

The Music of the People: An Introduction to Egyptian *Sha 'bī*

This dissertation project, towards a doctorate in ethnomusicology, focuses on a recent (1970s) category of Egyptian popular music which came to be labeled with the term *sha 'bī* and its role in shaping and expressing Egyptian working class cultural identity. *Sha 'bī*, an Arabic word meaning “folk, traditional,” and “popular,” is often considered “the music of the people” as it is created and consumed by the working class, the vast majority upon whose backs Egypt races towards extensive modernization and militarization. Often considered tasteless and vulgar by the Egyptian intelligentsia, this music celebrates the exigencies of *sha 'bī* street culture using a new textual and musical language fused with an urbanized and vernacularized “thick description” of Egyptian working class identity (Geertz 1973). Due to the fact that *sha 'bī* exists in a contradictory status, both revered and despised, it has the potential to reveal a great deal about the relationship between the subaltern and the popular. Truly, *sha 'bī* music culture provides a window through which we can see both domains clearly, as well as the cultural complexities of Egyptian class identity, custom, tradition and innovation.

Sha 'bī has proven to be a significant cultural phenomenon in two fundamental ways. Firstly, in direct opposition to Egyptian art music, or *mūsīqa al-'arabiyya* (literally: Arab music), *sha 'bī* grew out of Cairo's working class districts in the late 1970s early 1980s. Largely renounced by conservatory trained musicians and their upper class patrons, *sha 'bī* featured unkempt working class performers, short fast songs sung in a street-based vernacular to express previously inappropriate subjects such as politics or sex, and a small band consisting of musical instruments associated with Egyptian folk and art music as well as with the West. Secondly, in direct correlation with Cairo's booming cassette industry, singers of *sha 'bī*, like Ahmed 'Adawiya, sold millions of cassettes and attained superstar status virtually overnight. Within five years *sha 'bī* became the most popular music of Egypt, setting the standard for future waves of popular music for most of the Arab world.

Egyptians who identify with *sha 'bī* culture often uphold a sense of cultural authenticity in contrast with upper class modernized/Westernized Egyptians who view this term as signifying the antithesis of Egypt's elite cosmopolitanisms; the cultural backwardness of the uneducated masses. From this point of view, *sha 'bī* music culture is in contradistinction to the romanticized and essentialized ideal of folk culture established by late twentieth century Egyptian nationalism, modernist ideology, and cultural policy. Despite *sha 'bī*'s enormous popularity as a music genre, it is precisely these ideological tensions that have led to its official castigation resulting in its censorship from television, radio, and press. By merely drawing attention to itself, an “undesirable” *sha 'bī* culture, challenges the matrix of permissibility regulated and enforced by the guardians of Egypt's dominant modernist ideology and Islamic infrastructure.

Embracing the Popular: The Significance of this Research

The primary aim of this project is to examine *sha 'bī*'s socio-cultural impact on class identity, cultural policy, and the music industry in Egypt. *Sha 'bī* was the impetus for a reconfiguration of cultural ideals, class stereotypes, and became a potent source for upbeat socio-political critique. Thus, its impact on Egyptian society at large, as well as the eastern Arab world, can no longer be overlooked.

I have chosen this subject for two reasons: First, *sha‘bī*’s unique status as both an extremely widespread “music of the people” as well as a culturally contested manifestation of “undesirable” class identity is ripe for musicological, sociological, ideological, and cultural interpretation. Second, while included in some works (Armbrust 1996, Danielson 1996, and Racy 1977, 1982), there is presently a vacuity of Western and indigenous scholarship regarding Egyptian *sha‘bī* music culture. With regard to the West, this issue is related to the fact that popular music studies is a relatively new field (1970s) and ethnomusicology has traditionally focused on folk and art/classical music traditions. With regard to Egyptian scholarship, this issue underscores the contentious relationship *sha‘bī* has with Egypt’s elitist cultural policies. For these reasons this project is important and timely as it taps the pulse of Egyptian street culture, featuring subaltern voices of Egypt’s underrepresented majority in a politically-charged region and era; a time when such perspectives are crucial for a deeper cultural awareness of the Arab world.

