

## The Secret behind “El sit Ghalia” ’ s and Mahragan’ s Popularity : Growing Diversity and Dynamics within Egyptian Popular Culture

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## The Secret behind “*El sit Ghalia*”’s and *Mahragan*’s Popularity: Growing Diversity and Dynamics within Egyptian Popular Culture

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**Summary:** With the “January 25th revolution” in 2011, the long-lived Mubarak regime came to an end in Egypt. All of a sudden, with the end of governmental media censorship, various new forms of expression, such as advertisements, music, and TV shows, started to appear in the Egyptian popular media. One of these was the celebration of “*bi’a*,” a derogatory term meaning backward, vulgar, and hence un-modern. By taking “*EL sit Ghalia*,” an Egyptian live cooking TV show, and *mahragan*, a new music genre in Egypt as cases, this paper discusses how showing “*bi’a*” has become a new form of resistance. The media consciously deployed an image, such as that of a mother figure of the popular urban quarter that went against the government prescribed model of the ideal Egyptian’. Although the show depicted the image of the popular Egyptian urban mother who was very familiar to most Egyptians, viewers immediately recognized the show to be awkward, funny, and revolutionary in reference to their long internalized ideal. This paper also argues that by aggressively praising the image that went against the former policy, the show imposed a message that they no longer abided by the governmental sanction. “*Bi’a*” thus became a new fashion icon for the resistance.

1. Introduction: Encountering “*El sit Ghalia*”
2. “*El sit Ghalia*”
3. “*El sit Ghalia*” as Unique Egyptian Cooking Show
  - 3.1 The Dishes
  - 3.2 The Set
  - 3.3 The Personality
  - 3.4 The Conversation
4. “*El sit Ghalia*” as a *sha’bi* Live Show
5. Being *bi’a* by Choice
6. *Bi’a* as a Political Strategy
7. Conclusion: Shifting Boundaries, Blurring Hierarchy

**Keywords:** popular culture, *bi'a*, TV program, *mahragan*, January 25th revolution

## 1. Introduction: Encountering “*El sit Ghalia*”

It was during Ramadan in 2011, that Abeer, my favorite sister in law came to ask me if I wanted to watch a TV show with her at *sohor* (pre-dawn meal; *suhūr* in modern standard Arabic)<sup>1</sup>. She is a college graduate of the faculty of Commerce, Cairo University; a highly educated, very intelligent, and broad-minded woman. Then aged 32 years old and the mother of two, she is married to an Egyptian husband who works in Saudi Arabia. Since we first met in 1998, she has always been a big fan of American TV shows, which nurtured her great English-speaking ability and her great international sense of humor. Her cheerful sarcasm has added great charm to her beauty and, at four years younger than me, she has always been my favorite companion among my in-laws. When she made this proposal to watch a TV show together, she happened to be at her parents’ home on the outskirts of Cairo, in the middle of her annual two-month summer vacation in Egypt. I was there too on the summer research trip that my two daughters and I have made annually since we started to spend most of our time in Japan back in 2008. Abeer told me that all of her friends were talking about the show, and she knew that I would love it.

She explained that the show was absolutely “*bi'a*” from head to toe, and there was no reason that I, “a Japanese woman who is always into Egyptian *sha'bi* [popular-class] culture and the most bizarre things in Egypt” would not like it. She even added that the program was great material to develop understanding of core Egyptian social values. “*Bi'a*,” in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, usually translates to “vulgar,” “backwardness,” “uneducated,” and “uncivilized.” It also often means “of farmers.” If a person is said to be *bi'a*, people expect them to be lacking in proper manners and to offend others with their vulgar attitude. As an adjective, it indicates undeniable inferiority, often used with a strong sense of disdain. Whatever or whoever is said to be *bi'a* must be an object of disgust, despicement, and abomination.

However, though the show was indeed *bi'a*, as Abeer had predicted, I actually came to love it. The show was interesting in the way it was funny, yet rude, and very Egyptian<sup>2</sup>. While watching the show for the first time together that night, we learnt that it was called “*El sit Ghalia*,” after the show’s main personality, Ghalia. We laughed intensely during the show as Abeer made numerous sarcastic comments on Ghalia’s bodily gestures, her kitchen, her food, all of her equipment, and, most of all, the telephone conversations between Ghalia and viewers. I had never seen anything similar to this show before, even though Ghalia looked so

familiar that Abeer and I both agreed she looked like many comedy characters: the exaggerated versions of commonly seen Egyptian mothers from the popular quarters.

