

INTRODUCTION

While preparing my fieldwork trip to Egypt to explore a new research topic, I received an email from an American dancer who had recently visited Sayyid Henkish. Sayyid had helped me greatly in the late 1980s during my PhD research on female singers and dancers, being a popular (*sha'bi*) musician himself.¹ I had kept contact with him over the years and visited him and his family whenever I was in Egypt. The email conveyed a sense of nostalgia on Sayyid's part and his feeling that when he died, a wealth of information and experiences within "the trade"² would be lost. I was a bit amazed and even slightly annoyed by this suggestion, as I thought I had collected lots of information about Sayyid and his work, and particularly about his female colleagues, for my book *"A Trade Like Any Other": Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*. What did he mean? Was there much more out there? Hadn't he shared it with me?

Suddenly it occurred to me that indeed there was a story he had not told until now: his own story! He introduced me to many of his colleagues and relatives, whose stories I had collected and which Sayyid always illuminated or added to with a wealth of information and his own views. Yet I never systematically sat down with him to take his own life story. He had a different role in my research: that of advisor and teacher not that of a "respondent." In fact, he was my "key informant," but as an expert I valued for his knowledge rather than for his personal life experiences. Although we shared a lot of experiences and adventures—that is, he took me to many, sometimes quite rough, *sha'bi* weddings and provided me with inside information on what I witnessed—these events became "fieldwork notes" or "participant observation."

During and after my research, Sayyid became my "big brother in Egypt" and a dear friend. Although there were periods of silence when I was not able

to do fieldwork in Egypt, we kept irregularly in touch by phone. Pondering this feeling of knowing a lot about him and his background on the one hand, while on the other never having conducted a biographical interview, the thought occurred to me to take a very detailed and extensive life story over several sessions. Of course, I was not sure whether Sayyid would be willing to share his life in full detail, or whether he would be a good storyteller, but I decided to give it a try.

So, when I went to Egypt at the beginning of 2015, I paid Sayyid and his wife a visit. I was invited for lunch and presented my customary gifts from Holland. After exchanging news, I introduced my preliminary thoughts and said that I realized I had interviewed so many people about the trade but I had never taken his story. He did not react to my remark, but his wife took up the issue right away, animatedly repeating and explaining to Sayyid what I—indeed—intended. We decided that Sayyid would give it some thought and that we would discuss it another time.

A few days later I paid him a visit at his music shop in Muhammad ‘Ali Street. We settled in front of his office on two purple plastic chairs with a small table in front of us, accompanied by the *shisha*, the water pipe, which was his inseparable companion (see figure 2), and resumed our discussion on the project. He said that he was willing to cooperate and that he actually liked the idea. I asked him, using the methods developed by McAdams (1993) what the chapters of his life story would be, thinking that I would use his categorization to structure the different sessions.

Sayyid came up with a chronological structure that appeared quite conventional and gave some highlights of the story that would later unfold: First, “*tufula*,” his childhood, during which he witnessed his father, a talented *sha‘bi* musician, working at weddings. The second period he called “*bulugh*,” puberty, during which he started attending and working at *sha‘bi* weddings with his father. The third was “*murahqa*,” adolescence, when he had two secret love affairs that were interrupted by his obligatory entrance into the army. Next was “*sahib mas’uliya*,” taking on responsibility, during which he became a professional musician. The following phase, “*razana*,” meaning self-composure, steadiness, or gravity of demeanor, was the stage in which he said he became “a real man.” “Manhood” brought him the full responsibility for his house, and later his son. In this stage he took up many different activities within the trade to make ends meet. He finished with the stage in which he found himself now, “*kibir fi-l-sin*,” or old age, in which he more or less retired, occasionally produced music for a foreign dancer, and kept an eye on the music shop. Sayyid was sixty-five when we embarked on this project.

So far for our first—unrecorded—session. In the ensuing fourteen recorded sessions, Sayyid did not necessarily take his own arrangement as a way to structure his biography, but I found it illuminating for his outlook on life. It occurred to me immediately that it was a man’s perspective, focusing on responsibility,

duties, and manliness. I noted down that evening that I should also explore the theme of masculinity with him, not knowing how naturally this theme of manhood would be interwoven in Sayyid's own story lines.

Around the eighth session, when the taxi took an alternative route, my eye caught graffiti on a yellow painted wall (see figure 1). On the left it reads "*al-rugula mish bi suhula*," manhood is not easy.³ I immediately felt attracted to this expression as very apt for the project I was working on with Sayyid. I returned on foot to take a picture and later showed it to Sayyid. He smiled and nodded in agreement, affirming that being a man is indeed not easy. We then began to discuss his ideas on manhood in a more explicit way. He embraced my suggestion during the final session to use the graffiti as the title for the book.



Figure 1. Graffiti "Manhood is not easy." Photograph by Karin van Nieuwkerk.

Sayyid's developing notions on manliness are a leitmotif in his narrations: in the sessions on childhood, he described his father as his ideal of manhood; during his first love affairs and in his final choice of marriage partner, he explained his ideas on gender and marriage; and last but not least, in all his stories about his work at weddings or later in clubs, we can see how notions of masculinity inform his attitudes toward customers and colleagues as well as toward earning and spending money.

