SUFILAND
- Everyday life with the living dead in Upper Egypt

Frédéric Brusi
Sufiland

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Abstract

This paper describes how everyday muslims with no formal (or weak) affiliation to sufi brotherhoods in Upper Egypt practice and relate to sufism as a grand scheme or larger islamic tradition. The thesis highlights the importance of islamic sainthood in everyday religion, whereby the saintly dead are regarded as acting intermediaries between the divine and the worldly realms. Saints, holy people and blessed places are given agency through divine blessings, thus allowing villagers to partake in a larger islamic tradition through the mediation of– or cult connected to saints. This paper intends to demonstrate that an islamic concept of sanctity in muslim environments does not only exist historically, but is central to the contemporary religious landscape of Upper Egypt.

Nyckelord/Keywords

Sufism, Upper Egypt, Islam, Sanctity, Baraka, Everyday religion, Anthropology of religion
SUFILAND

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مدد

Frederic Brusi
Solna, August 2015
On Transcription and translation

Unless otherwise stated, Arabic sources in this paper have been translated by the author. For Arabic terminology common to the genre of islamology, a simplified transcription is used. Following the praxis of Shielke, Chih, Sedgwick and other anthropologists specialising on sufism and Egypt, I thus write dhikr and not ḍikr or to the Upper Egyptian dialect, the phonologically closer zikr. Mawlid is transcribed as moulid, awliyā’ as awliya, ṣūfī as sufi etc. Definite article is retained as al-throughout. Anglicised words and names of Arabic origin are also retained, such as sheikh instead of šaiḵ or shaykh. Abd in stead of ‘abd and so forth. Names of places are also simplified following the National Geographic standard: Qena and not Qinā, Luxor and not al-‘uqṣur. Names are generally also transcribed according to standard simplified models employed within islamology: Khalwatiyya and not ḵalwatiya. Where no standardised English model exists I have opted to stay true to local dialect and thus write Gurna and not Qurna for قرنة.1 Where deemed necessary to aid in pronunciation (in uncommon or in introducing new words) I have marked long vowels with diacritics: Seyūl, Gabāwi etc. Where local dialect is adduced, it is marked by italicisation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

According to several Gallup polls, Egyptians, together with many other arabic speaking peoples, are amongst the worlds most religious people. Such a statement naturally begs the question of what is meant by being religious and what do the Egyptian respondents of the Gallup polls interpret into such a question, but methodological inquiries aside it is an observable phenomenon which leads into a well established academic field of islamological studies. Daniel Varisco and Lila Abu Lughod independently demonstrate this scholarly focus of explaining the Middle East and North Africa through an islamic-religious lens and the epistemological problems connected to it. In short, they ask to what extent we can understand the Muslim world through the abstraction of “islam.” A rhetorical question to which Samuli Schielke suggests that there is too much islam in the anthropology of islam.

Acknowledging the epistemological problem is not implying that islam is an unimportant part of life in the muslim world. On the contrary, just as Esposito & Mogahed establish in the Gallup poll, islam is an important factor in the lives of Egyptian muslims, but how and why are completely different questions.

Schielke suggests that perhaps it is not the topic, but the focus of the researcher which needs to be calibrated. The anthropological study of islam has, in his words, lead to several innovative studies and theories but has stopped short of the question of everyday practice and the ambivalence, inconsistencies and openness of islam as part of everyday life.

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Anthropological studies of islam and sufism in Egypt have covered a great many aspects of both as religious, economical, political, feminist and sociological practice and ideology. The tendency has been to focus on devout followers, the institutionalisation of brotherhoods, or the articulation of orthodoxy etc. Although such studies have been valuable in themselves and for the greater production of knowledge in the field of islamology, few studies until very recently have focused on a minimalist approach on the subject matter. We know plenty about islamic norm systems, about how specialists and pious muslims uphold and translate them into meaningful representations of perceived realities. Less attention has been given to the islam of everyday life.

To a large extent we know what islam is to the devout, salafi proselyters, muslim brothers and Azhari theologians. This has of course influenced our conceptualisations of islam and muslimness, but what do we know of the islam of sugarcane farmers, semiliterate day labourers or disenfranchised factory workers? In a nutshell, finding out and adding to the academic enquiry on islam is not just a question of what we ask and observe, but a question of who we ask and observe.

