Chapter 5

Saints (*awliya'*), Public Places and Modernity in Egypt

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Introduction

Places close to the shrines of saints (*awliya'*) in Egypt are seen in this paper as public places that are continuously changing in relation to the surrounding structural context. Such gradual transformations can manifest themselves in the complete disappearance of this saint's public place itself or its being turned into a public trading and consumer center. Such transformations are undoubtedly linked to the broader framework of Egyptian society, however in many cases the veneration of the saints at their places often appears to resist all these changes.

I am not inclined here to see change in pure terms of proceeding from a traditional system to a modern one, as conventional theories of modernization would suggest, but wish to perceive this as the creation of a type of peripheral or counterfeit modernity, a thesis which I have already developed elsewhere (Zayed 2006). I assume that peripheral societies develop their specific modernities, which are culturally and structurally eclectic and politically authoritarian, however well equipped with all ingredients of modern consumer societies. In this type traditions co-exist alongside modern structures, and we find modern and traditional forms in a permanent process of interaction leading to a 'third culture' which is neither modern nor traditional. In its process of structuration, the 'third culture' or the 'third society' adapts itself to and copes with wider global and local contexts in contradicting ways. History is not made through accumulative actions and strategies, but through the accumulation of sporadic responses that end in the building up of new contradicted modes of social morphologies and social actions. Looking from the angle of these structural determinants, I assume that the places surrounding the shrines of saints quite strongly reflect such a third type of modernity, specifically where they continue to exist for ages and are entangled in processes of transforming their functions in relation to the society in which they exist. It may be anticipated that the 'traditional' and the 'modern' systems, engaged in a continuous dialogue and permanently reacting to each other, will be found here.

Modernity demolishes public places surrounding the shrines of saints and/or transforms them in such a way that the place reflects all of these contradictions of modernity in the periphery, including the veneration of saints in rural Egypt.

In this context clarification of what I mean by public places is needed. Public places are known as interactive, democratic, and meaningful places; they are open places receiving all groups, protecting the rights of all individuals involved in the reaction thereto, granting them the liberty of action, giving them both power of action and power of momentary ownership of the place or claiming its possession. Thus, a public place is transformed into a place, in which an individual behaves more freely, and he is tinctured by the deeds of individuals participating in the public or group activities. The salient feature of a public place is that it is a place owned by all people, a place in which individuals learn how to behave together (Carr et al. 1992: 19-20).

This definition brings to light two main characteristics of a public place: i.e. the relative absence of private interest and the domination of public or group activities. However, we might object to the definition on the grounds that a public place also provides an opportunity for the pursuit of private interests. Therefore, it cannot be defined purely in terms of public activities and a wider definition of the public place based on the experience of the human beings using the public place should be developed. The public place is a place where a number of people interact without necessarily knowing each other and at the same time participate in both group and private activities. According to this definition, public places are places which accommodate multiple types of interactions, extending from the pursuit of private interests to public interaction and representation, thus, all in all, a diverse range of an individual's local experiences (Smithsimon 1999).

While taking this into account, I wish to place the focus in this paper on the cultural nature of public places. In fact, there is a physical aspect of place involved that affects the social nature of the place. This is where we have to regard its nature as a cultural place which embodies the reproduction of different forms of social interaction and of the actions of individuals or groups.

This is where we must be aware of the fact that, although public places, as I see it, the saints places in Egypt entail certain characteristics of society, however, they are not merely a microcopy of it. The forms of interaction here are different from institutionally bound forms of interaction in society. Moreover, constraints and social control are weaker here than in places of institutionalized social interaction. In the saints' public places, there is a space for open forms of interaction and more liberal behavior than is known at other public places in society. The place also provides an opportunity for the mixing of different degrees and types of status, roles, and symbols. This may not be a general rule for all public places surrounding the shrines of saints. There

is a hierarchy of shrines and spatial order around them that narrows or widens the restrictions, class distinctions, and different levels of behavioural constraints. Shrines and the public places linked to them can be arenas or stages of power, status, and class representations; equally they can be places of very intensive liberal interaction. This local diversification of saints' places can be complemented by looking to the diversity of festivals or other occasions involving the meeting of individuals or groups in the place. For example, on the occasion of the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*mawlid an-nabi*), the place does not accommodate status, class, and power-based privileges. It may even reshape such privileges differently, regardless of the place's local nature. Accordingly, public places can be looked at as localities which materialize some aspects of public sphere. Eisenstadt argued that Muslim societies had developed autonomous and vibrant public spheres that play in important role in the control of the moral order of the community in contrast to their "limited autonomous access to policymaking" (Eisenstadt 2006: 310-311). Public places, especially those surrounding the holy shrines of saints, open horizons for different groups, sects, and/or organizations to interact and to express themselves freely apart from any political and social restrictions. Thus, they constitute venues for interaction and representation for the different groups of such 'autonomous public spheres'.

Finally, an explanation for the neighborhood of saints' shrines as archaeological sites might shed light on the historical role of local public places as cultural places. Al-Gawhary argues that such vicinity indicates that the graves of the *awliya'* were originally built on the rubble of ancient temples or sacred sanctuaries (al-Gawhary 1988: 109-112). By the same token George Stauth argues that Egypt was perceived in the religious mind "as the power of the past, combining broader concepts of Goddess with strong local ritual and symbolic practices […] that ends in reinventing the powers of ancient gods" (Stauth 2006: 163) and a continuous accumulation of cultural heritage. What made such accumulation possible is the cultural and social functions of the public places. They are not conceived as mere physical spaces, but as cultural spaces. Certainly, this affiliation of shrines with archaeological sites reflects historical transformations in the use of a place. The antiquities, mosques, and shrines contained in a place indicate the historical importance of the place and its relations with other places, and also tells us of the local society in relation to different historically and currently interacting cultures. Throughout history, such places might have been used as trading centers, as stations on the route of entertainment caravans (mostly by gypsies), and as venues by Sufi orders for their rituals. In this way it is obvious that these places have been points of cultural blending throughout history. They might have been used as cultural transit points, as places of interaction between villages and towns, expanding their relations and mixing experiences. Some of them even changed from be-

ing pure places to village centers, and furthermore contributed to the transformation of villages into towns or even cities.