What was so original and funny about the show? What made us feel it to be so Egyptian? By seeking answers to these questions, this paper will explore the meanings and connotations of and the changes to the Egyptian colloquial concept of “*bi’a*,” and its implications in contemporary Egyptian popular entertainment. Ultimately, we will argue that *bi’a* is potentially the “new black” in Egyptian popular culture, which indicates the dynamics and diversity of Egyptian popular culture and an ongoing battle over the trend in the Egyptian entertainment scene.

## 2. “*El sit Ghalia*”

“*El sit Ghalia*” was a 90-minute live cooking show, initially aired by an Egyptian, independent, low-budget satellite TV station, “25TV (*khamisa ashreen TV*),”<sup>33</sup> from Sunday to Thursday. The show launched in spring 2011, and by the time I first watched it that summer, it had already gained significant popularity. During Ramadan 2011, the show was aired at *sohor*, starting from 1:30am.

The title of the show, “*El sit Ghalia*,” literally means “Auntie Ghalia.” The honorific of “*sit*” in Egyptian colloquial Arabic conveys respect for a middle-aged or old woman, who constantly takes care of people surrounding her, and it connotes a certain welcoming atmosphere, together with great warmth, an incredible tolerance, and a strong sense of humor. Ghalia’s personality exactly fits this kind of perception. In fact, she embodies everything that the word *sit* implies. She is a round, dark woman with a beautiful smile and smooth hairless skin<sup>4</sup>. She talks loudly but speaks very sweetly with sugar-coated words and idioms. Her slightly husky voice indicates that she talks a lot, and she speaks loudly so that people around her can always hear what she is saying. She laughs a lot and constantly tells jokes about people she loves, works with, and has heard about; sometimes, she even makes jokes about the ingredients she is cooking, such as sardines or vegetables.

In each episode, Ghalia cooks three to four dishes, all of which are affordable for and familiar to Cairene popular class populations. She cooks those dishes as a three-course meal for four to six people that would, in total, cost less than 20 to 25 Egyptian Pounds. Throughout each show, she usually cooks alone, though occasionally joined by a special guest for a very short time. She usually is the only person appearing on screen, and she performs all of the tasks: introducing the dishes to be cooked, the ingredients and their measures, explaining the cooking procedure, providing information about the market prices, giving tips for choosing fresh ingredients, washing the dishes and bowls, and doing the actual cooking. She

even takes phone calls to chat with some of her viewers. On some occasions, when she finishes early or fails to finish everything within the show's 90 minutes, she dances for the audience.

### **3. “*El sit Ghalia*” as Unique Egyptian Cooking Show**

Anyone familiar with ordinary Egyptian TV cooking shows cannot miss the show's uniqueness and originality from the first glance. The show is particularly unique in its dishes, the set, and, most of all, Ghalia, all portraying and mocking the lifestyle of the Egyptian popular class.

#### **3.1 The Dishes**

In conventional Egyptian cooking shows, most of the dishes cooked are Western or Asian cuisines that do not yet regularly appear on the dining tables of the Egyptian popular class. The ingredients they use are so foreign or so expensive that most Egyptians of modest means simply cannot afford them.

Ghalia, on the other hand, cooks ordinary Egyptian cuisine, such as *molokhiya* and rice, okra stew, fried chicken fillet, cucumber and yoghurt salad, macaroni with tomato and garlic source, and sometimes even a chopped watermelon with white cheese or fresh green onions with lentil soup: all dishes considered to be the most local by the majority of Egyptians.

Instead of introducing foreign ingredients, Ghalia introduced ways to cook without meat or chicken by adding cheap seasoning, such as soup stock (known as *maggy*), that is widely available at the any local market. Likewise, she introduces some cheap substitute dishes, such as fried zucchini instead of fried chicken fillet, or stewed sardine instead of stewed salmon. What Ghalia cooks are undoubtedly authentic, homemade Egyptian dishes that will never be found outside Egyptian homes.

#### **3.2 The Set**

The show's set is also very unique. In ordinary cooking shows on Egyptian TV, the chef always cooks on a stainless or marble cooking table featuring a shiny, large stainless steel sink and a gas stove with multiple burners alongside each other. The cooking table, sink, and burners usually are placed in line on an island-style cooking table, so the chef can work while continuously facing the camera. Their equipment is all clean and shiny as it is made of stainless steel; some of the equipment, such as mixers, choppers, and slicers, are auto-operated, which could cost half of the monthly salary of the ordinary people viewing. They frequently use built-in ovens and microwave ovens, and when they need ice cubes, they take them from the ice cube machine built into a huge refrigerator.

