



**FEMALE STEREOTYPES IN LEBANESE
CONTEMPORARY SONGS: A CASE STUDY OF TEN
SONGS**

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have shown that popular music is a dynamic medium in the construction of personal and social identities. This study analyses the image of women in ten Lebanese songs produced between 2010 and 2014; each song ranked as big hits. Typical of contemporary popular songs, these songs do not accord to the woman the value of an equal partner of the man. While rarely mentioning the ideas of sharing, exchanging, or reciprocity, they circulate many stereotypes such as the threatened/beaten woman, the housewife won through presents and flattery, the woman under the care of a man, and the woman as an owned and sexual object.

Keywords: Lebanese Songs, Lebanese Women, Lebanese Contemporary Songs, Arabic Songs, Lebanon.

INTRODUCTION

According to Youri Lotman, “art is the language of life, through it reality expresses itself” (Lotman, 1973: 20). Many studies have shown that popular music is a dynamic medium in the construction of personal and social identities (Adorno, 2002; DeNora, 2000 & 2003; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002; Partridge, 2012).

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* Makale Geliş Tarihi: 28.12.2016
Makale Kabul Tarihi: 23.05.2017

“It’s *used* in everyday life to manage feeling and thought”, stresses Christopher Partridge (2012: 182). It is said that music

can be used increasingly as a means by which we formulate and express our individual identities. We use it not only to regulate our own everyday moods and behaviours, but also to present ourselves to others in the way we prefer. Our musical tastes and preferences can form an important statement of our values and attitudes (Hargreaves *et al.*, 2002: 1).

Thus, popular music can shape our conception of our personal identity through the ideas it delivers intensely and repeatedly in a standardized structure (as Adorno argues in the 1940’s). This personal identity is “the accomplishment of a storyteller, rather than the attribute of a character”, argues Jonathan Rée (1990: 1055). The storyteller is, in our case, the lyrics. With the system of meanings they represent, music and lyrics “place us in the social world in a particular way” (Frith, 1996: 121).

The reactions provoked by Muhammad Iskandar’s song “Republic of my Heart” (May 2010) are seen by feminist groups as offensive towards women and are without precedent in Lebanon.¹ However, this phenomenon must not mask the fact that there are different cases of female stigmatization in the songs played on radios and in Lebanese discotheques, which spread widely over the course of a few weeks before going into oblivion and replaced by other songs of the same genre. But there is one difference: the song “Republic of my Heart”, on the charts for more than 10 weeks (from March until May 2010), addresses a socially accepted idea that is rarely covered in songs— the explicit man’s refusal of his wife working; other songs trap women in stereotypes that are socio-culturally rooted. Images transferred by these songs are accepted by the power of being repeated.

Additionally, what makes these images problematic is the fact that they relate to the women considered among the most liberated women of the Arab world: “Most Lebanese women enjoy a climate protective of their rights and freedoms, but more importantly they benefit from an environment conducive to advocating and demanding more rights” (Melki & Mallat, 2015: 442). In recent years, women’s right groups have actively tackled several issues related to gender discrimination by raising public awareness and targeting legislators.

Nevertheless, Lebanese women remain prisoners of a reactionary legislation that is hardly changing and often entrusted to religious communities (the personal status laws).² Their images and roles in the media, as shown by

¹ The Observers (France 24), “Singers tells woman to give up work and focus on their man”, May 18, 2010. Retrieved from <http://observers.france24.com/en/20100518-singer-tells-women-give-working-concentrate-man-iskandar-republic-heart-sexist> (Last accessed September 25, 2016).

² The *Human Rights Watch* World Report 2016 stresses that “women across religions continue to suffer discrimination including unequal access to divorce, child custody, and property rights”.

several studies, are mixed. For example, a recent study about the gender representation in political talk shows in Lebanon shows that women represent less than 10 % of the guests, as well as of people's appearance in monitored news reports. Meanwhile, this rate rises to 54% in the case where women participate in producing news n content (Maharat Foundation, 2015). Another study about women in the contemporary Lebanese Arabic novel indicates that in the last decade, "the woman abandoned her role as a critic over the way men perceive her body, to develop her own personal perceptions instead" but "without colliding with the rigid masculinised moral doctrines" (Hussein, 2016: 370-371).

