

Media Capitalism

From Mass Culture to Mass Practice, 1907–1919

It is likely that the most effective forms of communication at this time were—as they are today—those which appealed simultaneously to the eye and to the ear and combined verbal with non-verbal messages, musical as well as visual, from the drums and trumpets of military parades to the violins accompanying indoor performances. In early modern Europe these forms included rituals, spectacles, plays, ballets and operas.

—Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media*



During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Egyptian public sphere went through unprecedented political and cultural changes, in part because a variety of mass media materialized to cater to a growing national audience. The increasing availability and accessibility of performance and sound media, such as the theater and the recording industry, reached an unprecedentedly large consumer base and contributed to the shaping of national tastes. As discussed in the Introduction, Benedict Anderson's print capitalism was an important component for establishing national identity; however, in a nation such as Egypt, in which literacy rates were (and still are) relatively low, nonprint audiovisual media played a more direct role in shaping perceptions and identities.¹ For example, songs especially could easily traverse from recordings and public performances to the ears of literate and illiterate listeners, and the most popular and easily remembered ditties could spread like wildfire by being sung and resung by those very listeners, who in turn could propagate those songs to an even wider audience.

For this reason, I consider the term *media capitalism* more appropriate for examining the cultural processes taking place, because it is broad

enough to incorporate all forms of mass media, including print, performance, recording, broadcast, and eventually Internet and satellite media. The broader scope of media capitalism is also less visual-centric than Anderson's print capitalism—better integrating the oral and aural along with the visual. As new sound and audiovisual media were being introduced, cultural consumers listened and watched as well as read. In other words, media capitalism is more realistically engaged with the wider range of sensory culture. Certainly in the Egyptian case, and I suspect in other cases as well, a synergetic combination of all available media, from print to music recording, simultaneously shaped the “modern” identities of cultural consumers. As Asa Briggs and Peter Burke suggest, “To think in terms of a media system means emphasizing the division of labour between the different means of communication available in a given place and at a given time without forgetting that old and new media can and do coexist and that different media may compete with or echo one another as well as complement one another.”²

The print industry, for example, was intimately linked with the theater, music, and recording industries. Plays, music concerts, dance performances, and gramophone records were advertised, critiqued, and discussed in the press. Pictures, news, rumors, and juicy gossip surrounding all the rising stars of these new media were thoroughly discussed in the pages of newspapers and tabloids. In turn, this wider public interest increased the number of records, newspapers, and tickets sold. Also, as we examined in earlier chapters, all the differing forms of colloquial mass culture, from print to the audiovisual variety, were essentially produced by the same colloquial writers, who were valued and sought after for their mastery of colloquial Egyptian. In addition to writing songs and plays for the theater and record companies, lyricists and playwrights such as Bayram al-Tunsi, Yunis al-Qadi, and Badi' Khayri also wrote *azjal* in colloquial newspapers, which they often edited (or owned). Typically, the songs that were successful on the theatrical or musical stage were re-sold by composers and lyricists to record companies, which were always on the lookout for commercial hits. Almost all the singers who sang in vaudeville and burlesque theater productions were already recording most of their songs. Indeed, because of this elaborate interconnectedness, a comprehensive picture of these important culture-shaping media can be achieved only when they are examined together as a media system.

Before examining the impact of Egyptian mass culture, in this chapter I first cover the explosion of urban mass politics from 1907 until the beginning of World War I. The political capital gained by Mustafa Kamil and his Watani Party after the Dinshaway incident was quickly translated into mass action, as public demonstrations became common practice in Egypt.

tian cities. I then cover the World War I period strictly from a popular culture perspective. During the war, Egyptians experienced many political and economic hardships and, because of the wartime application of martial law, anti-British resistance took on more nuanced forms. Jokes were certainly an important part of this passive defiance. Vaudeville, burlesque comedy plays, and recorded satirical *taqatiq* (colloquial songs; sing. *taq-tuqa*), which were all well suited as muted forms of discourse, became extremely popular at this time, providing both a form of resistance and, as we shall see, dynamic public forums where identities could be discussed and negotiated. Near the end of the chapter I ponder the inevitable class and cultural tensions that occurred when these new media were introduced. The conservative cultural elite, the traditional backers of Fusha, were incensed that colloquial Egyptian had become the language of choice for music and performance media. This view contrasted with the interests of the owners and workers of the growing mass media industries, who were primarily interested in profit and consequently catered to the overwhelming demands of the Egyptian cultural consumers, who almost always favored colloquial productions.

THE WATANI PARTY AND MASS MOBILIZATION

We went to observe the big demonstration that was announced in the newspapers and we reached Bab al-Khalq [one of Cairo's medieval gates]. We rented a carriage and decorated it with flags and two banners on which we wrote "Long live independence and long live the constitution" [*yahiyya al-'istiqlal wa al-dustur*]. All of the Egyptian store owners and the masses [*al-'amma*] helped us in every way upon finding out that we were nationalists and doing our part to save Egypt from the foreign enemy. We went around the streets with our carriage and chanted with the people in the streets: "Long live Egypt . . . long live our nation . . . long live our independence . . . long live the constitution." A large number of people gathered around us in 'Abdin Square . . . and they followed us into the Azbakiyya Garden.

—Muhammad Lutfi Jum'a, *Shahid 'Ala al-'Asr*

Perhaps the best measure of successful discourse is its potential to motivate public action. The successful manipulation of mass culture by the nationalists, as demonstrated in Chapter 4 by the retelling of the Dinshaway story, potentially transformed the Egyptian masses into an easily mobilized force that equally threatened the British, the khedive, and some of the conservative Egyptian elite. As the epigraph indicates, the emerging mass media could easily rally people into political action. Public demonstrations and other political actions, such as public speeches or even strikes, were announced in the press and often through the "shouting

and hollering” of roaming newspaper boys.³ As Mikha’il Sharubim disapprovingly describes, “Newspaper sellers of *al-Liwa* and other Watani papers are spreading the word about a political speech to be given by the leader of the Watani Party [Muhammad Farid] in the theater of Dar al-Tamthil al-‘Arabi. They went on shouting and hollering annoyingly, for two full days, while waving around their newspapers and the cloth of their turbans.”⁴ In this classic example of the interaction between speech and print, newspaper boys used oral communication to advertise and sell their printed periodicals, which in turn promoted a public gathering where a presumably written speech was read aloud to a mass audience (see Figure 5).⁵ This increase in potential political activism by the urban population transformed the Egyptian masses, for the first time perhaps, into a viably powerful political actor, which was one of the primary causes for a realignment of the differing power groups in the Egyptian political landscape.



FIGURE 5. Newspaper boy selling “seditious” periodicals.
From Sladen, *Oriental Cairo*, 64.

For most of Cromer's tenure, the nationalists, primarily consisting of the petit-bourgeois *'afandiyya* class, were aligned with the khedive ('Abbas Hilmi II), who attempted to counterbalance the power of the British authority. In turn, the British, especially under Cromer, made tacit alliances with many of the Egyptian economic and intellectual elite.⁶ The steady growth of the Egyptian urban masses as a political force equally threatened the khedive and the British; with the replacement of Cromer by the more diplomatic Eldon Gorst, a rapprochement between the British and the khedive changed the political equation and forced the nationalists to rely on the urban masses even more.

This political realignment was reflected rather pointedly in the 1907 official organization of political parties, which represented the differing political power bases at the time. Although Mustafa Kamil had been for more than a decade the leading nationalist leader in the country, he did not officially organize his movement into a political party until late in 1907. The principles of the new Watani Party were first publicly articulated by Kamil in front of 7,000 people at an October 22, 1907, speech at the Zizinia Theater in Alexandria.⁷ The 'Umma (Nation) Party, mostly led by wealthy pashas, represented the interests of the educated landowning elite and was developed in part as a reaction to the more radical nationalists who followed the charismatic Mustafa Kamil.⁸ The 'Umma Party was officially established on September 21, 1907, and favored a more gradual road to independence; it advocated the need for consulting with and benefiting from British tutelage whenever possible. Inherent in this policy was an aversion to any change in the stability of the status quo and a general distrust of the masses, who were deemed not ready for political independence.⁹ Rounding out the new parties was 'Ali Yusif's Constitutional Reform Party, which was mainly funded by the khedive to support his policies and, as such, was viewed with suspicion by most Egyptians.¹⁰

With the support of the urban masses, the Watani Party was by far the most powerful of the three. In his well-attended public speeches, Kamil repeatedly attacked the other two parties for not being true to Egyptian nationalism and for not demanding the immediate withdrawal of the British.¹¹ The activism of Mustafa Kamil (1874–1908) and the populist message of the Watani Party began the process of defining and popularizing urban Egyptian nationalism. After Kamil's premature death in 1908, there was more of an "urgent need," as described by Zachary Lockman, for "tapping into and mobilizing new domestic constituencies in order to build a more broadly based independence movement."¹² A rapprochement was also gradually reached between the Watani and 'Umma parties in an attempt to counter the developing close relationship between Eldon Gorst and 'Abbas Hilmi II.¹³

THE DEATH OF MUSTAFA KAMIL AND
THE RADICALIZATION OF EGYPTIAN POLITICS

Mustafa Pasha Kamel, the leader of the Egyptian Nationalist party, died on the 10th instant [February 10, 1908]. The funeral, which took place on the following afternoon, gave rise to a remarkable display of the regard felt for him by sections of his compatriots. The cortège was accompanied by the Grand Cadi [Qadi], the Sheikh of the El Azher [al-'Azhar] University, and a number of Notables, some of whom had previously held high posts under the Government. The procession was headed by students of all the secondary and higher schools and colleges in Cairo, who had absented themselves from their studies *en masse*, and who marched in good order in ranks of four. After the Notables came a great crowd composed of people of the lower middle class, minor government *employés*, and small shop-keepers. Some idea can be formed of the magnitude of this crowd by the fact that it took fifty minutes to pass by a certain spot. . . . At the cemetery a poem in praise of the deceased was recited, which produced considerable emotion among the bystanders. The crowd then dispersed without the slightest disturbance having taken place. Their orderly conduct throughout the whole proceedings was remarkable, and perfect order was maintained without the least difficulty.

