



## Nationalism and the Use of Pop Music: A Discourse Analysis of the Song “*Boshret Kheir*”

Mohamed Gameel<sup>•</sup> & Salma El Ghetany<sup>••</sup>

### Abstract

The Egyptian Arabic song, “*Boshret Kheir*” or ‘good omen’, represents an example of the role of popular music in promoting populism, patriotism, and the ideology of Egyptian nationalism. Given the song’s popularity, this article poses the question: what transforms an ordinary pop song into a national phenomenon? The song is studied through observational discourse, using visual semiotic analysis of its video clip. The song was adopted as a patriotic anthem of sorts by a segment of society—namely those espousing the mainstream narrative in support of the military. It was produced to encourage political activism and participation but carried a deeper meaning given its affiliation with the ruling military at the time. The song was released ten days before the presidential elections, almost one year after former president Mohammed Morsi was ousted, on June 30th, 2013. Although “*Boshret Kheir*” was meant to encourage people to participate in the presidential elections, the discourse analysis in this study shows that the song’s lyrics symbolized the election’s legitimacy.

### Introduction

In order to examine a moment or an event in our current history, one must trace the epistemologies or the framework of knowledge that surrounds the event in question. Events cumulatively and gradually build our memory and our sense of the world around us. Hence, some events constitute a transformational moment in our collective memory. It is not necessarily dependent on the magnitude of those events to be remarkable in their impact on us. Rather they are ones that definitively affect the representation of the world around us. This representation could be “a mass of elements that have to be grouped, made relevant, placed in relation to one another to form totalities.” (Foucault 1972: 7)

---

<sup>•</sup> Holds an MA from the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication of the American University in Cairo.

<sup>••</sup> Media literacy expert based in Cairo.



These totalities are where we live. We are products of our past and memories. Thus, and by this method of thinking, history is important to our present. This concept is summarized by Marx when he stated that “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already.” (1952) The conscious of our future starts from the conscious of our present that has been constituted by our conscious in the past.

The event under examination in this study might appear as an ordinary release of a pop song - namely “*Boshret Kheir*”. However, given the song’s content and extraordinary popularity in Egypt and the Arab world, its significance goes beyond that of generic popular music. So, what transforms an ordinary pop song into an extraordinary phenomenon in its popularity? Understanding this requires context.

In this paper, the authors will attempt to study the Egyptian Arabic song “*Boshret Kheir*” through an observational discourse analysis. Theories of and contrasts between notions of nationalism, patriotism, and social (national) identity will be examined as theoretical underpinnings of the study. Existing literature on the evolution of popular music in Egypt and in general is also presented. Visual semiotic analysis will be applied on the song’s video clip and observations will be made on the song’s political context, lyrics, and overall importance. This research will serve as a reflection of a significant point in Egypt’s history through the lens of popular music at the time, as well as the utilization of popular music to reinforce nationalistic goals; evident in the call for people to partake in the presidential elections of 2014. This round of elections comprised of a civilian candidate against another with, not only a military background, but also significant involvement in shaping the country’s political landscape and overall destiny in the years to come. The outcomes of the elections and their influence on the country to date is not the main focus of this paper, rather; the researchers are studying a point in time deemed crucial for reasons beyond politics as explained in the coming sections of the paper.

Before beginning the analysis of the song “*Boshret Kheir*”, it is essential to survey several concepts including nationalism, patriotism, and social identity. Together, these concepts build the epistemological framework which this study will follow later in the actual analysis.

## History of nationalism

Nationalism in the sense adopted here, is a relatively modern notion. It became generally recognized in the eighteenth century, and evolved to demand nationalities to have their own ‘state’ (Kohn 1965). Paleri (2014) defines the nation state as a “sovereign state of which most of the citizens or subjects are united also by factors which defined a nation such as language or common descent.” (p. 89) Some historical studies suggest that the state and the nation coincide. A major facilitator of the appearance of the nation state is nationalism, and it can be surmised that the



development of nation-states over time has enhanced the sense of nationalism among diverse groups of people who live in one state that accumulated the loyalty of individuals (Kohn 1965, Paleri 2014). Before the modern conception of statehood, individuals' loyalties were associated with different authorities. Different forms of ideological cohesion and political organization attracted loyalty. Individuals were loyal to the tribe, the city-state, the feudal lord, the church, the dynastic state, or the Caliphate (Kohn 1965).

Before nation-states, empire as a form of government dominated the majority of the inhabited earth. It is notable that empires didn't reflect a single nation; on the other hand, an empire collected diverse nationalities and ethnic groups to form a common civilization and, in theory, peace. Hence, according to Kohn (1965), "nationalities are the products of the living forces of history, and therefore fluctuating and never rigid."

Most nationalities distinguish themselves from others by several factors such as language, politics, territory, religion or traditions, but it is noteworthy that none of these characteristics is crucial to define a particular nationality. In the first quarter of the twentieth-century, nationality developed to be a source of culture and thus became a part of the education system in the nation-state (Kohn 1965).

As mentioned, the notion of nationalism is not contemporary. For instance, in the early 1900s in Australia nationalism mainly emphasized cultural egalitarianism, associated with leftist politics. This was contrary to Britain's identification, especially during World War I, which referred to nationalism 'as [an] unquestioning loyalty to a country under military threat' (Rajkhowa 2015). During that era, Communism was perceived as an enemy and patriotism entailed a 'commitment to liberal capitalism' (Rajkhowa 2015). In the 1960s and 70s, Britain's occupation of Asian land came to an end and the country became more integrated into the European Economic Community, giving rise to a newer nationalism in Australia; one that highlighted 'self-confidence, maturity, originality, and independence of mind,' (Rajkhowa 2015) signaling a return to cultural nationalism.

