Chapter 3

Remixing Songs, Remaking MULIDS: The Merging Spaces of Dance Music and Saint Festivals in Egypt

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Mulids[1], annual festivals held to commemorate saints, temporarily transform both the physical space and atmosphere of Egyptian urban neighborhoods and villages. With the saint's shrine at their center, public space is restructured to delineate festive grounds, mark frames for ritual practice, and connote the spiritual reach of the saint's presence. The festive time and space of mulids create a unique, ephemeral world, where the 'religious' and 'profane' intersect in manifold ways through a diverse range of spiritual and carnival-like spaces and activities.

At a mulid, groups of pilgrims may erect tents sewn out of plastic wheat sacks and old sheets; others might spread a mat on the ground. Both spaces serve as temporary homes and bases from which to offer 'services' to guests in the way of tea, food, and friendly communality in the deputized hospitality of the saint. Larger tents that are constructed of colorful Arabesque cloth and lit with chandeliers additionally offer *inshad*, Sufi spiritual singing that serves as the musical accompaniment to *dhikr*—a form of standing rhythmic movement meant to facilitate the invocation of God. A practice absolutely essential to mulids, *dhikr* allows some to experience heightened spiritual states of being.

Outside these intimate Sufi 'service' spaces, from the shrine to outlying alleyways, the area's festive space is intermittently strung with colored lights. A fair-like atmosphere unfolds as itinerant vendors spread their wares or set up carts selling toys, trinkets, sweets, snacks, and souvenirs considered to bear the saint's *baraka*, a type of locally-effusive spiritual energy. Carnival workers run swings, shooting booths, and magic shows. Makeshift for-profit cafés are set up, some with stages hosting party bands and singers. DJs work behind large speakers, and youth carve out dance spaces in the streets.

1 In the Egyptian colloquial called *mulid* (pl. *mawalid*), taken from the classical Arabic *mawlid*, this literally means a birthday or anniversary and in this context usually marks the anniversary of a saint's death.

The current of dance music these young DJs currently highlight is one called 'mulid', a trend that borrows musically and lyrically from Sufi *inshad*, mixing it with electronic beats and boisterous wedding-party vocal styles. Sometimes hosted in demarcated areas ornamented in ways similar to those of Sufi tents, DJ stations may also distribute a 'service' of cold herbal infusions to mulid-goers dancing, watching, or simply passing by. These mulid DJ spaces thus fuse, whether through physical form, artistic representation, or actual practice, many of the major elements of the mulid experience.

All of these mulid spaces are temporal, creating a time and place set apart from everyday life.[2] Yet mulids are also slowly being marginalized in various spatial, conceptual, and rhetorical ways as modernist and Islamic discourses and policies seek to contain their highly visible and aural forms of festive celebration.[3] Despite their temporality and the pressures being exerted on them, however, this current of 'mulid' dance music has successfully drawn on mulids as a cultural source and enabled representations of them to seep into more mundane social realms such as the production of bootleg cassette tapes, internet forums, public transportation, and the countless weddings celebrated across the country every night. It relocates mulids into social spaces far removed from the physical domain of the saint, extending the very idea of a mulid through time, space, and lived experience into forms and concepts arguably more permanent than those of the mulid itself. And, in the opposite direction, this music current is furthermore contributing to the ever-changing features of actual mulids, offering an alternative 'modern' approach to celebrating these festive occasions and meanwhile reinforcing their social significance.

This study explores how the remixing of Sufi *inshad* has led to a remaking of mulids, by shaping them into cultural metaphors found and used in a variety of social spaces as well as through contributing to an alternative 'modernization' of mulids themselves. In doing so, it follows the trajectory of this music current's developments and examines what meanings are conveyed when its social context is changed from the 'otherworldliness' of the mulid to the 'everydayness' of contemporary Egyptian life.

2 See Schielke (2006) for discussion of how the festive experience inverts reality in the context of Egyptian mulids.

3 See Peterson (2005), and, for much greater detail and analysis, Schielke (2006). I would like to point out that the editors of my magazine article made numerous changes prior to publication without my knowledge, including a changed title. The article does not seek to suggest that mulids are 'barely surviving'.

The Places, Times and Spaces of *mulid* Dance Music

Mulid dance music was not developed at mulids themselves, but rather by wedding musicians in low-income urban neighborhoods. Wedding artists first borrowed *inshad* melodies to flavor dance music in 2001, and the distinctive melodic riffs they employed on electric keyboards, ones usually performed on the *ney* and *kawala* reed flutes, were clearly reminiscent of mulids and Sufi *dhikr*. Wedding singer Gamal Al-Sobki then made these nascent dance tracks a hit in 2002 when he sang to them lyrics taken from the mulid milieu ("ya madad"—a form of supplication, "Hayy!"—a name of God chanted when practicing *dhikr*) and others in a traditional Sufi style referring to the Prophet Muhammad as a 'doctor' who heals the spiritually ill. This song, "hanruh al-mulid" (We're going to the mulid), also featured a barked wedding vocal style including salutations to his producers and "all of Al-Mu'asasa" (the cassette tape production and sales center of the sprawling, low-income Shubra Al-Kheima neighborhood). The novelty of this approach was given a marketing boost when his tape *al-mulid* was temporarily banned by the authorities in response to complaints filed by an Islamic preacher who held that some of its lyrics were sacrilegious.[4] Demand for the tape consequently rose, it selling under the table for up to 20 EGP (around 4 USD), nearly seven times its original price.[5] According to Al-Sobky and a magazine article he recalls from

4 The preacher railed against Al-Sobky in his Friday sermons and filed a complaint with the public attorney, leading state security to contact Al-Sobky. The case was dropped when it was confirmed that the tape was recorded 'live', meaning in one shot with all band members performing simultaneously, as opposed to a studied, rehearsed and professionally mixed recording. Under such circumstances, singers can "say what you want" and "nothing is meant by it", according to Al-Sobky (interview in Shubra Al-Kheima, 18 April 2007). The offending lyrics, which were cut from later releases, were, "kalimat habibi al-nabi lazim nidala'ha, wa fi zikra laylat al-nabi halif l-awala'ha, 'ala bab al-kiram da'at da'a wara da'a, wa huwa asl sayidna al-nabi 'amru ma 'al la'a. la'a [...] ha-n'ul la'a, ha-n'ul la'a" ("The word of my beloved the Prophet we must pamper, and on the anniversary of the night of the Prophet I swear I'll burn it up. On the door of the honorable I knocked and knocked, for our lord the Prophet never said no. No. We'll say no, we'll say no.") Offense was apparently taken at this final "We'll say no", as though it were meant as "We'll say no to the Prophet", a statement wholly unacceptable in the Egyptian public sphere. Attention to the song's performance, however, suggests that it was mere execution of a vocal repetition technique not intending to convey this specific understanding.