This paper attempts to cast light on the transformations that occur in places surrounding the shrines of saints in Egypt by considering them as public places and specifically analyzing the influences of modernity on them. The main questions to be addressed here are: how had the traditional mind built a sacred image for such places? How were they transformed into spiritual and cultural places? How were such images structured in the traditional society? What are the modes of transformation of such places and images in modern Egypt? And how is the modern life of Egyptians reproduced in the festivals and rituals related to saints in different parts of Egypt. I shall begin to answer these questions by demonstrating the nature of the relation between saints and their burial places, laying particular emphasis on the holy nature of such places and the way in which both the place and the saint (*wali*) establish their own reputation. I will then go one step further to describe the role of these places in traditional society. After this I will explain changes undergone by such places in modern Egypt. In treating each of these points, I shall depend on qualitative data collected recently from different saintly places in Egypt.

Specificity of the Place: The Making of a Domain

Hobsbawm claims that traditions could be created or even invented through processes affected by the political claims of the organized social and political movements, and/or by unofficial groups with no definite political objectives (Hobsbawm 1993: 263-307). In this perspective the tradition connected with saints (*awliya'*) and their miracles (*karamat*) could be considered as an invented tradition. Several studies have emphasized this fact. In his study on saints of the Atlas, Gellner referred to the inventive processes connected with the making of a saint (*wali*), endowing him with extraordinary faculties enabling him to impose his authority on a tribe (Gellner 1969). Works published in Egypt emphasized that saints are locally invented, in locations where people attribute certain stories to a man and thus identify him as a saint who performed exceptional deeds or miracles. These stories may even be developed when he is alive and they continue up to his death, whereupon new stories about the miracles he performed during his burial are narrated. All these narratives manifest the *wali*'s extraordinary faculties and thereby shape the images of the saint in the minds of individuals and in the general memory of the populace (al-Gawhary 1988; 'Uthman 1981; Mustafa/Ibrahim 2004).

Accordingly, public places around the graves of saints are similar objects of invention. It is through the narrations about *wali* that special sanctity is endowed to a place and that rites are performed in the place. Narratives about the miracles performed by the saint and about the rites performed in the place

reproduce the image of the place as a 'cultural space' in which the pity of the saint marks the frontiers of the space. To begin, it should be said that the place surrounding the saint's grave is sometimes called *haram al-wali* (the saint's sanctuary); that is to say, it is inviolable. Such terminology not only symbolizes the relation between the place and the *wali*'s grave, but it also endows it with a certain sanctity. It is often reported that the *wali* himself might choose his own burial place. Thus the place and all land associated it easily ends up being subject to the orders of the saint rather than remaining in full possession of its owner. It is only through the *wali* that they might continue to benefit from it. It is the *wali* who chooses the ground on which he walks, lives or sits while he is alive; in the same way, he chooses his burial place. He has a supreme freedom to live his life as he likes and to be buried in any place he selects. A variety of stories have been collected on the ways in which saints choose their burial sites:

1. It is often reported that some other greater *wali* or a group of important *awliya'* take possession of the people escorting the deceased (new) *wali* to his final resting place. It is the spirit of the great *awliya'* that makes the coffin fly to the burial place.
2. On order of these (greater) *awliya'*, the body of a deceased *wali* might refuse to move from one place to another one. If he wants to stay in his place, he must be buried here, as is the case of Sidi Musa Ghanim (Abu Lamuna) at Minyat Samanud, in the district of Aga, Daqahliyya Governorate, and Sidi Khamis Gubbarah, in al-Shuhada', Minufiyya Governorate.
3. The *wali* may have traveled from afar to his burial place, he first chooses his place, and may wish to wander further after his burial. There are various narratives about *awliya'* who came through the Nile or by sea and settled in a place on the sea shore or river bank until their death and then were buried in another chosen place. Of these *awliya'* are Sheikh Al-Awwam, at the town of Marsa Matrouh; and Sidi Muhammad Al-Iraqi (Kafr Ruzqan, in the Tala District, Minufiyya Governorate).
4. There are different rituals involved in the choice of the burial place, such as by hurling a stick or a piece of stone so that the place where the stick or stone lands will be his burial place. There is a story about Sidi Muhammad Al-Murshidi (Mutubis District, Kafr al-Shaykh Governorate) who came to this area from Morocco escorted by as-Sayyid Ahmad Al-Badawi. It is told that a difference of opinion occurred between him and Ahmad Al-Badawi about the site on which the shrine was to be built. Finally, the difference was resolved by Sidi al-Murshidi who held a piece of green palm branch (a twig recently taken out of a palm tree) and threw it in the air. The mosque was to be built on the site on which the thrown

stick fell and settled. The stick actually fell down on the place now containing both the mosque and shrine of Sidi al-Murshidi at a site which once was on the shore of Lake Burullus. Sheikh Murshidi was later known as the 'man of the palm branch'.