Some scholars argue that other factors such as mass media shape modern nation-states. In his thesis, Benedict Anderson coined the term "imagined community" to refer to the power of mass media such as print, radio, and TV in connecting people who do not know each other. Because of the influence of mass media, strangers in a nation-state became united by shared experience (Anderson 1991).

On the other hand, Hugh Seton-Watson concluded that the nation-state has no concrete definition. Anderson quoted him saying, "I am driven to the conclusion that no 'scientific definition' of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists." (Anderson 1991: 3) Currently, defining nationalism might be even more complicated. Rajkhowa (2015) argued that nationalism in the 21st century has been primarily shaped by the onset of global mobility against terrorism, which



relates to the use of the term during the World Wars and the 1950s. However, recent waves of populism and right-wing nationalism might indicate a return to the pre-World War II era. In the United States of America, the win of Donald Trump in the American presidential election, 2016 was remarkable. Trump is a businessman who lacks political experience, publicly announced himself as a nationalist and called for costlier strict procedures to control the USA borders. The unexplained victory of Trump followed by the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom showed how this trend of nationalism closeness is popular (Barnett 2017).

In recent years with the upsurge of the radical and violent ideologies of the so-called Islamic State or Daesh in many regions of the world, and despite the Middle East being considered to be the homeland of ISIS, many Western and Middle Eastern governments alike are adopting a narrative of nationalism that addresses a “War on Terror” and an “us versus them” rhetoric. This is made even more complicated as foreign fighters join ISIS from Australia, the UK, and Canada, among other countries (Rajkhowa 2015). In August, 2014, Australia’s Prime Minister Tony Abbott was trying to explain the country’s new tightened national security laws, stating that any Australians who wish to return to the country after leaving to join radical Islamist groups will have to be willing to join “Team Australia” in order to come back, leaving behind any conflicting loyalties. When questioned if people would be allowed to raise extremist flags in the country, he responded, “the only flag that should be flying is the “Australian national flag,” (*News* 2014). Crowe (2014) explained how the PM’s nationalism is “framed in terms of external threats,” thus, extending global political mobilizations for the ‘War on Terror.’

Nationalism is promoted by all nations to varying degrees. This and other ancillary forms of patriotism or comparative identities or freedoms have all been pervasive in societies for as long as nation states have existed (Billings et al. 2013). With this in mind, one can assume that nationalism can take on many definitions and shapes, “as people could view it as democratic or authoritarian, backward conservative, secular or religious, generous or chauvinist” (Billings et al. 2013). Huddy and Khatib (2007) examined a myriad of studies that address the contested socio-political terms that have evolved over centuries, simultaneously with the evolution of geo-political borders; terms like patriotism, social identity, and nationalism, which are often erroneously used synonymously.

### **Nationalism, social identity and patriotism**

Huddy and Khatib (2007) examine the three concepts’ definitions, how they can be different, and how they can have distinct applications in scholarship. Patriotism is typically associated with “a sense of national loyalty, a love of national symbols, specific beliefs about a country’s superiority, and as a crucial ingredient in the development of civic ties to a mature nation.” (Huddy and Khatib 2007) An extension of that definition into a sense of supremacy as well as “a need for foreign dominance” reflects what nationalism stands for. Nationalism in that sense becomes



more comparative to that of other nations (Billings et al. 2013).

Huddy and Khatib go further to differentiate between constructive and blind or uncritical (conservative) patriotism; the latter being defined as people's resistance to either criticize or even allow others to criticize their nation. This type of uncritical patriotism can often be linked to support of authoritarianism, or a tendency to unconditionally accept figures of authority (Schatz, Staub, and Lavine 1999). In these cases, individuals may strongly support their leaders and reject active political dissent; further lowering levels of political participation (Schatz, Staub, and Lavine 1999).

Conversely, constructive patriotism is characterized by a condemnatory loyalty to the nation that includes both questioning and criticizing authority, driven by "a desire for positive change." (Schatz, Staub, and Lavine 1999: 153) Furthermore, a social identity can be defined as "an awareness of one's objective membership in the group and a psychological sense of group attachment." (Huddy and Khatib 2007) Based on this definition, national identity becomes a personal feeling of belonging to one's nation that is internalized (Huddy and Khatib 2007). Terry, Hogg, and White (1999) argue that when national identity is strong, political involvement increases.

### **Nationalism in Egypt: *The Character of Egypt***

In his book *The Character of Egypt*, Gamal Hamdan<sup>1</sup> used the term "Super-Geography" to claim that geography alone cannot describe the individual's characteristics. It is not enough to study specific characteristics of specific geographical space, and then make a cumulative description to understand a particular identity. "Super-Geography" is more about the philosophy of the space. It includes the study of the philosophy, the language, and the history of specific place. Hence, studying the character of the country is not only about the present. It is also about the history, and by the historical role of individuals. Hamdan highlighted the importance of studying history to understand both the geography and the identity of the citizen living in it. When the environment is without voice, individuals take on this role. Humans speak for the land they live in. The environment affects and shapes them, and then they signify this environment. The geography might be silent and cannot speak for itself, but the history of humans who lives on it reflects the nature of it. Hamdan's methodology in studying Egypt and Egyptians could be summarized by his focus on geography, and how the geography of Egypt affected its people.

In his introduction Hamdan argued that Egyptians are the least knowledgeable about their country's history, geography, resources, and abilities. Furthermore, they exist

---

<sup>1</sup> **Gamal Hamdan** was an Egyptian geographer and scholar. His highly acclaimed writings include *Studies of the Arab World*, *The Contemporary Islamic World Geography* and *The Character of Egypt*. The three books together form a trilogy that tackles Egyptian characteristics of social, economic, political and natural resources as well as the country's position globally.



within the myth of Egyptian nationalism and feel superior to, and more patriotic than other nations. According to him “our national knowledge is fragmented, limited, and imperfect.” (Hamdan 1980: 19) Hamdan continued that the most hazardous terms used frequently by Egyptians and often misused are *nationalism* and *patriotism*. According to him, they have been used synonymously to erroneously reflect superiority over others. This notion is well matched with Max Weber’s notion that the typical concept of any nation is clearly defined as a particular solidarity of a certain group of individuals against the others (Weber 1970). Thus, the frequent use of those terms could have threatening consequences.

