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SINGING HEAVEN ON EARTH: COPTIC COUNTERPUBLICS AND POPULAR SONG AT EGYPTIAN *MŪLID* FESTIVALS

Abstract

This article explores the performative politics of devotional soundscapes at Coptic Christian *mūlid* festivals. Echoing the state's reformist efforts in the 1990s to transform Muslim saint festivals into utilitarian spaces and their goers into "modern" Egyptian citizens, today the Coptic Church works to refashion these popular festivals from places of debauchery into morally productive spaces. Aided by affluent Cairene-based volunteers, church choirs travel from Cairo's poshest neighborhoods to these festivals to actively sing, disseminate, and teach popular religious songs (*taratīl*) in an effort to develop poorer Christian pilgrims into modern, pious, and more audible "citizens of heaven." Through the analysis of one church choir's *taratīl* ministry at the *mūlid*, I illustrate how middle-class spiritual volunteers disrupt and, at times, reinscribe the Coptic Church's disciplinary efforts on the festival's poorer pilgrims, particularly as they look to modernize popular festivity into grounds of Christian ethical transformation.

Keywords: Copts; counterpublics; music; piety; soundscapes

In the spring of 2011, an affluent Coptic Orthodox Church choir named the Kural al-ʿAiʿla al-Muqadasa (Holy Family Choir, HFC) traveled to undertake a ten-day service at a Coptic Christian popular religious festival known as a *mūlid*.¹ The choir offered performances of popular religious songs known as *taratīl* (s. *tartila*) to festival pilgrims in official church-approved tents, as well as impromptu performances throughout the *mūlid* grounds.² And, every night choir members dutifully carried all of their instruments—electronic keyboards, drums, shofar horns, and sometimes even a boom box—up the village mountain in a procession of boisterous song. They ended their trip with a major performance at the *mūlid*'s holiest site: the cave where the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were purported to have taken refuge from King Herod when he sought to murder the young Jesus.³ Juggling all of their equipment, the choir members regularly stopped in the middle of the festival's marketplace to sing and pass out *taratīl* cassettes and religious pamphlets to curious onlookers, blocking traffic in the tightly congested streets. One night, the choir stopped for so long that it came under a fierce hail of carobs protesting their clamorous presence. Two choir members were even assaulted.

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Despite this violent encounter, the heat, and the dust, I was surprised to overhear HFC's affluent choir members describe the *mūlid* as "heaven on earth" for the duration of their song ministry. This reference was so ubiquitous that, following my initial trip with the choir in 2010, many members titled their Facebook festival pictures and related statuses as "in the land of heaven" or "I am going to heaven." The following year, as people prepared to return for another trip, many switched their profile pictures to an image of a bright light illuminating the sky with the brief phrase, *li-yakun nūr* (so that there may be light). Their private Facebook group page highlighted their mission in their self-assigned nickname as "God's Army" to transform Egypt's Christian *mūlids* from grounds of festive ambiguity to spaces of moral and spiritual refashioning through service and song.

This article explores the performative politics of devotional soundscapes at Coptic Christian *mūlid* festivals. While Egypt's religious and secular elites have long identified *mūlids*, with their ambiguous mixtures of sacred and profane experiences, as an affront to progressive modernity and Orthodox religiosity, these festivals have come under increased scrutiny in the past thirty years.⁴ Echoing the state's reformist efforts in the 1990s to transform Muslim saint festivals into utilitarian spaces and their goers into "modern" Egyptian citizens, today the Coptic Church works to similarly refashion these popular festivals from what the late Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Pope Shenouda III called *amākin kharāb* (places of debauchery) into morally productive spaces.⁵ Aided by affluent Cairene-based church volunteers, church choirs such as the HFC travel from Cairo's elite and middle-class neighborhoods to these festivals to actively sing, disseminate, and teach popular *taratīl* in an effort to reform and develop poorer Christian pilgrims into modern, pious, and more audible "citizens of heaven." Through an ethnography of two *taratīl* service trips conducted by the HFC in May of 2010 and 2011, I explore how modern Coptic subjectivities are crafted as part of serving and singing to the poor.⁶ Specifically, I examine how urban, upper- and middle-class Copts depend on these *taratīl* services to rural and impoverished Christian communities in order to contest an Orthodox Church's monopoly on a "heavenly belonging" solely in the afterlife, navigate their own charged relationship with the Church and its clerical hierarchy, and, finally, critique a Christian inaudibility in Egyptian public spaces.⁷

Drawing on Nancy Fraser and Charles Hirschkind's notion of subaltern counter-publics, where marginalized communities construct parallel discursive arenas with their own oppositional interpretation of their identities to facilitate the development of their own religious virtues, I demonstrate how the choir worked to cultivate Christian *mūlid* soundscapes as "heaven on earth" through song.⁸ I ask: how do the HFC's *taratīl* ministries serve as a commentary on their own sense of belonging back in Cairo's urban and largely Islamicized soundscapes, and how do these conversations contrast to the Orthodox Church's dialogue of a heavenly citizenship? More importantly, how does the choir's voluntary hardship, encounters of aggression, and physical exertion through overplaying and oversinging in the *mūlid* actually comply with the Coptic Church's public narratives of a deferred belonging in the afterlife? And finally, how does such implicit consent with the Church's policies mirror state governance and shape elite Coptic lived subjectivities as both modern Egyptian and Christian citizens? Through an analysis of the HFC's *taratīl* services and missionary trips to Upper Egypt, I illustrate the effects of its Christian audibility in Egyptian festive spaces as it disrupts and,

at times, reinscribes the Coptic Church's disciplinary efforts on the festival's poorer pilgrims.

I begin by exploring how beginning in the 1980s Egyptian state and municipal actors looked to "civilize *mūlids*"—specifically Muslim *mūlids*—by taming their popular piety, policing their festival ambiguities, and imposing a universalist order of urban space that looked to instill a kind of productive civic habitus.⁹ Drawing on an Aristotelian understanding of moral subject formation, Saba Mahmood defines habitus as the pedagogical process by which moral virtues are acquired and developed through a coordination of outward behaviors and inward dispositions.¹⁰ In other words, faith can be inwardly inscribed through habituated and outward acts of piety, such as fasting, praying, and, I argue, attenuated *mūlid* devotional performances sponsored by the state as well as the Orthodox Church. While the state revived its intentions to reconfigure the physical topographies of *mūlids* in the 1990s, the Coptic Church had already begun to transform Christian *mūlid* topographies twenty years earlier. Under the auspices of the late Patriarch Pope Shenouda III (1923–2012), Church clergy and middle-class urban volunteers introduced their own internal reforms, increasing liturgical services, broadcasting them in the festival's camp grounds, and hosting devotional entertainment from Cairo beginning in the early 1970s. With the arrival of urban volunteers such as the HFC to *mūlids* in 2005, these extraordinary festivals have emerged as important sites to negotiate a modern piety, civic engagement, and belonging as Egyptian citizens following the January 2011 uprising. I conclude by examining how HFC's public *taratīl* processions, overplaying, and proselytization in the *mūlid* market not only tune into Coptic Orthodox martyr eschatologies, where suffering and sacrifice is reconfigured as a cornerstone of Christian belonging to a Muslim-majority nation, but also reinscribe the Church's authority "to develop" the poor, legitimate the HFC's own middle-class habitus, and cultivate a neoliberal piety that turns a blind eye to the exacerbating gap between Egypt's rich and poor.¹¹ In the increasing religiosity of Egypt's public domains, where state and church efforts vie with those of middle-class and elite reformists to "clean up" the *mūlid*, songs and bodies collide.

