Sampling Folklore: The "re-popularization" of Sufi *inshad* in Egyptian dance music

By Jennifer Peterson

January, 2008. Beneath the looming limestone precipice that borders the old city of Cairo stands the shrine of Omar Ibn Al-Farid, a 13th century Sufi mystic and poet. Much of his verse is metaphorical love poetry, and, now deemed classic, is most typically recited in the Sufi lyrical genre called *inshad*. Most poignantly, perhaps, it is performed live at the late-night celebration held annually in Ibn Al-Farid's honor.[1] Revered as a saint since the generation following his decease, Ibn Al-Farid is today venerated with a mulid, or saint festival, held in and around his shrine.[2] **[Music Clip 1: Sheikh Yassin Al-Tuhami performs Ibn Al-Farid lyrics live]**

Although relatively modest in scale, the mulid of Ibn Al-Farid is a festival much like those held for hundreds of other saints in Egypt, combining spiritually-focused ritual with fairground fun.[3] Pilgrims visit the shrine to pay their respects and make

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[1] On the performance of *inshad* and its relation to Sufi poetry, see Frishkopf, Michael (2001) "Tarab ('enchantment') in the Mystic Sufi Chant of Egypt." In Sherifa Zuhur (ed.) *Colors of enchantment: theater, dance, music, and the visual arts of the Middle East*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, p. 233-269.

[2] Festivities held to honor a saint are in the Egyptian colloquial called *mulid* (pl. *mawalid*) from the classical Arabic *mawlid*, literally meaning a birthday or anniversary and in this context typically marking the anniversary of a saint's death. On Ibn Al-Farid, his poetry, and his sainthood, see Homerin, Th. Emil (2001) *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Fārid, His Verse, and His Shrine*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

[3] On mulids and their various aspects, including debates around them, see Schielke, Samuli (2004) "On Snacks and Saints: When Discourses of Order and Rationality Enter the Egyptian *Mawlid*." In Georg Stauth (ed.), *On Archeology of Sainthood and Local Spirituality in Islam*, Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam 5, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, p.173-194, and Schielke, Samuli (2006) *Snacks and Saints: Mawlid Festivals and the Politics of Festivity, Piety and Modernity in Contemporary Egypt*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Amsterdam.

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supplications amidst crowds praying, socializing, singing Sufi poetry, eating, and even sleeping in the mosque area. Near the shrine and throughout the festive space, Sufi patrons provide charitable "services" of food, water, hot drinks, and sweets to the public. Outside upon a stage draped in colorful cloth, a professional performer of *inshad* provides the musical and lyrical setting for *dhikr*, an emotionally-charged, rhythmic swaying movement whose practice is meant to engender a heightened spiritual state. Dervishes in eccentric dress converge on the mulid space, sometimes sporting ornate canes, flags, and symbolic props such as wooden swords. Families picnic on the pavement and children frolic among the fairground attractions, rambunctiously riding swings and playing at shooting galleys. Youth swagger in their most fashionable clothes, makeshift cafés fill up, and itinerant vendors hawk snacks, toys, party hats, trinkets, and cassette tapes of *inshad* and other music genres.

Although the mulid marks the height of the year's festive activity, Ibn Al-Farid's shrine remains a site for goings-on throughout the year, including the daily life of its caretaker's family and visits by the pious. It is located on the edge of the Al-Abagiya neighborhood, whose residents, like those of other low-income neighborhoods in Cairo, often hold their celebratory events in the streets. One evening in 2007, the tomb-lined block leading to Ibn Al-Farid's mausoleum was transformed into a bachelor party, the street strung with blue fairy lights, red Chinese lanterns, and chandeliers. With the shrine in the immediate background, a young DJ worked behind a wall of 18 speakers stacked across the road, orchestrating dance music for the party-goers and featuring a popular style called "mulid". Like the party's ornamentation, this music's name and sound evoked the atmosphere of a saint festival, but with a twist. Drawing on the context of mulid festivals and Sufi *inshad*, the "mulid" trend samples, imitates and remixes elements of mulid festival music, lyrics, and cultural references into a distinct form of boisterous, youth-oriented dance music.

This Al-Abagiya bachelor party was held for a DJ who produces "mulid" remixes on his home computer and specializes in this dance trend to the extent that he calls his small entertainment business "DJ Mulid". It was thus somehow fitting that he

commenced his wedding celebrations in the immediate vicinity of Ibn Al-Farid's tomb. From one perspective, mulid-goers generally believe that *baraka*, a type of spiritual energy and blessing, emanates from shrines to their surrounding areas, ostensibly imbuing his nuptial celebrations with good fortune. And like in many Egyptian celebrations, DJ Mulid's bachelor party contained festive elements reminiscent of the mulid held for Ibn Al-Farid himself. But most pertinently, this particular saint's work has contributed much to the content of *inshad*, the musical and lyrical tradition on which "mulid" dance tracks so pointedly draw. And as the "mulid" dance trend originated in and is most commonly heard at weddings rather than mulids, this particular bachelor party brought the inspiration of saints, mulids, and *inshad* into closer physical and symbolic proximity with the street-smart dance music modeled upon it.[4]

Yet the scene of youth dancing to "mulid" tracks at a bachelor party before Ibn Al-Farid's shrine also underlined a significant aspect of the "mulid" dance music trend. Having drawn on the "popular" tradition of mulid culture, "mulid" dance music remains essentially street-based, emerging from informal production circuits and maintaining a local, grassroots identity. Slick as some of it may be, mulid songs are not the stuff of upscale nightclubs, just as this street party was physically and symbolically distant from the nearest hotel reception hall hosting more lavish wedding celebrations. Well below the radar of trendy "world-musicized" dance currents, and distinct from elitist "intellectual" or "artsy" borrowings of *inshad*, the "mulid" dance trend incorporates elements of a very Egyptian genre into an equally grassroots "people's" production, bringing re-worked Sufi borrowings into "popular" settings such as back-alley parties and crowded public transportation. Its use of one "popular" genre in the production of another has resulted in the "re-popularization" of mulids and their music among wide sectors of Egypt's youth. This study examines aspects of how and why this arresting form of "re-popularizing" Sufi *inshad* has taken place.

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[4] On the relationships between mulid festivities, wedding celebrations, and the mulid dance trend, see Peterson, Jennifer (forthcoming 2008) "Remixing songs, remaking mulids: The merging spaces of dance music and saint festivals in Egypt." In Samuli Schielke and Georg Stauth (eds.), *Dimensions of Locality: The Making and Remaking of Islamic Saints and Their Places*, Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam 8, Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

Popularizing the mulid

Like low-income neighborhoods such as Al-Abagiya, the types of loud street parties they host, and the local youth who produce mulid dance tracks, the "street"-based music genre that the mulid trend belongs to is referred to by the term "*sha'bi*". As is the case with its common English translation of "popular", the word "*sha'bi*" comprises various shades of meaning. It derives from the word "*sha'b*", meaning "people", and is used variously to imply "populist", "popular" as in enjoying great popularity, and "popular" as in being "of the people" – of being local, vernacular, and from the proverbial "street". "*Sha'bi*" is also used as a virtual synonym of "folkloric", for example in the context of "*sha'bi*" or "popular" arts such as folk dancing, the narration of epic tales, and other traditional "folk" genres.

With regard to its sense as being "of the people", which is the meaning implied when used as a label for *sha'bi* music and culture, the term is endowed with a full range of connotations. Like its counterpart "*baladi*", an adjective describing "low-class" urban culture of rural origin, and essentially meaning "native" or "cottage-industry", "*sha'bi*" is held both in high regard and abhorrent disdain depending on who is doing the naming and the context at hand. On the positive side, it is used to suggest authenticity, savvy, cleverness, and an engaged connection to one's humble yet honored origins and social environment. At the negative end of the spectrum, however, it can imply being poor-quality, grossly impoverished, unsophisticated, and downright uncouth.

