PERFORMING MODERNITY: THEATER AND POLITICAL CULTURE
IN EGYPT, 1869-1923

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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“Performing Modernity” examines the intimate relationship between politics and culture in debates over identity and modernity in Egypt. Tracing changes in theater and performance, from the opening of the Khedivial Opera House and Suez Canal (1869) to a flourishing Cairene theatrical scene and demands for independence from colonial rule (circa 1919), it argues that modern theater was integral to shaping a uniquely Egyptian modernity.

This project takes modernity to be a lived historical experience that affected social and cultural practices in all segments of society, reshaping and framing notions of changing Egyptian identities. New technologies and sites of sociability of the late-nineteenth century—theaters, cabarets, the phonograph—alongside the old—streets, places of prayer, coffeehouses—offered myriad spaces for the articulation of that modernity. A focus on the content of performances, discussions surrounding them, and the physical spaces in which they took place offers a unique window onto the ways in
which Egyptians understood themselves, their relationships to one another, and their roles and responsibilities in a modernizing society. Critically, this project contends that modernity in Egypt was localized; while it incorporated European influences, it shaped them to fit local contexts, histories, and needs. Drawing upon underutilized sources like opera, plays, and musical recordings, it focuses on the Khedivial Opera House, middle-class Arabic theater, folk and women’s performances to demonstrate how each contributed to notions of modernity and “Egyptianness” invoked in post-WWI demands for Egyptian independence.
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Introduction

In the late-nineteenth century, Egyptians began to debate what it was that made them Egyptian. Though some individuals had engaged the subject earlier, in the last third of the century internal economic collapse followed by increased foreign imperial involvement in the country engaged more people in public discussion about Egyptian identity than ever before. A flourishing periodical press published articles questioning reasons for Egypt’s “backwardness,” debated the status of women in society, and argued the need to expand education to the broader populace. Muslim clerics proffered reinterpretations of Islam in the context of a modernizing society. Reformers pushed for an end to slavery; engineers called for the adoption of transportation and communication technologies; and literati composed poems and plays about corruption and other social ills. In their circles, intellectuals—writers, journalists, clerics, reformers, lawyers, and other professionals—saw themselves as arbiters of Egyptian modernity and civilization. These educated urbanites portrayed Egypt as a unified economic and political entity composed of a cohesive society. A modern Egyptian, for them, was a gendered, classed, and “civilized” subject—an identity that reflected how they saw themselves.

Intellectuals’ abundant writings make it possible to reconstruct how they depicted modern Egyptianness. But those writings do not account for the perspectives of the majority of Egyptians who were not members of the male urban elite, an elite whose representations of peasants’, women’s, and urban workers’ place in society incorporated them into a narrative of modernity that did not address the realities of their lives. To hear

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non-elite voices necessitates a search beyond nationalist pamphlets and journal articles to other, less obvious (and less accessible) sources. In the late-nineteenth century, new technologies and sites of sociability—theaters, cabarets, the phonograph—alongside the old—streets, places of prayer, coffeehouses—offered myriad spaces in which individuals of varied backgrounds communicated with one another. Investigating such new spaces and technologies, this study seeks to access a broader swath of an Egyptian populace that attempted to navigate rapidly changing political, economic, and social parameters.

“Performing Modernity” opens in 1869, when the Ottoman governor of Egypt, Ismail, presided over the opening of the Suez Canal. It ends in the era of 1919, when Egyptians marched in the streets to demand independence from Britain. At its core, this project’s question is the following: how did Egyptians attempt to reconcile the tension between being “modern” and being “authentically Egyptian,” specifically in an imperial context? Of course, such a question begs a host of others: what did it mean to be modern? What did it mean to be “Egyptian?” Who defined these categories? And what role did theatrical spaces and technologies play in all of this? Thus, this study answers Zachary Lockman’s call for further examination of the “cultural-political field.” As he defines it, this field was an emerging arena of “periodicals, and pamphlets, but also…plays, poems, songs, and other forms of cultural expression” through which people debated issues that continue to dominate debates pertaining to “the cultural politics of the Arab world—modernity, tradition, cultural authenticity, liberty, democracy, nationalism, Islam, and the role, rights, and status of women.”

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This project incorporates underutilized sources like opera, plays, and musical recordings—alongside newspaper articles and official government documents—to demonstrate how processes of cultural exchange, contestation, and interpretation were central to forging a modern, authentic, Egyptian identity. This happened in the most seemingly innocuous and diverse sites, and it was a process that ran up, down, and across society. Specifically, I focus on theater—places like the opera house, Arabic theaters, and urban streets—as a portal into a fluid culture to better understand how Egyptian elite, middle-class, women’s, and urban workers’ identities were forged in the period. By looking at such a variety of performers and spaces, it becomes clear that theater offers a unique window onto the ways in which Egyptians rich and poor, urban and rural, literate and illiterate, male and female, Muslim, Jewish and Christian, wrestled with questions of modern identity. The realities of limited literacy in Egypt increase theater’s significance, for as a site of aural culture, it offered “an important cultural terrain for retrieving marginalized voices of dissent.”

Each of the performative spaces examined, despite considerably different strategies, offered a constellation of scenarios that challenged the past and depicted ideals of Egyptianness and modernity. Those imaginings informed the events of 1919, when people from all walks of life took to the streets to demand Egyptian sovereignty. It also shaped the ways in which modern Egyptian identity would be articulated in the post-revolutionary period.

In examining the cultural-political field, this study is indebted to a great number of works that approach the study of Egyptian society in creative ways. Scholars such as

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Beth Baron, Nelly Hanna, Yoav di-Capua, and others have focused on journals, novels, political tracts, advertisements, and other forms of written expression to provide a critical foundation for further study. Most written sources, however, emphasize elite and middle class voices. Other recent scholarship, such as Hanan Kholoussey’s book on the “marriage crisis” in early-twentieth century Egypt, Ziad Fahmy’s work on colloquial language and Egyptian nationalism, and Eve Troutt Powell’s current research on the memory of slavery in the Nile valley, use sources such as Islamic court records, recorded music, songs, and popular jokes to access an even broader population. “Performing Modernity” dialogues with and advances this emerging scholarship.

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Historical Context

From the early-sixteenth century, Egypt was a territory of the Ottoman Empire. At the time of the opera *Aida*’s premiere in Cairo in 1871, the Khedive Ismail was the fifth ruler of an Ottoman family dynasty that had governed Egypt since the evacuation of Napoleon’s forces in 1801. Starting with Mehmed ‘Ali, the family of rulers initiated various reforms to bring Egypt up to par with the military, technological, and scientific prowess of the Napoleonic expedition. Under Ismail, reforms took an almost frenetic pace as commerce, education, agriculture, communications, and urbanization all expanded. Ismail promoted a good number of indigenous Egyptians to posts previously held by Turks, Europeans, and Armenians. Many of them had participated in Mehmed ‘Ali’s student missions to Europe where they not only acquired professional and technical skills but also encountered Western (especially French) culture in its varied forms. Upon their return to Egypt, such experiences would profoundly shape their notions of history, power, and culture.

By the late-1870s, a combination of economic collapse, recession, and bankruptcy brought Isma’il’s ambitious projects to a grinding halt. European creditors took economic control of the country in 1876 and forced Isma’il’s abdication in 1879. Three years later, the British occupied the country after crushing a rebellion of junior Egyptian army officers against their Turko-Circassian commanders. The ‘Orabi Rebellion of 1882,

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6 For more on Napoleon in Egypt, see Juan Cole, *Napoleon’s Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
as it was termed, marked the beginning of a British imperial presence that persisted through half of the twentieth-century. With the outbreak of World War One, the British cut Egypt’s legal ties to the Ottoman Empire and established martial law in the country. Egyptian demands for independence after the war led Britain to offer unilateral political independence to Egypt, but British military control and political and economic influence persisted until 1956.

**Theater**

In the context of an Egypt shifting from Ottoman province to British protectorate to independent nation-state, individuals across society debated questions of who they were, their role the world, and their destiny. Theater offered one of the most important public arenas for such debates throughout its long history in Egypt and the Arab world. In many ways, the case of Egyptian theater is not unique. The significance of theater as a space for shaping national identities, allowing subaltern speech, and critiquing political and social conditions, appears in theater throughout the Global South. Susan Seizer’s ethnography on Special Drama artists in South India, for example, looks at popular, bawdy, improvisational comedy to explore the ways in which stigmatized, lower-class performers—especially women—use humor and linguistic play to address and negotiate questions of class, culture, and gender. And Joshua Goldstein’s work on Peking opera at the turn of the twentieth century offers a sophisticated analysis of the ways in which

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8 Seizer, *Stigmas*.
Peking opera, which had been a relatively young, fluid art form, came to be constructed and reinterpreted as a tradition that stood as a “monument of Chinese national culture.”

Furthermore, Egyptian theater was deeply embedded within the larger context of performance in the Arab world. Many of the playwrights, composers, lyricists, actors and actresses involved in Egyptian theater were of non-Egyptian origin. Syrians, in particular, contributed heavily to Egyptian theatrical production. Egyptian troupes toured the Levant and North Africa, performing plays that brought them great acclaim. While some troupes used formal Arabic in their performances—an Arabic shared by the entire region—others used colloquial language, thereby facilitating the spread of Egyptian dialect throughout the region. But the dissemination of language and ideals was not unidirectional. In their travels, troupes established and maintained circuits of culture that crossed political boundaries. Traveling entertainments allowed for exchange of ideas about modernity that resounded throughout the Arab world.

Nevertheless, a study of Egyptian theater is critical in its own right. An examination of the Egyptian case makes a unique contribution to understandings of modernity and changing identity in its particular context and specific critiques of Egyptian society at that time. Plays referenced local geographies, spoke to and mocked distinct social groups, and raised doubts about contemporary political and social practices and problems. References to Egypt, Egyptians, and their ancient history helped to shape

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9 Goldstein, Drama Kings, 10.
categories of identity and belonging. Theater, in its many forms, was a dynamic space that engaged directly with questions of modern Egyptian identity.

Scholars debate the degree to which older forms of shadow play, puppetry, street performance, ta’ziya (religious) plays, and the like, might be considered “theater,” arguing that secular European drama had no parallel in the Arab world. Narrowly defining theater through a contemporary lens, they argue that the proscenium stage, “fourth wall” (the separation between actor and audience), and specific forms of audience behavior were not indigenous to the Arab world. Rather, they were European imports. For these reasons, such scholars’ central concerns raise questions such as: how did Arabs learn about this type of drama? And why did modern drama “take so long” to appear in the Middle East? In this way scholars imply more or less explicitly that despite the history of indigenous performance in the Middle East, European—namely French, British, and Italian—forms of theater were more highly developed. As such, they had to be introduced to parts of the world that were less culturally advanced.

Such a narrative does not allow for alternative understandings of theater history or the possibility that drama took multiple forms and meanings. Nor does it ask the types of questions that scholars like Eve Troutt Powell, Dina Amin and Ilham Makdisi address in their work, such as how forms of theater and drama changed over time in the Arab world.

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11 See, for example, Neville Barbour, “The Arabic Theater in Egypt,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies 8 (1935): 176-78; M. M. Badawi, Early Arabic Drama (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Hamdan, Poetics, Politics, and Protest; Landau, Studies in the Arab Theatre; Mohamed Ali al-Khozai, The Development of Early Arabic Drama 1847-1900 (London and New York: Longman, 1984); P. C. Sadgrove, The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century 1799-1882 (Reading, Berkshire, UK: Ithaca Press, 2007). All stress the rupture between older and new forms, pointing to Napoleonic era Egypt as the moment when modern (read: “real”) theater entered Egypt and Arab world for the first time. Without discounting the significant influence of Western theater on Egyptian performance, this study focuses less on rupture and more on cultural transition, exchange, assimilation—processes which demonstrate the agency of Egyptians actively engaged with the modern world.
what functions they served, and why they changed in the ways that they did.\textsuperscript{12} “The West” becomes a standard of measure for cultural change, while local conditions, cultural proclivities, literary contexts, and questions of patronage and power take a back seat.

This work parts from studies which claim that stage-theater in the Middle East was simply an unmediated European import or a forced colonial imposition. Instead, it emphasizes continuities and connections between older and newer forms of dramatic art in Egypt. Without neglecting the influence of European theater, it argues that performance incorporated new theatrical conventions while reinterpreting and reincorporating older modes of performance to engage contemporary tastes and concerns. The physical space of the theater, content of performances, and discussions surrounding them both mirrored and shaped the ways in which Egyptians understood themselves, their relationships to one another, and their roles and responsibilities in a modernizing society.

Focusing on the content and context of dramatic performance is critical for several reasons. For one, the mobility of actors made them vectors of ideas and change. As troupes toured Egypt’s provinces—and the larger Arab world—they served as social links and cultural brokers, disseminating visions of Egyptian identity and modernity to large numbers of individuals. They also created powerful fantasies of a shared Egyptian history, identity, and future. As Nandi Bhatia eloquently argues, “theater’s visual focus, emphasis on collective participation and representation of shared histories, mobility, potential for public disruption, and spatial maneuverability” offers a non-textual means to

recuperate histories not just of the subaltern, but of all segments of society.¹³ This study illuminates the ways in which theater contributed to the creation of these collective histories.

Furthermore, the spatial component of theater makes it a provocative and critical site of study. As James Scott notes, “each place of assembly is a different site of intercourse requiring different manners and morals.”¹⁴ The hierarchical, majestic interior of the opera house shaped and reflected very different relationships between attendees than the communal, interactive experience of the sameer, a theater-in-the-round that blurred the lines between actor and audience. While the sameer encouraged active, vocal audiences, the opera house called for silent viewers assigned to specific seats who witnessed events of which they were not part. A similar contrast existed between salas (music halls) and Arabic theaters. The food and drink offered in the sala created a more convivial (and controversial) atmosphere than that of the more formal Arabic effendi theater. In each space, expectations for degrees of interaction and behavior varied, disciplining audiences in ways that mirrored prescriptive behaviors for modern Egyptians being disseminated in the world outside of the theater.

A framework that undergirds this study draws from James Scott’s work on public and hidden transcripts. Scott defines the public transcript as “a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.”¹⁵ The hidden transcript, conversely, is a “social realm in which the missing part of a subordinate’s replies and assertions may be safely spoken.” It involves a negation of the

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¹³ Bhatia, Acts of Authority, 3.
¹⁵ Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 2.
public transcript and the creation of counterideology. Similarly, I argue that theaters in Egypt offered spaces for the creation and propagation of a hidden transcript as well. Whereas Scott’s primary focus is on of the exercise, maintenance, and resistance to power, this study emphasizes the ways in which social spaces were used to shape and articulate multiple, sometimes contradictory, discourses regarding identity and modernity.

But the walls of Egyptian theater were not solid, encasing only homogenous social groups. Rather, theaters were porous spaces that brought together diverse audiences. Middle-class, or effendi, Arabic theater emphasized the mores of an emergent effendi class but also attracted elites and foreign visitors. Salas, or music halls, full of dancing and singing women, attracted foreign troops stationed in Cairo, landowners from the provinces who visited cities, indigenous middle class men, and top Egyptian politicians. And all theatrical spaces—exempting, perhaps, private performances—faced degrees of surveillance and censorship from both colonial and Egyptian authorities. For these reasons, it would be easy to argue that the diversity of theatrical audiences and participants makes it difficult to claim Egyptian theater was an unmediated site for the creation of hidden discourses.

Instead of seeing the heterogeneity of spaces as limiting analysis, however, this study focuses on the ways in which playwrights, performers, singers, and audiences used strategies to stage indigenous social and political problems in creative ways. Elites and cultural critics, for example, often framed theater as didactic. An article in the newspaper al-Ahram, summed this up neatly, arguing that theater was “the best entertainment for minds, the best teacher for the people, the best means to prohibit forbidden actions and

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16 Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 118.
the best instruction for good deeds. No one can deny that plays are the tools of civilization and one of the reasons for material and moral success.” But alternative performative spaces demonstrate the limits of elite influence both on entertainments and also on defining modern Egyptianness. Indeed, sha’bi (urban, working class) and female performers embodied and promoted very different ideas of modern Egyptian identity than did elite and effendi performers. By invoking forms of “political disguise” on stage, such as euphemism and language play, crude humor, improvisation, and role play (which allowed an actor to distance him/herself from the actions of his/her character), sha’bi and female performers could disseminate messages that challenged top-down definitions of modern Egyptian identity. Polyvalent symbolism and metaphor in theater meant that audiences might interpret what happened on stage in numerous ways. The ambivalence of these possibilities, along with the sheer pleasure of attending and/or participating in entertaining theatrical events, made theatrical spaces ideal for invigorating not only anticolonial sentiment but also encouraging reassessment of hegemonic ideologies and challenging elite definitions of modernity.

**Modernity**

One of the essential aspects of being modern, C.A. Bayly has observed, is believing oneself to be modern. As he writes, “at one level…the nineteenth century was the age of modernity precisely because a considerably number of thinkers, statesmen, and scientists who dominated the ordering of society believed it to be so.”

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pertaining to modernity—its origins, characteristics, and transformations—have preoccupied scholars of the Middle East for quite some time. Until relatively recently, modernizationist approaches that stressed a linear narrative of progress have dominated the field. These were theories that stressed modernity’s Western origins and the rest of the world’s (often failed or incomplete) efforts to “catch up” to Western economic, social, technological and intellectual advances. As Ilan Pappe notes, historians well into the 1960s focused most on the birth of modernity, arguing that “[t]he parents were unquestionably Western, the midwife the local elites.” Reactions against the West and modernization were subsumed within this narrative, framed as a rebellion of child against parents, or as a dialectical relationship between a commitment to modernization and simultaneous reaction against it. Modernization was equated with Westernization by way of interactions between European power brokers and indigenous elites. Colonialism and nationalism were, thus, definitive moments in the “introduction” of modernity to the Middle East. Using this interpretation, modernization in the Middle East has remained incomplete to the present day.

While the terms of the narrative changed, with scholars like Albert Hourani and Hisham Sharabi attributing change in the Arab world to internal rather than external forces, the assumption that elites were central to processes of modernization remained intact. This was also true of counterideologies that emerged in the 1970s as scholars began to recognize that modernization was not as linear—nor was it as inevitable or

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20 See, for example, Bernard Lewis, What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
22 See, for example, David Cannadine, Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Hourani, Arabic Thought.
desirable—as had been argued. Political economists influenced the field of Middle Eastern studies profoundly as they argued that economic developments, which had been thought to modernize local economies by forcibly integrating them into world/capitalist economies, only marginalized them further. Such a negative view of modernization promoted alternative views of the relationship between Western and non-Western societies.

Postcolonial theory pushed beyond the modernist narrative, asking questions not about the origins of modernity but the ways in which colonizers and the colonized employed power to impose and resist a Western modernity. For this diverse group of scholars, nationalist discourse, which credited elites with modernizing their countries, was an extension of imperial discourse that had allowed indigenous elites to maintain power over subaltern groups, men over women, metropole over province. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the book that virtually launched the field of postcolonial studies, argued that the study of the Orient was never an innocent endeavor. Rather, it was “a systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.”

In the many critiques of Said’s work (which testify to its importance), scholars argued that Said painted the Orient as a passive victim with no material reality of its own. People like Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak attempted to give voice and agency to subject populations in very different ways but worked within narratives of Western, colonial imposition of modernity.

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and non-Western responses to it. In this way, the idea of a Western model imposed on the rest of the world persisted.

Certain key narratives repeatedly underlie the concept of modernity: rationalization, secularization, industrialization, commodification, technologies that increasingly compress space and time, challenges to former social and religious hierarchies, and a general unreliability and instability of forms. But as scholars continue to debate the cogency of these narratives as being rooted in the Western world, so too must they be challenged in the context of Egyptian (and non-Western) history.

In his book on modernity in the Middle East, Keith Wattenpaugh argues that the experience of modernity was “something more complex than mere colonial and postcolonial acts of imitation or mimicry.”

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28 Scholars have questioned the Western origins of modernity in several ways, not least of which by expanding the narrative of modernization to recognize its imperial dimension. Expanding the history of modernity to understand it as a global phenomenon has corrected limited accounts that locate modernity’s origin in Europe and North America, but it runs the risk of limiting histories of non-Western regions by seeing them as significant only in relation to their contributions to the emergence of the West.

outside the West should, as Timothy Mitchell suggests, “complicate, rather than simply reverse, the narrative logic of modernization.”

In response to Bayly, Mitchell, Wattenpaugh, and a number of cultural anthropologists, this study views Europe as one factor among many that effected change in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century. Considering change to be a process both universal but with local characteristics, it argues that modernity was (and is) a lived historical experience that affected social and cultural practices in all segments of society, reshaping and framing notions of changing Egyptian identities. Critically, I argue that modernity in Egypt was localized; while it incorporated European influences, it shaped them to fit local contexts, histories, and needs while also following its own, internal logic.

Concern with modernity was not unique to Egypt, of course. But understanding the manifold, local ways in which various segments of Egyptian society engaged the question of how to be modern without losing a unique identity allows for an analysis that goes beyond any question of who owns modernity to focus, instead, on the transformative power of modernity as a global experience that manifests in manifold local ways. Modernity did, and does, unfold within specific historical, social, cultural, and political contexts. Recognizing this supports an interpretation of modernity not as a singular experience but, rather, as fragmented and contingent. The question then shifts away from “who is modern” and “who is not,” for modernity is no longer an experience that can be mapped on a continuum of progress. Instead, it grapples with the ways in which discreet historical actors interpret modernity in particular and changing local contexts.

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While some scholars have introduced a concept of “alternative modernities” to counter a metanarrative of modernity, this study resists the expression for its own inadequacies. While it offers a less Eurocentric way to acknowledge the unique and equally important trajectories of non-Western histories, the expression runs the risk of detaching modernity from any historical moorings, making it an “ahistorical essence” with no acknowledgement of what makes it a uniquely powerful contemporary force. As Bayly writes, “[m]odernity…was not only a process, but also a period which began at the end of the eighteenth century and has continued up to the present day in various forms.”

At the same time, referring to modernities as “alternative” implies that non-Western modernities are imagined and explicated in relation to an original—or generic—Western modernity. Building on Bayly’s writings, I argue that even though some Western societies “retained a competitive advantage…because of the way they did business, made war, and publically debated politics,” these advantages were contingent and interactive. As states outside of Europe adopted new political, economic, and social forms of organization, their own traditions and histories fed into and shaped the meaning of modernity. Though the West, for a time, was “an exemplar and a controller of modernity,” by the mid-nineteenth century, many other states came to challenge that singular control.

This study takes Egyptians’ engagement and struggle with modernity as a process by which people employed modernity for their own ends, albeit within an uneven power situation. The colonial context of Egypt in the late-nineteenth century cannot be ignored.

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31 Watenpaugh, Being Modern in the Middle East, 14
32 Bayly, Birth of the Modern, 11.
33 Mitchell, Questions of Modernity, xii.
34 Bayly, Birth of the Modern, 121.
as the hands of the British colonizer foisted much economic, political, and social change in attempts to modernize the country and link it into a new global economic system. Imperialism in Egypt involved the reorganization and reorientation of schools, villages, and cities to make them legible and manageable for British administrators. The new “order” was considered superior to what appeared to have been chaotic, uncivilized society. But colonial domination also compelled Egyptians of all backgrounds to address and negotiate the threat of these changes. As in other parts of the world like India and China, local elites, nationalists, and modernizers participated in processes of modernization in efforts to forge more powerful “state forms that might ultimately contribute to the struggle to resist colonial domination.” But they were not the only actors. Workers, women, peasants, members of religious minorities, and others also contributed to the shaping of modernity in Egyptian terms.

Chapter Breakdown

“Performing Modernity” opens in 1871 with the world premier of the opera *Aida* in Cairo. The composition of the opera, and the construction of the opera house where it was performed were part of a broader modernizing scheme that the Ottoman governor of Egypt, Isma’il, had initiated in anticipation of the Suez Canal’s inauguration in 1869. The opera house was the jewel on the crown of urban renewal, a project that precariously banked upon a temporary cotton boom and foreign bank loans that ultimately sank Egypt into bankruptcy.

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During *Aida*’s magnificent premier, however, this fate was not remotely palpable. Isma’il had commissioned Giuseppe Verde to compose what he termed a “purely ancient and Egyptian opera,” a request that was not merely to provide elite and foreign audiences with entertainment. More importantly, I argue, it was a political and ideological production aimed at showcasing one version of a distinctly modern Egyptian identity.

In an era of imperial expansion, the construction of an Italian-designed opera house in central Cairo was not a meaningless foreign import. The inclusion of harem boxes for female members of the khedivial family asserted Ottoman court culture in a space that otherwise echoed the design of the Milanese opera house, La Scala. Such an assertion challenged any assumption that Egyptians were merely mimicking European design. Rather, the building offered a clear example of the indigenization of new forms to make them compatible with local needs and histories. The specially commissioned opera *Aida* further contributed to this process, as, despite its imported operatic format, the storyline and music presented Egypt as a modern, imperial force, distinct from sub-Saharan Africa, rooted in its ancient history, and commensurate with contemporary European powers. Together, the opera house, and opera *Aida*, projected an elite vision of a distinct Egyptian modernity.

The second chapter focuses on a different segment of the Egyptian populace, the newly emergent effendi class and their involvements in Arabic theater. It uses Syrian playwright Farah Antun’s play, “Misr al-Jadida wa Misr al-Qadima” (New Egypt and Old Egypt), to illuminate the ways in which the effendiyya—a diverse and growing stratum of society that included government bureaucrats, intellectuals, and members of the “new professions”—constructed their own, self-consciously modern identities while
also promulgating them to the broader population.

Antun’s play, which warned against the seductions of over-Europeanization, advocated the need to cultivate a sober, hardworking, self-sufficient society grounded in its own history. The message reflected the ways in which the effendiyya navigated an embraced modernity without losing sight of what it meant to be authentically Egyptian. For them, theater was a focal point for the propagation of this domesticated, or localized modernity. It offered unmediated space in which the effendiyya could transmit and promote their own culture as an emblematic modern Egyptian culture. Theater offered a powerful forum not only for depicting the dangers of losing sight of Egyptian heritage and groundedness—it was also a space in which to model and inculcate the disciplined behaviors of the model modern Egyptian. A prescriptive literature taught spectators rules of proper audience behavior which included arriving on time and listening quietly to the actors on stage. The experience of theater-going, coupled with the didactic aims of many effendi performances, together cultivated norms of modern Egyptian behavior that the effendiyya, at the same time, adopted for themselves.

Chapter three shifts to sha’bi (urban, working class) performance, drawing on two improvisational performers, both named Ahmad al-Far. Starting in the decade before World War One, the al-Fars performed in coffeehouses, private weddings, and in between acts of more formal plays on the Arabic stage. Both were muhabbizun (farcical players) and mugallidin (mimics) whose bawdy, colloquial performances were very popular in their time, but whose names largely have been forgotten or erased in histories of Egyptian theater. The reappearance of some texts of their skits offer rare insight into the cultural world of the Cairene sha’b and hint at the reasons why their performances
historically have been overlooked.

Very little is known about the cultural life of the sha’b, a very loose label for a range of urban workers whose skills and experiences varied tremendously. In a general sense, they were the chief targets of “effendification”—effendi attempts to modernize and shape Egyptians in their own image—but little is known of sha’bi responses to such efforts. Undoubtedly, the world of urban workers was dynamic, as influxes of foreign and rural migrants constantly changed its composition. New traditions, beliefs, and practices infused this world, contributing to a unique experience of modernity. The content of sha’bi performance illustrates the ways in which the sha’b explicitly resisted effendi calls for a certain type of civilizing and modernity. The al-Far texts illustrate the ways in which sha’bi performance created a type of collective culture in which humor dissolved difference and mockery diminished those with power. The sha’b, who “got it” and laughed at the jokes were, thus, the real Egyptians, superior in their understanding of the world’s absurdity.

Central to sha’bi performance was the interactive relationship between audience and performer(s). Audiences were not only encouraged but expected to yell, cheer, sing and dance with the muhabbizun. Their reactions to skits shaped the directions storylines would take. In the context of performance, the sha’b understood themselves as agents whose voiced opinions could induce change. In these ways, sha’bi performances offered more than release from the frustrations of lived realities—they provoked audience imagination as to what might be. Thus, this chapter argues that out of such interactions, coupled with imaginative colloquial humor and fantastical scenarios, muqallidin and
muhabbizun gave voice to what it meant for the often overlooked sha’b—those who made up the majority of the urban population—to be modern and Egyptian.\footnote{For more on the notion of giving “voice,” “shape” to modernity, see James Scott, \textit{Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 62.}

Chapter four brings the study forward to the era of the 1919 rebellion and delves into the realm of female performance in Egypt. Tracing the formative years of Egyptian singer and actress Munira al-Mahdiyya’s career, it argues that nationalism and the women’s reform movement offered a language by which typically marginalized female performers might articulate a modern Egyptian identity. After outlining the role of Egyptian women in the national movement for Egyptian independence, the chapter shifts to focus on female performers who, despite tremendous popularity, elicited much critique for what was deemed an inappropriate degree of visibility. Mahdiyya, a Muslim woman who performed unveiled before men, was one of many whose public role threatened nationalist and female reformers’ calls for an idealized womanhood as wives and mothers in an independent nation-state. To navigate that stopped short of embracing female performance as an acceptable choice, Mahdiyya blended older and newer signs of legitimacy. By mastering what was considered a “male repertoire” of song and also infusing song lyrics with nationalist and female reformers’ rhetoric, Mahdiyya rooted her identity in authentic roots while embodying a new, provocative model of modern Egyptian womanhood.
Cairo’s Khedivial Opera House was filled to capacity long before curtain time on the evening of Dec. 24, 1871. The bedecked, eager audience had assembled to witness the world premiere of Giuseppe Verdi’s highly anticipated opus, Aida. Over the next few hours, spectators witnessed a tragic love story between an Ethiopian slave named Aida and an Egyptian military commander that was set some time during the “reign of the Pharaohs,” a vague 3000 year period. Boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and spectacle, blurred as the production unfolded. Actress and society writer Mabel Caillard described European actors mingling with “genuine Ethiopians and real slaves …[who carried] statues and figures of the ancient gods” from Cairo’s Museum of Antiquities. By the end of the opera, it was claimed that spectators had witnessed 3000 actors—and non-actors—cross the stage.

By all accounts, the production was a smashing success. One spectator raved that it was a production of “superlative magnificence…this premier performance of Aida was
simply perfect.” Critics from a host of foreign journals sang Verdi’s praises, and immediately after the performance, Paul Draneht, Superintendent of Khedivial Theaters, sent a telegram to Verdi commending him for the “triumphant success” of the opera. “Not one number passed over in silence,” Draneht wrote, “total fanaticism. Enthusiastic audience applauded absent Maestro. Congratulations, thanks.”

It was the Ottoman Governor of Egypt, the Khedive Ismail (r. 1863-79) (Figure 1), who invited Verdi to compose an original opera worthy of this new opera house. Under Isma’il’s patronage the opera house was constructed in 1869, on the eve of the completion of the Suez Canal. Ismail asked the French Egyptologist and director of the Museum of Antiquities, Auguste Mariette, to propose a storyline to Verdi—a story that would be, in Ismail’s words, “purely ancient and Egyptian.” In an intriguing blend of scientific Egyptology and popular Egyptomania (a blend not uncommon at the time), Mariette drew the plot of his story from the reign of the pharaoh Ramses III, even patterning costumes after scenes from his tomb and insisting that all actors be clean-

42 De Kusel was British Controller-General of Egyptian Customs. Samuel Selig De Kusel, An Englishman’s Recollections of Egypt, 1863-1888 (London: John Lane, 1915), 90.
45 Initially, Isma’il had asked Verdi to compose a hymn in celebration of the opera house’s opening, but Verdi refused, considering the job to be beneath him. Aida’s storyline, however, captured Verdi’s imagination. His interest in the story, along with rumors that Verdi’s rival, Wagner, was Isma’il’s second choice, may well have encouraged his acceptance of the charge. Paul Draneht, letter to Giuseppe Verdi, 28 April 1870, Opera House Documents (Opera House and Music Library, Cairo, Egypt). McCants, Verdi’s Aida, 22. Auguste Mariette, letter to Camille Du Locle, 28 April 1870, reprinted in Busch, ed., Verdi’s Aida, 12. Verdi’s conditions for signing a contract appear in Giuseppe Verdi, letter to Camille Du Locle, 26 Aug. 1870, reprinted in Busch, ed., Verdi’s Aida, 57.
46 Auguste Mariette, letter to Camille du Locle, 27 April 1870, reprinted in Busch, ed., Verdi’s Aida, 11.
shaven, as the ancients appeared not to sport facial hair. The storyline captured Verdi’s imagination, and with librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni, he composed the opera that would become a global success and staple of operatic repertoires in both Egypt and abroad.

**Figure 1: Khedive Isma’il, r. 1863-79**

*Aida’s* premier was part of a larger program of urban renewal that had peaked with the Suez Canal’s inauguration on November 17, 1869. Ismail considered celebrations surrounding the inauguration an opportunity to showcase a new Cairo to his visitors and to match the impressive European exhibitions of the nineteenth century. To this end, he instituted a massive public works program to modernize the sections of Cairo and Alexandria that visitors would most likely see—or, be directed to see. Wide boulevards, landscaped gardens, and luxury hotels built of the iron, steel, and improved glass of the nineteenth century spread across what had once been a swampy flood plain.

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The relationship between Isma’il’s project of urban renewal and commissioning of the opera *Aida* are the subjects of this chapter. For just as urban design functioned to organize Cairo, making it attractive and navigable both for Egyptians and Egypt’s visitors, so too the opera *Aida* packaged and presented ancient Egypt in an intelligible and pleasurable manner to its viewers. While the redesign of Cairo involved the implementation of a certain understanding of modernity, the opera *Aida* delivered that message of modernity to a broader population. Parallels between the imperial ordering of the city and the power involved in cultural production abound; to be controlled, the state had to be legible.49 The opera *Aida* was very much tied to power and control over the depiction of history in the service of modernity.

But whose modernity was it? As Edward Said observes, an individual like Mariette was made possible by Napoleon’s *Description d’Egypte* and Champollion’s deciphering of hieroglyphics—in other words, a legacy of imperial Egyptology that produced an individual—and an opera—that embodied “the authority of Europe’s version of Egypt at a moment in its nineteenth-century history.”50 Nevertheless, to assume that European imperial powers unilaterally imposed order on both the recounting of history and the physical cityscape would be incorrect. Renovations in Cairo were conducted before French and British-imposed economic and political control of Egypt. They were initiated by the Ottoman governor under the Egyptian Minister of Public Works, ‘Ali Pasha Mubarak, and enacted by a mix of European and Egyptian engineers. Critically, the modernity that such individuals attempted to impose on Egypt was not an unmediated


Western intervention. Though it was a top-down, European-inspired project, it was also indigenized, or localized, to suit the needs, histories, and contexts wherein they were enacted.

Modernization in Cairo’s urban design echoed state projects in other parts of the world. James Scott’s work on state modernization schemes demonstrates the ways in which authoritarian regimes espousing a “high-modernist ideology” have enacted programs of social planning to forcibly create legible societies. In most cases, those projects ignore the complexities of informal society—local knowledge and know-how—that play a critical role in state function.51 While Scott investigates why such projects are often disastrous, this chapter looks at the Egyptian case to understand the ways in which modernization and modernity were interpreted by elites who navigated a world of competing European, Ottoman, and Egyptian imperialisms.

The task at the heart of both the creation of Aida and Cairene urban renewal was to make contemporary and ancient Egypt legible to the state, its people, and its guests. In the case of European audiences, the opera’s depiction of a triumphant and powerful ancient Egypt tapped into a wealth of Orientalist knowledge and assumptions about its pharaonic history.52 For Egyptian audience members, the impact of the message differed. The educative power of the opera house was part of a larger conversation amongst elites concerned with “civilizing” the populace by way of the arts of acting and exposure to

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51 Scott defines high-modernist ideology as: “self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature…and, above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws.” Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 4-5. For a specific case of how this has played out in the Middle East, see Toby Craig Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Forged Modern Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Western theater. At the same time, the physical space of the opera house, with its Italianate décor, visible loges, and harem boxes enforced hierarchies of power that reflected a mixture of elite European and Ottoman court culture. How audiences interpreted each of these messages was a different story. For some, the opera *Aida*’s representation of ancient Egyptian power tapped into a source of cultural pride. For others, opera was dull and evoked indifference. When the opera house became a desirable site for indigenous middle-class charity fundraisers, it inadvertently became a staple of middle-class life.

The chapter that follows argue that the Khedivial Opera House, *Aida*, and the larger project of urban renewal were not merely Western interventions or meaningless foreign imports. Instead, patronage of urban reform, opera, and opera house construction were testaments to Egyptian cultural achievement and commensurability with European civilization and modernity. Control of street planning and cultural production fell under the same rubric of creating the modern state. At the same time, however, in the physical construction of the city and its opera house, *modernity was localized*. Foreign urban design was shaped to fit local needs and architectural patterns. 53 Opera house construction asserted the primacy of Ottoman court culture and power. And the production of *Aida* presented Egypt as a modern, powerful force grounded in and legitimated by its ancient history. *Aida*, the opera house, and the new Cairo did not merely reflect or elevate European culture. They were expressions of an elite, local modernity.