Moreover, this paper tries to identify the woman's image in ten Lebanese songs written between 2010 and 2014 and performed by different singers and ranked as big hits. Although the video clip of this song can effectively demonstrate this image, we will stress only the linguistic part. We will first present an overview of the evolution of the contemporary form of the Arabic song to identify the production context. In a second step, we will display our corpus of songs, along with both the performers and the composers, before concentrating in a third step on the explicit content of the songs. Also, with the adoption of the qualitative approach of content analysis, statements reflecting a certain socio-cultural conception of women, their role(s), and their relationship to men will be considered and categorized as general characteristics in relation to these reflections.

1. THE CONTEMPORARY ARAB/LEBANESE SONG

After several centuries of decadence, the renaissance of the classical Arab song can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century (occurring during the *Nahda*, or Arab revival); it rests on the vestiges of the Andalusian heritage as well as on the religious *muwashah* and the Koranic Psalmody. However, it is the period from 1925 to 1975 that comprise the golden age of the contemporary Arab song represented by Sayed Darwish, Muhammad Abd-el-Wahhab, and Umm Kulthum (Sahhab, 2009). In fact, this transitory period was engendered, among other things, by the proliferation of mass media (radio and cinema):

The impact of the vinyl record was evident on the disappearance of certain forms of singing and the imposition of others, between 1921 and 1927. These impacts were the object of vivid criticism from writers, thinkers and literary figures, who saw in them a catastrophe befalling the art of singing in Egypt (Sahhab, 2009: 133).³

Retrieved <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/lebanon> (Last accessed February 25, 2017).

³ It should be noted that before the 1930s, the Egyptian song was the only dominant song in the whole Arab world – including Lebanon – if we do not consider the folkloric song genre. In Lebanon, after the independence in 1943, the authorities attempted to create positions at the heart of the radio to control the songs' lyrics, encouraging the writers to compose using the Lebanese dialect (Sahhab, 2009: 141).

The Consumer Song

However, while this transition (taking place at the beginning of the 20th century) was a continuation of a recent heritage, there is some agreement among researchers on the idea that the last quarter of the 20th century constitutes a real decline of the Arab song (in all its identities). This decline is correlated with, among others, an increasing recourse to occidental electronic instruments and to the increasingly marked distancing from the classical Arabic language (and, consequently, from poems in formal language) in favour of local Arab dialects and the cultural industrialization process, which produces an endless parade of popular yet almost generically identical songs. We call to mind “commercial”, “degrading”, “consumer” and “mercantile” songs (when it comes to both the music and lyrics), to which a great part of singers and composers from the “golden period” give in.

The *taqtuqa* then becomes the dominant Arab song towards the end of the last century— a light vocal genre sung in dialect and already present at the beginning of the 20th century, which was already described in 1924 as “miserable” and “moribund” by the Lebanese musicologist Alexandre Chalfoun. Chalfoun denounces it as “an epidemic that should be stopped whatever the cost” and that it has “swept all the other learned music” (including *dawr*, *muwashah*, and *mawwal*⁴) to which he denies any artistic qualifications (quoted in Poché, 1994).

Had these genres existed during the same golden period, the *taqtuqa* would not have been considered as an absolute evil. The elementary call for a repetitive rhythm, an evasion song, an unexpected story, “is revealed as the indispensable addition to a balanced mental life. There is here a healthy exercise of normality”, stresses Umberto Eco, “as far as it represents a breaking moment. The drama of mass culture is that the ideal of the breaking moment becomes the rule” (Eco, 1965: 25). This rule to return to our “woman” can idealize the passions and the themes that it guides. As Tia DeNora stresses it, “music may serve as an ideal of where one is going, or where one ‘ought’ to be emotionally (...), in a way that individuals may say to themselves something in the order of, ‘as this music is, so I should or wish to be’” (2000: 158).⁵

In this circle of influence, the feelings become, in a way, the “raison d’être” of the music from which the term “sentimental song” is derived. This applies to our corpus of songs, which represents the mentioned contemporary Lebanese

⁴ These are more elaborate musical genres “inherited from the 19th century” (Sahhab, 2009: 18), using classical Arabic poems for *muwashah*, the Arabic dialect for *dawr* and *mawal* (see Abou Mrad, 2004), and usually based on traditional Arabic instruments such as the *oud*, *qanun*, *kamanja*, *nây* or *riq*.