5. The body of a deceased saint or *wali* may be moved either by the *wali*'s will and action or by the will of certain persons who visited his shrine in their dreams and were ordered to undertake that mission for him. A good example of this is the story about Sidi Abdallah Ibn Salam: "his corpse, after being killed, flew in the air and came to the graveyard in Daqahliyya Governorate, and every drop of his blood falling down on a place turns that place into a blessed one whereupon a shrine for him is constructed." This narration symbolizes the saint's supernatural power which makes him capable of expropriating land anywhere for his benefit. All land is his and nobody can prevent him from being buried wherever he wants. One drop of his blood is even sufficient to make a place a blessed one. It also explains why so many of his shrines exist in the Daqahliyya Province.

Dreams and visions intermingle with reality, in that certain people wake up with visions requesting them to build a shrine for a certain saint. This occurred in the case of such famous saints as Al-Husain Ibn Ali, al-Sayyida Zainab, the Seven Girls (Sab'a Banat), and al-Sayyid Al-Badawi who have numerous shrines at different places around Egypt. The place chosen by the *wali* and/or the people 'who dream' is not just a place for the tomb but it turns into domain protected and safeguarded by the *wali*. Once chosen nobody can claim it. The will of the *wali* must be realized, even by force. Let us consider the following three stories narrated in three different places:

1. In a story about the saint Sidi Ali al-Yatim (in the village of Kafr Abu Gum'a, Qalyubiyya Governorate), we found that his shrine is located on cultivated land because he was a Bedouin and liked seclusion in open fields. People in the village say that the *wali*'s body is spread in all the grass covering the area, and that he lives under the grass with forty others.
2. In another story about the saint Sheikh Muhammad Hasabu in the village of Tarabumba, in the city of Damanhour (Buhayra governorate), people mention that "he used to sit under a tree close to the cemetery in an open area. After his death, he was buried in an ordinary cemetery but he appeared to one of his sons in a dream and told him that his grave was under the tree where he used to sit. This tree and this place were owned by one of the wealthy people. Thus, the saint's children did not want to bring out the subject. However, the *wali* insisted on appearing to them and telling them to look out for his grave under the tree. They did so and transported the body from the cemetery to the place under the tree and this

tree became a blessed one, and the whole place became a blessed place".

3. In a similar story, Sheikh Talha al-Tilmisany, in Kafr al-Shaykh City, "used to move from country to country till he settled in the area where he wanted to be buried and said that this was his place at present and ever after. The story mentions that when he settled in this place, he had a horse that landed on a piece of land owned by the King of Sakha nearby and ate from it, thus the king sent forces to drive Sidi Talha away. Forces came through the sea and were surprised to see Sidi Talha himself walking on the water, pointing at them to stop the ship. The force could not move the ship (as if they have been frozen) and so they went to summon the king who went to see the truth of it. Sheikh Talha came out to the King of Sakha walking on the water and indicating once again with his hand, so the ship stopped again and could not move. The King asked the Sheikh what he wanted and the Sheikh replied that he wanted this area to himself so the king responded to his request".

These three stories may well illustrate how saints create their own places. In the first story, the saint's body is spread in the fields, thus, preventing farmers from trespassing over the land. The idea the saint being spread over the land represents a symbol of the extension of his strength, despite the fact that the saint's shrine is small and built of clay. Also he keeps forty people with him. They are also saints and they guard the domain against any violation (can I dare to say that they constitute a hidden army to help in times of crisis). In the second story there is conflict between the worldly power of the land owner who owns the place of the tree and the relative weakness of the saint. The conflict ends to the advantage of the saint. In the third story, the conflict is turned into an open conflict between the temporal power (of the 'king') and the spiritual power (of the saint). We notice here that the use of the word 'king' is rather metaphorical and the story teller wants to confirm the strength of this worldly power. The word 'king' is invented because rulers of districts have never been called kings in Egypt. The story ends with the victory of the spiritual power. The saint wins over horses and swords with his magic powers. As soon as he appears walking on water the war ends. The story develops a symbolic relationship between the worldly civil power and the spiritual power, stressing the winning of the latter by means of the supernatural. This symbolizes the potential strength of ordinary people against the governor and the nature of their relationships to men of power. There is here an ambiguous wish to resist, however combined with a disability to indulge in an open conflict. The helplessness of the weak compels them to look out to the world of magic to find their own power.

Once the saint occupies an area, it is considered 'sacred' also in the sense of being 'protected'. At the same time ever more stories are recycled about

miracles that happened in the place, defending the sanctity of the saint and his place. In the case of Sidi Hassan Abu Raytayn in the village of Bani Walims (Minya Governorate) a thief attempting to steal wheat from the field surrounding the sheikh's shrine, was kept stuck to the ground until the owner of the wheat woke up, forgave the thief, and released him.

Sometimes the holiness of a place relates to a tree, a well, or a lake, based on their symbolic power which identifies them as sources of magic or blessing. The sycamore tree and the prickly pear trees that surround the famous shrine of Sheikh Abu Mandur in Rashid (Rosetta, north of the Delta) bestow blessings on the place and provide a picnic site for the visitors. A tree can also be considered a source of healing as in the case of the tree near the shrine of Sheikh al-Gharib in the village of Bani 'Amir in the al-Adwa district (al-Minya Governorate). People come here to seek the blessings of the sheikh and request healing or release from distress by hammering a nail in its trunk or by hanging something on it. The same is reported about the wells found near some of the saints's shrines, for example the well near Sheikh Abu Mandur's shrine, in whose water the sick bathe, the well in the Church of the Virgin Mary in Mostorod (Helwan, Cairo) and the lake near Sheikh Abu Ghunayma's shrine in the village of Sakola (al-Minya governorate) where people bathe in search of healing or the resolution of their problems. It is believed in these cases that the tree or the waters of a well or a pond are inhabited by the spirit of the *wali* and thus transmit his strength and blessings.