All of these various qualities are applied in evaluations of *sha'bi* music, a genre that often fuses "rural" musical traditions with "urban" instruments, dance tempos, and lyrical concerns. Yasser Abdel Latif, a fan of the *sha'bi* genre, describes it as a blend of traditional, plaintive scat – "oh night, oh eyes, oh, oh" – and a type of urban blues "whose content revolves around cursing fate and its treachery that destroys pleasure and disperses communities, as well as love concerns of a sensual nature […] This is in addition to the untamed, raw performance of this sector's singers and their rough voices that pour over

music that is a mix of the city's clamor and crowdedness […]".[5] Fans of *sha'bi* music appreciate what they perceive as an unassuming attitude, simple honesty, and a down-to-earth approach that remain in touch with contemporary urban reality. Detractors, on the other hand, typically deem it "meaningless", vulgar, and gauche. *Sha'bi* songs including the mulid strain are eschewed by official broadcasting outlets, which characterize them as "lowbrow" and unsophisticated. Mulid songs are not given airtime on the radio and are not heard on television except for rare snatches broadcast in the soundtracks of a few films.[6]

Effectively barred from corporate media venues and unable to afford the high and rising costs of professional studios, mulid dance songs exist outside of the "culture establishment", at once marginalized to and widely popular within the "informal" realm.[7] Even at its most professional levels, the production and distribution of mulid songs remain largely in the hands of independent ventures and small, homegrown businesses. For example, Sawt Al-Tarab for Acoustics, the producer of *sha'bi* star Mahmoud Al-Leithy's mulid hits, is a family business located in the central fruit market of the *sha'bi* neighborhood Imbaba. Its space is split between a studio/office upstairs, where music is produced, and, downstairs, a *baladi* lingerie store displaying a full range of apparel in lamé, feathers, and sequins. Family members staff both enterprises, and cassette tapes

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[5] Abdel-Latif, Yasser (2007) "musiqa al-shari'." *amkenah*: *ta'ni bi-thiqafat al-makan*, Book 8, Alexandria, p. 232-237, citation on p. 223. Abdel Latif works for an Egyptian music television station loosely modeled on MTV (*qanat al-nil li-lmunawi'yat* "Nile Channel for Variety Acts"). In this article, he chronicles his attempt to co-produce a show documenting the lives of *sha'bi* stars and the cultural assumptions and biases encountered in the process.

[6] A peculiar exception to this rule was an advertisement played in December 2007 on *iza'at al-aghani* (Song Radio) calling on listeners to vote for their favorite male and female singers, lyricists, composers, and songs for 2007, and playing a mulid dance music track. When I called to vote for mulid songs, the staff member handling calls seemed surprised and amused, but granted that "tastes change" and "nothing is strange these days". He was unaware that the advertisement featured a mulid song, but suggested that its purpose may have been to provide a "change". Films that have featured mulid dance music include *lakhmat ras* (A mixed-up head), which showcased a full track, *'awdat al-nadla* (Return of the mean and nasty), discussed in detail below, *al-hubb kida* (Such is love), which incorporated a mulid dance riff into one *sha'bi* song, and *karkar* (Karkar), which featured mulid instrumentation in a wedding scene and a short mulid track subsequently adopted by the mulid dance trend. *lakhmat ras* (A mixed-up head), Ahmed Al-Badri, Cairo: Al-Sobky Film, 2006; *'awdat al-nadla* (Return of the mean and nasty), Said Hamed, Cairo: Al-Sobky Film, 2006; *al-hubb kida* (Such is love), Akram Farid, Cairo: Al-Sobky Film, 2007; *karkar* (Karkar), Ali Ragab, Cairo: Al-Sobky Film, 2007.

[7] Muhsin, Mahmoud,"studiyuhat al-aghani tahawwalat ila 'aswaq tujariya'…wa-l-muwazzi'un sabab al-azma." *Al Masry Al Youm* newspaper, No. 1024, Tuesday, 3 April 2007.

from upstairs are shelved among the bedroom attire showcased on the ground level. As an example of more amateur-sounding homemade productions, some other mulid tracks are recorded at extremely low cost and quality by a singer accompanying a computer-mixing DJ in a makeshift studio or on the street. The low sound quality of such productions, however, does not necessarily detract from their popularity. An example is the 2007 compilation tape *mulid al-kharbana al-gadid* (The new mulid of the screwed-up). Its producer, Abdel Megid Al-Mahdi, characterizes it and its quality as "trash", but says that this is "what the people want" and that he is happy to profit by supplying it.[8]

Thanks to the low-cost, largely decentralized means of *sha'bi* production, the mulid trend has been able to grow rapidly both in quantity and style. It was first developed in 2001 as a twist to instrumental dance tracks by wedding musicians in the *sha'bi* sprawl of Cairo's Al-Matariyya neighborhood. The mulid motif was later picked up by wedding singer Gamal Al-Sobky, who added phrases taken from the mulid milieu, lyrics sung in a traditional Sufi style, and salutations to presumed wedding guests/mulid-goers, including his eventual producer. *Sha'bi* dance songs are often first tested out at weddings, and having passed this initial screening, his song "*ha-nruh al-mulid*" (Let's go to the mulid) was recorded in 2002, becoming a *sha'bi* hit and inspiring the eventual development of the mulid current.[9] *Inshad* melodies and rhythms, direct references to mulids and their milieu, and language from *inshad* and Sufi contexts were soon incorporated into scores of *sha'bi* dance tracks, some purely instrumental and many re-using stock phrases (such as *madad*, a formulaic supplication) and lyrics from other "mulid" songs (such as *ma-tkhafshi*, "don't be afraid"). Single tracks first appeared with simple titles such as "the new mulid" or "mulid 1" and "mulid 2", yet as the current grew established, subsequent songs adopted a range of eye-catching titles, material and approaches, much of it remaining irreverently tongue-in-cheek. Examples of these later track titles include "mulid of the crazy", "mulid of the upside down", "mulid of the devil", "mulid online" and "mulid of the censor board". In addition to recorded songs, computer-

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[8] Conversation held in Al-Mahdi's cassette tape shop in Imbaba on 20 April 2007. *mulid al-kharbana al-gadid* (2007). Imbaba: Abdu Company.
[9] Gamal Al-Sobky (2002) *al-mulid*. Shubra: Al-Imam for Artistic Production and Distribution.

generated compositions and remixes became common, with many of the most popular tracks being created by anonymous DJs. **[Music Clip 2: Gamal Al-Sobky's "Let's go to the mulid"]**

As in production, the distribution of mulid songs is facilitated by informal *sha'bi* networks. They are often featured on inexpensive bootleg cassette tapes that compile a "cocktail" of the latest hits and are widely available on the street in *sha'bi* areas. However, as a young DJ called 'Alaa puts it, mulid tracks are essentially an "MP3" current.[10] Many are produced electronically, and all are available as music files that can be easily and cheaply disseminated. Due to their plummeting costs, computers have become common even among low-income urban and rural families, and the practice of transferring files by removing and re-installing hard drives is highly common. Songs of all kinds, including mulid tracks, are widely distributed by this means, while USB memory sticks, personal MP3 players, and music-playing cell phones are also increasingly serving as a means for the informal distribution of songs. Some internet cafés burn compilation CDs for a modest fee, and many homes and shops use computer-less CD-ROMs connected to speakers so as to enable the playing of music copied as data files. It is these kinds of informal technological solutions that, for example, allow DJs working in highly marginalized conditions to nonetheless function professionally. Take the case of DJ Ragab, who lives and works on the agricultural Gold Island, which is located in Cairo's Nile and accessible only by boat. Ragab, who lacks the personal computer many *sha'bi* DJs use, takes a sailboat ferry to Cairo's mainland and burns compilation CDs in an internet café. After sailing back to the island, he plays them on two CD-ROMs, bypassing the need for a computer.[11]

The internet is another resource that facilitates the informal distribution of mulid dance tracks. Googling "*aghani mulid*" (mulid songs) brings up pages of links to mulid tracks uploaded by producers and aficionados onto Arabic-language web sites. Many of these are forums that offer posting services to members and often include special sections

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[10] Interview with DJ 'Alaa, Al-Sayyida Nafisa, 17 July 2007.
[11] Interview with DJ Ragab, Gazirat Al-Dhahab (Gold Island), 20 August 2007.

for *sha'bi* songs. Members upload mulid tracks, often with comments such as "a really hardcore mulid song", "it'll light the wedding on fire", or "it'll smash the DJ station", and then other members (and sometimes the general public) can download them for free and post responses. The comments made to such offerings of music are often highly enthusiastic, with drawn out words (*gaaaaaaaaaaaamid* "haaaaaardcooooore"), flashing images of smiley faces, and expressions of effusive gratitude to the "pasha" or "man" who provided them. Members can request tracks that are difficult to find, and DJs who produce mulid remixes sometimes advertise themselves through posted comments and images, as well as by attaching their names and phone numbers to uploaded music files.[12]

In the realm of the video clip, too, the mulid dance current remains largely informal and marginalized from the slick production world. Video clips for mulid songs are extremely rare due to the high costs involved, the tracks' being a fairly "underground" *sha'bi* sub-genre, and – according to DJ 'Alaa – the fact that their content is considered unsuitable for the narrative clip genre.[13] The only clip that has been professionally produced is one for the mulid song by Sa'd Al-Sughayr, a *sha'bi* star who plays in 5-star hotel weddings and pricy nightclubs, and who features in light comic films. His mulid song was in the 2006 film "*lakhmat ras*" (A mixed-up head), featured in the scene of a street party thrown for the protagonist, whose father mistakenly believed that he had been accepted into police academy. The video clip is a mélange of vignettes from the movie, mostly of Al-Sughayr singing it on the party stage and people dancing. Obviously intended for promotion, the clip ends with an announcement for when the movie was to begin screening. As with mulid tracks, Sa'd Al-Sughayr's video can be downloaded from internet forums and is transferred between computers as an electronic file. **[Video Clip 1: Sa'd Al-Sugahyr's mulid video]**

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[12] Such websites accessible in August 2007 included www.anamasry.com, http://dgnet.jeeran.com, and www.tzbeets.com.