While the kitchen sets in ordinary Egyptian cooking shows seem exactly the same as those in their American, Italian, or other Western middle class or wealthy family’s equivalents, Ghalia’s kitchen seems exactly the same as those in thousands of Egyptian popular class urban homes. It is obvious that the set is built to replicate the contemporary Egyptian popular class kitchen. The layout of the sink, gas oven, refrigerator, cabinet, and even the kitchen entrance replicate the traditional layout, except it is little bigger than most ordinary kitchens to allow space for a big cooking table and refrigerator, which are normally placed outside the kitchen, most likely in a dining/living room or salon. All of her kitchen equipment, such as the single-door refrigerator, naked small-sized sink, simple two-burner gas oven, and a wooden cabinet, represent the typical local middle- or lower-class household. In addition, Ghalia’s kitchen is full of materials that typify today’s urban popular class household with a mother in her forties or fifties. From plain aluminum cooking pans and a thin, plain, deep aluminum pot to various plastic plates and a plastic apron, as well as cotton towels hanging over the sink, everything must appear very familiar to the Egyptian audience. All of these are the cheapest of their kind and easy to find at any local market. Because her made-in-China plates and cups and locally manufactured pans and pots do not have much variation, I am sure that people can find the same plates and pans in their own kitchens.

### 3.3 The Personality

However, the biggest source of the show’s uniqueness is Ghalia, the main personality. In previous Egyptian cooking shows, cooks were either a professional chef working in famous hotels or restaurants in a white chef’s outfit, or a famous female TV personality with softly curled blond hair, wearing fashionable western-styled clothes in a modern, stylish atmosphere. In both cases, those cooks were portrayed as professional men and women for whom cooking is a career.

On the contrary, Ghalia appears as a domestic mothering figure, wearing *galabeyya* (Egyptian domestic clothes) and a head scarf covering her hair. She was presented as a typical Egyptian mother from the popular class, without any clear affiliation or profession besides being “*sit Ghalia*.” In a way, her homely, domestic appearance constituted a major part of her character, as well as her professional occupation as the “*sit Ghalia*.”

### 3.4 The Conversation

According to Abeer, my sister-in-law, the show’s *bi’a* attitude was most apparent in the conversations between Ghalia and her viewers. The program continually displays the station’s telephone number on screen, asking viewers to call so that they can talk to Ghalia live and on air. Even though the show at that time was

aired after midnight, from 1:30am to 3:00am, many people called-in<sup>5</sup>). The length of these conversations varied from only 20 seconds to more than five minutes. Most of the callers were female, though occasionally there were some males. Most said that they were calling from places in Egypt, but a few stated they were calling from abroad.

The conversations sounded so intimate that it took me, a foreign researcher only capable of speaking broken Egyptian Arabic, a while to realize that most were calling for the first time and they usually only exchanged endless greetings with Ghalia. It seemed that the constant exchange of templated greetings helped to create a friendly, intimate atmosphere. For instance, in a conversation on March 22, 2011, between the caller, mother-of-three Farida from old Cairo, and Ghalia, 65–70% of the three-and-a-half-minute conversation was occupied by exchanging greetings.

The effects of exchanging endless greetings were clear. First, people do not have to engage in meaningful conversation based on shared information about each other. Even in situations in which one knows nothing about the other, exchanging long greetings certainly avoid awkward silences or odd replies. By remaining in the templated greeting exchanges, two complete strangers can play the roles of intimate friends without causing humiliation. The dialogue between Farida and Ghalia is a perfect example of this: even though they did not seem listen to what each other was saying, they still sounded like best friends.

Second, even though people do not have much knowledge about their counterpart, they can still create and share intimacy through simply exchanging greetings endlessly. For instance, during the live conversation, Farida invited Ghalia to her house in old Cairo; Ghalia accepted the invitation and even promised to come. This conversation lasted about 45 seconds and, for all that time, they sounded as if they were actually making plans. However, no viewers would genuinely expect Ghalia to actually visit Farida, because they all knew it was an invitation for its own sake; in essence, still a exchange of greetings. An invitation to one's home implies a high degree of admiration and respect in ordinary conversations, so viewers could understand that this invitation conveyed nothing more than Farida's admiration of Ghalia. Similarly, by promising the visit, Ghalia showed viewers that she sincerely accepted Farida's admiration that showed reciprocal respect toward her. In this particular conversation, the invitation was meant as a grand gesture of respect and intimacy, and Ghalia, by kindly accepting it immediately, also expressed her respect and appreciation for Farida.

