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Ahmad Wahdan

Maestro among the Frenzied streets of Cairo[1]

Nicolas Puig

Photo 5.1 Ahmad Wahdan in 2005 at home during a rehearsal

Ahmad Wahdan is a master. He is a singer and multi-instrumentalist who moves from place to place according to the rhythms of his professional commitments and many encounters, each intended to maintain various circles of acquaintances, as well as formal moments spent with musicians officiating at one or another of the many celebrations that punctuate the Cairo night air.

The moment he appears, Ahmad is hailed from the stage by whoever is mc-ing an occasion, microphone in hand. Occasions for celebration are many. Engagement parties, wedding ceremonies, alcohol-laced shows intended to make clients happy, sometimes helped by the sweet anesthesia of hashish in some random downtown cabaret on the banks of the Nile or along the Avenue of the Pyramids, a more middle-class scene. It would be a mistake to draw the portrait of Ahmad's peregrinations too hastily, however, based on the economics of his movements and the corresponding social elevation of his activities or to portray him as a "wise-man" serenely cruising through Cairo's frenetic streets. A great deal of work is involved in achieving – and maintaining – the status of master. It is a status that is earned through years of work, the time it takes to make a name for oneself, and it requires daily work to sustain it on the stages of street parties and amid the incessant flow of sociabilities that confer to the musical profession its relational ponderousness. Being a master is merely a formal indication of one's peers' recognition, which is as fragile as it is unstable.

Still, one of the most salient features of Ahmad Wahdan's itinerary, amid this unending articulation of place and displacement, is the central question of

Photo 5.2 A stage at a street wedding in the Cairo neighborhood of Darb al-Ahmar, 2003 recognition. Seen from this perspective, the spatial chain of his social contacts reveals a sort of cartography of celebrity.

In this “proximity-based society” (Puig, 2003) that conjugates being rooted in the territories of proximity with intense circulations that create reservoirs of opportunity, success is achieved and maintained through daily interaction. According to a popular adage among musicians, their profession requires “saluting people you don’t know.” Being “recognized” initially means that one may be known by the people one encounters, but the opposite might not necessarily be true. This socially binding celebrity is experienced from one close acquaintance to the other, through the contact with the other, and in the intimacy of the neighborhood as well as on far-away stages. Recognition therefore involves the physical identification of an individual whom one stops in the street to say, with greater or lesser sincerity and sometimes with mild irony: “Hey, Mr. Artist, how you doing?” Or, when two cars meet in one of the tiny side-streets in the old city and the musician behind the wheel might say “Hey, Artist, you don’t wanna let us pass?”

Ahmad, a master in the midst of the frenetic activity of the streets of Cairo, is a musician who is often seen lugging his synthesizer (*urg*) or his Arab lute (*oud*) and amplifier, starting and stopping amid the endless tide of people and machines coursing through the city’s streets and passages. His pauses in this human ebb and flow alternate between artistic and social performances whose function is to unleash, maintain, or sanction recognition. It is this precious resource that determines a career, whereas Mohamed Ali Avenue, where a group of cafés has functioned as the epicenter of Cairo’s’ musical scene for over a century, is to some extent a holdover from an older era. Although its prestige has declined in favor of other locations, the Avenue – the term has acquired toponymic value in the profession – still serves as an important reference.

Ahmad wanders through numerous urban stages that vary from wooden platforms at street parties to the living rooms of urban apartments, each of which provides another place to display and cultivate status, position, and territorial belonging. His appearances are greeted with a “Welcome Master Wahdan!” by the “ambience maker” at wedding receptions,[2] as more boasts and promotional slogans fill the air: “Long live Sayeda Zaynab, the neighborhood of men, the real ones!” or “Darb al-Ahmar, the neighborhood of guys with good taste.”

In this urban musical “garden,” such displays and rituals energize the professional culture of Cairo’s musicians. Beyond the question of musical ability, participating in the scene means traveling between different social circles and adapting one’s performance to a wide range of audiences. This demands social intelligence that allows an individual to meet others “on their level” in both social and musical terms. This tension between social and artistic aptitudes is mirrored in the tension inherent in the collective arbitration of status and social and moral deliberations about both the profession and categorization processes in Egyptian cultural circles. This mirroring effect extends to the West, where popular music and dance are the focus of constant – if somewhat diffuse – interest.

The Egyptian term for “place,” *makân*, captures perfectly the dialectic between mobility, movement, and social position that characterizes Ahmad’s peregrinations. The reference points that arise in the course of Ahmad Wahdan’s itinerary can be generalized because they reside at the intersection between urban anthropology and sociology of social roles.

My exploration of Ahmad's life and career will unfold in four parts, beginning with his fables, a moment of methodological return that leads to the Arab accordion, which exemplifies Western influence over many local references. In between these two parts, the prelude, the beginnings, and the early ruptures as well as the stakes involved in occupying a "place" will provide opportunities to thread Ahmad's life narrative into the urban and social contexts through which he travels.

Ahmad's fables

Taking advantage of her presence in the two scissor-manufacturing and sharpening workshops that her husband Ahmad owns in the old city, I occasionally join Um Rana for brief, one-on-one conversations over a cup of tea or a Coca Cola on an old worm-eaten wooden bench in the small dusty street in front of one of the shops. She tells me about her husband Ahmad's antics and adventures and a wide range of other matters that are somewhat clear to me because of my long acquaintance with the family. She confides, with a sigh, that "Ahmad, he's a fable" in other words "a long story." She is not attempting to tell me Ahmad's tells but instead is retracing what comes to the surface and how, through his actions and behaviors, Ahmad authors his own life as if it were a fable. Um Rana's commentary is not especially flattering as she somewhat harshly contextualizes Ahmad's itinerary, including evidence of his role in his family and the neighborhood environment. The neighborhood is not a source of concern for Ahmad, because he fully assumes that his way of life is seen as deviant, which allows him to cultivate a form of social and cultural superiority over the other inhabitants of his apartment building.