⁵ I often see my students using the songs’ lyrics to express a state of mind towards their partner in the virtual public space (their status on *Facebook*, tweets on *Twitter*, and nicknames on *Messenger*). I had the chance to ask some of them about their reasons, and the answer was usually the same: “This song expresses what I feel or what I want to express in the best way possible.”

songs that are dominating yet despised. We should mention that before tackling our corpus, alongside this popular consumer song, exists a song, although short, that offers quality lyrics and remarkable music.

The Ten Songs Analysed Songs in the Study

For our paper, we have selected ten songs (a purposive sampling) that directly deal with women's issues, are sung by masculine singers, and ranked as big hits (and usually filmed as music videos). Produced during the period from May 2010 to March 2014, these songs are:

	Title	Year	Lyrics by	Music by	Singer
Song 1	[<i>Jumhûriyit 'albî</i>] (Republic of my Heart)	2010	Farès Iskandar	Salim Salameh	Muhammad Iskandar
Song 2	[<i>Kibrâni bi-râsâ</i>] (She Makes the Big Head)	2012	Mounir Bou Assaf	Hisham Boulos	Najy al-Osta
Song 3	[<i>Larmîk bi-balâsh</i>] (I Will Throw you for free)	2013	Adel Raffoul	Wassim Boustany	Nasif Zeitoun
Song 4	[<i>Ya kill ad-dinî</i>] (You're the Whole Existence)	2012	Mounir Bou Assaf	Hisham Boulos	Joseph Attiyeh
Song 5	[<i>Al-Banât al-awâdim</i>] (The Good Girls)	2011	Farès Iskandar	Salim Salameh	Najy al-Osta
Song 6	[<i>Izâ Allah 'atâni</i>] (If God Gives Me)	2012	Jihad Hadchity	Jihad Hadchity	Hisham al-Hajj
Song 7	[<i>'Am assis hâlî</i>] (I'm Building Myself)	2011	Adel Raffoul	Wassim Boustany	Amer Zayyan
Song 8	[<i>'Am dawwir 'a 'arûs</i>] (I Am Searching for a Bride)	2013	Salim Assaf	Salim Assaf	Farès Karam
Song 9	[<i>Ghîri kbîri</i>] (Big Jealousy)	2014	Farès Iskandar	Farès Iskandar	Majd Mousally
Song 10	[<i>'Assabt 'ayhâ</i>] (I Was Angry at Her)	2013	Farès Iskandar	Maher al-Ali	Rabih Gemayel

The Singers

The singers of the songs comprising our corpus belong to two different generations. On the one hand, we have Muhammad Iskandar (1960), known since the late 1980s, and Hisham al-Hajj (1975) and Fares Karam (1973), both known since the mid-1990s. All have highly appreciated vocal capacities. On the other hand, we have the other singers, younger than the aforementioned, who have only recently entered the musical scene: Najy al-Osta (1978), Majd Mousally (1990), Rabih Gemayel (1988), Amer Zayyan (1988), Joseph Attiyeh

(1986, winner of the 3rd Star Academy⁶ edition in 2005), and Nasif Zeitum (1988, originally from Syria⁷ and winner of the 7th Star Academy edition in 2010).

Despite the academic and vocal potential, which have distinguished some of these singers during musical reality TV programs where they sang classical songs, their production has completely moved away from this category, becoming exclusively based on the consumer songs that dominate the Lebanese airwaves and public places.

The Songwriters

The young writers of the songs in our study apply the conditions for “consumer” success. They are highly visible in the media, holding interviews and giving advice and “worthy judgments”, work in teams and multiply their production: Farès Iskandar (whose name is normally preceded by the title of “poet”), the son of the singer Muhammad, collaborates with the composer Salim Salameh (they co-authored two of our ten songs); Iskandar wrote another two songs mentioned in our study; and Mounir Bou Assaf collaborates with the composer Hisham Boulos, collaborating on two songs. We also have two songs co-authored by Adel Raffoul (writer) and Wassim Boustany (composer), and Salim Assaf writes and composes songs and sometimes performs them. In summary, these recurring collaborations translate into the pre-eminence of our writers and composers over the popular song industry, which reflects a disposition for stereotyped production.

