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Satellite TV & Islamic Pop Culture in Egypt

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Before the advent of the satellite era, state television channels did (and continue to) broadcast religious genres of music during major Islamic religious holidays and during the month of Ramadan. These songs are usually older recordings in classical Arabic, with limited instrumental accompaniment and juxtaposed with montages of low-quality, stock images—primarily of natural phenomena, religious sites, Arabic calligraphy and the Quran, and Muslims engaged in ritual acts such as circumambulation of the Kaaba in Mecca. Very rarely are the singer or singers (frequently, but not always, male) depicted alongside the images, and in general, these videos convey a sense of solemn religiosity set apart from the ordinary rhythm of daily life.

In contrast, popular pan-Arab satellite music video channels such as Mazzika, Melody, and Rotana broadcast a new style of religious music video that combines lyrics in colloquial Arabic in praise of God and the prophet Muhammad with *shababi* (youth) style instrumental music and a new set of high-quality, commercially appealing images and storylines in contemporary settings. Although they are broadcast more frequently during the month of Ramadan and religious holidays, the most popular songs appear throughout the year and like other music videos that circulate within the prospering satellite television-mobile phone economy, they are available for downloading as ring tones or videos onto viewers' cell phones.

This new trend of commoditized religious music video emphasizes the dignity and humanity of Islam and its harmonious integration with a comfortable, middle-class modern lifestyle. The popular Egyptian

Sami Yusuf,
Amman, 2006

With the proliferation of music video channels on pan-Arab satellite television in the past decade, new styles of religious-themed videos are appearing on these alternative outlets to state television broadcasting. The growth and popularity of this new genre of religious music videos, along with "clean" cinema and Islamic satellite television productions, reflects shifting discourses concerning the arts and entertainment within the Islamic Revival. This essay explores the appearance of these music videos within a particular cultural moment in the Arab world in which popular culture is increasingly the site of ethical-aesthetic interventions aimed at moral and social reform.

tian boy-band WAMA, for example, released in 2005 the popular hit *Kan Nifsi* (I wish that I could)—a slow, lyrical song with no musical features to mark it as "religious" except the faint sounds of the call to prayer, set against the background noise of a busy metropolitan city, that begin the track. Using the simple colloquial language that predominates in *shababi* music, the four university-aged members of the group take turns singing of their desire to meet the prophet Muhammad, to sit with him and his companions in heaven, and to follow his path in Islam. Dressed in chic, all-white casual cloth-

ing, the boys wander among the golden sand dunes of a beautiful remote desert location, the kind that financially comfortable Egyptians, not just foreigners, increasingly frequent as the national tourist industry taps into the disposable incomes of the new moneyed classes created by the neo-liberal economic policies of the past three decades. The video ends with the boys walking into the sunset shoulder to shoulder, conveying a message of brotherly unity in Islam.

Pious performers

Although many of these stylish religious songs, like the WAMA video described above, present male homosocial worlds and bonding experiences in Islam, others prominently feature female performers. One example is the song *Illa Ibn Abdallah* (Except for the Son of Abdallah), which was first aired around the time of the Prophet's birthday celebration (*Mawlid al-Nabi*) in 2006. A response to the Danish cartoon controversy, the video features a large group of pan-Arab singers staging a peaceful protest to express outrage over the derogatory treatment of the Prophet and their love and respect for the son of Abdallah (the name of Muhammad's father) and his religion. The female performers, dressed in fashionable white veils, sing in the chorus and alternate with their male counterparts as soloists; one of the female singers, Sahar Fadil, is a "repentant" artist who used to star in racy music videos of the variety referred to by critics as "burnu klibhat" (porno clips). Another example from Ramadan 2006 is the song *Khalihha 'Ala Allah* (Leave the Matter to God), performed by the respected Syrian singer Assala Nasry. The lyrics in Egyptian colloquial praise God and describe the singer's pious love and devotion, and the images depict her (veiled) in prayer and (unveiled) reading the Quran, donating food, and breaking the Ramadan fast with her children in her well-appointed home.

