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Profile of a Prominent Muslim Woman:
The Legacy of Umm Kulthum
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Music can be a powerful force; it can unify, divide, inspire, and move those who listen and perform. In the case of Umm Kulthum, music was also the springboard from which she propelled herself from a common peasant girl with an uncommonly powerful voice to one of the most renowned female singers in Egyptian history. With the help of sheer talent, and impeccable public image, and the ability to navigate social and cultural expectations, Umm Kulthum was able to go beyond the musical world and leave a lasting mark on Egyptian society.

Born in a village on the Nile Delta, Umm Kulthum was the third and youngest child in her family. Her father was an *imam*¹ at a local mosque and her mother was a housewife. Her father supplemented his small salary by singing at religious events nearby. The whole family was devout, doing their daily prayers and studying the Qu'ran. "Education for girls was by no means the norm, but neither were they excluded from the life of *kuttab*."² (Danielson, 1997, p. 22) Besides three years of religious schooling, Umm Kulthum received very little formal education.

However, her ability to flawlessly recite the Qu'ran became one of her biggest assets in launching her singing career and later creating national and religious pride amongst her listeners. In fact, "the sound of recitation and religious song was an

¹ Religious leader

² *kuttab* = religious school

important part of the cultural expression shared, in one way or another, by virtually all Egyptians.” (Danielson, 1997, p. 24) Her religious foundations were able to transcend factors that may have been a hindrance to her, such as a low socioeconomic status, her gender, and age.

While her gender did not stop her religious education at a young age, Umm Kulthum was first made aware of gendered differences as she began singing in the public domain. As a child, her father dressed her in Bedouin boy clothing and insisted that alcohol was not served during her performances. (Danielson, 1997) Dress in general is always a matter of controversy for women, especially Muslim women in societies that stress modest dress (such as Egypt). As her career progressed, Umm Kulthum carefully crafted her image as a pious and modest woman, and was able to adapt to her surroundings³.

As Egypt is a nation made up primarily of Muslims, veiling⁴ of some sort was common at the time. However, in most the photographs of Umm Kulthum, both her head and face are uncovered. She was able to remain successful as an uncovered Muslim woman because she lived during a time of great change⁵. “...It is interesting to note how the great Arab singing and movie star Umm Kulthum, who in her early publicity photos in the 1920s and very early ‘30s was shown with her head covered with head veils...by 1932 was appearing in portraits with her head uncovered.” (Stillman, 2003, p. 155) Umm Kulthum’s unveiling did not inhibit her image as an upstanding Muslim woman.

³ Between 1967-1971, Umm Kulthum traveled around Egypt, to at least seven countries in the Middle East and Africa, to the USSR, and to Paris to perform. (Lohman, 2010) She was well received and upheld her image of Egyptian piety and grace.

⁴ Egyptian veiling could include any combination of covering the head or face.

⁵ In 1923, the Egyptian Feminist Huda Sha’rawi threw her veil into the Mediterranean Sea. This was one of the first and most famous occurrences of a woman denying the veil so publicly.

Umm Kulthum was also influenced by the elite women she sang for in Cairo and was able to incorporate Western and traditional styles. “The European aspects of such costumes conveyed cosmopolitan competence; the ‘coveredness’ bespoke the important local value of personal modesty.” (Danielson, 2004, p. 155) It is important to note that although Umm Kulthum was able to realize the importance of portraying an elite version of herself, her nationalist and religious roots were not neglected. It is this authenticity that captivated her audience.

Besides her dress, her performance style was a determining factor in her success. She was known for her improvisation and the intense emotion and strength in her voice. “‘Standing still,’ relatively speaking helped identify her as a singer, not a dancer, which was a much less respectable entertainer in Egyptian society.” (Danielson, 2004, p. 156) Her ability to stay poised and focus on the music and lyrics of her songs quickly elevated her status and enabled her to be appreciated as an artist.

Her still performances contrasted sharply with the dynamic nature of her songs and her interactive audiences. It was the norm in Egyptian performances for the audience members to give feedback, whether positive or negative, to the singer throughout her performance. Umm Kulthum’s listeners were an important part of her career and she preferred live performances to her recordings because of the lively environment the audience fostered. It is the “listeners who produce, respond to, reproduce, and reuse music and so constitute a practice of music.” (Danielson, 1997, p.6) Music is a venue of communication and there are many contributors to the meaning of each song.

As a celebrity, Umm Kulthum had to be careful with her public perception, which is why she chose her songs and dress so deliberately. Public figures became progressively

more like symbols with the advent of photography. “Until 1919, photos of female nationalists rarely appeared. Thereafter, women allowed themselves to be the subjects of photojournalists and attempted to shape the making and initial publication of the images...Photos acted as a crucial link, documenting women nationalists in the midst of their activities and creating images—veiled and unveiled—that became symbols.”

(Baron, 2005, p. 100) Photographs provided a physical image for the positive conceptual image Umm Kulthum was trying to convey.