1.3 Disposition

In chapter two I shall acquaint the reader both with what is known and what has not been studied of sufī traditions in Upper Egypt, thus presenting a rationale for this study which is further defined in chapter three where, in concrete terms, I define the aim of the thesis. Chapter four discusses the theoretical points of departure of a study of tradition

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and religion, mainly drawing upon Talal Asad’s idea of discursive tradition and Samuli Schielke’s writings on everyday religion. As a theoretical-historical background I also present a working definition of islam and sufism. Chapter five is an exposure of the applied methods and discussion of what is inherently problematic in the methodology of this study. The same chapter also introduces the reader to the anthropological field and my key informants. Chapter six contains ethnographic and empirical material and the final chapter is a discussion and conclusion of the study.
2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This chapter will introduce the reader to the anthropological field of religion in Upper Egypt. To begin with, I shall account for how the field has been approached hitherto, starting chronologically with Winifred Blackman and ending with Rachida Chih who has written extensively on sufism in the Upper Egyptian village of al-Gurna. As a conclusion I shall situate my thesis amongst those works, thus highlighting what has not been previously studied.

2.1 The anthropology of Upper Egyptian religion

To say that the religious traditions of Upper Egypt are understudied is in itself an understatement. The pioneering works were made by W.S. Blackman (1927) and H.A. Winkler (1936). Blackman made an effort to link the customs she observed to pharaonic rites which she believed would render “not only an addition to anthropology, but also a contribution to Egyptology.” 8 Though we may remain critical of Blackman’s colonial perspective and the essentialism of her day, her empirical material is impressive, on a smaller scale echoing the massive work of the famous orientalist Edward W. Lane. Blackman’s book is to some extent representative of how the field often has been approached since then, with descriptions of blood feuds, magic, superstition and evil spirits, saint-day festivals, religious festivities and sanctity. Interestingly enough, and to our benefit, she doesn’t write specifically about islam in a grand narrative sense of the word. If she does mention it, it is as a peripheral thought and not central to her research, most likely due to her obsessiveness to prove that modern Upper Egyptian culture is a direct continuation of pharaonic culture.

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8 Blackman, W.S. The Fellahin of Upper Egypt: their religious, social and industrial life to-day with special reference to survivals from ancient times, London: Harrap 1927. p. 9
In contrast to Blackman, Winkler produces a for his time unusually insightful holistic approach to the study of spirit possession in a village close to the provincial capital of Qena in southern Egypt. In *Die Reitenden Geister der Toten: Eine Studie über die Bessessenheit des ‘Abd al-Radi und über Gespenster und Dämonen, Heilige und Verzückte, Totenkult und Priestertum in einen oberägyptischen dorfe* Winkler provides the reader with the religious and cultural perspective of the believer and reminds us that the study neither proves nor disproves the ontological reality of ghost riders (spirit possession). The suspension of belief employed by Winkler and how he situates the phenomena of spirit possession in relation to the larger islamic culture it plays out in, makes his study feel remarkably fresh even though it was conducted close to eighty years ago.9

In 1954 Hamed Ammar published his study *Growing up in an Egyptian Village: Silwa, Province of Aswan* as an encyclopaedic attempt of presenting an interdisciplinary understanding of his childhood village. Ammar’s greatest insight is that he presupposes that one couldn’t possibly understand child rearing in Upper Egypt without understanding the larger culture and socialisation processes. Ammar was one of the Egyptian intellectuals of his time who were quite critical of popular religion10 and he takes an apologetic stance towards local religious practice, such as the propitiation of saintly people or the use of charms which he comments as “not part of the pure faith.”11

Nicolas Hopkins and Mark Sedgwick have each specifically studied expressions of islam and sufism in Upper Egypt. A compilation of some of their findings is presented in the anthology *Upper Egypt: Tradition and Change* from 2004.

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9 Winkler’s study was published in English as: Winkler, H. A. *Ghost Riders of Upper Egypt*. Cairo: AUC Press, 2009

10 I will provide a critique of the term popular religion in chapter 4.

Hopkins’ chapter on sufi organisation in rural Asyut provides a mild correction of Gilsenan’s (1973) hypothesis of religion being isomorphic with social conditions. The assumption that sufi orders are in decline as social conditions change does not hold according to Hopkins since they are, some thirty years in passing, still around. He also outlines an interesting theory of why ‘fundamentalist’ movements have not succeeded in penetrating the rural villages as they have the cities. In Hopkins’ account this is due to the isomorphic relation between sufi orders and village social structure, where people are organised hierarchically; detrimental to the egalitarian (or at least meritocratic) ethos of modernist ‘fundamentalist’ interpretations of islam.