What Hamadan said about Egyptian nationalism is that it is diverse and could be affiliated only to a specific element or elements such as language, religion, or ethnicity, and the only way acquire a deep understanding of Egyptians is to study their complex history, geography, and environment. Finally, what we can conclude from Hamdan’s writings is that political regimes throughout modern Egyptian history tried to unify Egyptians around the ruling elite.

The researchers argue that in Egypt, the main focal consideration of this study, the current notion of nationalism - with the return of military rule after the overthrowing of the first civilian president since 1952 - can be brought back to the same context as the one adopted during Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser’s era. The definition of current-day Egyptian nationalism is an extension of the Nasserist narrative that emerged after the 1952 coup d’état. This rhetoric relied heavily on the use of symbolism in instigating and mobilizing Egyptians to up rise against the monarchy and imperialism, turning to the military for salvation. The Nasserist (1954-1970) nationalist model continued through the eras of Anwar Sadat (1970-1981) as well as Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011), a consequence of their shared military background. The use of this narrative was temporarily suspended and was substituted with notions of ‘autonomy’ and ‘determining your own fate’ during and right after the January 25, 2011 Revolution (Anderson 2006).

### **Nationalism and pop music culture**

Without a doubt, music in general is internationally viewed as a means of communication that articulates emotional and passionate messages through its tempo and tune, even in the absence of understanding the lyrics.

Historically, the “International” could be considered as one of the earliest songs to represent a sort of a nationalism. The song was composed by Pierre Degeyter and based on a text by Eugène Pottier. The “International” appeared in France in 1871 and was widely used by socialist organizations and labor unions in France to unite the individuals around its goals, had a major impact on the public (Bohlman 2004). The use of music and song to unite people around national goals and to increase the sense of patriotism has continued since that time.



Since the beginning of the twentieth century and until the end of the Second World War, the increase of populism and patriotism around the world were accompanied by some songs worth mentioning. These songs include original songs and songs that were derived from folklore. “Bella Ciao”, “Katyusha”, and “Hava Nagila” are just a few examples. “Bella Ciao” appeared during the Italian civil war and was used during the Second World War as an anti-fascist anthem. “Katyusha” is a Russian song that appeared around 1938. The song gained great popularity during the Second World War. The song’s verse encouraged national unity against Russia’s enemies and represented a romantic image to encourage Russian soldiers to achieve the victory (Bohlman 2004).

On the other hand, “Hava Nagila” has a relatively different story. It is a Hebrew folk song that was composed during the Ottoman Empire. The song was one of the earliest Hebrew songs to be written after Jews were encouraged to revive the Hebrew language. Thus, to a large extent, it signifies Jewish nationalism. In short, to a great extent, the above-mentioned examples represent the power of popular music in representing and awakening of the national sense (Lofeeler 2017).

Popular music has a remarkable sentimental power; it moves the body and senses with its melodies, rhythms, and tempo. As Dewberry and Millen (2014) argued, music connects to us emotionally, those listening are dragged into sentimental and emotional bonding with the singer and with the fans, and in this case with the use of a particular song, “*Boshret Kheir*”, political engagement. It has meaning behind its symbolic value; that we should look at how it was told, and not merely what was said (Dewberry and Millen 2014).

In a study done during the Ivorian crisis from 2002 to 2007, it was claimed that a new assembly of political activists was using pop music as an ‘instrument’ for mobilization; a ‘patriotic’ genre called *Zouglou*. These *Zouglou* songs came out at different times during the Ivorian crisis and were used for government political mobilization. Those who sang them were labeled as “praise singers for the regime.” (Schumann 2013). Introducing this kind of music was a means of expressing their political views as well as for political debate, as it was only limited to the privileged party under former President Felix Houphouët-Boigny. Hence, according to Schumann the rise in popular political mobilization led by the “PDCI-RDA” (Democratic Party of Côte d’Ivoire African Democratic Rally), the FPI (Ivorian Popular Front), and the RDR (Rally of Republicans) totally altered the management of politics; before political activists were only coming from more affluent segments of society, but these changes opened the field to all members of society (Schumann 2013). Both the opposition and the government took advantage of *Zouglou* music using it as a signifier of authority to acquire increased legitimacy from the phrases of “praise and protest.” In addition, in the post Houphouët-Boigny era, a new generation of political life caused significant changes in the political culture and style including a change in meaning for political actors using pop music to gain support from the population (Schumann 2013).



Indeed, choosing a particular song for a political campaign can have a key difference and outcome for the candidate's appearance among his fellow supporters. In the United States, presidents Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton picked rock songs to improve their campaigns' representation in all states. Since music is believed to appeal to emotion, political candidates use it to galvanize voters (Dewberry and Millen 2014). In this way, examining the meaning of a song, we should interpret the lyrics along with the music. A song, with its lyrics and melody, can have multiple meanings. While other times, the music itself can have a stronger effect and influence than the lyrics. Lyrical content can give political candidates a reason to use songs that are complementary to their campaigns, and this addresses what speech communication is all about: the delivery. This can create mixed feelings with the reasoning behind any song. For example, "Born in the USA," a song by artist Bruce Springsteen and "Don't Stop," a song by Fleetwood Mac (Dewberry and Millen 2014).