Ghalia was, in fact, very good at playing with greetings. She could converse with anyone on any topics, without any information about the callers but only with exchanging greetings. Although these conversations seem meaningless, she always succeeds in pleasing her callers.

Conversely, this exact characteristic made Abeer to comment that “*El sit Ghalia*” was not a show worth watching. Abeer commented that Ghalia essentially used overly glamorous gestures and pointless silly greeting exchanges that indicated Ghalia’s low level of education because it is a typical manner of low-class people. According to Abeer, the way Ghalia converse with people is *bi’a*, hence Ghalia is *bi’a* and the show is *bi’a*. Abeer also pointed out the frequent use of religious expressions as evidence of Ghalia’s dumbness and her uneducated background. She commented that using God’s name without fidelity was a sign that Ghalia neither understood nor respected religion (specifically Islam). To reinforce her point, Abeer referred to Farida’s expression, which said, “I swear by God, for the sake of God’s life, that I have a son and a daughter but they are all married,” in which Farida was swearing to God to confirm the accuracy of her information. This kind of expression appeared to Abeer unnecessary and even troubling because it goes against Abeer’s belief that no one should swear anything to God as this is disrespectful to him especially for the purpose of only adding some importance to oneself.

#### 4. “*El sit Ghalia*” as a *sha’bi* Live Show

In short, the show was about the Egyptian popular class, providing some useful information in a popular class manner catering for the popular class population. In Egyptian colloquial Arabic, such popular class customs, manner, taste, and attitudes are expressed by the word “*sha’bi*.” The term *sha’bi* literally means “folk,” “traditional,” and “popular” (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 466). The term also “evokes [in] many Egyptians a sense of local identity, tradition, and heritage, and the aura of authenticity” (Grippio 2007: 259); hence the term is often understood as “of the people” (Grippio 2006). In addition, in everyday conversation, the term is frequently deployed to indicate backward customs or an uneducated manner, to mean “low class” as opposed to “elite” in society (Armbrust 1996).

*Sha’bi* was, for a long time, an unspoken subject in the Egyptian mass media. According to Kubala, an anthropologist specializing in the Egyptian media, anything not fitting the nationalist rhetoric, in which Egyptian elitist cultural norms and morality constituted the ideal vision of Egyptian citizens, had been erased from the mass media (Kubala 2010: 177–181). In Egypt, television was operated under the state-run institution, the Egyptian Radio and Television Union (ERTU), which had monopoly power over the industry. The ERTU censored all programs to ensure their contents were consistent with the wishes of the current regimes; sometimes, programs were even forced to include certain national propaganda, namely, the national modernist ideology (El Amrani 2005: 326–7). The ERTU since the 1990s ordered channels to broadcast images well cultured, secular, fully



industrialized modern Egyptians, to claim the country's status as a well-developed competitor of the West (Grippio 2010: 155; Hammond 2007: 32–4). In this way, anything indicating Egypt to have backward customs or uncivilized, overly religious attitudes are believed to have been kept away from the mainstream media (Hammond 2007: 31; Kubala 2010: 178)<sup>6</sup>.

As such, *sha'bi* was only portrayed as a “bad example” or simply erased out. For instance, as an ethnomusicologist, Grippio revealed that *sha'bi* music (popular class music)<sup>7</sup> had been banned from Egyptian state TV and state-run radio stations due to its imagery contradicting the Egyptian national ideal (Grippio 2010: 155).

*Sha'bi* had also been excluded from the more recent phenomenon of folklorization of the Egyptian cultures. Sociologist Mona Abaza argued that while Egyptian local customs and traditions had been introduced into the fields of architecture, interior design, and fashion as a new trend since the late 1990s, the local customs thus promoted as fashionable were limited to those of *baladi* (local) (Abaza 2006: 215–217). *Sha'bi* was, again, omitted from that trend. “*Baladi*,” as an adjective, means “traditional Egyptian style,” “Egyptian native,” “common or ordinary,” “of the lower class,” and “vulgar” in Egyptian colloquial Arabic (Badawi and Hinds 1986: 97).