Other voices echo some of the criticisms made by his disillusioned wife, but I will not give them undue prominence here, except to mention in passing Doctor Ragab (whose honorific title does not necessarily reflect academic distinction), who spends his evening "trimming the wool off of Ahmad's back," the local expression for talking behind someone's back.

But let us return to Um Rana, who asks point-blank if I remembered Hag Mahmoud. She continues, informing me about her death with a sad smile and fatalistic tone. Bad news such as this often greets me when I come back to Cairo after an extended absence and ask about certain individuals. Specific causes of these sudden deaths are scarce, and people do not seem overly concerned about why Allah has decided to end the life of a member of his flock. There is occasionally acknowledgement that an individual was "tired" or suffered from some vague illness. But these deaths inevitably provide a lesson about life's fragility and the need to urgently take advantage of it. Ahmad, who is in his fifties, has decided to spend the time that remains multiplying experiences. After hesitating in his forties, he seems to have definitively chosen license over the repentance belatedly adopted by many of his fellow sinners, who renew their broken connection to religious observance in preparation for their future introductions to the Creator.

He makes no secret of this decision, explaining:

> I've got the *blues*. My daughters are married, they're grown up and have children. My wife works, my son is a student. I'm alone in the world, and I want to enjoy complete freedom, play music, and take advantage of every moment, do like the others and practice my profession wherever I feel like it. I want to have new, original experiences.
>
> (2010)

Um Rana is exasperated by Ahmad's attitude. He no longer does anything at home, and he has abandoned the conjugal bed, spending most of his time in a minuscule apartment in Duwiqa that he acquired after the 1992 earthquake. He sold two of the apartment's rooms, keeping the entrance hall, a bedroom, and a bathroom. He intends to live an unfettered life, doing as he wishes. For the past several months, he has been accompanied by a young Copt who owns an old Nasr (a car locally assembled under license from Fiat), an unemployed accountant who follows Ahmad and runs small errands for him. He manages to scrape by, drinking tea, buying cigarettes – the day's fuel – and drinking a locally made alcoholic beverage nicknamed "petrol" thanks to the modest gratuities that the Master pays him.

As he strolls through his numerous errands, often with motivations that appear somewhat unclear, Ahmad's Coptic associate broadens his circle of acquaintances, never missing an opportunity to speak to an acquaintance, in one case someone who immediately found him a job with a large Egyptian firm for thirteen to fifteen hundred Egyptian pounds per month (a bit under two hundred US dollars).

Um Rana's critical counter-narrative narrates a phantom, darker itinerary that casts a shadow over Ahmad's autobiographical trends when telling his own story. I occasionally feel lost among the threads of innumerable stories, anecdotes, rumors, value judgments, reproaches, and worries . . . with the ultimate effect of balancing or perhaps adding uncomfortable elements to my effort to create his "majestic portrait."[3] In the end, the density of these exchanges and the omnipresence of hesitations about what is happening and what is not only reflect a form of instability that becomes part of life and that requires permanent re-evaluation of what should be responsible actions.

And they inform us about an ethics of daily life through which men interact in the pursuit of their "interest," a recurring word that reveals the harshness of social relations while retaining and appraising what should be proper behavior. These changes ultimately indicate how practices are categorized, especially moral practices. The itinerary allows us to re-insert into daily routines the rhetorical resources and positions that spontaneously slip into the course of the action.

The itinerary thus offers a way of putting discourses and acts into perspective and, as a methodology, it demands direct observation, albeit accompanied by interviews and conversation. This is because our understanding of social relations depends as much on real-time patterns of sociability as on how individuals are anchored within various temporal systems.

The problem is finding a way respect the constraints of the coproduction of the itinerary by two or even several voices while also deriving a few general insights from the fictional singularity that the process generates. An additional challenge is capturing participants' complex orientations within relatively dense relational spaces. Accompanying Ahmad on his complex rounds, one experiences this density as one might a voyage in time.

Before this study began, I adopted a position that questions the culturalist perspective that maintains that remote, all-encompassing cultural or religious referents govern daily lives. In this case, these referents would be the Islamic norms issued at other times and in other places that supposedly – and uniformly – determine people's patterns of behavior. The itinerary is a tool that allows us to interrogate such mechanistic paradigms by calling attention to the variable boundaries of such normative bodies of rules, of which most participants only have partial knowledge, which they adapt to their own daily lives in highly diverse ways.

Ultimately, one of the legitimate objectives of this approach is to portray a trajectory in such a way that it comes alive, unveiling a universe to the reader and offering social insights while reflecting what the participants themselves think and feel about their situations, while also respecting informants' privacy. A musician aspires to be the center of a form of attention that sees him as an artist and not as a man who has a private life, friends, and routines, although all of these factors are necessarily inter-related. Of course, emphasizing biographical information assumes that the study neglects some personal details, which in itself introduces a certain bias, particularly once the informant himself becomes aware of this research interest in private matters and his social network becomes an instrument of dissemination. What criteria can help decide what to make public and keep private about an individual's life? What image among the many versions of his trajectory should be privileged? And how can Ahmad serve as his own witness? Another question relates to what I ought to do with the stories about her husband that Um Rana tells me, contrasting versions of their shared history about whose importance or weight I have only the slightest idea. What should I do, for example, when she tells me about that memory of the very positive reaction of her father-in-law to their marriage in the mid-1970s at dawn one morning in October 2010, when he gave her his blessing with a prosaic "take him," and then warmly thanked her, clearly delighted to be rid of a difficult son?