5 I bought my copy on the street at a microbus station in the small Delta town of Al-Ibrahimiya for around 3-5 EGP in spring of 2005. My copy, which is counterfeit, has the original lyrics, and is accordingly labeled "ahdath al-munaw'at al-'arabiyya (Up To Date Arabic Types [sic])" to avoid unwanted attention from state security.

the time, it was the best-selling album of the season, outselling Lebanese commercial pop stars Nancy Ajram and George Wasouf.[6]

Like their creators and the urban areas they have been developed in, mulid dance songs are considered *sha'bi* and form a sub-current within a larger class of music referred to by the same term. *Sha'bi* derives from the word *sha'b*, meaning 'people', and is used variously to mean 'populist', 'popular' as in being liked by many, and also 'popular' as in coming from the people, that is, being native, grassroots, and from a 'working-class' socio-economic background. It is this latter definition that applies in the case of *sha'bi* singers and music, although they may also (and often do) enjoy immense popularity (*sha'biyya*) even beyond the *sha'bi* classes. Like its complementary counterpart *baladi*, essentially meaning 'native', 'local', or 'cottage-industry', the term *sha'bi* has both positive and negative connotations. On the negative end of the spectrum, it can imply the unsophisticated, the gauche, the inferior-quality, and the impoverished. Conversely, it is used in positive ways to suggest 'authenticity' and being 'down-to-earth', clever, savvy, and 'street-smart'. Fans and detractors of *sha'bi* music and mulid dance songs apply the entire range of these concepts when appraising them.[7]

Following Al-Sobky's success with *al-mulid*, other *sha'bi* singers began to adopt a 'mulid' style. Mahmoud Al-Leithy, a young up-and-coming *sha'bi* star, produced a *dhikr* dance hit called "qasadt baabak" (I aimed for your door) that borrowed heavily from traditional styles, including that of Sufi *munshid* (*inshad* performer, pl. *munshidin*) 'Arabi Farhan Al-Balbisi, with regard to both its lyrics and melody. This song stormed the so-called microbus circuit and the Nile pleasure cruise scene, at once expressing and reinforcing the sub-genre's popularity in the urban *sha'bi* milieu. Another example is provided by Sa'd Al-Sughayr, a childhood friend of Al-Sobky's and a *sha'bi* superstar (in)famous for his dancing who now performs at 5-star hotel weddings, expensive Pyramids Road nightclubs[8], and in box-office hits.[9] Al-Sughayr produced a mulid song that was featured in the film *lakhmat ra's* (Befuddled) and which reflected and reinforced the popularity of mulid dance songs through commercial mass media, a channel otherwise generally not

6 This, and all future references to and quotes by Al-Sobky from interview in Shubra Al-Kheima, 18 April 2007.

7 For more on *sha'bi* culture and music, see Armbrust (1996) and Grippo (2006).

8 Pyramids Road, which leads to the pyramids of Giza, is lined with nightclubs that cater mainly to wealthy visitors from Gulf states and which are notorious for their exploitive atmosphere, all-night belly dancing shows, plentiful hard liquor, and assumed prostitution.

9 Research is needed on the commercially successful yet purely *sha'bi* films produced by Mohamed El-Sobky (of no relation to the *sha'bi* singer Gamal Al-Sobky) and the social tropes they represent and explore.

open to this particular music current.[10] Yet in terms of sheer quantity, most mulid dance songs have been produced either by otherwise little-known *sha'bi* singers, possibly trying to make their break with the mulid style, or largely unidentified DJs who remix this already hybrid sub-genre on their home computers.

Both the fluidity of music as an artistic genre and the relative flexibility of informal *sha'bi* contexts are to be credited for allowing mulid dance songs to take off in the directions they have, both with regard to their musical and lyrical dimensions and to the numerous social spaces they have occupied. Concerning their internal form, the combination of inspiration drawn from mulids, often perceived as 'rural' in origin, and the urban production of dance music is one that works well in the *sha'bi* music genre. *Sha'bi* music often fuses 'rural' musical traditions with 'urban' lyrical concerns, instruments and dance tempos, a characteristic that has facilitated its adoption of mulid motifs. Yet the *sha'bi* framework has also afforded the mulid dance trend the freedom to assume a range of approaches in tone stretching from the earnestly Sufi-oriented to the tongue-in-cheek, boisterous, mocking and naughty, and even the polemical. This range is put into perspective when *sha'bi* mulid songs are compared to the Sufi-inspired and religious songs of mainstream commercial pop stars Mohamed Mounir and Amr Diab, all of which remain staid, relatively slow-paced, and strictly pious in tone. In contrast, and as an example, while the titles of some mulid dance tracks make direct reference to the spiritual mulid context (such as 'mulid of Saint Ali', 'mulid of *dhikr*', and 'mulid of the worshipper and Satan')[11], others flagrantly market themselves as sources of a state of *mazaag*. Literally meaning 'mood' but used in Egyptian colloquial to suggest a heightened sense of pleasure induced or expressed by anything considered well-executed, from music, food and dance to a carefully-constructed stylish outfit or a joyous, carefree attitude, *mazaag* is often associated with states of intoxication.[12] Examples of such titles that boisterously suggest some of the fun-loving aspects of mulids include 'the crazy mulid', 'the mulid is supreme pampering', and 'the "don't awaken pain" mulid'.[13]

In a manner similar to the flexibility granted to the current's musical and lyrical dimensions, the relatively underground nature of the *sha'bi* context

10 According to www.egyfilm.com, this film made 4,071,405 EGP in box-office sales (http://www.egyfilm.com/films.php?MovieID=2427).

11 In Arabic, mulid sidi Ali, mulid al-zikr, and mulid al-'abd wa al-shaytan.

12 For more on *mazaag* and the mulid dance trend, see also Peterson (2008). On the related concepts of *tarab* (enchantment/rapture) and *saltana* (which implies being 'reigned' by a state of extreme pleasure), see Racy (1982 and 2003).