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53 Cairo’s domestification of foreign influence was much like other Ottoman cities in the same period. See Zeynep Celik, *Empire, Architecture, and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters, 1830-1914* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), and *The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
Historical Context

Egypt had been a territory of the Ottoman Empire since 1516, and the Khedive Isma’il was the fifth ruler of an Ottoman family dynasty that had governed Egypt since the evacuation of Napoleon’s forces in 1801. Starting with the Pasha, Mehmed ‘Ali, the family of rulers initiated various reforms to bring Egypt up to par with the military, technological, and scientific prowess of the Napoleonic expedition.\textsuperscript{54} Mehmed ‘Ali, a mamluk of Albanian provenance, initiated a process of bureaucratic centralization that would support the centerpiece of his reforms: the creation of a new, conscript army.\textsuperscript{55} His institution of a uniform tax on cultivable lands and establishment of government monopolies over major crops raised necessary revenues for building and equipping the army with modern weaponry. The army’s need for engineers, physicians, and other technically trained men fueled the Pasha’s support for a state system of education that consisted of a network of special schools in Cairo and special training programs in Europe.\textsuperscript{56} Various public works programs that improved irrigation, developed transportation systems, and supported industry also provided necessary infrastructure and revenue to support the army.\textsuperscript{57}

Aside from the creation of a modern army, Mehmed ‘Ali also presided over successful experiments in the cultivation of long-staple cotton. These two developments—a modern army and cotton cultivation—were the most important in his

\textsuperscript{56} F. Robert Hunter, \textit{Egypt Under the Khedives 1805-1879: From Household Government to Modern Bureaucracy} (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999), 17.
\textsuperscript{57} Fahmy, \textit{All the Pasha’s Men}, 9-11; Hunter, \textit{Egypt Under the Khedives}, 15-17.
career. The unprecedented profits reaped from the sale of cotton funded the army, navy, and other institutions created under his rule. Cotton cultivation changed the nature of Egypt’s economy by integrating it globally and underwriting many of the reforms that continued throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, the army’s success in military actions against Istanbul (1831/2, 1839) led the Sultan ‘Abdulaziz, who ruled the Ottoman Empire, to grant extensive autonomy to Mehmed ‘Ali that included a right to his family’s hereditary rule in Egypt.\(^{58}\)

In the decades following Mehmed ‘Ali’s death, his successors differed in their regard for European models of reform. The pasha’s grandson, ‘Abbas I (r. 1805-48), slowed reforms to focus more on establishing economic stability, entrenching the new dynastic order, and maintaining autonomy from the Ottoman empire.\(^{59}\) Due to his suspicion of European interests in Egypt, reputation as a homosexual, and “strange proclivity for Arabian horses and desert palaces,” ‘Abbas was not favored by the ruling family nor by European elites who painted him as a mad reactionary who dismantled many of Mehmed ‘Ali’s reforms.\(^{60}\) His successor, Sa’id (r 1854-63), was regarded more favorably and portrayed as an enlightened ruler by his family and the European powers. Though it was ‘Abbas who began phasing out monopolies and streamlined conscription policies, Said received credit for the improvements.\(^{61}\)


\(^{61}\) Toledano, *State and Society*, 10.
Sa‘id opened the doors to European immigration and allowed considerable increase in the influence of foreign consuls in domestic affairs. These concessions would become a source of great contention within Egyptian society. In that same period, Ferdinand de Lessops received his concession to begin the Suez Canal project, a human-made, 195 km long, 9 meter deep channel, built between 1856-59 by the Suez Canal Company. But the agreement would become increasingly problematic for the Egyptian government as it was forced to bear construction costs of more than 450 million francs (about $100 million at the time). Furthermore, tens of thousands of Egyptian peasants forced to labor for the company paid for the brutality of the work with their lives (Figure 2). To finance construction and the 176,000 shares of company stock he had committed.

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to purchase, Sa’id raised taxes, withheld state employee salaries, and borrowed from European merchants and banks. 63

Under Ismail, Sa’id’s successor, the pace of change hastened. Legal reforms in the form of new Mixed and National Courts based in French law, shifted emphasis away from shari’ah law. To support a European-educated Egyptian elite, Isma’il expanded the budget for education more than ten-fold, promoting the growth of primary and secondary school systems, specialized technical schools, female education, and educational missions to Europe. Al-Azhar, the venerable site for religious training in Cairo, became one choice among many, as these modern, secular, state schools attracted a new generation of Egyptians. The most important technical schools included Dar al-Ulum (1972), a school for training Arabic language teachers in the new state system, and the School of Languages (1868), later the Cairo School of Law, which offered a highly desirable French-based legal education.

As Isma’il worked to centralize, and thereby modernize, the state, he consolidated his own authoritarian power in Egypt. He used diplomacy—mostly money and gifts—to further extract Egypt from the orbit of Ottoman control. He managed to attain such a degree of autonomy that many believed he would use the Suez Canal’s opening to declare independence from the empire (he did not). 64 Though he had a cadre of Ottoman Egyptian confidants, they did not share any of his power. Instead, they served as an inner circle on the Majlis Khususi, a privy council of supporters who heard and advised the khedive on affairs of his chosing. Isma’il established the Majlis Shurat al-Nawwab (Chamber of Delegates), in 1866, a body composed of seventy-five village sheikhs

63 Hunter, Egypt Under the Khedives, 39.
64 Scholch, Egypt for the Egyptians, 13.
(notables with varying degrees of religious education), chosen by the people and confirmed by the government. They represented indigenous land-owning and merchant families to the Khedive for a three-year period. Though Isma’il touted the council as a step toward parliamentary rule and a measure of Egyptian advancement, the Chamber functioned more as a second privy council, providing the khedive with information that he solicited on provincial problems and offering limited advice on public works projects. An often recounted anecdote about the first Chamber meeting illustrates the limited scope of the delegates’ powers. When the sheikhs were told to form three groups following European parliamentary models—a ‘right’ to support government, a ‘left’ opposition, and a moderate middle—all of them scrambled to take a place on the right. They knew the dangers of opposing Isma’il and clearly did not see the council as a forum for debate. Indeed, establishment of the council did not mean a relinquishing of Isma’il’s power. On the contrary, he used it only sporadically and benefitted from the mobility of its representatives. The nominated sheikhs, who moved between Cairo and their provinces, served as middlemen between the khedive to the people, extending his reach into the countryside.

**Nineteenth-Century Egyptian Elites**

The power elite of Egypt in the nineteenth century were an evolving cohort of Turkish, Egyptian, Armenian, and European individuals. Whereas under Mehmed ‘Ali, the great majority of members of the ruling class were Turks, mid-century changes in

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66 Seven of the representatives that first year were from the Coptic minority. Scholch, *Egypt for the Egyptians*, 39.
recruitment incorporated technicians, provincial officials, and Europeans who challenged Turkish control and changed elite culture.

Elites exercised both political and cultural power and were defined by a mixture of economic, educational, familial, and cultural markers. Those who attained the most distinguished positions in the viceregal household and state bureaucracy were members of the *dhawat* (upper class/aristocracy/persons of high state rank). In the early part of the century, they were typically Ottoman Egyptians with a military background who were given the titles Pasha and Bey to reflect rank and status. For much of the nineteenth century, the *dhawat* differed from *a’yan* (rural, Egyptian-born notables) in terms of ethnicity, wealth, seniority of public office, and residence (urban vs rural). By the last quarter of the century, however, the lines between *dhawat* and *a’yan* blurred as Turks and Egyptians intermarried, and *a’yan*, enriched by increased involvement in global markets and cotton cultivation, moved to cities to pursue political interests, enjoy urban life, and offer their children better educations.\(^6\) Ismail promoted a good number of these indigenous Egyptians to high posts in the state bureaucracy.

Despite rivalries within and between factions that made up elites, they shared a common faith in the need to make Egypt modern. Many, not least the Khedive, shared a view of modernity touted by the Egyptian Minister of Public Works, ‘Ali Pasha Mubarak. This involved the rational, orderly design of both Cairo and Egypt’s modern educational system. New, modern streets and schools were, as Timothy Mitchell explains, “the expression and achievement of an intellectual orderliness, a social tidiness, a physical cleanliness that were coming to be considered the country’s fundamental political

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requirement.”69 Discipline and education would solve the problems of noise, bad hygiene, ignorance, and crime that kept the city from progressing to modernity.

Elites also shared common material interests and similar lifestyles. The acquisition of personal wealth in the form of cash and land became a measure of status and influence for high-ranking officials. Tastes and consumption patterns changed with this increase in wealth. By the 1860s, officials were less concerned with smoking narghila pipes and riding horses and more interested in steam engines, European cigarettes, and carriages. Men wore frock coats instead of robes and sported mustaches. Women dressed in Parisian fashions.70 And all spent evenings at the opera house.

But the cultural orientation of elites was not only westward. For even as Isma’il worked to distance Egypt politically from Ottoman control, he and the elite circles that supported him looked to Istanbul as a cultural center from which to draw. Male elites who wore frock coats also wore fezes instead of turbans, while their wives wore gossamer veils, a style imported from Istanbul. Elites vacationed in both Paris and Turkey.71 And while the opera house offered mostly European performances, Isma’il’s court hosted a variety of Egyptian and Ottoman singers and musicians. In household architecture, a mid-century style termed Constantinopolitan modeled this blending. It was a mix of European and Turkish influences that rejected mamluk and Arab design.72 As Ehud Toledano explains, “in social and cultural terms, Egypt remained very much

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69 Mitchell, Colonising Egypt, 63.
70 Hunter, Egypt Under the Khedives, 102.
71 See, for example, Huda Shaarawi, Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998), 88-91.
72 Hunter, Egypt Under the Khedives, 101.
within the Ottoman orbit” even as the Mehmed ‘Ali family dynasty worked to separate itself from Ottoman political rule.\textsuperscript{73}

Thus, elite Egyptian modernity involved, among other things, a selective blend of European and Ottoman culture. While Egypt’s leaders shared a general interest in reforming Egypt, they differed considerably in what changes to implement. Generally, they agreed on a notion of progress that meant incorporation of European technologies and know-how, and a break with past customs. But selecting what to incorporate, the speed of implementation, and the limits of change were subject to much debate. For some, chief concern lay in implementing constitutional law that would limit the autocratic power of the khedive. For others, it involved looking to ancient Egypt to identify sources of unique, Egyptian identity.

Despite its strong Western orientation, modernization did not mean a complete casting out of local identity. Looking at the aspects of Cairo that Isma’il highlighted as authentically Egyptian offers an alternative interpretation. For while he supported modernization projects in the western part of Cairo, he also supported what some term the “medievalization” of eastern sections of Cairo that were renovated to highlight Ottoman design and obliterate mamluk and Arabic periods of Egyptian history.\textsuperscript{74} His decision to build a road that would lead visitors directly to the pyramids points to another source of authenticity that Isma’il showcased: Egypt’s ancient past. Thus, though Isma’il’s Francophile leanings clearly influenced the shape and scope of modernization

\textsuperscript{73} Toledano, \textit{State and Society}, 249.
he promoted in Egypt, he used elements of Ottoman and ancient Egyptian culture and history to localize the modernity he imposed.

**Expositions and Urban Renewal**

In 1867, Egypt participated in the Universal Exhibition held in Paris. Ismail’s visit to the exhibition would profoundly affect his vision of what Cairo could be and served as a catalyst for the acceleration of his own projects at home. The same Auguste Mariette who created *Aida* was responsible for the 1867 Egyptian exhibit. It was an amalgam of temporary structures that included a temple to represent “antiquity,” an “Arab-style” pavilion to represent the Middle Ages, and a caravanserai with a *mashrabiyyah* (lattice screen) to represent the modern period. What was vaguely described as an antique temple served, ironically, as “Egypt of the future,” within which the chief French engineer of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand de Lesseps, gave lectures on the canal’s construction. Ismail greeted visitors in the *salamlik* (a greeting area for men) of the temple, further fusing fiction and reality, past and present.

Though he had already begun to build on his grandfather’s educational and military reforms, Ismail’s experience in Paris is widely acknowledged to have renewed his call for public works projects that would physically alter the landscape of sections of

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75 Ismail had studied in Paris as a boy and later served a diplomatic role there under the previous Egyptian governor, Said. P. J. Vatikiotis, *The Modern History of Egypt* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969), 79.


78 The *salamlik* was a domestic space typically found in upper class and upper middle class homes.
Cairo. Indeed, most literature on the nineteenth-century modernization of western Cairo emphasizes the influence of the French Baron Haussmann and his redesign of central Paris on Cairene urban renewal. Haussmann’s concern with the unity of urban space; circulation of people, air, and water within that space; straight lines and attractive facades; and a pleasant, convenient urban environment certainly influenced decisions that were made in Cairo as well.

But those who claim that Cairene urban renewal in the 1860s and 70s blindly followed a French model miss the complexities of change in Cairo at the time. Without denying the influence of French, Italian, Austrian, and British design (all of which have been well documented) a closer look at architectural developments in nineteenth-century Cairo challenges the notion that European—particularly Haussmann-style innovations—were imported blindly and forced onto the Cairene urban fabric. Rather, changes in Cairo incorporated local needs and architectural patterns. Moreover, a

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79 See, for example, Abu-Lughod, Cairo, 104; Hubert, “Les Expositions Universelles,” 290; Reid, Whose Pharaohs, 129.
82 See, for example, Khaled Asfour, “The Domestication of Knowledge: Cairo at the Turn of the Century,” Mugarnas. An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture. Essays in Honor of Oleg Grabar, vol. 10 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 127-29. Asfour argues that it wasn’t until the 1890s that there was a shift in Egyptian architecture away from “blind faithfulness to the French model” to what he terms a “domestication” of architectural theory. As he defines it, domestication meant “modifying the original model so that it became just one component of a new product, the other components of which would spring from the peculiarities of the local culture.” In effect, “negotiation and compromise” with local people and conditions became the norm. Asfour acknowledges, however, that from the beginning Egyptian engineering students were taught theory but also environmental conditions in Egypt that had to be taken into account when importing “Western” techniques.
number of design elements attributed to Haussmann predated his work in Paris and reflected earlier shifts in Ottoman design in Egypt.

The Cairo that Ismail inherited was a city divided into ten quarters, each under the supervision of a sheikh and separated by gates that closed at night.\textsuperscript{84} Between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, elite residential areas existed close to the Citadel, the center of Mamluk political power. Those sections now are considered the eastern and southernmost parts of Cairo. As those areas became saturated with people, middle-class and elite families began moving westward to an area called Ezbekiyyah that had previously been swampland.\textsuperscript{85} Mehmed ‘Ali had drained the area in the mid-1830s by way of a canal which raised it above the Nile’s flood level. It was then filled with a lake and surrounding garden. By the 1840s, Ezbekiyyah played host to numerous public ceremonies and housed some of Cairo’s best hotels. Thus, it became a locus of entertainment and residences for upwardly mobile local families, tourists, and, as the century progressed, foreign residents.

Upon Ismail’s return from the Universal Exhibition, efforts to modernize portions of Cairo began in earnest. Taxation and forced peasant labor were critical to the success of the building projects, but chief financial support came from two other sources: cotton and European bank loans.\textsuperscript{86} When the outbreak of the American Civil War effectively halted American cotton exports to Britain, Egypt and India became its chief cotton suppliers. Consequently, the price of Egyptian cotton increased four-fold between 1861

\textsuperscript{84} J.C. McCoan, \textit{Egypt As It Is: 1829-1904} (New York: H. Holt, 1877), 49.
\textsuperscript{85} McCoan, \textit{Egypt As It Is}, 50; André Raymond, \textit{Arab Cities In the Ottoman Period} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 160-162, 260.
and 1863, and income from cotton exports increased from 918,000 pounds sterling in the early 1850s to 10 million pounds sterling in the late 1800s.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{87} William L. Cleveland, \textit{A History of the Modern Middle East} (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 94.
Ismail charged his Minister of Public Works, ‘Ali Pasha Mubarak, with the design of a master plan that focused on western sections of Cairo but also encompassed the older southern and eastern sections. This involved the construction of straight, wide streets that extended out from central squares or *midans* throughout the city and the construction of a road lined with sphinxes, sycamores and acacias built to connect Cairo with the Pyramids at Giza. Ismail hired the French landscaper for the city of Paris, Monsieur Barillet-Duchamp, to create a lake surrounded by a garden with shrubbery, shady parks, cafes, and grottoes to replace Mehmed ‘Ali’s canal. To the west of Ebekiyah sat the venerable Shepherd’s Hotel, the premier home away from home for European guests in Egypt. North and east were European shops and private houses fronted with shady arcades, and to the south stood the new Khedivial Opera House and Comédie Francaise. Other cultural institutions included a Khedivial Library and Geographical Society, and additional display halls were added to the Bulaq Museum of Egyptian antiquities.

Baedeker’s and Thomas Cook’s travel guides included detailed maps of the area and assured visitors of the district’s many pleasures.

The arrangement of new boulevards and squares in nineteenth-century central Cairo was not simply about urban reconstruction. It was also, as Timothy Mitchell describes, about a “principle of order” that the new layout represented and “inscribed in the life of its inhabitants.” The layout rendered the city knowable and navigable to its inhabitants.

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91 Reid, *Whose Pharaohs*, 97, 105
92 See, for example, Karl Baedeker, ed., *Egypt* (Leipsic: Karl Baedeker, 1885); Thomas Cook, *Cook’s Tourists’ Handbook for Egypt, the Nile, and the Desert* (London: Thomas Cook and Son, 1876).
visitors by overlaying it with a type of ordered
plan, one that was intended to turn Egypt into a
modern state.\footnote{For more on legibility and the modern state outside of Egypt, see Scott, \textit{Seeing Like a State}, 9-84.} Mitchell argues that the western
city’s streets and facades appeared to be
organized specifically for the observer as a
picture or stage set that represented “some reality
beyond.”\footnote{Mitchell, \textit{Colonising Egypt}, xiv.} Visitors’ observations testified to the
fact that the new, open streets of central Cairo
introduced a “principle of visibility and
observation, the principle of exhibition.”\footnote{Mitchell, \textit{Colonising Egypt}, xv.}

But ordering the city did not involve a
mere overlay of new design over old, nor did it
mean total Europeanization. Local architecture,
histories, and needs shaped the new form the city would take. According to ‘Ali
Mubarak, for example, in the first half of the nineteenth-century Mehmed ‘Ali’s court
welcomed a variety of mostly Greek architects who built in the Rumi, Greek, Balkan, or
Albanian styles.\footnote{Nihal Tamraz, \textit{Nineteenth-Century Cairene Houses and Palaces} (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994), 24-27.} Rumi style in particular was a carryover from Greece and the area
surrounding Mehmed ‘Ali’s hometown of Kavala, modern-day Bulgaria and Albania.
The characteristics of the style typically included a two-story building with a decorative

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure3.jpg}
\caption{Rumi style home in Cairo (Source: Nihal S. Tamraz, \textit{Nineteenth-Century Cairene Houses and Palaces} (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994), Figure 2.29)}
\end{figure}
wooden frieze separating the stories; irregular internal ground plans; plain, geometrical facades; and “vertically elongated” windows (Figure 4).

The last two elements—large windows and geometrical facades—typically attributed to "Haussmanian" style, predated Haussman in its appearance in Rumi architecture. Furthermore, Rumi construction, typically wood or wood covered in plaster, was the framework for Ismail’s “European-style” Opera House.97 In effect, the incorporation of European design, even by Francophile Ismail, was not blind but rather, subject to local conditions, concerns and compromises.

Figure 4: Opening Ceremony of Suez Canal Presided over by French Empress Eugenie on Reviewing Stand (Distant), 16 November 1867 (Source: LIFE Photo Archive Hosted by Google, http://images.google.com/hosted/life/f?imgurl=78e2ae8232b8e104)

97 Tamraz, Nineteenth-Century Cairene Houses, 35.
Ambivalent responses from Europeans in Cairo ranged from pleasure to suspicion with Isma’il’s modernization project. Baron de Kusel recorded his favorable impressions of the Suez Canal festivities in his recollections. For everyday people, he wrote, “large marquees had been erected in which tables beautifully decorated awaited those who wished to eat or drink” imported delicacies and much wine. The day after the opening, some guests went to Cairo “where some remained two or three weeks, sight-seeing, and enjoying themselves at the expense of the Khedive, even the carriages hired by them…The expense…must have been enormous.”

Ezbekiyyah, in the words of an enthusiastic visitor,

forms a handsome European town, intersected by broad, well-paved, and gas-lit boulevards, flanked by shops and villas worthy of the Riviera, owned for the most part by Pashas, Beys, and wealthy foreigners to whom the Khedive has granted free building sites on the sole condition of the houses erected being of a certain architectural merit.

Others were not convinced of the degree to which notions of progress and modernity penetrated beneath Cairo’s surface. Actress Mabel Caillard, for example, saw the new construction as “cardboard monuments” flimsy, superficial, and, thus, somewhat “unreal.”

Another guest stated:

the civilization of the place, so far as it has any, leaves nothing to be desired…But in spite of all these things is scarcely a veneer of modern progress…it is very easy, when walking about the European quarter, to mislead one’s self into an over-estimate of the extent to which modern progress has established itself.

European accounts raised questions about the degree to which Egyptians themselves internalized the changes. A visitor commenting on people in the streets saw individuals

99 Caillard, Lifetime in Egypt, 17.
100 John C. Van Dyke, In Égypt (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1931), xxii-xxiii.
as a spectacle, even comparing them to fictional characters: “in Cairo only are now to be found in the scene and most of the dramatis personae of the Thousand and One Nights within stone’s throw of nineteenth-century civilisation in many of its latest results.”

For English court tutor Alfred Butler, “real” indigenous voices only disrupted reveries about the civilized ancients. As was common at the time, Butler, along with several servants, had climbed to the top of a pyramid for a better city view. As he lay down after enjoying a filling meal, he described his time “pondering…surveying…thinking…recalling, perhaps, quaint Herodotean gossip about the building and builders of the pyramid” when his thoughts were interrupted by the “harsh and jarring” Arab voice of one of his servants. “Such chatter,” he writes, “soon put an end to our would-be sublime imaginings.” The pleasure of his fantasies, in contrast to his dismissal of real Egyptian voices, made clear that imagining the ancient past was preferable to engaging with Egypt’s contemporary realities. A sense of superiority permeated these writings that implied Egyptian modernity was partial or incomplete. But some anxiety might be detected as well. As Rita Abrahamsen suggests, the hybridity of Cairo, its blend of Europeanization and local design (and people), signaled a creative adaptation, interpretation and transformation of western cultural symbols and practices. Local peoples were not simply passive victims in the face of an all-powerful Western culture.

Nevertheless, making Cairo legible was not only to impress Europeans. It was a process that affected Egyptians’ lives. As historian Nelly Hanna carefully outlines, economic, social, and state factors encouraged urban development in the area including

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and surrounding Ezbekiyyah, what she terms the “core area” of Cairo. Hanna argues that the western area from Ezbekiyyah to Isma’iliyyah has been mistakenly termed “the European quarter” when, in fact, only certain pockets of the area hosted a majority European population. Instead, Egyptians chiefly populated these quarters. Its privileged position in the city was not due solely to European interests, but “because it represented the interests of a class of people who were involved with a growing new economy, linked to European capitalism.” The core was where the institutions necessary to sustain this economy—the Post Office, Telegraph Office, Mixed Courts, tourist companies and hotels—were situated. Urban renovations benefited the needs and interests of segments of the indigenous population who lived in the area.

As Cairo’s “core” developed, an influx of poor migrants flooded in. Between Mehmed ‘Ali’s census and 1907 the population of Cairo increased two and a half times. Furthermore, in 1907, about one-third of those living in the city were not born there (some were foreigners, some migrants). Concern with delimiting boundaries between city quarters and keeping the “dirty” poor from entering and contaminating the “clean and orderly core” meant that circulation and visibility, two hallmarks of Haussman-style renewal, were relevant to local conditions as well. The institution of several laws that only affected this section of the city exemplified this, such as an 1891 law that instituted payment of an entrance fee and “appropriate” dress to enter the

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104 Nelly Hanna, “The Urban History of Cairo Around 1900,” in Jill Edwards, ed, Historians in Cairo: Essays in Honor of George Scanlon (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press: 2002), 192. Hanna argues that the “core area” changed over time. In the mid-nineteenth century, the “core” was the Ezbekiyyah and surrounding districts.
106 Egypt, Ministry of Finance, The Census of Egypt Taken in 1907, vol. 1 (Cairo, 1921).
Ezbekiyyah gardens. The law was meant not only to keep European visitors in the neighborhood shielded from the poorer members of local society, but also to address middle and upper class Egyptian concerns with drugs, crime and prostitution.

Historian Khaled Fahmy’s work serves as a reminder that changes to western Cairo impacted upon Egyptians who lived outside the area as well. Focusing on petitions and complaints sent to the Department of Health Inspection of Cairo (Taftish al-Sihha), he argues that ‘Ali Mubarak’s obsession with constructing sewers and reducing bad odors throughout the city affected local inhabitants in ways that differed by social class. Inspectors promptly responded to what were mostly elite Egyptian and European complaints about pungent smells emitted from food vendors (especially butchers, fish fryers, and people who sold salted fish called *fisikh*). Inspectors also responded to concerns about “heavy air” and vapors emanating from vacant land, a lake, and a mosque’s cesspool. Each case was considered a violation of health standards. Medical authorities concerned with miasma theory and ruling elites shared a concern with new notions of disciplining the human body that included certain measures of hygiene. Fahmy theorizes, “it seems the class bias behind the authorities’ obsession with smell and stench reflected the heightened sensitivity to odors…that was part of the project of modernity as understood by Egypt’s upper classes.”

As indicated in everyday acts of resistance to these new health measures, not all Cairenes experienced the same revulsions. In one report, butchers, newly required to slaughter animals in certified places—and to pay a tax to the head of the slaughterhouse—agreed to abide by the law but attempted to confound the system by all appearing at the slaughterhouse on the same

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day to cause as much chaos as possible. Cairenes met new ordinances forbidding burials within cities with petitions requesting exemption from the regulation, as they did not want to be separated from their dead. And decrees prohibiting public urination and defecation were routinely ignored. Though such examples offer limited information about non-elite reactions to rapid urban modernization, they offer some degree of insight into the ways in which urban Egyptians experienced, and resisted, the reordering of their lives.

Figure 5: Khedivial Opera House, Cairo
(Source: Cairo Opera House Archive)

The Opera House

South of the Ezbekiyyah Garden stood the Khedivial Opera House, a focal point for the new center of Cairo. An emblem of civilization and modernity, it also stood, for local elites, as a site within which to civilize and modernize Egyptians.

The Italian company of Fasciotti and Rossi designed the opera house in the eclectic Italian Neo-Renaissance style of La Scala in Milan, and corvée labor of Egyptian fellahin completed it in a mere four or five months (Figures 6 and 7). Inside, burgundy and gold brocade hangings lined the white, four-story structure, and private gilt-scrolled boxes for pashas and the Khedive made up the second floor. The entire house seated approximately 800 people. Despite its attractive appearance and luxurious décor, most of the building had been constructed of wood and plaster. Before gas lighting, candles lit the interior, making it necessary for a fire brigade to stand ready for emergencies behind the scenes at every performance.

Paul Draneht Bey, a Greek member of Ismail’s court, supervised the Opera House. His responsibilities included trips to Italy and France each year to assemble troupes for both the new Comédie Francaise and Opera House. Concern with attracting top stars meant considerable budget expenditures, an issue Draneht raised frequently in letters to the head of the Council of Ministers, Riaz Pasha. Top stars translated into

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113 Sources list different seating capacities for the opera house, ranging from 750 to 1000. See, for example, ‘Abdu ‘Ali. *Al-Qahira fi ‘Asr Isma’il*, 70; Sadgrove, *Egyptian Theatre*, 52-53.

114 Caillard, *Lifetime in Egypt*, 18; Paul Draneht, letter to Riaz Pacha, 1 January 1870, File 7, Mahfuzah 80, ‘Asr Ismail (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt). A letter from Emanuele Muzio (Verdi’s former student and friend who conducted the Opera House’s inaugural performance of *Rigoletto*) to Verdi mentioned a fire that broke out in the clock above the proscenium. 7 January 1870, reprinted in Busch, ed., *Verdi’s Aida*, 6.

115 Budgets from 1869 onward are available in File 3, Mahfazah 80, ‘Asr Ismail (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt). Notably, the opera *Aida*’s budget and all other expenses connected to it were always listed separately in ledgers. Not being lumped together with other performances for 1869, it was set apart, even financially, from the others. Paul Draneht, letters to Riaz Pacha, June 1870; 13 July 1870; and 27 August 1870, File 7, Mahfazah 80, ‘Asr Ismail (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt). Alfred Butler complained that during the opera season, “one actress alone got 1200 l. a month; all had money and jewels showered on them at leaving” (Butler, *Court Life*, 61).
large audiences—a concern shared by theater directors, Isma’il, and local journalists.\textsuperscript{116}

Isma’il’s generous opera house budgets came from European bank loans and the government’s coffers.\textsuperscript{117} Moreover, he ordered Pachas to hire loges (boxes) each season and charged them with the responsibility to cover ballerinas’ expenses for the duration of their stay in Cairo. Opera House budgets paid for building maintenance, stage sets, performers’ salaries, and passages to Egypt, and special seats set aside for guests of the khedive. The best seats were reserved for visiting diplomats, and the police prefect; others were reserved for municipal and Egyptian police, European language journals, directors for other theaters and the Circus in Cairo, and major foreign bank officers.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{116} Draneht, letters to Riaz Pacha, 27 August 1869; 24 May 1870; June 1870, File 7, Mahfazah 80, ‘Asr Isma’il (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt); Draneht letter to Barrot Bey, 21 April 1875, File 1, Mahfazah 80, ‘Asr Ismail (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt). After the turn of the century, the Egyptian Standard an English-language version of nationalist Mustafa Kamil’s al-Liwa, called for more government subsidies for the Opera House as it was undeniably an important tourist destination. “[W]hat about the foreign tourists who come here to pass a season, a month, or a fortnight,” the author asks. “[I]f Cairo wishes to compete with the Riviera and other winter health-resorts, the opera must be patronised and strongly subventioned by the Government” (“Opera Season,” Egyptian Standard [Sept. 13, 1907]: 1).

\textsuperscript{117} Paul Draneht, letter to Eram Bey, 27 November 1869, File 4, Mahfazah 80, ‘Asr Isma’il (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt); Budget for 1871-1872, File 4, Mahfazah 80, ‘Asr Isma’il (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt).

Elite patronage of religious and secular entertainments had a long history in the Arab world. In nineteenth-century Egypt, ruling elites hosted events in public spaces (particularly around Ezbekiyyah), in private homes, and at the khedivial court.¹¹⁹ Alfred Butler, court tutor to Ismail’s grandsons, gave several accounts of such experiences. On the occasion of ‘Eid al-Fitr, a feast day to mark the end of Ramadan, Butler observed court servants, 4000 troops, ministers, body-guards, and merchants praying on a rug that had been laid in front of the palace steps. When the khedive arrived, their prayer was interrupted by “four bands of music [that] clashed out the khedivial hymn, and the troops

presented arms.\textsuperscript{120} Royal weddings raised the bar further, as was the case in 1873 when Ismail held a forty day celebration in honor of his three sons’ and daughter’s weddings. The celebration included stunning public illuminations and music in Ezbekiyyah Garden.\textsuperscript{121} An Ottoman theater troupe, Turkish comedians, Egyptian singers, musicians, acrobats and dancers performed at Qasr al-Nil palace.\textsuperscript{122} Ismail’s favored singers, people like Abdul al-Hamuli, Muhammad al-Aqqad, Mahmud Othman, Almaz who synthesized Turkish music with local Egyptian folk music, appeared regularly in the palace. But these same singers rarely appeared in the Opera House, which was reserved for European performers.\textsuperscript{123}

When the opera house opened in 1869, it provided a new venue for performance marked by elements that set it apart from other theatrical spaces and practices. Unlike more traditional performances that often were connected to larger events and celebrations, this venue offered entertainment for its own sake. Attendees traveled to a building designed specifically for performance rather than watching them in public spaces or, in the case of elite patrons, having the performance come to them. Spectators purchased seats that were theirs for the duration of the performance. And performances, which took place on a proscenium stage, were primarily European in language and style, demanding different listening and viewing practices than the interactive and vocal audience engagement to which Egyptians were accustomed.\textsuperscript{124} Chronicler al-Jabarti had

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{120} Butler, \textit{Court Life}, 179.
\bibitem{121} Butler, \textit{Court Life}, 282.
\bibitem{123} Alfred Butler gives his account of a Turkish play held in the palace of Prince Mahmud. See Butler, \textit{Court Life}, 280-81. Vatikiotis, \textit{Modern History}, 108; Racy, \textit{Making Music}, 37. This was not met quietly by journals that pled for Arabic language performances at the Opera House. See, for example, \textit{Wadi al-Nil} (April 18, 1870) quoted in Sadgrove, \textit{Egyptian Theatre}, 58.
\bibitem{124} More on this in chapters two and three.
\end{thebibliography}
commented on many of these distinctions in his observation of theaters built in Cairo to entertain members of the Napoleonic expedition:

At Azbakiya, at the point known as Bab al-Hawa’, the construction was completed of what in their tongue is called La Comedie. It is a place where Frenchmen assemble once every 10 nights for some four hours to see plays performed by a French troupe, in French, for pleasure and entertainment. To enter, one has to have an admission ticket and suitable garb.\(^{125}\)

Half a century later, Rifa’a Rafi’ al-Tahtawi recounted what appeared on stage when he attended a performance in Paris:

They construct the stage as the play demands. For example, if they want to imitate a sultan and the things that happen to him, they set up the stage in the form of a palace and portray him in person. If for instance they want to play the Shah of Persia, they dress someone in the clothes of the Persian monarch and then put him there and sit him on a throne.\(^{126}\)

Inside the theater, loges offered not only a better view of the stage, but also more visibility of the occupants within. As in European theater, this was significant in that what happened offstage was often of equal, if not greater, importance than what happened on.\(^{127}\) No example of this was more clear than one night in 1893 upon the new Khedive ‘Abbas II’s first visit to the opera house since his accession. The rumor of his intended visit had stirred much gossip and anticipation that the khedive had tried to thwart by sending out a counter-rumor that he had decided not to go. He eventually


\(^{127}\) See, for example, James H. Johnson, Listening in Paris: A Cultural History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). An article in the Egyptian Gazette was quite critical of this, complaining that “[I]t is notorious that a goodly proportion of the habitual opera-goers of Cairo confine themselves during the entre’actes and overtures to a survey of the frocks and faces—doubtless charming—which they see around them, and subside, on the lifting of the curtain, into a comatose lethargy.” (“Subventions to Theatres,” Egyptian Gazette [Oct. 27, 1906]: 3.
arrived, quietly (though not without a welcome by the head and some members of the Council of Ministers), while the first act was in progress. When he appeared in his loge, the performance, which happened to be *Aida*, stopped, and the orchestra played the khedivial hymn four times, as the audience cheered.\(^{128}\) The fact that attendees that evening included Lord Cromer, the diplomatic corps, and, according to the *Egyptian Gazette*, “the most distinguished and brilliant of Cairo society,” illuminates the political significance of the event.\(^{129}\) Such visual and vocal support of ‘Abbas II in a space of ostensibly benign entertainment made possible a veiled critique of Lord Cromer even while it was enacted in front of him.

Indeed, the physical design of the opera house made hierarchy visible (and contestable) in new ways.\(^{130}\) Visibility allowed spectators to note who was in attendance and facilitated visits between audience members in their loges.\(^{131}\) Audiences purchased seats that divided them in ways correlating with wealth and status. This created a type of legibility that mirrored increasingly complex and stratified hierarchies in Egyptian and European societies undergoing rapid political, economic, and technological transformations that altered social organization as well.\(^{132}\)


\(^{130}\) This was similar to the function of the opera house in eighteenth-century France. As James Johnson writes, “like the balls, banquets, coronations, and ceremonies of absolutism, musical experience in the Old Regime served the ideological function of temporarily illuminating the invisible power structure of the system.” Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 34.

\(^{131}\) American diplomat Thomas Skelton Harrison made note of a M. Turnères’s visit to his loge, or box, during the intermission of *Rigoletto*. In another entry, he writes at greater length about his secretary’s experience being “invited into Lord Granville’s loge” where he “had much politeness generally offered to him.” Thomas Skelton Harrison. *The Homely Diary of a Diplomat in the East: 1897-1899* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1917), 52, 80.

The attendance of so many members of the police force added another dimension to the visibility of the opera house. For just as people spent much time looking at each other, they knew that they were being watched as well. But it was not only police who surveilled the audience—journalists and critics did as well. Press critiques of performances commented not only on the production, but on the other spectators, their dress, chatter, orderliness or disorderliness as well. On the opening night of *Aida*, for example, audience members attracted so much attention from critics that it was difficult to determine if the spectacle was the audience or the performance on stage.\textsuperscript{133} Noted Milanese critic Filippo Filippi’s review of the opera *Aida* focused more on the exoticism of the theater, the dress of the Jewish and Coptic merchants, and his glimpses of the harem ladies than on the performance itself.\textsuperscript{134} After commenting on the beauty and elegance of the European women, he went on to note:

\begin{quote}
I ought to also say, from love of truth, that by the side of the handsomest and the best dressed were to be seen every evening the faces of Copts and Jews, with strange headgear, impossible costumes, colours which clashed so violently that nothing worse could be imagined.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

With comments such as these, critics intimated certain norms—in this case, appropriate dress—that should be observed by elite, modern, orderly society.

But clothing was not the only hierarchical distinction on display. Despite its Italian design, the opera house’s physical interior highlighted what, for many, was the epitome of Eastern “otherness.” For on the second floor, adjacent to the stage and opposite the Khedive’s loge, the women of the royal harem attended performances in

\textsuperscript{133} De Kusel, *An Englishman’s Recollections*, 90.
\textsuperscript{135} Mostyn, *Egypt’s Belle Epoque*, 81-82.
harem boxes. These were specially designed loges with private staircases guarded by eunuchs. And, as Ellen Chennelle, English governess to Ismail’s court, described:

[T]hey were a novelty to be seen in no other country…the whole front of these boxes was covered with a fine network of iron, painted white, and covered with flowers in gold. It had the effect of lacework, but it was all iron, and the elaborate pattern of the flowers made it more difficult to distinguish any person or thing within the boxes so covered.\(^{136}\)

For many European audience members, the harem boxes seemed, oddly, to publicly assert private or segregated space. The fact that harem boxes were loges—elevated sections that ordinarily allowed for heightened visibility for those within and without—created dissonance by being covered and inaccessible. They effectively provided a “hidden visibility” that captivated visitors’ imaginations. Oriental Secretary to Lord Cromer, Ronald Storrs, voiced this fascination in his account of how it was possible to catch “flashes of magnificent jewels and even more magnificent eyes from behind the harem boxes.”\(^{137}\)

But such juxtaposition was not contradictory if interpreted as a natural extension of Ottoman court culture. As historian Leslie Pierce observes, the “public display of splendid isolation” was an old practice inherited by the Ottomans from Islamic and Christian Byzantine monarchies.\(^{138}\) The Ottoman sultan, for example, might be visible to his subjects as he moved through the palace or city, but set off by the physical and human boundary of his entourage. In the case of the Opera House, the harem boxes effectively and appropriately functioned to “display” the women in their isolation. Confounding clear divisions of public and private space, these boxes physically and metaphorically


“domesticated” the opera house by forcing its structure, and guests, to comply with Ottoman court culture.

Viewing the Opera House as an extension of the royal court cautions against easily labeling the Opera House’s interior as split between private and public spaces. Rather, it introduces spatial designations more relevant to Ottoman culture, namely, privileged/common, sacred/profane, and interior/exterior. This exterior/interior binary was inscribed in the physical structure of Topkapi, the Sultan’s palace in Istanbul until the nineteenth century. As art and architectural historian Gulru Necipoglu writes, Topkapi, “once served as a vast stage for the enactment of a ceremonial, codified down to the smallest detail, whose symbolic language emphasized the elevated status of the sultan vis-à-vis his subjects, his dignitaries, and the representatives of foreign powers who came to his court.” As the sultan was considered sacred, the emphasis was on imperial seclusion and the sultan’s aloof relationship to the outside world. Topkapi’s design as a series of circles embedded within circles created distinctions in which interior spaces were places where people with familiar connections to the ruler mingled and dwelt. The interior was, thus, of greater political significance than exterior sections of the court. In a sense, it was an inversion of any notion where “public” space is interpreted as more politically significant than “private” space.

