Chapter 8

Merchants and *Mujahidin*: Beliefs about Muslim Saints and the History of Towns in Egypt

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Introduction: History and Folklore

In Egyptian anthropology, folklore is considered to be a creation expressing the spirit and symbols of popular cultural attitudes in everyday life. It is considered to determine the immediate relationships between man and environment, between people interacting with each other, and between people in their material, social and intellectual worlds as represented by symbols in language, art and religion.

There are cultural generalities that are shared by local people and, more specifically, there are different attitudes which are related to gender, age, class, occupation and geographical location. Although people inherit the values and beliefs that feature in the symbols, tales and rituals, they also change these values and beliefs and use them in different ways.

Popular beliefs and practices draw on the past and interpret it with respect to present daily life and future expectations. It is increasingly acknowledged today that popular beliefs represent a mixture of folklore, religions and other forms of knowledge. However, they also transport the belief in supernatural powers that can be avoided or controlled through rituals that repel evil creatures and invite benevolent ones. Based on the German tradition of *Volkskunde*, Muhammad al-Gawhary has introduced folklore studies as a specific approach in Egyptian anthropology. Today, however, American approaches to folklore studies, such those developed by Alan Dundes (1992) and Michael C. Howard (1995), exert significant influence in Egypt.

With respect to history and its impact on folkloric expressions as they relate to the cultural nature and collective personality of people, the influence of German *Volkskunde* and, specifically, the Munich School, which was concerned with the history of beliefs, and modern continuities in language and art (Brandish 1992: 60-65), remains influential. This approach goes back to the *Volkskunde* studies of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Herder attached major significance to the inherent relationship

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between the formation of personality and popular traditions. He argued that folk tales contained representations of community principles and local history, law and morality. For him it is a kind of poetry that emerges spontaneously from the conditions of life at the moment of redemption, and people express it in a simple spirit, each individual considering it a real expression of himself or herself (cf. Oring 1994).

It is important to note that the specific dimension of locality is important within these traditions of folklore studies, which largely deal with modern identity formations. In this framework, it becomes possible to map mentalities on the basis of an historical-geographical view (cf. Dundes 1980: 18-20). As opposed to this, it has been debated whether it is still possible to sustain a pure identity/history relation. The notion of the past changes and folklore is seen to represent only a certain period that the community sees as particularly important for it (e.g. Ben Amos 1971).

Based on these discussions of Egyptian folklore studies, in this study, I will lean on this concept of change. I will concentrate on the tales about a *wali* (saint) and shift the ritual aspects of celebrating the *awliya'* into the background of my analysis. Visiting the shrine, offering votives, and celebrating the *mulid*, the annual saints-day festival, are key elements of the veneration of a saint. However, there is difference in the way rituals are performed and symbols used. These differences are mainly dictated by the specific character of each *wali*. My argument here is that each town has created different *wali* characters and related to them a special historical imagination. Some of these *awliya'* are associated with ruins of ancient cities, such as Abdallah Ibn Salam near the well known Tell el-Rub', which is the ancient town of Mendes, the capital of the sixteenth nome in old Lower Egypt. Tell al-Muqdam (Busiris), which was the capital of the 19th nome in old Lower Egypt and is located near to Mit Ghamr, hosts the shrine of Al Muqdam Ibn al-Aswad (Selim Vol. VI: 407-408). Some villages are related to the Coptic history, for example Bussat al-Nasara and Tonnamel where tales about Maria the Copt and Caliph al-Ma'mun are found.