13 In Arabic, al-mulid al-magnun, al-mulid al-dala' kullu, and mulid ma-tsahush al-muwagi.

and its informal networks has also facilitated the prolific production and wide scale distribution of mulid dance songs, ultimately allowing the current a tangible presence in a variety of mundane, everyday spaces. [14] In terms of accessible production, some mulid songs are recorded at very low cost and quality by a singer accompanying a DJ in an office studio or on the street, while others rely solely on sampling crafted on a home computer. As for distribution, while cassette prices for *sha'bi* music remain low (around 5 EGP), a plethora of even cheaper (3 EGP) bootleg tapes and 'cocktail' compilations make the latest hits, including mulid tracks, easily affordable, and are readily available on the street. Yet as one young DJ told me, mulid songs are essentially an 'MP3' current[15], utilizing digital technology to enter numerous social spaces despite being shunned by the channels sanctioned by the official arts establishments, such as radio, television, and large commercial recording companies. For example, the plummeting costs of computers have made them common in low-income urban and rural areas and homes, and the practice of transferring files between them by removing and re-installing hard drives has contributed to the wide distribution of mulid songs, among others. USB memory sticks, MP3 players, and music-playing cell phones are other increasingly common informal modes of distribution, while compilation CDs can be burned at internet cafés for a modest fee. Arabic-language internet forums are yet another channel for the distribution of *sha'bi* songs, including mulid dance tracks, whereby web forum members and the general public request them, aficionados upload them, and DJs advertise themselves by attaching their names and telephone numbers to the titles of their remixes' music files. The accessibility of the internet has facilitated the distribution of mulid songs even beyond Egypt, with users of one website downloading mulid songs registered as residing in Ethiopia, Germany, Kuwait, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the USA.[16]

Some of the informal, *sha'bi* methods of distributing and promoting mulid songs, of carrying them into social spaces physically and temporally distant from actual mulids, are mobile in themselves. For example, while cell phones that can store and play music files aid distribution in general, ring tones featuring mulid songs also assure the mobility of the dance current and its aural presence in cafés, street corners, workplaces, and all other public and semi-public spaces whenever they receive an incoming call. Mulid songs have also found a space in various forms of transportation, both those used for getting around in practical terms and those employed for fun outings. A cheap and semi-informal mode of public transportation that primarily services *sha'bi*

14 On the mulid dance trend and *sha'bi* uses of technology, see also Peterson (2008).

15 Interview with DJ 'Alaa' in Al-Sayyida Nafisa, 17 July 2007.

16 This was www.tzbeets.com, accessed in April 2007.

neighborhoods, microbuses (mini-vans) and their cassette players have long been considered an important means of distribution for *sha'bi* songs in general. Yet *tuk-tuks*, which are unlicensed three-wheeled motorcycle carriages serving crowded *sha'bi* quarters as informal public transportation, are now assuming this role even more so than microbuses. Usually driven by teenagers and featuring a carnival-like atmosphere with decorative lighting, ornamentation, large speakers, and a thrillingly dangerous ride, they often blast the latest mulid dance hit. In a similar vein, colorfully lit-up motorized pleasure boats that boast significant dance floor space and powerful speakers act as mobile barometers of the moment's most popular music as they noisily cruise up and down the Nile, often blaring mulid songs. Mulid tracks are also loudly featured in the highly ornamented horse carriages that take outing-goers for a ride along Cairo's Nile promenade.

While these dance songs have brought musical references to mulids into a variety of relatively everyday spaces such as internet forums, cell phone ring tones, public transportation, and evening outings, their extensive reach into these various social spaces has also allowed for their development into an independent metaphor representing boisterous fun as expressed by *sha'bi* youth culture. It is, further, a marker of their popularity that mulid dance songs have inspired a transfer of their name to other semiotic spaces in the world of *sha'bi* music, used as a label for products other than themselves. Some highly popular *sha'bi* songs, such as Emad Ba'rour's 2006 version of the song "al-'aynab" (Grape), are occasionally titled mulid songs on compilation tapes and internet forums (hence, "mulid al-'aynab") although they are not in fact mulid songs in that they do not employ *inshad* melodies or incorporate lyrical references to mulids. This practice is also applied to *sha'bi* hits from movie soundtracks, resulting in titles consisting of "*mulid*+movie title", an adoption that can be interpreted as both affirmation of and marketing for their supposed party-atmosphere inducing quality. Yet this metaphorical development has gone even further in the titling of entire compilation tapes "such-and-such mulid" although they might have only one, or even no mulid songs listed. The covers of such party 'cocktails' invariably feature photos of belly dancers and small cutouts of the popular *sha'bi* singers whose songs are included on the tape. On the one hand, producers have explained this use of the term 'mulid' as a gimmick meant to draw attention to potential purchasers.[17] Indeed, titles such as "mulid of who doesn't pay can watch", "mulid of the stoned" and "mulid of Al-Ahly" (a soccer team)[18] are eye-catching, and maybe particularly so to *sha'bi* youth. On the other hand, however, 'mulid' has in this con-

17 Conversations with Gamal, a producer of bootleg cassette tapes in Imbaba, and Abdel Megid Al-Mahdi, producer of Abdu Company tapes in Imbaba, March and April 2007.

18 In Arabic, mulid illi ma-yidfa'sh yitfarrag, mulid al-mastul, and mulid al-ahly.

text become almost synonymous with both 'raucous fun' and 'cocktail compilation', implying a somewhat chaotic mixed bag of delights offering something for everyone, much like in actual mulid festivities.

'Mulid' has hence come to mean more than just the carnival-like celebration of a saint or a particular strand of dance music. After having been condensed into musical representation, mulids, in their new social space of *sha'bi* music, have been re-packaged into a concept suggesting chaotic and boisterous fun, noisy expressions of joy, a wild party-like atmosphere—an experience that bootleg cassette customers are offered to try on their own terms, at the time and in the place of their choosing. Just as various aspects of mulids have entered the Egyptian cultural consciousness at large through, for example, a metaphor for chaos, 'it was a mulid missing the saint'[19], and representations of sweetly quaint folkloric celebration, as in the much-loved puppet operetta "al-layla al-kabira" (The big night)[20], mulid dance songs have now established a cultural representation of mulids as mind-bending fun and a musical means to accessing the out-of-the-ordinary, even in the everyday.