[13] DJ 'Alaa suggests that most video clips center around a love story. Interview in Al-Sayyida Nafisa, 17 July 2007.

The only other mulid videos produced by the time of writing are much more informal, homegrown productions. One clip made the circuit of hard drive transfers around 2003; called "*al-turbini wala'ha*" (Tourbini burn it up), it features a mulid track played to footage of Western foreigners dancing in a nightclub. Although one young DJ claims it was filmed in the Sinai beach resort of Sharm Al-Sheikh, the club's size and style suggest that it was filmed in Europe, and the logo in the corner confirms that it was copied from television.[14] Another amateur "clip" that circulated on cell phones in 2007 consists of a mulid track played to a video snatch, perhaps filmed on a cell phone, of a woman dancing suggestively in a living room. Both of these clips belong to a genre of videos circulated among computers and cell phones in which *sha'bi* songs are played to homemade images, some video clips and others still snapshots, of women pictured in various suggestive outfits, poses, and dance movements.

All of these various production and consumption circuits have served to bring Sufi *inshad* and the mulid milieu into previously uncharted cultural waters. Although its *sha'bi* character keeps the mulid current distanced from official arts channels, its informal, *sha'bi* nature has allowed it widespread distribution, featured on cell phones, shared between computers, and played extensively in the street. While in these *sha'bi* musical contexts *inshad* is variously sampled, imitated, electronified, remixed, and ultimately altered to serve boisterous dance songs and other products of feisty youth culture, *inshad* and its context of mulids remain evident through the musical and lyrical associations made, as well as through the songs' symbolic entitling as "mulid" tracks.

These circuits of production and consumption also highlight the *sha'bi* context of mulid dance songs as compared to other contemporary borrowings of *inshad*. An example of non-*sha'bi* borrowing is provided by Music Matbakh, a project conceived and sponsored by the British Council as a means of bringing musicians from the Arab world and Britain together to share experience and fuse musical styles.[15] A concert flier distributed in Cairo at fashionable downtown art galleries describes its sound as ranging

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[14] Interview with DJ Mahmoud, Sohag City, 2 April 2007.
[15] See www.britishcouncil.org/musicmatbakh.

"From hip hop, rock and electronic music to Oud, Nay, beautiful vocals and Sufi rhythms". Yet despite a purported goal of bringing peoples and cultures together, its only Egypt stop on an August 2007 tour was at the SOS Music Festival, located on the elite Mediterranean holiday destination of the North Shore.[16] Its "free" tickets, furthermore, were only obtainable by filling out an English-language form posted online. From conception and formulation to marketing and accessibility, this instance of contemporary Sufi borrowing was completely off the *sha'bi* radar, being produced by and, apparently, for, the privileged few.

In contrast, the mulid dance current's status as a strain of *sha'bi* music, coupled with its widespread success, means that it has "popularized" *inshad* and the mulid festival in two senses of the word. Firstly, in their reconstruction as boisterous "mulid" tracks, *inshad* and the mulid festival have gained wide popularity as a dance favorite among sectors of the population who do not otherwise listen to *inshad* or attend mulids. The mulid dance trend has thus made the relatively marginalized realm of saint festivals one that is "popular" among youth in its remixed form. Secondly, having been crafted by *sha'bi* artists and home-based DJs independently of official culture channels, *inshad* and mulid culture have been uniquely transformed into a "popular" dance trend – one that is proudly considered grassroots by some and derided as trashy by others, but which in all cases is undeniably "*sha'bi*".

"Developing heritage"

Yet why *are* Egyptian dance music artists drawing on and "popularizing" Sufi *inshad*? Detractors of *sha'bi* music and the mulid trend argue that this borrowing indicates an inability to produce something original or locate other suitable material. Drawing on existent musical styles in the production of contemporary music, however, is neither new nor limited to the mulid dance current.

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[16] On aspirations for the Music Matbakh project, see Cumming, Tim "Middle Eastern collective Music Matbakh cook up a musical feast", Independent Online Edition, 18 May 2007, accessed at http://arts.independent.co.uk/music/features/article2554622.ece, and Lynskey, Dorian "'Governments can go to hell'", Guardian Unlimited, 8 June 2007, accessed at http://arts.guardian.co.uk/filmandmusic/story/0,,2097397,00.html.

Writing 11 years ago on contemporary popular music in Egypt, Virginia Danielson noted that "Like their predecessors, young artists are using local materials; they have not loosened their work from the moorings of older Arab repertoires".[17] This statement remains applicable today, at least in terms of musical inspiration and borrowings; blind imitation of "older Arab repertoires" is not the norm. Various forms of "modern classicist" music, such as the works of the influential 20th century singers and composers, and, to a lesser extent, "folk" music, including sung colloquial poetry and rural musical genres, continue to serve as models and material for Egyptian music ranging from commercial pop songs and love ballads to the so-called "alternative" scene that includes fusion jazz and electronic music.[18]

Danielson's statement certainly applies to the mulid dance trend. Yet while it occasionally draws on various forms of "classical" Arab music and most specifically the songs of Oum Kalthoum, its strongest tie is to what producers and listeners describe as "folklore" and "heritage" (*turath*).[19] This is in keeping with the general orientation of the *sha'bi* current since the 1970s, when Walter Armbrust writes that "Composers like [Hani] Shenuda and [Ahmed] Adawiya were trying to develop a fusion style.[20] But the tradition they were blending with European instruments and harmonies was not an updated version of Ottoman court music (the basis of much Arabic classical music), but the folkloric tradition."[21] Today, the *sha'bi* music genre continues to fuse conventional "rural"

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[17] Danielson, Virginia (1996) "New Nightingales of the Nile: Popular Music in Egypt Since the 1970s." *Popular Music* 15/3, p. 299-312, citation on p. 301.

[18] These modern classicists are namely the composers and singers Muhammad Abdel Wahhab and Farid Al-Atrash, and singer Oum Kalthoum, who led a "renaissance" of Arab music in the mid-20th century, combining classical music genres and poetry with colloquial lyrics, large orchestras, and Western-influenced compositions. The colloquial "folk" poetry referred to here includes that of Ahmed Fouad Nigm, Bayram Al-Tonsi, and Fouad Haddad, considered "national" poets who express the people's sentiment and whose verse is often critical of the Egyptian government and/or external threats such as the colonial powers or Israel and the United States.

[19] Oum Kalthoum (d. 1975) remains until today the utmost exemplar of Egyptian, and indeed Arab, singing and the modern classicist musical tradition. See Danielson, Virginia (1997) *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

[20] Hani Shenuda composed for Ahmed 'Adawiya and had his own band *Al-Masriyin* (The Egyptians). Ahmed 'Adawiya is a singer considered the father of urban *sha'bi* style.

[21] Armbrust, Walter (1992) "The National Vernacular: Folklore and Egyptian Popular Culture." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol. 31, Issue 4, p. 525-542, citation on p. 533. See also Armbrust, Walter (1996) *Mass*

traditions with innovative "urban" styles using "Western" instruments and fast dance tempos, relying on "older repertoires" to produce innovative new sounds. Indeed, *sha'bi* singer Gamal Al-Sobky characterizes this reliance on the "old" as the current norm in *sha'bi* music:

> All the songs that come out these days are old, and developed. No one comes up with something themselves, it must be something from folklore, from heritage, something really old that they know by heart, [...] that they develop. You know Sa'd Al-Sughayr's song "*hamra ya uta*" (red tomato)? This is folklore. They take it and fix it up (*yuzabituha*) [...], they add to it.[22]

With its distinctive genre and religious context, *inshad* might appear more "traditional" than other forms of "heritage" music, or at least be more easily identified as such. The borrowing of "folklore" or "heritage" may thus seem to producers and consumers more pronounced in the mulid current than in other *sha'bi* strands simply because it draws so conspicuously on *inshad*. Although in some cases the perceived "quaintness" of *inshad* and *dhikr* is a source of jest in mulid dance songs, the sense that this material constitutes "folkloric heritage" is also exploited as a musical asset. "Heritage" is often employed in mulid dance tracks as a musical convention deemed part of the national culture and therefore seen as legitimate, even promising, material to build upon.