It is believed that *awliya'* (saints) are people who performed *karamat* (miracles and extraordinary deeds). These *karamat* may have taken place during their lifetime or after their death. Examples of these *karamat* as described in hagiographies and vernacular traditions include travelling away and returning on the same day, walking on the surface of water, and curing serious illnesses without medical intervention. Since saints are believed to have a special relationship with God, people ask them to act as intermediaries between themselves and God so as to bring blessing to people. While present in localized Muslim cults around the world, this phenomenon also has deep roots in ancient Egyptian culture (Hassan 2000: 219-220). Old beliefs and practices continued and featured in the life of people in different periods, although they were often sub-

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ject to restrictions imposed by and confrontations with orthodox religious and state institutions. An important question, therefore, concerns the reasons that lead to the continuation of the phenomenon of belief in *awliya'* and the role played by saints play in local communities and their historical imagination. An equally important question is how people adjust and redefine the cults of *awliya'* in the face of opposition from religious movements opposed to the veneration of saints. I will attempt to answer these questions below by explaining the relationship between the tales about *awliya'* and the history of al-Mansura, the capital of the ad-Daqahliya Governorate.

Al-Mansura and its Saints

Some of the *awliya'* of al-Mansura are related to the Crusades and Mamluk sultans. Others can be traced to the period of the British occupation and mixed courts which were intended for foreigners. Some of them were leaders of neighborhoods or cemetery guards. Their lineage may be traced to Ali ibn Abi Talib and Abu Bakr al-Siddiq. Some are martyrs of the Islamic conquests, others are leaders of Sufi *turuq* (orders), or natives of those villages who were famous for their piety or were exposed to injustice and oppression during their lives. Some were been *magazib*, divinely insane men and women, and finally some may be legendary characters representing the symbols of nature.

Daqahliya Governorate extends in a plain with a rural nature. It is divided into a number of districts along the Damietta branch of the Nile. Most of the districts are located on the east bank of the Nile, and a few of them are on the west bank. Al-Mansura became the capital of the Governorate at the beginning of the Ottoman rule. It was originally built by King al-'Adel Abu Bakr ibn Ayyub in 1218 A.D. during the 5th Crusade when Damietta was captured by the Crusaders. He stayed there until the Crusaders left Damietta. During the 7th Crusade in 1248 A.D., King al-Kamel Ayyub stayed in Al-Mansura. That decisive battle ended with the capture of King Louis IX of France in Ibn Luqman House (al-Maqrizi 1974: 194-210). Those incidents had their apparent effects on the popular mentality that wove a lot of tales on the *awliya'* related with that period.

Sufis played an important role in leading the popular resistance against the Crusades. According to the legend, Abu al-Hassan al-Shadhili, the founder of the Shadhiliyya *tariqa* in Egypt went with some Sufis to Al-Mansura to urge people to fight (Mahmud 1984: 19). Thus those Sufis were related in the popular thought with piety and supporting Islam, and shrines were built for them throughout the city.

In the Middle Ages, Sufis played an important role in spreading beliefs about *awliya'*. They spread tales about the *karamat* of those *awliya'*, and contributed in building shrines in other towns and villages. The State and the reli-

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gious establishment, both closely associated with Islamic mysticism, where largely supportive of the veneration of *awliya'*. All classes of the people believed in sacredness of *awliya'*, because of their descent from the Prophet (peace be upon him) or a spiritual genealogy leading back to him. The rich were keen to build shrines for them at their own expenses to be buried beside major saints in the hope that the latter would intercede for them in the afterlife. Members of the ruling class were equally keen to build their tombs beside those of *awliya'* (The tombs of the royal family, for example, are located beside the shrine of Abu Shibbak in ar-Rifa'i Mosque in Cairo). Since the beginning, the shrines build around tombs were commonly attached to mosques. But some shrines were built inside markets, where a shrine was the center of the market, and a place where poor classes would gather for relief and cure, and to ensure blessing for their transactions.

With the multiplicity of Sufi *turuq*, the characters and symbols of *awliya'* became very diverse. With the growth of the city the number of *awliya'* increased and their characters varied. Belonging to all classes and categories (Ben-Ari/Billu 1987), some of them were members of Sufi *turuq* (Shadhiliyya, Rifa'iyya, and Burhamiyya) or ordinary people. The *wali* could be free or a slave, white or black, a man or a woman.

The members of all classes had a chance to turn into *awliya'* after their death, and thousands of folk tales have been told about their piety and *karamat*. Although those tales were a kind of literary creation invented by the popular imagination, they can be used to explore some aspects of the social history whose recording was neglected in formal history books. To some extent they give us a presentation of the real history of towns and their battles against invaders. More importantly, they also present a popular historiography of trades and craftsmen, the emergence and development of neighborhoods, and local families and the ways they tried to immortalize their names.