In the last ten years or so, Egypt has seen an increase in production of popular cultural material in cinema, documentaries, literature, music, and poetry. According to Mostafa (2012), the popular creative content in Egypt is referred to as *fann sha'bi*, which means "the art of the people or the masses." The concept of nationalism was at the heart of much of this popular cultural production, especially after the January 25, 2011 Revolution when the relationship between nationalism and popular music shifted with its many contexts. The revolution provided the Egyptian people a chance to express their creativity giving the revolution a deeper spirit through slogans, songs, street art (graffiti), and poetry. As a component of this spirit, nationalistic songs and lyrics became an important tool in expressing pride in and patriotism towards the country.

More thoroughly, when learning the connection between pop music and nationalism, there are types of music we should consider. Typical nationalistic songs like national anthems, which - in the case of the Arab world - are usually marches written in classical Arabic, or *Fus'ha* Arabic, and the relatively novel genre of music that emerged during and after the January 25 Revolution, which are not nationalistic per se, but call for and emphasize the notions of optimism, activism and taking matters into one's own hands. These songs are usually very positive and encourage political and social engagement. While nationalistic songs existed prior to 2011, this new genre is accessible to all strata of society, and is attractive and linguistically simple enough to appeal to all segments of Egyptian society.

Many patriotic songs surfaced from this novel genre such as "*ezay*" by the very prominent singer Mohamed Mounir, "*ya belady ya belady*" by Ramy Gamal, and "*aeish, horreya, a'adala 'egtema'eya*" by Ramy Essam. The success of these songs shows the flexibility of the society in welcoming new and emerging art forms that exhibit artistic creativity to aid in the process of the expression of people's views (Mostafa 2012). This success has been proven throughout the January 25 Revolution, and more recently during the events of June 30, 2013.





The song “*Bosbret Kheir*”, arguably the most widespread and successful of these songs, lies under this category, however, due to its very deep affiliation with the military. The authors argue that the song was used in a nationalistic sense, by the sector of community that supported the military. We argue that the song was produced to encourage political activism and participation, but it carried a deeper meaning given its affiliation with the ruling military at the time, and given the fact that the song was released just ten days before the presidential elections.

## Methodological approach

### Political context

On January 25, 2011, a day previously known as Police Day, a national holiday that commemorates Egyptian police forces, thousands of Egyptian citizens took down to the streets and protested against the regime’s failures, led by President Hosni Mubarak. Protesters marched to the headquarters of the ruling party at the time, the National Democratic Party (NDP), Maspero, the state television headquarters, as well as the ministry of foreign affairs (Al Jazeera 2011). As clashes between protestors and police forces broke out, the police resorted to using water cannons and tear gas cans, leading protestors to Tahrir Square.

As days went by, people’s demands rose higher to call for the ousting of President Mubarak. In a matter of hours, protests had broken out in Alexandria, Mansuora, Tanta, Aswan, Suez, and Assiyut. On February 11, after eighteen days of heavy protesting, sit-ins and a lot of violence, former President Hosni Mubarak resigned. The rule was then transferred to the hands of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) for interim rule. (Al Jazeera 2011). The constitution (enacted in 1971) was suspended and the parliament disbanded. SCAF then laid out a six-month plan to draft a new constitution and elect a civilian government. In November 2011, the new parliamentary elections took place with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists winning around ninety percent of the seats. On May 23, 2012, the presidential race began with 13 candidates running for president. Following the first round of elections, two candidates remained, Mohammed Morsi, the candidate representing the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice party, and Ahmed Shafik, former prime minister appointed by Mubarak before his overthrow (Childress 2013). On June 30, 2012, Mohammed Morsi was sworn in as president.

By November 29 of the same year, the Islamists had finished drafting the constitution; a constitution which sidelined women, Christians, and all minority groups, and sparked many human rights concerns. After numerous protests over the following months, “Rebel” or *Tamarod*, a new protest movement was formed calling for new elections and for mass protests to rebel against Morsi on June 30, 2013, one year after his inauguration (Childress 2013). As country-wide protests broke out and lasted three days, the military gave President Morsi an ultimatum ordering him to find a political solution within 48 hours. General Abdel Fattah el-



Sisi, then defense minister, appeared on state television to address the president and said, “If you have not obeyed the people after 48 hours, it will be our ... duty to put forward a road map for the future instead,” to which president Morsi replied, “I will not allow anyone to dispute my legitimacy. This is unacceptable. Unacceptable! Unacceptable!” (Childress 2013)

On July 3, 2013, President Morsi was removed from office by the military. The following day, July 4, Chief Justice Adly Mansour of the Supreme Court was appointed as Egypt’s interim president. Six months into the interim presidency of Adly Mansour, a new constitutional referendum took place, and the constitution was passed on January 18, 2014 (Egypt’s Constitution 2014). The presidential elections, then took place between May 26 and 28, 2014 where Abdul Fattah el-Sisi was elected president.

### **Symbolism and semiotics**

Visual semiotics is derived from linguistic semiotics. Hence, visual semiotics could be understood in specific contexts for specific ends; furthermore, it is invoked from these contexts. To be precise, visual semiotics that is extracted from linguistic semiotics consists of the icon, the index, and the symbol. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Swiss philosopher Charles S. Peirce defined these components. According to him, the icon simply “resembles what it stands for” (“Icon, Index and Symbol: Types of Signs” 2000). It is the direct sketch of the signifier. A picture of a cat is an icon of a cat. Semantically, it could be read as the denotation that describes a literal meaning (Chandler 2014).

Hence, some sensory feature could describe the picture index (“Icon, Index and Symbol: Types of Signs” 2000). In other words, the index is the story behind the image. Although it has its unique structure and requires a sort of knowledge of the events surrounding the picture, it does not require a unique knowledge or sense of the cultural connotations. Simply, it puts a picture in its space-time context, and what a picture can tell is more than its icon. A picture of dark clouds can tell us that it had been captured in winter or it might rain. Here the signifier and the signified are directly connected. The signifier—in this case the clouds—signifies to the signified: winter or future rain.

