Stockholm University

Gracious Traditions

Contemporary Transnational Egyptian Post-Tariqa Sufism

Frederic Brusi

Doctoral Thesis in History of Religion at Stockholm University, Sweden 2022

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Abstract

An overarching aim of this study is to contribute to the developing body of studies of non-organized and thereby "invisible" Muslims in the West. The thesis probes into the question of what Sufism means in the individual lives of seven Muslims in the US and Sweden who share a relatively privileged Egyptian socio-economic background. The questions addressed have concerned how they relate to local, national and transnational Islamic traditions, beliefs and practices. A foundational idea of the thesis has been to get a close read of Sufism as a personal relation to the Muslim identity of the interviewees. Through positioning personal stories in larger frameworks, the study highlights how Sufism is a situational matter. Sufism is interpreted differently in different contexts and influences approaches to politics, civil society and family dynamics.

The empirical material is produced through semi-structured interviews where the data collection on "Sufism" hermeneutically leads to interconnected themes such as nationalism, history, sainthood, religion, institutions and social class. The thesis is driven by a predominant interest in post-*tariqa* Sufism outside of institutionalized forms and focuses on (1) how the informants relate to Sufism and the shape this relation takes when positioned adjacent to or across other belief; and in particular (2) when it matters to them. Further, it poses the question of (3) what role cultural backgrounds play in interacting with new social environments outside of Egypt. The thesis uses the results of those questions to critically discuss the field of invisible Muslim minorities in the West.

The empirical material shows that the informants are aware of being part of a larger and diverse Islamic context. They regard themselves to be ordinary Sunni Muslims, sharing common beliefs with other non-Sufi Muslims. They simultaneously stress their own contexts in the realization of such beliefs. "Universal" tokens of Islam, such as fasting the month of Ramadan, the mosque as the primary place of worship, or Mecca as the centrifugal geography of Islam is sometimes bracketed, but not rejected. What the study points out, is how the informants have a tepid relationship to local American or Swedish Islamic institutions for the benefit of personalized bonds to their own Egyptian Islamic context. Sufism is commonly associated with Egypt and Egyptian Islamic culture, which means that it also is a position in intra-Muslim theological debates. The perception of Sufism as an innately Egyptian Islam means that Salafism and Islamism can be regarded as foreign traditions, which also resonates with an established state narrative. Sufism in this sense is functionally and realistically perceived as a middle or balanced position, stabilizing the informants between two perceived opposite extremes, being neither fully secular nor religiously fundamentalist. Sufi practices and attitudes are seen as having historical continuity and the benchmark for Islam in Egypt, which the informants find in for instance popular culture and history as well as in some formal theologians.

Finally, the study adds to previous studies of post-*tariqa* Sufism by re-introducing a social class perspective. There is no remarkable difference in the beliefs of the informants and Sufis from other social backgrounds in Egypt. What seems to be a variance is rather the creative space that Sufism carves out for them. The informants confer with an intermediate realm, *barzakh*, where they in individually different ways are able to interact with an unseen world and saints, mainly through dreams, but also in ways that they can perceive in the material world.

Keywords: *Sufism, Post-tariqa, Islam, Egypt, Saints, Religion in migration, Invisible Muslims, Individualization of religion, barzakh.*

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for Magda Tabrizi
in loving memory

Contents

Introduction

Irga' ayâm el-zaman! [Come back, the days of past] This is the phrase my Egyptian sister-in-law invokes with emphatic nostalgia one day in Cairo in 2016 when I strike up a conversation about life in contemporary Egypt. It is unclear what period of time she is referring to, but definitely one before her own. "Nostalgia in this context is accompanied by a 'sense of loss' that the Cairo one grew up in no longer exists. The feeling that 'the city has lost its soul'"[1], Mona Abaza describes the melancholic mood towards the khedival *belle epoque* amongst Egyptian intelligentsia.

One analytical run-up for critically understanding modern and contemporary Egypt examines the roles played by the Army, the Islamic movement(s) and the segment of society that Tarek Osman dubs "the various groups that comprise Egyptian liberalism", in the context of six decades of Egyptian republicanism.[2] In the aftermath of the Mubarak regime that fell to the 2011 revolution, it became clear that the almost half of Egypt's population under thirty-five are not easily compartmentalized into the roles assumed by their parents and grandparents nor the political and societal elements relevant to either.Youth in the Middle East are both participators in a global youth culture as well as involved in forming their own locally-situated ones, cultures that are able to incorporate aspects of Western pop-culture without necessarily conforming to "secular" ideals. "The way the past has come back into favour goes way beyond the mimicry of antiques and the cult of heritage and its commemorations", writes French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, who interprets a resurge of religious, national and ethnic revivalism as being identarian maps pointing back to the past in a technological homogenizing global society that "occurs in tandem with a process of cultural and religious fragmentation that mobilizes myths and foundation stories, symbolic inheritances, and historical and traditional values."[3] A nostalgic and romanticizing longing for the past is in this aspect not a purely ideological orientation, but a profoundly existential one.

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[1] Mona Abaza, "Critical Commentary. Cairo's Downtown Imagined: Dubaisation or Nostalgia" in *Urban Studies*, 48 (6), 1075-1087, May 2011, 1079

[2] Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to the Muslim Brotherhood*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 242

[3] Gilles Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern times*, (London: Polity Press, 2005), 62

Sufism is a distinguishable aspect of Islam in Egypt, and it appears to be gaining popularity in the middle and upper classes. To be "Sufi cool"[4] or going to the saint's day *moulid* in Egypt[5] can perhaps be likened to a surrealist painting. The components are figurative, but the composition challenges our preconceived notions and understandings. It is both recognizably Islamic, Muslim and Sufi, yet it is framed in contexts which makes them escape reductive analytical entrapments. This study is interested in how a Sufi Muslim religious identity is constructed and how it is upheld as an individual ideal that is simultaneously secular and religious, contemporary and historic, individual and collective. It is interested in the dynamic of low-level engagement in local Islamic institutions and the strong personal commitment and emotional attachment to saints in Cairo and the Nile Valley. What is Sufism in the stories of seven trans-migratory, highly mobile, well-educated, globally affluent, non-marginalized alumni of the American University in Cairo?

That question forms the overarching query of this study. It serves to highlight similarities as well as discrepancies between the informants in relation to each other but also in relation to other Muslims. Like other religious phenomena in human history, Sufism is too complex and interwoven into all aspects of human culture to be easily defined and given stable boundaries. Its varying definitions can be observed in holy texts, in the commentaries of theologians and individual parishers, as well as in expressions of architecture, literature, legislation, oral history, art and language. As a theoretical point of departure, it warrants an understanding of Sufism as a particular historical trajectory that has created and continuously creates peculiar polyphonic, multifaceted local, regional and universal Islamic simultaneous cultures.

Human beings are storytelling animals. Furthermore, our stories generate and convey meaning to a far greater extent than truth in any ontological sense of the word, even if the two are perceived identically by most under normal circumstances. What myths, which symbols and whose history and values, is kith and kin to post-revolutionary Egyptians, and how are those symbols, myths and narratives interconnected and creatively woven into stories of the self? How can we understand the general confusing and multi-dimensional situation of religion and society in Egypt by particularistic ethnographic studies? This study aims to diligently pursue an anthropological tradition in where cultures are held to be dynamic and changing relations between people and contexts and the role of the researcher is that of an interpreter rather than a translator. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, the task at hand is more akin to

4 Roxanne Varsi, *Warring Souls*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2006), 10

5 Jennifer Peterson, "Going to the Mulid": Street-Smart Spirituality in Egypt" in *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, edited by Samuli Schielke & Liza Debevec (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012)

how a critic illuminates a poem rather than how an astronomer accounts for a star.[6]

This study proposes using very narrow categories to find voices of unknown clusters of Muslims to further embellish, or thicken, our descriptive analysis of Islam as a lived religion and "Muslim-ness" in the intersection of a given and a self-proclaimed identity. It thereby also aims to analytically provide a platform for understanding the struggles, dead-ends and contestations of the aftermath of the Arab Spring in Egypt. It is a study of Sufism as a context, moreso than a specific content. This work is an account of understanding Sufism as a means of positioning oneself in the tug-of-war between the Army, Islamic revivalism and Egyptian liberalism, but it is also an account of the nostalgia and longing of the migrant; the wistfulness in rekindling a lost love; the desire to reestablish one's ties to something or someone, a mythological time, a specific geography, or a particular saint.

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6 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, (London: Fontana Press, 1993), 10

Chapter one: Aim & Queries

The aim of this study adresses the question of what Sufism means in the individual lives of seven Muslims from a relatively privileged socio-economic Egyptian and Sudanese background. By proposing queries on how they relate to local, national and transnational Islamic traditions, beliefs and practices, the foundational idea of the thesis is to get a close read of Sufism as a personal relation to one's Muslim-ness. Contrasting narratives of their own experiences and ideas of Islam with competing interpretations, this study will highlight Sufism as a relational and subjective analytical category. In short, this thesis presents novel material within a well-trodden discipline, relatively understudied in the study of Islam; Islam of the middle and upper classes.[7]

Arguably, such an analytical perspective is merited as it describes the complexity and idiosyncratic features of Islam as a lived religious tradition by drawing attention to how it coincides with social, political, historical and economic factors in the narratives of the informants. Accordingly, we cannot view religion as a singular causality surrounding "being Muslim" but rather as a part of a larger human experience, one coinciding with family history, nationalism, institutions of religious authority; especially, the individual hopes, dreams and feelings of the participants.

This study will account for an ongoing popular and theological debate on "true" Islam stemming from the latter part of the 19th century, in whose presence the informants willingly or unwillingly find themselves and how they position themselves relative to some of its controversies. Apart from describing the religious world of the informants, the thesis will focus on rationalizations and uses of Sufism as arguments against contesting forms of Islam. Through situating the informants in a wider historical perspective and comparing the narrated experiences of individual actors, this study will critically discuss definitions stemming from the dismissal of or the lack of directly addressing Muslims outside of religious institutions. Rather than treating the empirical material as non-representative or subjectively secular, if that term is used as short-hand for qualitatively less religious or at odds with mainstream religion, this study aspires to progress concepts and theories within the academic study of Islam in general, by arguing for the development

[7] See: Nadia Jeldtoft, & Jørgen Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts in the Study of Muslim Minorities: Visible and Invisible Muslims* (London: Routledge, 2012), 1-6

of new fields in the light of the unique data brought forth. Structurally, the dissertation will be guided by the following queries:

> (1) What do the participants consider Sufism to be in the sense of a larger tradition and how do they see themselves in such a context? (2) When does Sufism matter to them and (3) what role does their cultural background play in navigating the Islamic and non-Islamic environments in their transnational lives? (4) Why are (1,2,3) important in understanding Islam as a human experience?

The *How* and *What* queries are to be comprehended as serving a descriptive pursuit whereas the *Why* and *When* provides the basis for the analytical part of the study. The study engages in theoretical exploration as well as empirical scaffoldings in order to reach its stated aim.

Situating the thesis

This study is located at the crossroads of several scholarly discussions and therefore needs to consider a diverse range of academic fields. Foremost it will necessarily address the definitional questions related to Sufism within Islamic studies. As the study shares the particularity of ethnographic studies, it does not aspire to contribute with general theories on (or definitions of) Sufism. The narratives of living people describing the religious aspects of their lives and how they relate to Sufism may differ from an anthropological interest of the entire *Lebenswelt* of the people whose culture it assumes to gain access to. In contrast, the thesis aims at retaining a situated historical focus on the informants' description of Sufism as particularly *Egyptian*, *Islamic*, *contemporary* and *personal*, in order to understand how notions of tradition are construed and authorized while others are rejected. This naturally has an effect on how one relates both to society generally as well as Islamic organizations specifically. As a result, the study must negotiate the historical structural perspective and an ethnographic focus on identity and actors. In short, it needs to balance between contributing to the collective academic knowledge of Islam as a human religious phenomenon whilst not falling into the trap of Islamizing Muslims into a distorted and unreal image. It is necessary to take heed of Samuli Schielke's warning of overemphasizing Islam as causal in Muslim modes of action:

> This means we should take as our starting point the immediate practice of living a life, the existential concerns and the pragmatic considerations that inform this practice, embedded in, but not reduced to the traditions, powers and discourses

> that grant legitimacy to some concerns over others and structure some considerations while leaving others diffuse.[8]

The study is akin to the methodological problematization in studying Muslim minorities drawn up by Nadia Jeldtoft and Jørgen S. Nielsen, i.e. the hidden statistics outside of studies that generally focus on Islamic organizations and their active representatives. Jeldtoft and Nielsen point out several methodological problems, two of which are given a noticable consideration in this study. Related to Schilke's shorthand of "too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam"[9] is their raising awareness of minority studies' tendency to mobilize Islam and Muslim as common denominators. In the European context, the pair explain that 'Muslim' is a political hegemonic category, and thereby a problematic analytical category. Research on Muslims has established that there is little use in analyzing the sum of Muslims as a unified category, regardless of political bent.[10]

The second problem, as mentioned above, concerns how to develop methods for studying Islam in the lives of non-organized Muslims. This study is thus positioned at the crest of the sociological problematization portrayed by Jeldtoft & Nielsen, adding nuance and detail to the empirically "invisible" and non-organized Muslims and Islam in the West through mobilizing analytical categories such as class, ethnicity and nationality. It is meant to be an ethnographic contribution of individual narratives that are placed in the larger canon of scholarly discussions of Islam as a lived tradition. In sum, the study partakes in three interconnected Islamological discussions: the methodological problem of the invisible Muslims; the theoretical sluggishness in theorizing Islam as the causal factor of "Muslim-ness" in the study of Muslims; and the unclear relation between Islam and Sufism. The thesis does not aim to resolve these issues, but instead to contribute significantly to- and expand upon the work of previous studies.

State of the art

The study of Sufism is a longstanding Western academic tradition. In this section I will account for the most recent stage in the development of the field. A general tendency in research on Sufism since the turn of the millennium has

[8] Samuli Schielke, "Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam, or how to make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life". *ZMO Working Papers*, No 2, (2010), Zentrum Moderner Orient, 12
[9] Ibid.
[10] Jeldtoft & Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts*, 1-3

been to highlight the incongruences and idiosyncrasies of Sufis and Sufism globally and historically. Much like Islam, Sufism has an origin story. An origin story that like all others is composed of historical facts and correlative events, but at its core is a mythology, an ideological narrative. This history of Sufism thus serves many purposes for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The academic study of Sufism can be regarded to have two distinctive tracks historically. The mainstay of 20th century research has involved either the intellectual production of Sufis or the organizational forms of Sufism, the *tariqas*.[11] Earlier Orientalist fascination with the Sufis and the Muslim world would also occasionally lead to assumptions that the Sufis and their practices were somehow detatched from Islam.[12] Mark Sedgwick mentions for instance how Rudyard Kipling describes a character in the novel *Kim* as a Sufi and therefore a free-thinker.[13] Before Kipling, the British orientalist Edward Lane, who described "Darweeshes" in mid-1800s Cairo, writes about Sufi practices and beliefs in a high-handed and occasionally racist manner. However fascinated Lane is with some rites and some individuals, he generally regards much of it as folkish superstition and even goes as far as to judge the Egyptians' veneration of saints as un-Islamic:

> A superstitious veneration, and honours unauthorized by the Kur-án or any of the Traditions, are paid, by all sects of Muslims, except the Wahhábees, to deceased saints, even more than those who are living; and more particularly by the Muslims of Egypt.[14]

It suffices to say that early modern accounts of Sufism mirror both non-Muslim biases as well as internal Muslim contestations of its relation to Islam. Whether in the role of caretaker or an otherwise critical position, the Sufism origin myths commonly begin by assuming that it is Islamic mysticism originating in 8th century Baghdad. Sufism then developed into ascetic practices that gradually solidified into the well-documented *tariqa*

[11] For instance, Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Michael Gilsenan, *Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973); Valerie Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics and Saints in Modern Egypt*, (Colombia, USC Press, 1995)

[12] A common cited critique of the Western Orientalist projections onto the Islamic world is Edward Said's *Orientalism* from 1978, which draws attention to the tendency of Western writers to portray the Arab world in a network of interests with the ends to dominate it. Said has later been criticized for perhaps being too tendentious and selective in his critique of Western history of ideas. For a critical assessment of anti-Orientalism see: Aaron Hughes 2015; Aaron Hugehs & Majid Daneshghar 2020.

[13] Mark, J.Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials*, (Cairo: AUC Press, 2003) , 7

[14] Edward, W.Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, (Cairo: AUC Press,), 236

organizational form, aimed at deepening a worshipper's relationship with God and purifying the soul from vice.[15]

Despite the shortcomings in Lane's account stemming from his personal beliefs, the empirical material is solid and interesting when reviewed critically. It is notable that Lane makes a strong connection between Sufism and the veneration of saints. Some sixty years after Lane, Winnifred Blackman makes similar observations in Upper Egypt where she makes an anthropological effort in tracing pharaonic religious rites in the local religious traditions of the peasant population in a village in Upper Egypt. Blackman cites Lane in her chapter on superstitions but does not go as far as the latter in that she does not interpret whether or not her material stays in line with Islamic "orthodoxy".Rather indifferently, she concludes that "these holy men and women are venerated all over the country, the cults connected with them having become part of the general popular religion."[16]

Another early 20th century account of Egyptian Sufism that differs from Blackman's and Lane's relatively detached theory is the monography on spirit possession by German anthropologist Hans Alexander Winkler. Although he witnesses plenty of the same phenomena as Blackman and Lane does, he finds it completely in line with mainstream Islam:

> It might seem that the fellaheen [the Egyptian peasantry] have accepted Islam only very superficially, as though the old and local persist in uncontrolled freedom. This appearance misleads. The way in which Islam works only deepens the religiosity of the fellaheen. Even though this depth does not often come out in daily life, it is there, and becomes visible in time of need. The clear prophecy of Muhammad brought no system, but a recognition and a goal: the image of the compassionate lord of the worlds.[17]

At the turn of Egypt's second modernization process in the 1950s helmed by president Gamal Abdel Nasser, Hamed Ammar published his work on child rearing in a village in Upper Egypt. In it, Ammar is highly critical of what he regards as erroneous religious traditions "not part of the pure faith", for instance seeking intercession with saints.[18] There are of course plenty of apologetic Islamic writings, such as al-Ghazali's 11th century *al-munqid min al-dalal*, that defend Sufis and Sufi practices as not only in line with the message of Muhammad but perhaps as the very heart of Islam. The continued

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[15] This narrative is for instance reproduced by John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 101-109; Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*; Antoon Geels, *Muslimsk Mystik: Ur Psykologisk Synvinkel*, (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma 2005)

[16] Winnifred.S. Blackman *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt: their Religious, Social and Industrial Life To-Day with Special Reference to Survivals from Ancient Times*, (London: Harrap 1927), 240

[17] Hans. A. Winkler *Ghost Riders of Upper Egypt*. (Cairo: AUC Press, 2009), 25

[18] Hamed Ammar. *Growing Up in an Egyptian Village: Silwa, Province of Aswan*, (London: Routledge & Keagan, 1954), 75

production of Sufi apologetics points to the extension of Muslim critique of Sufism well into the modern period.[19]

Academic writings on Sufism however remain relatively divided between disciplines until the sixties and seventies where theorists like Michael Gilsenan shift focus towards the Sufi orders as organizational factors and their popular decline in the shadow of new charismatic movements like Nasserism and the Muslim Brotherhood.[20]

In Spencer Trimingham's comprehensive encyclopedia-like study and theory on Sufism, he regards Sufism as the belief of a possibility of direct experience of God and the "tendencies in Islam which aims at direct communion between God and man."[21] Of particular importance for the development of Sufism to Trimingham is the progressive merger of sainthood (*wilaya*) with a new reverence for the prophet as the Logos. What popularizes Sufism in the Muslim public is the constitution of Sufi hospices in proximity to the tombs of saints where ordinary people seek the blessings (*baraka*) of a *wali*.[22] Trimmingham also espouses the idea of an emergence, late medieval peak and modern period decline in Sufism.

In the mid-nineties, Valerie Hoffman challenges the idea of a decline in Sufism in Egypt by illustrating not only the energetic Sufi life in Egypt but she also makes a case for popular contemporary Sufism as a continuation or even consequence of classical texts. Hoffman identifies the pivotal role that Sufism has had and continues to have as a subculture in the greater Egyptian society, undergirding Islamic spirituality and intellectual life. Not only is the presence of Sufis noticeable in the provinces, but it continues to attract young educated urbanites.[23]

Although it is common for scholars to assert that Sufism is a complex or multifaceted phenomenon that at the least relates to Islam–perhaps "Islamicate" as Marshall Hodgson would label it[24]–it should be clearly stated that these studies reflect a merging of the worldviews of the researchers and

19 See for example Shaykh Muhammad b. Alawi al-Maliki al-Hasani, *Notions that must be Corrected*, (The Netherlands: Sunni Publications, 2008)

20 Gilsenan *Saint and Sufi*

21 Trimingham *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, 1

22 The Arabic terms *wilaya* and *wali* are not directly translated to English's *saint*. It is commonly done so in Academic writings on Islam and Sufism in Sunni Muslim contexts (See for instance Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the Atlas* (Chicsago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) Gilsenan 1973; Hoffman 1995; Scott Kugle, *Sufis and Saint's Bodies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). In other Islamic contexts, such as in Shi'i Muslim theology or Salafi Muslim theology, the translation to saint may be misleading in the former case and perhaps nonsensical in the latter.

23 Hoffman, *Sufism, Mysticism and Saints in Modern Egypt*

24 In a nutshell, Hodgson uses this term to overbridge the temporal, creedal and cultural limits of the term "Islam", allowing for an inclusive historical view that can account for aesthetics alongside with ethics. Shahab Ahmad's brick *What is Islam* (2016) can in part be seen as a continuation of Hodgson's suggestion.

their informants. The early and mid-2000s offer numerous studies demonstrating the link between Sufism and mainstream Islam and political power, such as those of Leif Stenberg (2001)[25], Rachida Chih (2007)[26] and Steve Howard (2016).[27] Subsequent anthropological contributions have focused on the relationship between (popular) Sufism and (popular) Salafism and the dynamic between them. Samuli Schielke (2012) and Noah Solomon (2016) each map out how everyday Sufi-esque religiosity navigates a dominating Salafi moral terrain, adequately described by Jennifer Peterson: "[A]spects of fundamentalist (*salafi*) thought have become an intellectual norm in Egypt, and yet still the embodiment of a strictly *salafi* lifestyle remains the choice of a committed minority."[28]

My aim in this introduction is not to present a comprehensive catalogue of studies of Sufism, but rather to familiarize the reader with the terrain and the mapping of Sufism present within the narratives of this study's informants. From the aforementioned works cited, we can deduce that the relationship between Islam and Sufism is contested. It may be approached as Islamic world-renouncing mysticism but also as a very mundane matter. Sufism can be characterized, perhaps too narrowly, as a particular form of religious organization yet it displays elements which are intimately connected to individual sages. In the Egyptian context, Michael Gilsenan was early to recognize the readiness of Egyptian parlour and culture to incorporate Sufi phenomena into "the potentials of everyday life."[29]

Alexander Knysh (2017) sums up Sufism as the historical amount of individual imagination, tangible in its sociopolitical, practical, cultural and material implications. Sufism, many Muslims assert, is the only true path to God and one's pious ancestors, while others are convinced it distorts and violates said truth. The outsider's fascination with anarchistic Islam, free-thinking or ascetical Muslim mystics, is present as well.

> Regardless of all these conceptualizations, in the end, Sufism stands tall – an imposing monument to human *creativity*, a whole-hearted and often disinterested commitment to a lofty spiritual ideal and to achieving perfection in word and deed.[30]

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[25] Leif Stenberg "Politisk Sufism i Damascus: En fredag vid Schejkens fötter" in *Levande Sufism*, edited by David Westerlund. (Nora: Nya Doxa 2001), 82-117

[26] Rachida Chih "What is a Sufi Order? Revisiting the Concept through a Case Study of the Khalwatiyya in Contemporary Egypt" in *Sufism and the Modern in Islam*, edited by Martin van Bruinessen & Julia Day Howell. (London: I.B. Tauris 2007), 21-38.

[27] Steve Howard. *Modern Muslims: A Sudan Memoir*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016)

[28] Jennifer Peterson, "Going to the Mulid", 122

[29] Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam*, (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 80-81

[30] Alexander Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 34 (My emphasis)

In the spirit of Knysh's formulation of Sufism being a multifaceted phenomenon that is ultimately an expression of human creativity, I will therefore bracket any preceding theory, whether theological or functionalistic, phenomenological or historical, for the benefit of the reiteration of the informants' understanding of Sufism in dialogue with me.

Globally, contemporary Sufism is no longer easily labled a homogenous phenomenon–if it ever was.[31] Recent studies of Sufism have started to question the continuous validity of Sufism as a temporally stable organizational factor, one necessarily connected to Islam.[32] At the same time, other studies put the description of Sufism as Islamic mysticism[33] or spirituality[34] in question.[35] In my opinion, a meta-analytical approach to these studies proves the innate complexity of a field that is ultimately theoretically constructed.[36] The consequence is that the study of Sufism is a potentially unbounded field and the function of what follows in this chapter is meant to provide the latest and outermost boundaries that frame the thesis.

The academic study of Sufism has largely been conducted within three major themes: individual Sufis, Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqas*) and popular Sufism.[37] Neeedless to say, this typology of mine is not a conclusive catalogue, and there are several important studies that diverge from the three themes. It is a schema provided as an orientation and overview of the development of an academic discipline. A case in point is the *Routledge Handbook on Sufism* (2020), edited by Lloyd Ridgeon. The first part, "the early period", is mainly edited into nine chapters out of fourteen specifically dedicated to individual Sufis of fame such as Rumi, Ibn Arabi and al-Ghazali. The second part, dubbed "the middle period", focuses on the formation of Sufi orders and historiography of particular brotherhoods, i.e. institutionalization. The final part consists of seven chapters that portray popular Sufism in both the non-Muslim-majority West as well as in Islamic heartlands. Common themes are those of re-interpretation, re-formation and even dis-integration.[38]

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[31] See for instance; Mark Sedgwick & Francisco Piraino, *Global Sufism*: Boundaries, Narratives and Practices (London: Hurst, 2019)

[32] See for instance; Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

[33] For instance; Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, (London: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), 2001)

[34] See for instance the works of Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977) or; Carl Ernst, *Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, (Edingburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004)

[35] See for instance: Chih, "What is a Sufi Order?"

[36] See: Aaron Hughes informative discussion in "There is no data for Islam" in *What is Islamic Studies* edited by Leif Stenberg & Philip Wood, (Edingburgh: Edinbugh University Press, 2022)

[37] The term *popular* in a religious studies context is further addressed in the theoretical considerations section.

[38] Lloyd Ridges, ed. *Routledge handbook of Sufism*, (London: Routledge, 2020)

None of the categories I suggest in this overview is to be interpreted as monolithic and insulated from aspects of the other two categories. Furthermore, my review is mainly based on English and Swedish-speaking material, but it does illustrate the reifying tendency in the general description of the history of Sufism.

The link between individual Sufi authorities and the formation of *tariqas* as well as their impact on popular Sufism has been outlined by Michael Gilsenan (1973); Valerie Hoffman (1995) and Dickson & Xavier (2019)[39] Tariqa-centered Sufism, well defined as by Spencer Trimmingham (1971) remains an important aspect in the study of Sufism, but changes relating to the experience of the modern period is addressed by van Bruinessen & Howell (2007) and Earle H. Waugh (2008), showing among other that the *tariqas* (societies) are involved in reforming both content and form. On a related matter, Raudvere & Stenberg (2009) address several aspects of change due to transnational flows of Sufis across the globe. Taken together the studies support an argument that Sufism in its organizational form is reactive or sensitive to time and place, regardless whether it has been narrated as an unchaging practice or belief since its inception.

In the same period there has been a growing academic interest for Sufism outside of Muslim-majority countries. Ron Geaves (2000) and Simon Stjernholm (2011) have both looked at Sufi communities in Great Britain. Geaves highlights an ethnic organizational factor of Sufi groups in Britain– which is also recognized in Catarina Raudvere's study of Bosnian Muslims in Sweden, in whom Sufism is perceived more as a national heritage than a necessary practice[40]–Stjernholm hones in on the emergence of a noticeable "deculturized pool of Sufi knowledge", spearheaded by the Naqshbandi-Haqqani tariqa.[41] The trans-locality of *tariqas* and contested authenticity found as a theme in Stjernholm's study is addressed again in Simon Sorgenfrei's study of the Mevlevi Order of America (2013), which also brings the question of non-Muslim Sufis to the overarching discussion. The situation is seemingly thus that transnational Sufism can be a phenomenon that either solidifies national (or ethnic) identity or transcends it, while either being intimately or vaguely connected to Islam. One way of dealing with the discrepancies, Olav Hammer (2001) has been to create a typological model of "traditional" and "neo" Sufism. A careful conclusion follows that there are two chief forms of Sufism in the West that can be categorized into forms stemming either from migration with a strong ethnic/national connection or

[39] William R. Dickson & Merin S. Xavier "Disordering and reordering Sufism" In *Global Sufism* eds. Francesco Piraino and Mark Sedgwick

[40] Catarina Raudvere "Between Home and Home: Conceptions of Sufi Heritage in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Swedish Bosniak diaspora" in *Sufism Today*, edited by Catharina Raudvere & Leif Stenberg (London: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 49-64

[41] Simon Stjernholm *Lovers of Muhammad: A Study of Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufis in the Twenty-First Century*, (Lund: Lund University, 2011), 294

forms that are founded in converts' experiences. It is important to note though, as seen in Sorgenfrei (2013) or more recent, as in Yusuf Muslim Eneborg's (2020) study on Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, the boundaries are not set in stone and there are numerous conjunctions between "traditional" and "neo" Sufism in the case studies.[42]

Mark Sedgwick (2016) interjects that, outside the expected problematica of Weberian ideal types, the categorization of Sufis in the West as either Islamic or Neo-Sufi,[43] fails to capture how some Sufi movements in the West can be characterized as moving away from Islam while other groups can be described as moving towards a kind of orthodoxation. Piraino and Sedgwick (2019) subsequently categorize Sufism–in its widest meaning–as an inherently heterogenic historical phenomenon, arguing that what ultimately distinguishes Sufism as an object of study is found in the intention of the subject. "For some, orthodoxy is desirable, while for others, heterodoxy is preferable."[44]

The umbrella term post-*tariqa* Sufism (Hermansen 2014; Geaves 2014; Sedgwick 2016) describes several phenomena where Sufism differs from earlier *tariqa*-centered Sufism organizationally and to a varying degree in content. David Westerlund (2001) borrows the expression from Sufi shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri (b. 1937), who calls himself a "post-tariqa shaykh", and Westerlund argues that it applies to many of the emerging post-war Sufi leaders in the West.[45] In Eneborg's (2020) take, the change in form is intimately connected to the challenges of modernity, where the content is moved to the interior–at least rhetorically–in order to situate Sufism and Islam in a language of psychology.[46]

Although the category is diffuse, it is applied to Sufi-like affinities where traditional forms of affiliations have been replaced by more vague or non-verbalized forms. Originally used to describe the trajectory of Sufism in the West, scholars have recently started to describe similar trajectories of Sufism in the Muslim majority world. Marcia Hermansen (2020) claims that the expression can encompass groups that have a Sufi origin, even if they intuitively fall outside a more classical definition of a Sufi order:

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[42] Yusuf Muslim Eneborg, *A Sufi for a Secular Age: Reflecting on Muslim Modernity through the Life and Times of Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri* (Göteborg: University of Gothenburg, 2020)

[43] See: Olav Hammer, "Sufism som Nyandlighet" in *Levande Sufism* ed. David Westerlund, 188-203 (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2001) ; Sadek Hamid, "The Rise of 'Traditional Islam' Network(s): Neo-Sufism and British Muslim Youth in *Sufism in Britain*, edited by Ron Geaves & Theodore Gabriel, 177-196 (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014)

[44] Piraino & Sedgwick, *Global Sufism*, 2

[45] David Westerlund "Sufism i Europeisk Miljö: Ett Religionsteologiskt Fokus" in *Levande Sufism*, ed. David Westerlund (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2001), 173; an extensive overview and analysis of Haeri can be found in Muslim Eneborg (2020).

[46] Yusuf M. Eneborg, *A Sufi for a Secular Age*, 315 ff

> For example, several important Muslim pietistic movements with Sufi roots, such as the Tablighi Jamaat of South Asian origin and the Nur Movements in Turkey, tend to downplay personal connection and loyalty to a single teaching shaykh, while formal initiation and practicing rituals of a specific Sufi order are no longer considered foundational for participation in or affinity with the group.[47]

It follows that the field "Post-*tariqa* Sufism" does not describe or frame a uniquely Western phenomenon and forms of it can be discerned in contemporary Egypt. For example, in Valerie Hoffman´s (2021) study on *the Egyptian Society for Spiritual and Cultural Research*, she defines the society as "an example of a number of trends in contemporary Islam that are marginal in terms of the broader Muslim society but are nonetheless significant in certain sectors of society. The first of these is a form of Sufism that is both eclectic and pluralistic."[48] Hoffman's contribution to the field of post-*tariqa* studies disconnects Sufism as an observable phenomenon (i.e. phenomena) with substantial theological definitions of Sufism, emphasizing (post-*tariqa*) Sufism as a context in order to better understand contemporary Islam in Egypt. This is not to claim that traditional forms of Sufism do not remain, but Hoffman is sensitive to a trend within contemporary Sufism that has disintegrated the established teacher-disciple relationship (*tariqa*) for new forms, much to the expectations of younger generations. This trend offers an Islam that is in tune with real problems of poverty and social inequality all the while remaining relevant to an educated elite looking for an Islam that is spiritually satisfying and authentic without completely blocking out modern liberal values: "[S]ome young Muslims are looking for new ways of understanding their faith. With its combination of spirituality, pluralism, intellectualism, individualism, and social responsibility, the ESSCR is a thoroughly modern creation, a Sufism that is oriented toward today's globalized society."[49]

[47] Marcia Hermansen "Introduction" in *Varieties of American Sufism: Islam, Sufi Orders and Authority in a Time of Transition,* edited by Elliott Bazzano and Marcia Hermansen (New York: SUNY 2020), xii

[48] Valerie Hoffman "A Sufism for our Time: The Egyptian Society for Spiritual and Cultural Research" in the Routledge Handbook of Sufism edited by Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: Routledge, 2021), 483

[49] Ibid. 484

Contribution of the study at hand

This research probes into a new sub-field of interest found at the intersection of previous studies of migratory and post-tariqa Sufism(s). It sits with studies of Sufism in the West and migratory Islam and to a lesser extent, studies on contemporary Islam, attempting to address the occurrence of Sufism in the West outside of self-designated proselytizers and organizations. The thesis will subsequently provide new perspectives in understanding the role of Islam in the West together with a contribution to the detailed image of who the Muslims and Sufis in the West are.

Following the line of Safet Bectovic who holds that "[a] large proportion of Muslims (or rather people who have a Muslim background), who are not part of these organizations and for various reasons have not been present in the public discourse, have thus been fairly unexplored"[50], this study contributes to increasing our knowledge of Muslims who are marginalized in studies of Muslims generally but who are not marginalized in their contemporary societies. It is a study of a well-educated, highly mobile societal elite that has multiple resources for integrating into a new society, but also the confidence to retain their unique religious identity in relation to other Muslims and the surrounding society overall. As such, the empirical and analytical take of the dissertation contributes a detailing relief to the mosaic that houses Muslim voices[51] and global Sufism[52], particularly in a minority context.[53]

The dissertation focuses on the individual Muslim outside of local organizational forms of religion. Important discussions from such a methodological choice are those of Islam as a proselytizing religion, a family tradition, a global phenomenon, or the Muslim as a non-secularized individual. This dissertation attempts to problematize such categories without preference and deal with them as intersecting aspects of Muslim-ness, a term I use throughout the dissertation to separate it from the theologically burdened designation "Muslim".

Islamologists are usually in agreement that the interpretation of Islam, i.e. what Islam is for any given Muslim, is characterized by processes of change on both individual and structural levels.[54] Although researchers may disagree

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[50] Safet Bectovic, "Studying Muslims and constructing Islamic identity" in *Methods and Contexts in the Study of Muslim Minorities*, eds. Jeldtoft, Nadia Jeldtoft & Jørgen S. Nielsen, (London: Routledge, 2012), 13

[51] See for instance: Fazlhashemi, *Vems Islam?*; Esposito & Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*

[52] Piraino and Sedgwick, *Global Sufism*

[53] Jeldtoft and Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts*

[54] See: Martin van Bruinessen & Julia Day Howell (eds.), *Sufism and the Modern in Islam* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013); Leif Stenberg & Philip Wood (eds.), *What is Islamic Studies? European and American Approaches to a Contested Field,* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022)

towards where such trajectories point, this thesis aids in mapping out one possible route. Adding to the relatively new studies and theorization of post-tariqa Sufism, this study suggests that there is merit in analyzing the repercussion of changes in religious authority not only in self-proclaimed or historically established societies of Sufis, but also in the broader Muslim community: i.e. sympathizers that do not undergo the formal initiation into being a Sufi disciple. Shifting focus to the individual perspective tentatively also means drawing attention to a conscious fuzziness, or moral imperfections of religion in the lives of humans.[55]

The socio-economic background of the informants in this study, in light of previous studies, opens up a discussion on the revitalization of Sufism in the upper echelons of Egyptian society, whose patronage of the Sufi societies were pivotal until they relinquished their favor in the modern era and Sufism suffered a gradually fading existence in the metropoles of Cairo and Alexandria, remaining a vital force only in the rural Nile valley.[56] Somewhat difficult to quantify, Sufism appears to be gaining popularity in the middle and upper classes, at least in the scope of this study. It is perceived not only as a genuine and true Islamic practice, more tolerant and cultured than an Islamist or Salafi alternative, but also as *bona fide* spiritual tradition offering Muslims a more profound religious experience in a world where they are challenged not only by the rigidness of fundamentalism but also the existential desolation brought on by modern consumerism.

This study depicts the roles of cultural background and societal position in individual positioning to the remarkably infrequent, and in some cases non-existing, participation in general Islamic rites or activities provided by local mosques. Muslim commitment to their religion is not necessarily nor uniquely found within Islamic institutions. Arguably, this is a segment of Sufis hitherto not typologized in the studies of Sufism in the West.

Structure of the thesis

In this introductory chapter I have accounted for the overarching aim of the thesis and positioned it in its theoretical and academic context as an ethnographic study on post-*tariqa* Sufism. I have also mentioned a relation to

[55] See: Samuli Schielke & Liza Debevec, "Introduction" in *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, edited by Samuli Schielke & Liza Debevec (New York: Berghahn, 2012)

[56] See chapters by: Sedgwick; Gaffney; Hopkins; Chih in *Upper Egypt: Identity and Change* eds. Nicholas Hopkins & Reem Saad, (Cairo: AUC Press, 2004)

the two adjacent fields of diaspora studies and identity which will be addressed in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter two contains the analytical framework of the study. It is a report and legitimization of the dissertation's design and methodological approach, together with a critical discussion on method in general. In it, I account for how I utilize and differ from an oral history approach in my research. The chapter also addresses ethical issues as well as a related reflexive review on choices made in the processes of gathering and analyzing empirical data together with considerations regarding the relationship between researcher and the informants. Chapter two covers a discussion of the theoretical scaffolding that frames and legitimizes the overall aim and analytical point of departure of the study. The chapter provides an anchor to the empirical material in order to set it firmly in an established discussion within Islamic studies on authority and change. Discourses relating to individualization (or privatization) of religion and diaspora or religion in migration are intended to stimulate further critical discussions on post-*tariqa* Sufism, particularly how a Sufi identity can be something mundane and relatively uneventful, yet individually of utmost meaning and importance.

Following these two contextualizing and formal chapters are five chapters of empirical and analytical character. The third and seventh chapters discuss Sufism as it is perceived by the informants, the former from a more structural point-of-view while the latter approaches Sufism in the sense of a relational practice connected to the saints. In between these two chapters I present three chapters in which I demarcate the empirical material that relates to the theorization of Islam. In the fourth chapter I compile material from the participants on the relation to Islam as a shared identity with other Muslims. The fifth chapter is dedicated to highlighting narratives of difference to other Muslims or competing interpretations of Islam. Chapter six accounts for the role national or ethnic aspects of identity plays in the participants' religious personas. Finally, in chapters seven and eight I present their approach to Sufism broadly with special attention given to how their world is enchanted through stories of dreams, claivoyance, spirits and saints. Chapter eight contains a summary of the results of the analytical and empirical chapters as well as an critical discussion of my results, one which reflects the theoretical scaffolding that supports the study.

Chapter two: Analytical frame

In this chapter I shall first describe the circumstances of how the dissertation came into being and with what underlying assumptions and biases I have constructed the field that also colors the analysis. Secondly, I present a deeper reflection on interviewing as a research strategy, why I choose to regard my material as oral history, but also how I differ from more established forms of the method. The following sections also describe data gathering and the systematization of the empirical material together with an account for how I address linguistic issues such as transcription, translation and codeswitching. After the methodological review, I will speak to a number of relevant theoretical fields alluded to in the first chapter that are utilized in analyzing and comparing the empirical material. In these I primarily address my approach to Islam as an analytical category, Sufism as a locative/supralocative phenomenon and (religious) identity, particulary in a migratory context. I will begin by discussing how I conceptualize invisibility.

Locating and framing the invisibles

There has been a growing attention centered around questions relating to Muslims in minority and majority contexts within Islamic studies. Organizations and institutions form relatively well-defined subjects, but Muslims outside of segments of politically recognizable forms organization, require different methodological approaches. Nadia Jeldtoft and Jørgen S. Nielsen draw attention to what they see as the two central difficulties of studying non-organized Muslims by problematizing "a workable definition of 'organized' across a variety of European countries" where the concept itself can be substantially differing on legal, social and cultural lines. Following that, they raise questions on how to methodologically approach the "invisible"

or "private" expressions of Islam not directly accessible.[57] Like most people, Muslims across the world are organized in the sense that they are likely members of trade unions, sports clubs, political parties and other forms of interest organizations. What Jeldtoft and Nielsen examine is a large and diverse group of Muslims outside of Islamic organizations "who simply feel that they belong to a cultural and ethnic common identity."[58]

The predominant query in this study relates to Islam and Sufism within the large and lesser known segment of Muslims in the West unaffiliated with organizational forms of Islam. A case in point is the situation in Sweden: According to the data of the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities there were 200 445 members of national Muslim faith organizations in 2019.[59] Comparatively, because Swedish law forbids registry of religious identity, the total number of people of a Muslim background in Sweden are estimated to be around 800 000.[60] This entails that studies on Islam from an organizational horizon corresponds to approximately 25% of all Swedish Muslims. An analogue situation is addressed in the Danish context by Jeldtoft and Nielsen.[61] The condition in the United States is perhaps even more ill-defined since there is no federal data revealing the organizational status of the approximately 3.75 million US Muslims.[62]

David Thurfjell and Erika Willander meritoriously draw attention not only to the potential problem of designing studies on the premises that all Muslims share in their Muslim-ness equally, but also that studies should "reflect clusters of phenomena whose commonality exists not only in the eyes of the beholding scholar but which is also supported by observable criteria."[63] In other words, to move on from a methodologically problematic position, we must abandon the notion of an Platonic ideal Islam that can be studied as "a choice among ready-made 'packages' […] usually on offer" to a new problematic position of individuals that "frequently move among them."[64]

The interviewees in this study do not form a coherent social group but are approached as individuals that cultivate their religious identity and interact with the fluctuations of their social environment. In this study, they are

[57] Jeldtoft & Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts*, 5; See also Ann af Burén, *En Känsla av Samhörighet*, in *Kvinnligt Religiöst Ledarskap: En Vänbok till Gunilla Gunner*, edited by Simon Sorgenfrei & David Thurfjell, 279-288 (Huddinge, Södertörns högskola, 2022)
[58] Jeldtoft & Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts*, 4
[59] https://www.myndighetensst.se/kunskap/statistik-om-trossamfund.html
[60] David Thurfjell & Erika Willander, "Muslims by Ascription: On Post-Lutheran Secularity and Muslim Immigrants" in *Numen*, 68, (2021), 308
[61] Jeldtoft & Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts, 3*
[62] Besheer Mohamed, "New Estimates Show U.S. Muslim Population Continues to Grow" *Pew Research Center*, January 3, 2018
[63] Thurfjell & Willander, "Muslims by Ascription", 330
[64] Jeldtoft & Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts*, 4

assembled into a segmented cluster according to observable yet somewhat situationally selected criteria that I will justify.

They are limited to seven unique informants that have been selected through a larger initial sampling of Muslims abroad. Informants have been approached in two separate geographies, Stockholm County in Sweden and Champaign County in the state of Illinois in the US. Participants were selected on the following criteria: (1) Egyptian or Sudanese origin (self-assessed), (2) Muslim (self-assessed), (3) practice or affinity towards Sufism, particularly in regards to the veneration of saints, (4) period of study at the American University in Cairo, (5) residence for a significant period of time without and within Egypt and (6) willingness to participate in the study.[65]

The criteria ensure a coherent segmental sample on the lines of social class, religious affiliation and cultural background as well as personal experience of navigating (at least) two different social environments. During the sampling process, potential informants were excluded from the selection either because they failed to meet one or several of the six criteria listed, or that they fitted the criteria, but were outside of the geographical scope. There are therefore possibilities for extending the segmental sample by removing the geographical delimitation of the two counties where sampling was conducted. During the sampling process, through a snowballing effect, I was for example in contact with AUC alumni who fit the six criteria living in Texas, the Emirates, England and New Jersey but were eliminated from my sample due to the initial geographical limitations and subsequent shut-down policies due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

Any study is preceded by the researcher's bias on what it is that is being studied, in the same manner as languages not being merely instruments of description but also shapers of events (such as facts).[66] In the words of Pierre Bourdieu:

> …it was necessary to remind people that facts are made, fabricated, constructed, that observations are not independent of theory, that the ethnologist and his informants are collaborators in a work of interpretation, the informants proposing to the ethnologist, following an entirely special rhetoric of presentation, the "explanations" they invent as a cost of a truly theoretical effort, one implying the assumption of an extraordinary stance induced by the interrogatory situation itself.[67]

[65] The informant Maryam is a partial exception to the fourth criteria in that she did not study at AUC, but have had her children studying there as well as having interacted with it in her role as professor. The criterion is used in the study as a class marker rather than a causal factor.

[66] Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 2010), 169

[67] Pierre Bourdieu "Afterword" in Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, (Berkely: University of California Press, 2007), 164-165

The seven informants in this study should not be understood as representatives of Muslims in any generic sense nor do they personify popular Islam, as Sufism has sometimes been perceived.[68] Individually, they represent themselves, and as a cluster in this study, the shapers of a hitherto less known segment of Egyptian and Sudanese Sufi Muslims, that is co-constructed between the researcher and the informants. Six of the seven informants are women. There are important Islamological studies that frame invisibilty on gendered lines. Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2005) and Pia Karlsson Minganti's *Muslima* (2007) both challenge notions about Muslim women subjected to Islamic piety without agency and autonomy. A recent contribution to the field is Vanja Mosbach's (2022) dissertation, which also highlights–to post-*tariqa* studies–a similar aspect of the individualization of Islam.[69]

This study, however, was framed with a particular interest to Egyptian Sufism in general and the role of saints in particular. The dominance of female informants was not intentional and it did not consciously guide the interviews. My role as a male researcher was never openly adressed by any of the interviewees as problematic, and neither was I as a researcher prompted to reflect on it during the period of data gathering. It is of course probable that the results would have been different if the data had been extracted in rural Nile Valley or a working-class neighborhood in Cairo. Even though my line of questioning differs from Karlsson Minganti's or Mahmood's, the results may also reflect diversity concerning Muslim women. It is likely that belonging to different social classes means having different sets of resources for empowerment in what may be very different milieus. Instead, I perceived common identities, for example being academics, Sufi-positive Muslims and Egyptians in exile, familiarity with AUC, to effectively delineate us as a make-shift group of insiders with little to no resistance.[70]

[68] For a critical discussion of the term see: Schielke & Debevec, "Introduction" 1-12

[69] Vanja Mosbach, *Voices of Muslim Feminists*, (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2022)

[70] I am of course not Egyptian in a strict national or ethnic aspect of it and neither do I claim to be. I have through long periods lived and worked in Egypt, and furthermore been married into an Egyptian family, which allows me to access some tokens of insider-ism, that to a great extent also guides my academic interest in religion in Egypt. Critically, I suppose my position could be described as appropriating some aspects of Egyptian culture. However, as I hold that cultures (especially on a national level) are neither uniform nor stable, a discussion on appropriation is misleading. As this thesis will come to describe, neither 'Muslim' nor 'Egyptian' are substantial definitions. As a researcher, one is always in dual positions of being an insider and an outsider in relation to one's informants.

Surveying Islamic Champaign, IL

In the following section I will provide a more detailed description of how I came to construct the field and how I selected the informants out of a larger pool.

I arrived in Chicago in late August 2019. On the train from O'Hare to downtown Chicago I struck up conversation in Arabic with two young men who turned out to be visiting exchange students from Saudi Arabia. At this point my stated aim of doing research in the US was partially undeclared. The religious traditions and culture of the Nile Valley is a central focus of my academic interest in Islam. With the opportunity to teach part-time at the University of Illinois for two semesters, I was planning to gather material for analyzing how and to what extent families with Egyptian and Sudanese backgrounds were able to retain a certain Nile Valley culture, particularly Sufi aspects,[71] in diaspora. The two Saudi cousins and I talked about the situation of being Muslim in USA. They had already spent time here and were helpful in providing me with their overview of Muslim life in Illinois. As we parted ways, I felt confident that I would be able to acquire a plentitude of informants that were relevant to the idea of a Nile Valley Sufi culture in diaspora.

Once settled in a motel in the outskirts of Champaign, IL, I was hoping to survey the local area and from there work my way outward, expanding the scope to other parts of Illinois and possibly also Michigan, where there is a large community of Egyptians and more recent arrivals, families from Sudan, by using a snowballing method to data collection. Admittedly, there is a untested quality apparent when entering the field without a guide, but my experiences in Egypt as well as people I had been in contact with in Chicago assured me that I did not lack orientation entirely. Surely, with the similar ingenuousness of a young Paul Rabinow, I was definitely already in the practice of working the field:

> How ethnographic. In Morocco only several days and already I was set up in a hotel, an obvious remnant of colonialism, was having my coffee in a garden, and had little to do but to start "my" fieldwork. Actually, it was not exactly clear to me what that meant, except that I supposed I would wander around Sefrou a bit. After all, now that I was in the field, everything was fieldwork.[72]

There was a Muslim student union at university and a larger mosque just outside of Campustown. Even though I already knew I was not explicitly interested in Islam as an organizational factor, they seemed like perfectly good

[71] Mark Sedgwick, "Upper Egypt's Regional Identity: The Role and Impact of Sufi Links" 97-118, in *Upper Egypt: Tradition and Change*, edited by Nicholas Hopkins & Reem Saad. (Cairo: AUC Press, 2004)

[72] Rabinow, *Reflections*, 11

places to start looking for contacts. Perhaps counterintuitively, but very much in line with my preconceived notion, I was not able to find any potential informants with the Muslim Student Union at campus. Even though I petitioned them several times and tried to attend social activities organized by them, I never came in contact with any Egyptian or Sudanese Muslims in the group. Beyond that problem, the nature of the activities and lectures of the student union also did not seem very interested in Sufism in any general sense, even though the organization never appeared to favor or one particular Islamic denomination.

The local mosque which I visited regularly every Friday was unhelpful as far as my proposed study was concerned. In Egypt, apart from its religious function, my experience has been that of the mosque as a social hub. It is where a lot of contacts are made and it has always proved to be a starting point in acquiring new informants. Although I was able to make brief contact with a few Egyptians that attended the mosque, I was unsuccessful in making them interested in my research. In hindsight, I now realize that not only is a mosque in the US different from a mosque in Egypt, but even more imperative, I am a very different presence in the two different social settings. Travelling to local Sufi shrines in Egypt with other pilgrims, I stand out as an oddity, something that in itself evokes interest and questions of who I am and why I have come. In this mosque in the US, I was not such an idiosyncratic presence, especially not in a mosque that regularly hosted a local interfaith conversation with other religious communities. What had sometimes been a nuisance to me in the field while in Egypt, never being able to sneak in under the radar, was in this setting the exact opposite problem. I was invisible and I lacked the adequate social skills to make myself visible.

Providence takes care of fools, lovers and drunks as the saying goes, so through chance, I was soon starting to interact with Egyptians that I came across outside of the institutional religious spheres. My very first interaction with an Egyptian happened at the bank, where we were both applying for bank accounts as foreigners. I overheard him speaking Egyptian Arabic to his mother and struck up conversation with them. In the following weeks I followed suit and started to walk around campus, almost casually finding more and more potential informants. I met Ibrahim the second week in Illinois and he told me about the times he had accompanied his mother to the huge saint's day festival of *Sayyed Ahmad el-Badawi* in Tanta, something he hinted to me was not perhaps what he felt was completely in line with "proper Islam". Ibrahim never struck me as particularily observant of the usual tokens of modern Islamic piety, I for instance never saw him attending Friday prayer in the local mosque, but at the same time he would not publicly drink alcohol or eat pork, at least not when I was around. Ibrahim became a friend of mine, and we often stopped and talked about life in the US compared to Europe, which he also had experience of living in. In many ways, he was the kind of Muslim that I felt needed to be better described in Islamological literature. I especially

found his balancing of his mother's Islamic practices of *ziyara* (visitation to a saint's tomb) with his own sober and rather formalistic modern view of Islam intriguing. For a long time, I considered him for the study, especially for the generational aspects, and he also agreed tentatively to be part of the study. It was not until I came across other informants that I decided to not go forth with him due to the constraints of this study.

I haphazardly came into contact with Aziza in the foreign languages building, where I was teaching Swedish. Overhearing her speaking Arabic with an Egyptian accent, I put faith into dumb luck and struck up conversation in my flawed Egyptian dialect. Little by little, we would have occasional conversations about Arabic, Islam and Egypt that eventually led to discussions on Samuli Schielke and his research on Egyptian Sufism. When I came to understand that Aziza looked favorably upon Sufism, I asked her if she knew of any Egyptian Sufis in Illinois and she introduced me to Hassan, who at the time was pursuing a PhD. Hassan in turn, familiarized me with a community of American Sufis that met regularly for common Sufi practices such as performing *dhikr*, practices that involves chanting a name of God, or verses of the Qur'an, for example. The group and their spiritual leader welcomed me with warm sincerity to join their sessions, which I also did although with some irregularity. Ali and I were in contact throughout my stay, and he introduced me to Basma at a pot luck together with a group of Egyptians that socialized regularly.

After having spoken to Basma for an evening, I started to revise my originally planned study. Even though I at this point had but three informants, that in many ways were different from one another, there were a few enticing key similarities that needed close attention and analysis. They were all strongly committed to religion and being Muslim, yet they did not seem to be overly attached to organizational forms of Islam, like the mosque or the Muslim student union. They shared a class background and had all studied at AUC at some point. It appeared to me as if they predominantly had an individualized perception of Sufism and they spoke of Egyptian-ness seamlessly integrated with Muslim-ness. They undoubtedly belonged to an invisible minority of Muslims, but they were not socially or economically marginalized. With these preliminary results, I started to construct a theoretical field, relating primarily to post-*tariqa* Sufism and invisible Muslims in some kind of diasporic situation.

Moving into the winter of 2019 I had been given other leads. I knew a couple living in Texas who would fit the criteria, and I was invited to a family in New Jersey who promised to introduce me to a very large and vibrant Egyptian community in the Garden State. Some 1200 kilometers from Illinois, I decided for practical reasons that a visit to them would be feasible at the end of my stay in the US in the summer of 2020, when I would have almost two months open to travel anywhere without any teaching obligations.

Expanding the sample

I finished my first couple of interviews with the four "American" informants by the time that we received news of Covid-19 reaching Chicago. In a rapid progression, the university as well as the state started to shut down and a German colleague of mine reported that he had been restricted from travelling between states during a field trip. The university decided to switch to online classes and encouraged all American students to return home. Every morning I witnessed disheartened from my window fewer and fewer cars in the parking lot below me and the trips to the supermarket I would take to buy groceries felt apocalyptic with empty shelfs from the effects of hoarding as well as supply chain issues. The claustrophobia of being stuck in an almost empty dormitory complex, a ghost town of a campus, with no social life and nowhere to leave to, was overwhelming. When SAS suspended flights between Chicago and Stockholm and another European colleague reported he had heard guns fired in close vicinity to where I lived, I decided to cut my losses and leave for Copenhagen, from where I was hoping to make it to Sweden. I cleared my departure with my supervisor and made it back on one of the last flights out of Chicago. This was the third time my field had rapidly disappeared in front of me since I was accepted as a PhD student to Stockholm University.

Back in Stockholm, I continued to interview my informants, realizing that they shared most of the aspects we were talking about with three women I already knew in Sweden. I contacted Fatma, Rabia and Sonia who agreed for me to interview them. Since I already had gathered plenty of data from the "Americans", the interviews with the "Swedes" were to some extent more guided by the coding I had started with the American material. The overall semi-structured aspect of the interview remained similar throughout all interviews, but in the latter ones, particularly with the Swedes, the tendency was that of a slightly more focused line of questioning.

There are aspects of randomness to the data gathered for this study that are shared with many anthropological studies. A researcher does not choose informants to any larger degree than they choose (or tolerate) him or her.[73] And the field, however defined, may be or may not be there at any given moment. There were possibilities to expand the sample further after having surveyed the Swedish informants, but at one point, one must decide to resist

[73] See: Rabinow, *Reflections*, 31 c.

the endless task of gathering data, as Harry Wolcott writes, and begin searching "for underlying relationships and meanings."[74]

The "field" in this study is the researcher's construction of individuals into a diasporic group. In this sense it consists of narratives of people in several geographies with a pronounced shared culture. Thomas Tweed defines a diasporic group as "shared cultures who live outside the territory they take as their 'native' place, and for whom continuing bonds with that land are decisive for their collective identity."[75] Samples are gathered both in person and online from the US, Sweden and Egypt, with a focus on their relation to Islam and Sufism. The diasporic situation of the informants creates an interesting opportunity to compare it with their individual perceptions of Islam as a religion of here, there and anywhere, to borrow language from Jonathan Z. Smith.[76] I will return to both Smith and Tweed at a later stage in this chapter.

Ethical considerations

This study is designed to protect the integrity of its participants. Before agreeing to participation, the informants have been briefed on what the researcher generally is interested in knowing about them and their lives. During the interviewing process the researcher and each participant have been engaged in informal discussions on towards where the material is leading and the informant has been allowed to steer the interviews in detail, though not in the general aim of the study. The participants have also been informed that they can at any point disengage from their role as interviewee or retract or amend statements made. By May of 2022, no informants had approached me with any such consideration. The research has been ethically reviewed and approved according to the rules and regulations at Stockholm University and the Swedish Ethics Review Authority

The field recordings only exist in one copy, stored on a SD chip. The digital audio files have never been connected to a computer and can therefore never be subject to a compromised firewall breaches or internet leaks. The master anonymized transcripts are stored on a separate USB memory.

The research has been conducted within the guidelines of the Swedish research council (Vetenskapsrådet)[77] and the general principles of Reliability,

[74] Harry F. Wolcott, *The Art of Fieldwork*, (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1995), 13
[75] Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138
[76] See: Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 323-334
[77] Swedish Research Council, *Good Research Practice*, (Stockholm: Vetenskapsrådet, 2017)

Honesty, Respect and Accountability of the ALLEA.[78] This study does not cause any conflict of interest between the researcher and the aim or results of the research. The informants have participated freely out of their own consent. It is the researcher's assessment that no direct harm nor any direct benefit will come to the informants through partaking in the study. This study has been designed so that it does not place unduly societal burden on Egyptians, Sudanese, Muslims or Sufis as minority groups or as individuals in American, Egyptian or Swedish majority contexts.

Fieldwork is primarily funded by Stockholm University and the researcher initially received an initial smaller stipend from the Helge Ax:son Johnssons stiftelse in Sweden, covering field trips to Egypt and Illinois conducted in 2018 and 2019. The researcher was part-time employed as TA by the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana at the department of Germanic languages during 2019 and 2020. The research received two generous stipends as the final manuscript was edited during the summer of 2022, one through Helge Ax:son Johnssons stiftelse and one through Kinanders stiftelse, administred by Stockholm University, to whom I am very grateful.

[78] All European Academies, *The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity*, (Berlin: Allea, 2017)

Interviewing as research strategy

In this section I will account for how I approach interviewing for acquiring empirical data and how I have systematized the material in a brief technical discussion together with a longer discussion of the methodological implications of the chosen strategy.

Martyn Denscombe writes that interviews are a particularly well-suited research method for gaining insights in "people's opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences."[79] It is unclear what Dencombe means when he states that interviewing allows for access to the interviewee's feelings, but as far as this study is concerned, it is understood as the expression of a sentiment, not access to the interior of an informant.The interviews conducted in this study can be described as semi-structured, where I as researcher was aiming for interviews that had the feel and style of open-ended conversations rather than interrogation. The outspoken framework of the interviews was my interest in Sufism, meaning they were not *tabula rasa* interviews, but as far as possible I tried to limit my impact to nudging the informant in a certain direction, with follow-up questions in the interview.

The open-ended interviewing technique demands a high level of personal involvement, where feelings and experiences are invoked in order to empower the interviewee. I thereby consciously sidestepped a conventional researcher's stance of remaining passive and neutral in order to minimize impact on the results and used my own identity as a sounding board for the informants, thus co-creating the empirical material to a high degree. It should be recognized that the identity of the researcher impacts the willingness of the interviewee to disclose data. It is highly unlikely that a cool and dispassionate stance would have yielded such fruitful material.[80] Undoubtedly my own Muslim identity and familiarity with everyday life in Egypt worked to my benefit in acquiring the trust of the informants.

Every interview was transcribed verbatim, with the exception of personal names which were anonymized by means of pseudonyms chosen by me. In some cases, I have also altered professions, specific geographical references and similar information in order to anonymize the informants, as far as possible. Each transcript was then printed in one master copy which was used for open coding the material. After an interview was transcribed, coded and sub-coded, I placed it in a designated document in where I translated the quotes into a narrative. The empirical chapters were thus to some extent written in parallel while the interview process continued in a grounded theory-

[79] Martyn Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Projects*, (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 173
[80] Ibid. 178-180

esque kind of process. Categories were not given beforehand but grew out of the process of constant comparison of new data with old as they emerged.
Anna Davidsson Bremborg posits that an interview study is framed by two urgent questions, *who* and *how many*, followed by the puzzling query of whether or not one has found all the empirical data that could be found in order to analyze and develop a theory, i.e. theoretical saturation.[81]

"All the empirical data" besides being a headache for any PhD student, is a judgement call and perhaps a delimitator between sociological and ethnographical perspectives. The *who* and *how many* is in the context of this study self-providing and at some point, when conducting sampling, the resolution should be that "the further bits of data ceases to contribute anything new to the properties of the codes, categories and concepts being developed."[82]

Interviewing is an established research method that comes with a set of perks and a set of epistemological and theoretical problematica. Because the thesis averts claims of grand theories on Islam or Sufism, there is little need to discuss the question of representativeness that often accompanies studies on Muslim beliefs in both academia[83] and popular discourse.[84] Although not a scholarly aim, the design of this study implicitly comments on and adds to the nuances of such debates by contributing to the description of Islam as a multi-faceted phenomenon, questioning the sustainability and coherence of the non-descript category Muslim.

Oral history (of a life Islamic)

At the core of their scholarly output, historians and ethnographers tell stories, writes Thomas Tweed.[85] Tweed's choice of words is important, implying a sensibility to the criticism of historiography drawn up by Michel de Certeau.[86] Through approaching ethnological data as stories, rather than the finite history of something, the problem of key-event historiography can be circumvented.

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[81] Anna Davidsson Bremborg, "Interviewing" in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler, 310-322, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 313-314

[82] Denscombe, *The Good Research Guide*, 117

[83] See: Esposito & Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam?*, Fazlhashemi, *Vems Islam?*

[84] See: Evin Rubar, "Slaget om Muslimerna",2009; Eli Göndör, *Muslimer i Sverige* (Stockholm: Timbro, 2018)

[85] Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile*, 135

[86] See: Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988)

To be blunt, the history or a general interpretation of Islam is not the focus here. The interest is in the personal history of Islam, the context that religion gives to (or exists in) human lives.

Oral history is a qualitative academic discipline at the intersection of historical studies and ethnography. Born out of a desire to reflect the perspective of the historically marginalized, it is today a common approach in several academic fields, yet has met some methodological critique on validity compared to scriptural material. Such debates reflect larger theoretical areas of distinguishing the boundaries and identities of disciplines. In my opinion, it does not invalidate the method itself, but acts as a vehicle for definitions, refining the answers to overarching questions such as what history should be, or what the study of religion at its core, a discussion I shall return to at a later stage of this chapter. A workable way to think about this is to use Bruce Lincoln's elucidation of history being the method of study and religion being the object of interest.

