WORLD ORAL LITERATURE PROJECT

# Oral Literary Worlds

## Location, Transmission and Circulation

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Sara Marzagora and Francesca Orsini (eds), *Oral Literary Worlds: Location, Transmission and Circulation*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2025, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0405



ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-311-9
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-312-6
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-313-3
ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-314-0
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-315-7

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0405

Cover image: Woman playing Nyatiti during School Cultural Day in Tanzania. Photo by Onesmo Daniel (22 September 2017), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:African_local_music_instrument_-Nyatiti_01.jpg

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

The Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies (MULOSIGE) project received generous funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 670876)

# 11. Dissenting Voices of Cairo

## Sheikh Imam, Ahmad Fu'ad Negm, and their Legacy in the Contemporary Music Scene

*Virginia Pisano*

### Introduction

This chapter analyses the work of Egyptian singer and *'ud* player Sheikh Imam (1918–1995) and poet Ahmed Fu'ad Negm (1929–2013), together with the songs of young Cairene artists who have been inspired by the duo. Sheikh Imam and Ahmad Fu'ad Negm's songs are symbols of Egyptian popular culture in terms of musical aesthetics and poetics.[1] And they were still aesthetic referents for collective struggle during the demonstrations of January 2011 in Tahrir Square.

It was while in Cairo in 2010 that, following the suggestions of a Palestinian researcher and activist friend based in Berlin, I decided to work on Sheikh Imam and Ahmed Fu'ad Negm. Born as I was in a family of music-loving Italian political activists who took part in the May 1968 movement, it was inevitable that my research topic would revolve around the relationship between arts and politics. Because of the

1 Marilyn Booth, 'Exploding into the Seventies: Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm, Sheikh Imam, and the Aesthetics of New Youth Politics', *Political and Social Protest in Egypt*, *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, 29.2–3 (2009), 19–44. All translations from the songs are mine unless otherwise indicated.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0405.11

decline of political songs in Egypt during Mubarak's time, I had initially decided to focus on the 1970s and on the myth of the 'committed singer'. But between January and April 2011, I found myself involved in the protest movement and began interviewing musicians who were giving concerts in Tahrir Square.[2] Therefore, I decided to include in my enquiry the experiences and views of these young artists on the artistic and political heritage of the 1970s. My research topic took shape between interviews conducted in the stairwells of buildings where people were taking shelter during street clashes, and outdoor concerts unthinkable until a month earlier.[3]

The core of this chapter is devoted to my analysis of Imam-Negm's songs. The first part considers the songs in relation to modern Egyptian vernacular poetry, while the second reads them as representatives of the collective imaginary. I then assess the songs relation to censorship and evaluate their diffusion and popularity, within and outside Egypt. The final section revolves around contemporary—musicians, singers and a theatre and choir director—selected because of their proximity to Imam-Negm's style and their interest in keeping his heritage alive. The dissenting songs in Cairo, I argue, do not necessarily draw inspiration from imported genres, such as rock and rap, or from folk music—as some scholars and journalists tend to highlight[4]—but can be the product of indigenous forms of music and poetry (see also Laachir in Chapter 10 of this volume). I end the chapter with a few considerations on the circulation of the 'Arab artist' label in the post-2011 period, inspired by my personal experience as a researcher and curator.

## Imam-Negm's Songs as Products of Egyptian Popular Culture

Imam Mohammed Ahmad 'Eissa was born in 1918 in a poor family of the Giza area, Ahmed Fu'ad Negm in 1929 in the Egyptian Delta province of Sharqiya to a police officer and a housewife. They spent

2 This research was carried out between Autumn 2010 and Spring 2011. Cairo today is in a much less hopeful state, waiting for the release of its 40,000 political prisoners. Chants and screams have become whispers; paranoia and depression have taken the place of the thrilling energy of 2011.

3 See for example the event *Al fan midan*; Silvia Mollicchi, 'Al-Fan Midan Brings the Arts to the Streets', *Egypt Independent*, 10 May 2011.

4 See e.g. Mark LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008).

their childhood as colonial Egypt declined and grew up artistically in a politically charged cultural environment. It was an epoch marked by a shift from elitist Oriental music to national Egyptian music, with theatre director Salama Higazy (1852–1917) and the great composer Sayyed Darwish (1892–1923). Musical theatre became a major cultural tool of resistance against British occupation; Darwish played an important role in creating the national sentiment that became a central element of the struggle against the British rule, and his social and patriotic songs won him the sobriquet of the father of Egyptian modern music.[5] Indeed, till the mid-twentieth century the main grievances voiced by Egyptian songs of dissent concerned nationalist demands and independence from British rule.[6]

A few decades later, under the Egyptian political establishment of, first, Gamal 'Abdel Nasser and later Anwar Sadat, political songs became 'state-commissioned and government-orchestrated patriotic songs'.[7] A few political songs did remain genuine songs of protest, however, Sheikh Imam and Ahmad Fu'ad Negm's compositions among them. Their dissenting songs were political songs that used literary and musical elements of Egyptian popular culture to provide a social and political critique along the lines of the left-wing opposition to the regime.[8] The duo was at the forefront of an underground cultural movement that, from the end of the 1960s, denounced the social problems in the country and derided the Egyptian—and international—political establishment.

This cultural movement was led by poets such as Salah Jahin (1930–1986), Fu'ad Haddad (1927–1985) and Abderrahman Abnoudy (b. 1938), who challenged official mainstream Fusha (classical Arabic) poetry by composing poems in colloquial Egyptian. By using idioms and words belonging to everyday life, these poets dealt with topics that

5 Habeeb Salloum, 'Sayyed Darwish: The Father of Modern Arab Music', *Al Jadid Magazine*, 7.36 (Summer 2011); R. El Maliki, 'Political Songs in Egypt', *Egypt Today*, August 2008.

6 El Maliki, 'Political Songs in Egypt; Booth, 'Exploding into the Seventies'.

7 Salah Eissa, editor-in-chief of *Al Qahira Weekly*, speaking for a documentary on Sheikh Imam on *Al Jazeera*; 'Cheikh Imam'.

8 The UK-based Centre for Political Songs defines political songs as 'music providing social commentary and supporting a historical narrative, traditional songs and political parodies functioning to sustain a campaign, to express discontent, to generate support, to motivate, to console, to provoke, to educate or to mock'; http://www.gcu.ac.uk/politicalsong/

had been hardly treated before and raised 'controversial issues about the responsibility of cultural producers, the political roles of poetry in a neo-colonial context, the boundaries of community/nation and the meanings of marginalities'.[9]

The process had started even earlier, in the 1880s, with the poet of the Urabi revolt, 'Abdallah Nadim (1844–1896). He was followed by Bayram Tunsi (1893–1961), who brought the pre-modern tradition of *zajal* poetry to new heights.[10] Tunsi's poems addressed a popular audience, both in the sense of as wide a public as possible, including all strata of the population, and of the public as an agent opposed to the centres of power.[11] Their main targets were British domination and corruption and the quarrels among Egyptian nationalist politicians. Nadim and Tunsi's poems were dismissed by the members of the cultural establishment, who considered colloquial literature to be inferior to classical Arabic literature. Curiously enough, one of their critics was the writer of the 'Egyptian street' Naguib Mahfouz, who called colloquial Egyptian a pernicious social disease needing urgent treatment.[12]

Marginality and dismissal made this genre of *zajal* poetry a valuable tool for political resistance. A broader community of writers and readers than the ruling educated elite was created, and the poems asserted a separate, specific identity, and proclaimed a distance from the nation and subverting the message of the regime.[13] Nevertheless, in some cases *zajal* poetry was co-opted by the regime and its official opposition as a tool to talk to the masses. Under Nasser, for instance, *zajal* poems for workers and peasants were published as booklets (like *Ikhtarna li al-fallah*, We have Chosen for the Peasants), or in the journal of the official opposition party, *Hizb al-Tagammu* (Socialist Party).[14]

9 Marilyn Booth, 'Beneath Lies the Rock: Contemporary Egyptian Poetry and the Common Tongue', *World Literature Today*, 75. 2 (Spring 2001), 257–266 (p. 257).

