Egypt’s Music of Protest
From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha

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The culture of protest associated with the Egyptian uprising has attracted a huge amount of media coverage—much of it, unfortunately, partial and superficial. Partial, in that it privileges hip-hop to the virtual exclusion of every other kind of nationalist and protest music sung by musicians and crowds during the 18 days of the original Tahrir Square occupation, January 24-February 11, 2011. Superficial, in that it fundamentally misapprehends the role of music in the revolt.

The emphasis on rap makes it seem that Westerners, through the export of a “Western” art form, somehow played a major role in overthrowing Husni Mubarak. This notion allows for too easy an identification between Westerners and the Tahrir revolutionaries and makes for too quick an “understanding” of their movement, as if it is all about Arab youth overthrowing the older, passé generation’s traditional and puritanical culture, in order to usher in a more tolerant, modern and US-friendly order. Western media representations of Egypt’s protest music are also misleading in that they often describe it as the “soundtrack of the revolution,” as if the tunes were a playlist on protesters’ iPods while they battled security forces or a live broadcast over a sound system behind the barricades.

The protest music at Tahrir was not a soundtrack, not a reflection, not a commentary or a report on events, but something integrally tied to and embedded within the social movement. Musicians on the square for the most part performed a repertoire that the crowds could sing along with, a body of songs that connected the artists and...
their audience to a history of struggle. Or they composed ditties on the spot, in the heat of events. The purpose of musical performance at Tahrir was to move the crowds (and the musicians themselves) into a sentimental or affective state, such as anger, mourning, nostalgia or patience, or to unify the crowds in a state that Durkheim has called “collective effervescence.” A song’s meanings therefore were not just already inherent in the lyrics and melody or in the associated memories and resonances, but they also forged in performance, at charged political moments.

**Anti-Imperial Struggle**

Take the song “Patriotic Port Said” by El Tanbura, a collective of musicians from the city of Port Said on the Suez Canal, formed by Zakariyya Ahmad in 1978. El Tanbura perform a genre of music particular to Port Said called *subbagiya*. It was developed over 150 years, dating back to when the town was first settled, when barracks and tents housed the Egyptian workers conscripted by corvée to dig the Canal. It is the product of a confluence of musical traditions—those brought by migrants from villages in the Nile Valley; those characteristic of the ports of the Red Sea; those enjoyed by Europeans who lived in the foreign quarter of the city until 1956; and those of the entertainers on the decks of ships passing through the Canal. What especially distinguishes the *subbagiya* of Port Said is the sounds of the *simsimiyya* or lyre (whose generic name is *tanbura*), an instrument played by fishermen and in coffeehouses in coastal towns throughout the Red Sea area.

El Tanbura was on Tahrir Square every day of the January-February 2011 occupation, and they performed “Patriotic Port Said” and other nationalist songs multiple times from the various stages. The song refers to the 1956 Suez war, known in Egypt as the Tripartite Aggression, when Israel, France and Great Britain attacked Egypt after President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. When war broke out on October 29, lightly armed civilians in Port Said were able to hold off the foreign invaders in house-to-house combat. Local musical groups quickly composed songs, performed on the *simsimiyya*, to commemorate the martial success. The residents of Port Said were hailed as champions of Egypt’s anti-imperialist struggle, and the *simsimiyya* came to be identified with their fight.

In the wake of the June 1967 war, after the Israeli army occupied the eastern side of the Canal, Port Said’s residents were evacuated and settled in refugee camps dispersed throughout the Nile Valley. Only after the 1973 war, when Egypt regained the eastern side of the Canal, were they returned home. During the period of the evacuation, young people from Port Said formed *simsimiyya* groups and toured the refugee camps in an effort to keep alive the memory of the city and its neighborhoods. “Patriotic Port Said” is reportedly one of the songs performed during those difficult times. The song includes the following lines:

In patriotic Port Said  
Youth of the popular resistance defended with virtue and virility  
And fought the army of occupation  
Congratulations, O Gamal

The “Gamal” referred to here is of course President Nasser, but when performed on the square in 2011, “Gamal” (which, as a noun, means “beauty”) could stand for the youth of the anti-Mubarak resistance. The song is a stirring anthem, designed to mobilize feelings of militancy and unity of a nation and people that includes all citizens, not just residents of Cairo. It served to place Port Said and its distinctive musical culture, not unfamiliar to Cairenes but very different from the traditions of the Nile Valley, within the national revolutionary culture staged on the square. It positioned the struggles at Tahrir within a longer history of Egyptian resistance, and figured Mubarak’s security forces and his *baltagiyya* (thugs) as the most recent in a series of armies of occupation.