A few days later, Ahmad, heir to a lineage of artisans, explained his difficulty explaining his marriage to his family because of the social and economic disparities between the two families. The truth is less important than the fact that Ahmad remains convinced that modest superiority, demonstrated by his quasi-paternalistic attitude toward lesser people, is justified. He clings to this attitude when he pictures himself as spokesperson for the artisan-musicians on the Avenue.

It also seems that, regardless of the conditions under which their lives together began, Ahmad was seeking to flee his family, which he felt mistreated by and found claustrophobic. Even at fourteen or fifteen years old he liked to wander

Photo 5.3 Ahmad Wahdan in front of a music store on Mohamed-Ali Avenue (c. 1970)

Mohamed Ali Avenue and admire the elegant stars. A few years later, he found the financial resources that he needed on the Avenue to finance his household as well as a place that matched his ambitions.

The beginning: a liminal period (1960–1975)

Ahmad was fascinated by the artists sitting on café terraces along the avenue. The unknown sat alongside with the anonymous as well as the best-known names, especially at the celebrated *‘awat at-tigara* café. This elegance stands in stark contrast with the rusticity and conservatism of the artisan milieu in the nearby old city of the site of Ahmad’s origins.

Life was not easy at home after his second wife left. His mother remarried and took her daughter with her, leaving him as the only child of that couple remaining with his father. The other children living there were older children of the father's first wife. He had one son, Salah and six daughters, which explains why Ahmad's father wanted to keep him at home. He suffered from the isolation and the family punished him for his mother's behavior – or at least that was his experience. He nevertheless preserves tender memories of childhood:[4]

> The story began [. . .] I was climbing the stairs, by myself, and I was crying. I was crying a lot, to the point that all of a sudden I became aware of my voice, and then of the silence [. . .] and going down the street, I started listening. A piece of music, a song, a person reciting the Koran whose voice was beautiful, or a song by Um Kalthoum, Abdel Halim Hafez, or Farid al-Atrach, or, I don't remember what there was at the time anymore, in the sixties [. . .] and I forgot all my problems, all the worries that I had in my heart flew away, as if I hadn't been oppressed, as if that way I had started to manage my problems.
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> (Ahmad, May 3, 2010)

He gradually immersed himself in music, initially at school, where he learned Koranic chants, and later at home listening to his older brother Salah. He borrowed his brother's lute whenever he left the house to teach himself to play it. He explains this growing passion for music as a way of escaping from his stepmother's mistreatment, while everyone else treated him like a servant who could always be called upon and Salah was the favorite.

The eldest son of his father's first marriage, Salah had the privilege of having his own room. In the neighborhood's cramped lodgings, even if the apartment of the Sennân family[5] was not very small, Jean-Charles Depaule explains that the privilege of possessing "a house within the house (*bêt fi-l-bêt*)" was a matter of intense negotiation in which boys have priority. Salah was evidence of the elevated status of an oldest son that guaranteed him his own patch of domestic territory to dispose of as he wished (1990). Thanks to the sanctuary provided by his brother and in spite of his father's opposition, he began his apprenticeship and developed his proficiency as a musician.

The difference in how the two brothers were raised produced contrasting results. One of them held court, receiving friends who would later become leading intellectual figures, including Omar Shara'î, a musicologist and historian, before ultimately immigrating to the United States and opening a veterinary clinic. In fact, Ahmad never ceases to express his astonishment at the idea that dogs receive cosmetic surgery. The workshops that he inherited with his sisters provided him a steady income that made him less dependent on the vagaries of being a musician. His older brother also played music as an "enlightened amateur." It was out of the question for him to make a career out of music, which he did not consider respectable. Ahmad dreamt of becoming part of the music scene, however. His brother, the guarantor of the family's honor, helped pay for his studies at the Institute of Music to make this ambition more socially acceptable. He later harshly criticized Ahmad's daughter after the unpleasant surprise of seeing her playing the synthesizer at a wedding party in a side street in the neighborhood. For reasons of morality and convenience, it is completely forbidden for a young woman of good family to expose herself to the men's gaze in this way.

To some extent, Ahmad's family reveals a widespread division in the field of music and other cultural practices. Problems of legitimacy tend to be associated with forms of festivity connected to the popular classes, and as a result they are often stigmatized as being licentious and low quality.

The startling contrast between Ahmad and his half-brother, with his contemporary conservative middle-class values, resulted from their respective positions in the family. In keeping with the plebeian character of the neighborhood, they were a lower middle-class family that later lost their status, except for the older brother, who had found financial success in the United States.

Ahmad became a musician at a time when the Avenue's influence in the music scene was diminishing, which allowed closer contact between music professionals and artisan-musician networks in nearby neighborhoods. These changes encouraged a number of young people attracted by the prospect of an artistic career to seek careers as professional musicians as an alternative to small manufacturing jobs and the cultural baggage associated with them.

Only a few years earlier, the Avenue was a mandatory rite of passage for musicians from the provinces or abroad who aspired to join the Cairo music scene. Well-known musicians sometimes settled there, including Samira al-Qurayshi, who bought an apartment in the area in the early 1950s, where I met her, surrounded by her musician children, not long before her death a half-century later. When she first arrived, her rise to fame had just begun, and she was helped by one of the agents who haunted the cafés scouting for emerging young talent.

