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Contentious culture: the convergence and contestation of class
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CONTENTIOUS CULTURE: THE CONVERGENCE AND CONTESTATION OF CLASS AND IDENTITY IN EGYPT'S MAHRAGANAT SCENE

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Abstract | Le Mahraganat a, depuis sa naissance au début des années 2000, réussi à saboter le contrôle culturel traditionnel et a remodelé la scène musicale égyptienne afin de devenir l'un des genres musicaux les plus contestés de notre époque. Cet article étudie le Mahraganat sous l'angle de la formation d'une identité culturelle et des développements technologiques, et cherche à contextualiser la diffamation de ce genre musical et de ses créateurs. S'appuyant sur des recherches menées dans la capitale égyptienne entre les années 2019 et 2024, cet article retrace l'histoire du contrôle de la culture et soutient que les questions de classe sont au cœur du débat autour du Mahraganat. Le travail de terrain montre que les producteurs de Mahraganat rejettent la notion élitiste selon laquelle le Mahraganat n'est pas « égyptien ». Au contraire, ils se considèrent comme la continuation de la riche tradition musicale du pays plutôt que comme un phénomène isolé rompant avec cet héritage.

Mots-clés | Mahraganat, sonic class line, d'une identité culturelle, questions de classe, ethnomusicologie.

Abstract | Since its inception in the early 2000s, Mahraganat music has undermined traditional cultural gatekeeping and reshaped Egypt's music scene, becoming one of the country's most debated music genres in recent history. This paper aims to examine Mahraganat within the broader context of cultural identity formation and technological developments and contextualize the criticism of the genre and its makers. Building on research conducted in Egypt's capital between 2019 and 2024, this paper explores the history of cultural gatekeeping and argues that social class lies at the core of the heated debate surrounding

Egyptian music and Mahraganat in particular. It shows that Mahraganat producers reject the elitists' notion that Mahraganat is 'un-Egyptian', considering themselves a continuation of Egypt's rich and enduring musical heritage.

Keywords | Mahraganat, sonic class line, cultural identity, social class, ethnomusicology

Introduction

"[The singing of] Mahraganat is not befitting of the reputation of Egypt".¹ It is February 2020 and the head of the state-affiliated, influential Musicians' Syndicate, Hany Shaker, is dialled in to one of Egypt's popular late night talk shows. He is invited to elaborate on the Syndicate's decision to ban Mahraganat artists from performing and revoking previously issued permits. The trigger for this drastic and far-reaching measure was a live broadcasted Valentine's Day concert held a day earlier. In front of a packed Cairo Stadium, Mahraganat performers Hassan Shakoush and Omar Kamal sang their immensely popular hit 'The Girl Next Door', which included the lyrics 'if you leave me, I will drink alcohol and smoke weed'.² While the line was barely audible (it was only audible on the backing track and not sung by the artists, who instead asked the audience to put their hands up), the duo's general and indirect reference to these substances was deemed unacceptable and the Syndicate promptly regarded it as a transgression of moral boundaries.³ The few Mahraganat musicians, who until that point had held legal performances, saw it immediately voided. Furthermore, the ban was extended to include any venue hosting Mahraganat artists which would now also face legal repercussions. Merely banning performances of the music in Egypt was apparently not enough; The Syndicate also reached out to major streaming platforms such as YouTube and Soundcloud, in an attempt to protect citizens from what it labelled as 'immoral' music and to halt its export as an Egyptian product to the rest of the world.⁴ Through word and action, the Syndicate has explicitly denied Mahraganat any recognition of being a creative outlet that represents the country or its cultural identity. The sentiment of the music causing a moral decline and loss of public taste is not only carried by the Syndicate. This opinion is also shared by the cultural elite as well as the conservative middle and upper classes. In this context, (im)morality is not necessarily seen through the lens of religion, which is in fact an integral part of Mahraganat music and the identities of its artists, but rather one of social status and background.⁵

1- SHAKER Hany, *istihāla ayy muṭrib Mahrajānāt yighannī fī ayy ḥitta.. ghunā' al-Mahrajānāt la' yulayyiq bi 'ism Miṣr*, interview by Amr Adib, *al-Hikāya*, MBC Masr, 16 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKLBtQkUe6k> (Accessed 2 July 2025).

2- The original title is *bint al-jirān*. Original lyrics are: *tisibīnī, akrah ḥayāti wi sinīnī, atūh wi mish hayla'ni wi ashrah khumūr wi ḥashish*.

3- MAGED Mira, *Egypt Independent: Egypt's Musicians Syndicate contacts Youtube, Soundcloud to take down Mahraganat songs*, 20 February 2020. Available at: <https://egyptindependent.com/egypts-musicians-syndicate-contacts-youtube-soundcloud-to-take-down-mahraganat-songs/> (Accessed 30 June 2025).

