusur ath-thaqafa</u>, (the National Agency of Culture Palaces) promote folklore that has been sanctioned by the state. These Culturel Palaces are found all over Egypt and employ civil servants and musicians who perform and represent local musical folklore and popular arts (music and dance).

State institutions maintain a substantial influence on the cultural destiny of popular music. Their presentation of musical styles, through controlled mass media or

cultural promotions results in the "folklorisation" of rural music and the stigmatization of urban music and of popular-class musicians in general.

It is this struggle for collective survival, recognition and markets in a spatially fragmented and class-segmented city that this chapter will discuss. How are these different urban cultures combined in the restricted space of the town where one finds "the greatest variety of subcultures, the most elaborate cultural apparatus, and a number of contrasting but interlinked modes of managing meaning (Hannerz 1992, 173-174)"? Indeed, the landscape of musical performance and promotion reflects the dynamics of urban society in Cairo, in the context of social differentiation and spatial conjunction. This chapter analyzes the changing roles of sha'bi musicians, their "subculture," and their relationship to the rest of Cairo's spaces and inhabitants; the rise of the booming cassette recording industry in the last thirty years; and the "problems" this low-scale industry raises in the national and Arab-regional public sphere of culture.

The exploration of the musical subcultures of Cairo is based on fieldwork I have been doing since the year 2000 on the musicians of Mohamed Ali Street, based in one of their rallying-point cafés, and joining them as they performed in weddings, engagements and street celebrations throughouth the capital. In order to shed light on the uncertain destinies of popular musicians in Cairo, first I will map out this space and its "publics" then I will describe the career of Mohamed Ali street musicians. Second, I will consider the place of popular-class musicians' self-organization, promotion, identity and performance in the public sphere of urban culture in order to understand the relationships of endogenous music to an official culture within the Cairo urban scene.

Street celebrations take place in Cairo's popular neighborhoods, in the ʿashwaʾiyyât (informal housing districts), the Islamic quarter, the old city of Fustat, etc. These celebrations include "artists' nights" (leilat al-fannannîn), organized as benefits for one of the musicians with financial needs, activating reciprocal relationships of obligation within the profession. Such relationships are also reinforced during other kinds of street ceremonies like weddings.

On stage, the band is usually made up of an electric organ (urg), some percussion instruments (tabla, two kinds of tambourine named riʾ and duff), a singer and one or two women dancers. Sometimes there are also an accordion and drums. The nabatchî, or master of ceremonies, is also on stage, in charge of collecting money and complimenting the donor publicly on the microphone. For the sake of the ceremony a section of the street is appropriated creating a private space in the residential community. Large red-colored and ornately patterned tapestries delimit the space reserved for the ceremony while leaving a narrow passage for the pedestrians, transfiguring the street into a festive space serving contradictory functions—as a space of transgression on the one hand (often where alcohol, marijuana and scantily-clad women dancerscirculate) and, on the other hand, as a space where the deepest social and community norms are reproduced.

Image 1: Two Dancers and a Band from Mohamed Ali Street on Stage at a Street Wedding

The Reference Point of Mohamed Ali Street

Mohamed Ali Street today is the reference point place for popular-class musicians performing in these weddings. Until the 1970s, the street was the center for all musicians, including of classiest ones. Nineteenth-century initiatives infused the core of

the old Cairene neighborhoods with a dominating form of modernist urban rationalism, one visible until today in the design of many of downtown Cairo's streets and public space. The plans for the urban development of the city drawn in the middle of the nineteenth century, under the reign of independence-minded Ottoman Pasha Muhammad Ali, included breaking open new avenues and widening older streets, to construct a new diagonal vector, "like a surgical incision through the densely packed residential areas between Azbakîyah and the citadel" (Abu-Lughod 1971, 96).

Muhammad Ali Street was to be located between the mosque of Hassan Sultan and the Al-Rifa'î Zaouïa and the park-cemeteries of Azbakiya and Munâsira (Mubarak, 1980, 247). Muhammad Ali seized the grounds, demolished the existing buildings, and moved the debris and human remains towards other cemeteries (Imam Shâfi'î's in particular). However, the two cemeteries kept being used until the last years of his reign (1805-1848) since the building of the street was interrupted for a time. The street was completed in 1873 under the era of the Khedive Ismâ'îl (1864-1879). Mohamed Ali Street became a two-kilometer avenue that bisected older Islamic Cairo, symbolizing the reforming, penetrative will of the rulers and his aggressive embrace of modern urbanism. It was one more of the monumental public works of the Khedive, who strove to make his city a second Paris by building a new downtown zone, renaming the central district "Isma'iliyya" to bring glory to his name (Arnaud 1997, 173; Abu-Lughod, 1971, 100-112).

> [Mohamed Ali Street] was considerably wider than al Sikkah al-Jadida and unlike that prototype, was provided with wide sidewalks, shaded in part by trees and in other sections by the arcades of buildings that were swiftly built to line it. Gaslights were installed along the entire length of the road which, being the pride and joy of the monarch, was compulsively swept thrice daily to keep it

immaculate. The dream of Muhammad Ali was thus finally realized (Abu-Lughod 1971, 113).