—Sir Eldon Gorst to Sir Edward Grey, February 16, 1908

Mustafa Kamil's funeral demonstrates like no other event the extent of the demographic power and organizational ability of the Watani Party and the influence of the emerging mass media. This mass ritual, perhaps Egypt's first national funeral, was covered extensively by all Egyptian newspapers. Most of these periodicals described the tens of thousands of Egyptians walking in the procession, illustrating an entire nation in mourning, a snapshot of a national symbol in the making. To the consternation of the British and the khedive, the influence of Kamil did not end after his death; in fact, Kamil's historical memory was carefully cultivated and shrewdly used by his successors to mobilize the masses for years to come. Almost immediately after Kamil's death, anthologies of his writings, speeches, and ideas were printed and disseminated all over Egypt. As other nationalist leaders soon realized, merely invoking Kamil's memory, displaying his picture, or mentioning his name carried useful emotional capital, which they readily exploited.¹⁴

Muhammad Farid, who was selected to lead the Watani Party after Kamil's death, continually made sure to honor, as well as politically benefit from, Kamil's memory. As a contemporary observer noticed, for one of Farid's public speeches a makeshift memorial, including a large shrine honoring Mustafa Kamil, was strategically placed to evoke maximum emotional effect from the gathering audience.

On Saturday April 18 [1908] at 5:00 o'clock, people raced to listen to the speech and a great mass of people showed up, almost trampling each other. The number

of those who were outside attempting to get in was much greater than those who were able to enter the premises. Tempers were flaring because of the general disorder caused by the presence of a large number of vulgar rabble, common peddlers, and the overall dregs of society, mostly from Bulaq. At the center of the stage they placed a large picture of the deceased Mustafa Kamil on top of a table covered with flowers. Sitting behind this table was Muhammad Farid, who upon standing up to give the speech, was drowned out with applause and chants of "Long live Muhammad Farid" and "Long live the Watani Party."¹⁵

In his speech Farid emphasized the need for the Watani Party to continue its struggle after the death of Kamil, and he accused the 'Umma Party of collaborating with the British. To the delight of the gathering crowd, Farid ended his speech by shouting, "Long live Egypt! Long live the constitution [*dustur*]!" The crowd, as Mikha'il Sharubim disapprovingly described, shouted the same slogans loudly while "clapping, whistling, and pounding their feet uncontrollably for almost an hour." Sharubim described the entire gathering as disorganized and primarily lower class, snobbishly recounting that "most of those who attended this gathering were a mix of rabble, craftsmen, and artisans of the lower professions, like metalsmiths, carpenters, barbers, and tailors who inhabit Bulaq and other such areas of Cairo. Whenever they heard the speaker mention the British, they got excited and rose up chanting anti-British slogans about how the British are the enemy and that they should get out of Egypt."¹⁶ Sharubim's obvious disdain for the urban masses was reflective of the general attitude shared by many of the Egyptian elite. This general condescension toward the masses was also, as we have seen in earlier chapters, directed toward colloquial cultural production, which was deemed as vulgar as its readers and audiences.¹⁷

In the years after the death of Mustafa Kamil the radicalization of Egyptian politics increased dramatically, as Sharubim described: "In those days, speech makers and loud agitators increased in number to an unprecedented level. For every day there was some speaker or other who supported some sort of issue . . . to the extent that the sane among us began to wonder at the effects of this (rebellious) spirit among the nation and began to speculate on the long-term effect of these disturbances."¹⁸ The Watani Party lacked effective centralized leadership, which contributed in part to the radicalization of some of its splinter groups. Muhammad Farid, who assumed the mantle of leadership after Kamil's death, lacked the leadership skills of Kamil and to a certain degree fell under the ideological influence of Sheikh 'Abd al-'Aziz Jawish. Jawish, a religious conservative who was appointed by Farid as the editor of *al-Liwa*, perpetually courted controversy. A British intelligence report referred to him as "the notorious Sheikh 'Abdel Aziz Shawish," whose hand, the report

continues, “can be discerned in almost every occurrence during the past few years which has disturbed the public peace or embarrassed the authorities.”¹⁹ The frequency of these public disturbances led to sustained efforts by the British and the Egyptian authorities to regulate and censor new media expression.

MASS POLITICS AND THE REVIVAL OF
THE 1881 PRESS LAW

In recent years the virulence of a certain section of the vernacular press in Egypt has greatly increased, and false news and misleading comments on the actions and motives of the government are spread broad-cast, adding greatly to the difficulties of administrating the country. Many of the articles published in these newspapers are calculated to arouse the passions of the mass of the people, who are, and must remain for years to come, far too ignorant to appreciate the absurdities and the falseness of the diatribes which are read out to them daily in the villages.

—*Reports by His Majesty's Agent and Consul-General*

This quote from a British intelligence report²⁰ not only demonstrates the importance and increasing influence of the colloquial Egyptian press but also the mounting fears of the British and some of the Egyptian elite over the effectiveness of such a medium in communicating counterhegemonic ideas and rousing ordinary Egyptians. This was especially true after the death of Mustafa Kamil, with the weaker Muhammad Farid unable to keep in check Sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Jawish and the militant branch of the Watani Party. Thus, when political discourse regularly began to motivate mass political mobilization, the British, in conjunction with the Egyptian ruling elite, began entertaining the idea of reviving the press censorship law.²¹ According to the memoirs of ‘Ahmad Shafiq Pasha (1860–1940), president of the Khedival Council (*diwan*) at the time, ‘Abbas Hilmi II warmed up to the idea of increasing press censorship in part because of some pressure from Eldon Gorst and mounting attacks by the nationalist press, which “accused him of betraying his nation to the British.” After some consultation with his advisers, the khedive asked Butrus Ghali, the newly appointed and increasingly unpopular prime minister, to reenforce the 1881 press law.²²

The revived law went into effect on March 27, 1909, and contained several detailed stipulations aimed at suppressing and controlling the press: (1) The names and addresses of the owners of all printing presses that were publishing newspapers in Egypt had to be “printed on every issue of every newspaper”; (2) all newspapers were required to “send five copies of every issue by mail to the Department of Publications of the

Egyptian Interior Ministry [Nuzarit al-Dakhiliyya]”; (3) “any changes in the ownership or editorship of any newspaper that deal[t] with political, administrative, or religious issues” had to be “immediately report[ed] to the Department of Publications”; (4) newspapers that were categorized as having “the above mentioned subject-matter must acquire a license from the government in advance”; and (5) printing press owners also had to make “an official request with the Department of Publications in order to acquire a printing license” if they planned on printing a newspaper. The March 27 declaration also provided a list of thirty-one Arabic periodicals and twenty-four foreign newspapers and magazines that the authorities deemed “acceptable periodicals” and thus exempt from acquiring a press license. Or as Gorst described it, “The higher-class Arabic newspapers and the local European press will be in no way affected.”²³ The owners of the rest of the regularly published periodicals (i.e., those deemed unacceptable or “lower class”) were given until April 15 to license their newspapers with the Ministry of the Interior.²⁴

The result of this attack on press freedom was an immediate backlash by the urban masses, which “extended to manual workers and craftsmen like metalsmiths, carpenters, barbers, plumbers, other blue-collar workers and even 'Azhari sheikhs.”²⁵ Political demonstrations were organized and preannounced by the press. Several of them were held in Cairo, and some led to violent confrontations with the police. One of the demonstrations began on Wednesday, March 31, 1909, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. The demonstrators met in Gizira (Zamalek) and, after listening to a few speeches, marched across the Qasr-al-Nil Bridge to 'Abdin Square, eventually ending up in Opera Square in Azbakiyya.²⁶

According to a contemporary observer, throughout the march the protesters continuously shouted slogans such as “Long live the press! Down with the publication law! Long live the nation [*al-Watan*]! Long live the homeland [*al-'umma*]! Down with despotism [*'istibdad*]!” The demonstrators singled out the khedive and Butrus Ghali for most of their shouts and insults. Because of his role as the president of the special Dinshaway tribunal, Butrus Ghali was especially unpopular. Dozens of arrests were made, and many of the demonstrators were imprisoned, which prompted the Watani Party newspapers to “insult the judges and accuse Prime Minister Butrus Ghali of being an unjust, thoughtless tyrant.”²⁷ By April 1909 the public demonstrations were so widespread that serious discussions took place between Gorst and the khedive over the creation of laws to discourage large public meetings. The significance of these demonstrations lay not only in the concern of the public over the freedom of the press but also in the apparently active relationship between the press and the urban Egyptian middle classes. Concerned newspaper editors an-

nounced and planned these demonstrations in their respective newspapers, and the readers (and listeners) responded with instant mobilization and action.²⁸

COPTIC-MUSLIM STRIFE AND
THE ASSASSINATION OF BUTRUS GHALI

The press law was tested and put into practice almost immediately after its implementation with the prosecution of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Jawish for a June 28, 1909, article in *al-Liwa* commemorating the Dinshaway incident. In his article, “Reminiscences of Dinshaway,” Jawish went on the offensive, particularly attacking Butrus Ghali for his role in the trial.

Hail to those innocent souls which Boutros Ghali Pasha, President of the special tribunal, tore from their bodies as silk is torn from thorns! He took these souls in his hand and offered them as a holocaust to the cruel and oppressive tyrant whose only aim is to destroy us. . . . He [Boutros] belongs to a party among the Egyptians which fears the English more than God—people who only seek fortune and promotion, even though their country is oppressed and their own dignity “sacrificed.”²⁹

During his trial, Jawish took advantage of the extensive press coverage and used his defense to continue the offensive against the British and Ghali. In their reports back to the Foreign Office, the British authorities were dismayed by the theatrics of Jawish, who considered it “incumbent upon himself to sob bitterly whenever his counsel uttered the word ‘Denshawai’ [Dinshaway].”³⁰ For this first offense, Jawish was only fined, although within a few weeks he was brought to trial again for writing several articles praising the Indian nationalist Madan Lal Dhingra (1887–1909) for assassinating Sir William Hutt Curzon Wylie, the political aide-de-camp to the secretary of state for India.³¹ The British cited Jawish’s article in the August 17, 1909, issue of *al-Liwa* as particularly inflammatory. The article, “*al-Yawm Yuqtal Dhingra*” (Today Dhingra will be killed), was an unapologetic panegyric to Dhingra, who was to be executed that day. The murder was deemed dangerous by the British authority for its potential to incite copycat assassinations.³² This time, along with another fine, Jawish was sentenced to prison, prompting yet more demonstrations at the Azbakiyya Gardens.³³

Although the reapplication of the press law was theoretically supposed to decrease the number of “libelous” claims and accusations, it did not stop a growing trend of attacks and counterattacks by radical Muslim and Coptic journalists. Jawish, who would soon be released from prison,

continued his attacks on Butrus Ghali, vilifying him as a traitor to the nation, while expanding his attacks on the entire Coptic Egyptian community, accusing them of collaboration with the British.³⁴ Some of the more radical Coptic newspapers, such as *al-Watan* (The nation) and *Misir* (Egypt), were as militant as Jawish in their attacks on Muslims and Islam, prompting scores of accusations and counteraccusations.³⁵ The severity of the attacks on both sides was best expressed by the contemporary Coptic Egyptian chronicler Mikha'il Sharubim.

