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**ENERGY SECURITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR
U.S.-CHINA-MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS**

IS THERE AN ARAB POPULAR CULTURE?

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Is there an Arab Popular Culture?

A great deal of attention has been given in recent years to the way that Arab satellite television has emerged as a transnational political force. But very few commentators have bothered to study how this news is being received, how it shapes a nebulous "Arab" world or Arab community, and especially, to the fact that most of what is projected on satellite television is not news at all. From the beginning, soap operas, talk shows, music videos and serials have dominated most satellite programming. But because most of those writing about Arab television want to believe that they can comment on the "effects" of TV news on the opinion of a dispersed and diverse public based on the assumption that "Arabs" spend hours each day watching al-Jazeera, the work being done by historians and ethnographers on such topics is generally ignored by those who simply assume that there is such a thing as an "Arab public" or "Arab popular culture".

To speak of the "popular" in the Arab world evokes linguistic distinctions of dialect to formal, classical Arabic, 'amiyya to fusha, a dichotomy that exists among all Arabic speaking populations. Modern standard Arabic unites educated Arabic speakers everywhere- it is the language of newspapers, textbooks and academic papers. This might lead us to see it as the language of High Culture, as opposed to the local, popular culture that accompanies the use of dialect. To speak about an "Arab popular culture" thus poses problems from the beginning because the popular is not really "Arab" in an inclusive sense. If the popular, the *sha'bi*, is related to local expressions that cannot be understood by those in other parts of the region, then it is difficult to understand the idea of "Arab popular culture" as being of a single cloth. Anthropological studies of cultural expressions ranging from music to ritual to poetry tend to push us in this direction. They tend to show us a world that is perhaps united by a single formal language, a shared religious faith, and references to a shared history, but in only a few instances, like the spread of the stories of the Beni Hilal in North Africa (Slyomovics) do such studies actually demonstrate how elements of the world of dialects traverse regional, let alone national borders. Studies of dialects reveal that there are several broad regional continuities in dialects- those of the Maghrib, of the Mashrek, the gulf dialects and those of Egypt. But these distinctions seem only to take on a meaning for popular culture when they are translated into a context that cannot be defined by the fusha or MSA of what might initially be taken to be Arab "High Culture".

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The problem is that MSA does not really serve the role of a transnational culture of reference. First of all, it has grown up in the context of several distinct colonial settings that have placed English and French as the double of MSA in elite cultural debates. Thus, for instance, academic circles in Egypt or the Gulf might employ MSA in their publications, but the references they employ and even the more technical jargon they transcribe into Arabic tends to be drawn from English and an Anglo-American academic discourse. This is perhaps even more the case in parts of the Arab world where French shapes intellectual production. This doubling is readily apparent not only in the references but the linguistic usage of people from diverse places into the Arab world. Indeed, except in the domain of theology, engaging in debates of "high culture" seems to imply familiarity with various Western configurations of high culture- something that only a few individuals can do with equal reference to work being done in the English speaking and francophone worlds. The result is that the map of any high culture of the Arab world is really not as clear-cut as a contrast of fusha to 'amiyya would suggest.

Rabat December 2004

There are not many fervent advocates of the present American policy in Iraq in Morocco. My old friend Lahcen is one of them. He is no stranger to being in the minority. Born in an isolated oasis in the South, Lahcen spoke only Tamazight (Berber) before he attends school. By the time he joined radical leftist organization in the early 1970's, he had mastered Arabic and French and become a star pupil in mathematics. Like so many students of his generation, he ended up spending a decade of his life in prison. Since he was released in the 1980's he has built a solid career as a professor of econometrics, married and raised two children. But he abandoned neither his attachment to the idea of democracy and equality that led him to become a political activist. Although his studies have led him to change his understanding of the world economy, his conviction that cultural change is needed to support democratization is intact. But because he is so strong in his external intervention as a means to this end, his reaction to American attempts to influence Arab public opinion via the media, are particularly telling.

December 2004, Rabat

After a good lunch and a long walk, it's time for me to go meet another colleague at the university. Lahcen, Fatima and I have been watching the news on French TV 5, but once we get into the car, I notice that Lahcen has his radio tuned to radio sawa. Although I have met several journalists who work for voice of America and "sawa" in Washington dc, I have never actually listened to their programs. Lahcen explains that he finds their news "more objective than medi-1" because medi-1 refers to the Iraq insurgents "freedom fighters" as does al-jazeera. But I as soon as the news bulletin is over, I notice that Lahcen quickly shifts back to listen to the music on medi-1. I ask him to go back, since I want to listen to radio sawa. They switch into some American pop song that neither Lahcen nor I recognize. It all feels out of synch with the city we are driving through- rather like listening to Hindi music while driving through Albuquerque. Perhaps not uninteresting, but definitely out of place. You see, this is what I don't understand about the Americans, Lahcen chuckles. They offer me balanced news, but then try to convince us that we have to be Arabs- they are the new agents of the forces of the Gulf and the Middle East- aren't those just the forces that we need to be rid of to be free?"