In the new urban configuration, the street was a major axis plowing through the old city, connecting the Citadel (the residence of the Egypt's viceroy, rulers of the country in the Ottoman era) to the Abdin Palace (the new military and administrative center), and the new cosmopolitan park and leisure zone of Azbakiya.

The reforms which took place in the second part of the nineteenth century in Egypt also influenced music and its norms. The bandstands of the new gardens of Azbakiya were used by Ottoman musicians throughout the century, invited by the members of the Khedive family and by Sufi brotherhoods (Lagrange, 1996, 70). An elite set of "court musicians" centered on the palace of Abdin whose most famous representative was the singer and compositor Abduh Al-Hamûlî from Tanta. European music was at that time well represented in Cairo, including military bands and the orchestra of the Cairo Opera House inaugurated in 1869.

Egyptian music gradually acquired musicological autonomy infused with a specific spirit from mixing Turkish, local Arab, and European cultures. Al-Hamûlî traveled to Istanbul with the Khedive court and brought back to Egypt musical innovations and integrated them into the old Arabic local context. And "music was affected by change dictated by social conditions" (Vigreux 1991, 58).

By the start of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, musicians and string-instrument workshops settled in Mohamed Ali Street. Musicians gathered in cafés according to the type of instruments they played and their music style. Cafes were located in this place that symbolized the power of the Khedive and enabled proximity to the European town (Isma'iliyya) and its new cultural focal points (the opera house, cabarets,

and the bandstands of Azbakiya). This privileged relationship between urban spaces and artistic practices throughout history have made Mohamed Ali Street not only an emblem of Egyptian music and an artistic center with influence throughout the Arabic-speaking world, but it had also for a time became a prestigious space in downtown Cairo.

Image 2: Sa'ad as-Sawâ' Café on Mohamed Ali Street

Musicians' cafes were initially the urban crossroads from which the musical and professional norms of the time were disseminated. Musicians from Upper Egypt (the poorer areas of the southern Nile valley) and the Delta (agricultural region north of Cairo) who were launching their careers in Cairo had to frequent these cafés to establish their reputations and win recognition from their peers. The cafes are public spaces, open to all men. As one customer explained to me: "Mohamed Ali Street does not have doors. There are cafés which welcome anyone who can afford to pay for a cup of tea." However, one still has to be recognized by others to begin a career as a wedding musician. The newcomer must become a regular visitor to the café and a figure of the group thanks to his talent and his adaptability. Both immigrants and newcomers had to become regulars in one of the cafés and gain the respect of older musicians, allowing them to integrate into the profession and begin their careers in the different musical venues in Cairo. A musician had to become a <u>sâhib kursî</u> (a chair owner), someone who occupied a place in the café regularly and legitimately, with the consent of others musicians. For nearly a century Mohamed Ali Street was the gateway to the Egyptian capital and to its greater work opportunities for aspiring musicians coming from Cairo, Egypt and even other Arabic countries (Puig 2001).

Image 3: A Musician's "Chair" in Halawithum café, Mohamed Ali Street

A witness to the history of the cafés explains:

In this café everybody can sit: he occupies a chair (<u>sahib kursî</u>), he occupies a space. He will become somebody who has a 'name,' somebody 'famous,' known. When I want a qanûn player [zither family], I say I want so-and-so. Like this he occupies a chair, he gets a reputation. It is similar to the sheikhs who taught in al-Azhar in the past who always settled with his students next to the same column, and were known as the <u>sahib 'amûd</u> [owner of the column]. Who is the best qanûn player? This man. Who is the best 'ud player? This one. These men occupy a chair, they get a name thanks to their talent and their technique (Sayyid, interview with the author, Halawithum Café 2000).

However, since the 1970's the vocation of the street has changed. It has been marginalized in the subjective hierarchy of city places as well within the musician's community. The street has lost its centrality and renowned musicians have begun to congregate and manage their careers in other more attractive places. To sum it up: "The heritage of the 1970s—that is, the end of the monopoly of the Mohamed Ali Street performers and their growing individualization, combined with the recent economic recession—has affected the entertainment market in several ways" (Van Nieuwkerk 1995, 57).

The marginalisation of the street has not benefited one other area in particular. The less geographically concentrated and distinctive new spatial organization of the music industry in town reflects the diversity of aesthetic styles and artistic waves that also arose in the 1970s. The sprawling urban recomposition of Cairo and the increased mobility of all classes has also influenced the musicalspaces in the town. These urban changes are accompanied by a renewing of centralities and a poly-localisation of cultural practices.

Along Mohamed Ali street these days, there are only the "lowest" ranks of popular-class musicians who perform in weddings and mulids in a few cafés and workshops that manufacture and sell traditional musical instruments like the 'ud (Arabic lute) or percussion instruments. One can also find workshops where tailors stitch the belly dancers' costumes. Some belly-dancers live in hotels around the street and wait for evening engagements in weddings or cabarets.[2] It is not considered proper for females, even belly dancers, to hang out in the cafes which are still predominantly gendered as male spaces.

