The *Ibtihalat* in the Digital Age: Public and Private Domains

Heba Arafa Abdelfattah

Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06511, USA; heba.abdelfattah@yale.edu

**Abstract:** One of the most popular cultures in Islam is the genre of “hymns” or “invocations” (pl. *ibtihalat*, sing. *ibtihal*), which has recently been amplified on social media platforms. The *ibtihalat* are Arabic short poems performed by a sheikh known as the “supplicator” (*mustahil*). They air regularly on Arabic TV stations and more frequently on radio stations, especially those broadcasting about the Qur’an, its recitation, and its interpretation. In Egypt, the Qur’an’s radio station, which has millions of followers, launched a YouTube station that airs *ibtihalat* before and after dawn prayer daily. The viewership of one *ibtihal* like that of Sheikh Sayyid al-Naqshabandi’s “My Lord” (*Mawlay*) reached 11 million on YouTube. The *ibtihalat* are also integral parts of Islamic festivities during the two Eids and Ramadan. Focusing on al-Naqshabandi’s *ibtihal* “My Lord” (*Mawlay*), this paper discusses the genre of Islamic hymns as a popular culture approach to study Islam as a lived experience based on the inclusion, not the elimination, of difference. To that end, I explore how the *ibtihal* becomes a domain for contemplating the place of the self in the present moment without the gaze of authority and how this reconfiguration of authority within the self has deep roots in the Islamic notion of “unicity of God” (*tawhid*).

**Keywords:** Islam; music; *Ibtihalat*; Islamic hymns; al-Ghazali; al-Nashabandi; Baligh Hamdi

On 3 April 2021, the Royal Mummies Parade was broadcasted on almost all Egyptian TV channels. The parade was held for twenty-two ancient Egyptian kings and queens escorted to the new Civilization Museum built in the al-Fustat area in Old Cairo. It was a grandiose ceremony, no doubt. The Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi appeared on TV rushing through a long passageway in the museum to receive the royal mummies at the door; he took a military stand to greet them. While his supporters cheered the stance as an assertion of his successful efforts to “make Egypt great again”, his critics interpreted the move as a delusional display of power; a parade of the dead can never out merit the lively protest parade of those who marched to free their country from thirty years of dictatorship and demand freedom and social justice in 2011 (Hirschkind 2012). I want to step here outside the dominant narrative, which focuses either on nationalist identity politics or the political utilization of the event, to underscore, instead, its artistic aspects. It appears to me that the popularity of the parade inside Egypt derives from the glowing public reception of the “Majesty of Isis” hymn, which, despite being sung in a language that most Egyptians do not understand, gained an unexpected cheer of public admiration that surprised even its makers. One reason, I argue, is that the music and the performance style resonate well with the more contemporary and long-standing genre of Islamic hymns known in Egypt as the “invocations” or “supplication” (sing. *ibtihal*, pl. *ibtihalat*) which, since its records started circulating at the turn of the twentieth century, has always enjoyed considerable visibility in the public sphere.

The “Majesty of Isis” was sung by soprano Amira Salim, supported by the live performance of the United Philharmonic Orchestra led by maestro Nader Abbasi. The idea was to replicate the performance of the priests who used to sing the hymn to venerate Isis. The hymn translates as:

O people and gods above
She is the only lady.  
Reverence for Eset (Isis)  
She gives birth to the day.  
Reverence for Eset  
The lady of the west and the two lands  
Reverence for Eset  
She is the great eye of Ra in the provinces.  
Reverence for Eset  
You offer the dear and precious for the king of Egypt.  
Upper and lower  
O, my only lady  
Reverence for thee  

The above lyrics underwent many edits for their meanings to become as accessible as possible to their local audiences. According to Maysara ‘Abdullah Husayn, professor of archeology at Cairo university, who oversaw the project from the beginning to the end, some lines are part of an Isis hymn found in her Luxor’s Deir al-Shelwit Temple near the original burial place of the moved kings and queens. However, the final version is not identical to the original source, which belongs to the genre of “pride hymns,” typically found on the entrance of temples to announce the reasons for venerating the god or goddess for whom the temple is dedicated. Rimon Malak, the manager of the United Philharmonic Orchestra, initially suggested the text when he came across a rare Arabic translation. Still, the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities, Khaled El-Enany, requested new translations and edits. The text was then modified, and since many lines have faded from the temple wall, alternative lines were added (Al-Sharqawi 2021).