Yet while mulid songs have been traveling through *sha'bi* networks into various mundane social spaces and become cultural metaphors for the ultimate *mazaag* in *sha'bi* youth culture, they have also traveled from their origins in the *sha'bi* wedding milieu back to the source of their inspiration, mulids themselves. Mulids have always featured various forms of popular music entertainment, and in recent years the mulid dance current has created a strong presence for itself in this mulid context, affirming the role of youth in a mulid's more secular celebrations and highlighting their contributions both physically and aurally. At rural mulids, this may be confined to the loud playing of mulid songs by cassette vendors and as accompaniment to rides, such as bumper cars or a Ferris wheel, in the amusement area. At the 2007 mulid of Abu Hatiba held in the Delta village of Al-Sids[21], however, these songs in fact aurally competed with that of the *sayyita*, a Sufi performer whose songs are woven into the narration of a morality tale, and whose truck-bed stage was in close proximity to the amusement area. Moreover, the performance of this *sayyita*, in addition to being remarkable because she was the first woman to have taken on this public spiritual role at this particular mulid, contained some musical and lyrical borrowings from the *sha'bi* mulid current itself. Here, *sha'bi* dance variations inspired by the mulid context were contributing to the re-shaping of the performance of Sufi *inshad* itself.

19 In Arabic, mulid wa-sahbu ghayib.

20 Written by Salah Jahin, composed by Sayyid Makkawi, and performed by the Cairo Puppet Theater, cassette tape recording produced by Sono Cairo, 1972.

21 Al-Sids is located in Al-Sharqiyya governorate, and the finale night was held on Thursday, 12 July 2007.

Perhaps more readily striking, however, are the DJ stations proliferating at many Cairene mulids. The flexibility and affordability of DJs is contributing to their increasing popularity and partial replacement of live bands (which now also play live versions of mulid dance tracks), while the rise of the mulid current has resulted in it virtually monopolizing the play lists of these mulid DJ stations. The dominant presence of such youth culture was tangibly felt, by way of example, at the 2007 mulids of Fatima Al-Nabiwiyya, where at least seven different DJ stations dotted all the paths leading to the shrine, and Sayyida Sakina, where the four DJ stations outnumbered both the popular bands and Sufi *dhikr* spaces (two each).[22] The area alongside the mosque and shrine of Sayyida Sakina, the spatial and spiritual heart of the mulid, was marked by two DJ stations that towered along the mosque walls with eight to ten large speakers stacked upon tables and a DJ perching atop one of them, framed by the mosque's strings of flashing lights. A party-like atmosphere was created as the DJs shouted into microphones to encourage youth to dance, and others sprayed foam and created flame jets by igniting aerosol sprays. Here, mulid dance songs and their spatial theater were not simply representing select aspects of mulids, they were remaking them, spatially, aurally, and in terms of social meaning. Martin Stokes aptly describes this power of music and its use as a negotiation of social space and its ultimate transformation:

> Music and dance […] do not simply 'reflect'. Rather, they provide the means by which the hierarchies of place are negotiated and transformed. Music does not then simply provide a marker in a prestructured social space, but the means by which this space can be transformed. (Stokes 1994: 24)

Even as many of the youth who attend mulids to dance and joke with their friends consider the spiritual intent of mulid celebrations invalid and a form of *bid'a* (innovation discouraged in Islamic law), or perhaps outdated folk custom, their active contribution to mulids in the form of DJ dance areas legitimizes and reinforces the role of mulids as a space for the enactment of fun.[23] Various forms of modernist discourse and policy are seeking to limit and control the mulid in numerous ways including their relative spatial, temporal and aural marginalization[24], and yet in the case of mulid DJ stations, the 'modernity' of the latest youth culture practices are reshaping the mulid according to a different logic, one that is as chaotic and loud (and yet, 'modern') as the 'traditional' mulid is typically perceived. While these youth may refute some of the spiritual beliefs and activities related to mulids, their dance-oriented

22 The finale night of the mulid of Fatima Al-Nabawiyya was Monday, 23 April 2007, and that of the mulid of Sayyida Sakina was Wednesday, 30 May 2007.

23 On cultural and religious debates around mulids, see Schielke (2006).

24 Ibid. Also, see Peterson (2005) and Schielke (2004).

participation reinforces some of the other, more secular (and ever modernizing) elements of frenzied carnival-like fun at the mulid. And in doing so, they also reaffirm a sense of local identity connected through time and place to the mulid event, by using the opportunity it provides to celebrate the *sha'bi* culture of themselves, their neighborhoods, and ultimately their mulids, through proudly performing *sha'bi* dance, to *sha'bi* music, in an area they have staked out in possibly the most quintessentially *sha'bi* space there is—the street.

Farah: Expressing Joy at Weddings and *mulids*

Mulid songs have carved out a tangible presence in various everyday spaces and metaphors, in urban outings, and even at mulids themselves, where they help to reinforce *sha'bi* identity and heighten the mulid's focus on fun. Yet, why is it that mulids in particular are being drawn on in the production of *sha'bi* youth culture, and why did urban wedding musicians choose saint festivals as material to begin with? To answer these questions, it may be useful to examine how mulid songs are used as actual music tracks, and in what kinds of social contexts this use produces meaning. As Virginia Danielson points out,

> 'Music *use*' [...] 'is no less part of "social practice" than is production' (1990, p. 139). Assuming that musical meaning is co-produced by listeners and that, as Middleton argues, 'acts of "consumption" are essential, constitutive parts of the "material circuits" through which musical practice exists—listening, too must be considered a productive force' (1990, p.92). This is salient in the Arab world where historic definitions of song include the listener as a principle constituent of the process of performance. (1996: 300)[25]

Egyptian 'listeners' typically use mulid songs in two ways—by dancing, and by watching dancing, interacting with and encouraging the dance performance by clapping in time. This is true to the extent that the above statement could be modified to "listening *and dancing*, too must be considered a productive force" and that "definitions of song include the listener, *dancer, and dance spectator* as principle constituents of the process of performance." Ramy, a 19-year-old dance enthusiast from the *sha'bi* neighborhood of Al-Sayyida Zeinab, stresses the essential dance factor of mulid songs thus: "Mulid songs in general are not listened to. It would be noise pollution if you listened to

25 Danielson's reference, a source I was unable to locate, was Middleton, Richard (1990) *Studying Popular Music*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

them. They are only danced to. If I'm sitting here and you play a mulid song for me, I won't be able to listen to it. I can dance to it, but not listen."[26]

Mulid songs are thus meant to be danced to, and Egyptians readily do so. On a comic home-made video spoof that circulated on cell phones in 2007, their love of dancing is exemplified as both uncontrollable and more representative of nationhood than nationalism itself. The clip shows a spy, hooded and kneeling on the ground before his two weapon-wielding executioners. A statement is made declaring that he has betrayed his country and been sentenced to death, but when the popular *sha'bi* song "*al-'aynab*" starts playing, all three dance together joyously, spontaneously tossing hood, shackles and weapons aside.