Hatred was surfacing on many levels. . . . Many wrote hateful letters and editorials in political party newspapers, especially those belonging to the Watani Party, which attacked and insulted Coptic Christians and Christianity. The country was plagued by the likes of the *Maghribi* Sheikh [referring to Jawish's Tunisian ancestry] 'Abd al-'Aziz Jawish. Whenever the situation began to settle down and peace and unity began to take hold, he lighted the fuse of religious strife once again. . . . The situation was worsened by the retaliations of the Coptic press, which answered each of the wrongs of the Watani press with two wrongs.³⁶

Sharubim also blamed the publication of Lord Cromer's book, *Modern Egypt*, which was "filled with attacks against Islam" and what he labeled as the "behind-the-curtain machinations of Sir Gorst, who would revive religious tensions whenever they died down."³⁷ It is doubtful, however, that Gorst intentionally inflamed religious tensions in Egypt. His correspondence with Sir Edward Grey at the Foreign Office indicates clearly that he was fearful of Coptic-Muslim religious tension and did all he could to contain it.³⁸

On February 20, 1910, tension between Muslims and Copts climaxed with the assassination of the Egyptian prime minister, Butrus Ghali. Most Egyptian nationalists never forgave Ghali for his role as chief judge in the prosecutions of the Dinshaway villagers, and his appointment in November 18, 1908, as prime minister infuriated many. His popularity decreased even more because of the strong role he played in legislating the press law and his support for the proposed extension of the Suez Canal concessions.³⁹ Thus, when 'Ibrahim al-Wardani, the 25-year-old assassin of Butrus Ghali, was asked upon his arrest why he shot the prime minister, he unhesitatingly replied, "Because he betrayed the nation."⁴⁰

The assassination of Ghali was politically motivated, as Eldon Gorst made sure to stress in his report to the British foreign secretary: "As I stated at the time, and now repeat, the crime itself was political and not fanatical." It was, nonetheless, still viewed by many in the Egyptian Coptic community as religiously motivated, which threatened to increase religious tension to an even higher level. Gorst was unsympathetic to the Coptic cries of persecution, judging that the "feeling of alarm and angst

amongst the Copts in general” was in part a result of their minority status and their readiness to “cry out before they are hurt.”⁴¹

However, the case can be made that the sense of alarm within the Coptic community was justified, especially considering some of Jawish’s rants. This panic was exacerbated by al-Wardani’s almost immediate memorialization by many nationalists as a heroic national figure. Almost immediately after his arrest, several nationalist and tabloid newspapers wrote editorials about al-Wardani’s daily life behind bars. Articles discussing his sleeping, waking, reading, eating, drinking, and washing habits abounded. *Al-Liwa*, for example, stated that al-Wardani slept extremely comfortably and well. And *Misr al-Fatah* wrote that al-Wardani lunched on two cutlets of lamb and a plate of pasta. Cartoons, pictures, and drawings of al-Wardani, along with *azjal*, poetry, and ballads venerating his assassination of Ghali, filled the pages of the press. According to Sharubim:

The low and vulgar newspapers set out to immediately venerate the killer while glorifying his deed by drawing his picture on the pages of their publications along with low colloquial poetry and trivial remarks. . . . Upon hearing the newspaper sellers of these types of newspaper, the masses and the rabble descend upon them, buying and reading them. Typically the reading of such a newspaper attracts all kinds of unemployed lowlives who laugh, giggle, and celebrate what is written with spontaneous and meaningless remarks such as “oh boy” and “oh man” [*’aywa ya ‘am*] and other such nonsense. Typically this type of scene continues until the police arrives and either arrests them or separates their gathering.⁴²

In July 1910, a newly available book containing thirty-nine nationalist poems and *azjal* and edited by a certain ‘Ali al-Ghayati appealed to the masses and called for resistance against the Egyptian government and the British occupation.⁴³ Contributing to the book’s legitimacy were introductions written by none other than Muhammad Farid and ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Jawish, accompanied by their photographs. This “volume of seditious poems,” as Gorst described it to the Foreign Office, “constitutes a specimen of subversive literature of a dangerous type.”⁴⁴ Several of the *azjal* and poems glorified al-Wardani as a national hero, including a poem detailing the day of al-Wardani’s trial; others compared al-Wardani to the Indian Dhingra or insulted the khedive and accused him of being a collaborator. According to the Egyptian government, the book broke three penal codes by (1) acting as an apology for a crime, (2) being an affront to the office of the khedive, and (3) attempting to bring the government hatred and contempt. Al-Ghayati disappeared after a warrant was issued for his arrest and, according to Gorst, he most likely left the country.⁴⁵ Ample evidence suggests that the perception of al-Wardani as a national hero was widespread and was expressed in the streets. Law

school students, who were most certainly members or sympathizers of the Watani Party, posted pamphlets on the walls of their school that declared, “al-Wardani is dead . . . Long live al-Wardani,” and many others were arrested for shouting other pro-Wardani chants and slogans.⁴⁶

PASSIVE RESISTANCE:

LAUGHING AT KITCHENER AND CROMER

Hey Lord! Go ahead and leave
and don't let the door hit you on your way out

. . .

Those who were hanged are greeting you
saying their heart will always be with you
Those who were flogged or orphaned
They declare their eternal love for you
Those who were imprisoned or had their houses demolished
hold you in great favor
Truly all of your good works speak for themselves
and all are covetous of you
But Lord! Please leave
and don't let the door hit you on your way out

—Izat Saqr, *Diwan 'Amir Fann al-Zajal*

'Izat Saqr's *zajal* (the poem that opens this section) was written almost immediately after Lord Cromer resigned from his position as consul-general.⁴⁷ The satire and humor of this *zajal* is derived from the irony of contrasting Cromer's repeated claims that he was loved by the Egyptian fellah with the realities of what happened in Dinshaway. Popular jokes also expressed the collective abhorrence of Lord Cromer by the Egyptian people, especially after he published his book on modern Egypt.⁴⁸ Many of the jokes revel in the fact that, because of the Dinshaway incident, Lord Cromer could never return to Egypt in any official capacity. For instance, one of these jokes expresses the desire of Cromer to return to Egypt and conveys the impossibility of doing so: “A reliable informant has reported to us that he saw Lord Cromer sitting in an Egyptian coffee shop [*qahwa baladi*] in London with a long beard and wearing a *galabiyya* and '*abaya* [traditional Egyptian dress].” A similar joke satirizes Cromer's desperation: “Cromer is wishing to return to Egypt even if he is assigned a position as an assistant worm [*musa'id duda*].”⁴⁹

Eldon Gorst, who replaced Cromer in 1907, was more diplomatic than his predecessor and was perceived, rightly or wrongly, by many Egyptians as being “softer” than Cromer. So when Gorst became gravely ill in the summer of 1911 and soon passed away, news that his replacement would

be Lord Horatio Kitchener (1850–1916) caused a great deal of alarm in Egypt. Kitchener was a known commodity because of his previous position as sirdar of the Egyptian Army in Sudan; he had a reputation as a tough and unpleasant character. The appointment of Kitchener by the Foreign Office was in no doubt partly motivated by the desire to counter the relative disorder that was taking place.

Even before arriving in Egypt, Kitchener was viewed with suspicion and was depicted in the Egyptian press as an “exact replica of Lord Cromer.”⁵⁰ In anticipation of a stricter policy than Gorst’s, the satirical magazine *al-Sayf* (The sword) printed an article titled “Welcome to Harsh(er) Policies” (*Marhaban bil-Shidda*). The writer sarcastically welcomes Lord Kitchener and his reputed forceful policy by announcing that Egyptians are used to more aggressive governance by their rulers and that his appointment will only make resistance and nationalism more effective. The writer then asks, “Why were England and France liberated, and how did the American Republic rise? Was it not because of oppressive and forceful rule? Show us this forceful rule you speak of. We most certainly welcome it” (*’ayna hiyya al-shidda? Marhaban bil shidda*). In conclusion, the writer declares that “nations are often revived and resuscitated through their reaction to oppressive policy. So we welcome your repression!”⁵¹

The jokes of the time also reflected the consternation of the masses regarding Kitchener’s appointment. For instance, one joke announces that Kitchener was asked at a parliament meeting, “Will you always be frowning like this, when you take over your position in Egypt?” A frowning Kitchener responds to the Parliament committee, “I will not crack a smile even if they start tickling me.”⁵² Presciently, another joke pronounces that “the reason that Lord Kitchener was late in coming to Egypt was because he was taking extensive notes and advice from Lord Cromer.”⁵³ Indeed, Cromer was in correspondence with Kitchener and often directly advised him on policy issues relating to Egypt. One of these letters makes it clear that Cromer did perceive Kitchener as an extension of himself and his policies; it also supports the other jokes that allude to the fact that Cromer sorely missed his old position in Egypt: “It is a real consolation to me to think that under your auspices the work of my lifetime will not be thrown away; until your advent I confess that I began to fear that such would be the case.”⁵⁴

Long before newspapers and other communication technologies arrived, proverbs, jokes, and rumors were an integral part of a coping mechanism in premodern societies, helping people to deal with oppression, whether colonial or local. Indeed, as we have seen, humor and jokes, especially in an urban setting, have a tremendous impact on people’s biases

and thoughts and can arguably give us the most accurate glimpse of popular opinion. The printing of the most current jokes in some of the satirical periodicals was yet another example of the ongoing relationship between the oral and the textual, which undoubtedly enhanced the national circulation and popularity of these jokes.

TAQATIQ (TA'ATI') AND THE CULTURE MARKET,
1907–1919

The primary motivating drive for music writing today is commercial. I am not exaggerating when I say that the record companies often ask us to write over one hundred pieces at a time . . . and they only demand the types of songs that increase their profits and attract large audiences, which undoubtedly is of the *taqtuqa* variety.