Hierarchy in Ottoman court culture was, thus, metaphorically and physically conceived not as vertical but as horizontal, and a critical index of power was one’s degree of access to the “center” or “interior” of the physical palace. As the royal harem was situated at the center of the palace, this meant that women had the greatest access to the

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139 Pierce, The Imperial Harem, 8-10.
physical body of the sultan.\textsuperscript{141} By extension, this meant that women who lived in the harem had considerable power. Indeed, court women in Egypt and Istanbul participated in the exercise of sovereignty through cultural, architectural, educational, and religious patronage; through marriage and motherhood; and through public participation in imperial ceremonies.\textsuperscript{142} Ismail’s mother, for example, was a formidable figure whose actions were regularly reported in the press. She had her own palace; founded the Rafa’i Mosque (the main mausoleum for the royal family); supported the Egyptian nationalist Ahmed ‘Orabi; and exercised significant influence over her son.\textsuperscript{143}

Thus, the spatial designations in the physical arrangement of opera house seating worked in more than one way. For one, it visually represented hierarchies of power that reflected Ottoman designations of status. Additionally, it situated Egyptians within new spatial frameworks of culture and power tied to a larger mission of creating a legible modern state.

**Modernizing Egyptians**

In the 1870s, concern with limited Egyptian interest in Opera House became a subject of discussion in elite circles and the local press. Despite the fact that Egyptians’

\textsuperscript{141} This was a major reason why adult males were kept out of the family quarters of the palace—any threat to the sultan’s lineage was also a threat to his person.


\textsuperscript{143} Hassan, *In the House*, 69.
toil and taxes paid for the opera house’s construction, they were financially unable, unwilling, or simply uninterested in enjoying it.

Earlier in the century, Egyptian scholars like Rifa’a Rafi’ al-Tahtawi had championed French theater as similar to adab, an indigenous concept that referred both to classical literature and the valued dispositions and norms of behavior that the study of such literature could instill. Access to Tahtawi’s views in Egypt was considerable, as his writings about Paris were read aloud in schools and given to all senior officials in the Mehmed ‘Ali administration.

Al-Tahtawi’s first experience with French theater was in France when he served as leading imam on a number of Egyptian educational missions to Paris. Though students traveled to Paris ostensibly to learn professional and technical skills in law, medicine, and engineering, the many months that students experienced abroad exposed them to French culture as well. Such experiences included visits to the theater, which he described:

In reality, these plays (al’ab) are serious matters in a humorous form (hazl): one is usually taught good lessons because one sees both good and evil deeds enacted; the former is praised while the latter is condemned, so that the French say they reform morals and refine men’s characters…One of the wonders is that in the performances they quote and go into profoundly extraordinary problems of science and other complicated matters, so you would think that they were savants

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144 One century before this, in 1720, a Mehmed Efendi also wrote about the Paris Opera for an Ottoman audience. He described it as “a special kind of entertainment called opera, where wonders are shown. There was always a great crowd of people, for all the great lords go there. The regent goes often, and the king from time to time…Each is seated according to his rank, and I was seated next to the king’s seat, which was covered with red velvet…The place was superb; the staircases, the columns, the ceilings and the walls were all gilded. This gilding, and the brilliance of the cloth of gold that the ladies were wearing, as well as the jewels with which they were covered, all in the light of hundreds of candles, created the most beautiful effect” (Bernard Lewis, ed. A Middle East Mosaic: Fragments of Life, Letters and History [New York: The Modern Library, 2001], 364).

145 Sadgrove, Egyptian Theatre, 34-36.
(ulama)...In short, for them the theater is a kind of school for the general public, which gives instruction to both the educated and uneducated.\textsuperscript{146}

For him, theater was “a great public school” and morality could be taught, even through comedy.\textsuperscript{147}

The specifics of how theater might function as an educative and moral tool, a notion not unique to Egypt, varied depending on who was speaking about it. In 1882, for example, a letter to the Ministry of Public Works by M. Ernest Wilkinson, Englishman requesting the following year’s Opera House commission, reflected concerns with Egyptian modernization. “Egypt is progressively achieving its place among the civilized and free nations, opening to its population a new era of prosperity,” M. Ernest Wilkinson wrote, “but it is dependent upon certain results that are difficult to achieve...amongst those are education of the masses; and from history, we see that the theater, as a moral element, has significantly contributed to bringing people...wisdom and morals.”\textsuperscript{148} It was rare, in his eyes, for one to witness “virtue oppressed by despotism and perversity” on the stage and leave the theater without feeling one’s indifference “penetrated by sentiments of justice.” If granted control of the Opera House, he promised to “educate” Egyptians by incorporating Egyptian actors into his plays. He explained that he hoped to inspire other Egyptian stage talents and to overcome their “ignorance” of the art of acting.

Syrian and Egyptian journalists in Egypt, most of whom were part of an emerging middle-class, or effendiyya, also attached importance to the moral and

\textsuperscript{146} Rifa’a Rafi’ al-Tahtawi, \textit{Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz} (Bulaq: Dar al-Tiba’a’ al-Khidiwiya, 1834/5), 88, as reproduced in Sadgrove, \textit{Egyptian Theatre}, 36
\textsuperscript{147} Sadgrove, \textit{Egyptian Theatre}, 5.
\textsuperscript{148} M. Ernest Wilkinson, letter to the Ministry of Public Works, February 21,1882, File ½, al-Ashghal, Mahafiz Maglis al-Wuzara’(DWQ, Cairo, Egypt).
educative functions of the stage. However, the moral element they extolled came not from the art of acting, but from the realism of theater, the emotions it evoked, and the moral lessons it drew from history. They promoted theater as a critical component to a modern society.\textsuperscript{149} The Syrian journal \textit{al-Jinan}, for example, included an article on the benefits of theater, claiming “It is known that plays (\textit{al-riwayt al-tashkhisiyah}), called theatricals (\textit{al-tiyatrat}), are amongst the most important indications of progress and one of the most important reasons for the reform of customs and implanting of historical wisdom in the minds of the people.”\textsuperscript{150} \textit{Wadi al-Nil} concurred, stating that plays were an “excellent innovation and a way for general education [which is] commendable because it makes people see things in their true light. They depict the events of man before his eyes [to his perception] so that he acquires the virtues and avoids the vices, apart from (having) other worthy benefits and important advantages.”\textsuperscript{151} Translator ‘Uthman Jalal attempted to explain the powerful modernizing force of theater:

\textit{[T]his art…has not happened amongst us, but we have witnessed it amongst the Europeans, who started plays [\textit{tiyatrat}], and made them a powerful force to civilise their countries. For civilisation involves training and educating the soul to adopt good morals. This can only be done by acquainting “souls” with information about the ancient people and the histories of advanced nations.}\textsuperscript{152}

The fact that the performances to which they referred were in European languages meant that it was not long before the same journals that praised theatricals began to support and report on translations of European language productions into Arabic and Turkish.\textsuperscript{153} Indeed, Jalal’s translation of plays was testament to his belief that translation

\textsuperscript{149} Sadgrove, \textit{Egyptian Theatre}, 10.
\textsuperscript{150} \textit{Al-Jinan}, 6:15 March 1875), reprinted in Sadgrove, \textit{Egyptian Theatre}, 56.
of plays into Arabic was critical to overcoming obstacles to Egyptian enjoyment and benefit from the artistic medium.

Elites were very much invested in this civilizing project. Correspondence between Opera House Superintendent Draneht and Ismail’s secretary Khairi Pasha, for example, included discussion of details regarding *Wadi al-Nil* editor, Abdullah Abu al-Suud Effendi’s (1820-1878) offer to translate the libretto of *Aida* into Arabic and Turkish. He earned 1270 francs for the job.\(^{154}\) A letter from Draneht to Khairi Pasha noted “five days before the première. Four hundred copies of *Aida* were printed in Turkish, and three hundred in Arabic at the *Wadi al-Nil* press.”\(^ {155}\)

Al-Suud’s offer to translate was not incidental to his career as a journalist, as he was a professional translator for the School of Languages, Egypt’s first institution of professional translators.\(^ {156}\) Under its first (and returning) director, Rifaa al-Tahtawi (1835-49, 64-68, 68-71), the bureau translated various texts in topics ranging from engineering and medicine to politics and literature. In the 1860s, it added opera libretti to its repertoire, starting with Offenbach’s operetta, *La Belle Hélène*, in January 1869. Newspapers that encouraged attendance at European theatricals—such as *al-Ahram*, *al-Mahrusa*, *al-Waqt*, and other Syrian journals—encouraged readers to buy opera translations, manuscripts which they could pass from hand to hand while watching

\(^{154}\) Paul Draneht, letter to Khairi Pasha, 31 Jan. 1872, Opera House Documents (Opera House and Music Library). His translation of the libretto for *Les Huguenots* into Arabic earned him 1006 francs.

\(^{155}\) Paul Draneht, letter to Khairi Pasha, 31 Jan. 1872, *Abdoun* (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt).

\(^{156}\) Like many trained translators, Al-Suud was also a leader in arts and letters. He was a history master at Dar al-’Ulum, an author of history textbooks, and founder of the journals *Wadi al-Nil* (1866) and *Rawdat al-Madaris* (the first Arabic journal to publish translated European plays). The first publication of a translated European play was Muhammad Bey Othman Jalal’s *Al-Fakhkh al-Mansub li al-Hakim al-Maghsub*, or *Al-Tabib Raghm Anfihi*. Al-Muwailihi and Jalal were also involved in the Translation Bureau’s liberetti translations. Sadgrove, *Egyptian Theatre*, 5.; Abul Naga, *Les Sources Francaises*, 64-65.
performances to make plays more accessible and, more importantly, more useful educational tools. Based on the observations of a correspondent for the journal *al-Jawa‘ib*, the translations were indeed put to use. Turkish and Egyptian notables, Indians, and foreigners, he noted,

> each of them had in his hand an Arabic text [containing] a translation of these plays. I saw a black slave in a white turban, and in his hand was a translation of Don Juan. I was that evening in the box of the Director of the Theatre, and he said to me: ‘Nothing delights me more than to see the people of Egypt pleased with these theatres. Now they have entered through all the doors of civilization, with the theatre providing its relaxing side.’

Despite Ismail’s promotion and support of libretti translations in the service of “civilizing” the Egyptian people, there was a vast separation between civilizing rhetoric and reality. Though educational reforms and increases in European mission schools increased the number of Egyptians who could understand European theater, the numbers of attendees remained small. It is not safe to assume that elites were enamored with opera either. Pachas who were ordered by the khedive to purchase loges at the opera house did not seem very interested in performances. Though attendance at the opera house became central to elite lifestyles, reports indicated that Pachas purchased, but often left their boxes empty “rather than submit to the tediousness of listening to fine music.”

An article in *Wadi al-Nil*, for example, appealed to God to grant success to the translations of opera libretti and their use “so that the taste for them will spread amongst the native communities.” (*Wadi al-Nil*, 55: 28 Feb. 1870 reprinted in Sadgrove, *Egyptian Theatre*, 57-58).

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were “about as enthusiastic as their husbands as they listened, half asleep, to Offenbach’s opéra-bouffe.” On the other hand, the governess of Isma’il’s harem noted that a eunuch who had accompanied her to the opera house “apparently follow[ed] the performance with great interest.”

In many ways, the Opera House’s alternative use as a space for fundraising unintentionally facilitated its entrée into middle class Egyptians’ lives. In hopes of locating other sources of funding to sustain the theater, by the 1880s the Opera House was frequently let for fundraisers for numerous local communities and organizations. These ranged from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (of which Lord Cromer was a patron) to the Italian Benevolent Society and Syrian Relief Fund. Permissions were given to Coptic, Jewish, and indigenous philanthropic organizations who sought access to the Opera House’s attractive space for their own functions and Arabic language amateur theatricals.

Aida

Ismail’s request for the opera Aida to be a “purely ancient and Egyptian” opera raises a host of questions, not least because opera did not resemble any indigenous forms

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162 Chennelle, Recollections, 265.
163 A. Rouchdy, letter, 24 Feb. 1887, No. 874, Mahfazah ½, Al-Magmu’ah al-Ashghal, Maglis al-Wuzara’ (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt).
165 See, for example, A. Rouchdy, letters to Minister of Public Works, 24 Feb. 1887; 12 March 1887; 10 March 1887, Mahfazah ½, al-Magmu’ah al-Ashghal, Maglis al-Wuzara’; (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt).
of musical performance. As historian Donald Reid asks, “what does authenticity mean in a European musical extravaganza that no ancient Egyptian and few Egyptians of his own day could have understood?” Ismail’s choice to make a “purely ancient” Egypt the subject of the opera is also intriguing in light of his efforts to modernize the state and its inhabitants. Why did Ismail select ancient Egyptians as the subject of the opera as opposed to modern Egyptians? Was this, as Edward Said has argued, simply one more Orientalist opera, or was it something more? And, finally, what was the relationship between opera and urban renewal in Cairo? A closer look at the opera Aida suggests that its presentation not only served to entertain but that it also was very much tied to power and control over the depiction of history.

In many ways, Ismail’s preference for an opera about the grandeur of ancient Egyptians echoed the esteem that Europeans accorded to ancient versus modern Egyptians. Perhaps Anglo-Egyptian resident E.L. Butcher summed this up best when she stated: “like everyone else, I was too much absorbed in the Egypt of the Pharaohs to care much about their degenerate descendents…” Ancient Egypt, for many, had attained heights of civilization that the moderns simply did not inherit.

Such notions predated but were considerably enhanced by waves of Egyptomania that accompanied the unearthing of ancient tombs, temples, and other antiquities. Before Napoleon’s Description de l’Egypte, European architectural design, Mozart’s opera The Magic Flute, and interest in Freemasonry reflected a general fascination with ancient

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166 Isma’il’s involvement in the creation of Aida included instruction on the scenery, décor, and costumes to be used. Auguste Mariette, letter to Barrot Bey, 28 August 1870, File 5, Mahfazah 80, ‘Asr Isma’il (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt).
167 Reid, Whose Pharaohs, 12.
169 Edith Louisa Floyer Butcher, Egypt As We Knew It (London: Mills & Boon, 1911).
Egypt. Nineteenth-century archaeological discoveries only fed the interest. Egypt was commonly imagined as an antique, exotic land of Pharaohs, the Bible, Herodotus, and the *Arabian Nights*. Archaeologists contributed to the blending of Egyptology and Egyptomania by writing chapters for travel guides, organizing exhibits at European exhibitions, and writing fictional histories of the ancients. The opera *Aida* contributed to this cultural production, offering a framework for presenting ancient Egypt to European spectators.

But Egyptians were in attendance too. *Aida* was intelligible to most Egyptians in attendance by virtue of 300 Arabic translations of the libretto in circulation during the performance. Nevertheless, viewing their own ancient history on stage must have resonated in different ways. In the few decades before *Aida*’s premiere, Egyptian intellectuals like Sheikh Rafaa al-Tahtawi had just begun to write about Egypt in a new way—as a living legacy of its ancient past. Al-Tahtawi was profoundly influenced by his exposure to French thought and culture when leading student missions to Paris. It was in France that he first witnessed the combined effects of Egyptology and Egyptomania. He returned to Egypt determined to promote the pharaonic legacy among modern Egyptians. In his lengthy and influential career as educator, translator, and journalist, al-Tahtawi published numerous translated and original works on ancient Egyptian history that carefully elucidated the ancients’ accomplishments. For al-Tahtawi, such heights were not merely historical; they could, once again, be regained.

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171 This became even more pronounced upon Carter’s unearthing of King Tutankhamen’s tomb in November 1922. See Fayza Haikal, “Egypt’s Past Regenerated by Its Own People” in Irene A. Bierman, ed., *Napoleon in Egypt* (Ithaca: Garnet and Ithaca Press, 2003), 125-126.  
The desire to recall an age of Egyptian greatness, nonetheless, also must be understood in the context of Egypt’s relationship to the rest of the Ottoman Empire and Africa in the mid-nineteenth century. While Mehmed ‘Ali’s reforms allowed Egypt some degree of disengagement with the sultan, Ismail managed to wrest so much control from Istanbul that Egypt’s provincial status was merely nominal over the course of his reign. Primarily by way of gifts and bribes, Ismail had forced the Sultan Abdulaziz to elevate his title from Viceroy to Khedive and had earned rights to expand his army, issue his own currency, and contract foreign loans without the sultan’s approval.

At the same time that Ismail was claiming greater independence from Istanbul, he was working to expand his own empire in Africa. Ismail hired British and ex-Confederate American soldiers to lead the Egyptian army into the Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda and beyond, ultimately claiming control over most of the Nile basin, a territory that was approximately half the size of the United States.\(^{173}\) Soldier-explorers like Sir Samuel Baker and General Charles Gordon established outposts for Isma’il in the outermost reaches of the Nile.\(^{174}\) But two major factors would bring an end to Isma’il’s imperial ambitions: strained budgets and the rise of a young Sudanese religious leader named Muhammad Ahmad. Ahmad, known as the Mahdi, led a Sudanese uprising that took back most of the Sudan by 1884.

Egypt’s relationship to the Sudan in the nineteenth-century was ambivalent and fraught. Considered both a fearful place of exile and a target for an Egyptian civilizing

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mission, the Sudan deeply connected to developing notions of Egyptian identity. As Isma’il expanded his empire into the Sudan and beyond, his expressed aim to British critics was a desire to civilize Eastern Africa. Notwithstanding the material and political benefits derived from empire-building, Isma’il and the dhawat who surrounded him articulated their own civilizing mission for sub-Saharan Africa—one that included banishing slavery. For Isma’il, ruling elites, and an emerging effendiyya who would articulate their own version of local identity, Egypt was an imperial civilizer, separate from and superior to sub-Saharan Africa. Reflecting this, the opera Aida clearly demarcates Pharaonic Egypt from Africa. The separation between a “militaristic Egypt” and a “suffering Ethiopia” is inscribed deeply—not in the lyrics, but in the music. As Paul Robinson observes, “Egypt is characterized by music that is regular, diatonic, and brassy…distinctly European.” The more “exotic” music in the opera is reserved for Egypt’s victims—Moors and Ethiopians—and women. Thus exoticism in Aida is both gendered and racial, separating women and sub-Saharan Africa from a Europeanized Egypt.

As Egypt was vulnerable to European expansion but also fulfilling its own imperial aims in tension with European expansionist goals in the region, it becomes increasingly apparent that the opera Aida was not merely a tribute to a bygone age of Egyptian greatness. It was an assertion of modern Egypt’s power in the face of increasingly menacing European states. Hearkening back to a “civilized” Egyptian past

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175 Powell, *Different Shade of Colonialism*, 68.
177 Robinson’s discussion of Verdi’s political leanings as someone sympathetic to the plight of the oppressed adds another layer to the opera—seen through the perspective he describes, Aida is about the Italian Risorgimento as much as it is about ancient Egypt.
in operatic format was not nostalgic. For Ismail, it was evidence of Egypt’s distinction from the rest of Africa and proximity—cultural and political—to Europe. 178 “My country,” Ismail once famously stated, “is no longer part of Africa. It is a part of Europe.”

The production of *Aida* was, therefore, multivalent in its message and reception. From the perspective of European visitors, the opera made Cairo “legible” by representing exoticism at an observable distance, but also somewhat familiar, as it represented Egypt as similarly European and within a recognizable musical format. It appealed to elite Ottoman and Egyptian audience members by representing a version of ancient Egypt that reflected the glory of a past that might once be regained. And, to Isma’il’s satisfaction, *Aida* represented Egypt as a modern imperial power.

**Conclusion**

The consequences of elite modernization in Cairo were ambivalent. Despite urban developments in western Cairo and the introduction of opera to elites and some of the middle classes, the changes foisted upon the broader population induced everything from indifference to outright contestation. Despite Isma’il’s lofty aims, “civilizing” the populace by way of new sanitary regulations or opera opera house performances could only go so far when Egyptians were unable or uninterested in participating in them.

Throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the opera house remained a venue for predominantly European performances. While some Egyptian actors and singers actively sought permission to appear on the Opera House stage (and

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178 See Powell, *Different Shade of Colonialism* for more detailed discussion of Egyptian perspectives on Africa in general and the ambivalent relationship between Egypt and the Sudan in particular.
occasionally succeeded), most did not appear there and sought alternative venues for their performances. Arabic theater was only given space most often when there was no other European attraction. At the same time, the debate over the proper role and function of theater in the cultural life of Egypt’s diverse population and its potential for “educating” Egyptians persisted. In fact, it expanded alongside the theater scene. As the Arabic theater became more popular, the question no longer merely centered on the benefits of the Opera House, but began to address more pressing political and social concerns. The discussion took on particular urgency in light of larger nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates on the limits, benefits, and dangers of foreign cultural influence. Was theater to be a realistic representation of events, an escape from reality, a moral tool?

Shortly after Aida’s memorable premier, the cotton boom that had first financed Ismail’s projects came to an end, and the high interest rates, brokerage commissions, and other charges connected to Ismail’s massive bank loans sent Egypt into a downward spiral of debt. Egypt’s debt before Ismail’s governance had been 3 million pounds sterling; by the end of his reign, it was over 100 million. The khedive’s desperate attempts to sell everything—from his palaces to the family silver—in efforts to stay afloat failed. By 1875, the threat of bankruptcy forced Ismail to sell all Egyptian shares of the Suez Canal to Britain, and one year later, fearing its potential insolvency, Egypt’s European creditor nations set up a Public Debt Administration in Cairo, effectively

179 Some performers like Salama Hijazi, Ahmed Abu Khalil, and Soliman al-Qardahi were able to perform on the Opera House stage, but only for a limited number of shows. See, for example, Rouchdy Pasha, letter to Council of Ministers, 24 December, 1884, Mahfazah ½, Al-Magmou‘ah al-Ashghal, Maglis al-Wuzara’ (DWQ, Cairo, Egypt).

turning financial control of Egypt over to Britain and France. Ismail’s attempts to resist loss of economic control led French and British consuls to force the Ottoman sultan to remove him; the sultan, weakened by the Ottoman Empire’s fiscal problems and debts to those same creditors, complied. Ismail was forced to abdicate in 1879.

It had been only a few years before that Ismail proudly declared Egypt no longer a part of Africa but a part of Europe. It is unlikely that he could have foreseen how devastatingly true this would be. Within ten years of Aida’s premiere, Egypt came to be subsumed, economically then politically, by Britain. It would remain so, in various guises, until 1952.
Chapter Two
How to be an Effendi: Arabic Theater, Politics, and Morality

The Khedivial Opera House opened its 1913 season with the Arabic drama, *MISR al-Jadida wa MISR al-Qadima* (*New Egypt and Old Egypt*). Unlike the usual Opera House repertoire of comic operas and ballets, this was a morality play written by journalist and playwright Farah Antun and performed by the troupe of esteemed actor Jurj Abyad (See Figures 8 and 9). The journal *al-Ahali* described an opening scene that depicted five individuals coming to “suck Egypt’s blood.”¹⁸¹ “The thing that we most fear for Egypt,” the reviewer claims, “is the sea that tosses these people upon us.” After describing a few key plot lines from the considerably complex story, he closes in praise of the show: “The actors were magnificent in portraying our current circumstances, and the writer, with great ability, accurately depicted our daily activities and what folly they bring to our youth, our peasants, our sheikhs, and our women.” Egyptians were encouraged to attend what the press dubbed the first truly “Egyptian play.”¹⁸²

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But neither Antun nor Abyad were Egyptian—not by birth, in any case. Both were Syrian Christian immigrants to Egypt, and both were heavily influenced by French thought and culture. Abyad had trained with renowned actor Sylvain in Paris before starting an acting troupe in Egypt. And Antun edited a journal, *al-Jami‘a*, in which he published eighteenth-century French romantic and secular rationalists’ writings in translation. Furthermore, public theater and performance had a long history in Egypt. Street theater had thrived for centuries in shadow plays, storytelling, and various other forms that entertained while often conveying rough political messages and social

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criticism. \(^{184}\) So what was it that persuaded the press to consider the fruit of Antun’s and Abyad’s collaboration a new, indigenous form of expression?

*Misr al-Jadida*’s perceived novelty and authenticity were intimately connected to the play’s content, its social and political context, and the spaces in which it was performed. As *al-Ahali*’s reviewer remarked, the play addressed problems and idiosyncrasies that were specific to contemporary Egyptian life and used the modern theater to disseminate its playwright’s moral message. The play, *Misr al-Jadida*, as one representation of Egyptian society and its ailments, offers critical access to the concerns, beliefs, and prescriptions emanating from those who identified themselves as modern Egypt’s most able leaders—the *effendiyya*.

Undoubtedly, continuities between *Misr al-Jadida* and traditional performance existed; the play’s main characters were chiefly familiar stock characters from shadow plays: the wealthy pasha, the exploitative European, the simple *fellah*. \(^{185}\) But it also included a few newer characters: the “modern woman,” in this case a singer who longs for family life, and the *effendi*, the hero of the play. Moreover, despite the long history of morality plays in the Middle East, Antun’s version differed in its secular, rather than religious, content. \(^{186}\) The protagonist, who initially succumbs to vices connected to overwesternization and European exploitation, experiences an “awakening” that moves him to recognize his responsibilities to both family and country. Atonement—physical


\(^{186}\) Antun certainly was not the first to write secular morality plays; this was just one of several components that made his work novel in its time.
work in a place of exile—offers him an opportunity for a type of rebirth, and he returns to Egypt a new man.

Such transformation, framed as an individual awakening to a moral, ethical, and cultural imperative, was to serve as a model for a broader Egyptian population living under colonial influence, and modern theater offered an ideal conduit for the dissemination of such ideas. In the early twentieth-century, as modern theaters became increasingly popular as seemingly benign spaces of entertainment and leisure, they offered spaces in which playwrights, translators, and performers reflected and critiqued society. Hence, modern theaters of early twentieth-century Egypt were not only sites for entertainment. They also served as cultural and ideological frontiers, places where sundry voices gathered, collaborated, and debated their prescriptions for building a modern Egyptian society.  

Questions of modernity, tradition, nationalism, Islam, and the rights and status of women were all addressed in the physical context of the theater and on the stage, making the theater a sort of “press for the masses.”

For the effendiyya—a diverse, fluidly defined, and growing stratum of society that included government bureaucrats, intellectuals, and members of the “new professions”—the theater was a focal point for the propagation of a *domesticated*, or *localized, modernity*. Critically, it offered unmediated space in which the effendiyya

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189 The term “effendi” was first used as an Ottoman honorific title but evolved in the nineteenth century, first to refer to a group of bureaucrats from privileged backgrounds who had
could transmit and promote their own culture as an emblematic modern Egyptian culture. As the effendiyya sought to secure their position in Egyptian society, they endeavored to create a myth of “societal consensus and unity” around shared aspirations and interests. The modern Egyptian identity they negotiated and promulgated on stage was one that reflected the “civilized” identity they were forging for themselves, one that was defined against European cultural and colonial impositions. It was also defined internally against *ibn al-dhawat* (local elites), *fellahin* (peasants), and the *sha‘b*, (broader urban Egyptian population).

But such lines of distinction were not quite so discrete. Effendi relationships with each of these groups were fraught, for though they worked to establish their own position in society, they originally came from families that identified with the social categories the effendiyya busily were defining themselves against. Most came from traditional homes and considered themselves *awlad al-balad* (authentic sons of the country) even though their secular educations alienated them from their roots and encouraged them to seek a unique place in society. Such ambivalences made their mark on theater and debates connected to appropriate and worthy stage material. Generational, religious, social, ideological, and ethnic diversity within the effendiyya necessarily meant that definitions of “modern” and “civilized,” and methods for transmitting ideas, would differ between

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Received their western educations at the new khedivial schools or in Europe. By the turn-of-the-century, it expanded to include those who entered the “new professions” like engineering, law, medicine, journalism, and theater.


**191** As Katherine Zirbel explains, the term “*sha‘b*” carries cultural and class connotations, denoting, for example, traditional, patriarchal practices connected to urban working classes and peasant migrants to urban areas. Katherine Elizabeth Zirbel, “Musical Discursions: Spectacle, Experience, and Political Economy Among Egyptian Performers in Globalizing Markets” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1999), 184.

them as well. Whether plays should draw from European or indigenous sources; promote nationalism, Islam, socialism; offer historical lessons, political analyses, and/or contemporary social critiques depended on a playwright’s aims, resources, and disposition.

The seriousness with which writers engaged these questions was a testament to their esteem of theater and its role in Egyptian cultural life. This was most evident in debates regarding the role, benefits, and potential dangers of theater. Antun reflected the views of a large segment of the effendiyya who believed that theater should serve a didactic role in the life of the nation. His choice of genre—the morality play—and the themes he engaged firmly situated him within this context. Some, however, voiced concern that the representation of vice on stage and the mixing of male and female audience members might have unintended negative effects. Addressing such anxieties would be critical to an effendiyya who sought to offer unified leadership to a modernizing Egypt.

As Egyptian effendi nationalists worked to cultivate a sense of unity within their own social group, as much as in broader Egyptian society, the openness and fluidity of the category “effendi” became more constrained. Characteristics of Egyptianness were circumscribed to create the myth of a single Egyptian identity, and, inevitably, voices which did not fit in were excluded. Thus, “dissonant cultures and voices—women, minorities, social outcasts, the poor”—had to be minimized, neglected or erased.193 This could be done by trivializing their interests and concerns; it could also be done by

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elevating them to stand as symbols of the unified nation.\(^\text{194}\) Ironically, Syrians, like Farah Antun, who had effectively pioneered the indigenous press and contributed much to debates over Egyptian identity, came to be numbered with other “intruders,” as people who exploited Egyptian wealth and openness.\(^\text{195}\) In effect, Antun’s critique of foreigners in *Misr al-Jadida* was effectively turned into an accusation against him and his compatriots. Though the fluidity of the category effendi initially allowed Antun and other Syrians to participate in imagining a New Egypt, the narrowing conception of who embodied the New Egypt ultimately came to exclude them.

**Historical Context**

Six years after the financial crisis that led to the creation of a Public Debt Commission in Egypt (1876), a political crisis ensued. What would be termed the ‘Urabi revolt (1879-1882) was a series of battles between the British and Egyptians who sought to limit khedivial authority and end foreign influence in Egypt’s economic and political affairs.\(^\text{196}\) In the process, Egyptian army colonel Ahmad ‘Urabi emerged as someone whom many consider to be Egypt’s first nationalist hero. The rebellion started within the army when Egyptian officers, led by Ahmad ‘Urabi, voiced grievances with a new law limiting military advancement of individuals with peasant origin. Though the khedive rescinded the law, ‘Urabi and his supporters turned their protest into a national campaign

\(^{194}\) See, for example, Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005) on how women were used to represent Egypt and Powell, *Different Shade of Colonialism*, on how caricatures of Sudanese people and the Sudan were central to articulations of Egyptian national identity.


\(^{196}\) Historian Juan Cole argues that the ‘Urabi revolt was actually a revolution. See Juan R. I. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt’s ‘Urabi Movement* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999).
against European political and economic domination in Egypt. Civilians from various sectors of the population soon joined the coalition, each with different grievances. Members of the elected Chamber of Deputies, for example, sought more executive power, and Egyptian a ‘yan (landowning elites) and effendiyya all sought greater roles in government as well. Together, they proposed a constitutional regime and rallied for it under the slogan “Egypt for the Egyptians.”

Unable to contain the movement, the khedive appointed ‘Urabi Minister of War in 1882, and a movement to create a national assembly followed. In mid-July 1882, when it appeared that ‘Urabi’s movement would threaten European interests in the region, British forces invaded the country at Alexandria and eventually defeated ‘Urabi at the battle of Tel al-Kebir (September 13, 1882). Though the British intended only a brief intervention to restore khedivial authority, British occupation lasted until 1956.

Despite its defeat, the ‘Urabi revolt was a historical moment with considerable consequence, for it inspired new ways of thinking about Egypt. Those who participated in it began to articulate a notion of national unity and devotion to the watán (a territorial unit), a term that acquired particular emotional resonance in this period. 197 Journalists and playwrights like Ya’coub Sannu’, Adib Ishaq, and ‘Abdullah al-Nadim voiced this sentiment in articles, satirical cartoons, and plays that stressed the importance of national education as the most critical means by which to preserve a national culture. What exactly this national culture should be was up for debate.

The influx of Europeans in Egypt which followed the ‘Urabi rebellion contributed to Egyptian concerns with defining themselves. By 1882, 90,000 Europeans had settled

in Egypt, a significant increase from the 68,000 who had lived there in 1870. They settled in the country for a variety of reasons, not least due to the British occupation, which offered them positions in the expansive colonial government. Other opportunities also abounded for profit and power. Modernization projects attracted those with technical expertise in engineering and urban design. The cotton boom increased the foreign commercial community, particularly in the port city of Alexandria. And the Capitulations, which gave foreign protection and privileges to those residents, offered them benefits that Egyptians did not share.

Censorship of the press in the 1880s limited nationalist dialogue, but with the accession of the Khedive ʿAbbas Hilmi II (r. 1892-1914), tolerance for an anti-imperialist press increased. In their writings, nationalists articulated notions of an Egyptian identity and history that they would develop in the coming decades. For the most part, pro-Ottoman sentiment suffused these writings. Support of the Ottoman empire indicated allegiance to an Islamic community for many; for others it offered the most clear avenue for resistance to British occupation.

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century when the most clear articulations of Egyptian national identity appeared. The Denshawai incident of 1906 contributed to this development. That summer, press reports from the small delta village of Denshawai reported a conflict that had broken between British occupation officers and local peasants. Accounts indicated that an occupation force stationed in the Munufiyyah district, north of Cairo, awaited orders to march to Alexandria. In search of distraction from the boredom of waiting and the heat of a dry desert summer, a group of five British

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officers decided to go pigeon shooting in the outskirts of neighboring Denshawai, an agricultural area where the fellahin bred pigeons near their homes. What they thought would be a leisurely hunt turned into violent conflict when the villagers, angry with what had been become a regular British pastime of shooting at their livelihood for pleasure, attempted to physically stop the officers by seizing their weapons. As tensions escalated, fighting broke out, a villager’s wife was shot, and a threshing floor caught fire. Individuals on both sides sustained injuries, the most serious of which was head trauma to a British captain who died shortly afterward from a combination of those injuries and heat stroke.

In a climate where the British were increasingly concerned with a perceived upsurge in Pan-Islamic rhetoric, colonial administrators led by Lord Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, saw the Denshawai incident as a potential flashpoint for dangerous new trends in anti-British activity. It was of paramount importance to them that court proceedings against the fellahin serve as a lesson and a warning against potentially seditious activity, regardless of what had actually motivated their actions on that particular day. After two days of hearings, the Coptic Egyptian Acting Minister of Justice, Butros Ghali, pronounced the verdict: of the 52 villagers brought to stand trial in court, 21 were considered culpable for the violent outbreak at Denshawai. Of those, four were charged with premeditated murder and sentenced to execution by hanging. Nine would serve terms of penal servitude ranging from seven years to life, and eight were to be publicly flogged in Denshawai, to burn indelibly the spectacle of punishment in observers’ minds.199

Shortly afterward, Egyptian nationalists began to organize official political parties that drew much strength from Egyptian outrage at the outcome of Denshawai. Leaders produced journals that articulated their political views. They espoused notions of identity ranging from an Ottoman/Islamic orientation to territorial national patriotism to Arab nationalism. Political stances coalesced into two major positions, those of *hizb al-watani* (the Nationalist Party) and *hizb al-umma* (the Party of the Nation). Mustafa Kamil, the charismatic young leader and passionate orator of the Watani party drew the greatest popular support in the pre-World War One period. His pro-Ottoman stance, still popular with the majority of the population, acknowledged the importance of religious allegiance to the sultan. But his primary concern was with Egyptian territorial nationalism and forceful opposition to British imperial presence. For Kamil, the two positions were not contradictory. On the other hand, Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid, the head of the Umma party, emphatically rejected the idea of a bond with the Ottoman empire, arguing that a religious-based solidarity contradicted any notion of a territorially based, secular nation. Furthermore, he argued, such an allegiance would only split the nation which counted Jews and Christians, in addition to Muslims, as part of its population. For this reason, the Umma party attracted the greater number of Copts and other religious minorities who were suspicious of Kamil’s position.

The concept of territorial national identity was not entirely new in the early-twentieth century. In the 1860s and 70s, Rifa’ Rafi’i al-Tahtawi had first articulated a notion of Egyptian land and people as being a distinct unit. He used the word *watan* (nation) like the French *patrie*, to stress not just a place but also an emotional attachment that tied one to one’s country. In his writings, he narrated Egyptian history as a single

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continuum, linking ancient Egypt to the contemporary period, a practice that both Kamil
and Sayyid developed in their own writings. Kamil wrote of Egypt as an exceptional
nation, once stating “if I had not been born Egyptian, I would have wished to become
one.” Al-Sayyid went further to define what he considered to be the distinct national
color of Egyptians and arguing that the umma, or nation, was a living organism with
rights to autonomy and liberty.

Connection to any sort of pan-Arab identity was most popular amongst
immigrants to Egypt, like Farah Antun, but did not gain much traction with the local
population in the pre-war period. While nationalists like Kamil and al-Sayyid publically
called for acceptance of migrants, particularly Syrians, loyal to Egypt, they also
considered Syrians to be “intruders” in Egypt. As Gershoni and Jankowski note, native
Egyptians expressed a “sense of distinctiveness, of superiority, and sometimes
hostility…toward other Arabs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.” As
many Syrian immigrants were often well-educated, ambitious individuals who prospered
in British occupied Egypt, Egyptians who competed with them for work resented their
overrepresentation in government, business, and the cultural arena which included
journalism, acting, and playwriting.

201 Gershoni and Jankowski, Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs, 12.
202 For more on the changing meaning of umma, see Charles Wendell, The Evolution of the
Egyptian National Image: From its Origins to Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (Berkeley: University of
203 Gershoni and Jankowski, Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs, 15.
Farah Effendi Antun and the Syrians

Farah Antun was born in Tripoli in 1874 to an Orthodox Syrian family. Orthodox Syrians differed from their fellow Syrian Christians in several respects, and those differences, alongside his educational background, did much to shape Antun’s intellectual interests and pursuits. Unlike Maronites, who were powerfully concentrated in the mountains of northern Lebanon and supported by French patrons, the Orthodox were scattered throughout Syria and lived side-by-side, without foreign protections, with Muslim neighbors. As such, the social limitations of dhimmi status were more readily apparent to the Orthodox than to Maronites living in their own communities. While Maronites hoped for eventual independence in the form of a French-protected Lebanese state, most Arabic-speaking Orthodox lay intellectuals, like Antun, sought out ways in which to break out of their millet (confessional community), which was dominated by Greek clergy, and participate in a secular Ottoman state as equals to Muslims. Such aspirations colored Antun’s articles and plays in later years.