These historic changes in the role of the Avenue are consistent with an important shift in Ahmad's life story. During a liminal moment, he was an adolescent gradually separating himself from his family and beginning to take his place as a young man on the cusp of professional life, although without full membership in the community of musicians. It was the years that he spent at the Institute of Music that enabled him to enter the "musician market," followed by a period of discoveries and new horizons that he described to me in 2002:

> The Institute had something strange – it was the first mixed secondary institute. And it was the only one in Egypt that mixed girls and boys. There weren't many of us. There were 13 girls and 13 boys in the class. They classified them depending on the needs of the Cairo symphonic orchestra and depending on the instrumentalists being requested. Meaning they needed a cello – they employed three or four instrumentalists to work with the students, who specialized in that instrument. There was demand for the *sitar*, so they assigned seven or eight students. If there were too many for the violin, they reduced the number. It involved preparing orchestra musicians for the future at a time when there was not a single Egyptian instrumentalist in the Cairo symphonic orchestra.

> The orchestra was entirely composed of foreigners, every one of them instrumentalists. So the conservatory and the Academy began training children starting at the age of seven. The students entered at six or seven and left as first-class musicians (*brima vista*). You could put a musical score under their noses and they could play it right away. To get to this level, you have to stay with the violin for fifteen, twenty years. They studied and learned the technique and positions. The foreigners were the ones who gave the examinations and the grades. I was unlucky at the Institute because of the social class I came from when I entered . . . and I was surprised to have girls with me as a teenager. And young people that age . . . I partied, I worked outside . . . I was already on the market on the Avenue Mohamed-Ali, which was where musicians assembled at the time.

Musicians' arrival on the "market" created a clean break, at least that was the term used to describe the event. It meant giving up a conventional lifestyle – usually with a sense of relief – including regular working hours and being part of a hierarchy. This change also caused conflict in some families, although not in the few remaining musical clans. This extended to a variety of situations that ranged from placing underage children in a work environment, even if it meant removing them from school, in order to ensure that they received the most prestigious instruction possible so as to ensure their upward mobility.

Material concerns were critical at a time when such choices carried important long-term implications. Ahmad and his colleagues recall the signs of promising beginnings that now only exist as a few pictures in old photo albums, such as a red car with Ahmad posing at the wheel, whereas now he only owns a scooter, albeit a red one. They experienced less competition at the time, and a musician could earn between fifty and one hundred Egyptian pounds in an evening, compared to a civil servant who could scarcely bring home sixteen pounds a month. On Thursday nights at the time, "the entire city of Cairo was partying" (Ahmad, January 10, 2009). According to Ahmad, this all ended some time ago:

> I followed the professionals. Mohamed Ali Avenue had no doors. There were open cafés that welcomed anybody who could pay for a cup of tea. I went down, I followed and observed, how this guy works. I discovered that musicians' incomes were very high. At the time, a musician could sometimes make 100 pounds in a night.
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> When business graduates were working for 16 pounds a month, an accordion player was taking home 100 pounds from a party or a wedding. That was a lot of money. When I started thinking about getting married, I couldn't have lived off of 16 pounds, but I could manage quite well with 100. Even if I only had a single gig, I could live for a whole month. I counted everything up materially like that, and then the occupational pyramid started to invert itself. It's the same thing. Everything went up. If you take any construction worker, you'll see that he can take home 50 pounds, and if you take a *mazahrgui* (a percussionist who plays the *mazhar*, a tambourine equipped with cymbals), he's going to take home the same amount,

> 50 pounds. And the worker works every day, but the musician rarely works once a week.
>
> (September 5, 2002)

This golden age ended with a marriage, the same one that Um Rana now seems to regret, her eyes becoming unfocused while she draws on her water-pipe, an indispensable possession of artisan-bosses. The couple moved into the apartment in the neighborhood under the citadel where they still live. The neighbors accepted the couple, particularly the musician, since they were already accustomed to the loud noises of machines like the antiquated leather hole-punching machine in apartments that were converted into workshops. Since then, some neighbors have died, but most of them are still living there with reduced living spaces because of the real estate crisis. The little neighbor, Shayma, is now fully grown and married with her first child; the single room that she lived in with her mother – they share a bathroom on the landing with three other neighbors – now houses her entire little family, which will undoubtedly continue to grow by adding at least one additional child.

From the beginning, Ahmad imposed his uniqueness on this small universe, delegating the social domain of the neighborhood to Um Rana and allowing her to manage relationships, a task at which she excels. Meanwhile, he threw himself body and soul into the artistic life that he believed would place his name at the top of the charts and provide him social recognition.

Position and prestige

Thirty years later, in 2006, the act of renewing an identity card was to be a major turning point in Ahmad Wahdan's life, because it was the first time he could write "musician" next to the word "occupation." His daughter Rana had married the secretary of the musicians' union that he joined after refusing to join for years because the dues were too high. The official is a noteworthy factor in his having his professional status formally recognized.

This coincided with another important change in Ahmad's life when he turned over managing the scissor workshops to one of his daughters and later to his wife, making music his sole occupation. After being a shopkeeper, he was now an official "musician," a status that his "identity" continues to demonstrate. He sees this status as a form of recognition, although he is aware that a faint note of suspicion surrounds small-time musicians like him, those who do not circulate in suits and ties, who play prestigious halls around the city and make money only on the commercial circuit, which is branded by the stigma of social illegitimacy.

Ahmad left the cafés on the Avenue behind him and developed new routines centered around the "Casino Nasif," which is now known as "Saad the Chauffeur" because of the new owner's name and occupation. He was finally an official musician now that began to distance himself from the network. From the point of view of his peers, he had long enjoyed an enviable position – with a regular gig in a café and a dedicated chair of his own (*sâhib kursî*). This status was evidence of his peers' esteem and ensured him a privileged place within the professional hierarchy, and his professional activities centered on the café.