—Yunis al-Qadi, *al-Masrah*, March 15, 1926

To the chagrin of some of the conservative elite, the Egyptian culture industries, like all industries, were primarily concerned with profit, and hence they catered to the tastes of the mass consumers of culture. This meant not only that the de facto language of choice for most cultural productions was colloquial Egyptian but also that the subject matter needed to be light enough to be palatable to mass consumers. The songs and plays that were most in demand, and hence most profitable, were reproduced in greater numbers and listened to by more people. As Pierre Bourdieu has shown in his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, “taste classifies,” and it seems that by the 1910s and 1920s a sort of mass taste, shared by most Egyptian culture consumers, was developing.⁵⁵ This emergent mass taste was in sharp contrast to the more rigid and hence far from universally accessible taste of the Egyptian cultural elite. Allowing the masses such a powerful input in what would effectively become the dominant national culture contributed to the perpetual attacks that some of the conservative elite made on most forms of mass culture.⁵⁶ This does not mean that the Egyptian elite did not listen to or watch popular colloquial Egyptian songs or plays. In reality, Egyptians of all classes—including some of the very critics who were staunchly attacking colloquial culture in the press—enjoyed the full range of colloquial Egyptian cultural production.

For the first time cultural production was driven by the desires of mass consumers, and the continual demand was for colloquial songs and plays. The record industry, in particular, was aware of the needs of the market and was always scouting for new talent. Record sales were increasing as mass-scale manufacturing of gramophones and discs made them cheaper and more accessible to a greater number of Egyptians. For example, an

American-made gramophone that sold for 3 £E (Egyptian pounds) in 1904, cost only 2 £E in 1906 and included five free discs and a five-year warranty. These prices made it possible for many urban coffee shops to buy phonographs, especially if they could not afford live entertainment. There were even “mobile phonographs” carried by their operators, who charged a small fee for playing songs on demand.⁵⁷ As Virginia Danielson has shown, even some villagers in the Egyptian countryside—in this case a young Umm Kulthum—had access to recorded music by listening at the house of the village *‘umda*.⁵⁸

With the notable exception of the records made by the Mechian Corporation, an entirely Egyptian-based operation, most of these Arabic records were recorded in Egypt and later mass-produced in Europe or the United States.⁵⁹ Although we do not have exact figures for how many records were imported into Egypt in the first quarter of the twentieth century, we can reasonably piece together a picture of an active and profitable industry. From 1900 to 1910 the Gramophone Corporation alone recorded 1,192 different records in Egypt.⁶⁰ The 1913–14 Egyptian catalogue for the Odeon Corporation listed 458 records. Unfortunately, we do not have any official figures for the Polyphon, Baidaphon, Pathé, and Mechian corporations, which were also active during this period.⁶¹ In 1912, Germany exported 65,000 records to Egypt; these were most likely for the German Odeon label. By 1929 the estimated number of records imported by Egypt from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France was 728,000.⁶²

The increasing exposure of more Egyptians to recorded music created the beginnings of a democratization and, to a certain degree, a homogenization of popular music culture. As more Egyptian men and women from all social classes were exposed to the same music, an increasingly national taste was forming. Most of the differing forms of colloquial mass culture were essentially produced by the same colloquial writers, who were valued and sought after for their mastery of colloquial Egyptian and hence their ability to convey ideas to all Egyptians, regardless of class or education. Because of these new market demands, the price of a *zajal* dramatically increased during the first quarter of the twentieth century, for not only did dozens of satirical periodicals need colloquial writers for their printed *azjal*, but also the burgeoning theater and music industries began contracting these same writers to write theatrical monologues, comedic sketches, plays, and *taqatiq*.⁶³ For instance, as Marilyn Booth has shown, the colloquial writer Bayram al-Tunsi “left a textual legacy that encompasses a range of genres and media: poetry, short stories, essays, verse and prose parody, serial dialogues, musical-comedy theater, film scripts, songs, and radio serials.”⁶⁴ This was also true for other colloquial writers,

including 'Amin Sidqi, Badi' Khayri, and Yunis al-Qadi, who were vital to the growth and development of these new media.⁶⁵ In this growing market, competition was fierce between the different record companies as demand for recorded colloquial music rapidly increased and good colloquial writers, especially composers, were in short supply.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, record companies were competing for composers, songwriters, musicians, and singers. Yunis al-Qadi (b. 1888), a prominent colloquial songwriter and playwright, describes how the Gramophone record company had exclusive deals with the *zajjal* 'Ahmad 'Ashur Sulayman—who was also one of the newspaper editors for *al-'Arnab* (The rabbit) and *al-Babaghlu* (The parrot)—and the musician Dawud Husni to write the words and music for their *taqatiq*.⁶⁶ Odeon, which started recording Egyptian artists as early as 1905, soon built up its reputation by signing a contract with the legendary Salama Hijazi and several popular female singers, including 'Asma al-Kumsariyya and Bahiyya al-Mahalawiyya.⁶⁷ According to Pekka Gronow, in 1906 there was such an “extraordinary demand for Arab records in Egypt” that the Odeon Corporation had contracted a famous Egyptian singer (most likely Salama Hijazi) for the unprecedented sum of 10,000 francs. To “recoup this investment, it was claimed that the company would have to sell at least 100,000 records.”⁶⁸

Munira al-Mahdiyya (1884?–1965)

By 1908, most of the well-known Egyptian performers were contractually bound to either Gramophone or Odeon.⁶⁹ For instance, Gramophone paid the singer 'Ibrahim al-Qabbani (1852–1927) 200 £E a year just to guarantee exclusive rights to his recordings.⁷⁰ Not to be outdone, Baidaphon, owned by the Lebanese Bayda brothers, signed an exclusive contract with Munira al-Mahdiyya, the most famous singer in Egypt at the time.⁷¹ Al-Mahdiyya's real name was Zakiyya Hassan Mansur. She was born in the mid-1880s in the town of Zaqaziq. Her father passed away when she was a child, and she was raised by her eldest sister. She attended a French convent school but did not finish her primary education. Al-Mahdiyya left home at a young age to pursue a career as a professional singer in Cairo, where she quickly rose to stardom.⁷² She later expanded her repertoire, transforming herself into a theater actress and joining the 'Aziz 'Id troupe and later the Salama Hijazi troupe, where “she performed the male roles written originally for Hijazi.”⁷³ In 1917, al-Mahdiyya started her own theater company, where she was featured as the main singing and acting star. According to Virginia Danielson, al-Mahdiyya “personally assumed management responsibilities for her troupe, negotiating with the theater

owners, composers, lyricists, and singers, planning schedules and meeting payrolls, as well as performing herself.”⁷⁴

The artistic and economic power that al-Mahdiyya held within the Baidaphon company was also significant. Although the company had 'Ahmad Ghunayma as its exclusive composer, al-Mahdiyya often composed her own songs and, according to al-Qadi, made executive decisions within the Baidaphon Corporation.⁷⁵ Before al-Qadi could be hired as the primary songwriter for al-Mahdiyya, for example, Butrus Bayda, the owner of Baidaphon, had to acquire her approval.

At seven o'clock, he brought me to his office and sat me next to a lady who was wearing the traditional black Egyptian *milayya laf* [wrapping sheet] and veil. He then told her that this is the [prospective] writer of the company. I began to wonder, Who was this Egyptian woman? And why does she care who the writer of the company is? Is she one of the owners of the company? And is she merely a consultant, or does she have an executive privilege? . . . The owner declared, “This lady is Munira al-Mahdiyya,” and I soon realized that she has executive-privilege and as the brightest star, is the be-all and end-all [*al-kul fil-kul*] of the company.⁷⁶

In a tongue-and-cheek manner, yet another theater magazine describes the power Munira al-Mahdiyya held over Baidaphon: “It is said that the company [Baidaphon] has an exclusive monopoly on recording the voice of Munira al-Mahdiyya, but in reality, Lady Munira is the one with exclusive controlling rights of the company. The owners of the company do not dare sign or record any new singer without conferring with Lady Munira, the official consultant of the company.”⁷⁷

As the diva of Egyptian popular culture at the start of the twentieth century, al-Mahdiyya's earning power was significant. In addition to the money she collected from Baidaphon, she made a considerable amount from her theatrical productions, and by singing for just 40 minutes a night in the Alhambra Casino in Cairo, she earned an additional 124 £E a month.⁷⁸ Al-Mahdiyya was only one among dozens of female actresses and singers who played an important role in these thriving national productions. As mentioned in Chapter 4, *taqatiq* were an almost exclusively female art form, and record companies scoured Cairene and Alexandrian coffeehouses to find talented female singers to fill their recordings, transforming some of them into national stars (see Figure 6).⁷⁹

Al-Mahdiyya was also not the only Egyptian female artist with music-writing experience. Na'ima al-Misriyya, who was famous in her own right, was known to write some of her own music. Sayyid Darwish, who was to revolutionize music composition in twentieth-century Egypt, used to frequent al-Misriyya's house in order to solicit her musical opinion. According to Yunis al-Qadi, Darwish believed that al-Misriyya was



FIGURE 6. *Munira al-Mahdiyya as Cleopatra. From al-Naqid, March 19, 1928.*

among “the best singers and song critics and knew more about music composition than most composers.” Al-Qadi stressed that if al-Misriyya approvingly selected one of Darwish’s songs, he was certain that it would become a hit.⁸⁰ Al-Misriyya had a similar background to al-Mahdiyya. Born in Cairo, she was raised in a lower middle-class family and took up professional singing as a way to support her family after her divorce at a young age. Like Munira al-Mahdiyya, al-Misriyya rose to the top of her profession, purchasing the famous Alhambra Casino in 1927, “which she managed herself, appearing as the star singer and planning the other entertainment.”⁸¹

Sayyid Darwish (1892–1923)

Sayyid Darwish was born in the popular quarter of Kom al-Dika in Alexandria and started his career playing and singing in coffee shops.⁸² In 1914, he got his first professional break when he was hired as a composer (and singer) for the Mechian record company.⁸³ Darwish was the single most important figure in early twentieth-century Egyptian musical production. His revolutionary compositions were instrumental in the creation of “modern” songs that were in high demand, and record companies competed for his services. Darwish was also instrumental in transforming traditional “oriental” music, with its stuffy Ottoman classicism, into a distinctly Egyptian and “modern” compositional style that was catchy and short and perfectly suited the needs of the record companies and their overwhelming demand for new *taqatiq*.⁸⁴ Most *taqatiq* were of the light variety, with sexually suggestive and flirtatious themes, although, as we will soon examine, growing numbers of *taqatiq* had nationalist themes or addressed current social and economic concerns. One of the earliest examples of this type of *taqtuqa* was Darwish’s 1914 “*Ista‘gibu ya ‘Afandiyya*” (Isn’t it shocking, oh gentlemen), which describes the kerosene and gasoline shortage and the subsequent rise in prices on the eve of World War I. After commiserating that 1 liter of kerosene now cost the same as a 5-liter tin (*safiha*) did,⁸⁵ the song then angrily continues, “Who would have imagined that this would happen . . . even matches are now just a memory and gas lamps are almost legendary . . . costing more than a franc and a half.”⁸⁶ Another Sayyid Darwish song, ironically titled “*al-Kutra*” (Abundance), takes an even more direct approach to criticizing Egypt’s deteriorating wartime economic condition. The general feeling of disenfranchisement, the unavailability of essential goods, and the increasing poverty were subtly blamed on British wartime rationing and foreign-owned capital.