POLICING PIETY

In his experiential ethnography, anthropologist Samuli Schielke describes the rambunctious sights and sounds of a *mūlid*: a colorful pastiche of Sufi pilgrims mix with roaming youth and families as they navigate thick markets, sites of ecstatic piety, popular music concerts, hashish (cannabis) corners, and moments of solemn commemoration in saint shrines.¹² This rich constellation of festivity, spiritual mysticism, and vibrant trade happens against a backdrop of pulsating lights, songs, and sounds. Literally meaning "birth," *mūlids* are celebrations of a saint's birth, though many, including those of Coptic saints, take place on a saint's death as a celebration of their birth into the afterlife. A *mūlid*'s physical and sonic topographies highlight this eschatological emphasis on death; almost all festivals center around a saint's tomb, considered the most sacred focal point of *mūlid* pilgrimages and processions.¹³ These sites radiate one of the most important elements of the *mūlid*: blessings and otherworldly aura otherwise known as *baraka*. It is because of their holy and, many times, martyred death that saints' bodies are believed to be privileged places where the contrasting poles of Heaven and Earth meet, making available to

the faithful who visit their tombs a measure of the power they might have taken in their rest in a heavenly afterlife.¹⁴ The extraordinary power of *baraka*, as it reaches out to the farthest edges of the festival, exonerates pilgrims from problematic binaries of what many Egyptians consider to be sacred or profane, carnal or spiritual, pious or joyful.¹⁵ Traditionally, people's unfettered mobility between these realms—from mosque, to Sufi service tents known as *khidma*, to popular (and at times illicit) entertainment stalls—and the unsegregated bodies of men and women throughout the festival emphasize this liminal ambiguity between realms. Overhead, the festival's layered soundscapes from both secular and sacred genres match this openness and ambivalence: jingles of festival rides frequently undergird the sacred consonances of Qur'anic broadcasts from mosques and shrine centers. In turn, these sounds of unaccompanied prayer preface the more rapturous echoes of Sufi hymns (*inshād*) whose heavy and electronicized reverb and *tabla* beats envelope men and women as they worship together, drink free tea distributed by volunteers, and socialize in Sufi *khidma* tents.¹⁶

Another important element that characterizes *mūlid* festivals is their sense of suspended time, one that ethnomusicologists such as Philip Bohlman argue is propelled forward by sound and song.¹⁷ Music and sounded worship are integral to transforming the *mūlid's* sacred places into sacred spaces where believers directly encounter God and the power of the saints. In Bohlman's words: "pilgrimage is unimaginable without music" because it punctuates and intensifies the experience of timelessness at the sacred site itself and recalibrates the rhythm of the body.¹⁸ More importantly, music performances challenge linear temporality toward a more fluid social organization of time. By extending late into the night, concerts invert normal rhythms of the day to allow for extended prayer, time with friends, or musical commemoration (*dhikr*) of the festival's hosting saint.¹⁹ And, as pilgrims frequently visit from all over the country and largely come from lower-class habitus, festivals emerge as special times of the year when one suspends work and forgoes day-to-day rhythms and responsibilities. This liminality of space, body, and time, coupled with *baraka's* otherworldly power and accompanying festive soundscapes, is integral to the *mūlid's* extraordinary dimensions. As I describe later, it is not only pilgrims from a lower socioeconomic habitus who have these cathartic *mūlid* experiences; middle-class and affluent visitors such as the HFC also strategically interpolate these "out of the world" contexts as they navigate and construct their own Coptic counterpublics. While their elite and middle-class status easily affords trips to the Egypt's most exclusive vacation resorts, many insistently return to *mūlid* festivals to take blessings from their songs service. And, every year, their own musical encounters at the *mūlid* form a kind of utopic narrative of spending their time in "heaven on earth," emphasizing the *mūlid's* sense of suspended temporality and liminality.²⁰

Yet, it is the *mūlid's* very ambiguities and liminality, between festivity and piety, that has prompted the Egyptian state, religious establishments, and urban middle-class visitors such as the HFC to action. Schielke argues that in the last three decades Muslim *mūlids* have undergone dramatic transformations in an effort to impose a universalist order of urban space, linear temporality, civic habitus, and a sense of religious morality.²¹ Their once bustling centers around saint shrines, full of circling crowds navigating sacred sites, market, and entertainment stalls, have been emptied of festive bodies by state officials. Instead, these open spaces have been refashioned into sites of state spectacle, modernity, and civility where iron fences limit pilgrim mobility and use of public space

around tomb graves. In turn, reformists have swept ambivalent festival elements such as entertainment vendors, *khidma* tents, and pilgrim camps into side streets, disrupting the *mūlid*'s natural flow and shifting its popular dimensions farther away from mosque centers and public view. Inside the mosque, once-shared spaces of saint shrines have been reconstructed with gates to segregate men's and women's pious bodies around the tomb. In the city's square, the presence of the police has muted the bustling sounds that illuminated festival piety, monitoring pilgrim movement inside the square as well as taming any sights and sounds of ecstatic worship.

As *mūlid* physical topographies shifted on the ground, so did their popular soundscapes, with particular state attention to discipline popular Sufi dhikr remembrance concerts.²² In the same way that festival centers have been transformed to reflect state spectacles of order and progress, state-sponsored concerts have emerged as utilitarian sites of civility and modernity. This was particularly evident when I attended Sidi Mursi 'Abd al-'Abbas's *mūlid* in Alexandria in July 2010, a festival celebrating the 13th-century Andalusian saint who relocated and died in Alexandria. In an official and state-sponsored *khidma* tent at the mosque steps, professional suit-wearing musicians took a high stage to perform a dhikr remembrance ceremony. They used sheet music with Western music notation, expensive electronicized piano (*org*), and a subdued percussion section to play to an audience of seated and separated men and women. Like many Western music concerts, the sparse crowd politely clapped and remained calm, far, and disengaged from the musicians who performed a tame and introspective *inshād*. Their performance context stood in far contrast to a Sufi dhikr that took place just one street over behind the mosque. In this Sufi service tent, a *munshid* (singer) sang a rapturous devotional *inshād* through an overpowering microphone, his voice heavily reverberating at ear-splitting levels. And, along with instrumental accompaniment on a violin, *ney* flute, *ṭabla* drums, and a *riqq*-frame drum, the *munshid* gradually built a thick tapestry of sounds in which his audiences directly engaged, danced, prayed, and moved together in the tent's densely crowded and mixed space. Occasionally, a veiled female *munshid* took her turn to lead the dhikr, her own voice low but loud behind the microphone. No one seemed to think twice about the religious ideologies that have long banned women's voices and presence from public prayer in Egypt.²³ Watching and listening to her perform was a poignant reminder that despite the state's efforts to make the *mūlid*'s "profane" elements invisible from city squares, these elements were far from inaudible in the city's backstreets.

While state projects have slowly disciplined Egyptian festival topographies and increasingly pushed celebrations into side streets and semiprivate contexts, in the past few years other changes in Egypt have transformed the *mūlid*'s image in public discourse and lowered attendance. Beginning with a religious revival in the 1970s, growing sentiments of moralism swept through the country, with increased interest in reading, knowing, and publically performing Muslim and Christian piety and faith. Scholars have long monitored these changes: aided by shifts in Egyptian public education and popular culture, as well as increasingly neoliberal economies, political rhetoric highlighted religion's utilitarian role. It also allowed for the reinterpretation of religious scripture to serve modern, secular, as well as religious reformist discourses linked to the state's nationalist and free-capitalist projects.²⁴ As early as the turn of the 20th century, Egyptian modernist narratives have resonated with nationalist discourses as the state propagated a Western-inflected ideal of secularization, technological industry,

free-market, and development as key qualities to a flourishing nation. In postcolonial contexts, many middle-class and elite reformers, whom Walter Armbrust calls the focal point of modernity and nationalist ideology in Egypt, turned their attention to *mūlids* and increasingly regarded these festivals and their largely poor attendees with great ambivalences.²⁵ In their efforts, many middle-class elites claimed that festival practices not only threatened a religious and social order of society, but could also destabilize the nation.²⁶ In Muslim reformist circles, these festivals were also denounced as *bid'ā*, un-Islamic innovations that thinly bordered on the blasphemous, echoing Coptic critiques of Christian *mūlids* as places of debauchery that also threatened communal moral order. By changing both the *mūlid*'s physical and sonic topographies, state and religious reformers looked to echo the orderliness and coordinated soundscapes of "civilized" cities and productive civic habitus that Schieke argues reflects middle-class notions of a modernist piety, one that fits within a boarder frame of both global and neoliberal economies.²⁷ Through their popular song service, volunteers such as the HFC hoped to elide their more urban and reformist middle-class habitus with a pious one. And, they hoped to do so as they transformed Coptic pilgrims into modern and neoliberal pious subjects through song.

