

## **Performing Piety: Singers and Actors in Egypt's Islamic Revival**

*Karin van Nieuwkerk*

*Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013. 320 pages.*

Anthropologist Karin van Nieuwkerk's latest book-length study addresses the phenomenon, widely discussed in Egyptian media since the 1990s, of celebrated singers, actors, and dancers who withdraw from their professions to live according to what they believe are Islamically sound principles. The author of *"A Trade Like Any Other": Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), van Nieuwkerk draws on experience and contacts from over two decades of research. But this project, as well as its subjects and issues, presents new challenges for the ethnographer.

Each of the three main sections describes the trends of a particular decade. The first wave of famous women to retire began in the late 1980s, and thus the first section focuses on the shared rhetorics, ideologies, and activities of "repentant" artists. From the beginning, artists cannot be read as simply adopting wholesale Salafist ideologies, since their personal turning points bore as much influence from "popular" or "Sufi" religiosity as from the "rationalist" tendencies of Islamists (p. 30). In the early 1990s, as retirements peaked, Egyptian media became central to both celebrities' and fans' understanding of this new trend. In this section, the author focuses on debates over secular(ist) aesthetics and changing discourses on women's participation in public life. Two generations of preachers offer different rationales for women's retirements or re-entry into art, reflecting the sea change incited by a generation of Muslim Brotherhood-allied "lay preachers" such as Amr Khalid during the 1990s.

The 2000s are depicted as a time of experimentation. Some veiled women choose to return to entertainment on their own terms; their productions cater to a growing market for entertainment that reflects elite consumption habits and piety, overcoming a longstanding association of overt piety with impoverished Cairenes and villagers. Noting other authors' commentaries and terminology, van Nieuwkerk follows Asef Bayat in calling this market "post-Islamist" – explicitly pious but unconnected to an Islamist dream of re-making the state (p. 203). I particularly appreciated how her insights into the simultaneous influence of American and Gulf consumer culture dislodge easy readings of globalization as synonymous with Americanization (pp. 227-28). The full sweep of all three sections provides a cultural history of the Islamic

revival through the changes it has wrought on the nation's television, film, theatrical, and wedding stages.

In a broad sense, this book fills a gap by tracing the impacts of the piety movement on Cairo's elites, who have formed new class-conditioned expressions of pious taste over the last three decades. The author provides a refreshingly frank depiction of the challenges and necessity of "studying up," as Laura Nader put it in her 1972 essay. As the introduction describes, those who see themselves as public figures guard their time and speech in ways non-celebrities may not. Even when she succeeds at interviewing celebrities, van Nieuwkerk notes that their conversations inevitably reproduced previously circulated accounts (p. 8). Throughout, readers are reminded that knowledge gained in this way is inevitably partial and mediated. In the classroom, this can open critical reflections on the partiality of all knowledge. At the same time, van Nieuwkerk frequently claims that her interlocutors' celebrity status means their decisions have enormous impact on the piety movement, elite women, and Egyptian women in general (e.g., pp. 3, 9, 83, and 201), an assertion that she supports with media analysis but not through documented interaction with actual consumers.

Van Nieuwkerk's methodology informs every aspect of the work, including the organization of its sections and chapters. In an unusual nested tripartite structure, the book offers a broad chronological overview while simultaneously weaving together a range of ethnographic idioms (e.g., oral history, conversational vignettes, and quotations from journalistic accounts) with literature review and historicization. Within each section, three chapters separate and analyze constituent issues. Most chapters follow a further tripartite division: each opens with a "retired" or "repentant" artist's retelling of her own religious trajectory, which van Nieuwkerk calls a "spiritual biography" (p. 12). This is followed by the analysis of themes in each artist's story that relate to the goals of the section. Finally, each chapter concludes by placing the artist's story and the issues it crystallizes into the larger historical context, concentrating on its relationship to the Islamic revival movement and to self-identified Islamists in particular. Signposting and recapitulation of exemplary clarity begins and ends each chapter.

By the 2000s, contemporary television, film, theatre, and music offered Egyptian consumers a wide range of acceptable entertainment. Identifying three overlapping categories – "Islamist" didactic religious fare, *al-fann al-hadīf* (purposeful art, or "art with a mission"), and *nadīf* (clean) productions – the author argues that for some, the creeping adoption of mainstream aesthetics inevitably diminishes a work's significance and obscures its pious con-

tent. She closes the afterword by asking if the ultimate aim of “the Islamist art project” is to “Islamize popular culture and art or to popularize Islam” (p. 273). As she admits, this question must remain open. Yet it depends for its framing upon a conflation of “Islamicizing” with “Islamist,” and thus with Islamist political goals, rather than with the internalist, ethical self-making of the broader piety movement. By this point, having absorbed the careful delineation of Egyptians’ varied arguments for and against veiled actresses, “clean” comedies, and purportedly dull historico-religious theatre, the reader may well ask whether one can reasonably speak of “the Islamist art project” any more than one can speak of “the” secularist art project.

Most of the celebration and scrutiny of “repentant” artists has been directed at women who have chosen to retire and to veil. Gendered practices of piety and their reception are thus at the heart of the analysis. Veiled women who continue to appear in public life as television presenters, actors, charity workers, or preachers symbolize high standards of purity and perfection, expressed on their bodies and in their comportment; they are expected, by themselves and others, to bear heavy representational burdens for the nation’s women and the nation itself. Van Nieuwkerk provides a thoughtful, textured account of her interlocutors’ reasoning and choices, always spotlighting these famous women’s agency in sifting through their occasionally conflicting religious, material, and familial needs.

Nonetheless, male artists’ choices to retire, keep working, or limit themselves to “Islamically acceptable” contexts are given little space – a single chapter discusses both male and female musicians at contemporary upscale weddings. As she notes, male artists’ participation in the piety movement is hardly noted by the mediascape that so carefully follows veiled female artists. When they are discussed, male artists’ choices to keep working in what are considered impious contexts are given less thought by Egyptian publics and often accepted via a discourse that presumes men’s participation in public space and their primary role as breadwinners to be not only necessary to contemporary life, but complementary to male piety (p. 207). Yet ethnographers need not reproduce the discourses they study. Precisely because they are undernarrated in Egyptian media, an analysis of more male artists’ choices would have provided a welcome counterpoint and made the gendered repercussions of women’s withdrawal from, re-entry into, and renegotiation of the public sphere more explicit.

In sum, van Nieuwkerk provides a finely detailed contribution to the study of elite public cultures in the “Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region. Her refusal to avoid celebrities simply because she cannot study them

as she would their poorer contemporaries leads to an inventive analysis of the circulation of taste in a fractured media environment and, more profoundly, to Egyptians' own worries over the intersection of market demands and pious living. *Performing Piety* can be profitably read next to recent influential ethnographies of micropractices of piety and secularism, including those of Asef Bayat (2009), Lara Deeb (2006), Saba Mahmood (2005), and Charles Hirschkind (2006), all of whom van Nieuwkerk cites. Jessica Winegar's (2006) study of visual artists, many of whom claimed secularism as much as an artistic credo as a legacy of Nasser's Egypt, would make an excellent companion piece for students.

In a review of several recent ethnographic studies on lived Muslim experience, Daniel Martin Varisco concluded with: "Writing for the general public, without resorting to the oversimplification that often tarnishes journalistic accounts, is an important need at the moment. Who will step forward to help fill this need?" (*Contemporary Islam*, April 2014: n.p.). With her streamlined, lucid prose and scrupulous contextualization, van Nieuwkerk's work can be recommended to educated lay readers and upper-division undergraduates even as it provides critical insights for anthropologists and area specialists.

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