4- "Mā-fish aghānī Mahrajānāt 'alā Youtube qarīban" *Ḍarba jadīda li-bika wa shākūsh*. In *Nile News Agency* [online]. 20 February 2020. Available at: <https://nilenewsagency.com/%D8%B6%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B4-%D9%85%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A3%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%85%D9%87/> (Accessed 30 June 2025). It is unclear if the Syndicate proceeded with filing a request to remove Mahraganat from the platforms. In fact, Google's Transparency Report on government-requested data removal does not show a request from Egypt to remove the any content: <https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/overview?hl=en> (Accessed 23 June 2025).

5- KITZLER Gisela, "Anyone who Loves our Lord, Put your Hands up! Religious Motifs in Popular Urban Egyptian Music: The Case of Mahrajānāt Lyrics", In: *Rocking Islam: Music and the Making of New Muslim Identities*, p. 79.

Mahraganat originated in the impoverished suburbs of Salam City and Matariyya in the early 2000s. The genre combines influences of hip-hop, electro and dance with musical elements of *Sha‘bī* (urban working-class folk music from the 1970s). The music’s high-pitched synthesizers and dynamic percussion are accompanied by heavily autotuned vocals from young male singers who, much to the dismay of many, do not shy away from profanity and taboo topics such as drugs and sexuality. The pioneering Mahraganat artists began their careers performing as MCs at street weddings, a common occurrence in working-class neighbourhoods.⁶ As the MC’s popularity in the wedding scene steadily increased, they began recording their improvised lyrics in home studios. In the early days, these makeshift studios often consisted of nothing more than a desktop computer and a cheap microphone. To this day, and after over two decades of development, virtually all of these music producers remain self-taught, with no formal background in music or any related fields. Instead, they are autodidacts who learn through experimenting with downloaded software or by watching online tutorials. With all the tools needed for music production readily available, through legal or illegal means, Mahraganat artists are able to produce and distribute songs from the comfort of their own living room. Both micro buses and rickshaws (colloquially referred to as ‘tuktuk’), that play music through small speakers, were important in the physical dissemination of Mahraganat prior the availability of mobile internet. Music was widely shared both via Bluetooth and USB sticks amongst fans of the genre using these public modes of transport, which weaved through the streets of Cairo. Thus, Mahraganat quickly found its way to every corner of the metropolis.

Aiming to reflect the daily lives of marginalised working-class youth, Mahraganat songs address themes that fit comfortably into five categories: women and sexuality; friends and betrayal; money; politics and society; drugs and alcohol.⁷ With the genre’s growing popularity, a sixth topic has become prominent in newer tracks: ‘*tashlif*’ – meaning ‘battling’ – in which they criticize their peers and boast about their own talent and success.⁸ Songs overtly criticizing (formal) political structures are rare to come by nowadays, due to the government’s massive crackdown on any form of dissent. Instead, artists cover what Sadat, one of the founding fathers of the genre, has also referred to as ‘politics of the streets’, exploring themes such as gang life, prison time and the street’s unwritten rules.⁹

6- ELFEKY Mohammed, “The People are Tired, and Just Want to Have Fun”: Mahraganat Music and the Struggle for Sonic Presence in Post-2013 Egypt, *Middle Eastern Studies*, City University of New York, 2022, pp. 2-3-25, Available at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/5009/ (Accessed June 2025).

7- MUKHTAR Sarah, *Yom 7: 5 mawqū‘āt lā takhraj ‘anhā al-aghānī al-sha‘bī fi Maṣr... ahamhā khiyyānat al-suhāb*, 19 April 2016. Available at: <https://www.youm7.com/story/2016/4/19/5-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B6%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%AC-%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%85%D9%87%D8%A7/2682992> (Accessed July 2025).

8- SCHOUTEN Elisa, *Van Madīnat al-Salām naar mainstream: een onderzoek naar de emancipatoire boodschap van Mahragānāt*, University of Amsterdam, 2019, 55 p.

9- SADAT AL-‘ALAMY, Interview, 2 April 2019.