We have pointed out previously that a strong relation exists between miracles (*karamat*) and local conflicts where the saint is linked to a sort of separate sphere which is dominated by the world of saints (*awaliya*) and confronts the world of the real. This is certainly linked to the process of creating a public sphere around the saint's shrine. This creation of a public sphere around the shrine could be considered as related to people's desire to create within the realm of the saint's personal space (a specific domain) a space full of common freedom and culture, as opposed to the different world of the everyday bound to authority and legal restrictions. Truly the first world is also a world of power where authority, status, and power are included, and influence cannot be disputed. However, it is a world by people's choice which they create in their imagination, co-existing with real power as though it were a reality in itself and beyond discussion. However, the continuation of such an imaginative world as a public sphere owned by the people should also be seen in relation to modern society, the state, the mass culture and one could suggest that the greater the scale of these these influences, which are often viewed in local contexts as a type of authoritarianism of modernity, the more people escape to their personal caves, and the more they produce daily life utopias relating them to the disputes over real human existence and the life of the saints. It may also be suggested that the greater the pressure of modern institutional hi-

erarchy, the greater is the inclination of people, who live on the periphery, to create autonomous domains and to recognize and dispute territories and frontiers. The mythical culture and the rituals and actions related to that culture is only one example of such domains. It is only the most important because of its historical roots.

Awliya's Squares in Traditional Society

In traditional village society, when a *wali*'s shrine was located in a central spacious place, it was used as a public place, even though that it could be privately owned by one of the families that traced their descent to the *wali*. It was used by everyone for a variety of activities. It gave people an opportunity to reveal personal behavioral attitudes and representations which otherwise would not have been accessible to them due to social rules and class hierarchies. Here, the villagers were able to meet strangers, the poor among them could meet rich people, the weak could meet the strong. The place opened up for interaction which social constraints would otherwise have prevented. This open communication between different social classes at the place parallels that between life and death, or, in other words, between the life of people in the place and the shrine of their *wali*, a dead human being, who sorts out matters and rules them while they seek his blessing. They enjoy being close to him and celebrating his anniversary, and he is believed to protect them and guard the place for them. For them he is the weak, poor, and humble man who became powerful owing to his spiritual and then supernatural ability to perform miracles (*karamat*). He is believed now to possess the place, allowing them to use it. This public place allows for everything and even for behavior which otherwise may not be socially acceptable. It seems that people derive their freedom from the saint, using him to build a relationship with the other world and an experience of being close to it.

This ideal picture of the relationship between the people and their *wali*'s shrine is of course a more common and pure case in traditional village societies, as the example of Sheikh Hassan Abu Raitain in one of the al-Minya villages shows. The *wali*'s shrine is located on a small hill surrounded by the village's cemetery (*kum*) which was surrounded by wide open place (*gurn*) which reached to the river banks of Bahr Yusif. The location remained unchanged until the mid 1970s.

It was a place that saw strangers, especially in between village wanderers, like cattle traders, entertainers and gypsies. Of course the place was used by local cattle traders too. They took the place in order to tie their cattle before selling it. As for camel traders, they usually came from far away villages. Sometimes they came in caravans from the desert. Every year, people in the village talked about the caravan that would arrive soon. It consisted of camels

which were led and ridden by strangers from Morocco or from Sudan moving to the village from the Western Desert. These traders took the area surrounding the wali's shrine as a place to settle for a week or two before moving to another village. Concerning entertainers, they were swing owners, moving from village to village especially after the harvest, when people were free and had time and money for fun. Among the people who would periodically frequent the shrine were gypsies who settled with tents for a month or two near the Wali. Of course, not knowing from where they make their living, people were suspicious that the gypsies could steal. However, they normally would not do it in the village they settled. In the night the place becomes a ground for children and youth to play. One of the most popular games played in this place is *turnaza*. Similar to hockey, it is played with a ball made of twisted strings and hooked rods from palm branches. However in the times of the harvest and at the festival of the Prophet's birthday, the place was differently used.

In the harvest season, from the beginning of summer in May and continuing till the end of July, peasants brought their principal crops, broad beans, clover and wheat to the area near the shrine in the belief that the *wali* guards their crops.

In the days of the anniversary of Sidi Hasan Abu Raytayn, which starts on the first day of the Islamic month Rabi' al-Awwal, that is, shortly before the Prophet's birthday festival, people set up market stands to sell sweets, peanuts, and tea and tables for playing cards. The stands are called *farsh* and consist of two or three benches and a table to display the goods. The roof of the kiosk consists of palm branches or corn reeds supported on four wooden columns. There are about ten of these stands. The festival continues until the night of the 12th of Rabiʿ al-Awwal when the 'great night' (*al-layla al-kabira*) is celebrated. The market stands are more or less empty in the morning and at noon, but from the afternoon until the evening they are crowded with people: some eat peanuts and sweets, others play cards, and some buy peanuts and sweets, either as souvenirs to bring home from the festival, or for female relatives who spend the festival in tents further away from the center of the celebrations. Youths invite one another to eat sweets and peanuts. Family relations influence the choice of market stands people frequent: young people from a certain family prefer the *farsh* belonging to some of their relatives, although this is not a general rule. Swings are set up to children and professional entertainers attract the visitors to shooting stands, circus performances, and tests of strength—in a popular attraction known as 'train' or 'cannon' young men push heavy iron weights on a rail. If the contestant manages to give the weights enough speed, they hit a firecracker at the upper end of the rail. The weights can be adjusted depending on the strength of the contestant.