This destiny of Mohamed Ali Street reflects the rise and fall of the 19th-century European urban center founded by Isma'il Pasha, grandson of Mohamed Ali. The prestige of the street and its surroundings had declined by the end of the twentieth century, as did the whole of the "Belle Epoque" downtown center which is now frequented by the popular urban classes during festive moments [See El Kadi and Elkerdany in this volume for further analysis of the heritage of the "Belle Epolque" downtown area and recent efforts to revive it.]

Furniture sellers and mechanics' workshops are gradually replacing musical spaces, but there is still a small but dynamic music market. Wedding party promoters, cabaret owners or impresarios can go there to find musicians. On the typical nights for weddings (mainly Thursdays and Sundays), Mohamed Ali street is a lively and vibrant place, combining the varied new commercial activities with scenes of musicians leaving the cafés for parties in Cairo's neighborhoods. These cafés are the heart of what musicians call suq al-musiqiyyîn, a gathering place, a center for maintaining the musical

traditions for weddings, and a space for economic transactions. As singer Hakim declared:

> I didn't earn any money [in Mohamed Ali Street], but I learned a lot just by dealing with musicians. Even today, I always say that the musician who never worked on Mohamed Ali is not a musician, and I cannot trust them to stand behind me. Anyone who has not tried playing on the streets is no good. Mohamed Ali Street is the ultimate academy (Wahish 2002).

In spite of Hakim's assertions, street cafés are no longer the prerequisite gateway to success. Apart from some exceptions like the singer Hakim, the street leads to a dead-end for most musical careers and appears to have lost all of its cosmopolitan ambiance. In the earlier period, local residents and the artistic elite of the country and larger region, met in these cafes and interacted with each other, but today, the clientele of Mohamed Ali's cafés has narrowed down to a local clientele and the street has lost its more cosmopolitan nature. The street is the center of the awâlim , a pejorative word which now refers to groups of musicians and dancers that perform in street weddings. Nowadays, the street is identified with the "slums" of Cairo and its inhabitants.

The market for musicians has shifted and now the urban focal-point of cosmopolitan Arab music and dance performance has relocated across the Nile to the river-side hotels as well as to the cabarets of Pyramids Roads with an audience made up mostly of Gulf and Saudi Arabs (K.E. Zirbel 2000, 126). [See Abaza and Elsheshtawy chapters in this volume for further analysis fo the ways in which Gulf financial flows and consumptive styles have been influencing Cairo.] Older musicians have recently developed nostalgia about the glorious past of the street:

> For approximately thirty years, Mohamed Ali Street at night was completely different that it is now. It had an aspect of 'carnival.' You found musicians smoking, their shoes shining. They were astonishing characters which made

people happy. I liked to go down to look at them and I aspired to become one of them (Ahmed, interview with the author, Darb al-Ahmar 2000).

Grounding carnival-style play in regularized vernacular institutions, Mohamed Ali cafés serve as sites of professionalization and masculine sociability deeply-rooted in the urban landscape, and resemble the artisanal guilds of other professions. In this profession, men interact with women due to the nature of their craft. Musicians often work with female belly dancers or singers and thus remake some of the norms of gender segregation in public and work spaces. This gender-mixing also gives their entire profession and avocation a slightly racy or sexually provocative reputation

Image 4: Halawithum Café on Mohamed Ali Street

Image 5: Ahmad Wahdan, singer and 'ud player who was trained on Mohamed Ali Street

The Career of a Mohamed Ali Street Musician

Observing dance musicians in Chicago, Howard Becker notes that: "the antagonistic relationship between musicians and outsiders shapes the culture of the musician and likewise produces the major contingencies and crisis points in his career" (1997, 102). First, it is noticed that musicians in Chicago and also in Cairo develop a strong consciousness of group specificity and solidarity and thus feel that they are a distinct group. They are very much in demand for entertaining at wedding parties and other functions, but people have mixed feelings about them. On one hand, they feel jealous of them, because of the "freedom" they reputedly enjoy, and, on the other they

despise them because of their supposedly licentious way of life. "Though their activities are formally within the law, their culture and way of life are sufficiently bizarre and unconventional for them to be labeled as outsiders by more conventional members of the community" (Becker 1997, 79).

Due to the lack of valorization of this profession, most families try to stop young men who embark on this type of musical career. Many musicians join the "sûq al-Musiqiyyîn" after they fail in school and then begin to hang out in these cafés. An older musician sponsors the novice and teaches him his skills; and then the novice gets "on-the-job training" at his teacher's performances at weddings and mûlids. This training does not highlight musical theory but trains the ear by practice and experience.

They learn a large repertory which ranges from the highly classical songs of Umm Kalthum or Abdel Wahab to the lastest pop or sha'abi hits. At street weddings, music is played in an entirely different way from the classical tradition to showcase the greetings and compliments that the nabatchî' (master of ceremonies) directs towards the guests. The music is punctuated by frequent interruptions, sound saturation, echo effects, and frequent improvisation praising the financial generosity of the guests from the master of ceremonies. This music is quiet different than the zikr [spiritial chanting of the name of God] found in local mulids [see Madoeuf in this volume]. Nevertheless, beside the sheikh's tents at mulid celebrations, one will find several places where musicians perform urban popular music (cafés, tents, "theatro", etc.).