**Revolutionary Memories**

Another song from the revolutionary repertoire is Sayyid Darwish’s “Ahu Da Illi Sar,” variously translated as “This is what happened,” “So it goes” and “This is where we’re at.” Singer and composer Darwish (1892–1923) is celebrated for having modernized Egyptian song in the early twentieth century and is especially remembered for tunes he wrote during the 1919 revolution against British occupation, as well as other songs expressing nationalist themes. (It is sometimes forgotten that the lyrics for Darwish’s songs were mainly composed by respected poet Badi’ Khayri.) Among Darwish’s most memorable nationalist compositions are “Um Ya Masri” (Rise O Egyptian) and “Biladi, Biladi” (My Country, My Country), which became Egypt’s national anthem. Another is “Salma ya Salama” (Welcome Back to Safety), a song about the million-plus Egyptians who were recruited, often by force, to assist in Britain’s war effort during World War I, many of them sent to serve outside the country. The song is all about their yearning for the homeland while abroad. In Egypt, Darwish has come to be considered an artist whose musical compositions were rooted in Egyptian “folk” sources and represented the first “figural expression of the soul of the people and its national demands.” The majority of the nationalist songs for which Darwish is remembered were in fact composed for the musical theater and performed to the backing of a European musical ensemble conducted by a Signore Casio, Darwish’s maestro. Darwish’s theater music was very Westernized, and his tunes used musical modes compatible with the piano, whose presence in his ensembles the modernist Darwish considered a necessity.
Ziad Fahmy has shown that it was Egypt's recording industry that rendered a national anthology of songs familiar to most Egyptians at the time of the 1919 revolution. 4  “Ahu Da Illi Sar” has remained in the popular repertoire in Egypt for the same reason, and it has been recorded and performed by numerous prominent Egyptian and Arab artists since it was first composed, probably around 1919. The song was apparently not composed for any of Darwish's operettas—but it sounds like it could have been. It was one of several Darwish numbers recorded and performed by Egypt’s famous revolutionary singer of the 1960s and 1970s, Sheikh Imam (d. 1995). More recently, it has been recorded by the Egyptian pop star, 'Ali al-Haggar (born 1954), whose career began in the late 1970s and is regarded as a serious artist whose recordings often deal with social and national issues. “Ahu Da Illi Sar” has also been recorded by legendary Lebanese chanteuse Fairouz, one of the Arab world’s great stars, who opened her first concert in Cairo in 1989 with it, and more recently, by her son, Ziad Rahbani. Probably the most well-known performances of “Ahu Da Illi Sar” from the days of the Egyptian uprising were by the “alternative” rock band Massar Egbari (“Compulsory Detour”), who come from Sayyid Darwish's hometown of Alexandria, and appear in the 2010 film about Alexandria's underground art scene, Microphone. One can view a very moving clip on YouTube of Massar Egbari performing “Ahu Da Illi Sar” at the al-Sawi Cultural Center in Cairo on January 10, 2011, just days before the Tahrir uprising was launched. They were playing at an event held in commemoration of the victims of the terror bombing at a Coptic church in Alexandria on December 31, 2010, which killed 21 and wounded 96. The attack was widely thought to be the work of Egyptian intelligence. It was one of the precipitants of the demonstration called on January 25 that launched the 18 days of Tahrir.

Massar Egbari performed “Ahu Da Illi Saar” at al-Sawi with a great deal of emotion. The song comes across, however, as a call to self-reflection and introspection more than a summons into the streets. The lyrics, open to a variety of readings, include the following lines:

This is what happened, this is what was
You don't have the right to blame me
The wealth of our country is not in our hands
Egypt, O mother of wonders
Let’s link hands and fight

While there is general consensus that “Ahu Da Illi Sar” is associated with revolutionary times and traditions of resistance, there is less agreement on what it means, precisely. Some Egyptians I consulted stress the line “Let’s link hands and fight” and assert that the song argues for unity and in confronting the powers that be. Others construe it as meaning, “If we were unable to do what needed to be done in the past, let’s leave aside our differences now and struggle to rebuild our country.” Others were particularly moved by the line “the wealth of our country is not in our hands.” If the nation’s riches used to be held by colonialists, in 2011 the song seemed to say, today they are in the clutches of Husni Mubarak’s kleptocracy.

Poetry of Resistance

Rami ‘Isam, a rock singer from Mansoura, was at Tahrir with his guitar from the first days of the January-February events. He is most famous for the song, “Irhal” (Leave), composed on the spot out of the slogans that the assembled mass was chanting non-stop on the square: “The people want the fall of the regime,” “He’s leaving, we aren’t leaving” and so on. ‘Isam put them to a kind of grunge acoustic guitar backing, and the song was an immediate hit at Tahrir. It quickly earned him, via YouTube, a global reputation.