Although, the literal meanings of *baladi* and *sha'bi* are very similar and there are evidently overlaps in their meanings, each has different usages. *Baladi* is mostly used positively, with a close connection to the Egyptian land or soil, a strong indication of Egyptian authenticity or essence, and representing the particularity of Egypt that constitutes the source of Egyptian pride. Conversely, *Sha'bi* is mostly used with negative connotations, indicating anything from the ordinary, low-key, everyday life of the popular class. According to Abaza, folklorization, or the revival of certain old Egyptian designs, was mostly conducted by the Egyptian intellectual class and Egyptian entrepreneurs, with some help from the foreign community (Abaza 2006: 215–217). In essence, certain privileged people (mostly from the West) picked some particular Egyptian customs or designs to be *baladi* and representative of the Egyptian tradition, leaving the rest as *sha'bi*: trivial, meaningless components. The cultural anthropologist Katherine E. Zirbel has also discussed the discovery of Egyptian “*baladi* music” and how it broke into the global market (Zirbel 2000). Zirbel highlighted it was also the Western gaze that appreciated the exoticism of local music and promoted its unfamiliarity as the proof of authenticity (Zirbel 2000: 136–137). Once again, not all Egyptian local musicians succeeded in enjoying Western attention: only the rural musicians playing traditional music achieved such success, while the majority of the urban and up-to-date Egyptian musicians were neglected as a backward and inferior model of the West, although they were the popular artists among the Egyptian popular class audience. Hence, *sha'bi* had been excluded from both the Egyptian

national mass media and the international trend for promoting Egyptian folk cultures.

If “*El sit Ghalia*” had been aired under the previous Mubarak regime, the show would undoubtedly have resulted in being banned from the air<sup>8)</sup>. I would argue that the producers of the program were fully conscious that what they were presenting was *sha’bi*, the previously hidden side of Egypt concealed by the government. “*El sit Ghalia*” was not shy about being *sha’bi*, even calling itself a *sha’bi* cooking show in its opening song. It was loud and clear, even without the literal statement that the show was about the lifestyles of Egyptian urban popular class families, from its dishes, set, main personality through to the conversations with viewers.

These facts of “*El sit Ghalia*” promoting itself as a *sha’bi* cooking show explain the program’s uniqueness. “*El sit Ghalia*” was not merely a local cooking show but also a reality/live show that presented “the real” Egyptian popular class culture or *sh’abi* lifestyle on screen, from their cooking to their everyday form of communications. Overall, the show was unique not only due to its *sha’bi* characteristics – featuring a *sha’bi* woman as a main character, portraying *sha’bi* lifestyles, and providing useful information such as affordable recipes and price fluctuations in the local market for the *sha’bi* population – but also through its way of depicting the *sha’bi* character. The producers were proud to depict *sha’bi* as part of Egyptian culture, and/or as part of themselves: people who regain their Egyptian pride through the January 25th revolution. In short, “*El sit Ghalia*” was a new kind of entertainment show in Egypt, presenting *sha’bi* culture with pride for a wide cross-class and cross-border audience with a comedy touch<sup>9)</sup>.

To understand the show’s comical aspect, one perhaps needs a little explanation of how *sha’bi* had previously been illustrated in conventional Egyptian entertainment. Although the mass media never talked directly about *sha’bi* cultures, *sha’bi* characters such as Ghalia were not new in Egyptian entertainment. In many Egyptian comedies featuring the comic greats Adel Imam or Ismail Yesin, one can always find strong, stubborn, silly *sha’bi* female characters, just like Ghalia. In the Egyptian entertainment context, *sha’bi* characters were always portrayed to be funny, silly, and nonsensical, usually playing the role of proposing dumb ideas to the protagonist. They can be very important characters but never present their own stories; they can be funny and silly, but not worth listening to.

This could offer a great explanation for so many Egyptians instantly finding Ghalia to be very funny. First, people found her funny as a classic comedy character. It was almost like an instant reaction. Second, people found the situation in which a *sha’bi* character does all the talking to be odd and awkward therefore funny and amusing due to its incongruity. The show broke the previous taboo as it presented Ghalia to be a popular class heroin with her own wisdom and skills but not as a silly dumb character.

## 5. Being *bi'a* by Choice

It was probably not a coincidence that “*El sit Ghalia*” was one of the first programs 25TV station had broadcasted after their launch as a TV station following the January 25th revolution in 2011. It was obvious that the show was intended to deliver new contents to Egyptian TV culture that had not existed before. In addition, the show undoubtedly caused controversy in Egyptian society: this was obvious even in Abeer’s reaction, as she showed mixed feelings about the show. She enjoyed watching the show and hated the show, especially Ghalia, at the same time.