We live in the Nile valley, yet our drinking
is rationed by water meters
From gas, salt and sugar
to the tramways of *khawaga* Kiryaniti
May you never experience our desperation
Our pockets are clean [empty] and our houses even cleaner
Even the clothes we are wearing are already pawned
What a ghastly life⁸⁷

Many of these songs became instant hits and were sung and played on gramophones throughout the country. “The Fortune-Teller” (“*Bassara Barraja*”), one of Darwish’s early songs, was written specifically for Munira al-Mahdiyya, and in its original version it had subtle nationalistic overtones, with the fortune-teller declaring to her client, “It is apparent

you are Egyptian . . . and that you have countless enemies and almost no fortune/luck.” In an obvious allusion to the British, the fortune-teller continues, “May God punish your enemies . . . for they are enslaving your people!” This reference, however, was not enough for al-Mahdiyya, who added another “improvised” line to the song in her recorded (and probably her live) version: “I am Munira al-Mahdiyya and for me the love of my nation is a passion. . . . For freedom and for my country I would sacrifice my life . . . and what does fortune have to do with that?”⁸⁸

In what would arguably become his most popular song, Darwish composed the music for a *zajal* by Badi‘ Khayri that celebrated the return of the survivors of the approximately 1-million-man Egyptian labor force, recruited (often under coercion) by the British to help with the war effort. Many of these men had been sent to foreign destinations, including France, Malta, Syria, and Palestine. “*Salma ya Salama*” (Welcome back to safety), with its nationalistic theme of yearning for the homeland, struck a chord with most Egyptians; it became extremely popular and was widely sung throughout Egypt.

Welcome back to safety
 We went and returned safely
 Blow your horn, oh, steamboat, and anchor
 Let me off in this country [Egypt]
 Who cares about America or Europe
 There is no better than this country
 The ship that is returning
 is much better than the one that is departing
 . . .
 Welcome back to safety
 We went and returned safely
 . . .
 Who cares about the British Authority, it was all for profit
 We saved as much as we could
 We saw the war and the violence
 We saw the explosions with our very eyes
 There is only one God and one life, and here we are
 We left and now we returned
 . . .
 Welcome back to safety
 We went and returned safely⁸⁹

The speed with which this song turned into a national hit, heard and to a great extent sung by everyone, was unprecedented. Indeed, this was only the beginning of a growing and constantly changing repertoire of Egyptian songs, a national anthology of songs heard and, more important, sung by most Egyptians.⁹⁰ This certainly would not have been possible

without the gramophone and the recording industry, making recording media at least as important as print media in transforming the way Egyptians perceived their identity. With the transformation of songs into a mass medium, discourse and praxis often converged, in the sense that unlike novels, newspapers, and other printed texts, listeners often participated in the experience of discourse dissemination by simply singing along. Although periodicals, especially colloquial satirical newspapers, were often read out loud in coffee shops—dramatically increasing their reach—songs were directly consumed by their listeners without intermediaries or translators. More important, because of simple melodies and lyrics, literate and illiterate alike could easily memorize and disseminate songs, reaching a much larger audience.

Some evidence suggests that early on in the Egyptian music industry, listener and consumer participation in the process of music dissemination was encouraged. Sheet music was printed by the thousands and distributed by record and theater companies for consumption by their viewers and listeners.⁹¹ Because of its accessibility to a much greater number of people and its ambiguous status between discourse and practice, recording media played an important complementary role to print media in the development of national identity.⁹² During World War I, the importance of the music and theater industries was enhanced even further as a result of the enforcement of martial law, which vigorously imposed censorship of the press. Censorship of songs and plays was less stringent and harder to enforce, allowing a great deal of flexibility for writers who took advantage of this gap and filled the need for cultural and political expression.⁹³

LAUGHTER, HORSE MEAT, AND THE SOCIOECONOMIC EFFECTS OF WORLD WAR I

The process of domination generates a hegemonic public conduct and a backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power.

—James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*

The assassination of Butrus Ghali, the elevated civil strife between Muslims and Copts, and the subsequent increase in demonstrations and other acts of resistance were important factors in a zero tolerance policy directed at the Watani Party, leading to the imprisonment or exile of most of its leadership. This suppression was especially intensified with the application of martial law during World War I, and it left a temporary, though significant, leadership vacuum in the Egyptian nationalist movement. Dur-

ing the first couple of years of World War I, the British were worried about political instability in Egypt. The fact that at the time the Ottoman sultan was considered the caliph of all Sunni Muslims and the official sovereign of Egypt certainly contributed to this fear and forced the British administration to act swiftly to minimize any risk of rebellion.

Thus, like clockwork, on the night of October 31, 1914, several hundred “Turkish, Khedivist and nationalist agitators” were arrested; some were deported to Malta. General Maxwell, the commanding British officer, placed Egypt under martial law on November 2, and on November 5 Britain declared war on the Ottomans.⁹⁴ Britain declared its protectorate over Egypt, and Ottoman suzerainty over Egypt was officially severed on December 18. On the morning of the next day, ‘Abbas Hilmi II was deposed and replaced by Sultan Husayn Kamil.⁹⁵

The reaction of the Egyptian street was surprisingly calm, which in part at least could be explained by the harsh martial law policies, which severely punished public disorder. In examining the Foreign Office correspondence, it seems that the British were starved for intelligence reports and “expert” opinions about the attitudes and reactions of the Egyptian people with regard to the war. A curious nine-page intelligence report by the Indian Aga Khan, who vacationed frequently in Egypt, described to the British Foreign Office the situation in Egypt at the beginning of the war: “Our first impression, which still remains unchanged, was that except for the evidence of considerable military activity for the defense of the country, there was no outward sign that the Egyptians were in any way perturbed by the Great War, which had drawn into its vortex and ranged on opposite sides the British and Ottoman Empires.”⁹⁶

Public gatherings of five people or more were criminalized, and this law was regularly enforced. Special proclamations were posted regarding the “possession or introduction into Egypt of arms, explosives or seditious literature.” A British-run military censorship office was established and headquartered at the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior. Newspapers and periodicals were more vigorously censored, and censorship was extended to all letters and telegrams entering or leaving Egypt.⁹⁷ This resulted in the eradication, for the time being at least, of many of Egypt’s smaller periodicals (including a significant number of satirical magazines). As we examined in Chapter 4, the imposition of the press law in 1909 together with the political repressions of World War I resulted in a sharp decline in Egyptian journalistic activities throughout the 1910s. For instance, in the 1900s there were 278 new Arabic periodicals in Egypt. This number declined in the 1910s by more than 70% to only 80 new magazines and newspapers; however, this was only temporary, as an extraordinary 442 new Arabic periodicals were published in the following decade.⁹⁸

Aside from a sudden increase in political repression, the war had a tremendous economic impact. Shortages of most essentials, from grain and meat to clothing and paper, were commonplace. Unemployment and inflation were rampant as prices soared. The economic hardships were felt across class lines, and many landowners were bankrupted, in part because the British kept cotton prices below market value to ensure a steady supply of cheap raw materials for the war effort. The countryside was devastated as farm animals and especially beasts of burden were confiscated to help supply the British armies in the region, and, as mentioned, Egyptian peasants were recruited to work in labor gangs.⁹⁹

Despite tighter censorship enforcement, some of the surviving newspapers were able to express the frustrations felt by the Egyptian people over wartime rationing, price fixing, and inflation. This anger was best expressed by Bayram al-Tunsi, who wrote a short poem in *al-'Ahaly* newspaper describing in a play of words how the pricing (*tas'ir*) committee was in reality the hardship (*ta'sir*) committee. Al-Tunsi sarcastically continues to describe how the pricing committee has “decided the price of lunch with every individual grain of wheat, rice, and sesame costing one dirham.”¹⁰⁰ *Al-Masamir* (The nails), subtitled “A Critical, Literary, and Humorous Nationalist Periodical” [*Jarida Wataniyya Fukahiyya 'Adabiyya 'Intiqadiyya*], was one of the few satirical newspapers that survived the censorship purges of the war. *Al-Masamir* was filled with comedic sketches and *azjal* expressing wartime frustrations.¹⁰¹ For example, a *zajal* appearing in the July 21, 1918, issue implicitly attacked the British for draining the Egyptian land of crops.

Due to neediness we find the poor
 even in the 'Id are re-stitching their clothes
 Some patch up their shoes
 even changing the leather of their *tarbush* [fez]
 And others can't afford even this
 for they own nothing in this life . . . oh brother!
 This despair, how do we put an end to it
 and who will push it away from us?
 In our land we plant plenty of goodness
 yet evil comes in and plows it away
 The moist fertile branches are withered and dried out in their own land¹⁰²

Al-Masamir was also full of colloquial dialogues similar in style to the social dialogues written by 'Abdallah Nadim a generation earlier. Written in an everyday colloquial language, the dialogues offer a glimpse of actual conversations and concerns during those trying times, and many emphasized the poverty and economic inequities facing the urban middle class. For example, the following dialogue, consisting of an everyday

conversation between Fahmi and Ramzi, reflects the hardships that the lack of basic necessities and wartime inflation had imposed on most Egyptians:

FAHMI: The poor, how do they survive in these harsh times, considering that their salaries are around 150 or 200 piasters and they probably have five or six kids? What are they supposed to do? How do they eat, drink, and cloth themselves and their kids?

RAMZI: By God, you are right, Fahmi, since these days, their salaries barely cover the price of bread alone! Only millionaires can afford to even see a loaf of bread today!¹⁰³

Not surprisingly, class resentment was developing at the time, which was reflected in plays and songs and in the press. An anti-elite *zajal* written for the September 16, 1918, issue of *al-Masamir* powerfully reflects the poor economic conditions suffered by the urban middle classes and the natural resentments that the have-nots felt toward the well-to-do foreigners and Egyptians.