DISCIPLINARY SOUNDSCAPES

It was in May of 2010 that I first climbed the long steps of Gabal al-Tayr (lit. Bird Mountain) to attend the Marian festival outside of Samalut. Peanut vendors, mountains of dried chickpeas, and plastic blue-robed statues of the Virgin sat under a tent made out of old rice and flour sacks stitched together to make a makeshift canopy of the Mulid al-ʿAdra market. Swarms of people shifted languidly from kiosk to kiosk. From various loudspeakers, I could hear popular Christian *taratīl* blend with Egypt's contemporary popular music and urban folk songs known as *aghānī shaʿbiyya* (lit. people's songs). A recorded electronic *org* (electric keyboard) blared out synthesized *ṭabla* beats, claps, and automated women's ululations while a raspy popular singer carried a simple and repetitive melody over the sounds of an accordion. Together, sacred and secular genres were almost indistinguishable, only different from one another through their religious text praising the Virgin, the local Bishop, and Christian saints. People traveled seamlessly between the festival's realms, from campsites to market to sacred ground, only sporadically interrupted by gates to mark Orthodox Church-sponsored territories such as the cafeteria, bishopric, or historic sites. At the Church cafeteria, one even had to pay a modest fee to enter and then pay again to purchase a cup of tea (quite unlike the free tea in a Sufi *khidma* tent), so it was almost always less crowded than other festival spaces. Like a Muslim *mūlid*, the festival took place against a backdrop of vibrant sights and sounds, only recognizable as Christian through closer inspection of song texts, popular religious memorabilia, and the broadcast of Orthodox liturgical services from the festival's center.

Known as *al-gamb al-rūḥī*, the "spiritual side" of the *mūlid* was located in one of the central squares of the Gabal al-Tayr village. Situated at the edge of the mountain, this end of the festival housed the Coptic Orthodox Bishopric, the cafeteria, immense baptismal fonts, and finally, the historic Kanisat al-ʿAdra, the Church of St. Mary. The church was built over the cave where the Holy Family is believed to have taken refuge from King

Herod. In turn, the village gained its name as Gabal al-Tayr from a miraculous folk tale in which birds helped to etch a cave into the mountain to protect the Holy Family.²⁸ Today, this cave has emerged as the Holy Family Shrine and constitutes a major pilgrimage site for Egyptians wanting to take the *baraka* of the Virgin.²⁹ Thousands of Christian and Muslim pilgrims predominately from lower socioeconomic classes travel from all of the country just to walk around the church's barren walls, and offer substantial donations (*nadr*) in lieu of miraculous favors believed to be rendered by the saints.³⁰ Standing in long lines, many walk through a beeping metal detector to touch the icons of the church and to bring *baraka* back to their bodies. Others light candles and sing saint doxologies and *taratīl* in front of designated areas and icons in the church.³¹ To the chagrin of the state's antiquities department, some even draw red henna crosses on the walls of the church hoping that the Virgin will hear their prayers, heal the sick, and provide devotees with a miraculous apparition.³² As pilgrims exit the church, they file by another building where Orthodox priests are ready to pass on another form of *baraka*: in large fonts, they regularly baptize thousands of children every year. Their families celebrate not only their official initiation as Orthodox Christians, but also that the initiation took place on holy ground. Dressed as young Coptic priests—or in the case of young girls, as brides of the church—these children are then paraded in small and proud procession around the church, then the rest of the village, to the accompaniment of popular folk ensembles playing *sha'bī taratīl* and secular folk songs.

During my visit, I learned that pilgrim experience at the Virgin's *mūlid* was not always organized this way. According to Father Matta and a priest serving in Gabal al-Tayr since 1973, newly assigned bishops by a young and activist Pope Shenouda III had initiated changes as early as the 1970s. The initial changes were small. First, local bishops instituted what was an informal process to parcel *mūlid* grounds for rent to Muslim and Christian vendors and for pilgrims to pitch their tents. Then the bishopric amassed enough volunteers from Samalut across the Nile and village youth to form an administrative committee known as *lagnat al-niḏām* (Committee for Order) to better organize vendors and secure diocese space. Wearing neon orange shirts and bright yellow badges, these volunteers (*khudām*, or spiritual “servants”) served as ushers and moral police at liturgical and official church events throughout the festival. And, like the Egyptian security apparatus at Muslim *mūlids*, they too quelled any sights and sounds of ecstatic piety. In 1983, the Church of the Virgin that housed the Holy Family Shrine was renovated, with the addition of major domes and tall bell towers. The Baptismal fonts that pilgrims used for mass baptisms, the cafeteria, and a major diocese building quickly followed.³³

Besides construction, the local diocese sought to reconfigure and discipline Christian *mūlid* soundscapes through the instillation of loudspeakers on newly built church towers.³⁴ Through mounted PA systems, sacral sounds began to extend beyond the *mūlid*'s official center, with church-sanctioned popular *taratīl*, Orthodox liturgical services, and Arabic saint doxologies continually streamed over and pushed into the festival's various spaces. These genres are all decidedly more somber than previous *sha'bī* genres, with strophic melodies and tame, if any, instrumental accompaniment. The PA system was so loud that I could hear church-approved *taratīl* and liturgical hymns faintly at the *mūlid*'s farthest edges, where the market, fairground, and makeshift stages converged for popular (and also very loud) entertainment. Through these mounted speakers, the Church aimed

to extend the festival's sacral soundscape over its more "profane" elements, and to domesticate other popular and folk influences. In one instance, Father Matta described a fierce competition between one bishop, Pavnutius, and a local folk singer who sang at the festival each year, the well-known Muhammad Taha. Despite Taha's famous reputation as a populist and rural singer, and his own insistence on his songs' shared themes and nationalist sentiments, Pavnutius banished him from the festival.³⁵ After Taha left, Father Matta recalled that popular *taḥṭīb* troupes, famous for their folk "stick dances," also left, and were quickly followed by Sufi *tanūra* dancers whose bright whirling skirts were a regular mainstay at Egyptian *mūlids* for generations. Instead, many of these folk troupes and popular entertainers have been replaced by visiting church choirs such as the HFC and local diocese volunteers who travel through the festival grounds in small groups and undertake home visitations to sing and sermonize to pilgrims.

The shift of Coptic popular festivity into increasingly liturgical, modern, and exclusively Christian spaces administered by the Orthodox Church has coincided with a burgeoning religious renaissance in the community that mirrors Egypt's Islamic religious revival. Known as the *Harakat Madaris al-Ahad* (Sunday School Movement), this pivotal religious education reform movement would have a lasting effect on Coptic Orthodox subjectivity, piety, and civic engagement.³⁶ Aimed to raise pious and loyal Christians from their youth, it depended heavily on the revival of Coptic language, liturgical hymns (*alḥān*), pedagogical *taratīl*, and Coptic martyr hagiographies. In their religious lessons, taking place either on Fridays or Sundays following Orthodox liturgies, Sunday School students were encouraged to enact revived moral virtues of sacrifice, detachment, and withdrawal from earthly desires through bodily acts such as the community's seasonal and extended vegan fasts (*ṣiyāmāt*, s. *ṣiyām*), long hours of prayers (*ṣalāa*), community service (*khidma*), home visitations (*iftiqād*), and singing of Church-sanctioned genres such as *alḥān* and *taratīl*. The movement's founder, a middle-class layman named Habib Girgis, has written extensively about his efforts to reconfigure his community's moral interior. Through the habituated outward acts of singing and listening to *taratīl*, he believed that Copts could become "more useful members of their nation" and achieve a heavenly belonging in the afterlife.³⁷ Echoing popular nationalist discourses of his time and leading to Egypt's postcolonial independence from British control, Girgis' Sunday School movement is particularly significant for inculcating today's modern Orthodox piety that is lived, embodied, and widely sung by a growing clerical class and most of the Coptic laity.