Given their dance prerogative, mulid songs are most commonly used in contexts of social dance, which in Egypt are manifold. Mulid songs are danced to at social events that range from the street-side grand opening party of a small business (such as a cell phone store or butcher shop) or a short pleasure cruise on the Nile, to a picnic outdoors or even a simple gathering of friends in a private home, dancing to entertain one another. The communal context is essential, as stressed by *sha'bi* singer Gamal Al-Sobky who says, "There's no such thing as someone who sits alone and dances. Dancing needs *lamm* (close gathering together)." Also essential, yet perhaps a product of this dancing as much as a contributor to it, is a sense of joy. As Al-Sobky further explains, "if you want *haysa*, you have to listen to *sha'bi*." *Haysa* means a loud and raucous time, considered equivalent to an experience of fun and the expression of joy. It is also considered an ingredient essential to the success of many forms of Egyptian celebration, which range from store openings to birthday parties (including the 'birthday' marking the first seven days of an infant's life, *al-subu'*), and the various stages of wedding celebrations. Mulid songs are thus widely used in celebratory atmospheres in which people dance (or encourage dancing by enthusiastically watching and clapping) as a medium of communally enacting joy, and particularly so, but by no means exclusively, in *sha'bi* contexts. (*Al-subu'* and birthday parties, for example, are often relatively quiet and contained indoor affairs, yet in some *sha'bi* neighborhoods they may be held in the street with *haysa* provided by a DJ and mulid songs, flashing lights, and refreshments ranging from soda and cake to beer and hash).

Just as mulid songs developed in the wedding milieu, then, the most common context they are found in is the wedding party, Egypt's ubiquitous, and arguably most socially significant, communal context for celebrating, dancing, and expressing joy. Mulid songs feature in the celebratory atmos-

26 Interview with Ramy 'Al-'Aqil' ('the rational'—so called because he's 'crazy') in Al-Sayyida Zeinab, 27 April 2007.

phere of engagement and wedding events ranging from back-alley affairs in unplanned housing districts to five-star hotel receptions to rural village weddings.[27] And it is important to note that in Egypt most weddings are indeed parties. Rather than the white lace motif, pink roses, and harp music associated with American weddings, for example, Egyptian weddings typically feature disco lights, dry ice, bright, primary colors, and dancing crowds. Muslim marriage rituals are usually performed separately, often far in advance of the wedding that socially marks and sanctions the marital bond, and typically in the privacy of the immediate family. The wedding, in contrast, is a highly inclusive event that is often open to the public in the way of a street party. It is officiated only by DJs or other MCs and lacks speeches or other textual narrative, the entire event being orchestrated by loud music and various shouts of encouragement to dance or clap, from the moment the bride and groom arrive and until they leave.[28] Mulid dance music, then, both draws on and facilitates a collective experience of clamorous joy that is considered essential to Egyptian weddings and intrinsic of their structure. A shopkeeper explains its musical and connotative connection to Egyptian wedding party atmosphere in the following terms:

> This is mulid music. You can only hear it here [at the mulid] and at weddings. At any other time and place it has no meaning; you won't be able to listen to it. These songs are full of raucousness (*haysa)*, uproar (*dawsha*), and clamor (*dawda'*). Weddings (*afrah*) need things with lots of raucous clamor—slow songs won't work. And it needs to be loud to suit the *sha'bi* environment.[29]

This focus on celebratory joy and its public expression is reflected in the Egyptian colloquial term for an engagement or wedding party—*farah* (pl. *afrah*) literally means 'joy'. The concept and enactment of *farah* is perhaps most obviously associated with weddings due to their weighty social significance and everyday pervasiveness among Egypt's family-oriented populace

27 On the topic of mulids, music, and weddings, it also should be noted that traditional, ritual-based Sufi *inshad*, used by listeners in the form of the rhythmic movement accompanying *dhikr*, is performed by famous *munshidin* at certain weddings, mostly in Upper Egypt or those held by migrant Upper Egyptians in Cairo.

28 This framework and orchestration was even the case at a dance-free Islamic wedding I attended (in Shubra, 9 July 2007), where DJs blasted Islamic wedding songs mainly sung in chorus to the accompaniment of Islamically-condoned frame drums.

29 Grocer on Al-Tabbana Street in the historic, *sha'bi* neighborhood of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar, and whose shop faced a DJ station during the mulid of Fatima Al-Nabawiyya, 23 April 2007.

of an estimated 80 million.[30] Given the crowded population and the high percentage of marrying-aged youth, as well as the many highly visible and loudly celebrated public customs associated with weddings (such as transporting the couple's new furniture, picking up the bride from the beauty parlor, touring the city to take photos at scenic sites, wedding processions, etc.) various aspects of weddings and their effusive joy are casually encountered on a daily basis. Yet, through the wedding-oriented development and use of mulid dance songs, the Egyptian *farah* draws on another event in which the concept and enactment of joy is arguably just as essential—the mulid. Even as a spiritual occasion, Sufis convey a feeling of joy at the mulid as being part of the love that is felt, expressed and shared in the realm of the beloved—the saints, the Prophet, and God. Even the toil associated with offering 'services' of food, refreshments, and spiritual-social gathering spaces can be framed by a concept of joy, as expressed by a Sufi tent sponsor who told me that while she never even washes a teacup in her own home, at the mulid she scrubs the very mats and is happy (*farhana*) as she does so. She says that she sits for hours on a low stool cooking in huge pots, but that her body never aches because she is happy, doing it out of love.[31] For other mulid-goers, joy experienced at the mulid is part of having fun and celebrating a change of scenery, of exploiting an opportunity to let one's hair down and enjoy the mulid's party-like atmosphere.[32]

