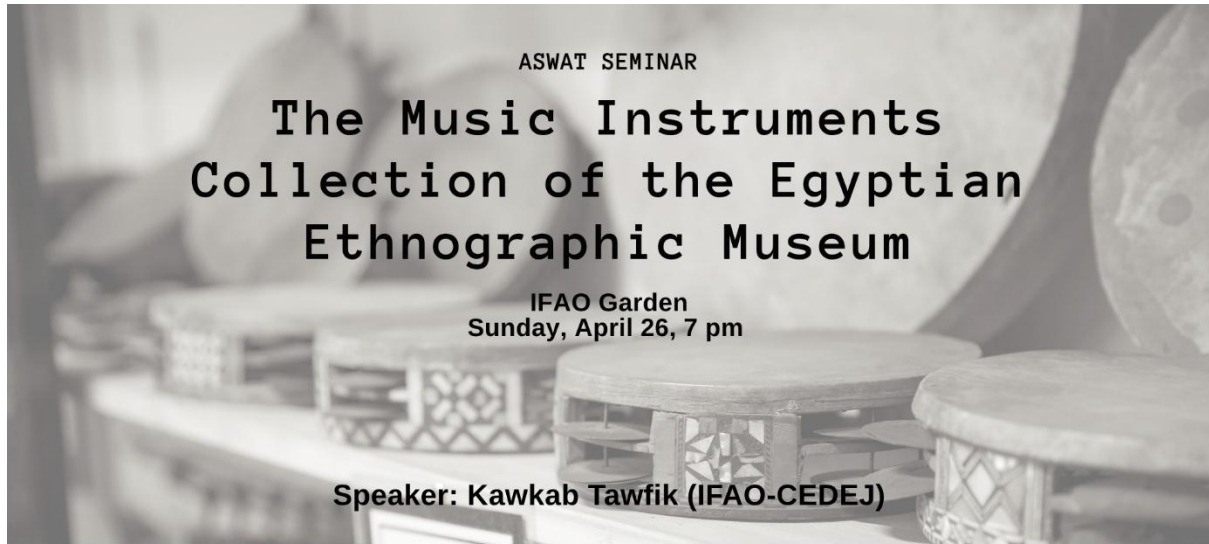


ASWAT SEMINAR SERIES

The Music Instruments Collection of the Ethnographic Museum of Cairo, between imperial knowledge production and emerging national identity

April 26, 2026

[IFAO Gardens](#) - 7pm



The collection of musical instruments within the Ethnographic Museum of the Egyptian Geographical Society can be examined as a lens through which to analyze the intersections of science, colonialism, and nation-building in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt. Established within a naturalist and evolutionist epistemological framework, the museum classified objects according to typological and comparative principles derived from European anthropology. Within this system, *ṭarab* e *shaʿbī* musical instruments—namely a rich set of *nāy*, *kawala*, *arghūl*, *mizmar*, *rabābah*, *riqq*, *mazhar*, *doholla*, *lutes*, *cymbals*, a *qānūn*, *horns*, and *naqrazān*—were categorized alongside other ethnographic materials, yet occupied a distinctive position linking material culture to performance, ritual, and oral tradition.

These instruments were associated with social practices including weddings, religious ceremonies, and itinerant storytelling. As such, they functioned as mediators of collective memory and embodiments of intangible cultural heritage. Their interpretation was shaped by the concept of ethnographic “survivals,” reinforcing narratives of continuity between ancient, Coptic, Islamic, and modern Egyptian traditions. At the same time, their inclusion in both Egyptian and African sections of the museum reflects underlying colonial frameworks, particularly in relation to Sudan. Ultimately, the collection reveals tensions between

classification and lived culture, and between imperial knowledge production and emerging national identity.

The presentation will be followed by *taqasim* performance of Egyptian flutes

Kawkab Tawfik

Kawkab Tawfik holds a PhD in Cultural Heritage from the University of Rome Tor Vergata (2020), with a specialization in ethnomusicology. Her research focuses on the intersections of music, space, and politics, with particular attention to ritual and performative practices in Egypt. She adopts participatory methodologies, working closely with musicians and instrument makers in the Nile Delta. A former Diego Carpitella Fellow at the Fondazione Cini in Venice, she produced a documentary on *Salila*, the zār water spirit. She has also been *membre scientifique à titre étranger* at the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (IFAO), she lectures on the History of Islam at the University of Tuscia and, since 2021, curates the ASWAT seminar-concert series at IFAO and CEDEJ.