Mahraganat's origin story and way of production is the antithesis of the way music was produced during what many Egyptians consider as the peak of modern Egyptian culture - namely, the country's cultural 'golden age' of the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, Egypt held an international reputation as a hub for culture and arts, and the country was hailed as the cultural capital of the Arab World.¹⁰ For decades, the (cultural) elite and authorities quite successfully instilled a narrowly defined idea of 'proper taste' upon the Egyptian public by suppressing working-class artists and dismissing their work to being categorized as 'vulgar noise'. Through nationalized and tightly controlled media, the ruling class's ideology was solidified by being disseminated across all platforms. However, the more democratised technology became, the less control the gatekeepers were able to maintain over the country's cultural production. This prolonged suppression transformed Egypt's soundscape into a proverbial (symbolic) battlefield. Although the conflict has manifested in many forms throughout the years, its underlying theme remained the same: disputes on what constitutes respectable Egyptian culture and who is allowed to produce it. In this context, Egypt's conservative middle class, along with the cultural elite, have relentlessly branded the Mahraganat music that emerged from working-class neighbourhoods as demoralising and, more importantly, as 'un-Egyptian'.

In this paper, I aim to contextualise the arguments both in favor and against Mahraganat, and to situate this form of creative expression within the broader historical framework of cultural gatekeeping, technological advancements, and identity formation in Egypt. I will also elaborate on the role of Egyptian radio and cassette technologies in shaping Egypt's cultural legacy. Drawing on the works of Ziad Fahmy, Samia Mehrez and Andrew Simon, I will show that the distinction between 'low' and 'high' culture are neither organic, nor new, but are man-made and have been constructed decades ago. Turning at the present-day context, I will deconstruct the predominantly negative discourse surrounding Mahraganat prior to discussing how Mahraganat artists and producers perceive and position themselves and their music based on interviews and studio visits conducted between 2019 and 2024 in Cairo. I argue that issues of social class lie at the core of the ongoing debate surrounding Egyptian music in general and Mahraganat in particular.

Methodology

Between 2019 and 2024, I carried out fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt, and have been closely involved in the Mahraganat scene, following coverage of the genre on both social and Egyptian state media. The fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews with Mahraganat singers and producers, studio visits and attendance of live performances held in various locations, including street weddings, night clubs and concert venues. Five interviews were held – most of which took place in 2023- in colloquial Arabic. The interview questions focused on

10- HAMMOND Andrew, *Pop Culture Arab World!*, California, ABC-CILO, 2005, 141 p.

the artists' sources of inspiration, their perception of identity and culture, their own relationship to Mahraganat and other (local) genres, as well as historical and technological evolution of the genre. Lastly, to ensure a comprehensive and representative sample of different ages and career stages, I spoke with artists that have been involved in the genre since its advent and those who entered the scene most recently.

Institutional Gatekeeping and Media Circumvention

The debate regarding the position Mahraganat should or should not hold in cultural representation is not new, nor is the discourse on what constitutes 'high' or 'lowbrow' culture -according to the cultural elite- and, by extension, what deserves to be celebrated and what needs to be suppressed. The construction of these binary classifications can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when the '*Nahda*' (cultural renaissance) was flourishing and co-shaping post-colonial modern Egyptian identity. In her book, titled '*Egypt's Culture Wars*', Egyptian literature professor Samia Mehrez explores the increasing entanglement between the political and cultural sectors, specifically during the three decades of Mubarak's regime (1981–2011). As she argues, to some extent both 'high' and 'lowbrow' artforms encounter obstacles from the state and other cultural authorities.¹¹ While elite forms of art such as literature and visual arts are not exempt from scrutiny, they do not face the same intensity or form of scrutiny as art produced by the working class. The latter work is often marginalized due to its creator's inferior socio-economic background, as is exemplified in the case of Mahraganat. This perspective is also illustrated by Ziad Fahmy, whose work on the changing sounds of Cairo's streets over the last century provides an insight into the origins of the divide between high and low cultures - between accepted 'sounds' and lower-class 'noise' (often framed as *talawwuth sami* 'sonic pollution') which required silencing. Fahmy refers to this concept as the 'sonic class line'. Around the turn of the twentieth century, with the advent of the technological revolution impacting the soundscape, 'judgmental dualities concerning a changing definition of taste, class, and modernity infused most discussions about sounds and noise'.¹² Street vendors and beggars, public wedding celebrations and crowded funeral processions all produced sonic expressions that, since produced by lower-class, were deemed vulgar and unsophisticated; Therefore policies were enacted by the authorities to control and suppress them. the middle class played a key role in driving this agenda, motivated by a desire to establish a distinct identity in the societal realm. Indeed, the middle class, that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, sought to differentiate and legitimize itself from those it perceived uncivilized and poor. This would reinforce a superior, distinct class identity for the middle class.¹³ This

11- MEHREZ Samia, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice*, Cairo, AUC Press, 2011, p. 10-11.

12- FAHMY Ziad, *Street Sounds: Listening to Everyday Life in Modern Egypt*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020, p. 7.