Rarely have I met indignation over Sufi musical traditions being incorporated into *sha'bi* dance songs, and the few objections I've encountered have been highly understated. Rather, commentators most typically suggest that it is "natural" to draw on "heritage," and that doing so, rather than belittling it, recognizes and confirms its greatness. *Sha'bi* star Mahmoud Al-Leithy goes as far as describing mulids and their Sufi music as the "basis" of all other music and in particular the *sha'bi* genre.[23] Although

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Culture and Modernism in Egypt, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, and specifically part of the chapter "Vulgarity", p. 180-190.

[22] Interview in Shubra Al-Kheima, 18 April 2007. The *sha'bi* song "*al-'aynab*" (Grape) and its variants and spins including "*al-balah*" (Date) and "*al-samak*" (Fish), highly popular since 2006 and still hits at the time of writing, are also explained as stemming from "folklore" and "heritage", even as detractors scoff at the perceived "meaningless" of their lyrics. "*Al-'aynab*" is said to have been first borrowed in the *sha'bi* genre by singer Shafiqa in the 1980s, and *sha'bi* mulid singer Mahmoud Al-Leithy recorded a version of it on his 2005 debut album, *'asfourayn*.

[23] Interview in Imbaba, 25 April 2007.

Karin van Nieuwkerk suggests that *sha'bi* performers at mulids may in certain times and contexts be seen as the bottom rung of entertainment, Sufi *munshidin* (sg. *munshid*, performer of *inshad*) and musicians are considered by many to be the most skilled and sensitive artists there are.[24] Some of Egypt's most popularly acclaimed performers emerged from religious contexts including mulids, the prime example being Oum Kalthoum.[25] And in contrast to van Nieuwkerk's observations, some place considerable value on the skills of *sha'bi* musicians in the mulid milieu; from this professional respect comes the saying that "who hasn't worked in the mulid isn't an artist."[26] Al-Leithy, speaking of the contemporary role models for his generation of *sha'bi* singers, lists several non-religious oriented *sha'bi* stars who gained essential musical experience at mulids.[27]

The idea that Sufi music and the mulid milieu form a deep well of musical heritage that contemporary innovations can draw upon is further expressed in the lyrics of a 2005 song by the Cairo-based Arab Rap Family. The group's producer, Nadoo, was raised between Seattle and 'Ataba, the *sha'bi* area that serves as the "threshold" (the literal translation of its name) between the historic old city of Cairo and its modern downtown. In this track titled "*il-lekh il-lekh*" (etc., etc.), Nadoo raps in Arabic about the influence of Sufi music on his artistic development, and describes it as the very essence of art:

> Hey mister, who should I dress for,
> Starmaker and the artists?
> Forget it and tell me where the art is.
> I used to go to the mulid
> And listen to the Sufis' songs.
> I used to listen and hang around in Al-Hussein.

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[24] Van Nieuwkerk, Karin (1996) *"A Trade Like Any Other": Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, p.59.

[25] See Danielson's section on Oum Kalthoum's childhood, "Min al-Mashāyikh" (reared among the shaykhs) (1997: 21-28). Another example is provided by composer Sayyid Makkawi, who began his career as a *munshid* and Qur'an reciter (Schielke, 2007: 181).

[26] This saying was originally attributed to Ahmed Fouad Hassan, who was conductor of the "classical" Arab orchestra Al-Firqa Al-Massiya (which often played for another 20th century "great" – the heartthrob singer Abdel Halim Hafiz), and who previously worked as a musician at mulids.

[27] See also Puig, Nicolas (2006) "Egypt's Pop-Music Clashes and the 'World Crossing' Destinies of Muhammad 'Ali Street Musicians." In Diane Singerman/Paul Amar (eds.) *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, p. 513-536, specifically p. 523, 527, 529.

That's what the art is, Bey.[28]

When used well, some see the power of "heritage" as a secret of success. Proof of it "working" is well-established, it thus serving as a musical-cultural authority to rely upon. Its time-tested appeal moreover suggests to some that an almost "innate" response has evolved to it, that its irresistibly powerful aesthetic is one that, due to their collective musical memory, Egyptians cannot help but like. Ahmed Wahdan, a musician whose career began on the "mulid-wedding circuit", speaks of the "mulid rhythm" as one that "forces the spirit to dance."[29] Sufi patron Sayyid Ragab similarly describes virtual magic in the mulid dance current's use of "heritage"; he characterizes its use of Sufi rhythms as playing to musical sensibilities he sees as deeply connected to the very core of Egyptian national character:

> The basis of all music is rhythm, and you can tell a person's nationality from the rhythm that moves them. The Egyptian rhythm, which Egyptian emotional being (*wajdan*) is raised upon, is the rhythm of the mulid. Any Egyptian in the world, if you play them this rhythm – you'll find them immediately swaying, even if they're not Sufis or *darawish*.[30]

Wahdan and Ragab characterize "mulid", or Sufi, music as an archetypical Egyptian art form and emotive force that is overpowering to listeners, driving them to engage in *dhikr* or dance. Ahmed Al-Bayoumi, a Sufi *munshid* who disapproves of mixing *inshad* and dance music for fear of it distorting Sufism's image, meanwhile suggests that the mulid

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[28] Al Hussein is an area in "Islamic" or "Fatimid" Cairo that hosts the city's largest mulid each year in honor of its namesake, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. "Bey", or "Bek", is an Egyptian title of Turkish origin once used to address the aristocratic class and used today as a form of respect. In the original Arabic, these rap lyrics are "fa-ya-fandim ahandim hadumi l-min, Starmaker wa-l-fananin, insa wa ul li al-fann feen, ena kunt zaman 'ala l-mulid aruh, asma' fih tawashih al-suf, asma' wa aliff fil-hussein, huwa da al-fann ya bey."

[29] Conversation and interview in Al-Darb Al-Ahmar on 22 and 27 April 2007. One of many material elements closely connecting mulids and weddings is the fairground entertainment provided by *sha'bi* musicians, singers and dancers who have traditionally performed in *both* contexts, what van Nieuwkerk calls the "circuit of saint's day celebrations and weddings" (1996: 59).

[30] Conversation in Imbaba, 28 April 2007. *Darawish* is the plural of *darwish*, often given an English language equivalent of "dervish". In the Egyptian context, a *darwish* is a Sufi who devotes a great deal of time to visiting saints' shrines and attending mulids and *dhikr* sessions, and whose love for the Prophet and the saints is effusive.

dance current is, through its use of Sufi-based music, "trying to pull the *dhikr* crowd."[31] Like Wahdan and Ragab, he is suggesting by this that mulid dance song artists are picking up on a musical tradition associated with rhythmic movement that has a powerful, perhaps irresistible, draw. If *inshad* compels listeners to engage in the rhythmic movement of dhikr, and if the mulid current's aim is to make Egyptians dance, its selection of *inshad* as its pick of "heritage", may, consequently, be considered an astute one.

This irresistible "magic" that Wahdan, Ragab, and Al-Bayoumi suggest is a motivation behind the *sha'bi* adoption of *inshad* might also be framed in the context of *tarab*, an Arabic term that describes musically-induced "enchantment" or "rapture".[32] *Tarab* is typically characterized in the literature as dependent on the audience-performer dynamics of a live event, and generally deemed an aesthetic element that is highly diminished, if not entirely extinguished, in the contemporary music scene. Michael Frishkopf argues that *tarab* remains a vital element only in the Sufi milieu, where live performance remains essential and the spiritual context imbues the musical experience of all participants with an intense and sincere emotive force.[33] If this is the case, it can be argued that the mulid dance current did well when choosing to draw on *tarab*-inducing *inshad*, given its aim of inspiring dancing and facilitating a sense of joy.[34]

If, as Frishkopf argues, *inshad* remains a medium for inducing *tarab*, the mulid dance music that draws on it is intended and used as a medium for inducing *mazaag* and *saltanah*, two concepts similar and related to *tarab*. *Mazaag* literally means "mood", but is used to refer to a state of being that is highly sensitive to aesthetics and appreciative of perceived beauty and charm. People may be characterized as being in a state of *mazaag* when they are cheery and witty, or have exerted effort to create and appreciate a special atmosphere; the term is often associated with states of love-inspired fervor or drug-

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[31] Conversation with Sheikh Ahmed Al-Bayoumi at the mulid of Sheikh Mustafa Abdel Salam, Edfu, 1 April 2007.
[32] On *tarab*, see Racy, A.J. (2003) *Making Music in the Arab World: The Culture and Artistry of Tarab*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[33] Frishkopf, 2001.
[34] On the expression of joy and its relationship to both the Sufi context and mulid dance music, see Peterson (forthcoming 2008).

induced intoxication. *Saltanah* derives from the word "Sultan" and implies a state in which *mazaag* has overwhelmed a person who is luxuriously basking in an ecstatic atmosphere, rapturously at one with their "mood".