The choice to simplify the hymn’s lyrics and make it comprehensible was further honed by nominating composer Hisham Nazih to create the music (‘Abd al-Wahhab 2021). Nazih earned his fame by creating the scores for many Egyptian blockbuster films in the last decades. Titles include, but are not limited to, ‘Adil Adib’s Histirya/Hysteria, 1996, Radwan al-Kashif’s Al-Sahir/The Magician, 2001, Sharif ‘Arafat’s Iks-larj/X-Large, 2011, and Marwan Hamid’s Ibrahim al-Abyad/Ibrahim al-Abyad, 2009, among many other films. Nazih also created the scores for popular TV dramas like Khalid Mar’i’s al-‘Ahd: al-Kalam al-Mubah/The Pledge: The Permitted Speech, 2015 and al-Saba’ Wasaya/ The Seven Commandments, 2014, in which Nazih mixed Sufi with rock music. While Nazih never professionally studied music, he is a proud fan and a student of Sheikh Zayn Mahmud, one of the most famous contemporary performers of ibtihalat in Egypt today (The Film Observer 2020).

The influence of the ibtihalat on Nazih’s music composed for the “Majesty of Isis” appears distinctly in his choice to start by relying primarily on the human voice and gradually introduce simple instruments like the harp, the nay, and then later the oud. It also appears in his constant assertions in different interviews that his music is not meant to be put into the service of rituals. Although he has developed a passion for Sufi music, he is more invested in the impact of group chanting and how similar influences can be achieved in as limited a time as possible. His stance echoes the function of the genre of ibtihalat, which, after all, is despite being categorized as a form of “religious singing” (Al-Faruqi 1980, p. 56) in Islam, is more associated with festivities than rituals. While one can only wait to see if Nazih’s “Majesty of Isis” or other similar projects will continue to enjoy the immense popularity it had achieved, I still doubt that it can at any point compete with the popularity of the ibtihalat. This is primarily because the ibtihalat cannot be appropriated to essentialize the power of the ruler as an extension to the power of God as was the case in the Isis hymn or parade.

The ibtihalat are Arabic short poems performed by a sheikh known as the “supplicator” (mubtahil). Unlike the Sufi “singing” (inshad), the ibtihal is usually a solo performance that
recurs in almost all Islamic festivities, at least so is the case in Egypt. These performances air daily on TV and more frequently on radio stations, especially those broadcasting about the Qur’an, its recitation, and its interpretation. For example, in Egypt, the Qur’an radio station, which has millions of followers, launched a YouTube channel that airs *ibtihalat* before and after dawn prayer daily. The viewership of one *ibtihal* like that of sheikh Sayyid al-Naqshabandi’s “My Lord” (Mawlay) reached eleven million on YouTube alone. The *ibtihalat* are also an integral part of Islamic festivities during Eid and Ramadan. Usually, the official celebration of Eid starts with Qur’anic recitation, which is followed by an *ibtihal* before the beginning, or the end of Ramadan is announced on the TV. The genre produced its own stars like Nasr al-Din Tubar (1920–1986), Sayyid al-Naqshabandi (1920–1976), Muhammad al-Tukhi (1922–2008), Taha al-Fashni (1900–1971), and Kamil Yusuf al-Bahtimi (1922–1969). They share a first-class knowledge of both Qur’anic recitations and “the system of melodic modes” (*maqamat*) used in traditional Arabic music. While the genre is male-dominated (the performance of *ibtihalat* is usually a profession undertaken by an al-Azhar graduate specializing in Quranic recitation), women such as the renowned Egyptian divas Layla Murad (Nassar 2010; Beinin 1998), Shadiya, and Umm Kulthum (Danielson 2008) have also performed *ibtihalat*. While many famous singers today have tried their hands with *ibtihalat*, none of their efforts have succeeded enough to out fame the classic performances. One reason appears to be that their attempts could not replicate the classic performance style of the *ibtihal*, which used to be performed in a public gathering while creating a private space for self-assessment in the public sphere so that that the listener can contemplate the place of the self in the present moment without the gaze of authority. In a way, this made the *ibtihal* itself a domain of for a conceptualization of Islam that is not based on the elimination of difference, but rather on the inclusion of difference, or as Shahab Ahmad puts it, Islam as a human and historical phenomenon characterized and constituted, not merely by immense variety and diversity, but by the remarkable presence of outright contradictions.

