Satellite TV & Islamic Pop Culture in Egypt

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

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

This new trend of commoditized religious music video emphasizes the dignity and humanity of Islam and its harmonious integration with a comfortable, middle-class modern lifestyle. The popular Egyptian boy-band WAMA, for example, released in 2005 the popular hit Kan Nifsi (I wish that I could)—a slow, lyrical song with no musical features to mark it as “religious” except the faint sounds of the call to prayer, set against the background noise of a busy metropolitan city, that begin the track. Using the simple colloquial language that predominates in shababi music, the four university-aged members of the group take turns singing of their desire to meet the prophet Muhammad, to sit with him and his companions in heaven, and to follow his path in Islam. Dressed in chic, all-white casual clothing, the boys wander among the golden sand dunes of a beautiful remote desert location, the kind that financially comfortable Egyptians, not just foreigners, increasingly frequent as the national tourist industry taps into the disposable incomes of the new moneyed classes created by the neo-liberal economic policies of the past three decades. The video ends with the boys walking into the sunset shoulder to shoulder, conveying a message of brotherly unity in Islam.

Pious performers

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

The growing number and popularity of songs such as these reflect the broader trend toward public displays of Islamic piety and increased support for Islamist socio-political visions that have marked Arab society as a whole since the 1970s. But it must be stressed that the Islamic Revival has affected the Arab world’s entertainment industry, in particular its twentieth-century capital, Egypt, in a number of different ways (see Van Nieuwkerk’s article in this issue for further discussion of this history). In the 1980s and early 1990s, popular...
The video of “al-Mu’allim” juxtaposes English and Arabic lyrics in praise of the prophet Muhammad with images of a chic young photographer, portrayed by the singer, going about his daily life; working in his studio in his large, well-appointed suburban Cairo home; behaving kindly to his veiled old mother and the people in his community; and teaching religious lessons to children amidst the splendour of Islamic Cairo’s medieval architectural heritage. At the end of the video, he drives off in an SUV to undertake a solo photography shoot in the desert, and in the darkness, he captures on film the image of a glowing, Kaaba-like structure radiating light, perhaps meant to symbolize al-nur al muhammadî (the primordial light of Muhammad). The video thus emphasizes the special role that the artist, in this case a photographer, plays in devoting his talents to expressing the beauty of God’s creation and the truth of the Prophet’s message. At the same time, he leads an exemplary and pious life in his community, all the while enjoying the technological amenities and comforts of a modern, cosmopolitan lifestyle. In this way, Yusuf’s on-screen music videos embody the ideals of al-fann al-hadîf—tasteful art with an appropriate message of moral respectability and social responsibility—a persona that is reinforced by the singer’s interviews and website statements that articulate his dedication to working for the well-being of the Muslim ummah.

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

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

Notes
1. For an insightful analysis of these figures’ critiques of secular media culture, see Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), in particular, chapter 4.
4. Sami Yusuf’s website—www.samiyusuf.com—posts statements by the singer on his music and current events and also includes links to several interviews with the press.