The third element is the symbol. The symbol according to Peirce is the pattern that gives a meaning (“Icon, Index and Symbol: Types of Signs” 2000). In visual arts, this pattern could not be completely comprehended without a deep understanding of the cultural contextual relationship. Here the signified is not direct, and one image’s symbol could be read differently from culture to culture. In this level of reading, the connotation is important, because it produces a different important reading than the image denotation.

Thus, according to Louis Hjelmslev (1961) there are several significations’ orders.



The first is the denotation in which the sign is a unified understanding of the signifier and the signified. In the second level, the “connotation is a *second-order of signification* which uses the denotative sign (signifier and signified) as its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified.” (as cited in Chandler 2014) Accordingly, the signifier of a denotative sign signifies the connotation sign.

## Sample

Perhaps one of the most recent and prominent examples of the involvement of popular music in promoting the idea of nationalism is the song “*Boshret Kheir*”. The song is performed by popular Emirati singer Hussain Al Jassmi. This was not the only song for Egypt by Al Jasmi; in 2006, his song “*Bahebk Wabashtini*” translated into “I love and miss you”, became a popular score for an Egyptian movie about migrating in pursuit of better opportunities. In fact, it is not unusual for Arab singers to release songs expressing love for Egypt. It was released on May 16th, 2014, almost one year after former President Mohammed Morsi was ousted on June 30th, 2013. “*Boshret Kheir*”, which translates to ‘good omen’, was created to encourage people to go vote in the presidential elections that took place between the 26th and the 28th of May, 2014. The video of the song was released with a caption that said “Dedicated to all Egyptians.”

In an interview with the privately-owned Egyptian satellite channel CBC, Al Jasmi, asserted that “*Boshret Kheir*” was not made to favor a particular candidate, but to encourage political engagement in general. “I haven’t sung ‘*Boshret Kheir*’ for a certain campaign, a certain political party or a certain person. I have presented it for Egyptians, who have lost joy over the past period.” (El Sheribini 2014). Al Jasmi had released an earlier song specifically dedicated to the Egyptian military translated as “God Bless You”. The song was aired on Egyptian television with footage of then General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, one year before he was elected president on June 8, 2014. Al Jasmi also performed a special operetta for the 6th of October celebrations in 2015 that were held in the National Air Defense Stadium and in the presence of President Al-Sisi.

The song’s massive popularity prompted a group of Egyptians to call for granting Al Jasmi honorary Egyptian citizenship. A Facebook group was setup to promote that initiative since Al Jasmi was also famed for singing other songs praising Egypt, “This is a gesture of appreciation and respect for this artist, who has loved Egypt more than some Egyptians.” (El Sheribini 2014)

The video for “*Boshret Kheir*” was widely popular, not just in Egypt, but throughout the Middle East. Covers of the song were made in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. On the first day it was released, it received over five million views on YouTube, and as of December 2015, the video had received more than 125 million views. As of January 2019, it had received more than 348 million views. The video also inspired many national and international parodies and remixes. To this day, the



song is frequently played in Egypt and across the region on celebratory or festive occasions. The video shows clips of Egyptians dancing and celebrating in different locations in some governorates in Egypt, holding up posters with messages pushing citizens to go vote. The video has a generally positive and celebratory feel.

The lyrics of “*Boshret Kheir*” were written by Egyptian songwriter Ayman Bahjat Qamar. Egyptian composer and singer Amr Moustafa composed the song’s music. The song opens up by asking “What has Egypt gained from your silence? Don’t deny it your vote. You’re determining tomorrow on your terms. This is a good omen.” (El Sheribini 2014)

To allow our observations to be as reliable as possible given the nature of the research methodology, we provided operational definitions for some variables in the video clip, allowing us to derive stronger observational statistics. Initially, age groups were divided by observation into four categories; children, up to 16 years of age; youth (17-30), middle-aged (30-50) and older (over 50 years). Secondly, geographic locations were defined as either inside or outside of Cairo. Locations clearly visible to be outside Cairo, through identifiable landmarks or representation by signs or lyrics that accompany the shot were labelled ‘outside Cairo’. Scenes that could be visibly identifiable as shot in Cairo were labelled as such. Scenes that were not clear were excluded from the calculation. Thirdly, in terms of gender, the number of male and female characters was counted. Children were counted separately and were not included in the male vs. female ratio. We were able to apply some comparative statistical observations using this quantitative technique, serving the purposes of this research. A margin of error was considered; therefore, the term ‘estimate’ is used to reflect that fact.

## Discussion and observations

### Lyrics and video clip

The lyrics of the song “*Boshret Kheir*” are meant to entice voters to go out and vote in the presidential elections. The song addresses Egyptians of different governorates by calling them out by where they live and asking them to take that extra small step to ‘doing it’ after times of silence and passiveness. The lyrics call people to come together and unite to become stronger, to determine their own future and have a voice.

The song “*Boshret Kheir*” came short of accurately representing Egyptian society. To an ordinary viewer, this video clip duly represents Egypt’s vast landscapes and scenery. After thorough observations however, it was found that this is not the case. The video clip was Cairo-centric, which can be attributed to a more cost-efficient production. Only 37% (89 out of 237) shots could be clearly identified as shot outside of the Greater Cairo area.



The lyrics of the song only mentioned as many cities and governorates as the rhyme could handle, leaving behind many prominent cities in Egypt such as the internationally famous Luxor, Aswan, Sharm El Sheikh, and Hurghada. Even though the overall intention of the song was to address all Egyptians in all corners of the country. In the video clip, the lyrics calling for active involvement and political participation were perfectly timed with shots of typical Egyptians holding signs carrying words of encouragement. This audio-visual combination contributed to priming viewers to the fact that their individual votes may determine the country's destiny.