One example that I discuss here is “My Lord” (Mawlay), a classic *ibtihal* that Sayyid al-Naqshabandi first performed in 1972. The story of this *ibtihal* starts with President Anwar al-Sadat, who was celebrating his daughter’s engagement near the al-Qanatir al-Khayriyya, a city in the Qalyubiyya governorate. He had invited al-Naqshabandi to perform. Among the invitees was composer Baligh Hamdi (1932–1993), who created some of the greatest hit romance songs in the 1970s and worked with idols like ‘Abd al-Halim Hafiz and Umm Kulthum, among others. Sadat was reported to have said to Hamdi that he wished to see him collaborate with al-Naqshabandi. The latter agreed reluctantly but soon rejected the offer. On the one hand, he had never considered himself a singer. On the other hand, he never performed with instrumental music. He grew up in a family shaped by the Sufi Naqshabandi tradition, which adheres to “a silent form of dhikr”, i.e., remembering God with the heart without speech (Shiloah 1997). Therefore, al-Naqshabandi said that he had only performed with his human voice following the Arabic melodic modes; to perform with instrumental music composed by Baligh Hamdi, who made the best dancing melodies, would be impossible. Al-Naqshabandi also believed that adding instrumental music to the *ibtihal* might defy its purpose and make the performance imperfect. Nevertheless, he eventually agreed to at least listen to Hamdi’s composition and then decide. While it is possible that Naqshabandi could have been pressured politically, it is equally possible that between the moment of rejection and that of acceptance, al-Naqshabandi might have changed his views because Islam’s position on music varies widely. Muslims have produced multiple viewpoints and theological arguments on the lawfulness of music which is often signified in the literature with the Arabic word *sama’*.

Proponents of prohibiting *sama’* are usually backed by the traditionalists known as *ahal al-hadith* (Ziauddin 1972). Most authors in this regard followed the footsteps of Ibn Abi al-Dunya (823–894), the tutor of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu‘tadid (r. 892–902) and his son, al-Muktati (r. 902–908). Ibn Abi al-Dunya wrote the first known treatise on the unlawfulness of *sama’* and titled it *Dhamm al-Malahi* (Condemnation of the Malahi). *Malahi* is a derivative
of lahwh, which translates literally as “pastime” or “diversion”. Ibn Abi al-Dunya seems to be the first to have systematized a pejorative meaning to indicate what he called: “the instruments of diversion.” The word, however, was not always a pejorative term during the time of Ibn Abi al-Dunya. Two contemporaries of his, the geographer and historian Ibn Khuradadhbih (825–911) and the grammarian al-Mufaddal b. Salama (830–905) wrote treatises entitled Kitab al-Malahi (Book of Musical Instruments), dealing mainly with the characteristics, and lexicographical and historical aspects of musical instruments as well as music in general without any pejorative reference to malahi (Robson and Farmer 1938). Since the Qur’an, the major textual source of Islamic theology, does not have a clear statement on music, Ibn Abi al-Dunya made his case for the prohibition of sama’ by relying mainly on a sequence of hadiths (i.e., reports attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), the authenticity of which is not scrutinized. Most of these reports are statements concerning “forbidden pleasures” (malahi) and misbehavior which Ibn Abi al-Dunya classified as incompatible with the performance of religious duties or moral conduct. Thus, based on these reports, Ibn Abi al-Dunya classifies sama’ as a form of diversion that ought to be avoided (Shiloah 1997).