10 The Urabi revolt was an uprising led by Colonel Ahmed Urabi between 1879 and 1892 challenging the Khedive and European influence in Egypt. *Zajal* (plural *azjal*) is a form of colloquial poetry composed in prescribed meters and rhyme schemes that was introduced in the Middle Ages in Arab Spain (see Laachir in Chapter 10 of this volume).

11 See Booth, 'Beneath lies the rock'.

12 Quoted in Kamal Abdel-Malek, *A Study of the Vernacular Poet Aḥmad Fu'ād Nigm* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), p. 2.

13 See Joel Beinin, 'Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (*zajal*)', *Poetics today*, 15.2 (Summer 1994), 191–215.

14 Ibid.

## Negm's Poetry and Its Subversive Power

Although Negm already wrote poems in *zajal* form, his encounter with the poetry of Bayram Tunsi while in prison was a turning point in his life and career.[15] Indeed, according to Dalia Said-Mustapha, Negm was not an innovator but a biting observer of his time who inherited the tradition of Egyptian vernacular poetry.[16] His collection of *zajal Images from life and prison* won the prize sponsored by the Supreme Council for the Promotion of Arts, Literature and Social Sciences in 1964. The main theme of this collection is social injustice, viewed as inequality and domination rather than class struggle:

> I am the people, marching and making my way
> My struggle is my weapon and my resolve is my friend
> [...]
> My children will defeat every oppressor.[17]

In 1962 Negm met Sheikh Imam, who had started singing his compositions in local cafés, accompanying himself with the '*ud* (lute). While Negm was a self-educated member of the working class—he had worked in the British army camps and was fired for organizing workers' demonstrations—Imam was born in a poor family. After training as Qur'an reciter, Imam had learnt the basics of music and *muwashshah*[18] singing from Sheikh Darwish el-Hareery, a prominent musical figure in Cairo of the time. He then started singing at weddings and circumcision ceremonies, and played in Zakarya Ahmad's ensemble before his phase of political engagement. In the words of the poet Nizar Qabbani, the collaboration between the pen and the '*ud* became 'an alliance to fight for the cause of the masses whose tongue was tied'.[19] In the *zajal 'Shayyid*

15 In an interview, Negm states that Tunsi's poetry was responsible for his artistic and political awakening; Booth, 'Exploding into the Seventies', p. 24.

16 Dalia Said-Mustapha, 'Negm wa al Sheikh Imam: su'ud wa uful al ughnyia al siyasyya fi Masr' (Negm and Sheikh Imam: the rise and the decline of political song in Egypt), *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 21 (2001), 128–160.

17 Ahmad Fu'ad Negm, *Suwwar min al-hayat wa al-sign* (Images from life and prison) (Cairo: al-Majlis al-a'la li-ri'ayat al-funun wa al-adab wa al-'ulum al-igtima'iyya, 1964); Negm-Imam, 'Anā al-sha'eb'.

18 'A genre of pre-composed art song with roots in Andalusian Spain'; Marcus L. Scott, *Music in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 100.

19 Abdel-Malek, *A Study*, p. 19.

*qusurak*' (Build your palaces), Negm and Imam name the actors of collective resistance:

> We know our minds and we have joined together
> Workers, peasants and students.[20]

After the Arab defeat of 1967 in the war against Israel, the duo became renowned among students and the leftist intelligentsia, and their songs became the leitmotiv of strikes and demonstrations during Nasser's and Sadat's rule. In the late 1960s, the duo moved to the lower-class neighbourhood of Khosh Qadam, which later became an important centre of political and cultural activism. In 1968, with the song '*Gifara mat*' (Che Guevara is dead) their popularity among the leftists increased, even abroad. The song is a call to workers and ordinary people to come together against the establishment:

> O workers and dispossessed
> Chained from head to toe
> Enough!
> You have no way out
> But guns and bullets.[21]

Although this was hardly a realistic strategy for workers and peasants, who had just resumed mobilizing at the end of the 1960s after a period when collective resistance had abated, such inflammatory calls were severely punished by the regime. The duo was jailed several times between the 1960s and the 1980s.

Most of Imam-Negm's songs re-interpreted oral stories, proverbs, and vernacular poems. While I return below to a more detailed analysis of their popularity, it is important to stress this link to popular culture as one of the reasons for their success among a wide range of audiences.[22] Indeed, according to Dalia Said-Mustapha, Imam-Negm's compositions are a product of the Egyptian popular culture that emerged onto the official cultural scene in the twentieth century.[23] The songs could be understood and sung also by illiterates, which is why they became

20 Negm, 'Shayyid qusurak' (Build your palaces), quoted in Beinin, 'Writing Class', p. 212.
21 Negm-Imam, 'Gifara mat'.
22 Booth, 'Exploding into the Seventies', p. 39.
23 Said-Mustapha, 'Negm wa al Sheikh Imam'.

threatening tools of social protest.[24] As '*ud virtuoso* Mustafa Said puts it, 'they were the only ones to convey the thoughts of the street'.[25]

Yet, despite their Marxist view and radical political programme, Negm-Imam rarely drew attention to the differences among these social categories in terms of class, demands and objectives. Their project—like Bayram Tunsi's—was conceived in collective popular-national terms. Their *zajal* were tools for creating a popular-nationalist discourse that could challenge dominant cultural and political norms.

## Expressing Resistance Through Music

Popular culture played as much a role in the lyrics written by Negm as in the music composed by Sheikh Imam. Take the song '*Baqaret Haha*' (Haha's cow), written by the duo as a response to the defeat of 1967. According to Said-Mustapha, Negm-Imam filled with political content the skeleton of a song that was already popular among the people of the *rif* (countryside):[26]

> Outsiders came in and sucked all the milk
> The cow called out and screamed 'My Children'
> But the children of shame were fast asleep.
> The cow was oppressed, she was overwhelmed
> She fell into the well; bystanders asked
> 'Well, why did she fall?'
> She fell from fear
> She fell because of hunger and rest.[27]

The helpless cow represents Egypt, suffering because of its defeat in the Arab-Israeli war and inability to resist American interference. The song has a circular rhythm often used in popular ceremonies like the *zar*.[28] It is easy to follow and creates a sense of ordinary ecstasy. The choir is an important element in the song and builds a dialogue with the singer by repeating the word '*Haha*' on a higher pitch.

24 Ibid.
25 Personal interview, Cairo 6/05/2011.
26 See Said-Mustapha, 'Negm wa al Sheikh Imam'.
27 Negm-Imam, 'Baqaret Haha' (Haha's cow). Translation by Walaa' Quisay.
28 Ceremonies with music, singing and dance, organized mainly in the countryside in order to heal illnesses.

Many scholars consider Negm-Imam to have been largely inspired by the famous Egyptian composer and theatre director Sayyed Darwish.[29] In fact, Negm-Imam's aim comes close to Darwish's: composing songs of social interest that could be easily understood and appropriated by the people, and performing them on any kind of stage, from factories and streets to theatres and universities.