Meanwhile, the servants of the shrine prepare it by cleaning it, giving it a fresh coat of paint, and placing a large flag fixed on a tall thick column of wood that marks the beginning of the celebration in the middle of the square facing the shrine. At the beginning of the festival, the servants of the shrine invite a group of drummers from a nearby village called al-Garnus. The drummers, three or four of them, belong to a Sufi brotherhood associated with Sheikh Abu Shuk of al-Garnus. They are joined by the professional drummers from the village. Together they form a procession that passes through the village on each of the twelve days of the festival, carrying flags of Sheikh Abu Shuk and Sheikh Abu Raytayn. They all participate in celebrating the days of the anniversary. In the morning, the drummers come out with the two flags carried by two of Sheikh's servants or their children. They start their tour around the village houses, stopping by each one to recite loudly the *Fatiha*, the opening Sura of the *Qur'an*, so that the house owners give them a small present in cash or seeds (depending on the family's financial means), known as *al-'ada,* i.e. '(the Sheikh's) habit'.

This procession ends in the afternoon at the Sheikh's shrine where people gather to celebrate or begin another procession. There is a reason for this: the young people compete in parading with the flag around the village to the rhythm of drum beats. This is called 'touring the flags'. Women stand further away, observing their children and encouraging them with waves. The young men not only carry out this process just to be blessed, but also to show off their pride and strength. Each one who waves with a flag, pays a piaster or more to be collected and added to the total income of the celebration.

The villagers call the group that tours around the village with drums and flags *al-zawiya*, meaning literarily 'corner', but in this context referring to a Sufi group's meeting place where the group performs its rituals and, indirectly, the group itself. Many people donate a meal to this *zawiya* at lunch or dinner throughout the days of the celebration to the extent that members of the *zawiya* are unable to attend every invitation for dinner or lunch. Therefore members of the *zawiya* often accept the invitations without eating.

Every evening, a *dhikr* (a rhythmic, dance-like meditation on Qur'anic verses and poetic praises of the Prophet) is performed in front of the shrine. It is led by the only Sufi order present in the village, the Bayyumiyya order, which has spread in the village since the early 1970s. Prior to this, *dhikr*s were organized by the followers of Sheikh Abu Shuk who were experienced in this. This could be the reason for the continued privileged position of the *dhikrs* in celebration. The donations collected during the festival are divided by three among the 'servants' (*khadim*, pl. *khuddam*) of the sheikh of the village, the followers of the main sheikh in al-Garnus village, and the followers of Abu Shuk.

The 'great night', the last and most crowded night of celebration, marks the end of the festival; it is the night of the prophet's birthday when people delay their work to attend the nocturnal celebration. The celebration begins in the afternoon when the *khalifa*, dressed in white and riding a camel which is also covered with a fresh blanket, leads a procession around the village. The *khalifa*, literally 'successor' is the local representative of the larger Bayyumiya order and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Men on the left and right of the *khalifa* carry flags, and others in front of him beat the drums. After him come children and youths who ride richly decorated donkeys and camels. After the procession of the *khalifa*, the smaller flag processions continue until the evening. On the square facing the shrine, a *dhikr* begins, amplified by loudspeakers. At the end of the great night, a sheikh recites religious supplications and finally receives money from people asking for God's protection, saying "Mr. so and so". His chorus follows by saying, "Oh, may God protect him" or "Oh, may God have mercy upon him", each according to the situation until dawn. Each person or household seeks protection or mercy for their dead family members through this chorus. Women sit behind and receive gifts of peanuts and sweets. Trade flourishes on this night as everybody buys peanuts and sweets for their houses. The celebration lasts until the morning when everything comes to an end and the days and nights return to their normal course.

Undoubtedly, this is an ideal description of the celebration, for the village could be in anguish for the death of a village nobleman, youth, or a large number of men. In such a year, there is no festival at all, or there could be one but on a more restricted level than that described here. Importantly, the festival is influenced by the general economic and societal situation.

The celebration manifests different patterns of symbolic exchange and power representation. Openness is the key characteristic of these patterns: while various groups and authorities participate in the celebration, none of them has exclusive power over the site. The festival is open for the various celebrations of different groups of people. The square surrounding the *wali*'s shrine functions in a traditional society as a public place in which interactions of different types take place. It is the place through which villagers interact with foreign traders and entertainers, accommodate outsiders such as gypsies, prepare their crops for storage, and gather to celebrate a religious occasion.

Modernity and Transformation of the Place

Many observers, both in Egypt and abroad, expected that modernity disrupts and totally destroys the quietude of a traditional place like the saint's square in the village. Modernity, which we shall deal with here, is a peripheral, or counterfeit modernity. In other words, it is a type of modernity that is not established on an internal foundation, but depends on the random and irrational

transference from Western modernity which spread through colonization, mass media and communications around the world. As a result, this type of modernity is characterized by its dependence on induced modernization, irrational selection, and consumerism (Zayed 2006: 72). This kind of modernity does not obliterate traditionalism totally or even boycott it, but instead copes with, transforms, and uses tradition in different ways. Of course, this was also the case with the high modernity in Western industrial nations in the 20th century. But while the high Western modernity, along with the nationalist project of developmental modernity in Third World countries, have been built on a strong (even if often imagined) dichotomy of modernity and tradition, peripheral modernity, both as an ideology and as a social practice, gives up much of the dichotomizing nature of high modernity in favor of an idiosyncratic mixture of different forms of power and social organization.

