



***Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt.* By Andrew Simon. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022. 304 pp. ISBN: 978-150-363-1441 doi:10.1017/S0261143023000296**

Through whatever lens one follows modern Egypt – history, anthropology, media, religion, etc. – one feature of the society quickly becomes apparent: the vibrancy of its popular culture. Egyptian film, radio, television and music emerged in the 1930s and 1940s as immensely productive cultural fields with an influence that spread well beyond the country's borders to the extent that they came to be seen as definitive of what constituted the 'Arab world' – the agglomeration of societies in which any cultural item could achieve maximum distribution through the common denominator of language. Egyptian cultural output was so successful in beating this path that the dialect became a new lingua franca, coexisting with the formal language. That success made Egypt attractive to many artists throughout the region who became stars in various fields through Egypt. The Nasserist political project revved the engine further as culture became a vector for ideology. As political power began to shift in the 1970s towards the Gulf region, and the pan-Arab media revolution took off in the 1990s, 'Arab popular culture' transformed gradually into something more diverse. For one, actors and singers could more easily achieve regional fame through singing in their own dialects.

As one of the key technologies facilitating this cultural output, it is surprising that Egypt's cassette industry has not received much scholarly attention before. Andrew Simon's *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt* makes a first effort to fill the gap in the literature as a study of the humble tape from its invention in Japan in the 1960s, to its proliferation in 1970s Egypt as a medium for musicians, religious scholars and politically dissident voices to reach a mass audience regardless of the Egyptian state's media juggernaut, to its apparent demise only in very recent years with the spread of digital internet technologies. Simon looks in some detail at several case studies in this history: the popular singer Ahmad 'Adawiyya Shaykh Imam, who became famous singing the subversive colloquial poetry of Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm, and the state-approved singer of 'high culture' Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab, who failed to prevent the pirating of his music when dozens of small companies producing cassette music appeared in the late 1970s and 1980s. He looks at other cases too, such as that of Shaykh 'Antar Musallam, whose Qur'anic recitation style was subject to censorship by Al-Azhar but survives nevertheless today on the internet.

If anything, Simon could have hit these case studies harder since there is a long list of singers and preachers who attained huge followings despite state media ignorance, critical disapproval, censorship and anti-piracy enforcement. As he notes throughout in his analysis, the cultural production facilitated by cassette tapes was a site of intense contestation over value, subject to categorisation according to the binary of high/low culture and the state's efforts to enforce its role as arbiter. Gilles Kepel was one of the first scholars to draw attention to the importance of tape culture in his study of 1970s Islamic movements, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh* (1986), which showed the use of cassettes in spreading a seering discourse of state failure that influenced the group that assassinated Anwar Sadat in 1981. Yet somehow interest in the topic of cassettes seems to have stopped there, despite the plethora of studies over the past two decades from scholars across a variety of disciplines covering Arabic media, cinema, recent trends in

popular music such as the *mahragānāt* phenomenon, and other aspects of the subaltern world – all of which were enabled by the cassette tape, among other media.

Yet Simon seems to have been wise in using his dive into the cassette world to address historiographical questions of cultural memory: who gets to write a society's history and when the state shuts the door to one archive, can a popular format such as the tape provide another? Access to Egypt's national library and archives (Dar al-Kutub wa-l-Watha'iq al-Qawmiyya) is subject to the approval of security agencies that will almost certainly reject requests for material of the modern era such as government documentation since 1952. Islamic manuscripts and newspapers and journals are a better bet, although the publishing houses in question and many libraries around the world have their own collections of the latter. Turkey has established a regional standard in the way it has ordered its Ottoman archives since the 1990s, but Egypt remains several degrees more guarded.

Simon makes the case for what he calls alternative or shadow archives, consisting of visual, textual and audio materials in street markets, private collections, public libraries and commercial enterprises, or in the case of cassette tape culture, people's attics, storerooms and garages. Newspapers and journals are a go-to source for researchers on Egypt and other countries of the region, but the cassette tape is not. Simon also notes the use of cassettes as oral diaries that Egyptian expatriates working in the Gulf countries would send home to their families in previous times (in contrast to today's WhatsApp text and oral messages that go undocumented). Museums have become adept at using this kind of testimony in their presentations, as any visitor to the Bin Jelmood House in Doha with its commemoration of the slave trade will have seen.

This study celebrates the fact that 'material remnants of a once-robust cassette-tape culture endure in contemporary Egypt' (p. 173) in a variety of locations. Yet, as the author points out, increasing digitalisation on internet sites such as YouTube brings the risk of instant erasure, while other many sites, from the small and informal to the grand and corporate, are kept behind paywalls. The latter complaint can also of course be levelled at university libraries and academic journals, where research is effectively only accessible to the institutions that pay. The book would have benefited from more attention to the English transliterations of Arabic names and titles, which sometimes appear incorrect rather than merely simplified. These are small gripes, though. This innovative and overdue study is likely to stimulate further research across numerous disciplines into the dissident world of ordinary people.

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Reference

Kepel, G. 1986. *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh* (Berkeley, University of California Press)