> History of religions is thus a discourse that resists and reverses the orientation of that discourse with which it concerns itself. To practice history of religions in a fashion consistent with the discipline's claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.[87]

Utilizing oral history in the field of the study of Islam is subsequently an ideological and methodological positioning by the researcher, presuming the material value of the spoken word. The method is questionable to yield unambiguous results if the scholarly aim is to produce generalizable answers about Islam from a substantive approach. However, as the aim of the study is to examine the creating of (religious) meaning in a hitherto understudied segment of Muslims, it is arguably an adequate approach. Inspired by the creative blend of story-telling and empirical history of Natalie Zemon Davies', Yusuf Muslim Eneborg uses a biographical approach where the story of an individual "reflects the historical context in which he can be situated."[88]

In this sense, this thesis is oral history with a nod to both microhistory and cultural history, without explicitly being either. It shares in cultural history's hermeneutical endeavor to locate meaning together with the bold aim of microhistory to find answers to great questions by the study of small objects.[89] As Stephen Caunce has argued for oral history, the individual perspective applied in the discipline not only catches the subjective perspective of a

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[87] Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method" 165-167 in *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion* edited by Aaron Hughes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 165

[88] Muslim Eneborg, *A Sufi for a Secular Age*, 36

[89] Sigurdur Gylfi Magnusson & István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 5-7

historical actor, but also relates to larger societal phenomena, their impact and change over time, in the eyes and words of those that experience them.[90]

Oral history as method has three benefits according to Richard Cándida Smith. Analyzing the empirical material in several contexts creates (1) a sharper understanding of the interconnectedness of everyday life and larger social processes, (2) provides a tangible methodology and facilitates the production of original historical sources and (3) ultimately empowers researchers to creatively integrate their own perspectives into research. "They learn that scholarship is not just a matter of summarizing what can be found in a library."[91] In other words, like Thucydides (d. 400 BCE), we historicize partly on what we witness and partly on what other witness for us. A central and largely unavoidable argument concerning oral history is found in the decreasing production of written material, letter writing and journal keeping.[92] Online culture, i.e. the restructuring of social interaction and technological impact on literacy, further stresses the importance on recording oral history in contemporary times.

However, a claim to oral history begs the question of the history of *what*. Here I argue that the relevance is sought in the heuristic or hermeneutic understanding of an oral history of Sufism of a particular segment of Muslims. Interviews have always been a primary source of writing history and the historical object here is an abstraction. This means that the thesis in its overall construction reflects the work of such journalists as Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, retelling the history of an equally abstract historical phenomenon: punk culture. Through carefully editorializing interview transcripts chronologically and thematically, they allow for the subjectiveness of the narrative to lead the definition of the historical object. In the same way that there is no data for Islam, there is no data for punk.[93] "When we use this term, we mean a book of edited passages from a collection of interviews and additional texts that are tightly woven together into an accurate chronology, creating a carefully crafted narrative."[94]

Taking that into consideration, there remain important and noticeable differences between *Please Kill Me: the Uncensored Oral History of Punk* and *Gracious Traditions*. This thesis approaches the oral history of its informants in the context of Sufism and Islam as personal resources of meaning making. It broadens and anchors the narratives in both historical and contemporary

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[90] Stephen Caunce, *Oral History and the Local Historian*. (New York: Longman, 1994), 27 c.

[91] Richard Cándida Smith, "Case Study: What is it that University-Based Oral History can do? The Berkeley Experience." in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, edited by Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 424

[92] Donald Ritchie, "Introduction: The Evolution of Oral History" in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3-4

[93] For a critical discussion of the object of study, see: Aaron Hughes "There is no data for Islam"

[94] McNeil, Legs & Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*, (New York: Grove Press, 2016), 463

larger phenomena, creating an analytical understanding that arguably is larger than the sum of the individual stories. A micro-historical deep dig "into an alien system of meanings"[95]

To some extent, it is fair to question how historical the thesis is, given that it does not overtly relate to a "key event" in the past. The simple answer to such a critique would be to defer the question to the relation between the informants and historical processes, such as urbanization or globalization, not to mention the history of Islam. History is an important context for understanding not only why informants are where they are in the world, but also for contextualizing their narratives about their religious beliefs and practices. As Hughes and McCutcheon remind us, history is not only about the past, but it is also about the present, as it is used to narratively connect a constructed past with a contemporary subject position. On that note it is also about the future.[96]

In this study, I have actively chosen to contextualize the narratives of the informants in an ongoing Egyptian theological debate over the possibility of saints, a debate that the informants willingly or unwillingly are prompted to position themselves in. What the context reveals is how a religious belief connected to what be a very personal relation to a saint spills over into larger issues such as politics and nationalism. The narratives collected often appear multiple times as a recollection of memories taking place in real time or even a referral to mythological (or at least ancient) times subjectively anchored in the present. Thus, the resulting implication points towards the existence of several particular temporal contexts. World events may not necessarily explicitly appear in the data, but they nonetheless constitute part of the larger contexts in which the informants and the researcher is situated. Some significant events include the outbreak of Covid-19; the interviews being held in post-revolutionary Egypt; the emergence of the rogue Islamic State in Syria; the omnipresence of the American War on Terror in the age of new islamophobia; and the blowback created by the dissolution of the USSR.

The narratives relate to the creation of meaning and subjective view of the individual but also addresses questions of Islam and Sufism as dislocated religion in exile that has thus far not been examined. In order to convey this, the text borrows a narratological form from both the academic and the journalistic uses of oral history. From McNeil and McCain it finds *inspiration* in the intuitiveness and methodological rigor of putting the individual narrative dead center. The *expiration*, nonetheless, steps beyond mere

[95] Magnusson & Szijártó, *What is Microhistory?,* 62

[96] Aaron Hughes & Russel T. McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 Words*, (New York: Routledge, 2022), 120

journalistic description and anchors the empirical material in an analytical mode.[97]

Reflections on research design

The bulk of empirical material in this thesis is built on the ruins of failed field work, and failure is a great didactic tool. By being forced to dig where I stood, I encountered a completely different set of data than if I had continued to do field work in Egypt and Sudan. But even though my geographical field changed, my anthropological and genuine interest in the lives of people remains intact. In the endless arches of the contradicting, counterintuitive and confusing cultures of what it is to be human, I have focused on how Islam and Sufism makes sense to the people I interview.

Ethnographic data can always be described as somewhat chaotic. Arguably, this is not problematic in and of itself. It is commonly accepted that "the field" is chaotic and it is precisely this insight that has advanced the study of Islam. Invoking Jonathan Z. Smith, Susanne Olsson and Leif Stenberg remind us that map is not territory but a representation of it for the sake of comprehension. Analytical categories are justified in terms of usefulness.[98] The method and material of this study are thus chosen in order to substantiate analysis of just how entangled and complex religious identities are. In order to qualify reductive categories like "Muslim", "Sufi" "Arab" or "Egyptian", they are necessarily open-ended. The point of the study is not to descend into lengthy debates over definitions but rather to make a partial contribution to the methodologically problematic field of *visible* and *invisible* Muslims. In that supposition, it follows Jeldtoft and Nielsen's call for research that:

> will open broader perspectives on a field which has become excessively politicized and in the process contributed to marginalizing, if not making invisible, a substantial proportion of ethnic and religious minority communities with some form of Muslim heritage.[99]

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[97] An inspiring creative use of oral history is used by Klara Folkesson who argues that only through the lifestories of her informants is she able to see subjective experience of marginalization and the mechanics behind it. See: Klara Folkesson, *Inkludering, Marginalisering, Integration? Enskild medborgares identifikationer och Kommunalpolitisk Utveckling*, Örebro: Örebro Universitet, 2012

[98] Susanne Olsson & Leif Stenberg, "Territory at Stake!" in *What is Islamic Studies?* edited by Leif Stenberg & Philip Wood (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 102

[99] Jeldtoft & Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts*, 5

Allowing for analytical categories such as "Religion", "Islam" or "Sufism" to remain diffuse is a conscious choice in order to allow for a comparative aspiration of the empirical material, consisting mainly of individual and personal accounts of religious beliefs and practices. The analytical point of this study is not *if* such beliefs and practices are in congruence with a Platonic ideal Islam, but *what* the informants believe them to be and *how* they use them to create a meaningful story of themselves. This entails that the design and theory shares in Jonas Otterbeck's contribution to the study of the invisible Muslims, dynamically looking at the appropriation of rituals by asking when and where, rather than honing in on normative statements of the organized and deeply devout.[100] The design of this study mimics in part Otterbeck's assumptions of the non-organized and builds from his call for studies that asks in-depth questions "about the understanding of different prayers, the view on Islamic history, the feelings involved in celebrations, the practice of tarawih, and so on."[101] This has the effect that the thesis utilizes comparison on several levels, the empirical material is compared and classified, and the analysis also compares itself with other studies. Michael Stausberg states that comparison is an unavoidable human cognitive strategy. Faced with an unknown we are genetically predisposed to compare it to a phenomenon we already are cognitively familiar with.[102] Further, he holds that comparison is historically not a single method but rather design or a "mode of analysis, a way to approach a given problem."[103] The question of whether or not comparison is a passable road leading to analytical advancement is not answered by choice of method *sui generis*, but how the preferred method is applied. After all, any scholarly research can be conducted in bad faith, Stausberg cautions us.

The human experience is chaotic, inconclusive and at times inconsistent, self-contradictory even. By conducting studies focusing on Muslims' perception of Islam, there is a risk that religion as an instructive category is over-emphasized in importance. Methodological observations are not "doctrine(s) of immaculate perception" as Beer stated in dismissing the positivist scientific ideal.[104] Since bias is unavoidable–the observed and the observer's mind are inevitably related within a dialectic process–Wolcott suggests that we should reconsider bias as something that we cannot live

[100] Jonas Otterbeck, "Ritualization amon young Muslim adults in Malmö and Copenhagen" in *Methods and contexts*, edited by Jeldtoft & Nielsen, 66
[101] Ibid, 61
[102] Michael Stausberg, Sammenligning" in *Metode i Religionsvitenskap*, edited by Siv, E. Kraft and Richard, J. Natvig (eds.)(Oslo: Pax Förlag, 2006), 32
[103] Michael Stausberg "Comparison" in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg, and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2014), 34
[104] C.G. Beer "A View of Birds." In *Minnesota Symposia on Child Psychology*: edited by Anne D. Pick, Volume 7., 47-86. (University of Minnesota Press, 1973), 49

without. A good bias will lend us focus, essential to perform research. "Bias should stimulate inquiry without interfering in the investigation."[105]

What must be avoided is the obfuscating cognate of bias, prejudice, because it stops us from assessing the world as it presents itself to us. Shahib Ahmed gives a telling example when one professor at a formal dinner at Princeton is surprised by a Muslim visiting scholar drinking wine. The don says to the colleague that he was under the impression that Muslims do not drink wine, an assumption that is met with a stoic reply from the visitor that he comes from a family of wine-drinking Muslims, a family that had been wine-drinking Muslims for a thousand years. The professor is even more severely bewildered by such an answer and continues to state that he does not understand. I know you do not, says the Muslim colleague, –but I do.[106]

By shifting the comparative purpose towards more minute detail, a stronger case for the validity of the method can be made, as Bruce Lincoln notes, favoring what he dubs "'weak comparisons', i.e., inquiries that are modest in scope, but intensive in scrutiny, treating a small number of examples in depth and detail, setting in in its full and proper context."[107]

Though Lincoln primarily interests himself with textual religion and myth, it is possible to pursue an ethnographic study that rests partially on Lincolns take on mythic narrative. In comparing *Beowulf* with the middle Persian myth, the *greater Bundahišn*, Lincoln asserts that a weaker comparison does not entail universal themes or a shared prehistory, as the stories have arisen independently in different temporal and geographic settings. The common traits they share, however, are not accidental, and they "reflect similar points of tension in the social structure of the peoples among whom these stories circulated."[108]

The problem of interviewing lies at its core not in the method with which data is gained, but with the epistemological presumption that humans are culture-producing animals. All human beings lie. Everyone doctors their statements. We all omit telling the entire truth in order to be functioning individuals in our social environments. Michael Gilsenan noticed in conducting fieldwork in a Lebanese village: "[L]ying in the everyday world is also a conscious act directed at another; it is always part of social meanings and social relations."[109]

Whether or not we are interacting with people for research purposes, others will relate to us what they are comfortable with us knowing about them and they will construe information in the manner they want to be perceived. The

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[105] Wolcott, *The Art of Fieldwork*, 165

[106] Ahmed, *What is Islam*, introduction

[107] Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On and With Comparison*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 11

[108] Ibid. 32

[109] Michael Gilsenan, "Lying, Honor and Contradiction" in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Volume 6, Number 2, (Autumn 2016), 1

promise of anonymity should not be expected to change the nature of that power dynamic. Unavoidable as the situation is, it still brings methodological implications under critical review. On a more abstract theoretical level, it can be argued on the lines of Paul Feyerabend that "[s]cience is essentially an anarchic enterprise: Theoretical anarchism is more humanitarian and more likely to encourage progress than its law-and-order alternatives."[110] In this post-Popperian spirit, methodology is meant to serve science through structuring what is interesting and worth pointing out. Knowledge, Feyerabend claims, "is not a series of self-consistent theories that converges towards an ideal view; it is not a gradual approach to the truth."[111]

A similar epistemological attitude, that research is about what is worth pointing out, particularly in the field of religious studies can be discerned in Russel McCutcheon who summarizes his thesis on method thus:

> Using the word "data" in this manner, as a marker for how an object of study has been isolated, from the hectic world, by our curiosities, how something has become an item of discourse for us, prompts us, I think, to be far more epistemologically humble in our work as scholars, thereby helping us to see that things become interesting (or not) to us, "for purposes of argumentation," which is a move that challenges us to articulate our interests, our thesis, and thus the argument that we're trying to make, instead of simply presenting our descriptions of items in the world as somehow self-authorizing and inherently interesting, as if the world commands us to passively pay attention to this and not that.[112]

Ideally, ethnographic interviews are to be accompanied with participant observation, the so-called triangulation that is supposed to yield valid and reliable anthropological results.[113] I do not challenge the epistemological importance of methodological triangulation or the truism of contradiction. It is important to reiterate Gilsenan's conclusion that people do not necessarily live their lives, conscious of the moral inconsistencies between their beliefs and their actions.[114] The insights with such a method whilst valid and reliable, also yields a certain analytical focus: What people say they do and what they actually do are (usually) two separate analytical categories.

Yet in this study, customs and traditions are narrated, and so are feelings for that matter. They are not observed practice. What the applied method points to is not only the description of beliefs, but how, when and where such beliefs are operating. Furthermore, the informants are to differing degrees removed from their "original" social, cultural and national milieu, the

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[110] Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 1
[111] Feyerabend, *Against Method*, 14
[112] Russel T. McCutcheon, "Afterword". In *A Modest Proposal on Method*, (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 212
[113] See for instance; Davidsson Bremborg, "Interviewing"
[114] Gilsenan, "Lying, Honor and Contradiction"

observational leg of ethnographic triangulation is hard pressed to design. What would tentatively be observed and what possible results that would supposedly give that do not come across during the interviews is a question that will remain suspended.

It must be recognized that "belief" is a problematic term. Bruce Lincoln raises two contestations for why he prefers the term "discourse" in its stead. His first point is the epistemological consideration that belief is necessarily mediated and therefor always imperfect and a distorted representation of an internal state. Second, Lincoln argues on ontological terms that belief is not an immaculate interior reflection, but generally follows exposure to the discourse of others. "As these statements are received and metabolized by those by those to whom they are addressed, they are internalized as belief, but in this process, discourse is both logically and chronologically prior to belief."[115]

Referring to belief in this thesis indicates the internalized end of the discursive processes that precedes it, not a claim of unmediated access to the interiority of any of its informants. In a nutshell, the study at hand interests itself in the narrated religious beliefs of its participants, expressed as the thoughts and feelings on complex historical and cultural milieus and what that tells us as outside petitioners about the Islam of a segment of the invisible Muslims.

On language, transcription and translation

The main language used in the interviews is English. Some code switching between English and Egyptian or Sudanese Arabic occurs. An exception was the interviews with Rabia, where the interviews were conducted in Swedish with occasional code switching to Egyptian Arabic but more frequently to English. Quotes by Rabia in this paper are thus translated from Swedish to English by the author.

As far a possible I have tried to retain in writing the natural flow of the spoken language of the interviewee. The consequence is that Arabic words and sentences injected in a larger English flow by the speaker are preserved with a translation added in brackets if the Arabic gloss is not deemed to be commonly known, e.g. if the transcript reads: "As'altuh bass I didn't hear his reply", it would be quoted as: "*As'altuh, bass*, [I asked him but], I didn't hear his reply". As a general rule, all Arabic will be italicized and occasionally the

[115] Bruce Lincoln, *Thinking about Religion after September 11*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 111 (note 15)

translation as well, if it is needed for syntactic purpose, i.e. reference. Commonly known Arabic words or expressions such as *Islam*, *Yalla*, *Sharia*, *Habibi* etc. are not translated but remain italicized if they are quoted or referred from an informant.

Interjections in English are retained as […ehm…] and the most common Arabic interjection as [*Fa*…] and the common Egyptian Arabic filler as [*keda*]. In the case they are used by the speaker for their lexical or grammatical value, they are translated.

Transliteration of Arabic is simplified meaning that no attention is paid to emphatic letters. [ت], [ث] and [ط] is simply transcribed as [t]. [ع] and [ء] as [‘]. The same is true for [ح] and [ه] that both are transcribed as [h], following that pattern, [س] and [ص] are retained as [s]. The reader is trusted to contextually understand that [sh] can signify the Arabic letter [ش] or […سح…] and subsequently that [kh] usually points to [خ] but could theoretically be an allusion to […كح…]. Finally [d] can point to both [د] and [ذ], although there are some instances where [ذ] is transcribed as [dh]. [z] could be [ز], [ذ], [ض], [ظ] or [ث], depending on the inflection of the speaker or if Standard Arabic or Egyptian Arabic is used. The gloss [ذكر] can thus be transcribes as [dhikr] if standard Arabic is used and [zikr] if the speaker uses Egyptian Arabic. The definite article is given as [al-] in formal Arabic and [el-] in Egyptian Arabic. Assimilation, i.e. Sun and Moon letters are not marked. Vowel omission is marked [-] in some names e.g. [Abu-l Hajjâj]. Long vowels are generally marked with added diacritics [â, î, û], unless they are assessed to be common in English vocabulary, e.g. [Halal], [Islam], or [Haram].

Although the simplified transliteration is linguistically subpar, I have opted for it because of the study not being conducted in the discipline of linguistics, and the question of with which method one best transcribes spoken Arabic is not on the table. However, using spoken or formal Arabic carries a meaning in this study and the simplified transliteration used will be able to distinguish between the two.

In a few instances I have felt forced to alter the syntax or other grammatical problems in a direct quote for purposes of legibility or comprehension. Where such altercations have been made I have cited the fact that the quote has been grammatically changed.

Theoretical considerations

Having described my method and critically assessed it, this following section provides an in-depth discussion on the major theoretical concerns of the thesis. Through highlighting three central fields by which I approach the empirical material, my intention is to offer a context to the following chapters as well as a basis for my contribution to the study of contemporary Islam in general and the study of Sufism in particular.

Islam

The study of Islam is particularly complex in that it is tightly entangled with its own disciplinary history. The earliest studies were commonly Christian theological rebuttals. The modern period gave birth to a certain pejorative or romanticizing Orientalist literature and our contemporary era has been formed by the discussion of religion and politics. In shorthand: Feminism, Islamophobia and Islamism.[116] The scholarly output has thus been surrounded by at times dogmatic and at times shifting discourse between prescriptive and descriptive approaches, both equally problematic–albeit in very different ways–in the assumption of Islam as a substantial object that can be studied. The aforementioned is well known[117] and thoroughly discussed within the discipline of Islamic studies and the historiography of Islamic studies will therefore not be described in further detail.[118]

With that opening statement, it is still difficult to proceed writing a thesis named "Gracious Traditions" without mentioning the impact of Talal Asad and the discursive tradition theory. A significant merit of Asad's 1986 theory is how it puts Muslim practice in the foreground of Islam as a studied historical object. Particularly in the field of the anthropology of Islam, this has been an important contribution for studies that highlight Muslim agency and the

[116] For a more elaborate overview see: Leif Stenberg & Philip Wood, "Introduction" in *What is Islamic Studies?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022)

[117] See: Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Carl Ernst, *Rethinking Islam*; Aaron W. Hughes, *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction*, (Sheffield: Acumen, 2012)

[118] See: Hughes, *Theorizing Islam*, who makes a convincing call for a return to a critical study of Islam instead of the theologized and apologetic output that he holds is currently dominating Islamic studies, particularly in the US.

creative process of attributing a "traditional" (and Islamic correct) behavior to oneself, by ascribing it to a set of authorities such as texts or theologians.[119]

Asad, who explicitly responded to what he believed to be a Geertzian essentialist depiction of Islam as a system of symbols, created and interpreted by the researcher,[120] has in turn received ample critique for his theologizing tendency in privileging of the Qur'an and Hadith as the boundaries of an Islamic discursive tradition.[121] Another important and critical objection is made by Samuli Schielke, who questions the heuristic value of "tradition" in how Asad's theory is invoked to focus on defining what Islam "is", begging the questions what it is that "Islam" would explain, and what is *not* a discursive tradition? Schielke finds an inconsistency in how Asad questions the use of the term "religion" whilst failing to see how he himself uses the term "tradition" rather uncritically.[122]

Aaron Hughes is critical on how Asad is mis-used, especially by Carl Ernst, who, according to Hughes, fails to "unpack generic and essential terms such as "Islam" into a variety of heterogenous and historically specific elements, each one which embodies and reflects a variety of power relations in local situations"[123] Hughes urges scholars of Islamic studies to adopt a centripetal view, i.e. inward from the margins, to avoid the imagined normative Sunni-centric view that dominates the historiography of Islam. Through highlighting the periphery, it is possible to look at doctrinal cohesion and doctrinal prescription emerging from the dialectic between center and margins.[124]

Schielke's critique of Asad acknowledges the important turn in looking at creed as a discursive tradition in that it highlights the "ways people worship gods, read books and act in institutions," while asking how the insights of that paradigm can be implemented in ethnography that depicts these perfect ideals lived out in imperfect lives, highlighting how Muslim life on the streets in Egypt is characterized by moral ambiguities. From this point of departure, Schielke states that working with ideal oppositions such as revivalist piety and liberal secularism is obstructive, because most people display aspects of

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[119] See for instance Charles Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd" *American Journal of Islam and Society*, no. 12(4) (1995) 463–477; Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Simon Stjernholm, *Lovers of Muhammad*

120 Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" (1986) in *Qui Parle* Vol. 17, No. 2 Spring/Summer 2009: 9-10

121 See: Jonas Otterbeck, "Power Practices and Pop: The Islam of Zain Bhika" in *What is Islamic Studies? European and North American Approaches to a Contested Field*, edited by Leif Stenberg & Philip Wood. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022): 109-110

[122] Schielke, "Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam", 3-4

[123] Hughes, *Theorizing Islam*, 108

[124] Hughes, "There is No Data for Islam", 39

both.[125] In my mind, Schilke's invocation of the importance of noticing ambiguity in the religious lives of Muslims, refines Meredith McGuire's idea of bricolage, which she calls the process of eclectically synthesizing together seemingly incongruent pieces of meaning, where paradox and metaphor is characteristic of popular religion.[126]

The main argument for moving away from the idea of "popular" religion however, Schielke and Liza Debevec find in how it is rarely mass mediated. According to them, the "popular" should be taken to be an emic category. It is in reality an insider term relating to theology, nationalism and folklore studies that serve as "very powerful notion[s] in service of claims to orthodoxy and authority around the world."[127]

Majid Daneshgar and Aaron Hughes holds that the notion of insider/outsider has been a blurred relationship in Islamic studies in the Euro-American academic field in part because of the tendency to assume Muslim epistemologies as natural; "the contemporary study of Islam in the Western academy still relies on, continues to engage with, and otherwise works within the parameters set out by these classically constituted topics."[128]

I interpret Daneshgar and Hughes call for critical scholarship not a call to abandon established categories such as "Islam", but to approach them with an analytical intention, rather than reproducing what is basically academic legitimization of religious truisms. On this notion, it is fruitful to follow Olsson and Stenberg's suggestion to circumvent the red herring of becoming ensnared in a debate of definitions of religion. A more rewarding departure is to proceed from the empirical material in a manner that "should be redescriptive and analytical accounts" that ultimately results in new knowledge about religion and/or religious people.[129]

One of Russel McCutcheon's "modest proposals" suggests that a relatively small shift in focus may yield great results in moving away from the problematic position of working analytically with emic categories uncritically:

> This implies not studying the meaning of an object—whether it be the Bible or a hunch, I guess—but, instead, the historically embedded conventions that allow some thing to become meaningful for a specific group at a specific time; it implies no longer studying the identity of a group but the contingent structures in which particular social actors come to think of themselves as having shared

[125] Schielke, "Second thoughts," 10-12; see also: Samuli Schielke "Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation and the Moral Selves in the Lives of Young Egyptians" in *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol 15, (2009) Islam, Politics, Anthropology,
[126] Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, (Oxford: oxford University Press, 2008), 195-196
[127] Samuli Schilke & Liza Debevec "Introduction", 5
[128] Majid Daneshgar & Aaron W. Hughes "Introduction" in *Deconstructing Islamic Studies* edited by Majid Daneshgar and Arron W. Hughes (Boston: Ilex foundation, 2020), 3-4
[129] Olsson and Stenberg, "Territory at stake", 102

> affinities and estrangements (to borrow terms from Bruce Lincoln), as well as the techniques they use to authorize those structures as if they were eternal and universal; it entails ending our studies of traditions and instead examining the contestable means by which traditions and canons are created and legitimized.[130]

Aaron Hughes metaphorizes that "Islam" is not "out there", existing as an ontological reality in itself, instead that it should be approached as the cumulative traditions of both Muslims and non-Muslims that projects and prescribes imagined normativities. "[W]e conjure it into existence by the theoretical choices, methodological moves and rhetorical flourishes we choose."[131]

Walking the Islamic studies tightrope is to some extent a balancing act to avoid falling either into a reifying and caretaker position on the one hand,[132] or an objectifying and ultimately dehumanizing phenomenology or epistemology, on the other.[133] In this thesis, I therefore suggest treating statements insinuating religion (or for that matter, tradition) as moebius strips ultimately referring back to themselves. "Islam" or "Sufism" or "Tradition" etc. is deemed to not have an analytical significance *sui generis*. The analytical value is vested in the method itself, investigating the existential implications in a life Islamic, embedded in a variety of cultural and temporal contexts. To reach such an exploration, we need to consider some perspectives of the location of religion.

Sufism and its location

As a starting point, Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg write that it is common that notions of Sufism are associated with Muslim tradition, but not necessarily with Islam. They assert that contemporary Sufism is found in a virtual space where historically established orders (tariqas) are found sharing space with individual masters (shaykhs) and exercises incorporated into New Age practices. Sufism today is thereby a multifaceted phenomenon "transformed by born Muslims and converts in urbanization, by transnational migration and under the impact of national and international politics." They

[130] Russell T. McCutcheon, "Introduction: I Have a Hunch". in *A Modest Proposal on Method*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 46
[131] Hughes, "There is no Data for Islam", 38
[132] See: Hughes, *Theorizing Islam*; "There is no Data for Islam"
[133] See: Schielke & Debevec, "Introduction", 3-5

draw special attention to the dialectic between diaspora communities and the notions of homeland versus a global community of Muslims[134]

Migration–as far as this study is concerned–is broadly conceptualized as relocation across a variety of borders, not only the geographical and political borders of the nation-state, but also include cultural, linguistic and religious boundaries of "recognized significance".[135]

Kleinschmidt's definition doesn't cover all bases in defining "migrant", but resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's idea of "belonging" in a time where identarian borders are shaky. In highly individualized societies, political, cultural, sexual, professional and religious identities are unstably juxtaposed with national identity, once coerced into the *Lebenswelt* of peoples, but now far less a centrifugal force in the spirit of technological globalism.[136]

Martha Frederiks identifies three theoretical fields within the studies of migration and religion.

> (a) Theories about personal faith as spiritual and social resource for people actually crossing borders; (b) theories that study the role and significance of religious communities for people who migrate; and (c) theories that focus on migrants' transnational networks, leading to conceptual reflections on what notions like 'context' and 'locality' might actually entail for migrants and migrants' religious communities.[137]

Frederiks draws attention to how Smith (1978) observes the role of religion as a means of ensuring continuity with the past and how Kurian (1998) builds from this to theorize on religion as a key symbol of contrasting identity to the majority society.[138] Frederiks raises a cautionary finger though in the light of more recent studies, that such findings seem to speak of pioneer migrants, who were disproportionally involved in establishing religious communities. Summarizing Diehl and König, later cohorts seem to be more invested in "secular" priorities such as finding a job or a house.[139]

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[134] Catharina Raudvere & Leif Stenberg, "Translocal mobility and traditional authority" in *Sufism Today* edited by Catharina Raudvere & Leif Stenberg (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 1-2

[135] Harald Kleinschmidt, *People on the Move: Attitudes Toward and Perceptions of Migration in Medieval and Modern Europe*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 13-17

[136] Zygmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 20-27; See also: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2005

[137] Martha Frederiks, "Religion, Migration, and Identity" in *Religion, Migration and Identity* edited by Martha Frederiks & Dorottya Nagy (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 10

[138] Ibid. 14

[139] Ibid. 15

NB: Finding a house or a job is in my view not necessarily a "secular" activity, since it actually involves living a life, a highly existential problem and may therefor definitely involve a religious aspect to it. However, in order not to derail the discussion, I refer such a discussion to a later stage in the thesis.

In their lexical entry on diaspora, Hughes and McCutcheon connect religion and diaspora to the act of socially constructing an identity alien to one's current setting, "but familiar to memories of a distant or lost homeland." The memory of home, however, risks becoming a condensed image of potent and meaningful but ultimately anachronistic symbols.[140]

Diaspora is an ambiguous term, but generally refers to migrant groups who in resettlement maintain an enduring "religious, ethno-national or national identity." Girish Daswani continues via Rogers Brubaker (2005) to suggest that diaspora differs from other forms of migration by spatial longing and a temporal desire for an imagined past.[141]

Bauman argues that identities are negotiable and revocable and hinge on the feeling of belonging. It is not until someone experiences being "out-of-place" that the question of one's identity is activated. In the globalized world, identity is a multifarious problem because of the mobility of the contemporaries of liquid modernity. The experience of being displaced can be stigmatizing as well as beneficial, but remains problematic.

> The more one practices and masters the difficult skills needed to get by in such an admittedly ambivalent condition, the less sharp and hurting the rough edges feel, the less overwhelming the challenges and the less irksome the effects. One can even begin to feel everywhere *chez soi*, 'at home' – but the price to be paid is to accept that nowhere will one be fully and truly at home.[142]

Bauman implicitly points to the problem of de-territorialization as an aspect of globalization, migration and transnationalism. What counts as context, Frederiks asks, "when people's social fields seem to stretch across the globe and people seem to live simultaneously in a particular identifiable locality as well as in several other 'imagined' locations?"[143]

Sufi networkshave historically been transnational entities.[144] Piraino and Sedgwick assert that boundaries and structures together with politics are pivotal in regarding Sufism as a global phenomenon; they regard spiritual travelling as a teaching instrument for Sufis, adding that the more renown brotherhoods have always transcended cultural, political and linguistic borders.[145]

Citing Mike Featherstone (1990), Raudvere & Stenberg propose the idea of Sufi communities as "third cultures", signified by a complex relationship

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[140] Aaron W. Hughes & Russel T. McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 Words*, 77

[141] Girish Daswani, "The Anthropology of Transnationalism and Diaspora" in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, edited by Ato Quayson & Girish Daswani (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 36

[142] Bauman. *Identity*, 13-14

[143] Frederiks, "Religion, Migration, Identity", 21

[144] Raudvere & Stenberg, *Sufism Today*, 3-4

[145] Piraino & Sedgwick, *Global Sufism*, 3

to a distant home culture all the while communicating on a global scale beyond ethnic and national boundaries, thus creating change over generational and gendered boundaries.[146]

Seán McLoughlin summarizes a model for the new patterns of religion in diaspora in the following manner:

> (1) *home traditions* (e.g., whether the religion is tied or not to a particular people/place); (2) *host traditions* (e.g., the general relationship of religion to the state); (3) *nature of the migration process* (e.g., whether it involves sojourning, settlement, or seeking refuge); (4) *nature of migrant group* (e.g., its size, ethnic and denominational diversity, geographical dispersion, and level of education); (5) *nature of host response* (e.g., social attitudes to integration, racism, and ecumenism.)[147]

As far as I understand it, McLoughlin's model is designed for larger samples, but still offers applicable analytical guidelines for this study, not the least as they offer an outline for possible contexts in which the individual migrant is found. In this study it means that there should be a contextual difference in the experiences of the informants in the US and in Sweden, not only between them but also towards other migrant Muslim communities.

For Piraino & Sedgwick, contemporary Sufism, which is not a homogenous phenomenon, but is characterized by hybridity, a blurring of the boundaries between religion, ethnicity, aesthetics and politics, and, in some cases, a process of de-Islamization. From Egypt to the United States, there are global and contradictory trends that can be approached as the dynamic negotiation of the orthodoxy signifying Sufi renewal.[148]

The unbounded, diasporic and culturally hybridized phenomenon of present-day Sufism thus presents a theoretical challenge of how to contain a potentially unbounded field. In the context of this study, I suggest a creative use of Jonathan Z. Smith's comparative model of religions of Here, There and Anywhere, in order to analyze contemporary diasporic Sufism: Smith builds his idea based on a late antiquity religious focus shift from space to time, from Robert Orsi's (1991) article on pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Jude and a concept of "spatial decentering." Smith subsequently suggests a topographical tri-part model:

> (1) the "here" of domestic religion, located primarily in the home and in burial sites; (2) the "there" of public civic and state religions, largely based in temple constructions; and (3) the "anywhere" of a rich diversity of religious formations that occupy an interstitial space between these other two loci, including a

[146] Raudvere & Stenberg, *Sufism Today*, 5
[147] Seán McLoughlin, "Religion, Religions and Diaspora" in *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, edited by Ato Quayson & Girish Daswani (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 130
[148] Piraino & Sedgwick, *Global Sufism*, 4-5

> variety of religious entrepreneurs and ranging from groups we term "associations" to activities we label "magic.[149]

Although Smith uses his model to theorize on religion over a huge time period, it is possible to use aspects of it in order to further analyze aspects of Sufism and Sufis in diaspora, especially with a focus on the location of Sufism in the minds and lives of the informants. Which boundaries are traversed and which are upheld or created, not only towards majority society, but also towards other migrants, be they Muslims or Sufis?

This model is similar to how Thomas A. Tweed utilizes Smith's (1978) suggestion on the location of religion, whereby religion can orient and map worlds of meaning, in the former's study of exiled Cuban Catholics in Miami. The notions addressed here reference religion locatively–reinforcing territories locally, a view from the center; and supralocatively–religion transcending both homeland and hostland, a peripheral view. Tweed agrees that "the precarious character of both religious mapping and identity formation, seems clearest when peoples become *out of place*,"[150] but concludes in contrast to Smith, that diasporic religion and the sense of belonging to the homeland is an extremely powerful sentiment that persists beyond the migrant generation and is religiously negotiated.

It must also be mentioned briefly that, the emergence and accessibility of the Internet has made a huge impact on the notion of the trans-local, not the least in the sense of the development of a global Muslim public sphere.[151] This key feature of globalized Islam, further stresses the need for a critical appraisal of a distinct location of Islam and Sufism. Reflecting on Lila Abu-Lughod's insight of the disappearance of the bounded anthropological field, writes Peter Mandaville:

> [W]ithin any given culture or community we find various and often competing conceptions of what that identity is and what it means. The politics of identity is therefore based not only on the presence of an external other against which communities and cultures may define themselves, but also on the processes of negotiation and debate taking place within a given community.[152]

The internet creates a possibility not only to form new "supralocative" communities of like-minded individuals as well as possibilities in diaspora to remain connected to people and places of "home", but it also connects the

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[149] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 325

[150] Thomas A. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile*, 93

[151] See: Peter Mandaville, "Muslim Transnational Identity and State Responses Europe and the UK after 9/11" in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 35(3), 494 ff*

[152] Peter Mandaville "When Meaning Travels: Muslim translocality and the Politics of 'Authenticity'" in *Meaning and International Relations*, edited by Peter Mandaville & Andrew Williams. (Taylor & Francis Group, 2003.), 119

individual Sufi to the entire online community of Muslims and the greater world involved in contestations[153] and affirmations[154] of the social construction of "orthodoxy"[155] that is a central feature of contemporary Islam and Sufism.

Approaching Islam and Sufism as a diasporic phenomenon can aid in understanding (or mapping) how Muslims create meaningful boundaries on a large scale in ways that would remain oblique outside of the *out of place* social situation. As McLoughlin states: "[G]reater attention to religion in everyday life (…) is an area for development too, as is religion beyond organizations."[156] In order to achieve such a perspective, some notions about individual religiosity need to be addressed.

Identity & individualization of Islam

Plenty of studies on religion and migration discuss the relation of displacement and identity. Before delving deeper into a theory on identity, it is necessary to assume that religious actors (or consumers) do not form their religious identity out of thin air, reinventing religion in every stage of life, but construct a meaningful relationship from what resources they have at hand.

Grace Davie, in her extensive research on religion in Britain, describes a move from obligation to consumption (or choice), religious interaction framed primarily by experiential elements.[157] An important question raised by Davie's research becomes whether the phenomenon is exclusively northern European (Christian), or part of a global temporal trend in religion. Davie posits that decline in religious attendance in Europe may be an outlier from a global perspective, yet, citing the Kendal studies, which suggest the shift from obligation to that of choice, she questions the lack of attention to "the middle ground, those who self-identify as Christians, many of whom might turn to the Christian churches for the rites of passage."[158] Reflecting on her own experiences in working in the deprived parts of Liverpool, she states that a move away from institutionalized religion is parallel to increasing heterodoxy,

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[153] Knysh, *Sufism*, 186-191

[154] See for example: Abdal Hakim Murad, *Understanding the Four Madhhabs: The Facts about Ijtihad and Taqlid*, (Cambridge: The Muslim Academic Trust, 1999)

[155] The term is borrowed from El-Shamsy, highlighting Muslim (Sunni) orthodoxy a historical process, a dialectic between theologians, rulers and ordinary worshippers. Ahmed el Shamsy, "the social construction of orthodoxy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, edited by Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

[156] McLoughlin, "Religion, Religions and Diaspora", 136

[157] Grace Davie *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, (Hoboken: Wiley, 2014), 3-17

[158] Davie, *Religion in Britain*, 169

but religious beliefs are not hinged upon belonging to a religious institution. Believing without belonging appears to be normal in the British working class. But as class structures and the notion of class metamorphizes, Davie concludes, it intersects with other cultural identities, making analysis even more complex.[159]

In this sense, carefully comparing the British case to Islam, the invocation of "tradition" or "true Islam" becomes a powerful authoritative instrument for the individual Muslim. Perhaps the most significant tool of theology, individually as well as collectively, in a religion that lacks the historical central authority found in the Catholic or Protestant churches.[160] As already mentioned, there are some limitations to how far Asad's idea of discursiveness allows an understanding of the process of identity forming. It may be a partially useful tool in theorizing on *how* identities are formed, but it is less practical in answering *why* and *when* such processes take place.

The religious identity of Muslims can and has been studied as tied to the theorems of authorities and religious leaders. John McCauley takes this approach by sustaining the uniqueness of religious identity as "underpinned by formal doctrine in ways that other identity types are not. (…) Islam is no less Islam in Nigeria than in Iran or Indonesia; it is simply Islam practiced in a different social context"[161] This study, however, finds such a baseline far too simplistic and reductive, basically Islamizing Muslims into a different species altogether, a shallow caricature of a human being, a *homo Islamicus*.[162]

In order to investigate on Muslim identities, it serves better to take inspiration from Jonas Otterbeck's applied nuanced starting point, where a Muslim's relatedness to Islam is addressed as a "complex web of emotions,

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[159] Davie, *Religion in Britain*, 222

[160] I am aware of the gross oversimplification of the churches I am making here, my aim is not to describe what the churches are, but how Sunni Islam differs from them, without forgetting that there are many parallels between the establishment of for instance National Churches and how Muslim political leaders established or patronized certain theologians or schools of thought.

[161] John F. McCauley "A Theory of Identities, Political Choice, and Conflict," In *The Logic of Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Africa*, 27-51. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 36

[162] The term Homo Islamicus, seem to have originated as an emic term related to the theorization on Islamic finance in post 9/11 Western Muslim discourse, see: Mohammed Omar Farooq. "Self-Interest, Homo Islamicus and some Behavioral Assumptions in Islamic Economics and Finance," unpublished draft paper, 2006, available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20061016235749/http://globalwebpost.com/farooqm/writings/islamic/i_econ_fin/Homo-islamicus.doc (retrieved 2022-02-18). For a critique of accepting such emic views, such as Farooq's homo Islamicus, at face value see: Carl Ernst. Rethinking Islam; Islam as a modernist project: Aziz al-Azmeh. Islams and Modernities (London: Verso, 2009); Over-Emphasizing Islam as an explanatory factor in Muslim life see: Schilke, "Second Thoughts" 2010; The political context of over-emphasizing Islam in Muslims: Arun Kundnani. The Muslims are Coming: Islamophobia, Extremism and the War on Terror, (London: Verso, 2014)

bodily memories, and discourse."[163] It is not necessarily an active theological pursuit of formulating–or conforming to–dogma, but part of individual identity acquired through familiarity and socialization. The emic point of religious practice and belief is not necessarily perfection of ritual, but the pragmatic leeway granted the indiv,idual in relating to a grand scheme, as Schielke and Debevec note.[164]

Jonas Otterbeck shows how young Muslims in Denmark and Southern Sweden create forms of being Muslim that negotiate both their relation to majoritarian non-Muslim society and to their own religious traditions and affiliations. "By doing this, they hope to avoid being identified as similar to radical Muslims. They also accuse the media of presenting a false and stereotypical rendering of Islam, which also legitimizes their own position."[165] Otterbeck highlights that the narrative strategy used by his informants is in line with an individualized dominant contemporary culture. Practicing Islam–which is commonly done outside of the public sphere–is described to their surroundings (and the researcher) as a personal choice.

Although not addressed by Otterbeck, his study evokes attention to Lila Abu-Lughod's theorization of resistance as a diagnostic of power,[166] recognized by Saba Mahmood as an important analytical tool for moving beyond a binary rationality of simply resistance and subordination.[167] Resistance as a diagnostic tool is helpful in understanding the complexity of "Muslim-ness" as a situational and relational identity.

The individualization of Islam (in Europe), Jocelyn Cesari states, does not involve a unified tendency, as far as the expressions of Islam is concerned. It may lead to growing distrust in religious authority as well as to a reemergence of a stressed orthopraxy, which "can actually mean emancipation from cultural, ethnic and patriarchal constrains."[168]

Individualization is a theoretical approach in the field of the sociology of religion that has emerged from addressing some of the problematic assumptions of secularization, primarily the connection between

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[163] Jonas Otterbeck, "I wouldn't call the Muslims: Constructing a Respectable Islam" in *Numen*, Vol. 62, No. 2/3 Special Issue: Religion and Identity Politics: Defining 'Acceptable' and 'Respectable' Religion, 2015, 258

[164] Schielke & Debevec, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes,* 7

[165] Jonas Otterbeck, "I wouldn't call them Muslims", 262

[166] Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance" in *American Ethnologist* (17 (1), 1990): 41-55 N.B. Jonas Otterbeck develops a convincing theoretical model where he includes a Foucauldian power perspective to accompany Asad's discursive tradition in: Otterbeck "Power Practices and Pop" in *What is Islamic Studies,* edited by Leif Stenberg & Philip Wood (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022)

[167] N.B. Mahmood challenges Abu-Lughod's failure to recognize the normative position of regarding all "resistance" as socially, ethically and politically similar. Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety,* 9

[168] Jocely Cesari, "Introduction" in *European Muslims and the Secular State*, edited by Sean McLoughlin & Jocelyn Cesari. (New York: Routledge, 2005) ,5

secularization and Weberian *Entzauberung*.[169] Individualization of religion is meant to abridge the seemingly contrary relation between de-institutionalization of religion, loss of meaning, and the robustness and vitality with which religion seems to survive its projected demise in modern society. For Cesari, the decisive aspect of individualization is the transfer of piety onto the individual, in the form of choice.[170] Jenny Berglund, reflecting on the maximalist Muslims found to be "paradigmatic examples" in religious education material, finds the misrepresentation:

> limiting the scope of religious expression to a striving for the ideal in piety, morality, and self-discipline. The problem with such a representation is that the vast majority of Muslims, like the vast majority of human beings, are sometimes, but not always, pious, sometimes, but not always moral, sometimes, but not always, self-disciplined. They sometimes, but not always, attend the mosque, sometimes, but not always, recite their prayers, sometimes, but not always, observe the holidays, and so on.[171]

Berglund concludes that many scolars have noted that Muslims in the West have approached their Muslim identity in terms of choice, rather than hereditary, thus reflecting a "fundamental moral category" dominant in the modern project.[172] Organizing society through such a paradigm, by exercising the least amount of coercion and the greatest possible degree of personal choice, does not mean that authoritarian structures have vanished. They have been replaced by communication, a process that can be described as personalization.[173] Several studies on Muslim modernities have stressed personalization, observed as autonomy, internalization of religious authority, a move to the private from the public, and de-traditionalization, as some of the key features of strategies in being contemporary and modern Muslims.[174]

As beneficial the focus on choice is, Cesari does however draw from a functionalist dichotomy between Islam as a practice and Islam as a belief, resulting in an impractical dualist description of the "two extremes of Islam – one, reformist and open to influence, the other, radical and closed in on itself – which continue to polarize the Muslim communities of the West."[175]

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[169] For an orienting discussion on Weber and theory of secularization, see: Malcolm Hamilton, *The Sociology of Religion*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 185-214

[170] Cesari, "Introduction", 5

[171] Jenny Berglund, "Widening Our Scope from "Maximalists" to More Ordinary Practitioners" in *Kvinnligt Religiöst Ledarskap: En Vänbok till Gunilla Gunner*, edited by David Thurfjell & Simon Sorgenfrei, (Huddinge: Södertörns Högskola, 2020), 320

[172] Ibid. 319

[173] Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, 6-7

[174] An informed discussion and overview can be found in Mosbach, *Voices of Muslim Feminists*, chapter 4.

[175] Cesari, "Introduction", 6

I agree with both Otterbeck and Cesari, in underpinning active –but of course not necessarily rational– choice as a key feature of the individualization of contemporary Islam. What can develop the theoretical model is to add the diagnostic tool of (em)power(ment). Choice is not only *to* something but also *from* something. This is clearly illustrated but perhaps slightly underarticulated in Otterbeck's study.[176]

Approaching the study of Islam from these (individualized) horizons aids us in mapping out the situational and relational boundaries of Muslim-ness, in more detail than in dichotomizing typologies, such as Sufi-Salafi; Liberal-Conservative; or Reformer-Traditionalist, that are useful in academic macro perspectives, but inoperable as far as the queries of this study are concerned, which itself is more catered towards Jeldtoft and Nielsen's call for studies that examine the feeling of belonging.[177]

Concluding discussion: A theoretical framework for the ease of being Muslim

In this chapter I have outlined and discussed the theoretical and methodological scaffolding of the study. I began by mapping my methodological framework and discussed both its merits as well as pointing to some concerns and limits of the applied method. I have demonstrated a feasible method with which "invisible" Muslims can be studied that is innately time consuming and potentially low-yield, which of course, from a sociological perspective, puts matters of generalizability into question. Since the anthropologist cannot, according to Wolcott citing Mead, control the sample in the same manner as the sociologist, the craft of the anthropologist is to contextualize the sample. Instead of trying to find the typical informant, a feat that rests on the shaky assumption that ideal types even exist, "we ask how our informant or village or setting fits into a larger scheme of things. To what extent is the one in some *important* ways like the many?"[178]

Mead's problematization is no less central in contemporary hyperindividualized times, in which authority is democratized and referred back to the individual. Umberto Eco states that "[t]he recognition of a great number of sign repertoires cannot convince one that those repertoires *are*

[176] See also: Jonas Otterbeck, "Ritualization among young adult Muslims in Malmö and Copenhagen"
[177] Jeldtoft & Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts*, 4
[178] Wolcott, *The Art of Fieldwork*, p. 174

systems, nor can we take for granted that any cultural phenomenon *is a sign*.[179] James Peacock states that ethnography is a form of generalizing, although in a way that "differs from the standard scientific model, however, and in some ways is closer to the arts…As in good literature, so in good ethnography the message comes not through explicit statement of generalities but as concrete portrayal."[180]

From a post-positivist scientific perspective, generalizations may be desirable but they also run the risk of misleading the researcher into an understanding of humans or societies as typical and non-typical. A way of theoretically circumventing the problem of typologies in the study of Islam is found in Kluckhohn & Murray's statement on the relation between the individual and her greater society:

> Every Muslim is in certain respects
> Like all other Muslims,
> Like some other Muslims,
> Like no other Muslim.[181]

In a way, it is a slight return to Margret Mead's concept of the single informant as a guide to a broken culture, revamped and redefined as the informant as a guide to herself and position in several cultures, the "embedded conventions" of McCutcheon's with which a thing (such as Sufism) becomes meaningful to a group of people. Categories such as "Muslim", "Sufi" and "Islam" are approached as critical categories in this thesis, defined by how they are authorized and contested by the data extrapolated in the empirical material. Culture, or participating in an aspect of culture is a form of communication. Umberto Eco frames a similar notion as a hypothesis based on the assumption that any cultural phenomenon "is *also* a sign phenomenon", formulated as "*all aspects of culture can be studied as the elements of content of communication*."[182]

This entails that harvested data is subject to comparison, in Stausberg's and Lincoln's combined understandings of the method, the merits of which are not only to be sought in eventual similarities but even more abundant for theorizing beyond the scope of the study in the anomalies and variances of data. The heart of the matter concerns what the data is culturally communicating. By approaching the study of Islam as individualized religion,

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[179] Umberto Eco, "Social Life as a Sign System" in *Fashion Theory* edited by Malcolm Barnard (London: Routledge, 2020), 4

[180] James L. Peacock, *The Anthropological Lens*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 83

[181] Clyde Kluckhohn & Henry Murray, *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1948), 35, N.B. The original noun "man" has been substituted with the noun "Muslim" by the author

[182] Umberto Eco, "Social Life as a Sign System", 4

the anthropological critique raised towards religion as a discursive tradition can be side-stepped without falling into the essentializing tendency it raises a cautionary finger at, as long as the inquiry stays clear of the nonsensical question of what Islam *is* or *should be*. Clifford Geertz was early to understand how broad cultural categories provided a location in a general cultural mosaic; it classifies but does not portray. Counterintuitively, writes Geertz, the broad categories are what actually allow for hyperindividualism in social relations.

> What makes the mosaic work is the confidence that one can be totally pragmatic, adaptive, opportunistic, and generally ad hoc in one's relations with others (…) Selfhood is never in danger because, outside the immediacies of procreation and prayer, only its coordinates are asserted.[183]

What is interesting from an analytical horizon is what informants *include* and *exclude* in their understanding –or rather communication– of themselves as participating in a culture, religious or not. To quote Robert Orsi:

> Fundamental to the approach to religion and to research in religion (…) is the notion that all cultural idoms are intersubjective, including and especially religious ones. Men, women, and children *together* make religious worlds in relationship with special beings and with each other. Intersubjectivity is not only a local or intimate matter: such relational ties structure religious practice and experience in a global context too. Immigrant and migrants establish connections between heaven and earth that stretch well between one environment and another and among families, friends, teachers, and others around the world, in their new homes and in the ones they left.[184]

The theoretical considerations of this study thereby examine the religious beliefs of its informants as relational and situational, rather than innate. It is through external stimuli, such as migration, being questioned by a researcher, or sharing a meal with other Muslims, that initiates "Islamic" considerations, often in small gestures and ultimately undramatic and mundane terms. By bracketing causality between Muslim (religious) beliefs with a given Islamic theology (even as a discursive tradition), we can achieve a thicker, more substantiated description and understanding of a life Islamic in all its existential complexity.

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[183] Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 68

[184] Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: the Religious Worlds People make and the Scholars that Study them*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2-3

Part II

Michael Gilsenan's auto-ethnographic introduction to his masterly *Recognizing Islam* begins with a nineteen-word sentence that has been a guiding principle for my academic endevours since I first read them: "My own experience of Islam began with a surprised and uncomfortable recognition that things are not what they seem."[185]

Like many –if not all– researchers found in the anthropology of Islam, the idiosyncracies and imperfect moral consistency has become what I expect from the field. Undoubtedly, several Muslims and the study of them portray Islam as a pious project of self-improvement and a blueprint for a good society to be attained either through moral rectification or by big stick policy. But, like many who have spent prolonged time in the Muslim world, things are much more complex and counterintuitive than what they seem from a distance. The self-appointed preachers and propagators for moral uprising are a noticeable part of Cairo streets, but their impact may be marginal in the lives of people. Saudi influenced Islam has an impact on Egypt, but the Egyptian commitment to the veneration of saints in the forms of *mawlid* (Saint's day celebration) and *ziyâra* (visitation) is continuous and even shows some signs of becoming increasingly popular.

In the following chapters, I present my empirical material, analysis and conclusions. Each chapter is introduced with an autoethnographic reflection for the purpose of familiarizing the reader with the general theme of the chapter as well as a hint of my own motives for highlighting the particular themes that I have chosen in this study. They consist of anecdotal observations of events that I have chosen to further investigate in the empirical samples. For what it is worth, they are my Michael Gilsenan moments of realizing there is more to this than what meets the eye.

The empirical part of the study begins with the third chapter in which I present the informants' own stories and understanding of Sufism as integrated in their religious beliefs. The third chapter then probes into the complexity of defining Sufism, floating between pious ideals to untangible political power, from a personal choice of an Islamic spirituality to a family inheritance.

The fourth chapter reconnects with the theme of institutionalized Islam and low-level engagement with local Swedish and American Islamic

[185] Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam*, (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 9

organizations, and a return to the methodological discussion on invisibility. The chapter is primarily designed to probe into the problem of associating visible Islamic piety as the model of Islam, commonly taught as the five pillars. By addressing the issues of Ramadan and the Mosque, the chapter also addresses some issues of ritual time and Islamic geography, de-centering the role of Mecca as the prime concern of all Muslims. The chapter concludes in a discussion on the need to approach claims of Islam as religion of anywhere with some caution.

Following the chapter on institutional Islam, the fifth chapter describes the role Sufism plays for the informants in relating to the challenges posed to them by contesting forms of Islam, particularly Salafism, but also calls for re-interpretations, demonstrating how Sufism is a form of low-intensity resistance, stemming from a range of personal convictions and motivations, backed up by the authority and historical weight of al-Azhar university, framing the debate between Salafism and Sufism, in the perception of the informants very much as into a question of foreign and domestic Islam.

Chapter six picks up the question of Sufism as an Egyptian national identity, showing how the two identities of Sufi/Muslim and Egyptian often coincide in the narratives of the informants. The chapter describes how the interviewees use several different cultural resources, such as architecture, history and popular culture, to place themselves in an Egypt that is saturated with the Sufi and Islamic gracious traditions that Egypt is thought to preserve.

The final empirical chapter is meant to provide an additional context of the individualized Sufism adhered to by the informants through describing the class aspects of Egyptian society. The descriptive analysis is then juxtaposed with individual stories of miracles and saints, which prompts a suggestion that Sufism of the privilegied classes in Egypt is not different from the agrarian population in content, but rather in form, supporting the analysis from previous chapters that ethnicity or nationality are not negligible aspects of Sufism post-*tariqa* studies. In chapter eight I summarize the major conclusions drawn from my study.

Chapter three: What is a Sufism?

The overarching aim of this chapter is to set up and legitimize the thicker description of a Sufi identity in the subsequent chapters that goes deeper into ethnic, national, doctrinal and personal motifs, i.e. the existential meaning, that Sufism gives the informants. The chapter is a bricolage of the initial conversations I had with the informants which established a baseline for the interviews, wherein in individual terms they established themselves as Sufis or defined Sufism as an integral part of their own Muslim identity. The chapter highlights "Sufi" as contextual terminology in the understanding of informants.

Introduction

I have been in Luxor governorate for a couple of weeks and I have so far not seen anything that fits my preconceived notions of what Sufism should be. There are no sages teaching the medieval mystic Ibn Arabi, no circles of devotees reviving the religious sciences at the feet of their master and the man I have been told is the most important Sufi shaykh in the area, the few times I see him, seems to primarily be consulted and occupied with very mundane issues. If he is a Sufi master, then Sufism seems to consist of constant calls on a cell phone, connecting people with one another, meddling in business deals, having one's picture taken with newlyweds and general social decorum. The other night I was invited by some acquitances to a *zikr* and ended up at a pop music festival. I find all of this fascinating and very likable. I am truly enjoying my stay but I am also starting to doubt that I will be able to write about Sufism in Upper Egypt. I just cannot seem to find any Sufis, the way I have encountered them in Sweden. The image that I have of Sufism that I carry with me from Sweden are one of highly motivated and pious Muslims devoted to learning religious texts, perfecting their religious practice and adhereing to the prophetic model. Instead I have found plenty of cannabis-

smoking, occasional drinking and a generally lax fatalistic attitude towards life. Very sympathetic, don't get me wrong, but not at all what I expected.

Then, one night, a friend grabs me by my hand and more or less shoves me into the back of a beaten up old Peugot 505. The car speeds off from our small town at breakneck spead onto the pitch-black desert road. The driver only occasionally turns on the headlights on the unlit road. We seem to be following the car in front of us, where the Sufi shaykh is riding.

– Where are we going I ask the other men in the car? They answer with what I assume is the name of a village.

–What are we doing there, I ask? Heads turn around and look at me with the amusement of what I now imagine having heard the dumbest question ever. Here is a guy, all the way from Sweden interested in Sufism, sitting in a car with the most important Sufi shaykh in the area, and he's asking why!

–You wanted to see Sufism, yes? We're going to *zikr*!

Some time after returning from my first Upper Egyptian *zikr*, I am sitting in the cool evening together with Abbas on the porch outside his house. I don't know what he actually feels, but he seems to be happy that I had attended the *zikr* in company with the shaykh.

–My mother was a Sufi, he suddenly says. I look at the empty beer bottles piling up outside his door. There's no moral judgment on my behalf, and even if there was, I have come to learn that such things would not bother Abbas anyway. He appears to be oblivious to moral reproachment in any social setting.

– How do you mean, I ask, almost immediately regretting how I phrased the question. Abbas looks at me with the same type of amused confusion that I saw in the car on my way to the *zikr*.

–I don't know…I mean…my mother is a Sufi; her father was a Sufi. It's in the family…He stops midsentence and starts telling another story.

–This one time, when I was younger me and my friends rode our horses to Qena for the *mawlid* of shaykh el-Ginawi. O, you should have seen us, on the desert road with horses, you know, next to Shaykh's house…

I am not a Sufi

In my field trips to southern Egypt, even in the midst of an ongoing *zikr*, or *mawlid* celebration, few participants recognize themselves as Sufis. "The Sufis" seems to be a designation always pointing away, towards someone else. Some Muslims point towards individuals and/or groups they call Sufis with a

finger of warning, others towards Sufi men and Sufi women as an honorific title, something to aspire to. In the interviews that are the foundation of this study, it was often used specifically as an antonym to Salafism[186]. Moreover, though none of the informants in this study had a negative view of Sufism, one criterion for being part of the study was that they looked favorably upon the phenomenon. Nonetheless, they did display the usual reluctance of calling themselves Sufi, even if they were regularly participating in activities that are commonly acknowledged in studies as expressions of Sufism. "The Sufis. The lovers. The Sufis…very few people will call themselves… will say: I am a Sufi," as Aziza puts it.[187]

Rabia is the only person in the study besides Hassan that regularly engages with a specific Sufi *tariqa*.

> Brusi: Would you call yourself Sufi?
>
> Rabia: Is that a trick question?
>
> Brusi: No, absolutely not.
>
> Rabia: I'm just kidding because one shouldn't… [interference]
>
> Brusi: Pardon? I didn't catch that.
>
> Rabia: I'm sorry, there was a telephone call. Well, I guess I could say that I am…I am a *murîd*. Being a *murîd* means that you try to be a Sufi. When you are a Sufi, you're…I think it means that you have arrived, so to speak. At that point you're at a really high *maqâm*, [spiritual station], and I am certainly not there. So, it's better to say you're a murid, someone on the path, a *sâlik*. But if you were talking to someone that doesn't know anything about Islam, one might say that 'Yes, I am in a Sufi-*tariqa*', sure. In that case I might say it. To be a bit more…so to speak…correct, then one is…it might not be that important but still…to be modest, one doesn't walk around saying that one is Sufi. That word is rarely used in my context, I can tell you. We don't say that.[188]

She says that although she is aware of Muslim denunciation against the practice of Sufism, it is not for fear of criticism directed at herself that she abstains to call herself Sufi. She's content with calling herself a *murîd*, a disciple, and the term Sufi has become tainted with all kinds of prejudice, that it is almost meaningless as a descriptive term today. The way she understands it, she says, is that a Sufi is someone you read about in the books about Sufis and quotes her now passed Sufi Shaykh who, according to her, once said:

[186] See: chapter 5
[187] Interview H
[188] Interview I

"They are the Sufis, we're not Sufis." [189] I ask her to explain. Rabia clarifies that all of the worship that she or other Muslims are engaged in is an imitation of real worship. "It's just like how we don't really pray. We try to pray, you know. That's the difference."[190] She elaborates by saying that when she prays, she has a hard time staying concentrated; it is not unusual that she gets distracted by fleeting thoughts or other worldly matters. In contrast she retells a story when a large tree fell down next to *sayyedina* Ali[191] as he was praying, and he did not even notice it, until he had finished his prayer. With such high ideals, it is comprehensible that the title Sufi is not one cloaks oneself with unproblematically.