Photo 5.4 Ahmad Wahdan, at home in the Darb al-Ahmar neighborhood, 2003

Years later, in 2010, Ahmad vividly recalled that the ambience of the café was an essential part of his work:

> Thursday was a special day, it was the day that people were everywhere and musicians got together, leaving the Avenue to play weddings throughout the

> entire Egyptian Republic. For example, you leave Mohamed Ali Avenue and you play a wedding at the Fayoum or in Aswan. And Thursdays were known for that. [. . .] Me, I wanted to become part of that world and they, the musicians, were looking for people. On Thursdays, there were more than 1,000 parties in the city, and the whole Mohamed Ali Avenue worked all across the country. I was there, and there were no accordionists.
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> They told me to learn the accordion to get work [Ahmad originally played the *oud*]. I didn't even have any instruments, and they had work to offer me. We came to an understanding for a party – I'm in the café and somebody came to see me. "Can you do this? Can I introduce you to people? What do you play?" "I play the accordion, tablas, etc. I ask this much." We made a deal like that. And using some of the money I made, I rented an accordion. [. . .]. That's how it is, if there's a celebration, somebody tells somebody else . . . and then we know each other. "Ah he's a good singer, he's a great instrumentalist, that guy's not bad, this other guy is no good." I had a good reputation. I had worked on my reputation, I am a good musician, I can play the music needed for a wedding, I know how to make dancing girls work, I can play so people dance. I know how to play music that a dancer can move to, and that's important; and I know how to play the music that people request at weddings [. . .] it was going well, and then after that, it was over [. . .] the parties got to be no fun, they changed.

When he quit frequenting the café a few years ago, Ahmad was affirming a new status – from now on people would have to come see him "on purpose" about gigs, meaning he no longer had to hang out waiting for contracts at the café. Matters of position and rank involve processes of hierarchy formation in economic, social, and cultural fields that also intersect with musicians' livelihoods. This is common across a wide range of apprenticeships, modes of functioning, places, and reputations. As evidence, here is an example that shows the importance of this place and, in passing, the omnipresent mechanism that shapes relationships between musicians.

After he received an invitation to play at a Western diplomat's home, Ahmad spent part of the evening trying to form a duo with a renowned Egyptian violinist. He was unable to approach the great maestro directly, so he sent word through his entourage so that someone would hand the maestro his card. His invitation to perform in a duo with him was declined – although not frontally – under the pretext that performing with no time to rehearse as a duo might limit the time that the maestro would play during the gig. An assurance that things would be better-organized next time was communicated to Ahmad, but he was not duped. He had failed to engineer what could be described as musical hypogamy, meaning a marital union with a spouse of inferior social rank. The violinist's refusal of musical hypogamy arose from a fear of even a temporary alliance with an artist of lesser renown, Ahmad. The danger was that it might lead to avoidance tactics or, on the contrary, depending on the situation, to attempts to reconcile in order to benefit from the other's prestige (*brestij*). Examining such convoluted social maneuvers is fundamental to the ethnography of prestige.

An array of subtle games involving negotiations of rank and status are played out in an effort to continuously publicize oneself via different interactions and encounters, from place to place. Civilities and subtle codes are used according to who takes precedence over whom. Ahmad, who felt he had been somewhat led on by the violinist during the earlier upscale evening, was unaware of the "drama" being played out. He is much more master of the situation when he welcomes musicians he has trained in his own home who are often from his own neighborhood and who, although they are friends, still display a certain deference toward him.

Ultimately, Ahmad himself refuses this musical hypogamy by declining to test his prestige by playing street weddings. An integral part of these festivities, which are situated at the lower rungs of the employment hierarchy, he gradually climbs up the professional ladder. My own three-year presence in Cairo contributed to his ascension, because I was sometimes able to arrange prestigious performances for him in places like the gardens of the French Institute of Oriental Architecture or the inauguration of a restored palace in a historic neighborhood that was attended by the Governor of Cairo.

In this way, Ahmad was catapulted into a social world that was previously out of his reach with the intermediary efforts of a moderately connected Westerner. For a variety of reasons, however, Ahmad's ascension remained incomplete, and he was forced to organize his own events in a hall in a chic Cairo neighborhood the Al-Sawi Cultural Center in Zamalek. He paid out of his own pocket for most of these occasions, which naturally irritated his wife. She again lamented his spendthrift habits and his pretentious ego while she slaved away in order to pay for their daily lives, in addition to their son's private lessons, which were a necessity for success in school.

The structure of employment at their social level leads to this form of impermeability, as difficulty circulates between the sectors of the music market, with the wedding musicians who gather on Mohamed Ali Avenue constituting the lowest level, even if there are still a few stars to be found there to confirm that it is a music school . . . but on the condition that one is able to graduate and move on.

There are of course examples among the city's musicians of careers that expand in natural ways. Those who rise above performing at street weddings subsequently avoid playing in them because it would entail stepping down from a rank attained with considerable difficulty. Ahmad paints a somber picture of the profession:

> The state of the *souk* [the "market," in this instance of musicians] . . . and can we still even talk about a *souk*? I don't go to the café anymore. Now I don't have the energy to go there. I want to advance. You either advance, or you die. And if I die honorably, that's better. I have built a good name and am a good person. I have trained a lot of people. So I don't want people to see me under less good conditions that the ones I have attained – for which I wore myself out – and that have left a good impression on people. The most honorable thing would be for me to stop the moment I can totally rely on another source of income. I don't need this work as much as I did in the beginning.

> If I need it, it's going to signify the beginning of my decline. The profession gives you only good things in the beginning – dignity, prestige, good looks, money, fame, and a happy life.
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> Then it starts to take everything back from you. Until the pyramid inverts itself. It starts to take back your dignity, your social level, your health. It starts to take away everything that it gave you. I am an instrumentalist who makes 200 pounds. I work in the *souk*. A less experienced musician comes along. He's works for 50 pounds. He works and I don't. To be able to work, I have to accept 50. And there is no difference between him and me. If there were, he wouldn't be able to stay in my place. [. . .] Me, I'm either in my place or I would rather just not show up.
>
> (September 5, 2002)

> Attention: You are a man used to sleeping all night, and you don't sleep at night at all. A lack of sleep at night ruins people's health. An hour of sleep a night is better than five hours during the day. So you lose your health. And then for weddings, the client wants somebody young, a young man to play and sing. He doesn't want an old man. So for that old man, the decline begins.