As the first monograph centered on a Middle Eastern popular music outside the folk and art/classical genres, the fields of ethnomusicology and popular music studies will benefit from the new contributions this work makes towards bridging gaps from past studies to the contemporary. My detailed analyses of *sha‘bī*’s modes, rhythms, lyrics, and compositional techniques towards a comparative analysis between *sha‘bī*, Egyptian art music (*al-mūsīqā al-‘arabiyya*), and Egyptian folk music (*al-mūsīqā al-sha‘biyya*), is a potentially valuable resource for scholars of Middle Eastern music. Unpacking the differences and similarities between these genres highlights, of course, specific musicological elements but also sheds light on what Egyptians of a specific class find culturally important. With over eight years of participant-observer experience with *sha‘bī* music professionals, the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, and Middle East studies will benefit from a new ethnohistory on working class communities, their formation of identity, and the creation of a burgeoning “cassette culture,” an informal street-based music market (Manuel 1993).

My Research History and Method

I have resided in Cairo, Egypt for various lengths of time since 1998, studying Arabic, solo instrument theory and technique (on *‘ūd* [lute] and *qānūn* [plucked zither]), and conducting research for different projects. I befriended several musicians from the main categories of Egyptian music (folk, art, and popular) and, in addition to extensive interviewing, was soon performing in *sha‘bī* bands all over Egypt. Still an undergraduate during these first trips, I could not foresee that this ethnographic work would fill the pages of my future dissertation. In this way I have devoted the past eight years towards developing cultural competency in *sha‘bī* social circles, a viable research methodology, and ultimately, the fruition of this project.

In fall of 2003, at the beginning of my Ph.D. program, I completed the foundation for this research with a Fulbright IIE fellowship in Cairo, Egypt. In this ten month grant period I established many of the contacts and sources needed to actively pursue this research. The four cornerstones of my multidisciplinary ethnography include: (1) archival analyses of published texts and sound recordings (cassettes, studio tapes, etc.) as well as historic information on primary *sha‘bī* personalities (singers, composers, producers, etc.); (2) musical analyses of modes, rhythms, timbres and aesthetics; (3) private lessons on *‘ūd* (fretless lute), *qānūn* (plucked zither),

and in arrangement techniques, to facilitate a thorough understanding of *sha 'bī* performance practices; and (4) extensive interviews with music professionals, including professors of art and folk music, families, friends, and acquaintances from all classes.

Upon my return to the United States I organized and chaired a panel on Middle Eastern popular music at the Society for Ethnomusicology national conference (Nov. 2004), and gave a presentation titled: "Egyptian *Sha 'bī* and the Permissibility of Pop." I also transcribed, translated, directed, and performed (as solo vocalist) two famous *sha 'bī* songs in the UCSB (Univ. of California, Santa Barbara) Middle East Ensemble. In the winter of 2005 I returned to Cairo for one year with a Fulbright-Hays dissertation research fellowship where I continued my research. After being invited to present my findings in Egypt at the Fulbright Commission, the American Research Center of Egypt, and the American Cultural Center, I was afforded the opportunity to discuss and debate aspects of this research with Egyptian intellectuals and other American scholars. As a result of these activities, and the interest in my research on *sha 'bī*, I have been asked to submit four articles to journals and edited editions (three have been submitted).

Research Schedule

Since the majority of my fieldwork has been completed my research schedule has transformed into a dissertation writing schedule. Aspects of my research that remain, such as archival, analytical, and interpretational work, are being integrated directly into the potential dissertation chapters and appendices. After the completion of my Fulbright-Hays dissertation research project in Cairo, Egypt on November 6, 2006, it took our family a few months to find another home and settle back into Santa Barbara. My work has resumed slowly but I have devoted myself to the actualization of the following goals:

- 1) End of 2007: dissertation draft submitted to my committee.
- 2) Beginning of 2008: editing, rewriting, and incorporating material as advised by my committee.
- 3) Spring 2008: travel to Cairo Egypt to consult with my research affiliates and colleagues as well as to conduct auxiliary research.
- 4) Late summer 2008: resubmission of dissertation to my committee.
- 5) Fall 2008: dissertation completed and filed.
- 6) Late fall 2008: dissertation defense.

I have made some progress on my dissertation, such as partially-completed introductory chapters, a finished chapter, a table of contents, and an annotated bibliography. I plan to write 4-5 hours a day (five days a week at least) and archive and analyze my research data 4-5 hours a day. With the exception of occasional guest lecture-demonstrations, conferences, rehearsals, and sporadic performances, the majority of my time will be devoted to dissertation writing. Due to the fact that I have written introductory material and my full-time writing regime has already commenced, I am confident that a dissertation draft will be submitted per my projected goal (end of 2007).

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