It is important to note not only that Lahcen's first language is Tamazight, but that it is the language he speaks at home. Although he, his wife and children all attended Moroccan public schools and indeed, he excelled in the study of Arabic, over the fifteen years I have known him, I don't think I have ever heard him speak a word of Arabic. With me and at social gatherings in Morocco, he speaks French. With people from the Middle East, he prefers to speak English, in spite of his mastery of Arabic. Lahcen is indeed quite militant about his Berber heritage- having participated in a number of organizations and publications dedicated to Berber cultural renewal over the past decade. So of course, he says that Sawa is ignoring Berber music and culture- and the Bush administration is thereby ignoring a potentially rich source of influence in North Africa.

The issue of direct political influence is not one I will address here- but the gap between how the Arab world is conceived and people's day to day practices that Lahcen's comments expose it

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worthy of attention. He did not say that Sawa should play only Berber music- indeed, he prefers the kind of blend of North African music in Arabic, French, Spanish, English and Middle Eastern music he hears on Medi-1, a multi-lingual radio channel that has been broadcasting to the Maghrib and Southern Europe since the 1980's.

When I met my friend Amina at the university, she too brought up the problem of the way that the Arabic language both connects and distances Morocco from other regions of the Arab world. She believes that there ought to be a process of nationalization or localization of Arabic. *Derija*, the Moroccan dialect, should be the national language in her opinion. She has developed this idea due to how she envisions popular culture in her country, but also as a response to what she sees as the growing and pernicious influence of the Middle East, and especially the Gulf, via popular art forms as well as political and religious networks. As we all now know, extremist organizations based in Saudi Arabia have used their financial means to enroll young Moroccans in their cause. But what is less understood is how the Gulfis have flooded the market with cheap or even free cassettes of their singers and soap operas- and in the process, "presented a vision of society that is inherently much more conservative than ours, a society that has no idea of individual rights and that is repressive to women."

Amina is perhaps more attached to the Moroccan nation and its ability to progress as a community than is Lahcen, but she shares his emotional reaction to the "cultural imperialism" of countries like Egypt, Lebanon, and more recently, the monarchies of the Gulf. She too proposes a linguistic solution to this problem; a solution that is grounded in an idea of popular culture close to that employed by anthropologists or historians. Rather like French and Italian liberated themselves from Latin, she sees the development of a Moroccan in a collective cultural project. Through the institutionalization of Moroccan *derija*, or dialect, as a language in its own right, her proposition promotes the development of a nationalist project, rather than a regional or religious one. Neither French nor Literary Arabic can fully draw on the very rich oral culture of the country- neither can include the illiterate and the elite in the way that ordinary jokes or shared stories do.

Lahcen and Amina are both passionate about their views- and their disagreements. But they do

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share a common rejection of how they're being assimilated to an "Arab world" that is seen from the outside as politically driven by a few satellite television stations, and culturally weighted to the Levant and increasingly, the Gulf. Do people in Morocco tune into al-Jazeera or al-'Arabiya? Of course they do. Do they understand the words in Egyptian songs? Usually, but the inverse is very rarely the case.

Arab Students say "bezaf"

While I was teaching at Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab studies from 2001- 2004, I was often confronted with the flip side of the Moroccan's dilemma of dealing with the "Middle East". I observed first hand how American academia's understanding of the region as a whole has been shaped by generations of language schooling of Americans in Lebanon, and then in Egypt. Scholars from the Levant and Egypt dominate Arab studies in Anglophone academia. The political interests of the US also focus on this area, with an additional interest in the oil-rich countries of the Persian Gulf. But even oil rich Algeria has not attracted attention beyond specialists of petroleum. All of this contributes to the elaboration of a notion of Arab culture that bore only a family resemblance to what I knew of the Arab world through my life in Morocco, work in the Maghrib, and scholarly and political contacts in France.

For many students from Lebanon or Egypt, readings I proposed on the Maghrib introduced them to another "Arab world" than that they felt engaged in. At the same time, some of them argued at a conference on the globalization of Middle Eastern music that Sylvia Onder and I organized in 2003, that the emergence of satellite TV, and internet were reshaping a new Arab world, a world that brought them closer to other Arabs. One example they gave me was how they now "understood" North African dialects because they could hear Algerian Rai music and watch videos of Chab Mami on television. I was not really convinced. For although it is indeed the case that North African's do have greater access to many Levantine and Egyptian or even Gulf performers via satellite, the number of North African singers or poets or political commentators from the Maghrib who appear on transnational Arab TV is limited. The few individuals who are well known are like Samira Said- a Moroccan singer who sings in the dialect of Cairo, only

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recently singing a well known song in which she employs Moroccan dialect. Indeed, this practice mirrors the speech practices of Moroccans throughout the world. As the Fatima Badry has shown in her studies of Moroccan women's linguistic practices, there is a marked tendency to adopt the dialect of one's interlocutor on the part of Moroccan women, at least. (Badry, in press). This can give the interlocutor the impression that he or she understands Moroccan since the Moroccan speaker will continue to have a particular accent when speaking, and a few words of dialect might slip into the conversation, but it does not mean that there is a real comprehension of the dialect.