Ahmad recently began to complain about exhaustion and pains in his bones. The body, he believes, ages poorly because of the difficulty of the work and the long nocturnal hours. He even says that "sunlight is the musician's enemy."

Like many of his peers when they approach their fiftieth year, he was always on the lookout for a position that was better suited to his idea of what a respectable man should do. Some envisioned quitting the profession altogether, leading to a few ill-defined professional conversions that became part of their itineraries. Ridha, the percussionist, for example, was currently employed by a security company as a night watchman, and his colleagues at the café sardonically observed that "at least he gets to work all night long." Ayman, on the other hand, made the transition toward a more acceptable, related activity by maintaining, repairing, and renting musical instruments. The change provided him with higher status and a modest amount of social recognition. The question of morality, which people avoid their entire lives, becomes increasingly pressing as time passes and society changes or as a younger, unattached man becomes a father. Two registers are superimposed that, although they overlap, are not entirely consistent with each other: Social shame, which causes a sense of discomfort about how one presents oneself, and the religious transgression associated with the musical professions in many people's minds.

This difficulty is understood in various ways involving compromises to one's margin of action in terms of established conventions and how one behaves according to personal convictions. In other words, "I have a respectable occupation, and it is not a problem to do that, God doesn't really care." Stricter interpretations imply position such as "it's bad to drink, *farah* (marriage) is *haram* (prohibited by the religion), and people commit major sins there, of the flesh, alcohol." Ahmad considered the matter for a long time. He began to pray, suddenly aware of the precariousness of his personal situation and of his need for redemption before he presented himself before the Creator. He was also concerned about his respectability here on earth.

These interludes never lasted long, though, and, although he was a true believer, he quickly abandoned his observances, taking a pragmatic point of view and placing his faith in divine mercy. Ahmad developed an adapted form of religion involving recognizing Islam but determining how and what he did to express this faith. According to Kertzer (1997, cited by Ferrié), this collective form of "solidarity without consensus" ultimately typifies the majority of believers' actual religious practices.

For Ridha, who confided her dreams of a peaceful small businesses in me, it is not so much a question of conforming to norms or not – which sometimes contradict each other anyway, as illustrated by the proliferation of religious literature and Internet forums – but instead of the discomfort that her work causes her, particularly regarding her growing son and his neighborhood acquaintances, from whom he prefers to hide his mother's profession. Living with this "dark secret" (Hannerz, 1983: 318)[6] does not necessarily mean living under the burden of sin, even if the sense of transgression can become so great a burden to dancers and, to a lesser extent, musicians, that they abandon their careers. In Ridha's case, like others, the problem is more seeking an element of anonymity and avoiding suspicious looks.

This attitude can be compared to the "morals of visibility" that characterize prevailing ethics among alcohol consumers in Tunisia more fittingly than the "morals of culpability" (Buisson, 1997). Sensitivity to social convention can provide sufficient motivation to compartmentalize one's existence. By aspiring to melt with complete anonymity into one's home environment, one can throw a veil over an activity that most fellow citizens perceive as deviant.[7]

Ahmad holds out hope that this young and still fragile revolution is the beginning of a period of potential reconfigurations of social relations and relationships with authority. Above all, "Egypt is not in the midst of a revolution, it is in *mouled*," he argues, considering the exaltation that had taken over the city and the animation along the banks of the Nile crowded by young people meeting each other and broadening their horizons in the wake of the events. Finally, without the abuses of the previous regime, it is possible to imagine that street parties regain acceptance, sacred as well as profane. Such popular festivities have typically been supervised by the police authorities, providing them an opportunity to collect "contributions" from event organizers in exchange for inaction.

While awaiting confirmation of these imagined tomorrows of unfettered musical celebration, the changes that Ahmad made in his trajectory opened new perspectives. The presence of a Western researcher who suddenly became an expert thanks to a mission for a far-away French museum, long Ahmad's calling card, has noticeably enhanced his social position.

This positive connotation flows naturally from its Western association, which confers an automatic advantage despite the fact that the relationship with the West is ambivalent. One illustration of this mixed blessing is the way in which Western references are used in the discourses surrounding musical practices, which opened the way for my fourth and final immersion in Ahmad Wahdan's itinerary, an episode introduced with a certain degree of fanfare by a discussion on the Arabization of the accordion.

The Arab accordion, or what can be done about the West?

Jean-Noël Ferrié has observed that the mechanisms used to refer to the West "undoubtedly have very little to do with this disquieting, majestic thing that we call 'the vision of the West'" (1997). In fact, retracing the manifestations of this vision in Egypt should begin by examining them in context and exploring the ways in which this distant entity – the West – whose actual contents are infinitely malleable, is referenced – and un-referenced.

The diatonic accordion became Arabized through a process that exemplifies how a foreign object becomes integrated into prevailing esthetic conventions. The object is redefined through a process that culminates in its indigenization. Ahmad, who masters the subtleties of the instrument, describes the operations required to adapt it to Eastern music.