Although it was Abeer who encouraged me to watch the show, and we enjoyed it together, she kept telling me that she intensely hated the show. She explained her disgust by saying the show was silly, stupid, and lacking in manners, and she could not stand Ghalia’s dumbness. Expressing her strongest contempt, Abeer remarked that the show was “absolutely *bi'a*” (“*bi'a khālas*”), before urging “please do not consider Egyptians to be like her. She is *bi'a*, and she is not normal.” I would speculate that Abeer’s reaction was genuine, especially but not limited to, among college graduates or middle-class and elite populations who strongly embody Egyptian national modernist ideology, especially as the program was not only meant to be *sha'bi*, but also promoting *bi'a*, which would violate Abeer and many others’ decency code.

As we discussed at the beginning, *bi'a* is a concept that usually translates to “vulgar,” “backward,” and “uncivilized.” It is a term emphasizes strong inferiority with a lack of proper manners and taste. Sometimes, *bi'a* can be a description of *sha'bi*, as it has strong connotations “of low class” or “of farmer-like” attitude. However, *bi'a* can be applied regardless of people’s social background. Unlike *sha'bi*, *bi'a* is not a class-specific concept. *Bi'a* people do not even have to be Egyptians. The word does not connote the locality or the Egyptian land. Essentially, *bi'a*, more than *sha'bi*, remains irrelevant to the officially promoted Egyptian modernity and its view of citizens. Therefore, it was unsurprising to find people with state ideology strongly internalized to find the show offensive.

To make a better sense of Abeer’s emphasis on inferiority of *bi'a* attitude, it should be noted that in the current Egyptian setting, most of the lower-middle class population is living their life standard just above the poverty line, and they are always facing the fear of slipping down the social strata. In order to keep their superior status in the society, many of the college graduate with the middle class back ground including Abeer are living the constant battle to present and distinguish their superiority from the less privileged population (for a similar argument, please refer Gilman 2014 especially chapter 2).

Interestingly, “*El sit Ghalia*” was not the only current entertainment

phenomenon to place the *bi’a* attitude as its core value. A recently booming Egyptian music genre called “*mahragan*” (which translates to “festival”/“festivals” in English, plural: *mahraganat*)<sup>10</sup> is also said to be both *sha’bi* and very *bi’a*.

*Mahragan/ mahraganat* is a type of music that evolved from “*muzika sha’bi*,” the popular class music that started to appear in the Egyptian popular music industry in the late 1980s (Grippio 2010). “*Muzika sha’bi*” was sometimes referred as “*muzika takushi* (“the taxi music”) as many taxi drivers play their songs.” *Mahragan* started to become highly popular, especially among the Egyptian youth, after the January 25 Revolution in 2011<sup>11</sup>). By taking motifs from *muzika sha’bi* and famous Egyptian singers, *mahragan* creates digital remix versions of Egyptian *sha’bi* music. In combination, their extensive-use of digital effects, sampling layers, and vulgar lyrics create *mahragan’s bi’a*, vulgar, and outlaw attitude. The songs’ motifs are usually taken from the everyday-lives of the urban popular class population and the language they use is very *sha’bi*. Among the Cairene population, *mahragan* is sometimes called “*el muzika tuk tuk*” (“the *tuk tuk*<sup>12</sup> music”) as oppose to “the taxi music”, since both *tuk tuk* and *mahragan* are considered to be *bi’a*. Many *mahragan* songs include cursing or profanity in their lyrics, which was “previously unheard of in Egyptian music” (Swedenburg 2012), even though the use of profanity often is treated as tantamount to a social crime in Egypt. Although many *mahragan* artists are actually from the popular quarters (Swedenburg 2012), today, *mahragan* is no longer a monopoly of the popular class, and some *mahragan* groups had already penetrated the international music market. Some sang in concerts in Europe, and some had their own TV shows on satellite music channels (France culture 2014). In summer 2016, I personally witnessed the extreme popularity of *mahragan* among youths, regardless of their social class, and wherever I went, I had to listen to *mahragan*: in taxies, at local cafés, in clothes shops, or in a mega mall. It seemed that no one can escape their music and I kept hearing *mahragan* songs playing at maximum volume from the passing cars on the street.