While *tarab* is usually described in the literature as the outcome of dynamics between a performer and listeners who may be vocal in their appreciation but are presumably seated, in the Sufi context, as shown by Frishkopf, *tarab* is produced by a force of emotion shared by a performer (a *munshid*) and an audience of *dhikr* participants, who use rhythmic movement as one way of channeling and expressing their "enchantment". Active audience participation in the form of movement is both a product of, and an additional catalyst for, the emotion otherwise evoked by the *munshid*'s performance. In the mulid dance context, *mazaag* and *saltanah* override the necessity of a live performance but are similarly achieved through dynamics between a recording, played at very high volume, and an audience employing the music to facilitate an "enchanted" experience that is fostered by and expressed through dancing. This comparison is offered not to claim that mulid songs have inherited or acquired *tarab* from *inshad*, but rather to point out that their borrowing of a *tarab*-inducing tradition is aesthetically congruous with, and perhaps a facilitation of, their focus on the more immediate and individually obtained gratification of *mazaag* and *saltanah*.

One indication of the compatibility between *tarab*-inducing genres and other musical catalysts of ecstasy and *saltanah* is found in the ease with which singer Al-Sayyid Imam has moved throughout his career between Sufi *inshad*, *sha'bi* music, and the healing *zar* ritual, which relies upon music and rhythmic movement.[35] Another example of compatibility between sources of *tarab* and *saltanah* is provided by one of the early mulid dance hits, one that has provided material for numerous remixes and copies. In "*qasadt baabak*" (I aimed for your door), *sha'bi* star Mahmoud Al-Leithy heavily employs the musical style and lyrical content of Sheikh 'Arabi Farhan Al-Balbisi, a

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[35] Interview in Al-Muqattam, 18 July 2007.

munshid Al-Leithy describes as having been "close" to the *sha'bi* milieu at that time.[36] As an indication of his popularity in *sha'bi* contexts, Al-Balbisi is the one and only *munshid* commonly heard on the speakers of Nile pleasure boats, where *sha'bi* music is a staple. Al-Balbisi, from the Delta region, sings an *inshad* style in which Frishkopf writes "musical accompaniment is close to secular folk music, adapted to accommodate dhikr, and often evokes a dancelike ethos."[37] This combination of folk aesthetics, the powerfully emotive, "enchanting" element of *tarab*, and a dance-driven rhythm perhaps made Al-Balbisi a perfect choice for *sha'bi* mulid songs, given their aim of inspiring dancing and fostering *mazaag* and *saltanah*. A catchy melodic riff he employs on the *kawala* reed flute has since become a distinctive feature in many mulid dance tracks, played instead on the electronic keyboard or generated by computer. **[Music Clip 3: Mahmoud Al-Leithy's "I aimed for your door"]   [Music Clip 4: Sheikh 'Arabi Farhan Al-Balbisi]**

Yet by drawing on the magic of heritage and *tarab* as ingredients of success, mulid dance tracks are also reinforcing the continued popularity of local art forms and the positive reception of musical productions that highlight them. Eleven years ago, Danielson wrote that associations of local cultural pride are often a factor of success in Egyptian music trends: "The materials important to the structure of widely popular music in Egypt have local colours of some sort […T]he music that many Egyptian listeners seem to prefer draws threads of local tradition into the present day."[38] "Authenticity" (*asala*) is in fact a feature described by Ali Jihad Racy as an aesthetic criterion for music in Egypt in general, and yet is particularly pertinent in the *sha'bi* context given its characterization as "native" music.[39] The intentional use and recognition of Sufi "heritage" in mulid dance songs evoke a sense of "authenticity" at once essential and intrinsic to *sha'bi* music by underlining a sense of affiliation to local Egyptian identity.[40]

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[36] Interview in Imbaba, 25 April 2007. This song was included on Al-Leithy's debut album *'asfourayn*, which he says sold a million copies. Mahmoud Al-Leithy (2005) *'asfourayn*. Imbaba: Sawt Al-Tarab for Acoustics.
[37] Frishkopf (2001), p. 246.
[38] Danielson (1996), p. 309.
[39] Racy, Ali Jihad (1982) "Musical Aesthetics in Present-Day Cairo." *Ethnomusicology* 26/3, p. 391-406. Other terms he uses to imply the same quality are "tradition" and "genuineness".
[40] Authenticity here implies being "original" and "native". Authenticity in the sense of "pure" is not intended, although it is an essential criterion for some in judging music. An example concerning Sufi *inshad* and *sha'bi* music is provided by the comment of a fruit vendor from Sohag, made at the mulid of

Although related to similar events and styles elsewhere in the Islamic world, mulid festivals and *inshad* are perceived as typically Egyptian and serve as strong markers of nationhood.

Implying cultural authenticity by drawing on local heritage also fosters social tolerance of the mulid dance current regardless of how rowdy, irreverent, or "vulgar" some of its songs may be perceived. Affiliation with local identity and adherence to the cultural-religious framework dominating life in Egypt precludes public outcry over any perceived transgressions in this youth culture trend.[41] DJ 'Alaa', for example, notes that people in his neighborhood often comment on his appearance – when I spoke with him he sported bleached, gelled hair, a black Eminem T-shirt, and intertwined jelly bracelets. Although he and his often long-haired or baseball-capped peers might seem exotic to some of the populace, and some others might be deemed deviant for their conspicuous consumption of drugs, they and their "authentically local" music remain seen as safely on the side of Egyptian, the youth ultimately deemed "neighborhood boys". This cultural safeguard of "authenticity" is contextualized by comparison to the 1996 case of Egyptian heavy metal fans being arrested on charges of Satanic worship. Their iconoclastic dress and consumption of drugs were also singled out, in addition to a range of cultural taboos, in a highly sensational media frenzy. The public outcry and their arrest, however, hinged much on the non-Islamic, non-Egyptian associations of these youth's adopted music culture.[42]

Sidi Abu Ikhlas in Alexandria on 12 April 2007. Of the Sufi *munshid* performing he said, "Next he's going to sing *al-hantour* (a popular *sha'bi* dance song about an outing in a horse-drawn carriage)" because the *munshid* was "mixing up his words" by inserting Oum Kalthoum into his performance, a practice in fact highly common among *munshidin* and *sha'bi* singers alike, and one not typically criticized.

[41] On the religious-cultural framework of mulid dance tracks, see Peterson (forthcoming 2008). Relations between religiosity and pop and rai music are discussed respectively in Varzi, Roxanne (2006) *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 21,133, 136, and Schade-Poulsen, Marc (1999) *Men and Popular Music in Algeria: The Social Significance of Rai*, Austin: University of Texas Press, both cited in Swedenberg, Ted (2007) "Imagined Youths." In *Middle East Report* 245, accessed online at http://www.merip.org/mer/mer245/swedenburg.html.

[42] See Hamzawy, Amr (2000) "Processes of local deconstruction of global events, news, and discursive messages: case studies from Egypt." In Bjørn Olav Utvik and Knut S. Vikør (eds.) *The Middle East in a Globalized World: Papers from the Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, Oslo 1998*, London: Bergen, pp. 130-149, accessed in August 2007 at http://www.smi.uib.no/pao/hamzawy.html, and Napoli, James J. (2002) "Covering Islam in Egypt", posted on Religion in the News, Vol. 5, No.1, accessed in August 2007 at http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/csrpl/RINVol5No1/covering%20Islam.htm.