13- *Ibid.*, p. 53, 80.

new dehumanizing discourse and the state's repressive policies were collectively aimed at reinforcing an ideal image of the 'modern' Egyptian society at the cost of the working classes. The classist division between 'sound' and 'noise' was the groundwork for dismissing music created by the working classes as sonic pollution, and therefore as undesired.

The state's interest in regulating music increased with technological advancements such as the invention of radio, and later cassette tapes. By the mid-twentieth century, the nationalized Egyptian Radio had emerged as the 'central institution of Egypt's musical life'.¹⁴ It was also the only legal radio station available, as all amateur radio channels had been banned. The radio's mission was not just to provide musical entertainment, but it was first and foremost considered a medium to cultivate culturally redefined citizens with refined taste, as per the state's definition of 'cultured'. This task was not taken lightly, and several government bodies were involved in safeguarding society from potentially immoral and distasteful works. Artists, who did not contribute to 'elevating the listener's taste', were forced to seek other ways of having their voices heard, of which there were highly limited opportunities. The exclusivity of radio broadcasting was not only a source of national pride but considered a necessity for constructing and safeguarding a proper Egyptian cultural identity and therefore enlightening Egyptians.¹⁵ Radio's role as a cultural gatekeeper worked not only by promoting what the state favoured, but also by repressing what it deemed improper. While the Golden Age of Entertainment is often praised for the dominance of the Egyptian cultural industry in the region, not all artists and art forms were allowed to flourish equally. On the contrary, talents that were considered inferior or dissenting encountered harassment, censorship and, in extreme cases, even imprisonment.¹⁶

The efforts, that the authorities and cultural elite had put into dictating 'proper' culture, were heavily compromised by the rise of cassette tape technology in the 1970s. The affordable and portable technology allowed the working classes to become producers of culture in their own right - much to the dismay of those that had previously marginalized and silenced them. This social change was mostly facilitated by economic change introduced under the leadership of the country's new president, Anwar al-Sadat (1970 – 1981), who decided to open doors that had been firmly closed under the staunch socialist policies of his predecessor Gamal Abdel Nasser (1954 – 1970). In 1974, Sadat introduced an economic liberalisation programme known as '*infitah*'. Reversing course from the legacy of his predecessor, Sadat's vision for the country was one of free market economics and American-style capitalism. Therefore, he passed several laws aiming to

14- DANIELSON Virginia, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, 85p.

15- EL-SHAWAN CASTELLO-BRANCO Salwa, « Radio and Musical Life in Egypt », *Revista de Musicología*, vol. 16, n° 3, 1993, p. 1233.

16- KOTB Amr, *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy: Questioning Egypt's Golden Era*, 23 May 2016. Available at: <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/questioning-egypts-golden-era/> (Accessed July 2025).

increase and attract foreign direct investments. This new economic reality enabled the easy import of both software and hardware necessary for the production and distribution of cassette tapes, recorders and players. With the emergence of this new avenue of music production, those previously marginalized and silenced by the cultural elite, previously in charge of the state media, were now empowered to become not only as consumers of culture, but as producers of their own redefined culture. This was a radical shift that completely transformed Egypt's music scene. As Andrew Simons argues, 'audiotape technology and its operators decentralized state-controlled Egyptian media well before the dawn of satellite television and the internet'.¹⁷ Up until the emergence of cassette tapes, the distribution of recording artists' work was confined to the approval of a limited number of radio employees and institutional committees. However, the introduction of cassette tapes dismantled this barrier, offering unrestricted access that allowed essentially anyone to record and distribute music. In other words, cassette tapes provided a successful and relatively easy way to bypass the cultural gatekeepers. One-room recording studios, often located in sidewalk kiosks, were run by working-class entrepreneurs who usually had little to no experience in the music industry. One genre, in particular, whose origins coincided with the spread of cassette technology, gladly made use of the advantages it brought. Aptly named '*Sha 'bī*' ('of the people'), its performers sang about everyday struggles of ordinary Egyptians through lyrics written in a language that everyone could understand, namely colloquial Arabic. This was an important breakthrough as the state-sanctioned music, prior to that point, exclusively featured lyrics in formal Arabic, never a version of colloquial Arabic – a language heard in the streets, especially amongst the lower classes. Thus, *Sha 'bī* was held in low regard by the cultural elite and was criticized as superficial, vulgar and fretful. Upper-class critics denounced it as a corrupting force on public taste and viewed its audience as despicable. It should be noted that this music did not receive any airtime on the radio, nevertheless, it resonated deeply with many ordinary Egyptians, largely due to its relatable content and language.