Negm-Imam's songs are very essential: the music is minimalistic, with few embellishments; the rhythms are basic, there is no virtuosity, and the lyrics appear to be more important than music. Almost all songs start with a *muqaddimah*, an instrumental introduction in the main *maqam* or melodic mode of the song. The choice of only the '*ud* and sometime the *riqq*, a frame drum, as accompaniments to his voice, as well as the important presence of the choir, show the link with medieval *zajal*, which in the Andalusian tradition was performed by a poet/minstrel accompanied by percussion, flute, and choir. This style lends itself to be easily received by the audience, and its simplicity is in contrast with the style of the popular songs of the time, in which the orchestra played a central role and which left no place for audience participation.[30] According to the virtuoso '*ud* player Hazem Shaheen, Sheikh Imam sang 'collective songs': this feature differentiates them from the typical style of Egyptian singers of the time like Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez, whose performances were conceived only to be listened to.[31]

Returning to the song *'Gifara mat'* (Che Guevara is dead), it is possible to identify different parts. The song starts with a military march beat that announces an important message, repeated by the choir on a low, serious pitch:

> Guevara is dead
> Latest news, on the radios
> In the churches
> In the mosques
> In the alleys
> On the roads
> And in cafés and bars

29 E.g. Booth, Said-Mustapha, El Maliki, 'Abdel Malek.

30 See Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song and the Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

31 Hazem Shaheen, personal interview, 4/06/2011.

Imam then switches to an ironic tone, the music becomes lighter, and the voice pitch higher. This part is addressed to the 'unheroic' local politicians and military leaders whose practices contrast those of Guevara:[32]

What do you think?
You, with your wealth and your *antikat*[33]
All dressed up and fed
All warmed up.
You and your new-age stylish struggle
In the floaters[34]
What do you think?
You, with your wealth
Guevara is dead.

Following this ironic part, the song moves to the rhythm and musical phrases often used by mourning women in the Egyptian countryside and in poor urban neighbourhoods:

Guevara is dead
No humming
No propaganda
In his moment of demise
With none of his comrades to bid him farewell
His screams ascended to the heavens
Shouting, but who would listen?

The final part of the song is characterised by a severe tone that suggest an idea of seriousness to the audience. The poem becomes a declaration of armed struggle, at the time of the first real challenge to Nasser's regime:

Guevara's screams! You slaves!
In any homeland and every place
There is no alternative
And no other way.
Get the armies ready
Or tell the world
This is the end.

32 See Booth, 'Exploding into the Seventies', p. 32.
33 By '*antikat*', Negm means the members and supporters of the regime; he defines them as the old generation.
34 The reference is to Abdel Nasser. At the time left-wing intellectuals criticized him for the Six-Day War.

In this as in other songs the choir plays a central role. Indeed, Sheikh Imam staged participative performances in which the choir involved the audience impromptu in the performance. In this specific example, it functions as an echo of the singer, a collective reply in a descending tonal line, mourning the dead hero.

In summary, two main features characterise Imam's songs: the use of familiar poetic structures and diction, and a musical language that evokes and encourages popular oral performances and collective life. Negm's use of the *mawwal*,[35] the heroic epic, children's games, jokes, and storytelling creates an unapologetic political vocality that is recognizable as part of oral popular culture. Likewise, the style of Sheikh Imam's compositions, with is musical rhetorical strategies of repetition, refrain, and dialogue, draws on both popular secular songs and on Qur'anic recitation. According to El Maliki, they have become part of the collective memory of the Egyptian people.[36]

## Representing the Collective Imaginary

Imam-Negm's songs embed a form of collective imaginary that is based on three elements: a typification of Egyptian society, a pungent use of humour and satire, and a set of themes and targets. [37] The main characters they depict are the *fellah* (pl. *fellahin*) or peasant, the *afandi* or bureaucrat, representing the educated elite, and the *ibn al balad* or son of the country, who represents the working class. Two groups above these categories—the indigenous ruling class and the *khawagat* or foreigners—are perceived as the oppressors. The dialectical narrative of these songs

35 The *mawwal* is a genre of vocal art music improvises melodically while singing poetic texts; see also Laachir in Chapter 10 of this volume.

36 El Maliki, 'Political Songs in Egypt'.

37 See Abdel-Malek, *A study.* During my fieldwork, I experienced what Bruno Nettl describes in his chapter 'You Will Never Understand this Music: Insiders and Outsiders' (in *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-Three Discussions,* University of Illinois 2015 [1983], 157–168). After being told by his teacher of Persian chant that he will never understand Persian music as Persians instinctively do, Nettl reflects on the different approaches of outsiders and insiders to musical heritage. Likewise, many interviewees explained to me that it would be almost impossible for me to understand the humour of Sheikh Imam and Ahmed Fu'ad Negm as it was 'typical Egyptian humour'. Yet even though some allusions or nuances are difficult to catch for a non-Egyptian, many 'outsider' researchers have managed to identify the main features related to humour and satire in these songs.

depicts Egyptian social forces in a perpetual 'struggle of opposites': rich/poor, urbanized/rustic, ruler/ruled, native/foreigner.[38]

In his song '*Ya'ish ahl baladi*' (Long live the people of my country), written one year after the 1967 defeat, Negm uses irony to portray the Egyptian social pyramid with the rich at the top and the poor masses at the bottom.[39] The following stanza shows the poet's critique of Nasser's slogan of social alliance:

> The people of my country live
> Not knowing one another
> No bond among them
> To allow the 'alliance' to live on.

Although Negm-Imam's songs were popular among left-wing intellectuals, the song does not spare them from ironic critique:

> Long live the intellectual,
> Pedantic, slippery, chatty.
> He lacks experience
> He dislikes the crowd,
> With one empty word here
> And a hollow term there,
> He quickly fabricates solutions.

Poor people, and particularly the *fellahin*, are the heroes of Negm-Imam's songs.[40] Many of them celebrate the peasants and portray the *rif* as the breeding ground of talented and honest people.[41] The song *'Ya Baheyya'* ('O Baheyya'), which became very popular thanks to the movie *Al 'asfur* (The sparrow, 1976) by Youssef Chahine, describes Egypt as a poor peasant woman who looks modest but whose beauty is concealed:

> Egypt
> Mother Baheyya
> Clad in scarf and in galabeyya
> Time has turned senile
> You are still youthful
> Time is moving back
> You are coming forward.

38 Abdel-Malik, *A Study*, p. 31.
39 Negm-Imam, 'Ya'ish ahl baladi'.
40 Said-Mustapha, 'Negm wa al Sheikh Imam'.
41 Salah Eissa in 'Cheikh Imam'.