Advocates of the permissibility of sama’ are championed by mystics and philosophers. The philosophers wrote some of the most complex, systematic, and sophisticated literature that explains an elaborate and artistic medieval Arabic music theory. While grammarians al-Khalil Ibn Ahmad (718–791), and al-Kindi (d. 874) wrote the earliest Arabic theoretical works on music (Ehrenkreutz 1980), the most famous book on Arabic music is Abu Nasr l-Farabi’s Kitab al-Musiqa al-Kabir (Grand Book on Music) which treats many issues in ways that are still meaningful today. Al-Farabi’s works, after their translation into Latin in the eleventh century, found their way into the works of several theorists such as Jerome of Moravia and Lambert (Randel 1976; Farmer 1960, pp. 6, 20–22). Another theorist contemporary with al-Farabi was Sa’adyah Gaon (892–942) (Farmer 1943, p. 18). In addition, there is, of course, the treatise of Ikhwan al-Safa on music as well as Kitab al-Algani al-Kabir (The Grand Book of Songs) by Abu Farj al-Isfahani (897–967), which is the most important source for early Islamic music history. A gap in the literature, however, appears after the eleventh century, as a result of the destruction of the Baghdad library by the Mongols in 1258, until the writings of Safi al-Din al-Urmawi (d. 1294), who is known as the founder of the systematic schools in reference to the tuning system which he devised (Ehrenkreutz 1980, pp. 249–65; Van Gelder 2012, pp. 1–9; Wright 1995, pp. 455–78). Many other writers followed, such as ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Ladhiqi (1481–1512). While the philosophers mastered the literature on music theory, mystics took the burden of defending its lawfulness. The mystical position on music, however, is not linear. Overall, it is in favor of sama’ and can be summed up in the following short sayings: “the secret meaning of sama’ is a power that creates divine influence to seek [ . . . ] God” (Shiloah 1997, p. 150). The views of the mystics thus are varied and focus mainly on the content and purpose of sama’. For example, the ninth century mystic Dhu al-Nun al-Misri (796–859) held the view that music does not produce in the heart what is not in it. One of the earlier mystical leaders, Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 996), held the view that “the [singing] voice is an instrument said to carry and communicate meaningful ideas; when the listener perceives the meaning of the message without being distracted by the melody; otherwise, and when the content expresses physical love, [reckless] desire and futilities, the sama’ is a pure diversion and must be banished” (Shiloah 1997, pp. 134–55). Another early Sufi scholar Abu Nasr al-Sarraj (d. 988) distinguished between the sama’ of “the vulgar” and that of “the elect.” The great mystic Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240) distinguished between “two fundamental sama’, the ‘free or soundless’ (mutlaq) and the ‘linked-music’ (muqayyad). He divided the latter into three subdivisions: the ‘divine’ (ilahi), ‘spiritual’ (al-ruhani), and ‘natural’ (al-tabi’i). Those who attain the degree of ‘divine’ speak to God and listen through God because he is active in all what they hear; spiritual listening consists of the ear hearing how all things sing the Glory of God; the ‘natural’ refers to the formal sama’ as practiced by the Sufis, that is actual music. Only a few in old age attain the degree of the ‘soundless;’ they listen with their minds,
very likely through concentration and contemplation” (Shiloah 1997, pp. 134–55). No other group engaged with music in Islam more than the Mawlawiyya order (or the Whirling Dervishes), a movement led by the great poet Jalal al-Din al-Rumi (d. 1207–1273). The order gave the most spectacular and sophisticated music and dance practices in Islam. The Syrian mystic theologian ‘Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi (1641–1731), who was affiliated with the Mawlawiyya, wrote a treatise titled *Idah al-Dalalat fi Sama’ al-Alat* (Clarifying Denotations with Regard Listening to Instruments) in which he defended musical instruments and argued that *malahi* does not necessarily indicate that musical instruments are always for purposes of diversion. Musical instruments, if employed with good intention and for a beneficial purpose, are not harmful. Muhammad al-Dikdikji (d. 1775), a close companion and a student of al-Nabulsi, repeated his teacher’s views and added that “the problem is not in music as much it is in the technical term *malahi*” (Shiloah 1997, pp. 134–55).