For Basma, who unlike Rabia, has not joined a Sufi *tariqa* by pledging herself to a shaykh, the title is not less weighty and problematic. I never asked her if she considered herself a Sufi, but in our first sit-down interview, talking about Sufism as Egyptian cultural phenomenon, countering Saudi Islamic dominance, I suggest that she is "sympathetic to the Sufi type of Islam", a description of herself that she embraces. She says that even if her observations are limited to her social circle and community, she has a feeling that Sufism is becoming more noticeable. "I find a lot of people who are listening to Sufi music or…who don't necessarily know much about Sufism or are connected in a real serious spiritual way…" She thus distinguishes between Sufism as a popular expression and hints that it also has a more profound reality, but that the popular manifestation is not bad in any way: "Very Egyptian, true. I don't know, maybe it's now moving back towards the simpler versions of religion? You know, the more accepting and loving parts of religion."[192]

I ask Aziza why she does not call herself a Sufi and she says that it would feel pretentious for her to claim to be one. For her, the expression is equal to calling oneself a saint and implies a lot of work and qualities, she may not see herself possessing or at this point in time having the means to perform:

> Aziza: I appreciate and admire Sufism a lot and I think it is an important aspect. I try to do as much as I can, but I know that I…This, what I describe, the commitment, I think it's a thing. Like, I know I should be exercising regularly, but I don't. Occasionally I'll take a walk or you know, use the stairs instead of the elevator, knowing that I should probably be more committed, more organized. This is how I view myself and I don't think of myself…you know,

[189] Interview I
[190] Interview I
[191] *Sayyedina* [Honorific title approximately *our master*] Ali is Ali ibn Abi Talib (d.661), cousin and son-in-law to Muhammed the prophet, held in high esteem in all major Muslim denominations and especially within Sufism as he is normally seen as the founder in all chief *tariqa* lines with the exception of the Naqshibandiyya who traces their spiritual heritage to his contemporary Abu Bakr (d. 634)
[192] Interview B

> a lot of good people, a lot of righteous people etcetera…So, no. I don't think of myself as a Sufi.[193]

Having stated that about herself, Aziza does not mind if other Muslims use it to describe themselves, not the least because she thinks that the word has fallen out of grace due to a strong campaign of vilification in recent history. If the word becomes more commonplace, then the ideas behind the word might also become more commonplace, something she would welcome lovingly. Because in the end, Sufism is an integral part of Islam, as she describes it, and part of all Muslims' spiritual and cultural heritage: "As I said, I think that among normal people…most people actually don't object to these ideas. Most Muslims." Like Rabia and Basma, she expresses an understanding that Sufism is for all Muslims, but to be an actual Sufi requires a lot more from the individual. "…to be a Sufi you have to be a beautiful person, a righteous person and very… You know, we try occasionally but…"[194]

In this sense, Sufism represents an esteemed pious ideal. A way to be intensely "spiritual" as Basma describes it and as Aziza states, is supposedly not only an integral part of Islam, but also something that is welcomed by a majority of Muslims. Rabia holds that the tradition of Islam is intimately connected to submitting oneself to a Sufi master by formally taking a pledge of allegiance. Although she admits that following this path of attaching oneself to a Sufi shaykh is not incumbent upon every Muslim, but something for the people that has a particular spiritual urge for it, it is still of great importance, because it is a shield from falling into the trap of being religiously motivated from one's own desires or character flaws:

> Brusi: So what separates Sufism from "just following Islam" or "*Sharia*"? A Muslim that performs what is mandatory and perhaps what is recommended according to *Sharia*, what separates Sufism from that?
>
> Rabia: I think it is that you have a shaykh, to have someone that teaches you how you can control your *nafs*, [ego]. Without a teacher, without someone who aids you in that you will always be leading yourself, if you know what I mean? You will always be your own boss, in some way. The condition for successfully taming your *nafs* is that someone tames it for you, in the same manner that you need someone to teach you other things. You need someone who has travelled this road before and knows all the tricks.[195]

There is a possible comparison between Rabia's view of her Sufi path as a non-mandatory addition to Islam, with the distinction between Christian monasticism and the Greco-Roman tradition of master-disciple. The latter was an instrumental relationship, meant to lead to the autonomy of the disciple,

[193] Interview H
[194] Interview H
[195] Interview J

whereas in the former, obedience is a permanent sacrifice, and a virtue of the self in itself.[196]

There is an implicit critique of self-taught religion in that she ascertains that one is hard pressed to reach any spiritual goals without a knowledgeable teacher. This theme of critique of what is perceived as DIY-Islam is a recurring theme in many of the interviews. In Rabia's view, which is undoubtedly informed by her engagement with the Naqshabandi-Haqqani *tariqa*, truth and tradition with capital T's and is found in the idea of a continuous spiritual lineage, something that Stjernholm describes:

> The shaykhs position themselves in representative and hereditary roles as carriers of truth and authenticity. For such bold self-representation to work they must find resonance with their audience. Here, they rely on an inherited practice of building legitimacy on one's predecessor through a *silsila*: the shaykhs become integrated into a broader historical narrative linking them with a chain of sacred authority. It is a distinct claim to represent an inherent truth or even a 'secret', as passed on through the forty generations in the suggested Golden Chain from the prophet…[197]

Stressing the importance of an authentically "Muhammadan" spiritual teacher is common in many western-oriented Sufi groups like the Habibiyya-Darqawiyya, the Haydariyya-Shadhiliyya, the Shadhiliyya-Battawiyya or Hashimi-Darqawi orders.[198] The Sufi society to which Rabia owes allegiance sits as comfortably in this typology through being at least partially a European presence, with a noticeable constituency of converts to Islam.[199] Even though Rabia finds that it is increasingly easy for people to join the Sufi path through attaching oneself to a Shaykh, it is at its heart not a light matter, but should ideally be approached with utmost sincerity, just attaching oneself to a teacher is not enough to be a Sufi:

> Rabia: It is traditionally quite difficult to become a Sufi, judging from what my Shaykh says. In his days, when he started to become a *murîd*, his Shaykh accepted maybe two or three people during his lifetime. It wasn't open. There was a…high standard, or what do you say? The bar was high. To even become a *murîd* was a difficult matter. Not easy. But, nowadays, in modern times it's different. Maybe it's because of the times in which we are living, it becomes more flexible and open. My shaykh…you know when I met him, he was giving

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[196] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self" Lectures at the University of Vermont Oct. 1982, in *Technologies of the Self* 16-49 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988)

[197] Stjernholm, *Lovers of Muhammad*, 2011, p. 139

[198] See: Hermansen, "The Other Shadhilis of the West", in *Une Voie Soufie dans le Monde*, edited by Eric Geoffroy, (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2005). N.B. I Use the term "Muhammadan" here, not as an Orientalist short-hand for Islam, but for the claim of authenticity of a religious tradition and knowledge going back to the foundational persona of the religion of Islam. Which is a perception asserted by my informants.

[199] Stjernholm, *Lovers of Muhammad*, chapters 4 & 5

> *bayyah* to anyone that asked for it. I think it's his blessings to say, 'Okay, I accept. Come!' But, it is not proper *tarîqa*.[200]

For Rabia, *bayyah*, pledging oneself to a shaykh and the shaykh accepting you as a follower is central to what she calls "proper *tarîqa*". Rabia's thought reflects the "hierarchies of knowledge and knowers" that "Sufi teachers have been actively engaged in constructing" over the past several decades, in Knysh's understandanding of the Naqshabandi-Haqqani *tariqa,* gatekeeping the interpretation of the prophetic message (Islam) from complete democratization, contrary to the project of Islamic reformers.[201]

She explains that there is a qualitative difference in just attending the Sufi activities such as a saint's day festival (*mawlid*) out of love for the saint or the prophet and the self-imposed discipline that being in a tariqa implores. She stresses that she doesn't find anything wrong in being motivated out of love and joining the Sufis for worship, but it is by definition something different from Sufism. I ask her about the popular festivals of Egypt and how she relates to them and what goes on there.

> Rabia: I've visited a few *laylas* and *mawlids*, but it's not really my main preoccupation. As I see it, it's more of a popular kind of…You know, people love that kind of events. It's a party and Egyptians love parties. Someone said it's a relief. You know, one lives a tough life and then the mawlid comes and…because you know they contain all kinds of stuff. Everything in them might not be kosher. I read in Rodenbeck's book[202] about a tent in one *mawlid* where there was this woman that would moan sexually, like some kind of carnival attraction, and people would pay money to go in and listen to her.[203]

The point of being a Sufi, according to her, is not an evening of folkish distractions from the pangs and pains of the world *per se*, but through supererogatory ritual acts to be in a state of constant worship of God. From such a perspective it's easy to understand that an auditory porn show at a saint's day festival may be stretching the idea of holiness. Yet as Schielke reminds us, the *mawlid* from the outside is utterly chaotic: "[A] colorful mixture of Sufi pilgrims, roaming youths, families in front of their homes, amusements, trade, ecstatic piety, and solemn commemoration, all framed by colorful lights and very loud Sufi music."[204]

Sonia explains that Sufism was inevitable for her since she was born Muslim. Over a steak and a beer at a dive bar in Stockholm where she

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[200] Interview J

[201] Knysh, *Sufism*, 111

[202] Likely a referral to: Max Rodenbeck, *Cairo*: *The City Victorious*, (New York: Knopf, 1999)

[203] Interview J, translated from Swedish. N.B. *Layla* [lit. night] is a night of *zikr*, but not confined to members of a specific brotherhood.

[204] Schielke, *The Perils of Joy: Contesting Mulid Festivals in Contemporary Egypt*, (New York: Syracuse University Press), 19

currently lives, she explains to me that had she been born a Christian, she would most likely have engaged with Christian mysticism. Having stated so, she almost immediately she corrects herself and states she doesn't like the word mysticism because there's no overt meaning to the word. In her view, all religions display an interpretational spectrum ranging from dry and dogmatic to for-the-lack-of-a-better-word, mystical. Sufism is by that view, the un-dogmatic tradition found in Islam.

> Sonia: I think life is so hard to understand. I mean, what is this? What are we doing? I think that's what I'm after. I am looking for answers. Does Sufism give me those answers? Yes, it does. Because, Sufism for me is a way of re-…re-…re-raising yourself from… You know, as humans we can both be the lowest of the low and we can also rise above our… I don't think I've lost that hope yet.[205]

Although there is no unambigious mutual definition of Sufism with the informants, it is clearly something that evokes thoughts to Michel Foucault's analysis of a technology of the self. Sufism is not thought to produce something or to dominate other individuals as to form a certain mode of production, but rather on-the-nose "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[206]

With that stated, invoking Foucault's idea of a technology of the self, in looking at Sufism, is not an analysis but a starting point for further inquiry. What is it that attracts people in Egypt to the celebration of a certain saint? What draws the informants to Sufism? Is it, simply put, a spiritual discipline, or the pursuit of happiness, perfection or wisdom? If I was to pick one of Foucault's suggestions, I would pick (symbolic) immortality based on my general understanding of religion as ideologies for managing existential fear of death, a general theory of religion developed by Ernest Becker.[207] Yet, as my conversations with the informants venture further, a much more complex understanding unfolds, one that transcends an analysis of their Sufism as a one-dimensional personal development technology. Self-development is an important non-negligeble aspect of it, but undergirding it, are endlessly complex human cultural depths.

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[205] Interview O

[206] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 17

[207] Primarily: Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, (London: Souvenir Press, 2017); *Escape form Evil*, (New York: The Free Press, 1975)

Baraka, a political map

So how can we interpret the role of Sufi shaykhs in the contemporary world? From a materialist point of departure, Sufism in the sense of mystical-spiritual teachers akin to the frugal asceticism of Christian mystics, is to be sought in the emergence of class society which substantiates religious specialists, according to Knysh. "[U]nproductive workers who were maintained out of general revenue, charity, or patronage (…) In the case of Sufi masters (*shaykhs*) they are trading their *baraka* for livelihood".[208]

Baraka literally means blessings or grace. From a more idealistic position, it may strike us as odd to view *baraka* in terms of a commodity, i.e. an object that is endowed with value only to the extent that it acquires such in exchange with other goods, but it serves as a good model to understand why *baraka* matters in a Sufi context, and how it is realized.

Clifford Geertz interprets *baraka* in Moroccan society as the metaphysical currency of public hierarchical position: "that God had gifted one with the capacity to dominate, a talent it could quite literally be death to hide. It was not a condition, like charity, or a trait, like pride, that shines by itself but a movement, like will, that exists in its impact."[209] Initially, Geertz' definition seems to miss the common translation of *baraka* to blessing. But when Hassan brings up the death of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, whose family name is literally 'blessed', there seems to be something resoundingly Geertzian baked into his description:

> Hassan: I'm not going to talk about Mubarak himself, *Allah yarhamuh*, God have mercy upon him, of course. Actually, I was very sad that he died, but also very happy that he died on the first day of [The Islamic month of] *Rajab*, which is a very, very good day. I am a person that believes in that stuff.[210]

Hassan explains to me that he means is that the circumstances of Mubarak's death corroborates to a kind of as-above-so-below symbolism that can be utilized to understand the world:

> Hassan: Mubarak, he died on that day so he should be having like…even if he's a bad person, and I don't think he's really bad, he did something good to be able to die on that day. And we have for example *el-zift da*, [this piece of garbage], what's his name? Mursi. He died in jail. You see the differences. Again, it's your ending that tells everything about what you did in your life and that's how I see it. If you have like a good ending it basically means that you're a good person.[211]

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[208] Knysh, *Sufism*, p. 28
[209] Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, p. 136
[210] Interview E, edited gramatically
[211] Interview E, edited gramatically

For Hassan, a disdain for the Muslim Brotherhood, and the affiliated president Mohamed Mursi (r. 2012-2013) is a recurring theme in his journey to Sufism. His view of Hosni Mubarak, deposed by the 2011 revolution after 30 years in power, is simultaneously both unique and not completely without precedents in Egypt. In Egypt I have encountered a nostalgic longing back to the days of both the monarchy as well as the more recent presidencies, perhaps on the same lines that people in my generation can long back to the days of the Cold War.[212] Not because there were better days in any quantifiable way, but because the binary socio-political logic of the world between the Yalta conference and the fall of the Berlin Wall –in the turbid gaze of hindsight– feels like an easier map for navigating life. In the words of Scott Atran:

> For there is, together with a flat and fluid world, a more tribal, fragmented, and divisive world, as people unmoored from millennial traditions and cultures flail about in search of a social identity that is at once individual and intimate but with a greater sense of purpose and possibility of survival than the sorrow of here today, gone tomorrow. For the first time in history, ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union shattered the brief illusion of a stable, bipolar world, most of humanity is politically engaged.[213]

It is possible to interpret Hassan's view of Mubarak's death as a post-revolutionary anxiety about the future, replenishing the modernistic "mystique of progress", as Gilles Lipovetsky portrays the Zeitgeist of the onset of the 22nd century.[214] The short-lived period of the Islamist presidency in Egypt is disparagingly regarded by Hassan, not because it failed to incorporate the democratic ideals of the revolutionaries, but because it failed to harvest *baraka*, which earlier regimes had been keen on reaping through visiting the saints:

> Hassan: There's this thing where you feel that the president or the people in power…how they deal with the *Ahl al-bayt*, [the prophetic family]. For example, Sadat when he issued the war of 73, he actually went to Sayed al-Badawi. He went to *hazrat* Sayyedina el-Hussain. He went to Sayyeda Zaynab and he stayed there for a couple of hours, just praying and seeking their help and asking them. I do believe that one of the big Sufi people in al-Azhar, if I remember correctly, actually had a dream telling him that one of the big saints, it may be Sayed al-Badawi, telling him: 'Yes. Go Over. Do it!' [i.e. launch the attack on the Israeli army occupying Sinai]. Also, Mubarak. I would say less than Gamal Abdel Nasser and Sadat how he…how he loved *Ahl al-bayt* and

[212] See: *The Economist*, "La Vache qui Vit: Many Egyptians miss their deposed President Hosni Mubarak" The Economist (Aug 24, 2019) https://www.economist .com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/08/22/many-egyptians-miss-their-deposed-president-hosni-mubarak
[213] Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, p. 41
[214] Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times*, p. 35

> how he maintained the *mazâ'ir* [mausoleums] and all of that. It was still better than Mursi and the *Ikhwân Muslimîn*.[215]

Reading Mubarak and his predecessors as Sufis is akin to Umberto Eco's definition of unlimited semiosis: "The main feature of hermetic drift seems to be the uncontrolled ability to shift from meaning to meaning, from similarity to similarity, from a connection to another."[216] There is no proper religious studies context for the assertion that the Egyptian presidents were Sufis in policy, even if there are narratives of their personal commitment to religion. Especially Nasser's relationship with the Upper Egyptian Sufi saint Ahmad Radwan (d. 1967) is well known and Nasser's animosity towards the Muslim Brotherhood therefore takes on several speculative layers, not just one of realpolitik.[217] The narration of a connection rather reflects Hassan's perception or world view, where Sufism and Good are interchangeable mutual signifiers of one and another. The context of Mubarak's demise is the sign from which he can know something else.

In Hassan it seems to create somewhat of an ambivalent position between ideals and reality. In the Egyptian context Sufism is different to him than how it is in the US. Its Egyptian political aspect has subsided for the benefit of refining his character traits:

> Hassan: I do believe all Sufis hate the *ikhwân al-muslimîn* and every Sufi has…or share a similar political view, specifically when it comes to Egypt (…) It became easier when I came to the States (…) Ok, a Sufi person is a nice person. A Sufi person accepts everyone. All that good stuff. You just leave politics behind and start talking to people about love, about God, about the prophet, peace be upon him.[218]

To a degree, Sufism is different things for Hassan in different geographical contexts. In the US, the focus has turned more to that of a technique of the self, whereas in Egypt, it began with and retains a strong political dimension. Institutionalised or not, there is also a dimension of Sufism as resistence.

Sufism as resistance

215 Interview E, edited

216 Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994), 26 c.

217 Hoffman, *Sufism, Mysticism and Saints*, 266

218 Interview E, edited

Hassan's journey to becoming a Sufi Muslim began during the tumultuous years of the Arab spring. After the fall of the old Mubarak regime in 2011, he attended the American University in Cairo to pursue a Master's diploma. He was finding the growing political leverage of the Muslim Brotherhood highly problematic and was searching for a political alternative without surrendering his religious identity. At the university he became friends with an employee who was a member of an organized *tariqa*. Hassan felt a connection with how this Sufi oriented himself politically and religiously and sided with the Sufis as a personal opposition to the Islamists of Egypt.

> Hassan: I was completely lost, and those policies [of the Islamists], I know they weren't right, but I needed the religious perspective on it. I needed to feel, who are the religious parties that support and don't support this revolution? I wanted to hear who from religion, religious people or groups or organizations that supported the army. That supported…that were against the [unintelligible] religion and I found that in the Sufis. Sufi people in Egypt and that is because they are always full of the *sunna*, [the prophetic example].[219]

Siding with the Sufis provides Hassan with a stable vantage point from where he can make sense of post-revolutionary Egypt. The revolutionaries that overthrew the *status quo* acted against the prophetic example. From a theological understanding they committed a sin, a social failure as constriction on responsible action, as Ernest Becker postulates: "It is almost impossibly difficult for the individual to assume the responsibility for his own meanings: he must, by his very nature as a creature immersed in the infinite, try to ground his acts in superordinate authority, in self-transcendence of some kind."[220]

> Hassan: …the sunna is…there are hadith [recollections] from the *Rasulullah*, [God's messenger], peace be upon him, that revolutions are bad. Even if the governor or the sultan or whatever…the president, even if he is bad, don't make a revolution. Just follow…stay in your home, stay in peace.[221]

Hassan explains that the consequences of not paying heed to the prophetic warning can be observed directly in both Egypt as well as the surrounding countries. He is of the opinion that people had thought of that hadith as theoretical, but the detrimental trajectories of the revolutions of the Arab Spring proved that there was a real practical reality behind them. He returns

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[219] Interview E, slightly edited grammatically

[220] David Liechty, *The Ernest Becker Reader*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 119

[221] Interview E, edited, syntax N.B. There is an ongoing debate within Islamic jurisprudence whether or not revolt/revolution is permissible against an unjust ruler. The debate is centrered around the imperative in some canonical hadith (e.g. Muslim 1847 and 1849; Bukhari 7054) that urges the Muslim to endure unjust rulers with patience.

to the archetype of the Khawarij in describing the illegitimacy of the events in the revolutions of the Arab Spring:

> Hassan: And it gets more intense towards what happens in Syria and of course, we know also Syria is a very good place to…study Sufism. (…) *Allah yarhamuh*, God have mercy on him, Shaykh al-Buti who was a very well-known Sufi person. Shaykh! And he was actually killed in the *masjid* [mosque] while he was doing the…reciting Qur'an with his *murîds*. Actually, he was teaching the Qur'an. They were doing Qur'an studies and he was shot while doing this. He was shot by the anti… by the revolutionist, I can say, or by…I don't want to say revolutionist, I always call them by the religious term: *Khawarij*. Because they went out on the…on *el-haga* [the thing]. That means they are *khawarij*. So, I would say it stayed very, very intense on the hate relationship towards those people.[222]

In Egyptian Muslim discourse, the Kharijites are not merely the historical third party that emerged from the schism between Ali and Mu'awiya in the battle of Siffin (657 CE), but has since the time of Gamal Abdul Nasser been evoked as an epithet for Islamists that, according to Jeffrey Kenney, "highlights the connection between religious legitimacy, secularization, and Egypt's experiment with political modernization."[223]

Hassan's initial contact with Sufism was at the American University in Cairo at the hands of a custodian staffer who introduced him to the Sudanese-Egyptian Burhaniyya *tariqa.* By his own acknowledgement, he was not attracted to the religious or spiritual aspect of Sufism but rather from what he perceived to be the political position of the Sufis that he encountered. "I was trying to find the people who are against the *Ikhwân* and [at that time] I didn't know [yet] that they are the Sufis."[224]

Aziza acknowledges Hassan's description of the year of the revolution and its aftermath as tumultuous and divisive in Egyptian civil society. She says that previous to the revolution she couldn't make distinctions like "Sufi" or "Salafi", but had a more general, intuitive perception of what a religious Muslim was. She laughs as she remembers finding out that there were apparently different modes of being Muslim: "I never even heard the word Salafi before then. I hear this only in 2011 and…I thought it was…I heard it on CNN or something and I thought: 'Oh my God, it's so funny, they made up a word." Aziza was introduced to the lines of conflict through television foremost through political commentary shows she used to watch with her family that she expresses took a turn for the worst rhetorically, badmouthing people and displaying very aggressive language. "All they talk about is

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[222] Interview E

[223] Jeffrey Kenney, *Muslim Rebels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 72 N.B: The image of the Kharijites in modern Egyptian rhetoric is further developed in chapter 6

[224] Interview G

politics and [they have] conflicts with everybody. It was really unpleasant and it was really sad."[225] Contrary to Hassan, for whom Sufism was a political position (at least initially), Aziza leads me to understand that she finds Sufism more of a direction away from mixing politics and religion, a notion that is common with all the informants.

Talking to Basma and Maryam about the short rule of the Muslim Brotherhood after the revolution, they recognize that the period was far too short for any guesses of how it might have turned out in the long run. Whatever popular support the Islamists may have had, the short period displayed not only how politically inexperienced they were, i.e. thinking that religion itself would be enough to fix a broken system, but also according to Maryam and Basma there is no theological justification for moving away from a secular constitution:

> Basma: I wish it was that easy. I think people gradually started realizing, I would say… I am comfortable to say that this is outside the scope of religion. Religion is not…for me *ya'ni*, this is my opinion, religion is not here to tell us… God does not mean to tell us how to *ya'ni* run a country or whatever. It is not an alternative to knowledge and human experience, science and…It's just meant to…
>
> Maryam: And the prophet said himself, *Antum a'lem umûri dunyakum*, [you know the matters of your world]. This is *umûr al-dunya*, [wordly matters], not *umûr al-dîn*. *Dîn*, [religion], helps you to become a good human being and then *ba'a*, handle your things as you are taught in schools to handle them.
>
> Basma: *Fa*…[if] we're not taught in schools, *ha-na'mil eh ba'a*? [what are we to do?] [226]

What are we to do, Basma asks rhetorically and the three of us laugh, aware of the challenges the Egyptian educational system is facing: overcrowded classrooms; low level salaries for teachers; and a parallel private school system, that together with extensive corruption, has set the stage for an almost impossible pedagogical situation.

The brotherhood slogan of "Islam is the answer" is discernibly not a sufficient polity to solve complex problems, neither in Egypt nor in the lives of the people in this study. Defending the secular Egyptian state is not equivalent of renouncing religion, but rather the means of protecting a status quo that –at least in Maryam's stated opinion– is more Islamic than the proposed Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood.

At this point, a brief aside is needed to ponder the question of just how political Sufism and Islam are. In many nation states, both in the Arab Muslim

[225] Interview H
[226] Interview D

world and outside, governments have sponsored Sufism, particularly as a means to suppress the political opposition posed by Islamist groups.[227] The consequence, regardless of any individual Sufi Muslim's inner attachment to her faith, is that Sufism becomes politicized by proxy. Since Islamism, by a minimal definition, is a political claim, opposition to it also has a political edge, even when Sufism is generally held by all parties to be the a-political segment of Muslims. In Egypt the situation created the paradoxical response of Muslim Brotherhood supporters accusing Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of using religion for political gain, when he campaigned through visiting major Sufi leaders and groups.[228]

Sufi spirituality

Setting the political implications of Sufism aside for now, I will return to the issue in chapter 6. The matter, for some Muslims, is not just about whether or not Islam should be a political project, but in many ways also a question of the correct interpretation of Muhammad the prophet's original message. It strikes me that Rabia has a very clear-cut definition of Sufism as being a certified aspect of Islam. When I ask her if one can be Sufi and skip the Islam affiliated parts of it she rejects such an idea with emphasis while laughing.

> Rabia: Absolutely not. Impossible. I know there are people that call themselves Sufi, but you cannot. Sufism is Islam. It is not separate from it. You can't be Sufi if you skip Islam. You have to be Muslim first and then Sufi, kinda like…an advanced course in Islam. You have to start with being Muslim.[229]

In Illinois, however, I did encounter referrals to the author Idries Shah, who has been an influential writer on Sufism particularly in the West[230], cited by a Sufi gathering that I attended With Hassan. Shah suggests that Sufism transcends formal religion that is naught but a function, a social framework, which the Sufi can penetrate in order to "understand the real meaning of religion,"[231] that to Shah is the perennialist connotated "inner secret of every

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[227] See: Fait Muedini, *Sponsoring Sufism: How Governments Promote Mystical Islam in their Domestic and Foreign Policies*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

[228] Tom Perry, "Egypt's Sisi turns Islam on the Islamists" in *Reuters*. (Friday, May 9, 2014) https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-sisi-religion-idUSBREA480G820140509

[229] Interview J, translated from Swedish

[230] Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) argues that Shah is the "most widely read Western writer on Sufism", chapter 12

[231] Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, (New York: Anchor, 1964), 29

religion."[232] Shah's concept of Sufism is obviously quite empty of Islamic elements, as he is criticized for by his contemporaries: "a 'Sufism' without self-sacrifice, without self-transcendence, without the aspiration of gnosis, without tradition, without the Prophet, without the Quran, without Islam, and without God."[233] However, just as Shah was occasionally accused of seeing Sufism in everything, Aziza puts forth a similar view that everything in Sufism (in her definition of it) actually is Islamic. For the historian of religions, this means addressing an epistemological incommensurability. What is the relation between Islam and Sufism?

According to Mark Sedgwick, not only have Sufism been incorrectly placed in opposition to Islamic orthodoxy by Western scholars, but predominantly since the twentieth century, there has been a remarkable output of Muslim opposition to Sufism portraying it like a deviant minority practice and belief outside the boundaries of *sharia*.[234] In the light of that trajectory, it is not extraordinary that the acclaim to Sufism is accompanied by an apologetic framing:

> Aziza: …some people maybe look at this and they see it as, oh this Sufism is…maybe lenient on certain things. 'How is it that they are allowing someone who *mazalan* [for example] drinks alcohol?' But, you know, that's not because they are approving. They're just tolerant and they want everybody to come, everybody to find a place.[235]

Sedgwick ascertains that the general critique of Sufism since Ibn Taymiya (d. 1328) is to be regarded as opposition to specific Sufi practices rather than it being an unreserved dismissal. One of the most central judgements of Ibn Taymiyya's is the exercise of "visiting tombs, a practice particularly associated with Sufis."[236] This idea transverses time into present anti-Sufi critique which can be discerned in Aziza defending the practice in terms of a misunderstanding on the behalf of the critics:

> Aziza: They'll say that the Sufis worship tombs or something. Or that they worship the saints. Of course, if you hear this as a Muslim you say: *'astaghfirullah* [God forgive], that is not Islam, that is contrary to Islam.' (…) Maybe the word makes it seem like it's something off, but you know (…) It's all Qur'an and *Ahadîth*. Everything is Qur'an. Everything is *Ahadîth*. Even the sayings of the Awliya [the saints] is all Qur'an and Ahadîth. So, it's a very integral part of Islam, as I said.[237]

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[232] Ibid. 27
[233] James Moore, quoted in Sedgwick, *Western Sufism*, chapter 12, 14
[234] Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials*, (Cairo: AUC Press, 2003), 89
[235] Interview H
[236] Sedgwick, *Sufism*, 90-91
[237] Interview H

Aziza's defining of Sufism as analogue to Islam prompts a detailed typological discussion. I have thus far purposely not provided a theoretical frame for how Sufism is to be understood, in part because I believe that the study itself may lead to new Islamological insights by treating the empirical material without the constraints of what ultimately will be a theological framework. Rather than anticipating the result, the entirety of this chapter describes the individual approaches and attachments to the relatively abstract phenomena that is Sufism.

The purpose of Sufism, Rabia explains to me, is *jihad al-nafs*, to spiritually discipline one's soul or ego. She says that she has been taught that the reason for taking the Sufi path as a Muslim is to ultimately prepare oneself for standing in the presence of God. One's whole life as a Sufi should be devoted to that preparation, and that is the difference between being Muslim and being a Muslim Sufi, as she puts it.[238]

> Brusi: Do you mean that Sufism is a spiritual discipline, is that what you're saying?
>
> Rabia: Yes, it is. I'd definitely say that, but it starts with the outward. I mean, it starts and it proceeds with the outward. You have to discipline yourself in how you speak, what you say to people, how you behave, that you pray, that you keep yourself clean, you know those outer aspects that are… Sufism isn't something… What Sufism does, is that it guides you for how to discipline yourself. Your ego.[239]

The outer discipline that Rabia talks about seems to me to be analogous of following sharia. I wonder if she has an explanation to why there are so many Muslims that are critical to Sufism if it's so integrated into the larger Islamic framework and grounded in Islamic ritual practice. She asserts that she is aware of the critique and clarifies that it is grounded in a modern trend of modulating the status of Muhammad the prophet. "It's sad, really. He's fundamental and you should love *sayyedina* Muhammad and *ahl al-bayt*. It's a fundamental part of our…worship."[240]

At the heart of Sufism is the prophet, namely respect and love for the prophet, Aziza says, similar to how Rabia talks about Sufism. She also acknowledges the idea that Sufism relates to Islam in the sense of an internal aspect compared to the more external sharia, without denying either an importance in day to day living. Both are structures for organizing a whole experience of being human:

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[238] Interview J

[239] Interview J,

[240] Interview J, *Sayydina* means our master and *ahl al-bayt* is the prophetic household. *Fiqh* is Islamic jurisprudence, see chapter 5

> Aziza: Of course, there's an outward ritual practice and that's an important aspect of it. I think it's very important. But Sufism, in addition to that, also concerns itself with the inwards, spiritual aspects as well. Because, our experience in this world is physical but also spiritual. (…) For the ritual aspects of Islam there's *fiqh* and that puts structure to this, and you know, concerns itself with the details and the definitions of this. This is all important. But also, Sufism then adds structure to the spiritual aspect in terms of how to develop one's self spiritually. So, for me, that's what Sufism is.[241]

Hassan says that his Sufi shaykh in Illinois does not oblige anything from him. There's no compulsion in anything, as he puts it. The group's Internet precence is irregularly updated and does not make a strong argument for Sufism's Islamic connection. In the fragmentary information that's given, the stress lies on presenting Sufism as a human spiritual quest. This is not to be understood as an Islamic connection being denied. The group does, for example, celebrate the *mawlid* of Muhammad the prophet, an event that I attended in November in 2019, and also hosts weekly regular *dhikr*-gatherings that are not unlike most *dhikr*s I have attended in either the Muslim world or outside. The group presents itself as a Sufi group that performs devotional music with influences from different spiritual paths. At one point in time, they draw my attention to Idries Shah, refering to him as a man of Sufi spirituality.

As such, it would be easy to categorize the group as a non-traditional Sufi group, but when someone disputes the Islamic-ness of the group's activities, the answer on social media is quite frank and to the point. Following an Islamic greeting, the answer is that they are Sufis who follow Islamic law, but with some differences compared to how mainstream Islam is practiced. Hassan confirms that the group is arduously upholding the traditions of the prophet, even as they are converts, to a far greater extent than he is as a born Muslim. At one point, we come to discuss the idea of wearing a turban, something which a mutual acquaintance of ours from the Chicago Naqshabandi tariqa does:

> Hassan: *Murshid* [i.e. Shaykh] and everyone is very, very strict about the *sunna*, so you wouldn't find anybody…except me. Even with the new *murîds*, everyone when they are outside home or like meeting someone else, like online, they should be wearing like a hat. Not a turban, but just like covering their heads. Women and men. Men more, actually. It is the *sunna* of the prophet definitely. I just find it hard, somehow. It becomes much easier in the winter, right, and when it's really sunny, you just put something on your head. But, they also do it when they do *dhikr*, or when they pray. They always cover their heads…with anything, not just big turbans but with a hat or anything. Cover it, as if you are paying respect.[242]

[241] Interview H
[242] Interview G

Hassan falls silent for a while and I stay silent with him, thinking that I do not fully grasp why he as a Muslim born in Egypt found his way into a mainly convert-dominated Sufism in the US, often far from the Egyptian traditions he otherwise speaks very highly of, and that I myself probably idealize as the gold standard. I am jostled back into our conversation as Hassan breaks the silence with a laugh and reflects on what he just said: "Yeah, I'm not following this. I can tell you there's a lot of things that I am not following in this group."[243]

Hassan points to that he, even as a born Egyptian Muslim with all its innate perks, such as access to language and theological traditions, still falls short of the heartfelt devotion that the converts show towards following the tradition they're taught by the Indian shaykh that leads the group. The sincerity of Hassan's produces a feeling in me that I can only describe as shame. Shame born out of the jadedness that's the result of having approached the academic study of Sufism through an analytic, deconstructuralizing horizon for so long that I have somewhat lost the feeling of the emotional connection that individuals can have towards it. As I am writing up this section, I come to remember how Sonia once saw an academic book on Sufism in my hand as we met, which she commented by saying: "Are you still trying to understand this intellectually?"[244] Her rhetorically framed question suggesting that it was a futile attempt, at least in her understanding.

There is no disconnect in Sufism, Fatma reassures me. On the contrary, Sufism is how you plug in. She laughs, possibly from seeing the perplexed expression on my face that I am trying my best to hide. I curse myself for asking her such a silly question, what is the connection or disconnect between Islam and Sufism? The disconnect, she continues:

> is in the hyper-focus on heteronormative, patriarchal, established…like *Hanafiyya*…*Sunni*…all this. God, it's just infuriating, *astaghfirullah* [God forgive]. But, yeah, like the making of a political Islam that is about dichotomies, us and them, even within the faith.[245]

It appears that Fatma uses the descriptive term "political Islam" in a wider sense than to only frame what is commonly thought of as Islamism in academia and seems to include hierarchical structures within theological history into the definition. She recalls that interacting online with an inclusive mosque organization in the US has given her a new insight on what Islam should truly be:

> Fatma: It's recognizing and submitting to source, and source being that: *Rabbena*. [our Lord] *El-ilah*. [the Deity] The place of origin, source of the big

[243] Interview G
[244] From memory. Autumn 2020
[245] Interview N

> bang, *kullu ya'ni*, everything. So, I have no…interest or I feel no…affiliation with…I want to call it like 'The Republic of Islam' [laughs] you know, this politicized, male-dominated, angry Islam that is about dichotomies. The us-and-them. The *harâm*.[246]

She clarifies that she is aware that there are Sufis that are active within the framework of this political Islam, in order to change it from within, or to create some resistance to the negative forces that are also a part of the history of Islam, but for herself, she tries to stay away and keep her family away from that space.

Fatma is silent for long periods of time before she answers my questions during this interview. Through the computer screen I get the notion she is listening to herself for the answer before she starts talking, and when she talks, her voice is deep and hesitant, as if she is making sure each word she utters is the same she hears inside of her. She sums up her long answer to my question on the connection between Islam and Sufism, and there is no doubt in my mind that the wording of her last sentence is exact and deliberate: "I feel *al-Sûfiyya* is truly… the all-encompassing home for those that submit."[247]

Not until I write up my thesis do I notice Fatma's use of language. To submit is in Arabic either through the type IV verb *aslama* or the type X *istislama*, in a religious context, usually leading to the state of (being) Muslim, having submitted. Another way of understanding her sentence is to render it as "Sufism is the home of all Muslims", Muslim here, not necessarily to be interpreted as the normative theological exclusive definition of someone who ascribes themselves to the religion of Islam, but anyone.

Sufism, a family affair

Maryam, mother of Basma, is the most apprehensive of all the informants I talked to when it comes to fully emerging herself into Sufism. As I sit down with her in a café in central Illinois, she explains this reluctance being related to her generation and particularly her own family. Her sisters in Egypt are recurring examples of a strong anti-Sufi influence on her. At the same time, Maryam is also the one that appears to be keen on using our conversations as a stepping stone into Sufism. She often asks me to legitimize or authorize arguments and beliefs she has that are pro-Sufism. I sense that she has a strong desire to reconnect with a Sufistic Islam that she remembers from her

[246] Interview N
[247] Interview N

childhood; among other memories, she recollects that her mother regularly used to take her to visit the shrines of *Sayyeda Zaynab* and *Sayyeda Nafisa*, two of the most popular female "patron saints" of Cairo.[248] She explains that her family in her generation gradually "lost connection with the invisible" and adapted a Salafi mindset, after having lived in the Gulf, plausibly because Muslims like them felt the need to defend religion through the use of logic and Western perceptions of the truth.[249]

> Maryam: To tell you the truth I always had this conflict, this internal conflict. Because, we spent some time in Saudi Arabia and maybe it affected me somehow. But I would hear that we should not pray in a place where somebody was buried and this is kind of *shirk* and we would be falling into that kind of *shirk*. And glorifying the *Ahl al-bayt* sometimes, if you do it like...exaggerated, this is not correct because 'they are human beings and not glorify anybody.' Even the prophet himself you have to glorify him to a limit so that you don't fall into blasphemy. So, there was always like... a curb from going into... something that I personally like, and I believe that. I believe in. What makes me revisit these fears is that I know people that are...*awliya* [laughs]...not exactly *awliya* but I know people that are close to God. We see things that happen. My own father was like this.[250]

Awliyâ, the plural form of *Walî*, can be, and is usually translated into English as 'saint', although it has a different connotation in an Islamic context compared to a Christian Catholic or Orthodox theology, but as far as in popular culture, the differences may be slight.[251] Similar to the phenomenon in Christianity, saints in the Islamic tradition have not primarily sprung out of foundational texts, but they appear to be popular traditions that underwent a process of orthodoxation around the 10th century CE.[252] The temporal parallell in Christian and Islamic traditions does suggest a close similarity in popular religion in the extended Mediterranean at the time. A key difference, however,

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[248] "Sayyida Nafisa is an authentic saint of the city. She was the great-grand-daughter of Hasan, one of the Prophet's two grandsons. She immigrated from the Hijaz to Egypt and settled in al-Fustat. She had a great reputation for *baraka* and for performing miracles. Among the people who visited her was Imam al-Shafi'I, a great authority on Sunni law whose tomb is further south. After her death in 824 many people were buried near her grave to benefit from her *baraka*." Caroline Williams, *Islamic Monuments in Cairo: The Practical Guide*, (Cairo: AUC Press, 2008), 123; "Ruqayya was not Fatima's daughter, however, but was born of another of Ali's wifes. Ruqayya came to Cairo with her stepsister Zaynab. Along with Sayyida Nafisa, these women are traditionally considered the patron saints of the city." ibid. 121

[249] Interview B

[250] Interview C

[251] See for instance Nicolas Biegman, *Egypt: Moulids, Saints, Sufis*, (London: SDU & Kegan Paul International, 1990), who at least implicitly argues that three Abrahamic religions in Egypt are doctrinally different, yet retains a distinct Egyptian similarity in the popular saint cults (Moulids) performed along the Nile valley and the Delta.

[252] See: Bernd Ratke & John O'Kane "Introduction" in *The Concept of Sainthood in Early Islamic Mysticism: Two Works by al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi*, (Richmond: Curzon, 1996)

is in the political context, where Pope John XV (d. 996 CE) initiates a process where canonization is intimately linked to the Holy See, but hagiographies are produced in both traditions. Historically, the Mediterranean was goverened by the impact of Saints' feast days and shrines, topographically as well as temporally.[253]

Regardless if one is a believing Sufi or not, the title which is derived from both Qur'anic and other authoritative source texts is weighty and it may be why Maryam is hesitant to use it when she describes her father. He was to Maryam someone who, despite not appearing as the pinnacle of piety, appeared to experience the material world as transparent. She recalls that during a period when he was living in the Gulf where he held a teaching position, he suddenly had a vision of a body being carried out of a building. He told Maryam's mom that they had to telephone home to Maryam and her sister. When the mother asked why, he said that something has happened. Distressed they made the phone-call and heard from Maryam's sister that there was grief at the neighbors. The father of that household had died in his sleep that very night.

> Maryam: This is not because he was worshipping 24-7, but he was…close to God and a kind person. So, I feel…I know there are…Even though I was brought up in a place where everyone studied science and medicine and we were affected by the Saudis, the Salafi sect and all of that…Maybe it's studying literature, maybe it's other things, that made me open to this. But, I still have scruples.[254]

Maryam's sense of unease is not doctrinally unique. There are some early Christian discussions of that the veneration of saints may lead to the abandonment of the worship of the crucified.[255]

Hassan says that what started as his political journey into Sufism has become a family affair. What began with him developing the habit of visiting the shrine of Hussein every Thursday with the Burhaniyya *tariqa* led to his brother developing a curiosity for this tradition that was always right there under their noses, so to speak. Hassan says that he was a bit apprehensive at first because people around him would warn him that the Sufis were actually Shi'a Muslims, a confusion he says remains with many Egyptian Muslims to this day. He believes that the misunderstanding is born out of a kind of religious illiteracy where some Muslims interpret the similarities of Sufi veneration of *mazarât* and the litanies of *mawlid* with similar activities in the Shi'i tradition, as if they were the same tradition. Sonia believes that a lot of

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[253] Ibid; Mark Humphries "Saints and Hagiographies" 501-514 in *The Early Christian World*, edited by Philip F. Esler (London: Routledge, 2017), 511

[254] Interview C

[255] As discussed in *The Martydom of Polycarp*, see: Humphries "Saints and Hagiographies", 511

conventional Sunni Muslims mistake Sufism for Shi'ism in that "it's much about love for the Prophet and his family." In this perspective, she asserts, Sufism is closely related to Shi'ism.[256] Such assumptions are not completely unfounded. Not only will Egyptian historiographers willingly portray Shi'i cultural influence through the Fatimids[257], but there are even influential Muslim insiders in Western academia, like Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) will also willingly reduce and amalgate the two complex phenomena for the benefit of a singular coherent 'true' and ecumenical Islam:

> Shi'ism and Sufism, then, possess a common parentage in that they are both linked with the esoteric dimension of the Islamic revelation and in their earliest history were inspired by the same sources. In later periods they have had many mutual interactions and influenced each other in innumerable ways. But these historical manifestations have been no more than applications to different moments of time of an essential and principal relationship which belongs to the eternal and integral reality of Islam itself.[258]

Hassan though, perhaps to Nasr's dismay, has no problem in differentiating between Sufism and Shi'ism and as far as he ever expresses an idea about the essence of Islam, it is vested in the idea of *wasatiyya*. A middle or balanced form of Islam, neither to strict nor too lax.[259] His brother, whom he took with him to different Sufi activities in Cairo, eventually found his way into a branch of the *Shazli* [Shadhili] *tariqa* in Cairo which eventually their parents also joined.

> Hassan: He is actually more advanced than me now. With the whole Covid situation and working, employment in Egypt because of the Covid…erm…and he also just graduated, so he's paying a lot of attention to that path. And my family saw all the positive sides, my parents, from me, before I leave. And my brother. It's mainly my brother who affected them. So, I would say. I effected my brother and my brother effected my parents.[260]

In general, it is plausible that one of the benefits that can be discerned in following a shaykh is that it provides the individual with a source of surrendering important decisions to an authority that is perceived to be more knowledgeable than oneself. Potentially life-altering choices can of course feel less arbitrary if they are –at least partially– in the hands of a specialist.

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[256] Interview O

[257] See: Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot, *A History of Egypt: From the Arab Conquest to the Present*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

[258] Sayyed Hossein Nasr, "Shi'ism and Sufism: Their Relationship in Essence and in History" in *Religious Studies* 6, no. 3, 229-242 (1970), 242

[259] The term is contextually defined and it is not uncommonly claimed by a range of different Muslims from Salafists to Sufis, see chapter 5

[260] Interview G, edited grammatically

There are probably a few common instances where we could see ourselves surrendering autonomy for the benefit of an expert's opinion on the matter. We generally trust a medical doctor's opinion in prescribing medicine, for example, but it might be more difficult to fully grasp why one surrenders their individual autonomy to someone whose authority lies in the abstract field of spiritual matters. Such differences can not only be difficult to balance within individuals, but also cut right down through families.

> Maryam: I am an example of a person that is like in between and back and forth. In my heart I definitely believe in that but sometimes when I sit with the whole family, like Basma's father and my sisters or everybody. I'm afraid to say something. My husband for example had a friend and his wife who used to visit a certain shaykh in Beni Sueyf who I forgot the name of. They would go and consult that shaykh on every single thing in their life and they would go to him and they would go to him and ask his blessing before they get married, before they move from one place to another, all of that. My husband found this crazy, 'what the hell are they doing?' He started advising his friend that this is kind of, this is not correct and only God knows and his friend would say that...
>
> Basma: *La, bass* I think *ya'ni*, I think there is a difference between *baba's* and your sisters' views...
>
> Maryam: [laughs] No, my sisters they are...fanatics! They kill me, I mean with their...absolute knowledge. 'This is wrong and this is...'
>
> Basma: Ah, they're so certain about what...
>
> Maryam: …They are so certain and so militant![261]

Contrary to Maryam's family where Sufism is contested, in Aziza's immediate family it is a mutual belief. She admits that there are practical reasons that cause them to live out the practice of for instance visiting the shrines of Sufi saints differently, but it is not a source of theological debates amongst them.

> Aziza: We all kinda do this in varying degrees. We listen to the same *shuyûkh* [pl. Shaykh]. (…) [My family] believe in this too and we do this in different, varying degrees. My mom sometimes, my beautiful mom, her idea of this, or the image she has of this…the area of *sidna el-Husain* is very crowded and you have to worry…you have to hold your backpack because somebody might *ya'ni*…*fa*…for those reasons sometimes she doesn't like to go, especially to the very small alleys and things like that. She has those kinds of constraints, but nothing related to creed or belief.[262]

[261] Interview C
[262] Interview F

For Rabia the matter is clear as the day. ”There’s no Sufi that does not have a spiritual guide, and it is he who guides you through a spiritual connection. From heart to heart. It’s something mysterious but it’s very normal.”[263] Although she says that the spiritual guide nominally advices his disciples, it is proper to accept them and implement them, especially in some matters like travelling to other countries, getting married or divorced. I am a bit surprised that she also adds conducting the pilgrimage to Mecca as something one should ask one’s shaykh’s advice on, given that it is generally seen as mandatory for all abled Muslims. As mentioned earlier, it points to a difference of opinion when authority is concerned. I do not believe that the example should be interpreted as if Rabia holds that the shaykh’s advice supercedes, but that he has an insight in his disciples’ needs and abilities. She lets me understand that the point of undergoing the discipline of a spiritual teacher is to strive for becoming a human whose every waking hour is spent in devotion to God. As already presented in this chapter, she strongly believes that Sufism is a disciplining practice meant to perfect one’s life, a truly sincere effort and commitment. Asking one’s spiritual guide, for her, is as much a matter of courtesy as it is a question of authority. As one that can know the spiritual readiness of his protégés, the shaykh’s opinion does not supersede shariah per se, but is advantageous in decision-making. As in the example of praying, it is not just about going through the motions, but of striving to do so in a perfect inner state of “nothing-but-God”.

Regardless of how it is conceived of, many regard Sufism as something that the individual acquires or actively pursuits somehow. It can also be a more tangible part of one’s family history, a part of kinship that informs the individual about boundaries. Fatma tells that until recently she took the heavy role of being a representative of her extended lineage; the *Mahdiyya*[264], upon herself. She explains that this self-imposed ambassadorship restricted her autonomy, in ways that in the end were detrimental to her connection to religion because of phenomena like shame culture, that she clarifies, does not have to be connected to religion, but can nevertheless appear in it, for instance, as it certainly became in Islamist Sudan. She believes that her lineage to the

[263] Interview J

[264] The Mahdiyya is a reform movement in the Egyptian Sudan originating with Muhammad Ahmad b. Abd Allah in an uprising against the Turco-Egyptian rule. In January of 1885, Khartoum fell to the Mahdi and his Ansar, killing governor-general Gordon in the fighting. The Mahdi califate was relatively short-lived and succumbed to internal rivalries and military pressure from Belgian expeditions in the south and a British-Egyptian assault from the north. By 1898 the Mahdiyya state was crushed, yet remains a powerful symbolic force, not the least politically in the formation of the Umma-party in 1945. *Encyclopedia of Islam* 2:nd edition “Mahdiyya”

foundational Sufi shaykh *Abdel-Qader al-Jilani* (d. 1166)[265] can explain for how the world appears to her.

> Fatma: The claim to being *ashraf*, the descendants of the *mahdi*, that hasn't really taken any space for me in my mind because my father's lineage is direct lineage from *Abdel-Gader al-Jilani*. Seventeen fathers from shaykh *Abdel-Gader*. That to me meant a lot more in terms of my *dîn* [religion] and how I felt in my heart. The emotional connection with the spiritual. So there…and nobody really asked and I don't advertise it but…but I feel strongly about being of the *ashrâf* lineage and I feel like…It's not a responsibility, it is a blessing. There's a little transparency a little bit, in terms of reading energy, reading the energy of a building, understanding things, sometimes intuitively. There is a real gift there.[266]

Maryam connects the qualities of a saint to the ability capability of seeing or sensing what is unseen, as her father could, a phenomenon that is most prevalent in popular beliefs in Egypt, both in the Nile valley[267] as well as among the urban poorer classes, also outside of Islam.[268] But through the modernization period of Egypt, *mawlid* celebrations have been held at armlength by the privileged classes, that now in general seem to again tie themselves closer to the Sufism which they once patronized, through amongst others, sponsoring *mawlid* celebrations, which may be connected to the folkloric elements of *mawlid* being toned down.[269]

Sufism, the people's choice

[265] *Abdel-Qader al-Jilani* was a 12th century Hanbalite theologian and Sufi, is founder of the Qaderiyya tariqa, buried in Baghdad. His teachings of Sufism were framed as jihad against self-will, something he described as the idolatry of the self. In lore, his whole life is portrayed as endless miracles, amongst other he is said to have had the power to extinguish fire, raise the dead, dry up seas and crush mountains. *Encyclopedia of Islam* 2:nd edition "ʿAbd Al-Ḳādir Al-Ḏjīlānī'"

[266] Interview K N.B. *Ashrâf* denotes linage that can be traced back to the prophet.

[267] See for instance Winkler, *Ghost Riders of Upper Egypt*, 2009

[268] See: Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Coptic Saints and Pilgrimages*, (Cairo: AUC Press, 2000), 93-99

[269] See: Samuli Schielke, "On Snacks and Saints: When Discourses of Rationality and Order Enters the Egyptian mawlid" in *Archives de sciences sociales des religions 51e Année*, No. 135, Reveils du Soufisme en Afrique et en Asie: Translocalité prosélytisme et réforme (Jul. -Sep., 2006), 117-140

When Rabia practices Sufism, it is for instance with a majority of converts and westerners, which gives her context a peculiarity but does not make it essentially different from other Sufi groups, according to her:

> Rabia: It feels like they [other *tariqas*] are our brothers and sisters, on the road to a common goal. It's more like different dialects. There's different shaykhs and different styles to different tariqas. They say you end up in a *tariqa* depending on your personality. I don't really know but, there's something in it. When it comes to the Naqshabandi, at least, it's the case that Naqshabandi has opened its doors for a lot of people from the West, for some reason. At least when I joined our group, there was this understanding that one is from the West and has little knowledge about Islam. It gave you time to adopt to this new…lifestyle.[270]

In Egypt, as far as Sufism is concerned, Rabia interacts mainly with non-Egyptians in her circle and it is from that group she primarily understands and relates knowledge about Sufism. Her situation is not therefore too dissimilar from Hassan's in Illinois, who is also part of a Sufi group made up primarily out of converts. The group itself, like many Sufi chapters in the West, is both a double minority while members of it may politically or economically be of the majority, or enjoy majoritarian privileges. Belonging to the Muslim minority, the group is also a minority within the local Muslim community. Both groups, as far as I can discern, mainly consist of well-educated people that not uncommonly hold advanced degrees. Rabia's group is primarily not Egyptians, but people living in Egypt, out of which quite a few have been associated with AUC at some point. Hassan, who was also a former student at AUC, also mainly interacts with non-Egyptians in Sufi matters, which is less odd perhaps since he is not residing in Egypt. But it is not for lack of trying. The Egyptians he invites to the group's sessions, he tells me, often reacts with estrangement.

> Hassan: I completely understand them. It's just the way the shaykh here has to cope with the Buddhist, has to cope with the antagonist, with the atheist, with a Muslim, Christian…pulling all together to be Sufis. It's completely different from a Sufi person in Egypt. Here, we talk more about pluralism, and we are accepting everyone. In Egypt, Sufis don't talk about pluralism. We don't need to talk about pluralism in Egypt.[271]

The way that shaykh explains Sufism and Islam in this context, Hassan concludes, would not be very helpful for a strict Muslim. Both Hassan and Rabia are involved with groups that to some degree fit within the theoretical framing of "Euro-Sufism", that Antoon Geels proposes.[272] Both groups are

[270] Interview J
[271] Interview E
[272] Geels, *Muslimsk Mystik*, 229-230

distinctly local phenomena, yet, they are more of a transnational presence, especially in the case of Rabia's Naqshabandi group, being *in* Egypt but not *of* Egypt. Simon Stjernholm has drawn attention to how this group is discursively what he calls traditionalist Muslim.[273] In comparison, the adherents to Hassan's group also affirm their Islamic-ness when prompted, although they are in a very different setting.

I believe it is already apparent that it is a common theme in the interviews to present Sufism as a vast field of practices and perhaps beliefs, out of which one does not necessarily ascribe to all universally or uncritically. Aziza mentions for instance that her own rituals when she visits the shrine of *el-Husain* in Cairo are different from some other Egyptians even if they are nominally there for the same purposes:

> Aziza: there are variations in this group, there are people that maybe have some rituals and, you know, kind of do things that…ehm…but, that's not me. When I go to *sidna el-Husain*, I pray there, I say my regular ritual prayer there and the I go to the *maqâm* [mausoleum] and make *du'a* [petitional prayer] there…there are people that I know…I heard, or read maybe that people *mazalan* [for example] to *tawâf* [circambulation] around it. I don't do that. We don't do that. It really has mor to do with honoring, venerating and really believing that this is an extrodinary individual and…that there's *baraka* there. It's more about the belief than anything else. There are no…rituals we do a lot associated with the *maqaber* [grave] other than venerating it, wanting to get *baraka* from there and in my family, there is no conflict with that.[274]

Basma stresses that she experiences a psychological barrier towards some activities in the Sufi groups she attends when she is in Egypt. It is not because she is of the opinion that there is anything generically un-Islamic about them, but that she is simply not comfortable with them. She describes a notion of pressure to accept and do everything, but has concluded that, in the end, it is up to herself.

> Basma: *Ya'ni* in the beginning when I used to attend *magâlis* [gatherings] and *keda,* I used to force myself *shwayya*, [a little], or feel bad about not wanting to participate in this. Afterwards I came to this conclusion: Well, if we all agree it's not necessary, if it's something, somehow extra, then if I don't feel like I'm ready to do it or I'm not in the stage yet or I don't have enough information or whatever, it's totally fine to just abstain. So, that is, I guess, also the beauty of it. Sufism is not just one idea or one action. You can connect and feel the spiritualty in so many different ways. Of course, there are some ways more typical than others, especially if you have a *tariqa* and a shaykh there are stuff you need to do *bass*...if you like *inshâd,* [religious songs], and *dhikr* and you

[273] Stjernholm, *Lovers of Muhammad*, 290
[274] Interview F

> celebrate *mawlid* but you don't visit the *awliya* every... I mean, it's not an all or none thing, that's what I mean. It's not like, a package or a one form.[275]

At the same time, she also stresses that the acts associated with Sufis are not mandatory from a jurisprudential point, that is, you do not need to force yourself to perform them, but neither is that a license to criticize the people that do. Gilles Lipovetsky reminds us that contemporary times are not irreligious; rather, secularism creates a new domain for religion that is "de-institutionalized, subjective and focused on the emotions." Fatma explains that Sufism, *al-Sufiyya*, as she calls it, is open. A religious attitude towards life that is inclusive and steers clear of what she describes as the dichotomies created by closing oneself off. In this sense, Sufism is by definition an anti-authoritarian attitude, that to her, is the spirit of Islam, an attitude that seemingly resonates with Lipovetsky's description.

Fatma explains when I ask if there are hierarchies of knowledge, saying that there are people that have had access to more knowledge than others: "There are people who have been blessed with more knowledge whether they looked for it or it came to them and there are people who have the gift of delivering messages, so one can listen until it stops making sense." She gives an example from how she would listen to the American neo-traditionalist preacher Hamza Yusuf with some benefit, until he started talking normatively about gender differences in boys and girls. From that point on, Fatma senses that what had previously been an enlightened human being, had moved into the dark, and was no longer making sense.

> I feel like there are many voices that can be relevant and if you –in all modesty and honesty– lift a question from your heart, you will find an array of answers. Then you have to pick for yourself. *Ma huwa da al-islam, wala shnu*? [That is Islam, don't you agree?][276]

It is a rhetorical question, but it cuts right to the core of a key Islamological problem: If Sufism and the individual voices and beliefs of Muslims are not Islam, then what is? This problem was already noticed by Cantwell Smith, whoin his definition of religion distinguished between two dynamic and distinct factors: A historical cumulative tradition and personal faith. The latter of which, Cantwell Smith concludes, is open to "much further exploration," and as he concludes that religions are continual processes, such ventures are plausibly endless. Especially as the roles of observer and participant begin to coalesce, there's room for radically new interpretations of traditions.[277] In the

[275] Interview C
[276] Interview N
[277] Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p. 195 ff. N.B Cantwell Smith also drew attention to the reification of Islam, where "faith" is gradually replaced with "islam" by Muslims as the more frequent vocabulary to describe their relation to God.

individualized hybridized times of the early twenty-twenties, faith, rather than religion (in the accumulative tradition sense of it), seems to be making a strong case for itself.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I presented some aspects of the informants' understanding of Sufism integrated in their religious beliefs. Overall, the perceptions of Sufism are described in terms of "spirituality", however with a strong attachment to Islam, commonly seen as the ultimate truth, or core of the religion professed by Muhammad the prophet. Outside of the understanding of Sufism as connected to Islam, there is little indication for a common narrow definition. The open-endedness may in fact be the point, as some indicate Sufism to be a more tolerant, and thereby "true", form of how to be Muslim.

Some of the informants, like Sonia, Rabia and Hassan, have at one point joined Sufi *tariqas* but still share the individualized relationship to it as the others who have not. Sometimes the relocation to a new country impedes regular contact. In 2020 many *tariqas* suspended physical gatherings due to pandemic restrictions. Aziza, who is not in a *tariqa*, avows her attachment to a spiritual guide through online resouces in the same manner as Rabia, who is. For some, like Fatma, Basma and Maryam, there is a strong sense of lineage, a kind of Sufi bloodline that challenges the idea of it simply being the question of a choice or an action out of belief. In order to disentangle the themes and issues raised in this chapter, I will now proceed with chapters aimed at further analyzing the political, cultural, personal and Islamic contexts that have been outlined in this chapter.

Chapter four: Like all other Muslims

In the spirit of Gilsenan, this chapter is introduced on an autoethnographic note. It reflects what I in hindsight have come to understand as an aspect of being Muslim, usually not considered in descriptions of Islam that tends to focus on conformity to Islamic ethics. The anecdote below is meant to introduce the reader to the chapter's theme in which I analyze the informants' stories of how they relate themselves to Islam as a wider referential cultural framework. By looking at the case of fasting during the month of Ramadan, from where I initiate discussions of Muslim identity as a collaborative project, I dig deeper into an analytical treatise on the universal sustainability of institutionalized forms of Islam. I am particularly turning attention towards the mosque and Mecca-centrism, as central to Muslim religiosity. The overarching aim of the chapter is to highlight the counter-intuitive feature of an identity of Muslim as a relation to Islam, and by using aspects of Clifford Geertz' writing on thick and thin descriptions, I will demonstrate that local contexts are as important as global ones in an analysis of Islam, and how local contexts in some cases also migrate with humans.

Introduction: A scene from Middle Class Cairo

Heliopolis is too far away to hear the canon fire from the citadel, that old nerve center of Ayyubid Cairo, towering on an offshoot of the Muqattam hills. It may have been possible in earlier days, but in contemporary times the sound would be drowned out from the cacophony of the Salah Salem freeway. Packed with cars jostling with one another, constantly honking their horns, swirling at neck-breaking speed over four lanes, persistently cussing, invoking insult and injury to ineptitude of the driving skills of others, the cars of Cairo make up the bulk of the aural landscape. It is the month of Ramadan and the sun is close to setting.

In Cairo, the time of breaking the fast is marked by a salute from a canon on the top of the citadel, a tradition that is said to have originated in the Burji

Mamluk period, when sultan al-Malik al-Zahir Khushqadam (r. 1461-1467) was given the cannon as a gift and ordered it to be fired on the first day of Ramadan. According to folklore, the people of Cairo assumed it was to mark the time of breaking the fast and thanked the Sultan who subsequently ordered for the cannon to be fired every day of Ramadan at sunset.[278] The gun in question is a Prussian Krupp field cannon from 1871, allegedly gifted to the viceroy Khedive Ismail of Egypt (r. 1863-1879). The gun is more likely part of an arms deal from the Khedive's 1866-1877 mission to Europe where several pieces of Krupp artillery left over from the Prussian wars were acquired together with Remington rifles from the United States.[279] The gun had actually not been in use for some thirty years prior to 2020 and was reinstated after having been restored by the Supreme council of Antiquities.[280] Yet, during the silent years starting in 1987, many Egyptians heard the traditional salute through Egyptian state television which upheld the tradition by broadcasting it followed by a call to prayer.

I have scattered memories from spending several evenings of breaking fast in Cairo with my wife's family. Scattered but with a vividness, I can close my eyes and recollect the viscosity of my mother-in-law's bird's tongue soup, the scent of Egyptian lemons so pungent the perfume stays for hours on one's fingertips. I remember the worn-out stairs up to the apartment of an uncle or an aunt of a once beautiful turn-of-the-century house in Cairo's Sakakini neighborhood and the absolute chaos in trying to come to grips with who was whose cousin whilst trying to keep up with animated discussions in a language I posess a basic command of at best. I have a tactile memory of the delicious greasiness of the *Mumbar* chitterlings of my wife's youngest aunt. I recall the distorted sound of an old TV with the volume turned up way to loud and gramma sitting under a huge painted portrait of then president Hosni Mubarak, in her chair trying to explain the intricacies of a particular Egyptian drama to me. I distinctly remember hearing the cannon's salute on TV and the effect it had on everyone hearing it. It was like a starter's pistol at marathon, setting bodies in motion. Given enough time and space, I could probably write a book on what I've eaten, talked about and seen during Ramadan evenings with my in-laws. What I couldn't do, based on my personal experiences, is to present

278 There seems to be little historical material for supporting this belief: "On the whole, Khushqadam's reign remains understudied, overshadowed especially by the long reign of Qāytbāy. In terms of material culture, his reign appears particularly bleak, and to date few artefacts have surfaced. Rather exceptionally, his tomb in Cairo's Northern Cemetery has not been preserved." *Encyclopaedia of Islam THREE*, "Khushqadam"

279 Hill, Richard, *Egypt in the Sudan*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1959), 109

280 *Egypt Today*, "After 30-year hiatus, Ramadan cannon fires again from Citadel of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi in Egypt" (April 13, 2021) https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/100868/After-30-year-hiatus-Ramadan-cannon-fires-again-from-Citadel

a comprehensive manual on the shared ritual Islamic aspects of Ramadan. A statement requiring an explanation.

On any given Ramadan afternoon, we would congregate at a previously designated house of a family member. Food was brought and prepared in the kitchen, tables were set. The women, who were usually a majority of people in the gatherings, would do all the work in preparing for the anticipated salute that marked the time when everyone would break fast. As the TV announced dusk, all would proceed to eat. Some would have but a little soup and a handful of dates and then turn to a quieter corner of the house to perform the evening prayer, *al-maghrib*, and then return to have their main meal. Others would remain at the table to eat their fill. Some would not pray at all and others may have prayed both *maghrib* and *'isha* just before the longer Ramadan night vigil *tarawîh* prayers in their houses, or perhaps at a mosque.

The individual actions are not really important in themselves here. The analytical point is that regardless of how each one individually addressed the religious obligation of praying or fasting, one's "Muslim-ness" was never questioned. Being Muslim, was a baseline identity, detached from one's actions or lack thereof. It was a background choice, an inherent identity. It was a family history that I only now, some fifteen years later, am even starting to understand the importance of. The rituals of Ramadan, in the microcosm of a Muslim middle-class family, is in my view, not best described as broken, but as utterly chaotic and uncentered, yet they weren't detached from the (Egyptian and Islamic) culture in where they were acted out.

The several traditions of Ramadan

Clifford Geertz states that ontological questions about human action are irrelevant in ethnography. In his advocacy for Ryle's differentiation between a wink and a blink, Geertz posits that the point of human action is not philosophical –true of false– but whether or not the action is successful or failed.[281] The success (or failure) of action can only be understood in what Geertz theorized as the particular meaningful system of symbols, a culture. In other words: What separates not eating from fasting is the unknowable intention of the actor but also the observable cultural framing, or context, in which it is enacted. It follows that Islam is in this sense a culture, a frame of reference from which actions are either successful or not. However, as in the anecdotal example of this chapter, there is more to being Muslim successfully.