The song's audio has a fast paced and upbeat tempo, suggesting an attempt to appeal to younger age groups, and typical current-day pop music consumers. The video clip was also shot in fast track, with 237 different shots in three minutes and 46 seconds (including credits). It featured 444 individuals (including children).

### **Gender representation**

Females were underrepresented in the video clip with only 13% of featured characters (58 out of 444). Males appeared in 71% of the total number of characters (315 out of 444) and children appeared in 16% (71 out of 444). It is worth noting that the last official demographic statistics in Egypt announced by the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) was in 2017, which stated that the female population in Egypt was 49%, and the male population was 51%. A more updated source, the American Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) Factbook, released their Egypt's demographic statistics in 2014, stating the same percentages of males and females ("The World Factbook" 2015).

### **Age and ethnic representation**

Different ethnicities were portrayed in the video clip, promoting a sense of unity among Egyptians. Furthermore, characters exhibited an overemphasized euphoric state of dancing and smiling, and even dressing festively. We attribute this to the producers' need to link that state of mind to the presidential elections. Should we adopt the mainstream affiliation of the song to the military, we can extend that linkage to a happy state of mind with military rule.

The video clip relied heavily on the youth and middle-aged as characters. Young people were shown 41.4% of the time (184 out of 444), while middle-aged people represented 32.6% (145 out of 444). It is worth noting that children representation exceeded older people even though they are not eligible to vote. Children's percentage was 16% (71 out of 444), while older people were represented in 10% of the shots (44 out of 444).

From the above observations, we can deduce that the average character portrayed in the song is that of a young to middle-aged male inside Cairo. This reflects the song's stereotypical view of Egypt and Egyptians.



## About the singer

The singer was not featured once in the clip. We argue that Al Jasmi's appearance in the video, being of Emirati descent, would have distracted viewers from the content of the song. The song wasn't produced to add to the popularity of Al Jasmi or to increase his status. It was produced for Egyptians, not a song targeted at a Middle Eastern audience, but to promote political engagement and to create a sense of unity between Egyptians. The song was released just a few days before the presidential elections, and was attempting to drive Egyptians to go vote.

## Semiotic analysis of the song

The *icon* of this song is to promote political participation in the presidential elections of 2014 and to tell people that their votes matter. The *index* includes that fast-paced/pop music that appeals to Egyptians, and that the majority of Egyptians are young and middle-aged males. Moreover, the song's popularity indicates a change in overall taste of music in the Egyptian culture, since the nature of patriotic songs has evolved from classical music and Arabic, to more upbeat music, and colloquial lyrics. Furthermore, the *index* signifies that people's votes matter. This underpinning contrasts the Muslim Brotherhood's disseminated views that voter turnout cannot affect the already predetermined results in favor of Al Sisi. The *symbol* behind this song is to promote the legitimacy of the electoral process, against the Muslim Brotherhood discourse to boycott the elections, deeming them illegitimate and unconstitutional (referring to the 2012 constitution). It is noteworthy to mention that a substantial group of international media and politicians referred to the June 30, 2013 events as an illegitimate coup d'état. Another symbol extracted from the song is the implied priming that Egyptians will enjoy a greater sense of contentment with the coming political regime.

## The Egyptian flag and the use of symbolism

We can see the Egyptian flag frequently in the song. People are waving it, kissing it, and overall happy holding it. But to understand its semiotics and its relationship to the song, some important events and context should be highlighted. At the time of the events of June 30, 2013, the Egyptian population was divided into several sectors. Some were in support of the army and the decisions they took, including the violent clearing of sit-ins in and around the Rabaa Al-Adawiya Mosque and Nahda Square<sup>2</sup>, while some others were supporters of the ousted President Morsi and against what they labeled as a military coup and a massacre against protestors. These groups were overtly against military rule and the termination of the rule of former President Mohammed Morsi and his Freedom and Justice party. It is important here to highlight that the researchers do not necessarily stand with

<sup>2</sup> The Rabaa Al-Adawiya Mosque and Nahda Square were the main locations used by Muslim Brotherhood and President Mohamed Morsi supporters for rallies and a six-week sit-in in protest of overthrowing Morsi by the military in June 2013.



any of the abovementioned affiliations. At the time, a considerable sector of Egyptian society was neither supporting military intervention nor the Muslim Brotherhood's rhetoric. However, Associate Fellow on the Middle East and North Africa Program at the Royal Institute of International Affairs Maha Azzam, referred to the division of the Egyptians at that time, saying, "there's no grey. You either stand with the military takeover... or you stand against the coup." (Beck 2013) NGO worker and activist Bassem Maher said that the Egyptian people are "stuck in the middle between military and fundamental authoritarianism." (Beck 2013)

During this political and social dichotomy, supporters of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood adopted the Raba'a sign a four-fingered hand sign signifying the violent dispersal of Morsi supporter sit-ins in August, 2013 (Evans and Qandeel 2014) to reflect their convictions, and support their cause. The icon of Raba'a sign is a yellow background with a right black hand and a folded thumb on the palm. Four fingers signify the number four that denote the Raba'a name in the Arabic language. Hence, the sign index is devoted to Raba'a Square, and the symbol here could be showing sympathy with people who died in Raba'a Square, and to remind people of Raba'a clashes and violent military dispersal by using a simple sign.

The claiming is that Raba'a sign was a symbol of "justice, freedom, and conscience," the "unification of the Islamic world," and the rise of a new movement for the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party. The Raba'a sign also became a salute flashed by protesters against the military rule and the ousting of Morsi (El Shinnawi 2013). It is important to say that the Raba'a sign attracted wide attention when the Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan used it. He was one of the first international instigators flashing of the Raba'a salute.

On the other hand, citizens who supported the military rule and the ousting of Morsi held on to the Egyptian flag as a sign of expressing their patriotism, and to distinguish themselves from Morsi's supporters. Thus, in their view, Morsi's supporters were not or less patriotic (Abdel Kader 2013).