The accordion is modified by filing one of the two reeds mounted along reed boards inside the case, which lowers the sound frequency. This is typically performed without the aid of a tuning fork because the ear is sufficient. This allows the production of a note lowered by a quarter-tone on the pull stroke or opening (*fath*) of the bellows, or, alternatively, its natural version on the push, which is called closing (*'afl*). An accordion modified in this way is called *mitssayik* from the word *sîkah* or quartertone.[8] People believe that this micro-interval shows that the instrument has "become Arabized," increasing its appeal to Egyptian audiences and ensuring that it is integrated into the local musical scene:[9]

> The accordion appeared in Egypt and became part of the *takht shar'I* [Eastern *takht*: a small musical grouping that developed in the late nineteenth century], which includes the violin, the lute, the sitar (*qanun*), and the reed flute (*nay*). It was integrated into this mix of instruments. Egyptian musicians added quartertones because the accordion was originally a Western instrument used with Western styles, techniques, and rules, but Egyptian musicians customized it by adding quartertones. And it appeared in Um Kalthoum's orchestra with the famous accordion player, the master Faruq Sallama, which brought him enormous fame, and the sound of his accordion is like a *zaghrouta* [youyou] in the middle of the *farah.* A *farah* without an accordion was not appropriate, so this instrument and its music were needed.
>
> (Ahmad, January 11, 2009)

The common belief that Arabic music is a superior vehicle for expressing human emotions derives from the melodic subtleties made possible by micro-intervals. The enhancements that result from altering an instrument and/or a specific way of playing it are parts of a highly specific approach to music.[10] Familiarity with the original exogenous references is built up through repetition and over time, a

Photo 5.5 The musician Ad-Damanhuri on stage at a wedding. Darb al-Ahmar neighborhood, Cairo, 2003

process that the local lexicon takes into account and that began under the influence of Western musicians.

Unsurprisingly, Italians occupy an important position in this musical history because of the significant influence of Italian musicians on the Egyptian music scene since the nineteenth century. The use of Arabized Italian terms thus connotes a certain distinction among individuals who use them, allowing them to infuse social exchanges and other situations with the supposed urbanity of this "civilization." "*Brima vista*," "*maestro*, and "*bruva*" (repetition) become elements of this cloud of meanings. While French (*do*, *ré*, *mi* for C, D, E . . .) and Arabic (*rast*, *dukka*, *sîka* . . .) notations coexist in musical theory, Egyptian music professionals use English terms in fields semantically linked to the most influential cultural environments since the 1970s, including terms like "drum" and "guitar" for instruments or "sound," "echo," and "reverb" to refer to sounds. These traces of past and present cosmopolitanism echo the multiple refractions of the idea of the West (*al gharb*) that Ahmad and his peers often draw upon. But the ways in which this space is invoked remain vague and contradictory, and the contents vary depending on each individual's adaptation to a particular situation.

The notion of popular "*shaabî*" has a slightly ambiguous meaning in such complex deliberations, as do references to the West, and it is continually debated, with highly variable contents. Ahmad openly adopts contrasting positions by contending that he can happily picture himself as a privileged witness, the quintessential representative of a "popular" style, while also distancing himself from that role in favor of his newly acquired role as a cultural middle-man, which enables him to reach cultural spheres that are otherwise outside his current cultural scope.

The ease with which Ahmad circulates among different social worlds is a skill recognized by his peers in the same way as his musical aptitude. Ahmad cultivates social skills that he acquired in the multi-layered, heterogeneous Egyptian society of the city, in which each circle possesses its own singular courtesies and customs. He uses this social facility to maintain his rank in the social hierarchy of the different neighborhoods and houses that he traverses while exercising his profession or engaging in social networking. This includes his own home, where foreigners are increasingly frequent visitors. His public relationships[11] have become more cosmopolitan over the past ten years as foreigners have joined his circle of acquaintances – musicians, professors, friends, students of Arabic, and, more recently, a number of European women belly dancers trying to improve their knowledge of Egyptian music and dancing. His close contacts on the local scene and his privileged access to a type of authenticity provide foreign dancers with an edge in European and American dance markets. As a result, it is not unusual to see a foreigner or small groups of Westerners in the *hara*[12] Abdallah Beyk in the Darb al-Ahmar neighborhood. Um Rana points this out with a certain satisfaction, asserting that "if there's a foreigner here (in the *hara*), everybody knows they're coming to our house."

The process of patrimonialization of music – which we will call informal, through educated Westerners who come to the Wahdan's home to meet the master later became more formal due to a program for collecting musical instruments and sound file samples for Mucem, a French museum. This transition allowed Ahmad to detach himself from local norms and become a middleman at the interface between "Avenue" circles, French collectors, and a scattering of impassioned foreigners. The musical esthetics involved in this research and the associated interactions partly evade debates about their intrinsic qualities, because it is enough for them to remain connected in some way to “local culture.”

In this way, they also come under a problem of cultural relativity and a logic of incommensurability because they cannot be quantified or compared. The renewal of the term *almée* is evidence of a similar process. In fact, the word “*awâlim*” – the plural of “*âlma*,” which referred to a category of Egyptian singers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Rodinson, 1975), took on a more pejorative meaning in the twentieth century. It has been rehabilitated in the past several years because of increased Western interest, at least in France and, from what I observed, the United States but without the moral condemnation associated with it in Egypt. The Western infatuation for Eastern dancing and the rise of broad-based interest in Arabic cultures have created new opportunities. An orchestra of Egyptian musicians that took the name “The Cairo *awalim*” for the occasion performed in Paris in the mid-2000s, and there is an *Awalim Dance Company* in Atlanta in the United States, as well as an association called *Awalim danse orientale* [Awalim Oriental Dance] in the French city of Perpignan. Although not particularly appreciated in their country of origin, a number of terms and the cultural contents to which they refer have become vectors of exoticism in Western contexts. This is the case with the Musicians of the Nile, who are locally rejected and called “gypsies” but who accepted this label to promote their performances in the West (Zirbel, 2000). Ahmad has become a resource person for these groups and even performs occasionally with some of the dancers.