[281] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 10

The comedic aspects of which is aptly described by Haroon Moghul in his autobiography *How to be a Muslim*:

> There were once again two Haroons. The me for public consumption–who felt like thigs were going remarkably well, who *wanted* to be in the public eye, who *needed* the attention–and the me who behaved, shall we say, nontraditionally. The reasons I wasn't dating, for example, were nonreligious–nobody said yes. Not even once.[282]

By that, it incentivises the writing of a thicker description of the individual approaches and how Islam actually matters, as in the questions "how is any Muslim in certain respects like all other Muslims" and how are they in certain respects like no other Muslim?[283]

An important additional question to those is that of Islam as a common denominator. An established approach to describing Muslim religious life is that of Dale Eickelman's consideration of Islam from a five pillars-description; praying, fasting, pilgrimage, tithe and the testament of faith, all entry-level reductive descriptions of Islam in a world-religion kind of approach. By adding the three elements of *time*, *scale* and *internal debate* as part of the analytical frame, Eickelman assures that viewing religious practices in historical context and the extent to which they are universal or particular to local traditions together with a focus on power relations "within and impinging on particular societies", it is possible to highlight the relationship between belief and authority.[284]

There are good reasons for conceptualizing Ramadan, the month of fasting as the most important observable universal Muslim ritual, in that 94% of Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa report that they observe the fast in comparison to the 53% of Egyptians that report that they pray all the five mandatory prayers. Fasting is second only to the stated belief in God and the prophet Muhammad which is at a 100% with Muslims in Egypt.[285]

The thin and wholly unanalytical statement that Muslims fast because it is ordered by God, can serve as a starting point. In the Qur'an, fasting is incumbent on Muslims with two main arguments in the second chapter. Verse 183 states: "You who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was

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[282] Haroon Moghul, *How to be a Muslim: An American Story*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017), 102

[283] Kluckhohn and Murray, *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture*, 35 (See also chapter 2: A theoretical Framework for the Ease of Being Muslim)

[284] Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East and North Africa: An Anthropological Approach* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2002), 246

[285] James Bell, "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity" Washington: The PEW forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012. N.B: The median number of people that pray some or all the mandatory prayers in the Middle East and North Africa is 69%

prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of God."[286] Verse 185 on the other hand argues that believers should fast for the entirety of the month for it was when the Quran was disclosed to humanity:

> It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur'an was revealed as guidance for mankind, clear messages giving guidance and distinguishing between right and wrong. So any one of you who sees in [sic!] that month should fast, […] He wants you to complete the prescribed period and to glorify Him for having guided you, so that you may be thankful.[287]

The Qur'anic discourse invoke a supposedly established pre-Muhammadan tradition, as well as its own emergence during the time of prophet, to validate fasting for the believer, the purpose of which is to become God-conscious and grateful. Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is seemingly uninterested in individual motivation for fasting or anything not involving the technical and ritual framework of fasting, for that matter. It is simply an obligation to uphold by "the believer who is a major and a sane person, who is not on a journey, is in sound health, and is free of a relieving factor, which is menstruation for women. There is no dispute over this."[288]

The dialogue between the texts and the designated interpreters of the texts have thereby established an institutional Islam, in Bruce Lincoln's definition, that "regulates religious discourse, reproducing them over time and modifying them as necessary, while asserting their eternal validity and transcendent value."[289] The encyclopaedia of Islam for instance, highlights an 11th century authoritative jurisprudential text as grounds for the gravitas with which Muslims advance the obligated fast. To deny the fast is equivalent of being a non-Muslim, with the exception for those Muslims who has not been in contact with the scholars, i.e. is not aware of the duty.

> Fasting in the month of Ramaḍān is the fourth pillar of Islam; whoever denies the obligation to fast is a kāfir (infidel), except for the recent convert or one who has not been in contact with the ʿulamāʾ . Whoever omits to fast without good cause, without, however, denying the compulsion to fast, may be imprisoned.[290]

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[286] Quran 2:183 (transl. Haleem) N.B: Haleem opts to translate the verb *tattaqûna* as "mindful [of God]", the direct meaning of the verb *taqâ* is *to fear*, etymologically from *waqâ*; *to guard, preserve* (s.th.), *take good care of* (s.th)

[287] Quran 2:185 (transl. Haleem) The addition of the preposition *in* may be a typo. The Arabic reads "fa man shahida minkum al-shahra…" So, whomever from you that witnesses (or sees) the month…

[288] Ibn Rushd, *The Distinguished Jurist's Primer*, trans. Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee (Reading: Garnet, 1994), 331

[289] Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 7

[290] Encyklopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, "Sawm".

Several private and public institutions of Islamic scholarship and legal opinion [*fatwa*] publish an incalculable number of articles or *fatwas* on miniscule aspects of fasting, especially during the month of Ramadan. The Egyptian *dar al-ifta'*, a branch of the ministry of justice responsible for issuing new *fatwas* in response to public demand, issued over one million three hundred thousand fatwas in 2020[291] with petitions relating to fasting covering topics such as if it is permissible to remove body hair with laser during fasting, if using moisturizing lip balm breaks one's fast, or exactly when someone travelling by air should commence fasting, to name but a few.[292]

Islamic virtues such as praying, fasting, giving alms and the pilgrimage to Mecca together with the testimony of faith are undeniable signposts of Islam that to an individually varying degree encompasses a Muslim's every day.[293] At the same time, it is also a fragmented and two-dimensional view on Muslims and therefore Islam if used as a blueprint for what constitutes the whole of religious life of any one Muslim. The situation closely resembles a discursive tradition based in the Qur'an and Sunna, to reiterate Talal Asad and Bruce Lincoln. To be clear, Ramadan as tradition is not a mere repetition of patterns in the past, as Hughes and McCutcheon write, but "an active selection and willful reproduction that always takes place in the present."[294]

The discursive turn can be observed in the adopted focus of entry-level non-confessional books on Islam, where fasting is presented as an ethical issue, rather than the mechanical-practical of medieval theological tractates. Jonas Otterbeck for instance claims that the nominal purpose of fasting is to remember God or in a modern context to be ethically aware of the world's needy[295], while Mark Sedgwick describes it as kind of a formalized sacrifice, that creates a particular extraordinary time.[296] John Esposito highlights it as a "time for reflection and spiritual discipline, for expressing gratitude for God's guidance and atoning for past sins, for awareness of human frailty and dependence on God, as well as for remembering and responding to the needs of the poor and hungry."[297]

It seems to me, then, that Ramadan is not one tradition, but several, not mutually exclusive but sometimes in contestation with each other. Ramadan in Egypt, Basma states, is not only about the actual fasting as an Islamic ritual,

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[291] https://www.dar-alifta.org/Foreign/ViewArticle.aspx?ID=7465&CategoryID=1

[292] https://www.dar-alifta.org/Foreign/ViewCategory.aspx?ID=80

293 See: Dale Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2002), 250-252

[294] Aaron W. Hughes & Russel T. McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 more Words*, (New York: Routledge, 2022), 281

[295] Jonas Otterbeck, "Det Rituella Livet" in *Islam: En Religionsvetenskaplig Introduktion*, edited by Susanne Olsson & Simon Sorgenfrei (Stockholm: Liber, 2021), 145

[296] Mark Sedgwick, *Islam and Muslims: A Guide to Diverse Experience in a Modern World*, (Boston: Intercultural Press, 2006), 75

[297] Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 90

but it is also somewhat of a family holiday, and as such, it is also *ipso facto* a very Egyptian holiday for her. This year, it is the first time ever that she will be without her family and on top of that outside of Egypt. Even though Ramadan is universal for all Muslim, she expects it to be different from what she is accustomed to.

> Basma: Honestly, Ramadan is very cultural. I am used to going to a certain mosque for *tarawîh* prayer or having *suhûr* [breakfast] in certain places and also…the family gatherings of course, but I am also interested to see how people here experience Ramadan.[298]

Tarawîh is the optional prayers during Ramadan when Muslims gather to perform a number of supererogatory prayers while each night a thirtieth of the Quran is being recited. Although it may be performed in solitude which is even considered preferable and correct *sunna* within some Islamic schools of rite,[299] it is most common to join other Muslims for the prayers, which might take somewhere between thirty minutes up to a little over an hour at any given mosque for the duration of the holy month of fasting. In Egypt it is common to spend the rest of the night with family or friends at a social club or a hotel until it is time to eat the pre-dawn meal, *suhûr*. When I mention how some friends of mine have travelled to Egypt just to take part in the Cairene Ramadan experience, Basma recalls the comment of a friend of hers from Saudi Arabia that attended university with her in Cairo. "When she started living in Cairo and experienced her first Ramadan she was like: 'Wow, this is not like any Ramadan I ever had in Saudi!' It's very loud and everyone…".[300] Basma loses her train of thought mid-sentence and I never get to know what it is a Saudi girl thinks about everyone in Cairo during Ramadan. Instead, Basma begins to reflect on an internal conflict between the religious implications of Ramadan and the tolls of maintaining social relations, which she ascribes to the particularities of Ramadan in Egypt. Accepting an invitation to break the fast in someone's house is something one does not dismiss carelessly.

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[298] Interview B

[299] The two dominant schools of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence in Egypt, the Shafi'i school and the Maliki school acknowledge both communitarian and individual prayer. One common reference to Shafi'i rite states that: "It is recommended to perform *tarawih*, which is twenty rak'as of group prayer on each night of Ramadan. (O: As well as being sunna to pray *tarawih* alone, it is also sunna to pray it in a group)." Al-Misri, Ahmad ibn Naqib, *Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*, (Beltsville: Amana Publications, 1994), 158; For the Maliki position Al-Qayrawani's *matn* states: "Stand in congregation with an imam in a mosque! But he who wishes to stand [to pray] in his house, it is better for him whose intention is stronger in solitude." Ibn Abi Zayd Al-Qayrawani, *Al-Risala Al-Fiqhia*, (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1997), 162 (Translation from Arabic by the author.)

[300] Interview B

> Basma: People would take it like…they won't be offended but…it would be a big deal if I said no to a gathering. I agree, this is something special in Egypt that we value you know, family and friends gathering in Ramadan in particular…[301]

Basma turns silent as if realizing the layers of complexity that renders a straightforward moral judgement impossible. After thinking about it for a while she starts to negotiate the issue:

> Basma: …which is…I love it. It is super nice and warm and you know, but from another perspective, I feel like we kind of lose the point sometimes. It's nice and never a bad idea to socialize and spend time with the people you love but sometimes in Ramadan you feel like time is really valuable and you want to spend it doing something…maybe…more useful religiously.[302]

Basma assures me that according to her beliefs there is no correct way to spend one's time in Ramadan but there is at least an aspect of it that should impose some degree of still contemplation on one's relationship with God and the prophet. Laughing, she sums as Ramadan including at least to some degree a space, not necessarily physical, where one can "work on your spirituality. I don't know if pays off eventually, but we have to try."[303]

Speaking to Rabia in Cairo over the internet, she lets me know that she also experiences a bit of mixed emotions about what she observes has happened to Ramadan in Egypt. She says that Ramadan has come to be less about undergoing the fasting and praying as a resource to draw closer to god for the benefit of bingeing TV-dramas and maximizing one's social life by hanging out with as many people as possible. She designates this shift in focus as somewhat "sad" but at the same time says that she is not personally affected since she has the freedom to choose her lifestyle and to which degree she participates in the more profane sides to Ramadan observance. I ask if she thinks that the social aspect of Ramadan is completely without merit which leads her to clarifying what she was critical to:

> Rabia: Our religion is oriented towards these contexts of meeting and being together. It is of utmost importance, the spirit of being a community. What I meant was it may be on the expense of making…I mean, often you'll be invited to someone for *iftâr*, [breaking the fast], and there's enormous amounts of food and you may be pressed for time to pray *maghrib* [the sunset prayer]. You might skip *Tarawîh* because you can't make that in time and you know, it becomes more prioritized to stay up late. If the dinner is really late you might not wake up in time for *fagr,* [the dawn prayer]. *Dunya,* [the material world] takes over.[304]

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[301] Interview B
[302] Interview B
[303] Interview B
[304] Interview L. N.B: The hard G in Fagr denotes a Cairene accent.

For Rabia, there is a point and a purpose to Ramadan beyond the actual fasting or the communal shared experience, and she defines it in part as not getting too distracted from the opportunity to feel closeness to God. Rabia and Basma have similar thoughts on what they refer to as the spiritual worth of the monthlong fast, but they experience it differently since one is in Cairo and can opt out of social events where as the other is abroad and will be referred to slim pickings: A small band of fellow Egyptians and one mosque.

Rabia and Basma both express a perception of fasting that is more layered than an either/or situation. Fasting is to an extent a mechanical success that has to compete with social success, as well as success in higher religiously framed ideals, such as becoming more spiritual or closer to God, and the latter seems more difficult to achieve. A classic example of that can for instance be observed in theological material of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE), the well-recognized Sunni Muslim scholar[305] who is given the honorific title of *Hujjat al-islâm* –the proof of Islam– wrote profusely on fasting as a mystical experience. In his Exposition of the *Benefits of Hunger and the Evils of Satiety*, from the monumental Revival of the Religious Sciences, he methodically describes how fasting "(I) purifies the faculties of spiritual perception; (II) it softens the heart and renders it more receptive to divine grace; (III) it is a form of humbling the ego". Further, it will remind the faster of the pains of the poor and remind the believer of the chastisement of hell, all whilst weakening one's passions, like sex drive and sleep. It benefits general health and in very practical terms, he adds, it saves time and money.[306] Al-Ghazali was of the opinion that there were three hierarchical levels of fasting. Fasting of the common people entails keeping oneself within the outer boundaries of the *fiqhi* definition, fasting of the elect encompasses a deeper commitment to also refrain from all types of sins during the fast and fasting of the elect, i.e. prophets and saints, is a state where the [spiritual] heart is completely focused on God.[307] The influence of Ghazali can be seen far exceeding his own intellectual elite circle of theologians and is to be regarded today as mainstay in many segments of Muslim societies.[308]

Regarding it from such a demanding horizon, Basma's reflections on the difficulty of balancing social and spiritual aspects of Ramadan become comprehensible. The ritual (or legal) and ascetic aspect of abstaining from

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[305] See: Montgomery Watt, *Al-Ghazali: The Muslim Intellectual*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963)

[306] T.J. Winter "Introduction" in Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid, *Al-Ghazali on Disciplining the Soul & On Breaking the Two Desires: Books XXII and XXIII of The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, trans. T.J. Winter (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1995), LXVIII f.

[307] Al-Ghazali, *The Mysteries of Charity and the Mysteries of Fasting*, translated by M.A. Fitzgerald, (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2018), 93-94

[308] See for example the Swedish website Islamguiden regarding fasting: http://www.islamguiden.com/fasta.shtml#.YTszgi2l7fY

food and drink is not the end but a means to a deeper spiritual meaning. By being isolated from her family, she realizes the potential for focusing more on her relationship with God, a new and intensified experience. At the same time, the familiarity and emotional connection she and her family have to Ramadan is not something easily dismissed. Other Egyptians in her circle in the US spend almost the entire Ramadan together, she says with a laugh. "All they do is spend the days cooking and all the nights eating. Very typical of the Ramadans I am used to."[309]

Even though Basma has a small community of Egyptians around her, and there is a mosque close to campus that will arrange *tarawîh* and communal meals when the fast is broken, there is a degree of emotional stress about spending the first Ramadan ever outside of Egypt that can be discerned in her.

> Basma: It is probably a time that I am more likely to be homesick. It's not going to be easy. But then again, if I think of it as a chance for more quiet time in a valuable season that I probably wouldn't have in Egypt, then maybe that is the positive side of it. Maybe I'll spend more time praying and reading *Qur'an* or doing *zikr*, so yeah. This should be an intensive…we'll see.[310]

The case of Ramadan illustrates the multiple levels of Islam. It is on the one hand spatially decentered, as migration out of Egypt does not cancel the obligation to observe it under local conditions, yet its framing remains a distinct "home tradition". For Fatma, the experience of being in Sweden, in the sense of being isolated from her extended family, has forced her to reflect on the purposes and established religious habits she had living with her family. Not only has it made her think about what used to be habitual, but the long Swedish summer nights has presented a whole new set of problems she must address, she laughs heartily, and asks rhetorically *ihna sayyimeen leh*, [why are we fasting]?

> Fatma: Why am I praying my prayers when the *adhan* calls? Why am I fasting? Why am I eating all of this food when I break my fast? It doesn't make any sense. Why are we fasting if we're just going to eat for six hours at night? There's no time for pause, and in Sweden I had the opportunity for the first time really to think about when I do those things and why I do those things and the times… Having time. The experience was augmented also by really strange things. Like, *ma fish isha*, [there's no night] in the summer. Do I pray it or don't I? Is it lying if I pray it? [311]

The long days of the Swedish summers, especially in the past 10 years during which time Ramadan has been observed in the summer months, is plausibly one of the most engaging topics of discussion with Swedish Muslims. Because

[309] Interview B
[310] Interview B, edited grammatically
[311] Interview K

there is no central Islamic authority, there is no consensus as to when the month should begin and neither are there any agreed upon Swedish authorities that can determine for Muslims in Sweden, what the general rules or exceptions should be for fasting Ramadan in the country. The issue is not completely novel in Islamic history. Muslims have been in minority positions since the advent of the prophethood, and Muslim legal scholars have dealt with and keep dealing with similar problems. The problem is not that there are not Islamic scholars that address the issues at hand, but that Muslims disagree on who is a trustworthy interpreter of God's original intention for the Muslims.[312]

This has come to have the consequence that Ramadan outside of Egypt, to a certain extent taxes the Muslim individually to come up with a functional solution. Should you mimetically follow the general rule of fasting from dawn to sundown when there is no proper night, and if not, by what principle should you then fast? Do you fast during the same time as Mecca, although that has no clear precedent in Islamic jurisprudence? Do you fast according to the standard called *aqrab al-bilâd*, and fast according to the time of the nearest geographical point that has a proper dusk, night and dawn and if so, is it the concrete number of hours and minutes you follow, or their actual time?[313]

It is quite clear from these examples that the situation of being out of place, activates reflections akin to McLoughlin's model home traditions, and necessitates a bracketing of typologizing religions into "ethnic" and "universal" in studies of diasporic religion.[314] In Basma's, Fatma's and Rabia's reflections on celebrating Ramadan there are several negotiations taking place that all relate to finding a balance between religious ideals and social or geographical realities, that arouses questions on the locality and temporality of tradition, as well as a need to critically assess to what degree Ramadan is a ritual or ritualization[315] that creates a collective and universal Muslim identity or culture. With the informants, a successfully performed ritual of Ramadan, seems to involve a bridge back to Egypt.

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[312] See: Susanne Olsson, *Minority Jurisprudence in Islam: Muslim Communities in the West* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 1-29

[313] See: Fredrik Brusi & Simon Sorgenfrei "Ramadan i tid och otid" in *Tidningen Kulturen*, (2011)

[314] See: Steven Vertovec "Religion and Diaspora" in *New Approaches to the study of Religion: Textual, Comparative, Sociological and Cognitive Approaches*, edited by Antes, P. Geertz, A.W. & Warne, R. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004) Vertovec seems to denote Judaism, Sikhism and Hinduism as diasporic because of their historical connection to a people or a place, whereas Islam and Christianity and Buddhism as missionary, so-called world religions, essentially different from the former.

[315] See: Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 197-223

How Islamic is "Islam"?

Bruce Lincoln argues that a practice becomes analytically religious when it is used to produce a proper world or human subject, as defined by religious discourse. Fasting is not a religious act in itself, but becomes so when it is discursively framed as such by a practitioner.[316]

As we are discussing Ramadan in Egypt, Rabia tells me: "You mustn't think that it is superior to sit at home and meditate. That's not how it is. There has to be a balance to everything." She says that it is pivotal that one's social life, also outside of Ramadan, does not distract from what the ultimate goal is. A possibility to experience God's immediacy and Ramadan is an excellent opportunity for it. Almost demonstratively she adds: "I believe that Islam in general is a very balanced religion. We marry, we socialize, we have a nice time (Swedish: *trevligt*), we eat, you know. Everything is allowed."[317]

The statement of everything being permissible catches me by surprise and I break out laughing. I do understand what Rabia is insinuating by stating that it is a permissible religion. I have come across it as a talking point in many different Muslim milieus where it seems to me to be connected to the idea of Islam as a middle position, or at least that "real" Islam should be a middle position, neither too lax nor too strict.

What is fair and balanced is obviously dependent on what parameters are set up. Compared to strict veganism and celibacy as ideals, then *sharia* is quite a permissible ethical system, but in relation to my Swedish everyday life, it is perhaps experienced as somewhat restricting. What I am vaguely reffering to here is what has been dubbed "protestant secularism", a worldview signified by postmaterialism, secular rationalism, relativism and individualism.[318] It is the contrasts of our horizons that make me laugh and I apologize for laughing and Rabia laughs with me as I comment by saying that sure, everything's permitted with a lot of exceptions to that rule of permissibility.

> Rabia: You know what I mean. We don't have this ascetism. You know, we're not radical in that we shun the world completely. We always strive to find this balance and it's hard. Even in talking about one's work and worship, to find the balance in it all, the time you spend with your family and your work and everything that has a claim on you and then to find time, you know…for God.[319]

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[316] Lincoln who uses the analogy of wearing a beard, means that a beard does not indicate anything *sui generis*, but may be understood as an emulation of Muhammad the prophet, or Jesus the Christ if it is intentional. Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 6

[317] Interview L

[318] David Thurfjell, *Det Gudlösa Folket: De Postkristna Svenskarna och Religionen*, (Stockholm: Nordstedts, 2019), 26 c.

[319] Interview L

Rabia hints that she understands her life-world in a dichotomous fashion, divided into two realms, where religion or worship of God is seemingly separated from the mundane or everyday aspects of life. This is not unique to her, but was also expressed by Hassan who wishes to pay more attention to the Sufi path and spiritual development but finds it difficult to do so under the workload of being a grad student:

> Hassan: I'm very busy with my PhD. Even though I now have a shaykh, a spiritual teacher, and I should be way better in terms of spiritual progress but I would say I'm…very…I'm very steady. It's not increasing. It might be decreasing actually. Doing a PhD here in the States is tough.[320]

On the surface level, both Hassan and Rabia seem to make a separation between worldly matters, such as studying; working for a living; or recreational activities and undertakings of a spiritual or religious affair; in a manner as if they were echoing Mircea Eliade's distinction between the sacred and the profane.[321] Taken as analytical categories they are blurry, not only for their historical connectedness to a Western Protestant bias but also because they are legitimized in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*): "Islamic law divides all legal acts into either ibadat or muamalat. Ibadat are acts of ritual worship such as prayer or fasting, and muamalat are acts involving interaction and exchange among people such as sales and sureties."[322]

Up to this point, an Eliadean consideration seems to be functional (pun intended). By merits of Islamic jurisprudence, i.e. analyzing religion "grasped at its own level…*as* something religious"[323], Islam looks like an independent variable. Comparably, to a Rabbinical understanding of religion, Islam as an ethical system (*fiqh*) encompasses most –if not all– aspects of human life, and in that regard, there is no distinct differentiation between for instance worship and other more mundane activities. Structurally, any human activity from an ethical viewpoint is either permissible (*halal*) –with subcategories such as mandatory, preferable, neutral and discouraged– or impermissible (*haram*). The model however starts to come apart considering that Islamic ethics normally don't delve in matters of belief.[324]

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[320] Interview E

[321] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, (New York: Harper One)

[322] *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, "muamalat", (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003)

[323] Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1958), xiii

[324] In *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, Umar F. Abd-Allah, is of the prescriptive opinion that Muslim society and culture, nomocratic rather than theocratic, is best accessed through understanding the centrality of *Shariah* in them. Without engaging in a discussion with the problematic normative historical assumptions of Abd-Allah's, it is still worth noting that the basis for his idea of a nomocratic society, that he likens to the situation of Rabbinical Judaism, as something apart from the Christian theocratic model. If I understand Abd-Allah correctly, he argues that each religion's relation to secularism is thereby particular

When Rabia defines Islam as a balanced religion, she is not excluding family life or social interaction from virtuous Muslim behavior. On the contrary, she believes that among her own most valuable religious acts, is creating a religious atmosphere in her house and her social life, for the benefit of her children: "It's not that they have to learn something [from the religion] directly, just that they socialize with people who are religious and normal, if you know what I mean?"[325] She thus distinguishes between her own aspirations of practicing religion for the sake of drawing closer to God, and being socialized into Muslim, without either being mutually exclusive. For Rabia who is living in a Muslim majority city, resources for either aspect are abundant. For Basma, Sonia, Fatma and Hassan, who are living as minorities without their kin, the situation is somewhat different.

Returning to the case of Ramadan, Sedgwick has written about how it can be a very different experience for Muslims in the West compared to how it plays out in Muslim majority countries. Not only are the social surroundings oblivious to what it involves but some people may not even be aware that it is going on. Without the communal and cultural framework that families and friends form, "fasting Ramadan in the West is for many a lonely and alienating experience."[326]

Basma's mother Maryam joined her in Illinois to spend the first half of Ramadan together with her daughter and will go back to Egypt for the second half to spend it with Basma's father and older sister as well as the extended family. It was already decided that Maryam would visit and Ramadan was a factor for them in planning the dates of visit, says Basma. As Maryam would attend a conference in close proximity to Ramadan, they decided to prolong the visit a couple of weeks so that they could stay together for the first half of the month of fasting. "Of course, I won't leave you in Ramadan", Maryam commented when they spoke of the issue. On the other hand, Maryam leaving to stay with Basma for two weeks of Ramadan caused a reaction with her husband and other daughter who were equally distressed by Maryam not being there for the first half of Ramadan, Basma tells me. "It's always a factor in family gatherings and the dynamics of how families work."[327]

Ramadan is clearly a multifaceted Islamic phenomenon. It is a particular religious time, a cyclical recurring ritual, a family tradition, a time for exceptional moral behavior and also for fun and games. Schielke describes the contradictory manifestation of the season with the observation of Ramadan football matches:

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and cannot be addressed in a general comparative way. This theme is also a main concern of Talal Asad (2003)

[325] Interview L, translated from Swedish

[326] Sedgwick, Mark, *Islam and Muslims: A Guide to Diverse Experience in a Modern World* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 2006), 76

[327] Interview B

> It is one of the gatherings so characteristic of the sense of community that prevails in the month of fasting, and a way to kill time that is not deemed immoral or un-Islamic. But at the same time it shows a very complex understanding of religion and morality. Not only does it mix ascetic discipline with fun and entertainment, it is also part of a time of exceptional morality that, by its nature, will only last as long as Ramadan lasts, and that by virtue of its temporally limited nature indirectly legitimizes less consistent approaches to religion and morality for the rest of the year.[328]

Besides the common problems of Ramadan as a moral battleground where Muslims may find themselves juggling the finite number of days between worship and social obligations, let alone abstinence from food and drink, they also find themselves having to deal with the existential problem of loneliness in a society that is not particularly accommodating to people engaged in a month-long fast. Sedgwick notices, the local mosques often try to cater to this situation. They will not uncommonly arrange *iftâr*, the ceremonial breakfast meal at sunset, for the local community of Muslims. Besides having the effect of moderating the loneliness experienced by some, it also has the repercussion of shifting the focus of Ramadan from a family holiday to one centered around the mosque.[329] But, what is it that makes the mosque qualitatively more Islamic than the family kitchen or living room? The question is neither silly nor is there a simple answer when approached critically.

What is a mosque?

Akin to Ramadan, it seems as if the mosque, nominally a place of communal prayer, is also fluctuating with time and place, if not substantially, then at least functionally. The contemporary mosque in the wider Muslim diaspora contributes to a process of Islamizing matters that previously were situated outside of religious discourse. It is also a topic that often came up in the interviews. What the the interviews revealed is that the informants perceived that mosques were different in distinctive contexts and they related to them differently while in Egypt compared to while being in the US or Sweden.[330]

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[328] Samuli Schielke, ”Being Good in Ramadan”, 25

[329] Sedgwick, *Islam and Muslims*, 77

[330] By “Islamization” I am not suggesting “radicalization” or “fundamentalism” or any other political buzzwords that are used to describe Islam in certain geopolitical agendas, but simply the discursive process by which something is constituted as “Islamic” where it previously have not been perceived as such.

The mosque is undoubtedly a significant and observable architectural token of Islam, from which in Muslim majority geographies the passing of time is marked by the call to prayer, beginning at true dawn. The mosque [Arab. *Masjid: place of prostration*] holds a somewhat diffuse position historically and theologically. A *masjid* may originally have referred to any type of temple or place of worship in any religion. This is seen in both the Qur'anic text and with scholars such as Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406 CE), meaning that the definition was relatively open up until the early modern period. The early mosque did not function solely as a place of Muslim worship, but a place of congregation in general and the sacralization of mosques is gradual yet not completely separating itself from its multi-purpose and probably pre-Islamic origins. The mosque as it is stylized today has its roots in the Umawi dynastical period (661-750 CE), heavily influenced by Byzantine sacral architecture.[331]

Although the mosque is an Islamic signpost, and that the activities in a mosque are indisputably Islamic, it does not follow that the mosque by necessity is the axis where Muslims practice worship. According to a study made by the Pew Research Centre, regularly visiting a mosque is a decreasing activity in the entire Middle East and North Africa. 54% in the ages 18-34 compared to 69% over 35 attend a mosque once a week or more in Egypt, compared to the 74 and 76 percent respectively that states that religion is very important in their lives.[332] The prayer, as prescribed in the Prophetic narrative, may be performed anywhere as "The entire earth has been made a place of prayer"[333] and Muslim jurists with a few individual exempts unanimously hold that any place free from uncleanliness is permissible for prayer.[334]

Visiting a mosque during a regular prayer in any country can be a surprising experience. The prayer room or hall may be frequented by only a handful of men. The exception is the Friday communal prayer and sermon and the nights of Ramadan and the two *eid*-prayers, when mosques are often packed to the limit with participants sometimes even extending to the streets outside. For a local mosque outside of Muslim majority countries, the occasional high demand may render unusual solutions, such as performing three back-to-back congregational *eid*-prayers, which was the case in Stockholm in *eid al-adha* 2019[335] as well as in Urbana, Illinois in 2021.[336]

In 2020 though, the local Urbana mosque suspended *tarawîh* prayer and other Ramadan activities in the Mosque for the entire month of Ramadan due

[331] *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, "Masdjid"
[332] Bell, "The World's Muslims", p. 18
[333] Tirmidhi, 317
[334] Ibn Rushd, *The Distinguished Jurist's Primer*, p. 129; "There are differing opinions among jurists about places such as slaughterhouses, dunghills, graveyards, roadways, public baths, kneelingplaces of camels and the roof of the Ka'ba."
[335] https://www.stockholmsmoske.se/event/eidbon-eid-al-adha-2/
[336] https://www.cimic.org/cimic-announcement/eid-ul-adha-2021/

to the Covid-19 outbreak.[337] The discontinuation of local mosque rites, however, was of relatively small importance to Basma and Aziza. It was even less so for Hassan, who out of the three is the only one that regularly attends Friday prayer in Urbana, a sense of religious duty and established custom from his upbringing in Egypt. He admits that although he misses a lot of the peculiarities surrounding the communal prayer in Egypt, he prefers some aspects of it in the US that he ascribes to the diversity of the local Muslim community:

> Hassan: What I really like is to have all these people of different colors. You find the white, the brown, the black, all are here and they are all praying together. Sometimes there are new converts and you see them as they are taking the *shahada*. You don't see that in Egypt.[338]

"Taking the *shahada*" is an anglicization of the Arabic *tashâhhada* – witnessing, meaning the act of formally converting to Muslim through pronouncing the formulaic Islamic testimony of faith, *al-shahâda* or *al-shahâdatîn*. There is no deity save God and Muhammad is the messenger of God. The expression is interesting in itself, signifying an anglophone urban Muslim dictionary. There are no exact data when the expression comes to life but it is plausible that it has evolved together with Islamic proselytizing on the internet. Some data suggests it is as late as 2008.[339]

The first time I met with Hassan in a café that also doubles as a bike repair shop, I remember how he talked at length about online theological debates with other Muslims that he would engage in. It is possible he has picked up this expression from his online presence or from the group of American Sufis he frequents on a regular basis. Regardless of where he picked it up, it is a marker of some familiarity with Islam as a modern anglophone phenomenon.

Hassan interprets the prevalence of converts and a diverse community as relatable seekers which he explains helps to "ignite your spiritual thing with Him" but that all things considered, he still misses the "Sufi flavor" of Fridays in Egypt. A normal Friday prayer for him, he vows, would consist of visiting a *mazar*, a mausoleum-mosque like *el-Hussayn* or *Sayyeda Zaynab* in Islamic Cairo, public recitation of the Qur'an before the sermon by a professional *qari* and Sufi brotherhoods gathering for *zikr* afterwards. These are things that you don't find anywhere but in Egypt, according to Hassan.[340]

Hassan's ambivalent sentiments toward the local mosque beg the question of what a mosque is in his understanding. On the one hand, a mosque is merely a structure designated as such according to a set of architectural or theological Islamic standards. These are also criteria that the Urbana mosque clearly

[337] https://www.cimic.org/cimic-announcement/ramadan2020/
[338] Interview E
[339] https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=take%20shahada
[340] Interview E

upholds, recognized popularly and designated as such. The mosque is also a pattern of social action such as communal prayer and an egalitarian melting pot for a diverse Champaign-Urbana Muslim community. Yet, it comes up short compared to a Cairene mosque even though it seemingly serves the local Muslim community's religious needs, i.e. establishing communal prayer, teaching Arabic and the fundamentals of Islam, while also performing other pastoral care to the Muslim and non-Muslim community, including charity work and interreligious dialogue. Aziza weighs in on the topic as we speak over the internet, after Ramadan 2020: "I don't go to Friday prayer and the daily prayer…sometimes I pray in my office and sometimes in the *musalla* at campus because there's usually no one there anyway."[341]

A *musalla* is a place of prayer which hasn't been designated to be a mosque. What constitutes a mosque [Arabic: *masjid*;] according to jurisprudential standards varies internally between the different schools of *fiqh* but is minimally a structure that has been titled a mosque and is from then on remains a mosque until the end of time, commonly in the custody of a charitable endowment, a *waqf*.[342] A *musalla* in comparison lacks the technical or theological status of a mosque, but can fill the exact same needs and purposes. It could typically be any place that is sufficiently clean according to ritual standards and can be used for individual or communal prayer as well as study groups or social events. Both among Muslims as well as non-Muslims, "mosque" is used as shorthand for any type of place of prayer yet there is a major distinction theologically in that although they both are places of prostration, the mosque is permanent, lacking the equivalent of an ecclesial de-sacralization ceremony, where the *musalla* is temporal and may be removed or converted to another type of place at any given point in time.

For the people in this study, certain mosques are very important and central to their "muslimness", but the local mosques in and around their places of residence outside of Egypt and Sudan provide very little pull. For Aziza it is the lack of particular Sufi practices:

> Aziza: Here in Chicago, you know, in a mosque they wouldn't have a *dhikr*-session, a *halaqa dhikr* or *haga zayy keda*, [something like that]. They wouldn't have that in Urbana for example. But at the same time…I don't think that these are things that… I mean, I like this form of Islam but it is not like I reject all the Muslims that does not appreciate this or anything like that.[343]

Dhikr [formal Arabic] or *Zikr* [colloquial] literally means remembrance and is probably the most defining practice of Sufi Muslims even if it not exclusive to them in general terms, the Qur'anic text for instance reads *O you who are*

[341] Interview F
[342] *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, "Masdjid"
[343] Interview F

believers, remember God with much remembrance.[344] Muslims are urged to practice it on the day of *eid al-Fitr,* from waking up until the commensuration of the communal Eid-prayer ending the month of fasting saying for instance repetitively: "*Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar. La ilâha Illa Allah. W Allahu akbar, allahu akbar. W li-Llahi al-hamd*" God is great; there is no deity save God. God is great and to God is all praise [directed]. What separate the Sufi practices of *dhikr* from others may be the forms and frequencies in which they manifest. What Aziza misses from the local mosque is a circle of remembrance, a *halaqa dhikr,* something akin to the Sufi flavor Hassan misses from the mosques he would attend in Egypt.

Aziza regards the mosque in Urbana as inclusive, welcoming and accommodating. Although denominationally a Sunni mosque, it is frequented by Shi'i Muslims too, which she takes as a token that there is little emphasis on sectarian division for the benefit of "more general form of Islam", yet she believes the current resident Imam with his roots in West Africa, may be more open to Sufi practices, perhaps even be practicing them himself. To be honest, she says, she doesn't regularly attend Friday prayers and she doesn't go to the mosque regularly outside of Ramadan.[345]

Re-describing the mosque

The mosque does not only vary in the individual settings, but the function of this traditionally male space, has also varied in time. Attending the Friday congregational prayer *salât el-goma'* is historically seen as an obligation only for men. In the earlier Islamic period it was likely not such a common occurrence for all men to regularly attend the Friday prayer. Although it was perceived as an obligation, there were also notable exceptions for attendance. Outside of the major Muslim towns and settlements (*amsâr*), during the time of the second Caliph Umar (d. 644 CE) only one mosque in each town was permitted, in which the communal Friday prayer was performed. Muslims in villages were exempt from the obligation to attend and in some cases such as in Egypt, even forbidden to hold the Friday prayer in their local mosque. This was the norm in Egypt until the Mamluk period, when the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence that had been favored by the Ayyubid dynasty and only permitted the Friday prayer to be held in a single one of Cairo's mosques, was

[344] Qur'an 33:41. Translation by author. N.B. The imperative *Udhkur Allah dhikran katheeran,* may be understood as the more Sufi-leaning meaning: "perform much *dhikr*" as well as the more general "remember God much" without the Sufi implication of a specific form of *dhikr*.
[345] Interview F

politically sidelined for the benefit of the Hanafi School.[346] The historical trajectory of how Friday prayer becomes a central feature of Muslim religious rite can partially be observed from the texts of *fiqh*, where traces of the arising uncertainty as Islam spreads outside of the Hejaz can be sensed if they are approached dialectically. The Egyptian Shafi'i scholar Al-Misri determines in the 13th century that attending the communal prayer is obligatory for villagers on the condition that they are less than 40 and can audibly hear the call from the congregational mosque.[347] In the late 1800s the Egyptian Maliki scholar al-Ashmawy said that there is no lower limit to what's considered a congregation, but that some Maliki scholars set the limit to 12 persons that remain until the prayer is finished.[348] In contrast to this, the famous 10th century Maliki scholar al-Qayrawani says that the obligation to attend is incumbent on anyone in the city or anyone less than three Arabic miles (*amyâl*) from the mosque.[349] I have provided these examples from Islamic theological history as a reminder that the Friday prayer's centrality, even for men, has developed in relation to the times and societies in where Islam was present, not as central unified dogma that was universally applied everywhere in every time. Jesper Petersen indirectly addresses this trajectory in terms of structure influencing the outcome of Islam, which is why there are similar feminist pop-up mosques in Europe, but not in Senegal.[350]

Women, although not forbidden to attend, have unanimously been exempt from the obligation to hearken the call to prayer in the mosque. It is most notably in the context of Islamic revivalism that female space and place in the mosques become a contentious issue, as it has been analyzed for instance by Saba Mahmood who observes Egyptian women asserting presence in a male dominated space by conforming to a male discourse "that have historically secured their subordination to male authority."[351] Yet, for other Muslims, as already hinted in the previous section, any generic Mosque can be an Islamic institution in the margins of their religious life. Fatima remembers:

> Fatima: In Cairo, we didn't ever go pray *jum'a* in a mosque, in my family. I mean, this includes about two-thousand people plus of *ansar*, Descendants of Muhammed Ahmad el-Mahdi. Not to be mistaken with the *ansar al-sunna* or *salafi-wahabi* sects. Women don't go to the mosque unless it's *eid*. It's a bit silly, but that's how they do. So, in Egypt we didn't go to the mosque…[352]

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[346] *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, "Masdjid"
[347] Al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 202
[348] Abd al-Bari Al-Ashmawi, *sharh matn al-ashmawiyya*, (Cairo: Al-Azhar, 2012), 97-98
[349] Al-Qayrawani, *Al-Risala al-Fiqhia*, 142
[350] Petersen, *The Making of the Mariam Mosque: Serendipities and Structures in the Production of Female Authority in Denmark*, (Lund: Lund University, 2020), 347
[351] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 5
[352] Intyerview K, edited

Sometimes in Cairo though, when the family would be out on what Fatima merrily labels as a "familje-utflykt", they would actually attend the old and ancient mosques around Cairo's old Islamic quarters and pray there. "Because we could and it was awesome!"[353] Fatma compares her situation in Swedenwith Egypt and Sudan. The conversation glides into a description of a visit to the central mosque of Stockholm. In vernacular Swedish, it is often referred to as "Stora Moskén" –the big mosque.

> Fatima: Those who I know, I also know they go to the big mosque in Söder. South Stockholm. We have had…oh… We don't like it, my husband and I. I think the energy there is really problematic. The children, my youngest, from the time she was a new-born and we went for *Eid*-prayer, she started screaming the second I walked into the building… And of course, the imams there… They don't recite. They shout. I don't understand why they have not had a noise complaint with the kommun [the municipal office]. It is really unpleasant![354]

The central mosque of Stockholm, officially Zayed bin Sultan Al Nayhan's mosque, is accurately described by Sorgenfrei as "Sweden's most renown and least representative Muslim place of worship."[355] By dubbing it the least representative, Sorgenfrei foremost draws attention to the fact that the mosque in question is non-representative of Muslim congregational life in Sweden due to most such activities taking place outside of the city centers in converted warehouses and basements in residential or industrial zones.[356]

Through geographical factors and the sheer size of the mosque and a successful administrative organization (Islamiska Förbundet) that runs the mosque, it is notwithstanding a local Stockholm landmark that appreciates catering to 160,000 visitors yearly[357], far exceeding the number of congregational members. Like many other mosque organizations in Sweden and the US, the mosque houses a Muslim women's league (Muslimska kvinnoföreningen) that describes itself as a platform for shattering stereotypes, opinion-forming and creating a safe space for Muslim women's community.[358] These two features of the mosque alone point to the complexity in defining a mosque in contemporary and historic time. Although a lot of the activities in the mosque, such as the Muslim women's league are of a social action kind, most visitors to the mosque do not –surely for various reasons– engage in organizational life through membership in the congregation at all. Akin to Hassan, they will perhaps go for Friday prayer in order to uphold a sense of religious duty, or like Fatma to attend the annual Eid prayer, because

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[353] Interview K
[354] Interview K
[355] Simon Sorgenfrei, *Islam i Sverige: de första 1300 åren*, (Stockholm: SST, 2018), 223
[356] Ibid. 225
[357] Islamiska Förbundet, "Om oss" https://www.stockholmsmoske.se/om-oss/
[358] Sofia Aouinti, *Ibn Rushd* "Systerskap i Muslimska Kvinnoföreningen"

of religious family traditions. Contrary to the women of the Mosque's Women's league who are assumed to have " a pronounced need to find a place where they can talk about Islam and feel a spiritual community"[359], and may by that be involved in redefining space in the mosque, in the long run perhaps even shaping the Islam of the future to come, but that is with the assumption that the mosque is an important part of Muslims' Islam. As it turns out, not all mosques are alike. Not from the perspective of the informants. Using Petersen's study as a model in inversion, we can theorize how a mosque is also so-to-speak "un-made" by the action of not participating.

Fatima herself uses the phrase "happy-hippie Muslim" to describe the Sudanese tradition that she springs from. She doesn't specify what that tradition comprises, but clearly it is not to be found in the mosque in Stockholm, which she describes as having a problematic energy. The problematic energy is not solely the shouting of the imams, as she mentions, but as she exemplifies with the crying of her child, something on the lines of a bad vibe. The mosques she remembers visiting in Cairowere "awesome".[360]

As I have already mentioned, in those instances, the designation mosque may point to the activities that goes on in it. Rather than the architectural structure itself, a combination of religious practice, educational activities, community involvement and after school programs make up the weave of what constitutes a mosque in this perspective. I ask Rabia if she ever attended a mosque when she visited Sweden and she mentions the same grand mosque in Stockholm as Fatima speaks of, and adds that we together attended a lecture once in another smaller mosque in Stockholm:

> Rabia: I really liked it, this lecture we attended. It was a positive experience. It really gave me something. I can't say the place itself was very interesting. It was the congregation that was rewarding and the lecturer was captivating. I don't think I have ever been anywhere in Sweden where I have felt this…you know the feeling when you enter a beautiful mosque here in Cairo or in Istanbul or something like that. Actually, I don't think that the place is as important as the community. But then again, I haven't really experienced that much of spiritual gatherings in Sweden.[361]

There are obviously architectural differences between a medieval mosque in the Muslim world and any given Swedish Muslim place of worship, be it a *musalla* or a designated mosque, yet in my travels in Egypt I have also come to ask myself if the difference translates not only to space but also in time. Newly constructed mosques in Egypt seem to me to be more similar to "mosques" in Sweden than to the older mosques in Egypt

[359] Aouinti, *Ibn Rushd* "Systerskap i Muslimska Kvinnoföreningen" Translated from Swedish by author
[360] Interview K
[361] Interview L

Rabia for instance, distinguishes between the Swedish mosque she attended and the historical mosques of Cairo or Istanbul, not by the activities –clearly the content is similar (but not identical) in either– but through her emotional response to the architecture. In her broad definition, she also includes her home in the typology. Fatma finds the mosques in Cairo awesome but the one in central Stockholm housing a bad vibe. Hassan discovers that his spirit is revigorated in the Urbana mosque, yet gets homesick for the contents of a Friday prayer in Egypt. Aziza and Sonia rarely attend.

The aesthetics of awe

In the heart of Fatimid Cairo, next to the medieval bazar quarter of *Khan el-Kahlili*, stands an architecturally eclectic and impressive structure with its initial roots in the mid twelfth century, officially called *the mosque of our Lord Hussain*, in Arabic. The mosque is as much an attraction for visiting tourists as it draws Egyptians from all over the city and country to it, especially during Fridays or in the month of Ramadan. Inside the mosque, in a separate chamber, is a shrine said to contain the head of the martyred grandson of the prophet Muhammad, el-Hussain. Friday prayers at el-Hussain will draw crowds that far exceeds the capacity of the mosque and afterwards the prayer hall is full of Sufi brotherhoods engaged in *zikr* while others crowd the room containing the holy relics, surfing the multitude of visitors seeking the saint's help, a scene that seems to not have changed fundamentally since Ibn Jubayr reported it in his travelogue in 1186.[362]

Lane considers el-Hussain to be "the most sacred" of all of Egypt's sanctuaries[363] which may well be true from a popular perspective. Regardless of that, it remains a signpost of Egyptian Islam and an active memory and practice with many Egyptians in exile, not the least the people in this study. To visit the shrine and mosque of el-Hussain is not a requirement, not a religious duty incumbent upon any Muslim, but something that is done out of other motivational factors. A *maqam*, a saint's shrine, is one incentive.

> Rabia: We have so many *maqams* here. We have *sahaba*. We have *sayyedina Hussain, radiallahu 'an*. You know, that's why I like Cairo. I can ride for half an hour to visit *sayyedina Hussain* or another *maqam*. It's that side of it too, the spirituality. It makes it a special place for me.[364]

[362] Williams, *Islamic Monuments in Cairo*, 218
[363] Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, 236
[364] Interview I

Rabia will visit el-Husain regularly but she says that she rarely will go to any mosque for regular religious service such as the mandatory prayer. Since prayer in the mosque is not mandatory for women, she says, one attends the mosque solely if one so desire. She explains that she has taken upon herself to praying her five daily prayers in her house or reciting the Qur'an there in order to sanctify the home, to fill it with *baraka*, blessings or grace. "You could say that it is my role as a woman to create a religious space [religiöst rum] or a religious atmosphere in my home. That becomes our…or my mosque."[365]

Talking about mosques in general and her feelings towards them, she reminisces a recent visit to Islamic Cairo where she had strolled by *Sultan al-Qalawun* complex on *al-Mu'izz* Street. She describes the Mamluk architecture of the area as incredibly beautiful.

> Rabia: The architecture, the splendor and the Intricate…eh… how do you say it in Swedish? Craftmanship. The work put into it. The purpose behind it. The aesthetics inspires awe in you. Even if not spiritually but at least aesthetically it makes one feel… That and history, which one can read on these buildings, it makes one feel reverence and a little pride actually. You know, that there is such a deep tradition and beauty in our…in the history of the mosque.[366]

Entering a mosque and standing under the dome looking up is a very spiritual state, she says. It comes from the architecture itself, and not all mosques are equal in this respect. Rabia prefers some over others. El-Hussain is one of them. Even as it is crowded and somewhat chaotic, she observes a special tranquility coming over her inside the mosque. It is quite clear that Rabia is not talking about any of the thousands of mosques or *musallas* in Cairo but singles out the older ones, especially those with a saint's tomb connected to them. If she visits a mosque it is likely one of them and as an extraordinary event. For everyday religious practice, as stated, she remains at her house. Once pressed a little she does concede that it may happen that she visits a more generic mosque in case of a holiday or so. At such occasions there may be an aura of spirituality present which she ascribes to a congregation of believers engaged in worship. She seems to believe the mausoleum-mosque, by comparison, harbors and emits this aura of spirituality or holiness constantly.[367]

The experiences of Rabia, Fatima and Aziza in their relationship to the local mosques pose important questions of the conceptualization of the mosque as a signpost of Islam in islamological queries. As Petersen has thoroughly demonstrated, a "mosque" may turn out to be naught more than an ambulatory

[365] Interview L
[366] Interview L
[367] Interview L

suitcase unpacked every Friday.[368] It could also be, as Sorgenfrei describes, a multi-purpose premise where worship is but one of the activities taking place.[369] I believe that the little use of any generic mosque by Rabia, Fatima or Aziza adds another problematic dimension to the definition of a mosque, and that is the situational and contextual. Parallel to thinking about *what* a mosque is, I believe it is also fruitful to think about *when* and *why* a mosque is from an analytical perspective. Regarding its materiality and sociality in its own right, I would argue that the mosque is also an emotional category with many Muslims. Thus, all mosques arenot sentimentally alike. I will return to the topic of pilgrimage to mausoleum-mosques in a later chapter but will briefly touch upon it in the following section, where I reflect on the spatiality of Islam, allowing Fatma's view to contrast a centrifugal.

"Islam is where the heart is!"

Most mosques are to some degree modeled upon what is thought to be the "original" mosque that was build by the first Muslims in Medina. For many Muslims the prophet's mosque in Medina is a primary religious concern, but the Qur'an and other normative texts point to Mecca as the center of Islam's sacred geography."Turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque; Wherever you [believers] may be, turn your faces towards it."[370]

There is no doubt that Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammad, is designated to be sacred or holy in the Qur'anic narrative, if we restrict our definition to the *haram*, the *Kaba* and the courtyard that surrounds it, the Sacred Mosque as it is referred to in the quote above. Muslim pilgrims go there to perform the annual *hajj* ritual and they orient their mandatory daily prayers towards it. The larger city of Mecca and the entire region of *Hijaz* which also is the region that houses the city of Medina, the final resting place of Muhammad, is of course also an important historical and mythological[371] geography for many Muslims. It was here that he received the revelation and it is here that the stories from his biography take place. Yet, under the current regime and its legitimization of and through Wahabism, there is discernible friction between

[368] See: Petersen, *The Making of the Mariam Mosque*
[369] Sorgenfrei, *Islam i Sverige*
[370] Quran 2:144 (transl. Haleem)
371 I use the term mythology here to denote the multivocal narrative in Muslim historiography. There are several interpretations of the events in Muhammad's life that differ according to time and ideology, but the Islamic origins myth is commonly shared and exist both in written and oral traditions among Muslims. See: Fred M. Donner, "The Origins Myth", (2021) https://www.americanacademy.de/the-origins-myth/

a number of Muslims and the Kingdom's track record of preserving the earliest Islamic cultural heritage. Irfan al-Alawi calls this process of destruction of cultural sites for the benefit of commerce: "Maccahattan."[372] Al-Alawi's critique is not without historical counterparts as architectural reconstructions of Mecca and Medina have always evoked reactions that invoke arguments of tradition and heritage.[373]

Perhaps insensitive to some religionists' feelings but nevertheless a fact, Hughes and McCutcheon propose that it cannot be avoided that pilgrimage is a species of the broader category tourism.[374] In this understanding, the destination of a pilgrimage can simultaneously be regarded as holy and a life altering event as well as a business trip, distinguishable only by some internal criteria such as intention. Ultimately, they argue, to regard any internal criteria, such as intention, lacks analytical value and furthermore runs the risk of essentializing all those involved in pilgrimage as "automatons."[375]

Although sympathetic for their call to deconstruct the distinction between pilgrimage and tourism, I believe that the matter can be refered to how close the descriptive analysis is. Consider for instance Ibn al-Arabi's *al-Futûhât al-makkiya*, which is perhaps the most renown example of the medieval mystical experience of *Hajj*: "The essence of what is included in this work comes from what God inspired in me while I was fulfilling my circumambulations of His Temple, or while I was contemplating it while seated in its holy precincts"[376] with a modern contemporary example of the proclaimed transformative experience of Malcolm X's *hajj*,[377] or Michael E. Jansens autoethnographic account.[378] Neither undertook the ritual journey for the exact same motifs and neither describes the outcome of their journeys in similar fashion.

There is some (religious) tourism in the Hijaz to historical sites such as *Badr*, where the Muslims defeated the Quraysh in a first battle, or *Jabal Thawr* where Muhammad and his closest ally Abu Bakr is thought to have taken refuge from a Qurayshi lynch mob as they were fleeing to Medina from persecution in Mecca. The Saudi regime is struggling with the idea of religious tourism outside of the projected 20 million pilgrims to visit the holy mosque

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[372] TRT "Money Talks: Mecca's Dilemma, Interview with Irfan al-Alawi" September 27, 2016 https://youtu.be/4vWStYH0hTg

[373] See: Suraiya Faroqhi, *Herrscher über Mekka: Die Geschichte der Pilgerfahrt*, (München: Artemis, 1990), 151-162, 261-262

[374] Hughes & McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 more words*, 177

[375] Ibid. 181

[376] Ibn al-Arabi, *The Meccan Revelations*, trans. William C. Chittick & James W. Morris (New York: Pir 2002), 8

[377] *The New York Times*, "Malcolm X Pleased by Whites' Attitude On Trip to Mecca", (May 8, 1964), https://www.nytimes.com/1964/05/08/archives/malcolm-x-pleased-by-whites-attitude-on-trip-tomecca.html

[378] Michael E. Jansen "An American Woman on the Hajj" in *Everyday Life in the Muslim Middle East*, 266-273 edited by Donna Lee Bowen & Evelyn A. Early (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002)

in Mecca during *hajj* and *'umra*, not the least because they fear that it may stimulate what the Wahabis see as idolatrous and non-Islamic practices.[379] Access is restricted to the *al-Baqi'* graveyard in Medina, the final resting ground for several members of the prophetic family and early Muslim saints was wrecked by Wahabi zealots in the mid 1920s on the grounds of hindering grave worship.[380] The graveyard since then has been without any structures or landmarks, and visitors to it have witnessed harassment by the so-called "religious police" if they are suspected of not complying with the correct interpretation of "promoting virtue and prohibiting vice."[381] The earnest iconoclast sentiment of the Wahabis may at one point even have had them contemplating demolishing the prophet's mausoleum in Medina in order to inhibit direct veneration of him.[382]

Although historically a token of personal spiritual importance and notable social impact, it is not difficult to see how contemporary Muslims may have mixed emotions towards the geography of the "two sacred mosques" (Mecca and Medina), given that they are today administered by a political and religious regime that strikes down with impudence and violence on manifestations of Muslim religion they decry heretical. What was once a voyage of a lifetime, a journey that not uncommonly lasted for a year or longer and could instill in the individual Muslim immense spiritual transformation and mystic revelation, let alone be the end of one's life due to the dangers of travelling, is today a very different experience.[383]

During the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser (r. 1954-1970), in the heyday of Arab nationalism, performing *hajj* was encouraged as a token of support for the Nasserist cause, attracting both Sunni and Shi'a Muslim sympathetic to the pan-Arabist ideal, effectively blurring the definitions of politically and religiously motivated pilgrimage.[384]

It is probably most accurate to state that Hajj has never been a major Muslim personal experience. Most Muslims do not perform the pilgrimage. Globally, according to PEW only a median of 9% of Muslims say they have performed hajj, which is plausibly the highest number ever historically. Although the proportion of *hajjis* increases with geographical proximity to the holy-held sanctuary[385], there are grounds for understanding Mecca as a peripheral geography in the spiritual topography of Muslim ritual life.

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[379] Katie Paul, "Saudi Arabia Seeks Islamic Tourism Boost in Test for Heritage, Tradition" *Reuters*, September 4, 2017

[380] Encyklopaedia Islamica, "Al-Baqi'"

[381] Riazat Butt, "Secterian Hostility Lies Beneath Hajj Spirit, Pilgrims Say" *The Guardian*, November 16, 2010

[382] Anthony H. Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century*, (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 206

[383] Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia, 252*

[384] Eickelman, *The Middle East and Central Asia*, 253

[385] James Bell, "The World's Muslims"

Accordingly, when Fatma and her husband negotiate the rules of fasting Ramadan in Sweden, convinced they cannot keep the taxing physical demands of following local times, they opt to follow the day of Khartoum over Mecca, even though the day is slightly shorter in Mecca. Their negotiation points to how Ramadan is thus not just the act of fasting for the sake of pleasing God, or a zero-sum game because it is ordered in the texts or by tradition. Rather, fasting the month of Ramadan reflects a deep and personal relationship to one's religious beliefs that indicates and underlines a slight dissonance between religious institutions and individual choice and practices that are dependent on resources, contexts and settings.

It is well-established among contemporary imams and Muslim organizations in Sweden that Mecca is the go-to option for shortening the day, although they rarely elaborate on how they have come to such a conclusion, but like Swedish theologian Othman al-Tawelbe, often refer it to previous scholarly opinions.[386] Without questioning the mythological importance of Mecca for many Muslims, including the informants in this study, its role as a "sacred" geography must be analyzed with regards to economical and political aspects, some that I will address in further detail in the following chapter.

I think it is possible to think of the relation between Muslims and Mecca, or Muslims and Islam analogous to how Robert Orsi describes the relationship between Italian Catholics in Harlem and their relationship to the American Catholic church in the early 20th century Harlem, in which the religious lives of people were undoubtedly "shaped by a Catholic sensibility, although not by the Catholic church, Italian or American."[387] One's religious identity or self-assessment is not hinged upon personal observance, but on other, seemingly mundane and small gestures that can be of great personal importance, but can go unnoticed in larger abstractions of the study of Islam.

What is the value of Khartoum over Mecca, Fatma asks me rhetorically. We have been talking at length over the internet and in person also outside of the interview situation about Ramadan, often describing to each other how we perceive and experience it differently in Sweden compared to Egypt or Sudan. When she tells me how she, her husband, and their children ritualize the fast in their new environment in Stockholm, I am struck with the thought that Ramadan as I have perceived it in Egypt actually has very little to do with fasting, or Islamic theology, in a similar manner how particular Christmas traditions may have very little to do with dogmatic Christianity. What is the value of Khartoum over Mecca, Fatma asks: "*Ya'ni, fî l-âkhir, el-farig min khamsa daga'ig iftekir*, [in the end, I think it's only a difference of a couple of

[386] Anne Henriksson, "Man kan fasta enligt Mecka-tid" *Helsingborgs Dagblad*, July 29, 2011;
[387] Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1959* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 220

minutes]. *Lakin*…", she makes a small pause and drives home the point: "Where is the heart?"[388]

Concluding remarks

Investigating primarily the cases of fasting (directly) and praying (indirectly), this chapter has demonstrated that although Muslims nominally share Islam as a cultural framework, the individual variances in describing and relating to this Islamic culture need a context in order for them to become analytically sensible. This is of course only a partial image. Clifford Geertz states that although there needs to be a minimal coherence for a cultural system to be a system, validity of interpretation is not found in the tightness of an impeccable depiction.[389]

From an ethnographic particularistic vantage point, the argument is not to regard the informants as a microcosm of Muslims or Islam, but to draw attention to the limits of the analytical value in historical categories (Islam, Muslim, Prayer, Mosques etc.) in mediated Muslim religious life. There are mosques and there are mosques in the narratives of the informants. Some have a strong pull factor and other repel them and some leave them indifferent and this fact naturally has implications when doing larger-scale sociological studies of mosques, for instance. Apart from the problematization of rendering non-organized Muslims invisible, raised by Jeldtoft and Nielsen,[390] I would also raise a question of the seemingly heuristic approach in supposing that organizing is a phenomenon that can be analyzed in terms of religious denomination.[391]

There are naturally, internal and psychological motivations in the informants' adherence to established (discursive) traditions that make up the vast cultural terrain of Islam, ones which remain unknown and unknowable. What Rabia "feels" by looking up at the dome of el-Husain cannot be interpreted into a meaningful analysis. What we can use as comparative material from this chapter is how the participants relate themselves to different mosques and traditions in different geographies, in a manner that suggests that time and place are necessary contexts in theorizing Islam. "In obvious ways translocality connects places", Catharina Raudvere writes, "but it also makes

[388] Interview N
[389] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 18
[390] Jeldtoft & Nielsen, *Methods and Contexts*, 2-3
[391] An example of this is the organizational structure of the Catholic Church in Sweden, and the Islamic Council of Sweden (Islamiska Samarbetsrådet), where the former legitimizes its structure through ecclesial tradition, and the latter has formed itself through conforming to the formal rules of the Swedish state.

the different realities of homeland stand out more clearly. The dreams of homeland, origin and authenticity are contested by the ways in which religious practice, life styles and values change at both places."[392]

In a following two chapters, I will therefor turn my attention to how the informants imagine Egypt and how that informs their interpretations of Islam.

[392] Raudvere, "Between Home and Home," 52

Chapter five: The others

The core of this chapter concerns the informants' memories of the situation in Egypt and particularly their relation to Salafism and Egyptian Islamic institutions. The informants critically mentioned a number of groups and individuals that they distanced themselves from, thus using "the others" to explain how they apprehend Sufism.. This chapter begins like the preceding chapter, with an anecdote that introduces the overall theme of the chapter, a moment of surprise "when realization collided with illusion", as Gilsenan describes the ideal anthropological starting point.[393] The introduction serves to illustrate how Muslims are highly aware of their internal different interpretations. It is followed by a discussion of sharia and jurisprudence and the important role that religious institution in close proximity to the Egyptian state has in the religious perceptions of the informants. The chapter continues by addressing how the informants talked about religious revivalism which was perceived to be out of touch with both Islamic history as well as contemporary times.

The final part of the chapter probes into how the informants relate their Sufism to be in a middle position, rejecting both the maximalist mimetic revivalism of Salafism as well as the perceived nihilism of secularism, through understanding Islam as a personal and spiritual relation to religion, an interpretation with deep roots in Islamic history, as well as it being in line with institutional Egyptian Islam.

Introduction: A tale of two stews

Basma and I had been introduced through Hassan and previously met at an Egyptian and Lebanese students' potluck supper, where I discussed my research interest in detail and was reintroduced to one of my most frequent pastimes of my younger teens: Playing table tennis. Needless to say, I was thoroughly beaten by both Basma as well as by the other players. As we all

[393] Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam*, 22

sat down to share our meals, one participant informed the group which meat stew was *halal* and which was made from non-*halal* beef. I never asked and neither did I find it important at the time, but I was under the impression that everyone in the group was Muslim. I also suspect that my Swedish cultural background somewhat impedes me from asking direct questions of a person's religion or religiosity and come to think of it, no one in the group ever discussed religion unless in direct conversation with me. To some degree, this was because they were interested in my academic role as a historian of religion focusing on Islam, notwithstanding my personal history of how I came to share the identity of being Muslim with them. We sat into late hours drinking tea and playing backgammon and as I was heading back to my dorm, skipping joyfully from the warm and friendly atmosphere of the dinner, I pondered the evening with the notion that I had experienced something noteworthy in the dynamic of the group.

Although there were both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims present, both unmarried men and women seamlessly intermingling –and *nota bene* neither things are not uncommon in any way– there were two versions of the same stew. One *halal* and one non-*halal*, yet it was not as if the group itself was divided into segments of Muslims (who would supposedly have to conform to only eating halal) and non-Muslims (whom are subsequently free to eat whatever) or according to any other obvious typology. Neither did it strike me that anyone in the party was particularly lax about adhering- or conforming to Islam or the religious framework (*shariah*) that is part of it. The question festered in my head. Why would any Muslim tentatively eat or serve a dish that is designated as non-permissible for Muslims according to *shariah*, unless as to make a statement on their position on Islam, which was not the question of in this case. The first conclusion to draw is that both dishes were "halal", but in this case not a direct referral to a theological definition of "permissible." It rather reflected the speaker's awareness of the diversity of Muslim ideas and practices within a shared definition of being Muslim. It resonates with Ahmad's notion that "the operation of *truth* in the bulk of human and historical Islam has been conceptually, discursively, socially and spatially *non-compartmentalized*"[394] in which the individual Muslim operates in a vast and polyphonic discursive terrain. In that sense, both stews can be nominally permissible. The designation "halal" only separates the one from the other in that they recognize the individual possibility of room for deviating opinion within a wider and purposely indistinct phenomenon: being Muslim. Ahmad's testification to the historical and socially uncentred Islam is plausible but also unsatisfying. If there is no central authority or dogma, then how do Muslims know that they are Muslims?

[394] Ahmad, *What is Islam*, 191

What is *fiqh*?