PHOTO BY STR NEW / © REUTERS, 2006

Image not available online

The growing number and popularity of songs such as these reflect the broader trend toward public displays of Islamic piety and increased support for Islamist socio-political visions that have marked Arab society as a whole since the 1970s. But it must be stressed that the Islamic Revival has affected the Arab world's entertainment industry, in particular its twentieth-century capital, Egypt, in a number of different ways (see Van Nieuwkerk's article in this issue for further discussion of this history). In the 1980s and early 1990s, popular

Egyptian cassette and television preachers such as Shaykh Abd al-Hamid Kishk, Shaykh Muhammad Mitwalli al-Shaarawi, and Shaykh Omar Abd al-Kafi criticized Egypt's national entertainment industry as morally harmful to Muslim audiences and called upon performers to repent and retire from their professional activities.¹ The Egyptian national press sensationalized cases of these "conversions" and attributed them to the spread of extremism and corrupting Gulf influences on Egyptian society. While male stars were also part of this phenomenon, the veiling and repentance of female entertainers by far received the most attention in the popular media. Although most of these "repentant" female artists left the entertainment industry, a few, such as Huda Sultan, donned the veil but continued to work under conditions acceptable to their new sense of religiosity.

Since the late 1990s, many male and female performers and media personalities have embraced the latter alternative. The advent of transnational satellite television broadcasting in the Arab world in the late 1990s has been accompanied by an explosion in private, commercial television productions with Islamic themes. Muslim scholars, popular preachers, and producers are actively encouraging the creation of alternative forms of pious entertainment, and the growth of religious satellite television programming in the last decade has provided numerous opportunities for formally retired male and female media personalities to utilize their talents, but this time appearing in Islamic-appropriate dress as preachers, hosts of talk show programmes, or actors in television serials with suitably pious roles. In the Egyptian cinema industry, a growing number of filmmakers, actors, and actresses, veiled and unveiled, refuse to visually portray sexually explicit scenes, appear in immodest clothing, or depict immoral characters. The new regime of morally disciplined representations in the "clean cinema" trend, as Egyptian critics have dubbed it, marks a shift in the Islamic Revival towards regarding the entertainment industry as an arena for refashioning religio-ethical norms, particularly ones surrounding the female body and sexuality. In this new site of social reform, as Karim Tartoussieh notes in a perceptive recent analysis of clean cinema, "The sinfulness of art—a discourse that was prevalent in the 1980s and resulted in many female actors renouncing their artistic careers and veiling—is replaced by a different discourse that is amicable to popular culture as an arena of social purity and morality."² This alternative discourse of *al-fann al-hadif* (purposeful art) stresses the responsibility of the artist to serve as a model of moral decency and to convey socially constructive messages in his or her work.

Purposeful art

The increasing presence and popularity of religious videos on satellite music television channels reflects this shift towards *al-fann al-hadif* within the Islamic Revival's discourse regarding entertainment and the arts, a discourse that is often reflected in the images and narrative tropes of the music videos themselves. Sami Yusuf's hit music video *al-Mu'allim* (The Teacher) provides an exemplary illustration of the proper relationship between artists, social responsibility, and Islamic piety articulated within the discourse of *al-fann al-hadif*. A transnationally acclaimed British artist of Azeri origin, Yusuf was introduced to Arab satellite television audiences by the popular preacher Amr Khaled, whose discussions on culture and media on the programme *Sunna' al-Hayah* (Lifemakers) encouraged young Muslim artists not to retire but to use their God-given talents in the service of strengthening the Muslim community.³ A trained musician and composer but not a native Arabic speaker, Yusuf's albums blend primarily English lyrics with Arabic, Turkish, and Hindi vocals and refrains, and his compositions employ a range of Middle Eastern and Western instruments, rhythms, and melodic themes. The singer's first album, entitled *al-Mu'allim* (The Teacher)—referring, of course, to the prophet Muhammad—was released in 2003, and a music video of the title track was shot in Egypt using an Egyptian director (Hani Usama) and production team. It debuted on Arab music satellite television stations during Ramadan 2004, and it has remained one of the most popular and frequently aired religious music videos since then.