In 1962, one of Girgis's star students emerged as a pivotal reformer himself: the newly elected bishop of education, and later pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III. When he took over the helm of the Sunday School movement in 1971, he renamed it the Church Upbringing Movement (*Harkat al-Tarbiyya al-Kanasiyya*).³⁸ Throughout his forty-one year reign (1971–2012), Shenouda further emphasized refashioning a Christian selfhood through ascetic-like piety, recounting martyr hagiographies, and the rise of a spiritual activism that further highlighted this notion of a deferred belonging to *al-waṭan al-samāwī* (the heavenly nation).³⁹ Some of his most famous poems, such as "Strangers in the World" and "A Pilgrim," written during his time as a hermit monk (1956–62), also pressed such lessons of worldly detachment, suffering, and sacrifice and were disseminated as popular and pedagogical *taratīl*.⁴⁰ As early as 1957, Shenouda published much of his devotional poetry along with other homilies in

his famous book *Intilaq al-Ruh* (Release of the Spirit). The last thirty-five pages of the book containing his poetry have been adapted as an impromptu *taratīl* pamphlet and moral manual regularly sold in church bookstores all over Egypt and beyond.⁴¹ His widely circulated poem-songs emphasized the patriarch's shifting political stance beginning in 1985.

While he first emerged as a fiery proponent of Coptic Christian citizenship rights and civic representation at the beginning of his career, a bitter confrontation with President Anwar al-Sadat led to his house arrest in the Wadi al-Natrun monastery beginning in 1981. After his release four years later under the Husni Mubarak presidency, Shenouda forged a noticeably docile and withdrawn entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Egyptian state, with the promise of the community's allegiance in return for concessions such as church permits and security.⁴² Historian Paul Sedra argues that such a partnership wedged a deep rift between clergy and the Coptic Orthodox elite laity in the 1980s, one that continued to shape his pastoral and political leadership.⁴³ More importantly, the system reinvigorated an Ottoman *millet* system in which the Orthodox Patriarch had historically maintained responsibility for administering communal affairs and reporting back to Ottoman officials.⁴⁴ As Shenouda's church partnership with the Egyptian state denied Coptic laymen any civic agency, including advocacy for civic engagement and demands for sectarian representation in Egypt's political landscape, many Copts, including members of the HFC, turned their activist energies inward, engaging in questions of belonging and citizenry in their spiritual volunteerism within their own communities. Privately, many expressed discontent with the church's collaboration with the state and mirroring of its politics before Shenouda's death in 2012. Such criticisms came to a head during the 2011 uprising: despite the pope's warnings for Copts not to join demonstrations in Tahrir Square, many HFC members openly joined protests and told me that "the church was next."⁴⁵

Nonetheless, at the beginning of his career, the young bishop had initially mobilized much of the middle class through his reformist Friday sermons that addressed contemporary issues such as dating, family planning, and other challenges of modern piety to audiences in the thousands.⁴⁶ He also turned his attention to another focal point for urban reformists, that is, transforming Coptic popular festivities with their assumed degraded morals, dancing, and singing into productive, utilitarian, and even modern celebrations of the saints. Hence his efforts to officially change the name of Coptic saint festivals from *mawālid*, a colloquial designation shared by Egyptian Muslims and Christians, into a more specifically Orthodox word.⁴⁷ Today, the official term used by Orthodox clergy is *iḥtifālāt*, a synonym of celebration in Arabic, so as not to mix it up with a saint's canonical feast day in the church (also known as *a'ṣyād al-qidīsīn*). Besides Shenouda's domesticating efforts, his festival name change signaled a growing Coptic withdrawal from Egypt's shared public and folk spheres towards a new focus on a deferred belonging in afterlife. When the HFC first arrived to Gabal al-Tayr in 2005, the choir's sermons and ministry similarly stressed this retreat, claiming their *mūlid* experience through a specifically Christian eschatological lens. Despite its critique of the Orthodox Church for the pope's increased reticence in Egyptian political and civic life, as well as the church's growing emphasis on a heavenly rather lived citizenry, the HFC further propelled the institutions' disciplinary efforts and discourses by singing a "heaven on earth." The choir not only organized *khidma* tents in the festival peripheries beyond the Bishopric's

grasp, but it also aimed to teach Christian audiences to habituate their piety publically in particularly visible and audible ways and with a focus on “rejecting the world.”⁴⁸ In the *mūlids*’ public markets, the HFC brazenly proselytized to Muslim onlookers through boisterous song processions, and faced serious repercussions for doing so. Yet unlike the state’s reformed, governed, and nearly empty dhikr tents, the HFC’s *taratīl* concerts and spiritual lessons drew in audiences by the thousands.

SINGING TO THE POOR, SINGING FOR OURSELVES

When I first met members of the HFC at the beginning of the Marian festival in May of 2010, they were singing on what seemed to be a forgotten edge of the *mūlid*: an empty hill overlooking the Suez Cement Factory which employed many local men in its El-Minya plant outside of Samalut. This hill, dusted white with faint traces of cement, hosted a slew of young couples and groups of friends. Many seemed to have broken away from their supervising parents, church officials, and even the village police. As the choir informally played on drums, church cymbals, and an accordion, members sang *taratīl* to curious onlookers who flocked to them, chatted, and posed for pictures. Some listeners also left with the first religious pamphlets and *taratīl* cassettes that the choir members regularly brought to the *mūlid*, totaling some 80,000 tapes, 60,000 CDs, and 100,000 pamphlets.⁴⁹ In this informal performance, the choir sang “Zidu al-Mash Tasbh,” one of its more popular songs that would become an impromptu anthem during its 2010 trip. Written by the contested but immensely popular Orthodox singer and charismatic televangelist, Maher Fayeze, the song aptly described the choir’s proselytizing and reformist mission at the *mūlid*. Its texts also clearly resonated with an Orthodox eschatology and called on familiar tropes in Coptic martyr hagiographies:

Chorus: Increase your Praise for Christ, boast to your Lord with Song
Call the martyrs heroes, and walk with a cross before you
Verse: They say that the first death has no power,
and there is no salvation without His forgiveness
And the light of the Bible spreads/increases⁵⁰

The HFC did not always have such an evangelical bent. Rather, the group started unofficially among friends at the St. George Coptic Orthodox Church in the upper middle-class neighborhood of Heliopolis in 1990. The director of the choir and one of its founding members, Amir Rafla, recalls that the group initially performed between homilies at youth meetings or bible studies, reinforcing lesson themes and facilitating prayer in song. Most of the choir’s *taratīl* choices emerged from church-sanctioned songs and singers, and many members even served as spiritual volunteers in their church. The HFC had not considered service trips to Upper Egypt until another church volunteer, Adel, approached Amir with the explicit request for the choir to become *khudām mawālid* (lit. servants of the *mūlid*) in 2003. Adel was part of a growing movement of middle-class reformists who donated their full time and skills, and even vowed life-long celibacy, to service Egypt’s poor. He regularly traveled to Upper Egypt to “develop” various Upper Egyptian audiences through sermons and service trips. And, like a Muslim *dā’ī* (preacher), he “invited” his largely poorer audiences to embrace a

more public and habituated form of “Christian lifestyle” through attendance at liturgical services, Sunday School, and the singing of church hymns and songs.⁵¹ Adel hoped that Amir’s choir would open for his sermons, particularly so that he could compete with the Protestant and Pentecostal ministries in Upper Egypt where popular *taratīl* were also a mainstay of services.⁵² In 2005, Amir finally agreed and joined him.

When the HFC first arrived to Gabal al-Tayr, its song ministry only numbered twenty people who followed Adel from one service tent to the next with a small song procession between tents. Before Adel’s extended sermons, they would simply warm up the crowd with a song and then shift to the background until they sang again in closing prayer. Besides offering modern and popular-sounding *taratīl* using the electronic keyboard, drums, and guitar, the choir offered other gifts of an urban modernity in a religious game of bingo (*saḥb*). Audiences could win various commodities such as fans, cellphones, and even cassette players for the *taratīl* cassettes that the choir passed out during services. Today, the choir’s *taratīl* ministry has grown significantly: in its 2016 service, the group has expanded to include 158 people, with a waiting list for others to join the choir for its trip down south.⁵³ And, it is Adel who now serves as the choir’s concert opener, giving a brief homily on which the choir based its extended concerts and embedded spiritual lessons. More importantly, in the past few years, the choir has teamed up with other spiritual servants from neighboring churches in Cairo including the Abu Siffayyin Coptic Orthodox Church in the posh Mohandessin district as well as the local diocese in Samalut. The HFC has expanded its *taratīl* ministry to include Sunday School lessons for kids and expanded to join diocese volunteers in home visitation for adults for “lost” parishioners who did not regularly attend any of the devotional concerts in *khidma* tents or liturgical services in the church.⁵⁴ One of the most memorable scenes I witnessed in Gabal al-Tayr was a line of children boisterously following choir members dressed up as large doll mascots who, in turn, carried a boombox blasting *taratīl* to collect kids from the fairgrounds for their Sunday School ministry known as PhiloKidz.