In mainstream culture, the marginal and even shameful reputation of these musicians is reflected in pejorative colloquial Arabic words such as mazikatî (ill-trained musician as opposed to musiqar, maestro, or highly-trained musician) or alâtî

(instrumentalist, synonym of cunning, craftiness). These connotations of alâtî comes from the resourcefulness of popular musicians who manage to make a living despite numerous problems they have to overcome. From a more historical perspective, this meaning refers to the official distinctions enforced between alâtî and "modernist musicians." The Congress of Cairo on Arab Music held in 1932 highlighted this opposition between members of the Institute of Arab Music founded in 1923 and the alâtîyyas. The institute posed as reformers, criticizing alâtîyyas' ignorance and "backward" musical practices based on orality that they claimed caused musical disorder. Nevertheless, Alâtîyyas remain members of the musician's union founded in 1920. Philippe Vigreux represents this contrast by a series of oppositions: trade union (syndicate) vs. institute; common people vs. Beys, Pashas, and Aristocrats; amateurs vs. professionals; alatiyyas vs. musiqiyyin; "traditional"musician.vs. modern musicians; space of immorality vs. space of morality; attachment to an Eastern legacy (Persian then Ottoman) vs. the purified and paradoxically classicized and modernized "Arab music" (1992, 232).

The evolution of the term 'awâlim, which refers to popular-class musicians and dancers, highlights the stigmatization. First of all, 'awâlim is the plural of 'âlima, "erudite." It comes from the name of female singers and dancers who performed only for women in the Ottoman aristocratic households (Rodinson 1975). At the time, because they played in the segregated world of women, they enjoyed a respectable artistic and social reputation during Ottoman rule (Ghunaym, 1998, 9). Yet, when the French invaded Egypt in 1798 they translated 'âlima into French as almée, meaning "woman singer and dancer from Orient." Flaubert popularized "Almée" in his famous Egyptian travel story but he confused 'alîma with ghawâzî, a quite distinct type of female artist

performing lascivious dances in front of men and singing with a mixed band, thus transgressing prevailing norms of gender segregation.

According to Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "the hayday of the ‘awâlim was at the beginnning of this century" (1995, 49). At this time perfomers and ‘awâlim were in great demand because many new entertainment places appeared in Cairo under the influence of a European model such as café-concerts and cabarets, while there were still many opportunities to play music at festive occasions like weddings.

But, in the present context, the word ‘awâlim refers very derogatively to musicians and belly-dancers performing in street weddings (afrah baladi). As an example, when I interviewed Hasan Abu Sa'ud, the president of the musician's union, he complained about an article I wrote in Arabic entitled "Cairo, Capital of the ‘Awâlim" arguing that it was like identifying Paris with Pigalle! However, some musicians in Mohamed Ali Street play with the meanings of the words and connect ‘awâlim not to ‘âlima (erudite) but to ‘âlam (pl. ‘awâlim) meaning "world." The plural of both words sound the same in Egyptian Arabic; they have the same spelling with different meanings (‘awâlim: erudite people and ‘awâlim: worlds). Musicians therefore argue that the word ‘awâlim could refer not to the dubious milieu of poplar musicians and female dancers but to the different (social) worlds they enter, integrate and confront when they go to entertain in Cairo's neighborhoods. Because they perform for many different social milieus they consider themselves privileged witnesses of urban diversity. Their ability to perform for very different audiences is frequently celebrated by the professionals of Mohamed Ali Street. Their musical dexterity and social sensitivity—"to read" any audience and what it wants—is seen as essential to their trade.

I work everywhere, in popular neighborhoods, informal housing areas, slums , fashionable districts, with robbers, pickpockets, 'beys [aristocrats],' doctors, and engineers. My work enables me to go everywhere and I have to interact with all these people. If it is a high-class audience, I raise my level to be able to speak with them. Among the lower class, I diminish completely my level to be able to interact with them…The job requires me to adapt my musical style to the audience. It's not judicious to perform 'Rubba'iyyât d'al-Khayyam' [sung by Umm Kulthum] or Abdel Wahab songs in front of people with very plebian cultural tastes. They will not understand what I'm playing. So, I go down to their level, and I play rubbish (Midhat, Interview with the author, Darb al-Ahmar, 2002).

Ethno-musicologists like Martin Stokes recognize the importance of this cultural and musical dexterity for musicians:

Musicians often live in conspicuously trans-local cultural worlds. They travel; their social skills are those of people capable of addressing varied and heterogeneous groups, and their value in a locality is often perceived to be precisely their ability to transcend the cultural boundaries of that locality (1997, 98).

Mohamed Ali Street musicians share this vision. Moreover, they consider the ability to move in different "worlds" a specific quality of a good Mohamed Ali musician, a quality that other local musicians that are not from the street, as well as classically-trained ones, do not possess because they are not as competent and their academic training keeps them from improvising and adapting to their audience. Even if some of them have had formal musical training in a school (typically the Institute of Arabic Music), musicians of Mohamed Ali Street do not consider themselves "acadîmî." In the Egyptian context, this word signifies the legitimate official circuit of musical training and performing in state musical institutions (like the Cairo Opera Orchestra). Popular musicians are the ones who take themselves among the people at feasts, weddings and mûlids, while the public would have to leave their worlds and travel into more official or exclusive spaces and adopt proper behaviors in order to hear "acadîmî" musicians.