This successful undermining of the traditional music industry, its values and the consequential 'pollution' of public taste was of great concern to the state. With the advent of cassette technology, the text and listening committees, that had been responsible for overseeing and upholding artistic standards on the radio's programming, were largely rendered obsolete. Although they could refuse to broadcast tapes deemed crude or inappropriate, it quickly proved nearly impossible to contain the 'tasteless' tapes beyond the airwaves from spreading through the country. As a result, millions of tapes - both original copies and an even greater number of pirated ones - flooded Egyptian streets and households. This foreshadowed the ways in which Mahraganat would subvert the omnipresent state control years later.

17- SIMON Andrew, *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2022, 75 p.

The Musicians' Syndicate Vs. The Internet

The battle for cultural authority and power has since transitioned from the era of cassette tapes to the digital landscape of the worldwide web. This new arena comes with its own opportunities and challenges, primarily because it lies beyond the direct grasp of the authorities. Unlike the amateur radio channels of the 1930s - that could easily be banned due to their limited scope - or the cassette tapes that could be physically confiscated, it is more difficult to regulate activities and interactions on the internet. This presents a major challenge to the government. There is no ideological monopoly in the decentralised and relatively uncontrolled environment of the web, as the internet does not function under the ideology of the ruling class, but rather provides access to a multitude of alternative - often hegemonic-opposing ideologies. This reality threatens the reproduction of the prevailing social hierarchy and power dynamics that are in favour of the elite and the state. In the anonymity afforded by the internet, the user can be free of the expected societal role they are expected to perform and is able to encounter and engage with perspectives beyond their habitual environment. It is in this ambiguous space that Mahraganat operates and has managed to outsmart authorities in a cat-and-mouse dynamic and thereby garner a fanbase that largely transcends geographical and social divisions.

With Mahraganat artists now being full-fledged producers of their own cultural works -often from the comfort of their own homes-, rather than passive consumers, Egyptian authorities have attempted to reassert the control the internet took away from them. Institutions such as the Musicians' Syndicate historically have, and continue to, construct and reinforce narrow definitions of proper/legitimate culture and cultural identity. As the Syndicate's attempt to remove all Mahraganat songs from major streaming platforms proved futile, it has since redirected its efforts to an area that they have more jurisdiction over, namely live performances. In order to legally hold concerts, artists need to be granted a performance license by the Musicians' Syndicate on a case-by-case basis. This governmental entity has wielded its monopoly and power to restrict and reshape creative expressions such as Mahraganat, similar to the role previously held by national radio committees in earlier decades.

Following his appointment as president of the Egyptian Musicians' Syndicate in October 2022, pop singer Mostafa Kamal issued a set of guidelines aimed at regulating Mahraganat music. By this time, the Syndicate had already established its antagonistic stance toward the genre and its performers in the previous years. Individual singers were suspended, performing licences revoked, and artists were sued. At one point, the genre itself was even banned. In an effort to resolve this tense and chaotic situation, the Syndicate's newly appointed president Kamal, sought to start with a clean slate and temporarily prohibited all Mahraganat artists from performing while a new regulatory framework was being established. Artists were subsequently called to individual meetings at the Syndicate, during which they had to sign a contract vowing to adhere

to the new regulations. These included abiding by vague provisions such as abiding to ‘Egyptian family values’ and obtaining a permit from the Ministry of Culture before performing abroad. In a press conference held in October 2022 to announce these guidelines, Kamal said:

We will establish two categories: the first is the skilled singer, equivalent to the singers of the art of *Sha ‘bī*, will be regarded as a *Sha ‘bī* singer. The second performance style, which must respect and uphold the values and traditions of our country and its songs, as well as reflect self-respect, will be called vocal performance. If I find anyone labelling his videos with the term *Mahraganat*, he/she can consider himself/herself written off. We will eliminate this term from our lives.¹⁸

Just a few years ago, the mere thought of having a division dedicated to *Sha ‘bī* music within the Musicians’ Syndicate would have been unimaginable, much less one that equates *Sha ‘bī* to art and its performers to skilful singers, given that the genre was disregarded as ‘crass noise, consisting of weak voices’ that believed to degrade the taste of Egyptian listeners. Therefore, its acknowledgement by the Syndicate was long considered too farfetched to even be negotiable. In this context, Andrew Simon’s concept of ‘the fluidity of vulgarity’ is highly relevant. Simon argues that cultural labels, such as ‘vulgar’ versus ‘proper’ and ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’, are ambiguous and ever-changing. Similar comments are frequently made about *Mahraganat*, which critics claim is vulgar, degenerate and even a threat to national security. By denouncing the genre in this way-and, furthermore, claiming it is not representative of Egyptian identity-, the speaker reinforces the previously discussed sonic class line. As *Mahraganat* is described as ‘low-brow’, the music is implicitly attributed to the lower socio-economic classes, thereby solidifying a class divide between the ‘sophisticated insiders’ and the ‘uncultured outsiders’. This discourse then justifies the repressive measures against the genre, under the pretense of ‘refining the public’s taste’- a pattern evident in the treatment of both *Sha ‘bī* and *Mahraganat* music.¹⁹ The transformation of *Sha ‘bī* from being considered undignified noise to a respected art form is exemplary for this shifting attitude and classification. It is conceivable that this trajectory is one that *Mahraganat* may also follow in the future. According to one of *Mahraganat*’s pioneers, singer and producer, Ahmed Figo, this shift is extremely possible. Citing the similarities in public reception between societal feedback to the two genres, he says:

“*Mahraganat* has imposed itself on society. When Adawiyya first started, he faced harsh criticism and was told he was a failure. Thankfully, he persevered and created a new musical style: *Sha ‘bī*. Similarly, we too have

18- KAMEL Mostafa, *Klaket News: Mostafa Kāml yaḥdḥur muṭribīn al-Mahrajānāt khilāl ijtīmā ‘hu: illi hayiktib kilmit Mahrajānāt ‘ala al-ughniyya bitā ‘tu hayitshaṭṭab*, October 24, 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBubTD2fzHA> (Accessed July 2025).

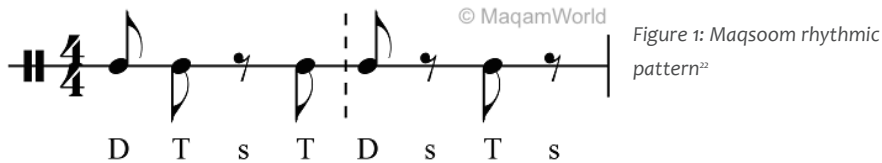
19- OMAR Eslam, *Al-Ahram News: Egypt Musicians Syndicate suspends permits to non-union Mahraganat singers; to investigate bribery allegations*, October 16, 2022. Available at: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/477957.aspx> (Accessed July 2025).

created something new. As we grow up, we will leave our message to the next generation. I'm optimistic that Mahraganat will be a genre that's written into history."²⁰

Maqsoom, Mahraganat and Man-Made Boundaries

While former Syndicate president Hany Shaker declared Mahraganat to be inherently 'un-Egyptian' – a label that also had legal ramifications – its makers have maintained a staunch rejection of this notion. Contrary to this official exclusion, the makers take pride in what they consider their (music's) embeddedness in Egyptian cultural identity. A reoccurring theme in the interviews I conducted was the '*maqsoom*' – a distinctive 4/4 rhythm of Egyptian urban folk music (conveyed as *dum tek – tek dum -tek*).²¹

The *maqsoom* has widespread appeal across the Arab world and is by no means confined to Egypt. Although limited scholarship describes it as a regional style, the musicians I interviewed exclusively claimed it as their own. Significantly, because generations of Egyptian music icons that span from *Tarab* to *Sha'bi* have used the *maqsoom*, today's Mahraganat artists consider it as the most vital musical element linking them to Egypt's collective musical heritage.



Each producer referenced this musical element to emphasize the connection of Mahraganat to other genres and eras of Egyptian music that had previously existed. As Zouksh, a young producer who hails from Salam City district on the outskirts of Cairo and is one half of the Mahraganat duo Double Zouksh, stated: '*The basis of my music is the rhythm, the rhythm of my country that Umm Kulthum used to sing in, only I changed it into an electronic version.*'²³ By establishing a close approximation to Umm Kulthum, generally considered as the Arab world's most iconic vocalist, Zouksh positions Mahraganat alongside a treasured national (and regional) icon, one widely considered a personification of Egyptian culture and referred to as 'Egypt's fourth pyramid'.²⁴ Not only does Zouksh see a connection between the renowned singer's music and his own, he also frames Mahraganat's existence as a natural progression of musical transformation over time. 'During

20- Ahmed Figo, personal interview, 21 June 2023. All direct quotes are from interviews with the author unless otherwise stated.

21- Maqamworld (2018), *Iqa' Maqsum* [online]. link: <https://www.maqamworld.com/ar/iqaa/maqsum.php> (Accessed July 2025).

22- *Idem*.

23- Zouksh, personal interview, 4 September 2023.

24- DANIELSON Virginia, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 21-30.

Abdel Haleem Hafez's era,²⁵ they discovered bass guitar, then with Tamer Hosny and Amr Diab it became sub-bass. And then we came along and we turned it into: [makes subwoofer noise].’ He concluded: ‘So that’s it, music evolves; but in the end, it’s the same. It’s Eastern, the same Arab music. So how could anyone say it does not have an Arab origin or Egyptian culture?’