The icon of the Egyptian flag is simple in terms of structure and colors used. It consists of three colored bars; red, white, and black, with a gold eagle in the middle white bar. The eagle index is the military. The Egyptian flag had been changed by the military after the 1952 revolution. The three colors indicate peace through the white color, strength through the red color, and dark colonializing eras that Egypt witnessed through the black color. The current Egyptian flag was chosen by the military. This might explain why it is usually affiliated with patriotism and developing Egyptian nationalism. Thus, the Egyptian flag was adopted to a large extent by this group of people in the face of the Raba'a sign that was adopted by mainly Muslim Brotherhood supporters.



The overwhelming use of the Egyptian flag as a sign of support for the military against the Muslim Brotherhood contributed to increasing polarization in the Egyptian street, since people started to affiliate the flag with the military rather than the state. If someone raised the flag, he/she could be labeled as a supporter of the military not the state. If someone did not show enthusiasm to the flag, he/she could be labeled as a betrayer, or shunned by the other group.

Thus, the use of the flag in the song's video clip could be, to a large extent, affiliated with supporting the military; furthermore, this study argues that the embedded symbol of the flag in the song has other cultural and contextual dimensions. Therefore, these dimensions, as mentioned before, extend another meaning to the flag, both in the song and in real life.

### **Limitations and conclusion**

One key limitation can be the choice of the sample itself; this specific song was chosen as a focal point of our study despite the fact that there were other popular songs of a similar nature. However, we believed this song was a phenomenon in itself deeming it to be a subject of study. It is worth noting that research, especially in the social sciences, accentuate the importance of 'reflexivity,' or establishing cause and effect, in a research study of value. Such an approach, therefore, dictates clear expression of the researcher's position, which is also significant to the stages of data collection and analysis. Bourdieu (1999), for example, wrote about the need to discard "epistemological innocence," that demands that the researchers articulate their position within the research frame "in terms of their value stances, their problem choice, and their theoretical and methodological frames."

Another related point is subjectivity based on observational analysis. Despite the depth of the research variables, the methodology is selective by nature. Specific elements were chosen while others were eliminated. This is fundamental of qualitative research. According to Finlay (2002), being a qualitative researcher entails the researcher being a key figure influencing data collection, selection, and eventually exegesis. He argues that there is a "co-constituted" relationship between the researcher and the participants, or in this case, the song chosen as a study sample. Should other researchers residing in other cultures attempt to research the same social context, a different story will be told (Finlay 2002).

Despite these limitations, this study attempted to maintain a scientific methodology to explain an important event in Egypt after June 30. It is important not because of the song itself, but because of the song context; furthermore, only involved individuals and researchers can comprehend these factors.

This study did not attempt to claim that this song enhances the sense of nationalism among Egyptians; moreover, it does not argue that the song reshapes Egyptian nationalism per se. The direct goal of this study is to observe the image of Egypt





presented in the song, and in the wide sense what the relationship is between society that is represented in the song and the embedded meaning of nationalism in literature. The finding is that the song does not reflect the diversity of nationalism as it exists in Egypt. Nationalism is a notion in continuous transformation and evolution, and it is difficult to completely grasp what constitutes Egyptian nationalism from a single song. However, the prominence of the song was a great motive to examine this relationship. There is no doubt that anyone who listens to the song “*Boshret Kheir*” at first glance finds it appealing and catchy. The song lyrics and rhythm are memorable and perhaps this contributed to its evident popularity both locally and internationally. Typical listeners of the song might not dwell on its symbolic or hidden connotations. However, as researchers, we felt compelled to shed light on the context in which the song emerged, as well as how it could have contributed to the state of political division that emerged after the events of June 30, 2013. This was reflected both in the song’s lyrics and video clip, as well as the timing of its release.

National identity can be referred to as “a conception of common cultural heritage.” (Huddy and Khatib 2007) In our discourse of the song “*Boshret Kheir*”, it was found that the song’s lyrics symbolized the election’s legitimacy. It even went a step further when people automatically associated the song with support of the military despite the singer’s claim that it was not meant to show support for any particular candidate. With the Muslim Brotherhood calling for boycotting the elections and discrediting their legitimacy, this song aimed more to encourage voters to vote; with people associating the call for voting with legitimizing Al Sisi’s Coup, the song evolved to reflect loyalty to and support of the military. “*Boshret Kheir*” was referred to as the ‘election anthem’, with voters dancing to its tunes at election booths on the two days of elections (Carr 2014). It could be concluded that the song’s lyrics and video created a common myth of Egyptian society; a Cairo-centric, male-dominant society with a predominant reliance on the youth and middle-aged.

It can be argued that despite national attempts to induce feelings of patriotism and even sentiments of nationalism in their people through the use of visual and audio symbolism, it becomes crucial to revisit these areas of thought and periodically evaluate them.

## References

- Abdel Kader, M. 2013, October 14. Turkey’s Relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. Retrieved May 6, 2019, from: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/alarabiya-studies/2013/10/14/Turkey-s-relationship-with-the-Muslim-Brotherhood.html>
- Al Jazeera. 2011, February 14. Timeline: Egypt's Revolution. Retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/01/201112515334871490.html>
- Anderson, B. R. O. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. and extend ed.). New York; London: Verso.
- Anderson, B. R. O. & American Council of Learned Societies. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. ed.). New York; London: Verso.