We should finally stress that our singers and writers belong to different social and sectarian backgrounds, which gives our results a national dimension that surpasses sectarian specificities, although these do, in fact, influence the role and the place of women on both judicial and social levels.

2. The Stereotypes of Women in Analysed Songs

Very typical of contemporary songs, these songs do not depict women in equal partnership to men. They circulate the following stereotypes of women.

The Threatened Woman, the Beaten Woman

In song number 2, the man is complaining about his woman “who becomes stubborn and refuses to talk to him anymore”. “May God forsake me if I don’t let her see stars at noon”, he threatens before he swears that she will “beg” him soon to bring her back to him. The singer believes that his wife has a lover who is “in complicity with her mother”, so he goes against her: “‘Pick up’ your daughter when her lover ‘gives her back’ tomorrow (throws her away). In the second and last couplet, he is more furious, and his warning implies violence:

⁶ This is about the Arab version of this international program produced in Lebanon.

⁷ Even though the singer is not Lebanese, we have kept Nassif Zeitoun’s song in our corpus because both the writer and the composer are Lebanese, and the song was recorded in Lebanon.

“May she drown in her tears, may she return distressed, she will wake up soon with a slap mark on her face.” Cases of violence perpetrated against women are frequent. Indeed, it was only in August 2011 that Lebanon repealed article 562 of the criminal code, which reduced sentences of people who claim they killed or injured their wife, daughter, or other relative to protect the family ‘honour’. More recently, in December 2016, the Parliamentary Committee for Administration and Justice announced an agreement to repeal another article (522), which stops prosecution or execution of a penalty if the person who has committed rape, kidnapping, or statutory rape marries the victim.

It is worthy to mention that the abundant use of degrading expressions, in informal language and consequently in songs, denotes a masculine superiority often accepted by women. The man in song number 7, for example, “thanks God because he has shown me, since the beginning, that you [his girl] are not human”. Because she has met another man, he asks her to “get lost”.

In song number 10, the man “was angry at his girl because he is jealous of his shadow” while “tears flowed from her eyes”. However, he discovered later that “she wasn’t actually agitated”, and indeed “she was happy of my reaction” and “pretending she is sad just to ignite my heart”. Another stereotype is making women accepting of a jealous reaction, or even a violent one, thus demonstrating the “manhood” of the man— a manliness (he speaks of the “virility of his heart”) that pushed him to “remain serene” while his wife “was crying”.

The “Housewife” Won Through Presents and Flattery

In song number 1, Muhammad Iskandar refuses to allow his wife (in the song) and his daughter (in the video clip) to work.⁸ In accordance to the song, the woman’s place is at home:

We do not accept the fact that our daughters use their diplomas to work; where we live, the girl is spoiled and everything is at her service. Your work is my heart, my feelings and my affection; you will have no time to do something else: all you need is to be the President of my heart, as the song says.

We can ask ourselves what is the value of a woman’s diploma if she does not work, other than to increase her husband’s status.

Song number 5 also reflects the concept of the housewife. After having found the woman of his life (he mentions the circumstances later in the song), the man wants her to “understand him, to take into consideration his work conditions, his travels and the fact that he comes back late at night”. She will be present to “raise *my* children in a good way” (the man of song number 8 also wants a bride who “will raise *my* son”) and “to make herself beautiful for me”. Is the writer here not implying what was explicit in song number 1— the one that

⁸ Note that Lebanese women have no legal restrictions to any occupation or profession.

lead to feminist manifestations— that is not allowing his wife to work, making him the sole income provider? Thus, paid work is an exclusive male activity: “A working woman, that is economically responsible, is an aberration in a system, where women are defined as passive and obedient because of their financial dependency” (Ait Sabbah, 2010: 39). Therefore, men who get married want a home but stay capable of escaping it whenever they want to: “Men are citizens, producers before being husbands, women on the other hand are first of all, and often exclusively, wives” (De Beauvoir, 1976: 277).

On the other hand, as stressed by Thorstein Veblen (1979) and Jean Baudrillard (1972), in a patriarchal society, women’s luxury testify to their master’s legitimacy or social privilege. This is acquired through presents, money, and flattery, and is the case of the man who would “burn money for his woman” and the man who is going to work hard to fulfil “his dream” that will also be his wife’s. It is as if the man declares, “We both have one dream, this dream is mine”.