In order to better understand the situation described above, it may be useful to present different perspectives regarding Islamic jurisprudence. In order to begin to understand that, we must first briefly consider an account for the history of *sharia* and debate whether we deem Islam best understood as a text-oriented religion or as the Muslim historical attempt to emulate the prophetic model of conduct. The Qur'an, accepted by most Muslims as the eternal and uncreated speech of God, is surprisingly void of legal text.[395] The Qur'an remains the primary source of *sharia*, but the text is not *sharia* in itself. Except for a late attempt in the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, sharia was never a legal code encompassing all Muslim territories.[396] There are of course Muslim states today that proclaim to rule by *sharia*, but despite sharing the name, those legal codes remain national law.[397] A better way to conceptualize *sharia*, although painfully simplified, is to approach it as the *legal philosophy* connected to the religion Islam.[398]

From a normative majority Sunni perspective, sharia is arrived at through *fiqh*, literally meaning 'understanding', but commonly translated to (Islamic) jurisprudence or (Islamic) *legal theory*. If there are no codices on sharia, there are an insurmountable number of manuals of *fiqh*. Some are comprehensive, covering in essence all aspects of human action, while others are distinctly small in scope when treating a particular topic, such as 11th century scholar al-Daudi's *kitâb al-amwâl*, on property right or the more all-encompassing 9th

[395] This is of course a normative statement, related to what a contextual definition of "legal" is. What I allude to here is that the Quranic text contains relatively few passages that would be recognized in terms of "law" in a general Western legal sytem.

[396] The Ottoman Empire was governed with several legal systems, amongst other a non-systematic religious identity-based *millet* concept, alongside with other regional laws and independent bodies of sharia throughout the Muslim lands. Starting in the Ottoman reformed constitution of 1876 which considered all citizens of the Ottoman empire as 'Ottomans' from the reforms initiated during the early to mid 1800s, had the effect of though limiting the legal and political power of sharia also establishing it constitutionally, especially in family law. Many of the MENA geographies that had been under Ottoman rule subsequently inherited the frozen sharia Ottoman family law as they emerged as sovereign states.

[397] Consider for example the legal systems of Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are both seen as sharia based and may share some commonalities in their respective penal codes, yet are constitutionally completely opposite, one being a monarchy and the other a republic.

[398] It is for instance found in the scholarly works on *maqâsid al-sharia* by Muslim theologians beginning systematically in the 10th century (CE) by formulating general legal theory on the objectives (*maqâsid*) of law (*sharia*). Although a vast scope of study in itself, a common program is formulated as five essential values: (1) The preservation of Islam, (2) preservation of life, (3) preservation of property, (4) preservation of intellect, (5) preservation of dignity; see: Mohammad H. Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2008, pp. 123-140

century classic *al-Muwatta* by Malik, assumed to be the earliest formulation of Islamic law.[399]

Steffen Steltzer sees the emergence of *fiqh* alongside Islamic speculative theology (*kalâm*) profoundly as the production of (an) Islamic ethics apparatus, rooted in the problem of the demise of the prophet. With the mouthpiece of God gone, the Muslims were faced with having to address their social reality with what resources they had at hand. These were foremost the Qur'an and the collective memory of Muhammad's actions and utterances, the sunna.

> In this sense, fiqh and kalâm can be understood as attempts to answer two kinds of insecurities. In the case of fiqh, once the groundwork for the assessment of human action has been laid (through the Sharî'a derived from the Qur'an and the sunna), there remains the task of applying these guidelines to particular actions and situations and, thereby, establishing the means available and acceptable for formulating particular rulings. Kalâm, on the other hand, can be seen as an attempt to answer a basic insecurity regarding knowledge of the nature of acts themselves.[400]

Steltzer points to the latter insecurity being born out of the uncertainty of agency in the Qur'an, ascribing both mankind and God to having it. Mankind is nonetheless taxed with responsibility, which leads into a central Aristotelian inquiry on ethics on the end of human action and who (then) acts, if God is omnipotent and the creator of action whilst mankind is given ownership over his actions? The Muslim intellectuals thus early on starts to indulge in two separate, occasionally overlapping thematic existential inquiries. What is God's command and what means do we possess to find that out?[401]

Although refined and expanded on since, the Sunni-Muslim consensus rallied around the theologian al-Shafi's (d. 820 CE) definition of *usûl al-fiqh*, that its primary sources were the Qur'an, the sunna, consensus of the Muslims and analogous reasoning. Sunna is a stretchy term. The contemporary meaning is nominally the normative practice of the prophet, but it is sometimes used synonymously with *hadith*, the corpus of textual sources that are the records of prophetic action and proclamations.

It is clear, at least during the first three centuries of Islam, that *hadith* and sunna cannot be equated but are just related concepts. The former is the initially orally transmitted and later written registration of, among other things, the revered practice of the pious forebears, at its head the prophet and the earliest Muslims.[402]

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[399] Yasin Dutton, *The Origins of Islamic Law*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 22

[400] Steffen Steltzer. "Ethics", in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 163

[401] Ibid. c.

[402] *Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition*, "Sunna"

This means that sunna in early Islamic theology was not necessarily and always referred from the prophet, but as in the famous case of the Maliki jurisprudential method, could also be found in the practice of the Medinese community.[403] Historically, sunna was a wider concept that related to the practical implication of an Islamic ethical system. The *hadith* were one of the sources, perhaps even the most important source to the prophetic sunna, but the two terms were not interchangeable/synonymous.

As Islamic theology matured and was developed, it split into two distinct areas of inquiry. *Usûl al-fiqh*, the prescriptive study of Islam in practice, and *'Ilm al-kalâm*, a branch of knowledge more closely related to the term theology in the English language.[404] These two areas were not hermetically sealed off from each other and there are examples of matters that intuitively relates to praxis showing up in treatises of creed and vice versa. Al-Tahawi (d. 933 CE), for instance, includes a paragraph on the valid dispensation of wiping water over foot-coverings, performing ritual ablution, in his popular 130 clauses of correct Islamic creed.[405] Similarly, Al-Qayrawani (d. 922) includes in his well-known manual of *fiqh*, a first chapter entirely devoted to definitions of correct faith, which he ends with a exhortation to obey the Muslim leaders, scholars and the tradition of the pious predecessors and to "stay clear of religious controversies and all that was innovated by the innovators."[406]

Sunni Islam develops thus on these two legs of a theory of ethics and an ontology of the divine in close proximity and often overlapping conjunction. Scholars who often wrote on both aspects subsequently functioned as the watchmen of a philosophical-religious prescriptive tradition, especially after the disciplines started to solidify in the 10th century. What survives to our day are four (Sunni) schools of jurisprudence (*madhhab*) and two (Sunni) schools of theology, defined as *traditional* or "orthodox."

Historically, Egypt was dominated by the Maliki and Shafi' schools until the *hanafication* of Egypt in the 19th century, when centralization following modernization reforms by the khedivate resulted in the creation of the Hanafi

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[403] Dutton, *The Origins of Islamic Law*, 37

[404] For example: "kalâm is the science which is concerned with firmly establishing religious beliefs by adducing proofs and with banishing doubts. (from the Mawâkif of al-Īd̲j̲ī, 8th/14th cent.) quoted from *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE* "Ilm al-kalâm"

405 Tahawi,The Creed of Imam Tahawi, translated by Hamza Yusuf, (California: Zaytuna Institute, 2007), 70. A feasible explanation for putting a matter pertaining to fiqh in a creedal manual can be found in the author's need to comment on the status of the Qur'anic text (which commands washing the feet) with the hadith (that permits wiping over socks, arab. "khuff") a contested issue with contemporary theologians, uneasy on allowing hadith texts to take precedent over Qur'an.

[406] Al-Qayrawani, *al-Risala*, p. 80 (و ترك المراء والجدال في الدين وترك كل ما احدثه المحدثون) it is clear here that al-Qayrawani is not referring to the scholars of hadith (also al-muhadithun) but to those that bring something unprecedented into the religion, contextually, in the matters of beliefs. Al-Qayrawani does not supply a heresiology to accompany the statement.

madhhab, the state *madhhab*, impacting not only religious education at al-Azhar university, but also the legal system, which to this day is partially built on a codified version of *hanafi* fiqh.[407]

Fiqh matters

Religious traditions, like Islam or Judaism, intimately connected to a sacred text, will unremittingly be faced with the problem of application of the ethical imperative in the text without losing its relevancy in the new space or time in which it is to be applied. In the previous chapter, we encountered some issues where the participants of this study were left to their own devices in finding solutions to particular problems they encountered with their Muslim identity and relevancy. If religious norms were difficult to mimetically uphold, the tension was resolved through an individual scheme that was perceived to be in lines with *sharia*, implying that the informants regard *sharia* to be a wide field of permissible actions. This perception was occasionally explicit among the informants.

> Basma: If we can make people's lives easier, why not? That should be the point of modern *fiqh*. I am not saying we invent rules, but we can use whatever space there is to make life closer to the lives we are actually living.[408]

Basma says that the interpretational tradition inherent in Islam means that it can easily stay in tune with a fast pace changing world without losing relevancy or its core values. Changing the form of the Friday prayer for instance, which we were discussing at the time of the interview, she asserts that it is not changing the religion in itself for the mosque or the *khatîb* to facilitate to the needs of the Muslims in the area. The Urbana mosque holds two back-to-back Friday prayers, so that students or faculty members who have classes during lunch hour can make it to the second *khutba*, thus not missing the virtue of attending Friday prayer. In the same vein, one of the mosques in Stockholm, I tell Basma, has reduced the mandatory part of the prayer[409] to a minimum, so that working Muslims in the area do not need to

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[407] Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State, (Leiden: Brill,* 1997), 56-65

[408] Interview B

[409] The mandatory part of a valid Friday prayer is: a sermon (*khutba*) that should be in Arabic and must include at least one word praising God, a prayer for the prophet and encourage piety. The sermon should be followed by two cycles of prayer during an audible recitation of the Qur'an. See: Ibn Rushd, *The Distinguished Jurist's Primer*, 175 ff

reduce their lunch time by more than ten or fifteen minutes. Muslims that have the time and expect a longer sermon arrive earlier when the imam is giving a longer explanatory sermon, but if you are pressed for time, the mosque has chosen to use *fiqh* in order to cater to the needs of their constituents.

Basma approves and comments that although she suspects that older, more conservative Egyptians may contest using *fiqh* in this respect, she does not find it unimaginable that a younger generation would embrace such strategies. The end of it "actually makes total sense." She reasons that, on an individual level, one is free to spend as much time as one chooses in a mosque, but it is not fair to impose the desires or conviction of one onto the commune who may find themselves in very different situations. "Life is already difficult, why make it more difficult" she sums up her principal stance on the issue.[410]

As far as I can tell, Basma is sincerely devoted to her religious beliefs. Regardless of the setting, Islam remains meaningful to her. She draws strength from a tradition that does not appear archaic when she describes it, but has tools for dealing with a secular world just as well as any other religious tradition. For her, the formal study of Islam is the key that unlocks the door to not only the true meaning of religion itself, but also a diversity and tolerance within it. She says that her feeling is that the more someone has studied Islam and *fiqh*, the more liberal and understanding and less dogmatic they appear to her.[411]

At the heart of Basma's reasoning lies a question of authenticity. There is a parallel to Basma's view with the Swedish Muslim women in Pia Karlsson Minganti's study.[412] However, where Karlsson Minganti's informants see a means to an authentic Islam through reinterpreting the sacred sources, they reject aspects such as culture or tradition. Basma not only acknowledges tradition as personally valuable, but together with other informants in this study uses both culture and tradition as tokens of Islamic authenticity.[413]

Like many Egyptian Muslims, Basma received some rudimentary religious instruction from her parents and a local mosque as a child where she primarily learned the basics in reciting the Qur'an. She also received some confessional tuition in school which she describes as "disruptive and not very focused". It was later when Basma had grown up that, on her own initiative, in wanting to deepen her knowledge she came into contact with what she describes as a "formal way of learning religion" that opened her up to Egyptian institutionalized Islam:

> Brusi: What would you do if there is a question you need to know about. Where would you turn for guidance?

[410] Interview B
[411] Interview B
[412] See chapter 2
[413] Karlsson Minganti, *Muslima*, 88-89; See chapter 7 this study

> Basma: I was lucky that I was able to form this network from attending a lesson here [in Egypt] and taking a few courses even if I wasn't super invested in anything. I took a few classes at an Islamic institution. It was an institution in Cairo. It was open only for a few years. It was a private institute founded by the *shuyukh al-Azhar*. They had this vision that they wanted to make knowledge more accessible.[414]

Shuyukh al-Azhar means (the) scholars of al-Azhar University. Al-Azhar University was founded in 970/972 by the Isma'ili Shi'i Fatimid dynastic caliphate; it is one of the world's most renowned Sunni Muslim institutions. It is of course debatable how influential al-Azhar is outside of Egypt, especially in modern days, but in Egypt and with Egyptians abroad it tends to still be regarded with a sense of national pride and as a token of Islamic tradition. Since the early sixties non-religious disciplines were added to its curriculum albeit both linguistics and theoretical philosophy that may not necessarily be understood as theological subjects together with for instance medicine, has been taught there in medieval ages. Al-Azhar together with the *dar al-ifta* and the ministry of endowments and religious affairs are undoubtedly the most important institutions for defining and proclaiming Islam in Egypt. Because of its long history, al-Azhar is perceived as a beacon of traditional Islam, a role it willingly also proclaims together with assurances to the non-Muslim world of standing for a moderate Islam.[415]

Defining tradition with the Egyptian state

The modern history of al-Azhar is closely knitted together with the reforms of the modern Egyptian monarchy and the Egyptian republic. Sometimes a partner, sometimes a conservative speed bump to the needs of the political elite, it is noticeable that, regardless of the relation to the Egyptian state, al-Azhar has had to answer to the challenges of the modern era where the spread of mass literacy and printing in Egypt has expanded public discourse on Islam. The theologian is not only accountable to his peers but increasingly to the Muslim public who may be influenced by numerous other factors that influence their perception of what the religion should be, as Skovgaard-Petersen concludes.[416]

The people I interviewed in this study do not take everything that comes out of al-Azhar at face value, and there are instances where the informants

[414] Interview B
[415] See for instance Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State*
[416] Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State*, 374-375

may be critical towards certain statements or actions of individual scholars. But it is commonly seen as a source of an Islam that they value above forms of religion that challenges the informants' idea that Islam is inevitably a longstanding intellectual tradition.

> Basma: The rebellion against religious authority and submitting Islam to this idea, so you actually lose knowledge and lose the point of learning and investing time, learning what this was about and where it came from. Just allowing anyone to say what they want because they have access to *kitab wa sunna*, it is ridiculous.[417]

It is clear that Basma understands the religion of Islam as a multifaceted tradition, involving much more than just the source texts, the *kitâb wa sunna*, as she snidely hints at the Salafi call to arms. One way of understanding what the debate, or rebellion as Basma describes it, is really about is what in Arabic is called *taqlîd*, emulation. It is nominally incumbent upon any Muslim to impersonate the prophet Muhammad, the perfect human being, according to Islamic theology. Yet a doctrine of *imitatio Muhammadi* is not self-evident but creates as much confusion with Muslims as the doctrine of *imitatio Dei* has created amongst Christians. Should Muslims mimetically copy Muhammad's behavior in everything, or should actions of the individual Muslim be in the prophet's spirit, and what sources do the Muslims have at hand to access knowledge of Muhammad's sunna? Basma is of the opinion that even if it was as easy as following the Qur'an and the *hadith* texts to the letter, such as she believes to some extent is the method of the Salafis, who argue that the texts should be literaly understood, the assumption that one can understand archaic texts is akin to arrogant:

> Basma: It's an idea that doesn't make sense to me because first of all we don't even have the tools. *Aslan* [To begin with], my Arabic, you know my *Fusha* and classical Arabic is very poor compared to what I would actually need to learn those texts and understand them and act accordingly, and I would say that my Arabic is better than average.[418]

Basma is certainly not assuming that Salafi Muslims do not have internal hierarchies of knowledge or figures of religious authority. What she alludes to is how modernization processes in Egypt in the late 19th century; a growing class of literate peoples; and subsequently an increase in independent publications; among other factors, led to what Skovgaard-Petersen describes as increased aspirations towards participation in the political process. In an early 20th century Egypt where the traditional religious scholars of al-Azhar had already been sidelined, early Salafists, no longer in control of their

[417] Interview B
[418] Interview B, edited grammatically (reference)

established fields of education and legal consultation, were able to use new media to gain the attention of the emerging Muslim middle class that had come out of Egypt's new secular school system.[419] Although there is quite the intellectual and material distance between contemporary Salafi Muslims and the early intellectual Salafi Muslims in Skovgaard-Petersen's early history, the frictional relationship between traditionalists and Salafis remain to this day.

> Hassan: on every corner you find this type of mosque that's not related to al-Azhar or that is not related to *wizârat el-aw'âf*, [the ministry of endowments]. It's run by an unknown person who didn't study religion and who's knowledge is just Ibn Taymiyya and and the Salafi movement, Salafi ideas. And he just goes there and he preaches the *khutba* [sermon] of *salât al-jumua* [Friday prayer]or lead the prayer.[420]

Hassan rejects the idea that Salafism is rooted in an Islamic tradition, and especially not in an Egyptian one. He seems to be suggesting that non-Azhari religious functionaries are ignorant of Islam outside of their own bubble of knowledge. Al-Azhar needs to be vigilant against the presence and potential spread of Salafi ideas amongst Muslims, he says.[421] Tradition in this sense is typically not positively defined in the sense of what it is, but the mirror of what it isn't and a key distinction is made between institutionalized knowledge and individually acquired knowledge. Islam is not known through reading books alone, even reading the Qur'an and the *hadith*, but rather it must be attained through what is perceived as the proper traditional channeling, which is Al-Azhar in this case.

> Rabia: These debates and discussions back and forth with self-appointed, self-taught, having taken a course on-line in…You know, there is so much arrogance in young people who think that they can become a shaykh through some correspondence class. What gives!?[422]

Rabia and I laugh heartily at her feigned indignation, not entirely sure if it is the outburst at younger people in general, or the reference to the archaic correspondence classes [Swedish: *postorderkurs*] that positions us as way past our youth. "Well, you know what I mean. Then they go out and scold [literally "bark"] at people telling them that this is *bid'a* and that is *bid'a*, you know…"[423]

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[419] Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State*, 77-79
[420] Interview E, edited. English gloss added.
[421] Interview E
[422] Interview J
[423] Interview J

Bid'a is commonly translated as "innovation". It is a disputed concept in Islamic theology based on a statement of the prophet (*hadith*) which says "…every innovation is misguidance and every misguidance is in the fire [of hell]."[424] The Encyclopaedia of Islam defines it as "a belief or practice for which there was no precedent in the time of the Prophet."[425] Most, if not all Muslims deem technical or otherwise worldly innovations unproblematic. The dividing line falls rather between innovations that come into play in matters that relate to worship or religion in general. There are several Islamic practices that are generally viewed as orthodox by most Muslims. They are definitionally innovations, instituted after the time of the prophet, or at least not by him, such as performing a second call to the Friday congregational prayer, attaching a minaret to the mosque or gathering the Qur'an down into a written codex.[426] Such practices rarely if ever draw the anger of Salafi Muslims who supposedly follows only what was established by the first three generations of Muslims. What Rabia alludes to is a practice where Salafi Muslims take upon themselves to purify the Muslims from what they believe are religious practices that are in direct opposition to *sharia* and *sunna*, often practices that are connected to popular religion. Visiting saints and believing in their intercession or gathering in circles to perform *zikr* or celebrating the birthday of the prophet may not only invoke contempt and unwarranted sermons from some Salafis, but in a few extreme cases has led to outright iconoclasm and brawls.[427]

One name that often pops up in my interviews with the informants is Ali Goma (b. 1952), the former grand *mufti* of Egypt and head of the Egyptian *dar al-ifta*, a government branch under the ministry of justice instituted in 1895 by the *khedive*[428] Abbas II Hilmi (r. 1892-1914). The nationalist viceroy's reasons for creating an institute for Islamic jurisprudence parallel to al-Azhar University is likely sought in the struggle for modernizing the Egyptian state. By creating an institute under state control, the *khedive* could control the appointment of a national mufti who was beneficial to the needs of the state,

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[424] *Sunan al-Nasa'i*, 1578

[425] *Encyclopaedia of Islam 2nd edition*, "bid'a"

[426] An in-depth discussion from a legalist point-of-view can be found in: Al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 908-917

[427] Irfan Al-Alawi, "Egyptian extremism sees Salafis attacking Sufi mosques" *The Guardian*. (Apr 11, 2011),https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/apr/11/salafis-attack-sufi-mosques

[428] The Khedivate of Egypt (1867-1914) was the middle part of the Muhammad Ali dynasty rule over Egypt, an outcome of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798. In the power vacuum that followed the Anglo-Ottoman invasion army of 1801 against the French a civil war broke out between Turkish, Mamluk and Albanian constituents of which the Albanian general Muhammad Ali (r. 1805-1848) emerged victorious to establish Egypt as an official autonomous province and de facto a hereditary monarchy in the Ottoman sultanate. Khedive is an honorific title of Persian origin and was recognized by the Ottoman sultan Abdülaziz II in 1867 and first bestowed upon khedive Ismail, Muhammad Ali's grandson.

albeit the pick was made from the ranks of al-Azhar. Illustrative to this, the *khedive* picked Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) a low ranking and controversial Azhari bent on reform as the second head of *dar al-ifta* in 1899.[429] Skovgaard-Petersen writes that the institute has not only contributed in institutionalizing Islam as a national project in Egypt but has also led to the role of *mufti* changing from that of an Islamic legal consultant to that of a government employee, a civil servant expected to be loyal with the state.[430]

Ali Goma was the 20th grand *mufti* of Egypt. He assumed office in 2003 appointed by then president Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981-2011) and became a well-known presence in Egyptian media where he was seen, or portrayed himself, as being able to balance Egyptian Islamic tradition with the needs of a modern society.[431] In writings and talks he often would defend Sufi practices and traditional Islamic theology and in deed he participated in reinstating traditional circles of learning in the Azhar mosque.[432] After some controversy regarding his stance on the second revolution following the Arab spring, Goma was retired from his post in 2013[433]

As already mentioned, for Hassan, Ali Goma is a key figure and authority for defending Islam, especially against the challenges from Salafists or Ikhwanis. In the previous chapter I described that the categories of nation-state and religion are somewhat intangible in Hassan's narration which carries over to his view on Goma. It suffices to say that Goma has not single handedly fought off the Muslim Brotherhood, whose brief stint of political power in Egypt was ended through several causes: lack of political savviness and underestimating their popular support which are only a few crucial factors.[434] Nevertheless, Goma certainly played a part even before the revolution by contributing to the legitimization and popularization of Sufism as a genuine Islamic tradition.He was also well remembered for his unapologetic public announcements of the Muslim Brotherhood as being the "most malicious group in history".[435]

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[429] Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh: A Biography*, (Cairo: AUC Press, 2009), 77

[430] Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam*, 21-22

[431] A selection of topics addressed by the mufti can be found in a YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/user/SheikhAliGomaa1/videos

[432] Fredrik Brusi, *In search of a lost paradigm – a case study approach to retracing traditionalist influence in the fatwas of Ali Goma*. (Stockholms Universitet, 2012), 20-22

[433] David, H. Warren, "Cleansing the Nation of the 'Dogs of Hell': Ali Juma's nationalist legal reasoning in support of the 2013 Egyptian Coup and it's bloody aftermath" in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3, (2017), 457-477

[434] Khaled Al-Anani, "Upended Path: The Rise and Fall of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood". *Middle East Journal*, 69(4), (2015), 527-543. Retrieved May 5, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/43698286

[435] *Egypt Today* "MB will even deal with Devil for power: Gomaa" *Egypt Today*. (Mar 14, 2018) https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/45187/MB-will-even-deal-with-devil-for-power-Gomaa

During all of our talks, Rabia steers away from political commentary. Often, she says, because she has very little interest in it and her focus is more directed to spiritual development or dealing with everyday life. She has however met Goma in person once, and uses him as an example of a normative scholarly shaykh, in line with her belief that a Muslim should succumb to the authority of a teacher in order to spiritually succeed.

> Rabia: *Mufti* Ali Goma said once that after graduating from al-Azhar, they would spend fifteen years with one book. Fifteen years and they weren't allowed to take it home. It was important that you read it in the presence of you teacher. The teacher protected you from misunderstanding. I believe misunderstanding is common. It easy to misunderstand Islam… the Qur'an…*hadith*. That is why there is a tradition of scholarship that you have to respect.[436]

The way Rabia explains it, Islamic tradition is a kind of a closed circle. Knowledge is retained within the ranks of scholars and challenges to either structure or content may provoke a reactionary response. If tradition is perceived as established and good, there is little worth in changing it. As I come to learn, such challenges do not only come from Salafi Muslims who question the divine sanction of the established Islamic tradition at for instance al-Azhar but also from other ends of Egyptian society.

Hassan is still undecided if he is going to remain in the US after graduating or if he will return to Cairo and his family. Egypt, he senses, is in good hands and is evolving on a generally benign path back towards its Sufi and Azhari roots:

> Hassan: Egypt is going more and more Sufi and I give all the credit to Ali Goma. Doctor Ali Goma. He was the grand ex-mufti of Egypt and he has all the credits to fight those bad people and to make Egypt more…the Egypt we knew. The way it should be.[437]

It is hard not to look at Hassan's statement as the sigh of melancholic patriotism informed by having been a child for a great part of his life prior to the 2011 revolution and the "Egypt we knew" is not to be taken as a carte blanche for all policies and actions by the Egyptian state in the modern era, but can psychologically be interpreted as the selective memory of a social and political world that felt safer and more predictable.

In this respect, Hassan equates religion as a benign factor with the state's ability to provide political stability. He feels that al-Azhar should be able to act as a counter-weight to religious unrest, but it had been compromised and was engaged in internal conflict between what he describes as an *ikhwani*

[436] Interview J

[437] Interview E, edited grammatically

mindset and an Egyptian mindset. "If you love Egypt, you side with the army", he explains to me. Since military service is mandatory in Egypt, most Egyptian families are intimately familiar with it and even if there are some issues, he admits, they are there to help and protect the country. "I wanted to hear who from religion, religious people or groups or organizations that supported the army and I found them in the Sufis."[438]

Being Egyptian and being Sufi is intimately tied together for Hassan to the point where it is hard to distinguish one from the other. He says that he he believes that all Sufis hate the Muslim Brothers and that all Sufis share similar political views, specifically when it comes to Egypt. By comparing Egypt to the political situation in the other countries that were affected by the Arab Spring uprisings, he senses that the Egyptian experience all in all was a successful one. Compared to the Brotherhood affiliated candidate Mursi's short presidency, the current president Sisi checks all of Hassan's boxes: Army, Egypt and Sufi.

President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's connection to Egyptian Sufism is comprehensively discussed in Egyptian society. His father *al-Hagg* Sa'îd, hailing from the *Menofia* governorate in the southern Delta, was a well-respected Sufi shaykh in the *Ahmadiyya tariqa* in Cairo's *Gamaliya* district. It is unclear whether al-Sisi is actively a Sufi today, but there are suggestions connecting him to both the *Ja'afariyya* and the *Khalwatiyya* orders.[439]

The Egyptian state, through the ministry of religious endowments, has been sponsoring popular religious festivals, such as the *mawlid* celebration of *Sayyida* Zeinab (d. 682 CE), the granddaughter of the prophet, intimately connected with Egyptian Sufism.[440] The state's close amicable relation to Sufism has not passed unnoticed by Egyptian Salafists who have pleaded to the president to eliminate the Sufi elements during mawlid as part of al-Sisi's call to religious reform.[441] The presidential call to religious reform has thus been interpreted differently by different actors in Egypt. According to an article in the magazine Id'aât, since the emergence of the republic in 1953 the Egyptian Sufis, which may include up to half of the population, have played a major political role with both the Nasser regime (1956-1970) and the Sadat regime (1970-1981), the latter who by legislation created a sort of strategic alliance between the Sufi orders and the state. This policy which strives to use the Sufis as a means to marginalize other civil Islamic organizations was

[438] Interview E, altered grammatically

[439] Mahmoud Al-Shahawi, "Al-Sûfi 'Abd al-Fattah al-Sîsî: 'an islâmahu wa tariqatahu wa 'ilâqatahu khassat ma' allah" in *al-Bawaba*. June 7, 2015 https://www.albawabhnews.com/1334445

[440] 'Amru Rushdi "Al-Awqâf tataqad ma' shirkat hirâsat litâmîn mawlid al-sayyida zaynab" in *al-Bawaba*. April 9, 2017 https://www.albawabhnews.com/2467948

[441] Sa'id Hijazi, "Dâ'iya salafi yatlub bi-l qada'i 'alâ al-mawlid khilâl thawra al-tashih al-diniyya" in *Al-Watan.* May 13, 2015

continued, albeit with some friction, by Mubarak (1981-2011).[442] Hassan welcomes the reemergence of state affiliated Sufism after the short presidency of Muhammed Mursi (2012-2013).

> Hassan: You see it in Sisi. *Ahl al-bayt*, the way he talks about them, the prophet's household. In every speech he uses some words that are specific to the religion in a very…nice way. It's not like Mursi because he… he is an Islamist.[443]

The idea of an Islamic tradition is not without partisan implications in Egypt, irrespective of the political perception of the individual Muslim, who may feel that they are only living according to the religious tradition without any such aspirations. On the individual level, any Egyptian Muslim may want to only live out her hopes and desires for a good life through adhering to *sunna*, however widely that is construed of, it is always tradition that is either in cohorts with- or aversive to the state. The Salafi critique of Sufism in Egypt is by extension therefore a critique of the state partial to Sufism, which means that a critique of Salafism inevitably sides one with the current regime, regardless if one supports all of its policies. From an objective examination of history, Al-Azmeh claims, *sharia* has always evolved in parallel with the societies in which it exists. Not as a unified code but rather as an emblem "deriving what unity it has from its relations with the government authorities in whose name it is enforced."[444] *Cuius regio eius relegio*, of course, but the situation in the Muslim world and Egypt is not brought on by a tug-of-war between theological differences of the past, such as the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun's (r. 813-833 CE) patronage of *mu'tazili* theology, but can be traced to the effects of Arab secularism and the eviction of religious institutions from the political into the public sphere. The societal consequence of which al-Azmeh describes as "a sort of historical purgatory, belonging neither to their own past nor to anyone else's present."[445] In the contemporary Islamic world, anyone can preach.

Preach!

[442] *Id'aât* "al-zâhid wa al-siyasi: al-'ilaqa mâ bayn al-turuq al-sufiyya wa nizam fi misr" (January 4, 2017) https://www.ida2at.com/ascetic-and-politicians-relationship-between-sufism-and-regime-in-egypt/
[443] Interview E, altered grammatically
[444] Al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities*, p. 69
[445] Ibid. 67

Reforms and reinterpretations of Islam are not new, but take on a particular trajectory in the modern period.. The crisis of modernity in Egypt that began with the Napoelonic invasion of 1798, ending Mamluk rule for the benefit of Muhammed Ali's autonomous monarchy, ultimately led (however indirectly and perhaps also unintendedly) to an Islamizing of the individual on a hitherto unprecedented way. At the end of the 19th century, intellectuals like Al-Afghani (d. 1897), who was a great admirer of Luther, advocated for a universalist and dogmatically non-specific Islam on Lutheran lines that would change the submission to piety for the submission to conviction through means of faith. As the ideas of al-Afghani were expounded upon by Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), the reformist project became guided by the principles of utilitarianism and naturalism, one which recognized no authority save reason in the interpretation of the sacred sources. By this Enlightenment-influenced philosophy, historical Islamic authorities such as the caliphate or various theological institutions such as al-Azhar are little more than secular offices carrying no doctrinal authority. Islam in this manner is akin to a symbolic order, perceived as a natural theology of sorts.[446]

The primary function of religion for the early Islamic reformers was theodicy, i.e. a benevolent God of mercy who always chooses the ultimate good. Consequentially, the moral justification for religion is morality itself, protecting society from chaos by disciplining the soul to steer clear of carnal vice. Contemporary revivalist Islamic preachers follow this line of thought, advocating for moral virtue and "traditional values" from a rationalist and often disenchanted narrative, focusing on personal success and a good life, rather than on the minutiae of jurisprudence or hagiographies of the Egyptian saints.

At a sit-down with Basma and Maryam the conversation slides in to Islamic revivalists, of which I attended a public address in 2005 at the American University in Cairo's Greek campus. Amr Khaled (b. 1967), who Susanne Olsson describes as an Islamic revivalist, filled a lecture hall and was widely recognized on satellite TV where he brought forth his religious message in a rhetoric style filled with pathos delivered in a signifying high-pitched voice.[447] I ask Maryam and Basma if they think that he would fill a lecture hall today.

Maryam: *La la la la la*, never!

Basma: Of course not. Oh god!

Maryam: People are disillusioned.

Brusi: What happened?

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[446] Al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities*, 110

[447] See: Susanne Olsson, *Preaching Islamic Revival: 'Amr Khaled, Mass Media and Social Change in Egypt*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015)

Maryam: On the political level he failed people.

Basma: I mean Amr Khaled in particular I guess, the guy he lost almost all audience. Salafis turned their back on him, revolutionary people they hate him and Sufis think he's an idiot. He has no audience what so ever now, but someone like Mustafa Hosny for example who's like the same...I can't...

Maryam: Cheesy! [both laugh] *Haram*, but cheesy![448]

Clearly neither Mostafa Hosny nor Amr Khaled hold any sway over the religious sentiments of Basma or Maryam; on the contrary they become objects of ridicule. Maryam continues by describing Amr Khaled as lacking sophistication after she self-aware has hedged her invective cheesy by saying *haram* which contextually is equivalent of saying "I really shouldn't" or "God forbid" in English.

Amr Khaled and Mostafa Hosny (b. 1978) can be likened to charismatic evangelical televangelists in American culture. Neither comes from a formal-traditional Egyptian Islamic background, such as the ranks of al-Azhar, but operate from a platform of popular self-proclaimed *da'wah*, proselytizing. *Da'wah* is a problematic term. It includes both missionary type of work such as spreading Islam to non-Muslims as well as preaching Islamic revivalism to the already Muslim but perhaps -according to the proselytizers- weak in faith.[449] Today they have largely migrated from satellite TV to social media platforms where Mostafa Hosny has 4.13 million followers and Amr Khaled 1.19 million followers on YouTube, posting videos exclusively in Arabic, which suggests they are mainly preaching to an Arab Muslim audience.[450] Basma who is of a younger generation than Maryam lays down the law on what rubs her the wrong way when it comes to the self-proclaimed preachers:

Basma: I would say this whole category of *mutadayynikul*, the *shabb el*-positive *el*-cute *el-keda*… I don't think it's working anymore. I became very...actually I think this phase made me very sensitive to anything theological, to anything that is not traditional. I kind of have a turn-off automatically. I don't know about you, *bass* it just proves that their rhetoric is not working. It's mostly based on...It's not based on anything! Nothing is solid or profound or whatever they're providing. It's just people who are...maybe some of them are a bit charismatic or know how to talk or know how to use language that sounds good with the people but they don't have any content to provide.[451]

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[448] Interview D; N.B. *Haram*! In this context does not refer to *Shari'a*, but is an expression equal to "God forbid!" or "Shame on me!"

[449] Susanne Olsson *Preaching Islamic Revival*, 41-44

[450] https://www.youtube.com/c/MustafaHosny/featured;
https://www.youtube.com/c/AmrkhaledNetAmrkhaled/featured

[451] Interview D

It is worth noting that the label *mutadayynikul*, which lexically means pious or religious, is used by Basma in a pejorative sense. It is not that she believes that being religious is a negative thing but explains that the Islam professed by Amr Khaled and the likes of him is detached both from reality and the hereafter, *al-akhira*.

> Basma: The over-emphasis of this side to the extent that you kind of ignore that there is evil in this world and there are bad things that are happening and the inability to deal with god's power, if I may...I sometimes feel like people are too afraid or too scared to handle... God calls himself *Al-Jabbar*, *al-mu'taqim*, *al-mu'takabbir*, *al-mudill*...I don't see anything wrong with the fact that the world is as it is. It is not necessarily going to be a nice place or a pleasant experience for everyone and we will face evil and things that are inherently bad.[452]

Basma stresses that the theology put forth by Amr Khaled is naïve or even "cute" but that it fails to address real issues in the human experience such as evil and misfortune, which in her mind, traditional Islamic theology can tackle. Although she acknowledges the idea of trials and tribulations and a paradisiacal reward for those that endure the world's pangs and pains, the rhetoric revivalist preaching she finds almost insulting to her intelligence. Even as I am some twenty years older than her, I sense a post-revolutionary gravitas and maturity in Basma's voice that I lack, as she sums up her feelings towards revivalist preaching:

> Basma: This rhetoric of Amr Khaled and his likes fail to provide any realistic view of the world. They kept promising people of things that don't happen. Especially the revolution and how things went in Egypt and people had very high hopes and then got disappointed, most of them, my generation in in particular. It just became dumb and meaningless to hear this kind of speech again.[453]

At the heart of the issue, Basma is of the opinion that the type of preacher that Amr Khaled represents is something new to Islam. Both preaching and a preacher can be found in the form of an *imam al-khatîb* or just *khatîb*, responsible for delivering the sermon at the communal Friday prayer. Thus she sees no use or historical basis for the revivalist. "I don't think we have this role in Islam. It didn't exist and I don't see why it should exist now." With sincere earnest she ascertains that whatever redeeming qualities Amr Khaled has, he lacks a formal education in *sharia*. "I don't see why I should listen to someone who's not more knowledgeable than I am."[454]

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[452] Interview D
[453] Interview D
[454] Interview D

As I talk with Basma about contemporary Islamic revivalism in Egypt, Maryam weighs in that she suspects that financial interests may also be part of what motivates the self-proclaimed preachers. Commercializing religion, even by selling advertisement space, taints the deeds with some degree of hypocrisy. "They make tons of money", they both declare.

Maryam also remembers earlier days and cassette tapes that were spread in the seventies. Do you know *shaykh Kishk*, she asks me? I answer affirmatively, remembering how a co-worker of mine in 2005 or 2006 in Cairo had talked about how he loved to listen to his cassettes in his car on his way to work. *Abdul Hamîd Kishk* (d. 1996) became a notorious preacher during the sixties and onwards, often commenting and criticizing the political situation in Egypt as well as his peers of Azhari scholars. He was imprisoned for two years during the Nasser presidency and boycotted by state-controlled media during Sadat's in the seventies when his sermons and talks reached an audience well beyond Egypt through being distributed on cassette tapes.[455]

What separates Kishk from revivalists such as Amr Khaled or Mostafa Hosny is that he came from within the ranks of al-Azhar, having graduated from the theological faculty in the early sixties and was thus early in his career appointed imam al-khateeb of a state-run mosque. Yes, Kishk was *azhari*, but he was a very special type of preacher, Maryam affirms with reminiscing laughter.

> Maryam: He had sense of humor. Very sarcastic. He would talk about actresses and actors...like *Umm Kulthum* for example. He would give her like... like an attack. A very sarcastic attack and people would laugh during the *khutba* or after the *goma*-prayer he would have this lesson. People liked him very much. I don't like this very much.[456]

Neither of us having experienced this time in Egypt, both I and Basma react to the mild shock value of an Egyptian popular and national icon being defamed. Knowing how popular Umm Kulthum was in the sixties and seventies, was it really possible that Kishk could get away with such cheekiness, we ask?

> Maryam: There is a song of Umm Kulthum in which she says to her lover: '*Khodni bi hananak khodni ba'îd, ba'îd. Ana we inta ba'îd ba'îd wahdîna'*. You might have heard it *ya'ni*. And he would say: This hack singer *di*, very old lady who would say come and let's go far away. He said: *'Khodni? Akhadik Allah ya shaykha! Rabbena yahdîkum*', I don't know, *ma a'rafsh* and people would laugh and enjoy it.[457]

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[455] Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharao: Muslim Extremism in Egypt*, (Zed books, 1986), 172 c

[456] Interview D

[457] Interview D

The song that so evoked Kishk's sarcastic dislike is Umm Kulthum's famous *Inta 'Umri* [you are my life]. Kishk then proceeds to a kind of wordplay to the phrase "Take me with your tenderness, take me far away. Me and you alone, far away" by paraphrasing it "Take me? May God take you, old lady. May our Lord guide you [to the right way]." Kishk's wit is unmistakable and draws a laugh from both me and Basma even if his comment does not resonate emotionally with either of us. With my mind set on maintaining an academic distance and therefore not commenting Kishk's insolence, I find myself quite grateful when Basma retorts that she finds it hard to make sense of such incidents even until now. "I think even now, for someone to criticize Umm Kulthum that harshly, I know I wouldn't take it well…" Before she finishes her sentence, Maryam sums up what is her understanding of the development of Islamic trends in Egypt since the time of Nasser: "*Ayywa*! El-Kishk *ba'a* was the beginning of Salafism. The beginning of Wahabi and Salafi. I think Kishk belongs to that group." "That makes sense," Basma says and the three of us fall silent as if we needed time to digest what had just been shared by Maryam.[458]

Salafis

A re-occurring topic or theme in talking to the interviewees in this study, Salafism is used as a type of undefined shorthand for what seems to be several phenomena that are somehow interlinked or share familiar traits. Sifting through the material in Sweden after having distanced myself from the field, I am again and again struck by how often I and an informant assume we share a common understanding of the phenomena we are discussing. Basma for example appears to make a distinction between a more profound and spiritual Islam that she finds in what she calls traditional Islam and a superficial approach to religion more focused on dress, form and mimetic adherence to *shariah*. Even Amr Khaled, even though it is debatable from an academic point of view to what extent his style of self-appointed revivalist preaching fits into her typology of Salafism, is understood as being part of it in Basma's understanding: "My guess again, some of this was more *ya'ni* Salafi rhetoric or of do's and don'ts, again and over-highlighting of everything, you know, superficial. Basically, dress code and that type."

Susanne Olsson discusses how Salafism is an academic hyperonym, an umbrella term used to describe several phenomena within the Muslim human

[458] Interview D

experience and Islamic institutions.[459] Especially since the term is used both self-identificatory as well as a term for topologizing Muslim human terrain both internally by Muslims and by non-Muslims, albeit possibly with different input values, the term has an undefined fuzzy quality to it. That the common denominator amongst Salafis seems to be the moral imperative to model oneself upon the earliest Muslim community in Medina and their descendants in two following generations is not unique for the Salafi Muslims, even though it is this that has rendered the ascribed name for the phenomena. According to al-Azmeh, the Salafis share some common traits with Protestant fundamentalists, like the tendency to give primitivism and primevalism precedence over history, which gives Salafism a significant anachronistic feature, the denial of temporality "premised on the reversibility of time."[460] In this sense, what separates Salafism from historical Islam, according to al-Azmeh, is that Salafis see the Medinan constitution as a program of social and political action whose purity can be revived and constructed again, whereas in the historical view, the Medinan Caliphate remains a myth, a didactical utopia "but not repeatable in its totality."[461] It is not in the interest of this study to contribute to the typology of Salafism *per se*, but to present how the phenomena is thought- and spoken of in the lives of the seven people in this study.

> Hassan: [The Salafis] are cowards. They are kind of sneaky and they're trying now to do the… what the Shi'a do, you know how…you can lie…in order to reach something… *Taqiyya*! *Taqiyya*. You hide whatever you have in your heart.[462]

There is a lot to unpack in Hassan's statement. The doctrine of *Taqiyya* is defined in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as the "practice of concealing one's belief and foregoing ordinary religious duties when under threat of death of injury."[463] As Hassan states it is most often associated with the Shi'ite branches of Islam due to having historically undergone persecution in Sunni Muslim territories. It is important to point out that Hassan holds no grudge against Shi'i Muslims in general. He claims that "Unlike the Salafis, we Sufis love our Shi'a brothers. We don't have any problem with them."[464]

To begin with, it is central to keep in mind that lying in itself is generally seen as a vice in an Islamic ethical framework. The influential theologian

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[459] Susanne Olsson, *Contemporary Puritan Salafism: A Swedish Case Study*, (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 55-57
[460] Al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities*, 150
[461] Ibid. 151
[462] Interview E, grammatically edited.
[463] Matt Stefon, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Taqiyyah"
https://academic-eb-com.ezp.sub.su.se/levels/collegiate/article/taqiyya/71252
[464] Interview E

Imam Nawawi (d.1277), for example, is quoted to have said "Primary texts from the Koran and sunna that it is unlawful to lie are both numerous and intersubstantiative, it being among the ugliest sins and most disgusting faults."[465] However, in both Shi'i and Sunni jurisprudence (*fiqh*), there are instances where the theologians permits lying or withholding the truth in order to avoid a greater vice, the preservation of life for instance as has been addressed by the *Encyclopedia Britannica* above. Hassan does not challenge the doctrine of *taqiyya* per se, although he does point it out as a phenomenon belonging to Shi'ism. What he does do, is attributing it to contemporary Salafists in Egypt, thus rhetorically creating, what Umberto Eco would perhaps describe as the perfect adversary,[466] an enemy that is both cowardly and deceitful. In Hassan's opinion, this separates the Salafists from the Muslim Brothers, who even if they share quite a few common denominators, are bolder and more outspoken in their agenda: "*Ikhwân Muslimîn* is different. *Ikhwân Muslimîn* is more…they are more…I don't know…. They are more courageous to change or to impose their own ideas."[467]

In one way, it seems to me that Hassan regards the Salafists with more disdain than the Muslim Brothers because besides what he narrates as their despicable characteristics, they are also at their core a non-Egyptian manifestation of Islam contrary to the Muslim Brotherhood, who is undeniably Egyptian in origin. In his view, the Salafists are a Saudi or a "*Khalîgi"*(Gulf) phenomenon that are also marked by a type of political double standard. You never see them criticizing the king of Saudi Arabia or other Gulf countries, he says, but they can speak very badly about al-Sisi or anything related to Egypt. But anyway, he concludes, the point is that they do have their own agendas and they are cowards and as if he suddenly remembers my original claim that Salafism is a modern phenomenon he adds: "…and yeah! They didn't start from eighteen-hundreds…it is way back."[468]

There is no love lost between Basma and Salafism, although compared to Hassan she presents a more nuanced image of the movement. She asserts that she honestly only has a negative regard of the movement due to the detrimental impact it has had on the Egyptian streets and Egypt's religious culture yet she acknowledges that she can empathize with the cause that initiated a movement that developed into Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism and subsequently Salafism. "I understand it wasn't completely un-based."

She talks about the emergence of Saudi Arabia as a consequence of historical events where what she labels as "conservatism" of the Wahabi movement was a strategy to combat foreign influence, in other words a kind of anti-colonial nationalist movement that in the long run, came to have

[465] Al-Misri, *Reliance of the Traveller*, 744
[466] Umberto Eco, *Inventing the Enemy*. (London: Harvill Secker, 2012), 1-21
[467] Interview E, edited grammattically
[468] Interview E

"terrible consequences" not only for Egypt but for "the whole region, I would say the whole world" due to the influence bought with petrodollars. "Salafi ideas that were imported to Egypt, led to a wrong and negative understanding of Islam" she says and adds: "Totally unnecessary."[469]

Even though Basma is highly critical of the Salafi strand of Islam, she also emphasizes that she does not regard it as a simple dichotomy between Salafism and Sufism. It is not a situation of mutual exclusions for her, but a complex relationship that encompasses theology, history and human psychology. The debate between the two positions itself, she feels, is stand-offish and not really moving forward. Although debating the issues can be enticing for numerous reasons, she says that she deliberately tries to stay out of it because there is little to gain from engaging in it. It is an unnecessary fight that has been reiterated over and over and there is nothing new that is added to the arguments that leads anywhere. We should be more tolerant, she says, which I interpret in context as a call for Muslims in general to be more open to the pluralism of Muslim thought, and a move away from the idea of Islam as a monolith. In the end, she continues, getting bogged down in such debates is in reality a red herring:

> Basma: It also diverts a lot of energy away from maybe more important stuff. I find a lot of Sufis that spend a lot of time and energy debating with Salafis that don't think we should follow *madhhab* or whatever. Really when you think of this - I'm not saying it's not important- but when you think of it sometimes, maybe it shouldn't be the first priority, maybe it shouldn't take all of this attention. I would say there are other ideas and differences and disagreements within the schools of thought or approaches to religion. Things that we should pay more attention to or talk more about rather than to be confined to this idea between Sufism and Salafism.[470]

Adherence to a *madhhab*, a school of jurisprudence, is one of the battlegrounds in modern Islam where Salafists either position themselves or are being positioned as adversaries of following an institutionalized praxis and methodology in relating to *sharia*. Many if not all Salafi Muslims would probably argue that they are neither against the several *madhahib* nor the scholars within the schools of jurisprudence *per se*. It is more likely that they would argue that they are against blindly following a school of thought without checking or knowing the source texts of the Qur'an and the *hadith*. This also means that the dissension plays out on several epistemological levels. At its root and most abstract level it of course touches upon the fundamental religious ethical question raised by Steltzer earlier in the chapter. *What does God want from me and what means do I have to find that out?*

[469] Interview B
[470] Interview B

Hassan relates an incident from Cairo which he supposes highlights the difference between himself and the Islam of a Salafi. In his neighborhood he can choose from going to two different mosques. One is an Azhari/government mosque where he generally will attend the Friday prayer but for the dawn prayer there is a smaller private mosque he goes to because he enjoys the voice of the *mu'azzin*, the prayer-caller, there. He would normally just go there for that prayer in peace and leave straight after. Once he decided to stay until sunrise doing *zikr* and he had come to understand that the people in that private mosque were either Salafi-oriented or Ikhwanis. This had been confirmed by a friend of Hassan's who had related to him it was somewhat of a hub for the Muslim brothers. This particular day as he lingered in the mosque he was approached by a man who asked Hassan what was the most beloved thing in the universe to him. Hassan did not know him from before but answered that it was the prophet. The prophet was the most beloved thing to him in the universe.

> Hassan: Then he said to me, 'the prophet died. I mean now. What is the most beloved thing to you now?' So, I answered him again that it was the prophet, peace be upon him. He asked me again a third time and I answered the same. Each time he asked me he became more and more angry and when I gave the same answer, he just left.[471]

Hassan says that he does not know what kind of answer the man had expected, but he guesses that the man had wanted him to answer "Islam" or maybe the Qur'an, prayer or perhaps even jihad. Since the man disappeared, Hassan never got a clarification, but lets me understand that there is a clear difference between him and the man in the mosque in terms of what kind of Islam is at the core of them both. As I listen to Hassan retell the story I am reminded of how Carl Ernst describes that a key feature of modernist perceptions of Islam, e.g. Salafism, tend to reify or objectify religion as a thing.[472]

The incident is not a singular occurrence in the Muslim world but is in reality illustrative of an ongoing tug-o-war of what in a way is perhaps the most significant disparity between different contemporary perceptions of Islam; the role and status of Muhammad the prophet. If we borrow two words from Islamic parlance, we may illustrate this difference by looking at how Muhammad's role as a messenger (*rasûl*) or as a prophet (*nabi'*) is stressed. In Islamic theology he is mentioned as both and although neither status supersedes the other, they do connotate a slight variance in meaning. A messenger is linguistically someone who delivers a message (*risâla*), specifically in a Muslim context, the message of Islam. Because it is not contested amongst Muslims that Muhammad died, most commonly believed

[471] Interview E, edited grammatically
[472] Carl Ernst, *Rethinking Islam*, 66-69

to have occurred in 632 CE, the difference of opinion lies in what the purpose of his life was and what his current after-life status is. Especially in the modern era, there has been a noticeable amount of publications that portray him as a man, albeit as one of the finest qualities, whose main mission was to deliver Islam as a religion to mankind.[473]

One of the first published biographies that follow this line of thought is the Egyptian writer and minister of education Hussein Heykal's *The Life of the Noble Prophet Muhammad.* Published in 1933[474], it is an attempt at writing the prophet's biography in the light of positivistic science, shunning popular and miraculous accounts for the benefit of psychological or sociological interpretations of the events in his life. Though Haykal's biography is enticing in its own right, it is equally interesting that it survives as an authoritative source in some camps. In an online English edition of it, the President of the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, an organization under the Ministry of higher education of Saudi Arabia writes in a foreword:

> Fortunately, Islamic sanity has persistently resisted all attempts at deifying the Prophet's person. Despite the fact that no human being has ever commanded as much respect and none has ever been object of so much affection by his followers, Muslims have rejected every suggestion imputing to the Prophet superhuman power or characteristics. By itself, and when compared with the conceptions of the careers of charismatic founders and leaders of other religions in history, the Muslims' insistence on Muhammad's humanity remains a miracle, a genuine triumph of the Muslim's historical sense.[475]

In contrast to Haykal's and later the Saudi take on Muhammad's mission, Qadi Iyad's (d. 1149) classical biography *al-Shifa*, the healing, has its entire fourth chapter, some one hundred pages, dedicated to listing the miracles performed by and surrounding Muhammad from even before his birth.[476]

Aziza often returns to the prophet when we talk about Islam. She believes that the Salafi opposition to traditional Muslim expressions of veneration of him is a recent development in Islamic history and that resistance to it is a strange kind of antagonism. With all due respect, she says, "I don't think they understand it and I also don't think they understand Islam very well."[477] She explains to me that a possible reason for the animosity of the Salafi against popular Egyptian Islam may be found in the generally tolerant atmosphere therein. She says that this may cause some observers to mistakenly think that

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[473] For an in-depth discussion see: Jonas Svensson, *Människans Muhammed*, (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2015) chapter 2

[474] Svensson, *Människans Muhammed*, puts original publishing year to 1936, p. 126

[475] Hassan, ibn Abdullah al-Shayk. "Foreword to the English Edition" in Haykal, Muhammad, H. *Life of Muhammad* (1976) https://muqith.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/muhammadbyhaykal.pdf (2021-05-05) 1976

[476] Qadi Iyad, *al-shifa: bi-tarif huquq al-mustafa*, (Cairo: Darelhadith, 2004), 167-254

[477] Interview H

the people are approving of for instance intoxication through alcohol but it is not from a lax of observance to *sharia*, it is not to be confused with approval:

> Aziza: When you go to a *majlis* [gathering] with a shaykh, the people and the shaykh are very tolerant and they are not going to make you…Like, if anyone can come and join and sit quietly and respectfully, they are not going ask you this or that. They are not going to make you feel unwelcomed.[478]

Aziza describes this attitude as Sufism, or an attitude belonging to those that practice Sufism. In her understanding it is not something outside of Islam but as she puts it: "…an integral part of Islam. It is not additional or an extra thing." When you sit in a circle, a *zikr* or a *majlis*, she relates, even if it may seem unfamiliar, it is all coming from the Qur'an and from the *hadith*, everything is firmly based in tradition and theology. At the heart of Sufism is the prophet, she concludes. "Respect and love for the prophet and then the saints and the *awliya* because they are descendants on the same kind of path as the prophet, peace and blessings be upon him."[479]

Maryam is convinced that Salafism is slowly being marginalized in Egypt and will eventually be completely relegated to historical memory. The younger generations, she says, will revive religion through connecting to Sufism. As people are growing tired of the street preachers and the bearded men in the mosque's failure to cater to people's spiritual needs, young people will either distance themselves from religion altogether or they will find resources in the Sufi traditions. She explains that if you go to the mosque and are met by a barrage of superficial critique, people commenting that some hair is showing or that one cannot pray with socks on, the one who is wanting to connect to god will likely avoid the mosque: "The Sufi gives a layout for like a better connection, without the do's and the don'ts that are suffocating people. I guess it's an outlet from religious fundamentalism."[480]

Basma agrees with Maryam. She hesitates using pejorative language against any Muslim but reiterates that in her opinion, it is easier to commit to an expression of religious conviction without someone's constant judging or solicitation of unwarranted advice, as may be in the Mosques that Maryam talked about. She says she would rather practice a religion that puts emphasis on spiritual development and then she falls silent for a moment as if she gathers her thoughts and say: "It's hard to measure or quantify if you are doing well spiritually or not but…"[481]

It appears that Maryam and Basma agree that Salafism is losing ground in Egypt on its own merits, and what they sense is a surge in popularity with Sufism is not necessarily because of the active work by Sufis, but that is was

[478] Interview H
[479] Interview H
[480] Interview D
[481] Interview D

a viable and present alternative for the younger generation. The point of Sufism for many young people, outside that it is a true spiritual tradition, may be exactly that it is not Salafism. Sufism is at least seen as a tradition that is not tainted with what is perceived as the negative aspects of Salafism:

> Maryam: I like to think that way. I like to think that the young people always bring new blood. I think the Salafi attitude is declining and there is a tendency of people losing their religion altogether…not built on anything, just a feeling. A gut feeling that the young people are clinging to a religion in a different, more flexible way. More spiritual, more Sufi if you like. Kind of…maintaining the religion and helping others to see a different aspect. […] I agree with Basma there are some people that jump on anything that is attractive but I think that's how it started, because people are fed up with…ehm…Salafi style.[482]

Salafism is rejected not primarily on doctrinal lines; the only area of contestation is seemingly how some of the participants stress that Salafis downplay the holiness of the prophet, which may of course be a serious issue in itself, but it is not used to exclude someone from the category of Muslim, at most, it is seen as a strange or maybe ignorant position to hold. The main critique is found in the perception that Salafism is out of touch, not only with a historical tradition as well as contemporary times from for not being attentive to the spiritual needs of a younger generation.

A psychology of the others

For Aziza, the accusations of *bid'a* is sought in what she believes is a misperception from the critics' viewpoint, a confusion in terms of semantics, as she phrases it. The term Sufi itself has incorrectly become burdened by the misunderstanding of uninitiated people that do not understand that appearances may be deceitful and everything that takes place in the presence of an authentic Sufi shaykh is firmly anchored in sound Islamic tradition, she claims. "When you sit in a *zikr* or a *majlis* it is all Qur'an and *ahadith*. Everything is Qur'an. Everything is *ahadith*."[483] It is a view presented that positively affirms tradition as correct per definition and criticisms to it as misconstrued from a linguistic confusion.

I ask Rabia how she understands the fractionalization of Muslims into subgroups. I suggest to her that all the groups, regardless if they call themselves Salafis, Sufis, Wahabis or another name, from the outside they all

[482] Interview D, slightly edited grammatically
[483] Interview H

appear to be strongly devoted to both their religion and their god. I am curious as to how she understands the internal strife. Rabia says that she does not waste a lot of time and energy on the theological debates between proponents of different varieties of Islam. She finds it unfortunate that some Muslims in modern days relegate the role of the Prophet to little more than a "postman" but she doesn't want to engage in Salafi critique of Sufi beliefs and practices either because she feels that would be nurturing a negative energy. Because it doesn't really affect here daily life, there's really nothing to say about it, she concludes.[484]

> Rabia: I think it is human to support one's…one's football team, kind of. I don't know, really. It is *fitna*. It is *fitna* between Muslims and it is lamentable that it is like that. What is important is not to say that you are Sufi or Salafi. One shouldn't label, one should say that we are *ahl al-sunna wa al-jama'*. It is more important to say that we are Muslims, we are brothers and sisters.[485]

Fitna is a concept that has Qur'anic presence, in where it carries several lexical interpretations.[486] In context, Rabia is referring to the historical split of the Muslim community into several fractions, relating to the so-called first *fitna*, the schisms (or civil war, really) between Ali, Mu'awiya and the Khawarij, a conflict that was never resolved. In common usage, conflicts between Muslim on doctrinal lines can be referred to as *fitna* because how it archetypically plays into the historical model of a perceived unified *umma* (nation) fractionalizing.[487]

The history of the first *fitna* provides a sound theory for making the contemporary world historically meaningful from a religious perspective. Sunni Muslims may find the conflict between the prophet's son-in-law Ali and the founder of the Umayyad dynastic caliphate somewhat morally problematic in that the conflict leads to the second Umawi caliph Yazid's near complete annihilation of the prophetic family lead by his grandson Husayn at Karbala in present day Irak in 680 CE. It is common to understand the first two parties in the conflict as the origins of Shi'i and Sunni Muslims respectively. The third party of the original conflict, the *Khawarij*, is often held as the archetypical heretics in most Muslim historiography and heresiology.[488] They

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[484] Interview J

[485] Interview J

[486] For example: *Testing sincerity of belief* (Q 29:2); *Blocking the way* (Q 5:49); *Persecution* (Q 16:110); *Disbelief* or *Idolatry* (Q 2:193); *Leading into deception* (Q 57:14); *Corruption* (Q 6:73); *Misguidance* (Q 5:41); *Attacking* (4:101); *Disagreement* (Q 9:47); *Insanity* (Q 68:6); *Trial by fire* (Q 85:10)

[487] *Encyclopaedia of Islam 2nd edition*, "Fitna"

[488] For an in-depth discussion see: Keith Lewinstein "Making and Unmaking a Sect: The Heresiographers and the Sufriyya" in *Studia Islamica*, 1992, No. 76, Leiden: Brill, pp. 75-96

are viewed as a deviating sect in Shi'i[489], Sunni[490], as well as with Salafi groups.[491] In the Egyptian context, Jeffrey Kenney has mapped put how the mythology of the group has been used in Egyptian politics to combat Islamist violence and attitudes. By evoking the imagery of the *Khawarij*, religious and political authorities mobilize popular support against Islamic movements that challenge the status quo.[492]

> Brusi: In your opinion, what is the origin of the Salafi movement? Has it always been around? I tend to think of it as modern phenomenon, that comes in maybe the eighteen-hundreds, late eighteen-hundreds. What's your opinion? I mean they have some…you mentioned the *khawarig*…
>
> Hassan: Exactly. I would go back to that point. The *khawarij* at the time of the prophet, peace be upon him. He said… One of them was actually praying and he asked the companions to go and kill him, while he was praying, this *khariji*. He ordered the companions to kill him and all the companions said: 'But, Prophet, he is praying, how do we kill him?' So, nobody killed him and then he left. Then the prophet, peace be upon him, said: 'From this person, from his spreading his ideology and all, we will be having the worst of people.' He said: 'They are *Klâb Ahl al-Nâr* [The hounds of the people of hellfire]. They are the worst of the worst of the people of the hellfire.' So, it's that person that spread everything. That was the origin.[493]

Hassan often describes to me a kind of bewilderment he experienced in the aftermath of the ousting of then president Hosni Mubarak. He is suspicious that the revolution was undermined by foreign powers or if not foreign then by Egyptians with alternative agendas. What was good for the country was not their priority, as he puts it. In his view, the revolution that dethroned Mubarak had chaotic effects on Egypt, because it upheaved societal order.

> Hassan: You have the Salafists who of course were very happy with the revolution. They had many issues with Mubarak and lots of people were in prison and got out because of what happened. They gained a lot in the parliamentary elections. Yeah, it was very bad.[494]

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[489] https://en.wikishia.net/view/Khawarij

[490] "According to Al-Tayyeb's explanation, the Khawarij are Muslims who committed unprecedented sins, however they still believed in [Allah], therefore they cannot be considered as 'apostates'. Regarding the punishment ordained for the Khawarij, according to Islamic law, Al-Tayyeb said that Islam orders their killing and slaughter, because they are 'practicing corruption in Earth'; adding that IS members should receive similar punishment."
Quoted from: Taha Saker" Why does Egypt's largest Muslim beacon, Al-Azhar, refuse to declare IS 'apostate'? in *Egypt Independent*, 2017, April 14

[491] https://salafibookstore.com/product/the-religious-insurgency-of-the-khawarij/

[492] Kenney, *Muslim Rebels*, 4

[493] Interview E

[494] Interview E, altered grammatically

Hassan sees the Egyptian Salafists both as a contemporary manifestation of a heretical group of Muslims as well as an internal threat to national security that, all though they were not part of the initial force that culminated in the revolution, were quick to politically capitalize on its outcome. He clarifies that he doesn't see the Salafis as the direct descendants of the Khawarij, but that they effectively are. He does not contest the Salafis on doctrinal lines, but on how they are wreaking havoc on a society that he perceived as ordered and cohesive prior to the January 25th revolution. Perhaps worst of all to him is a character flaw he sees in them:

> Hassan: I wouldn't say that specific or the group of people at that time. And now it's manifested by the Salafi movement. The Salafi movement is actually…ehm…at least in Egypt...they are *gubenan*, they are cowards.[495]

The enemy that Hassan portrays comes with the inherent problematic that they do not obviously embody any of the common tropes of strangeness that can be identified in the literal creatigon of adversaries, such as how antisemitism manifested itself in the European mind.[496] The Egyptian Salafis do not necessarily talk differently, look differently or display different cultic behavior, in any major way compared to other Muslim Egyptians. Perhaps this aberration of this otherwise usual process makes them such a dangerous force in Hassan's mind.

Rabia on the other hand says there should be grounds for accepting differentness within a larger framework of Muslimness, the doctrine of *ahl al-sunna wa al-jama'* that she invokes. It roughly translates to "the people of the prophetic model and majority [of the Muslims]" and is the historical self-designated name for what today is translated as the umbrella term Sunni Islam. By that historical trajectory it follows that all groups that view themselves as being on that historical trajectory of course also claims to be *ahl al-sunna wa al-jama'*. Rabia does not go into detail of who she particularly holds to come under the umbrella of belonging to the people of the prophetic model, but it is seemingly a quite open definition.