I go to a lot of places, I'm sâhib kursî on Mohamed Ali Street. There are musicians performing music inside the borders of their neighborhood, but they never leave it. They are not very good artists and musicians. They are not able to entertain at a party at the Sheraton Hotel or in Aswan or in a mûlid or in a place outside of their neighborhood. They can just play music at street weddings where they live. That is all. Because they know what neighborhood inhabitants like, they are the local musicians. But those from Mohamed Ali Street, the one who is associated with street cafés, is ready in the morning when leaving his home to go to Alexandria, Aswan, Isma'iliyya, Luxor, the Sheraton Hotel, a mûlid, a puppet show, or a birthday party. He can manage all situations (Ahmad, interview with the author, Darb al-Ahmar, 2002).

Yet, wedding musicians who perform in wedding processions are still considered lower-status professionals than other musicians in Egypt and very few of them are members of the musician's syndicate, especially those who play only in their immediate neighborhoods. Therefore, Mohamed Ali Street musicians adopt professional strategies to improve their reputations and to distinguish themselves from even those lower on the professional totem pole. In densely-populated neighborhoods, where one's reputation is critical to one's moral authority and even economic position, musicians are rightly concerned about maintaining their reputations (Puig 2003).[3] For instance, a drummer confided: "How could my son say at school that his father is a tabla player (drummer) on Mohamed Ali Street? That wouldn't do; it's shameful" (Mahmoud, interview with the author, Darb al-Ahmar, 2002). Many would argue that a musical career on Mohamed Ali street is antithetical to family life and some musicians give up their careers when they start a family if they have another career opportunity. For others, they simply try to avoid performing in their own neighborhood, in fear of diminishing their social capital.

There are, however, a few successful careers available to those few musicians who regularly perform in prestigious places such as Ramadan concerts or embassy parties. If musicians escape from street weddings, they will try to never play at them

again because it would mean a loss of prestige. Each one carefully guards his prestige (brestij) and strategizes to distinguish himself from his colleagues and prove his excellence. Like numerous neo-mawwal singers, Ahmad Adawiyya began his career on Mohamed Ali Street. These singers are closely related to the milieu of Mohamed Ali musicians. Transcending anonymity, they become a name on a tape and retain a degree of fame in the wedding market, becoming labelled a nigm shubbâk (a star of the ticket booth). If they get enough offers, they employ a business manager settled in a fancy office, located in a district better than the Mohamed Ali Street, to promote their career. The market of anonymous musicians (suq' al-musiqiyyîn) waiting for hypothetical engagements is quite different than the market for more famous singers who have well-known agents. Few musicians and singers of Mohamed Ali have significant financial success unless they can have a hit on the cheap sha'abî cassette tapes that are produced locally and make the professional leap to perform in more prestigious places.

Hugely popular singer Hakim is an emblematic pioneer of this trajectory thanks to his ability to break out of the "microbus circuit" (so-called because these low budget cassettes are played in the microbuses that ply the transportation routes between poor neighborhoods). His success is due to his ability to mix romantic sentiment with sha'abî tradition by singing "neo-mawaal," a modern music elaborated from improvised popular songs sung particularly at weddings mislabelled "sha'abi" in Word Music: The Rough Guide (Lodge 1994) and in The dictionnaire thématique des musiques du monde (Bours, 2002). According to Michael Frishkopf, "this style is the musical response to rapid ruralization of the cities: low-brow, appealing to inhabitants of popular districts. Performers such as Ahmad 'Adawiyya, Hasan al-Asmar, and 'Abdu al-Iskandarani

updated older traditions of mawwal and zagal (genres of folk song), and risqué wedding songs, by modernizing the instrumentation and addressing urban life without losing a folk feel, full of improvisation and flexible interaction" (2002, 10). In today's Egypt, Hakim performs at five-star luxury hotel wedding receptions, appears on television and in big concerts with international stars like the English singer Sting. Popular cassettes of "néo-mawaal" are a commercial success although their stars performed first at street parties, weddings, and mûlids (Belleface and Puig 2003). The increased popularity of audio tapes in the last thirty years has lead in Egypt as well as in India to the emergence of huge alternative popular "cassette culture" (Manuel 1993).

For a long time, Mohamed Ali Street was the gathering place of prestigious musicians. Those who are now in the street try to draw upon their nostalgic history to increase the prestige of their profession. But according to these musicians, unfortunately "Egyptians like music and dislike musicians" (Ahmad, Darb al-Ahmar, 2000). These words remind us of Dwight Reynolds' comment about the epic songs of the Egyptian Nile Delta: "a respected art form transmitted by disrespected performers" (1989). Nevertheless the epic tradition is probably much better integrated into the official culture as a result of rural music folklorization than because of popular urban music. Indeed the relationship between the world of music and the public sphere of culture in Egypt is constantly changing.