As prestigious bureaucratic and military careers in the Ottoman Empire were closed to non-Muslims, Antun might easily have followed the path of his father—and many other members of the Syrian Ottoman community—to become a merchant or artisan. His education in a religiously tolerant Orthodox school, however, would expose him to a broad array of inspiring subjects such as the natural sciences, mathematics,

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204 The following information draws on Hourani, Arabic Thought; and Donald M. Reid, The Odyssey of Farah Antun (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1975). Note that at the time, Lebanon was considered part of greater Syria.

205 In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most Greek Catholics from Syria had migrated to Lebanon or Egypt in order to seek economic opportunities and escape persecution from the Orthodox Christians from whom they had broken. Reid, Odyssey, 7.

206 Dhimmi status was accorded to non-Muslims living in Muslim lands. It offered protections to certain religious minorities but also asserted a special tax, the jizya, and certain legal and social limitations.
history, and, most importantly, French. Together, these would lead Antun on a very different career trajectory from his father—but one not uncommon for young intellectuals of his era. For several years, Antun worked as a school teacher in Syria before abandoning his job and home to pursue journalism in Egypt.

Antun’s interest in the sciences and passion for anticlerical French authors did much to shape his intellectual leanings and secular proclivities. Though he believed in personal religion, Antun promoted its separation from science and governance. His primary concern lay in promoting equality and full citizenship for all Christians, and such concerns attracted him to the secular ideals of the French Revolution and French romantic writers. It also encouraged him to call for a secular Ottoman nationalism, to support a feminism that promoted women’s education inside the home, and to explore forms of socialism that emphasized more egalitarian distribution of wealth but without class struggle. All of these positions would evolve over time, most notably his shift from Ottomanism to Egyptian nationalism in the early twentieth-century.

When Antun arrived in Alexandria in 1897, the Syrian Christian community was in the midst of rapid growth that began in 1860 and peaked by 1930. While the Syrian population in Egypt in the 1830s numbered 5000, by 1907 it was 34,000. They arrived to escape religious tensions, local economic pressures, and censorship and creative restrictions placed on them by Sultan Abdulhamid II. Many had been educated in the new professions, such as medicine, law, and journalism, and Syria could not support them all. In Egypt, Syrian merchants found success in various commercial activities; professionals found a population in need of doctors, teachers, lawyers, and

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207 Reid, *Odyssey*, 26. Western Europeans, Greeks, and Armenians also arrived in great numbers in that time, jumping from 3000 in 1836 to 147,000 in 1907. Egypt, Ministry of Finance, *The Census of Egypt Taken in 1907* (Cairo, 1909), 129, 148.
others; and many found a growing bureaucracy in need of multilingual bureaucrats. Napoleon, Muhammad ‘Ali, and Ismail all employed Syrian Christians in government, but Syrian bureaucrats’ numbers were greatest during British occupation when Lord Cromer placed them, along with Armenians, in 30% of higher government posts, as opposed to 28% of Egyptians who held such offices.\textsuperscript{208} Those most threatened by Syrian Christians in bureaucratic positions were Copts, the indigenous Christian minority in Egypt, who most often were the ones displaced by the better-educated and multilingual Syrians. Thus, though affinities existed between the co-religionists, Copts resented the influx of Syrians and, in the late-nineteenth century, sought out educational reforms in their schools in order to make them more competitive employees.\textsuperscript{209}

Though no professional school for theater education existed at the turn-of-the-century, the theater slowly emerged as one of the new professions. Many who were involved in playwriting engaged in other careers, particularly in the early years when lines between professions were hazy.\textsuperscript{210} Antun benefited from this career fluidity, as he started his own journal, \textit{al-Jami‘a}, in Alexandria in 1899 and, over time, translated and wrote several plays and operettas for performers like Jurj Abyad and Egyptian actress Munirah al-Mahdiyya. Few playwrights and journalists, in the early years, were of Egyptian origin. Most, in fact, were Syrians who dominated the theatrical scene in Cairo from 1876 through the end of the century. The Egyptian climate of arts promotion, particularly under Ismail, encouraged Syrian playwrights like Adib Ishaq and Salim al-

\textsuperscript{208} Reid, \textit{Odyssey}, 31.
\textsuperscript{210} Some evidence of this exists in terms that crossed over between fields. The word \textit{riwaya}, for example, meant both “story” and “play.”
Naqqash to come to Egypt in hopes of securing patronage and escaping Sultan Abdalhamid II’s strict censorship.211

Antun ran his journal for five years before financial difficulties and a public debate with Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abdu encouraged him to go somewhere new.212 He decided to try his hand in New York City in 1905. For all his beliefs and apparent radicalism, Antun’s faith in Western models of modernity were shaken when he came face to face with the “West” that, until then, he had only read about in books and magazines. His failure to run his paper successfully there, alongside what he considered an excessive materialism, striving for money and power, and absence of moral and spiritual grounding in the U.S., discouraged Antun’s idealization of a Western model for progress. He returned to Egypt and published a few more issues of al-Jam’ah, but he realized that he would have to seek financial support in other ways. Thus he turned to writing articles for various nationalist journals, such as Mustafa Kamil’s al-Liwa’, and to playwriting which offered him a direct means by which to express his views in the unmediated forum of the theater. He felt that the way to reach the larger population with greatest efficacy was by way of the theater.213 The realities of limited regional literacy corroborated this notion. Census information indicates that in 1897, only 4.1% of the

211 Other Syrian playwrights and actors in Egypt in the late-nineteenth century included Yusuf al-Khayyat, Soliman al-Qardahi, and Iskandar Farah. See, for example, Landau, Studies in the Arab Theater; Muhammad al-Fil, Ru’iya wa Biyyan Haala al-Masrah al-‘Arabi (1) al-Ta’sis (Cairo: al-Hi’a al-Misriyya al-‘Ama li al-Talif wa al-Anba’ wa al-Nashar, 1965), 100.
212 For details on the debate, see Hourani, Arabic Thought, 253-59.
Egyptian population was literate; in 1917 it was 6.8%. Of those who were literate, fewer than 5% are thought to have purchased newspapers in 1914.  

A Modern Ahli Theater

Ahli, or indigenous, theater in early-twentieth-century Egypt was on the brink of explosive growth when Antun started playwriting. The first modern theaters to open in Cairo were the Khedivial Opera House and Comédie, but they appealed primarily to a select group of elites—foreigners, the khedivial family, governmental ministers. A few theaters in Alexandria, most notably the Zizinia, also offered spaces for professional and amateur European troupes to perform from the mid-nineteenth century. Ya’cub Sannu’ (1839-1912) was the first known Egyptian playwright. Having enjoyed European theater in Ezbekiyyah, he sought to broaden the appeal of theater and secured khedivial patronage to write and perform plays in colloquial Arabic. He did so from 1870 to 1872, when his theater closed, though he continued to publish plays for many years afterward. His contemporary, ‘Uthman Jalal (1829/30-98), translated numerous works by Moliere, Racine, and Corneille, some of which Sannu’’s troupe performed in Cairo. And a few years later, Egyptian journalist al-Sayyid ‘Abdullah al-Nadim (1843-1896) founded a literary society, Jami’yat al-Funun wa’l-Adab (The Society of Arts and

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214 These figures come from Reid’s analysis of Egypt, Ministry of Finance, The Census of Egypt Taken in 1907 and Egypt, Ministry of Finance, The Census of Egypt Taken in 1917, 2 Vols. (Cairo, 1921). The 1897 literacy figures refer to the native Egyptian population from age 0, and the 1919 figures include people from age 5. Reid, Odyssey, 45.


216 There is some debate as to the cause of its closure. Some say it was due to a play he wrote that the khedive found personally offensive; others argue that a jealous courtier, Paul Drahnet, encouraged the khedive to shut him down.
Literature) in an Alexandrian school for poor and orphaned children, where he served as playwright, producer, stage-manager, and actor. Al-Nadim saw the Society as an opportunity to advance his ideas and educate students through the content of his plays. Most Arabic performances occurred in schools at end-of-the-year events or as fundraisers for charitable societies. The newly emergent Arabic press sometimes published plays in translation, though their support for Arabic theater in the early 1870s was minimal.

Figure 9: Map of central Cairo, 1914. ‘Imad al-Din St. runs north/south down the center (Source: MFQ1 1379 59, 1914 Cairo Map, British National Archive)

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217 P.C. Sadgrove, *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century (1799-1882)* (Durham: Ithaca, 1996), 145-46. Al-Nadim had started a Muslim Charitable Society (*al-Jam’iya al-Khayriyya al-Islamiyya*) to help the poor, and it was this society which opened the school for poor and orphaned children that he directed. He started the literary society *Jami’yat al-Funun wa ’l-Adab* in 1879.
Syrian journalists and acting troupes that arrived in increasing numbers in the mid-1870s contributed much to the expansion of Arabic theater. Syrian-edited journals like *al-Hilal*, *al-Ahram*, and *al-Mahrusa* encouraged audiences to attend theatrical productions, advertised performance dates, announced the sale of theater scripts, and, by the late-nineteenth century, printed reviews of stage performances, especially those of Salama Higazi. Some also sought to educate readers in theatrical terminology, much of which was imported from French and Italian and sometimes Arabized.²¹⁸

Between 1887 and 1908 (before the explosion of theater as mass entertainment) historian Yusuf Najm notes that thirty-three small acting troupes established themselves in Egypt, most of which included a mixture of Syrian Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Copts.²¹⁹ Increased interest in theater was evident even in the burgeoning of amateur theatrical societies and student organizations that popped up in Alexandria and Cairo.²²⁰

Most histories of theater in the region attribute the beginnings of Arabic stage performance to Marun al-Naqqash, a Maronite Christian from Sidon, Syria, who wrote and produced the play *al-Bakhil* in Beirut in 1848.²²¹ The play’s success encouraged him to build a theater where his musical farces were performed until his death. In 1876, Marun’s nephew, Selim al-Naqqash, along with his friend Adib Ishaq and a troupe of actors led by Yusuf al-Khayyat, traveled to Alexandria to perform for a season at the

²¹⁸ See, for example, *al-Mashriq*, 2 (1899), 20-23; 71-74; and *al-Muqtataf* 1 Aug. 1926, 223-224.
²²⁰ See, for example, *al-Hilal*, 1 Dec. 1895, 273-274; *al-Hilal*, 1 June 1896, 754; *al-Hilal*, 15 Jan. 1897, 393.
Zizinia Theater. Though their adaptations of Charlemagne, Phedre, Andromache, and other plays did not attract as much attention as they had hoped, al-Khayyat won favor with the Khedive Isma’il. This was temporary, however, as his performance of al-Zalum (The Tyrant) offended Isma’il enough to banish al-Khayyat from Egypt.

Nevertheless, Syrians continued to participate in theatrical activities in Egypt. In 1882, the new khedive, Tewfiq, allowed Sulaiman al-Qardahi’s troupe to perform some plays in the Khedivial Opera House. The troupe, which included former members of al-Khayyat’s troupe, Qardahi’s wife, a female singer, and Salama Hijazi, later toured the provinces and regularly performed in a wooden theater in Cairo. Other Syrian troupes followed, including ones led by Abu Khalil al-Qabbani, which also performed in a wooden theater in al-Ataba al-Khadra, and Iskandar Farah, whose company dominated the Egyptian theatrical scene for eighteen years.

Most of the early plays performed on stage, with the notable exception of Sannu’s, were adaptations or Arabicizations of French plays. Moliere’s Tartuffe was a favorite, as were other plays by Victor Hugo, and Alexander Dumas. Arabicization meant that translators like the native Egyptian ‘Uthman Jalal, altered plots, names, and places to fit local contexts. Often, plays incorporated music, as singing and musical comedies attracted the largest audiences. Iskander Farah’s troupe paid translators and writers, many of whom were also Syrian and included Farah Antun, between twenty and

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224 Landau, Studies in the Arab Theater, 74.
sixty guineas per piece (the highest salary in his company was thirty guineas per month).\textsuperscript{225}

In the first decade of the twentieth century, playwrights, actors and singers began performing in, and later opening, their own Arabic theaters in the district west of the Ezbekiyyah Gardens, in the region of ‘Imad al-Din Street.\textsuperscript{226} (See Figure 3) Though entertainments existed in various sections of early-twentieth century Cairo, ‘Imad al-Din Street emerged as a center for the growing number of tiatros, cafés, cinemas, and salas that offered various forms of Arabic performance.\textsuperscript{227} A stroll down the street presented individuals with numerous options for an evening out.\textsuperscript{228} At its northernmost point sat the venerable Printannia theater which hosted such esteemed performers as actress/singer Munira al-Mahdiyya, comedian Naguib al-Rihani, and king of melodrama Yusuf Wahbi, in addition to English-language performances.\textsuperscript{229} Next door was the Metropole Café, a popular gathering spot for local artists. A few paces south, on the corner of al-Alfi Street, sat the Italian-run Kursaal theater, the largest in Cairo, in which international performers, like ballet dancer Pavlova, and local acts, like al-Rihani and singer Umm Kulthum,
graced the stage.\textsuperscript{230} Down al-Alfi Street was the Abbé de Rose sala, where al-Rihani first unveiled his character, Kish-Kish Bey.\textsuperscript{231} Further east, on the north side of the Ezbekiyyah Garden, sat \textit{Dar al-Tamthil al-‘Arabi}, where “The Nightingale of the East,” Salama Higazi, sang. South of al-Alfi, back on ‘Imad al-Din Street, was the Muhammad Farid theater. Makhzin Mar‘i, a store that sold clothes for the theater, sat between it and the Majestique theater, home to the beloved comedian ‘Ali al-Kassar. Nearby, the Restaurant Santi and Champs-Elysées coffeeshops offered viewings of evening motion pictures, starting in 1906.\textsuperscript{232} At the end of the street sat Casino de Bari and the tented Egytianna theater, both hosts to al-Rihani, among others.

Though most theaters were in Alexandria and Cairo, Port Said, Isma‘iliyya, Suez, Tanta, Mansourah, and Zagaziq also had theaters that fell under government regulations.\textsuperscript{233} Such regulations attempted to impose order, assure safety, and monitor stage productions. A 1904 act, for example, enumerated acceptable numbers and widths of doors (based on the number of visitors) and regulated lighting and availability of fire extinguishers. Amendments in 1911 further regulated interiors and set forth guidelines for safety inspections. Furthermore, they stipulated that space for police to watch the performances be made available. Names and information about actors, dates and hours of performances, and scripts or performance programs had to be presented to police in

\textsuperscript{230} Umm Kulthum conducted her renowned Thursday performances at the Kursaal. Baraka, \textit{Egyptian Upper Class}, 123.

\textsuperscript{231} Though the golden age for salas was in the 1930s, the few that existed earlier did especially well during World War I when foreign military troops frequented them. Baraka, \textit{Egyptian Upper Class}, 128.

\textsuperscript{232} These were European films, as silent Egyptian films did not start until 1923. Baraka, \textit{Egyptian Upper Class}, 124, 126.

\textsuperscript{233} \textit{Recueil des Documents Officiels du Gouvernement Egyptien} (1911), 251-252.
advance of shows, and “plays contradicting public order and morals” were forbidden.\footnote{Reglement sur les theatres promulgué par arrête du Ministère de l’Intérieur,” Recueil des Documents Officiels du Gouvernement Égyptien (12 July, 1911).}

Unless special permissions were granted, all theaters were to close by 1am, and contravention of the law could lead anywhere from fines to permanent closure of performance spaces. Such regulations applied not only to tiatros, or theaters, but also to café-concerts, salas (a more neutral term for the maligned cabaret), and other sites of public spectacle that opened throughout the course of the period.

\textit{Misr al-Qadima wa Misr al-Jadida}\footnote{Farah Antun, \textit{Misr al-Jadida wa Misr al-Qadima} (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ta’lif, 1913).} \footnote{Abyad, \textit{Jurj Abyad}, 98.}

According to Jurj Abyad’s biographer, Antun was inspired to write the play \textit{Misr al-Jadida} after a few visits to a notorious café in Cairo named “Coffeehouse of Joys and Pleasures.” He had frequented the Greek-owned café to “get to know the nonsense that took place beyond those walls,” and consequently drew up a story that centered on a coffeehouse/cabaret, its patrons, and the subsequent social problems that their interactions foisted upon the broader Egyptian populace.\footnote{Ilham Makdisi rightly notes that in theater, topics of social justice were usually tied to other issues of reform such as criticizing blind imitation of the “West,” and promoting female education. Her focus on “radical” theater led her to plays that also called for curbing the power of churches and demanding an Ottoman constitution. Ilham Makdisi, \textit{Theater and Radical Politics in Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria: 1860-1914} (Washington D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 2006), 17.} In effect, what he composed was a secular morality play that instructed audiences in how to participate in an economically viable and independent Egypt by virtue of individual action and self-improvement.\footnote{Ilham Makdisi, \textit{Theater and Radical Politics in Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria: 1860-1914} (Washington D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 2006), 17.}
The plot of the play is complicated, as Antun himself claimed that it is “in truth, four interrelated plays.” The first act opens with a passenger-laden boat approaching the harbor in Alexandria. Polite conversation between five individuals reveals that they are all connected to a crooked Greek coffeehouse/casino owner in Cairo named Christo. The first passenger, Muhafhaf Pasha, is a member of the wealthy, old, self-serving Egyptian elite; much of Christo’s wealth derives from people like him who lose their fortunes gambling, drinking and engaging in drugs and womanizing in his casino. Muhafhaf, whose name is a humorous Arabic word meaning “flighty,” is described as a man with a big body and bloated belly who speaks fluent French. Two others, Etienne and Pauline, a French couple personally invited by Christo to join him in Egypt, arrive with plans to set up their own business. They are traveling with a young, poor French girl who believes she will work as their secretary. In truth, they intend to sell her to Christo as a performer, though the implication is that more will be expected of her.

But it is their fellow passenger, Fu’ad Bey, cousin of Muhafhaf Pasha, member of the new Egyptian effendi social group, who is the protagonist of the play. The “handsome youth” also is initially seduced by Christo’s establishment, where he falls in love with the liberated, educated singer Almaz. But Almaz’s dreams of leaving her career for a future as wife and mother are devastated when she learns that her beloved is already a husband and father. Enraged, she leaves him and returns to morally questionable work at Christo’s establishment.

For Fu’ad, however, the experience is transformative. Once faced with the damage—moral, financial, and emotional—that he has inflicted upon so many, his

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determination to make amends leads him to atone for his indulgences. A melodramatic moment involves his successful intervention to save the French maid from prostitution. He then moves his family to take a job in the Sudan, and only returns to Egypt once he earns back the fortune he lost in his transgressions. The Sudan, considered a place of exile but also a source of economic opportunity, was a site for self-inflicted punishment and renewal for Fu’ad.239

In the meantime, Muhafhaf’s overindulgences eventually lead to bankruptcy and ruin. Christo continues to lure new patrons to his establishment and supplements his income considerably through financial extortion of anyone in need—from a fatherless man in need of money, to a peasant couple who have to pawn their land in order to repay Christo’s exorbitant interest rate.

The only one who successfully emerges from such vice and exploitation is the effendi, Fu’ad. For viewers, the message was clear: discipline, hard work, and self-reliance are critical if one hopes to rise above the subversions and deceptions of modern, urban life. The effendi Fu’ad, though imperfect, recognizes his weaknesses and works hard to overcome them, and he ultimately delivers the play’s central message to the audience: “move, don’t be stagnant do what is useful and attend to the blessings in your country before foreigners get ahead of you and take them.”240 The foreign Christo and the “stagnant” elite Muhafhaf Pasha are clearly Antun’s Old Egypt. The hard-working effendi, Fu’ad Bey, on the other hand, is his beacon for the New.

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239 Powell, Different Shade of Colonialism, 50-51.
240 Antun, Misr al-Jadida, 120.
How to Be an Effendi

The idea of theater as a school was in circulation well before the boom in early twentieth-century Egyptian theater. Al-Tahtawi’s early nineteenth-century reports from Paris, for example, included reflections on the educational benefits of theater. Even influential Islamic reformer Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani encouraged Sannu’, one of his many disciples, to “use the theater as ‘an instrument of public education.’” He considered writers to be “doctors of the spirit,” who were to treat society’s illnesses, alongside religious figures (the ‘ulama), by informing people “of events around the world,” and warning “of the dangers of neglecting society’s afflictions.” Still, elite support of Arabic theater in Egypt was limited, at best. In 1907, the nationalist paper al-Liwa’ published a harsh criticism of an Egyptian government “which professes such pious zeal for the spread of education by means of Arabic [and] can afford to subsidise [sic] French Opera in Cairo but has not a cent to bestow upon developing Arabic drama or Arabic music.”

Consequently, Arabic theater’s success depended on indigenous patrons, a supportive press, and local audiences. Journalists recognized that just as the booming press in Egypt offered new spaces to debate aspects of Egyptian life, theaters also offered

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243 The Egyptian Standard, 5 Sept. 1907, 2. Attempts by Jurj Abyad to garner funding to establish to win a concession to run the Opera House’s 1911-1912 season, for example, were unsuccessful; so too was as was his request for financial support for his troupe in 1910. Minister of Finance, letter to President of the Council of Ministers, 19 May 1910, Mahfazah ½, Maglis al-Wuzara’, al-Magmou’ah al-Ashghal (DWQ); President of the Council of Ministers, letter to Minister, 25 Feb. 1911, Mahfazah ½, Maglis al-Wuzara’, al-Magmou’ah al-Ashghal (DWQ).
244 The Egyptian government did, sporadically, support Arabic theater. For example, permissions were given to ‘Abdu al-Hamouli and Abu Khalil to present fifteen Arabic performances in the Opera House in 1885 and to Soliman Haddad to present a series of Arabic plays in the Opera House in 1895. A. Rouchdy, letter to Minister of Public Works, 24 Dec. 1884, File ½, al-Ashghal, Mahafiz Maglis al-Wuzara’(DWQ); and Council of Ministers, letter to Comité de Finance, Jan. 8, 1895, File ½, al-Ashghal, Mahafiz Maglis al-Wuzara’(DWQ).
spaces for translation, interpretation and deliberation. A number of those journalists, like Antun, not only edited papers but also translated, adapted, and wrote original plays.\textsuperscript{245} Indeed, Antun’s critique of various members of Egyptian society in \textit{Misr al-Jadida} arose from his interest in promoting effendi values for the sake of Egyptian renewal. Furthermore, his negative portrayal of the coffeehouse/cabaret fit into a larger argument that critiqued certain forms of entertainment and promoted others. Whereas public and private morality were considered by many to be lost in the coffeehouse, they were inculcated in the theater; whereas Egyptian capital and potential labor were wasted in the former, they were channeled toward the well-being of Egyptian society in the latter. The theater did not deprive people of entertainment; it simply offered more beneficial use of leisure time.

Thus, \textit{Misr al-Jadida}’s message regarding the benefits of work epitomized effendi hopes for the benefits of the theater. Not just a space for leisure, the theater might function to educate the greater population about the merits of work and other effendi values that were being cast as modern and Egyptian. This modernity was not blind imitation (\textit{taqleed}), and many, including playwrights Sannu’ and al-Nadim, wrote with great concern about the problems of over-Europeanization, obsession with food, effeminization, consumerism, and homosexuality in modern Cairo’s new social spaces. Instead it was to be localized, a blend of some elements of Western culture and technology with local traditions and culture. As individuals, the effendiyya worked to reconcile secular educations that stressed individual moral autonomy and universal citizenship with religiously informed worldviews and notions of the self.\textsuperscript{246}

\textsuperscript{245} This included people like Selim al-Naqqash, Adib Ishaq, ‘Uthman Jalal.
\textsuperscript{246} Gasper, \textit{Power of Representation}, 1.
Consequently, they held themselves up as models for how to thoughtfully incorporate elements of Western thought into Egyptian life. The content of plays by Antun, Teymur, and others reflected this.\(^{247}\)

A playwright’s choice of language was critical for the successful dissemination of particular messages to an audience, and the decision as to use *fusha* (Modern Standard Arabic or MSA), a colloquial dialect, or some combination of both was the subject of much debate. Underlying it was the question of whether or not colloquial Arabic was fit to express profound emotion or to portray tragic situations. For some, *fusha*, the language of the Qur’an, was the only way to express deep emotion and voices of authority, whereas for others the colloquial offered a more realistic form of speech with which audiences were more likely to identify. Though the roots of professional colloquial theatre were planted by individuals such as Sannu’ and Jalal, who communicated much through the accents, dialects, and vocabulary used by their characters, organized colloquial Egyptian theater was not the norm until the First World War.\(^{248}\) Antun chose to write most of *Misr al-Jadida* in what he termed an “elevated colloquial” or “diminished fusha,”\(^{249}\) a decision which marked a new path. In this way, he made linguistically distinct the voice of the effendi—a decision that accentuated other efforts to distinguish the effendiyya as a unique social group.

But it was not only the stage performance that was used in efforts to educate turn-of-the-century Egyptian audiences. A new discourse on rules for proper behavior within the theater offered another outlet for the effendiyya to promote, and for audiences to

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\(^{247}\) See, for example, Muhammad Teymur, *‘Abd al-Sitar Effendi* (Cairo: Markaz al-Ta’lif wa al-Targama, n.d.).


\(^{249}\) Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, 74.
practice, effendi culture. Whereas traditional performances were varied depending on whether they were performed in nobles’ homes or in the street, for men or for women, modern theaters brought everyone under the same roof and presented them with the same content. Some degree of social stratification persisted, however, in the range of seating options and concomitant ticket prices they demanded.  

New theatrical social spaces meant a different set of rules for audience engagement than had previously existed. Those rules differed considerably from the unspoken but widely understood practices for witnessing street theater or listening to traditional musical performances. Ethnomusicologist ‘Ali Racy’s analysis of behavioral norms for listening to musical performances in Egypt offers a useful point of comparison. In traditional settings, the emphasis lay in the importance of a shared emotional state between performers and listeners—a public attuned to musicians’ needs and feelings. False enjoyment of music, according to Racy, was anathema to the shared experience of tarab (ecstatic engagement) that the performer induces. Audience members who were attuned to the feelings of a performer were to “instill within him the right mood through affectionate words of approval,” as the performance took place. In other words, audiences were to actively engage with performers, for “that is what gives the singer the sense of comfort and the right disposition to engender tarab within you.”

The experience of tarab was emotionally charged, relatively uninhibited, and highly interactive.

250 Individual ticket prices for a reputable theater in 1931, were as follows: baignoire—75 piastres; loge—60 piastres; fauteuil—12 piastres; special—5 piastres. Though this is several years after the period of study in this chapter, the prices give some sense of how social stratification was spatially visible in theaters via seating arrangements. Baraka, *Egyptian Upper Class*, 126.  

Thus practices such as sitting quietly through a performance were not self-evident, as they were not in keeping with local conventions for relations between performers and viewers. Ya’coub Sannu’ wrote about the challenges that modern theaters posed to audiences, actors, and playwrights in his book *Masrahiyyat Mulyir Misr wa Ma Yiqasihi* (*Quandrories of the Egyptian Molière: A Dialogue*). The book is full of anecdotes recounting the difficulties of sustaining realism in performances due to actor and audience behavior. Actors in Sannu’s troupe repeatedly broke out of character to greet audience members they knew and to explain that the opinions they presented on stage were not really their own. Sometimes, audience members would jump on stage to interact with performers. And, in one case, an audience that was displeased with the conclusion of a performance refused to applaud until the playwright came on stage to be scolded for it.

Such challenges were addressed by a prescriptive literature that instructed audiences in listening and viewing practices deemed appropriate for the modern theater. One example instructed viewers as follows:

> We should not disturb others when we take our seats by talking with a loud voice, as we may bother them...when the audience likes things from the actors/players, they should clap, not whistle. If the play is funny, it is not polite to ‘ha, ha’ loudly or stomp feet. And when clapping, they should not bang their sticks and feet on the ground.

Playwright Ibrahim Ramzi added:

> If you want to see a play, be there before it starts and sit before the curtain rises...if the theater attendant refuses to let you in if you’re late, even though he’ll cause you great upset, he is doing his duty and is to be thanked heartily for doing his job. Don’t ever talk or whisper during the play or during the music...what is

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regrettable is that most people who attend performances do not stop talking and creating noise.\textsuperscript{255}

Ramzi urges people not to leave the playhouse in the midst of a performance, as those who do demonstrate that that “they are not well-bred.”\textsuperscript{256}

With such instruction, effendi playwrights explicitly aimed to train audiences in appropriate, civilized, ie. “effendi,” behavior through their active engagement. Because the effendiyya were largely defined in cultural terms, much of what defined them was visible and thus, might, theoretically be taught. Both by watching representations of such behavior on stage and performing properly in the audience, a viewer effectively might learn how to be an effendi.

**Effendi Theater: Teacher or Temptress?**

As the theater offered new public spaces in which to try out different social roles marked by codes of behavior, it was a critical site for reform. Indeed, Antun, and others like him, believed that Egyptians *should* and *could* be redeemed and that the theater *could help redeem them.*\textsuperscript{257} Even criminals could be rehabilitated by a trip to the theater. An article written by a Nazmi Effendi argues that, on stage, “sin reveals itself in the worst light…a guilty person sees the horrible deeds of his criminal life on stage…he is moved and his conscience makes him feel guilt.” He continues: “As children get educated in

\textsuperscript{255} Ibrahim Ramzi, “Don’t You,” in *Bughyat*, 133.
\textsuperscript{256} Ramzi, “Don’t You,” in *Bughyat*, 134.
\textsuperscript{257} See various articles in *Bughyat*; they speak passionately about the benefits of theater for cultivating morals in amoral viewers. Ironically, British and Egyptian elites spoke similarly of the benefits of European performances at the opera house for Egyptians, despite the fact that most Egyptians could not afford or understand them.
school with professors and shaykhs, adults get educated in the theater…when our teachers’ lessons are good for our psyches, they will correct our condition.”

Not all agreed. The assumed merits of theater, it was pointed out, might actually be potential sources of danger. If the theater could be a school for progress and morality, than might it not also school audiences in the vices performed on stage? As Tahtawi warned, the exemplary, didactic benefits of Parisian theater did not preclude it from offering “Satan’s temptations.”

Writer Muhammad al-Muwaylihi’s fictional romance, Hadith ‘Isa Ibn Hisham, encapsulated such concerns in his chapter on the theater. In his book, which first appeared between 1898 and 1900 as a serial in the journal Misbah al-Sharq, Muwaylihi addresses his contemporaries’ concerns regarding the growth of new Arabic theaters, their educative role, and their potentially hazardous channeling of the worst elements of Western culture. The story’s main character, ‘Isa Ibn Hisham, narrates a series of episodes describing and critiquing life in turn-of-the-century Cairo. One of the final chapters of the book recounts an evening at the Arab theater, and in it, ‘Isa richly details the physical space and audiences who attended the show:

Having reached the theatre where plays are performed, we mingled with the people as they went in, men and women of all shapes and sizes…they were all raising a hue and cry; joking and laughing, sharing abuse, and punching and kicking each other. On looking upwards at the boxes and tiers, we saw various

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260 Al-Muwaylihi was born to a conservative Muslim family in Cairo in 1858. His father was private secretary to the Khedive Ismai’l and also worked as a writer and journalist. He learned French as a child, attended lectures at al-Azhar, and traveled abroad, mainly in Europe. Al-Muwaylihi’s writings began as a series of articles that were gathered into a book in 1907. At one time, it was used as a textbook in Egyptian schools. Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1997), 129-30.
compartments with curtains drawn back to reveal beautiful women wearing pearls and gems on their necks, queens of the women’s quarters in palatial mansions. In the balcony seats at the top of the theater, the “mob” were “boxed in, horde upon horde, like traders at a sheep market where people never stop arguing and fighting.”

The picture he paints is one of a tremendous range of theater-goers—rich and poor, male and female.

‘Isa describes the play on stage, an overwrought love story whose first act ends with actors speaking about “stealing, fraud, betrayal, treachery and murder at one moment, and then about committing various other crimes, such as embezzlement and kidnapping.” After an intermission, the play resumes, and its final scene involves a dramatic stand-off between the young man and his lover’s father in which the characters end up wounded, fainting, or crying. ‘Isa and his friend leave during the next intermission when police arrive to break up a fight in the smoking room.

During the first intermission of the play described in al-Muwaylihi’s fictional story, ‘Isa Ibn Hisham and his bored companion, the Pasha, debate the merits and vices of the theater, with ‘Isa explaining that the theater “among Western peoples is acknowledged as being a basic aspect of education and culture, a rich source of virtues and worthy traits … It’s regarded as the twin of the press.” ‘Isa and the Pasha’s discussion echoed persistent notions among elites and the effendiyya of theater as a “civilizing tool” for the wider Egyptian population.

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The Pasha, however, is unconvinced. To him, Western society doesn’t appear to have benefited much from the moral education of theater, and he suspects it may be due to its method of illustrating vice in order to convince audiences to disavow it. In doing so, “robbers and other cunning rogues have received an excellent training by attending performances of plays.” Rather than uncritically importing this form of theater, the friend advises that “[p]lays performed in front of audiences made up of Eastern people must be relevant to the conditions in which they live,” both in terms of content and circumstances surrounding performance.265

The theater, as a site for the convergence of foreign performative practices and local politics and culture, was an ideal venue for propagating a seemingly appropriate, “domesticated” modernity. But as Al-Muwaylihi vividly illustrates, some worried that representations of immoral behavior, overwesternization, and overconsumption inadvertently taught such practices.

**Antun’s Egypt**

With *Misr al-Jadida*, Antun firmly situated himself as a believer in the edifying effects of theater on society. His realistic portrayal of character types with whom contemporary audiences were quite familiar demonstrated his confidence in the persuasiveness of his secular moral message; it also reflected his faith in the audience’s ability to discern between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, though his forthright message would have been difficult to misinterpret. For Antun, the theater offered a space in which most directly to address diverse audiences about contemporary society’s social

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problems. To him, the “consequential plays of this age are societal plays.”\textsuperscript{266} Thus, even while allowing for Antun’s idiosyncrasies, his plays offer a window onto what he and other secular reformers considered to be some of society’s most urgent problems and how to correct them. They also give an indication of what effendiyya, like Antun, were identifying themselves with and against. In some ways, secular reformers’ concerns differed from those of Islamist or Coptic nationalists; in other ways, they coincided, even if the logic behind them differed.

The bloated character Muhafhaf Pasha personified one of Antun’s greatest concerns—self-indulgent local elites. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the Egyptian upper-class was shifting as indigenous major landowners, or \textit{a‘yan}, increasingly intermarried with Turco-Circassian urban bureaucratic and military elites, the \textit{dhawat}, to create a new Turco-Egyptian upper class, \textit{ibn al-dhawat}. This often meant migration of \textit{a‘yan} to urban areas, despite the fact that large landownership remained central to their identities.

But elites were characterized by more than landownership, wealth, and access to power. While titles like “bey” and “pasha” distinguished them in one way, their lifestyles also set them apart from other Egyptians. Pashas gathered in exclusive social clubs like the Muhammad ‘Ali Club and sporting clubs like the Gezira Sporting Club; many smoked the \textit{shisha}, or water pipe (sometimes filled with tobacco, other times with hashish), and played games in cafes and bars like the Soult Parlour and Splendid Bar; and they sometimes included their wives in entertainments by taking them out for nights at the opera or inviting guests into their homes for (gender segregated) evenings of

\textsuperscript{266} \textit{Id, Tatawwur al-Naqd}, 100-101.
gambling and live musical entertainments.\textsuperscript{267} As the center of the Cairo developed, especially around ‘Imad al-Din Street, dance-halls and cabarets increasingly drew elite, alongside other patrons, offering opportunities for lavish spending, drinking, dancing, womanizing, and mixing with other classes.\textsuperscript{268}

Muhafhaf Pasha was very much a product and symbol of that world, one that Antun considered inimical to a new, modern Egypt. The Pasha’s overuse of French was a symbol of unchecked westernization, a form of excess that severed all ties to a stable, grounded, indigenous culture. Despite Antun’s own love of French and French thought and culture, his concern lay in its appropriate usage. Speaking French for personal gain and status enhancement, as in the Pasha’s case, was suspect, whereas Antun’s own use of French language to access new ideas that may be applied locally for the greater good was appropriate. The Pasha indulges his desires and squanders his wealth at Christo’s coffeehouse to the point of bankruptcy, mirroring Egypt’s own precipitous financial decline under the leadership of Ismail. Though Muhafhaf is married, he uses Christo as a middleman to arrange for purchasing the French maid as a nanny for his children, though it is clear that his intentions are less innocent.\textsuperscript{269} Such incidents reflected concerns amongst the larger population that local elites conspired with colonial powers for their own gain. Such leisurely self-indulgence and disinterest in any responsibility to the umma, or nation, were anathema to Antun’s New Egypt. Overwesternization, overspending, and overindulgence would lead to both the Pasha’s and Egypt’s downfall;

\textsuperscript{267} Baraka, \textit{Egyptian Upper Class}, 189, 190, 198, 199.
\textsuperscript{268} Baraka, \textit{Egyptian Upper Class}, 198.
\textsuperscript{269} Even more, hiring a nanny to raise children became a point of contention among the effendiyya who considered it a threat to proper childrearing. See Omnia Shakry, “Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt,” in Lila Abu-Lughod, ed., \textit{Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East} (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1998), 141.
similar errors had already made Egypt beholden to European economic and political occupation. Viewers were made to understand that prodigality—and those who engaged in it—could not lead Egypt into a modernity that allowed it to retain political, economic, and cultural integrity.

Christo, Etienne, and Pauline clearly stood for those Europeans who exploited Egyptian resources for personal gain. Between 1836 and 1907 Western European, Greek, and Armenian populations in Egypt jumped from 3000 to 147,000, thus concern with their influence is not surprising. Many were British bureaucrats in Cairo, but others worked as missionaries, teachers, soldiers, merchants, journalists, amateur actors, business owners, and in various other capacities. British bureaucrats had their own exclusive social and sports clubs for recreation, and in Alexandria, where Antun lived from 1897 to 1905, Greeks, Armenians, Italians, and others effectively created their own communities that included schools, voluntary associations, hospitals—even graveyards. Legal structures contributed to the social separation of many European groups from the indigenous population, most notably the Capitulations that the Ottoman Empire had established in the sixteenth-century to grant foreign merchants exemptions from local laws and taxes. Though the Capitulations originally were intended to encourage commercial activity, they became a source of great resentment amongst local populations as Europeans increasingly abused the system, using it to claim extraterritorial rights. In Egypt, the system fostered inequalities between European and Egyptian businesses and workers, as Europeans were paid more and Egyptian skilled labor was

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shunned in favor of European workers.\textsuperscript{272} Furthermore, the Capitulations effectively blocked Egyptian jurisdiction over activities like drug trafficking and prostitution.\textsuperscript{273}

\textit{Misr al-Jadida}’s representation of Europeans reflected these problems, depicting businessmen as exploitative and casting them as individuals who utterly lacked moral character or a sense of responsibility to the larger society. Antun’s subplot of the victimized French maid was a nod to the fact that not all Europeans were “evil,” but his focus was on those who conceivably could ruin Egypt’s future. At the end of the story, it is not only Fu’ad who is left standing—Christo and his establishment remain as well. They persist because those who indulge themselves in his café are powerless to destroy Christo so long as they give in to their base desires. Others who borrow money from him are caught in a web of debt from which they cannot emerge. Though Antun does not expressly state who is at fault, the implications are clear. Capitulations, which enable Christo to run such an establishment unfettered by local laws, unchecked desires to which his patrons succumb, and economic conditions that victimize the fellahin, are part of an old system that cannot persist should Egypt desire to renew itself.