The song also celebrates the peasants:

> Poor of this country
> *Fellah* and labourer
> You are the lubricant of the waterwheel
> The coal of the factory.[42]

This idealization of the poor may lead us to consider Negm-Imam's songs nationalistic or even populist rather than dissenting. Yet their use of humour and satire undercuts this idea and sets these songs in opposition to the apologetic public discourse of the regime. Indeed, while the regime tried to offer an abstract and romantic image of the homeland to distract the impoverished masses from the wretchedness of their life,[43] Negm–Imam challenged this representation, offering instead a critical nationalism. As a result, their songs were seen as anti-patriotic by the establishment, a view represented by the lyricist and *Al Ahram* columnist Mostafa al Damarani: 'this attitude is destructive. What are they criticizing? The Egyptian civilization is the root of all human progress and we should try to build, not destroy by being offensive.'[44] Nonetheless, their song '*Bahebbyk ya Masr*' (I love you Egypt) is a pure ode to the homeland:

> I love you Egypt
> At night and in the morning
> I swim with your love,
> It is my rescue
> [...]
> Even if they jailed me and hung me
> And thought about driving me out
> By torturing me
> I would come closer to you.
> I cannot flee.[45]

Irony, derision, mockery, and jokes are all important elements in Imam-Negm's songs. The musical parody of Imam gives to his songs a performative punch, and his hilarious tone does not soften the political critique, but rather it intensifies it. Verbal imagery and musical and

42 Negm-Imam, 'Ya Baheyya'.
43 El Maliki, 'Political Songs in Egypt', interviewing Salah Eissa.
44 Quoted Ibid.
45 Negm-Imam, 'Bahebbyk ya Masr' (I love you Egypt).

spoken tonalities are employed in parodies that criticize the official rhetoric of populism and to attack the rulers—whether Nasser, Sadat or Mubarak—and its foreign allies.[46] The first song to earn the artists a prison sentence—from 1967 to 1971—was '*Al hamdullillah khabbatna takhti bitatna*' (Thanks to God we bat under our armpits),[47] which directly attacked Nasser. The establishment saw this critique of the 1967 defeat as an insult to the military, as it directly attacked the regime's attempt to improve its image before the masses and contain their anger:

> How nice to watch our soldiers
> Come back empty-handed
> From the line of fire.
> The battlefield of Abdel Gabbar[48]
> Will ruin everything.
> Thank God for the state of Egypt
> Drowning in lies, the people confused
> Slogans praising and scraping
> Even before the traitor.
> God willing, He will destroy everything of Abdel Gabbar.[49]

After a concert at 'Ain Shams University in 1977, Negm spent one year in prison for 'insulting the president' and for imitating the president's voice.[50] The reason for this charge was the song '*Bayaan ham*' (Important announcement), in which Negm derides President Sadat and his alliance with the United States and Israel:

> This is an announcement
> Radio station 'Splendor of the past'
> From Cairo to Kurdufan
> And from Venezuela and Iran,
> And from any home
> And brutalized land
> Because of Yankee tourism.
> […]
> On this great occasion (to which you're not invited)

46 See Booth, 'Exploding into the Seventies', p. 38.
47 The image recalls the movement of soldiers marching.
48 Abdel Gabbar means the servant of the Fearsome as opposed to 'Abdel Nasser which means the servant of the Victorious.
49 Negm-Imam, 'Al hamdullillah khabbatna takhti bitatna'.
50 Janet Stevens, 'Political repression in Egypt', *MERIP Reports*, 66 (April 1978), 18–21 (p. 21).

We present to you Shehata[51] the stoner
Unrehearsed
The chief broker in our developing nation
Bribing the card dealers before each game of poker
Sabotaging the farmland and selling its crops.
Now he's a prince of the army too
You cannot deny
And say you don't know
Nor can you say you've never heard of him.

The phase of Imam and Negm's production following the 1973 war engages in social and political criticism against the peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.[52] Take the song *'Valery Giscard d'Estaing'*, which attacks Sadat's alliance with the West by deriding the French president, who visited Egypt in 1975:

Valery Giscard d'Estaing
Along with his madam
Will catch the wolf by its tail
And feed all the hungry
The poor will eat sweet potatoes
And walk around haughty and proud.
Instead of naming their kid Shalata[53]
The poor folk will name him Jean.
All of this thanks to our friend
The romantic d'Estaing. [54]

Another popular song of the time is *'Nixon baba'* (Papa Nixon), which derides the US policy in Egypt and the American president, who visited the country in 1974. The song displays Sheikh Imam's typical style of declaiming improvised phrases soaring above the rhythm:

Pleased to meet you papa Nixon
The boy of Watergate,

They loaded you
With many honours
The sultans of beans and oil.

51 A typical Egyptian name, it carries an assonance with Sadat; translation by Walaa Quisay.
52 See Okasha, 'Prince of Disillusionment'.
53 A common Egyptian name.
54 Negm-Imam, 'Valery Giscard d'Estaing'.

They put the red carpet under your feet
From Ras el Tin to Mekka
And they say you have done the pilgrimage.[55]

Imam's satirical verses also targeted social issues such as malnutrition and hunger. The song *'Al ful wa al lahma'* (Beans and meat) addresses the lack of nutritious food in a country that imports 40% of the food it consumes:

As for the question of beans and meat
An alleged source has decreed
That medicine has advanced greatly
And that Dr Mohsin says:
The Egyptian people are better off eating beans
Instead of meat.
And eating Egyptian beans
Makes you strong as an ox
And that such proteins
Cannot be found in any other food.[56]

Imam-Negm's verses contain many slogans of the left-wing opposition movement, which reached its climax with the bread riots of 1977. However, the singer Azza Balbaa', who married Negm in 1975 and later sang with Sheikh Imam, states that the two artists were not completely convinced by the slogans of the left movement but 'felt a kind of gratitude to the left because it embraced the whole experiment.'[57] Their parody of *Umm Kulthum* is an interesting example of this attitude: according to Azza Balbaa', Negm-Imam used to criticize the diva's alignment with the regime before the leftist bigwigs and their revolutionary audience, whereas in private they told Balbaa' that she 'should learn from this great artist and her style'.[58] The song *'Kalb el sitt'* (The lady's dog) refers to Umm Kulthum, who was called *'el sitt'* (the lady), and the use of her artistic and social charisma to the detriment of the poor people. Elsewhere, Negm-Imam target state-sponsored and co-opted artists, singing that, 'The state is submerged with lies/ but everything is OK

55 Negm-Imam, 'Nixon baba' (Papa Nixon).
56 Negm-Imam, 'Al ful wa al lahma' (Beans and meat).
57 Azza Balbaa' interview in Okasha, 'Prince of Disillusionment'.
58 Ibid.

as long as the damned masters are happy/ because of the poets who fill their stomach with poems.'[59]

In terms of social and political critique, the years 1975-1981 marked the height of the Negm-Imam phenomenon. This was the time when students called for armed struggle against Israel and imperialism, while President Sadat's economic policy (*Infitah* or opening to the free market) forced him to improve diplomatic relations with Israel and the US. Particularly after the Camp David accords of 1977 and the first *Intifada*, demonstrations and strikes in Egypt spread to all social strata, from students and members of the opposition to workers. Negm-Imam targeted the populist approach and the hypocrisy of the ruling class and the bureaucrats, who were only interested in amassing personal wealth.[60]

The themes and targets of Negm-Imam's songs vary according to the historical moment, this section has shown. They include war and defeat, the Arab-Israeli conflict, social struggle, social and artistic critique, the Palestinian issue, corruption, love for the homeland, the harshness of people's life, and the celebration of revolutionary heroes. Their three main targets include social injustice, political figures such as Nasser, Nixon, Sadat and their foreign allies, and state-sponsored artists like Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez.