Although Rami ‘Isam is frequently depicted by Western observers as heralding a new generation of Egyptian artists who have superceded stale tradition, it is clear that ‘Isam saw himself as connected to Egypt’s revolutionary cultural heritage. Another number that he was well known for on the square is “al-Gahsh Al lil-Himar” (The Foal Said to the Donkey). The song’s lyrics are attributed to Ahmad Fu’ad Nagm, the beloved poet who worked with Sheikh Imam, whose songs were also widely performed on the square. “The Foal Said to the Donkey” is a witty satire, in the form of a fable, of hereditary succession, composed at a time when Husni Mubarak was grooming his son Gamal to take over as president. The son, the foal, wants to take over the burden of pulling the cart from his father. The donkey says he is not ready:

The foal said to the donkey
Dad, hand me the cart
Dad, you’ve aged and it’s my turn now
The donkey coughed strongly, the passengers panicked
It’s not about health, son, the donkey said
Even the bridle is too big for you, son
Think and don’t be greedy or the passengers will rise up

There is some doubt as to whether the poem is really Nagm’s, but Egyptians familiar with the genre say it is certainly Nagm-like. It seems to have first appeared on various Egyptian blogs in the fall of 2010. Around that time, a lot of verse attributed to Nagm but actually penned by other poets seeking an audience by using his name started to circulate via the Internet. The name Nagm still has a revolutionary aura in Egypt, and Rami ‘Isam’s “al-Gahsh Al lil-Himar,” which cleverly mocks Mubarak and his son Gamal, trades on it as well. (When asked about this phenomenon, Nagm, who by then was in his early eighties, said it did not bother him.)

Working-Class Posse

If one were seeking an Egyptian parallel to rap music, then one’s attention should be drawn to the genre known as
Mahragan or “festival” music, which started to appear on YouTube in 2007. The music has been also called (mostly by outsiders) techno-sha’bi or electro-sha’bi. About one half of Cairo’s population lives in ‘ashwa’iyat, “haphazard,” unplanned settlements that teem with the poor, working and lower middle classes. Sha’bi music, rooted in the ‘ashwa’iyat as well as the traditional popular quarters of Cairo, has long been derided as unsophisticated at best by Egypt’s educated elites. But many educated Egyptians listen to and appreciate sha’bi music, if apologetically, and so several sha’bi artists have crossed over to mainstream culture, to wit, Sha’ban Abd al-Rahim, Hakim and Ahmad ‘Adawiyya.

Mahragan is at once deeply rooted in sha’bi practices and something quite new. The rhythms that drive mahragan are for the most part resolutely sha’bi, but are often produced electronically. Over the sha’bi beats that urge onlookers to shake their belly-dancing hips, singers chant or sing in autotune about faith, envy and the evil eye. This sensibility is on full display in the mahragan song “The People Want Five Pounds’ Phone Credit” both invokes the famous slogan of the Arab revolts, and at the same time, the people’s (and especially the people of the sha’bi quarters) exhaustion with it.5

Mahragan is also distinctive for its almost casual employment of profanity, something previously unheard of in Egyptian music. A notable example is DJ Haha’s “Aha al-Shibshib Da’” (Fuck, I Lost My Slippers), whose use of the extremely vulgar, almost unrepeatable expression “aha” created a sensation in Egypt. The song, as Soraya Morayef notes, is also very “sha’bi” in that it focuses on a mundane object, the slipper.6 Mahragan artists also frequently sing about everyday life in the streets, as in the wickedly catchy “Ana Aslan Gamid” (I’m Really Tough), by Tamanya fil-Miya (Eight Percent), a mahragan posse from Matriyya, a popular quarter in greater Cairo. Vocalists Ortega, Wizza and Oka name-check their hood, and they sing in autotune about faith, envy and the evil eye.

Egypt’s social turmoil has created unique openings for this distinctive music of the popular quarters. The Ministry of Culture is no longer able to monopolize the public performance of expressive culture, and so mahragan artists like DJ Islam Chipsy now perform at venues, like al-Azhar Park, previously reserved only for “respectable” performers. The demonstrations that have occurred regularly at Tahrir since early 2011 have brought together different segments and classes of society in unprecedented ways, and so middle-class passengers who hear the latest mahragan songs when they hire a taxi are also eager to be entertained by young electro-sha’bi artists at middle-class nightspots like Cairo’s downtown Greek Club. The growth in Internet access and usage in Cairo means that popular mahragan artists like DJ Haha and Eight Percent can release songs that quickly gain YouTube views numbering in the hundreds of thousands, with some of the bigger online “hits” even reaching several million.