In the following I explore the impact of modernity on the surrounding places of saints (*awliya'*), and the manifestations of peripheral modernity in these places. Before getting into the subject, let us relate some narratives by supporters of the saints that relate to the impact of modernity:

1. First narrative: "The place is the shrine of Sheikh Hasanayn in the city of al-Mansura, Daqahliya. The shrine is inside a small mosque which is near to a larger one. Both mosques are located in a big square called Sheikh Hasanayn Square. In the framework of a project to renew both of them, it was decided to demolish them. (In Egypt 'renewing' usually means the demolition of an old building and its replacement by a new one). The larger mosque had already been destroyed and so is part of the smaller one. When the contractor decided to move the grave of the *wali* from the small mosque using a tractor, the *wali* defended himself against this violation (because he does not want to leave his simple and small room). As a result, the tractor broke down, and the same happened to other three tractors. Besides, seven workers got sick while demolishing the mosque and were taken to hospital."
2. In a second narrative, we will relate an anecdote told by a servant of the shrine of Yusuf Abd as-Salam Ga'far also known as Sidi Yusuf in San al-Hagar village, Sharqiya Governorate: "The young people of this village gathered to prevent the servant from celebrating the festival of the *wali*, considering it a novelty with no religious ground and an event in which non-religious acts occur. As a result, the festival was stopped for four years. This harmed the financial benefits of the servant who depended on the annual income from the festival. Thus, he sought the assistance of the Sufi leaders who came to the village and persuaded the protestors to allow the resumption of the festival. The leaders' request was granted on the condition that no immoral conduct should be allowed during the festival."

3. The third narrative tells about Sidi Shibl al-Aswad and his seven sisters and/or brothers (*sab'a banat, sab'a ihwat*) in Al-Shuhada', a city in the Minufiyya Governorate. The story revolves around the saint's rescuing of a drug dealer from the police: "The latter had been caught and in his possession was an amount of drugs inside a box. During his arrest, the dealer raised his hands and said, 'Help! Sheikh Shibl, I seek your help'. When the policemen opened the box, they found nothing but some snakes. So, they released him. Soon after his release, the drugs were back inside the box". Such stories of the saint rescuing a follower from hands of the police are common, although, unlike this narrative, they often end with the saint personally punishing the wrongdoer after demonstrating his superiority towards the power of the state.

The three aforementioned stories show significant testimonials of the experience of peripheral modernity—in alliance with Salafi reformism—in Egypt as well as the clashes and contradictions resulting from it. In the first story, the traditional attitude triumphs over modern technology and even destroys it. Technology can be made use of in several fields, yet when it clashes with religious beliefs (we must remember that while it is easy for an outside observer to label them 'popular ones', for those who hold them they are a part of correct Islamic creed), such beliefs emerge victorious. Therefore, technology should co-exist with such beliefs and allow them to remain. It is not an exaggeration to say that in the conflict between modernity and traditions, traditions come out victorious. Moreover, modern forms may have only superficial existence that do not run deep in any way.

The second story is common story also found elsewhere in Egypt. There have been clashes between groups of young Salafis (a radical Islamic reformist movement strongly opposed to saints and Sufism) and the servants of some shrines in some villages in various locations. The Salafis believe that the practices and beliefs of the *khuddam*, i.e. the servants of the saint, such as visiting the graves of *awliya'*, the existence of a *wali*'s grave beside a mosque, and the celebration of festivals for *awliya'* contradict the principles of the Sunna doctrine. According to some studies, these clashes have a historical dimension since there have always been conflicts between a purist doctrine and Sufism, between orthodox religious scholars and Sufis. Sometimes, such conflicts ended with contriving conspiracies and arresting Sufists (Mustafa/'Abbas 2004: 200). Some attributed this historical enmity to the popularity and proliferation of Sufis, for they take control of people's hearts who like their way of practicing religion, a fact which some purist scholars of the Scripture consider as a danger against the true religious creeds (al-Tawil 1964: 174). Recent studies do point out, however, that this theory is strongly exaggerated and anachronistic, projecting a modern conflict on pre-modern times. While there

has always been conflict between more purist and exclusive, and more inclusive and ecstatic currents within Sunni Islam, Sufism and scholarly orthodoxy have nevertheless been very close throughout centuries, and the Islamic al-Azhar University contains a significant and powerful Sufi faction to the present day. The implicit enmity between purity and ecstasy has, however, changed over time to become more explicit and clear. Since the emergence of modernity in late 19th century, there has been a pronounced and strong antagonism between Sufis supporters of Salafi reformism. Although both claim to represent the true orthodox Islam, it is worth noting that the project of modernity in Egypt has shown much more sympathy for the Salafi reformist claim. The material collected from Delta villages displays some glaring examples of this conflict between some Salafi groups and the Sufis (especially the servants of the saints' shrines). Material from other villages in Egypt demonstrated that these conflicts are widespread and, in some villages, the success of the Salafis in proselytizing their doctrine (which claims that saints-day festivals are an un-Islamic and novelty) has reached an extent whereby some *awliya'* festivals have been stopped or are only being celebrated on a small scale.