Other themes are present, too. The songs *'Mamnu'at'* (Bans) and '*Sign el 'ala'a*' (The citadel's prison) deal with the impossibility of living everyday life, particularly because of the tension between personal freedom and state control:

> Banned from travel
> Banned from singing
> Banned from speaking
> Banned from longing
> Banned from discontent
> Banned from smiling.
>
> Oh Egypt, my love, you are a boat
> Longing but imprisoned
> With an informant in each corner
> A police in every port.[61]

59 Quoted in Michael Slackman, 'A Poet Whose Political Incorrectness is a Crime,' *New York Times*, 13 May 2006.

60 See Okasha, 'Prince of Disillusionment'; Clement, 'Worker Protests'; and Booth, 'Exploding into the Seventies'.

61 Negm-Imam, 'Mamnu'at' (Bans), transl. Walaa Quisay.

And in *'Sign el 'ala'a'* they sang:

> The devotees gathered in the castle's prison[62]
> The devotees gathered in Bab Al-Khalq[63]
> And the sun is a chant, rising from the prison cells.
> And Egypt is a chant, rising from the throat.
> The devotees gathered in the cell.
> No matter the length of imprisonment; no matter the oppression
> No matter the despotism of the jailer
> Who could ever dare imprison Egypt?
> [...]
> The liar landed informants at my door
> And the informants let loose their hungered vicious dogs.
> They gather the devotees to the prison cell. [64]

## Sounds of Power: Censorship and Diffusion

> 'With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world.
> With music is born power and its opposite: subversion.'[65]

Negm-Imam's songs were never publicly broadcasted in Egypt, and no official cassettes, LP or CD were ever recorded. It was in France that *Le Chant du Monde* recorded a LP in 1976 that reached platinum with one million copies. Even today, there is no official recording in Egypt, and the cassettes that circulate originate from other Arab countries, mainly Lebanon and are considered valuable items, though nowadays their songs can be easily downloaded from the Internet. In other words, Sheikh Imam's songs have been living in the memory of people and in underground or private recordings of very poor quality. As the next section will show, the situation has slightly evolved since the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. Yet, as theatre director Salam Yousry put it, 'they are not on radio, nor on television, they are still in prison!'[66]

In Egypt, these songs circulated only through underground unofficial cassettes and through live concerts that took place in universities, during demonstrations, at the headquarters of *Hizb al-Tagammu* (Socialist Party),

62 During Anwar El Sadat's presidency, the underground room in the citadel of Saladin in Egypt was turned into a political prison.
63 A court that dealt with political prisoners.
64 Negm-Imam, 'Sign el 'ala'a' (The citadel's prison).
65 Attali, *Noise,* p. 6.
66 Salam Yousry, personal interview, 17/01/2011.

or in private houses, often advertised by word of mouth.[67] By 1975, 200 songs were recorded on cassettes and distributed in the underground market. Performances were a way of challenging the attempt by the state to control sites of mobilization and they constituted occasions for encouraging collective participation to the public sphere. After a brief appearance on state television and radio early on in Imam and Negm's careers, the regime immediately understood that co-optation could not work with them. As already mentioned, the duo was imprisoned several times and systematically censored. As Negm said: 'We do not fear prison which has become a constant duty of any person in Egypt with self respect'.[68] Unlike contemporary musicians, they seem to have hardly experienced forms of self-censorship.

For Attali, music is an attribute of power in all its forms. 'Eavesdropping, censorship and surveillance are weapons of power. [...] to listen, to memorize, this is the ability to interpret and control history, to manipulate the culture of people, to channel its violence and hopes'.[69] His ideas about censorship and state control under totalitarian regimes apply to the Egyptian case: the state has become a 'gigantic eavesdropper' that seeks to silence subversive noises and dissenting voices in search of cultural autonomy.[70] As far as control over recordings is concerned, the Egyptian case is twofold. On the one hand, censorship represents a pure exercise of power with the aim of preventing the masses from accessing dissenting songs. On the other hand, censorship prevented Negm-Imam's songs from becoming part of the music industry, and as a result it kept their consumption collective, as songs were consumed before the invention of recording machines. When Marylin Booth asked Sheikh Imam in an interview if he would have accepted to cooperate with official media channels, replied: 'I would still refuse unequivocally. My mass media are the masses'.[71]

67 Booth, 'Exploding into the Seventies', p. 21.
68 Negm-Imam, interviewed by Janet Tucker, 'While Sadat Shuffles: Economic Decay, Political Ferment in Egypt', *MERIP Reports*, 65 (March, 1978), 3–9, 26 (p. 9).
69 Attali, *Noise*, p. 7.
70 Attali goes even further, arguing that recording has always been a mean of social control, beginning with the Tables of the Law. He quotes Hitler's *Manual of German Radio*: 'without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany'; Ibid., p. 87.
71 Booth, 'Sheikh Imam the Singer', 20.

Negm-Imam were the voice of the leftist movement. If to say that the left co-opted them is probably too strong, it is important to stress that it only the regime but also the left-wing opposition movement involved artists in their political project. At the same time, it was thanks to their affiliation to the movement that the duo gained a broader audience and sponsored sets for performances. In Negm's words: 'We have slept for years in those prisons, but we have been able to continue singing to the people as members of the Egyptian nationalistic intellectual movement, that wishes to build an advanced humanistic culture.'[72] If music was an instrument of the Egyptian regime, for Negm, too, 'Songs are weapons'.[73]

## Popularity and Decline of Sheikh Imam's Songs

Issues of censorship and diffusion have played a part in the popularity and decline of Sheikh Imam's songs are related. When, during my fieldwork in Cairo in 2011, I asked artists and audience members to estimate Negm-Imam's popularity among Cairenes in terms of class and generation, many argued that their songs had been popular among leftist intellectuals and students in the 1960s and 1970s.[74] According to Marylin Booth, 'to this day, these songs circulate in the memories of 1960s activists and onlookers'.[75] Indeed, most academics and journalists think that Negm-Imam's popularity in Egypt remained confined to activists, intellectuals and students, mainly members of the Socialist Party.[76]

72 In Tucker, 'While Sadat Shuffles', 9.

73 Said-Mustapha, 'Negm wa al Sheikh Imam'.

74 I prepared three different questionnaires, one for the artists, one for the older generation of listeners, and one for the younger members of the audience, in order to evaluate the popularity of Sheikh Imam and Negm's songs in Cairo. I also interviewed listeners, most of whom belong to the habitual audiences of performances by the artists selected.

75 Booth, 'Exploding in the Seventies', p. 21.

76 See Abdel-Malek, *A study*; El Maliki, 'Political Songs in Egypt'; Okasha, 'Prince of Disillusionment'; Said-Mustapha, 'Negm wa al Sheikh Imam'. Professor Francesca Corrao of Naples' Orientale, who was personally involved in the left wing political and cultural environment of 1970s' Cairo, concurs that Sheikh Imam was and is mainly diffused among the Cairene intelligentsia. In the past only wealthy people could afford recorders, and today they alone have access to these songs on the Internet. She points out that it is very difficult to perform a quantitative analysis of the popularity of Sheikh Imam, however, particularly because of the changes that

While their popularity among intellectuals and students shows the strong presence of popular culture among educated people, it also implies that the popular strata were unconcerned or could not access these songs, which as we have seen were hardly available since they were censored and banned from the official market. However, several of my interviewees stated that the lower strata of the population also knew, and still know, them. When I interviewed the young daughter of a member of the Islamist opposition movement who was active in the 1990s, she declared that her father raised her with Negm-Imam's songs and that part of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood shared a passion for these songs with the left-wing movements.[77] While stressing that this is the personal view of the interviewee, it shows that the struggle against a common target could make cultural tastes of activists with different backgrounds converge. Perhaps Sheikh Imam's training in Qur'an recitation made him appear *halal* to the moderate stream of the Islamist movement. It is not by chance that he was called 'the red sheikh'.

Negm often declared his mistrust towards the Islamist approach to social injustice and criticized the local Muslim Brotherhood, declaring that the sheikhs are corrupted and that religious ideologies are responsible for the poor's resigned acceptance of class inequalities.[78] At the same time, in 1979 he published a collection of poems in praise of the Iranian revolution.[79] In one of them, Ayatollah Khomeini is called '*gamid giddan*', a very strong man, and is praised for exacerbating relations with Israel and the US. As Negm put it: 'I wrote these poems as the Iranian revolution was on the threshold of victory. I dedicate these poems to Iran, to revolution everywhere and to Egypt'.[80]

Many activists who were involved in the January 2011 uprisings in *Tahrir* Square told me that when young artists sang Negm-Imam's songs in the square, people from different classes and backgrounds started singing along: many knew the songs though not necessarily the singer. Other interviewees affirmed that most people belonging to the lower

Cairo has undergone in the last three decades in terms of demography, migration and social mobility; personal interview, 23/05/2011.