In late nineteenth century, Al-Mansura was a large city on the bank of the Nile. It had industries of silk, cotton, and wool. It had the main tribunal of the Governorate, a hospital, and foreign missionary schools. Beside its native Muslims, Copts and Jews, it was inhabited by a Greek community and some French and English (Mubarak 1990: vol. 15, p. 57). The city was divided into two main areas: the east and the west, further subdivided into smaller neighbourhoods. The inhabitants of the western neighborhoods were called *hawaryon* (those who live in alleys) and those who lived in the eastern neighborhoods were called *hadharyon* (the urban people). Each neighborhood had a leader who was obeyed at the times of hardship. Fights took place occasionally—once every three months at maximum. Preceded by boys throwing stones and brandishing a club the neighbourhood leader would lead the young mob of the neighborhood. Midway between the neighborhoods, he would be met by the leader of the other neighborhood followed by his people to the

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fight. Fighting would go on until the police came and dispersed the two parties. Sufi *turuq* tried to put an end to those fights and to change them into popular celebrations during which the inhabitants of a neighbourhood would come together with others in the celebration of their *wali*.

Sufi *turuq* had largely dominated popular thought until the end of the 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century Sufi thought was seen by many to be marginal to the scientific approaches needed by the Egyptian society, while fundamentalist trends retreated. In the second half of the 20th century fundamentalist trends became active anew and overwhelmed the Egyptian society. These trends reached their climax in 1980s, when the clash between Sufi and Islamist groups was clear throughout of the Egyptian society. Shrines were demolished to build mosques in their places. The mosque of the Salafi organization al-Jam'iyya al-shar'iya in Port Said Street was first established beside the shrine of Sidi al-Masri who was a hero of the Crusade wars. In a recent enlargement of the mosque, the shrine was demolisched. Sometimes places were made for shrines at the back of mosques, and in some other case rebuilding the shrine was completely ignored. In some cases a shrine was destroyed to build a complex containing a clinic, a place for social services, and a place for memorizing the Qur'an and religious guidance through lectures for men and women.

Despite that campaign made by the Islamist groups against shrines, Sufi *turuq* had their own means to defend the shrines, and they have also built a number of new shrines in the second half of the 20th century. They have reinterpreted the biographies of saints to give them more legitimacy in face of the Islamists. Furthermore, they developed old shrines and attached to them associations providing social and health services, notably to orphans and widows.

Mediaeval Saints: From Mystics to Martyrs

Sidi Mashhur

The shrine of Sidi Mashhur is located in the Gidayla suburb east of the city. It is a new suburb that used to be dwelled by lower class families living from odd jobs beside working in the agriculture. Today it is known for its high percentage of educated people, as well as the activity of Islamist groups. In the past there were some shrines in this suburb, but the fundamentalist thought led to their demolition and the construction of mosques in their places. Those mosques carry names of the *awliya'* whose shrines used to be in those places. Nevertheless, the relatively new shrine of Sidi Mashhur, built in 1980, stands in the middle of the district. This shrine is visited by inhabitants of the district, especially on Fridays, when they offer votives of candles to light the shrine.

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Who is Sidi Mashhur and how could his shrine be built in a time when many others were being destroyed? When the troops of the ninth Crusade entered Al-Mansura from the east in 1249 A.D. they built their camp in al-Gadila. Sidi Mashur was one of the heroes of the struggle against the Crusaders of whom many local tales are told. According to the story the people of al-Mansura bravely fought the invaders with palm tree trunks. Sidi Mashhour was a leader of the popular struggle and died as a martyr in the battle.