He will do everything, materially speaking, to satisfy his wife (song number 5). Also, the man of song number 6 promises to give his wife everything— “trips,” “jewels,” “flowers,” and “for her anniversary, the moon”— “if God gives him [money].” As John Fiske stresses, “Jewels are the coins by which the female-as-patriarchal-commodity is bought, and wearing them is the sign both of her possession by a man, and of his economic and social status” (Fiske, 1987: 13). For these reasons, the man of song number 8 is looking for a bride who “will make me proud” and “make my parents happy”.

As for the man in song number 7, his wife has left him because he was not able to buy her presents. He complains to her, saying, “I am still young, and still building myself, I run alone; you should be content with this situation and stop being so demanding”. He reproaches her for lacking patience regarding his financial situation: “You want this; you want that! You think I am a rich boy!”

The fact that the husband is the sole provider, in addition to his presents, determine to a great extent the level of obedience the wife owes to him. A religious text stresses that “Men have authority over women by (...) what they spend for maintenance” (Qur’an 4: 34). This financial dependency results in the fact that women have the least negotiating power, less possibilities to leave the marital relationship, and are thus susceptible to be forced to suffer an oppressive relationship (Bereni et al., 2012: 175-176). The role of the wife is thus limited to reproducing, educating the children, and satisfying her husband’s needs in the private space where she functions, i.e. home (the man of song number 8, searching for a bride, is looking for a woman who “will kill herself to make me happy, if she found out that I’m sad”). Another religious text requires women “to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands (...)” (New Testament, Titus 2: 5).

The Woman “Under the Care” of “Her” Man

Many songs explicitly describe this obedience. Song number 4 comprises less tension on the man/woman exchange since it revolves around a man who is addressing his sister on her wedding day. Hence, the images revealed through these lyrics reflect the image of the woman-sister. However, the masculine dominance is still clearly expressed in the transmission of the authority, which is practiced over the woman, between the family and the husband once her relationship status shifts from being single to being married: “From your parental home, I take you to live in *his* home and to live in a heart that watches over you throughout your life.” The marital home is also the husband’s in a society where the “tools” of marriage, especially the home, are always for the man to acquire. Song number 7 also carries this idea that after a breakup, the man asks the woman to “start packing”. In Lebanon,

the husband is the head of the family and is declared its guardian by law; the wife, on the other hand, is obligated to live in the domicile of her husband and to follow him wherever he chooses to reside (Shehadeh, 2010: 217).

In song number 10, the girl tells her man that she is “the youngest child of her family house” and, consequently, “a little bit spoiled”. So, she asks him, “be careful with me” and “protect me as my father did”. She adds, “I loved you because you resemble my father”. Song number 5, mentioned earlier, treats the family protection theme as well. It is because she did not give him “neither her name nor her phone number” the singer concluded that the girl “is from a good family” (literally, “a house girl”⁹), he who “thought that the girls of good families” (the song’s title)— namely the non-emancipated girls— “do not exist anymore”. The singer says, “her mother told her: move, don’t smile to a stranger” before he gets astonished: “Where could we find, in these days, girls obeying their mothers?” He concludes: “While I have sworn to never get married [for lack of good girls], this girl made me think again about this decision, without opening her mouth.” The man sees in this a promise of subordination, as long as the scene takes place in a public space. Bourdieu stresses that in a masculine society, “looking at the face, staring in the eyes of others, as well as speaking publicly are the man’s monopoly” (1998: 32-33). This situation reminds us of old times, when people used to get to know their partners on the wedding day. In fact, a majority of men solicit inexperienced virgin girls¹⁰ who are under the care of their families.

The Sexual Object

The singer of song number 1 clarified in his first couplet the reasons for not allowing the woman to work. It is about her physical beauty and her boss’s feelings:

⁹ This term exists abundantly in the lyrics of the Lebanese songs.

¹⁰ While the experience for men is highly recommended as is the case of the man in the song number 8 who is seeking a woman by whom “he will become a good boy”.

It will be for your own good to omit this idea that will only bring you problems because, even if I accept that you work, what will I do with your beauty? [When] tomorrow the director will fall in love and his sensations “will start out”.