Basma, similarly to Rabia, regards the engagement in religious debates as part of human psychology. Maybe they take it personally, she says. "Maybe it feels bad that someone is telling you that what you are doing is…not nothing but…in the wrong direction." She believes that if a person starts identifying

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[495] Interview E

[496] Medieval Christianity made a strong connection between Judaism/Jews and the emergence and image of the Antichrist. See for instance *Syriac Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, (volume 1, part 4, 5th century); Adso of Montier-en-Der, *Letter on the Origin and Time of the Antichrist*, (10th century); Heldegard of Bingen, *Liber Scivias*, Volume 3, part 1, section 14, (12th century) which undergirded anti-Semitic imagery in the later popular and bourgeois Anti-semitism in Baptiste-Henri Grégoire, Richard Wagner or Adolf Hitlers writings. See: Eco, *Inventing the Enemy*, 7-10

as a Sufi Muslim, then he or she has surely invested a lot of time and effort, probably also emotion into building that identity. When it is then challenged by competing theologies or truth-claims, it puts the individual under significant stress: "Maybe they get really frustrated, [and they are] not necessarily defending religion but their path." Some people, she continues, may of course engage in the debates for the sake of enlightening others that are less knowledgeable when it comes to history or theology. If there are loud voices calling people to a misunderstanding, it might be warranted to provide a counter argument. Or… Basma becomes pensive for a brief moment and summarizes her insight: "Or some of it is just anger relief. It's just human nature. We look for something to get a chance to release our anger and our energy."[497]

After coming to Illinois, Hassan feels that he has become more at ease with the internal politics of Egypt and he's trying to focus more on his spiritual development with his group of non-Egyptian Sufis and their shaykh. Although I sense that he from time to time gets himself worked up a little talking about the Salafis or the Muslim Brotherhood, he also relates at one point that they aren't categorically a problem in Egypt anymore, after field marshal Sisi has taken the reigns over the country.

> Hassan: Just a couple of weeks ago we heard that the Muslim Brotherhood is moving their main location from Egypt to London. That tells you a lot about this movement. They have lost everything. I don't mean just the money and their own people. They have lost the Egyptian people. The Support. Everything.[498]

There is nothing triumphant in Hassan's voice. Rather, there is a tone of relief as he concludes that a great threat, in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood, has been averted. Salafism and its proponents remain problematic to him, but for different reasons than the Brotherhood who were outspoken in their political ambitions. The challenges posed by Salafism are more covert.

> Hassan: They are not like *Ikhwan Muslimin*, [the Muslim Brotherhood]. They have a lot of conflicts with *Ikhwan Muslimin*. For the Mubarak regime they were like… They know how to deal with the power, in order to cover their stuff.[499]

[497] Interview B
[498] Interview E, altered grammatically
[499] Interview E

Secularist others

If Salafism represents a type of superficial and too literal take on Islam, a kind of misconstrued detail-oriented fundamentalism that can be sought in personal character flaws, as Rabia describes it: "You know, if you state that you've understood everything and this is the way it is, that is nothing more than arrogance"[500], it does not mean that such an arrogance is limited to Muslims of a Salafi persuasion. The problem with Salafism for Rabia may be seen as a problem of interpretation due to it being disconnected to what she experiences as a proper Islamic tradition whereas an even deeper controversy is challenging the Islamic source material themselves. Almost in passing, in one of our conversations over the phone, she mentions how there are people who are engaged in calling for the removal of parts of the hadith source material:

> Rabia: Some people want to re-interpret *hadith* or remove *hadith* from, what do you call it? The canon! Because they don't think they are fitting.
>
> Brusi: Because of what, you said?
>
> Rabia: Well, they might contain something that they think is…not in the spirit of Islam or something like that. There's even a TV-show that states opinions on Islam that they come up with, I mean there is a trend too, but I'm not really qualified to say something about this…
>
> Brusi: You don't have to take a position, I'm just wondering who it is that wants to remove hadiths?
>
> Rabia: I don't know if they want to remove them but they criticize them and say things like 'this can't be correct.' For example, this person says in this hadith which is sahih al-Bukhari that this or that happened, you know. 'How can that be? It has to be a mistake. It has to be an error, it has to be wrong. Let's remove it, let's change it.' You know, they question that which prior has been taken for granted. There's been quite a lot of controversy over this. You can look him up for the entire story. He's called Islam Beheyry.[501]

Rabia is referring to Islam al-Beheyry (b. 1974) who was sentenced in 2015 according to Article 98 (f) of the Egyptian penal code for "exploiting religion (…) with the aim of instigating sedition and division or disdaining or contempting any of the heavenly religions or the sects belonging thereto, or prejudicing national unity or social peace."[502] Al-Beheyry was initially

[500] Interview J
[501] Interview J
[502] Freedom House, *Policing Belief: The Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Human Rights - Egypt*, 21 October 2010, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/4d5a700b2d.html

sentenced to five years in prison but received a more lenient ruling of one year in the court of appeal. In 2016 al-Beheyry was pardoned in toto by president Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi[503] thus highlighting a growing friction between the president and the religious elite of al-Azhar who had hitherto defended the law and resisted al-Sisi's call for religious reform.[504]

From a longer historical perspective, it is not controversial in-and-of-itself to criticize hadith nor is it particularly uncommon. Muslim scholars since the time of Muhammad have had to deal with an insurmountable amount of material and truth claims of the sayings and actions of the prophet. By scrutinizing both the chain of narrators and the content itself, a method of falsification of *hadith* has developed into a hierarchical typology with a limited corpus of reports deemed as absolutely credible (*sahîh*) and an exponentially increasing number of reports that are reckoned to be plausibly true to outright fabrications. One must also take into consideration that *hadith* material is most often contextually used in the classical Sunni interpretational tradition. There are for instance examples of how interpretations in the Maliki School of jurisprudence are directly opposite of the literal wording of the prophet in a text that is regarded as absolutely credible, even within the school itself.[505]

In the light of my pre-conceived notions of historical critique of *hadith*, I tell Rabia, that I don't see the problem of Beheyry's as clearly as she does and she explains to me that what is different with his is that he is not coming out of the ranks of scholars at al-Azhar but, as far as Islamic theology is concerned, is a self-taught Muslim. She continues to relate that he his critique has been answered by high-profiled scholars from al-Azhar as well as the famous Yemeni shaykh Habib Ali al-Jifri, but that Beheyry persists. She laughs and says: "They've tried to explain to him how he is making the wrong conclusion and that his whole project is a fallacy but he endures. Even after being jailed he continues to do shows."[506] The root of the controversy is not the critique *per se*, but that Beheyry hones in on what Rabia calls the canonical *hadith*. For her, and likely many other Muslims, the content of the collections of *hadith* of *Bukhari* or *Muslim* are non-contested. The interpretations and uses of them may vary from school to school or even interpreter to interpreter, but as ethical sources, they are thought of as absolute. What Beheyry is challenging is by extension not only the credibility of the text but tradition itself that Muslims like Rabia may be heavily invested in. But as she has come

[503] Deutsche Welle. "Egyptian President el-Sissi pardons 82 detainees" *Deutsche Welle*, Nov 17, 2016
https://www.dw.com/en/egyptian-president-el-sissi-pardons-82-detainees/a-36428917 (2016-11-17)
[504] https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/02/18/reforming-islam-in-egypt
[505] Dutton, *The Origins of Islamic Law*
[506] Interview J

to learn, in the modern world it is difficult to keep the problems of the world at an arm's length.

Transferring Muslim-ness

I sense that Rabia struggles with finding the balance between being in the world and being of the world, so to speak. Like many other religious people, she understands the world as partly detrimental to spiritual growth, yet she maintains that a complete shunning the world is not a feasible option, nor a desired one according to her understanding of Islam. As we are talking about Ramadan as a family holiday, I ask her about her thoughts on handing her chosen tradition over to her children, not just Sufism but Islam in general. We laugh together as she says that practice was not at all even close to the theory. Before she had children, she continues, she had thought that she would be able to shape them to a much greater extent. She had pictured a setting where they would sit together and learn Qur'an and read a lot of other books.

> Rabia: I mean, there are families that have succeeded and that are really industrious but, in my case, I haven't really been successful. I think because it takes such a taxing…commitment. You know, it becomes stiff and doesn't feel natural once you sit down and you are saying to them that 'now we're going to learn this.[507]

Instead, she expresses gratitude that her children receive some religious foundational instruction from their private school in Cairo. She believes that the teacher is very good and she feels confident that it is better for all if she can stay out of it. It is hard to teach your own children and that is true for all parents, Rabia reflects. If the school provides some theory of Islam, what Rabia and her husband aims at providing is a lived experience. "We don't want it to be merely theoretical belief or merely empty practice, but a way of life," she explains.

> Rabia: …when they reach a certain age we should get them to pray and thank god, two out of four are praying. They have a tutor that comes weekly for Qur'an. Sometimes we sit together and read a hadith or something, but that's kind of sporadic. And then… I mean, I do go to this group on Wednesdays that meet, you know this Qaderi group and I do try to bring my kids sometimes just so they get to feel this… It doesn't have to be about learning something directly,

[507] Interview L

> I just want them to spend time with people that are religious and normal, do you know what I mean?[508]

What is religious and normal for Rabia are families that value Islam. She says that it should not be like a Sunday school, where religion is compartmentalized into a certain period or place, but that religion must permeate one's life. Even with such maximalist ideals, I do not get the impression that Rabia force-feeds religion to her children. It rather seems that she holds herself to a high standard and like any parent wishes for her children to find the resources and meaning she has found, but is also aware that they have their own destiny to fulfill. "I read this book on teenagers by a Christian missionary," she surprises me by saying, and in this book Rabia found the advice that at a certain time in children's life it is more important to pray for them rather than talking to them about God. In the end, she hopes her prayers will lead to her children finding the same love for her religion and the prophet that she feels. Because, she states, it is not easy times to be living through and like any parent, she wants to provide her children with a set of resources that can help them to navigate the world as safe and sound as possible.

> Rabia: I mean, even here it's starting to become…there's a lot of Western…culture. That's what there is here. If you belong to a certain social class then it is… It is chic to be Western and to imitate everything Western. I mean, I don't have anything against the West but one could be more…I usually say to her [the oldest daughter] when we are in Sweden and when we are here that we'll pick the best from the West. We appreciate it, but we choose what suits us, so to speak. The best from that world which will enrichen us and we'll leave what doesn't suit us.[509]

I joke and suggest that Rabia's strategy means they steer clear of the Christmas ham but go all in on the pickled herring, fully aware of the simplified reduction I am making out of Rabia's sincere problematization of equipoising several identities with due fairness. She laughs at my jest and answers in earnest:

> Rabia: Every situation is unique and somewhere they have to experience and explore other cultures and what not. At the same time, as a parent one has to take a position, to say that this is where I stand, so that they are fully aware of that.[510]

Similar to categories like "religion", "the West" is one of those short-hand expressions where the meaning is assumed but almost never verbalized. I ask Rabia if she can give a more specific example of what it is that she finds problematic with Western culture. She says that it isn't the West in itself that

[508] Interview L
[509] Interview L
[510] Interview L

is problematic and that she has a great appreciation for the intellectual and cultural tradition of the west. She asserts that when it comes to Sweden in particular she especially appreciates that there is a strong literary tradition and that people are generally well-read. In contrast to Egypt where she finds that people are chasing after the Disney channel, in Sweden one can still find people who are searching for something of real worth, as she puts it.

> Rabia: …maybe it is about how our society succumbs to this western culture at the expense of its own identity, do you know what I mean? Nowadays we have… Ramadan is no longer about fasting, praying and drawing near to god but it's about…watching soap operas and maximizing one's social life. Things like that make me a bit sad, but at the same time it doesn't really affect me that much because I can choose to live differently.[511]

If Rabia experiences a slow intrusion of Western culture that is to some degree detrimental to the religious values with which she wants to maintain inside her house, Fatma experienced them crashing in as she married into a non-Muslim family. Once relocated to Sweden, she found herself acclimatizing to a new social environment by surrendering personal convictions or adopting new habits. When Fatma came to Sweden, she says, she was leading a very healthy lifestyle. Sugar, caffeine and alcohol were completely excluded from her diet. She describes it as eating really well. However, in establishing a relation to her new milieu, little by little she found herself capitulating to expectations and challenges from her in-laws that were bewildered and possibly provoked by Fatma's odd diet:

> Fatma: My in-laws were very uncomfortable around me. They thought I was unreasonable. Eventually I gave in and I drank coffee and tea and I had wine when I was at dinner with them. Eventually we had wine at home on the weekends and it got to the point where I just felt ill all the time.[512]

As time passed Fatma was able to use her predicament as a resource. In the same manner as she had found that she had a personal spiritual attachment to Islam that became visible as she moved out of her Sudanese context, she was able to experience first-hand that a complete immersion into the dietary habits of a non-Muslim society was neither a viable option for her. Today she has excluded alcohol from her diet. Her in-laws still offer it politely at dinner, but have accepted her abstaining from social drinking. Fatma stresses that she is not excluding alcohol on principle. It is not the question of blindly following s*haria* or Muslim conventions, she explains: "I realized my body doesn't want it, my mind doesn't want it."[513]

[511] Interview L
[512] Interview K
[513] Interview K

Both Fatma and Rabia find themselves in situations where they have to negotiate their beliefs or values with the experience of a social reality that is outside of their control. Rabia feels that her children are drawn to a consumerist lifestyle that she herself has tried to abandon or marginalize which collides with her conviction that children have to be allowed to explore their identities. In one way, the same culture that provides streaming services of the Marvel cinematic universe is also the culture in which she acquired her ideas on child rearing. She finds a position where she can take a personal stand, which she hopes will provide the children with a sense of stability and guidance. Rabia mentions a diversity of resources for relating (and abridging) the problem. Other Sufi-esque families that can act as role models and institutions such as the private school the children attend together with what I assume is Christian missionary edification material, points towards using whatever resources one has at hand that one deems relevant. The idea that Islam is an ethical system that can be applied structurally from the outside-in is very distant in what I learn from all of my informants. In looking at the situation from overhead, Maryam and Basma can see why people would put their hopes to Islam in the Islamist understanding of it in some tangible way could be a simple way out of a complex problem. Returning to a story about the men of the mosque close to them it is quite clear that their understanding is not to be mistaken for sympathies with their agenda:

> Basma: …there is this trend. It's a very famous idea in this mosque that we [as Muslims] need to preach to everyone and preach to every Muslim to become a better Muslim and for every non-Muslim to convert to Islam.[514]

Basma and Maryam explain that at one time they hosted an American exchange student for six months. She stayed at their house and when the men in the mosque, the "big-bearded men" as Maryam calls them, found out, they convinced a male relative of Maryam's to start driving the girl, so that they could use the opportunity to convert her to Islam.

> Basma: Aah, *ya'ni* they're really convinced they can make her convert to Islam as if she is a dumb person and ignorant and you know, someone who has never read anything before or met anyone. I mean, she's been living in Egypt for a year now, so she is probably…I mean, she is living with a Muslim family, she's obviously heard some things and if she wanted to talk more about it and ask about more, she would have done that. This concept of personal space and content and personal freedom it just doesn't exist at all.[515]

Perhaps feeling that they may have been a little harsh in their opinion, both Maryam and Basma adds that the men of the mosque also have redeeming

[514] Interview D
[515] Interview D

qualities. They for instance are deeply invested in charity work and other saving graces. Maryam recalls that the relative, who would drive the American girl, will fill his car to the limit with ready-made meals during the month of Ramadan, not returning to break his own fast until he had distributed those to feed the fasting and the hungry. They don't doubt the sincerity of their intentions. It is a type of stonewalling in the attitude of them that they both find problematic:

> Basma: …the vibe is suffocating. They are very convinced that they know everything…
>
> Maryam: They know it all…
>
> Basma: …and nobody else. You know, the experiences of people and their knowledge and their minds and how they think just…It doesn't matter to them.
>
> Maryam: They are living in a different era. I mean all of them.
>
> Basma: Yeah. It's like a ghetto.
>
> Maryam. It is a ghetto.
>
> Basma: They listen to each other and they talk to each other and it's just one…you know…one rhetoric, one language going around to an extent that they just can't see anything else.[516]

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have prolonged the discussion on Muslim identity from the previous chapter, by looking primarily on a negative construction of self-identification. As in the example with the two stews, Islam is seen by the informants as complex and multifarious. Knowledge and challenges to their religious beliefs by other interpretations, such as Salafism, were generally warded off as ignorant and stemming from human arrogance. Besides theological differences in the perception of the holiness of the prophet, much of the critique expressed against Salafi Islam were not on theological issues per se, but related to contemporary issues or psychological shortcomings of "the others". Sufism on the other hand, was everything Salafism was not: Accommodating, spiritual, traditional, in tune with the world and by that feat genuinely Islamic. Moreover, it was validated by Islamic institutions such as

[516] Interview D

al-Azhar. Rejecting Salafi maximalism, however, does not mean taking an opposite position, where religion –or at least religious beliefs– are sidelined completely. The responses of the informants in this study is following the general trend of studies of Muslim attitudes towards religiousness, where Islam is reported as important to a higher degree than conformity to regular ritual behavior.[517] This is an important aspect in the politicized debate on Islam in the West. Following Jeldtoft's and Nielsen's (2012) lead, Muslim minorities need a closer descriptive analysis in order to understand how they relate to one another as well as to their majority milieus. The participants discussed critically the problem of dealing with the material world in relation to their spiritual aspirations, but never expressed that the challenges in themselves could be solved by de-secularizing the world politically. On the contrary, in case Islamism was addressed, the participants argued against it in religious terms, quoting the prophet and the Qur'an, saying that neither are grounds for a theocratic state. In general, the participants practice and hold their religious beliefs on a personal, although not private level. This partially explains the mild irritation with which they relate to modern preachers, Salafists and Islamists. Personal in this sense means that they can choose the contexts in where they interact with other Muslims, especially abroad. As it was pointed out in the previous chapter, interaction with Islamic organizations is almost non-existent which means that for Fatma especially, actions in-line with Islamic ethics are more grounded in herself. Islam as an ethical system is rendered meaningful precisely because it is not the norm. Rabia's wrestling with what she calls "Western culture" in Egypt has a similar effect on her where she is lead to bringing her children to gatherings to instill Sufism and Islam in them. It is not necessarily for the religious practice itself but in order to normalize a religious dimension of life. If the previous chapter demonstrated that one becomes Muslim by adhering to Islamic practices at least to some extent. This chapter qualifies that assumption by demonstrating that being Muslim can also be found in rejecting the Islamic practices of other Muslims, not by rejecting their Islamic-ness or sincerity, but by rendering it impractical or uncalled for. If tradition is seen as wide and inclusive, one's Muslim identity and thereby Islamic authenticity is never completely without a solid footing. Commitment to the "Egyptian" Islamic tradition means that what is contrary to it was in the end rejected on the grounds of it being foreign, a theme that I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

[517] See ofr instance: James Bell, "The World's Muslims"; Michael Cosgrove, "How does France count its Muslim Population?" *Le Figaro*, (April 2011); CBS "Religie aan het begin van de 21ste eeuw (www.cbs.nl, 2017)

Chapter six: Egyptian-ness

This chapter picks up on a central theme that has been alluded to in the previous chapters, and the general aim of the thesis where I have argued that in order to understand Islam as a lived tradition, attention needs to be drawn to political, historical, economical and ethnic factors. In this chapter I will present how my informants experience and connect their national identity in relation to their religious (Muslim) identity. The chapter will probe into if and how they see a contradiction between what in this thesis is referred to as Egyptian-ness and Muslim-ness and how those two aspects of identity are juxtaposed or incorporated into one another. In this chapter I will briefly describe the structural construction of Egyptian nationalism as a backdrop for understanding the context in (or outside) which the informants' place themselves and how that is important for understanding their narration of Salafism and Wahabism from the previous chapter as not Egyptian and Sufism as an indigenous tradition. I will also discuss Egyptian-ness as ethnicity, especially in the context of migration and the role of history and language as pivotal in the creation of an Egyptian-Muslim identity.

Introduction: Egypt vs everyone

In an early Friday morning of November of 2009, around one thousand Egyptians gathered outside of the Algerian embassy on Zamalek island in Cairo, shouting anti-Algerian slurs while burning Algerian flags, causing material damage to shops and cars in the vicinity. The dawn riot was quelled by the police who were attacked with makeshift firebombs, injuring eleven officers. Instances of smaller anti-Algerian protests stirred all over Cairo following the Friday prayer that afternoon. Alaa Mubarak (b.1960), the son of then president Hosni Mubarak and an alumnus of the American University in Cairo appeared on national news offering an apology for the anti-Algerian sentiments with the Egyptian rioters: "When you insult my dignity…I will

beat you on the head."[518] What had sent Cairo and other parts of Egypt into an anti-Algerian frenzy was a world cup qualifier match the night before in Omdurman, Sudan.

Football in Egypt can be a violent affair and the Cairo derby between clubs al-Ahly and Zamalek is generally held to be one of the most classic matchups in the world.[519] During the January 25th revolution, the supporters of both clubs joined forces with the democracy movement, temporarily sustaining the rivalry between themselves in order to fight the common enemy, the police and the old regime. "Without their strength on the battlefield in resisting Mubarak's forces, the 25 January revolution would have been defeated early on", the Guardian reports in 2011. Apart from war, only revolution and football can bring millions onto the streets. The article quotes a columnist for the newspaper Al-Ahram, the connection between football and politics in Egypt is longstanding, tied to the anti-colonial revolution and Nasser's Egypt.[520]

The 2009 riots were not the first occasion of anti-Algerian sentiments in Egypt indicted by football and rumors on the streets and social media.[521] There have been instances of violence between players, fans and officials at least since 1978, possibly related to Anwar Sadat's peace treaty with Israel in 1977, which led to Algeria cutting of diplomatic relations with Egypt until 1988. After the 1-0 victory of Algeria in Sudan, I was introduced to some of the more humorous sides of the rivalry by Egyptians I knew. The Algerian supporter chant "One, two, three - Vive l'Algerie" was mockingly sung by some Egyptian fans as: "One, two, three – *nilbisu* lingerie" (One, two, three, we are wearing lingerie). Following the football riots from Sweden, I remembered my friend Bulbul, a line-cook from rural Egypt who was working in Cairo who used to tell me jokes during work. Once he told me one that I remember well because it was the first time I had heard anyone quote the Qur'an as a punchline to a joke:

An Egyptian and a North African is arguing over who is better. The Egyptian finally says triumphantly that Egypt is mentioned five times in the Qur'an. The North African jeers. – So what! We're also mentioned in the Qur'an, he retorts. The Egyptian is perplexed and asks his opponent to cite where in the Qur'an that his people are mentioned.

– Do you know *sura al-falaq*, [Qur'an chapter 113] asks the North African?

– Of course, the Egyptian answers.

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[518] BBC News, "Egypt-Algeria World Cup Anger Turns Violent in Cairo" *BBC News*. (Nov 20, 2009), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8369983.stm

[519] *World Soccer Magazine*, "The 50 Greatest Derbies in World Football" World Soccer Magazine, (July 2008)

[520] Schenker, Jack. "New Egypt Sees Old Sporting Rivalry Resume" in *The Guardian*, June 28, 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/football/2011/jun/28/new-egypt-old-sporting-rivalry

[521] Al-Jazeera English "Rivalries Persist at Cairo Football Match" *YouTube*, Nov 14, 2009

– Do you know the second verse, *min sharri ma khalaq*? [the evil He has created]

– Yes?

– That's us!

For better or for worse, the joke –which I implore to not be retold heedlessly, lest it may be offensive to some– was in essence my introduction to both several constituent aspects of Egyptian nationalism as well as the popular characteristic of having *damm khafīf*, literarily: "light blood" an Egyptian expression for being cheerful and humorous. But, as the incidents in 2009 and 2011 illustrate, blood can coagulate and stir overwhelming emotions of solidarity in the in-group and antipathy against the out-group. As the saying goes, *rubba harb shabbat min lafaza* – many a war has been ignited by a single word.[522] Or, rather, started with a single goal in a football match. Nationalism and religion are powerful motivators in Egyptian society, themes that this chapter shall now procede to investigate.

Being Egyptian

One of the first things Basma says in my very first interview with her is: "I think of myself as an Egyptian and I think this is a major part of my identity"[523] Taken at face value, there is nothing remarkable with the statement. Nationalism has been and continues to be one of the more stable identity-providing ideologies of the modern period.[524]

Egyptian nationalism is not a single phenomenon born from the relative autonomy to the Ottoman Empire under the Albanian Muhammad Ali basha (d. 1849) dynasty that ruled until the revolution of 1952. The early formative hperiod in Egypt resembles the situation in Europe, where legitimacy of dynastic rule has little to do with nationalness.[525] Following the end of WWI, Egyptian territorial nationalism can be approached through the ideological current called *Egyptianism*. The emergence of Egyptian nationalism during the formative state period was not a popular movement but an elite project closely knit together with the political process of modernizing Egypt modeled on Western European models. "By the 1920s, not only had Egyptian territorial

[522] Titus Burckhardt, *Arabic Proverbs; Or The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (Australia: Leopold Classic Library, *1830)*, 312

[523] Interview A

[524] See: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 1991

[525] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 83 c.

nationalism become the dominant nationalist outlook expounded by Egyptian intellectuals, but it had also become the central inspiration behind the political, institutional, and cultural life of Egypt."[526] Intellectuals of the day like Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid (d. 1963) and Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1956) refused to succumb to the established popular image of Egypt, which they held was both ahistorical and dysfunctional, a static and anti-progressive portrayal. This meant that the Egyptianism of Haykal's, marginalized Ottoman and Islamic aspects together with the latent Arab linguistic and cultural elements, traits that would later re-emerge in the nationalism of republican times.[527]

Goldschmidt holds that although comparisons are difficult to make, Egyptians have developed a stronger sense of nationality than other Arab speaking peoples, with the possible exception of Moroccans. In a nutshell, he regards a nation as an object of loyalty whereas a state is a political and legal system. Nationality in Egypt is formed from the balancing and interplays between *Arab*, *Muslim* and *Egyptian* identities, fluidly moving between the three in response to contemporary political circumstances.[528] Though this model could be criticized for being overly simplistic from a political science point-of-view, it is quite on-the-nose with the Egyptian (2014) constitution's first article which affirms that Egypt is part of the Arab nation, part of the Islamic world, belonging to Africa geographically and proudly having an Asian extension.[529] Hassan explains to me that, in his view, what distinguishes Egypt from the Levant is the absence of sectarianism. Contrary to the factionalism he sees in the states of Lebanon and Syria, he argues that Egyptians are united and strong under the umbrella of nationalism: "In Egypt you just have Muslims and Christians and they're all together like that. I do believe this gives Egypt its power."[530] Stating that Egypt lacks the sectarian violence of Syria or Lebanon is of course both true and false. It is true in the sense of that Egypt is lacking the sectarian diversity of the Levant, in Hassan's words: "Egypt has best thing which is that everyone is similar. That's very nice. It's not like Lebanon. It's not like Syria where you have *Sunni*, *Shi'i* and *Duruzîn*[531] and whatever…".[532] Yet, it is untrue in the sense that Egypt has

[526] Israel Gershoni & James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood 1900-1930*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 270

[527] Ibid. 79

[528] Arthur Goldschmidt, *Modern Egypt: The Formation of a Nation State*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 196

[529] The Egyptian Constitution, Revised 2019

Verbatim: *Egypt* (*The Egyptian people) is part of the Arab nation and works for its perfection and unity. Egypt is also part of the Islamic world, belongs to the African continent and is proud of its Asian expanse and contributes to building human civilization.* (Translation by author)
(الشعب المصري جزء من الأمة العربية يعمل على تكاملها ووحدتها، ومصر جزء من العالم الإسلامي، تنتمي إلى القارة الإفريقية، وتعتز بامتدادها الآسيوي، وتسهم في بناء الحضارة الإنسانية)

[530] Interview E

[531] Arabic: Druze pl.

[532] Interview E

definitely seen its share of sectarian strife and violence both between Christians and Muslims, Muslims and Muslims as well as between political actors such as the state and Islamist groups. Mariz Tadros writes that although there is a strong response in the Egyptian public against sectarian violence, led by religious authorities, yet the frequent occurrences of violence against non-Muslims is largely denied and rebuffed as pertaining to foreign powers or a "deviant few Egyptians"[533]

I think Hassan's statement must be understood as informed by his personal history and beliefs rather than being the result of a comprehensive historical analysis. It is likely that as he attended a Christian school in Egypt, he has come to strongly identify with his Coptic peers from Egypt and thus what he expresses is not only a prescriptive adherence to a national identity but to some degree also his own personal experience. In exile, the idea of a nation is further de-territorialized. In Tweeds description, "a supralocal or transregional cultural form, an imagined moral community constituted by the diaspora and those who remain in the homeland."[534] In his world-view the identity of Egyptian supersedes the identity of Muslim, at least in one possible occurrence:

> Hassan: I'll tell you something, how much I love my roots and Egyptian…There was this guy I knew and before I left for the States he asked me: 'If you had the option to choose your roommate from two people, would you choose a Christian Egyptian or would you choose a Pakistani Muslim?' My answer was of course an Egyptian Christian, and this guy became angry shouted at me: 'How can you! You should be taking the Muslim always, even if he's Pakistani!' But I am thinking that, he doesn't speak my language. There is nothing in common between me and a Pakistani except how we pray. He might not even be praying, actually. I don't care if he's praying or not, it's something between him and God. I just care about how we will be interacting. We would probably speak English, which I don't like. But as for an Egyptian Christian, it means that there's an Egyptian person with me. We would be cooking the same thing, we'd be talking a lot, having a lot in common. I've never felt that there is anything…not in common between a Muslim and a Christian Egyptian.[535]

Hassan identifies his interlocutor as an *Ikhwâni*, not necessarily a formal member of the Muslim Brotherhood, *al-ikhwân al-muslimîn*, but at least someone with a sympathetic attitude towards the Brotherhood's understanding of Muslim identity politics. In the background of this chapter, it illustrates the complexity with which modern Egypt is both a nation and a state, a past and a present that every Egyptian has to navigate collectively and

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[533] Mariz Tadroz, "Cross and Crescent in Post-Mubarak Egypt", in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt,* edited by Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensig, (London: Verso, 2012), 197

[534] Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile, 86*

[535] Interview E. Quote is altered slightly for legibility

individually. Religious and national identities are not congenially mutually exclusive in subject. In Hassan's frame-of-mind, language, a shared background and other cultural building blocks, such as food, supersede the seemingly overarching grand narrative Islam and the identity of being Muslim, at least in as far as a potential roommate is concerned. Hassan's perception of the Christian Egyptian conflates a national and ethnic definition of Egyptian into an imagined kinship, a "critical mobilizer" that overtakes the language of kinship found in the self-proclaimed designation of the Muslim *Brotherhood*. In Hassan's case, Islam is not enough to create the imagined kinship with a Pakistani Muslim comparatively to an Egyptian, even if he would not be a Muslim. Scott Atran states that the mere evocation of imagined kinship isn't sufficient to form a greater bond, but needs additional factors to actualize, most often "underpinned by a universal psychological bias known as 'essentialism.'"[536] The essential assumption in this case is that of a shared culture in the guise of language and habits, implicitly believed to be perfectly encompassed by nationality.

Aziza grew up in the Gulf and the USA and thinks of herself as Egyptian, but perhaps differently from Basma or Hassan that have spent the lion's share of their lives in Egypt. She expresses that an emotional attachment and a nostalgic longing is part of her ties, or generally any Egyptian's ties to it, and testifies that she spends time and effort reading on Egyptian history and about Egyptian culture. She says that she is proud of being Egyptian and adds that she talks of pride in a positive sense.

> Aziza: I'm proud to belong to this...rich history, although it's messy at times, it's still a rich history and all of that. That's being Egyptian to me. That's how I identify. As Egyptian.[537]

Egypt is a homeland to the people in this study. A homeland is in this sense both a country of origin, a culture, a family history as well as closer to the Arabic gloss *watan*, a place of residence, at least at some point in time. Yet, since all, save one, are also disconnected from everyday life in Egypt, at least physically, the geographical distance puts emphasis on the homeland as an abstraction, a memory that has to be re-created discursively. Diaspora studies, writes Hughes and McCutcheon, illustrate how an enunciated present produces nostalgia pitched outward and backwards in time "though bearing all the marks of the contemporary." But, rather than being a juxtaposition of binary opposites (here and there, then and now etc.) it serves as a means to understand the dynamics in the creation of identity in diaspora by observing how these binary opposites inform one another.[538]

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[536] Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 305 c

[537] Interview F

[538] Huges & McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 words*, 77

What it is to be Egyptian is on the one hand an undefined given in a situation where reflection is unwarranted. Yet a homeland is not really about specific political borders but a chaotic situation of what historian Shlomo Sand has investigated under the theories of *Mythistory* and *Mytherretory*.[539] Sand's focus is the ideological construction of modern-day Israel, but his critical approach is applicable beyond the specific uses of *mythistory* in Zionism.

> The word 'homeland' (*moledet*) appears in the books of the Bible a total of nineteen times, almost half in the book of Genesis. All the meanings assigned to the word have to do with a person's land of birth or familial place of origin, and never contain the civil or public dimensions encountered in the cultures of the Greek polis or the ancient Roman Republic. Biblical heroes never set out to defend their homeland in order to attain freedom, nor do they articulate expressions of 'ultimate sacrifice' and the 'sweetness' of dying for the homeland. In short, the idea of patriotism that developed in the northern Mediterranean basin was barely known on its southern shores and known even less in the Fertile Crescent.[540]

Egyptian civilization is ancient, the pre-dynastic period starting around 3500 BCE and a unified Nile-valley kingdom under the pharaoh Narmer (around 3150 BCE). Although Upper and Lower Egypt were incorporated into one political and cultural realm, the political borders of Egypt have been, and remain inconsistent until the late modern period and the rise of Nationalism. Borders have sometimes stretched well into the Levant and far south into Nilotic Africa only to retract, poetically similar to the flood and ebbing of the Nile, which is the undeniable lifegiving center of Egypt. Dynastic ancient Egypt was not an unbroken line of Pharaohs, but occasionally ruled by foreign invaders such as the Hyksos, Libyans, Nubians, Assyrians and Persians. Alexander the great's wrestling Egypt from the hands of the Persians in 332/331 BCE led to a long period of Greek and Roman rule, which was subsequently overtaken by the early Muslim Arabs during Umar ibn al Khattab's (r. 634-644 CE) time as primus-inter-pares. Medieval Egypt (614-1517) was ruled by several different Muslim rivalling dynasties until it became a province of the Ottoman Empire in 1517. The 1798 French invasion led by Napoleon weakened the Ottoman Sultan's power over Egypt and ultimately led to the autonomous dynastic Khedivate of the Albanian Muhammad Ali (1805). This eventually morphed into the Egyptian monarchy. When Muhammad Naguib took office as Egypt's first president in 1953 of the newly declared republic, it is sometimes narrated as Egypt getting its first

[539] See: Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People,* (London: Verso, 2010); *The Invention of the Land of Israel: From Holy Land to Homeland,* (London: Verso, 2012)
[540] Sand, *The Invention of the Land of Israel*, 67

"native" ruler since more than 2500 years.[541] Such a statement is hinged upon the ideologically informed opinion that there's no naturalization in the movers and shakers of the Ptolemaic, Ayubids, the Mamluks or the Royal house of Egypt.

During the entirety of the period, Egypt also went through several linguistic and scriptural shifts from Egyptian (old, middle and late) to Demotic to Coptic to Arabic, the latter in Egypt heavily influenced also by Turkic and Persian languages. The dominant religion[542] has also changed numerous times, in the medieval period having both different Sunni dynasties as well as the Fatimid Shi'i ruling over a majority Coptic Christian population. Not even counting the impact the modern British presence has had on Egyptian schooling, it follows that identities formed out of the history of Egypt should be entangled and chaotic. Rather than formulaic, it seems to be a bricolage of individual resources, interests, or what just comes to mind at the moment of the interview, where the line of question prompts reflexivity from the informant.

Egyptian-ness: Language and Arabism

If the first constitutional period was framed as a relative detachment between Egypt and the Arab Middle East, Egyptian liberals as well as conservatives in the 1920s started to advocate for both cultural outreach as well as financial and educational intergradation with "the East" i.e. the Arab countries and beyond.[543] Like many other countries in the Middle East, the boundaries between the state and society are fuzzy. Nation-building in Egypt departed from the colonial experience, and the British assertion that Egyptians were too immature for thorough independence. To counter the argument, inter-religious harmony between Muslims and Copts became a signpost of the Egyptian national struggle, but by the early 1930s, Islam and Arabism became an

[541] See: Michael Wood, "The Use of Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism" *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt,* 35 (1998), 179-196

[542] It must be underscored here that there is a dual challenge to this in this statement in that not only is the modern concept of religion contested, but ancient Egyptian lacked a term for it entirely. As far as ancient Egyptian religion is thought of as such, it lacked a singular connected logical system but was rather "composed of a series of cults" synthesized to befit a general structure; see: Terje Oestigaard, *The Religious Nile: Water, Ritual and Society since Ancient Egypt*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018),

[543] Gershoni & Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs*, 232-233

increasing concern with Egyptian Muslims, while Copts turned their attention inwards towards their own cultural heritage.[544]

> The interplay of these diverse elements in the 1930s and 1940s also led to a very different pattern of nationalist development from that which had occurred in the 1920s. Internally, the exclusive Egyptian territorial nationalism of the earlier period rapidly gave way to more Islamic and Arab-oriented nationalist ideologies. Externally, Egyptian political leaders responded to the new pressures placed upon them by adopting a more Arabic and Islamic foreign policy. The new worldviews and policies of the 1930s and 1940s were a radical break with the prevalent Egyptianism of the post-1919 era.[545]

The republican period, beginning with the 1952 revolution, is notably characterized by the animosity between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nasser presidency and the emergence of Islamism in the post-Nasser period and later in the seventies the political unrest created in the clashes between the state and violent Islamist movements. Nasser was not profiled as having an especially warm relationship with Islam, but that may be partially explained by his biographers usually focusing on his ideological projects and persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood. Having initially been cooperating with mutual political reform programs, Nasser and the Brotherhood would later frame their falling out with each other on ideological lines. The Brotherhood were keen to be perceived as victims of authoritarianism, portraying themselves as supporters of constitutionalism while Nasser related how the MB behind closed doors demanded that the new republic intervened in peoples' privacy and that they were disloyal to the Egyptian cause, secretly running the errands of Saudi Arabia.[546] As Nasser nationalized British and French interests in the Suez Canal and supported Algerian independence against the French, Egyptian nationalism again downplayed religious identity, stressing a new kind of pan-Arab ethnicity, not the least through internationally broadcasting the radio station *Sawt al-Arab*.[547]

For Basma, coming to Illinois has highlighted her Egyptian-ness through having to reflect on her own identity in relation to a larger Arab community. She says it is the first time she has ever been deeply engaging with a community of non-Egyptian Arabs: "It is interesting as I observe the

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[544] Sebastian Elsässer, "Muslims and Christians in Egyptian State Formation" in *State Formation and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Kenneth Christie & Mohammad Masad (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2013), 145

[545] Gershoni & Jankovski, *Egypt, Islam and the Arabs*, 274

[546] Fawaz A. Gerges, Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb and the Clash that Shaped the Middle East. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 94

[547] Stephen A Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) ,71 c

differences and the similarities between our cultures. This makes me think about how Egyptian I am. Even versus other Arabs."[548]

When Basma says that she thinks of herself as an Egyptian, she is not referring to her legal status, but something akin to a folk-psychological idea of ethnicity. Hylland Eriksen reminds us that ethnicity is but an aspect of a relation, not a static quality of a group[549], which is illustrated by how Basma positions herself within her American-Arab surroundings. Just like Hassan and Aziza, the other two informants in Illinois, she expresses a noticeable emotional commitment to her Egyptian-ness that appears only as she starts communicating the differences she observes in interacting with "other Arabs."[550]

Aziza grew up chiefly outside of Egypt. She has been keenly interested in linguistics in general, particularly the Arabic language, and it is clear that she primarily connects her Egyptian-ness to spoken Egyptian Arabic: "Being Egyptian, I think, for me…for me… Number one: the language! Having our distinct...our distinct dialect and you know…using it and speaking it."[551]

Language is also mentioned by Basma as a component of being Egyptian. Through the interaction with a Syrian-Lebanese friend and the larger Arabic community of Campustown at the university, she utilizes the outsider perspective in motivating her Egyptian-ness: "He thinks of me as really Egyptian. He was saying that I and another person in the same group are the ones he would consider pure Egyptians if he had a question about accent or how you say something particular in dialect."[552]

When asking Sonia if she feels Egyptian during a walk in Stockholm, she says that she feels more Egyptian in Sweden, but like a "bad" one. I ask her to clarify and she explains that she means bad in the sense of being flawed. She says that she thinks that although she in many ways is culturally Egyptian, due to having grown up in continental Europe, returning with her family to Egypt in her teens, she never really learned formal Arabic. Regardless of being an astute reader in four other languages and fluent in spoken Egyptian Arabic, not having adequate skills for reading Arabic effortlessly makes her feel incomplete, she says.[553]

Language is a particularly authoritative transmitter of culture and some research identifies language as a prime, prompting particular mindsets.[554]

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[548] Interview A
[549] Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, *1993*), 47
[550] Interview A
[551] Interview F
[552] Interview A
[553] Field note 2021-01-24
[554] Schwartz, Vignoles, Brown & Zagefka, "The Identity Dynamics of Accultration and Multiculturalism: Situation Acculturation in Context" in *The Oxford Handbook of Multicultural Identity*, edited by Verónica Benet-Martinez & Ying-yi Hong (New York, Oxford University Press, 2014), 6

Arabic is of at least two types in this study. There is a formal or standard Arabic *al-lughat al-ʻarabiyya al-fusha* or just *fusha*, which also doubles as a ritual language. The other Arabic is the more informal spoken Egyptian Arabic *al-ʻammiyya* that all informants use to varying degree outside of Egypt but which of course is intimately tied to "Egyptian-ness".

When we talk about as to why Basma thinks that she retains a linguistic "pure" Egyptian-ness she believes it is related to relatively less exposure to other cultures compared to her friends and peers: "Because everyone else is more hybrid or like have lived in different places or have been more involved within whatever communities. But like...I wasn't lucky enough to live anywhere but Egypt so…"[555]

Rabia, the only Egyptian that currently resides in Egypt, moved there from Sweden in order to study, more than twenty-five years prior to our interview. Her initial contact with Egyptian Arabic appeared rather as an obstruction than a resource for the construction of her Egyptianess, which she recounts with laughter:

> Rabia: It was so different back then. I was in my early twenties and back then it was more like awfully boring dinners with the extended family that were just dragging on eternally. I didn't understand anything and the radio was played at maximum volume and the TV was on simultaneously at maximum volume. Everybody was screaming and I thought they were fighting but of course they were only having a normal conversation.[556]

Hassan is undecided if he will remain in the US after his PhD. He is still a bachelor, but when I ask him hypothetically if he would get married and remain and what he woud try to pass on to his children from his Egyptian background. he mentions three things: Maintaining the prayer, his language and Egyptian gastronomy. When he contemplates over these he asserts that he himself is a bad cook and a tentative wife might not be Egyptian and so he is unsure that it would work out. As to retaining language, he asks if my children, whose mother is Egyptian, speak Egyptian. When I tell him that they understand it somewhat but use Swedish as their first language, he posits in a slightly resigned tone that it will probably be the same in his case. Maybe, he adds, frequent visits to Egypt, like he has seen other families doing, could mitigate the language problem. If you spend the summer in an Arabic country, it compels the children to learn and to interact. Yet, if they grow up in the States, the cultural gap between the two cultures might be confusing for them, he adds thoughtfully.[557] Hassan does not know Rabia, who grew up in Sweden, but as he imagines his possible future, I cannot help to think of her experience.

[555] Interview A
[556] Interview I
[557] Interview G

With Fatma's background, similarly to Sonia and Aziza, she has grown up with one set of Arabic in the household and another language in her social surroundings, and is therefore multilingual. She says that most of the Arab media she is consumed in her life has been in Egyptian Arabic. Soaps like the popular Syrian show *Bâb al-hâra*, caused her to also pick up *shâmi* Arabic, but because of her strong personal history with Egypt, she retains a stronger connection to Egyptian *'ammiyya*. We talk of the diglossic language situation in the Arab world and the conversation leads to a discussion on we both as parents handle a political language situation that doesn't treat dialects on equal basis with Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Children's books in particular are usually published in MSA, a language that no one really speaks as an everyday language. With Swedish being Fatma's children's social environment, she says that at this point she is less concerned with what dialect her children will speak as long as they speak. I ask how she would feel if they grew up speaking MSA, a rare occurrence that I know only one example of: convert Muslim couple that have learned MSA and use it as household language, which has caused their children to having MSA as their L1. We laugh as Fatma comments: "I know. Poor kids [Swe: stackars], *ya'ni*", not knowing which situation is more bizarre. That there are children somewhere growing up speaking MSA as their "mother tongue" or the fact that we're communicating in three parallel spoken languages, during the section of the interview.

> Fatima: I thought it was really interesting that there were a lot of people *mazalan bi Masr biykallamu ammiyya*, [for example in Egypt they speak Egyptian Arabic], but they don't understand *fusha*. But then, the MSA that we hear on the news *mazalan* [for example], it's not really *Fusha*. It's the Modern Standard. I don't understand why Jazeera couldn't be like that either. I still have trouble watching Jazeera, like huh? What? What is he saying, and they speak so quickly? It's just a total turn-off. And I think that children's books should not be in *fusha*. It breaks my heart.[558]

When Fatma reads books in Standard Arabic to her children, she says they immediately protest. She laughs and mimics them: "Näää, mamma, näää, sluta! [nooo, mommy, nooo, stop it!]". She and her husband have solved the problem by retelling the books in spoken Arabic.

Out of all the people I interview, Aziza strikes me as the one who has the strongest attachment to the Arabic language itself. Her being a keen reader of poetry amongst other, I ask her about formal or classical Arabic, how she relates to the language. She answers that Arabic is an ancient language and through that fact alone, it is ripe with interesting linguistic curiosities such as its morphology and lexicon outside of the diglossic aspect of it. Arabic is also closely tied to Islam and therefore the language attracts a lot of students, not only Muslims, but naturally many will be. She remembers hearing from an

[558] Interview K

Arabic teacher who was teaching non-Arab Muslim students that they have expressed being Muslim without access to Arabic as licking the honey on the outside of a jar, instead of being able to get a full share from inside the jar. Aziza believes that non-Arabic speakers may even feel more passionately about Classical Arabic than born Arabs, who to some degree receive at least portions of the language from their heritage.

> Aziza: *Fa*…of course I think the language has a special status, and the poetry therefore that was composed in Arabic about God and about religion has a special status because it is in Arabic, but also because it can use or borrow the same terminology and the same descriptions that the Qur'an and that the prophet, *alayhi al-salâtu wa al-salâm*, themselves used.[559]

Aziza makes a clear distinction between the Arabic of the Qur'an and the spoken forms of Arabic. The former, she asserts, is not the property of any nation, but belongs to the entirety of Muslims and possibly also beyond, echoing the universal claim of Islam that it was not a religion for the Arabs but for all mankind:

> Aziza: Allah made it a language for everybody and not really a language of the Arabs. Per se because we're… In our daily communication we don't speak fusha Arabic. It's not…ehm…something restricted or reserved for a certain group of people. It's for anybody that's interested in having the…connection to this specific language. We find historically that many of the great linguists and the great…who…uncovered the secrets of Arabic, many of these people were not ethnically Arab, and for many Arabic wasn't even their first language, subhanallah. Allah gives *fath*, success[560], to whomever. It doesn't have to be an Arab or anything like that.[561]

At face value one could deduce that Aziza sees it as Muslim being an open identity. It is not dependent to a specific ethnic marker or culture, but as she stated in an earlier interview, it is not completely outside of it either: "It is through culture that religion manifests itself."[562]

Talking to Aziza about the intersection between being Muslim and being Egyptian, I am reminded of an incident in a Swedish mosque several years earlier where one Muslim whose dislike I may have incurred from the way I spoke or acted. Sneeringly he asked me if I had converted to Islam or if I had converted to Egyptian. Aziza laughs as I retell the incident. She says that a lot of people felt inclined towards becoming Muslim because they felt it an

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[559] Interview H

[560] *Fath* literarily means opening, as in the opening chapter of the Qur'an, *al-fâtiha*. Contextually, I have opted for translating it as 'success' even though it is with some poetic license. 'Unfolding', 'Unlocking' would be closer to the Arabic lexical meaning.

[561] Interview H

[562] Interview F

important element in the identity and culture of a land they wanted to blend in with. I am not sure at this point if she means me specifically and although that is of no consequence to me personally, I have a feeling she may have been making an apology for me. She excuses herself for a moment while she goes to turn off her air conditioning unit and when she returns she picks up her train of thought. She says about converts that adopt an Islam with a belief that religion exists outside of culture: "Not to judge or anything but I think that it is not a very good approach, to eliminate culture and…ehm…treat religion as something that have to kind of take over things, you know."[563]

Being Muslim is of course one way that one can be Egyptian, Sudanese, Swedish or American, but can the opposite relationship be equally true? Can you actually convert to being Egyptian, and what would that even be? Consider Manning Nash's short-hand definition of "bed, blood and religion"[564] as objective markers of ethnicity. A common language can of course be imbedded in the criteria of lineage and all the informants share a common religion yet all but one resides outside of Egypt. On those grounds it would be conceivable that Rabia would be able to think of herself as Egyptian, as she sleeps, eats and prays in Egypt, in the vicinity of her Egyptian kin. Categorically though, it turns out she perceives herself more of a Swede acculturated to Egypt.

> Rabia: Actually, I don't feel very Egyptian, I think it's more a question of liking Egypt. I like living here. I have this love of Egypt but I must admit that I am very Swedish in other ways, my values and doing the right thing. You know, wear a seatbelt and do not ride your bicycle without a helmet. You may have sweets only on Fridays. In that sense I am very Swedish.[565]

Acculturation to what history?

Rabia is of the opinion that her Egyptian-ness is relative to her social context. Similarly, to Basma, she also experiences feeling more Egyptian outside of Egypt but if push comes to shove, she says she most likely identify more as a Swede. During our jovial conversation on Swedish culture, she does not notice the small idiosyncrasy of her confusing sweets only on Fridays with the established cultural practice of "lördagsgodis" (Saturday-candy), a

[563] Interview F
[564] Manning Nash, *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World,* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988)
[565] Interview I

phenomenon with its roots in the national Swedish Medicinal board's recommendations in the 1950s[566].

I have observed this interchanging "lördagsgodis" with "fredagsgodis" in a handful of Swedish Muslim families, although how widespread the phenomenon is amongst Muslims in Sweden in general is a guess. There are similar phenomena in the Swedish Muslim milieu, where an established "Swedish" practice is revamped into a relatable parallel but ultimately new practice. Jenny Berglund for instance describes the use of a Ramadan calendar intentionally in lieu of the Swedish-Christian advent calendar and as such, the "new" practice becomes comprehensible and recognizable for both insiders and outsiders.[567]

In Rabia's case, "fredagsgodis" means she can maintain a sense of belonging, of being Swedish while she simultaneously creates new practices which are neither Swedish, nor Egyptian nor Islamic in of themselves, yet they are seamlessly integrated into her life and therefor possibly transmitted to her children as a Swedish family legacy, akin to what Tweed describes as the symbolic construct of a past and a future by migrants to "bridge the homeland and the new land."[568] When pushed a little on how Swedish the use of seatbelts really is, she concedes that it might not be tied to Swedish-ness at all but a reaction to living in Egypt and interacting with Egyptian society:

> Rabia: A common conflict is when one of the kids is going on a playdate. Naturally, I talk to the other parents and tell them that, I know I am being neurotic now, but will you please put on a seatbelt on my child, and they go: "of course, don't worry, it's not a problem," but as the child returns home I hear, "No, I didn't wear a seatbelt." It's things like that.[569]

After having thought about it for a while, Rabia mentions that her Egyptian husband is also very meticulous when it comes to their children using car seats and helmets and laughingly concedes that it probably makes him quite Swedish as well. "I don't know if it's connected to Swedish-ness, honestly," she continues. "it's just that I find it a bit too lax here with certain things. I don't believe that the way it is representative of Egypt either. At least not the way that it should be. I am certain it hasn't always been like this."[570] Rabia then continues to mention what she thinks are some of the good manners she

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[566] Cathrine Edwards, "Swedish Word of the Day: Lördagsgodis" *The Local*, Feb 15, 2019 https://www.thelocal.se/20190215/swedish-word-of-the-day-lordagsgodis/

[567] Jenny Berglund, "Svenska Ramadantraditioner under Uppbyggnad" in *Gudomligt Gott: Om Religion och Mat* ed. Lena Roos (Religion och Bibel: Nathan Söderblom-sällskapets årsbok, 2017)

[568] Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile, 84*

[569] Interview I

[570] Interview I

has assimilated in Egypt, which she thinks she has picked up from her husband:

> Rabia: For example, to maintain good relations with your neighbors…you know when you are visiting someone, to bring a gift. How to treat a guest. To always try to be extra generous if…little things that you might not think about all the time, at least I didn't think of them having grown up in Stockholm. There are these things…actually it's hard to say what's Egyptian and what's Swedish. It's just too big.[571]

It is revealing that Rabia finds the definition difficult because the topic is too big. Social identities are of somewhat intangible qualities and are very hard to pin down. Looking at the case of Europe, Hylland Eriksen states that the segmentary nature of social identities, theorized by Evans Pritchard in 1940, entails that the individual can have multiple memberships in different groups that exists as long as they are socially relevant.[572]

When speaking about a "Swedish" quality in herself, Rabia mentions "to be safety oriented and to be considerate of others" but realizes at the same time that her husband is also safety-oriented and that she has learned many what she dubs "Egyptian" manners that could easily be read as a consideration of others too. It is when we find ourselves outside of our normal social environment that we might suddenly realize that we to some degree differ from the new normal, forcing reflexivity upon our own actions or habitus. Her reflections point, rather, to the relative unboundedness of identity. As Gerd Baumann's states, "all identities are identification, all identifications are dialogical."[573] Being questioned by a researcher or shifting one's place of residence are two examples of what might cause such a dialogue, an experience that may be both positive and negative. Basma, for instance, has found her "otherness" in the US to be a social resource.

> Basma: I think that I am lucky that I come from a place that is somewhat interesting. That people know something about or some stuff about, even like...because of Egyptology. I get to talk more about Egypt than about, you know. Lots of people are also interested in the political situation after the revolution, what's happening. I get to talk more about Egypt than when I am in Egypt, actually.[574]

Olivier Roy has stated that Muslims of foreign descent in Europe are involved in processes of acculturation on five identarian levels, on a spectrum ranging from transposed well-bounded kinship groups to being acculturated along "Western lines" i.e. privatizing faith to the confinements of home with little

[571] Interview I
[572] Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 92
[573] Quoted from Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 93
[574] Interview B

connection to their home culture. In between those opposite ends Roy finds national origin and a "neo-ethnic" Muslim identity.[575] Although there are some merits to Roy's typology, he also overstresses the idea of the first generation arriving in the West with "a pristine ethnic culture" and thereby creating a need for following generations to acculturate on the lines of his typology.

Consider for instance how Hassan finds the Egyptian social landscape very different in the States compared to Egypt. Aware that there are potential lines of conflict of religious and political nature between Egyptians in migration, he actively chooses to maintain a polite but detached relation to most of them.

> Hassan: When I came here in 2016, I knew that not all Egyptians would agree with me politically. I cannot tolerate an *Ikhwâni* person and they feel the same towards me, so I preferred to stick to my own…like my conversations would be very superficial. Most of the time I just say *al-salâm 'alaykum*, because there are many people with whom I do not agree on many issues. We have different backgrounds.[576]

Supposing there is a "pristine" Egyptian culture, it can perhaps in Hassan's case be understood as a fragmented one. The aftermath of the 2011 revolution that ousted president Mubarak (d. 2020) created a bipolar political landscape, where the society of the Muslim brothers were the only real opposition to the ruling National Democratic Party. Among the secular elite in Cairo, the situation was understood as either supporting a regime they may otherwise have had little fondness for, or handing over the reins of the country to an intolerant Islamist organization, thereby jeopardizing the rights of women and Egypt's Coptic minority.[577] The narrative landscape in Egypt was thus very similar to the Manichaean discursive terrain between the figures of Bush and Bin Laden, "without possibility of neutrality, hesitation, or middle ground."[578]

The early nationalist period in Egypt, as already mentioned, intimately connected to the ideology of *pharaonism*, permeated art, literature and education as well as politics. It was an ideology that with a blind eye to the anachronic connection between the time of the pharaohs and present-day Egypt, still saw peculiar distinctiveness in Egypt compared to other Arab and Islamic nations. Writer Taha Hussain (d. 1973) who was an espoused pharaonist in the 1930s, for instance proposed that even during in the Islamic

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[575] Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 117 N.B: It is slightly unclear how Roy defines Europe and to what extent his theory is applicable to the US, since he several times seem to obfuscate the terms "the West" and Europe.

[576] Interview E, altered slightly for legibility

[577] Samer Shehata & Joshua Stacher "The Muslim Brothers in Mubarak's Last Decade" in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt*, edited by Jeannie Sowers & Chris Toensig (London: Verso, 2012)

[578] Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 20

era, Egypt retained a particular feature, leading a revolt against the caliph Uthman (d. 656) in Medina and gaining independence under the Tulunids. Pharaonism was challenged mainly by the emergence of political Islam from the 1930s an onward,by not only challenging the negative connotation the Pharaoh has in Abrahamic textual traditions, but also on the grounds that Egyptology (even in Egypt) was mainly a Western preoccupation.[579]

Early Islamists like Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949) envisioned an Egypt that would be culturally of politically unified with the rest of the Arab world on the grounds of a shared faith, rather than cut off from it by particularistic history. "Since the 1940s then, artists and politicians, with a few exceptions, have shown little interest in the Pharaonic past as a possible basis for building the modern Egyptian nation. Before Nasser moved on to Arab nationalism in the 1950s he began to utilize Pharaonic symbols; Faruq's portrait on the piaster coin was replaced by the Sphinx and the huge statue of Ramses II from Memphis was raised in front of the Cairo railway station."[580] Presidents since have in the eyes of the Egyptian Islamists quite regularly been associated with the Pharaoh and have been a model for pre-Islamic ignorance, most notably perhaps in Qutbian ideology. Anwar Sadat (d. 1981) was murdered by Khaled Islambulli who exclaimed "I have killed Pharao" [581] even though Sadat himself had toned down, more so than any Egyptian president, the ancient heritage for the benefit of the Islamic.[582] The example of Islamism in Egypt underlines the problem of thinking about "Islamic" culture isolated from other aspects of identity, be they historical, national or ethnic. Undoubtedly, the symbolic world of a murderer like Islambulli is internally meaningful to him, but it is to a large degree also meaningless outside of the Egyptian political and cultural context in which it plays out.[583] A regicide, in Lincoln's view, was meant to ceremonially destroy an entire ideology.[584]

The post 9-11 world has been troublesome for Muslims in the West. In his biographical novel *How to be a Muslim*, Haroon Moghul reflects on the problematic Muslim assumption that Islam is essentially different and separated from culture.

> Like many modern Muslims, steeped in some kind of neo-Islamist miasma, I was taught that religion and culture were two different and exclusive things, and that the more of one you had, the less the other. This is not only very stupid, but explains why so much of our contemporary literature is literally childish:

[579] Michael Wood, "The Use of the Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism."
[580] Wood, "The Use of Pharaonic Past", 185
[581] Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharao*, 192
[582] Wood, "The Use of Pharaonic Past", 186
[583] For a discussion on the national context of Islamism in spite of its globalist rhetoric, see: Khaled Hroub, *Political Islam: Context vs Ideology*, (London: Saqi, 2010)
[584] Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, 90

> we are afraid to think complicated thoughts, for fear that any kind of nuance is only a gateway drug to heretical atheism.[585]

Moghul's personal reflection speaks volumes about contemporary religion, especially Islam as a migratory phenomenon. Moghul's background as a Muslim student union activist allowed him to cultivate the common dichotomous assumption that religion and culture are two easily distinguishable categories. Religion, (highly idealized in the neo-Islamist miasmic view) is morally pure but may be subjugated and corrupted into the (lower) level of human culture "in which it is inevitably situated, expressed and practiced."[586] As Moghul matures and goes through a painful existential crisis, he gains new perspectives where the distinctions between the two are not so clear. That may of course be an intimidating discovery for any Muslim that is submerged in Moghul's earlier mindset, the adopted "neo-Islamist miasma."

When Aziza refers to the history of Egypt as "messy at times," it is plausibly both a moral judgement as well as recognition of the problematics of methodological boundaries, especially in the post-modern literary tradition, "the rejection of centres and systems of power, especially the State, while engendering the growth of local identities."[587] According to Jeff Haynes, the de-centered condition of religion in the post-modern world, together with the impact of modernization (urbanization, industrialization and new technology), gives way for new creative cultural interpretations. Religious identity is especially salient in occasions when unwelcome influences encroach upon (perceived) group identities, cultural transitions yielding cultural defenses.[588]

Rabia has for the last couple of years been in the process of researching Cairo's Islamic history. She says that she predominantly does so for her own historical interest and for the sake of introducing her own children to their Egyptian and Cairene cultural heritage which she expresses as almost completely invisible to her children in relation to what she describes as "Western culture".

> Rabia: There's this wish to share this with the children because I see how little they participate in the culture here and it's partly because they are so totally marinated in Western culture. They come home and it is just Netflix, Disney channel, Minecraft and all of that. Western culture as far as the eye can reach. It's only when we have like Ramadan that we have something from our culture, I mean, they were just out with the neighbors doing some kind of Halloween-thingy, I mean…[589]

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[585] Moghul, *How to be a Muslim*, 136
[586] Hughes & McCutcheson, *Religion in 50 Words*, 62
[587] Jeff Haynes, *Religion in Global Politics*, (London: Longman, 1998), 211
[588] Jeff Haynes, *Religion in Global Politics*, 211-217
[589] Interview I, translated from Swedish

She uses the expression Western culture as a type of short-hand and metonym for consumerist economics or perhaps late-stage capitalism[590] that she feels is at odds with her ability to transfer the love she feels for Egypt to her children, realizing in the process of conducting her research, is also part of her self-understanding, herself as a link in history. A history she understands is morally not perfect nor does it exist outside of partisanship or methodological bias. She laughs as she accounts for her research:

> Rabia: Initially I set out to find the real Egypt, but then you come across the plague and then some war, some more war and more plague and tyrants and… I couldn't maintain such an idealistic approach, at least not as idealistic as I had been in the beginning.[591]

Some forty years down the road Rabia is aware that written history is tendentious and since she does not have access to Arabic sources due to her self-assessed poor Arabic skills, the English language references she uses inevitably give her a skewed point-of-entry to Egyptian history. She is aware that it is somewhat of a problem she has not come to terms with yet but that she in the end wants to introduce children to the different eras of Egypt's history, not analyze or morally judge different political systems or rulers. What interests her is the everyday life of common people, what they ate, how they dressed or how they spent their time, she says, and adds: "It is the same thing that you're interested in."[592]

At first, she had thought of starting a children's theater workshop but capitulated to the realization that she did not possess the time or the energy for such a project. What makes her love living in Cairo is what she describes as the multitude of historical layers wherever you look. She compares it to being an accidental archeologist stumbling haphazardly into sites that seem to be in an unlimited supply. When I ask what parts of Cairo that are her favorites she mentions Zamalek, the area around Gezira club, and Korba in Heliopolis, areas that all sport a strong turn-of-the-century architectural air. She also mentions old Islamic Cairo and stops as a new train of thought enters her mind: "Do you know why I like Cairo? I believe it is…a blessed city." She elaborates that it is the plurality of saintly shrines which she calls by the Arabic gloss in anglicized plural *maqâms* that are a source of divine favors. "It is very much this that make it a special place for me. The spirituality."[593]

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[590] For a discussion on de-politicized culture in the framework of late capitalism, see: Angela McRobbie, "All the world's a stage, screen or magazine: when culture is the logic of late capitalism", in *Media, Culture and Society*, (1996) Vol 18, iss. 2, 335-342

[591] Interview I, translated from Swedish

[592] Interview I

[593] Interview I

Gracious traditions

Fatma has relocated several times in her life. From Sudan to England to the US to Egypt and she is now living in Sweden. Terribly self-aware of how irritatingly common and tedious the question must be for immigrants to Sweden, I apologizingly ask her how she is finding life to be in a new town and a new country. She pauses for a second. "There is…a fantastic opportunity for self-reflection here because you're just given so much space as a human being."[594]

Self-reflection was the first thing Fatma learned to appreciate about life in Sweden. In contrast, she adds, life in Khartoum is much more communal and crowded. "There's barely any room to breathe," as she puts it. Fatma explains that living so close to one another makes it difficult to hear yourself think sometimes and for her that has meant that she would often follow along what people around her did in terms of religious practice. Not that the practices themselves change, at least not significantly, but living in a new social and geographic milieu has the consequence that she has had to address some that were previously given. The benefit of having so much time to think and reflect is that she feels as if she has found a stronger and more autonomous connection to God.