The representation of fellah as victim was one of an evolving set of representations that appeared in the early twentieth century. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, the restructuring of agriculture to produce cotton as a single cash crop weakened peasant families. In the nineteenth-century, the fellahin increasingly were forced to work as wage-laborers or to migrate to cities as a result of the development of capitalist agriculture and a monetized rural economy. Though land laws supported fellahi


ownership of land, indebtedness resulted in a high rate of land loss, and in order to pay for seed, animals, and monthly tax installments, the fellahin were forced to borrow at high rates of interest.\textsuperscript{274} The fellahin expressed their grievances in folklore, songs, jokes, and poetry, where issues related to land reform, old feudal lords, socialism, and contemporary events appeared.\textsuperscript{275} Such cultural forms served to relieve people from hardships, entertain, celebrate the living, lament the dead.

For Egyptian nationalists, with whom Antun aligned himself in this period, the voice of the fellah was of less concern than the fellah as symbol. Though late-nineteenth century journals commonly represented the fellah as ignorant, backward, and superstitious—in opposition to the effendiyya who published these journals—his image slowly evolved into a timeless symbol of the “authentic Egyptian,” the wise font of respectable folk tradition. The intricacies and difficulties of peasant life were rarely addressed in any meaningful, nuanced manner, as nationalist concerns never fully coincided with those of the fellah himself. Thus the fellahi couple who appear in \textit{Misr al-Jadida} are depicted as victims to a system that is out of their control. As those who raise crops in a land dependent on agricultural production, the fellahin are necessarily a part of Antun’s “new Egypt,” but their role in the play seems merely to remind audiences of their victimhood and the inhumane consequences of greed and exploitation.

Though he does not explicitly attend to how the problems of fellahi indebtedness might be addressed, Antun’s views on economic advancement offer a glimpse of what solutions he considered tenable. Antun distrusted Western capitalism, a system he felt was ready to devour the Arab region. For him, hope for the most equitable future lay in a

form of socialism that featured more prevalently in another play he wrote and printed in his journal al-Jami’a in 1904: Urushalim al-Jadid (The New Jerusalem). In the New Jerusalem, the Christian promise of love and tolerance plays out in a secular, religiously tolerant manner in which society is egalitarian, work is collective without exploitation, and the wealthy are responsible for helping the poor.\footnote{Moosa, Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction, 235.} Though Antun does not develop any of these ideas in Misr al-Jadida, the call for audiences to work hard and “attend to the blessings of the country” might well have not only been a reference to the Nile, history, and surrounding land, but also to the fellahin who long occupied and worked that land. As symbols of an eternal Egypt, and as a group that members of the effendiyya hoped to bring into the nationalist fold, the fellahin stood at the heart of effendi campaigns to unify Egyptians in the name of an independent Egypt.

The “woman question,” too, was a fundamental effendi concern and uniquely manifested in Misr al-Jadida in the form of the performer, Almaz. Almaz’s role as a singer of questionable virtue reflected preconceived notions regarding female cabaret performers in early-twentieth-century Egypt. Cabarets were only one of several sites in which women performed at the turn of the century. Women were actresses, singers, and dancers, and they performed in places as varied as the opera house, tiatros, people’s homes, and the street.\footnote{Ya’coub Sannu and Selim al-Naqqash are some of the earliest playwrights to have employed women on stage. The women were Christian and Jewish, probably because of the greater stigma that would be associated with Muslim women mixing unveiled with men on a public stage. See, for example, Sadgrove, The Egyptian Theatre, 41, 94, and Bedawi, Early Arabic Drama, 32.} The context, audience, and content of performances all figured in to the degree of respectability accorded to these female performers; women who performed in front of men in settings that allowed for alcohol and drug use were some of
the least respected. Women who performed in cabarets typically sat and drank with customers in between stints singing or dancing on stage. This practice of drinking with customers, known as ‘fath,’ from the Arabic verb “to open,” typically yielded the evening’s greatest profits for both performer and cabaret owner. Female performers kept a certain percentage of the profits from the drinks they and their customers consumed, often amounting to half the pay they took home every night. Such renumeration promoted heavy drinking and creative strategies for encouraging wealthy men to spend lavishly on drinks. Though prostitution was not necessarily involved, women might consent to it in order to retain wealthy patrons and earn more money. Thus, despite the fact that women were not paid by cabaret owners to engage in prostitution, most female performers acquired reputations as morally dubious amongst the broader population.

Antun’s representation of Almaz, however, is more ambiguous. On the one hand, she appears as a seductress, one of many whom Christo uses to “trap” patrons and who almost succeeds in tempting Fu’ad Effendi to destroy his family and personal honor to be with her. On the other hand, Almaz’s heartfelt statement about her own dreams and aspirations cast her as a lost soul, victim to the vices of Old Egypt and, thus, a woman who might be saved. Rather than exhibit pride in her vocation, she states that: “the home—the home is a woman’s paradise and kingdom.”

278 Van Nieuwkerk illustrates numerous examples of the competition that female entertainers encouraged between wealthy men and other strategies used to encourage patrons’ spending. Some female entertainers drank too much to complete their stage performances. Karin Van Nieuwkerk, “A Trade Like Any Other”: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt (Austin: University of Texas Press), 44.

In some ways, nationalist concerns with women’s status in Egypt were reflected in their personification of Egypt as a woman who needed to be honored and protected.\textsuperscript{280} This was complicated by the fact that the effendiyya sought suitable female counterparts—women who shared similar values and common goals—to be wives and mothers to their children. Though, as an unmarried public performer, Almaz does not live up to those specific ideals, Antun uses her character to highlight the need for both Egyptian women and the figurative “woman,” that is Egypt, to be saved by the effendiyya.

Antun’s views on women correlated with those of the effendi judge Qasim Amin, often designated the “father of Egyptian feminism.”\textsuperscript{281} Though Leila Ahmad cleverly delineated the ways in which Amin merely substituted Western for Eastern patriarchy, Amin’s three widely read books on the status of women in Egypt articulated a perspective on the role and needs of women that many of his cohort shared.\textsuperscript{282} His position called for reform in marriage and divorce, education for women, and unveiling.\textsuperscript{283} The emphasis for Amin and others was on domestic vocations as opposed to work in a profession. Beth Baron broadened this patriarchal history of feminism in Egypt by noting that female intellectuals in pre-1919 Egypt, too, were concerned with expanding and elevating the role of women, usually within the context of the family.\textsuperscript{284}

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\textsuperscript{280} See Baron, \textit{Egypt as a Woman}, 15.
\textsuperscript{281} Maroun ‘Aboud, “Farah Antun,” \textit{al-Kitab} II (Nov. 1947), 1742.
\textsuperscript{283} Beth Baron, \textit{The Women’s Awakening in Egypt} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 4.
\textsuperscript{284} Baron, \textit{Women’s Awakening}. Such concerns neglected problems that \textit{fellahi} women faced and were unrealistic for, if not irrelevant to, poorer women.
Female intellectuals at the turn of the century, in fact, published a host of journals (and other writings) in which they articulated beliefs regarding the role of women in a modern Egypt. Though often conflated under the label of “feminists,” the women embodied a range of perspectives and prescriptions that fell, broadly, into three major categories: secularist (mostly minorities who focused on language and education), modernist (those who promoted innovative interpretations of Islam to improve their status within the family), and Islamist (those who stressed the rights that Islam had given women in its “truest” form and called for a return to it). Like the secularist feminists, Farah Antun, member of an ethnic and religious minority, was less concerned about aligning changes to women’s status with Qur’anic teaching, and more interested in promoting education and skills women needed to properly care for home and family. He did not agree with a segment of women who defined feminism differently, who saw family as anathema to freedom and emphasized political, social, and economic equality for women. Though he considered the idea of women working outside the home, his years in New York City aroused anxieties with regard to women who, in his eyes, behaved like men. Even less would he embrace the cause of another segment of feminists who advocated stricter seclusion and heavier veiling to increase women’s status.

It appears, however, that the majority of female intellectuals and effendiyya could agree on a few prescriptions for women. Their writings commonly promoted education,

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287 Such an array of perspectives raises questions as to the usefulness of the general term, “feminist,” to describe the diverse men and women seeking to improve women’s status in early twentieth-century Egypt. See chapter four for more on this.
companionate marriage, “scientific” domestic practices, and patriotism. Thus Almaz’s yearning for a home as “paradise and kingdom” reflected a shared ideal propagated by male and female intellectuals of the day. The problem, however, lay in Almaz’s failure to acquire this respectable position in society. When she finds that the Fu’ad has lied to her, Almaz leaves him and returns to her work for Christo. What does one make of the woman who yearns for a respectable life but cannot attain it? Is she merely a casualty in the process of “effendification,” in the transition to a new Egypt; a victim; or an agent who should be held liable for her fate?

As Antun’s focus is on the effendi as prime agent, hope, and model for a modernizing Egypt, Almaz, like the fellah, is cast in a position where she can only be saved by someone other than herself. In most intellectuals’ writings, the limited financial and social resources available to lower-class women were sometimes addressed but rarely figured in to prescriptions for a respectable life. It was the effendi who had to marry her to save and deliver her to the home for which she longed.

As was apparent in Fu’ad’s characterization, the effendi was more defined by his values and lifestyle than his background. Both Fu’ad and Muhaflah Pasha came from the same wealthy family, but it was Fu’ad’s decision to work for a living, focus on his family, and help others in need that set him apart as a member of the effendiyya, a leader of the “new Egypt.” The effendiyya were a cadre of young men from disparate social, geographic, and economic backgrounds, who increasingly saw themselves as “members…of a new social elite…based on knowledge, individual merit, and

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289 For more on Egyptian feminism and class, see Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*; and Shakry, “Structured Play,” 137.
commitment to the national cause..."\textsuperscript{290} Their secular educations produced a growing number of youth who stood in a cultural and intellectual middle-ground, estranged from their homes but also unaccepted by urban elites. The effendiyya, however, turned this to their advantage, using their distinct perspective to serve as bridges between European and indigenous cultures, between local elites and the broader population, without fully being a part of either.\textsuperscript{291} Perhaps it was the instability of that position which made movement and mobility central to their way of life. Their shared concern for exploring the possibilities of political and social modernity led them to value political action and social engagement, and they used the technologies of a nascent public sphere, such newspapers, journals, and social spaces, to spread those ideas. Conversely, political and social action in the public sphere was central to effendi identity. Hence, Fu’ad’s call to action, directed at the audience, was entirely fitting both as representative of the character’s effendi identity but also as another way in which the stage was utilized to teach audiences modern Egyptian—effendi—behavior.

Not solely distinguished by social status and mobility, the effendiyya were also discernable by certain physical signs and cultural proclivities. They typically sported tarboushes or berets on their heads, wore western-style suits, and carried walking canes. Such accoutrements, along with their youthfulness, made visible the tensions between them and older forms of knowledge and authority represented by the young men’s fathers. The “tarboush-wearers,” or \textit{mu’tarbishun}, challenged their elder fathers, the

\textsuperscript{290} Lockman, “Exploring the Field,” 137-53.
\textsuperscript{291} Lucie Ryzova, \textit{L’Effendiyya ou La Modernité Contestée} (Cairo: CEDEJ, 2004), 128, 132. There would be divisions within the effendiyya over their role as arbiters of modernity. Some felt that all citizens should have rights and duties and that all should be educated to handle them. Others felt that a few ‘enlightened individuals’ should lead ‘the masses.’ This would become a bigger source of tension after Egyptian nominal independence from Ottoman and British rule in 1923.
“turban-wearers,” or *mu’ammimun*, in terms of the intellectual, religious, and moral authority that their head coverings represented.

The effendiyya cultivated ideas and identity in “sites of urban sociability” such as literary salons, legal and bureaucratic institutions, capitalist print media, and voluntary associations. Café Riche, for example, was a coffeehouse and tiatro in central Cairo that became popular gathering space for effendi intellectuals. In a sense, it sold a cultural identity to patrons through “authentic voices” of famous performers such as Ruz al-Yusef, Umm Kulthum, and Mounira al-Mahdiyya. Organizations like Mutual Aid Societies promoted leisurely pursuits such as attending choral music performances and lectures and writing poetry, all for the cultivation of a particular effendi culture amongst the effendiyya. The theater was even more significant, however, because it offered effendi culture not only to the effendiyya but also to anyone willing and able to purchase a ticket. Thus, effendiyya like Antun used the theater in order to represent their evolving identity as a model for a modern Egypt.

For Antun, Fu’ad and others like him were Egypt’s only hope for escape from the decadence that Muhafrh Pasha, Etienne, Pauline, and Christo embodied. Together, elite and foreign exploitation represented poison and decay, the danger in Egypt’s succumbing to all things foreign. In the early twentieth-century, as the Egyptian “woman” and the “fellah” were rendered into symbols of the Egyptian nation, the devotion and protective

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292 Gasper, *Power of Representation*, 72-73, 82. The Opera House was used as a fundraising site for many of these associations such as the Coptic, Greek Catholic, and Maronite Societies. A. Rouchdy, letters to the Ministry of Public Works, 24 Feb. 1887, 10 March 1887, 12 March 1887, File ½, al-Ashghhal, Mahafiz Maglis al-Wuzara’ (DWQ).


role of a faithful effendi was both literal and figurative. In the context of the family, the
effendi was to encourage his wife’s education, consider her a companion in the home,
and remain monogamous.\footnote{For more on the importance of effendi domestic life in relation to nation and citizenship, see Pollard, \textit{Nurturing the Nation}.} Outside the family, the effendi was expected to speak and
act publicly on behalf of the \textit{umma}, or nation. As historian Michael Gasper notes, “to be
civilized meant to act decisively and in public…to redress problems in society through
reform.”\footnote{Gasper, \textit{Power of Representation}, 97.} For Antun and many others, modern theaters offered public spaces in which
to perform this effendi identity and to use performance to improve the greater society.

\section*{The Myth of Unity}

Over the course of his short lifetime, esteemed Egyptian playwright and critic,
Muhammad Teymur, an effendi of aristocratic background, contributed much to debates
on the purpose of theater. Teymur had spent three years studying law in Paris, where he
became a regular theater attendee.\footnote{Badawi, \textit{Early Arabic Drama}, 10.} His time abroad was cut sho-
rt by World War One which broke when he was vacationing in Egypt and prohibited his return to France.
Before his untimely death in 1921, Teymur wrote a considerable number of essays and
articles on theater in which he enumerated what he considered to be the criteria of a good
play. His critique of the quality of Egyptian theater was less about morality and more
about principles of drama to which he felt Egyptian playwrights did not subscribe. For
him, Egyptian theater repeatedly fell short of European theater. To help overcome this,
he advocated the Egyptianization of foreign (especially French) literature to adapt it to
local conditions. His interest in Egyptianizing literature was matched by his distaste for
melodrama, vaudeville, revues and other types of seemingly trivial performance that relied on emotion rather than sound characterization and plot lines. Each of the plays that he wrote raised social concerns—elite and middle class problems, drug and alcohol abuse, generational conflicts, artificial westernization—and ended with a moral imperative for the audience.

In 1920, Teymur published a series of articles in his journal, *al-Sufur*, that put various playwrights “on trial” for the quality of their contributions to the theater. One of those playwrights was Farah Antun, who, according to a cohort of esteemed Western playwrights including Shakespeare, Moliere, Goethe, and others, had become lazy in his later years and wrote bad plays simply to make money. The judge accuses Antun of producing poorly written plays that neglected poetic language in favor of vulgar prose. He charges Antun with forcing Jurj Abyad to sing and recite prose, both of which led to the death of his career. And furthermore, he argues that Antun’s plays effectively were Arabicized forms of vaudeville, a form of entertainment that Teymur held in very low esteem. The fictional Antun pleads for mercy, conceding that his plays were inappropriate for Abyad and not true art, but, he contends, “this is the type of work that appeals to the larger population’s tastes.” He ultimately is banned from writing plays for ten years “in hopes that the time will be long enough for the Egyptian public to forget

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298 Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama*, 103.
299 Powell, *Different Shade of Colonialism*, 196.
301 Teymur, “Muhakima,” 127.
this unprofitable type of play.\textsuperscript{302} The punishment had been reduced in recognition that Antun’s early plays, including \textit{Misr al-Jadida}, had edified society.

The fictional Antun’s response to Teymour’s accusations points to a real tension in the life of effendi theater: discourse on the moralizing and civilizing power of theater did not always align with reality, for performers ultimately had audiences to please. Jurj Abyad and other dramatic actors soon learned that their successes or failures were very much connected to commercial realities—audiences had viewing preferences, and performers who ignored them simply could not succeed. Though the play \textit{Misr al-Jadida} gained a measure of respectability by opening in the Opera House, it only attracted local audiences in Arabic theaters by adding the famed singer Salama Higazi to the performance. \textsuperscript{303} Higazi sang between acts, and, as Antun noted, his voice was what people came to hear. Abyad was respected, but Higazi was the draw.\textsuperscript{304}

Anxieties that certain members of the effendiyya, like Teymur, expressed with regard to what he considered the “vulgarization” of theater point to a larger issue within and among the effendiyya. For as they worked to define and differentiate themselves from other Egyptians, they were battling not only external influences but also the ambiguities of their own, complex, diverse, and changeable identities. Plays that too closely resembled elements of street theater—including traditional music, vulgar jokes, etc—threatened to identify the effendiyya too closely with folk culture, a culture not fitting with effendi notions of a modern Egypt, but also one to which many of them were rooted by birth. Thus, performances of musical vaudeville and women’s cabarets, in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{302} Teymur, “Muhakima,” 129.
  \item \textsuperscript{304} ‘Id, \textit{Tatawwur al-Naqd}, 119.
\end{itemize}
particular, were dangers on two fronts. On the one hand, they offered seemingly mindless entertainments connected to what were considered imported western vices of alcohol, public women, and drug use. On the other hand, they offered elements of *sha’abi*, or folk culture in spaces intended to offer modern lessons and entertainments.

Effendi playwrights and actors quickly recognized that audience demands did not always align with the ideals that certain of their members promoted. The appeal of less overtly didactic forms of theater—vaudeville, cabarets, and folk theater—and their underexamined/underestimated role in the life of modern Egypt, demand closer examination.
Chapter Three

Farce, Mimicry, and the Making of the Modern Sha’b

In the decade before World War I, two improvisational artists, both named Ahmad al-Far, were regular players in the Cairene performance circuit. Both were *muhabbizun* (farcical players, also known as *Awlad Rabiyya*) and *muqallidin* (mimics) who drew from and participated in popular street performance in Egypt. Each “mouse,” as the name Al-Far is translated, was famous for imitating animal noises, playing instruments like the *rababa* (a two- or three-stringed guitar), delivering comedic monologues, and performing original plays. The more famous al-Far took the title “effendi” and the middle name “Fahim” to distinguish himself. Other muqallidin in the same period offered different sorts of entertainment. Muhammad Idris, for example, earned his reputation by perfecting his mimicry of a famous and beloved singer named Sheikh Salama Hijazi. Hijazi was Idris’s contemporary, a man from a poor family whose voice had propelled him to fame in the world of effendi stage theater. Idris’s mimicry of Hijazi had started as a hobby but soon became a full-time career, which testified to Idris’s (and Hijazi’s) broad appeal.

Despite the popularity of Idris and the al-Fars, very little is known about them. They are absent from most prominent actors’ monographs and are scarcely mentioned in

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306 Ziad Fahmy, “Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism: Colloquial Culture and Media Capitalism 1870-1919” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona, 2007). There also may have been a third Ahmad al-Far who performed at the same time.
This apparent contradiction deserves more than fleeting mention. For if the muqallidin were as well-regarded as available sources indicate, why are they missing from the historical record? Is their omission a problem of scant or inaccessible resources? Is it evidence of certain cultural biases that made their work less respectable? Or are there larger questions of power at stake? Might one explanation be that the arbiters of history and culture—historians, religious leaders, cultural critics—have deemed such performances unworthy of record? And, if so, why?

This chapter engages such questions and uses them as a means to delve into the scarcely examined world of an emerging urban, working-class, (sha’bi) popular culture in early-twentieth century Egypt. While granting that the lack of extant manuscripts is a serious obstacle to a full analysis of sha’bi performance, it suggests that a deeper issue lies in the challenge that such performances posed to those who sought to control the trajectory and articulation of Egyptian history. Intellectual, cultural, and political elites voiced disgust with the vulgarity of sha’bi performances. But they also feared its threatening potential to offer alternative views of identity and modernity for a growing number of urban workers who were beginning to see themselves as a unique—and powerful—stratum of society.

Paltry information is available about the sha’b who attended such performances, as most information about workers’ lives does not explore their broader cultural

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milieu. The everyday concerns and realities of their existence—family life, faith, living spaces, joys and hardships, hopes and expectations—have received considerably less attention, chiefly due to the difficulty in accessing a segment of the population whose forms of communication were mainly aural and oral. For these reasons, closer examination of playlets performed at weddings, coffeehouses, and theaters offers a critical portal into the lives of the sha’b who enthusiastically attended and engaged with them. Such skits raised societal issues that concerned the general populace and invited audience members’ active engagement in the shaping of storylines. Thus, popular entertainments offer a unique point of entry into the social concerns, interests, humor, and imagination of a subaltern social strata that until now have been largely understood from the perspectives of cultural and political elites.

By the early twentieth-century, men who spent evenings with friends in coffeehouses not only smoked and drank tea and coffee—they also enjoyed musical performances, laughed at local comedians’ acts, and witnessed farces performed on raised platforms. Muqallidin like Idris and both al-Fars performed in such coffeehouses, under tents for religious mawalid (holidays), and in private homes for weddings and other celebrations. In the early-twentieth century, they also began performing on the proscenium stage at the ends of and intervals between more serious, reputable Arabic plays, especially in the area around Ezbekiyyah. Muqallidin mimicked street vendors and famous singers but also staged original, colloquial plays where they excelled at mimicking regional accents and dialects. Muhabbizun, or Awlad Rabiyya, terms

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308 See, for example, Beinin and Lockman, *Workers*, and John Chalcraft, “The Cairo Cab Drivers and the Strike of 1907,” in *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire*, Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber, eds. (Beirut: Ergon Verlag, 2002), 173-198.

translated variously as “professional comedians,” “folk jesters,” or “strolling players,”
also performed for mawalid, in private homes, at court, and, by the early twentieth-
century, on the proscenium stage. Both muqallidin and muhabbizun drew their
techniques from older traditions of karagoz (puppetry) and khayyal al-zill (shadow play),
but they blended them with newer practices of theatrical performance. Fluid categories
meant that an individual player might be either a muqallid, a muhabbiz, or both. Such
players were very much at the heart of most sha’bi Egyptian entertainments.

Despite sharing a stage with the effendiyya in Arabic theaters, sha’bi performers’
bawdy, clever lines were intended to shock bourgeois sensibilities and provoke laughter
from audiences that encompassed everyone from private patrons to the urban working
classes. Their loose scripts were merely frameworks for improvisations that muqallidin
and muhabbizun adapted to local contexts and the mood and makeup of their diverse
audiences. Drawing on elements such as collective history, humor, and mythology—in
addition to contemporary social and political situations—muhabbizun and muqallidin did
more than offer release from the frustrations of lived realities. They provoked audience
imagination as to what might be. By focusing on Idris and the two Ahmad al-Fars, this
chapter argues that muqallidin and muhabbizun, by virtue of their imaginative, colloquial
humor and fantastical scenarios, gave voice to what it meant for the often overlooked
sha’b—those who made up the majority of the urban population—to be modern and
Egyptian.

At the same time, Idris’s autobiographical sketch reveals other aspects of the
sha’b’s changing relationship to and perception of its place in a larger Egyptian society.
As only one of many Hijazi mimes, Idris’s performances disseminated music, lyrics, and
some version of Hijazi’s voice to people who ordinarily would not have been able to afford to see him on stage. Hijazi, an emerging cultural icon, transcended social divisions by virtue of his sha’bi (urban working class) background, religious training, and soaring melodic voice. In this way, he attained distinction as an authentic, indigenous symbol that helped to unify Egyptians in a new way. Hijazi, and those who performed and disseminated his “voice,” helped to shape an Egyptian cultural identity that would slowly supersede—but never entirely displace—the regional, confessional, and social identities already at work in Egypt. As Idris embodied Hijazi’s person and disseminated his music, it is clear that the muqallid was part of a process of cultural circulation that would affect sha’bi notions of themselves and their relationship to a larger Egyptian identity. Muqallidin helped to make music, song, and comedy central to “molding national tastes” which, in turn, facilitated the development of a national identity.  

Critically, this chapter illustrates that folk performance was never static. Its content reflected, debated, and offered interpretations of current political and social conditions. By framing contemporary problems, responding to audience demands to shape performance to local tastes, and offering viewers a range of common cultural symbols, sha’bi performers cultivated a unique view of modernity grounded in humor, social critique, and fantasy. It was a rejection of an effendi modernity, locating cultural authenticity with the sha’b, not the effendiyya. Conversely, it circulated sounds and icons of a common culture that would help to shape the notion of a new, unified Egyptian identity. As actor and audience together were engaged in shaping this common culture,

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the active, critical audience was as essential to its creation as were the players who performed their roles.

**The Sha’b**

The word sha’bi describes a range of entertainments that were accessible and of interest to the majority of the urban, working-class Egyptian population, or sha’b, in early twentieth-century Egypt. Those workers, who formed a new social stratum of property-less laborers in urban areas, were drawn from a migrating peasantry (*fellahin*), urban artisans who were formerly guild-members, and foreign immigrants. Their numbers increased due to economic shifts in Egypt over the second half of the nineteenth-century, and especially in the two or three decades before World War One. In that period, foreign and Egyptian state investment promoted the rise of large-scale industrial and transport enterprises. Investments centered on the development of goods and services for a European and Europeanized urban population. They also supported the processing of agricultural raw material and the growth of a transport infrastructure. Changing agrarian relations between peasants and the state over the nineteenth-century meant that fellahin increasingly needed to rent land, work for large landholders, or hire themselves out as wage laborers in order to survive. Thus, fellahi workers began to migrate in large numbers from the countryside to towns in search of work in the emerging free labor market. At the same time, urban artisans and craftsmen were experiencing the decline

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313 By 1907, about thirty thousand residents of Cairo came from Asyut province. Certain jobs began to be dominated by migrants from Upper Egyptian villages. For example, many water carriers came from Dar al-Baqar in Gharbiyya, porters often came from Musha village in Asyut,
of a guild system which had protected them and their crafts. The transition to a capitalist economy meant that certain handcrafts, such as copper vessels, wooden lattice-work, and woven materials, declined due to competition with urban and foreign industries. Following these shifts, many artisans found it necessary to turn to wage labor to make a living.

By 1907, the labor force in Cairo was approximately half a million people. In relative numbers, the population of laborers was a minority; but as a growing segment of society that gradually perceived themselves as a unique stratum, they became increasingly vocal over time. Urban intellectual and political leaders took note of this, and spurred by events, such as the 1906 Dinshawai incident, they began to reach out and include the working class sha’b and minorities in their demand for an independent “Egypt for the Egyptians.” By 1908, the word sha’b underwent a semantic shift, as Egyptian nationalists increasingly used the word with more specific connotations. As Zachary Lockman explains, “it was not quite identical with ‘the nation,’ but nevertheless suggested its great majority, its ‘authentic’ core, was the repository of its nation-ness.” The change marked a shift in nationalist thinking that perceived the great majority of Egyptians as something more than an undifferentiated mob in need of reform. Instead, they became “a potential constituency to be mobilized.”

Muhammad Farid, the leader and large numbers of building workers came from Tirsa in Giza. For more on the decline of guilds and other economic shifts in nineteenth-century Egypt, see Gabriel Baer, Fellah and Townsman in the Middle East (London: Frank Cass, 1982).

314 Baer, Fellah and Townsman, 67, 74. As Robert Tignor points out, however, in a few cases small scale manufactures, such as those in textiles, metallurgy, and leather-making, managed to thrive into the early-twentieth century. Robert L. Tignor, State, Private Enterprise, and Economic Change in Egypt, 1918-1952 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).


of the Nationalist party, for example, started to publicly criticize terrible working conditions and the absence of labor laws in Egypt in 1908. At the same time the party’s newspaper, al-Liwa’, published articles in support of labor struggles. Members of the party also helped to establish a network of people’s night schools (madaris al-sha’b) to teach literacy, arithmetic, geography, religion, ethics, hygiene and history to workers and artisans.\textsuperscript{317} By 1910 there were eight of these schools in Cairo and more in provincial cities. Thousands of workers and artisans were connected to the schools in their first two years.

These were not the first attempts to educate and mobilize the working classes, but the rise of mass politics in the early-twentieth century propelled concern about the sha’b to the forefront of mass education. The effendiyya were not the only ones concerned with bringing an educated working class into their fold. Individuals of various ideological persuasions, including communists, socialists, and anarchists, also attempted to diffuse messages and mobilize the working class to aspire to their varied social prescriptions.\textsuperscript{318} Theater was intimately connected to projects to “educate” the working classes. From as early as the 1870’s, the Egyptian nationalist ‘Abdullah al-Nadim used school plays to help poor and orphaned children “use a theater for discourses, plays and discussions.”\textsuperscript{319} And Ilham Makdisi has shown how the Ferrer play of 1909 worked to disseminate a radical socialist ideology to its effendi and sha’bi audience.\textsuperscript{320} When Syrian actor

\textsuperscript{317} Beinin and Lockman, \textit{Workers}, 67.
\textsuperscript{318} Ilham Khouri-Makdisi, “Levantine Trajectories. The Formulation and Dissemination of Radical Ideas in and Between Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria 1860-1914” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2003), 161.
\textsuperscript{320} Ilham Makdisi, \textit{Theater and Radical Politics in Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria: 1860-1914} (Washington DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 2006), 3-4.
Iskandar Farah formed a new acting troupe, a writer for the journal *al-Hilal* reported that it was “a venture whose educational fruits will not be less valuable than the establishment of a big school that educates youth for free.” Theater was deemed an appropriate educational tool not only for the effendi but for the sha’b as well.

**Muqallidin and a Cultural Icon**

The muqallid Muhammad Idris specialized in mimicking an extremely popular singer of his era: Sheikh Salama Hijazi. By exposing the broader sha’b to Hijazi’s voice, muqallidin like Idris helped Hijazi to transcend social boundaries. Together, Hijazi’s voice, and those muqallidin who mimicked it, helped to make Hijazi into a shared cultural icon.

Hijazi was born in a sha’bi district of Alexandria to a sailor father and a Bedouin mother. He attended a local *kuttab* (religious school), studied Qur’anic recitation, while apprenticing to a barber in the afternoons. As Alexandria was a hub for theatrical performance, he was exposed from a young age to various Arab singers and European performers. He soon became friendly with a number of them, including the renowned singer ‘Abd al-Hamuli who, captivated by Hijazi’s “resonant, mellifluous voice,” helped him navigate the theatrical world in Cairo. Soon, stage performers like Soliman al-Qardahi, Yusuf al-Haddad, and Iskandar Farah actively sought out Hijazi, and from 1885 through 1905 he sang with their troupes. Though Farah allowed him to act as well, Hijazi recognized that people did not come to see his acting; they came to hear his

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In 1905, he left Farah’s troupe and started his own based in a newly renovated theater in the Cairene Ebekiyah district: *Dar al-Tamthil al-‘Arabi* (The House of Arabic Acting). Theatergoers could not get enough of him, and neither could newspapers and journals, which reported more extensively on his performances (including his tours in Damascus and North Africa) than they had on any previous performer or troupe.

Hijazi’s Egyptian background and mastery of Qur’anic recitation gave him an authenticity that made his involvement in theater respectable. His voice moved audiences by its emotion and by the depth of meaning it imparted to lyrics. A Muslim Egyptian who sang both religious songs and amorous *qasaʾid*, Hijazi bridged the gap between religious and secular music. His performances also mixed traditional musical forms of *qasida* and *taqtuqa* with European musical elements such as long instrumental introductions and the monologue, dialogue, and trialogue. What he helped to create through this blending was essentially a new genre of music: that of musical theater. He was the most successful exponent of musical theater in his time; the genre would shape Egyptian theater for decades to follow.

Working class Egyptians most probably would not have been able to afford tickets to see Hijazi on stage. Thus, muqallidin like Muhammad Idris, along with the expansion of the phonograph, made it possible for the broader population to hear Hijazi’s music and witness the roles he played on stage. In this way, mimics expanded the audience for Arabic stage performance. The relationship between effendi theater and shaʾbi performance was mutually beneficial in other ways as well. Artists and players

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borrowed themes and characters from each other. Consequently, effendi theater audiences and the broader population came to share a common repertoire of music, songs, and symbols. Idris’s performances contributed to the shaping and dissemination of an imagined common culture that had the potential to unify the sha’b with the effendiyya.

Idris’s account begins in 1895 in al-Muski, the sha’bi neighborhood of Cairo where he was born. As a young man, he apprenticed at a printing shop near the Opera House where he was “seduced by the sounds of shouting vendors who came to the neighborhood every day.”\textsuperscript{326} Idris perfected his imitations of them to such a degree that he was regularly invited to neighborhood weddings to mimic them. His repertoire encompassed everything from the shouts of candy vendors to quacking ducks. The arrival of the phonograph broadened Idris’s soundscape and introduced him to the ecstatic experience of hearing Salama Hijazi’s voice. As he states, “I used to stand in front of phonograph stalls for so long that I would forget the time, be late for work, and get in trouble.”\textsuperscript{327} He started to memorize Hijazi’s songs, and soon was performing with an amateur acting troupe in the theater of Syrian actor Iskandar Farah. The troupe performed excerpts from the operas and plays ‘Aida, Hamlet, Salah al-Din al-Ayoubi, Shuhadat al-Gharam (Romeo and Juliet), and Tasiban or Shahidat al-Wafa’. In each, Idris played the role of Salama Hijazi—the lead actor in the original versions of the plays.\textsuperscript{328} In other words, Idris performed a role within a role. Idris’s performance clearly

\textsuperscript{326} The following account comes from Al-Ra’i, \textit{al-Kumidiya}, 161-62.
\textsuperscript{327} Al-Ra’i, \textit{al-Kumidiya}, 161.
\textsuperscript{328} Ads for plays indicated who played leading roles. Hijazi was always listed as the lead in his troupe’s plays. See, for example, \textit{Misr}, 30 January 1906 reproduced in Ahmad Sakhsoukh, ed., \textit{Al-Masrah al-Misri} (Cairo: Dar al-Za’im li al-Taba’ah al-Haditha, 1998), 18-19.
impressed audiences, as he was asked to perform in Alexandria at the behest of Hijazi’s son.\footnote{It was Muhammad Hosni, one of Hijazi’s troupe members, who personally chose Idris to play the role of Hijazi in the plays. Hosni went so far as to train Idris in each of the roles, starting with ‘\textit{Aida}, Al-Ra‘i, \textit{al-Kumidiya}, 161.} \footnote{Al-Ra‘i, \textit{al-Kumidiya}, 161.}

Idris’s work in the Sayyidna al-Hussein neighborhood began with a successful engagement in 1912 at the Egypt Club. When a new improvisational group invited Idris’s troupe to sing between acts of their performances, Idris was captivated and shocked when he “found they performed without a play(script) and without a prompter.”\footnote{The character, and look, were at the very least a nod to the well-known player George Dakhoul, who also played the role of a servant with a half-upturned mustache. Al-Ra‘i, \textit{al-Kumidiya}, 162.} His fascination with improvisational performance is curious. Doubtless, Idris would have been exposed to improvisation before, as he had grown up in a sha‘bi neighborhood. But his immersion into Hijazi’s world of scripted Arabic stage performance may have made the imaginative world of improvisation foreign to him once again. The juxtaposition of the two worlds was somehow jarring, but he quickly grew accustomed to the show. Within the year, Idris was performing not only between acts but also as a player with the troupe. Alongside him, the head comedian, Hafiz ‘Abbas, played the recurring role of a servant who wore pajamas in fifty colors, a pointy tarbuch that looked like a fool’s cap, and a mustache with one-half drawn to point upward.\footnote{Al-Ra‘i, \textit{al-Kumidiya}, 162.}

Audiences loved the show. In the following years, Idris would continue to perform similar short skits (\textit{fusul mudhika}) in Rawd al-Farag’s small, cheap theaters, in the countryside, and at weddings. He acted with a number of well-known muhabbizun—most notably, Ahmad Fahim al-Far.\footnote{Al-Ra‘i, \textit{al-Kumidiya}, 162.}
As demonstrated in Idris’s account, Arabic stage-theater and sha’bi performance were not entirely discreet spaces and genres. On one hand, stage theater influenced sha’bi performance. Idris, like other muqallidin, performed music from Hijazi’s plays in coffeehouses in sha’bi neighborhoods. The influence of Arabic musical theater was widespread. Improvisational artist Georges Dakhoul, who performed at the Café Kamil in Sayyida Zeinab, for example, was known for incorporating elements of musical melodrama in his troupe’s shows. On the other hand, sha’bi performance influenced the Arabic stage. Idris noted that he sometimes performed in Arabic theaters.

Professional actors and writers, like Muhammad Hosni (a member of Hijazi’s troupe) and Egyptian playwright and journalist Ya’cub Sannu’, attended and were influenced by sha’bi performance. Exposure to sha’bi performance led Syrian playwrights in Egypt, such as Abu Khalil al-Qabbani, to “Egyptianize” their plays by including music, singing, and puppet theater on stage. Comedians Najib al-Rihani and ‘Ali al-Kassar both

333 See Laila Nessim Abou Seif, “Theatre of Najib al-Rihani: The Development of Comedy in Modern Egypt” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois, 1969), 17. Famed actors Najib al-Rihani and ‘Ali al-Kassar are the individuals most frequently associated with developing the fasl mudhik to become its own genre of stage performance. But others, such as George Dakhoul, are recognized by Egyptian historians of theater for transitioning fasl mudhik from street to stage. Dakhoul influenced the writing of both sha’bi and more formal comedies. He influenced Rihani, al-Kassar, Ibrahim Ramzi, Muhamad Teymur, and Tewfiq al-Hakim. See al-Ra’i, al-Kumidiya, 8. George Dakhoul’s performances point to a different circuit of culture. His skits became so popular among the sha’b that they inspired several muqallidin of their own, many of whom modified his plays to be even more ribald and licentious. They forced Dakhoul to refer to his Syrian stage-character, Kamil, as Kamil the Original, or Kamil al-Asil, so as not to be mistaken for a copy.