The concept of joy is so entrenched in both the practices of celebrating weddings and participating in mulids that the word *farah* actually crosses semantic boundaries in their respective contexts. The teenaged dancer Ramy, for example, made several slips of the tongue when telling me about his mulid experience, saying things such as "Then we went to another *farah* (wedding)" when he meant another DJ station. And in fact, within the mulid context, *farah* is commonly used to mean both 'an experience of joy' and a type of metaphorical mulid 'wedding' celebration. Both of these meanings are implied in the following quote by a Sufi woman at a mulid as she explains her opinion of the loud dance music played by a nearby band and highly audible in her mosque-side tent:

This is a *farah* and the people act out their joy (*bi-yifrahu*) each in their own way. That girl dressed up in trendy pants is not in mulid dress but rather like that for a wedding or holiday (*'eid*). See how that boy is walking down the street, clapping his

30 July 2007 population estimate according to the CIA World Factbook, accessed online at https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/eg.html on 24 July 2007.

31 Hagga Ragaa', who sponsored a small Sufi service tent beside the mosque at the 2007 mulid of Fatima Al-Nabawiyya, 22 April 2007.

32 See Schielke (2006) for discussion of the concepts of love and fun at mulids.

hands? People eat more than they should, dance about, wave their arms, laugh hysterically as though visiting with a dear old friend. That music is part of the *farah*, and those playing it must be happy (*farhanin*).[33]

With regard to the first meaning of *farah* in the mulid context, that of 'joy', it applies as readily to the spiritual framework as it does to the carnival fun-making. To Sufis, love of the saint is so powerful and pervasive that it touches all those welcomed in his or her presence, and this love is held to be a source of joy that can be experienced in manifold ways. Sufism's inclination towards tolerance allows for the embracing of seemingly disparate manifestations of joy, while the conception of joy as being contextualized by and/or compatible with spirituality also conforms to a general cultural sense that there is no inherent contradiction between being pious and making people happy. Acting with a religious purpose can also seek to bring people joy, as illustrated in a conversation with young men who sponsored a DJ station at an ironer's shop during the 2007 mulid of Fatima Al-Nabawiyya. When I asked why they offered the 'service' of cold herbal infusions and a DJ station with loud speakers, they responded with "To make the people happy *('ashaan nifrah al-nas*)" in the same breath as "For Fatima Al-Nabawiyya." When I further asked why they wanted to make the people happy, I was given the response, "The people are choked (*makhnuqa*); the people are in poor shape (*ta'bana*). We want to make them happy. Muslims love to make people happy."[34]

As for the other meaning of *farah* as a 'wedding', this too is pertinent in both the Sufi and more festival-like contexts of mulids. With regard to the latter, mulids are compared to weddings and major religious holidays (*a'yyad*, sg. *'eid*) because each are exceptionally special, joyous occasions that occur relatively rarely, either once a year or, in the case of weddings from the perspective of those marrying, typically once in a lifetime. Their being long anticipated and set apart from the everyday heightens the uniqueness of their festive atmosphere and the joy felt and expressed in their celebration.[35] In the Sufi context, as a celebration marking the anniversary of a saint's death and union with God, the wedding is in fact an apt metaphor. And accordingly, many of the symbolic traditions practiced at mulids are also essential ele-

33 Hagga Ragaa', see footnote 22.

34 Sayyid Al-Gazzar, Abu Haroun, Hassan Ali, Okal, and Obeida each contributed 35 EGP to host the DJ event and prepared hibiscus and tamarind infusions to distribute to guests at their site a block away from the shrine of Fatima Al-Nabawiyya, 23 April 2007. This was the second year they had hosted this 'service'.

35 A more concrete connection between weddings and mulids is the fact that some musicians and *sha'bi* singers perform in both. See Puig (2006) and Van Nieuwkerk (1996).

ments of wedding rituals—both share forms of the henna celebration[36] the night before; the opening *zeffa*, or procession; and the *sabahiyya*, the morning-after reception. Moreover, female saints are often referred to as *'arusa*, bride, during their mulids, and their tombs are sometimes re-draped on the occasion with white tulle and silver sequins reminiscent of bridal gowns.[37]

The similarities between mulids and weddings with regard to their physical form and practice do not end here, however. In terms of spatial and temporal dimensions, both are night events, and at a glance, their ornamentation is strikingly similar with flashing colored lights, beaded chandeliers, and colorful tent awnings, to the point that when sighting them from a distance, it is not always immediately clear which kind of celebration they are.[38] More immediately pertinent to the mulid dance current, however, is the critical role of rhythmic bodily movement in each. In the spiritual context of mulids, *inshad* is typically used as musical accompaniment for and an aural catalyst of *dhikr*, a communally performed ritual that nonetheless fosters an individual bodily and spiritual experience. This form of standing, swaying movement is an absolutely key element in mulids. In parallel, and as explained by Ramy above, mulid dance music, which draws from this very *inshad*, is an art form that is essentially danced to, and dancing to mulid songs and others is generally indispensable at weddings. While the style of dance particular to mulid songs differs greatly from the movement of *dhikr* in its complex combination of varied moves and focus on sensational performance, the inevitability of its practice when mulid songs are played is reminiscent of the intrinsic relationship of *dhikr* to *inshad*.

Given the many conceptual, metaphorical, and material similarities between weddings and mulids, it should not be surprising that the words *farah* and 'mulid' cross semantic boundaries in both directions. In addition to mulids being termed *afrah*, the word 'mulid' has, since the rise of the mulid dance trend, also become a term of reference for large weddings with an extreme party atmosphere, ones that create a 'mood', in the words of *sha'bi* singer Gamal Al-Sobky. Such events, like the engagement party of Al-

36 The henna party is a type of warm-up to the actual wedding, and can be held separately or jointly for the bride and groom. Music is played and danced to, and prepared henna is displayed in a cooking tin and filled with lit candles; attendees may dye their hands with a piece of it.

37 The wedding analogy is also applied in Egypt to elements of the healing zar ritual.

38 Mulids and weddings also share various aspects of their ornamentation with those of other celebratory occasions and even funerals, as well as official events such as lectures and seminars, in addition to being used as cover-up for construction sites. The most commonly shared decorative element is brightly-colored Arabesque tent cloth.