77 Personal interview, 17/01/2011.

78 Interview with Al Naqqash.

79 A. F. Negm, *Ughniyat wa ash'ar lil-thawra* (Songs and poems for the revolution) (Beirut: Dar al Kalima, 1979).

80 Quoted in Abdel-Malek, *A Study*, p. 58.

social strata, and in particular those who were never involved in any political activity, do not know their songs. According to Mustafa Said, the new generation knows these songs better than the old one because of YouTube, though he adds that Sheikh Imam was more famous with the 1960s generation.[81]

For some, Negm-Imam's songs were more famous abroad—in other Arab countries like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine—than in Egypt, largely because in Egypt they were censored.[82] For Said Mustapha, Sheikh Imam was not as famous as Umm Kulthum or Abdel Halim Hafez because he sang provocative songs linked to the political and social context of the time and did not sing about everyday life topics such as love, pain and passion.[83] By contrast, for Zohair Sabbagh, a Palestinian professor of sociology at Birzeit University, 'despite the politics of obscurity, oppression, blockade and banishment which followed the Camp David Accords [...], it is clear to us that amongst the people, the poems of Ahmad Fu'ad Negm and the songs of Sheikh Imam were widely disseminated in Egypt, in our land and throughout the Arab world of silence'.[84]

So were these popular songs or songs of the elite? Negm himself stated that, 'I frankly admit that in my estimation I have not succeeded in becoming the poet of the Egyptian people... a poet who can reach all the Egyptians despite the conspiracy of silence by the state mass media. The reason for this is that our audience is limited to those of the middle-class who listen to our ballads because they can afford to own recording machines.'[85]

For Said Mustapha, these dissenting songs declined from the beginning of the 1980s until the early 2000s mainly because of the disappearance of left-wing political movements.[86] For Corrao, the memory of Sheikh Imam was lost until the birth of new left-wing political movements, and especially until the spread of the Internet. With the rise of the Islamist movement as the main political force—schizophrenically both repressed and co-opted by the regime—the left-wing opposition

81 Mustafa Said, personal interview, 5/05/2011.
82 See interviews in 'Sheikh Imam'; also F. Corrao, personal interview.
83 Said-Mustapha, 'Negm wa al Sheikh Imam'.
84 Quoted in Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London: Methuen & Co., 1987), p. 64.
85 Abdel-Malek, *A Study,* p. 23.
86 Said-Mustapha, 'Negm wa al Sheikh Imam'.

was dismantled, until the birth of *Kefaya* (Enough), the coalition of intellectuals from different ideological backgrounds founded in 2004 that called for the end of Mubarak's regime.[87] Since the leaders of this movement were former students involved in the 1970s uprisings, Sheikh Imam's legacy resurfaced, a view with which artists and audiences I interviewed generally agreed. A few members of the older generation, such as the activist Alaa' el Sheikh, went further and argued that the decline of political movements and of these dissenting songs was related to the fact that the generation born in the 1980s did not grow up in 'the culture of the revolution'.[88] According to Mustafa Said, instead, if this genre of protest songs declined after the 1980s, today there is a renewal of political songs in any style, from classical Arab songs to rap, hip-hop and heavy metal.[89] This takes me to the final section of this chapter, which deals with the influence of Negm and Imam's songs on activists and musicians involved in the 2011 uprising. I argue that a new generation of artists has inherited Sheikh Imam's legacy and still perform his songs, either keeping the same aesthetic features or introducing innovations.

## The Legacy of Sheikh Imam and Ahmed Fu'ad Negm in Tahrir Square

According to all the artists I interviewed during my fieldwork in Cairo in 2011 and who participated in the demonstrations, Sheikh Imam's songs could be heard everywhere in Tahrir square.[90] Many concerts were held, particularly thanks to the engineer and businessman Mamdouh Hamza, who financed the material for these performances. Despite the tightening of censorship in the last years of Mubarak's regime, all these artists could perform in public places and got resonance in the media, especially on Egyptian newspapers in English language and some private television channels.

I decided to conduct focused interviews in particular with two contemporary artists who were involved in the Tahrir events and were

87 See al-Sayyid M. K., '*Kefaya* at a Turning Point', *Political and Social Protest in Egypt*, 29.2–3 (2009), 45–59.

88 Alaa' el Sheikh, personal interview, 6/05/2011.

89 Mustafa Said, personal interview, 5/05/2011. See also Levine, *Heavy Metal Islam.*

90 See also Antoon, 'Singing for the Revolution'.

close to Sheikh Imam's style: Salam Yousry, the director of the theatre company *Al Tamye* (The Silt) and the project *Mashru'a Kural* (The Choir Project); and the *'ud* player Mustafa Said. I prepared a questionnaire that covered their social and political background; censorship and self-censorship; channels of diffusion; the aesthetic features of their works; humour and satire; old and new issues in their songs; their audiences; their motivations and political involvement; disappearance and renewal of songs of protest.

### *Salam Yousry: Al Tamye Theatre Company and The Choir Project*

Theatre and choir director Salam Yousry founded *Al Tamye* Theatre Company in 2002, which performed the show *Al Tamye wahed wa al shagar alwan* (Same mud, different trees) from 2003 to 2009.[91] The show was a tribute to Sheikh Imam and built on songs chosen from Imam's repertoire. These included *'El ful wa el lahma'* (Beans and meat), *'Bayan Haam'* (An important announcement), *'Shayyd Qusurak'* (Build your castles), and *'Kelmeteen le Masr'* (A few words for Egypt).[92] While the bare and humourous lyrics remained the same, the songs were deconstructed, stretched into longer acts and developed into parodic sketches following the style of composer Sayyed Darwish. The instruments were the same as in Sheikh Imam's performances, namely an *'ud* and percussions, with solo voices alternating with long parts sung by the choir. The performance was carried out by twenty-five singers/actors and a choir, which played a central role.

Most of *Al Tamye*'s members are former students of the faculty of fine arts—Salam Yousry himself is a painter and the son of artists—and are part of the upper-middle class. Some professional musicians and actors joined the company. Most members were born to parents who were themselves involved in political activities in the 1970s and used to attend Sheikh Imam's concerts. Likewise, the audience of *Al Tamye's* performances consists mainly of upper-middle class students, activists, the sons and daughters of the generation who used to demonstrate in Tahrir Square in the 1970s.

91 See http://www.altamye.com/
92 Mahmoud, 'Act of Parody'.

When I asked Salam Yousry about censorship and self-censorship, he replied that finding subtle ways of getting around them can sometimes stimulate artistic creation. He also added that the *mukhabarat* (secret service) always try to intimidate associations and venues hosting this kind of performances—in Cairo the most important ones at the time of this research were *Al Saqya* cultural centre, *Rawabet* Theatre and the Townhouse Gallery. The internet is the main tool of advertisement, especially Facebook. According to him, the show, initially very light, became politically charged and challenging, mainly after the Gaza bombing in 2009.[93]

Concerning the themes of the songs, Salam Yousry argues that the social issues treated by Imam are still contemporary, and even 'Bayram Tunsi's poems still concern living matters'. However, some themes and targets—like revolutionary heroes, political figures, and the war against Israel—have changed or are out of date. Interestingly, when I asked him about the link between Sheikh Imam's songs and Egyptian nationalist ideology, Yousry replied that he lost interest in performing this show because many verses are too nationalistic and distant from his beliefs. This is why he started creating new shows and later developed the Choir Project.