Home visitation (*iftiqād*) to adult pilgrims with local diocese volunteers have come to play a central role in the HFC’s song ministry and spiritual retreat to the *mūlid*. More importantly, *iftiqād* is also critical to many of the choir members’ shifting subjectivity as pious and modern Egyptian citizens who occupy a distinct urban and middle-class habitus. It was in these contexts that local diocese volunteers traveled to people’s homes or tents in the *mūlid*’s peripheries and first sang to “warm up the audience” while HFC members gave sermons aimed at ethical and moral restructuring. Coming from the Arabic root f-q-d, broadly meaning “to lose,” Christian *iftiqād* loosely resemble the Muslim act of *da’wa* (lit. to invite) to a Muslim lifestyle through prayer, song, and sermonizing.⁵⁵ And like contemporary *da’wa* encounters, many of the choir’s sermons about spiritual progress were entangled in discourses of modernity and neoliberal piety. In one particular visitation, I listened to an HFC member tell his listeners that besides routinely brushing one’s teeth, as well as being good and industrious citizens, they had to balance reading Scripture, fasting, praying, and punctually attending Orthodox liturgy to achieve the highest accomplishment of all: entrance into heaven.⁵⁶

In the same way that church reforms hoped to convert *mūlids* into increasingly liturgical and spiritual industrial sites, HFC members and their diocese collaborators hoped to transform their individual listeners—and finally themselves—into ethical and modern heavenly citizens, using neoliberal frameworks to think, talk, and sing about salvation.

By teaching pilgrims how to perform Orthodox-habituated piety through their song service, they were extending membership to a pious modernity in which they too were trying to gain entry. In a way, as they visited “lost others” and sang to the *mūlid* poor, they hoped to “find” and visit their spiritual selves. Over the span of ten days, volunteers of various upper- and middle-class statuses were all squeezed into tight rooms in the Samalut Diocese, and for the duration of these packed, sleepless, and driven nights, took a brief hiatus from the social pressures of their city life. Lara Deeb writes about this meshing of a pious modern and the social embeddedness of “developing” the poor. Self-development is not a private act, she points out, but a deeply relational one.⁵⁷ Besides the *baraka* or blessings of “spiritually developing” *mūlid* pilgrims to Gabal al-Tayr to actively perform as Orthodox Christians, *iftiqād* was critical to many HFC members’ personal moral restructuring; before their long service on the mountain, they attended their own lessons, listened to sermons from local clerics, and had intense prayer and song sessions together every day morning to late afternoon. More importantly, they saw each other in contexts outside of their neoliberal middle-class habitus back in the city: plain jeans and the choir t-shirt replaced much of their urban (and many times, designer) wardrobes to create brief equalizing effects; women forwent their usually coiffed hair for simpler looks and wore little to no makeup; and finally, many members left markers of their upper-class status at home, including expensive jewelry, phones, and watches. In a way, many briefly suspended their intracommunal socioeconomic hierarchies to cultivate a sense of community that surpassed their *mūlid* ministry. They created important relations and friendships across a small spectrum of their middle-class habitus that many took back to the city. Such friendships connected HFC members to each other, to God, and finally to themselves—some members who met during their *mūlid* service even got married, and the members of their wedding party mostly came from the choir.⁵⁸ Amir frequently reminded his choristers of the *mūlid*’s spiritual (and social) dimensions throughout their trip: “Remember, here we are served more than we serve.”

HEAVEN ON EARTH: SINGING COPTIC COUNTERPUBLICS AT THE *MŪLID*

Every year, the *mūlid* ends on a night known colloquially as al-Layla al-Kabira (the Great Night).⁵⁹ In church contexts, *Mulid al-‘Adra* culminates on the eve of the major Coptic Feast of Ascension, when a newly risen Christ is believed to have physically ascended to heaven. And though the HFC choir climbs the Gabal al-Tayr mountain every night from tents scattered in various neighborhoods to perform a concert at the Holy Family Shrine, the procession on this last night is considered the most momentous. In a way, the choir too ascends the mountain into the heavens. Beginning with the procession that evening, its performance can last between four and six hours without any breaks until returning to Samalut diocese in the early hours of the morning. Yet yearly, before al-Layla al-Kabira, many members already showed the wear and tear of their week-long service: the majority of singers had already lost their voice while other instrumentalists complained about the aches of player fatigue or downright numbness and tendinitis. In 2010, one choir member was even rushed home to Cairo for contracting a serious fever, which Amir considered the price of “ascending too high” at the *mūlid*.⁶⁰ In this final section, I explore how the choir navigated the voluntary hardships of the *taratīl* ministry to embody Orthodox

eschatologies of martyrdom in attempt to contest the Orthodox Church's monopoly on a deferred "heavenly belonging" in the afterlife. As the choir voluntarily suffered to sing at Christian *mīlids*, many members believed they sang heaven to earth. Yet, by doing so, they inadvertently embraced the Orthodox Church's emphasis on suffering and sacrifice as the sole route to an earthly and national belonging. I illustrate how the HFC's overt Christian audibility in the *mīlid*'s markets and its aggressive proselytization to festival pilgrims culminated in a violent encounter with market vendors. In turn, such a heightened moment helped the choir to cultivate its *taratīl* services as an alternative Coptic subaltern counterpublic, one in which choir members embodied and renewed their own ethical comportments within their own neoliberal frameworks.

In her work, political theorist Nancy Fraser challenges Jürgen Habermas's famous bourgeois conception of the public sphere, writing that subordinated social groups—women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians—have found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics and what she calls *subaltern counterpublics*.⁶¹ It is in these parallel discursive arenas that "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs." Charles Hirschkind presses beyond Fraser's liberal-democratic framework. He adds that discursive vehicles such as cassettes of Islamic sermons also cultivate counterpublics in which discipline and power are thoroughly interdependent. In Egypt's case, cassette sermons were critical to forging what he calls "ethical soundscapes" or Islamic counterpublic virtues that accommodated and traversed the moral and geographic boundaries of the nation and surpassed the state's modernity projects that began in the 20th century and continue today.⁶² These counterpublics also cut across modern distinctions between state and society, private and public, as well as religious and secular spheres that are central to normative institutions of modern democratic politics. In these spaces, everyday practices of pious sociability have gradually come to inhabit new political terrain, shaped by discourses of national citizenship, the afterlife, and emerging transnational forms of religious association.⁶³ With all of their sensory involvement, Hirschkind continues, it is ethical listeners—and as I argue here, ethical singers and performers—that inhabit counterpublics and embody the sensibilities of their religious virtues. In other words, ethical soundscapes are where religious discipline and deliberation further coalesce. In this particular case, the HFC embodied martyr hagiographies and Orthodox eschatologies to transverse the Coptic Church's moral governance, and to perform an Egyptian Christian belonging specific to its members' middle-class habitus. This particular piety, while stemming from the Sunday School movement, particularly resisted direct clerical mediation and authority, but nonetheless acquiesced to church and state orders. For example, choir members did not proselytize in their urban and upper-class neighborhoods, an act severely restricted by law and often persecuted under blasphemy laws.⁶⁴ And, in my experience, individual members did not publically broadcast and perform *taratīl* in their home neighborhoods either. Instead, many members regularly attended Orthodox services, supplementing official rites with their own private worship at the HFC rehearsals.