Many shrines are built years, even centuries after the death of the saint on the basis of dreams (see Mittermaier in this volume), and it was through such a dream vision that the mujahid Sidi Mashhur was to become a venerated saint of his district, legitimized against the Islamists by his status as a martyr. In 1980, a follower of the Ahmadiya Sufi *tariqa* built a a new shrine for Sidi Mashhour. It is said that the *wali* came to him in a dream and asked him to rebuild the shrine. He rebuilt the shrine as a part of his house. He used red bricks as construction material, a construction material of high social status in a time when most of the houses were built with mud bricks. But with the growth of the city and the labor migration of many inhabitants to the Persian Gulf countries, big economic changes took place. With influx of money from the migrants most of old houses were demolished and replaced by high buildings, and the shrine lies now between two of them. It remains the site of visits and veneration, and is lit on Friday nights in memory of the soul of the martyr *wali*.

Sidi ʻAbd al-Qadir

The shrine of Sidi ʻAbd al-Qadir is located in the Hasaniya neighborhood in the street carrying his name (Sidi ʻAbd al-Qadir Street). Except of his Moroccan origin, little is known about Sidi ʻAbd al-Qadir's life. In the past, the celebration of his *mulid* was an important event which continued for a week. The inhabitants of the neighborhood used to offer votives of food (bread, *mulukhiyah,* meat, cheese, lupine seeds, and chickpeas). At the night of the big celebration (*laylat al-mawlid*), a *dhikr* is held, poems are read, and verses of the Qur'an are recited. The *mulid* was organized mainly by inhabitants of neighborhood and adjacent neighborhoods. The procession was led by the ʻArusiya *tariqa*, followers of Sidi Abd al-Salam al-Asmar who ended their celebration with beating tambourines. With the development of the neighborhoods and the construction of new buildings and schools, the celebration became a source of disturbance for the neighboring schools in particular. Nowadays, the celebration is therefore carried out inside the shrine and only lasts one day.

At the shrine of Sidi ʻAbd al-Qadir at the neighborhood carrying his name in Al-Mansura there is at the top of the shrine a hexagonal star, and in front of

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it there is a place for offering votives. The hexagonal star, which has a long history in Islamic ornament, has mistakenly been interpreted as a Jewish symbol by fundamentalists who have repeatedly attempted to burn the shrine.

The shrine occupies a very small place, which made impossible for the inhabitants to turn it into a mosque. Originally surrounded by a small open areal, the shrine has become surrounded by buildings over the time. And because of the high price of the land in that area, some people wanted to demolish it. It has become a very contested site, with many people opposed to its existence. Some neighbors regularly attack it by throwing garbage on it. It was repeatedly destroyed and burnt. But every time Sufi *turuq* were able to rebuild it and cover the tomb with a new green cloth (*kiswa*) carrying the names of the four Rightly-guided Caliphs (Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman and Ali). And as the place is narrow, a structure was built outside the door of the shrine where the celebrants can put their votives.

In the recent years Islamist groups began a new attack on the shrine because there is a hexagonal star above the shrine. Gossip began to relate that star with the symbol of State of Israel, and rumours claimed the shrine belongs to a Jewish merchant. In fact hexagonal stars have a long history in Islamic architecture, and are found on many shrines and Islamic monuments. The point of interconnection between the two triangles represents justice and balance between heaven and the material world. Sultan Qalawun of the Ayubid dynasty used this star as his symbol. It also prevailed on popular products because of beliefs about the power of the hexagonal star engraved on the ring of king Solomon. In our days, however, the hexagonal star is almost exclusively associated with Judaism and Zionism, and the Islamic history of the symbol is unknown to most people.

Another reason given by opponents of the shrine for attacking it is that the square structure in front of it looks like an altar. But it is in fact the very existence of the shrine itself that incites the anger of its fundamentalist opponents. When I visited Sidi ‘Abd al-Qadir Street in 2006, I asked a fundamentalist about the shrine, and he answered, “There is nothing called a shrine! It only contains a person who died a long time ago.”