Although Sayyid's story is a personal and specific narration, it also reflects a certain way of living that is connected with the so-called authentic Egyptians, "*awlad al-balad*."⁴ The notion of *awlad al-balad*—as I will explain in chapter 3—is an intricate term that denotes both a certain group of people of lower-middle class background inhabiting *sha'bi* quarters of Cairo and complex rules of conduct that embody 'traditional' Egyptian values. The "people of the country"—which would be the literal translation of *awlad al-balad*—represent the ideal of

the “highly moral, traditional-minded ordinary Egyptian,” also captured in the notion of “salt of the earth” (Armbrust 1996, 25, 205).

The artists’ community is close to the trades that are usually associated with the “authentic Egyptians,” particularly those employed in independent free trades, like merchants, coffee shop owners, and skilled artisans living in *sha’bi* neighborhoods. *Sha’bi* entertainers share the important life events of people in the lower and lower-middle classes by performing for them at occasions like engagements, weddings, and births. Although artists in the wedding season might have periods of affluence, they also have dire periods in which they find it difficult to make ends meet. They also share important values of the *awlad al-balad* such as hospitality, nobility, responsibility, and conviviality.

The image of the authentic Egyptian is often romanticized in fiction and film and performed on stage in folk dances. It therefore also becomes like a character that can be impersonated. In Sayyid’s story, we will see how he enacted his own ideas of how to be a real authentic Egyptian. The notion of *ibn al-balad* is closely intertwined with a perspective on manhood, or as Sayyid would explain, “manhood is the same as being an *ibn al-balad*.” The concept of *gid’ana*, a set of values including nobility, integrity, and toughness, is particularly important to understanding Sayyid’s outlook on manliness. His conception of manhood is embedded in communal ideals of masculinity. In his story, he relates how he has tried to personify these communal ideals of a real *ibn al-balad*, with its successes and failures. Reality—as experienced both through economic and political hardship and through the ambiguities related to work at *sha’bi* weddings—makes a full embodiment of these ideals difficult at times.

Sayyid’s story will thus also illuminate the life and struggles of the lower-middle class of *awlad al-balad* and its associated values. Yet, although closely connected to and exemplifying the values of *awlad al-balad*, Sayyid’s narration also gives insight into the life and work of *sha’bi* entertainers, who have their own habits, morals, and even secret jargon. His story will thus also shine a light on the unique life of a *sha’bi* musician. Although I have studied this before, particularly the position of female entertainers, it was intriguing to hear his lifelong experiences and views on the trade as a man. Some aspects of the trade, like “working behind a dancer,” might appear to endanger a full embodiment of the script of manhood⁵ according to *awlad al-balad* ideals.

Of course, many developments in Egypt affected the entertainment trade. Sayyid’s personal and family history therefore not only provide insight into the developments of the trade, but help us to understand changes in Egypt at large as well. The state of the economy in particular had a huge impact on working in the trade and made Sayyid look for different options or combine various jobs at the same time. Manhood is strongly related to earning and spending money, so it is hit hard by an economic crisis.

Sayyid's story accordingly has many layers: starting from his personal life story in which becoming a man was the leitmotif, it is embedded in a set of communal values related to the concept and lifestyle of being authentically Egyptian, and particularly being an Egyptian man. In addition, his story is heavily colored by being a *sha'bi* musician, a trade that changed rapidly from the 1980s onward. Finally, how to embody ideals of manhood within a trade in recession also reflects larger changes in Egypt as a whole.

Sayyid enjoyed embarking on this project for several reasons. He wanted me to stress in this introduction that money was one of the least important: "Tell that I did not work with you on this project because of the money, but because of the great friendship between the two of us—the long friendship of twenty-five years!" When it became clear to me that his story would not be told in a few sessions, I offered to pay him for the sessions because it took a lot of his time. Although friendship and interest in the topic were more important, paying him for his services and knowledge had been the way we had always worked together since the late 1990s.

The intersection—rather than contradiction—between friendship and material benefit was also visible in the obligatory and reciprocal acts of hospitality or "*wagib*." This is customary among Egyptians, but I was also expected to reciprocate his efforts and the invitations to his home by doing *wagib*, like taking Sayyid and his wife out for dinner, or buying them food. Whenever I did, Sayyid told me, "You are a *bint gad'a*," connoting positive moral values such as being noble, hospitable, and tough, core values of the imagined community of *awlad al-balad* and, particularly, of manhood.

It was interesting to see how Sayyid extended the concept of *gid'ana* not only to me as a woman, but also to me as a foreigner. It will become clear in his story about Egyptian nightclub dancers, as well as on his long friendship with an American dancer, Ni'ma, how women can exhibit certain aspects of "manliness" as well. This draws attention to Sayyid's construct of manhood as "a stance" ("*mawqif*") and a way of acting that has to be embodied in daily life. In this performative understanding of masculinity women can also partake.

Sayyid's biography thus provides insight into different cultural values and lifestyles and offers a way "to read culture," in this case from a man's perspective (Plummer 2012b, 10). Before embarking on Sayyid's life story, I will first explain the importance of a biographical approach for "reading culture" and understanding world views, then analyze studies on masculinity and give an overview of the notion of "being an authentically Egyptian man."