Thus, the video clip and the lyrics reflect another stereotype of the woman: a sexual object. The singer continues: “It is normal in this case that I knock the company down over his head” before he plunges in a total egocentricity: “I respect women’s rights, but if you can take my feelings into consideration” and “what is that job that is going to separate us. Damn the money! I will burn it for your beautiful eyes”. The woman is thus deprived of having aspirations. She is reduced to physical sexuality. The video clips of most these songs confirm this notion.

The man of song number 8, in pursuit of “a bride”, wants a woman “whose perfect body could make a heart attack” (for people who see her): “If she walks, there will be dead and wounded persons whenever she puts her feet on the ground.” Therefore, the woman's physical traits are praised in most of the songs.

The Woman as an Owned Object

Beyond the representations mentioned above, it was curious for us to notice the usage of the verbs “to buy” and “to sell” to signify, respectively, a couple’s union or separation. These two terms are abundant, particularly in the Egyptian songs. To plead a polysemous term seems reasonable, especially if the use of these terms is reciprocal (although we thought that the use is mostly masculine, this statement exceeds the limits of our research). However, in one of the ten songs that make up our corpus (the song number 3), the verb “to sell” is clearly used in its common meaning (commercial meaning): “No, I will not sell you, but I will throw you for free” (this second expression forms the song’s title), as far as the singer insists on the fact that “the price is deceptive”. This only means that the woman is an object to be possessed. In her study of personal status codes in Lebanon (held exclusively by the religious authorities and generating many forms of discrimination against women), Lamia Rustum Shehadeh demonstrates that, in all eighteen sects, “since the purpose of marriage is sexual relations and reproduction, and since the husband has already either paid (*mahr*) or was paid (*dowry*) for this right, it is only natural that he should own the property in toto” (Shehadeh, 2010: 218). However, discriminatory laws “do not necessarily reflect the daily lives of Lebanese women and men” (*idem*: 224).

Besides these five stereotypes, we have spotted in a song the image of the emotional woman versus the reasonable man. In fact, the man of song number 9 dumped his girl because of “a big and dangerous jealousy”. “You are crazy, may God save me from your craziness”, he adds. While he advises her not to be “so innocent” by “revealing everything (about her feelings) to everyone”, he assures her that “if I want to make you cry, to cheat on you with another girl, neither you nor a hundred of intelligent people like you, can ever catch me”. By being separated momentarily (taking a break from the relationship), he seems to be in

complete control of his feelings, assuring her of his love, whereas “her tears flow daily”.

3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, in analysed songs, the ideas of sharing, partnership, exchanging and reciprocity do not exist. But it is justifiable to ask ourselves the following question: Do these songs really reflect the actual reality of the Lebanese women or must we observe a gap between reality, and a relatively stagnant “art” (particularly the consumer song— an art that, in its linguistic and thematic choices, “follows a logic of formulas of its own”, where “a song copies the other, forming a chain, almost because of style necessities, exactly like certain determined market movements, independent from individual will” (Eco, 1965: 21)? Is it about a cultural problem, related to a linguistic support (seen in McLuhan’s thesis (1964) “the medium is the message”) – here we mean the Arabic language – which with its formulas and syntactic structure, conveys what is said even before it is said?

Other studies seem clear in answering this question. However, it is clear that the models proposed by the songs tend to convince the woman of assuming socially constructed functions. As the media reception studies show, “musical texts, or, more broadly, musical materials, are by no means neutral. They are created and distributed in ways that employ and reinforce meanings” (DeNora, 2003: 45). They participate in the creation (or in the maintenance) of a state of mind pertaining to self-image or self-identity in correlation with what the texts promote: “Music is not simply used to express some internal emotional state. Indeed, music is part of the reflexive constitution of that state” (DeNora, 2000: 57).

Despite the fact that women in Lebanon have no legal restrictions, as seen in other Arab societies, several clues – some of which were mentioned above – do not make us optimistic regarding the place of women in this country. In Lebanon, the female representation in the parliament does not exceed 3% (only one woman figure appears in the last 30-member Cabinet, which was formed in December 2016), social organizations remain patriarchal, and the impact of religious authorities is increasingly felt and radicalized.

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Song 3:

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Song 4:

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Song 10:

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