> Fatma: Just to be able to sit with those thoughts by myself and decide for myself and realize, yeah, *huwa da al-islam*, this is Islam. I decide. It's my connection with God, there's nobody here to interpret or, you know, to play the priest.[595]

But there is also a downside to the new setting. Fatma mentions twice that life in Sweden also gets very lonely. All the time to be alone with one's thoughts, she says: "That's the best part of my life in Sweden and the worst also. Lonely…"[596] As Fatma fades into her own thoughts I can't help but to think of what Hugh Cornwell of the British punk band the Stranglers composed about Sweden in 1978 after having spent time as a PhD student at Lund university: "Too much time to think, too little to do."[597]

In the US, Hassan, who is very busy finishing his PhD, contemplates the particularities of being an Egyptian Muslim. Compared to Islam in other countries such as Syria, Lebanon or Iraq, he says, "our Islam is a little bit

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[594] Interview K
[595] Interview K
[596] Interview K
[597] The Stranglers, *Sverige (Jag är insnöad på Östfronten)/In the Shadows*, 7", 45RPM, United Artist Records (April Music Ltd/Albion, 1978)

different. It has certain flavor. I would say it's more of a Sufi thing. it's not that strict and it's not that lenient. It's *wasati*."[598] The term *islâm al-wasati* is not unique to Egypt or to Egyptian Sufism but is appropriated by most -if not all- Muslim groups or actors from Azhar University to the Muslim Brotherhood, from liberal reformers to reactionary conservatives.[599] The term is derived from the Qur'anic description of the early Muhammadan community as "*ummatan wasatan*"[600] – a middle or balanced community, or as some translators has suggested "a just community".[601] In the sense that it is psychologically unlikely to regard oneself as extreme regardless of the situation[602], another way to put it is that all Muslims agree that Islam is truly *the middle way*, but they are not in agreement as to what constitutes a "middle" or even a "way." For Hassan, the balance clearly lies in juxtaposing Egypt and Sufism:

> Hassan: I do believe that Sufism is the heart of Islam and it is the heart of Egypt. If Egypt didn't have this Sufi flavor, this Sufi way, it would just be dull… like Saudi Arabia.[603]

Hassan does not rovide a positive definition on what Sufism would be but seems to trust that he and I have a mutual understanding of what it is. That it is perceived as the "heart of Islam" is something that I have heard from many, if not all Muslims who are to some degree practicing Sufism. What is interesting is how he seemingly equates the two, effectively blurring the boundaries between them so that they each are shorthand for the other two. To be Egyptian is to be Sufi and to be Sufi is to be Muslim and so on in an unbreakable circle and what they are is negatively demarcated. It is not whatever Saudi Arabia is or what is found therein, which is dull. It is important to draw attention to the choice of words here. Hassan is not negating that what is found in Saudi Arabian Islam is "Islam" in a wider understanding. He is stating that the Islam he appertains to is the opposite of tedious and gloomy as he finds it in the Gulf.

Contrary to Hassan's gloomy view on Saudi Arabia, Aziza has fond memories of it where she grew up and would likely not label it dull. A childhood may be happy or sad, tragic or exiting, but it is rarely remembered as dull or bland. She says there are aspects of her that are both Saudi and American but her Egyptian side is manifest, not the least when religion comes up. She says she has a feeling that there is a particular way of practicing Islam

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[598] Interview E
[599] For example, see: Paul Katsivelis, *Sharia och Livet: Islamisk Retorik om Makt, Moral och Medelvägen (Wasatiyya) på al-Jazira* (Stockholm: Stockholms Universitet, 2016), 44-46
[600] Q 2:143
[601] Katsivelis, *Sharia och Livet*, 41
[602] Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 221
[603] Interview E

a distinctive tradition that could be called Egyptian Islam. She clarifies that she does not claim an Egyptian Islam that is theologically separated from the larger Islamic Sunni tradition, but religious practice and belief belonging to it, historically maintained or more common in Egypt, for instance intense love of the Prophet and the prophetic household and extended family, the *Ahl al-bayt*. It is something Aziza is vigorously enamored with because at the heart of her Islam, she says, is the prophet Muhammad.

> Aziza: I'm not saying that it's something that all Egyptians do, but in Egypt I do think we put emphasis on spirituality as well. Those are the kinds of things that I attribute to this form of Islam. Again, it's not specifically Egyptian but it is the kind of Islam that I practiced in Egypt and that's what I associate with Egypt.[604]

While Aziza is assertive her Egyptian form of Islam is absolutely correct, she does acknowledge that the issues she raises are contested with some Muslims who, according to her, incorrectly believe that she and others of her practice are elevating the Prophet or others to the status of deity when in reality all they are expressing is respect and veneration. It is worth noting here that although Aziza never mentions it, the question of veneration for the prophetic family, *ahl al-bayt*, is also a particular feature of the Shi'a branches of Islam, which may create further animosity or suspicions from puritanical critics in –and outside– of Egypt, as alluded to above. Although there is no scholarly consensus on the origin of many of Egypt's regional Islamic traditions, the phenomenon is well described by Valerie Hoffman.[605] Historian Al-Sayyid Marsot is convinced they are traceable back to the Egyptian Fatimid period (CE 967-1171) where an Isma'ili Shi'i dynasty ruled over a Coptic Christian and Sunni Muslim population.[606] How much of Egyptian Sufi practices and beliefs that originate in Isma'ili Shi'ism iremains an open questions, but I have also heard such critique against Sufi practices during field work in Upper Egypt.[607]

Basma stresses that what she narrates as Islam, or sometimes for clarificatory purposes, Egyptian Islam, promotes a deeper more spiritual religion with strong historical roots to the people and land of Egypt. Salafism on the other hand, she regards as its antithesis. If Egyptian Islam is organic, Salafism is artificial. If Salafism is shallow and materialistic, Egyptian Islam is deeply spiritual.

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[604] Interview F

[605] Valerie Hoffman-Ladd, "Devotion to the prophet and His Family in Egyptian Sufism" in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 24, no. 4 (1992): 615-37; Hoffman *Sufism, Mysticism and Saints*

[606] Al-Sayyid Marsot, *A History of Egypt*, 15-25

[607] Frederic Brusi, *Sufiland* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2015)

> Basma: Our experience with salafism is: Number one, focus on the superficial… how we dress or whatever is more important than what's inside. Number two, detachment from the good…*ya'ni*…*keda*…gracious traditions that we Egyptians used to have. Very smooth and very natural and very continuous.[608]

The gracious traditions Basma is talking about are visiting the *awliya*, the saints and their shrines, doing *zikr* and celebrating the saint's days or birthdays of holy people, *mawlid*. More than this she describes it in terms of "feeling connected to your ancestors" and cherishing their memory and the memory of good people that lived before us. "I don't know what's negative about this and why someone decided we should get rid of it and destroy all the good traditions about it."[609]

As I transcribe Basma's interview a few months after it was recorded, my attention is drawn to her reference to ancestors. The traditions and practices she alludes to are of course not exclusive to Egypt but occur all over the Islamic geography and history. Certain Muslims everywhere they are found are likely gathering at times to chant litanies, *zikr*, and the shrines of saints or prophets can also be found full of visitors all over the Muslim world. What strikes me as slightly outside the box is that parallel to understanding these practices as spiritual, as ways to draw near to the divine, as many practitioners[610] or scholars of Sufism for instance would, Basma also understands them as rituals that connect her, or any Egyptian for that matter, to history. A personal Egyptian heritage, if you will.

Both Aziza and Basma are connecting what we talk about in the interviews as Egyptian Islam to an idea of a theological true Islam. They both will from time and again reference traditional Egyptian religious authority as part of justifying their held beliefs. In this sense Egypt is not necessarily an originator of a new Islamic practice but a vessel for conservation of the prophetic custom: Sunna.

Aziza remembers a TV show she used to watch in Egypt. *Islâmnâ bi-l-Masri*, [our Islam in Egyptian] or possibly [our Egyptian Islam]. One of the episodes she remembers was centered on a taxi driver who was driving the host of the show early in the morning, at daybreak in fact. When the host, who was also a Muslim religious scholar but not Egyptian, paid the driver his fee, the driver took the money and kissed it. The host asked him why he did that and the driver said it's just a little habit that they have in Egypt. The scholar continued to tell him that the custom actually had its roots in Islam and the

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[608] Interview B slightly edited for legibility. The Arabic words *ya'ni* & *keda* are filler words translating to "meaning" and "like" respectively.

[609] Interview B

[610] See: Alexander Knysh, *Sufism*, 34 "Sufism's followers imagine it to be the only correct way to God and therefore feel obligated to defend it; occasionally, as we will see, they are even ready to give their lives for the sake of its ideals and values."

sunna because when the companions of the prophet used to bring the first round of crops of dates or similar, the prophet used to kiss it and say a prayer over one's sustenance. Even if the taxi driver was unaware of it, and just saw it as a habit detached from any larger framework, the illation of the episode was to show that a seemingly small habit may have its roots with the customs of the prophet of Islam.[611]

I think it is possible to say that in her opinion, culture is how a divine truth is manifested and there is not necessarily a dichotomic oppositional relation between theology and folklore or "popular religion". As mentioned, she relates how an Egyptian television show illustrates how popular religion may express Islamic virtues even as the individual Muslim performing them may not be aware of its theological origins. Popular culture is therefore not only popular culture but to some degree, a reserve of Islamic knowledge or practice and by extension a sound rooting of Islam with a people and a geography. In her own words: "It is through culture that religion manifests itself."[612]

Hassan expresses a similar perception and relates the matter to European governments lacking some degree of vigilance in dealing with the preachers that return to Europe from having studied at an Islamic institute abroad. Assuming that for instance Sweden can appoint the preachers of a mosque, they should be aware that the Muslim countries vary and they would be better served by an imam from Egypt than the Gulf. "They should know that if you get a preacher from Saudi Arabia then you are imposing a Salafi…ideology. If you are taking from Egypt, it will be more of a cool…not Salafi, more of a Sufi way."[613]

An Islam that is recognizable

Rabia finds it difficult to define Egyptian culture. She says there is a modern culture and a traditional that are in a somewhat disputing relationship with one another. Religious identity, she adds, is a third factor that is mixed in with them. She explains that she moved to Egypt to attend university with no intention of seeking God or religion but it was through an existential crisis while at university that she ended up a practitioner of Sufism. Even though born a Muslim by virtue of her Muslim Egyptian father according to a theological definition, she equivalates her Muslim-ness with religious conversion. Contrary to the other informants she was not raised in a Muslim

[611] Interview F
[612] Interview F
[613] Interview E

cultural environment and the Sufi group she attends, she regards as not really Egyptian although it has a chapter in Cairo because its spiritual leader, the shaykh, is in Turkey and the historical roots of the organization is Uzbek. She found her way through early in her spiritual awakening praying for God to show her what religion she should believe in and to follow because, she laughingly remembers, "I had no idea about that either." She already felt an inclination towards Islam but also sensed that there were many different varieties of it in her surroundings.

> Rabia: I guess you could say that there were a lot of faces to Islam, or to the people in my surrounding that practiced Islam. I just found the people that could provide me with an Islam that I recognized. An Islam that I clicked with and that was Sufism.[614]

When I ask her how important Egypt is in this circumstance, the "sufi spirituality in which she is a traveler," she both acknowledges it and downplays it more than I had assumed when I started interviewing her. She admits that that it is important because it gives her a context because it is in Egypt that she has the community of believers that make up the local chapter of her particular Sufi group, and that is "the most important" for her, she says. But since her spiritual guide is in Turkey, she might as well have been there. "It is not so much about the place, it is about the context. It is about the community you find. I like living in Cairo because it is a spiritual place but I don't think it really matters that it is Egypt or Cairo."[615]

Aziza maintains that what is talked about as Egyptian Islamic practices are so due to the particular practices are part of making up an Egyptian culture, yet the Islamic roots of that belongs to a larger Islamic phenomenon. Wherever there are Muslims, you will find Sufism, she says, but since there are different cultures there are different manifestations of it. She compares it with the celebration of the prophet's birthday which she says is something honored in all Islamic countries, but the forms of it will vary according to culture, because "people express their love differently." In Egypt it is natural that they do certain things in Arabic or celebrate the saints of Egypt because they are closer. In Pakistan, they'll celebrate Pakistani saints and probably in Urdu, she reasons.[616]

Basma references popular culture as a token of how Egyptian Islamic practice was mainstay and strongly rooted as perfectly non-controversial at some point in time. Visiting the shrine-mosque of the prophet's grandson *Sayyedina Hussayn* or another saint to ask for intercession:

[614] Interview I
[615] Interview I
[616] Interview H

> Basma: God! When I watch black and white movies. Egyptian movies. Old movies, I find it natural that someone with a problem in the movie, they would go and visit *Sayyedna Hussayn* or *Shaykh* [unintelligible]. And you know it isn't even the highlight of the film. It's something normal and minor and nobody even thinks about it twice.[617]

What Basma draws attention to is how these practices were mainstay of religious practices as seen through the lens of pop culture in the forties and fifties. For her it strengthens the conviction that the "gracious traditions" of yore she mentioned earlier were not only truly organic in Egyptian society but also fully Islamic and authentic. She returns several times to thinking about her religion from a pop-cultural perspective, mentioning that contemporary Egyptian TV dramas and movies more frequently displays groups of sometimes roughly characterized, almost caricatured "Sufis". Even though she holds that such portrayals may be unrepresentative of true Sufism, it indicates that either a Sufi religious culture, even if fictionalized is becoming more visible in the everyday life of Egyptians.

> Basma: There has recently been… portraying of Sufi traditions in Egyptian drama and movies. Most of the things is of really bad quality [laughs]. In my opinion they present very little of accurate Sufism, if any at all, but the idea itself is becoming more popular. That is why more people are getting to know more about even very cliché Sufi codes, practices or *fikrs*. The forty rules of love, for example.[618]

Basma refers to *the forty rules of love* that Turkish novelist Elif Shafak presented in a work of fiction in 2010. In a nutshell the story examines the relationship between the 13th century Sufi mystic Jalal al-deen Rumi and his enigmatic spiritual teacher Shams al-deen Tabrizi that in Shafak's view represents a universal spirituality. According to Billy Gray, the forty rules represent Shafak's belief in perennial philosophy and universalist ethics, part of a decontextualized and oversimplified view of Rumi and Sufism.[619]

Referencing pop culture is interesting because it points to an arena of ideas where authenticity is sought on several levels and it clearly brackets the understanding that Islam is just the five pillars of praying, fasting, giving charity, pilgrimage and the testimony of faith. Even if a contemporary TV drama or old Egyptian movies are not theological authorities per se, they are seen as indicators of an Islam that is near and familiar and rooted in Egyptian

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[617] Interview B

[618] Interview D, N.B. *Fikr* comes from the Arabic word for thought or knowing. It it's sometimes used in Sufi context as an equivalent of "reflection." See: "dhikr" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, (May 27, 2021) https://www.britannica.com/topic/dhikr.

[619] Billy Gray, "Rumi, Sufi spirituality and the teacher-disciple relationship in Eli Shafak's The Forty Rules of Love" in *Approaching Esotericism and Mysticism: Cultural Influences*. Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis, 29 (2020), 124-146

culture. Paraphrasing Basma, it's really no big deal; it's just something one does. Over a cup of American multinational corporate coffee in a quiet corner of the Illini student union with Basma and her mother Maryam I pose the direct question if they see the emergence of Sufism in popular culture as a way of reclaiming Egyptian-ness.

> Maryam: You can say so, yes. I think it is reclaiming the original link that has been distracted or…distorted by…for example the mosque near our home. It is kinda controlled by ehd el-arab [laughs]. It's controlled by male, strong, rich and usually loud people. Most of them with money from the Gulf.
>
> Basma: …most of them from the Gulf, yeah…
>
> Maryam: …and they kinda control the mosque and the ideas of *haram* and *halal* and all of that. I guess young people are fed up with this kind of…
>
> Basma: …Yeah but I guess young people are…a lot of them are fed up from…
>
> Maryam: …religion all together!
>
> Basma: Yeah, all together but again, maybe this Sufi approach to religion provides an alternative where you can…I'm not necessarily making a judgement call here, I don't know. I don't even know how I feel about this. I think it's easier to commit to a form of religion where someone isn't constantly judging you or instructing you, reminding you that you're doing wrong things and…yeah.[620]

Maryam jokingly refers to to the mosque direction as *ehd el-arab* which translates to something on the lines of *the pact of Arabs*. She has earlier in the conversation expressed a feeling that there is a tendency in society that people are losing their religion altogether and supposes that her children's generation will be able to reinvigorate it "in a more flexible way. More spiritual, more Sufi if you like" because as she alludes to in the description of the mosque near their home, doctrinal severity is alienating people. Both agree that the men aren't malintent, they for instance do amazing charity work for the poor but at the end of the day "the vibe is suffocating" owing to the fact that they put on the air, "exclusively knowing everything, regardless of other people's experiences and knowledge."[621]

The narrative constructed through their relation to the mosque is a dichotomy of familiar and strange, where Sufi practices are seen as "original" and genuinely Egyptian as well as Islamic. The Islam of the men in the mosque on the contrary is perceived as foreign and too judgmental or rigorous. The Cairo mosque and its congregation are obviously very Egyptian from a formal

[620] Interview D, slightly edited for legibility
[621] Interview D

point-of-view but the Islam that dominates the group, in the mind of especially Maryam, is alienating the younger generations from religion altogether. The term *wasati* is never used by either Maryam or Basma as descriptive of the Islam they feel more comfortable with, but is analogous to Hassan's previously mentioned description of how an Egyptian Islam is essentially different from other countries:

> Hassan: All the people who've had the privilege to spread Islam through the Middle East and Africa come from Egypt. A Muslim in Egypt we say, is a simple man. *Al-wasati. Islâm al-wasati*. Which is different from Islam you'll find in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.[622]

For Hassan there is no doubt that any other Arab Muslim would immediately recognize that because he is Egyptian, he is also a "*wasati* Muslim, that simple Muslim that Egyptians are."[623] Though I never asked him in person, I understood Hassan's use of the adjective *simple* in English coming from the Arabic gloss *basît*, meaning not only *simple* but also *unpretentious*, *easygoing*. Where Maryam and Basma speaks of Islam from the Gulf as a kind of spiritual hypoxia in their Egyptian setting, Hassan emphasizes the longevity of Egyptian Islamic institutions, i.e. tradition and authenticity over Islam in the *Khalîj*, [the Gulf] and especially Saudi Arabia:

> Hassan: When it comes to Saudi Arabi or *Khalîj* in general, I could never imagine that a true seeker would go and take their knowledge, religious knowledge from them, because they are new. They are actually new. Saudi Arabia has been there for like…I don't know…a hundred years? It's not, like, a major thing. When it comes to Egypt you have the Azhar that is very, very, very well rooted.[624]

It is fair to note that his comparison is slightly eschewed when comparing on the one hand a modern Nation-state to an Egyptian Islamic institution that predates the modern state of Egypt by a thousand odd years. One could suggest that a more balanced comparison would be al-Azhar University and the city of Medina or even the *haram* in Mecca, to where all pious Muslims should pilgrimage once in life if they have the means, but that is misunderstanding Hassan's point. It is significant that he describes the mosque-university of Al-Azhar as rooted, something which has grown out of the so-to-speak Islamic soil of Egypt and is therefore part and parcel of their religious landscape. It follows that what is deemed not rooted in Egypt creates an estrangement in him. It is a novelty. Something lightweight lacking the assertiveness that

[622] Interview E grammatically edited for legibility
[623] Interview E, grammatically edited for legibility
[624] Interview E, grammatically edited for legibility. The word "think" has been exchanged for "imagine" by the author.

tradition comes with. It is perhaps Hassan's conviction of Egypt's strong Islamic tradition and standing that permits him to put his national identity before his religious.

> Hassan: I would identify myself first as Egyptian, the second as a Muslim and third as a Sufi. It would never come that I'm a Muslim first, I would always say, treat me as an Egyptian first.[625]

I find myself somewhat stupefied but also impressed by Hassan's rather bold statement. From the late nineties onwards, I have spent time with a variety of Muslims and Muslim congregations in both Sweden and outside of it. While being very heterogenic in relation to each other both individually as well as collectives, what I have apprehended as a principal, perhaps the foremost belief with a majority of them, is that Islam through the merits of being the religion God has ordained for humankind supersedes all other identities. In hindsight I have realized that this distorted image of the particularly pious religiosity of Muslims was due to a skewed sample. It was embarrassingly naïve of me to draw conclusions basically grounded in theological statements. I have discussed this problem more thoroughly in the chapter on method. Aware of my own prejudice, the statement still tickles my fancy and it was instrumental to me in writing this particular chapter. Hassan does not fit the typology of what some describe as cultural- or secular Muslims, neither is he really what Ann af Burén calls tepid- or lukewarm Muslim.[626] He believes in God and the prophet and the central articles of faith. He complies with the framework of sharia but he's not active in nor does he to me appear to be emotionally connected to the local mosque, where he lives in Illinois. Like all the informants in this study, he deviates from my perceived norms regardless if they are prescriptive or descriptive or for that matter based in prejudice. I find it unusual to hear such a self-assessment pronounced even when one of my theoretical point of departures in this study, is just that; that most Muslims, like any other humans do not fit the molds that theories (or theologies) have set them out to be.

I push back a little by asking if he really sees a contradiction between being Muslim and being Egyptian. He admits that there is no innate conflict between the two. It is a statement relating specifically to the conflict he experiences in interacting with Muslims of other persuasions. As we have already seen, he holds that being an Egyptian Muslim as he is, meaning that one is a *wasati* Muslim. Being Muslim is in this sense implied in the being Egyptian. It is also implied that not being a *wasati* Muslim does not disqualify one from being Muslim, but it puts one outside of taking part in what Hassan's sees as Egyptian Islamic culture, regardless of having the Egyptian nationality. Like

[625] Interview E
[626] Ann af Burén, *En Känsla av Samhörighet*.

Aziza does, he puts respect, veneration for- and interaction with the prophetic household *ahl al-bayt* as an important signifier of true participation in the Egyptian experience. For him it even extends to the office of the President of the republic:

> Hassan: There's this thing where you feel how the President or the people of power deal with the *ahl al-bayt* [The Prophetic household]. [President] Sadat for example when he proclaimed the war of 1973 he actually went to *sayyed al-Badawi*. He went to *hazrat sidna al-Hussayn*. He went to *sayyeda Zaynab* and he stayed there for a couple of hours just praying and seeking their help, asking them [for advice].[627]

He goes on to say that Gamal Abdel Nasser (r. 1954-1970) displayed this attachment to the prophetic household and the saints of Egypt as well as did Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981-2011) including the current president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (r. 2014-). Hassan is a very outspoken opponent to both the Muslim Brotherhood as well as Salafism and one of the arguments he holds against the rule of Brotherhood affiliated Mohamed Morsi (r. 2012-2013) is that he and his administration failed to maintain the *mazâr*, the shrines of the Egyptian saints. More than not showing proper etiquette with the saints of Egypt, Hassan is convinced that Mursi and the Brotherhood did not have Egyptian interests at first hand.

> Hassan: It was all a break-down when they did this thing in Cairo stadium where they invited the Syrian revolutionists to Cairo and Mursi said that they are going to send the army to help the revolution in Syria. That was like a big no. From there I think people started to realize that Ok, we're going on the wrong track.[628]

Islamists generally seem to espouse a type of religiosity that is not recognized by the informants. Fatma who has connections to both Egypt and Sudan, also weighs in with a comment about the official Islam of Omar al-Bashir and his National Congress Party (NCP) that ruled Sudan through a *coup d'état* from 1989 until the popular revolution in 2019. Fatma expressed strong opinions that it was not representative of her own ideas about Islam nor that of her Sudanese Islamic heritage. She says that the positive difference is tangible. Even though she was still a child when the Islamists took power, the streets of Khartoum have now returned to some kind of normalcy, as she puts it, making it perfectly clear that whatever the thirty years of NCP rule was, it was not desirable nor something that was in the interest of the people of Sudan. When Fatma tells me about her visit to Khartoum after the ousting of al-Bashar I recognize something on the lines of how I some Egyptians reacted to the fall of the Mubarak regime well as reactions I sensed around me from during the

[627] Interview E, slightly edited grammatically
[628] Interview E

fall of the Berlin wall. There's an ease of breathing almost, like someone having to hold their breath for too long and finally drawing new oxygen into their lungs. Fatma is enthusiastic in sharing her immediate observations from the reunion:

> Fatma: I was just home in Khartoum for three weeks in December and January and the first thing I noticed was the other people arriving at the airport weren't veiled. They didn't put a scarf on their head when they arrived. There was a very pleasant exchange with the passport control. The men. The police men. No weird commentary about me showing up with mixed kids and a white husband. And the ads! Even inside the airport ads for telecom and food and whatever, both men and women had long hair and it was seen in the ads. The girls weren't veiled and boys had like dreads and long hair, which was also a problem before. [The ads were posted] all over the city and they hadn't been vandalized. That was really shocking and then I watched the corona TV-ads, like the public service ads, and also these like infomercials. People just looked *'adi*, they looked normal. They dressed like… *'adi*, without hijab. It was totally normal. It's not like they had eradicated the *tarha* [headscarf]. Some of the characters had a *tarha*, maybe it was on, maybe it was on their shoulders, maybe one of them had like fancy *hijab* or something like that. It was a much more balanced view. For that to have happened in the commercial sector in just one year and a half after the revolution is pretty big.[629]

To say that Islamism, whether in Egypt or Sudan, is not normal is of course a normative and not a descriptive statement. It reflects the informant's view that the kind of political and religious system Islamists offer is unrequited and in essence alien to religious life in the Nile Valley.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have presented how my informants narrate their national identity in relation to their religious (Muslim) identity. In Egypt, the "nation" has by different actors been perceived both as a historical particularity of the Nile Valley and a middle eastern Arab-ness, both to some degree at odds with an Islamist focus on the nation as the Muslim nation (*umma*), transcending national boundaries. With the exception of Rabia who is somewhat of an outlier in the sample, informants find the two reinforcing one another. Although having spent approximately the same amount of time in Egypt and Sweden, Rabia does not seem to be very heavily invested in either from an identity-forming aspect. She will rather speak of her connection to Islam and

[629] Interview K

Sufism as important and even though she relates the importance of Egypt as a religious or spiritual setting for her, it does not really show in her perception of herself as Egyptian. Aziza on the contrary speaks of pride in her Egyptian family heritage, although she is sure to explain it is because of the islamically correct practices which that entail. Basma and Sonia both reflect that it is a move out of Egypt that has activated their "Egyptian-ness" because of their relation to new social surroundings. For Basma the experience seems to be very positive whereas Sonia's has been both. Having gone to English language schools, she feels as if she cannot participate fully in the Arabic experience yet she still speaks of herself as Egyptian. Hassan, who, in my understanding, is outspokenly nationalist, is also the one who most noticeably blur the lines between religion and nationality. For him to be one is necessarily to be the other, but Egyptian is positioned at the top.

With the chapter I argue that religious identity cannot be aptly understood from a pure theological or normative horizon. What the chapter demonstrates is a creative use of history and theology together with everyday phenomena and personal resources. In the words and understanding of Aziza, religion is manifested through culture. It follows that the study of a religion must be analyzed in the light of the larger cultures in which informants relate themselves to. Participants are not uninformed about the supposed universal sources of Islam but will relegate them to being background choices for the benefit of history, politics or cultural aspects that they stress reinforce their particular beliefs and practices. Sufism matters because it resonates with their perception of what it means to be Egyptian and arguably vice versa.

From an islamological perspective this suggests that Islam is not exclusively an overarching and total ideology but in the understanding of the informants, a system of universal beliefs and practices that is found and rooted in local culture and therefore takes on recognizable forms. Egypt becomes a resource for how to be Muslim in the modern world. Egypt becomes a resource for understanding oneself in exile. This means that the resistance to "foreign" Islamic beliefs and practices is not to be understood as something akin to a theological refusal; none claim that Salafism is not Islamic for example. Rather, it is the dark mirror, in which one's own Sufism becomes tangible and defined. I suggest that it highlights an understanding of religion in general and Islam in particular with the informants as a sociological and historical subject.

Chapter seven: Saints and the intermediate realm.

In the previous chapters, I have portrayed the religious identity of the informants as constructed out of relatively homogenous collective parts, honing in on Islam, Sufism and Nationality and how they are mutually amplifying each other as identarian factors. In this final analytical chapter, I will focus primarily to the individual perception of *wilaya* (sainthood) and miracles and how they matter in the lives of the informants, as well as their understanding of an intermediate realm (*barzakh*) that is mentioned in several interviews. An important aspect that will be addressed is how the informants talk aobut the intermediate realm and the creative possibilities that it seems to provide to them and their understandings of everyday life. The chapter also traces the class background and migration of the interviewees and that information will be used for a discussion on some further issues of what that suggests for the overall study of post-tariqa Sufism and Sufism in post-revolutionary Egypt and Sudan. This chapter is stylistically slightly different from previous chapters as I have opted to retain several unedited narrations. I have chosen to retain these stories in this form because of their highly personal content in comparison to the other data. In this sense the stories illustrate both a specific event but taken together they will address and illustrate the scope of the creative field of the *barzakh* and bring a further understanding of how they view Sufism.

Introduction:

The main prayer hall of Abu-l-Hajjaj's mosque[630] offers some relief from the heatwave that has saturated Luxor just before Ramadan in 2018. The

[630] Originally the site of Luxor temple, it was converted to a church in the 4th century and a mosque as early as the 7th century, it is by some regarded as one of the oldest continuously used temples in the world

temperature is well over 100 degrees as the sun begins its decline under the horizon. It is not a planned visit, but as I had traversed the Nile for errands in Luxor city, I spontaneously decided to pass by on my way back to the west bank where I lived. After having greeted *Abu-l-Hajjaj* (d.1295 CE), the saint after whom the mosque is named, one of the custodians of the mosque recognizes me and offers me with some of the other *fellahîn* entrance to the other saint of the mosque, *shaykh Maghribi*, as far as I understand, a disciple of *Abu-l-Hajjaj*. He unlocks the heavy padlock to the grave, and, as I enter, I hear someone chiding him for letting me enter and his reply that everything is in order, he knows me and that I am a Muslim. My field notes from the day reveals some emotional and intellectual ambivalence. I have scribbled down that I am unsure of what I personally believe, but that I somehow have appropriated *ziyara* as part of my own cultural heritage. I was not born into a Muslim religious identity, but I have made some of the Upper Egyptian religious traditions part of what I do.

I thank the custodian for opening the grave for me and hand him some money as a token of my appreciation. The main prayer hall of the mosque is integrated with Luxor temple, and the walls of the direction of prayer are covered with hieroglyphics, which is a feature of the entire mosque for that matter. Out of all the mosques and shrines I have visited in Egypt, this one remains my favorite, as it so visibly defies puritanical Islamist ideals not only in the yearly massive mawlid tradition, but overtly and eternally even in architecture. As I am sitting there wishing I could decode the pharaonic inscriptions in the wall, I am approached by a man, introducing himself as Mr. Sami, who insists on speaking English, a language he commands with ease. We strike up conversation and although I politely stay clear of politics and religion, he is keen to discuss it with me. Luxor has been suffering financially from effects of the Arab Spring and Mr. Sami, who has been working as a tour guide, has had trouble making ends meet. The root of the problem, he explains, is how Western media is vilifying Egypt, but also how 80% percent of people on the West Bank and in Luxor town "are garbage." True to my non-confrontational nature, I offer the regular excuses that people need to survive and that times are hard, but he insists that it is flaws in character rather than circumstances that causes people to hike up prices. Out of the blue, he surprises me by asking if I am Muslim. When I answer affirmatively, he hands me a *mushaf* and demands that I read from it. At this point I feel insulted, not only on behalf of the people of the West Bank to whose villages and houses I regularly am invited, and with whom I have spent many sleepless mawlid and zikr nights, graciously offered a piece of meat with a side of molokhiyya stew and sour dough bread. As I randomly flick to a page and begin reading out loud, I remember thinking: "They're garbage? You're garbage!"

I speed through a few verses and hand over the Qur'an to him with an additional few shibboleths of insider-ism and consider him now in moral debt to me. Tell me about the mashaykh, I say with earnest. Mr. Sami explains that

the *mashaykh* [or *awliya*] is something particularly Egyptian. The ancient Egyptian gods, one in each village, are the same thing as the *mashaykhs* are today. They are but the current manifestations of the teachers that have always been around to help people to live a good life, he says. More people gather round us and start to join in on the conversation just as the voice of the *muezzin* is heard over the loudspeaker and the makeshift discussion group is disbanded. The last comment I remember hearing is someone saying: "All of that, is Islam."[631]

The Sufis of AUC

In 2008 the American University in Cairo moved from its locations downtown to the satellite city of new Cairo. The university enrolls almost 7000 students in 40 undergrad and 50 master's programs. AUC alumni are found in the entire world, with around 70 in Sweden and Scandinavia, and some 28,000 in the United States.[632] Due to the high tuition fees, getting a diploma from AUC or even just attending has long been a marker ofclass in Egyptian society, with internationally recognized alumni like Thomas Friedman, Yuriko Koike, Queen Rania al-Abdullah, as well as notable Egyptian academicians, artists and actors, ministers, bankers and CEOs. It is also alma mater for in this thesis mentioned Islamic scholar Shahab Ahmed and historian Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot,[633] as well as having employed Mark Sedgwick as a teacher for several years. It is most importantly also the alma mater of the informants, whose recollections, memories and views comprise the empirical material of the study. For Rabia, Sonia and Hassan, their time at AUC was also a direct reason for them in getting involved with Sufism. Before Sonia attended university, Sufism was really unknown to her.

> Sonia: In my family, there was no talk of Sufism. It was nothing anybody ever talked about. It was either religion or no religion. When I was small and I came to Egypt during the summers, I remember my parents…my grandmother had a neighbor who was very religious and she was interested with teaching me about religion. She was very that kind of seventies-eighties Muslim-brotherhood-religious-type-of-person. I didn't thrive at all. Nothing came through from her to me. We had nothing in common. So that didn't work out. Then my family, I remember my uncle and his wife went to *hagg* one year and they sent me like a little cassette tape they bought from Saudi with like a book on 'what is Islam?'

[631] Field note 2018.05.07
[632] Acuegypt.edu, "Facts and Figures" https://www.aucegypt.edu/about/facts-and-figures
[633] Aucegypt.edu, "Notable Alumni" https://www.aucegypt.edu/alumni/notable-alumni

> I listened to it but it was all just like very…dogmatic. Like, oh, this is Islam and this is what you have to do and this is what you have to not do and this is how you are Muslim.[634]

At university though, Sonia came in contact with a professor that would write and give talks about Sufism which she describes as awakening an interest or a drive towards something she had been unconsciously seeking.

> Sonia: through him I heard about Sufism, I maybe started to read about it a little, not in a very intellectual kind of way, but in a very *flummig*[635] – touchy feely kind of way. Then I heard about this other professor that was in a… I don't know, I was just always kind of drawn to it.[636]

Founded in 1919/1920, AUC is a US-accredited English language university that prides itself with being "the center of the intellectual, social and cultural life of the Arab world."[637] It was originally established as a Presbyterian Christian mission to "present Jesus Christ, in a strategically vital way, to the great Moslem world"[638], as the founder Charles R. Watson, wrote in his letter of resignation as secretary to the foreign mission board of the United Presbyterian Church of North America. Watson was not to be remembered as a remarkable missionary in evangelical circles however, as he early on stressed how AUC was to remain an independent institution from the church, much to the dismay from his missionary peers in Egypt at the time. Instead of becoming an outright base for Anglo-Saxon Protestant mission in Egypt, Watson steered the university towards ecumenical and dialogic relations with Egyptian society. By 1922, the rift between Watson's demand for autonomy and the Church's zeal for mission through education lead to a permanent frosty relationship between the two. In particular, according to Heather Sharkey, Watson was particularly concerned by Christian polemics against Muslims that he held to be incendiary and counterproductive.[639]

The Presbyterian roots of AUC are since long sidelined, but the inter-cultural and religious dialogue of Watson's spirit lingers, not the least in how some students are introduced to a hitherto unknown part of their historical religious legacy in humanities and arts classes. At the time when Aziza was doing her graduate studies at AUC, she came across a Western artist through AUC who was specializing in Arabic calligraphy. She describes an infatuation she's always had for calligraphy but she hadn't found resources for studying.

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634 Interview O
635 "Flummig" is Swedish vernacular for spaced-out; hippie-ish; non-linear
636 Interview O
637 Acuegypt.edu "About AUC" https://www.aucegypt.edu/about/about-auc
638 Heather J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 149
639 Ibid. 149-162

Attending an exhibition with the calligraphist, she mustered up courage and approached him to ask his advice on where she could immerse herself in learning the art:

> Aziza: He actually gave me a contact that led me to someone in Sidna el-Husain. (…) I go to Sidna el-Husain and everything but I hadn't *ya'ni* done anything in this area, other than going to the mosque. So, it was the first time of actually going to like a school there. (…) I went and I loved the calligraphy lessons and again, I met these beautiful people. I would call them Sufi…anything that has beauty in it and the prophet, *alayhi al-salatu w al-salam.* It was just so beautiful.[640]

Unlike Sonia, Hassan and Rabia who had a more direct introduction to Sufism at AUC, Aziza first asserts that her journey to Sufism was unrelated to her time at the university. But as she ponders upon the question a little, she starts remembering an introductory philosophy course she had taken, a course she describes as not directly causal, but to a degree influential in opening her up for the more overt Sufism she later started to embrace. "Socrates was nice to learn about, then he [the professor] kind of placed this in a continuum. It was interesting to learn about that, as a theoretical thing, in English from a beautiful man, and I know that he himself was a Sufi."[641]

When Aziza later started attending classes at al-Azhar, she reconnected what she had learned from classical Western philosophy at AUC with what was being taught in the study circles at the mosque, the main difference to her being the latter's stronger focus on practice. In the Egyptian setting she found that it spoke to her on how practical issues such as to be grateful and patient in one's every day, but in essence she saw both epistemes as coming from the same source. Philosophy was "a nice intro that was something else…not something else, but a different form for that."[642]

Rabia, who was studying at AUC before Aziza, Hassan and Basma, but around the same time as Sonia and Fatma, describes an atmosphere of Sufism as generally present even if there was no formal proselytizing or instructive classes, something of a background ambience through arts and poetry and the documentary films and presentations of Rumi and the Mevlevi Sufi order, by Shems Friedlander (b. 1940), now professor emeritus at AUC.

> Rabia: I mean, even if I didn't really know about it at that time, there was something. I just thought there were all of these bearded professors that I didn't know how many there were, but just kept seeing. You know, Muslim or Muslim looking Westerners. I thought to myself that there was something there. It was, what do you say? A trend? Like, Sufism, it was kind of, if you were to be a

[640] Interview H
[641] Interview H
[642] Interview H

> Muslim, then that was how you were Muslim. At least if you were intellectual or artistic. Maybe it was that? There were also a lot of the people, students in my vicinity who flirted some with Sufism and found it exiting.[643]

Sonia also found herself in the Sufi-esque milieu of AUC at the time and also mentions the work of Shems Friedlander as inspiring at the time. But it was another student and friend with whom she became personally involved and actively pursued Sufism.

> Sonia: This friend of mine was very…troubled. I think I went with him to one of the gatherings, one of the Naqshabandi gatherings. This person and his way of being, spoke to me in some way because he was a very troubled person. He still is and experiments with drugs, but it's all a way of seeking himself. It's not just for the sake of it. He's not a party person, but he experiments with these things to…get in touch with himself or something. That's how I came into contact with them [the Naqshabandi tariqa]. I met another old friend there, Rabia, who I had met a few years [earlier] at university as well. She was a completely different person then. So, it all just fell into place.[644]

The Sufism, and by extension Islam, Sonia encountered at AUC was presented to her in a less dogmatic and more accessible way. It spoke to her personal experiences as she phrases it. Similar to how Rabia describes an "Islam that she recognized, that she clicked with"[645] when she speaks about what attracted her to Sufism, Sonia was also estranged to other forms of Islam in her family and social milieu. Apart from being existentially relatable, it was also "something that gave social values in my life", she says.[646]

The Sufi milieu of AUC is to some degree different from other parts of Cairo and Egypt. It is made up of well-to-do academics and the economically privileged upper echelon of Egypt and surrounding countries. When I suggest to Sonia that she is relatively unique in the Naqshabandi society she joined while at university in her being Egyptian, she first protests and declare there are plenty of Egyptians in the tariqa, but as I suggest that there are noticeable differences to the many brotherhoods in Egypt outside of AUC she concedes that: "It's not a folk tradition. I think it's a very intellectual tradition."[647]

[643] Interview M
[644] Interview O
[645] Interview I
[646] Interview O
[647] Interview O

Gummy-Sufism

I ask Rabia about why she thinks Sufism attracts so many intellectual Westerners, in her own words, people with aesthetic and intellectual interests, particularly in the AUC environment. She asserts that the Sufis are Islam's socialists, the vanguard against the Islamist Trump-supporters, and laughs at her contemporary simile. "The door is open", she continues. "When people like Madonna and other popstars like Rumi's poetry and record it, it's just very accessible."[648]

What Rabia alludes to, even if she does not expressly mention it, can be seen as part of the Mipsterz-phenomena observed in the mid-2010s. Mipster became a buzzword after a video named "Somewhere in America #Mipsterz" went viral. The video soundtracked by a rap song by Jay Z showed young Muslim women in New York and Los Angeles engaged in everyday activities of contemporary youth culture; skateboarding, taking selfies, sporting or consuming fast food. The video sparked some controversy, but also established a frame for a hitherto undefined subculture, the Muslim Hipster.[649] Mipsterz was suggested by the Guardian to be a "young Muslims who strove to combine Islam with a modern urban lifestyle," and also suggested that it was sub-type of a Global Urban Muslim, abbrivated as "Gummy".[650]

The Gummy-phenomenon is noticed by many, and has also been emerging outside of the US and the UK. Basma, of a younger generation than Rabia, detects how many of her friends are also becoming more aware of Sufism. There has been a perceptible increase of portrayals of Sufis and Sufi traditions in Egyptian media, particularly in daytime dramas and in movies. Basma maintains that much of dramatized Sufism is of quite bad quality and has little to do with Sufism as she understands it, but she still sees some benefit to it because "they're bringing the idea back to life again. So, when someone had this in their background or in their subconscious, they will at least not react hostilely when they're introduced to proper Sufism, theoretically or practically."[651]

Anyone can be a Sufi, Mark Sedgwick writes. Whether rich or poor, "Sufism in the twentieth century is certainly found more frequently in villages than in cities, and university graduates are rarely Sufis, but this was not always so."[652] Some twenty years after Sedgwick drew that conclusion there seems to

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[648] Interview M
[649] Haimy Assefa, "Mipsterz: a space for Muslim hipsters", (CNN, June 3, 2015) https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/03/living/mipsterz-muslim-hipsters/
[650] "Mipsters: like hipsters, but Muslim" *The Guardian*, (April 10, 2016) https://www.theguardian.com/society/shortcuts/2016/apr/10/mipster-muslim-hipster-exploitative-marketing-term-growing-urban-trend
[651] Interview D
[652] Mark Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essentials*, (Cairo: AUC Press, 2003), 23

be a good foundation for reassessing it. There are indications that Sufism is making a comeback, not only in the streets of major cities, but also in the privileged classes[653] from where it had taken a hiatus for much of the twentieth century, as Sedgwick notes. Sedgwick meritoriously introduces a sense of class perspective into what can be assumed to be a look on Sufism from a primarily Egyptian vantage point, presenting the idea of an educated and uneducated, or high- and low-culture Sufism. The class aspect of Sufism in Egypt also introduces other dimensions in resisting it from a Salafi persuasion, which is not only a resistance in theological disagreements, but is closely related to the idea of modernity and meritocracy that was at the heart of reformist theologians like Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) for whom, true Islam was a religion in the spirit of reason.[654] When the professional classes became more invested in the modernizing project, Sufism slowly waned with the urban elite, and began primarily to be assocated with a backwards countryside.

Social class matters in Egypt. Gone are the days of unequal distribution of wealth of the *bashawiyât* in the pre-Nasserite agrarian economy, where more than a third of the country's fertile soil was owned by less than 0,5 percent of the population[655], yet the Egyptian street is still conscious of the segmentation of peoples cutting directly through sectarian identities. Although, the old aristocracy of khedival Egypt has mostly been replaced by a cosmopolitan upper middle class that primarily emerged during Sadat's economic liberalization policies and were cemented during Mubarak.[656] "If you want to cross the class borders in Egypt", says Sonia, "you better do it at the *maqâm* [saint's shine]."[657]

When Sonia tells me about her mother's reaction to her getting involved with Sufis and Sufism, especially how Sonia would visit the saints, she says that her mother reacted very negatively and would argue with her that it was a non-Islamic innovation (*bid'a*) and ultimately heretical. Given time to think about it, Sonia comments that her mother was guided by class awareness rather than theology. "Yeah, I think it was class sensitivity. Definitely. Because, there are no Sufis in my mom's family, they all come from my father's family."[658] Sonia's father's family, hailing from the Sharqiyya province in the Delta, had a family connection to the *Shazly* (*Shâdhilî*) Sufi

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[653] See: Patrick Haenni & Raphael Voix, "God by All Means…Eclectic faith and Sufi resurgence among the Moroccan bourgeoisue", 241-256 in *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*, edited by Martin van Bruinessen & Julia Day Howell (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013)

[654] Al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities*, 48

[655] Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 54

[656] Harry Pettit, "Uncomfortable ethnography: Navigating friendship and 'cruel hope' with Egypt's disconnected middle-class" in *Emotion, Space and Society*, Volume 36, Aug 2020; Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, chapter 4
2020,

[657] Interview O

[658] Interview O

tariqa. Instead of bar-hopping, one of Sonia's friends used to take her out for what they called *maqam*-hopping, basically visiting as many saint shrines as they could during an evening. The evenings became a unique insight for her to the lives of Egyptians she rarely came into contact with otherwise:

> Sonia: One night I ended up with some friends at a…ehm…a brothel kind of night club in *Mohandisîn*, basically a very low-class kind of place, with what I suspect were men from the working class and lots of prostitutes. It was me and a friend and two other male friends from university and it was such fun. But, we also felt threatened. Not threatened in a scary way but…you don't know what could've happened that night. I was very light-hearted about it, but what I am saying is, that's how you cross the class line in Egypt. At the *maqâm*.[659]

The question of Sufism and veneration of saints in Islamic Egypt is at its core an ontological and theological dispute amongst Muslims, but the aspect of class opposition shouldn't be discarded, otherwise the analysis will lack an important component. Maryam and her daughter Basma retell a story of a relative who was returning to Cairo by train from Aswan in Upper Egypt where she had been working. The relative was involuntarily stuck on the train for more than ten hours with a woman returning from pilgrimage to the *mazâr* of the famous saint *Abu l-Hassan al-Shâdhilî* (d. 1258) in the desolate desert in Humaythara in the Red Sea governorate.

> Basma: They were stuck together for more than ten hours discussing this, and the story from my aunt was 'this ignorant lady doesn't understand anything, making up a different religion [from Islam], being superstitious, uneducated. I don't know who the hell she was visiting there and…'
>
> Maryam: …'and the lady swore that he had a miracle and that he saved a child from the crocodile. And guess what, Maryam. He invented a name for Allah. A new name. We have 99 names of Allah, and suddenly she tells me, he invented a new name. What the hell is she saying?' She was angry and nervous, telling me the story.[660]

As Maryam continues to tell me the story of her sister's aggressive reaction to meeting the pilgrim to Humaythara, she confides in me that in her heart, she strongly feels drawn to the practices at the shrines. She remembers going to them in her childhood and will often accompany Basma to them, but not without hesitation. While Basma says that she will touch the grave in order to get the *baraka* from it, Maryam says she won't, but adds: "I feel the *baraka*. I wish I could do it. I wish I could do it without scruples."[661]

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[659] Interview O
[660] Interview B
[661] Interview C, edited

My father, says Basma, is different from her mother's relatives. Although he does not engage in Sufism, she feels that it stems from the standpoint of being more grounded in a disenchanted world view. "Baba is coming more from a position *keda* of being, you know, 'civilized' and practical. Sometimes I think that he thinks that this is superstition, not the act of an educated person. Why would you go and ask a blessing from someone? You should take care of it yourself."[662]

Not uncommon in Egyptian families, the parental and grandparental generations of the informants were part of the large urbanization push that followed the Republican era in Egypt until 1985.[663] All except Rabia grew up in Muslim families with parents who to some degree upheld common Islamic virtues such as fasting and praying. At least one of the parents had in their lifetime also migrated to Cairo from rural Egypt, either the Delta (Sonia, Aziza and Maryam) or Upper Egypt (Basma).[664] Aziza's story of her father remains an intimate part of familial history, but it is a general internal migrant history she shares with many other urban Egyptians:

> Aziza: My father is from a village on the border of between the governorates Daqliya and Sharqiyya. He is a *fellah* [peasant], my father. He grew up in this village. It is a very small village. When he was a little boy, there was no elementary school in this village, so from a very young age he had to move to a bigger village, so he could go to school there. For collage he came to Cairo, and this is the story of most of his family. They migrated to Cairo. From there, you know, he came to the US for higher studies.[665]

For Rabia, who grew up with what she describes as Swedish socialdemocratic egalitarian ideals, the adjustment to living a privileged Egyptian life came at the expense of emotionally taxing experiences. When she had just moved to Egypt and started attending AUC, for practical reasons, her father employed a driver to drive her to school. Rabia used to sit in the front seat, listen to Bob Dylan and smoke cigarettes, and chitchat to the driver in a relaxed manner. Today she says she understands that it was quite uncommon, but at the time she had a more naïve appreciation for both gender and class boundaries. After some time, she started to notice unwanted behavior from the driver and told her uncle. The driver was fired on the spot.

> Rabia: I used to think we're all equals (…) and then suddenly he lost his job, and I was like: 'Oh dear, what did I do now?' After that we got a new driver, but I still didn't really get it. Every day he was served lunch at my uncle's, before he finished work and I used to sit down in front of him and eat mine.

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662 Interview C, edited grammatically

663 Julia Zinkina & Andrey Korotayev, "Urbanisation Dynamics in Egypt: Factors, Trends, Perspectives" in *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Winter 2013) p. 23 f.

664 At the time of writing, it is unclear in the case of Rabia and Hassan

665 Interview F, edited.

> You know, like in Sweden if you have a carpenter at home, you don't think you're above him or anything. But this guy, he couldn't even move when I sat at the same table, he was so shy. After that I realized that…you can't act the same way you act in Sweden. There are different rules and a different social game here that you just have to play.[666]

From humble beginnings in the Egyptian countryside, many families were able to migrate not only geographically around Egypt but also found ample income as professionals outside of Egypt, part of the labor migration push out of Egypt from the 1970s. Many of the informants' familiesfound their way to Europe or the US via working in the Gulf for various periods of time (Rabia, Sonia, Aziza, Basma and Maryam). In Egypt in general, migrations within families double as social mobility migration upwards in society, and the move abroad as professionals (rather than manual labor) solidifies the new social identity. The political-economic trajectory of Egypt, has prepared it for the emergence of Gummies, "hyperdiversive, spiritual rather than Religious-with-a-capital-R, educated, transnational (…) –they have a high disposable income, and the vast majority are English speakers."[667]

The generational tension between the Islam of Basma's or Sonia's parental generation and their own choices to re-establish saint's visitation (*ziyara*) as an integral part of their religious practices needs to be understood not simply as contested orthodoxy, but more plausibly in the eyes of the preceding generation, a social, geographical and temporal move backwards, simultaneously as it challenges the idea of a division between "Islam" and "the West". Sufism in the hands of the Gummies, threatens status quo and disintegrates the position of power held by parental generation.

The Saints

Egyptian Sufism, especially the veneration of saints, may have been in decline during the latter half of the 20th century, andif not in decline, then at least under the radar, but it seems to be reemerging as Egypt moves further into the 21th century. For Aziza, there is no doubt that *wilaya* as a concept and *ziyâra* is part of Islamic orthodoxy.

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[666] Interview M

[667] Harriet Sherwood, "Muslim Lifestyle Expo in London highlights largely untapped market" in *The Guardian*, (April 7, 2016) http://theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/07/muslim-lifestyle-expo-london-global-brands-spending-power

> Aziza: This is what they teach us about *awliya*, about the prophet Muhammad. It's not something that I invented on my own. It is what has been transmitted to us. (…) I like to visit [the shrine] and I feel like it's…it does uplift me spiritually. I made a lot of prayers there and I believe that many of them gets answered as a result of that. Yeah. That's what I believe.[668]

According to Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, the resurgence of it seems directly related to the problems of the modern world.[669] The intimacy and comfort found in the saints, according to her, is a direct response to late urbanization and the anonymity of the newly constructed neighborhoods in a populace whose seniority is postponed due to the inflation in the cost of marriage. Educated enough to have left the sugar cane fields and peasant life but not educated or connected enough to rise to financial autonomy, the saints remain a lost memory of a popular culture in disrepair. Oppressed and disenfranchised within society, people turn to the saints anew to express themselves, to be heard, and to find some fresh air to breathe:

> The new profile of these devoted candidates explains in part the rejuvenation of saints, more urban, more modern, more adaptational. The origins are not absent, but they are somewhere else than in the countryside, objects of re-interpretation. The transpersonal saint (*majdhub*) is still venerated in the village; it is difficult for him to exist in the town.[670]

Mayeur-Jaouen points to a discontinuity in Egyptian Sufism from its village origins and the new phenomena of Sufism in the modern city. She may perhaps be over-interpreting the disconnect, as Valerie Hoffman demonstrates, popular Sufism is not without roots to both its local hotbed nor to the more literal and educated formal apparition of Sufism in the upper echelons of Egyptian society.[671] At face value, though Mayeur-Jaouen's theory is plausible, the role of the saint in Muslim religiosity is to anchor the believer in tradition. The power of a saint is thus incumbent on how successful he or she is in being relevant in contemporary times. Contemporary Sufism and veneration of saints take place in an Egyptian society stratified in social classes. The friction between countryside and city, between lower and middle-class society is present also in how Sufism is both perceived and practiced.

Rabia, who in her own appreciation, approaches the Egyptian society in which she has lived for over twenty-five years with the glare of an outsider, also distinguishes between her own tariqa-centered Sufism and the popular

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[668] Interview F

[669] Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, "Saints Coptes et Saints Musulmans de l'Egypte du xx:e siècle" in Revue de l'Histoire des Religions, no. 215-1 (1998), 183

[670] Mayeur-Jaouen, "Saints Coptes et Saints Musulmans", 184 (translation by author)

[671] See: Hoffman, *Sufism, Mysticism and Saints*

traditions of poorer Egyptians, ones she acknowledges as true but does not really participate in personally.

> Rabia: She used to…If she had problems she would go to *Sayyeda Nafisa*. That's how she solves her problems. If she's in a crisis, in a conflict, you go to a maqam, pray there and then receive help. I believe…It's inherent in our… the soul of the Egyptian people. To reach for the aid of these…*Sahaba* and *ahl al-bayt* and so, in these holy places. Yeah, it's there but maybe, like you say, a large majority of the population have a more flexible attitude to it all.[672]

Compared to the other informants, I get the sense that Rabia is both more distanced from the religious landscapes of the Egyptian society in which she lives while simultaneously being more categorically assured of what Sufism is personally. There are of course structural factors that contribute to how she came to think and believe in this manner. She is a stay home mother, she lives in a newer satellite residential area of Cairo, and the interviews take place at the peak of Corona restrictions, all of which naturally limit her day-to-day interaction with the Cairene street life. Like many *tariqa*-oriented Sufis, she follows a spiritual regime of reading a portion of daily litanies from the Qur'an or blessings over the prophet, so-called *wird* [pl. *awrâd*] In her *wird* is included a thirtieth of the Qur'an daily together with selected reading from one of the seven patron saints of the Moroccan town of Marrakesh, al-Jazûli's (d. 1465) collection of *awrâd, dalâ'il al-khayrat.*[673] In Sedgwick's approach, she definitely belongs to a high-cultured segment of Sufism that shares some intersecting space, but perhaps not place, with popular Egyptian Sufism.

> Rabia: I mean, we can't right now [because of Covid restrictions], but we do have a weekly *zikr* that we attend. That's the practical aspect. We do celebrate mawlids and so but, in my *tariqa* we don't go to…It's important to visit *maqâms* but we might not go to Hussain or Sayyeda Zaynab or someone's mawlid because they're quite…I mean, have you been to any of these attractions in Cairo?
>
> Brusi: If I have? Sure!
>
> Rabia: Yeah, I mean, they start really late at night and they're not always really…something that feels particularly spiritual, all the time.[674]

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[672] Interview J, translated from Swedish N.B. *Sahaba* means the companions of Muhammad the prophet

[673] The *dala'il khairat* (the guide to good) is mainly made up of invocations of blessings upon Muhammad the prophet. The text itself is framed by a hagiography, where al-Jazuli witnessed a miracle connected to a young girl who was able to make a well overflow by spitting in it. Once al-Jazuli learned that it did so because the girl's tongue was wet with praising the prophet frequently, he decided to compose a systematized collection of praises. dalailkhayrat.com is an English website, containing both the source text in Arabic as well as some contextual material.

[674] Interview J

One way of approaching the obvious difference of perspectives on popular Sufism, regardless if it is from a benign or more callous vantage point is to consider it to come out of a literary cultural critique, which of course coincides with class aspects. Barry Sanders claims that consciousness of self is intimately tied to the reflexivity born out of literacy and people in oral cultures do not experience themselves outside of direct real-world involvement. Reading and writing, on the other hand, "radically alter perception", almost instantly lifting the reader out of a collective into a more "self-centered and abstract world."[675] Paradoxically, Ahmed holds that the technological shift from orality to (mass) literacy in the Muslim world, led to a depletion of hermeneutical engagement with the texts and less reflexive reading of them. For Ahmed, the inner world of modern Muslims is poorer than of their pre-modern predecessors.[676] Be that as it may, the ability of self-reflection, writes Becker, comes with the cognitive penalty of dread and anxiety, the greatest and most peculiar one is the awareness of one's own inevitable death.[677] Religion, thus, broadly defined, can be described as a human effort to defy the anxiety that death instills in her, through the creation of immortality ideologies. The promise of life after death as the Qur'anic text assures, is discernably on the nose, but since immortality is possibly a question of eternal bliss or torture, post-existential stakes are of ultimate concern. From this outset, it is possible to outline some of the complexities in what Ahmed dubs the contradictory meaning-making conceptualization of Islam in which Muslims live.[678]

The *mawlids* of popular saints in Egypt can get a bit rowdy. Rabia says that she is primarily attracted to the sober, contemplative Sufism that her Shaykh propones. She mentions the affair of al-Hallaj as an example of the problem with ecstatic, or drunken, Sufism. At its core, she says, it is an unfinished, imperfect state. "I am not saying the experiences aren't genuine, I am sure they are, but when you act like that, it is because you haven't reached this sober…what lies behind it, when you are able to control yourself."[679]

> Rabia: There is this love of the saints in people, but it's with that like with everything. Some people might not have the best manners, but that doesn't mean they don't have pure hearts. One has to take it as it is, try to understand that there's good in that, at the core of it.[680]

[675] Barry Sanders, *A is for Ox*, (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 31
[676] Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 523
[677] Becker, *The Denyal of Death*, 69-70
[678] Ahmed, *What is Islam*, 404
[679] Interview L, translated from Swedish
[680] Interview L, translated from Swedish

I cannot help to think that matters like self-composure and discipline are aspects that especially attract a Western definition of spirituality; stoic and ascetic ideals wrapped into an ideology that is perfectly fitting idealizations about what the attributes of spirituality are from the European near-historical vantage point, that is, personal, subjective and focused on the self. Sufism concerns itself with the inwards, says Aziza. Sufism is in relation to *fiqh*, "because our experience in this world is physical but also spiritual."[681] Sufism to her is a similar to *fiqh*, a structural approach to develop oneself spiritually rather than in terms of ritual or ethics, as would otherwise be the purpose of *fiqh*.

Sonia loves visiting the saints. Like all the other informants, she makes an effort to visit Cairo's shrines whenever she has an opportunity. She feels particularly connected to visit the *mazâr* of shaykh Muhammad Amin in the heart of Fatimid Cairo, behind Husain towards *bâb al-futûh*. For ordinary Egyptians, she says, visiting the saints is very important, but usually it's a practice connected to specific needs. "But to maintain a constant connection with the saints, whether you are in trouble or not, is quite rare. You go to the saints when you need something."[682]

The lingering question remains why some Muslims feel the need to ask for the intercession (*tawassul*) of a saint, when other Muslims not only refuse the idea of sanctity and view the practice of *tawassul* to be the definition of heresy.[683] I ask Sonia why she believes so many Muslims visit the saints, when they are also taught that a supreme godhead is both omnipotent and directly addressable. Her face lights up and she laughs as she answers my somewhat unanswerable question:

> Sonia: Can I…Where can I visit God? I mean, where is God? Where can I visit God? I don't know, it just feels more real with the saints. It's like a direct connection to God, or something.[684]

Another idea about saints is presented by Basma, who suggests that death is an important aspect of sanctity, in that the world no longer offers a chance to get lured in by its temptations, through quoting what she credits a Sufi saying: "If you are to imitate someone, then imitate the one who died." I ask her to elaborate on what she means by that, and she explains that she thinks the idea behind the saying, is that people are fickle and in her own experiences she has

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[681] Interview H
[682] Interview O
[683] This is for instance often understood as the position of Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328), often quoted in arguments against *tawassul* violating the doctrine of *tawhîd*. See for instance "Why does some of the scholars disallow tawassul" in the Wahabi/Saudi webpage Islam Q&A: https://islamqa.info/en/answers/114142/why-do-some-of-the-scholars-disallow-tawassul-by-virtue-of-the-status-of-the-prophet-blessings-and-peace-of-allah-be-upon-him
[684] Interview O

witnessed how someone that looks and acts very pious can turn out to be quite disappointing. Once dead, they remain in the spiritual stature in which they died. On the other hand, Basma says, "Sometimes you meet people and they are obviously alive and you can't help thinking that this person has something special *ya'ni*, somehow they're connected."[685]

Ziyâra – Communicating with the saints

A minimalist definition of *ziyâra* is any pilgrimage outside of the institutionalized pilgrimage to Mecca. As Josef Meri points out, even if pilgrimage to the shrines of saints poses a threat to the Qur'anic stress of absolute monotheism, the veneration of saints and their resting places has been an integral part of religious life for most Muslims in late antiquity and medieval ages. The three main factors of the materialization of the phenomenon is sought in the martyrdom of Husain and the prophetic family emerging as a first category of saints. The second is the rise of the Sufi holy man in eastern Islamic lands, to whom people would travel for knowledge, and lastly the status of patriarchs and prophets in the Qur'an which encompassed many Muslims into the already existing Christian and Jewish sites of pilgrimage across the Levant and North Africa.[686]

Robert Orsi points out the important aspect of familiarity and emotional connection to saints in the religious lives of people.

> [A] network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together. These relationships have all the complexities—all the hopes, evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on—of relationships between humans.[687]

True to her habit, the last time Sonia visited Cairo, she also made sure to pay a visit to the *mazâr* of shaykh Muhammad Amin, of whom she explains having developed "a very special relationship". She found that this time the experience was different. The groundkeeper would not let her in to the shrine at first. She says she did not get a clear reason why, maybe the mosque itself, which badly needs restauration, was under a restriction order and she was

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[685] Interview D; translated from Arabic: (من كان مقتديا فيقتديا بمن مات)

[686] Josef W. Meri, "The etiquette of devotion in the Islamic cult of Saints" in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, edited by James H. Howard-Johnston & Paul A. Hayward, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 263-268

[687] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 2

perhaps perceived to be a tourist, but with a small donation, the guardian of the mosque let her in. Once inside she found that several other people were already there. When she asked the groundskeeper why he had let them in and not her at first, he replied that they were from the ministry of antiquities. "He was like, they're from the *Asâr*...but they weren't. That's bullshit. They weren't looking at antiquities." Like Sonia, they were involved in *ziyâra*.

> Sonia: It's damn funny [Swe: Så jävla roligt], on my way out, I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. I was leaving the mosque or going inside, I still hadn't taken off my shoes and I saw an old man coming out, led by a younger man. He said to me: 'Do you know shaykh Muhammad Amin?' I said yes. He said: 'Did he call you to come visit him?' I said yes, I have come from very far to see him. He was so happy that somebody came to visit the shaykh. Then his son or grandson said: 'Sister, cover your arms please. Cover your arms!'[688]

Sonia explains that the difference between the two men is a tell of the complexity of Islamic religious culture in Cairo. "One was more concerned…very loving. 'Oh, you're here to see the shaykh and he's called you' and the other one: 'Cover your arms.' I found it funny. I'm glad I went through that in my life."[689]

Developing a relationship is equally important to Basma. She explains it in terms of a psychological barrier towards making *ziyâra* to the shrines of saints she does not know, even though she emphasizes that she does not see anything wrong in it.