What we encounter here are two attitudes reflecting two forms of religion; namely, the Salafi religious movement and Sufism. We are not referring here to the view of 'folk' religion as the alleged opposite of 'formal' religion, which has long prevailed in both Egyptian and foreign literature (Uwais 1965; Gellner 1981). In this case, both sides claim to represent true, correct religion. What we have here is a conflict between a traditional mystical practice of Islam and novel form of religion, that is, the strict Salafi form of Islam. (I consider this form of Islam as an integrated part of peripheral modernity.) This conflict is a modern one which did not feature previously in traditional society. We have already referred to this conflict by saying that while conflicts between purist and ecstatic approaches have a long history, they were largely latent. The emergence of contemporary conditions have brought these differences to the surface and sometimes turn them into an open source of conflict. One of the most important of these conditions is the prevalence of an affinity with fundamentalism among the youth. The spread of this attitude was boosted by the intensive migration to the Gulf countries from the 1970s. Many of the migrants were influenced by the Wahhabi doctrine (named after its founder Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab), which prevails in much of the Arabian Peninsula. One of the key objectives of the Wahhabi and other similar doctrines is to fight what their supporters believe to be novelties and superstitions. Wahhabis and Salafis believe that visiting the graves of the dead and resorting to the intermediation of saints are pre-Islamic customs which started to spread in Muslim societies from the 8th century after Higra (Mostafa 1989: 305). Holding to a very strict interpretation of monotheism, Wahhabis

and Salafis believe that any kind of devotion to saints is outright polytheism that renders its practitioner an unbeliever.

In the third story we find the *wali* coping with the requirements of the modern age in a thrilling and astonishing manner. In this story, the *wali* does not stand beside a victim of injustice, protect someone from falling in danger, prevent a robber away from stealing, protect a cow from falling into water, bring back a lost child or causes a sick person to recover from pain—as he may do in many other stories—but the *wali* safeguards a drug trafficker. Narcotics and their criminalization are a feature of the modern society. Police forces that find narcotics and arrest their traffickers are one of modern society's apparatuses. In the first story we have a *wali* who refuses to be moved from his place and resists urban reconstruction and here we have another *wali* who condones the protection of a narcotics trafficker, that is to say, ensures the protection of a legally deviant person. One could wonder why the *wali* helps a trafficker against the police instead of helping the police to catch the drug trafficker. The saint's assistance is telling of the deep distrust of many Egyptians towards their police force and the competing forms of authority and power in peripheral modernity. Resorting to the help of saint appears as something like a resistance mechanism against the state as represented here by policemen. Helping the drug trafficker is thus not framed in terms of law and deviation, but of the saint standing up for his people against the state apparatus.

Let us move on now to study the effect of modernity on the use of public places surrounding the shrines of *awliya'*. The first of these effects was the disappearance of the place altogether, or at least the reduction of its size. This took place as a result of the spread of modern buildings in such locations. In the 1980s and 1990s, Huge expansion of the villages and cities took place in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the free market economy and the increase of migration ratios making previously unseen amounts of capital available for the construction of houses. Together with rapid population growth, this led to a dramatic expansion of the geographic area of villages, towns, and cities and random slum expansions which spread in every direction. This urban expansion has often devoured the areas surrounding the shrines of *awliya'* unless they are protected by legal prohibitions, such as the existence of archeological monuments on these sites. Local authorities often participate themselves in such building operations by making use of open spaces to build schools, local administration centers, or youth centers.

An example of such a development can be found at the shrine of Sidi 'Awwad in Qalyub City District (Qalyubiyya Governorate) which is located near a main road and a railway line. The area surrounding the shrine used to be free from buildings until a mosque was built beside the shrine. This was accompanied by an urban development that resulted in the shrine being sur-

rounded by residential buildings and shops. The area, moreover, witnessed the construction of schools and administrative buildings (e.g. the local administration of the city and district of Qalyub, telephone exchange, and a post office). Another example is the aforementioned shrine of Sheikh Hasan Abu Raytayn where the once spacious place around it has become crowded with buildings. Unable find a place in front of the shrine to celebrate the sheikh's *mulid* celebration, people have moved to celebrate it in the streets leading to the shrine. Sometimes, a shrine that was originally far away from a village becomes surrounded by new buildings, especially if a mosque is built beside it. We can see this in the case of the Nur al-Sabah shrine in the city of Tanta, capital of the Gharbiyya governorate. The construction of a mosque beside the shrine led to the construction of a road leading to the mosque which, in turn, was followed by houses and a large governmental building lining the two sides of the road. Almost the same thing occurred with the shrine of Sidi Abu al-Naga al-Ansari in the town of Fuwa, Kafr al-Shaykh governorate where a bank branch, a car parking area, and a market were built beside the shrine.

There are several manifestations of the state's interference in affairs concerning *awliya'* and the mosques containing their shrines. Such state interference reflects forms of induced modernization:

The inclusion of saints' shrines in tourism development plans as happened with the graves of the Sab'a Banat (seven girls) in Al-Bahnasa village, Al-Minya governorate. There, the site containing the graves of the seven girls was developed as a tourist site. Accordingly, an iron fence was constructed around each grave and painted green. Each grave was covered with a green cloth. The area surrounding the graves was cleaned in order to make it suitable for tourism.

A. Interference in the processes of collecting money at the shrines: visitors often come to the shrine of a saint to make a vow to God and leave a sum of money at a box next to the shrine. The income from these vows is significant, at major shrines in particular. These shrines have been under direct state control since the nationalization of the *awqaf* (religous foundations) in the 1960s, and the Ministry of Awqaf organizes the collection and distribution of the donations, keeping a lion's share for itself.
B. Interference in the organization of the annual *mulid* (pl. *mawalid*) festivals at the shrines: While large *mulids* of national significance have always been organized and policed by the government to a significant degree, festivals of local and regional importance were organized largely autonomously by Sufi orders and local notables. In recent decades, however, state interference in all *mulids* has increased, be it through the distribution of locations for market stands and Sufi *dhikr*s, through the

restriction of the movement of the public at the festival or through an intensive security presence.