334 Sannu’s first experiments with stage-theater were performed in colloquial Arabic and included the “quick-witted” native, the hypocritical religious man, and the silly foreigner—stock characters drawn from karagoz, khayall al-zill, and muhabbizun. As a child, comedic playwright Badi’ Khairi used to attend fasl mudhik at cafes in Sayyida al-Hussein. Cynthia Metcalf, “From Morality Play to Celebrity: Women, Gender, and Performing Modernity in Egypt, 1850-1939” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2008), 206.

derived their early plays from street farce.\textsuperscript{336} Indeed, Al-Kassar’s biography mentions the critical influence of muhabbizun whose performances captivated him in childhood.\textsuperscript{337} In general stage comedy incorporated the imitation of dialects, accents, manners, and tics into shows. Each of these techniques was central to the work of the muqallid in a fasl mudhik.

**Muhabbizun and Their Audiences**

The earliest and most detailed accounts of muhabbizun appear in European Orientalists’ and travelers’ writings. Victorian Orientalist Edward Lane’s impressions of muhabbizun offer important insight into their satirical content and popularity. The fact that he even mentioned them speaks to their ubiquity, as Lane’s work was intended to be a foreigners’ guide to Egypt. As he noted, men and boys played the roles of women, and shows opened with music and dance followed by a skit that might critique anything from the oppression of work to corrupt tax collectors.\textsuperscript{338} Lane’s accounts were of muhabbizun who performed for families’ wedding parties. In one case, he described a play that was staged in a *samer*, a circle made of spectators in the midst of which muhabbizun performed. The show included stock characters: a provincial governor (*nazir*), a village chief (*sheikh al-balad*), his servant, a Coptic clerk, a peasant (*fellah*), his wife, and five musicians. In the story, the poor peasant, Awad, is flogged and thrown into prison for failing to repay the government a thousand piasters of debt. He asks his wife to bribe the

\textsuperscript{336} Al-Rihani most likely witnessed muhabbizun performing fasl mudhik, especially as an unemployed actor hanging out in Cairo’s coffeehouses. See Abou Seif, “Theatre of Najib al-Rihani,” 17.

\textsuperscript{337} Al-Kassar, ‘Ali al-Kassar, 7.

Coptic clerk with food in order to secure his release, and she agrees to do so. She arrives at the Copt’s house and asks:

Where is the m’allim Hanna, the clerk?” They answer, “There he sits.” She says to him, “O M’allim Hanna, do me the favor to receive these, and obtain the liberation of my husband.” “Who is thy husband?” he asks. She answers, “The fellah who owes a thousand piasters.” “Bring” says he, “twenty or thirty piasters to bribe the Sheykh el Beled. [sic]

She takes the bribe to the Sheikh who accepts it, then suggests that she go the provincial governor (nazir). In preparation, she applies kohl (a thick black eyeliner) to her eyes and henna (a red dye) to her hands and feet. After completing the beauty ritual, she sets off to see the nazir:

“Good evening, my master” she says to him. “What does thou want?” he asks. She answers, “I am the wife of Awad who owes a thousand piasters.” “But what does thou want?” he asks again. She says “My husband is imprisoned and I appeal to thy generosity to liberate him” and as she urges this request, she smiles, and shows him that she does not ask this favor without being willing to grant him a recompense.339

Though Lane described the skit as “vulgar farce,” its social commentary must not have escaped him. Beneath its provocative elements was a veiled social criticism, a parody of corruption in Egypt. The satire served to alert its audience, most notably the Ottoman governor of Egypt, Pasha Mehmed ‘Ali, to the suffering of the sha’b in the face of such corruption.340 This particular skit’s concern with contemporary social problems was not unique. As historian Philip Sadgrove notes, “the depiction of the misfortunes of the downtrodden masses, the players’ attacks on corrupt officialdom, the high and mighty

ruling classes and excessive taxation” all appeared in kkaragoz and other farces well before the turn-of-the-century.  

Lane found Egyptian theater far inferior to the European. The former had no ornate sets and costumes, no set text, and no apparent logic in space or time. Egyptian performers practiced what Dina Amin refers to as the “politics of a-realism,” meaning that performances embraced absurdism, the fantastical, the humorous, and the cathartic. Such elements were prominent in street performances that were termed lu’bat (playlets, skits) before the term masrahiyyat (dramas or plays), entered the Arabic lexicon in the twentieth century. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the term for a play shifted from lu’ba, with a root that meant to play, toy with, act fraudulently, to riwayya (narrative or story), with a root that meant to tell, to relate, to give an account of. The change of labels reflected a shift in relations between actor and audience. A lu’ba implied communal and physical participation; a riwayya indicated that an audience that was told a story but did not actively participate in it. Such evolution in theatrical language marked a shift that occurred in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century theater when a curtain was introduced between players and audiences. Previously, theater had integrated audience and players in performances that involved the creation of a communal, imagined story. Audiences sat or stood in a circle around actors and voiced opinions about storylines, demanding changes when they were unsatisfied with performances.  

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Amin, “Egyptian Theater,” 78-106.
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Amin,”Egyptian Theater,” 78-106.
eighteenth century when he attended a farce in the courtyard of a house in Cairo. He wrote:

The story is that of a woman (played by a man), who lures one traveler after another to her tent, and who after robbing them of their belongings chases them away with a stick. Incidentally, the audience grew so tired of the repetition of this absurd situation that they forced the actors to stop their performance halfway through.\textsuperscript{345}

Audiences knew they were integral to performances; they regularly interrupted with shouts of praise and disapproval, and players spoke back to them throughout the scene. Although this type of interaction went out of fashion once the proscenium stage was introduced and audience behavior became more passive, it persisted among the sha’b.

\textbf{Fasl Mudhik: From Coffeehouse to Proscenium Stage}

In sha’bi neighborhoods like Sayyida Zeinab and Sayyidna al-Hussein, muhabbizun and muqallidin performed farcical one-act plays called \textit{fasl mudhik} (\textit{fusul mudhika}, pl) in coffeehouses and newly built café-chantants. Many performers, like the renowned comedic actor ‘Ali al-Kassar, started careers there, performing in theater-cafes like Dar al-Tamthil al-Zeinabi, Dar al-Salam,

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure10.png}
\caption{Model of Cairene coffeehouse with stage set up in back. (Source: Egyptian Folk Theater and Museum)}
\end{figure}

and the Egypt Club, and their performances reflected local concerns, language, and humor. 346

The fasl mudhik drew from traditions of puppetry and shadow play in several ways. First, it was an irreverent social and political satire performed in a mixture of colloquial Arabic and gibberish. It involved a limited number of stock characters, like the matchmaker, the foreigner, the fellah, the Turk, the Copt, and the trickster. 347 Simple plot lines, like those in puppetry and shadow play, made them familiar to audiences, although they were also improvised and therefore variable. Loosely episodic stories had no apparent rational sequence, and action in the skits centered on main characters’ exploits and changes of fortune, not their character development. 348 Costumes were minimal, and imitation of dialects, accents, and manners were fundamental comedic elements. 349 In most cases, the serious was juxtaposed to the comic. Audiences were expected to sing with the characters, curse villains, and freely interact with actors as they voiced their approval or disapproval. 350

In the years before World War One, the fasl mudhik was incorporated more often into Arabic stage theater as an interlude or at the ends of more serious plays. Ads for Arabic theater performances between 1900 and 1914 appeared daily, often boasting a

346 Al-Kassar, ‘Ali al-Kassar, 7. The muqallid Muhamad Salama al-Qit performed in Sayyida Zeinab for over ten years, and another muqallid, Muhammad Farid al-Magnun (the insane) specialized in performing plays by Salama Hijazi—just like Muhammad Idris. See Al-Ra’i, al-Kumidiya, 33.


348 Farouk ‘Abdel Wahab, Modern Egyptian Drama, 22. Al-Ra’i defines improvisational theater as involving a written text that is changeable based on circumstances; actors who perform on stage but are able to perform in other settings; and vigilant, intelligent spectators who critique and judge the performance. See Al-Ra’i, al-Kumidiya, 29-30.

349 Abul Naga, Sources, 38.

traditional music interlude and fasl mudhik as part of the production. Ads usually listed
the names and dates of plays, the troupes performing them, and names of musicians and
fasl mudhik players. Journals that included the Coptic Misr; the government supported
al-Watan; the British-backed al-Muqattam; and the nationalist al-Mu’ayyid encouraged
readers to attend shows. Traditional musical interludes involved the use of regional
instruments like the rababa, tabla (drum), and riq (tambourine). Some performers
sang improvised tunes or imitated those of more famous singers. Salama Hijazi often
incorporated fasl mudhik into his troupe’s plays. His versions of Hamlet and ‘Aida ended
with a fasl mudhik, presumably to lighten the mood. Inclusion of fasl mudhik also
appeared in ads for plays by the Arabic Acting Society, Iskandar Farah, the Coptic
Society, the ‘Akasha troupe, and even for amateur student performances. Syrian troupe
leader Soliman al-Qabbani, too, incorporated a fasl mudhik at the intervals or ends of his
formal plays.

The decision to present a fasl mudhik at the end of a play had both cultural and
commercial incentives. The placement of a fasl mudhik at the end of a serious play may
be connected to the longstanding local appeal of happy endings and comic genres.

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satisfy audiences, playwrights like Tanyus Abduh who adapted European drama for Egyptian audiences indicated that they had to alter plays to give them happy endings. For this reason, Abduh altered the ending of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In his version, Hamlet lives and is victorious in regaining the Danish throne.  

Including a fasl mudhik at the end of a serious play was conceivably another way to divert audiences from tragic endings.

Notably, audience members sometimes attended plays for the fasl mudhik and not for the main play. The fact that the short skits were considered important enough to be mentioned in advertisements testifies to their appeal. This was true in the case of an extremely popular fasl mudhik performer named Muhammad Nagi, who often appeared on stage at the end of Hijazi’s and Sheikh ‘Atta Muhammad’s troupe’s plays. His fans commented that they explicitly attended plays in order to see him and would not leave until he performed. Nagi’s popularity meant that he was included in trips to Damascus and Beirut when the troupes with whom he performed toured the region.

Ironically the appeal of the fasl mudhik was also what made it inimical to the more serious plays it was performed within and alongside. If Arabic stage theater was as much about “effendification” of spectators as it was about entertainment, the fasl mudhik contradicted the process at nearly every turn. Its disordered vulgarity and a-realism stood diametrically opposed to characteristics of the ordered, textual rationality that effendi theater offered. Arabic stage theater was very much invested in establishing, representing, espousing, and promoting certain Egyptian bourgeois norms. Effendi contributors often consciously set themselves and their plays apart from fellahi/sha’bi

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influences while establishing new modes of performance that embraced modern elements of European theater and integrated them with what they considered to be authentic Egyptian traditions. The distinction was tenuous but critical, as the effendiyya used the theater to shape and define themselves, just as they sought to shape and define Egyptians and Egyptianness in their image. Theater was intended to teach spectators about the merits of work and serve as a physical antithesis to the coffeehouse, which increasingly was derided by the effendiyya as a debauched space where Egyptian labor and capital were wasted on drugs and idleness. By contrast the theater was a place for personal improvement, a space where families could attend performances that were informative and edifying.358 How, then, did fasl mudhik—a type of entertainment that flourished in the coffeehouse—fit into the new effendi theater? What were audiences to make of the insertion of crude colloquial skits into “civilized,” “modern” theatrical settings? Such an intrusion surely confused boundaries that the effendiyya were attempting to impose.359

To be sure, the decision to include fasl mudhik in Arabic performances was not without controversy. Respected playwright Muhammad Teymur’s critique of vaudeville-type actors like Najiib al-Rihani was connected to effendi concerns with distancing themselves from their rural or sha’bi pasts as they worked to define themselves as a unique social category. Perhaps the answer lies in the improvisational nature of the fasl mudhik. Though it is impossible to know with certainty how much the fasl mudhik may have been “tamed” for the stage, existing texts demonstrate that their content changed based on context and audiences. Some may also have been selected because their content

358 Makdisi, Theater and Radical Politics, 29.
359 Teymur’s critique was also about the growing divide between more commercial stage theater and those who were concerned with cultivating highbrow culture on the stage.
was deemed appropriate for the stage. The question surely demands further study. A
look at Ahmad al-Far’s fusul mudhika offers a starting point.

**Ahmad Al-Far**

Much of the scant information on Ahmad Effendi Fahim al-Far comes from his
contemporary, renowned author Mahmud Teymur, who praised al-Far’s natural acting
talent. Teymur wrote that the Effendi al-Far performed with Iskandar Farah’s and Salama
Hijazi’s acting troupes, both of
which were popular and respected
at the turn of the twentieth century.
A contemporary cultural critic, ‘Ali
al-Ra’i, adds that the effendi al-Far
“wore Frankish clothes and drank
with the a’yans [wealthy
landowners], especially in their
gatherings he would
negotiate/enter into contracts in
Bar al-Luwa’.” He adds that the
effendi al-Far was “very good at
playing the mizmar, the qarba
(bagpipe), and the rababa in the

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**Figure 11:** Program of songs from a selection of Ahmad Effendi al-Far’s fusul mudhika  (Source: Lucie Ryzova, Private collection, no date)
neighborhood, delivering comedic monologues and acting” in satirical and farcical original plays. He was also famous for imitating animal sounds. In weddings and parties he would start by playing instruments, then shift to monologues before concluding with a fasl mudhik rife with misunderstandings and exaggerated situations. A few scholars have claimed that the plays had little dialogue, though existing manuscripts suggest quite the opposite. The effendi al-Far recorded several 78 rpms with the Baedaphone recording company. Titles of his monologues include: *Pampering the Fellahins’ Children, Pampering the Dhawats’ Children*, and *The Telephone*.

Though the non-effendi Ahmad al-Far was not as successful, he too performed at weddings. The introduction to one of his plays states that he was a short man who regularly wore a large ‘imma, or turban, on his head. He was primarily a muqallid of village life, women, and animals, and he performed most often in private, sha’bi weddings as the head of a troupe of twelve. The troupe would play a *tabla* and *zummara*, and one member would hold a burning torch in front of them during the celebration. After the four o’clock evening prayer, they would start the music, and friends of the groom, followed by one of the troupe members dressed as a woman, would dance. Al-Far would then appear sporting his huge ‘imma, an Upper Egyptian cloak called a *za’buut*, and a big stick in his hand.

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360 Pappé, *Modern Middle East*, 208-09.
361 See, for example Ilan Pappé, *The Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2005) 208-09.
Troupes such as those of both al-Fars were central to Egyptian wedding diversions. Several days of festivities involved singers, dancers, and actors who entertained guests in different parts of the house. Upstairs, female performers feted the women of the house, while in front of the house or in its courtyard male musicians, actors and sometimes women who sang from behind a screen entertained the men. Male guests typically stood around the actors in a circle called a samer. References to both al-Fars started to appear in journals in 1907. One advertisement for an al-Far performing a fasl mudhik on the Arabic stage makes no mention of “Fahim” or “Effendi,” and therefore may refer to the second al-Far. The ad promoted a special night of plays, singing, and moving pictures. A few other ads, however, refer explicitly to an al-Far, effendi. On August 13, 1907, for example, the Effendi performed between acts of the play *Zenoubiya Queen Tadmir*, for Soliman al-Qardahi’s troupe. He also “made people laugh” in the interval between acts of the play, *Opening the Andalus*, written by the then-deceased leader of the Nationalist party, Mustafa Kamil. An original play in Alexandria by the effendi al-Far received a bit more coverage. In 1910, he performed in a casino at the old Raml train station, a place that attracted “[e]legant men and those who love humor,” according to the journal *al-Mu’ayyid*. That evening, al-Far presented a “very funny” three-act play entitled *The

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365 Stage directions in the M manuscript indicate that the play was, indeed, performed in a samer.
Obstinate Sheikh. The enthusiastic listing continues: “tomorrow he will perform another play much like it” and the writer “urge[s] the people to seize the opportunity to see the priceless farce.” Unfortunately, ads did not offer any details as to the content of the fusul mudhika; it also was rare that they included titles.

The recovery of two manuscripts containing a series of al-Far’s fusul mudhika offers a rare peek into the world of sha’bi performance. Based on the paucity of information on each of the actors, it is difficult to make any sort of conclusive claim regarding which al-Far to whom these plays belonged. James Landau and Manfred Woidoch, who located the manuscripts, believe that they belong to the turban-wearing al-Far but have been mistakenly attributed to the effendi al-Far. This is a tenuous conclusion at best, for the evidence they cite is not clear, one way or another. As both al-Fars performed fasl mudhik in a variety of situations, it seems possible that either may have authored these texts. Perhaps more important, the evidence that the same fusul mudhika were performed at weddings and also shared with a broader audience suggests that an impressively wide array of Egyptians—effendiyya and the broader sha’b—and foreigners were exposed to versions of similar subject matter.

The Manuscripts

Before delving into the content of al-Far’s plays, some discussion of the manuscripts is in order. Two sets of manuscripts, distinguished by the designations “L”


370 Woidich and Landau, Arabisches Volkstheater, 22.

371 First mention of the al-Far manuscripts was in Jacob Landau, “Popular Arabic Plays, 1909,” Journal of Arabic Literature, 17 (1986), 120-25. The manuscripts were published in Arabic and German in: Woidich and Landau, Arabisches Volkstheater. Idris’s autobiographical
and “M,” each contain five of al-Far’s fusul mudhika with the same five titles. The letters L and M correspond to where they were located: L stands for the Leiden University Library, and M for Kurt Munzel, a man who lived in Cairo in the middle of the twentieth-century and who owned the second manuscript. Unlike the M manuscript, the L manuscript is bound, and though the titles of the fusul mudhika in each manuscript are the same, the L versions are lengthier than those of the M. Notably, the M manuscript is clearly marked as a collection of Al-Far’s playlets (li’b) for weddings, whereas the L manuscript is marked as al-Far’s baladiyyat, an uncommon word which, based on its root, probably means “folk stories.”

As impromptu theater is largely nontextual, the fact that these skits were recorded is unusual. Because the M manuscript is shorter and contains sections in which a summary of events is written rather than literal dialogue, Woidoch and Landau surmise that the scribe may have simply summarized parts that he was told about but had not seen, or that he abbreviated what he saw. But it seems equally plausible that the vagueness of the text may have meant that it was written as an open script in order to offer a general idea of what was to happen without impinging on the improvisation of actors. As there is evidence of actors who were literate, the notion of a general script for them is not out of the question. The L manuscript provokes a different set of possibilities as it was handwritten on high quality paper that bears the watermark of the Egyptian government. Either the government deemed the plays worthy of record or perhaps a

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sketch is in al-Ra’i, al-Kumidiya, 161-62. Though all of these manuscripts have been published, scholars’ treatments of the texts have been for different goals than those of this chapter. Al-Ra’i uses the Idris document as an illustration of a muqallid’s experiences, and Woidoch and Landau offer a detailed linguistic analysis of al-Far’s skits.

372 Woidoch now owns the M manuscript.
scribe used stolen paper to write them. A sticker on the back cover bearing the
bookbinder’s name (Rudolf Preller) adds another layer of possibility; perhaps the L
manuscript was recorded for an Orientalist audience in Europe.

Prose, poetry, and song intermingled in each of the skits, and humor came from
misunderstandings of identity, unexpected situations, mistaken assumptions, obscenity
and lewd (sometimes oblique, other times blatant) conduct. It also came from slapstick
and futile attempts to get the better of someone via matchmaking, cheating, stealing, and
wordplay. But critical variances between the two versions of the play exist as well, and
they provide insight into the workings of sha’bi performance and the ways in which they
were modified to appeal to particular audiences. The M manuscript, which emphasizes a
clever, trickster Sa’idi over a foolish one, and omits flattery of the effendiyya and
foreigners, was performed for a sha’bi wedding party. Conversely, the L manuscript,
which is full of blatant praise of the effendiyya and Europeans, was most likely
performed as a fasl mudhik for an effendi and Orientalist audience. But the differences
do not only signify who the audiences probably were—they also indicate what audiences
wanted the performance to be about. Their desires, fantasies, sense of humor,
frustrations, and assumptions could be read in the content of performances that were
improvised and depended on audience input. In other words, the “hidden transcript” of a
sha’b could be read between the lines of sha’bi performance, and differences between the
two scripts, which were intended for quite different audiences, reveals even more.374

Yet printed texts offer only a glimpse of what was actually performed, as actors
took cues from audiences and used texts as foundations from which to improvise lines

374 James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 1990), 4-5.
and endings. In its fluid relationship between performer and audience, its mobile and improvisational structure, and its layers of mimicry, the fasl mudhik unwittingly became an ideal vehicle for the circulation of culture in Egypt. As James Scott notes, oral culture has no primary text from which it deviates or with which it is consistent. Consequently, it achieves “the anonymity of collective property, constantly being adjusted, revised, abbreviated or, for that matter, ignored.” Its improvisational nature made it adaptable to a variety of sites and situations, from the stage to private courtyards. The few, but significant, differences between those two settings were the audiences and the contexts for the performance. And because the audiences and contexts were different, the content of the fasl mudhik differed as well. Its plasticity meant that it could be shaped to suit an array of tastes. Thus, the script of a fasl mudhik must be considered fluid and open-ended, just as muhabbizun and muqallidin would have used them, rather than as a rigid text.

*Riwayyat al-Sa’idi or The Upper Egyptian’s Story*

The meandering story *Riwayyat al-Sa’idi* (*The Upper Egyptian’s Story*) is set in Cairo over an indefinite period of time. It is the story of a man—played by al-Far—from southern, or Upper, Egypt, a *Sa’idi* in Cairo who finds shelter with a couple during his sojourn. Over the course of the play, the Sa’idi amuses the wife with some banter, exchanges insults with the husband, and attempts to talk his way out of an accusation of theft. The husband then bargains with the Sa’idi for some of his clothes but refuses to pay unless the Sa’idi locates a guarantor for the sale. The guarantor whom the Sa’idi

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375 Scott, *Domination and the Arts*, 161.
locates is a thief and former associate of his. Together, the Sa‘idi and thief humorously, but successfully, conspire to steal back the clothes from the husband.\textsuperscript{376}

A simple summary, however, leaves out the absurdist strain that runs through both versions of the fasl mudhik. In a preface to the play, \textit{Ya Tali’ al-Shajara} (The Tree Climber), modern Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim (1902-1986) explicated the importance of absurdism in pre-modern Egyptian performance. As he defined it, absurdism was “the expression of reality without realism, and the attainment of the ridiculous and the illogical in every artistic expression. It is the creation of abstraction in order to arrive at new rhythms and influences.”\textsuperscript{377} He went on to explain how the use of language figured into such performance: “when a play consciously departs from realism, it loses any justification for using realistic language with its characters. Therefore, what becomes more suitable for its unrealistic events is an unrealistic language, in other words a language other than the language of conversation…”\textsuperscript{378} Nonsense and wordplay are hallmarks of the fasl mudhik, and other absurdist characteristics, such as repetition and cyclical dialogue are central to skits, as seen in \textit{Riwayat al-Sa‘idi}.\textsuperscript{379} But such absurdist elements were not solely for entertainment purposes. As al-Hakim suggests, they were powerful vehicles for expressing the realties, frustrations, and desires of their urban working class audience. Skits like \textit{Riwayat al-Sa‘idi} reveal unique sha’bi perspectives on identity, modernity and cultural authenticity.

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\textsuperscript{376} “Riwayat al-Sa‘idi,” in Woidich and Landau, \textit{Arabisches Volkstheater}, 234.
\textsuperscript{379} Of course, absurdist theater did not come to be until the mid-twentieth century; even though absurdism had been central to sha’bi performance for as long as can be traced, it was not labeled as such until the mid-twentieth century.
\end{flushleft}
Much of the humor from both versions of the Sa’idi skit derived from the “the ridiculous and the illogical” to which al-Hakim referred. In both scripts, for example, an Arab woman pleads with the traveling Sa’idi to stay with her in her home. In a society where gender segregation was the norm, particularly in relation to strangers, the woman’s actions were transgressions of propriety. Her behavior was “masculine” in that it involved public engagement with an unrelated man. This provocative inversion of gender norms was undoubtedly mediated on stage by the fact that men played women’s roles in al-Far’s troupe; it made the situation funny rather than threatening.

The ridiculous and the illogical arise in numerous other situations. In the midst of the woman’s attempts to convince the Sa’idi to stay, for example, the Sa’idi inexplicably falls asleep and snores loudly until the woman awakens him. In conversation with both the woman and her husband, the Sa’idi shares several stories that do not seem to have any clear relevance to the situation at hand. Soon afterward, in a rapid change of tone, the couple angrily accuses the Sa’idi of stealing forty rials. In a response that is decidedly beside the point, the unprotesting Sa’idi asks repeatedly: “Is it French or silver coin?”

The conversation about the stolen money recurs repeatedly in both versions of the skit. The repetition seems ridiculous but draws attention to themes of thievery and manipulation in the fasl mudhik. Unlike effendi stage theater, in which drama typically

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384 This may have been an allusion to the confusing reality that multiple types of foreign coin were in circulation in Egypt at the time. “Riwayat al-Sa’idi,” in Woidich and Landau, *Arabisches Volkstheater*, 386, 190.
followed a logical, linear progression, sha’bi theater mixed linear and cyclical events and conversations to tell a story. Repetition, however, did not mean stagnation; rather, it offered a different model for progress that denied the strict teleology increasingly adopted by a Westernized effendiyya, following instead what was typically a rural conception of time and historical experience. Light mockery of social groups also played a significant role in the humor of the Sa’idi play. A conversation between the Sa’idi and the husband, a bedouin (pastoral nomad), demonstrates how no group was immune from ridicule. After the Sa’idi claims to speak seven languages, the husband replies that he, too, is multi-lingual. As evidence, he speaks nonsense words that the effendiyya use when speaking to children about food and drink:

Ahmad (Bedouin): Ask me, and I will tell you.
Sa’idi: What is “bread” called?
A: It’s called “mam.” [food]
S: And “water?”
A: “Imbu” [water]
S: God bless you, Egyptian…385

The use of such language was, on the one hand, a light-hearted mockery of the effendi who used such words and the Sa’idi who did not understand that they were not entirely real (though, of course, the words have meaning for children and the adults who speak them). The bedouin, too, appears ridiculous for attempting to behave as an effendi without understanding what he is saying. To adopt an identity without understanding it makes his words absurd and devoid of meaning. The notion of false identity adds another layer to the exchange. The husband is portrayed as a bedouin, a member of a desert dwelling, largely marginalized group with ambivalent ties to urban and rural Egyptians. This unusual bedouin, however, lives in Cairo and attempts to speak a ridiculous version

of effendi language, suggesting that he might also be striving to join the ranks of the urban effendiyya. The implication is that both the bedouin and the effendiyya were pretending to be something that they were not—the Bedouin, a social-climbing urban dweller, and the effendi, an authentic Egyptian.

Another example illuminates this further. When the husband attempts to insult the Sa’idi by referring to him as a fellah (peasant), the Sa’idi responds: “I’m not denying that I’m a fellah, you contrarian. I AM a fellah, and the son of a fellah. You think you’re the son of a soldier? You’re a fellah like me.”

To call someone a fellah, especially up until the late-nineteenth century, implied that he or she was backward, ignorant, oppressed, and submissive. The term developed other meanings by the 1890s when a new image of a “civilized fellah” started to appear in the press. As urban intellectuals developed a notion of Egyptianness that largely mirrored their self-perceptions, they cast the fellah as a “timeless repository” of Egyptian identity and presented themselves as its guardians and representatives. At the same time that they elevated the symbol “fellah,” the effendiyya were developing their own identities as Egypt’s modern vanguard while distancing themselves from their own rural, fellahi roots. Though the conversation in the play takes place between a Sa’idi and a bedouin, an effendi might well have received the same reprimand. The effendiyya, Westernized men who claimed to be the cultural arbiters of a modern Egypt, largely defined their urban identity against their rural origins. Disavowal of their heritage may well have appeared false to the sha’b.

Another exchange illustrates this notion yet again. The husband expresses interest in buying the Sa’idi’s cloak, an Upper Egyptian wrap called a za’buut, and his tarbush, a
hat worn by the effendiyya to mark their social status. The husband asks the Sa’idi if the za’buut is good for anything more than being worn, and the Sa’idi answers: “It’s good for the effendiyya; they can wrap it around their necks and [the lice in it] will scratch them instead of them using their hands.” He then asks the Sa’idi what the tarbush is good for and how it stays on one’s head. The Sa’idi replies, “You put on the tarbush, then you tie the lace around your neck…then it will be just right.” Though the tarbush—which has no laces—is a marker of effendi status, the husband who desires to purchase one makes a mockery of it by having no idea how it is to be worn or even what it stands for. At the same time, the za’buut, a marker of an Upper Egyptian, becomes desirable when the husband learns that an effendi might find it useful for scratching his neck. For an effendiyya trying to break from rural identities to create modern urban ones, the idea of wearing a za’buut with a tarbush doubtless would have been anathema; but the Arab woman’s husband, once again, is portrayed as one attempting to behave as an effendi without understanding what he is doing. In one example after another, it is the pretensions of the new middle class that al-Far mocks.

Upper Egyptians, too, can be either targets of mockery or clever tricksters, making fools of the effendi and characters from Lower Egypt. In some situations, the Sa’idi is portrayed as a fool—a naïve character who is unable to keep pace with urban society. In an exchange between the husband and the Sa’idi, for example, the husband swears at him by calling him the “son of 100 prostitutes,” a deeply offensive and crude

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389 “Riwayat al-Sa’idi,” in Woidich and Landau, Arabisches Volkstheater, 196-98. He considers the za’but to be precious because it carries a considerable amount of lice. The notion of the za’but being lice-ridden was common in Egypt at the time; it is unclear whether it was based in fact or fiction.
insult. “I’m the son of 100 prostitutes,” the Sa’idi deadpans. “Yes,” answers the husband. “No, son,” the Sa’idi replies, “I’m the son of ONE prostitute.” In other situations, the Sa’idi is portrayed as a trickster—a quick wit and clever bargainer who gets the better of those around him. Despite his long dialogue, rife with insults, with the husband, it is never entirely clear whether or not the Sa’idi had actually stolen the money he is accused of stealing. He spends considerable time talking his way out of the situation and is successful enough to distract the husband from the theft, at least for some time. The Sa’idi demonstrates a penchant for bargaining when the husband expresses interest in purchasing a few items of his clothing. In both plays, the Sa’idi sells his za’buut and tarbush to the husband after making them sound more appealing than they actually are. “These things are priceless!” he says of the za’buut, and, in the L manuscript, he spends considerable time explaining how it and the tarbush are to be worn. Finally, in the end, the Sa’idi successfully steals back his clothes from the husband without (re)paying the forty riyal. He walks away having surrendered nothing. In these scenes, the Upper Egyptian is not an ignorant victim; he is a clever rogue.

Nonetheless, the roles of fool and trickster are not discrete, and the slippage between them is quite fascinating. This was not unusual, as the trickster/fool is a prevalent type in Arabic theater and storytelling. As James Scott remarks, “It doesn’t take a great deal of subtle analysis to notice that the structural position of the trickster

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393 “Riwayat al-Sa’idi,” in Woidich and Landau, *Arabisches Volkstheater*, 192, 394. The Sa’idi acts as if he doesn’t know math but talks the numbers down.
396 Popular folk characters such as Juha, and stage characters like Najib al-Rihani’s Kishkish Bey, for example, exemplify the dual trickster/fool character. See, for example, Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed), *Tales of Juha: Classic Arab Folk Humor* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 2007).
hero and the strategems he deploys bear a marked resemblance to the existential dilemma of subordinate groups.”

Though trickster stories allow for the inversion of social relationships by allowing the protagonist to triumph over others who are usually his social superiors, the cohabitation of trickster and fool makes the Sa’idi a nonthreatening character. This is especially true in the version that most likely appeared on the proscenium stage, where the foolish Sa’idi is emphasized over the trickster. The exchange of insults, however, is one place where slippage occurs. Here it is unclear whether the Sai’di is insulting himself or the other character:

Husband: pig!
Sa’idi: Son of a pig, *ya buuy*! [Sa’idi nonsense expression of trouble, irritation or distress]
Husband: pimp!
Sa’idi: Son of a pimp, my son!

The expression *ya buuy* points to yet another key source of mockery in the representation of the Sa’idi. Perhaps the most distinctive marker of the Upper Egyptian in this skit is his dialect. Audiences for both versions of the playlet would have heard al-Far’s character speak with an exaggerated Sa’idi accent. In Upper Egypt the letter *qaf* (a throaty “k” in formal Arabic but a glottal stop in Cairene dialect) is pronounced instead as a soft “g.” Even if he had not appeared on stage wearing a turban, when the Sa’idi says the word *foog* (up), instead of *fooq*, or *fo’*, he is instantly recognizable as a Sa’idi. Colloquial language varied considerably based on the region in which it was spoken and the class, ethnicity, even occupation of those who spoke it. Thus, the type of Arabic used and the ways it was pronounced could be used to mark and mock social class, origins, even

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399 “Riwayat al-Sa’idi,” in Woidich and Landau, *Arabisches Volkstheater*, 382. At another point, the Sa’idi says *magluba* (upside-down) for *ma’louba*. (188).
religion. The play on dialect is furthered in a conversation between the Sa’idi and the wife. The Sa’idi claims to speak seven languages and lists them as follows: “Sa’idi, Arabic, Maghrebi, Berber, Rashidi, and…and…” The wife, undaunted by the Sa’idi’s claim to speak more languages than he can name, calls out to her husband: “see this Sa’idi, this donkey, that speaks different languages”. Aside from the disparagement of the Sa’idi by calling him a donkey (a rude insult, itself a statement on urban stereotypes of the peasantry), the passage is rich in relation to the development of a common colloquial Arabic in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Egypt.

Ziad Fahmy’s work on these patterns is illuminating. In this period of significant cultural production (journals, plays, novels, vocal music, etc), the colloquial language that was specific to Lower Egypt, that is, from Cairo north to the Delta, became the dominant national dialect. Fahmy argues that the portrayal of Upper Egyptian Sa’idi characters, speaking exaggerated Upper Egyptian dialect, as “dimwitted and backward” worked to showcase Cairene dialect as the proper standard of speech. But in the Al-Far play, the duality of the trickster/fool Sa’idi, and his claim that “Sa’idi” and “Berber,” for example, were distinct languages, suggests another interpretation. The Sa’idi’s insistence on distinctions between spoken Egyptian languages offers a critique of a centralizing modernity rather than mocking those who do not fit into it.

The manipulation of language appeared not only in varying dialects but also in the use of words with multiple meanings. Al-Far’s use of double-entendre made some exchanges between characters both offensive and funny. To understand them,
however, required a higher level of facility with colloquial Arabic language than did the more direct curses. In one instance of double (or triple)-entendre, for example, the Sa’idi attempts to complement the husband by asking “You clever fellow (daahiya), where are you from?” But the word daahiya also means catastrophe or calamity, and the husband, who understands the word in this way, responds angrily, “The same calamity that will send you back to your village!” “Oh, thank you,” the Sa’idi replies, once again understanding the word daahiya in a different way: “Traveling on a cursed flying carpet (daahiya) would be much better than traveling by sea.”\footnote{“Riwayat al-Sa’idi,” in Woidich and Landau, \textit{Arabisches Volkstheater}, 182.} The humor in the exchange exists on several levels, the most obvious being the Sa’idi’s naivite and the clever manipulation of language. But on a deeper level, it also comes from the oblique transgression of appropriate conversational language. Using the terms without explanation assumed that the audience was familiar with the words and understood why they were vulgar and funny. Audience members were “in on” the joke because they were well aware of the conventions that were being transgressed. Inversely, to be part of the authentic sha’b, one had to “get the jokes.”

Success in comedy, as anthropologist Susan Seizer argues, “assumes everyone’s familiarity with moralizing discourses of propriety, vulgarity, and the ideology of separate spheres…not normally laughing matters.”\footnote{Susan Seizer, \textit{Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 197.} Indeed, the skits assumed audiences had considerable local knowledge in order to understand their humor.

Transgression of social conventions—the assertive Bedouin woman, thieving, and using
crude language—also reasserts the importance of those conventions. Layers of meaning complicates Egyptian comedy writer Amin Sidqi’s theory that “a joke is not humorous unless it is completely understood by everyone.” Humor might derive from any of several levels of comprehension, some less accessible than others.

Though both versions of the fasl mudhik bear much resemblance to one another, their differences offer even more insight into the concerns of their different audiences. In some ways, the reason for differences between the two versions is relatively clear. For example, the Sa’idi wedding manuscript (M) reflects what would have been a male audience, as it opens with the Sa’idi calling out to guests saying: “Hey, lads!” On the other hand, the Sa’idi’s opening monologue in the L manuscript reflects the broader audience of the proscenium stage; one that may have included women and that certainly included members of the urban effendiyya. That scene opens with the Sa’idi calling out to: “Inhabitants of Cairo!”

The different audiences shaped each version of the fasl mudhik in the next scene as well, when, for example, the Arab woman insists that the Sa’idi lodge with her and her husband. Much of the humor undoubtedly came from the fact that the woman was played by a man, but it was also a result of the banter between the two, as the woman insists that he stay with her and the Sa’idi repeatedly refuses her invitations. In the wedding version, the woman repeatedly invokes the Prophet Muhammad in her dialogue with him. This common colloquialism would have sounded familiar to the sha’b in attendance, though

406 Seizer’s work on Special Drama on the Tamil stage led to the same conclusion: a “Buffoon’s comedy deftly reenacts the very conventions…that the public telling of such jokes would seem to transgress,” 177.
humor lay in her deliberate overuse of it. When she pleads with him to stay at her house, for example, she says, “I see that you’re tired, and the prayers of Muhammad.” Likewise, when she reprimands him, she says, “The neighbors and walls are tired of your snoring, and the prayers of Muhammad.”

The same sections in the L manuscript also make geographic rather than religious references. As the woman pleads with the Sa’idi, she asks him to stay “for the sake of Sohag,” a town in Upper Egypt. When he refuses, she pleads: “for the sake of Manfalut,” a town in Middle Egypt. He declines again, stating instead that he would stay for Qasr al-Nil, an upper class and European residential area in Cairo. The common plea “for the sake of” typically followed by one’s mother, or another valued family member, was instead followed by various villages and neighborhoods, making the exchange both ridiculous and entertaining while possibly suggesting the unity of “modern” Egypt. The Sa’idi’s favoring of a European neighborhood over rural towns provides another source of humor—the European neighborhood would have been the least familiar space for him, and the juxtaposition of the “outsider” Sa’idi with the elite section of town would have been cause for much amusement—but was that all? In these examples, the M manuscript took pains to lightly mock empty religious statements; the L manuscript, however, traced a “literary map” of Egypt. Mapping and social geography was of great interest to a portion of the effendiyya who espoused a territorial nationalism. Other examples of social mapping in the Sai’di skit illuminate this further. In conversation with the Arab woman, the Sa’idi tells her that he is going to look for a job in Cairo that will allow him

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to “eat *kisra* [a type of Sudanese bread] and drink water.” The reference to Sudanese bread ties him to southern, or Upper Egypt, which borders the Sudan. While it stresses that he is an outsider in urban Cairo, it also hints at the ambivalent relationship between Egypt and the Sudan that the effendiyya propagated. In this case, the Sudan is incorporated, in a limited way, into Egyptian life.