Following the Sunday School movement, the Orthodox Church has firmly centralized and narrowly standardized performances of piety in the city—fasting, reading scripture, attending liturgical services, and singing Coptic liturgical hymns as the sole routes of

salvation and pious citizenry. More importantly, the Orthodox Church also has considerable control over Coptic civic lives, beginning with questions of marriage, divorce, and political representation.⁶⁵ The HFC *taratīl* ministry, however, has offered forms of piety outside of these constraints, and opted instead for more lively, Western-influenced, and electronicized *taratīl* songs that allowed singers to engage Orthodox eschatologies in their own ways, albeit ways that are couched within a neoliberal piety. Rather than the traditional and somber use of the metal triangle (*al-muthallath*) and cymbals (*al-naqūs*) to accompany church hymns, the choir boasted of a modern and popular band made up of instruments—electric guitar, drum kit, and electronic keyboard among other things—that are otherwise prohibited in Orthodox Church services. In turn, women took on a more central role in their services, doing almost all the singing as they stood center stage; in processions a few even played the cymbals and the metal triangle, which they could never play in Orthodox settings. Women’s new status as soloists and leaders in the choir contrasted sharply with the clerical authority over their lives, bodies, and voices in the church, and more closely represented many of their lives and leadership roles as working professionals.⁶⁶ Many did not regularly fast, go to confession, or pray the cycle of canonical hours, and unlike in other Orthodox settings, did not ask if others did as well. Finally, HFC neo-Pentecostal inspirations no longer hinged on Orthodox clerical elites as conduits to a heavenly belonging through their performance of liturgical rites and sacrament; instead, popular songs democratized religious authority among the choir and, as they sang together, members believed that they could bring “light” to festival goers as “God’s Army.”

It was because of these differences, Amir explained, that the local diocese long regarded the choir with great ambivalence and it took a number of years before it could perform directly in front of the Holy Family Shrine. But, as the HFC choir gradually moved into the *mūlid*’s center topography, it increasingly echoed the church’s disciplinary efforts and spectacle of modern Christian piety. Through its own voluntary but momentary hardships at the *mūlid*, namely its oversinging and overplaying, the choir’s ministry reinscribed the church’s emphasis on martyr hagiographies. During our time together, one choir roommate told me: “You don’t always have to fast or go to church to be pious.” Rather, in her view the most important element of faith is the heart, a willingness to serve, and, literally, “to suffer for the sake of others.”⁶⁷ In short, HFC members looked to craft their own civic and pious participation through the same Sunday School model that the church offered through habituated performance of sacrifice and death that modeled the saints. Anthropologist Anthony Shenoda writes that martyr hagiographies have a special role in Coptic political discourses. Through their narrations of saints’ frequently violent deaths, they empower Copts, reminding them of the final triumph and power in death.⁶⁸ While Hirschkind adds that an experiential knowledge of death, through the recounting of stories and cassette sermons, is a condition of moral agency during Egypt’s religious revival, I add here that it is also critical to a political and civic agency in this life, crafting what it means to be an engaged Egyptian Christian citizen in Egypt beyond one’s personal moral interior.⁶⁹ In Gabal al-Tayr, the HFC’s public *taratīl* processions not only looked to change the *mūlid*’s sonic topographies as the choir ventured into the market, but also seized the chance to disrupt, reconfigure, and reorder social and power relations that the choir, and Christian Egyptians more broadly, have to navigate in Egypt’s political, civic, and social sphere. By overtly proselytizing

to Muslim pilgrims, and reconfiguring Christian popular festivity, the choir asserted a public and Christian claim to aural spaces that are otherwise muted and private in Cairo. Except for Church courtyards, nowhere in this city of highly Islamicized soundscapes, not even in Heliopolis's posh neighborhood where a growing number of Copts reside, is it possible to sing *taratīl* so loudly and publicly. All other sonic markers of identity are hidden or muted, relegated to *taratīl* cassettes in the car or one's home, or cellphone ringtones that momentarily sound and then fall silent. In Gabal al-Tayr, the HFC could publically sound its faith and did so at every given opportunity.

In 2011, the choir's final procession emerged as a locus to examine how the choir reconfigured both voluntary hardships and encounters of violence to further cultivate Coptic counterpublics and heaven on earth. Abuna Musa, the Diocese's liaison priest who worked with Amir throughout the trip insisted that Amir forgo the public procession in the market due to the lack of security following the 2011 uprising. Instead, he hoped that the group would navigate silently up the mountain to begin its performance on arriving to the Holy Family Shrine. Amir adamantly refused. While he acknowledged Musa's authority over him as an Orthodox cleric, he insisted that they perform *taratīl* more boisterously in a show of faith and courage. Approaching a congested market intersection, the choir also took on a particularly brazenly proselytizing tone. Despite cars passing through and the crushing throng of market crowds, choir members unloaded some boxes and passed out religious fliers and *taratīl* cassettes to curious onlookers. At one point, I watched on as a choir member slipped a few items to a driver who veered uncomfortably close to the standing procession. Despite the market din, the choir only sang louder, and I recognized the growing annoyance and disenchantment of many market vendors. Eventually, the curiosity shifted to annoyance when the choir did not move. After an extended stay, largely because the group had gotten stuck in the intersection's unforgiving congestion, we all came under a hail of carobs and stinging pebbles. Despite the choir's tight formation, where male instrumentalists buffered women's singing bodies, some onlookers aggressively pushed their way into the group.⁷⁰ One female singer was assaulted and the fellow chorister who came to her aid had a cigarette snuffed out in his back. Other members looked nervous as we overheard myriads of insults pelted our way. Nonetheless, we pushed forward and the choir continued to sing. In the center of the procession, as singers dodged low to avoid the next wave of seeds and carobs, the women sang loudly and aggressively, remembering the suffering of the saints in the *taratīl* texts: "the blood flowed, oh how it flowed, the blood of the saints, the victorious, the pure, the blood of heroes. Shine, Shine, O Church! Shine, shine, shine!"⁷¹

That morning, after a long and particularly charged four-hour concert, the HFC members filed into the buses silent and exhausted, unlike most other evenings when they sang to themselves all the way. As we drove back to the diocese in Samalut, I could hear the morning call to prayer go off in the distance. It was a sound I had not heard in days since my time enveloped in the *mūlid*'s layered soundscapes and the choir's continuous *taratīl* services. In a poignant exchange, a young HFC member named Mina looked up at me across the bus aisle in the dark. Leaning his ear towards the window, he said wistfully, "Wow . . . I almost forgot that sound. It means we're leaving heaven now."

CONCLUSION

By performing in the *mūlid*'s nonsacral centers and targeting Muslim vendors through proselytization, the HFC enacted the transformative potentials of its subaltern counterpublic by addressing religious strangers. Michael Warner writes that a public of subalterns only constitutes a counterpublic when its participants are addressed—or here, when they address others—in a counterpublic way. That is, the HFC continues performing, speaking, proselytizing, and singing Christian idioms in public forums, like *mūlid* markets, that were otherwise relegated to the private spheres. It is in such encounters between counterpublics that member identities are formed and transformed, challenging hierarchies of stigma that are part of everyday practice. In Warner's words: "One enters at one's own risk."⁷² But in Egypt such risk challenges the normative publics of both the state and the Orthodox Church. Unable to directly critique the Egyptian state, middle-class pious reformists such as the HFC members use Christian *mūlids* as a possible model to challenge Orthodox Church authority and practice broader political engagement. It is a risk that the choir is admittedly privileged to take, and one that is afforded by the higher socioeconomic status of the choir's members.

In their *taratīl* ministries to sing "heaven on earth" at Coptic *mūlids*, HFC members also sounded Christian auralities that were lived, loud, and literally felt on the body. But as they do so every year, the HFC's Coptic counterpublics remain largely private and exclusive to those outside of their middle- and upper-class habitus. In their efforts to refashion Coptic popular festivity and to reform poorer Christian pilgrims into modern, pious, and more audible "citizens of heaven," they even mirror the Church's problematic narratives of suffering and sacrifice as a cornerstone of Christian belonging to a Muslim-majority nation. The HFC also legitimates its own middle-class habitus, and cultivates a neoliberal piety that turns a blind eye to the exacerbating gap between Egypt's rich and poor. As Nancy Fraser reminds us, not all subaltern counterpublics are above their own modes of informal exclusions and marginalization, and many embody the very problems they wish to critique.⁷³ But, it is counterpublics' dual character that allows them to acquire some agency; while they may craft spaces for people to withdraw and retreat, exclude and marginalize, they also emerge as important training grounds for agitational activities directed towards wider publics.⁷⁴ In other words, counterpublics' dialectic nature allows for wider discursive spaces to challenge dominant narratives of belonging. In this case, HFC members were not simply satisfied with the Orthodox Church's frameworks of a heavenly citizenship in the afterlife, but also desired a broader political, religious, and social polity in their Egyptian national publics as specifically Christian citizens.