Mahragan therefore has much more in common with urban dance music that has gained global renown, like the baile funk of Brazilian slums or the kuduro of Mozambique shantytowns, or even the hip-hop that emerged in the South Bronx in the late 1970s, than it does with the rap that is largely a middle-class pursuit in Egypt. Mahragan is brash and willing to broach the everyday practices of Egypt’s poor urban neighborhoods, like hashish smoking. It often expresses skepticism toward middle-class pieties, including even nationalism and the revolutionary tradition. If the revolutionary repertoire of artists like Rami ‘Isam or El Tanbura or Massar Egbari is performed in a sincere attempt to foster unity, the characteristic orientation of the mahragan artists is irony and skepticism. Yet mahragan artists are also more than willing to aim their barbs at figures of authority, including Egypt’s post-revolution, popularly elected president, Muhammed Mursi. “Morsico Systems” from mahragan artist Ahmad Samih sets a presidential speech to a sha’bi beat, and splices Mursi’s sonorous message together with autotuned, impertinent commentary. To Mursi’s claim that “there is support for that,” meaning for his regime’s

Both the artists who retain a connection to the classical revolutionary repertoire and the young techno-sha'bi artists are likely to play a prominent role in the country's immediate cultural and political future. But one might argue that the edgiest and most explosive music is now being produced by Egypt's working-class youth. It ingeniously combines advanced technologies with "from-the-hood" beats. It is unafraid to tackle subjects heretofore ignored or downplayed in polite venues. Mahragan promises to be "really tough" for the state or cultural elites to appropriate or contain. 

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Marginality and Exclusion in Egypt is an insightful volume addressing the various forms of inequality that plague Egyptian society, with particular focus on the poor and working classes. With few exceptions, the chapters have a strong structuralist undertone; many use a political economy approach to describe class conflict. The volume's title notwithstanding, most chapters treat the concepts of marginality and exclusion as afterthoughts, and only a few grapple with marginality as a theory.

Readers interested in thinking through the titular concepts should pay particular attention to Asef Bayat's historiizing chapter as well as chapters by Reem Saad and Ray Bush. In some ways, Bayat's essay is a better introduction that the formal one, which is overly concerned with making the volume relevant to the 2011 revolution. Bayat shows how the concept of marginality developed over time, starting in the nineteenth century and surveying the literature on poverty from the 1950s onward. As he aptly points out, "in all of these deployments, the notion of 'marginality'—whether as a social group, class, region, nation or a group of nations and regions—refers primarily to a state of poverty, deprivation and subordination." "Do they have to be so?" he asks, a question taken up by Saad, who explores whether some positions of marginality can be read as frontiers or spaces of possibility. Her ethnographically rich, boundary-testing chapter compares the social marginality of elite Egyptian intellectuals and artists with edgy tastes to the ways in which being part of a low-status tribe enable an orphaned child to start her own business.

Bush's discussion is important for explaining why, in a country with such a deeply entrenched development industry, poverty remains a key problem. He highlights the roles of this industry and macroeconomic policy in the reproduction of systemic poverty.

Despite many strong individual chapters, the collection suffers from a lack of example. For example, the volume addresses the spatiality of inequality in three distinct ways—rural vs. urban (Habib Ayeb), exurban vs. urban (Dalia Wahdan) and targeted poverty reduction programs in individual villages (Saker El Nour). Together these three chapters supply a thread of cohesion. Yet the collection is organized into case studies in part to highlight "how people labeled as being marginal have tried to oppose or struggle against the policies that have created their marginality." And only in a few instances do the case studies showcase a struggle. Ayeb covers the dispossession of Egyptian and Tunisian farmers by neoliberal policies favoring agribusiness. Wahdan looks at the transportation networks that limit the mobility of residents in Sixth of October City, making them spatially marginal. El Nour uses a case study of geographical targeting of poverty to demonstrate how such extensive policies reproduce rather than alleviate poverty. Rather than struggle, the case studies underscore how particular policies perpetuate hierarchy and inequality. Two chapters—Kamal Fahmi's on street children and Heba Hagrass on the disabled—take on types of marginality and exclusion not principally defined by class. Fahmi reveals the coping strategies of street children in the face of social marginality. Hagrass highlights the vulnerability of Egypt's disabled population amidst a discriminatory cultural environment and a meager set of government services. A notable gap in the volume is gender.

Bush and Habib largely set up the book in terms of what led to the uprising of 2011. While understandable, this goal detracts from the theorization of marginality and exclusion. Rabab el-Mahdi's chapter astutely addresses class conflict in the revolution, but the strength of the volume is not in explaining why Husni Mubarak fell but rather in showing the numerous faces of Egypt's endemic inequality.

—Mona Atia

Endnotes

1 These observations are very much informed by Elliott Colla, "Emplotting Revolution: History and the Novel in Egypt," unpublished paper.