Likewise, “Adoration for...singers such as Munira Mahdiyya and Umm Kulthum unified Egyptians around stars and enhanced national identity...Rather than promote domestic virtues and give household instruction, they sought escape from the daily routine.” (Baron, 2005, p. 100) Umm Kulthum was able to attain tangible agency in guiding her career and creating a new ideal for Egyptian women. Because of her professional success, she was able to avoid the cultural norm of marrying young and becoming a mother⁶. If she had fallen into the standard lifestyle for Egyptian women at the time, it is difficult to imagine her having even a portion of the amount of success she had in the public domain.

Regardless of Umm Kulthum’s tremendous support from the public, her name was not without scandal. Because she chose to deviate from the norms of society and not marry at the standard age, there were rumors questioning her sexual orientation. To compensate for this, supportive artists and filmmakers made Umm Kulthum an object of desire and compared her to the fourth pyramid. (Lohman, 2010) By her own means, Umm Kulthum made herself the “Mother of the Egyptians”. Since Egypt was viewed as a

⁶ Umm Kulthum had no children. She eventually married when she was in her fifties. See the timeline (p. 7) for more details on other male prospects in her life.

family nation, and the Queen and wife of Nasser did not like being public figures, Umm Kulthum assumed the role as the motherly figurehead⁷. “The concept of motherhood stands in the place of womanhood or femininity.” (Lohman, 2010, p. 122) She frequently placed herself in photographs with children from the countries she visited and spoke fondly of children in interviews. Her deliberate attempts at appearing motherly, upholding appropriate Islamic behaviors, and her eventual marriage snuffed out most doubts about her sexuality.

Besides being a beloved performer, Umm Kulthum was concerned with the political state of her nation. She was in personal correspondence with President Nasser and wrote to him supporting his resignation. Throughout her career, she had a number of political songs, which supported Egyptian soldiers. For example, her song *Allah Ma'ak*, from 1967⁸ says, “Army of Arabness, brave one, God is with you//There is none more great, magnificent, or brave.” (Lohman, 2010, p. 22) Besides performances, Umm Kulthum provided monetary support for Egyptian causes and used her celebrity to advocate for donation to the soldiers and national organizations⁹. (Lohman, 2010) As with everything else in her life, Umm Kulthum approached advocacy from a framework of honor and religious affiliation.

At the end of her life, Umm Kulthum reached near idol status and even now, is an icon in Egyptian culture. She died of a heart attack in 1975, but her songs are still alive and well. “...Within the taxonomy of celebrity, Umm Kulthum transcended the status of

⁷ Umm Kulthum’s name may also have been beneficial to her. *Umm* means mother in Arabic, so puns were made about her being a mother figure. People may have subconsciously linked her with the meaning of her name as well.

⁸ The Egyptians lost the Six-Day War against Israel in 1967. It was a crushing defeat and Umm Kulthum was passionate about encouraging the Egyptian nation through song.

⁹ Umm Kulthum helped organize the National Assembly of Egyptian Women.

artist, icon, and star to reach that of hero—a famous person who did something significant in an active sense.” (Lohman, 2010, p. 6) She took her religious zeal, her talent, and her ability to read social situations and created positive change in the country she loved so much.

“Musical performance as a cultural production does not ‘reflect’ social or cultural values but actually helps to constitute them.” (Danielson, 2004, p. 162) This is especially true for Umm Kulthum. She worked within the infrastructure of Egyptian culture, but stepped outside traditional roles in many ways. Without music, she probably would have lived the average Egyptian peasant life that she was born into, but music provided an outlet to become the independent, strong female figurehead that she is known as today.

Timeline:

1903: The Gramophone recording company becomes active in Egypt

1904: Born in Tamay ez-Zahayra

1914-1915: British station 100,000+ soldiers in Egypt

1919: Cotton prices (the main Egyptian cash crop) rise, creating more economic opportunity

1919: Egyptian Revolution against British occupation

1923: Recruited by Odeon Records

1923: Egyptian Feminist Huda Sha'rawi publicly and symbolically throws her veil into the Mediterranean Sea

1926: First public concert in Cairo and the “turning point” in her career

1926: Became a landowner

1935: Began working on *Widad*, the first of her six films

1946: Received a marriage proposal from one of King Faruq's uncles, but unable to become engaged due to family interference

1946: Engagement to Mahmud al-Sharif

1952: Egyptian Revolution, which allowed President Nasser to rise to power

1954: Marriage to Dr. Hasan al-Hifnawi

1967: Egypt loses the Six-Day War against Israel

1967: Nasser gives his resignation speech, but it was rejected by citizens

1969: *'umrah* (minor pilgrimage) to Mecca

1970: Nasser dies of a heart attack. Succeeded by Anwar Sadat.

1973: Monthly concerts/radio broadcasts stop due to health reasons

1975: Died of heart failure

*bolded events = personal events in Umm Kulthum's life

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