In analyzing the role of *mahragan* music in the Egyptian political uprising in spring 2011, anthropologist specialized in ethno-musicology Ted Swedenburg observed that *mahragan* artists were not afraid to show their skepticism toward middle-class pieties, nationalism, and even the revolutionary tradition (Swedenburg 2012). In fact, instead of hiding their *sha’bi* attitude, *mahragan* artists, just like *sha’bi* musicians, were writing songs about their everyday lives, full of problems and frustrations. Their *sha’bi* upbringings and attitude played a major role in their music, and many youths from the popular class considered those *mahragan* songs to be their own. However, unlike *sha’bi* musicians, who had avoided making political statements in public (Grippio 2006), *mahragan* artists often vocalized their frustrations in political forms, such as openly criticizing the current regime in their

lyrics (Swedenburg 2012). In doing so, through their vulgar language, dirty fashion, and exaggerated body gestures, they emphasized their differences from the national ideals and their position outside any conventional power structures with their aggressive and vulgar manners, otherwise known as *bi'a*.

## 6. *Bi'a* as a Political Strategy

These *mahragan* artists teach us at least two things about playing *bi'a* as a political strategy. First, the relation between playing *bi'a* and winning political freedom; second, its potential power for challenging and changing social expectations.

*Mahragan* artists never seemed to care about their *bi'a* reputation; on the contrary, they seemed to enjoy and even be proud of that reputation. Their pride as *bi'a* seemed to fuel their passion for keep making their language more vulgar and playing their outlaw roles harder. It seemed that their *bi'a* attitude was a means to express they were beyond the reach of any authorities. By confronting social expectations by playing *bi'a*, they were exclaiming that they were not subject to any official value systems. It was clear that, initially, their *bi'a* attitude helped them to acquire a new audience (Swedenburg 2012). However, it does not seem that they were using *bi'a* only to sell their music. Those *mahragan* artists have shown us that their *bi'a* attitude actually helps to secure a space for expressing oneself. It was as if the more *bi'a* one became, the more freedom of expression one could practice. Their *bi'a* attitude and their underground marketing strategy, away from conventional mass media, were clearly helping them to win their freedom of expression.

The *bi'a* attitude of *mahragan* artists also revealed that what is and what is not appropriate in popular culture are constantly changing. The concepts of *bi'a* as vulgar, backward, uneducated, or uncivilized were all relative to the social ideal. There is no absolute definition of the state of *bi'a*, except the status of being outside traditional orders, ideals, and expectations: *mahragan* artists were called *bi'a* because they were not acting in accordance with certain Egyptian social expectations. In the current Egyptian context, they were called *bi'a* because they were neglecting the national modernist ideology of what is Egyptian by expressing the supposedly-hidden-side of Egypt. Only according to that national ideology could they be labeled as lacking in “proper” manners, “distasteful,” and “inappropriate.” By playing the deviant role and being provocative with their *bi'a* attitude, *mahragan* artists have succeeded in questioning and resisting the current dominant ideology that defined *mahragan* as distasteful and ignorant. As such, *mahragan* musicians’ *bi'a* attitude rebels against the authorities and their desire to police people without the artists having to make any obvious political statement.

“*El sit Ghalia*” had the same effect The program’s *bi'a* tone defined the show

to be outside previous social expectations. Just like *mahragan* artists, “*El sit Ghalia*” could also be seen as a political movement. For instance, the show was revealing a hidden contradiction within society, namely the competition over power between the state and the family. Clearly, Ghalia appeared to be the boss in the kitchen, and she never seemed to allow anybody, even the government, to intervene in her kitchen affairs. Like millions of other Egyptian popular class mothers, she was the authority and the power in the kitchen: the heart of the Egyptian household. Ghalia was a domestically uncivilized (at least according to the national modernist ideal) woman and mother, yet she was solely in charge of the whole situation: cooking for her loving family and worrying about children’s future, all regardless of the national political turmoil. This image of the absolute female monarch questions and challenges who is truly in charge of Egypt. Ghalia was portrayed as a woman who would not lose her power by the national politics. We can see from the way the program is refusing to reflect the social ideal of a modern Egyptian woman and illustrating Ghalia instead, as the ultimate monarch at home, that the producers of “*El sit Ghalia*” ridiculed the complex reality; the split between the state and the family, and the split sentiment among the popular class populations toward the national modernist ideology about the ideals of Egyptian family and its people.

In this way, the show projected itself as a huge social satire<sup>13</sup>). As a symbol of the Egyptian mother – the true authority of the Egyptian household, with total confidence in herself – Ghalia claimed that her authority was never to be undermined by state control: she was the mother: the absolute authority that every Egyptian obeys.

## 7. Conclusion: Shifting Boundaries, Blurring Hierarchy

In this article, we have seen how an Egyptian TV cooking show, “*El sit Ghalia*,” and *mahragan* music changed social expectations of who should be depicted as Egyptian in the country’s mass media. Those new contents shook the boundaries of what should and should not represent Egypt. “*El sit Ghalia*,” alongside the *mahragan*, revealed the potential power of popular culture as a manifestation opposing any controls imposed by the established authorities and mainstream social values. They both contested the current regime and the social expectations about who represents Egypt.