Complementing comments were made by Wezza Montaser, a renowned producer and rapper from Matariyya, another disenfranchised district of Egypt’s capital. ‘First there was Umm Kulthum, then came *Sha‘bī*, and from there came *Mahraganat*’, he said.²⁶ During the in-person interview, he stood up and punctuated each stage of this development with a hop forward, so as to physically act out *Mahraganat*’s emergence as the result of natural historic developments rather than in isolation from Egypt’s existing cultural identity. He further elaborated that ‘*Mahraganat* is one hundred percent Egyptian. Most of the songs are *maqsoom*. Why? Because this is the culture of our people.’²⁷ On another occasion, when asked what makes *Mahraganat* distinctive, producer Ahmed Figo vocalized the beat of the *maqsoom*, and declared ‘that beat is *Mahraganat*’.

For these producers, *Mahraganat* is not only undeniably Egyptian but also represents a natural progression of Egypt’s musical heritage. They regard *Mahraganat* as the culmination of decades of musical developments that include genres such as *Tarab*²⁸, *Sha‘bī* and Arab pop music. During their interviews, the producers referenced numerous influential artists that paved the way before them and elaborated on the similarities and differences between *Mahraganat* and other musical styles - both historical and contemporary, local and global. This showed a highly nuanced understanding of the respective technical and artistic elements and how they relate to *Mahraganat*, defying the often-heard critique that the genre’s creators are ‘uncultured’. Interestingly, Nicolas Puig’s work on *Mahraganat* highlights how his interlocutors consciously distance themselves from *Sha‘bī*, which they consider ‘a respectable form with which they would not dare to associate their own music’.²⁹ This dissimilarity in positioning reflects the heterogeneity within the *Mahraganat* scene, where artists take different positions on perceived similarity with other genres. This discrepancy provides a useful insight for further analysis of the music, its creators, and the nuances of this complex music scene. The Syndicate’s ban of the mere word ‘*Mahraganat*’, the existence of a multitude of labels used by artists to refer to this genre (such as *electro-Sha‘bī* and *trap-Sha‘bī*), as well as the outspoken ways in which some musicians have distanced themselves from fellow *Mahraganat* peers collectively

25- Abdel Haleem Hafez was a prominent *Tarab* singer between the 1950s and 1970s, amassing success similar to that of Umm Kulthum.

26- Wezza Montaser, personal interview, 08-01-2023.

27- Wezza Montaser, personal interview, 08-01-2023.

28- *Tarab* (tl. enchantment) is a classical arab music genre, most notably performed by Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum and is characterized by repeating of verses, prolonging vowels and evoking powerful physical and emotional responses to the music. Cf. A.J. Racy, *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

29- PUIG Nicolas, “The Sounds of *Mahraganat*: Compositions and Musical Circulations in Egypt”, *Hal* [online], 2021, p. 7. Available at: <https://hal.science/hal-04564121v1>

suggest that a process of 'othering' is potentially also happening within the scene itself. Those who were once cast out of society - shaped by people in power- and who found themselves automatically excluded are now redefining the boundaries to serve their own interests.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both the creation and regulation of music in Egypt are deeply intertwined with social structures, most importantly and particularly class background. As technological advancements provided new opportunities to marginalised communities to make their voices heard, cultural gatekeepers have tried to adapt to this evolving landscape – with varying degrees of success. Mahraganat has provided a platform for those of lower socioeconomic status to express themselves creatively and more importantly, has enabled the renegotiation of power hierarchies and inclusion. As both the genre and Egyptian society continue to evolve simultaneously, Mahraganat will remain an important site for negotiating the constitutes of Egypt's cultural identity and for contesting elite ideology. While Mahraganat's future remains uncertain, recent developments around the *Sha 'bī* genre may foreshadow a potential trajectory for the music's evolution.

In December 2024, *Sha 'bī*-pioneer Ahmed Adaweyya passed away at age of 79. In an official statement following Adaweyya's passing, spokesman for the Musician's Syndicate, Mohammed Abdallah, remarked that 'Egypt lost one of its most refreshing voices'. Furthermore, he praised him as not only an 'outstanding artist' but also someone who 'taught us how simplicity can be art'.³⁰ On the occasion of Adaweyya's passing, residing Minister of Culture, Ahmed Hanno, also extended his condolences to the singer's family, friends and fans, stating:

The *sha 'bī*-genre has lost one of its most prominent symbols, an artist that conveyed the sentiments of the Egyptian street with his unique voice; an artist with a rich career who has left an unforgettable mark on the history of popular music. Ahmed Adaweyya was an example of an authentic artist who excelled in presenting art that carried a unique identity, an approach that many *sha 'bī* artists have followed.³¹

30- AL-QASBY Mostafa, "Mutahadath niqābat al-mūsīqiyyīn: sawt Adaweyya kān mirāyat al-ālām al-basatā' wa ahlāmhum", *Youm 7* [online], 31 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.youm7.com/story/2024/12/31/%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%AB-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A2%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A2%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B3%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%88%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87%D9%85/6830556> (Accessed July 2025).