You have jewelry and your pockets are full of gold
 but it's not my business?
 I can barely dress and I don't have a penny
 but it's not your business?
 You inherited property and have tons of money in the bank
 but will you give me any?
 I work an honest living so I can eat and don't ask you for any handouts
 I don't have property or wealth, only what sustains me
 but do I take anything from you?
 What is annoying though, oh, Bey, Pasha or *Khawaga* is that I am a man
 like you!
 . . .
 So at the very least you should respect me like I respect you
 If you don't
 then your eminence can go to hell [*mal'un abu sa'atak*]¹⁰⁴

As would be expected, Egyptian jokes during the war were quite revelatory of the economic and political troubles experienced by the masses. More than any other mass culture source, they truly give a glimpse of the daily realities, fears, and tribulations experienced by the urbanite middle class. Some of these jokes specifically targeted the *dhawat*, or notables (Egypt's traditional landed gentry), who, as mentioned, lost a great deal of money because of below-market prices for Egyptian cotton. Because many large landowners were experiencing economic troubles, the jokes exaggerated their hardships—in a sort of mass gloating exercise—which in retrospect made the urban lower and middle classes feel marginally better about the dramatic decreases in their standard of living. For in-

stance, a popular joke at the time describes how “a group of thieves broke into the house of a notable and instead of stealing something, left some pocket money for him to spend.”¹⁰⁵ Another joke recounts how “one of the notables wanted to teach his children mathematics, so he taught them to divide a loaf of bread into ten equal parts.”¹⁰⁶

Curiously, instead of just talking about the scarcity of staples, many of the jokes that emphasized scarcity were concerned with the unavailability or, rather, the unaffordability of meat. For example, during *al-‘Id al-‘Adha*, when Muslims are supposed to sacrifice sheep and feed the poor and butcher shop windows are typically overstocked with meat, the following joke was in circulation: “One of the notables looked at the butcher shop window during the ‘Id and immediately passed out.” Another meat-related joke describes how “one of the *dhawat* [landowners] bought meat for 2 dirham but he made the butcher swear not to say a word to any of his relatives” (so that he would not have to share the meat with them).¹⁰⁷ It is doubtful that any of the notables who lost money during the war were destitute or could not afford to buy any meat, but exaggerating the relative “hardships” that the notables were having must have helped the middle- and lower middle-class people cope with their worsening financial situation.

Continuing this obsession with meat, dozens of jokes during the war were about butchers selling horse and donkey meat.¹⁰⁸ As with most jokes, this reflected real events that were taking place at the time. With the price of meat skyrocketing, some butchers were caught selling horse meat, and in Alexandria a law was passed allowing horse meat to be sold.¹⁰⁹ Two of these jokes stand out in particular for their complicated language play. Replacing the letter *sin* with *sadd*, the word *‘ahsan* (better) becomes *‘ahssan* (horselike or horsier) and removing a *hamza* from the word *bi‘aghla* (most expensive) transforms it into the word *baghla* (mule).

A butcher was asked: “Do you have any lamb meat?” The butcher replied: “I have meat that is horsier/better [*‘ahssan/‘ahsan*] than lamb.”

A butcher was asked: “For how much do you sell your meat these days?” The butcher replied: “For a mule-like/high [*baghla/bi‘aghla*] price!”¹¹⁰

Jokes like these reveal the daily concerns of average Egyptians during this time of scarcity. Everyday concerns overshadowed all others, and the average Egyptian was, above all, hoping for economic relief. When the war ended, there was a sense of optimism that was loaded with anticipation for economic and political improvements in everyday life. This mass anticipation was expressed in a long *zajal* printed in two parts in the December 15 and December 22 issues of *al-Masamir*. The *zajal*, which celebrates the end of the war, appropriately ends with a list

of banal yet significant concerns and questions: “When will the goods we need start arriving? . . . oils, leather and boxes of pasta . . . shoes, clothes, and well-made fezzes?”¹¹¹

THE EVOLUTION AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF
VAUDEVILLE DURING THE WAR, 1914–1918

There was the increasing vogue and availability of theaters and opera houses: an influence comparable to that of twentieth-century cinema, with everyone eager to adopt the admired accents and turns of phrase used on the stage.

—Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*

Because of the war, European theater companies could no longer travel to Egypt, leaving a large entertainment vacuum filled by a growing number of indigenous vaudeville theater troupes, which in the first couple of years of the war performed Franco-Arab plays.¹¹² In addition, despite the application of martial law and the overall repression imposed by the British during World War I, the budding Egyptian entertainment industry, and especially the comedic theater, was allowed to continue to operate with only limited censorship. 'Ibrahim Ramzi (1884–1949), who wrote some of these early vaudeville plays, described how “because the war was raging, in 1916, theatrical companies were especially performing comedic and satirical plays in order to alleviate the cloud of fear and worry that lingered in every heart and mind.”¹¹³ Indeed, it is possible that the British authorities allowed these sources of entertainment to continue as a safety valve for those who were feeling economic and political repression during the war.

According to newspaper advertisements, during the second decade of the twentieth century the price of general admission for most plays presented by the professional theater companies in Cairo and Alexandria—including the theaters of al-Rihani, al-Kassar, al-Mahdiyya, and Salama Hijazi—was 5 piasters.¹¹⁴ Najib al-Rihani mentions in his diary that in his theater in late 1917, there was also a 10-piaster second-class section and a 15-piaster first-class section.¹¹⁵ All these plays were open to female audiences, and many of the advertisements specifically mentioned the fact that admission was for both men and women. In addition, to maximize the number of women attending the theater, Tuesday afternoons were often designated exclusively for women and Sundays for families.¹¹⁶

'Aziz 'Id was the first theater manager to have a professional theater company entirely devoted to colloquial vaudeville comedies (see Chapter 4). The Arabic Comedy Troupe (al-Juq al-Kumidi al-'Arabi), which he established in 1907, performed a variety of plays in some of the main-

stream theaters of Cairo.¹¹⁷ ‘Id regularly performed these plays until the end of 1909, when he virtually disappeared from the pages of the press.¹¹⁸ After the start of the war, ‘Id reconstituted his troupe and reappeared more permanently on the Egyptian theater scene with a number of even more controversial and groundbreaking plays, opening the way for the unprecedented success of the competing troupes of Najib al-Rihani and ‘Ali al-Kassar. ‘Id’s play *Ya Siti ma Timshish Kida ‘Iryana* (Lady, don’t walk naked like this) was especially controversial, as the main star, Ruz (Rose) al-Yusuf, appeared on stage wearing just a bathing suit.¹¹⁹ Al-Yusuf, who would soon become a major celebrity, was named the vaudevillian beauty (*al-fudfilia al-hasna*) in the press, and in 1925 she was able to capitalize on her fame and transition into a successful career in journalism by starting and running *Ruz al-Yusuf*—arguably the most successful and most politically influential illustrated magazine in Egyptian history.¹²⁰

Many of ‘Id’s plays were translated from French into Egyptian Arabic by ‘Amin Sidqi, an up-and-coming colloquial writer who would later become the exclusive writer for ‘Ali al-Kassar’s comedic troupe. However, one of ‘Id’s most successful plays, *Dukhul al-Hamam Mish Zay Khuruguh* (Entering the public bath is easier than exiting it), was not a translated foreign adaptation.¹²¹ Rather, this colloquial comedy, written by ‘Ibrahim Ramzi, was an indigenous social critique of traditional Egyptian society, which according to its writer attempted to “reveal some of the flaws of the Shari‘a courts, especially when it comes to personal status laws.”¹²² *Dukhul al-Hamam* was so popular that ‘Id went on tour, performing the play throughout Egypt and giving some of its proceeds to the Red Cross to help with the “war’s victims.”¹²³ This was not unusual, as many singers and theatrical troupes performed songs and plays with the majority of the proceeds going to a variety of charitable causes.¹²⁴

Many of the theatrical events during this period, in true vaudeville fashion, involved an elaborate medley of acts and performances in order to maximize their audience. An advertisement titled “This Afternoon,” appearing in the February 23, 1917, issue of *al-‘Afkār* newspaper, illustrates an extreme version of these carnivallike variety shows.

All of the inhabitants of the capital will race to see the show, which will be performed at the Carousel [Theater] this afternoon. In addition to the performance of European games [gymnastics], theatrical sketches, dancing, tumbling, magical acts, clowning, etc., the Munira al-Mahdiyya troupe will perform the play *‘Ayyda* [Aida]. The lady [*al-sayyida*] Munira will perform the play’s most important acting roles and sing all of its songs. This will be followed by the play *Khala‘at al-Nisa’* [The loose behavior of women] performed by Kish Kish Bey [Najib al-Rihani], and then the play *al-‘Umda al-‘Abit* [The imbecile village chief] performed by Muhammad Nagi. General admission is 5 piasters.¹²⁵

Najib al-Rihani (1891–1949) was an actor and writer in ‘Id’s troupe until leaving in May 1916 to perform his own comedic sketches and eventually starting his own theater company.¹²⁶

By the end of 1917, al-Rihani expanded his one-act plays and comedic sketches to longer, more elaborate plays. His theater company would soon entirely eclipse the troupe of his former mentor and employer ‘Aziz ‘Id. Al-Rihani, who specialized in playing the role of Kishkish Bey, an *‘umda* (village chief) from the countryside lured to the city with its many temptations, became the undisputed king of the stage by the end of the war. As discussed earlier, all the comedic plays, including al-Rihani’s, relied on and included a great deal of music, mostly *taqatiq*. The popularity of these plays and songs was unprecedented, creating for the first time a national community of listeners who “collectively” heard and sang the same songs.