In the first half of the twentieth century in Egypt, Mahmud Shaltut (1893–1963), the rector of al-Azhar, which is the most authoritative scholastic institution in Sunni Islam, followed the footsteps of his predecessors and issued a legal opinion in favor of listening to and learning music so long as the practice does not prevent the believers from performing their religious duty. Shaltut argues that the purpose of the divine law is not to suppress natural desires. Divine law aims to limit extremes to preserve moral consciousness and help people carry out their everyday life responsibilities. The principle of moderation and the use of “intellect” (*’aql*) help Muslims reconcile apparent contradictions. God tasks intellect “as His agent in His Creation” (*hujja ‘ala ‘ibaduh*) to discipline nature according to the divine law. The ears are created to be “naturally inclined” (*majbulin*) to enjoy nice sounds just like human hearts enjoy the process of discovering the unknown, the sight of a green landscape, the pleasant smell, and the soft surface. Because God is the creator of nature, it is not possible that God prohibits music and singing, for God’s law does not contradict the nature of God’s creation (Shaltut 1959, pp. 355–59).

It is possible that al-Naqshabandi changed his mind based on Shaltut’s views and thus agreed to go to National Radio Broadcast to meet Baligh Hamdi and listen to his music. There, he was greeted by their mutual friend, renowned radio broadcaster Wagdi al-Hakim. Hamdi asked al-Hakim to leave him with al-Naqshabandi and to come back after thirty minutes. They agreed on a signal to save Hamdi the embarrassment if al-Naqshabandi refused the offer after listening to Hamdi’s music. The signal had to do with al-Naqshabandi’s turban. If al-Hakim came back and found al-Naqshabandi had taken his turban off, then he liked the music. Otherwise, he did not, and al-Hakim was to ask Hamdi to leave and save him the embarrassment. When al-Hakim returned half an hour later, he found al-Naqshabandi without his turban, and the latter said, “Baligh Hamdi must be a Jenni! He composed a piece of music that will last for a hundred years from now.” This *ibtihal*, which is often described as the cooperation between “the saint” and “the sinner”, given al-Naqshabandi’s religiosity and Hamdi’s carefree lifestyle, became an icon of Islamic popular culture in Egypt and many other Arab countries (see note 8). Emerging millennium performers (both Muslims and Christians) sing it. As this *ibtihal* continues to circulate, it now marks the end of the night and the arrival of a new dawn; it airs daily right before the dawn prayer. During Ramadan, it is broadcasted almost every evening as people await the *maghrib* call for prayer to break their fasting. Below is a literal translation of al-Naqshabandi’s *ibtihal* titled “My Lord” (Mawlay):

1. My Lord, I am at Your door spreading out my hands
2. Who else to ask for protection, if not You, my greatest support?
3. My Lord, here I am at Your door
4. When the vestiges of the night dwell in forgetfulness, I remember You; I wake up to talk to you
5. I ask you as my tears wet my whispers to You: how afraid I am and how I seek shelter in the illumination of your face.
6. Those who sought refuge in You will never lose their path.
7. No matter how I face in this world and its contingency, my thoughts of You engage me more than what my body sees.
8. A bitter living is sweet if lived with Your grace.
9. I bear no luxury lived with Your anger.
10. Who else is there for me, if not You?
11. Who else can see through my heart and listen to it?
12. All the creation is a shadow in the hand of the Eternal One
13. Let Your grace forgive my mistakes
14. Let my faith in Your goodness be my intercessor
15. Look at my state, at my fear and my longing
16. Who has more mercy for the human than God?
17. My Lord, at Your door, I spread out my hands
18. Who else to ask for protection, if not You, my greatest support?