With regard to more purely musical considerations, however, authenticity is insufficient to make music, *sha'bi* or otherwise, aesthetically pleasing; artistic creativity and the cultivation of individual and distinctive traits are other criteria that Racy lists. His fourth condition, one significant to the sampling and remixing of Sufi *inshad* in mulid dance songs, is "innovation and modernity", which he characterizes as the following:[43]

> [...] innovation is widely discussed under the topic of *tatwīr,* which means 'developing' or 'making evolve.' Envisaged as the raison d'être of any musical endeavor, the process of *tatwīr* is generally equated with making the music artistically more sophisticated and rendering it more modern. [...] It implies bringing the music closer to the ranks of *mūsīqá ' alamiyyah*, or 'international music'. [...] Despite its Western orientation, *tatwīr* is seen as a process bound by tradition.[44]

In contrast to blind imitation or straightforward sampling, the process of making *inshad* "evolve" is, in fact, exactly what mulid dance track artists describe themselves as doing, as borrowing from "heritage", "folklore", and "the basis of art", and then "developing" it and adding Western musical characteristics. This "development" implies building upon and modernizing older source material more than it suggests "improving" it. This "development" is further viewed as necessary in order for the new musical product to appeal to the current generation of youth. The following quotes from *sha'bi* singers Gamal Al-Sobky and Mahmoud Al-Leithy illustrate this point:

> The basis of the mulid is *dhikr*. If you listen to *dhikr* tapes of sheikhs, like Sheikh Yassin Al-Tuhami, we took their music and developed it a bit, made it a bit youth-like (*shababi*) [...] because this is something that belongs to old people. Sheikh Sharaf and Sheikh Yassin Al-Tuhami, old people understand them but you won't see young people like me listening to their tapes.[45]

> We took this art and made it chic (*shayyaknah*). We made it into Amr Diab.[46] The clever distributors introduced Western instruments, developed the rhythm,

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[43] Racy (1982), p. 391.
[44] Ibid., p. 394-395.
[45] Gamal Al-Sobky, interview in Shubra Al-Kheima, 18 April 2007. Sheikh Yassin Al-Tuhami is the most well-known *munshid* in Egypt today – he is featured on Egyptian television, researched by foreign academics, regularly performs overseas, and has a group of devoted fans who attend his performances across Egypt. Sheikh Sharaf (d. approx. 2005) is the most well-known performer of *qissas*, moral tales interwoven with Sufi *inshad* and performed at mulids.
[46] A slick Egyptian pop star.

developed the music, but our basis is the mulid. [...] When I took the song and developed it, I did it to suit my generation. [...] We develop the mulid, and, God willing, I will keep developing it.[47]

Here, mulid dance artists are not only drawing on "heritage" because it "works", because the magic of *tarab* is considered suitable material for facilitating *mazaag*, and because its "authenticity" satisfies *sha'bi* standards and more general Egyptian preferences for popular music that embodies pride in local identity. Rather, mulid dance artists are also "developing" these materials to make them better suit current tastes and ideals. This "development" largely hinges on electronification, sampling, and remixing, and includes the addition of various *sha'bi* vocal styles such as song introductions made by coquettish-sounding women, barked wedding-style salutations, and the sing-song, almost rap-like approach of *sha'bi* star Shaaban Abdel Rahim.[48] Sound bytes from popular movies and references to various youth preoccupations such as sexual frustration and the obtainment of drugs are sometimes featured, all of these elements woven together in an often chaotic montage that might be characterized by outsiders as a form of unwitting post-modernism.[49]

In some cases, this notion of "developing heritage" is applied to the treatment of lyrical content as well; Mahmoud Al-Leithy capitalizes on the popularity of remixing *inshad* to equally focus on the "development" of a track's words. Concerned with producing *sha'bi* songs with a moral message, Al-Leithy finds this modernizing approach a successful means of transmitting "old" religious ideas to the young generation.[50] It allows him to market to youth traditional knowledge (such as in his song about 25 prophets) and various messages of moral content through a modern medium that appeals to them both in terms of its aesthetics and the means of *using* it, typically by boisterously

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[47] Mahmoud Al-Leithy, interview in Imbaba, 25 April 2007.
[48] On Shaaban Abdel Rahim, see Grippo, James R. (2006) "The Fool Sings a Hero's Song: Shaaban Abdel Rahim, Egyptian Shaabi, and the Video Clip Phenomenon." *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 16, accessed at http://www.tbsjournal.com/Grippo.html.
[49] Sound bytes from movies are incorporated into some songs, and I once heard an entire cassette tape that interwove mulid and other *sha'bi* songs with textual excerpts from comedy films and plays.
[50] See Peterson (forthcoming 2008).

dancing in a party-like atmosphere.[51] Were it not for the "developed", contemporized

style he sings in, Al-Leithy argues, youth would not listen to his message:

> I sing for my generation.[52] This whole generation dances [...] so [...] it has to
> make people dance. [...] What is the key you'll sing in, the mood you'll sing in?
> [...] Does it work with youth (*al-shabab*)? [...] The third condition is that the
> words have a purpose. [...] If I make them dance, I'm happy and they're happy
> and the words stick in their ear – they've benefited from me and I've benefited
> from them.[53]

Al-Leithy's concern with the consequences of "developing" or "modernizing" both

musical and lyrical content focuses on the ultimate *use* of mulid dance songs by their

audience. This aspect of consumption is one that Richard Middleton describes as so

essential to the cultural significance of music that he deems it a "productive force" in

social-music practice.[54] Mulid dance tracks are most typically used at occasions of

celebration and merry-making in which collective joy is a dominant, essential feature,

such as weddings, mulids, and parties of various kinds. Although they lack a spiritual

framework, these collective, celebratory occasions share much with the mulid context of

inshad and *dhikr* in the way of shared emotion, ecstatic behavior, and an overall festive

atmosphere.[55] Yet mulid songs are also used in more individual, arguably more "modern"

ways, as the listening choice of drivers in various forms of public transportation, the

soundtracks to outings in horse-drawn carriages or Nile pleasure boats, or the music

selection of friends and family dancing in the living room to entertain each other.

Dancing is the intended and typical use of mulid dance tracks, and analogies of

"heritage" and "development" can be found here, too. This is not to claim that dancing to

sha'bi mulid songs is an art form modeled on *dhikr*, or that it is considered a

"modernized" version of Sufi rhythmic movement. Nonetheless, the parallels between

practicing *dhikr* to *inshad* and dancing to mulid tracks beg comparison of how each

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[51] Mahmoud Al-Leithy (2007) *ya rabb*. Imbaba: Sawt Al-Tarab for Acoustics.
[52] Al-Leithy himself was 27 years old at the time of this interview.
[53] Interview in Imbaba, 25 April 2007
[54] As cited in Danielson (1996: 300).
[55] On the spatial, temporal, metaphorical, and experiential relationships between the mulid dance current
and actual mulid festivities, see Peterson (forthcoming 2008).

movement genre functions with regard to approach, intent, and form as viewed respectively from the perceived paradigms of "tradition" and "modernity".[56]

Youth who enjoy the mulid dance current tend to view *dhikr* as traditional and perhaps even quaint to the point of being comical; it is unusual to find them seriously engaging in it. More typically, such youth are found at mulids lingering at the edges of Sufi *dhikr* sessions, mockingly mimicking the participants or dancing in styles generally deemed incongruous with the spiritual atmosphere. In a more thoughtful treatment of these conflicting approaches to movement, however, 19-year-old dance enthusiast Ramy describes his frustration with *dhikr* by comparing the rigidity of the "*really* old" to the variation, motion, and spirit of his youthful improvisations:

> I wanted to see what the *dhikr* is. So once I joined in the *dhikr* and I danced with them and all, and you become one with the song (*yinsigim*) and keep on dancing to it, but there's no change. I tried to introduce variation to it, but variation doesn't work with it. [...] It's one movement, so I got bored with it. [...] I've tried all kinds of dance, and *dhikr* is the only kind I didn't like. *Inshad* is nice – I could dance to *inshad* with something else, something different from *dhikr*. [...] I wanted to develop it, to try to make changes in it. [...] *Dhikr* is *really* old, and so I wanted to change it. I stood completely outside [the tent] and danced to their *dhikr* a totally different dance, one with motion, spirit, and grace (*halawa*). I enjoyed it.[57]

As in the dance forms practiced to *sha'bi* mulid tracks, *dhikr* is to a large degree a male domain. Motion-oriented *dhikr*, as opposed to other seated forms, is practiced to

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[56] Although Madoeuf (2006: 480) and Mustafa (2005: 108) characterize certain manifestations of *dhikr* as dance, and, below, dance enthusiast Ramy speaks of his experience using this term, the classification of *dhikr* as dance in strictly religious discourse, among Sufi circles, and among the general populace is debatable. (Madoeuf, Anna (2006) "Mulids of Cairo: Sufi Guilds, Popular Celebrations, and the 'Roller-Coaster Landscape' of the Resignified City." In Diane Singerman/Paul Amar (eds.) *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, p. 465-487, and Mustafa, Faruq Ahmed (2005) *al-mawalid: dirasa li-l'adat wa-l-taqalid al-sha'biya fi misr*, Alexandria: dar al-ma'rifa al-jama'iya.) One issue at stake is the degree to which "ritual" and "entertainment" are differentiated; another is how experiences of rhythmic movement made with various intents differ from each other in the view of practitioners on the one hand, and in the popular imagination on the other. This issue bears some resemblance to the problem of characterizing Qur'anic recitation as singing. For discussion of the so-called *sama'* (listening) polemic concerning the permissibility of musical audition of the Qur'an, see Nelson, Kristina (2001) *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, p. 32-51.
[57] Interview with Ramy "Al-Aqil" ("the rational", so-called because he's "crazy"), Al-Sayyida Zeinab, 27 April 2007.