C. One of the most important forms of state power at the shrines is urban reconstruction at the *wali*'s shrine. In this case, the area is redeveloped to appear in a modern form. For example, the shrine of Sidi Muhammad al-Murshidi in the village of Minyat al-Murshid, Kafr al-Shaykh governorate: the shrine and a small mosque overlooked an anchorage for boats in Lake Burullus. When the old mosque was demolished and replaced by a new one, the canal connecting the village to the lake was filled up with earth, and the land adjoining the berth was reclaimed. The new mosque was built in the standard style that has come to replace historic mosques in almost all of Egypt's villages and small towns. The shrine, dating back to 13th century and unlike the mosque an architectural site under supervision of the Ministry of Antiquities, is the only historical structure remaining. Both the shrine and the mosque overlook the new 'Sidi al-Murshidi Square'.

D. Interference may come from civil society and from the Sufi orders themselves with the help of governmental bodies as occurred in the case of the square of the shrine of Sidi 'Izz ad-Din Madi Abu al-Aza'im (Itay al-Barud, al-Buhayra governorate). The shrine is located inside a large mosque which also functions as the local center of the Azmiya Sufi order. A civil organization allied to the Azmiya order built a hospital—as an annex to the mosque—for the town's inhabitants and for the needy from neighboring villages. The new mosque complex also houses a kinder-garden and a pharmacy and hosts private tutoring classes for school children. Thus, the place has changed from a religious shrine to a both religious and civil shrine. Just as the traditional square in front of the shrine is open for all kinds of people and activities, the new shrine complex is also open to functions other than those deemed purely religious. However, in a distinctively modern manner, the variety of functions is clearly limited to those deemed in line with the reformist Sufi creed of the Azmiya, a group whose members largely originate from the urban middle classes. As multifunctional as the new shrine may be, it has no space for the genuine openness of the traditional shrine.

E. Finally, the traditional organization of saints-day festivals (*mawalid*) has been effected by societal and economic changes. The *mulid* festival, celebrated annually at the shrine of the *wali*, provides a space for various economic, social, cultural, and artistic practices. It is also a place where Sufi groups gather to meet, mobilize their supporters, and display their identity to the visitors (M. El-Gawhary 1988; F. Mostafa 1980). Until early 20th century, major *mulids* (especially the *mulid* of as-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta) constituted the country's most important markets.

With the growth of the modern economy, mulids have largely lost their importance as markets. However the cafes, amusements, and the trade in toys, souvenirs, sweets, and religious commodities continue to have enormous economic significance for towns that host major *mulids*. This trade demonstrates the many changes that have taken place in the traditional organization of festivals. Rather than unchanging traces of traditional culture, *mulids* today are in many ways thoroughly modern and infiltrated by the culture of consumerism. The first of such manifestations of change to emerge was the appearance of modern cafés in the public places around the shrines of *awliya'*. Previously, the tea-maker used to appear only at the festival (*mawlid*) in villages or sit in a remote place of the square in towns and cities to make tea for people sitting around him on ground. Some tea makers still run their business in this way. Next to the tea makers, however, there appeared modern cafés with chairs, tables, glass cups, and glittering lights. Another manifestation of modern consumerism is the development of simple shops in the districts around important saints' shrines into modern shopping centers with radiant facades and modern commodities. For example, the shops selling sweets around the shrine of as-Sayyid al-Badawi in Tanta are no longer small shops selling products made inside the shop, but have become part of a major industry with central distribution and a network of branches. Even the small trade of travelling vendors is connected to the global economy with the vendors selling incense made in India and rosaries made in China. With the availability of electric light, loudspeakers, and brightly colored textiles, the sound and appearance of the *mulid* have changed: Sufi *dhikr*s have turned into concerts with audiences reaching the thousands, the *mulid* is illuminated by a striking display of colorful lights, and Sufi processions appear to have become more radiant and splendid through the glittering colors of turbans and banners. The forms of entertainment have become more diverse, and new games have appeared. Thus, while certain places diminish and disappear due to urban expansion, other places undergo radical transformation under the influence of modern urban development. Their functions are also transformed, reflecting the general outlook of modernity prevailing in the society.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to open new horizons for the study of Egyptian saints (*awliya'*) and their miracles (*karamat*). I propose that we go beyond the conventional way of looking at saints as established in Egyptian folkloric and ethnographic studies. A peripheral structure of modernity exists in Egypt that is largely linked to the re-creation of saint veneration and beliefs, re-inventing

the world of saints and guarding it throughout all transformations of the social context over the years. I concentrated my analysis on the areas surrounding the saints' shrines as public places. There is a significant difference, however, in the nature of the 'publicness' found in these areas in traditional and peripheral modern societies. While the traditional square of the saint's shrine was most importantly characterized by the openness it enjoyed due to the *baraka* of the saint, the modern public space of the saint's square is in many ways more contested and fragmented due to ideological and religious contestation, urban expansion, modern economics, and state attempts to impose fences, police surveillance, and other physical restrictions on the use of the space. I have shown some aspects which are instrumental to the way in which these places have been transformed from the setting of traditional culture to places where saint veneration and communal culture and new forms of state and consumer culture overlap. I hope that this analysis will prompt further research incorporating this view of the continuity of the relationship between the spiritual power and the surrounding temporal powers, the role that popular beliefs play in shaping modern public ideology, and the problems and contradictions related to the construction of a modern society. There can be no doubt that we must consider the contradicting modes of the formation of modern material and cultural life in peripheral societies.

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