> Basma: Like visiting the tombs of people like people that are known to be *awliya* but I actually don't know much about them, or don't know them except for the name or something. I try as much as possible whenever I go to visit to read even a little bit about the person because...I don't know, I feel like a hypocrite. I don't know, I don't want to be like...even though *ma 'arafsh ayh* [I don't know what], there's another argument, you believe *innu* this person was a good person at some point or maybe he will help you one day. For me it makes a big difference if you know a lot about the person.[690]

Robert Orsi writes that hagiography can be prescriptive, which is also the safest way to imagine the bond between heaven and earth. "These holy figures can be taken as moral exemplars, ideal expressions of how people in a particular social world ought to live."[691] Maryam, remembering instances of making *ziyâra* with her mother as a child, has since been taught that the practice of *ziyâra* is akin even to idolatry. In our fourth meeting, she is quite

[688] Interview O
[689] Interview O
[690] Interview D
[691] Robert Orsi, *Between heaven and Earth*, 118

open to reconnecting to the practice as Basma talks of her relationship to shaykh Dardir.

> Basma: *Ya'ni* for example one of the places I love and feel very special in... Shaykh Dardir
>
> Maryam: Dardir?
>
> Basma: Aah, very close el-Azhar mosque, he was an Azhari person, shaykh in the nineties [sic]. I know the reason behind that, is that I know the person very well, *ya'ni*, I read a lot about him and *keda* and studied the *kharîda al-bahiyya*.[692] It's like a *matn*, you know? He wrote an '*ilm al-kalâm*. I'm really personally very grateful an in dept to this person because I have so many doubts and questions and *kharida* was the actual main reason that solves all this. So, like being there it feels like, I know the person and I am grateful to him and it's just...very straight forward, as if you're talking to someone you know.
>
> Maryam: You have got to introduce me to him.
>
> Basma: *Yalla*, *Wallahi* I miss him so much!
>
> Maryam: *Wallahi 'ullilu ummi magnûna wa l-nabî', haddihâ shwayya* [Tell him: My mother is crazy, by the prophet, make her at ease.] [laughs]
>
> Basma: *Fa*, it feels very natural, talking to him and being around him and wanting to get close to him I feel very natural *ya'ni ba'a*, when you hear stories about him, he was a blind person and it is known about him, *ya'ni* known by *tawâtur*, so many people said that he used to open locked doors, like he had some sort of super power and there was miracle he used to do. *Fa…*it's just you know, it makes you not doubt for a second that this is a very special person and this is a very special place. Of course, God gave him some.... power to be in this position, *fa…* it just feels very normal and natural wanting to be around him. Maybe more than...other famous people that you don't know much about them or there isn't this personalized...
>
> Maryam: It all has to do with chemistry by the way. Maybe there is something I mean that you found in the bier that made you in love! Yeah, I have nothing against this. Definitely.

Not all saints in Egypt are known to have come out of the scholarly ranks of al-Azhar. Neither are the hagiographies, whether written or in the public discourse, stating a connection between *awliya* and particular aptitude for *fiqh* or *kalâm*. But, saints that do double as theologians, arguably creates a "safer"

[692] The *Kharida al-Bahiyya* (The Radient Pearl) is a 71 line didactic poem on the *Ash'ari* creed written by Imam Ahmad al-Dardir (d. 1786), an Azhari of the Maliki school of jurisprudence and the Egyptian *Khalwatiyya* tariqa, to this day closely associated with al-Azhar through the al-Tayyib family. A reading of the poem can be found at https://youtu.be/npZMXgamr3M

bond between formal Islam and individual worshippers, very similar to Orsi's description of the dynamics of saints and church authorities in the American Catholic church.

How to recognize a saint

Where the Catholic Church instituted the rite of canonization, likely as a means to reign in the popular saint cults in the Mediterranean, there was no corresponding authority in the Islamic world, even if the development in both traditions appears to happen at the same time.[693] So, if saints in the Islamic world are not officially sanctioned as such, how do Muslims know who is a saint? Rabia talked about this extensively in an interview that will be cited next.. Her thoughts revealed that although the saints are somehow unordinary humans with the ability to perform miracles, they are also hidden in plain sight.

> Rabia: What is *awliya*? So, in general I think you could say…I just listened to a *sohba,* [a talk], on it yesterday. In general, one could say that you're *awliya* if you're beloved by god. You try to be completely devoted in your life, you try to come near god, then you are a *wali*, it's a designation, so to speak. But, *awliya* as miracle…that performs miracles, that's a completely different category. There are holy men and women that have become…well…they have reached…they have reached states where… It's described in a *hadith qudsi* where god says that 'you approach me through worship…' or…you know which hadith qudsi I mean, right?
>
> Brusi: I know which one you're talking about.[694]
>
> Rabia: and when…and then I become your eyes and your…Ok, you have to look this up so I quote it correct.
>
> Brusi: Sure. I know which one you mean.

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[693] See chapter 3

[694] "On the authority of Abu Hurayra, who said, the prophet said that God said: 'Whosoever shows enmity to someone devoted to Me, I shall be at war with him. My servant draws not near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have enjoined upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him, and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. I do not hesitate about anything as much as I hesitate about [seizing] the soul of My faithful servant: he hates death and I hate hurting him.'" *Forty Hadith Qudsi*, 1997, pp. 104-105

Rabia: Anyway. That's the state that they reach. In that sense they are united with God. Or, kind of, they are completely in his…power sounds wrong. They died before they died. They have kind of…

Brusi: Like a samurai?

Rabia: Like a samurai, like a leaf on a garbage dump.

Brusi: I'm sorry to interrupt, but did you know that Samurai means servant?

Rabia: No, I didn't.

Brusi: It does. It means servant. I found that intriguing. There are many, or not many, I know two guys who are really into martial arts. They're also converts to Islam. They did martial arts before they became Muslims and they see so many similarities between Bushido and Sufism.

Rabia: Yeah. I believe that the spiritual traditions, the genuine spiritual traditions have many similarities. I'm sure of that. But, back to the saints. Someone who is loved by God, that is close to God, and perhaps even–at least metaphorically–becomes one with the divine. I'm thinking of al-Hallaj here.

Brusi: Could you say that Sufism is the spiritual practice that is meant to facilitate to become a saint?

Rabia: Yes, that's a way of putting it. I mean, that is somewhere what you train to do even if not everyone reaches it. But, that is the purpose. Everyone has the potential of becoming *awliya*. Everyone has that. I mean, it's not saying that you're not going to be loved by god, that you're not going to come near him, but it's not guaranteed that you'll reach that before you die. It is what it is. People are different in how much *niyya*, [intention], how much love, how much attraction they have. It can fluctuate somewhat, but not the possibility. It's open for all, equally.

Brusi: Did you meet any saints?

Rabia: Plenty. I've been lucky. Both living and dead. I mean, we say that our shaykh is a saint. It a condition for being a real shaykh, that one is a *wali*. Otherwise you can't help. He can't guide you. He can't know anything outside of God's…you know as I told you… 'You see through me'. When God says 'I become your eyes.' That's how we know that a *wali* can know something about someone else. He sees what God wants him to know about his *murids*. It's not like he has some kind of super powers, that he can spy on people. It's from a kind of trust, you know. He sees what God wants him to see, so that he can aid in specific things. That's what we believe. A real shaykh is a *wali*. Then there are others, hidden more or less, that doesn't have the function of being a *murshid*, a guide. They are found around… you hear that so-and-so is a *wali*

and… I've met plenty of them and what is striking about them is that they are entirely… you could never guess. Imagine mother Theresa.

Brusi: Imagine what?

Rabia: Mother Theresa. I mean, she's not flashy, there's nothing to her except that you know what she did, but if you met her in the subway, you wouldn't think 'Oh, there goes a saint.' She doesn't radiate…something… They are hidden. They are so ordinary. You couldn't pick them out in a crowd.

Brusi: They walk among us?

Rabia: Yeah. That's one of the attributes, I believe, that they are humble. But I also imagine that people in our days don't look for saints anymore. That makes them even more hidden, I guess.

Brusi: Can all saints perform…I mean, are there miracles connected to saints?

Rabia: I'm sure. But the saints themselves, the way I understand it, they don't think it's anything to strive for. There's this story of Rabia al-Adawiyya. She was the teacher of Hassan al-Basri and both were *awliya*. At some point they were by a river and he took his prayer rug and walked out on the river and said, 'come Rabia, let's pray here.' Then she flew up into the air and prayed there. Then she commented by saying that it was nothing. 'Flies can do what I just did.' It's nothing. Nothing admirable. That's the attitude to miracles one hears when one socializes in that kind of a crowd. There's simply no focus on miracles, even if you know that they occur.'
It's possible that miracles are important for people. At the same time, one has to be careful because there are people that use *Jinn* to do things that appear miraculous. They can trick people into believing that they are able to do this because they are *walis*. That shouldn't be the criteria for distinguishing if someone is a holy person or not. There are other signs to look for. For example, number one is that he follows *sharia*. That's number one. Number two is that when you sit with such a person you are gratified. Your heart is swimming, kind of. I've experienced that myself, it feels like…like you get a taste of paradise, when you sit with such a person. Number three, your love for this person grows stronger and stronger with time. Those are the three signs one can use to make sure it is such a person. Miracles is nothing in itself to be looking for. Sure, in a way I understand how they are important. I've also experienced when I've been in contact with a *wali*, things that…are miraculous. My shaykh for example, he knew I would marry my husband. He could see it in *lawh al-mahfûz*, [the book of destiny][695]. He told me there is a doctor in Egypt who is forty years old and you will marry him when you have finished your studies.

[695] Literatim: The preserved tablet. The term is found in the Qur'an (85:22), not uncommonly thought of, or interpreted in Islamic exegesis to be the divine Qur'an, from which the (earthly) Qur'an originates.

> That's just what happened. Things like that. It's by default that all *awliya* can read from *lawh al-mahfûz*. They know what's written.[696]

I would not suggest that all the informants share Rabia's belief that the saints have knowledge of what in Islamic theology is referred to as the unseen [*al-ghayb*]. Rabia's account, however, highlights the very complex nature of how adherence to Sufism in a lifeworld that aims to merge several perhaps contradictory beliefs which is found with all the informants. She acknowledges the presence of miracles while downplaying their importance and meaning, she asserts the reality of saints but also holds that they are so plain that they normally don't register in peoples' perceptions.

In a reflexive spirit, it should be mentioned here that balancing a kind of magic reality with a material-rational one, is not a unique feature with the informants but, in my opinion, a human characteristic. Many people buy lottery tickets and put faith in a cultural concept called luck. We wear certain clothes when we attend sports events with the idea it can change the outcome of the game, or we entertain the romantic notion of finding true love, a soul mate we are destined to be with forever. According to Hughes and McCutcheon this division between a non-empirical inner state and an observable outer behavior, is a key feature of modernity, especially when the inner state is prioritized over the latter.[697]

> Sonia: Sufism (…) for me is like finding a teacher and letting the teacher guide you through life somehow. I don't know how they do it, but they are going to do it. Because, I am not being guided in any other way. It is something that happens in the spirit world. I am convinced it happens in the spirit world and not in the physical world. That's what I think Sufism is. But of course, that's not a very scientific explanation.[698]

Clearly Sonia is not talking about instructions in formal theological dogma or Islamic rites, but like Rabia, is talking about someone that through a certain procured spiritual status has the ability to move into another dimension where he or she can see or somehow acquire knowledge that is normally hidden to people in this world. But also someone who has transcended common human idiosyncracies and negative qualities, vice if you will.

> Sonia: I have this tendency to be very judgmental, and that's a trick of the ego. It's like a trap. It's very easy to judge other people like, oh, you drink or you do that (…) You can become very arrogant when you do everything right. And arrogant is not something you wanna be. It's one of the really big sins. But nobody talks about that in like, you know, Islamic TV. How arrogance is a big sin. Putting yourself in these situations where you make mistakes or do things

[696] Interview J, translated from Swedish
[697] Hughes & McCutcheon, *Religion in 50 Words*, 28
[698] Interview O

> that you're not supposed to do, it puts you in a position where you can't judge anybody anymore. I think these shaykhs and these saints, they have that ability, to not judge. Most common people are very judgmental. That is something that they don't do. They may chastise you for certain behavior or…but they may also use that as a way of teaching you something, allowing you to fall and make mistakes. It's very dangerous to become arrogant and think that you know it all.[699]

Both Sonia and Rabia talks about saints being both of the world and acting in it, all the while having access to a spiritual, intermediate realm. The crucial point is that these worlds are not hermetically sealed from one another, and their notions of what happens in the unseen world is both true and will influence this world. It is of course not belief in the sense of a spontaneous thought process that gives rise to social behavior. What is noticeable is how Islamic dogma, like some interpretations of the concept of *barzakh*, is internalizing authority in Sonia and Rabia through their observations and interpretations of the world.[700] It is perhaps no coincidence then that Sonia's favorite movie out of the Marvel franchise is Dr. Strange (2016).

The spirit world

For some, as Sonia recalls/explains/etc, the saints are a source of existential comfort in a life she recognizes as materially privileged. In other cases, communication between the saints and an everyday Muslim can be the difference between inflicting harm to others and being at ease with breaking cultural traditions. Rabia recounts a story of a woman employed in a friend's household:

> Rabia: You know, she is illiterate and barely has any education. But, she always had the habit of going to Sayyeda Nafîsa, '*alayhâ al-salâm* [peace be upoh her], whenever she had a problem. There was this time when her whole family urged her to circumcise her daughter. They were really adamant about it, her mother, her sisters, they were really dogging her about it. 'You have to circumcise her, otherwise she'll turn out a bad girl, she won't ever be married.' It was that kind of stuff, you know. But me and my husband argued against that and explained why she couldn't go through with it. It's illegal, it's against religion and since my husband is a doctor he could tell her with emphasis that this procedure is

[699] Interview P

[700] *Barzakh* [barrier; division] is a term found in the Qur'an (23:100) and has several interpretations. "The Sufis, too, town (sic) in the sense of space between the material world and that of pure spirits." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, "Barzakh"

> absolutely nothing she should have done to her daughter. She fell into absolute despair and didn't know what to do, so she visited Sayyeda Nafîsa. In a dream later, she met the saint who assured her to forget about the procedure, it is not to be done. By that she got the strength to stand up against social pressure and everything worked out fine.[701]

Dreams are critical in the Egyptian religious landscape, not only for understanding the strong sense of authority they can have for the individual, as with the instance retold by Rabia. It is also perhaps the most important realm for communicating with religious authority for Sonia. In 2003 she travelled to Cyprus to meet shaykh Nazim al-Qubrusi, spiritual leader of the Naqshabandi-Haqqani *tariqa*.[702] "I still felt unfulfilled after meeting him physically in this world. There was nothing he could give me in this world. But, I feel a huge connection to the shaykh in my dreams. To this day, I can remember all the dreams that I've had where he has met me."[703] She says that many of the dreams she has involves her searching for the shaykh, not being able to find him. I ask how she interprets those dreams.

> Sonia: I think I have been distanced from my shaykh in this world in the sense that I have been distanced from the *murîds*, and every time I try to get closer, I am not allowed to come near. I am always taken away. There must be a point to that. I think it is a reflection of that, that I always feel alone in my path. I think he knows that I get easily distracted.[704]

The dream-vision, according to Amira Mittermaier's informants, "can be invited through certain communal practices and technologies of the self, but the source of its ethical imperative is held to be a locus outside the individual and the visible social realm."[705]

During our talks Hassan often refers back to dreams of his or others, but also, as Mittermaier writes, for the discursive divide they create between for instance Sufis and reformist thinkers.[706] Dreams and the interpretation of dreams are not in themselves necessarily a divider between Sufis and Salafi Muslims in Egypt, but as Mittermaier writes, simultaneously highly orthodox and highly contested. As the revivalist movement since the nineteen seventies has shifted focus back towards the unseen, dreams, "together with the space of death (…) has reentered the public sphere and everyday discourses in Egypt."[707]

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[701] Interview L, edited
[702] For an in-depth study, See: Stjernholm, *Lovers of Muhammad*.
[703] Interview O, grammatically edited.
[704] Interview O
[705] Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination*, (Berkely: University of California Press, 2011), 141
[706] Ibid. 4-5
[707] Ibid. 234

The divide with the informants and other non-Sufi Muslims lies not in different dogma or theologies necessarily, but in how thin or thick it appears to be between the material world and the spirit world. A generation apart, Maryam and Basma, illustrate this shift clearly in a conversation about the status of the prophet in his grave:

Maryam: I actually had this feeling when we prayed in *Rawda Sharîfa Medina Munawwara* [The Prophet's mausoleum in Medina]. That was a beautiful feeling. [pause] But I remember also I was cautious about what I say...like. I mean, I had this idea in the back of my mind of *shirk* [idolatry]. Ask God and only ask God. That was so strong.

Basma: Sorry I don't want to impose but...Well, I don't agree with it when we're speaking about anyone, but speaking about the prophet, it's just so un-understandable for me.

Maryam: *La*, I was happy being close to him!

Basma: Oh my god, who can I talk to if I can't talk to him?

Maryam: I was happy being close to him but...I would ask God. 'God, I love your prophet and here near him' but not...'Dear prophet please do this or that for me.' I know, it's weird but...I mean for you, I mean, because it's a different way that we look at things. But, I would enjoy the blessing, enjoy the being close and asking God to keep me close to the prophet in the hereafter as much as I am close now. I would ask so many things for my daughters and for my family and talk about my problem and all of that. I would be emotionally moved and maybe crying and all of that. But what I say exactly is still like colored by how I was brought up.

Brusi: So, when you were there, would you speak to him in first person, I mean second person or in third person?

Maryam: To the prophet? *La, la, al-salâmu alâyka ya rasul allah, al-salâmu alayka ya habîb allah* [Peace be upon you, O messenger of God. Peace be upon you, O beloved of God] definitely. I would treat him like he was alive and feeling like he was alive, but what he can do for me now, I'm not sure. But I know again that this is a contradiction, because I know that when...I believe it very strongly that when I say *allahumma salli 'alâ Muhammad* [God, pray upon Muhammed] things open, so...

Basma: Ana, for me *bardo*, a very clear analogy of *al-shafi'yya* [the intercession] *ya'ni* that's why I say like *fi al- haq sayyedina al-nabî al-salatu w al-salam alayk*, [in sincerity, our master the prophet, prayers and peace on you]. It's very different, *mish zayy* [not like] different, *azdi* [what I mean is that] it's crystal clear to me that this is very ok actually, I don't see how it's not, how it wouldn't be ok because it's very known and I don't think anyone disagrees about that he personally mediate, technically mediate I guess is the word: *yashfa' yawm el-'iyâma fa* [He intercedes on the day of reckoning]... He

personally, is going to be responsible for this and he is going to talk to God about people.[708]

Basma continues to reason with Maryam about the possible interaction and intercession with the deceased for a long period of time, using examples from Islamic history, theology as well as analogies. Eventually we all fall silent and as I fear that the interview prematurely might have come to an end just as it was getting into a most interesting topic, Maryam breaks the silence and sincerely reflects her thoughts to Basma: "*Wallahi*, I have to say…something [you said] touched my mind." We all laugh together, in my mind as a token of the relief of Maryam in wanting to reconnect with the Islam of her childhood which she now perhaps sees in her daughter. After talking a bit about the *baraka* bestowed upon places and certain people she summarizes her newfound position:

> Maryam: When we pass by the *maqâber* [graves] we say '*Al-salâm 'alaykum*', so we actually speak to them (…) but what you guys are trying to convince me of, is that they can bestow peace upon me. That's the point. This is something I need to maybe revise a little and think about. Maybe explore a little more. Or maybe try to relax a little bit, in handling it. But, it is interesting. (…) If you just let go. It's not easy, mind you, for someone who…[709]

Akin to Mittermaier's conclusion that dreams problematize assumed and reductive positions of the range of sense-experiences, I believe that how the *barzakh* is imagined is a key aspect to understand Islam as a lived religion. Although I would be cautious to go as far as Robert Orsi and argue for an independent theory of the holy[710]–as it lacks analytical value outside of an emic perspective–when approached individually as in the data collected for this study, it shouldn't be pigeonholed to fit theoretical paradigms. Rather, as Mittermaier asserts, it is another part of reality that also is interpreted by the people that experience it.[711] The *barzakh* invites ambiguity, and also a space where two similarly dogmatic epistemes can creatively cohabit:

Hassan's dream

[708] Interview D
[709] Interview D
[710] See: Robert Orsi, "The Problem of the Holy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* edited by Robert Orsi, (Cambridge: Combridge University Press, 2012)
[711] Mittermaier, *Dreams that Matter*, 238-239

To underline Mittermaier's conclusion, another long citation follows where this time, Hassan retells how a dream not only lead him to Illinois, but also anchored his ambivalence in certainty that his Sufi instructor there was divinely ordained.

> Hassan: Before I came to the states I applied to many schools to do a PhD in electrical engineering. All of them were top schools. And then I did an *istikhara,* [a particular prayer for guidance]. I had two options, either to like leave the country and do my PhD and it had to be in the states, one of the top schools, or just go to an industry way and to do higher studies in al-Azhar. Then I had the *istikhâra* done and the result was: Ok, if you have something positive, like if you get an acceptance in the states that means that it will be better for you to go to the states. And actually, I had. The only acceptance letter we found, it was from Illinois. Maybe that's better actually also for my spiritual life because I had the *istikhâra* and it told me, Illinois is better than al-Azhar. At that point I kept praying: 'God! Give me a *Qaderi* group! Give me a *Qaderi* shaykh in Illinois.' And it was just a prayer.
>
> I actually had the habit of going to *Sidna el-Hussein.* So yeah, I go every Thursday for *el-Burhaniyya* for the *halaqa el-Burhaniyya,* [the circle of the Burhaniyya tariqa], just to stay there near the *maqâm* and ask god for the best. (…) Every week I would go ask: 'If I have to leave for the states, please give me a shaykh there.' At one point I dreamt that I am in *Sidna Hussein*. I always dreamt that I am revolving around *sidna el-Hussayn* outside. I never dreamt, until that point, that I enter the…*masjid*, the mosque. Actually, at that point in time where I was actually seeking to go to Illinois. I entered the *masjid* and that was like my first time. I did the *wuzû*, [the ritual ablution]. I did it fully naked. I don't know if that's important, but I did my *wuzû* fully naked in the bathroom there and when I came out, getting dressed, there was a brown guy waiting for me. At that point I might say, ok the brown guy means I might have an Egyptian shaykh. I'll be having an Egyptian shaykh or a *Burhani* shaykh. They are brown, they are black. In no point in my life did I think I would be having an Indian shaykh. I know that he was a brown person. He was looking for me very strongly, I was very afraid of him and then I did, in the dream I mean, I did my prayer behind the imam.
>
> So, I came to the states and the dream is saying I'll be finding here a brown person so I thought that he would be an Egyptian person. Ehm… at one point there was this group, people from the area actually, performing here on this day at the university, and the first time that they performed and I saw them. It wasn't like their first performance. It was for *mawlid al-nabî*, the prophet's birthday. So, I went there and I attended and I talked to the people from the group and they told me: 'Come, if you're Sufi you will learn from our *murshid*, our guide.' And I attended the session and he became my *murshid*…or my shaykh.
>
> This is another thing. They use shaykh a lot but in the subcontinent like India and Pakistan they use word for *murshid.* It was a little bit difficult for me because you also have *Ikhwân* they also use the *murshid*…so I don't like that word…make it shaykh *ba'a*. That's how I knew them. It's just the prayings in the beginning and then I find them…I couldn't actually believe because I always wanted the *Qaderi* people and I was very influenced ehm…by the

Qaderiyya people in Syria. Especially Syria. They are beautiful. They have beautiful litanies and beautiful poems. They are very, very soft. Even though I have been attending a lot of *Burhaniyya hadra* or *hadarât* or *zikr*, I don't really feel attached to them. I love those *zikrs* but I would never…thought of having membership from them.

Anyways, I attended the sessions and everything It was at that point. I was always asking myself: 'Should I leave? Should I leave? 'The shaykh is not an Arab, he doesn't really know Arabic very well. Should I leave? Should I leave al-Azhar? Should I just let go of my shaykh only to know Arabic very well? A born Muslim and everything, just to be with my…this shaykh?' I was always between this. Everyone would doubt what I mean like 'Ok, you have the Azhar why you would go and have like a non-Arab shaykh in Illinois - he doesn't really know Arabic'. He knows Arabic but…not really. Not rigorous. Why would you do that, why don't take someone from your own culture who knows your problems? Egyptian or at least Arab. And I was always between yes and no. Yes and no. Until one point. It really, really touched my heart and at that point I promised my heart: 'Ok, it's them.'

So, there was, we were in a certain…session. And then the shaykh ordered a lady in our group…or not ordered…asked a lady in our group to get him the Qur'an. And the way…she had the Qur'an in her bag, in her backpack. The way she…bent to get the Qur'an. Take out the Qur'an. The Qur'an was actually…she covered it with a piece of schaal and it was actually fragrance, they had like perfume on it. Once she opened the backpack and took out the Qur'an it was very, very…It smelled beautiful. The way she dealt with it. Very, very gently, like a baby. And give the Qur'an very, very gently to the shaykh and then the shaykh didn't just remove the cover and read through it. No! He just put it to his heart and start crying. Started kissing it. And then…when he is satisfied, he opened it very carefully and he read just one *ayah*. Just a single verse. Then he said to himself: 'I am satisfied.' Then he closed it back again. And the way she went back. The way she handled the Qur'an…I still remember it. She kneeled down. She took the Qur'an very, very gently. Put it back in the cloth. Very gently she put it back in the backpack. Then she held the backpack above the ground. I didn't see any person deal with a holy book like that. So much care. So much love. In Egypt we usually have the Qur'an in our cars for protection. In our homes, just collecting dust.

Brusi: Yeah, in the taxi. On the dashboard.

Hassan: Yeah, in the taxi car….so it's the answer. It has to be this guy. This guy was the brown guy in my dream.[712]

The prayer of guidance (*salat al-istikhâra*) is an institutionalized prayer in Islamic theology based in the idea of escaping indecision through inspiration,

[712] Interview E

either through dreams or rhapsodomancy, and is found throughout the Muslim world in varying forms and relation to shariatic norms.[713]

The *barzakh*, imagined as an intermediary realm, challenges the idea of an Eliadean division of a binary sacred and profane world view. It is undoubtedly so that the informants perceive a division between their own sensory experienced world and the fictional realm of the divine.[714] By being neither this nor that, the possibility of *barzakh* actually facilitates an enchanted world view, an Islam that transcends ethics, norms and conformity and creates a reality that feels existentially both safe and meaningful because the *barzakh* allows for the divine realm to come out-of-place.

Maryam: A carpet from God

Although not directly about the *barzakh*, Maryam shares a long story that she ascertains illustrates that there is a reality beyond the observable world. The citation below illustrates how everyday matters are understood and explained by her related to this view.

> Maryam: I have something personal that happened to me that cannot be explained by reason, by logic. I still feel grateful to Allah *subahanahu ta'ala* that this happened to me.
>
> Basma: *Al-Segada*, [the carpet]?
>
> Maryam: Ahh! Until this day I don't know how it happened. I can tell you the story if you'd like to hear it.
>
> Brusi: I would love to hear it, if you want to share it.
>
> Maryam: Yeah yeah, I want to share it. I share it with so many people actually. Because I think it's, I would say it's the price of patience and being, I mean controlling one's temper, particularly with my mother, because she was, *allah yerhamhaa*, [God have mercy on her] she was very tough person. She was uptight and very strong and kind of a control-freak. She wanted us to do things the way she liked and the way she wanted.

[713] Encyclopaedia of Islam, second edition, "Istikhara"; For a description see: Jamal A. Badawi, *Selected Prayers: A Collection of Du'a From the Qur'an and Sunnah*, (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1979), 63-64

[714] I use the term fictional here not in the sense of denying or belittling a religious belief, but to make a theoretical distinction between the shared reality of a world that is possible to describe through empiricism and a world that is primarily known through literature (i.e. the Qur'an, *Hadith* and other oral traditions)

At a certain point in my life, I refused to go and live in a building she had for all of us, you know a *sha'a*, [apartment], for each one and she would put her daughters... and my husband didn't want to go there. It was a suburb outside of Egypt, el-Obour city and his work was in Medinat Nasr and Heliopolis and he wanted to stay there and she would say: 'Your father is dead and you have to be near me and here is the place and you have to come' and all of that... I kind of said: 'Sorry mama but I can't do that. I'm sorry but I really can't.'

To cut a long story short. I was praying a lot. Trying to balance, you know, the needs of my family, my husband, my children because I didn't want to break the family because of my mother's orders, do's and don'ts. At the same time, we didn't have a flat at that time and she said...she took all my carpets, we rented a flat. I think, no, no, no, she prepared a small flat, one of my sisters' flats for us, for me and my husband to stay in until she sells the house that we were in order to build that new place for all of us. We moved because we didn't have any other option, and we were patient, and my husband was excellent, and he was busy with his PhD, and me also with my studies, and we said ok, let's go. Our children are young and the small flat is no problem. And then, when she builds this castle of hers *ya'ni* we will decide whether we should go or not. Still remains the problem of our carpets. What are we going to do with the carpets?

Basma: They were too big.

Maryam: They were too big to fit in the small flat, the transient flat that we moved into. So, she said: 'Never mind the carpets, I will keep them for you' and she took them somewhere and she stashed or stored them somewhere. Then, when the time came, she had the house built and they wanted to go but we decided we were better off financially, and we could afford to rent a flat of ourselves, for our own. A bigger flat where we can accommodate our carpets which she kept for us.

Then when I went to her, *Rabbena yisammaha*, I pray for her, she says: 'I have no idea where the carpets are, they may have been eaten by rabbits...rats or something, they may have been ruined, I don't know.' I kind of disobeyed her by not moving to the place she wanted She loved me so much and she wanted me so much and she saw no reason in her mind for us to rent an apartment and pay lots of money for it, when there is a flat is ready for us. So, she said: '*Yaa*, make the doctor buy you a new carpet. The carpets are not there.'

The other side of the story *ba'a*, my mother-in-law is a very traditional old woman who would take care of a plastic cup like this. So, if I went home and told her my carpets are gone...I mean she was there in the new flat that my husband rented for us and she was waiting for the carpets that my mother kept for me for a couple of years to arrive. I just didn't know what to do! *Wallahi*, I didn't know what to do. I was in a predicament and praying, praying: *Allahumma salli 'alayk ya rasulallah, ya rabb ya rabb*, [God pray on you O messenger of God, O Lord, O Lord], all the time. *Madad ya rabbi*, [relieve me O Lord]. I controlling my temper, I didn't say anything to my mother remembering: *la taqulum offin wa tanharhuma*[715], [do not say uff to them and

[715] Q 17:23

do not chide them], trying to be...to...take all the resources from *rabbena, ma fish ghayr keda,* [our Lord, there is nothing else]. I mean, to shout at your own mother...*khalas*, [that's it].

I came back home to find a gift for my husband. A carpet that fit the biggest room, the reception. My husband always gets gifts. But this was the only time in thirty or more years we got a carpet as a gift. *Wallahi* that was the only time in our life...

Basma: It's a weird gift, who gives someone a carpet?

Maryam: It's a weird gift and on this particular day. I was like: *Eh da?! Di 'ayân 'andi gabli segada. El-'ayân gabli segada,* [what is this? The patient gave me a carpet?] And to this very day, I have this carpet and I told them, this was matched by God. *Rabbena subhanahu ta'ala*, [our Lord, exalted and high]. I was patient with my mother, I was kind of trying to balance things walking on a tightrope and praying all the time for god to help and with this little carpet, I mean we started the whole carpet collection later on. *Fa…al-hamdulillah* I think this is one of the things that keeps me capable of making sacrifice. Capable of controlling my anger. Whenever anybody down my, my sister went to Mecca and she asked me what would you like me to pray for you, what would you want? She was expecting I want my daughters to get married or that I want more money or what not. I told her I want *al-hulm wa al-'ilm. Ya'ni ana ayza el-hilm,* [Serenity and knowledge]. I want, *innu huwa,* [that is], to control yourself and to control anger and *el-hilm*, to accept anything that happens to us. *Al-hamdulillah*, [praise God]. You [Frederic] will remember me as a person who got a carpet as a gift from Allah.[716]

From the individual perspective of this study, it is difficult to sideline Clifford Geertz' general focus of religions as cultural systems rather than political societies, not forgetting that religion may often have political implications and that the relation between societies and cultures are reciprocal. The relevance of Geertz is found in how his particularistic approach steers clear of second-guessing the beliefs of people with reductionist materialistic explanations. As little as believers may perceive the material culture of a religion as symbols, they may not any more perceive themselves as automatons. The key question is not what religion is, but why religion is. As Geertz writes in defense of particularism:

> But there is a great deal more to say. A great deal more about, as I mentioned, translation, how meanings get moved, or does not, reasonably intact from one sort of discourse to the next; about intersubjectivity, how separate individuals come to conceive, or do not, reasonably similar things.[717]

[716] Interview D

[717] Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 154

Geertz points to how ethnography's embracement of diversity within a bounded field is not aimed at undermining other investigative methods' integrity and strife for constancies, but should be a seriously meant object of "analytical description and interpretive reflection."[718]

In 2020, Sonia switched diets to a very specific vegetarian one based on the writings of a man who claimed to receive instructions from the spirit world. When I asked her about it, she stated in earnest that she did not care too much about the appeal to authority of the dietist but instead referred to how the diet made her feel healthier. "The proof is in the pudding, so to speak" she wittingly concluded. Ernest Becker asks rhetorically, that the central question posed about life, is on what level of illusion one lives, and that the necessary answer for each one is necessarily "the best". Best, meaning the most meaningful, or in Becker's terminology: "in terms of how much freedom, dignity, and hope a given illusion gives."[719] Becker's suggestion is that religion, in the sense of religious beliefs, solves the existential problem of death and thereby bestows mankind the possibility of "heroic victory in freedom and solves the problem of human dignity at its highest level."[720]

Cultures are no longer sealed off monoliths (if they ever were), and the informants are fluent and experts in several cultures, and this study only touches upon a few of them. Sonia balances an unverifiable claim with an observation of her own general health and when I ask Basma if she ever witnessed a miracle, she demonstrates proficiency in many cultural epistemologies:

> Basma: Not particularly...not as...obvious and flagrant like...opening a locked door by a blind person, I haven't experienced something like that. But like similar things that are "coincidences" that are very hard to be coincidences. People who'd kind of read your mind or know what you're talking about before you say it. Things like that. Even personally sometimes things...but I feel all of us somehow have experienced some content, but then, yeah you can, again, explain it by statistics and probability, but sometimes it's just too odd to be explained by probability. Bass yeah, this kind of thing. You do something and then you receive, you know, a message or you hear something or someone crosses your mind and then...or you dream of something and it happens. Telepathy and more of stuff like that. Yeah, I don't know if this counts as *karâma* [a miracle] or not.[721]

Sufism, or Islam for that matter, appears to be a way of framing human experience. It strikes me to be Geertz in reverse, in the way the informants often relate to it. More than it being symbols that instill in humans long-lasting moods through the formulation of a general order of existence, it is also

[718] Ibid.
[719] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 202
[720] Ibid. 203
[721] Interview D

highlighting the methodological problem of sharing a culture. People are generous, and the informants in this study have been beyond generous, in sharing their thoughts and beliefs, sometimes very personal and moving accounts of their lives. But, framing a study as a study on Sufism will also yield answers that graciously respond to the central question. As I am writing up my thesis in the spring of 2022, I realize that although Sufism and Islam are the two main themes of the research, I am also portraying the limitless phenomenon of human cultural creativity. More than being a map of Sufism, it is the creation of a situation-specific vernacular of a particular perspective. It is the informants talking to the researcher in a language he understands, a representation of what he perceives to be ontologically real.

Fatma: The healing

When Fatma was in her teens, there were moments where she expressed episodes of fear, relating to others in her family that she could sense presences of unknown beings. She would occasionally relate information that neither she nor others understood how she had received. Her mother commented by saying that Fatma as well as her siblings always had *shafafiyya* [transparency] and that she should just keep praying. Her father's response was to try and shut down any talk of such things, saying that "It's not real unless one talks about it." Fatma was bewildered by it. For her the experiences were tangible and real, so why shouldn't they be addressed? At one point she had the notion that someone was unwell, and that it was connected to the house in which they lived: "I was told to just settle down and stop being a teenager, to stop acting out." But soon after a group of Ansâr showed up and performed a ceremony known as *ratib*, every night at dawn and evening for some time. Fatma understood that someone else, outside had participated in what she describes to me as "ill will" and seen that she was suffering, and had therefore repented, but even with the rites being performed, no one acknowledged that Fatma's experiences were substantial and real. "This is twenty years ago and I just realized a few months ago, that I was like in a boot camp for this spirit and that I was being guided. I didn't understand then that I was being guided." She describes how disciplined ritual practice, like praying or yogic breathing, were grounding practices that are also healing practices.

> Fatma: But it didn't occur to me then that there are guides, that there's interaction with the light and the emissaries of that light. That's all coming into place for me now, twenty years later. Not through a Sufi master, not through someone from *al-sammaniyya* or *gaderiyya*, or from my own family. I'm more

akin with a woman from, I believe, Finnish heritage. Bint 'ammak inta [you cousin], probably. I went to her in November to say, 'I have a blockage in my energy system and I can't dislodge it on my own'. I'm tired of going to the doctor. I'm tired of going to the Chinese doctor. The gastro intestinal specialist said 'Nånting är skumt här!' [Something is weird here!][laughs] Looking at all the radiology and not understanding the images and the difference, just a few weeks apart, in physical, tangible physical pictures of something that is wrong in my anatomy, and then isn't. Where it can't be fixed. So, I went to her and I said this. I didn't say more, because I didn't know more. I just knew that I needed to find an energy healer, a reiki worker, a reiki master. I went to her in November. And it was clear that there was more that needed doing. I went to her in December and… then the… then it was clear to me the talk of realms was necessary and that there were presences around me for many years that were still around me, that I could name or speak or verbalize. Verbalize my fear of them, because I recognize them. She managed to decode all of that for me. To explain to me about that. There were differences and the differences were not how my intellect was telling me to be afraid but in how my body was reacting to these presences. There was a code and I was able to read it. I just needed to calm the fuck down and stop being so afraid [laughs]. I thought: Oh, here is my teacher and I was getting again and again the word "sisterhood" and so when…but I don't know how to listen, you have to teach me how to listen and then she would say…I'm not your teacher. I am learning from you, she'd say. (…)

So, I went to Sudan after that second session and the travel was an opportunity to confirm that I was free from energy that had been latched on to me that was not mine, that was not my fault, that it followed me or that it was on me, attached to me. It had a lot to do with other people, and I realize now that my *mahdi* heritage is…complex. There's a darkness there, that I cannot articulate. These that latched on to me came from there. There was a euphoria of feeling lighter in my own body. A clarity. Not feeling haunted. Literally. Not feeling haunted for the first time in so many years. To be able to stand in prayer without a presence standing behind me. I had tried to describe to my mother many times and was told: 'Wow, you have an active imagination. Why don't you read *surat al-baqqara*, that should help'. –What? Does that make sense to you because it doesn't make sense to me, if I have an overactive imagination, what does that have to do with *surat al-baqqara*? She did, God bless her, she did take me to shaykh Abu Zaki over a fifteen-year period, out of my insistence. The *fakî* [shaykh] talked about ill will that surrounded me. He could sense, and he understood where it came from. Now I understand why he was able to communicate with those things to me. Ain't no hocus pocus there. You know, he listened. He, being a *fakî*, made a *hijâb*[722] and said the *hijâb* needs to be just in your home. It's been there in my home, in my room in Sudan all these years. The amount of lethargy and physical pain and anger that was dislodged after I came into possession of that *hijâb* is enormous. (…)

In Sudan, Fatma started to clean out the house, going into old boxes and storage spaces while reciting *ayat al-kursi* in every corner and nook. She says

[722] A protective amulet

it was not an active choice but describes it as something she was called to do. She felt that there was "something heavy" that burdened her parents' house and that she literally needed to clean it out with a duster and a broom, after which she felt called to fasting and praying. "There is a communication. There's no voices or anything tangible that you can describe, but the information comes to you, except you know that this is not coming from your monkey brain." When Fatma returned from Sudan, her Finnish reiki healer commented and looked ecstatic as she understood that Fatma again were praying.

> Fatma: *We shuf, ya'ni*, look at the oneness there, of *al-risâla* [the message]. My Christian, medium, reiki-master friend is exited that I'm back in [unintelligible] of my Muslim prayer. So, do I feel like I have a privileged perspective or more of an opportunity to work through my Islamic journey without a figure of authority? No. I am also prone to feeling afraid and alone and wanting guidance. What I am understanding is the guidance is not always embodied in the man with the beard and the *guftan* [cloak]. The guides are with us. The emissaries of light are with us. There are those that seek and cannot hear. We are…we who can tune-in, can be of service, when we are called to do so. I don't feel a privilege, I feel a call to service.[723]

Fatma's story of healing highlights the individual human creative potential that is found within a religious tradition and is used to abridge divisions within as well as external to the person, a common thread in all the stories of the intermediate realm retold in this chapter. The informants understand Sufism as a particular tradition with its own history, but what is more important, is the metaphysical reality that is found beyond that. It is very much a creative space for healing, dream interpretation or divine intervention in the everyday world. It is a potentially endless multiverse of meaning. "I don't think I've had a hard life in any way compared to other people", Sonia says. But regardless of material security and the lack of any blatant unmet Maslowian need, "I still suffer. Even the richest person in the world with the most opulent lifestyle, still suffers. What does that tell us? Show me someone that doesn't suffer of something."[724]

The *barzakh* is wide creative space, subsequently also a place where Muslims like the informants find it possible to heal, or find the means for dealing with the existential pressures of the world.

[723] Interview N
[724] Interview O

Concluding remarks

A more significant examination of the mystical experiences can instead aid in understanding them from a functional horizon, as substantially they belong to the sensory world of the speaker, one which we can neither understand, nor one we should force into our own epistemologies. 'Translation' "is not a simple recasting of others' ways of putting things in terms of our own ways of putting them", as Clifford Geertz wrote, but an illumination the logic of others into our own locution.[725] The point is rather how the saints and miracles grant authority to their orator, and with the examples presented in this chapter, how this process carves out a creative space in a dogmatic reality for the individual. The realm of saints and miracles is about individualizing and personalizing the prophetic message i.e. Islam, because as Aziza says: "At the heart of Sufism is the prophet. Respect and love for the prophet, then the saints and the *awliya* because they are descendants, if you will, on the same kind of path as the prophet."[726]

A key factor for such an attachment is the creativity that the *barzakh* presents. Most clearly phrased by Sonia who pointed out the problem with a transcendent deity. The idea of anintermediate realm, a spirit world that is accessible through dreams and saints overbridges that problem, without necessitating a clash with Islamic dogma for the informants. It becomes for them a less abstract religious life. On the contrary, the *barzakh* is the means with which a very tangible enchanted everyday can be constructed.

The chapter was introduced with a memory from the initial field study I intended to make, focused on popular Islamic saints and their importance for how Islam is practiced in the Nile valley. When I revisit my fieldnotes from Luxor, some four years later, in the light of the interviews I made for this study, that lingering comment "everything is Islam" will not leave me alone. I think it is in part because it summarizes to me the entire complexity of studying a religion, particularly how it is perceived by people who are not the self-proclaimed or appointed spokespersons for a certain theology. The chapter illustrates the creative space that Sufism provides for Muslims not only by placing themselves in a vast Islamic history, but also allowing them to create a kind of augumented perception of everyday events, such as dreaming, receiving gifts or interacting with people on the subway.

[725] Cliffort Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, 10
[726] Interview H

Chapter eight: Results

Summary

An overarching aim of this study was to contribute to the developing attention of studies of non-organized–and thereby invisible–Muslims. The thesis has thereby probed into the question of what Sufism means in the individual lives of seven Muslims who share a relatively privileged socio-economic background. The questions addressed has concerned how they relate to local, national and transnational Islamic traditions, beliefs and practices. A foundational idea of the thesis has been to get a close read of Sufism as a personal relation to the Muslim-ness of the interviewees. Contrasting narratives of their own experiences and ideas of Islam with competing interpretations, this thesis has highlighted Sufism as a relational and subjective analytical category.

This study was designed through the creation of a bounded field of transmigratory Muslims from a privileged Egyptian background that to varying degrees related themselves to Sufism. The empirical material was produced through semi-structured interviews where the data collection on "Sufism" hermeneutically lead to interconnected themes such as nationalism, history, sainthood, religion, institutions and social class. The thesis was driven by an overarching query of how Sufism, in the post-*tariqa* study on it, is observable outside of institutionalized forms and focused on (1) how the informants related to Sufism and the shape this relation took when positioned adjacent to or across from other belief; and in particular (2) when it mattered to them. Further, I posed the question of (3) what role their cultural backgrounds played in interacting with their social environment outside of Egypt. These questions served as the basis of the central analytical question of (4) why such queries are important for the study of Islam, understood to be the lived experience of Muslims.

The diverse empirical material was categorized and presented in five separate analytical chapters. The chapters described the informants aware of being part of a larger and diverse Sufi context while also investigating certain elements either incorporated into or absent from their own religious life. Informants regarded themselves to be ordinary Sunni Muslims, sharing common beliefs with other non-Sufi Muslims, whilst simultaneously stressing their own contexts in the realization of such beliefs. "Universal" tokens of

Islam, such as fasting, the month of Ramadan, the mosque as the primary place of worship, or Mecca as the centrifugal geography of Islam was bracketed, but not rejected, . This study thus found it fruitful to find comparative perspectives in Robert Orsi's division between formal Catholic dogma and the "Catholic sensibility" in the practitioner's perspective. Chapters five and six discovered that Sufism as defined by the informants also existed in relation to challenges posed by other ideologies, primarily Salafism and Islamism, but also in a lesser degree to "secular" counternarratives. Sufism in this sense is fuctionally and realistically perceived as a middle or balanced position, stabilizing the informants between two opposite extremes. Being Sufi then becomes a position where Salafism or Islamism can be rejected with implicit religious authority without surrendering religion completety to the internal. The sixth chapter concluded that the being-out-of-place experience activates an expected heightened sense of Egyptian-ness with the participants. The Egyptian nationality and/or ethnicity was also a key factor in political and religious navigation of the world.The local setting, i.e. Egyptian context, represented Islam in recognizable forms to the informants. This meant that other forms of Islam in Egypt, such as the Muslim Brothehood and Salafism were criticised as being foreign and non-Egyptian. The final analytical chapter nuanced the third chapter in that it added a social class perspective in the contextualization of contemporary Sufism. There is no remarkable difference in the beliefs of the informants and other Sufis from other social backgrounds in Egypt. What seems to be a variance is rather in the creative space that Sufism carves out for them. What the categories suggest is that Sufism, or Islam for that matter, is a broad and complex analytical category in the lives of the informants, and I will therefore revisit my methodological and theoretical approaches in order to contextualize the results of the study.

A methodology for visualizing the invisible

At the outset of this thesis, I acknowledged the problem presented by Jeldtoft andNielsen, namely that the Islam of a majority of Muslims is largely unknown, or invisible, in Islamic studies. The sociological focus on organizations and institutions has produced a distorted image of Islam and Muslims. One problem with such a focus is that it tends to over-emphasize Islam as an analytical category, while downplaying factors such as ethnicity, politics, class, and perception of history. This has not only favored descriptive analyses of self-appointed gatekeepers and representatives, but also effectively obfuscated the dynamics of the diverse and multivocal observable reality of Islam occuring daily in the lives of Muslims outside of mosques and

Muslim organizations. That Islam matters for Muslims is a given, but such a statement lacks analytical value. An analytically valid method must engage in queries into how, when, where and why Islam matters and to whom, and such questions are directly related to the understanding of the researcher conducting the study. Several questions need to be addressed by the researcher. What does it mean, for instance, to study Muslims as a minority? Who is thereby given voice and who remains voiceless? when I constructed my field, I decided to proceed from Tarek Osman's description of Egyptian background being a success factor in the US and Europe:

> Egyptians are vastly over-represented in American academia; they have solid presence in high-finance, especially in New York and London; Egyptians are among the most successful entrepreneurs in Italy (…) in addition to numerous cases of personal achievement (from the richest doctor in the UK, to the world's most prominent fixed-income portfolio manager).[727]

This choice is not meant to undercut the importance of studies on Muslims as marginalized or underprivileged minorities, but it addresses the problematization posed by Jeldtoft and Nielsen and as such complements the study of Islam and Muslims. Although I agree that they are correct in their assessment of the hegemonic nature of Muslim as a politicized category in Europe, the suggested methodological recalibration on that of the non-organized Muslims is by itself an insufficient solution. The neighborhoods and social environments where we gather data are of great importance for how we analyze Islam and Muslims, and, in this particular matter, this thesis opens up an important mirror for scholarly reflection and debate. What happens to the description of Islam as a minority religion when we expand said description to include the study of religion with a focus on the successful and affluent Muslims? For every Abu Hamza al-Misri there is a Mohamed Salah or a Mohamed el-Fayed, for every Refaat el-Sayed a Rami Shaban.[728] The informants in this study may never cause an entire football stadium to sing how they will convert to Islam or that they want to sit in the mosque. Although not considered in this study, it is for future studies to further probe into how societies in which interviewees reside, are effected. The intersected roles as middle-class academics and professional Muslims, have not been much covered in the past or contemporary study of Islam.

The benefits of the applied methodology that supports the thesis are quite clear, but they come with certain problems as well as theoretical and practical implications that need to be addressed. One of the more obvious practical problems concerns construing a field to study. In the second chapter I address known problems of theoretical saturation (i.e. representativeness) which

[727] Tarek Osman, *Egypt on the Brink*, 13

[728] I owe intellectual credit of these examples to Jenny Berglund, professor at Stockholm University

becomes especially problematic in a potentially limitless field. There is no coherent method to account for the invisible Muslims, but data needs to be harvested in a time-consuming manner through new and hermeneutically acquired criteria. In comparison to a study set for instance in a village or a neighborhood, the researcher cannot become a familiar presence through everyday interaction with the social environment, but must rely on other strategies to gain access to each individual informant. The implication and result of such a method is that one ends up with individual narratives requiring a theoretical framing that allows for the creation of an analyzable body of data. In this study I have been inspired by an oral history approach in analyzing my material.

Recording an oral history of Egyptian Sufism

If a practice of history of religions is to live up to its titular claim, it needs to discuss the temporal, human and material dimensions of discourses that normally are represented as religious categories.[729] By refraining from using Sufism as an independent analytical category, but instead as an abstraction that needs to be concretized by the informants, who frame it as an integral part of their discourse of an Egyptian Islam, recorded in popular customs of others as well as with themselves, the study details a religious phenomenon that is both particular and simultaneously connected to grander schemes. Albeit not always explicit, the informants position their own appropriation of Sufism in a historical chronology which authorizes their own veneration of saints in what Basma refers to "the gracious traditions we [Egyptians] used to have." The thesis is of course not claiming to be a comprehensive history of Sufism in Egypt, but it highlights some historical aspects of how Sufis and their presence in contemporary Egypt are relevant for decoding post-revolutionary Egypt and the political and societal discourses. The critical argument is not that Egyptian Sufism *is* innately different from Sufism in other settings, but that it categorically *can* be when it is paired with a strong sense of ethnicity or nationality, and therefore, it can also be approached theoretically as a historical subject. This study specifically adds nuances and new perspectives to the history of Sufism in Egypt that has almost exclusively depicted Sufism as either a phenomenon of the agrarian and working classes or as a scholarly highbrow ideal.[730] A small piece is now added to that puzzle, whereupon we can hypothesize that Sufism is again becoming relevant to the Egyptian upper

[729] Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method", 165
[730] See: chapter 3

middle class. The select arguments that I have given here are but some of the foundational material from which I have formed my following conclusions.

Conclusions

There is no data on Sufism. What I want top draw attention to, paraphrasing Jonathan Z. Smith, is to raise awareness of how the conclusions I draw are hinged upon what is ultimately a reification of my own understanding of the world. I imagine there is a phenomenon that is called Sufism because other scholars write about it; Muslims talk about it; and I am quite certain that the informants in this study and I share an intuitive agreement that we are talking about the same thing. Sufism, as far as this study is concerned, is intimately connected to known phenomena from academic literature on Sufism, primarily the practice of *zikr* and the authority of shaykhs and *tariqas* (Chapter 3). What stood out in the material is the stress put on the role and function of and personal relationship with saints (Chapter 7). This can be approached in term of locality, namely the idea that Sufism (or a manifestation of it) was connected to Egyptian geography, particularly in the form of the material shrines of saints. Some interviewees overcame such localization by referring to a nonspatial *barzakh* where saints could be approached and interacted with through dreaming. There was no unified definition of what constituted a saint by the informants, but most referred to people that they regarde being very pious. What they meant with piety remained relatively blurry. Other referrals connected saints with the ability to know the unknown, to perform miracles or to have access to the spirit world. The title "Sufi" was to some degree used descriptively as analogue to that of "shaykh" or "*wali*", and to practice Sufism was seen as a means of aspiring to sainthood. However, there were also referrals to Sufism as a mark of identity in a social sense. Visiting saints and other rites connected to the practice were associated to a particular Egyptian Islamic culture that produced a narrative of Sufism as the insider Egyptian position and contestation of it, even if done through theological arguments, as an outsider position. Salafism and Brotherhood ideologies, however Egyptian they may be historically or socially, were described as foreign or alien ideas, whereas Sufism was considered to be not only Islamically correct but recognizable, tolerant, gracious and historically continuous. (Chapters 5 and 6) The Sufi identity notably did not keep the informants from regarding themselves as Muslims, i.e. sharing most of the common practices and signifiers of being Muslim (Chapter 4). Being Sufi was either integrated into being Muslim or as something additional to it. In practice however, the majority of them reported low-level commitment to local Islamic institutions

and organizations. This was not necessarily based on religious grounds, but they generally expressed their low-level commintment in terms of institutions and organizations being irrelevant for their religious needs. I believe this should prompt a meta-discussion about how the description of diversity among Muslims should not be reduced to dichotomies such as practicing/secular, Shia/Sunni or Sufi/Salafi. In relation to studies of post-*tariqa* Sufism, my results display a type of neither-nor position, where there are some aspects that are Western (such as location), "new age" or individual, yet simultaneously there are aspects such as a cult of saints, a strong sense of Islamic-ness, and orientation towards sharia-compliance and personal contact as entry to Sufism. One contribution of this study to the study of Sufism and Muslim minorities has been the conceptual reexamination of particularism, because ethnicity, nationalism, social class, psychology, migration, and historical context are all intersubjective factors that clearly affect how people frame and describe their religious worlds.

Moving beyond the study

Sufism is not an analytical result. In this study it is rather a theoretical starting point reflecting my own interest in Islam in an Egyptian context. I have conducted a study that I will argue makes a strong case for further studies that approaches lived Sufism as a culture (or cultures) within a broader framework that goes beyond the confinements of "religion". The statistical fact that most Muslims are un-organized (an anthropological given but perhaps a sociological nightmare) is in itself an incentive for exploring an unchartered territory in quantitative and qualitative fashions. Recent studies such as Ann af Burén's (2015) study on semi-secular Swedes or that of Vanja Mosbach (2022) on Muslim feminists, support the argument that in the individualized hypermodern period, as contemporary Western society has been defined by Zygmunt Bauman and Gilles Lipovetsky, we need to pay stronger attention to the religious individual and re-define not only our methods and theories, but also how we delineate our fields.

There is a strong need to for instance ask *who* exactly the Muslim minority is, in studies that relate to Islam in Europe or the US, as Nadia Jeldtoft and Jørgen S. Nielsen (2012) has advocated for. This is not to undermine studies of Muslims as disenfranchised segments of a population, but a reminder for future studies to consider other fields. Islam is a migratory religion, not only with refugees, but also with the affluent middle classes and white-collar professionals. As I have demonstrated in my study, they are not less religious in any remarkable way, but perhaps differently so. Class background,

nationality or ethnicity are factors that coincide with religion, or religious views and should not be ignored.

Some of the particular issues stemming from this study requiring further consideration are the following: (1) How widespread is the belief and practices connected to saints in any given Muslim group? (2) Is it always concurrent with positive attitudes to Sufism? (3) What are the positive attitudes to Sufism with the upper middle classes indicative of, locally and globally? and (4) what impact will it have in the receiving and departing social surroundings? (5) Is the Egyptian framed Sufism recorded in this study, transferred over generations outside of Egypt? It is a suggestion of longitudinal and comparative studies that continue to record the oral history of Egyptian Sufism.

Sammanfattning på svenska

Denna studie är ett bidrag till det växande forskningsfältet av studier som intresserar sig för icke-organiserade och därmed ”osynliga” muslimer i väst. Avhandlingen undersöker specifikt vad Sufism ges för betydelse i sju muslimers individuella religiösa liv, som alla delar en relativt privilegierad socio-ekonomisk bakgrund. Avhandlingen ställer frågor rörande hur de relaterar till lokala, nationella och transnationella islamiska fenomen, trosuppfattningar och praktiker. Framförallt ämnar studien till att skriva fram ett analytiskt porträtt över sufism som en personlig relation till informanternas muslimska identitet. Genom att belysa personliga berättelser i ett större perspektiv kan studien påvisa att vad som uppfattas som sufism är beroende av situation. Sufism kan tolkas olika i olika kontexter och påverkar politiska, samhälleliga uppfattningar, liksom det påverkar dynamiken inom familjer.

Det empiriska materialet består av längre semi-strukturerade intevjuer där datainsamlingen hermeneutiskt leder vidare till analytiska teman såsom nationalism, historia, helgon, religion, institutionaliserande och klassbakgrund. Studien relaterar främst till det etablerade studiet av post-*tariqa* sufism. Post-*tariqa* sufism är inget enhetligt fenomen, utan skall förstås som flera olika nutida fenomen där det ”sufiska” framförallt sker i nya organisationsformer, men också individuellt. Studien intresserar sig således för hur informanterna (1) relaterar till sufism och hur denna relation formar sig i förhållande till paralella, simultana eller kontrasterande muslimska trosuppfattningar och specifikt (2) i vilka situationer sufismen blir en viktig del av den egna identiteten. Vidare så undersöker studen (3) hur den kulturella bakgrunden spelar in i informanternas interaktion med en ny social miljö, utanför Egypten. Genom att undersöka och besvara de huvudsakliga frågorna ämnar studien att bidra till till den akademiska diskussionen kring osynliga muslimer i Väst.

Det analytiska materialet visar att informanterna är högt medvetna om att de deltar i både sin egna personliga kontext såväl som flera andra kulturella, religiösa och sociala sammanhang. Informanterna uppfattar sig inte på några tydliga grunder vara skilda från andra sunnimuslimer och de delar i stora drag trosuppfattningar som kan ses som icke-sufiska majoritetsmuslimers. Samtidigt påpekar informanterna sina egna kontexter och förståelse av religiösa dogmer när islamiska riter skall utföras. ”Universella” islamiska kännetecken, som att fasta under Ramadan, moskén som central plats för

gudsdyrkan, eller Mecka som den islamiska världens cetrifugalkraft förnekas inte, men åsidosätts i vissa fall till förmån för en egen uppfattning som knyts till Egypten, eller den egna (nya) lokala kontexten. Studien påvisar dock en relativt ljummen inställning till lokala amerikanska eller svenska islamiska institutioner. Snarare lyfts det Egyptiska och/eller det sufiska fram som förankrande den islamiska traditionen, på ”ett begripligt sätt.”

Sufism associeras frekvent med Egypten eller Egyptisk islamisk kultur, vilket ger intra-muslimska debatter en särskild dynamik. Andra Egyptiska fenomen som salafism eller islamism narreras som ”främmande” element, oavsett om de har uppstått i Egypten. Ett narrativ som också kan återfinnas i den Egyptiska statens kommunikation. Sufismen blir i informanternas uppfattning ett stabilt mellanläge mellan två upplevda extrema positioner. Varken fullt ut sekulär eller religiöst fundamentalistisk. Den sufiska Egyptiska traditionen ses som kontinuerlig och normen för Islam av Egypten, vilket informanterna ser i en mängd olika resurser, inte bara i teologiskt material men också i deras historieuppfattning och popkultur.

Studien ämnar att bidra till tidigare studier av post-*tariqa* sufism genom att återintroducera ett klassperspektiv. Tidigare studier har visat på att sufismen är ett växande fenomen i den övre medelklassen i Nordafrika. Denna studie finner inga större doktrinella skillnader i informanternas sufismperception gentemot andra Egyptiska sufier, men påvisar ett kreativt utrymme informanterna finner i *barzakh*, en ”andevärld” där de på individuellt skilda vis kan interagera med en förtrollad värld och muslimska helgon. Denna andevärld nås främst genom drömmar, men skär också in i den materiella världen på sätt som kan förnimmas av dem.

Post scriptum

No human being can comprehensively be reduced to one single aspect of their identity. The informants in this thesis have shared stories from their lives, their thoughts and feelings on contentious as well as everyday issues with a generousity to which I can never do justice. In fact, it is unavoidable that they are reduced to the distanced and cold role of informants. What is lacking in the portrayal is of course what I have chosen to omit. All the laughter and jokes, moments of profound human connection and even occasional tears. We have discussed schooling, American Irish bars, K-pop and we have shared information about the best place to have shawarma in Cairo (it's in Kurba by the way). What is also missing is the tone of voice, all the little nuances that really differentiates beteen literal and oral cultures. Although I have tried to convey some of the joy in which the interviews have been conducted, the smiles, empathy and my gratitude does not translate well into text. *Traduttore, traditore* –as the saying goes.

Writing this thesis has been painful labour. Both professionally and personally, it has been a process of overcoming adversities and learning to get up after having the wind knocked out of oneself, just to get knocked down again. I have been forced to restructure the thesis several times due to world events, and I have had to rethink and reflect on my roles as researcher and private person intensly, as the thesis changed from an observational study in the Nile Valley to very intimate interviews with people who either were or became near and dear to me. There were periods when I wanted to throw in the towel, walk away and never return to the chaotic pages. I am forever grateful to Susanne, Catharina, Marja-Liisa and Jenny for not letting that happen. Thank you. Above all, my eternal gratitude is for Salma. Without you, there would have been nothing, neither before nor after.

Writing the thesis has been painful labour, but it has been a labour of love. For better or worse, I can't seem to leave Egypt alone and Egypt and her saints do not leave me. Anyone who has spent time in Egypt knows how frustrating everyday life can be there, but, memories of quarrels and a constant hustle slowly subside. The scent of the food at Koshary Tahrir replaces that of pollution and the endemic traffic jams of downtown Cairo. Grumpy comments delivered with a whiff of smoke from a Cleopatra cigarette fade into images of smiles and the Summer heat no longer appers to have been that bad. My own romantic memories of Egypt are different from the memories of the

informants, yet we often met each other in a nostalgia over having been at the same place, or having met the same person. Every once in a while, I have been able to share stories with the informants from a part of Egypt they have never visited. Whether we dream back to the shrine of Sayyeda Zaynab or the pastries at Café Riche, or even the *ayâm el-zaman* of Nasser of be it king Farouk, we relate to Egypt like quarreling lovers that reunite after the hurt has subsided and tenderness and fond memories has repaired our broken hearts. To Cairo, to Luxor or to the gracious traditions we used to have. If they ever existed is besides the point, we just shared stories in where they do.

> And the days went by, the days pass
> between quarrel and loathing.
> And then I met him and I forgot I was his adversary,
> I forgot the sleepless nights, and forgave
> the torment and bewilderment he placed in my heart.
> I do not know how I managed to say to him:
> O Lover, I cannot bear to be without you.
> Who am I, without my beloved?
> Meet me with eyes of longing passion,
> surrender, and take my hand in yours!
> He whispered: tell me honestly,
> Did you forget about us while we were apart?[731]

[731] Ma'mûn al-Shinawi "Wa dârit al-ayâm" (1970). Translation by author.

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Interview E	"Hassan"	20.09.23	USA
Interview F	"Aziza"	20.09.02	USA
Interview G	"Hassan"	20.10.27	USA
Interview H	"Aziza"	20.11.12	USA
Interview I	"Rabia"	20.12.01	EGY
Interview J	"Rabia"	20.12.15	EGY
Interview K	"Fatma"	21.01.14	SWE
Interview L	"Rabia"	21.01.21	EGY
Interview M	"Rabia"	21.02.17	EGY
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The overarching aim of this study is to contribute to the developing body of studies of non-organized and thereby "invisible" Muslims in the West. The thesis probes into questions of what Sufism, Muslim saints and the *barzakh* means to the religious life of Muslims in the US and Sweden who share a relatively privileged Egyptian socio-economic background. The questions addressed have concerned how they relate to local, national and transnational Islamic traditions, beliefs and practices. A foundational idea of the thesis has been to get a close read of Sufism as a personal relation to the Muslim identity of the interviewees, by looking at how it intersects with national and ethnic identities. Through positioning personal stories in larger frameworks, the study highlights how Sufism is a situational matter. Sufism is interpreted differently in different contexts and influences approaches to politics, civil society and family dynamics.

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