NOTES

¹A *mūlid* is the Egyptian Arabic pronunciation of the classical Arabic term *mawlid* (pl. *mawālid*). They are popular religious festivals largely attended by Egypt's lower socioeconomic sector, regardless of religious affiliations. In both Christian and Muslim contexts, their ambiguous festive atmospheres intermix sacred, profane, and popular elements for profound and extraordinary experiences of religious pilgrimage, community festival, or public affair. See Samuli Schielke, "Policing Ambiguity; Muslim Saint-Day Festivals and the Moral Geography of Public Space in Egypt," *American Ethnologist* 35 (2008): 539.

²The Coptic community uses the terms *taratīl* and *taranīm* interchangeably to describe Arabic nonliturgical devotional songs that complement the official liturgical hymnody sung in the Coptic language, known as *alḥān*.

For the sake of brevity and clarity, in this article I will continue to refer to *taratīl* and *taranīm* solely as *taratīl* (sing. *tarīla*).

³NIV Matthew 2:16.

⁴Samuli Schielke, *Perils of Joy: Contesting Mūlid Festivals in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2012), 2.

⁵“Pope Shenouda’s Words on the Day of Our Bishop Aghathun’s Passing,” in *Qawqab Lama‘fi al-Kanisa: Niyafat al-Anba Aghathun*, ed. anonymous (Ismailia, Egypt: Ismailia Bishopric and the Monastery of St. Paul, 1999), 9.

⁶Amira Mittermair writes that in Egypt today, the category of “the poor” is largely understood through economic and material paradigms, with *faqīr* (impoverished, poor) understood as someone unable to earn a living (e.g., due to a physical disability) and *maskīn* as someone who lacks resources to earn a living (due to unemployment); her interlocutors also draw on a Qur’anic understanding of poverty, as those in the need of God, adding a spiritual dimension as well. Mittermair, “Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Egyptian Uprising and a Sufi Khidma,” *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (2014): 54–79. In 2014, Egypt’s Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistic (CAPMAS) estimated that 26 percent of Egypt’s 90 million inhabitants live in poverty, with 13 percent unemployment (and 24 percent for women); see *al-Jihaz al-Markazi li-l-Ta‘bi‘a al-‘Ama wa-l-Ihsa’ al-Misri*, accessed 1 February 2017, <http://www.capmas.gov.eg>. Within the Coptic Orthodox Church, Christians also categorize the poor as *ikhwāt al-rabb* (the Lord’s brothers and sisters). The term is directly inspired from a Biblical verse (Matt. 24:35–40) in which Christ embodied material need and referred to giving as a direct encounter with the divine.

⁷Framed within a Biblical salvation narrative of spiritual immortality after a pious life and/or a saintly death, Coptic Orthodox conceptions of a “heavenly citizenship” (*al-waṭan al-samāwī*) articulate a penultimate belonging in a heavenly nation in the afterlife. It is also a critical component of the Church’s performative and piety politics in contemporary Egypt. See Carolyn Ramzy, “To Die Is Gain: Singing a Heavenly Citizenship among Egypt’s Coptic Christians,” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 80 (2014): 649–70.

⁸Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Texts* 25/26 (1990): 67; Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 106–8. While I am aware that *mūlid* pilgrims also cultivate their own subaltern counterpublics in various ways, my ethnography here only extends to the Holy Family Choir and its use of popular Christian *taratīl*.

⁹Schielke, “Policing Ambiguity,” 540.

¹⁰Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). While Mahmood largely avoided an overdetermining grid of socioeconomic class in her work on Egyptian women’s piety in a burgeoning mosque movement, here I want to highlight the role that class plays in Coptic religious ritual, and specifically, a bodily performance of faith through song. While a Bourdieusian understanding of habitus implies distinction of class, I draw on Talal Asad’s analysis of habitus to “analyze the body as an assemblage of embodied aptitudes” as it is shaped by class. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reason of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993): 75–76.

¹¹For more on neoliberal piety and giving in Egypt and how it reconfigures religious practices in line with economic rationality, productivity, and privatization, see Mona Atia, *Building a House in Heaven: Pious Neoliberalism and Islamic Charity in Egypt* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹²Schielke, *Perils of Joy*, 19.

¹³Mircea Eliade first outlined the concept of a festival’s “center” and “periphery” in his pivotal edited work *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1963).

¹⁴Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 3.

¹⁵Schielke, *Perils of Joy*, 44.

¹⁶Jennifer Peterson writes about the rise of sampling Sufi *inshād* in Egyptian dance music and popular influences in contemporary Sufi piety. See “Playing with Spirituality: The Adoption of Mūlid Motifs in Egyptian Dance Music,” *Contemporary Islam* 2 (2008): 271–95; and “Sampling Folklore: The ‘Re-Popularization’ of Sufi Inshad in Egyptian Dance Music,” *Arab Media and Society* 4 (2008), accessed 1 February 2017, <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=580>.

¹⁷Philip Bohlman, "Pilgrimage, Politics, and the Musical Remapping of the New Europe," *Ethnomusicology* 40 (1996): 387.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 396.

¹⁹For more on the a *mūlid*'s sense of suspended time, see Schielke's discussion "The Time of the Extraordinary" in *Perils of Joy*, 48–52; For more on the sense of cyclicity in music, see Judith Becker, "Time and Tune in Java," in *The Imagination of Reality: Essays in Southeast Asian Coherence Systems*, ed. A. Becker and A. Yengoyan (New York: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1979): 197–210.

²⁰Phillip Wegner writes about the role of "utopian narrative" as way to navigate social spaces of the modern state in *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, The Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), xviii. Also, in their pivotal work, Victor and Edith Turner describe the pilgrimage experience as one of the most extreme forms of the liminod phenomenon; see *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 1–39.

²¹Schielke, "Policing Ambiguity," 544–47.

²²The state's disciplinary efforts extended to everyday public soundscapes when there were attempts to synchronize the azan, the Muslim call to prayer, under government control. The process did not succeed but highlighted the state's understanding of religious soundscapes as important national publics in which to engage citizens' pious polity; see Atia, *Building Houses in Heaven*, 81–82.

²³In religious contexts, women's voices are regarded with strong ambivalence, as they are also associated with temptation, pleasure, and distraction from prayer. See Karin van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade like Any Other; Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1995); and Van Nieuwkerk, *Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt's Islamic Revival* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2013).

²⁴See, among many others, Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education Politics and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Paul Sedra, *From Mission to Modernity: Evangelical Reforms and Education in Nineteenth Century Egypt* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2011).

²⁵Walter Armbrust, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9.

²⁶Schielke, *Perils of Joy*, 85.

²⁷Schielke, "Policing Ambiguity," 550.

²⁸The name is also likely due to the fact that the mountain used to be a significant site of hibernation for migratory birds. See Gawdat Gabra and Gertrud J.M. van Loon, *The Churches of St. Egypt: From the Journey of the Holy Family to the Present Day* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 238. Finally, the mountain is also known as Gabal al-Kaff, or "Mountain of the Palm," after a miraculous tale in which Christ placed and imprinted his hand on the mountain. See B. T. A. Evettes and A. J. Butler, eds., *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt and Some Neighboring Countries Attributed to Abu Salih, The Armenian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1895), 218.

²⁹In Egypt, Christians and Muslims alike revere Virgin Mary as a "shared saint" and one who, in mass public media, is celebrated for bringing people of different faiths together. Angie Heo explores the significance of growing Marian cults and practices of religious identification and differentiation in "The Virgin Between Christianity and Islam: Sainthood, Media, and Modernity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (2013): 1–22.

³⁰*Nadr* (vow making) are not only financial donations that pilgrims offer to the saints in exchange for miracles rendered. But, walking up the mountain stairs, I learned that *nadr* can also include various forms of voluntary bodily suffering or hardship, as interlocutors offered to walk to the festival from their home villages and up the mountain, while others swept and cleaned the long staircase up Gabal al-Tayr (personal communication with the author, 10 May 2010). For more on *nadr*; see Turner and Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 7. For *nadr* in Coptic contexts, see Elizabeth Oram, "Constructing Modern Copts: The Production of Coptic Christian Identity in Contemporary Egypt" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2004), 215.