- Barnett, A. 2017. *The Lure of Greatness: England's Brexit and America's Trump*. Random House.
- Beck, J. 2013, July 29. In the Wake of Clashes, Some Egyptians Lose Faith in the Armed Forces. Retrieved May 6, 2019, from:  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/07/in-the-wake-of-clashes-some-egyptians-lose-faith-in-the-armed-forces/278173/>
- Billings, A. C., et al. 2013. From Pride to Smugness and the Nationalism Between: Olympic Media Consumption Effects on Nationalism Across the Globe. *Mass Communication & Society*, 16(6), 910-932.
- Bohlman, P. V. 2004. *The Music of European Nationalism: Cultural Identity and Modern History*. ABC-CLIO.
- Bourdieu, P. 1999. The Social Conditions of the International Circulation of Ideas. In R. Shusterman (Ed.), *Bourdieu: A critical reader* (pp. 220–228). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Brincker, B. 2014. The Role of Classical Music in the Construction of Nationalism: A Cross-National Perspective. *Nations & Nationalism*, 20(4), 664-682. doi:10.1111/nana.12088
- Carr, S. 2014, May 19. "From the Campaigns: End of the Line." Retrieved May 6, 2019, from:  
<http://katycarr.com/katy-carrs-mayjune-2014-newsletter/>
- Childress, S. 2013. Timeline: "What's Happened Since Egypt's Revolution?" Retrieved November 28, 2015, from:  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/timeline-whats-happened-since-egypts-revolution/>
- Dewberry, D. R & J. H. Millen. 2014. "Music as rhetoric: Popular Music in Presidential Campaigns." *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 22(2), 81-92. doi:10.1080/15456870.2014.890101 "Egypt constitution approved by 98.1 percent." (2014). Retrieved November 28, 2015, from:  
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/01/egypt-constitution-approved-981-percent-201411816326470532.html>
- El Sheribini, R. 2014, May 24. "Emirati Singer Takes Egypt by Storm." Retrieved May 6, 2019, from:  
<https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/emirati-singer-takes-egypt-by-storm-1.1337773>
- El Shinnawi, E. 2013, August 22. "Four-Finger Salute: Egypt Rivals Use 'Rabaa Hand' to Turn Facebook Yellow." Retrieved May 6, 2019, from:  
<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/2013/08/21/Four-finger-salute-Egypt-rivals-use-Rabaa-symbol-to-turn-Facebook-yellow.html>
- Evans, J. & Qandeel. 2014, May 23. Songs for Voting to. Retrieved May 6, 2019, from:  
<https://madamasr.com/en/2014/05/23/feature/culture/songs-for-voting-to/>
- Finlay, L. 2002. "Outing" the Researcher: The Provenance, Process, and Practice of Reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 531-545. doi:10.1177/104973202129120052.
- Foucault, M. 2002. *Archaeology of knowledge*. New York; London: Routledge.
- Grattan, M. 2014, August 20. "What Does 'Team Australia' Mean? Race Discrimination Commissioner Asks." *The Conversation*. Retrieved on March 8, 2015, from:  
<http://theconversation.com/what-does-team-australia-mean-race-discrimination-commissioner-asks-30718>.
- Ḥamdān, J. 1980. *Shakhṣiyāt misr: Dirāsah fī `abqariyyat al-makān*. al-Qāhirah: Ālam al-Kutub.
- Huddy, L. & N. Khatib. 2007. American Patriotism, National Identity, and Political Involvement. *American Journal of Political Science*, 51, 63–77.
- Icon, Index and Symbol: Types of Signs. 2000. Retrieved December 6, 2015, from:  
<http://www.cs.indiana.edu/~port/teach/103/sign.symbol.html>
- Kohn, H. 1965. *Nationalism, its Meaning and History* (Rev. ed.). New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co.



- Lofeeler, J. 2017. "Hava Nagila's Long, Strange Trip." Retrieved September 10, 2017, from: [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Music/Israeli\\_Music/Folk\\_Music/Hava\\_Nagila.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Music/Israeli_Music/Folk_Music/Hava_Nagila.shtml)
- Mostafa, D. S. 2012. Popular Culture and Nationalism in Egypt: 'Arab Lotfi and Egyptian Popular Music. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 16(2/3), 261-282.  
doi:10.1080/14797585.2012.647673
- News. 2014, August 18. "Tony Abbott Says New Migrants Must be on 'Team Australia' as He Steps Up War on Home-Grown Jihadists." News.com.au. Retrieved on March 18, 2015, from: [www.news.com.au/national/tony-abbott-says-new-migrants-must-be-on-team-australia-as-he-steps-up-war-on-homegrown-jihadists/story-fncynjr2-1227027870342](http://www.news.com.au/national/tony-abbott-says-new-migrants-must-be-on-team-australia-as-he-steps-up-war-on-homegrown-jihadists/story-fncynjr2-1227027870342).
- Paleri, D. P. 2014. *Integrated Maritime Security: Governing the Ghost Protocol*. New Delhi: Vij Books India Private Limited.
- Rajkhowa, A. 2015. "Team Australia: Reviewing Australian Nationalism." *Pacific Journalism Review*, 21(1), 99-107.
- Rowe, D. 2014, August 26. "Dead Poets Society Meets Team Australia Under Captain Abbott." *The Conversation*. Retrieved on March 18, 2015, from: <http://theconversation.com/dead-poets-society-meets-team-australia-under-captain-abbott-30852>.
- Schatz, R. T., E. Staub & H. Lavine. 1999. "On the Varieties of National Attachment: Blind Versus Constructive Patriotism." *Political Psychology* 20(1):151-74.
- Schumann, A. 2013. "Songs of a New Era: Popular Music and Political Expression in the Ivorian Crisis." *African Affairs*, 112(448), 440-459.
- Semiotics for Beginners: Signs. 2014. Retrieved December 12, 2015, from: <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem02.html>.
- Terry, D. J., M. A. Hogg & K. M. White. 1999. "The Theory of Planned Behavior: Self-identity, Social Identity, and Group Norms." *British Journal of Social Psychology* 38(3):225-44.
- The World Factbook. 2015. Retrieved December 12, 2015, from: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html>
- Weber, M. 1970. *The Nation in Gerth, H. & Mills, C. W. (eds) From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.