The above lyrics were written by songwriter ‘Abd al-Fattah Mustafa, who worked with many popular singers, including Umm Kulthum and ‘Abd al-Wahhab. For a moment, it might appear that the above ibtihal is a Sufi song. Its anthropomorphism revives the debate between the two major theological schools of Islam, the Mu’tazilites, and the Asha’rites, over the attributes of God. Its mention of “fear” and “punishment” invokes the literature on “encouragement” (targhib) and “warning” (tarhib). In addition, one might ask: “Does this text speak for a conservative like Ibn Taymiyya or a Sufi like Ibn ‘Arabi?” And, above all, why is it so popular? While this question does not lend itself to an easy answer, I think it is possible to consider that the popularity and widespread viewersh of this ibtihal is due to its survival as an Islamic popular culture that conceptualizes Islam, not by the elimination of difference but by the inclusion of difference. This is not only evident in the context of its production but also in its classic performance style. The ibtihal is often performed in a public gathering as a monologue addressing what Seyyed Hossein Nasr once described as “the sacred silence” (Nasr 1972, 1976, 2013). The voice of the mubtahil breaks the silence in the public gathering in almost the same way revelation broke the silence of the cave where Muhammad used to meditate, and just like the “call for prayer” (adhan) breaks silence five times a day. The only difference is that the ibtihal simultaneously breaks silence and addresses silence. As people listen and the mubtahil performs a personal spiritual journey, a sort of a one-sided conversation with the divine, two things happen. The performance invokes the experience of what Shahab Ahmad once described as Islam’s message in its pre-text stage, i.e., the revelation stage, which was basically centered on a “monotheism” (tawhid) arising against social injustice and calling for change; this was the pre-Medina stage and the pre-Medina practice (Ahmed 2017). This invocation momentarily neutralizes the text stage (the period of revelation) and context stage (the period of anchoring of meanings). In doing so, the ibtihal neutralizes the entire legal tradition and its gaze that developed historically; it suspends judgment from the self, the peer, and the community.

Here, the participants are not merely those present and listening publicly; it is “the listener and God.” Even the Prophet is outside of this equation. This act of listening publicly in silence and speaking publicly through silence is not passive. Silence creates a private space for self-assessment in the public sphere. Each listener is free to reveal their imperfections to the divine and ask for forgiveness without having to confess their sins publicly. While the ibtihal indeed depicts a journey of submission to the divine, it is also a journey shaped by uncertainty, confusion, and what Paul Heck calls a skepticism that is not necessarily atheist (Abraham’s skepticism) (Heck 2014, p. 4). Here it is important to note that the nature of uncertainty is not the irrational doubt which springs from the isolation and powerlessness of an individual whose attitude towards the world is one of anxiety and hatred (Fromm 1941, pp. 76–77). The idea is not to find certainty by eliminating the isolated individual self, by becoming an instrument in the hands of an overwhelmingly strong power outside the individual. Faith here can be the expression of an inner relatedness to humankind and an affirmation of life; it is not a reaction formation against a fundamental feeling of doubt, rooted in the isolation of the individual and their negative attitude toward
life. It is the rational doubt rooted in the freedom of thinking and which dares to question established views. Faith here becomes a form of “submission” (taslim) to the fact of human limitation, not “submissiveness” (istisalm) to these limitations. In addition, this seems to echo the notion of “consciousness” (idrak) which brought the famous theologian al-Ghazali (1058–1111) (Griffel 2009) to the domain of Sufism when he tried to interpret the verse of light as expressed in the Q 24:35. The verse reads:

“God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is a niche, wherein is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as a shining star kindled from a blessed olive tree, neither of the East nor of the West. Its oil would well-nigh shine forth, even if no fire had touched it. Light upon light. God guides unto His Light whomsoever He will, and God sets forth parables for mankind, and God is Knower of all things”. (Nasr et al. 2015, p. 2287)

Another translation reads:

“Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is as a niche, wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star, kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon light; Allah guides to His light whom He will. And Allah strikes similitudes for men, and Allah has knowledge of everything”. (Moad 2007, pp. 163–75)

Engaging with the scholarly debate on al-Ghazali’s interpretation of the above verse and his fascinating work on the metaphysics of metaphor in his book Mishkat al-Anwar (The Niche of Lights) and the Platonic or neo-Platonic influence on his work is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I find that Egyptian intellectual Zaki Najib Mahmud’s understanding of al-Ghazali’s attempt to interpret the verse to be most fruitful for our purpose here (Mahmud 2020, pp. 23–26). According to Mahmud, al-Ghazali does not interpret light in the above verse as the physical light; he interprets it as “consciousness” (idrak) which varies and takes different forms and levels according to experiences. The first of these forms of idrak is what we learn through the senses. This is what the verse refers to as the “niche” (mishakt), which hosts a “lamp” (misbah) which itself is inside a glass. The lamp here refers to “intellect” (‘aql) which is constantly forming meanings beyond the input provided by the senses. The glass surrounding the lamp aids it. Here the glass refers to “imagination” (khayal) which signifies the ability to preserve/store the input of the senses so that it can be screened by “intellect” when the need arises. The power of imagination functions as the principle or set of principles that unify fragments received by the senses, which process them into “knowledge” (‘ilm) and then reveal the different forms/archetypes/ideals of truth. It does so by again filtering and selecting information that otherwise remains as useless fragments. This imagination is likened to a shining star that gets kindled from a source described as the blessed tree. The tree here seems to be a metaphor for the simplicity of the quest for light, i.e., idrak or consciousness. There is no need to look for it in the East or the West; it is as easily found and as close as an olive tree that derives its power from itself, not from anything outside it; it lights with its own oil which is ready to light even without fire. One just needs to try. This is, Mahmud explains, the origin of idrak, which stands independently. It can be described as intuition or what al-Ghazali refers to as the basira, which is cultivated by one’s ability to act according to her/his better judgment. It is imperative here to note that reason and the laws of the cause of effect are not overlooked here. What is being discussed is idrak in moments of contingency. Here, idrak is in line with Ibn ‘Arabi’s idea, in Fusus al-Hikam, of shifting from faith based on “imitation” (taqlid) to faith that is based on “examination/experimentation” (mu’ayana), which again varies according to a person’s level of interest, knowledge, and experiences (Abu Zayd 2014, pp. 39–42). To Ibn ‘Arabi, reason alone cannot achieve idrak. It is faith through mu’ayana alone that allows the soul to be conscious of the pre-text stage as experienced by prophets from Adam to Muhammad. The idea is not to become a prophet
but to realize the implicit connotations in these experiences, which are seen as words of wisdom.

It is this form of idrak that the ibtihal can potentially engender in the listener. This makes the ibtihal itself an emergent culture that provides a private domain within the public sphere for contemplating the place of the self in the present moment without the gaze of authority. Again, this reconfiguration of authority within the self has its deep roots in the pre-text stage of Islam where there are no mediators (be it a person or a text); it creates possibilities for the believer to focus more on becoming her/his “best possible self,” or what Nasr describes as the Qur’anic notion of “the content self” (al-nafs al-mutma’ina). This is not perfect, but it is more accepting of its human limitations and its need to remember the pre-text stage of the message without being coopted by a state-sponsored Sufism, a project that Sadat seemed to have had in mind when he initially invited al-Naqshabandi to co-operate with Hamdi on the ibtihal of Mawlay.