The *Masru'a Kural* or Choir Project is the other 'child' of Salam Yousry.[94] Born in 2010 as The Complaints Choir in Cairo—on the model of the one created by Kalleinen and Kochta-Kalleinen in Helsinki in 2005—this is a participatory project involving non-professional and professional singers and musicians.[95] Project participants write the songs during workshops lasting a few days and then perform in different venues; the themes are chosen from everyday problems in Cairo, such as traffic, pollution, as well as from issues of national interest, like unemployment, corruption, religious extremism.

I consider this project an important example of contemporary dissenting music. In fact, it is possible to find similarities with Sheikh Imam's songs, particularly for what concerns the songs' aesthetic features and political and social commitment: the music is minimalistic, though several instruments are played (an '*ud*, a *daf* or large-sized frame

93 Salam Yousry, personal interview,17/01/2011.
94 See http://www.choirproject.net/
95 See http://www.complaintschoir.org/

drum, an accordion, a melodica; a guitar and a *ney* reed flute were recently added); the melodies are simple and easy to memorize, and the lyrics are far more important than the musical compositions. Take the following extract:

> Workers are not heard,
>
> Factories have been sold
> The wheat we eat is American
> Our natural gas is sent abroad.
> I am a stranger in my own country
> My rights are trampled on
> Banks in place of green spaces
> All sense of justice gone.[96]

As Salam Yousry points out, these songs, like Sheikh Imam's, challenge the regime because they are collective, easy to memorize and increase people's social and political awareness and their involvement in the social sphere. This choir gives the participants an experience of collectiveness and of what collective action without leadership means. This is no doubt the main reason why Salam Yousry is persona non grata to the regime.

### *Mustafa Said*

Mustafa Said is a young virtuoso *'ud* player and composer from Egypt who teaches the *'ud* at Antonine University in Beirut. During our interview, he stated that Sheikh Imam was the only musician who conveyed the thoughts of the street, and that his songs, after a decline due to the dissolution of left-wing political movements, have reappeared in the last six-seven years. Said is the only musician I met who is not from an upper-class background; he gained his first musical experiences in the Sufi circles of Tanta, a city between Cairo and Alexandria. Although he does not usually sing Sheikh Imam's songs, I decided to include him in my research because of the song he composed for the revolution and performed in Tahrir Square in February 2011.

96 See 'Cairo Complaints Choir, May 2010, Part 1'.

The song's title is *'Ya Masri hanit'* (Oh Egypt this is only a few days away), with lyrics by the Palestinian-Egyptian poet Tamim Barghouti.[97] In a BBC broadcast, Said was interviewed along with Ahmad Fu'ad Negm: this is a revealing image that presents Said as the heir of Negm-Imam, though he has his own personal style that draws more from erudite music than from popular Egyptian style.[98] The way Said uses his voice in this song sometimes reminds one of Qur'an recitation: his pitch rises and descends fast with many embellishments, the *'ud* is a strong presence and is not only used as accompaniment but almost as a proper voice with an 'angry' tune. Unlike Negm-Imam's songs, there is almost no humour, and the dominant feelings in the song are pride and anger. This is an extract:

> Oh Egypt this is only a few days away
> Our day will be dewy
> And the day of the villain is gone.
> There is nothing left of the regime
> Other than a few batons,
> [...]
> O people there is no ruler
> Except in the imaginary of the ruled
> And those who will stay at home will be like traitors,
> Would be as if they handed the rest to the police
> Or told about where they live.
> [...]
> O Egypt we have become prisoners
> Dead and alive
> So those who stay at home are impossible to understand
> And those who go out will be protected by God.[99]

Aside from the song and his relationship with Sheikh Imam, Mustafa Said's music can be considered as the most interesting expression of his dissent, since it touches the core question concerning the Western cultural colonial heritage in Egypt. Along with his ensemble Asil and the foundation Amar (Arab Music Archives and Research) based in Beirut, Mustafa Said has managed to inject new life into the Arab music

97 Mustafa Said, 'Ya Masri hanit' (Oh Egypt this is only a few days away)', http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7l26PsSF6Q

98 BBC News Arabic, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZqtLDWA5ng&t=74s .

99 Transcribed from the video at footnote 97.

heritage of the early twentieth century, the music that existed before the Cairo Congress of 1932, when Western musicologists set the canon of modern Arab classical music. According to Said, the music before the Cairo Congress was deleted on purpose as a result of cultural colonisation from the West. According to Mustafa this colonial approach is still poisoning the image of Arab music in Europe nowadays.[100]

## Conclusions

This chapter has shown how lyrics written in a vernacular language and their musical arrangements have been tools for challenging the establishment and mainstream culture throughout twentieth century Egyptian history. A common thread links the compositions and poetry of Sayyed Darwish and Bayram Tunsi to those of Sheikh Imam and Ahmad Fu'ad Negm and the work of contemporary artists. An analysis of the latter's music and lyrics highlights how Imam-Negm's songs were composed according to musical idioms and poetics rooted in the Egyptian popular culture, embedding a collective imaginary in terms of popular themes and the role of humour. An analysis of the audiences and diffusion of these songs shows that despite their involvement in political struggles, Imam and Negm were—and still are—mainly popular among middle- and upper-class intellectuals and students, though their popularity did traverse social and ideologically boundaries.

As to the duo's influence on contemporary artists, this chapter has argued that, even though today some of their themes and language have become outdated, Imam-Negm's songs still represent an aesthetic reference for collective struggle. This living heritage is the product of a century-long tradition of vernacular resistance poetry put to music, connecting the grievances of several generations of Egyptians.

In fact, the evolution of dissenting songs offers a tool for analysing colonial cultural relations and twentieth-century Egyptian history from political, social, musical, and literary perspectives. Highlighting the renewed popularity argues and influence of Negm-Imam's song in Tahrir Square and with contemporary artists in 2011, this chapter has shown that old and new dissenting songs of Cairo do not necessarily

100 See 'Medinea Meetings 2015'.

draw inspiration from imported genres, such as rock and rap, and that they can be the product of renewed local forms of music and poetry. 'Innovation' in art production is not necessarily the integration of western patterns into 'a' supposedly conservative Arab culture.

This leads me to my final point. A decade after my fieldwork and the uprising of 2011, I want to end this chapter with a few reflections on some of the consequences of the intensified circulation of Arab artists in the French and British cultural scenes after the upheaval of 2011 in Egypt, reflections that are directly relevant to the question of global circulation that is at the heart of world literature as well as world music.

After I returned to France in summer 2011, a number of cultural organizations suddenly manifested an interest in my research. Meanwhile, projects led by 'young revolutionary artists' were produced, and major festivals and cultural organizations across Europe began to programme them.[101] This enthusiasm provoked intense questioning about how 'Arab cultures' in general—and the Egyptian 'revolutionary experience' in particular—get represented in European institutions. Many researchers started reflecting on how the 'revolution' and its main actors were becoming part of the international institutional machinery. Ilka Eickhof noted how the 'Arab springs' have been an important catalyst for international interest in the Arab art scene and for foreign intervention.[102] And according to Richard Jacquemond, the post-2011 period is marked by a re-organisation of the 'Arab cultural space' that includes an accelerated circulation of artists and intellectuals between Arab countries and Europe, and between Arab countries themselves, producing a 're-conceptualisation of the Arab cultural space and a shifting in the transnational dynamics.'[103] But, as Laura Gribbon argues, 'the game of the international artistic market tending to promote a post-orientalist and post-2011 version of the rebellious Arab artist started to push local actors to conform to the representations of themselves

101 See for example the event 'A night in Tahrir' organised within the first edition of Shubbak Festival.

102 See Ilka Eickhof, 'My friend, the Rebel. Structures and Dynamics of Cultural Foreign Funding in Cairo', *Arab Revolutions and Beyond: Change and Persistence, Berlin: Working Paper*, 11 (2014); and Ilka Eickhof, 'All that is Banned is Desired: "Rebel Documentaries" and the Representation of Egyptian Revolutionaries', *Middle East - Topics & Arguments*, 6 (2016).