This is how, in Ahmad’s fables, or at least within his sphere of influence, modest international connections have been created, using the humblest of means and as part of a lineage based on the vestiges of earlier moments of integration into Mediterranean or the even more remote spaces that made Alexandria and Cairo into cosmopolitan cities in the nineteenth century. The trajectories of objects and instruments transformed by local usages and the itineraries of individuals and encounters that can profoundly affect local categorization processes open up horizons that blend the inter-urban and international scenes. Ahmad does not dare to expect to profit directly from these trends, however, except for the satisfaction that his itinerary has gained an international dimension, since he often repeated his desire to travel, emphasizing that he would never return if he left, but he is also immediately pointing out – seemingly without contradiction – that he could never survive homesickness.

All of this is grafted onto his proliferating social interactions and the densification of the number of places that he traverses in the course of his engagements and visits, which ultimately explains his infatuation with the idea of having an “office.” He expresses his desire for a place that would prove his social position without any particular activity needing to be connected to it, a space independent of his family where he would receive people, manage his affairs, and hold court.

Ahmad never strays far from this inflated vision of his social mobility. He says that he aspires to owning a car and opening an office where he can devote his energy to maintaining his status for the remaining years left to him. This is because he is currently preoccupied by this rather somber perspective, which has suddenly increased his awareness of the precariousness of his presence here on earth and prompted him to think about how he can leave his mark or *sûfenîr* (souvenir). Egyptian Arabic borrowed this word, retaining its French and English meaning, to refer to items for sale in tourist shops that help recall important moments. It is also possible that he is referring to the possibility of conscientiously recording a few quality songs to create lasting memories of his itinerary. Or, perhaps a souvenir for Ahmad is something that would unify the phases of his musical career into a single, elegant musical production. His career is presently immortalized by only a few fragmented archives – postcards from various periods, concert announcements and brochures (which are referred to using the English word *pamphlet*) and dust-covered photographs. These are all tools used for self-promotion that have become markers of time along the axis of a professional itinerary.

At last, Ahmad might also mean "doing something for God," i.e., not for his after-life – will it unfold in paradise? – but in reality for no one, an act without importance that involves no grand expectations. Well, almost none, because this extension of himself would graciously remind his descendants of him, especially his children and his grandchildren now that he is a grandfather.

But, in this mortal life, here on earth, he made a detour through this life story, which – with the deepest respect for the dissonant voices, contradictions, and ambiguities that constitute the richness of Ahmad's character – is ultimately a form of homage, an homage that I hereby wholeheartedly render unto him.

Notes

1 A few weeks before sending our manuscript, Ahmad's daughter, Rana, called to let me know that her father had just passed away. Ahmad ended up disappearing in the city: He was hit by a car in the night as he was coming back from a gig in one of these frenzied streets of Cairo. Ahmad died on May 31, 2018, while doing his job. This homage written in his lifetime tragically turned into a posthumous tribute. *Allah yerahmak ya Ahmad, ya fennân, ya sadiq al-qalb.*

2 The *nabatshî*: He congratulates guests and addresses salutations and greetings to them. He collects gifts of cash in the form of tips to be distributed later among the members of the orchestra and the newlywed couple's families according to pre-established agreements.

3 The majestic portrait is focused on "the individual as public incarnation" (Marc Abélès, 2011: 188; 190). The portrait of Louis XIV by Hyacinte Rigaud (1701) is an archetypal example.

4 "Yes, what little I have of honor and courage, I have because [. . .] of the child that I was and who is now like an ancestor to me," Georges Bernanos, cited in Laurent Déom (2004: 101).

5 Ahmad's patronymic name, which means the knife-sharpener.

6 The author explains that segregated living is a perfect example of the urban lifestyle. It is composed of a group of stable relationships, each of which is supposed to represent the subject as he is. The impermeability of these groups of relationships means that one can adopt several social roles in parallel with each other, some of which are more illicit than others.

7 For a more detailed discussion of professional ethics, see Chap. 2 in Puig (2010).

8 The same term is used to designate the mode beginning with a half quarter-tone: E *sîka*, F, G, A, B *sîka*, C, D, E *sîka*.

9 In a discussion of globalization, Friedman (2000) cites the example of a beer label that the Papous attach to their shields because it symbolizes courage. According to Friedman, the resulting object is not a hybrid because it is fully appropriated and integrated into the local system of reference. This is an exogenous perspective that constructs hybridity by inferring displacement, something that the Papous do not perceive when they use the graphic image from the label and the beer's symbolism within the framework of their own codes. Jean-Noël Ferrié (1996), on the other hand, questions the idea of "encoding" that leads to fully integrating "transnational objects" into a local framework, because it entails postulating a "production of an 'always different' cultural difference in which culturalism only sees cultures that are resistant to change and immobile," a "coding installs the local in the elsewhere," which is essentially the same as substituting one culturalism for another, because the cultural system is considered to be the primary determiner of how individuals orient themselves.

Although, as Ferrié has suggested, it is true that "encoding situates the local in the *elsewhere*," I wish to emphasize that adapting a displaced object, which is sometimes transformed, involves a range of perspectives and intentions that are only partly accounted by either the model that focuses on appropriation or the second model that centers on the durability of the object's original reference. The continuum between these two poles contains a range possible combinations that involve the interplay between collective cultural constructions and individual orientations; time also plays a determinant role that neither model takes into account.

10 Such as creating quarter-tones on the trumpet by using the flexibility of his lips.

11 It is said that they are one of the two pillars of the profession, along with "politics," in the sense of knowing how to optimally manage one's relationships in a way that is consistent with one's own best interests.

12 A neighborhood can be defined as "a residential unit where people live 'with doors open,' [. . .] that continues to be identified with sociability and powerful solidarity among groups" (Depaule, 2010: 562).

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