Despite this campaign, Sufi groups have successfully maintained the shrine. In recent years, they began to take care of a nearby shrine which was unknown because it was located inside a house. It is the shrine of Sidi Taybaq. The shrine was restored, repainted and decorated with verses from the Qur’an. New saintly legends emerged that began to connect between the history of Sidi Taybak, Sidi ‘Abd al-Qadir and the Crusades. Rather than a Jewish merchant as sometimes claimed by the fundamentalist, Sidi ‘Abd al-Qadir thus made an appearance as a *mujahid* defending Islam against the Crusaders—a role which gave him a new kind of legitimacy in a neighborhood dominated by an Islamist movement.

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Saints of the Market: From Protectors to Providers of Services

Sheikh Hasanayn al-Shahawi

Sheikh Hasanayn (d. 1883) is an example of those shrines which were built in old market places which occupied vast areas among houses. Tales about this *wali* represent a part of the history of rich families in Al-Mansura, and how those families were related to Sufi *turuq* and believed in the *karamat* of the *awliya*'. Some members of those families built Qur'an schools which offered education for the children of poor householdsm and shrines for themselves to be buried in them after death beside those *awliya'*, thus developing the shrines into complex social sites of Divine protection of the market, identity of merchant families, and religious education.

The story of Sheikh Hasanayn is closely intertwined with the history of the merchant family of al-Qura'i Pasha. Folk tales about Sheikh Hasanayn represent a popular reading of history which depends on the name of 'Al-Qura'', a person whose head is hairless. They wove a myth related to the palace of the Pasha, King al-'Adil, and the history of mixed courts in Al-Mansura. After Sheikh Hasanayn's death, the family of al-Qura'i built his shrine with a *kuttab* (Qur'an school) beside it. Al-Qura'i Pasha himself was buried after his death beside the Sheikh, following the style of the Royal Family who built their tombs beside the shrine of Abu Shibbak (now inside al-Rifa'i mosque) in Cairo.

Sheikh Hasanayn's lineage can be traced to Musa Ibn 'Umran, the brother of Sidi Ibrahim al-Disuqi. He was a follower of the Burhamiyya-Shahawiyah *tariqa* which is stands in the spiritual lineage of Ibrahim al-Disuqi. Born in a village of Gharbiya Governorate, he was a weaver who got married and had one son called Mohammad. He traveled from village to village accompanied by two Sufi brethren called Sidi Abu Nawwar who died in Banha, and Sidi Ahmad al-Shishtawi whose famous shrine is located in al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Sheikh Hasanayn finally settled in Al-Mansura where he died in 1883.

When Sheikh Hasanayn came to the city, he built a hut in front of the house of a rich merchant Ali Pasha al-Qura'i in the place now known as Gazirat al-Ward. It is believed that it was the same place where King al-'Adil built his palace when he came to the city. Many tales exist about that palace on the banks of the Nile, on the site of which the villa of Dr. Ghayth has recently been built.

When the gardener saw Sheikh Hasanayn building the hut in front of the palace, he informed his master who, in turn, asked the gardener about the character and qualities of that man. The gardener told him that he was always glorifying God and praying. And amazingly enough he would put his praying rug on the surface of the water and pray on it—and the rug never sank. The

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owner of the palace sent new clothes to him, and ordered his men to take meals to him daily. He occasionally went to sit with him. On one occasion when the pasha visited the sheikh he looked upset. The sheikh asked him why. He told him that an English officer wanted to steal his palace with the pretext of it being a state property that he had stolen. At that time Egypt was under the British occupation and the foreign communities in Egypt enjoyed protection and had special tribunals known as mixed courts. The lawsuit was seen there and the judge was a Frenchman. The sheikh said to the pasha, "You will be victorious, Qura'i." Then he tapped his head delicately and compassionately. In result, all the hair from his head fell down. Since then he was called Qurai'y, as he had not been bald-headed before. The sentence was in favour of the pasha who swore to build a mosque carrying the name of the sheikh. He also built a tomb for him to be buried in after his death. He also ordered in his will to be buried beside the sheikh. When the sheikh died, he was buried in that tomb which became a shrine visited by people to get blessing.