103 Richard Jacquemond and Frédéric Lagrange, eds, *Culture pop en Egypte: entre mainstream commercial et contestation* (Paris: Riveneuve, 2020).

that circulated abroad or, at a minimum, to negotiate with these representations.'[104]

The sudden interest of French cultural organizations in my research topic enabled me to start working in the autumn of 2011 as a cultural operator and project curator. But if the possibility to make European ears hear voices from the alternative Egyptian artistic scene filled me with satisfaction, the enthusiasm shown by cultural institutions and audiences for the Egyptian 'revolution' and its protagonists left me with a voyeuristic and neo-colonial aftertaste. Despite my best intentions, I started feeling uncomfortable in my professional environment, especially given the ways in which some important French cultural institutions framed and presented artistic projects led by Arab artists. The institutional machinery, I felt, was transforming these artists into guinea pigs, just as the Canadian Lebanese artist Jayce Salloum had shown in his 1993 video project on the impact of the European glaze on narratives of the Lebanese civil war.[105] Simply put, the narrative of the 'heroes of the resistance' that emerged in the immediate post-2011 period builds on two alternative clichés: artists are either depicted as the heirs to a mythical tradition that is frozen in the past and requiring preservation (rather than being invented and constantly renegotiated); or else the same artists are represented as symbols of a (neo)colonial model of modernity and encouraged to adopt European dominant tastes and artistic norms.[106] As a result, artists seem to embody what the Egyptian poet Tamim Barghouti calls the 'false dichotomy of innovation versus heritage, where innovation means westernization, and heritage means backwardness and reactionary behaviours'.[107] This is why, in order to counter this tendency, I decided to focus on musicians who are part of a transnational community that defines itself as the 'alternative Arab artistic scene' and draws inspiration from local aesthetics and

104 Laura, Gribbon, 'New Coat, Same Colors: Ilka Eickhof on Funding and Cultural Politics', *Mada Masr, April 7* (2014).

105 See Jayce Salloum and Walid Ra'ad's video 'Tal3een al janub' (1993), in particular the interview at min. 57.11.

106 Richard Jacquemond, 'Un mai 68 arabe? La révolution égyptienne au prisme du culturel', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de Méditerranée*, 138 (December 2015).

107 Tamim Barghouti, excerpt of the text 'Circulation of Heritage and Innovation, on Both Sides of the Mediterranean', commissioned by Festival d'Aix for the Medinea Meetings 2015.

music forms.[108] Mustafa Said, with whom I later collaborated, represents a perfect antidote to the false dichotomy mentioned above.[109]

Following a conference that I curated in 2015, I started enquiring into how institutional discourses and curatorial approaches on the 'Arab artist' label have evolved in the last ten years, and how the postcolonial repositioning in arts production and dissemination is affecting the collaboration between European organisations and Arab artists.[110] Indeed, in the last three or four years, some important European cultural institutions have started questioning the 'Arab culture' or 'African culture' labels by staging debates and activities gathering professionals, artists and researchers around this question. For example, BOZAR organised the symposium 'Race, power & culture: a critical look at Belgian cultural institutions' in Brussels in May 2019, and Les Bancs Publics held an event on 'Post-migrant creation in Europe' at La Friche de la Belle de Mai in Marseilles in September 2017.[111]

London's Shubbak festival, with which I have worked, has also been very active in this regard. In July 2019 we organized four events, among which a talk on 'Programming contemporary Arab culture: a critical look at institutional discourses and practices',[112] attended by established artists and professionals, and a roundtable on 'Working with European institutions' involving mainly young artists from the Middle East invited by Shubbak.[113] The events framed the issue so as to show that the 'Arab

108 See the work of artists Kamilya Joubran, Tamer Abu Ghazaleh, Abdullah Miniawy; researchers Youssef El Chazli and Ali Charrier have written expensively on this topic.

109 See Mustafa Said's interview on this issue at the 2015 Medinea Meetings organized by the Festival d'Aix in Marseilles; 'Medinea Meetings 2015'.

110 Ibid.

111 https://www.bozar.be/en/activities/149228-symposium-race-power-culture; and https://www.lafriche.org/evenements/creation-post-migratoire-en-europe/

112 Invitees included the Syrian-French Paris-based arts manager and cultural thinker Jumana Al-Yasiri, British-Egyptian Artistic Director of Battersea Arts Centre Tarek Iskander, Moroccan artist Younes Atbane, Lebanese Programs and Editorial Coordinator at Mophradat Brussels Marie-Nour Hechaime, Lebanese artist, activist, theatre maker Hanane Hajj-Ali, British Director of The Mosaic Rooms Rachel Jarvis, and Egyptian Country Director of Drosos Foundation Wessam El Beih.

113 Invitees included Moroccan dancer Youness Aboukaloul, Jordan theatre maker Amal Raphael Khouri, Lebanese actress and director Tamara Saade, Egyptian-Dutch spoken-word artist Samira Saleh, Tunisian dancer Mohamed Toukabri, Egyptian cartoonists Mohamed and Haithem El Seht, Egyptian arts journalist

culture' label created and used by European cultural institutions is a contested one, often co-opted by different political agendas. The main critique revolved around the fact that if this label has helped some up-and-coming Arab artists to create a niche in a very competitive British artistic environment, it has also forced these artists to conform to institutional requirements in terms of topics, formats, and aesthetics to adopt. One speaker interestingly summed up the general picture by highlighting its contradiction: 'If, on the one hand, a number of European cultural organisations supporting Arab artists ask these artists to comply with their expectations and those of their audiences, on the other hand, the same institutions are in search of 'authentic' artistic projects that represent different visions of the world.'[114] Other artists pointed out that many colleagues have started rejecting these requirements and proposed new mobilisation strategies against what they called the 'NGO-ization' of the arts, and to reverse this domination. For example, some suggested avoiding 'hot' issues disseminated by mainstream media and recurring in the programmes of British organisations showcasing Arab artists, such as migration, war, religion, freedom of expression, cultural preservation, and so on. A participant raised the question of how to adapt the aesthetics of art projects created for audiences in European capitals to a local Egyptian audience (and if it makes sense to do so).

Navigating between my experiences of researcher and curator, in the last ten years I have begun to understand how the intensified circulation of Arab artists in European cultural institutions after 2011 has created patterns of mutual influence. Despite the contradictions implied by the adoption of the 'Arab artist' label, the increased attention and resources allocated by European institutions to promote artistic creation from Arab countries have allowed the creation of spaces for open debate involving artists, professionals, and researchers. Discussions have revolved around how institutional narratives and modes of production impact artistic work, and what strategies artists and professionals can adopt to respond to this tendency. These debates have opened up unexpected positive evolutions in the field and are contributing to reframing the relationship between the actors involved in the artistic market.

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Ismail Fayyed, Egyptian playwright Sara Shaarawi, Palestinian director of theatre Samar Khalil, and Moroccan cultural operator Mehdi El Azdem.

114 Tarek Iskander.

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