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CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds  
Studies

28 June - 2 July 2021



## Panel 16

### Ideology, aesthetics and the (re)significations of the «popular» in the music and poetry practices of the Middle East and North Africa

In the MENA region as elsewhere, popular music and poetry have historically been instruments for the popular masses to criticize and contest authority, to provide a counternarrative to official historiography, to serve as archives of the subalterns' history and depositories of collective memory. At the same time, the popular arts have also been tools of consensus: manipulated by a state authority or the cultural industry, they can support the dominant discourse and serve conservative purposes. By acknowledging the fluidity and ambiguities of the «popular culture» category, this panel aims at investigating the processes of transformation, re-signification, and re-appropriation of popular music and poetry in the Middle East and North Africa throughout history and through the lenses of changing power discourses. All the empirical contributions of this panel are the result of the participants' long-lasting fieldwork in their country of expertise, although their theoretical and methodological approaches vary, ranging from anthropology and ethnomusicology, to cultural and literary studies and cultural history. The entanglement between popular culture and issues of power and resistance, between national heritage and identity politics, will be thus discussed and dissected from a multidisciplinary perspective. This panel thus wishes to contribute to the current thriving debate on popular culture in the MENA, which has by now proved extremely fruitful for broadening and giving new perspectives to the understanding of the region's political and social history.

**Responsible : Carnevale Alessia (Sapienza University of Rome)**

**Discutant : Cornet Catherine (American University of Rome)**

#### Program

##### **Aboubakr Farah (University of Edinburgh)**

###### *Palestinian Artistic Scene and Memory Construction in the Diaspora*

Apart from being a means of entertainment, forms of popular art and music are instrumental in strengthening communal bonds and framing the nation's cultural, political, and social identity. While true in the majority of places, Palestinians suffer from constant political instability, hence impeding the concretization of the narrative of nation-building. Despite the growing fear of loss and political turmoil, popular forms of expression among Palestinians are becoming paradoxical tools of resistance or passive-aggressive form of acceptance; a process entangled with the recreation of the concept of 'the homeland' and regeneration of collective memory. This paper will analyze how forms of Palestinian popular culture, through the mnemonic lenses of musical discourse engage in the construction of sites of memory (Nora, 1989), engendering a new form of memory, namely prosthetic. The paper will also highlight the agency of cultural mediators, in this case, performers, and the process of cultural identity transmission and/or transgression within memory studies. In doing so, I will be highlighting the ambivalent interconnection

between the artistic discourse and political discourse among Palestinian artists in the diaspora.

### **Carnevale Alessia (Sapienza University of Rome)**

#### *Ideology and popular aesthetics in the Tunisian protest song*

During the 1970s and 1980s Tunisia witnessed the flourishing of the protest song genre (al-ughniya al-multazima). Drawing on the local heritage of popular poetry and inspired by Arab protest groups and singers (above all the Egyptian Sheikh Imam 'Issa), Tunisian protest songs played a major role in educating and mobilizing political activists against the authoritarian regime of Habib Bourguiba, as well as against capitalism and neo-colonialism in the Arab world. Besides revolutionary slogans, peasant symbolism and the popular common sense were deployed in songs, to speak to the masses with their language. Marginalized during the Ben Ali era, old protest songs have known a revival in recent times, and their political message has been re-activated to articulate the hopes and expectations of a younger generation that has witnessed the 2010-2011 uprisings. By considering popular culture as the battlefield of a continuous struggle for hegemony, this intervention seeks to investigate the processes of re-appropriation and re-elaboration of the «popular» by different political actors and to shed light on the importance of the popular cultural space in the construction of any political project. It does so by engaging with the analysis of oral testimonies and songs' lyrics and by paying special attention to the subversive and ideological use of the vernacular and rural imagery.

### **El Sayed Nadine (American University in Cairo)**

#### *The Rise of Indie Music from the Heart of Tahrir Square: Politics and Popular Music in Egypt*

Music has long been a medium to influence public opinion in countries where literacy rates are low, as they were in Egypt when Om Kolthoum and Abdel Halim were commissioned to sing in support of Nasser and Sadat, and even in 2011 when a new wave of songs during the uprising brought a growing appreciation of underground music and independent artists not previously accepted in the commercial music sector. This historical overview explores how platforms like YouTube and Anghamy purveyed diverse messages and genres, including Mahraganat, in a way not available to former dissenting singers such as Sayyid Darwish, or Shaikh Imam with Ahmed Fouad Negm.

### **Portelli Stefano (Leicester University)**

#### *Spirits of Displacement: heritage and gentrification among the Moroccan Gnawa*

The UNESCO declaration of Moroccan Gnawa music as a part of the immaterial heritage of the country concludes a decade-long process of 'heritagization' of a cultural complex studied by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists since the Sixties. The Gnawa developed a stratified subculture of the working classes which includes a musical repertoire transmitted orally, but also a hybrid argot, multiform and stratified ritual activities, and a shifting network of transborder mobility, economic activities, ritual practice and political alliances, which recently reached also Europe and North America. Besides the habitual concerns on the essentialization and crystallization of the repertoire, heritagization is part of a complex dynamic that aims at binding the brotherhood to the royal palace, the makhzen, and to disarticulate the autonomous political structures of the brotherhood. A crucial element involved in inducing this internal transformation of the Gnawa is urban renewal: the gentrification and turistification of Casablanca, as of most Moroccan cities, is progressively displacing many members of the brotherhood from their living environment, producing changes that are invisible to the observer who does not know the complex socio-spatial dynamics that connect the Gnawa to the urban fabric.