31- WAZĪR al-thaqāfa, "Nā'iyyan al-muṭrib Ahmad Adaweyya: ṣāhib masīra fannīyya ḥāfila.. wa aghānih tarakat baṣma la tansa", *Shorouk News* [online], December 30, 2024. Available at: <https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=30122024&id=18c98319-8050-462b-ae0c-4c7e6597cf99#:~:text=%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%AF%20%D8%A3%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF%20%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D8%A3%D8%AD%D8%AF%20%D8%A3%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A9,%D8%B0%D9%87%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D9%81%D9%8A%20%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%86%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A> (Accessed July 2025).

A few days later, on 8 January 2025, during festivities marking a new state-sponsored ‘Culture Day’, Minister Hanno presented Adaweyya’s son with a posthumous distinction/award honoring his father’s legacy. This distinction marks the only official recognition ever bestowed upon the artist by the state, both during his lifetime as well as after his passing.³² In elaborating on the accolade, the Minister referred to the late singer as ‘part of the fabric of Egyptian culture’.³³ The positive reframing of Adaweyya and his legacy, both of which are now celebrated by the same authorities that had once marginalized him and shunned his work, is remarkable. Paradoxically, whereas Adaweyya, during his lifetime, was long considered a representation of the perceived risks associated with granting wider public access to cultural creation, he is now hailed as a reflection of authentic Egyptian culture. The praise of his ‘simplicity’ (*basāṭa*) is especially noteworthy, given that this lowbrow association was the very reason behind the stigmatization and ridicule by the cultural elite that Adaweyya was forced to endure during the span of his career. As Mahraganat currently faces many of the same critiques that *Sha‘bī* once faced, it is conceivable that years from now, attitudes might shift in favor of Mahraganat in a similar fashion to what had happened with *Sha‘bī* music. There are subtle indicators that Mahraganat might already be taking on a more prominent cultural position, for example, Mahraganat songs featured as movie soundtracks and Mahraganat artists being the face of advertisements or actors in popular Ramadan series. The economic incentives for this shift are evident, and the trajectory suggests a move in the direction of greater acceptance by both the masses and the cultural establishment. Whether this acceptance will deepen or whether that is the extent of it remains to be seen.

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32- NABIL Baha, “Mohammad Adaweyya ba’d takrīm wālidu min al-thaqāfa: sha’rtu bi-taqdīr wa ta’thartu bi-hubb al-nās”, *Yum 7* [online], 9 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.yum7.com/story/2025/1/9/%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%AB%D8%B1%D8%AA/6840231> (Accessed July 2025).

33- TAHA Mohammad, “Wazīr al-thaqāfa yu‘allaq ‘alā takrīm Adaweyya wa Sayyid Darwish: aṣḥāb baṣma ḥaḥiqiyya wa mu‘athirin”, *Al-Masry Al-Youm* [online], 8 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/3348197> (Accessed July 2025).

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ملخص | منذ نشأتها في أوائل العقد الأول من القرن الحادي والعشرين، استطاعت موسيقى المهرجانات أن تزعزع الهيمنة الثقافية التقليدية وتعيد تشكيل المشهد الموسيقي في مصر، لتصبح واحدة من أكثر الأنواع الموسيقية التي أثارت جدلاً في تاريخ البلاد الحديث. يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة المهرجانات من خلال النظر إلى المهرجانات ضمن سياق واسع يشمل تشكيل الهوية الثقافية والتطورات التكنولوجية وتحديد إطار النقد الموجه لهذا النوع وصانعيه. واستناداً إلى دراسة أجريت في العاصمة المصرية بين عامي ٢٠١٩ و٢٠٢٤، تستكشف هذه الورقة البحثية تاريخ صناعة الهوية الثقافية وتجادل بأن الطبقة الاجتماعية تكمن في صميم الجدل المحتدم حول الموسيقى المصرية والمهرجانات على وجه الخصوص. كما توضح أن منتجي المهرجانات يرفضون فكرة النخبويين القائلة بأن المهرجانات "غير مصرية"، معتبرين أنفسهم امتداداً للتراث الموسيقي المصري الغني والدائم.

الكلمات المفتاحية | المهرجانات، الخط الطبقي الصوتي، الهوية الثقافية، الهوية الثقافية، الطبقة الاجتماعية، الإثنوموسيقى

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