You see today the Egyptian masses singing in the streets the songs of Kishkish Bey and others like it from the theater. And you see girls who have memorized these songs and are singing them at home. . . . The producers of such plays (and songs) have even printed the words and music of such songs in specialized booklets. Do you know how many of these booklets were distributed just in *Dar al-Tamthil al-‘Arabi*? 15,000 booklets and that’s just in a short period of time.”¹²⁷

Badi‘ Khayri, who wrote most of al-Rihani’s songs and plays, recalls in his memoirs that many of the fans of Kishkish Bey would “exit the theater memorizing his songs, and the music would spread everywhere.”¹²⁸ This observation is corroborated by many contemporary newspaper accounts. The playwright Muhammad Taymur, for instance, declared in an editorial in *al-Minbar* newspaper that “al-Rihani has become the most famous actor on stage” and his “songs are sung by women in private, repeated by children in the streets and alleys, and chanted everywhere by all classes, from the highest to the lowest [*min rafi‘ahum li-wadi‘ahum*].”¹²⁹ In another article, a cultural critic declared in frustration that Kishkish’s songs were “now the songs of the masses.” These songs, the critic continued, “have penetrated every house door and knocked down the walls of every inner sanctum.”¹³⁰

Although many conservative intellectuals, especially theater and literary critics, publicly attacked most of these colloquial productions, accusing them of vulgarity, colloquial Egyptian culture was in fact consumed by all Egyptians regardless of class or education. For example, in his diary entry dated September 4, 1918, Sa‘d Zaghlul Pasha describes a visit to his farm by the family of Isma‘il Sidqi Pasha (minister of agriculture from 1914 to 1917 and future prime minister). During the visit, Sidqi Pasha’s children performed sketches and songs from the vaudeville plays of Kishkish Bey for the adults.¹³¹ According to al-Rihani, Zaghlul also frequented his theater.¹³²

Most of the songs that were successful on stage were recorded by the record companies. Indeed, the theater and the music industry were inexorably linked. The writers, musicians, and composers who worked for the record companies were typically hired by the theater companies as well. This synergetic relationship proved equally useful for both industries, as each complemented the other and both benefited from bigger sales. Najib al-Rihani's *'Ululuh* (Tell him), for instance, produced at least nine musical hits, which were recorded almost immediately by the Mechian and Odeon record companies and were heard and sung all over Egypt.¹³³ Yunis al-Qadi, who wrote the words of many of Darwish's nontheatrical *taqatiq*, wrote in a 1927 article, "The best thing about these [Darwish] plays was undoubtedly the music, which was swiftly and astonishingly spreading from the mouths of the singers/musician to the mouths of the masses [*al-sha'b*] from one corner of the nation to the other, literally overnight."¹³⁴

Naturally, Sayyid Darwish's music was in high demand by theater companies because it almost guaranteed a successful and profitable play. Darwish was first employed in the theater business by George 'Abyad, who commissioned him to write the music for the musical *Fairuz Shah* (also known as *Kanu ma Kanu*), a successful comedic historical fantasy that satirized Egyptian politics. The success of this play, according to Yunis al-Qadi, helped expose Darwish's "original never-before-heard style of music to more and more people." *Fairuz Shah* also caught the attention of Najib al-Rihani, who immediately offered Darwish a lucrative contract to compose the music for many of his plays, including *Wa-Law* (Even so), *'Ish* (Wow), *'Ululuh* (Tell him), *Rin* (Ring/buzz), and many others of the Kishkish Bey series. (For a more detailed record of all the plays and songs composed by Darwish, see Appendix B.)¹³⁵

Because of Sayyid Darwish's unique musical talents and his near-guaranteed success with ticket and record sales, he could defy many of the professional codes of the time. Composers typically signed exclusive contracts with recording and theater companies, but Darwish became a free agent who wrote music for the highest bidder. He wrote songs, sometimes simultaneously, for the theaters of 'Ali al-Kassar, Najib al-Rihani, George 'Abyad, and Munira al-Mahdiyya.

Many of these vaudeville plays shared some of the same themes with the earlier colloquial Egyptian cultural expressions discussed in previous chapters, from street and puppet theater to the satirical press and *azjal*.¹³⁶ Perceived declines in morality because of Western influences, economic exploitation of native Egyptians by "conniving" *khawagas* (foreigners), and calls for increasing national solidarity were themes featured in many of the plays. Continuity with the comedic methods was also evident, with much of the humor achieved through language play and the satirizing of

non-Egyptian foreign accents. Intriguingly, Fusha was satirized, along with elite culture.

For example, the play *'Ish* (Wow), which debuted in January 1919, contained all of these elements.¹³⁷ The main plot of the play centers on Kishkish Bey (played by al-Rihani) losing all his money and his land after gambling with the Greek *khawaga* Kharalambo. The name Kharalambo is commonly used in Egyptian mass culture. The Greek name is used to exaggerate the sounds of the Greek language for comedic effect. Also, for added scatological humor, *khara* in colloquial Egyptian means excrement.

The play's theme song, a duet sung by al-Rihani and the up-and-coming singer Fathia 'Ahmad, begins by censuring Kishkish for his moral depravity. Kishkish responds by blaming his moral failings on the con-ning *khawaga*.

Kharalambo saw that my pocket was full
He immediately stood still (mesmerized)
His eyes were on my farmland
He told me, let's play some poker
Made me drink Johnnie Walker
I played, got drunk and lost
until I fell into the Abyss¹³⁸

The song, however, ends on a hopeful and nationalistic note as Kishkish promises his audience that “tomorrow I will be respectable again / and will serve my country and nation. / To love the nation is something to be proud of / and I am repentant of my past failings.”¹³⁹ This song, titled “*Abu al-Kashakish*,” proved successful outside the theater as well, and, like many other theatrical *taqatiq*, was recorded many times and sold by Mechian and Pathé records.¹⁴⁰

For comedic effect, Kharalambo and the other foreigners in the play speak in the typical *khawaga* accent used by all forms of Egyptian mass media. This formulaic foreign accent typically mixes verb tenses, confuses masculine with feminine nouns, and pronounces the letter *hab* (hard h) as *khah* and the letter ‘*ayn* as an ‘*alif*. This accent also serves the purpose of definitively marking some foreigners as “the other” and contrasting the *khawaga* character with the sympathetic *ibn* or *bint al-balad* (son or daughter of the country) characters, who speak flawless Egyptian Arabic. Those attempting to speak in Fusha (Classical Arabic) were viewed with similar skepticism and were also satirized as cultural outsiders.

One of the techniques used to satirize Fusha is the exaggerated use of the letter *qaf*, a prominent letter in Fusha but pronounced as a *hamza* (a glottal stop) in Egyptian Arabic. Most of these songs or sketches would inappropriately replace all ‘*alifs* and *hamzas*, even those letters supposed to be *hamzas* in Fusha, with the letter *qaf*. For example, in the song

“*Iqra’ ya Shaykh Qufa’a*” (Read, o sheikh Qufa’a) the words *’ustadh* (professor or mister) and *’abadan* (never), which are pronounced the same in Fusha and colloquial Arabic, are articulated instead as *qustadh* and *qabadan* by the sheikhs. The colloquial Egyptian word *’ayh* (what), which does not even exist in Fusha, is pronounced *qayh* by the sheikhs. Adding to the humor of the song, even when the sheikhs were laughing, they vocalized *haq haq* instead of *ha ha*.¹⁴¹

The disconnect between the Egyptian government, which uses written Classical Arabic in its bureaucracy, and the average Egyptian is portrayed in another sketch about an illiterate person named ‘Atiyya who asks a professional writer to write a letter in Fusha to the government demanding an exemption from military service. As the professional writer reads the supposed “classical Arabic” prose, primarily composed of repeating nonsensical Fusha-sounding phrases, the chorus girls declare, “By God, what classical clarity!”¹⁴² Thus, just like foreigners who spoke heavily accented Egyptian Arabic, those who unnecessarily made use of Fusha were viewed as elitists and incomprehensibly distant from everyday Egyptian life. According to the discourse of Egypt’s new vernacular mass culture, the primary prerequisite of Egyptian identity or Egyptianness was speaking flawless Egyptian Arabic. This message of equating linguistic facility with Egyptian national authenticity permeated all forms of Egyptian cultural expression.

Aside from the subtle nationalistic language play, many of the plays contained more direct references to the importance of Egyptian nationalism. Najib al-Rihani’s plays especially often ended with short nationalistic messages directed at his audience. For example, “*Lahn al-Siyas*” (The song of the stable boys) featured in the play *’Ish* speaks directly about the need for national unity: “If you really wanted to serve the advancement of Egypt, the mother of the world. . . . Don’t tell me you’re Christian, Muslim or Jewish, oh why don’t you learn, oh, brother. . . . Those who are united through their nation . . . religion can never separate them.”¹⁴³ Indeed, after the assassination of Butrus Ghali and the subsequent divisions between Muslims and Copts, Egyptian nationalists emphasized national unity. Vaudeville was at the forefront of this issue with repeated references emphasizing the primacy of Egyptian national identity over sectarian identity. Solidifying its commitment to Egyptian nationalism, *’Ish* ends with the following song:

Oh, Egypt . . . we live and die in order to love you
 You are what is beautiful on this Earth and there is no other nation like you
 Your Nile always overflows with goodness and your sons are most generous
 Your bounty benefits your men and women . . . may you live long, oh
 Egypt!¹⁴⁴

Exposure to the theater and its accompanying music was not just a Cairene phenomenon. In fact, most of the professional troupes performed in Alexandria, especially during the summer, and occasionally toured the Egyptian countryside.¹⁴⁵ More important, however, a number of semi-professional traveling troupes crisscrossed the country, visiting Egyptian provincial towns “from Aswan to Bani Suwayf to the Delta and the coastal towns.”¹⁴⁶ The most famous of these included the troupes of Ahmad al-Shami, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Jahili, Mikha’il Jirjis, ‘Awad Farid, Ibrahim Hijazi, and Husayn al-Kafuri.¹⁴⁷ In fact, early in his career al-Rihani worked as an actor in the traveling troupe of Ahmad al-Shami, and in his memoirs, he recounted the hardships of constantly traveling from the Mediterranean coast to Aswan.¹⁴⁸ Many of these traveling troupes copied the songs and plays that were popular in Cairo and Alexandria. Al-Rihani’s character of Kishkish Bey and al-Kassar’s Nubian (*Barbari*) character even had several specialized impersonators.

The *Barbari* character was impersonated by ‘Ahmad al-Masiri, Zaki Sa‘d, Mustafa al-Tawam, and ‘Ali Lawz, among others. And the impersonators of Kishkish Bey included Muhammad Yusif, ‘Ahmad Farid, Riyad al-Qusbaji, and ‘Ahmad al-Bayumi, among others. They performed in parties set up by the ticket distributors in the countryside and in some of the cafés throughout Upper and Lower Egypt. They performed the plays of Najib al-Rihani, ‘Ali al-Kassar, and some of the plays written by ‘Amin Sidqi for the actor Muhammad Bahjat. . . . The music and dialogue of these plays were almost completely memorized by them.¹⁴⁹

The increasing popularity of colloquial Egyptian plays and songs and their profusion not just in the northern urban centers but also in the national periphery helped to transform the Egyptian theater into an influential mass medium. However, precisely for these reasons, the developing media were viewed with a great deal of skepticism and perhaps fear by the Egyptian cultural and political elite.