The shrine of Sidi Hasanayn is located in the neighborhood carrying his name, in the middle of the marketplace. His *mulid* is held every year in mid-August and is attended, in addition to common people, by the Governor, notables of the city, and members of Sufi *turuq*. During the *mulid*, the sheikhs of the Sufi *turuq* gather with their banners and drums and go around the city in a big procession wearing their best clothes and reciting prayers. They are preceded by people carrying flags and followed by the *naqib al-ashraf* (the representative of the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad). The procession goes on until they reach the space beside the shrine. *Dhikr* and Qur'an recitation go on, while young men indulge in amusement, women buy things from the market and children buy sweets and play in swings.

The original shrine was a typical representative of shrines constructed in the Ottoman period, built in Mamluk style with domes and pillars. But after the decline of most rich families in the cities, there was a need to rebuild the old shrine in a way that was felt to be consistent with modern thought and the encroaching modern buildings on market places. 'Rebuilding' in Egyptian jargon of urban planning means demolition and the construction of a new building. Furthermore, with the spread of the Islamist trends and fundamentalist thought shrines standing by themselves were more vulnerable, and so the old shrine was demolished and the Mosque of Sheikh Hasanayn was built in its place. The new Sheikh Hasanayn Complex contains the shrine, a mosque, a clinic, and educational services.

Sheikh Al Bayya'

Sheikh Al Bayya' was the chief of merchants in Al-Mansura. Until early 20th century, there was a guild for each trade. No one could practice any trade

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without being certified by the sheikh of the guild (note that in the guild system, the term sheikh had a secular meaning of leadership which, however, could be conflated with the religious meaning of the same word in other contexts). That system of specialization led to the coherence of the members of each guild. The sheikhs of the guilds had an important role in the Egyptian towns and villages, a position which they could not reach without the acceptance of old workers of each trade. A sheikh occupied his position for life. But if the members did not accept his behavior they could ask him to step down. He was assisted by a *naqib* whose job was to implement the orders of the sheikh and to organize social events (Abu Sudayra 1990: 381).

Sons rarely practiced a trade different from that of their fathers. Craftsmen and merchants also used to marry women whose fathers practice their own trades. This must have led to a degree of social separation between different trades, and a strong social identity among the practitioners of each craft. The intervention of the state under Mohammad Ali in the first half of the 19th century led to some loosening of that structure. But the guild remained the central social and economic unit of the craftsmen until the First World War (Raymond 2005: 589).

Trades and industries never prevented those who practiced them from gaining knowledge in the field of religion, and some craftsmen were famous in the field of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), while some others practiced teaching. Craftsmen also had—and continue to have—a remarkable role in the organization of *mawalid* in the cities of Egypt. In the Middle Ages, beginning from the Ayoubid Period, and the Mamluk Period, each guild used to belong to a certain Sufi *tariqa.* The craftsmen's traditions in Al-Mansura were not different from those in Cairo. Most trades concentrated in al-Abbasi and al-Tumayhi areas, where neighborhoods were known by the trades practiced in them: *Suq al-Haddadin* (the blacksmiths' market), *Suq al-Naggarin* (Carpenters' Market), and so on (Ghunaym 1996).

Sheikh al-Bayya' was sheikh of the merchants' guild in al-Hasaniya neighborhood and a follower of the Rifa'iyya Sufi *tariqa*. After his death a shrine was built for him in the cemetery. But with the growth of the city in the 20th century, the cemetery turned into a residential area. In a way parallel to the reconstruction of the shrine of Sheikh Hasanayn, his shrine was turned into into al-Bayya' Complex. The ground floor houses the shrine and a mosque. The first and second floors house a charity association for orphans and an Azhari elementary school.

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Sheikh al-'Isawi

Sheikh al-'Isawi (1904-1965) was a follower of the 'Isawiya Sufi *tariqa* which traces its spiritual lineage to the Moroccan Ibn 'Isa (Mubarak 1990: 222). Sheikh al-'Isawi was also the sheikh of blacksmiths in Suq al-Haddadin in the 'Abbasi neighborhood. His portrait still hangs in the blacksmiths' workshops. Although the guild system is now defunct, most of former guild members still practice blacksmithing. Sheikh al-'Isawi never married, and his nephews inherited his workshop.