³¹David Frankfurter gives more details of what pilgrims might do to receive *baraka*, such as collecting dust from the stones or the oil lamps near the shrine, sleep near sites to receive dreams of the saints, as well as listen to and sing their hagiography in song. He adds that, if they are able, people also write down requests that are slipped into the shrine. David Frankfurter, "Approaches to Coptic Pilgrimage," in *Pilgrimage and Holy*

Space in Late Antique Egypt, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 4. The cave of the Holy Family was covered with these little written hand notes, while names had been etched into the walls and the plexiglas over the site.

³²Like discussions and performances of *taratīl*, Marian apparition narratives also have political dimensions. See Angie Heo, "The Virgin Made Visible: Intercessory Images of Church Territory in Egypt," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (2012): 361–91.

³³Father Matta, personal communication with the author, 11 May 2010.

³⁴Father Bishopy 'Abd al-Masih, *Tarikh 'Ibarshiyat Dimyat* (Hilmīyyat al-Zaytun, Egypt: Damietta Diocese, 1990), 216.

³⁵Taha is particularly celebrated as a populist and *sha'bi* singer for his well-known nationalist song "Ana Asli Falah" (I Have Peasant Roots).

³⁶For a thorough analysis of the Coptic Sunday School movement, see Wolfram Reiss, *Erneuerung in der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche: Die Geschichte der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Sonntagsschulbewegung und die Aufnahme ihrer Reformansätze in den Erneuerungsbewegungen der Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kirche der Gegenwart* (Hamburg: Hamburg Literaturzentrum, 1998); and S.S. Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁷Notes from the first General Committee for Sunday Schools in 1922 in Sinout Delaware Shenouda, "Madaris al-Ahad: Qissat al-Qarn al-'Ishrin," *Majallat Madaris al-Ahad* (November and December 2001): 47. For more on Habib Girgis, see Bishop Anba Suriel, *Habib Girgis, Coptic Orthodox Educator and a Light in the Darkness* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017).

³⁸Sinout Delaware, "Madaris al-Ahad: Qissat al-Qarn al-'Ishrin," 47.

³⁹Carolyn Ramzy, "To Die Is Gain."

⁴⁰Many of his poems were first put to song by the now famous duo, Faisal Foad and violinist Gamal Zikry. Today, Fouad regularly appears on Christian satellite TV, while Zikry has been ordained a priest, Father Antonious Zikry, and serves in St. Catharine's of Ontario, Canada.

⁴¹Pope Shenouda III, *Intilaq al-Ruh*, 16th ed. (Cairo: Amba Rueiss, 2009).

⁴²Mariz Tadros details Pope Shenouda's career and political encounters with Presidents Anwar al-Sadat and Husni Mubarak in "Vicissitudes in the Entente between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the State in Egypt (1952–2007)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 269.

⁴³Paul Sedra, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relation*, 10 (1999): 228.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 224.

⁴⁵On the channel *al-Haya 2*, well-known media critic 'Amr Adib questioned the Pope's recent communication with the president, to which the patriarch replied: "First, we wanted to check on him [*niṭammīn 'alay*] and we wanted to tell him that we are with you [*iḥna ma 'āk*]." When Adib's coanchor Rola Kharsa pressed him, "That we [the Coptic Community] are behind you?" he replied, "Yes, I told him that *we* are behind you." See *Ra'i al-Baba Shenouda fi Thawra 25 Yanayir wa-l-Hizb al-Watani*, YouTube video, accessed 27 June 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUU93DIxRHk>.

⁴⁶Mohame Heikal, *Autumn of Fury: The Assassination of Sadat* (New York: Random House, 1983), 162–63.

⁴⁷"Pope Shenouda's Words on the Day of Our Bishop Aghathun's Passing," in *Qawqab Lama' fi al-Kanisa*, 9.

⁴⁸Amir Rafla, HFC Director, sermon between songs, 28 May 2011.

⁴⁹The choir raised a total cost 170,000 LE from their own funds for these religious materials as well as to rent buses, tents, and sound equipment for its performance. Amir Rafla, personal communication with the author, 5 June 2010.

⁵⁰This is the author's translation of the Arabic; for more on Maher Fayez's ministry see Carolyn Ramzy, "Autotuned Belonging: Coptic Popular Song and the Politics of Neo-Pentecostal Pedagogies," *Ethnomusicology* 60 (2016): 434–58.

⁵¹Mona Atia write about *da'wa* as a "call or invitation" of preachers towards an "Islamic lifestyle" or public piety. Atia, *Building Houses in Heaven*, 60.

⁵²There were a number of Protestant denominations whose services and song ministries permeated Gabal al-Tayr. Though Bishop Pavnutius refused to grant many of these groups rent permits on festival grounds, ministries such as the local Apostolic Church purchased offices just outside of the diocese's jurisdiction and sent their representatives to proselytize among the village's Orthodox Christian community. Father Matta, personal communication with the author, 11 May 2010. Along with the HFC's presence at the *mūlid*, the

largest Coptic Evangelical Church in Cairo, Qasr al-Dubara, has sent down spiritual servants from Cairo to preach, serve, and sing. A Presbyterian organization, the Egyptian Bible Society, also organized a children's service only an hour before the HFC and volunteers from Abu Siffayyin presented their own Sunday School lessons. For more on Protestant activism, see Anna Dowell, "Landscape of Belonging: Protestant Activism in Revolutionary Egypt," *International Journal of Sociology* 45 (2015): 190–205.

⁵³This number is taken from the HFC's secret Facebook group.

⁵⁴Another extension of the HFC's ministry includes members of the choir who stay behind in Cairo and, maintaining anonymity, simply pray for the success and safety of the choir's trip. Amira Rafla, personal communication with the author, 5 June 2010.

⁵⁵In her work, Mona Atia highlights that charity and *da'wa* play a critical role in the formation of contemporary Egyptian Islamic subjectivities, and what she calls neoliberal piety. The growth of *da'wa* in Egypt, she argues, is an unintended consequence of the state's co-optation of Islam. Afraid of the state's crackdown on Islamist organizing, volunteers have joined informal efforts to sermonize and serve the poor. Atia, *Building Houses in Heaven*, 60. Elizabeth Oram argues that in Coptic contexts the growth of *iftiqād* visits to people's homes has extended the Church's surveillance power over its communities. Oram "Constructing Modern Copts," 215.

⁵⁶HFC and Samalut diocese volunteer *iftiqād* service, 30 May 2011.

⁵⁷Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'a Lebanon* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 186. The Turners also write about how "good works" are central to the pilgrimage experience in religious festivals and are a part of the drama's climax: "No one good work will ensure ultimate salvation; but in the popular view it ensure many occasion of grace (*baraka*) as rewards for a good work done freely out of a desire for salvation and for the benefits of others." Turner & Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, 17.

⁵⁸As far as I can tell, no one really kept a close relationship with any local pilgrims from their ministry in Gabal al-Tayr.

⁵⁹For more on the *mūlid*'s Great Night, see Schielke, *The Perils of Joy*, 29.

⁶⁰Morning sermon, Samalut diocese, 29 May 2011.

⁶¹Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 67; Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

⁶²Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 106.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 107.

⁶⁴See Jocelyne Cesari, *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: Religion, Modernity, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 76.

⁶⁵More importantly, the Church has considerable control over their civic lives, beginning with questions of marriage and civic "personal status." See Ryan Rowberry and John Khalil, "A Brief History of Coptic Personal Status," *Berkeley Journal of Middle Eastern & Islamic Law* 3 (2010): 81–139.

⁶⁶For more about clerical authority in women's lives, see Febe Armanios and Andrew Amstutz, "Emerging Christian Media in Egypt: Clerical Authority and the Visualization of Women in Coptic Video Films," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 513–33.

⁶⁷Personal communication with Lola, 30 May 2011.

⁶⁸Anthony Shenoda, "The Politics of Faith: On Faith, Skepticism, and Miracles among Coptic Christians in Egypt," *Ethnos* 77 (2012): 481.

⁶⁹Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 176.

⁷⁰Large *mūlid* festivals can emerge as a site where women experience harassment. See Schielke, *The Perils of Joy*, 33.

⁷¹The Arabic title for this song is "Nawari Ya Kanisat al-Masih" (Shine, O Church of Christ). Field recordings, 30 May 2011, Gabal al-Tayr, Samalut, Egypt.

⁷²Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 87.

⁷³Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 67.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 68.