The Public Sphere of Culture and Illegitimate Sha'bî Music

The musicians' position in the music world depends on the musical genre they play. Public sentiment, as well as acceptance and tolerance of these genres by the media

and the state cultural apparatus highlights debates within contemporary urban society. This is best understood by first examining the division and fragmentation that exists among different genres and social groups inside the world of Egyptian music. In the last thirty years, there has been a relative diversification of the artistic range of modern Egyptian music. Musical production is today dominated by two major currents: slick sentimental studio-produced pop songs, and popular-class (sha'abî) neo-mawwal urban music. The first includes a wide variety of pop music, from dance hits to ballads, heard on Egyptian radio and sung by stars like Amr Diab, Mustafa Qamar, Ihab Tawfiq, and Hani Shaker. Neo-mawwal music, banned from the airwaves because of its so-called vulgarity is best known these days through its rising star, the highly publicized Shaabân Abd al-Rehîm. Designed for a large audience in the Arab world, the sentimental pop form of Egyptian music takes few risks in its originality, its lyrics or its music. Composers mix basic oriental rhythms with light melodies taken from diverse sources such as simplified Eastern melodic modes, Spanish or Latin-based pentatonic, and Nubian traditions, among others (Frishkopf 2002). The marketing of pop Egyptian music is mainly directed to the Gulf and the Levant, quite the opposite for North African singers such as Cheb Mami and Cheb Khaled, which is marketed for Europe.

The Cairo-centered Arab-region showbiz industry broadcasts its pop music through the state-controlled as well as private satellite media and revolves around the launching and replay of all-important high-fashion music videos. [See Sadek in this volume for a discussion of the links between Cairo's music industry and the larger region.] Meanwhile the street music and neo-mawwal forms of the popular classes have developed their own networks and media of distribution. Considered illegitimate by the

guardians of normative culture, neo-mawwal finds its audience through the huge market

of cheap audio cassettes and is heard in non-institutional public spaces such as

microbuses, kiosks, and a wide range of street parties. Because this kind of music finds

no official support, it does not mean however that its practitioners lack media attention.

Although lately this attention has been largely negative since much of the media is hostile

to this musical genre and issues polemics against it, particularly on cultural grounds.

Focused on the social legitimacy of popular music, these polemics reflect the tensions of

a strongly hierarchical urban society. Shaabân Abdel Rahim who has enjoyed stunning

success for a few years is probably the most representative singer of this musical current.

In 2000, he sold a million and a half audio tapes equal to the sales of Amr Diab, the

biggest "respectable" Egyptian pop music star.

Image 6: Sha'aban Abd al-Rehim, the Star of Neo-Mawwal, whose career began on Mohamed Ali Street

Like Ahmad Adawiyya for instance, who was the first successful musician in this

style, Shaabân belongs to the core of urban popular singers. They learned their art twenty

or thirty years ago at street weddings and mûlids. Most of them come from Mohamed Ali

Street and have set an example for others. They never studied music academically as

Ahmad Adawiya pointed out to Al-Ahram Weekly newspaper: "It is my singing

experience in mûlids and tents that founded my entire career. My own talent, combined

with such a life, has qualified me for the equivalent of a PhD in music. I never studied

music, except through feeling, listening and a tough life" (El-Kashef 2001). Leading a

tough life is an asset for popular musicians. Shaabân used to work at a laundry

(makwagî). "He personifies the honor of the makwagî" an admirer told me one day at the

Halawithum café on Mohamed Ali Street. Unskilled workers, craftsmen, and young

unemployed men and women can identify with the lyrics of his songs. In his songs, he is

a chronicler of daily life evoking images of life in popular quarters, a recent disaster like

the crash of the EgyptAir plane, the housing crisis, or the war in Iraq.[4] His songs are an

open appeal to lower-class sensibilities as well as to a sense of place, deeply-rooted in the

inhabitants' consciousness. Indeed as with other singers of this trend, he often mentions

very emblematic places, within Cairo's popular neighborhoods. Although he reflects

shared meanings and produces them in some respects, Shaaban is unacceptable to the

educated elite. For the cogniscenti or simple detractors, his music is meaningless:

"Shaaban … is to Egyptian pop culture…an exercise in bad taste" according to journalist

Mohamed El-Assyouti (2001). Media critics are completely insensitive to the inhabitants

of the poor quarters and oblivious to the social irony of his lyrics. In the same way,

Sakina Fouad, an Al-Ahram jounalist asked "how can we build culture in Egypt in the

presence of the likes of Shaaban Abdel Rahim" demanding official intervention "to put

an end to this farce" (Mursi 2001).