Sobky's younger brother, do in fact resemble mulids in certain ways.[39] The all-night male-only segment of this event was essentially a huge street-side makeshift cafe (including a staff of waiters in uniform) covering an entire block and featuring a *sha'bi* band hosting numerous popular singers. While guests got stoned, snacked on treats, and ordered beer and water pipes, seemingly independent entrepreneurs made the rounds of the street space selling tea, fenugreek infusions, cigarettes, papers, lighters, trays of roasted seeds and peanuts, tissues, and flower garlands. While some of these items are sold by itinerant vendors or available from makeshift cafés at mulids, more significant was the similar atmosphere of public festivity, of an ephemeral world complete with all the actors and other means necessary to facilitate an experience of joy. It was more than a typical engagement party; it was a kind of outdoor festival—a mulid, as the newly-coined metaphor frames it.

Given the manifold similarities and overlaps between mulids and weddings on a number of levels, then, what is it that clearly differentiates them? Other than their distinct purposes—commemorating a saint and celebrating a marriage—the two forms of celebration are most markedly separated by a spiritual divide. The mulid, despite its many 'secular' aspects, is fundamentally an event with a spiritual origin and purpose, and many of its participants recognize the commemorated saint's *baraka*, spiritual energy, as one that affects all aspects of the occasion. Even though most youth I spoke with for this study were generally skeptical of the concept of *baraka*, one young DJ conceded that proximity to the shrine ensures that even DJ-sponsored dance events at mulids remain free of problems.[40] Yet this concept of *baraka* remains local and material—it is not transferred musically or lyrically through *inshad*, or, consequently, mulid dance songs. *Baraka* is not to be found at weddings, even those hosting Sufi *munshidin*.[41] Instead, the force that connects these two kinds of events remains that of pure joy, one that is perhaps heightened by the marvel of encountering the out-of-the-ordinary in spaces otherwise construed as the everyday.

39 Ahmed Al-Sobky's engagement party was held in Shubra Al-Kheima on 30 April 2007.

40 Interview with DJ 'Alaa' in Al-Sayyida Nafisa, 17 July 2007.

41 This point was strongly affirmed by Sayyid Imam, a musician and singer with years of experience in each of the fields of the zar healing ritual, Sufi *inshad* at both mulids and international festivals, and weddings and other venues for *sha'bi* music, and who stressed that *baraka* and weddings have no relation to each other (Interview in Al-Muqattam, 18 July 2007).

Mulid Music with a Message

But are mulid songs only about expressing joy, only popular because they "have a good beat and you can dance to it"?[42] And does their failure to transmit baraka or the mulid's spirituality mean that they exist outside of a religious framework or are devoid of any mulid characteristics other than that of fun? On the contrary, the songs of Mahmoud Al-Leithy, one of the mulid current's most popular singers, provide an example of a moral-driven and heritage-inspired style he describes as part of his vision for producing music with a message (*al-fann al-haadif*).[43]

Al-Leithy was raised in the mulid milieu, being related to performers in the old Al-'Akif Circus. He tells of traveling mulid circuits across Egypt with his dagger-throwing and gymnast aunts and uncles, and of being taught *madih*, lyrical praise of the Prophet, by his grandfather. By age 10 he was singing on stages at mulids, briefly taking over from the performing *munshid*, a context he still describes as "the most beautiful thing in the world. The best speech that comes out, the most sincere, is that singing [...]. [When singing in this context] I'm happier than all the people present".[44]

Al-Leithy went on to become a *sha'bi* wedding singer, and after Gamal Al-Sobky introduced the *nabatshi*[45] wedding salutation style to *dhikr* melodies, he decided to sing Sufi lyrics to them in a manner that would make people dance. His idea was to make *madih* chic (*madih mitshayyak*). Al-Leithy produced a *sha'bi* dance version of *dhikr*, to which he sang lyrics taken from Sufi *inshad* and others used to frame traditional epic ballads, and the individual track, "*qasadt baabak*" (I aimed for your door) was a huge success. According to Al-Leithy, the album it was included on, *'asforayn*, sold a million copies.

Although certain aspects of marketing to the musical fashion of the moment (and of honoring his *sha'bi* producers) can be found in Al-Leithy's work, the Sufi-, tradition-, and moral-inspired content of his songs rings true to both his upbringing in the mulid milieu and to his own self-proclaimed religious and artistic orientations. Al-Leithy is often described by fans of *sha'bi* music as 'respectable' and 'polite', and he describes himself, in addition to being a *sha'bi* singer, as one who sings *madih*[46], saying that he learnt his art

42 Amber von Tussle in the 1988 John Waters film *Hairspray*.

43 On Mahmoud Al-Leithy and moral content in mulid dance songs, see also Peterson (2008).

44 This and all further references from interview in Imbaba, 25 April 2007.

45 The *nabatshi* is the master of ceremonies who collects gifts of cash and loudly greets and praises those who give as thanks and recognition.

46 The reason Al-Leithy says that he *must* have a *kawala* reed flute in his band is that he sings *madih*.

from *al-shuyukh* (sg. *shaykh*, here meaning *munshid*). And in addition to his songs being widely played and danced to at mulid DJ stations, Al-Leithy continues to attend mulids in person, where he says he is dragged by fans from one popular band stage to the next, performing his moral-imbued mulid hits live.

His second album, *Ya rabb* (Oh Lord), includes, in addition to the religious-oriented title track and others of a moral nature, a song called "*al-anbiya'*" (The prophets) that names and briefly describes 25 different prophets in a romantic, tender tone. A track that DJs say is much in demand at weddings, it is one example of the approach Al-Leithy characterizes as music with a message, his goal being to teach the younger generation about its religion through a medium it enjoys and relates to. Al-Leithy says that his next song will address the five obligatory daily prayers and their spiritual benefits to Muslims, and that he also plans to sing about the Companions of the Prophet. In the coming months he further intends to produce his first video clip, extending his music with a message to a wider audience and possibly bringing mulid musical and lyrical borrowings, via *sha'bi* dance tracks, to the world of television at last.[47]

It is among street-smart youth often preoccupied with reaching or creating a state of *mazaag* that Al-Leithy's morally-driven and tradition-inspired mulid songs have been such a huge success. In contrast to how religious rock music might be received in an American context, for example, the moral content of Al-Leithy's songs is not considered a kill-joy force, just as acting with a religious intent is not seen as incompatible with facilitating the fun enactment of joy. Even as the 'sacred' and 'profane' do not form a dichotomy in mulids, the boisterous fun-making character of most mulid dance music (and the fact that it does not carry *baraka* or spirituality) does not preclude its existence within a larger cultural context in which religion, even at times of merry-making, remains a dominant and unquestioned force.