The video of "al-Mu'allim" juxtaposes English and Arabic lyrics in praise of the prophet Muhammad with images of a chic young photographer, portrayed by the singer, going about his daily life; working in his studio in his large, well-appointed suburban Cairo home; behaving kindly to his veiled old mother and the people in his community; and teaching religious lessons to children amidst the splendour of Islamic Cairo's medieval architectural heritage. At the end of the video, he drives off in an SUV to undertake a solo photography shoot in the desert, and in the darkness, he captures on film the image of a glowing, Kaaba-like structure radiating light, perhaps meant to symbolize *al-nur al-muhammadi* (the primordial light of Muhammad). The video thus emphasizes the special role that the artist, in this case a photographer, plays in devoting his talents to expressing the beauty of God's creation and the truth of the Prophet's message. At the same time, he leads an exemplary and pious life in his community, all the while enjoying the technological amenities and comforts of a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle. In this way, Yusuf's on-screen music video persona embodies the ideals of *al-fann al-hadif*—tasteful art with an appropriate message of moral respectability and social responsibility—a persona that is reinforced by the singer's interviews and website statements that articulate his dedication to working for the well-being of the Muslim ummah.⁴

Importantly, the music video as a genre on the whole stands in sharp contrast to the moral parameters of *al-fann al-hadif* in the minds of many viewers in the Arab world. The same satellite music channels that broadcast the new style of religious videos also broadcast a notorious and controversial style of racy music videos, labelled "burnu klibhat" (porno clips) by critics, that the genre of music videos as a whole has become associated with. While the banal lyrics, hackneyed tunes, and apolitical nature of these videos also draw criticism, what audiences and critics object to most are the revealing clothes and overtly seductive dance moves of the female models and singers. These sexualized representations of female entertainers, as well as the considerable outcry against them, echo the centuries-old debate in the Islamic tradition over the moral character of artists and the potentially dangerous affect of music and entertainment upon the subjectivity of the audience.⁵ As the work of Karin van Nieuwkerk, among others, demonstrates, female entertainers are regarded as particularly threatening because the improper display of their bodies is understood to easily tempt male spectators to commit adultery and other grave sins.⁶

By adhering to the chaste conventions of the clean cinema genre, which many television dramas as well as the new style of religious music videos also uphold, male and female entertainers and media personalities distance themselves from the cultural association of art with immorality. While representations of women as mothers, devout believers, and socially responsible members of their communities and the Muslim ummah are common in the religious videos, depictions of women in sexual relationships as lovers or even wives are scarce. In this way, female singers and models in religious songs mark out a respectable place for themselves in a media genre (the music video) that has become overwhelmingly associated with immodesty and sexual immorality. As the pop religious music video genre evolves with the shifts in the Islamic Revival and local and international political events, the gender dynamics currently on display can also be expected to shift.

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Notes

1. For an insightful analysis of these figures' critiques of secular media culture, see Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), in particular, chapter 4.
2. Karim Tartoussieh, "Pious Stardom: Cinema and the Islamic Revival in Egypt," *Arab Studies Journal* 15, no. 1 (2007): 41.
3. See the English-language transcript of this programme available from Amr Khaled's official website, <http://www.amrkhaled.net/articles/articles406.html>.
4. Sami Yusuf's website—www.samiyusuf.com—posts statements by the singer on his music and current events and also includes links to several interviews with the press.
5. A concise summary of medieval and modern Muslim viewpoints on this issue is found in Lois Al-Faruqi, "Music, Musicians, and Muslim Law," *Asian Music* 17, no. 1 (1985): 3–36.
6. Karin van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1996).

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