Studying Islam through the lens of ibtihal as popular culture evades reducing Islam to the politically driven salafist project (the puritans who dominate twenty-first century Islamic discourse and champion the Prophet Muhammad as the founder of a pristine, uniform faith which every Muslim should aspire to replicate). Islam ceases to be a system of permissibilities and prohibitions which achieve salvation for both individuals and society. Simultaneously, Islam is not reduced to the orientalist/Islamist discourse, which underscores the contributions of Muslims to the growth of human civilization by hailing the production of philosophy and sciences among Muslims, drawing attention only to mathematicians, astronomers, and physicists, who lost their battles with the triumph of the literalist school of theology over the rationalist school in the ninth century and hence caused Islam’s supposed civilizational decline. Islam becomes conceptualized as a form of idrak that can evaluate authority (be it religious or secular) to understand its ability to turn Islam into a political and social establishment with the sole mission of preserving the status quo and supporting it through fixed mechanisms of knowledge production.

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**Notes**

1. I refer here to competing nationalist ideologies (Pharaonic, Islamic, and Arabic). For more information see (Gershoni and Jankowski 1986).
2. While hymns are a standard church tradition in Egypt, Christian hymns known as taranim or tasabih have been unfortunately less visible in the public sphere. The most popular in recent years is the “Barik biladi” (Bless my homeland) hymn first sang in 2011 inside the Angelical church in Qasr al-Dubara during Christmas. It was attended by Muslims and Christians and broadcast on Egyptian TV.
3. Amira Selim was born in Cairo. She is the daughter of pianist Marcelle Matta and painter Ahmed Fouad Selim. She studied piano, ballet, and painting and started voice training in Italy. She graduated from the Cairo Conservatoire and later received a scholarship to study in France where she trained with soprano Caroline Dumas. For more information, see www.amira-selim.com. (acessed 8 October 2021).
4. Nadir Abbasi is the founder, artistic director, and principal conductor of the United Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir. In his conducting career Nader Abbassi benefits from his wide professional experience as a singer, bassoonist, and composer. For more information, see https://www.naderabbassi.com/biography. (acessed 8 October 2021).
5 This translation is based on the version provided by Egyptian archeologist Maysara ‘Abdullah Husayn, who posted the text on his Facebook page. The translation is available at the website of Egyptian English magazine Egypt Today. It seems that the original text was first published in Stefan Rüter, Halt Ehrfurcht Vor Der Gottheit: Die Snd-n-hymnen in Den Agyptischen Tempeln Der Griechisch-romischen Zeit, Gladbeck: (PeWe-Verlag 2009). See also (Zabkar 1983).

6 Deir al-Shelwit Temple is an ancient Egyptian temple in Luxor. It is dedicated to the goddess Isis from the Greco-Roman period. Isis generally became more visible as a deity thanks to the Ptolemies who venerated her and built temples for her. The most famous of course is the Philae temple in Aswan.

7 The twenty-two mummies were discovered in two locations, the Royal Cache in Dier al-Bahari and the tomb of Amenhotep II, in 1881 and 1898.

8 More recently Al-Jazeera Network made a short coverage of the contexts of production and focused primarily on the political aspect of the process.

9 One example is performer Mina Nabil who masters the performance of Christian and Islamic hymns (Al-Nahar 2020). He performed “My Lord” (Mawlay) on the “Bab al-Khalq” show, which is one of the most watched Egyptian television shows today. Also I step here outside of the consumption approaches which study popular culture as a mass culture or a superstructure of the industrial and economic base. See (Parker 2011; Adorno and Horkheimer 2002; Jameson 1979; Armbrust 1996).

10 For more details see (Obermann 1935; Watt 1948).

11 An alternative reading in this part will be, “Allah guides to light whoever wishes guidance”.

12 Again, an alternative reading in this part will be, “Allah guides to light whoever wishes guidance”.

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