Shaabân infuses his mawwal with social and political content. He layers his lyrics

over chords and melodies on the electric piano—the characteristic instrument of wedding

music which gradually replaced the accordion in the 1970s. The content of his music is

fitting of a genre of nationalistic protest music born in the seventies. However, such

content is inoffensive for Arabic states because it mainly contains denunciations of Israel

and support for the Arab leaders (bakrah Isra'il u Shumun u Ariel Sharun u bahib Amr

Moussa [I hate Israel and Shimon [Peres] and Ariel Sharon and I love Amr Moussa,[the

former Foreign Minister of Egypt and Head of the Arab League]). His music keeps alive

the spirit of Arab-nationalist protest but does not directly challenge the Egyptian state, except perhaps by implied sarcasm. Thus, Shaabân's tapes are not banned although some other songs of his were banned in the early1990s. In his song "Kadab ya greisha" (Kheisha, You Liar!), he celebrated and mocked the solidarity of the musicians' social world, full of manual workers (car painters, barbers, wall painters). A singer quoted in the song [who was referred to as a manual worker] complained to censor Hamdi Surour who imposed a ban on Shaaban's music (El-Assyouti 2001). It is not uncommon for the government to ban music. For example, Ahmad Fuad Nigm's poetry critiqued controversial and political, social and cultural issues in the 1970s and 1980s and his views reached a large audience when the very popular and revered Sheikh Imam sang and recorded his poems in spite of official censorship.

From Urban Music to Popular Society

Contemporary urban music has developed with the growth of the city. It accompanied urbanization as in other towns in the world: "The rise of urban popular music is thus a reflection and a product of the emergence of vast new urban societies that scarcely existed a century ago" (Manuel 1988, 16). This music is strongly linked to these neighborhoods as we have seen with the evocation of music centers such as Mohamed Ali Street and at the urban-street settings of popular-class weddings. In Cairo as well as in India and in numerous cultures worldwide:

> One of the remarkable features of the evolution of popular music is its association...with an unassimilated, disenfranchised, socially marginalized class… They share a common status on or beyond the periphery of stable, 'respectable' society—the economically and socially assimilated working and middle classes (Manuel 1988, 18).

Accordingly, in many respects, cultural elites and others who criticize and deplore the genre of urban popular music deepen the stigmatization of the people who enjoy and support this musical genre: the inhabitants of vast lower class neighborhoods, especially informal ones [see Eric Denis in this volume for a discussion of informal housing neighborhoods and their history in Cairo]. In other words, neither the favorite music of residents in these areas—nor even the residents themselves—are considered legitimate in the eyes of middle and upper class Caireans. Walter Ambrust has suggested that his Egyptian friends "frequently recommended al-Ataba (just next to Mohamed Ali Street) as a place to buy things cheap; the media often denounces it as a wild place where stolen goods are fenced and bad taste runs rampant" (2001, 2). In the same way, Shaabân in one of his songs (habattal as-sagayyîr) speaks about Wikkalat al-Balah, a popular clothing market next to al-Ataba often evoked in the media as a center of bad taste.

The condemnation of this music followed the explosion in cheap cassette tapes in the 1970s. Ambrust notes that Ahmad Adawiyya "is scorned by the official media as hopelessly vulgar" (2001, 2). In addition, when Shaabân was frequently invited to perform on TV during Ramadan in 2001 intellectuals and politicians met at the Media Committee of Parliament and unanimously condemned his appearances on widely watched TV shows during Ramadan, explaining that he would have a bad influence on Egyptian youth. Abdel Salem Abdel Ghaffar, Director of the Media Committee argued to journalist Muhammed Mursi that Shaabân "does not represent any artistic or cultural value" (Mursi 2001). In the same article, Naguib Surour, the censor of broadcast media justified the ban on Shaabân songs "to preserve good taste and fine arts" and added that

on the other hand he has "no authority over programs on television in order to ban his appearance."

In the debate about the cultural legitimacy of sha'bi music, we find some public stars such as Adel Imam supporting Shaabân. Egyptian cinema is mainly a popular one and Adel Imam is its emblematic actor. Moreover, Shaabân Abd al-Rehîm has done some cameo appearances on cinema screens like in a recent social satire: "Muwâtin wa mukhbar wa harâmî" (A Citizen, a Detective and a Thief) where he played the thief who moonlighted as a singer at wedding parties in Cairo's popular neighborhoods.

However, in mainstream culture, sha'bi singers are considered "backward" or traditional, in fact the opposite of modernity. The same critique, of course, is launched against the people who love their music: the popular classes or sha'b. A poster sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and entitled "A Hundred Years of Enlightenment" caricatures twenty-three assorted Egyptian artists and intellectuals, plus a few symbols of the people: "these were the state-approved icons of authentic Egyptian modernity, the short list of cultural heroes with whom all Egyptians who had been through the educational system should be familiar" (Ambrust, 2001, 192).

According to the same author, the modernism portrayed in the poster "makes perfect sense to Egyptian nationalists trying to establish the ideological underpinnings of a state that can compete with Europe without being European" (2001, 194). In this nationalist project, linked to a promotion of rationally ordered progress, popular urban culture is denigrated and abused. Its messages are too far removed from "the view of unbroken modernist evolution" (Ambrust, 2001, 194). The same criticism is voiced about the lower classes who are accused of not submitting to the smoothly mobile, harmonious,