CULTURE WARS? THE VULGARIZATION OF VAUDEVILLE AND COLLOQUIAL SONGS

The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.

—Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*

Pierre Bourdieu’s study of cultural taste speaks to what was happening in Egypt during the first quarter of the twentieth century. From the begin-

ning of the development of colloquial mass media in Egypt, with the late 1870s publication of *Abu-Naddara Zarqa'*, Egyptian conservatives aggressively attacked colloquial mass discourse. Colloquial songs and colloquial theater also incurred the same sort of indignation and were deemed vulgar and dangerous to the nation. This dichotomy between the more official Fusha culture and the increasingly commercial colloquial Egyptian mass culture perpetuated social distinctions between the cultural and intellectual elite and the masses. This was not merely a matter of aesthetics, cultural taste, or reinforcement of class distinction but a reflection of the conservative elite's fear of these new forms of media, which had an unprecedented influence on an increasing number of Egyptians and allowed for regular political mobilization and mass politics.

Although the attacks by many of Egypt's cultural critics were multifaceted, the primary criticism was a disparagement of the "low" artistic expressions of colloquial Egyptian, which, they argued, led directly to the perceived decline of culture and morality in Egypt. With the overwhelming popularity of vaudeville, the pages of the press were filled with such attacks. In a June 8, 1915, article titled "Arabic Acting: A Dangerous Trend," *al-Abram's* theater critic explained the definitions and parameters of the vaudeville theater and characterized most of its plays as inappropriate for Egyptian audiences. The critic was as incensed over the use of "corrupted colloquial" as he was about the "inappropriately vulgar" subject matter of the plays.¹⁵⁰ Some press condemnations called for the government to interfere and ban all vaudeville plays. A March 1916 article in *al-Minbar* went so far as to label vaudeville "morally dangerous" and accused it of "leading minds astray and corrupting souls." The critic ended his article by questioning why the government was so eager to censor for political reasons but not for moral reasons.¹⁵¹ Throughout this period, many articles with alarmist titles were printed, including "Countering Pernicious Acting" (*Mukafahat al-Tamthil al-Sha'in*) and "The Case [Against] Comedic Acting" (*Qadiyyat al-Tamthil al-Fukahi*).¹⁵²

Many of these criticisms were laden with class references, describing the "vulgarity" of the lower classes and opposing their representation on the stage. For example, in a review of the colloquial play *'Amina Hanim*, performed by the traveling troupe of Ahmad al-Shami, the theater critic was disappointed that the contractor, one of the major characters in the play, was portrayed as a "low class man who speaks with words only spoken by those who wear blue *jalabiyyat*."¹⁵³ Another critic declared that "these plays . . . are nothing but a collection of revolting pedestrian scenes encountered by ordinary folks in the streets, alleys, and cafés, and witnessed by those who frequent taverns and brothels."¹⁵⁴

Unlike ‘Abdallah Nadim, who retreated somewhat before the anti-colloquial attacks of the conservative elite (see Chapters 2 and 3), the colloquial writers of the emergent vaudeville and music industries had the implicit backing of tens of thousands of viewers and listeners and could afford to respond aggressively to their critics. ‘Amin Sidqi, who would later write most of the plays of ‘Ali al-Kassar, vigorously defended vaudeville and colloquial songs in the pages of the press. He responded to the *Ahram* rebuke of vaudeville with a forceful letter to the editor. Sidqi first accused the critic of plagiarizing his article from the Egyptian French language press, where a similar debate had taken place and where Sidqi had already responded to similar criticisms. He then explained that an essential component of all comedies is to exaggerate social behavior, especially what is thought of as immoral. This, according to Sidqi, not only creates laughter but indirectly counters the socially or morally corrupt behavior and does not condone it, as his critics claimed.

As for those who claim that this type of storytelling [i.e., vaudeville] is inappropriate for this day and age, I strongly disagree; for I am one who is never fooled by mere sloganeering. Egyptian audiences, and most especially those who attend my plays and laugh uncontrollably, are the ones who more than ever need moral education [*tarbiyya*]. . . . Acting was not specially created for the likes of the honorable critic, who can’t even express his own opinion. The theater was created for the masses and the majority [of Egyptians] who are illiterate or barely literate, and for this reason I never hesitated when I was asked by the director of the theater company [‘Aziz ‘Id] to retranslate these plays in colloquial Egyptian. A joke is not humorous unless it is completely understood by everyone, and since the majority of people [in Egypt] are as I have described above, the Arabic language [i.e., Fusha], as it stands today, makes jokes and comedic speech impossible.¹⁵⁵

Yunis al-Qadi, who wrote the lyrics for many of Sayyid Darwish’s and Munira al-Mahdiyya’s *taqatiq*, was regularly accused with writing “low and trivial” songs. Like Sidqi, he was not afraid to fire back at his critics.¹⁵⁶ Al-Qadi, however, defended modern *taqatiq* in a series of articles titled “Between the Old and the Modern” (*Bayn al-Qadim wa al-Hadith*).¹⁵⁷ The main thesis of these articles, which al-Qadi amply supported, was that there was no difference in content and subject matter between the “modern” *taqatiq* and the ones sung by earlier generations, making a mockery of the alarmists’ claims that modern *taqatiq* were causing cultural decay. “I want to emphasize once again that those ignoramuses that are writing for *al-Ahram*, the largest daily newspaper, are falsifying history by declaring that the older traditional songs were not like the modern *taqatiq* [in their sexualized subject matter]. This is entirely false and demonstrates complete historical ignorance.” To make

his case, al-Qadi methodically lists sixty-three traditional colloquial songs with sexual innuendo.¹⁵⁸

Sometimes colloquial songwriters and playwrights used their songs and plays to respond to and satirize culturally conservative critics. ‘Ali al-Kassar’s *Wi-Lissa* (More to come), which debuted in February 1919, simultaneously satirized the inaccessibility of Fusha and the attempts of the Egyptian cultural elite to “enlighten” the Egyptian masses through literal adaptation of “high culture” European plays.¹⁵⁹ A musical sketch titled “The Actors” sets up a dialogue between two groups of actors: comedic vaudeville actors who perform in colloquial Egyptian and drama actors who typically perform Western tragedies in Fusha. When the classically trained actors complain to the colloquial actors that vaudeville is destroying their livelihood, the vaudeville actors respond:

Why don’t you come and join us
and enough of your Romeo and Juliet
Your plays are laughably out of fashion
and you will always be in poverty
“Thou shall be obeyed o your highness”
and such incomprehensible jibber-jabber
Your words are harsh on the ears
and displease young and old

...

If you want to succeed
in your branch of drama and excel
perform plays like us with Egyptian themes and then you will succeed
What do people care about John and Raul or a play set in Liverpool?
People want to see relevant events and people that look and dress like
them.¹⁶⁰

As this comedic dialogue indicates, when it came to mass entertainment at least, the Egyptian people of all classes and persuasions played the decisive role in this debate by voting with their wallets. In just seven years, ‘Ali al-Kassar’s theater earned an estimated 47,000 £E, and remarkably, during the 1918 season alone Najib al-Rihani’s theater earned an unprecedented 28,500 £E.¹⁶¹ Colloquial music records and vaudeville tickets were selling in high numbers, whereas no one seemed to be attending the “culturally superior” Fusha plays.¹⁶² A theater critic writing for *al-Minbar* newspaper in the fall of 1918 corroborates this by blaming “Egyptian audiences for not appreciating the genius of a great actor like [George] Abyad and turning away from his theater and toward the (irritating) comedic theater.” The critic disappointingly describes how the “theaters that are playing vaudeville and the like are overstuffed with men and women, who are exposed to [lessons in] lewdness and public indecency. In the meanwhile, a small theater like Abyad’s is often barren with few spectators.”¹⁶³

CONCLUSION

The key driving force in the emerging Egyptian media capitalist system was monetary gain. The motivation for bigger sales increasingly called for the use of colloquial Egyptian as opposed to Fusha, and with it, an overall catering to the cultural tastes of the urban masses. In turn, the mass culture industries simultaneously shaped mass taste through their unprecedented standardization of cultural production. The result was a virtual dialogue between the consumers and producers of mass culture, strengthening the “authenticity” and ensuring the popularity of these new productions.¹⁶⁴ Achieving success as a colloquial writer was predicated on having just such a dialogue with everyday Egyptians in the everyday language. Indeed, many colloquial Egyptian writers preferred to write in coffee shops—which were typically open to the street—where they were exposed daily to the latest news and jokes and where their command of Egyptian street language and the accents and mannerisms of Egypt’s diverse foreign communities was honed and perfected.¹⁶⁵

The cafés on Imad al-Din Street, where most of the vaudeville theaters were housed, played an important role in the rise of the vaudeville theater industry. At least three major cafés on Imad al-Din Street were frequented by actors, singers, writers, and musicians: Qahwat al-Fann (The Arts Café), Qahwat Barun (The Baron Café), and Qahwat Misr (The Egypt Café). For instance, Ibrahim Ramzi, who wrote for ‘Aziz ‘Id, described how he wrote many of his plays in Qahwat al-Fann. Ramzi also acknowledged that Yunis al-Qadi “prefers to write only in coffee shops.”¹⁶⁶ Badi‘ Khayri also acknowledged the importance of Cairo’s coffee shops, helping him more fully “experience people and the colors of everyday life.” He relates that “these cafés were the most important school for inspiring my theatrical writing. I learned the Egyptian dialects and the differing Arab dialects from sitting in these cafés.” Even Najib al-Rihani confesses in his autobiography that early in his career, he was practically living in Qahwat al-Fann.¹⁶⁷

By integrating and using the languages and discourses of the street and of everyday life, the writers of these new media tapped into a growing demand for comprehensible, realistic characters, songs, and stories. This emergent media capitalist system—combining print, sound, and performance media—allowed for an increasing number of Egyptians to more fully participate in a variety of expanding public spheres. The market-driven forces fueling the commercial production of theatrical and recording hits had revolutionary social implications, not only because they increased the level of homogeneity of national taste but also because they trumped the exclusivist Fusha cultural models pushed by the cul-

tural elite and the Egyptian state. Thus in the first quarter of the twentieth century, mass cultural production, which followed the dictates of the developing culture market, was counterhegemonic primarily because it was independent of the Egyptian state and competed with, and in many ways mocked, the classicist traditions of the cultural conservatives.