We have also seen how *bi’a* can play its part in political struggle. By declaring themselves to be *bi’a*, Ghalia and *mahragan* created space to express popular class reality and their sentiments. However deviant the society claimed them to be, the fact that millions of people enjoyed the show and the music respectively ensured that they were not, in fact, crazy or irrelevant. They were connected to people’s

sentiments and frustrations, and people regarded them and their messages to be very relevant, to the degree that they consider those entertainment forms to be part of themselves. “*El sit Ghalia*” and *mahragan* clearly showed that playing the deviant role, or *bi’a*, helped ordinary people to express their opinions in a situation where the state-controlled ideology maintained a strong influence on the whole of society, including the mass media. Those contents not only succeeded in offering some new ideas but also in raising questions of the Egyptian national modernist ideology that had been embedded in each national, especially the one with the elitist, national identity. Meanwhile, many, especially among the youth population, started to accept and praise *bi’a* content as fashionable, trendy ideas. At least in the current Egyptian entertainment scene, *bi’a*, with its sense of humor, sarcasm, irony, and skepticism, became a “new black,” with the power to resist the control imposed on people by the authorities. This very fact strongly conveys the dynamics and diversities within the post-revolution Egyptian popular culture and its growing role in political and social change at large.

## Notes

- 1) In this article, all the local terms (Egyptian colloquial Arabic) are spelled as they sound.
- 2) When I screened part of the show at an international workshop at Japan’s National Museum of Ethnology on February 26, 2016, many of the attending Japanese professors who had spent more than a year in Egypt displayed a similar reaction. They suddenly started talking about their former maids, landlord, or the mothers of friends whom they had met during their stay in Egypt. It confirmed the idea that *Ghalia* is a character that portrays a typical Egyptian mother in the popular class whom everyone with certain Egyptian experience can relate to.
- 3) The channel closed in October 2012 after the situation became worse and the government started to impose even stricter censorship on the media than had the Mubarak regime (Sakr 2013: 4–12). The owner of the channel, Mohammed Gohar, had to flee to Canada as the state started to jam their signal and Gohar started to receive death threats (James and Mallen 2014).
- 4) Waxing whole body is common for Egyptian married women.
- 5) Due to its popularity, the station kept the show after Ramadan.
- 6) Hammond writes about the panic the Egyptian movie “*El-Limby*” caused in society: the comedy film was accused of harming the Egyptian reputation (Hammond 2007: 31). The government was also imposing strong censorship on religious expression. From an Egyptian vulgar popular hero to extremely pious women, anything that did not suit the governmental ideal was banned to be aired. A famous example was the issue surrounding women’s head scarves on Egyptian TV. Wearing a head scarf was not allowed for female anchors on national television and a female anchor lost her position on a news show due to her decision to start wearing a scarf in public. This incident caused a large social debate at the beginning of the 21st century, splitting society in two.



- 7) According to Grippo (2010), there are two types of *sha’bi* music. The first is Egyptian folk music; the second is a style of music popular among the working class population that was originally played in local weddings or night clubs and started to gain popularity in the late 1970s. The *sha’bi* music Grippo referred to in this article was of the second type (Grippo 2010: 144; 162).
- 8) After 25TV closed, Ghalia changed her platform to SNS (Social Network Service). She is now very active on Facebook, and has even been given a show on a different satellite channel.
- 9) 25TV had an English website, on which viewers could watch several episodes of “*El sit Ghalia*” with English subtitles (25TV English Channel 2012).
- 10) According to an Anthropologist specialized in ethno-musicology Ted Swedenburg, *mahragan* first started to appear on YouTube in 2007, and their popularity boomed during the protest in Tahrir in early 2011 by singing political slogan (Swedenburg 2012).
- 11) There is a short film of them called “*Mahragan*,” by Omar Al Shami, produced in 2012 (Unifrance 2016).
- 12) *Tuk tuk* is a three-wheel auto-mobile taxi, became popular in Cairo around 2003. Its fare is cheaper than taxi, but more expensive than *mikuro basu* (omnibus). It was only allowed to operate inside the local areas but not allowed to run on main streets.
- 13) Satire was also one of the important aspects of *mahragan*. To explain the characteristic of *mahragan*, Swedenburg mentioned skepticism, irrelevance, humor, and sarcasm along with satire (Swedenburg 2012).

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