The actual use of mulid songs sheds some light on how they function within an overarching religious framework. At weddings, mulids, and in other celebratory contexts, DJs typically open their musical event with recorded recitation of the Qur'an, often followed by a popular religious song whose lyrics consist solely of the 99 names of God.[48] At weddings, this is often followed by Western trance dance music and then a slow romantic song, while at mulids, the transition is immediately made to mulid dance tracks. Another way of defining the DJ's aural space as Muslim is the use of a microphone to shout things like "If you love the Prophet, raise your hand!" (whereupon everyone, including those smoking hash, does). Out of respect for the power of

47 On video clips and al-fann al-hadif, see Kubala (2005).

48 Called "'asmaa' allah al-Husna" this song has been recorded by numerous young popular singers including Hisham Abbas and Hamada Hilal.

religious utterances, DJs also turn off their music when the call to prayer is sounded and sometimes leave it off until nearby worshippers have completed their prayers. A final example of the respectful co-existence between the *mazaag*-focused mulid dance current and a larger religious cultural framework is provided by the case of a mulid DJ station that conceded shared aural and physical space to a *munshid* when he was ready to perform, even sharing its speaker system with him.[49]

With the exception of the controversy around Gamal Al-Sobky's first mulid song, there has been no religious outcry over the mulid dance current. Although the dance songs do not transport *baraka* or a sense of spirituality from the source of their inspiration, the mulid, their youthful boisterousness is not seen as counter to religion or as overstepping the boundaries of Muslim sensibilities. Rather, while sanctioned by the permissibility of 'religion' and 'joyous fun' commingling, their actual use and practice takes place within an unquestioned overarching Islamic cultural framework that is reinforced by the DJs and dancing youth themselves. This religious cultural umbrella is one that, on the one hand, allows for the moral songs of Al-Leithy to gain popularity among youth, and, on the other, sanctions the force of joy, spurred on by the informality of *sha'bi* culture, to carry various notions of the mulid into ever more 'secular' social spaces.

Conclusion

A block away from her shrine in Cairo's historic *sha'bi* neighborhood of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar, celebration of Fatima Al-Nabawiyya's 2007 mulid was still going strong following the dawn call to prayer.[50] People of all kinds passed through on their way to and from the shrine and mulid center. Men created spaces in front of their daytime shops to smoke water pipes, drink tea, and observe the late night activity. Families gathered on the wrought-iron balconies of dilapidated Ottoman-era homes to watch the scenes below, and rained hard candies upon street-side revelers. Without prior arrangement, a live band suddenly hosted the popular singer Mahmoud Al-Leithy, and he performed his *sha'bi* dance version of Sufi *dhikr*. Those present at the space's makeshift café clapped in time, while teenager Ramy spontaneously danced on the stage in his unique, eye-catching style. Around the corner, an ironer's shop blasted electronic 'mulid' music from large speakers while a group of teenage boys, some enthusiastically ripping off their shirts, danced energetically. Matronly figures watched on from the street margins, as did a Sufi dervish dressed in

49 This occurred at the mulid of Al-Rifa'i, whose finale night was on 28 June 2007. The *munshid* was 'Adel Al-'Askari.

50 The finale night was on Monday, 23 April, and the dawn prayer time was at 4.47 am.

layers of filthy, oversized *gallabiyyas*.[51] Eventually he rose to interact with the youth through dance, sliding his head and arms from side to side, keeping in time with the rhythm and in sync with the teenager facing him.

Here, at the height of the mulid's post-dawn climax, *sha'bi* dance versions of Sufi *inshad* provided the soundtrack as various dimensions of the mulid met on one street corner. Dancing youth, an itinerant dervish, and families all came together to communally celebrate in an inclusive atmosphere of fun. Those seeking a celebration of local identity, the release of youthful energy, spiritual closeness to the saint and God, or reinforcement of fame, were all drawn together by the joyful mulid dance songs that musically, and through their actual use, combined various essential elements of the mulid experience.

The successful integration of this dance music in the mulid's festive space, as well as its wide-reaching popularity in other social arenas beyond the saint's domain, affirms that the mulid, despite the various pressures placed on it, remains both a dynamic and productive cultural source and an animated social occasion. Music, with its fluid yet powerful nature, is at once able to represent aspects of the mulid, freeing them from the physical and temporal constraints of the saint's domain to enter other social spaces, and to augment the mulid by reaffirming its significance to local *sha'bi* culture and stressing its spiritually legitimized enactment of fun.

Although materially and conceptually centered around a shrine and embodying the various physical and social characteristics of its local place, the mulid is essentially an ephemeral event, a 'happening' of sorts that creates a form of festive space. Because it is a socially constructed space, the mulid can be restructured in other social locales that both outlive the original mulid's temporality and overstep the bounds of its limited geography. It is the *experience* of a mulid that can be, if not relived, reconfigured and applied to other experiences removed from the actual time and place of the mulid event. Although a particular mulid may only take place once a year, and the scope of its celebration may be increasingly restricted by the authorities, various aspects of its fun-loving joy and *sha'bi* identity can be, through their musical representation and dance-based re-enactment, expressed and experienced throughout the year in an untold number of other spaces and places.

It is also as this state of exemplified *haysa* that the musical representation of mulids re-enters the mulid event itself, highlighting its cultural dynamism and celebrating its provision of a framework for merry-making. Through its condensed musical metaphors and the spectacular performance of its dance forms, *sha'bi* mulid songs reshape the festive space of mulids, heightening their focus on the experience of fun. The remixing of Sufi *inshad*, then, in ad-

51 A *gallabiyya* (pl. *gallalib*) is a traditional form of dress for Egyptian men, essentially a full-length, tapered tunic/gown.

dition to reconfiguring the conception of mulids at celebratory events throughout the Egyptian social sphere, also contributes to the remaking of mulids themselves. Young DJs and their dancing audiences, the every embodiment of 'modern' fun-making, serve as cultural actors interpreting and remaking mulids as events that are at once relevant to *sha'bi* youth culture and increasingly expressive of unbridled joy.

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