The L manuscript’s appeal to the effendiyya (and foreigner) is most blatant, however, in a serious and lengthy conversation between the Sa’idi and the guarantor he locates for the sale of his clothes. It arguably offers the most striking difference between the two fusul mudhika and involves a discussion about the reasons for Egypt’s backwardness. Thirteen pages of the manuscript are dedicated to a dialogue regarding Egyptian inferiority, the problem of hashish, and the need to look to Europeans to learn about social progress.

Ahmad: Don’t you see how backwards we are and how people are laughing at us? We became inferior, that’s what the foreigners say. Doesn’t that cut to the bone?

Hanafi [Guarantor]: But what have we done to deserve this? We’re just carrying on with our lives; from home to work; we keep quietly to ourselves, stay away from evil, don’t say things about others. Why don’t they leave us alone?

Ahmad: This is what they are criticizing us for.

Hanafi: So they want us to involve ourselves in the world like them? Crazy? Running from here to there? Complaining that the papers wrote this or that? Do they think they are going to live forever?

Ahmad: Forgive me, but it is our attitude that has held us back. Going from work to home…we’re very helpless. Or do you hate money, work, ordering the home, happy life…Is the world only for the foreigner? If so, let’s get lost and leave it for them.

Hanafi: There is nothing better for a man to leave his work and go home, close the door, be with kids, friends would stop by, tell some jokes, take some drugs, and be happy. Don’t tell me that Britain, France, Italy said this, did that; that’s nonsense…
Ahmad: We come from God and we’ll return to God [Kor’anic saying]. You’re still sticking to hashish; don’t you know it ruins your mind? What do you worship? If only you would forget that stuff and look after what’s important/your own good and try to mingle with the khawagat [European foreigners], give and take with them, understand how they do their trade, open a store like them, wouldn’t that be better?...

A: Don’t you see the people who have left their countries to come here and are pursuing their own good, while we just complain about them—they’re liars, cheaters, etc. Why don’t we improve ourselves too? When we bring up the Christians [Europeans] and talk about them, why don’t they get embarrassed and return to their homes and leave us? They call us fellahin; to insult someone you say “go away fellah,” “humar” (donkey).

H: Yes, even the Berberi [Berbers] call us fellahin!

A: All because of hashish

Al-Far continues, calling on an urban vanguard to navigate these reforms. Egyptians, according to al-Far, needed to learn from Europeans in order to set up businesses that would fully satisfy the needs of the country. Work, order and discipline, not hashish, would make the country—and its people—modern. The message in the conversation between Ahmad and his foil, Hanafi, was contemporary Egyptians’ main problem was a lack of ambition. Hanafi’s satisfaction in passing time in the limited world of friends, family, work, and hashish was, according to Ahmad, the reason for Egyptian backwardness. Indeed, a lack of ambition was the reason why Europeans (and even people as marginal as Berbers), referred to Egyptians as “fellahin.” The word was leveled as an insult, a sign of backwardness and disengagement with the modern world. To progress, Egyptians needed to emulate rather than critique Europeans. The message might well have pleased an Orientalist audience. It also parroted an explicit effendi prescription for reform.
Sha’bi Modernity?

The two scripts of *Riwayyat al-Sa’idi* offer different views that are not entirely compatible. Though the L manuscript pokes fun at its effendi and foreign audience, the heart of the manuscript reiterates their prescriptions for a modern Egypt. It praises the foreigner as teacher and the effendi as leader charting the course for a modern Egypt. The M manuscript, conversely, in its omission of the entire section on Egyptian backwardness, was first and foremost a rejection of the order, logic, and rationality of effendi modernity and concern with the sha’b as a target of social reform. The refusal to incorporate Western theatrical conventions of performance, and the persistence of the a-realism of sha’bi performance were certainly a part of this. Modernity, in these scripts, was messy. It was full of unknown and unexpected turns; it required clever and imaginative use of language; it was rooted in an interactive community, cognizant of its shared rural heritage; and, perhaps most importantly, it was managed with a sense of humor. These were some of the characteristics of a sha’bi authenticity.

Even as sha’bi performance mocked the effendiyya, it did not entirely reject the notion of a shared Egyptian modern identity. As is evident in the Sa’idi play, skits addressed contemporary sha’bi concerns and realities. Though they borrowed from older performative conventions, their content engaged with the modern world, even as it critiqued and rejected elements of it. The Sa’idi’s discussion of geography, for example, painted a mental map of a bounded Egyptian nation. Without being explicit, the play envisioned shape and content of the modern nation, even while critiquing those who claimed to lead it. The probability that the L manuscript was performed on the proscenium stage adds another layer to the story. Al-Far’s participation in effendi
commercial theater meant that sha’bi plays that questioned effendi modernity still benefited from technologies of the modern theater and engagement with consumer society. In a broader sense, muqallidin like Muhammad Idris contributed to the sense of a shared identity by circulating sounds and images of key performers. The dissemination of sound and symbols created a common culture which bridged class, gender, and religion, paving the way to a shared, though contested, national identity.

Critically, sha’bi performances necessitated dialogue between audience and players. For the sha’b, the opportunity—indeed, demand—for active engagement in the performance meant that they were never passive outsiders but integral insiders whose voices and opinions not only mattered but were deemed essential to the outcome of a scene. In this way, one begins to understand why some elite observers considered such entertainments to be a “threat to the nation.” Sha’bi performance offered space for an opinionated, working class community to voice strong opinions. And audiences recognized that outcomes changed as a result of their input. Emboldened, it was possible to imagine these participants setting sights on engaging and debating issues outside of theatrical space. Such was the fear—and hope—of an effendiyya seeking to control sha’bi voices and terms of engagement. The combination of the active, participatory audience with the power of the iconic unifying voices like those of Hijazi would prove to be potent, especially during and after the First World War. Great suffering and increased popular politicization would make a unified, active, and vocal sha’b a force, which would have to be reckoned with in the revolution of 1919.

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413 Fahmy, “Media-Capitalism,” 83-103.
Chapter Four

Munira al-Mahdiyya, the Revolutionary Stage, and the Modern Egyptian Woman

At a set time one afternoon in March, 1919, a host of Cairo’s actors, actresses, and playwrights shut down their theaters and gathered in front of the Khedivial Opera House. There they joined the massive anti-British street protests erupting throughout the city and countryside. Waving a massive Egyptian flag, actress Fatma al-Yusuf led the theatrical group. She and fellow actress, Mary Mansour, sat in a buggy with editor-in-chief of the journal *al-Ahram* and wound their way through the theater district with a group of costumed actors following in their wake. What started as a spirited protest ended in a terrifying moment when a British soldier emerged from the shadows and leveled a weapon directly at Yusuf. She recounted the experience in the third person: “one of the soldiers raised his rifle and aimed it at the young artist carrying the flag, and she froze as terror flooded her body…she felt as if a bullet had pierced her back, so she clung to the flag as if to lean on it…[the feeling] was not, in reality, anything more than the consequence of her terror.” As she watched in shock, an Egyptian revolutionary shot the British soldier, saving al-Yusuf’s life. The experience changed her, moving her to participate even more fully in anti-British work. It later motivated her to establish a career in journalism, one which gave her a public voice as a leading critic of Egyptian politics. For her, the revolution was a moment of politicization.

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415 Yusuf, *Dhikrayat*, 54.
416 The first issue of her journal, *Ruz al-Yusuf*, was put out in October, 1925.
As Yusuf and others recount, it was the arrest and exile of nationalist leader Sa’d Zaghlul that triggered mass protests in the streets. Britain had occupied Egypt since 1882, and Egyptians’ grievances with British political control and uneven economic development only increased when Britain declared martial law in Egypt at the start of World War One. At the end of the war, Egyptian nationalists took notice of American president Woodrow Wilson’s call for self-determination of all nations. With great hope in what seemed to be an internationally binding legal basis for independence, a delegation of nationalists led by Zaghlul sought a place at the peace table in Versailles to demand Egyptian sovereignty. The British not only denied the delegates access to Versailles but also exiled them from Egypt. In response, mass protests broke all over the country, led initially by students and intellectuals but swelling quickly to include women of all classes, urban workers, peasants, Muslims, Christians, and Jews. It seemed that the entire country was unified in their demands for Egyptian independence, justice, and freedom.

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During the war, curfews designed to curb carbon use and keep people off the streets meant that theaters had to shut down at 11pm, which was earlier than usual. The influx of soldiers and newly enriched Egyptian landowners supported a flourishing vaudeville theater in the early years of the war. Many troupes, however, could not find urban audiences large enough to support themselves, so they supplemented work in Cairo and Alexandria with provincial tours and private jobs. Despite such efforts, many went bankrupt. Even for successful troupes, performances became increasingly difficult to sustain as the protests of 1919 broke out, for transportation workers’ strikes affected audience numbers, and new curfews required theaters to close even earlier, at 8pm. Yusuf, who was a member of the Ramsis acting troupe, recalled times when sounds of rioting interrupted sparsely attended performances, and protestors, escaping the wrath of the British army, ran into theaters to hide from their pursuers behind stage curtains and in dressing rooms.

Performers and writers seem to have demonstrated on more than one occasion, as a few actors’ biographies offer variations on Yusuf’s story. In one account, actresses Dawlat Abyad and Zeinab Sidqi, along with other unnamed women, donned Pharaonic and Arab clothing and led actors on a long procession that started at Station Square, passed through Opera and Qasr al-Nil Squares, and ended at Beit al-Umma, the home of exiled nationalist leader, Zaghlul. All the way, they demanded “freedom from occupation

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422 Ramsis ‘Awad, al-Tarikh al-Sirri li al-Masrah Qabl Thawrat 1919 (Cairo, 1972), 117.
424 Yusuf, Dhikrayat, 53.
or death!” The actors who followed the women were dressed in the costumes of Napoleon Bonaparte, Harun al-Rashid, and Othello. Another version of events suggests a different protest configuration. Actor George Abyad’s biography indicates that Abyad led a large demonstration of male actors, playwrights, and composers, while actresses Dawlat Abyad, Zeinab Sidqi, and Ruz al-Yusuf marched alongside leaders of the Egyptian women’s movement, Huda Sha’rawi and Saiza Nabrawi, veiled in yashmik and shawls, clothing worn by elite women of the era.

Protests continued on and off over the course of the year, and performers continued to participate in the revolutionary fervor both in the streets and on the stage. Many theatrical performers, most notably comedic actors Najib al-Rihani and ‘Ali al-Kassar, infused their productions with revolutionary themes. Recorded music and musical theater reflected similar concerns, and composers like Sayyid Darwish became famous for their incorporation of patriotic lyrics and sounds from the street in their music. Many plays invoked the glories of ancient Egypt to subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) support and memorialize the protests of 1919. This drew from nationalist

426 Harun al-Rashid was the fifth Abbasid caliph who governed at the height of the dynasty’s power and prosperity. His life and court were the subject of many stories, most notably the 1001 Nights. Othello was one of many popular Arabicized Shakespearean plays in Egypt at the turn of the century. The George Abyad, Salama Hijazi, Soliman al-Qardahi, and Ramsis acting troupes all performed the play many times. The three costumes represented real and fictional military men. For more on Shakespeare in Egypt, see Ramsis ‘Awad, Shaksbir fi Misr (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1992), 170-71, 181.
rhetoric which justified Egyptian independence, in one way, by pointing to Egypt’s notable ancient history. Nationalists elaborated this trope in various tracts and speeches; actors presented it on the proscenium stage and also in some of the Arab and Pharaonic costumes they chose to wear while demonstrating.

Women were central to the protests, both on the streets and on the theatrical stage. Some 350 upper-class women from Alexandria, Fayuum and elsewhere marched in Cairo’s anti-British demonstrations, and peasant women in rural areas worked alongside men to tear up railway tracks, destroy telegraph lines, and pillage and burn the countryside. Women who led the women’s rights’ movement in Egypt were some of the first to flood the streets after Zaghlul’s exile, offering a striking image of female political engagement and visibility in the public sphere, a space in which they had been involved only to limited degrees. In the context of a political march for independence, female involvement was considered not only acceptable, but also admirable.

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431 I avoid use of the terms “feminism” and “feminist” in this chapter for a few reasons. First, in most of the period under study, female reformers referred to themselves as participants in a “women’s/nisa’iyya” rather than a “feminist” movement. It was not until the 1920s that the word nisa’iyya would take on the additional meaning of feminist, though its historical connection to Western activists made Egyptian reformers wary of taking on the additional meaning. Furthermore, the range of Egyptian female perspectives on how best to advocate for women makes it difficult to categorize all female reformers under the same rubric of “feminist.” For thoughtful discussions on this in the Egyptian context, see Beth Baron, *The Women’s Awakening in Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 6-7. For a global perspective, see Bonnie G. Smith, “Introduction,” in *Global Feminisms Since 1945*, ed. Bonnie G. Smith (London: Routledge, 2000), 1-10.
Politicization offered a new language by which to demonstrate a local modernity, for it allowed women to create a space for themselves that embraced the ideals of the modern nation. Nationalist rhetoric provided women from all walks of life a means to respectable engagement in public life, and female performers benefited from this in unique ways. While nationalists embraced an image of the nation as a woman and the modern woman as a “category of manly possession and protection,” they also promoted a notion of equality before the law and of general citizens’ rights that allowed women a space in which to stake a claim to a modern, public identity.432

Whereas women who led the movement for reform in Egypt tended to be from the upper and middle classes, female performers often came from poor backgrounds and worked in a field marred by stigma. Indeed, one of the leading figures of the women’s movement, Huda Sha’rawi, refused to have her photo appear in Fatma al-Yusuf’s magazine for a time, fearing that allowing it would associate her with actresses.433 Most histories of the women’s movement in Egypt tend to focus on the dominant group of middle-class and elite women who furthered causes that pertained primarily to women of their own class.434 Their interaction with poorer classes was evident in the charitable organizations they organized and training programs they ran, though their aims did not always satisfy the actual needs of working women. The voices of working class and other women, by contrast, are much more difficult to access, chiefly due to the fact that

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few left behind written records. Theater and music, venues filled with performing women, offer a unique point of access to some of those largely missing perspectives.

Some recent writings on female performers have sought to challenge histories of Egyptian performance that have attributed innovation and significance in performance only to male artists, arguing that female artists offered an alternative voice, one that differed from the dominant voices of elite and middle-class women of the women’s movement in Egypt. By looking at the specific case of actress and singer Munira al-Mahdiyya, this chapter builds on those histories, analyzing the ways in which she, and her cohort, which included performers like Fathiyya Ahmad and Na’ima al-Misriyya, justified and made respectable their presence in the public sphere as a particular kind of “modern Egyptian woman.” In the process, they created a prototype for Egyptian womanhood that others would take up as well.

Mahdiyya, a performer from a poor family whose talent won her acclaim in elite and popular circles, offers a compelling portrait of a modern woman in the Egyptian public sphere. She blended nationalist rhetoric with older forms of female respectability in the context of a burgeoning sphere of commercial performance to create a new prototype for what a modern woman could be. In some ways, Mahdiyya supported a model of Egyptian womanhood that nationalist leaders and leaders of the movement for

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435 See, for example, Cynthia Metcalf, “From Morality Play to Celebrity: Women, Gender, and Performing Modernity in Egypt, c. 1850-1939” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2008); Fakhrolmolouk Haghani, “The ‘New Woman’ of the Interwar Period: Gender, Identity, and Performance in Egypt and Iran,” Al-Raida, The Journal of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American University, Summer/Fall 2008 Issue: Women in the Performing Arts; Virginia Danielson, The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth-Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and numerous articles by Frederick Lagrange. Also, see the Na’ima al-Misriyya Project (project manager Heba Farid), http://www.naima-project.org. This is a major endeavor to locate and publish works by Na’ima al-Misriyya, a female Egyptian singer popular in the early-twentieth century who has largely been forgotten.
women’s rights promulgated, for her work in the public arena might be seen as a logical extension of women’s demands for more public participation. But her career pointed to the limits of female reformers’ aims, for she physically embodied a version of womanhood that was at odds with idealized women’s roles as wives and mothers in Egyptian society. To navigate this, Mahdiyya combined older forms of legitimacy—mastery of the “male repertoire” of song, connecting her success to a lineage of male performers who “discovered” and nurtured her talent—with newer forms that included commercial success and infusions of nationalist and female reformist rhetoric in her performances. In this way, she made herself a model of womanhood that differed from the ideal that nationalists and participants in the elite women’s movement proffered. Hers was a female Egyptian identity rooted in “authentic,” local, respectable roots that also offered her—and others—a great deal of latitude as an independent, working woman engaged in the public sphere.

**Historical Context**

*We live in the Nile valley, yet our drinking / is rationed by water meters
From gas, salt and sugar / to the tramways of khawaga [foreigner] Kiryaniti
May you never experience our desperation / our pockets are clean and our houses even cleaner
Even the clothes we are wearing are already pawned / what a ghastly life*  
---“Al-Kutra,” Sayyid Darwish

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436 Sayyid Darwish, one of the most popular and important Egyptian composers of the era, wrote this song, satirically titled al-Kutra (Abundance). It expressed Egyptians’ frustrations with World War One and connected rationing and foreign control (represented by the generic Greek name Kiryaniti) to food and oil shortages in the country. Darwish’s mastery of the light, short composition called a taqtuqa made him extremely popular with audiences, acting troupes in need of composers, and the recording industry. He was credited with moving away from older Ottoman styles to create a distinctively modern Egyptian sound. Ziad Fahmy, “Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism: Colloquial Culture and Media Capitalism, 1870-1919” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona, 2007), 215.
The outbreak of World War One posed a dilemma for the British who occupied Egypt, a territory that was still a province of the Ottoman Empire. Once the Ottomans officially allied with Germany, the British government moved quickly to declare martial law in Egypt and made it a formal British protectorate. It also deposed the khedive, ‘Abbas Hilmi II who was in Istanbul when the war broke out, and replaced him with his more malleable uncle, Husein Kamel (r. 1914-17). Kamel’s title, “Sultan of Egypt” was a sign of Egypt’s definitive break from Istanbul, for the title “sultan” previously had been reserved for the head of the empire. Though Kamel had been a popular figure, many Egyptians turned against him once he appeared to become a puppet of their British occupiers.437

The declaration of a protectorate brought with it rigid press censorship, limitations on the assembly of five or more persons, and a host of other political and economic controls. Europeans or Egyptians exhibiting pro-Ottoman tendencies were interned or exiled, and religious leaders were encouraged to call for restraint in political activity.438

Despite promises to the contrary, British colonial officials and military commanders called upon Egyptian civilians to participate in the war effort in numerous ways. Egyptian men participated in active service on the banks of the Suez Canal and in the Sudan, the Western Desert, and the Gallipoli campaign.439 Approximately one and a half million peasants either volunteered or were forced to participate in the Egyptian

Labor Corps, an entity created to support the needs of the army both within and outside of Egypt. This amounted to one-third of Egyptian men between the ages of 17 and 35. Their recruitment could be brutal, particularly when local district and provincial governors (mamours and ‘umdahs), under the thumb of British inspectors, forced peasants into service. As Lieutenant-Colonel Percival Elgood noted, “village sheikhs chose the victims as they sought fit and without interference. Many an old score was thus paid off, and agricultural Egypt became rent with feud. Families denounced families, and corruption poisoned the air…” Recruits worked in Sinai, Syria, Iraq, France, and Palestine, laying railway lines, raising ramparts, digging trenches, and doing menial labor for miniscule pay. Though they were not supposed to participate in hostilities and tended to be away from the front lines, enemy forces saw laborers as belligerents. In 1917, 21,000 Egyptians served camel transport in the Auxiliary Egyptian Corps, and of them 220 were killed and fourteen thousand wounded. Four thousand more died in hospital.

Others who died due to disease and neglect often did not have family notified of their

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440 Egyptian intellectual Salama Musa wrote about the forced recruiting of peasant men to join the Labor Corps in his memoirs. He recalled, “men [were] bound with thick ropes around their waists and put in a long row with their fellow victims and marched like that to the village office where they were confined in the room for the accused to be deported to Palestine.” On one particular occasion, he remembered when “three of the men who worked our land were detained while ploughing a field.” They were bound in thick ropes to be taken to join the Labor Corps. Musa managed to bribe the officers who detained the men in order to secure their release. Salama Musa, The Education of Salama Musa (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1961), 92, as cited in Mario Ruiz, “Imperial Policing in Wartime Egypt” (paper presented to the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, New Brunswick, NJ, Oct. 16, 2007), 19.


442 Rifaat, Awakening, 209.


deaths. As a report to the British government stated, Egyptian laborers in the corps “died like flies’ due to the ill treatment they received.”

The invasion of Palestine increased British military demand for transportation and livestock. Under British authority, the Egyptian State Railways transported military goods, animals, and munitions, and transferred the debt to the Egyptian treasury. Already, in 1914, the British had decreed a limit on cotton production in exchange for greater cultivation of food and cereal. This meant that landowners in the Delta only used one-third of their land for cotton production, which was more lucrative. In 1916, state officials started to requisition those grain and cotton stores in addition to peasants’ animals of burden in order to feed and support the army. By the end of the war, serious shortfalls in food supply resulted in war-related malnutrition across the Egyptian countryside and an increase in the death rate in Egypt.

Urban dwellers initially benefited from the growth of local wartime industry, but this changed over time. Peasants increasingly migrated to cities to escape their many burdens and subsequently put pressure on an urban infrastructure already stressed by housing shortages and increasing rents. Stagnant wages, massive inflation, rising crime rates, prostitution, and drug use also plagued cities. As places like Cairo became garrisons for the hundreds of thousands of fighting units from Australia, India, New

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448 Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, 170; Tignor, “Egyptian Revolution,” 42-44.
449 Ruiz, “Imperial Policing,” 16.
Zealand, Malta, and other parts of the British empire, troops’ often rowdy behavior in the streets contributed to what was already a litany of Egyptian resentments.

Egyptian poetry, jokes, songs, and theater—particularly vaudeville—served as expressive sites for the frustrations of many during the war.\textsuperscript{451} One of the most beloved of Egypt’s contemporary composers, Sayyid Darwish, wrote a number of pieces that echoed the sounds and concerns of everyday people. His song \textit{Salma Ya Salama}, for example, celebrated the return of men recruited for the Egyptian Labor Corps. The combination of Darwish’s composition and respected writer Badi’ Khairi’s patriotic lyrics created what would become one of Darwish’s most popular songs:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Welcome back to safety / we went and returned safely}
Blow your horn, oh, steamboat, and anchor / let me off in this country (Egypt)
Who cares about America or Europe / there is no better than this country
The ship that is returning / is much better than the one that is departing ...

\textit{Welcome back to safety / we went and returned safely}
Who cares about the British Authority, it was all for profit / we saved as much as we could

\textit{We saw the war and the violence / we saw the explosions with our very eyes}
There is only one God and one life, and here we are / we left and now we returned
\textit{Welcome back to safety / we went and returned safely}\textsuperscript{452}
\end{quote}

The song’s popularity, as historian Ziad Fahmy notes, “was only the beginning of a growing, and constantly changing, repertoire of Egyptian songs, a national anthology of songs heard, and more importantly sung, by most Egyptians.”\textsuperscript{453} Music was central to

\textsuperscript{451} Ramsis \textquoteright{}Awad, \textit{Ittijahat Siyasiyah fi al-Masrah Qabla Thawrat 1919} (Cairo: al-Hi’a al-Misriyya al-\textquoteleft{}Aamma li al-Kitab, 1979), 235.

\textsuperscript{452} Fahmy, “Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism,” 217. \textit{Salma ya Salama} was also called \textit{al-\textquoteleft{}Umal wa al-Sulta} (The Workers and the British Authority). Fahmy’s translation.

\textsuperscript{453} Fahmy, “Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism,” 41.
creating solidarity amongst a diverse population.

By the end of the war, dismal economic, political, and social conditions created a situation ripe for revolt. Elite landowners resented British artificial controls on the cost of cotton and other production; the middle classes were angry with the increasing numbers of British bureaucrats taking what would ordinarily be their civil service jobs; peasants had had enough of economic colonialism, forced labor, and the requisitioning of their resources; and nearly everyone suffered due to spiraling inflation and stagnant wages.\(^{454}\)

1919

*Misr al-jadida, she is the only one*

*She is the only one, the only one*

*She is the only one, the only, Egypt*

*Pleasant residents live there*

*And there are many gardens, gardens there*

*And plenty, plenty of palaces, Egypt*

*...*

*There, in the middle of the woods, I have a room*

*[unclear from the recording]*

*and the rising new, new Egypt*

*Luna Park is there, May God protect her*

*From whomever comes to her, comes to her*

*And does her any harm, Egypt*

---“Misr al-Jadida,” Munira al-Mahdiyya\(^{455}\)

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\(^{455}\) Ethnomusicologist Carolyn Ramzy notes that this song, recorded by the Baidaphon Company, became popular some time after 1914. It was well-known enough to be adapted by the Coptic Church in Egypt. In one of its chief song booklets, the church indicated that one of its spiritual songs should be sung to the tune of Mahdiyya’s “Misr al-Jadida.” Munira al-Mahdiyya, “Misr al-Jadida,” as reproduced in Carolyn Ramzy, “Untold Coptic Music Narratives: Taratil and a History of Oral Resistance” (paper presented to the Middle East Studies Association, Boston, MA, November 2009), 4. Ramzy’s translation.
Munira al-Mahdiyya’s song, *Misr al-Jadida* (New Egypt), was one of her more popular songs during World War One. On the surface, it was a song about a new suburb northeast of Cairo, *Misr al-Jadida* (New Egypt/Heliopolis), that attracted the Egyptian effendi class in the early twentieth-century. Luna Park was an amusement park built in one of its neighborhoods. But lyrics about a “new Egypt” and concern with protecting “her” from harm suggest something more. Within it was a subtext of patriotic love for the entire country, concern with protecting it from enemies, and faith in the birth of a nation-state.

Since the 1890s, the theater and press in Egypt had debated what was referred to as “the Egypt Question:” its history, its future, and the roles and identities of its people. Between 1906 and 1907, three political parties coalesced in Egypt, each espousing a different set of goals for the country’s independence. ‘Ali Yusuf’s Constitutional Reform Party and Mustafa Kamil’s Nationalist Party demanded immediate independence for Egypt and were fiercely anti-British. Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid’s People’s Party, which appealed most to secular intellectuals, advocated a more gradual process of Egyptian reform and cooperation with the British that would lead to eventual independence.456 During World War One, those political parties were suppressed by law.

The day after the signing of the Armistace ending World War One, former Vice President of Egypt’s defunct Legislative Assembly, Sa’d Zaghlul, along with two colleagues, met with the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Reginald Wingate. Wingate’s refusal to grant their request for permission to represent Egyptian interests at the Conference of Versailles set in motion a series of revolutionary events in the country.

Zaghlul and the others created a delegation, or Wafd, under Zaghlul’s presidency and traveled to collect signatures, or *tawqilat*, from all over Egypt as proof of their mandate to speak for Egyptians.\textsuperscript{457} Despite their success in amassing large numbers of signatures, the Wafd was denied permission to travel abroad. Furthermore, on March 8, 1919, several of its key members, including Zaghlul, were arrested and exiled to Malta.

Decades of frustration with colonial rule coupled with the effects of war and the exile of Wafd leaders triggered an explosive response. Initiated by students, demonstrations against British occupation and demands for the return of Zaghlul and company soon included Azhari sheiks, Coptic priests, Jewish rabbis, Nubians, Sudanese, urban and rural elites, middle classes, workers, peasants, and women of all social classes. By the end of the nearly month-long protest, 800 Egyptians were reported dead (though some accounts number the dead in the thousands) and 1600 were wounded.\textsuperscript{458}

The consequences of 1919 were manifold. As a political movement, its short-term success in forcing the return of Wafd leaders from exile was coupled with a more ambivalent long-term outcome. For though the British did grant Egypt independence, it imposed it unilaterally and therefore failed to address some key nationalist demands that would haunt involved parties for many years.\textsuperscript{459} But the social consequences of 1919 were even more complicated, for regardless of the solidarity of popular protest against the British, Egyptians in the streets represented a diverse array of backgrounds and

\textsuperscript{457} In effect, the Wafd was creating itself just as it was promoting itself as a legitimate voice of the people. See, for example, Marius Deeb, *Party Politics in Egypt: The Wafd and its Rivals, 1919-1939* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979).


\textsuperscript{459} Issues included the future of the Sudan and the continued presence of British military on Egyptian soil.
experiences.\textsuperscript{460} Urban workers, for example, had organized and led strikes for higher wages and to protest poor working conditions at least as early as 1882, and women had begun to advocate for reform since the 1890s.\textsuperscript{461} Protesters from a variety of backgrounds and concerns meant that their perspectives differed on individuals’ needs and relations to the nation and national community. Commonly circulated demands for “independence,” “freedom,” and “justice” were open-ended enough to resonate according to each individual’s circumstances. This became clear almost immediately after the 1919 protests ceased.\textsuperscript{462} Husayn Fawzi commented on the range of groups that agitated for social change after the 1919 revolution:

> The [Ezbekiyyah] Garden Kiosk turned—after the superficial calming down of the waters of the revolution—into something reminiscent of the syndicates’ hall in socialist countries. The 1919 Revolution was in appearance and in essence a movement against occupation, which then revealed an even deeper essence: it was also a movement of great social change. It started in the form of professional groupings demanding their rights from those monopoly companies which controlled much of the country’s services. Look at the newspapers of the day and wonder at how the …Kiosk acquired a daily ‘agenda’ of meetings for which it was the venue: tramway workers; gas and electricity company workers; water company workers; café waiters; unemployed casual workers; cigarette company workers…drop-outs of the kafa’a [matriculation] certificate; old system eighth-grade civil servants; women workers in garment workshops; sufur [unveiling] women activists; pensioners; ex-convicts; ‘utuf [alley] dwellers to protest the squalor of their quarters, and dwellers of alleys overlooking the royal stables in Bulaq to protest the smell of the cattle, etc. This or that group is invited to convene on Saturday, Sunday, or Monday the 12\textsuperscript{th} …to deliberate upon their affairs or to demand such and such or to protest against this or that.\textsuperscript{463}

\textsuperscript{460} For an article that discusses Egyptian social relations in 1919, see “Social Relations in Egypt,” \textit{Al-Fusul}, 10: April 1933, 36-37.


\textsuperscript{462} Reinhard Schulze elaborates on this in his work on Egyptian peasants. He writes that peasants interpreted the concepts of independence, justice, and freedom in relation to their own situations. Independence indicated liberation from the repressions of colonization, justice was a call for revenge, and freedom meant the end of forced labor, whippings, and corruption. Schulze, “Egyptian Peasant Rebellion,” 188.

\textsuperscript{463} Husayn Fawzi, \textit{Sindbad fi rihal al-hayah} (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif Iqra’ series, 1968), 27.
The political revolution had unleashed a movement that soon turned inward to focus on sources of unrest within Egyptian society.

A Politicized Women’s Movement

Rapid transformations in the role of women at the start of the twentieth century inspired much discussion amongst male and female writers, reformers, and nationalists. The role of women in the context of a newly independent Egypt became a topic of great interest to nationalists, particularly with the publication in 1899 of Qasim Amin’s book, *Tahrir al-Mar’a*, (The Liberation of Women). Though women had published articles and journals on the topic since the 1890s, Amin’s book unleashed a torrent of debate, as he advocated unveiling, education for women, and reform in marriage and divorce. He and female reformers before 1919 favored enhancing women’s position in the home to pressing for issues related to individual rights. Changes such as the demise of seclusion (connected with unveiling), the increase in the marital age, and the spread of education raised questions about how women’s roles—and, by extension, men’s roles—would change in a society already in a state of flux as it transitioned from colony to nation. In such a fragile state, women who were considered “disobedient, immoral, free, independent, or overly educated [and] single, traits negatively deemed Western” were thought to pose a threat to men and, more broadly, to the entire Egyptian nation-state. Nationalist rhetoric, alongside with most female intellectuals’ voices, stressed the role of women as mothers of the nation, holding them responsible for raising proper citizens.

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464 Baron, *Women’s Awakening*, 5-6.
Male and female nationalist writers attempted to carve out a space for women as educated mothers whose role as custodians of morality and educators of their children put them at the center of nation-building while also keeping them in the home. Just as Western reformers and nationalists made women into symbols of the moral nation, so too did Egyptians.

Women’s participation in meetings such as the ones at the Ezbekiyyah Kiosk point to active engagement of women in Egyptian life. Protests were but one facet of a women’s movement that had started at the end of the nineteenth century. In the decades before 1919, Egyptian women’s intellectual, literary, and social lives underwent a period of ferment that anticipated a variety of reforms. Women started to publish books and contribute to literary journals, among them Anis al-jalis (1898-1908), Al-‘afaf (1910-22), and Fatat al-Nil (1913-15). They founded intellectual organizations for women that drew from a variety of traditions. The Society for the Advancement of Women, for one, took a conservative Islamic approach, whereas the Intellectual Association of Egyptian Women (1914) drew from more secular sources promoted by its founders, including the preeminent advocate for women’s rights in twentieth century Egypt, Huda Sha’arawi.

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and intellectual and writer Mai Ziyada. Women participated in the growing state educational system as teachers and administrators. They also initiated and participated in a number of social services such as dispensaries, nursery schools, and charitable associations that involved care for poor women and children.

Intellectual and organizational activity in the early twentieth-century soon led to increased political involvements for women as well. Women became more visibly active in politics as they collaborated with prominent male politicians and participated in growing debates regarding the appropriate role of women in a burgeoning modern Egyptian society. Safiyya Zaghlul, wife of Sa’d Zaghlul, served in both a symbolic capacity as “Mother of Egyptians” and also in a practical sense as a link between Sa’d and other Wafdist leaders when Sa’d was exiled. In his absence, Safiyya hosted Wafdist meetings in their home. Women also created parallel political organizations, such as the Wafdist Women’s Central Committee and New Woman Society, which supported men’s organizations. They organized boycotts of foreign goods and participated in public demonstrations during the revolution.

The 1919 revolution was significant for all types of women because it turned civic engagement into national responsibility. As Huda Sha’rawi put it, “the Egyptian women, from the moment of the first spark of the revolution of 1919, entered public life from the

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468 Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 172.
469 Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 51, 56; Baron, *Women’s Awakening*, 121, 142.
470 Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 173.
471 Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 172; Baron, *Women’s Awakening*, 121.
most honorable door, the door of national struggle for freedom and independence. On the one hand, language about the role of women as mothers of the nation rhetorically homogenized women by turning them into symbols. But women used nationalist rhetoric and patriotic language to create new spaces for themselves and to advocate for their own needs. They argued, for example, that proper mothering required proper education. They also sought greater access to public life that would grant them greater equality in society. Their degree of involvement in political life was limited, however, for several reasons. For one, women failed to secure voting rights in the newly independent Egypt as the constitution only allowed for male suffrage. For another, the emphasis of most female reformers’ work lay in the elevation of women’s status within the family, along with addressing social problems like poverty and prostitution.

In debates over personal status codes and appropriate roles for women in modern Egyptian society, women espoused a range of views, including leftist, secularist, and Islamic frameworks for reform. The tremendous range of thought and opinion might be grouped into two major, though by no means homogenous, strands of thought. What would become the dominant voice in the period under study was one that aligned itself more closely with westernizing, secular tendencies. It appealed most to upper-and upper-

476 Botman, Engendering Citizenship, 25.
477 See, for example, Badran, Feminists, Islam, and Nation; Botman, Engendering Citizenship, 28.
478 Personal status codes were laws relating to marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, and guardianship that defined women as legal subordinates to men. They derived from shari’a (Islamic) law. Botman, Engendering Citizenship, 48.
middle class women and also to members of religious minorities and immigrants, for despite its respect for Islamic law, it relegated religion to private life. The other strand of thought, which would emerge more strongly later in the century, was one which sought to articulate women’s roles in society in the context of a vernacular, Islamic discourse. It viewed with differing degrees of suspicion the influence of westernization. For some, this meant a slow reform of Islamic law in accordance with acceptable modern influences; for others it meant the purging of foreign influences and religious accretions entirely. If Huda Sha’arawi best articulated the secularizing strand of thought, Malak Hifni Nassef might be considered the preeminent voice of Islamic women’s discourse of the pre-1919 era.

Doubtless, the premature death of Nassef, among other circumstances, contributed to the greater success of the more prominent secular thought in the period. Historian Juan Cole’s examination of the secular nationalist women’s movement in Egypt links it to the country’s integration into the world market and the various ways it affected different social classes. He notes that the chief concerns among reformers, like Sha’arawi and Qasim Amin, involved issues such as seclusion, veiling, and child-rearing by nannies instead of mothers—all practices of Ottoman-Egyptian elites of the time. By addressing them, women effectively guided the transition of elite aristocratic lifestyles to

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479 Baron, *Women’s Awakening*, 121.
481 Baron, *Women’s Awakening*, 121.
482 Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 175.
a more rationalized European bourgeois ideal, one that accommodated the shift to a new agrarian capitalist class.\textsuperscript{483}

Highlighting the class-specific nature of women’s reform in Egypt is critical, as it raises a central question: to what degree did the women’s movement address the needs and concerns of urban and rural working women? Secular and leftist reformers’ concern with unveiling and an end to seclusion, for example, had little relevance to women who did not live in seclusion and whose relationship to veiling was more complex (or who did not veil at all). For some reformers, like Nabawiyya Musa, liberation included training women to work in particular fields, such as teaching and nursing.\textsuperscript{484} But for most leading female reformers, ideals of modern Egyptian womanhood meant being educated and patriotic, a virtuous wife and mother, skilled in the proper raising of future citizens.

Charity work allowed for the dissemination of such ideals to the broader society. It has been well documented, for example, that women’s organizations focused on both elite and poor mothers as sites for reform.\textsuperscript{485} Literature on childrearing charged elite mothers with raising lazy, unproductive children whose exposure to ignorant servants of bad character corrupted their morals. On the other hand, it argued that poor, uneducated mothers raised unclean, superstitious children in harsh living conditions.\textsuperscript{486} Though reformers established some sites for job training for those who had to work outside the home, most concern lay in elevating the authority and status of women within the

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\textsuperscript{484} Nabawiyya Musa, \textit{Tarikhi Biqalmi} (Cairo: Maltaqi al-Mar’a wa al-Thakira, 1999), 93-98.

\textsuperscript{485} See, for example, Ahmad, \textit{Women and Gender in Islam}; Badran, \textit{Feminists, Islam, and Nation}; Baron, \textit{Women’s Awakening}; Kholoussy, \textit{For Better For Worse}; Pollard, \textit{Nurturing the Nation}.