When I tested some Moroccan tapes of well known songs on visitors from the Middle East and the Gulf, my highly literate visitors could only grasp at a couple of words here and there. When I put on a video clip of the very popular Algerian singer Rachid Taha, an Egyptian friend asked me "where is this singer from? What language is he speaking?". While he was pleased to know that this modern, hard driving rocker was from the Arab world, he had initially assumed that he was from Eastern Europe, or perhaps Turkish.

What this suggests to me is that although a few rai songs have made it into the Middle Eastern mix, and a Moroccan singer like Samira Said has gone from singing strictly in Egyptian dialect, to including some songs in *derija*, one cannot think of the Arab world as a kind of cultural homogenized zone, especially if one hopes to develop an understanding of the kinds of activities and expressions related to what we might think of as either popular culture or "pop culture".

Nations in a nation: the Cultural Afterbirth of Arab nationalism

As the political project of Arab nationalism seems to have faded or replaced by newly religious brands of activism, the cultural arena and much academic scholarship tend to be conceptualized in terms of a unity and homogeneity that the League of Arab nations would long to replicate. The development of discourses about Arab transnational media has only led to an even great consolidation of the idea of a homogeneous space called the Arab world.

As is often the case when new technologies are developed, satellite television and the internet

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have produced a huge volume of theories and publications, most of which assume that they are dealing with a totally virgin research field. Of course, historians know better, but their voices are rarely heard when it comes to analyzing the influence of satellite TVs, perhaps most particularly, in the Arab world. The story told in most studies published in English is that for many years the Arab world has only state run media. In the 1990's, satellite TV introduces channels like al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya, the MBC or Orbit offered news and cultural programs to millions of people who have been deprived of free access to information and whose lives have been totally dominated by the negative and oppressive forces of their rulers. This narrative leads to a kind of remaking of discourses about the "Arab" audience. It flattens out the fact that authoritarian regimes are not actually all the same- as well as any discussion of who actually has access to this new media, who runs it, and how it relates to pre-existing media available in different parts of the region. It ignores the important fact that many of those involved in these transnational media are more tuned into English or French media than they are to what is going on in the countries where they were born- indeed, most of these media are produced outside the major capitals of the Arab world. It fails to notice that while programs are produced in London or Qatar or Dubai they express less a unity of the Arab world than a search for dominance by those who may not be economically central- but who seek to maintain their cultural dominance, something that can happen only if the idea of a unified Arab world, versus an Islamic umma, or a regional assembly of loosely affiliated nations in the image of the EU, actually exists. The historical cultural centers of Beirut and Cairo have thus been displaced- demoralized on might say. In spite of some token Gulf news casters, a quick look at programming on Arab satellite TV or a glance at the popular or feminine press demonstrates the continued dominance of Lebanese and Egyptian journalists, actors and musicians. They have maintained their ability to define what is Arab in the minds of many scholars, and indeed, we could imagine, in the minds of many of among their audience. People who watch television and listening to music produced in Cairo or Beirut do eventually learn to understand them. This is a process that has been taking place for several decades, and so transnational media simply reiterate what is already the case. Even in the academy today, it is more prestigious to study classic Egyptian cinema or soap operas than to examine "Rai" music or novels written in French by Moroccans: indeed, these subjects tend to be excluded from the area of Arab or Middle Eastern studies. The definition of what is Arab delimits the space of a particular understanding of culture and the popular.

Linked Comparisons and Alternative projects for the Arab World

The anecdotes I have shared with you here, but also my long term research on media flows in and around the Arab world suggest that there is no specifically "Arab" pop culture, except perhaps if we consider this term as simply designating a particular genre of music, for instance. Yet, to work from this assumption means excluding alternative genres produced in the Arab world to a marginal position. It also implicates us in the kind of political project I suggest above. How then might we think about something like pop culture or popular culture in the Arab world today? What about its relationship to "popular" culture in terms of lived experiences and how the media and popular art forms play a role in these?

I would suggest that we need to pay attention to how a certain idea of culture and of the Arab world is produced in the ebb and flow of media, performers and discourses. By noting the movements of media much more precisely, in terms of nations, but also social configurations and cities, we can develop a finer understanding of how the "popular" is construed and rendered "Arab" (or not). The kind of linked comparative approach I have employed in my previous research on women's beauty practices could be one way to set out a plan of research. (Ossman 2002) In that work, I tried to show that the Arab world is diverse, or that its urban centers are linked to a broader world by conducting a comparative study of a modern social space, the beauty salon, in cities linked by complex connections of history, language, migration and media. I also sought to explain not just that there were connections and differences among these cities, but also how diversity is produced in each of them simultaneously, and in ways that are not "grounded" solely in some national or regional or religious culture but worked out in particular forms of social interaction, as exemplified in different kinds of salon. To extend this approach to the study of Arab pop culture could be quite useful. Deborah Kapchan is doing this in her research on the diffusion of Gnawa music that has taken her to concert halls in cities in Morocco, Europe and North America. A similar project focused on the interplay of cultural practice and genres labeled as "Arab" could also produce quite interesting results.