and faceless ideal-model of urban modernist order. This modernist view of the urban order seems unpracticed in real life. By contrast, the popular crowd's celebratory mass-frequenting of Cairo's downtown streets during Ramadan nights does not correspond to the modern urban order that the Cairo Governor wants to promote in the city center. This order goes back to the notion of the capitalist town as a machine for free, smooth circulation, identified with Paris in the nineteenth century. In order to become modern, Cairo authorities are trying to regulate chaotic traffic, to forbid stalls that encroach upon public thoroughfares, public gatherings, and the endless bargaining in the market. The famous poem of Byram at-Tunissi, a renowned colloquial Egyptian poet of the twentieth century, "Hatgann" describes in a satiric but affective way "the defective civilities" in Cairo in comparison to modern behavior in London and Paris [see Vincent Battesti in this volume for a discussion about social practices in public spaces like the Cairo Zoo].[5] Cairo authorities still reproach the inhabitants for their anarchic manner of consumption which makes use of public space. Conversely, popular music like that of Shaabân, claims a presence for urban popular society not only in the public space of communication but also in the public spheres of traffic circulation as his songs are noisily aired in microbuses and roadside kiosks.[6] Downtown streets and public spaces are typically filled with Cairo's popular classes, particularly as they stroll and shop when the stores are open late during Ramadan. Yet, like their "vulgar" songs, the middle and upper classes consider these throngs vulgar and somewhat threatening so they have begun to retreat to more protected spaces like malls, clubs, and gated communities with their family entertainment [see Abaza, de Koning, Elsheshtawy, and Denis in this volume for these new construcitons of upper-middle class consumerism.][7] This contestation within the public

sphere around music as well as the use of public spaces reflects tension between "official" and "endogenous" versions of Egyptian culture.

Conclusion

Midhat, an electric organ player performing at street weddings revealed to me during an interview that he was playing the "music of the people" like Ahmad Adawiyya had done. He argued that this kind of music was different from music nowadays. "These new sha'bi songs have meaningless lyrics and are very poor musically." In the same way, Hassan Abu Sa' ud, composer of numerous Adawiyya hits in the seventies and now President of the Musicians Union, distinguishes his musical style that he calls "Egyptian pop" from mawwal or "true" sha'abi music, while the local mass media do not make such subtle distinctions (Interview, Musician's Syndicate, 2004). Seeking social legitimacy and respectability, wedding musicians make a distinction between musical currents and separate the old genre of sha'bi music from the new genre of Shaaban's music. Thus, they redefine musical styles and their boundaries in order to build strategies of legitimation in a music world straining under the pressure of official validation. The issue at stake for these musicians is how to find and transfer skills acquired in an illegitimate social world (street weddings, mulids, or the sha'bi audio tape market) and access the resources and publics of Cairo's other "worlds." Performers in the endogenous culture have different goals and strategies and some of them try to find validation by integrating their contributions and sensibilities with official and legitimized genres.

French Sociologist Alain Battegay wrote about what he calls micro-cultures which is quite similar to my notion of endogenous cultures: "unlike official cultures they always build and 'un-build,' and even if some of them can last for a relatively long time, they are always at risk of dispersion and disappearance" (2000, 246). Popular-class, vernacular "street" Egyptian music always runs such a risk of dispersion and disappearance, particularly because it depends primarily on cassettes and stages at wedding parties as a broadcast medium. This music is repudiated by educated people and state cultural institutions and this stigmatization mirrors the denigration of the "backward" manners of Cairo's popular classes and neighborhoods themselves. Official state and corporate cultural establishments mistrust these classes and do not want to share the public sphere with them. They fear the political potential of this music, in spite of the assumed political allegiance of singers like Shaabân Abdal-Rehîm. They are not really concerned about the lyrics of his songs but the way in which his popularity reinforces the cultural presence of the urban masses in the public sphere. From this perspective culture works to "invest aesthetics with ethics" (Martin, 2000, 179). In other words, music can symbolize an aspiration to social recognition through cultural expression. The same aspiration can be heard in many poor or informal housing areas, where the people often say, with a critique of government policy and the reigning economic paradigm implicitly understood, "<u>ayzîn na'ish bi-karama</u>" (we want to live with dignity). And in pursuit of dignity, pleasure and celebration, Cairo's 'awâlim will continue to cross between and articulate together Cairo's divergent worlds.

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[1] This is for musicians playing at street wedding feasts. But a big star like Egyptian pop star Amr Diab can earn up to 10,000 dollars in a wedding.

[2] For a specific discussion about female singers and dancers, see Karin Van Nieuwkerk 1995.

[3] Popular neighborhoods are "a major place of socialization and normative regulation. They represent a space of moral and social control of some over others, the proximity (physical density like cultural, economic and social proximity) is the privileged operator of this relation between spatial and social dimensions" (Puig, 2003, 150-151).

[4] His lyricist is Khalil Mohamed, an Arabic teacher.

[5] Hatgann yirit ya khuena maruhtish London walla Baris: "I'm going mad, Oh my brothers, I would like never go to London nor Paris" (Puig ForthcomingA).

[6] French urban sociologist Isaac Joseph explains that the public space of communication (discursive space) and the public space of circulation (among anonymous people) are two dimensions, closely dependent, of public space (1998, 42).

[7] G. Gillot notes that: "In a logic of separation and refusal of making use of public space as spaces of setting the scene of the social differences, the upper classes give up public spaces to the poor."(2002, 225). So for the upper-urban classes: "the structuration of daily space is characterized by a ensemble of gated places whose protection is often problematic... So all displacement is just a shift of the private sphere from a place to another"(2002, 234).