\textsuperscript{486} Shakry, “Schooled Mothers,” 137-38, 141.
\end{footnotes}
home. Literature in turn-of-the-century journals highlighted the shift from father to mother as the primary influence in shaping a child’s life. Many articles focused on household economy and debated different means by which to “uplift” poor women in order to raise productive, moral, intelligent, clean, healthy children. These beliefs complemented nationalist discourse that stressed the critical role of the mother in raising patriotic Egyptian children.

Performing Women

Nationalists’ and female reformers’ concerns did not always address the realities of working women’s lives. Performers provide a provocative case in point, and actress Bahigah Hafiz’s reflections offer a critical perspective. In response to much criticism for her choice of a profession in singing and acting, Hafiz responded:

Many have criticized me for having chosen this profession, calling it a great scandal! But have they ever considered the difficulties of all kinds thrown in the way of a woman alone, who is without resources but wishes to remain independent? What pushed me toward the cinema therefore was not mere whim nor a simple wish to appear before the public but my need to create a condition that would guarantee my freedom.

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487 Baron, *Women’s Awakening*, 166. In 1919, the New Woman Society (Jam’iyat al-Mar’ah al-Jadidah) opened in the Munirah section of Cairo to provide training in handcrafts for poor girls. In addition to being taught work skills, the girls learned how to read and write and guidelines for proper hygiene. Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 51. Huda Sha’arawi was a donor and honorary president of the organization.


490 Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse*, 100.

A woman who did not fit the paradigm of appropriate womanhood, Hafiz, like other female performers, challenged the women’s movement by resisting prescriptions to work within parameters that emphasized the primacy of the nuclear family and, instead, stressed the importance of her freedom. Even reformers who fought against female seclusion did not think that women’s unrestricted public presence was an acceptable alternative. An article by the editors of the journal *al-Hilal*, for example, argued that despite the dangers of seclusion, unrestricted “freedom is more dangerous for young women, so what is best is the middle ground.”

Ibrahim ‘Ali Salim, a secular advocate of premarital acquaintance, indignantly stated that “some narrow-minded people…hide their daughters from their fiancés but show them in theaters, amusement parks and….stores [practically] naked!” Clearly, Salim felt female visibility was appropriate only within certain parameters.

Female performers in previous centuries also had pushed boundaries of acceptable female engagement in the public sphere. Throughout the nineteenth-century, women in


\footnote{493} Ibrahim ‘Ali Salim, “Mushkilat al-Zawaj,” *al-Ahram* 57, no. 16730 (7 July 1931), 10, as cited in Kholoussey, *For Better, For Worse*, 58-59. For more on the “marriage crisis” to which this article refers, see Kholoussey, *For Better, For Worse*. 

Figure 13: Performers in a music hall in the late-nineteenth century. (Source: Karin Van Nieuwkerk, "A Trade Like Any Other:" Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 38
Egypt provided entertainment for various special occasions, such as saints’ holidays, weddings, and other events. Some also performed in coffeehouses from behind curtains or fully covered by veils and wrapped in malayat (a long, black covering) in order to perform in an acceptable fashion in front of men. In private homes, performers recited Qur’anic verse, danced, and sang religious repertoires, usually for other women. Though they were hired for private occasions, people from the neighborhood were welcome to participate in the festivities. While some performers worked locally, others traveled to perform at events throughout Egypt. Most received renumeration for their performances and were recognized for their remarkable musical skill.494

Professional female singers, identified as ‘awalim, participated in their own trade guild and often came from Muslim working-class families in Cairo. Groups of ‘awalim commonly lived together and worked under an experienced female performer, or usta (ustawat, pl), who taught them the trade. Muhammad ‘Ali Street, which was lined with coffeehouses and music shops, was a popular neighborhood for musicians and ‘awalim, and ustawat often visited its coffeehouses to learn the latest songs.495 Individuals seeking entertainers for specific occasions would head to Muhammad ‘Ali Street and negotiate with an usta, or her male assistant, in offices on the ground floor of their living spaces or in one of the cafes. Though some ‘awalim married local tradesmen, others made matches that offered them some degree of upward social and economic mobility.496 The most talented women were highly sought after and profited handsomely from their work. The royal court patronized the most exceptional performers, the most famous being Almaz,

495 Duniyat al-Fan, 9 March 1948, 19.
whom the Khedive Isma’il retained at court. The court rewarded them richly until their looks and talents declined. At that point, ‘awalim became increasingly dependent on their spouses for financial support, or they worked in the new, and less respectable, music halls. 497

Toward the end of the nineteenth-century, acting guilds started to decline and individual actors and actresses increasingly negotiated their own wages with theater troupes, recording companies, and theater managers. Such agreements lasted for entire performance seasons, or even years, as opposed to older practices of only negotiating individual engagements. 498 Most new performers immediately entered the realm of commercial entertainment, while some former ‘awalim transitioned to the new economic environment. By the start of World War One, few of the ‘awalim of the last century remained.

As entertainment districts developed on ‘Imad al-Din Street and in the Rawd al-Farag district in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, women increasingly performed in their cafes, music halls, and theaters. The shift from private entertainments to performance in commercial establishments created new dilemmas for women. In many cases, audiences were larger and unknown to the performers. Alcohol fueled rowdy behavior, and, in some music halls and cafes, female performers were expected to sit and drink with audience members. Consequently, the general feeling was that

entertainments—and by extension performers—were tainted by drunkenness, gambling, drugs, undignified behavior, and prostitution.\textsuperscript{499}

In some cases, female performers did engage in such behavior. Ratiba Ahmad, for example, was known for her alcohol consumption, romantic liaisons, and divorces.\textsuperscript{500} Her repertoire included songs that addressed controversial issues in marital life (such as polygamy and alcoholic husbands) and in single life (boasting of her youth, beauty, and sexual experience). The combination of Ahmad’s conduct, independence, and provocative songs made her a favorite subject of gossip columns and target of critique.\textsuperscript{501}

But this was not true of all female artists. Singer Fathiyya Ahmad (Ratiba’s sister) was known for her gentle and dignified demeanor.\textsuperscript{502} In addition to work in musical theater, Ahmad became an important concert singer, which allowed her greater control over her repertoire and to showcase her vocal talent. It also exposed her to large, often unpredictable audiences. To cope with rowdy concert-goers, Ahmad packed the audience with a coterie of their supporters.\textsuperscript{503} She married a wealthy landowner in the early 1920s and temporarily retired from the stage in 1929 to have children.

Recording companies of the early-twentieth century offered a new form of patronage that gave female performers a unique opportunity to circumvent certain proprietary restrictions while sharing their talents widely. Women like Munira al-Mahdiyya and others were heard in coffeehouses and private homes across the region,


\textsuperscript{500} An article in Ruz al-Yusuf indicated that she had set a record for having had eighteen marriages and divorces. Ruz al-Yusuf, no.185, 30 Aug. 1930.

\textsuperscript{501} See, for example, al-Masrah, 4 July 1927, 10.

\textsuperscript{502} Danielson, “Artists and Entrepreneurs,” 296-97.

\textsuperscript{503} Danielson, “Artists and Entrepreneurs,” 302.
making them recognizable in places where they physically had never been and popularizing their songs with audiences which included all social classes and women as well as men. Commercialism and mass production freed performers from the limits of patronage by khedives or wealthy patrons. In this way, their repertoires did not need to be shaped by benefactors’ tastes. Records allowed for the dissemination of the female voice without the presence of the female body, circumventing concerns about the propriety of women performing unveiled in front of men. Nonetheless, the technology was not without controversy. Playing records in private homes increased the possibility that mixed-sex audiences would hear songs dealing with risqué subject matter and that young girls might listen to lyrics detailing marriage, love, and other subjects considered inappropriate to their age and social status.

In the early-twentieth century, a shift toward professionalization created distinctions between fields of singing, dancing, and acting, privileging specialization over diversified talents. Though men tended to specialize in one specific form over another, women needed to participate in all fields to remain viable entertainers. Distinctions between professionalized male artists and non-professionalized female performers further entrenched negative biases against women already considered to be of doubtful repute and questionable talent.

Still, professionalization offered unique opportunities for women. The mastery of numerous repertoires and types of performance made women highly desirable additions to acting troupes in need of talent. Their range of talents made them more popular and

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appealing to audiences. And their knowledge of various types of performance prepared them to take on proprietary roles as troupe directors, and theater and cabaret managers.

**Munira al-Mahdiyya**

As a working woman who performed unveiled in front of a predominantly male audience, Munira al-Mahdiyya challenged the appropriate boundaries of womanhood. Female performers lived outside the norms of respectability because they often lived outside the boundaries of honor-protection usually provided by the males of the family. Even more, their comportment and the content of their performances raised questions in the press. A cartoon of Mahdiyya illustrated her power to seduce and emasculate men who, in states of ecstasy, could not help themselves from encroaching upon her and offering her flowers, jewelry, even themselves. Instead of

![Figure 14: Cartoon of Munira al-Mahdiyya (Source: Library of Congress, Ruz al-Yusuf, 31 Dec. 1929, p. 21)](image)

educating future citizens, she created havoc amongst young men, the nation’s leaders, thereby posing a threat to ordered society.

Despite this characterization, the circumstances of a changing society and the ways in which Mahdiyya crafted her own image as a modern female performer combined to elevate her, and other female performers, to a more respectable position in Egyptian society. Born some time between 1877 and 1895, Mahdiyya had a penchant for singing early in her life. She attended a convent school in Zaqaqiq but frequently neglected her studies in favor of singing with friends or sneaking out to hear popular singer, al-Lawandiyya. Soon, singing offered her a means to supplement her family’s meager income. She first performed at a coffeehouse in Zaqaqiq known for dancers and, by 1913, moved to Cairo, where she sang at the Nuzhat al-Nufus coffeehouse, a place regularly shut down by British authorities for its anti-imperialist performances. This may well have been a significant initial source of her exposure to nationalist thought in the context of theater.

Mahdiyya’s name and voice became increasingly recognizable with her success in both live singing and recordings with Gramophone, Odeon, and Baedaphon Companies. Actor and troupe/vaudeville manager ‘Aziz ‘Eid became enamored with her voice and encouraged Mahdiyya to take her singing to the theatrical stage. When the coffeehouse where she sang was once again a target of police repression, Mahdiyya took ‘Eid’s advice and joined the theater. For a time, she acted and sang between acts of ‘Eid’s plays at

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508 Accounts of Mahdiyya’s year of birth vary.
510 Al-Masrah, 27 May 1927, 308.
511 Al-Masrah, 27 May 1927, as reproduced in Isma’il, Musirat al-Masrah, 308.
the Printannia Theater. The journal *al-Akhbar* took note of her opening night, entitling its article: “The First Egyptian Actress.” It continued, “the evening of Thursday the 26th, in the Printannia theater, will be a night to celebrate the entry of the famous singer [mughaniyyah] lady Munira al-Mahdiyya, into Arabic acting.” That evening, she sang an opening song, composed by Kamil al-Khali’i, and performed the role of William in the third act of the play *Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi*. During 1915 and 1916, she sang Salama Hijazi’s songs in ‘Aziz ‘Eid’s productions, playing male roles such as Romeo (*Romeo and Juliet*) and William (*Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi*). Her performance in male roles may well have tempered public reactions to her being one of the first Muslim women to remove the veil and perform publically before a mixed audience. Despite (or, perhaps, assisted by) the controversy that this generated in the press, she attracted huge followings, and tickets for shows in which she performed sold out well before curtain time. Mahdiyya’s name was clearly a draw, as evidenced by the prominent placement it received in posters advertising shows. A journal article sharing a program at the Kursaal Theater listed Mahdiyya as one of several headliners who made up “the most famous actors and actresses of the era.” The article went on to describe the evening as “one of the most miraculous and astonishing at the Kursaal.” So as to attract the widest possible audience, it stated that “the second floor is entirely for Egyptian women, and they have a special door [for entry]. No one should be kept from seeing this performance; ticket prices are reduced.”

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It was not long before Mahdiyya’s popularity led her to form her own theater troupe. Though the composition of the troupe changed each theatrical season, it typically included a diverse array of men, women, Muslims, Christians, and Jews. In January of 1916, ads first appeared for performances by “Lady Munira al-Mahdiyya’s troupe” and listed the dates, names of plays, and theaters where it would perform. Typically, a season began with the performance of musical theater from previous seasons and/or borrowed from other troupes. Her repertoire included a combination of plays adapted from European productions and original pieces written expressly for her troupe. In that first season, her troupe performed the plays Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, Dahiyyat al-Ghawaya, al-Sariqa, ‘Aida, Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, ‘Ali Nur al-Din, Sidq al-Akha’, and Carmen in Cairo; Anis al-Jalis in Cairo, Tanta, and Alexandria. Ads for her shows highlighted her role as lead actress, emphasizing the number of songs she would sing. Like other effendi theater troupes, Mahdiyya sometimes included fusul mudhika in her programs. Until she had her own theater, Mahdiyya performed in a number of theaters in Cairo and provinces. Provincial tours were a regular feature of her calender, and as of September

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516 Adapted plays included: Shatirtun, by Alfred Duquenes, Arabicized by ‘Abbas Hafiz; Hamlet; ‘Aida, adapted by Selim al-Naqqash; Carmen, by Bizet, adapted by Farah Antun; Thais, by Massanet, adapted by Farah Antun; Edna, an Italian opera; and Telemak. Original plays included: Salah al-Din al-Ayubi, by Farah Antun; ‘Ali Nur al-Din; Kalam fi Sirk, by Sheikh Muhammad Yunis al-Qadi; Kulaha Yumayn, by Yusuf al-Qadi; al-Talta Tabita, by Yusuf al-Qadi; Antony and Cleopatra.


518 The ad for the play Rosina, for example, boasted that it had more songs than the operas Carmen and Thais. Al-Muqattam, 31 July 1918, reprinted in Al-Masrah al-Misri: 1917-1918 (Cairo: 3B Studio, 2001), 253-254; Al-Afkar, 19 Dec. 1918, reprinted in Al-Masrah al-Misri: 1917-1918, 305.

519 See, for example, al-Akhbar, 14 Nov. 1917; al-Afkar 18 Dec. 1917, 16 June 1917, 12, 13 Sept. 1917; al-Ahram, 1 June 1918; al-Basir, 22 Sept. 1917; Misr, 18 April 1918, 1, 7, 9, May 1918; 13 June 1918; al-Muqattam, 25 July 1918, reprinted in Isma’il, Musirat al-Masrah, 328.
1919 her troupe also began traveling outside of Egypt to perform in Syria.\textsuperscript{520} Though commercial recordings paved the way, Mahdiyya’s physical appearance in various locations increased her fame and exposed large numbers of people to her troupe’s theatrical performances, eventually earning her the title, “Sultanat al-Tarab” (Queen of Tarab) in contemporary magazines.\textsuperscript{521}

As the first woman to form her own troupe, she personally assumed its management duties. Responsibilities included negotiations with theater owners, singers, composers, and lyricists. It also meant meeting payrolls, planning schedules, and performing on stage.\textsuperscript{522} But Mahdiyya was not entirely independent in the endeavor, for it was her husband at that time, Mahmud Gabr, who initially bankrolled the troupe.\textsuperscript{523} This was not unusual, as most female artists up to that point had spouses or male benefactors who supported their endeavors.\textsuperscript{524} This would change somewhat in the 1920s as more female performers started to run their own troupes and cabarets.\textsuperscript{525}

\textsuperscript{520} Al-Minbar, 1 Feb. 1916; al-Muqattam, 21 Nov. 1917; al-Ahram, 1 June 1918; Misr, 30 July 1918; al-Muqattam, 12 Sept. 1919; Misr, 11 Sept. 1919, reprinted in Isma’il, Musirat al-Masrah, 311, 327-28, 331.

\textsuperscript{521} The ability of a singer to create a feeling of tarab, or ecstatic engagement, in audience members was indicative of the performer’s authenticity and talent. al-Ḥafni, al-Sultana, 83. A movie about Mahdiyya, directed by Hassan El Imam in 1979, was entitled “Sultanat al-Tarab.” For more on tarab, see Ali Jihad Racy, Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

\textsuperscript{522} Danielson, “Artists and Entrepreneurs,” 296.

\textsuperscript{523} Isma’il, Musirat al-Masrah, 324. Gabr was considered the financial manager of the troupe and rented the theater, Dar al-Tamthil al-’Arabi, under his name for Mahdiyya’s troupe.

\textsuperscript{524} Dancer and singer Tawhid, for example, performed in the club Alf Layla wa Layla which her husband, an Egyptian Greek, opened for her. When he died, she managed it on her own. Popular singer Badi’a Masabni initially depended on wealthy lovers in order to support her career. This changed in the mid-1920s when she used the money she had accumulated to open what would become a landmark music hall, Sala Badi’. Danielson, “Artists and Entrepreneurs,” 295; Nieuwkerk, ‘A Trade Like Any Other,” 46.

\textsuperscript{525} For example, after a number of years singing in local weddings, provincial music halls, and major theater districts in Cairo, singer Na’ima al-Masriyya bought her own casino, the Alhambra, in 1927 and managed it herself. Other female singers, including Mari Mansur, Fatma
Gabr rented the theater Dar al-Tamthil al-‘Arabi for Mahdiyya, and his name was often listed alongside hers as the troupe manager, among other capacities. Together, Gabr and Mahdiyya maintained full theatrical seasons, which ran each year from October through August/September of the following year. This lasted until 1924, when their marital estrangement and later divorce created a rift in the troupe and forced Mahdiyya to leave the theater that Gabr rented.

Mahdiyya continued to perform in different theaters in the 1920s and eventually opened her own sala (music hall) in 1931. She appeared regularly in theater magazines, and in a competition staged by one of them, she came in second place as the singer readers would chose to see performing live. Her nationalistic songs drew audiences that included ministers and political leaders like Sa’d Zaghlul, Rushdi, and Tharwat Pashas. They also inspired the slogan, “Hawa’ al-hurriya fi Masrah Munira al-Mahdiyya” (There is love of freedom in the theater of Munira al-Mahdiyya).


526 Al-Akhbar, 8 Aug. 1915, 10 Aug. 1915; an article in al-Basir noted that any charity interested in communicating with Mahdiyya should do so “via the home of her husband, Mahmoud Gabr, villa number 108 in Heliopolis.” 15 Jan. 1916, reprinted in Isma’il, Musirat al-Masrah, 311.

527 In the following years, Mahdiyya would go on to marry and divorce at least four other men. Danielson, “Artists and Entrepreneurs,” 301.

528 A sala, or “hall,” was a place of entertainment that often served food and drink and where musicians, singers, dancers, and variety acts performed. They were also called clubs or casinos. Al-Radiu, no. 31, 23 October 1931.

529 al-Hafni, al-Sultana, 90; Isma’il, Musirat al-Masrah, 335; Ruz al-Yusuf, no. 498, 30-31.

Melding Old and New Measures of Respectability

Around the time of the 1919 revolution, Munira al-Mahdiyya opened her troupe’s performances in a new way. Before the curtain was raised to signal the start of the show, Mahdiyya would step out in front of it and sing the following song:

Depending on her adab
She suppresses her emotion
She keeps the laws of decency and ‘afaf
For the sake of her country and her honor\(^{531}\)

Mahdiyya’s choice of language was no accident, as it drew from Egyptian anticolonial nationalist discourses regarding womanhood. As Omnia Shakry details, *adab* was an indigenous concept that referenced “a complex of valued dispositions (intellectual, moral, and social), appropriate norms of behavior, comportment, and bodily habitus.”\(^{532}\) It was central to the discourse of proper *tarbiya*, or upbringing/education, which was a concern of liberal secular-nationalist and Islamic modernizers who worked to elaborate a new notion of motherhood in keeping with the modern nation-state.\(^{533}\) Similarly, ‘*afaf* was a concept that described a woman of virtue, chastity, integrity, purity, decency, and honesty. For reformers, instruction in the “proper pedagogy of children, the cultivation of the body, and the moral education of the self,” (concerns shared, incidentally, with Western colonizers), could draw from indigenous tradition and serve to create a modern Egyptian nation.\(^{534}\) By using key concepts like *adab* and ‘*afaf*, Mahdiyya linked honor, national duty, and respectability to a call for public action. In doing so, she publicly

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\(^{532}\) Shakry, “Schooled Mothers,” 127.
\(^{533}\) Shakry, “Schooled Mothers,” 127.
\(^{534}\) Skakry, “Schooled Mothers,” 128.
voiced a respectable form of womanhood, one that she used to bolster her status as a performing woman.\footnote{In the 1920s, this would expand to include photo spreads of female performers in the context of home and family, demonstrating respectability in the context of their private lives. (111G)}

Throughout her career, Mahdiyya blended old and new markers of female respectability to push the acceptable boundaries of womanhood and to craft a unique prototype for the modern Egyptian woman. Her mastery of what was considered the more respectable male song repertoire, for example, gave her more credibility than the female repertoire for which she was more famous. Mahdiyya specialized in a type of song called the taqtuqa (taqatiq, pl), which was a short, ostensibly light, catchy piece sung in colloquial Arabic by a solo singer accompanied by a small takht ensemble. The genre was typically a female art form and considered a low-brow variety of song, as opposed to other genres, like the qasida, which set to music classic literary texts that alluded to historical or religious events. For contemporary cultural critics, mastery of the qasida, and other types of music connected to the male repertoire, demonstrated “musical and vocal skill or virtuousness, seriousness (dadd), enchantment (tarab), heritage and tradition (turath), and be passed down from master to pupil.”\footnote{al-Musawwar, no. 233 (1929), 29.} Record companies favored taqatiq, as they were much shorter than other genres (such as the wasla, which lasted two or more hours) and therefore fit easily in the three minute per side limit of the early 78 rpm shellac records.\footnote{Ali Jihad Racy, “Arabian Music and the Effects of Commercial Recording,” World of Music, vol. 20, no. 1 (1978), 47-55; Mitchell, “Forgotten Stars,” 2.} Egyptian critics, however, considered the taqtuqa frivolous and superficial and expressed alarm at its popularity. Its mass appeal may, in
part, explain cultural critics’ disapproval of the genre, as to them it did not uphold standards of artistic musical forms.

Over time, taqatiq evolved to engage rather serious contemporary problems. Issues of particular concern to women—debates about the nuclear family model, the dangers of polygamy, the right of a woman to get acquainted with a suitor before marriage, the minimum marriage age, how to deal with a spouse’s misconduct, and the roles and dangers of women working in the public sphere—all found their way into taqtuqa lyrics. Many of the topics were concerns that feminist leaders engaged, but taqtuqa singers presented them in a coy, flirtatious manner that pushed the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Critically, Mahdiyya was one of a few women to have mastered what was considered the male repertoire of song in addition to the female genre she more commonly recorded on records. This aspect of her biography lent a credibility to her talent, offering a foundation upon which to craft a respectable identity as a female performer.

In the new era of commercial recording and mass media, singers like Mahdiyya could use material success to bolster their positions in society. As a highly desirable performer, Mahidyya wielded much power in the world of commercial recording. At the turn of the century, Odeon, Gramophone, and Baedaphon record companies built their reputations off the caliber of the singers they signed. Odeon, which started recording Egyptian artists as early as 1905, signed popular singers like Salama Hijazi and Bahiyya al-Mahalawiyya, while Gramophone signed an exclusive contract with musician Dawud

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Hosni and singer Ahmad ‘Ashur.\textsuperscript{539} Baedaphon’s success in eventually signing an exclusive contract with Munira al-Mahdiyya was a boon for the Lebanese company. It was also a coup for Mahdiyya, for it allowed her a great deal of artistic and economic power and freedom. While the company employed its own composer, Ahmad Ghuneima, Mahdiyya was permitted to compose her own songs and, later, gave final approval when Baedaphon hired Yunis al-Qadi to be her primary songwriter. She benefited from a combined income from her recordings supplemented by payment for her coffeehouse and theater performances.\textsuperscript{540} Financial security made it possible for her to flourish as a performer even without the financial support of a husband or male benefactor.

Nonetheless, commercial success did not necessarily equal respectability. Cultural critics eyed commercialism and consumer society with suspicion, and such concerns manifested in their publications. In his critique of Mahdiyya’s opera Carmen, for example, reviewer Mustafa Isma’il al-Qashash fixated on the problem of deceptive advertising:

\begin{quote}
We read about Carmen in long ads before its performance on March 22 at Kursaal [theater]…that it was the first Egyptian opera, expenditures on clothes were hundreds of pounds, that 40 actors and 50 actresses would perform, so much that people were convinced to see it…but how quickly their hopes were dashed, how soon they realized they had been fooled…when the curtains rose, there were not 40 actors and 50 actresses…nor were there 180 tunes. In the end, al-Qashash warns, “the truth is that we must make ourselves aware because we were deluded
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{539} \textit{al-Zahur}, July 1911, as cited in Fahmy, “Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism,” 211.  
by the embellishments of advertising and we believed what biased people wrote, which is debasing to precious wisdom.”

Al-Qashash’s concern with the deceptions of advertising and the sense of fooled was one shared by many. Thus, while commercial success made possible Mahdiyya’s financial independence, it could not be the sole basis on which to demonstrate respectability.

Linking herself to male mentors and entourages, on the other hand, was a less controversial means to bolster her position. The writers, musicians, and lyricists for all of Mahdiyya’s troupes were men, who, along with her husband(s), formed a coterie of male supporters, especially in her early career. They included playwrights such as Farah Antun and Yunis al-Qadi and composers such as Sayyid Darwish. The relationship of male mentor to young female artist was a common one, seen repeatedly in the world of Egyptian theater. Newspaper articles and biographies of male and female performers often recounted such relationships, which were of particular importance due to the legitimacy they bestowed upon the young upstarts, especially if they were women.

Certain themes recurred in such accounts—stories of humble roots, early involvement with religious music, and tales of discovery by famous performers—for they allowed performers to claim a place in a lineage of singers. In many ways they echoed Islamic traditions of “isnad/tasnid,” which sought to assure the trustworthiness of a statement by

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541 Al-Aফkar, 1 April 1917. In 1927, she earned 40 pounds per record filled. Ruz al-Yusuf, 12 May 1927, 12.
543 See, for example, Fatma Rushdi, Al-Hub wa al-Fan (Cairo: Sa’adi wa Shandi, 1961), 26-29.
building on previously authenticated statements.\textsuperscript{544} As a form of cultural tasnid, performers’ discovery stories implied that their legitimacy was guaranteed due to their recognition by and association with an older, reputable mentor and patron. Thus isnad, together with humble religious origins that made them authentic *awlad al-balad* (literally, children of the country), accorded them some degree of respectability.

Mahdiyya enhanced her reputation further by publicizing her participation in charity work at various points in each acting season. Beneficiaries included Maronite, Roman Catholic, and Muslim charities and victims of a fire in a cloth factory.\textsuperscript{545} She was praised for her charitable work. An article in the journal *al-Basir* commented that she had used “talent and compassion…to help the meager victims of poverty.”\textsuperscript{546} The same article reported on one of her charity nights for Roman Orthodox charities: “she wrote to us to say that she is prepared to do this with all the charities of all the religions so long as the societies let her know four days in advance.”\textsuperscript{547} For Mahdiyya, just as for female activists, charity work was part of her civic responsibility and conducted for anyone in need, regardless of religious orientation.

Though most theater audience members in the early-twentieth century were men, Mahdiyya further bolstered her reputation by making space available in many of her performances for women. In some cases, ads explicitly stated that ticket prices applied equally to both men and women. Others indicated that separate seating areas would be


available for women.\textsuperscript{548} Regardless of the number of people who took advantage of this, welcoming women to her performances allowed Mahdiyya to intimate that her shows were appropriate for everyone.

Just as female reformers started to link civic responsibility to nationalist activities around 1919, Mahdiyya started to infuse her work with patriotic themes and language. Such a measure served as a powerful means to elevate her status and shape her unique modern Egyptian identity. With the outbreak of the 1919 revolution, Mahdiyya turned to composers like Sayyid Darwish to compose patriotic pieces for the stage. In one of his early pieces for her, \textit{Bassara Barraja} (The Fortune Teller), Darwish composed a song in which a fortune teller says to her client: “It is apparent you are Egyptian. . . . and that you have countless enemies and almost no fortune/luck…may God punish your enemies . . . for they are enslaving your people!” Mahdiyya performed the song on stage, which became popular enough to elicit a recording. In the recorded version, Mahdiyya added the overtly nationalistic lines: “I am Munira al-Mahdiyya and for me the love of my nation is a passion. . . . For freedom and for my country I would sacrifice my life…and what does fortune have to do with that?”\textsuperscript{549}

Mahdiyya’s work continued to embrace nationalistic references and symbolism. In May, 1920, she debuted a play entitled \textit{Kulaha Yumayn} (Just a Couple of Days), a title referencing faith that the revolution would soon be over.\textsuperscript{550} The story revolved around an exploitative foreigner, Marco, and two Egyptian siblings, Sa’id Talib al-Tib and his sister, played by Mahdiyya. In the story, Marco, who schemes to take Mahdyya’s and al-


\textsuperscript{549} Fahmy, “Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism,” 217.

\textsuperscript{550} Sayyid Darwish composed the music, Yusuf al-Qadi wrote the lyrics. Al-Hifni, \textit{Al-Sultana Munira}, 109.
Tib’s property by any means possible, bribes his sister to seduce al-Tib, an effort which fails. Marco then starts a fire in the Egyptians’ home. A distraught Mahdiyya accepts Marco’s deceptive offer of financial assistance, which, in truth, is a bill of exchange which allows him to seize their property. After turning brother and sister against one another, Marco leaves them homeless and selling food on the street in order to survive. The play ends with a reversal, however, as Mahdiyya and her brother take Marco to a court which finds him guilty and lands him in prison. In the end, justice prevails. A deceptive figure of seduction, destruction, hypocrisy, and divisiveness, Marco represented British occupation and foreign exploitation. Mahdiyya and her brother represented a long-suffering Egypt.

Several songs in the play incorporated nationalist and feminist tropes and concerns. As the fire rages in her home, Mahdiyya sings the song, The Firemen:

\begin{verbatim}
Attack the fire, be strong hearted / don’t let the hose (al-Khartum) slip from your hands
Sacrifice your life for your brothers’ sake / Fire! Fire! But it’s better than dishonor
Rise, Egyptians, and lend a hand / every supporting hand helps
Sacrifice your life for your brethren / you and your brothers can save your nation
Sacrifice your life for your brother’s sake / Fire! Fire! But it’s better than dishonor
Here are the true Egyptian men / those who protect our lives
They saved us from the oppressors / they risked their lives for our sake
Fire never harms those who are true / Egypt’s hellfire is paradise
\end{verbatim}

In the song, Egypt/Mahdiyya calls on Egyptian male saviors in her pleas for help, staging a metaphor of nationalist discourse that represented Egypt as a woman in need of honor and protection. The double meaning of al-Khartum—both “a hose,” and the capitol of the Sudan—was a clever reference to Egyptian nationalists’ concerns with maintaining

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551 Isma’il, Musirat al-Masrah, 333.
552 Fahmy, “Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism,” 217.
\end{flushleft}
control of the Sudan after independence. But Mahdiyya loses her home and is reduced to selling country butter in the streets. Country butter, a symbol of rural Egypt’s bounty, referencing the authenticity of the countryside. In an article entitled “I Battled the English with My Singing,” Mahdiyya explained this further. She noted that all the lyrics had to be:

insinuation and ambiguous critique because of English censorship of theater, cinema, and entertainment at that time. It made us have to hide our hatred of the English, so it was presented in plays and songs. I introduced in the theater where I worked...a play entitled “Kulaha Yumayn,” and in that play I was a butter seller, so I carried my wares on my head and shouted out singing this song:

*Maker of fresh butter*  
*Children of my country*  
*Buy and weigh it*  
*Beware of selling it*  
*To he who betrays,*  
*How can it be of so little importance to you*  
*My country, the choicest cream*  
*Butter, my children*  
*At your place, store it*  
*Do not give it up*  
*Else you live treated unfairly.*  
*My country?*

And these words, of course, had nothing for the censor to remove...but the audience understood the song’s meaning very well and its goal was to incite hatred and distaste for the usurper/colonizer.”

She concludes by pointing out that Sa’d Zaghlul was in frequent attendance at her theater, “to see these plays in which I struggled with the English.” The intensely nationalistic song sold thousands of copies.

The rhetoric surrounding the revolution of 1919, despite its mixed political outcome, provided a language for women to link the advancement of their education to the well-being of the nation. Mahdiyya took this even further, for by blending patriotic and women’s reform language with old and new signs of respectability Mahdiyya circumvented an elite movement for women’s liberation that was being born in Egypt and

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556 Fahmy, “Popularizing Egyptian Nationalism,” 296.
one in which she did not fit or play a part. It gave her the tools to create a prototype for a uniquely modern identity that could at once elevate her to a realm outside of mere “female performer” while also grounding her in the most respectable of identities, *bint al-balad*, or authentic daughter of the country.

Advancing the nationalist cause allowed Mahdiyya to shape her modern career using local idioms within an expanding framework of respectability. The language of patriotism offered Mahdiyya, and other performing women, a means by which to be independent and free—political and social concepts linked to modernity—while retaining some sort of authenticity and concern with *adab* and ‘afaf. Engaging such language, while also navigating local concerns regarding a female performer’s respectability (having a male protector, mastering the male musical repertoire, and commercial recording which allowed the dissemination of her voice without the appearance of her body) allowed her to appear as a modern, visible presence in the public sphere.

Though only one year before, the magazine *Ruz al-Yusuf* named Mahdiyya one of the five most famous singers in Egypt, by 1927, several factors indicated that Mahdiyya’s career had already peaked.557 Critique of her lack of innovation and her failure to transition to the world of cinema, among other challenges, made it increasingly clear that she was losing ground to her chief rival, Um Kulthum. But Mahdiyya’s legacy would be critical for female performers like Um Kulthum in the coming decades. Arguably the premier singer of the twentieth-century Arab world, Kulthum would take the prototype of dignified, modern Egyptian woman to new heights. But it must be remembered that

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557 *Ruz al-Yusuf*, 3 March 1926, 7. The other four singers mentioned were: Um Kulthum, Na’ima al-Misriyya, Tawhida, and Fathiyya Ahmed.
Kulthum entered a musical arena in which women like Mahdiyya had already set a powerful precedent for musical style, business management, and personal comportment, a world that Kulthum would have to navigate as well.
Conclusion

The revolution of 1919 did not resolve the problem of modernity in Egypt. The question of how to be both modern while retaining an authentic local identity only confounded Egyptians further as leaders of the newly independent nation-state grappled with the persistence of an old-regime monarchy and continued British imperial influence. Arguably, debates that pervaded Egypt in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries set in motion questions about modernity that persisted, even up to the present day.

Going back to the nineteenth-century roots of the question, this project has examined the relationship between culture and power and the development of postcolonial national identity in Egypt. Its study of the relationship between performance, space, culture, and power has interrogated the meanings and political functions of urban and theatrical spaces and analyzed circuits of culture in the specific context of an Egyptian colonial encounter. As such, it provides models of how to think about similar questions outside of Egypt.

While performance undoubtedly was a form of entertainment, it also was a critical tool wielded by Egyptians to educate urban audiences and to formulate particular notions of Egyptian identity. Performative practices and artists shaped and responded to local aesthetic preferences, social concerns, and political agendas. In their engagement with contemporary affairs, these people and the arenas in which they performed played a critical role in the shaping of both class and nation. Bolstered and complemented by the Arabic press, theater was one public arena where Egyptians contested the authority of their occupiers to frame history and situate Egypt and Egyptians in the contemporary
world. It was also a place for them both to mirror and debate conversations about what it meant to be modern and Egyptian.

But the message was not unified, and identity was not defined in singular way. Indeed, theater offers a rich and provocative focal point for the examination of the ways in which various strata of Egyptian society perceived and engaged debates over the meanings and manifestations of what it meant to be a modern Egyptian. Men, women, elites, effendiyya and urban workers framed themselves as Egyptians in different ways. For elites, the construction of an Italian-designed opera house in central Cairo presented Egypt as a modern, commanding force, independent of the Ottoman Empire and commensurate with contemporary European powers. The specially commissioned opera Aida enhanced this by representing Egyptian identity as rooted in its ancient history. But elite modernity never translated to include fully the broader mass of Egyptian society. Alternatively, the effendiyya, who worked within the middle-class Arabic theater circuit, represented their own lifestyles and mores on stage as models for how to be both modern and “authentically” Egyptian. In the meantime, the sha’b, a major target group for effendification, navigated effendi prescriptions while retaining what they considered a more authentic Egyptian identity. Sha’bi performance created at least a fantasy of a collective sha’bi culture in which humor dissolved difference and mockery reduced those more powerful. And female performers, whose appearance in the public arena was most controversial, borrowed language from the nationalist and women’s reform movements to create a new space for themselves that was both public and respectable.

Ultimately, the effendiyya’s social, cultural, and political concerns would come to dominate conversations about modern Egyptianness. The effendiyya managed to
harness the “individual” concerns of diverse groups in the service of independence by benefiting from the synergy of various new media, including theaters, in the first two decades of the twentieth-century. Indeed, the effendiyya as a social group emerged contemporaneously with the rise of modern theater in Egypt. In doing so, they helped to shape consumers, national tastes, and modern identities. The fact that a small number of colloquial song and script-writers dominated the entertainment sector contributed to effendi success in molding a coherent sense of identity and common language. Though not all Egyptians attended theaters, the most popular songs from the stage were also recorded on phonographs, part of a burgeoning new industry that disseminated voices, music and the ideas contained therein to a wide and diverse listening audience.\(^558\) The relationships and identities they forged as they moved through these new social spaces encouraged them to see themselves as critical players in shaping Egypt as a “bounded moral-political entity.”\(^559\)

Politization unified the populace but also trumped the many concerns of women, the sha’b, and others who were not part of the effendiyya. The suffering brought about by World War One, coupled with the clear existence of a common, British enemy, made independence seem to be the panacea for all social problems. The protracted fight for independence only further bolstered a sense of shared Egyptian identity standing in opposition to the British enemy. Theater played a critical role throughout the process. By providing a forum for the critique of society, encouraging vocal and invested audiences, and infusing the revolution itself with music and song, theater culturally undergirded the unfolding of 1919. Nevertheless, in the aftermath, as the effendiyya attained political power

\(^558\) Ziad Fahmy, 186-187.
and effendi culture became hegemonic in Egypt, women and workers felt increasingly disappointed in effendi leadership and disenfranchised from a country that neglected their concerns. The effendiyya may have acquired political power, but they did not silence alternative voices.

Questions about the shape Egyptian modernity should take persisted in both politics and theater throughout the century. In the 1960s playwrights like Yusuf Idris and Tewfiq al-Hakim, for example, mirrored Nasser’s attempts to root out remnants of colonialism by seeking out some sort of authentic, independent identity for Egyptian and Arab theater that was uninfluenced by Western drama. Most recently in what has been dubbed the Arab Spring, Egyptians used contemporary technologies to demand a purging of inauthentic rule and a demand for recognition of their dignity. The question, once again, has returned. In this new era of history, how might Egyptians be both modern and authentically Egyptian? The answers have yet to unfold.
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