



On Tuesday, January 9, 2024 at 11am at CEDEJ, **Sophie Frankford** will present her research **Listening to Shaykh Imam: Music, the Egyptian Left and National Belonging**.

**Abstract**

The Egyptian singer-composer Shaykh Imam (1918-1995) holds an almost mythical place in the social imaginary of the Arab left. An icon of dissent, he rose to fame alongside colloquial poet Ahmed Fuad Nigm in the late 1960s with a stream of songs commenting on current events and criticising the failings of successive political regimes. Banned from state media and imprisoned for his oppositional stance, he was embraced by leftist students and intellectuals who invited him to perform at universities and political rallies. His music fell out of favour as the 1980s wore on, resurfacing in 2011 when his songs were once again heard to be consonant with the revolutionary atmosphere of the times.

This talk, based on fieldwork in Cairo with fans of Shaykh Imam who were involved with student / leftist politics during the 1960s and 1970s, and a close listening of his repertoire, explores why this generation of the Egyptian left embraced Imam so wholeheartedly, and why they remain so attached to his songs. Conversational and scholarly accounts of Shaykh Imam tend to focus on his apparently astonishing powers of political mobilisation and his almost superhuman ability to spark protests among even the most apolitical of listener. He is celebrated as an unmediated, authentic voice of the masses, with broad appeal among varied audiences from the educated elite to factoryworkers to the fellahin. I unpack this mythology, exploring how leftists' embrace of Shaykh Imam as their mouthpiece was central in bolstering their vision of themselves as speaking for and from 'the masses'. Identifying with Shaykh Imam enabled his listeners to perform national belonging of a more intimate kind, and importantly, their embrace of him was central to their claims to be the authentic representatives of the Egyptian nation, amidst many competing claims.

**Sophie Frankford** is a postdoctoral fellow at CEDEJ. She holds a DPhil in Anthropology (University of Oxford), a MPhil in Middle Eastern Studies (University of Oxford), and a BMus in Music (King's College London). Her research centres on music in Egypt, with a particular focus on social class, urban space, and issues of modernity. She has taught at the University of Oxford and the Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

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