music and/or other aural catalysts including the chanting of God's name(s), clapping, and audible, rhythmic breathing. It is typically enacted by standing and swaying the upper body and head while remaining in place, although there are, of course, many personal, regional, and Sufi order-based variations. Even while it fosters individual spiritual and bodily experiences, *dhikr* is practiced communally, at once drawing from and contributing to a collective atmosphere of spirituality. *Dhikr* is often performed in sync, with participants lined up in rows, although more informal "free-for-all" *dhikrs* are also common at mulids. Without detracting from the richness or sincere emotive force of this movement style, it can nevertheless be argued that its motions remain relatively codified, "traditional" if you will, and contained within a discrete genre.[58] **[Video 2: *Dhikr* filmed at the 2006 mulid of Al-Sayyida Zeinab]**

In contrast, dancing to mulid songs incorporates complex and varied movements borrowed from numerous traditions and combined in an improvised form called "*tashkil*", meaning "diversification", or "compilation", and implying the assemblage of compatible but distinct elements. *Tashkil* is typically performed either solo or in a pair, and includes elements of *baladi* "belly dance", break dance, hip hop, vogueing, martial arts, and forms of interactive play-fighting reminiscent of traditional *tahtib* (a stick-fight dance from Upper Egypt). Props are sometimes used, most typically a large knife that dancers may twirl like batons and use to mimic cutting themselves or thrust at their partner in playful, rhythmic "fighting". **[Video 3: Youth dancing *tashkil* at the 2007 mulid of Al-Fatima Al-Nabiwiyya] [Video 4: *tashkil* dancing part 2]**

In keeping with its performance orientation, this street dance genre sometimes employs spectacular theatrics. Ramy, quoted above, takes wallets, cell phones, cigarette packs and other items from his audience and, after piling them on the ground, mimes the weaving of a magical spell by sinuously waving his arms over this collection as he dances around it. To the popular "*al-hanuti*" (The undertaker) mulid track, I've witnessed youth hoisting a friend on their shoulders, draped in a sheet as though he were a corpse.

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[58] I have been told, however, that the distinctive Leithy form of *dhikr*, which involves highly stylized and synchronized combinations of jumping, turning, stretching and breathing, is similar to traditional dance forms from the region in which it originates, the Aswan governorate of the deep south.

When the heavy dance beat kicked in, the "corpse" leapt from their shoulders and, revealed as wearing a ghost mask, danced beneath the sheet now used as an awning thrust up and down by the others. I have also been told that to the "*al-magnuna*" (The crazy one) mulid track, a group of boys sew their mouths shut with a needle and thread, enclosing a ten-pound note within their handiwork.[59] Typically performed at festive, celebratory events such as weddings and mulids, these shows of theatrical performance are often framed by a spectacular setting created with aerosol flame jets, foam spray, and flashing, colored lights. **[Music Clip 5: mulid al-hanuti]**

It is this kind of "modern", individualized, performance-focused improvisation drawing on a diverse range of moves and genres that youth like Ramy would characterize as "evolved" and "developed" in contrast to the "traditional heritage" of rhythmic *dhikr*. Although the two approaches are parallel to each other, rather than one the outgrowth of the other or indicative of direct borrowing, their comparison illustrates their aesthetic and practice-oriented differences as ones that can be, as in Ramy's quote, characterized by a contrast between "tradition" and "innovation". As in the discourse on "developing" musical "heritage", then, the *use* of mulid tracks through dance can also be framed within a perspective of modernization.

Sampling "folklore" and re-popularizing *inshad*

Producers and consumers of mulid dance songs use the terms "heritage" and "folklore" to refer to the current's drawing on a long-established cultural tradition, and they are not alone in this characterization of *inshad* and the mulid milieu. Although *munshidin*, musicians, and others at mulids might object to their art and culture being classified as folklore, it typically is described this way by Egyptian academics and official cultural establishments.[60] Staged representations of mulids, such as those orchestrated by television programs and government cultural agencies, are often

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[59] Interview with DJ 'Alaa in Al-Sayyida Nafisa, 17 July 2007.
[60] Schielke notes that Sheikh Yassin Al-Tuhami rejects the folklore classification, "stressing that his performance is a religious mission." (2006:175) See also Frishkopf (2001).

presented as cleaned-up, idealized and quaint folklore teeming with archetypical "*sha'bi*" beliefs and practices.

In these kinds of representations, aspects of "*sha'bi*" life become a marker of symbolic cultural authenticity, even though in the everyday the same practices are subjected to critical rhetoric and restrictive policies that seek to impose a system of order befitting the regime's vision of modernity. A simple example is provided by vegetable vendors, who in real life are sometimes chased from their chosen sites of sale because their commerce does not conform to the municipality's intended use for public space or keep within officially sanctioned market limits. Yet vegetable merchants, with their "scenic" donkey-drawn carts and street-side baskets, are also featured as backdrops to Ramadan talk shows, as in the sets of programs featuring colloquial poet Ahmed Fouad Nigm on the Dream satellite station in 2005. In such contexts, the informality of "*sha'bi*" life is presented as a quaint cultural symbol that, controlled as "scenery", has been made suitable for the staged dynamics of television and the purified social representations that it screens.

An example of polished, "folkloric" representations of the mulid is provided by one of the wonderland spectacles created by the Ministry of Culture as Ramadan entertainment. Each year during this holy month, the ministry transforms a children's park into an outing destination that hosts art exhibitions, poetry readings, intellectual seminars, music concerts, cafés, snacks, and handicraft outlets, and a theme is adopted for the decoration of a wonderland area landscaped with set designs, costumed actors, and musical performances. [61] The ministry's 2007 theme was the Mamluk period, and stage-prop period architecture housed the ubiquitous vegetable vendors, a Sufi group performing *inshad* and *dhikr*, and café performances of the Beni Hilal epic narrated by Upper Egyptian storytellers accompanied by the traditional stringed instrument *al-rababa*. In 2005, the theme was "Bedouin", orchestrated with trucked-in sand, pitched tents, and drum-playing "natives". The previous three years the theme had been the

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[61] This wonderland was previously created in the children's park of the *sha'bi* neighborhood Al-Sayyida Zeinab. In 2007, it was instead set up at Al-Fustat Park, another children's park located in a *sha'bi* area near the site of Cairo's establishment.

"*sha'bi* quarter", populated with vegetable vendors along the "alleyway", a pushcart seller of roasted sweet potatoes, and a "shop" selling hot *fatir* pastries. In the quarter's square, a goat was tethered to a tree and a Sufi group performed *inshad* beside a stage-prop shrine, a live scene intended to replicate a mulid with actors dressed in medieval garb meant to represent a public. One year, the ministry re-positioned the *munshid* and his band, performing in glowing white robes and shiny satin sashes, onto a stage high enough to be safely removed from the "mulid-going" Ramadan crowds. Ironically, the Al-Sayyida Zeinab neighborhood these theatrics were orchestrated in is considered one of Cairo's quintessential *sha'bi* quarters and annually holds one of Egypt's largest mulids in honor of its namesake. The staging of such a spectacle in this particular neighborhood heightened the contrast between the carefully manufactured representation of *sha'bi* life and the mulid on the one hand, and reality just outside the park gates on the other.