Sheikh al-'Isawi was called 'the axis of sainthood' (*Qutb al-Wilaya*) by his followers. Many miracles (*karamat*) were attributed to him already during lifetime. When he prophesied something, it would come true. He could be present in different places at the same time. He could walk on the surface of water. His followers came from different regions to learn about religion and to memorize the Qur'an.

After his death he was buried at Sandub cemetery, and his tomb was visited by men and women who ask him to realize their hopes and offer votives on the window of his shrine. A *mulid* is held for him in March. A mosque was built next to the shrine at the entrance of the cemetery now known as al-'Isawi Cemetery. The mosque is used for the prayers for the dead before burying them. A clinic and a place for the memorization of the Qur'an are attached to the mosque. In Ramadan, a *ma'idat ar-Rahman*, (service of free food for fast-breaking), is held beside the mosque. Inside the shrine there are two big posters depicting the Ka'aba (in Mecca) and the Mosque of al-Husayn in Cairo. The tomb is decorated with green and white pieces of silk cloth on which 'Allah' is embroidered and covered with a green *kiswa* on which seven copies of the Koran are placed. There are four lanterns at the corners of the tombs. The floor is covered with green carpet.

Conclusions

The history of al-Mansura as told through the stories of *awliya'* may not stand in any direct relationship to the real events that took place in the past. They do, however, tell us very much about the group identities, the growth of the city, local values and struggles as they have been imagined and described by the people who speak of the *awliya'*: Be it with the fundamentalists depicting a Muslim saint as a Jewish merchant, Sufis turning mystics into *mujahidin*, or merchants and craftsmen uniting social with spiritual leadership—in all cases people arrange stories and meanings in a way that fits with values they hold important. The folklore they thus create—the heroes, the festivals, the popular architecture—tells us of the group identities and local histories people tell to themselves. Take, for example, the *mulid* (saints-day festival), a phenomenon

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rich with all the elements of popular culture. It is a means to boast of identity and coherence of a community, the bond created between its members by shared values and experiences, and its continuous existence over time and place. Each group of people adheres to some elements of the tradition that may not be shared by others. These elements become the folklore distinguishing that group. But as a street festival open to everybody, the mulid also presents a site of exchange where different groups, styles, beliefs and points of view meet. On one level creating strong local bonds, the festive culture of saints-day festivals, continuously developing as districts and their inhabitants change, also allows for a dynamic character of the folkloric imagination.

Although the tales of *Awliya'* can be considered myths or popular imagination, they still are sources of social history, especially in small towns where no one cared to record their social history in writing. More importantly, they are an important form of collective memory in a time when all old structures are demolished in order to construct new buildings, especially with the high prices of the land and the need to use those places for providing services to the inhabitants.

The struggle over the shrines between Sufi and Islamist groups is one way of contesting and telling the history of the town. In their campaign against shrines and Sufi *turuq* Islamist groups have invented new folklore, borrowed from the sands of the Arabian Peninsula and juxtaposed to the culture of the Nile valley. Holding to an ahistorical interpretation of religion that excludes notions of historical development and growth, the Islamists attempt to flatten out both the physical landscape and the historical imaginary of the city, reducing it to a simple opposition of Islam and non-Islam. The shrines, for them, are not only an improper form of religiosity, but an annoying reminder of a history much more complex than they imagine. The Sufis defending the shrines, in turn, are compelled to partially take over the Islamist imagination to legitimize the cult of saints. Turning mystics into *mujahidin* and shrines into complexes with mosques and social services, they embed the saints into the modern imagination of contemporary history as struggle, social development and public education.

This strategy has turned out largely successful. The shrines which are still attacked by Islamist groups are those which form separate buildings inside residential areas. But those shrines which are located in cemeteries are not attacked, nor are the mosques attached to shrines, be it in cemeteries or in the market. Building mosques on the sites of shrines does, however, often lead to a shift of focus. With the mosque and the social services becoming more central, people sometimes pay less attention to the shrines. In some cases people no longer celebrate the memory of the owner of a shrine, or the celebration has become a very small event.

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