

The Middle East PhD Students Conference

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The London Middle East Institute at SOAS

Pre-organised panel proposal –

Voice, memory, agency in Egypt (1882-1956)

Participants –

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Nariman Youssef (University of Manchester)

Non-written forms of memory often carry subversive attitudes that go against the grain of official narratives and go largely unrecorded. Similarly, texts that imply alternative types of agency often escape the attention of historians. Together, these phenomena make up the gaps in recorded and official history.

In this panel, we attempt to address these gaps as they pertain to the cultural history of the Arab world. We do this through three avenues that explore different aspects of the interrelation between voice, agency, and memory in Egypt, 1882-1956. We are especially interested in how this interrelation can become part of identity politics, and how history can be written –or rewritten – through the identity narratives of non-official agents (theatre actors, amateur writers, resistance fighters).

The papers presented here respectively focus on:

- musical plays during the British occupation when Arab history was musicalised in the theatres;
- translators in Egyptian magazines of the early twentieth century as amateur appropriators of European culture;
- songs sung by ‘the people of Suez and Port-Said’ narrating the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the 1956 war.

Abstracts of the individual papers are enclosed below.

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The Voice of ‘Antara: A Revolutionary Hero in 1882, Cairo

The presentation deals with how history, politics, theatre and voice met in one body on the stage of the Opera House during the spring of 1882. This is the time when the ‘Urabi government hoped that foreign financial control could be lifted from late Ottoman Khedivial Egypt. The political and patriotic expectations found their sentimental expressions in the performances of the Arab Opera Troupe of Sulaymān Qardahi starring Shaykh Salama Hijazi. Resistance was embodied via the play *‘Antara*. Being the symbol of Arabness, being familiar to everyone, either via folktales or via the *Sirat ‘Antar*, this hero from the past – and its incarnation, Salama Hijazi - offered a possibility for emotional community with the support of Colonel ‘Urabi, who, being in the audience, mirrored the rise of an Arab/Egyptian hero in the present.

Alia Mossallam

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Unsung Heroes: Reading the 'Suez Crisis' through lyrics of the 'resistance'

And with a cry exploded by Gamal...

We have nationalized the canal!

We have triumphed! we have triumphed! we have triumphed!

(The Story of a People, sung by Abdelhalim Hafez)

With Hafez's above lyrics, the chorus explodes in ululation and applause as he continues to sing the 'triumph of a people' whose story echoes in the corridors of memory till this day. It is through these 'songs of the revolution', at the time engineering a nationalist sentiment, that this period is univocally narrated and often remembered. This paper ventures to explore the Nationalisation of Suez, and the Suez war; not as the crisis that crumbled an empire, nor as the triumph of a nation, finally independent. Rather the paper explores the experiences of the men, women and children who took up arms, in the absence of an equipped army, to *resist*. It explores the city turned to a battle-field for 3 months; the people who fought to keep the enemy off their land and the houses turned to forts of resistance. All through the stories committed to the *Semsemeyya*'s lyrics, an instrument unique and particular to the people of the Canal. It explores a rhetoric and sentiment that stretched deep into the trenches of a civilian struggle, and far from the reach of an international narrative and revolutionary valour.

Immortalise them, *ya baladna* , immortalise them..

Immortalise them as they did you, may you thrive and prosper.

(From a popular song of Shaa'b Khatt el Canal, i.e. the people of the Canal)

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“Amateur Modernity” and Literary Translation in Early 20th Century Egypt

This paper explores translated narratives of modern masculinity and femininity in *Al-Bayan*, an independent literary journal that was issued in Cairo between 1911 and 1921. The texts studied here are translations from English or French into Arabic, and include stories, literary essays and social commentary. As for the translators, they were either prominent writers –including people like Al-□Akkad and Al-Mazni –who translated in their free time, or readers of the journal who sent in the occasional contribution. The aim of this exploration will be to interrogate the notion of European influence on Arab modernity, a notion that is often reproduced either to explain forces that shaped cultural and social change or as a force that was resisted in that process. But because the question of influence itself goes largely unexamined, there prevails in the cultural history of the Arab world a vague but established idea of influence as a structured and intentional process that went hand in hand with European colonialism and in which Arab societies stood passively at the receiving end. In contrast, the bulk of translated texts in literary journals tells a story of amateurish and largely haphazard efforts of importing European culture (in a selective manner) in which the active agents came from within the Egyptian cultural and literary fields.