It is this kind of fanciful representation that can be characterized as "an 'ideological reconstruction' conjured up in what [Sami] Zubeida calls the 'folklorisation' of popular culture for staged performance".[62] In this citation, Cassandra Lorius discusses the performance of "belly dancer" Fifi Abdou, who theatrically adopts *baladi* roles in many of her dance shows. Abdou has also assumed the role of a vegetable vendor in television productions, for example in the performance of a *sha'bi* song whose set was framed with baskets of produce and references to mulids as represented by a dancer reminiscent of Mardi Gras or Village People "Indians" and *tanura* dancers, Egypt's rather psychedelic "popular arts" version of the whirling dervishes.[63] Yet staged and "folklorized" representations of *sha'bi* life and the mulid are not always so disjointed from reality as in this television performance or in Ministry of Culture mulids.[64]

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[62] Lorius, Cassandra (1996) "'O Boy You Salt of the Earth': Outwitting Patriarchy in Raqs Baladi." *Popular Music*, Vol. 15, No.3, p.285-298, citation on p. 289.
[63] This production was, typically, made for Ramadan viewing, which often focuses on "*sha'bi*" life. The song, "*buss wa shuf*" (Look) includes some minor mulid dance instrumentation and yet its performer, Hoba, classifies it only as "*sha'bi*" and not part of the mulid current. Conversation in Shubra Al-Kheima, 18 April 2007.
[64] For other treatments of the process of "folklorization", see, regarding Egypt, Harring-Smith, Tori (2001) "El-Warsha: Theatrical Experimentation and Cultural Preservation." In Sherifa Zuhur (ed.) *Colors of enchantment: theater, dance, music, and the visual arts of the Middle East*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, p. 77-86, and, regarding Latin America, Canclini, Néstor García (1995) *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Composed for puppet theater, the much-loved "*al-layla al-kabira*" (The big night) operetta is an example of artistic representation that remains more faithful to the spirit and dynamics of a mulid festival.[65] Created by artists familiar with mulids and "*sha'bi*" culture, it draws on the festival's scenes in an honest, endearing approach. Samuli Schielke describes this unique representation as follows: "Like a mawlid, *The Great Night* does not have a clear narrative structure: it is a cavalcade through the wonders of a mawlid […and] a fantastic yet realistic depiction of the atmosphere […] from changing perspectives, always funny but never arrogant."[66] **[Video 5: al-layla al-kabira operetta]**

With regard to the mulid dance current, the fact that producers and consumers consider the material it draws on as "folklore" is sufficient to deem its production and consumption another type of "folkorization." Among the elements considered "folkore" are the "heritage" music of *inshad*, stock phrases from the mulid milieu such as "*madad*" (meaning "assistance", and used as a supplication), and various associations of mulids including the practice of *dhikr*, the riding of swings, and the sale of sweets and special snacks such as roasted chickpeas. One *sha'bi* lyricist even suggests that the phrase "*salli*" (Pray!) is essentially "folklore".[67] Yet compared to some other simplistic or straightforward representations of mulids, the "folklorization" in mulid songs is often fluid and complex, involving multiple borrowings and layered representations. Compositions and phrases from the "*al-layla al-kabira*" operetta, for example, are borrowed by one mulid track in a musical weave that playfully folklorizes this already folklorized and artistic representation of mulids. Another example is found in a track named after the film "*'awdat al-nadla*" (Return of the mean and nasty), which presents a folklorized representation of mulids that, in turn, has been adopted as a track within the mulid dance trend. **[Music Clip 6: mulid al-layla al-kabira]**

In *'awdat al-nadla*, the film's protagonist Istiftah seeks to aggravate her long-lost ex-husband who divorced her during her years in prison, remarried, became wealthy, and

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[65] Salah Jahin (author) and Sayyid Makkawi (composer) (1972) *Oberet al-layla al-kabira*. Cairo: Sono Cairo.

[66]Schielke (2006), p. 180-181. For more on representations of mulids, see Schielke (2006) p.174-187.

[67] Conversation with Muhsin Al-Shabrawi, lyricist for *sha'bi* star Araby Al-Sughayr, Shubra Al-Kheima, 18 July 2007.

attempts to hide her existence from their now-grown son.[68] Refusing to be barred from his home and their son, Istiftah enlists the assistance of men from her *sha'bi* neighborhood and stages a mulid on the lawn of his villa. This mulid is a symbolic, condensed version featuring swings, carousels, shooting galleys, Sufis playing drums, colorful flags, snacks and toys for sale, and, as in the Ramadan show above, performers of *tanura*, which have no presence in actual mulids (camel rides and a stilt walker are other unrealistic innovations made to this representation). This mulid scenario is augmented by shots of *baladi* women washing clothes in the villa swimming pool and Istiftah bathing a donkey from its waters, underlining the chaotic nuisance her *sha'bi* persona is engendering through the staging of a mulid and stressing the disruption she threatens to cause to her ex-spouse's now privileged life.

The entire scene is musical, with Istiftah singing about patience in a "folkloric" style punctuated by the melodic riff of 'Arabi Farhan Al-Balbisi that has become synonymous with the mulid dance trend. In turn, the entire song, remixed with only a few voiceovers from elsewhere in the film, has since been titled "*mulid 'awdat al-nadla*" (Mulid of the return of the mean and nasty) and is available online through the websites that offer mulid dance track downloads. Here, two cycles of folklorization have taken place. First the film produced a folklorized representation of a mulid, which included a song featuring *inshad* tunes that have become highly associated with the mulid dance current. Then, the mulid dance trend borrowed the entire film song, adopting it as another product of "mulid heritage", remixing it slightly, and claiming it as a track within the mulid dance current.

It can be argued that all of these kinds of folklorization, whether by the government, television, film producers, or mulid dance artists, are essentially an attempt at isolating cultural elements related to mulids or *sha'bi* life to use as symbols for other concepts – a cleverly orchestrated chaotic nuisance, perhaps, as in the film "*'awdat al-nadla*", the free-flowing serendipity of festive experience, as in "*al-layla al-kabira*", or pride in the colorful and simple goodness of native life, as in the government's

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[68] Istiftah was played by popular actress Abla Kamel, who often assumes *baladi* roles.

wonderland spectacle and various television orchestrations. An equally significant outcome of "folklorization", however, is its reinforcement of perceived national character. Drawing on "heritage" for its symbolic value or because its greatness and poignancy outlive the passage of time indicates the placement of high value on one's cultural legacy and a reinforcement of pride in being *baladi*, an "authentic" Egyptian whose cultural roots run deep. In some cases, the notion of "developing" or contemporizing artistic productions that stem from "heritage" or "folklore" further suggests confidence that such cultural sources can still be made relevant to current social contexts.

The grassroots approach of drawing on heritage imbued with such cultural significance to produce new, *sha'bi* art forms suggests that the range of methods in folklorizing culture be reconsidered. Rather than turning mulid music into an outdated, quaint artifact to be preserved as part of the nation's cultural heritage, or selectively purifying folkloric elements to serve as media representations of mulids, the process at work in the production of mulid dance songs might be considered a kind of "folklorization from below". Rather than academics or media professionals classifying cultural products as folklore, here *sha'bi* cultural actors are labeling art as folklore and *using* it in new ways, incorporating it into their lives and their own art, be it music, song, or dance. Rather than preservation or top-down representation, folklorization is here a form of grassroots continuation, taking production "of the people", reshaping its form to suit the current context, and then creating a new, yet related, production "of the people" once again.

This view of the mulid dance current as a form of grassroots folklorization is further supported by the informal character of much of its production. Mulid dance riffs, lyrical phrases, and other sound bytes are freely and widely sampled, copied, and remixed as though they belong to a kind of shared "mulid" commons. And like the typically anonymous composers of folk ballads and epics, a large number of mulid tracks are produced by anonymous DJs and thus remain "authorless", including some of the most popular tracks that have served as material for subsequent remixes. Seen from this

perspective, the "popularization" of mulids and *inshad* can be said to have multiplied its meaning once again. Beyond their being "popularized" as a successful dance current enjoyed by wide sectors of the Egyptian populace, and by being transformed into a current within the urban "*sha'bi*" genre, mulids and their *inshad* have also been "re-popularized" through their grassroots classification and use as living, contemporary "folklore".

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Youth dancing with a knife at a Cairo street wedding. Photograph by Ahmed Kamel, www.ahmed-kamel.com.

DJ Mulid's work station and speakers at the 2007 mulid of Al-Sayyida Nafisa. Photograph by Jennifer Peterson.

DJ Krwaty remixes mulid and other songs on his home computer in the Delta provincial capital Zagazig. Photograph by Jennifer Peterson.

Mulid cassette tapes. Clockwise from top right "Mulid of the Eid", Gamal Al-Sobky's "*al-mulid*" tape, "Mulid of the Stoned", and Mahmoud Al-Leithy's debut, "*'asfourayn*". Photograph by Jennifer Peterson.

Mahmoud Al-Leithy performing at the engagement party of Gamal Al-Sobky's brother, Ahmed, in Shubra Al-Kheima. Photograph by Jennifer Peterson.

Sheikh 'Arabi Farhan Al-Balbisi performing *inshad* at the 2007 mulid of Al-Hussein. Photograph by Jennifer Peterson.

Ramy dancing before a wall of speakers at the 2007 mulid of Al-Sayyida Zeinab.
Photograph by Jennifer Peterson.

Spectacular dance theatrics at a Cairo street wedding. Photograph by Ahmed Kamel,
www.ahmed-kamel.com.