Sedgwick presents a historicised theory of regional identity in Upper Egypt as a cultural-religious sufi triangle between Upper Egypt, the Sudan and Hejaz until the end of the 19th century. As the Hejaz was concurred by the anti-sufi Wahabists the triangle becomes an axis where Cairo is incorporated but never central, “a destination but never a source.” Sedgwick claims that out of three normative islamic institutions in Upper Egypt (the courts, the Maliki school of jurisprudence and Sufi brotherhoods) only the latter retain a real influence in Upper Egypt. Sedgwick’s conclusion is that Upper Egyptian regional identity is closely linked to sufism and with the loss of the Hejazi third leg of the sufi triangle and the shift to a Cairo-Sudan axis, Upper Egypt is wedged between being a partial consequence and a partial cause of regional identity. Thus it displays both the characteristics of Sudanese islam, with tribalism and sufism

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13 **Fundamentalism** is a problematic concept in the field of islamology and I suggest that it is interpreted as **Salafism**, a broad piety movement within islam that very often (but not necessarily) employs a mimetic idealised fundamentalist approach towards religious texts and ethics. An elaborated discussion can be found in Ernst, C. Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World, Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press. (2004)


in synchronisation and limited scope of influence of religious professionals, and the Cairene religious bureaucracy as a push factor for elitist anti-sufi sentiments.\textsuperscript{16}

Rachida Chih has written about the courtyards of three of the sufí sheikhs around Luxor, in particular the in al-Gurna dominant Khalwatiyya-Hasasna sufí brotherhood under the patronage of Muhammed al-Tayyib al-Hasani. She asserts that although the religious practices of canonical duties (prayer, fasting etc.) are common to all muslims, and though one does find the practice of visiting saintly tombs or participating in moulid and the emotional attachment to the house of the prophet all over Egypt, some Upper Egyptian academics and writers claim these practices as a particular sa’idi (صعيدي) identity; Arabic and islamic per definition.\textsuperscript{17}

Chih outlines the sheikh’s courtyard as a multi-functional complex. It is first of all a spiritual centre for prayer, contemplation and spiritual guidance, but equally serves as a place of hospitality where passers-by can rest from the heat and enjoy a cup of tea, water or food. Moreover the courtyard is also the scene of traditional arbitration\textsuperscript{18}, where people seek financial aid or intercession with governmental authorities but perhaps most notably traditional adjudication in disputes and conflicts between individuals, families and clans.\textsuperscript{19} Chih asserts that the multifunctional purpose of the sheikh in al-Gurna maintains the continued authority and relevance the institution of sufism and its head even as society changes contrary to the assumption of Trimmingham (1971)\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} See also: Korsholm Nielsen, H.C. “Conflict Resolution” and “Tribes and Tribalism in Edfu” in Upper Egypt: Life along the Nile. Hopkins, N. (ed.) Højbjerg: Moesgård Museum (2003)
\end{itemize}
Especially interesting is Chih’s observation of two different “degrees of attachment” to a sufi sheikh, the murīd and the muḥibb, whereas the former has an official and personal affiliation with a sufi sheikh and the latter lacks formal affiliation but may to varying degrees participate in religious rites connected to a sufi brotherhood out of devotion.21

2.2 Conclusion: situating the thesis

Previous studies of religious traditions in Upper Egypt have either failed to recognise, or investigate, expressions of religion (cult of saints, spirit possession, moulid, dhikr etc.) as part of a larger sufi and islamic tradition (Blackman, Winkler, Ammar). The more recent studies (Hopkins, Chih) have investigated the sufi brotherhoods as a particular form of social organisation of initiated, without paying enough attention to how non-initiated villagers relate to or practice islam. Sedgwick is meritoriously able to connect regional sufism in Upper Egypt to a larger transnational islamic tradition and Chih does recognise different categories (or levels) of affiliation to sufi traditions, but puts her analytical weight on the social function and relationship of the sufi sheikh. Thus, this thesis fills an important gap in the study of religion (islam) in Upper Egypt by conducting research on how muslims that are formally not affiliated with sufi brotherhoods navigate islam in a sufi-dominant environment.

3. AIM OF RESEARCH

This study is concerned with everyday religion and religiousness in and around the village of Gurna (القرنة) on the Theban foothills between the edge between the rich farmland on the West Bank of the river Nile and the arid Sahara desert, by the ancient necropolis of the valley of the kings. Previous studies have identified religiousness in the villages of Upper Egypt as a reservoir of Egyptian sufism with a historical continuity since the earlier days of Islam in Egypt. I will in this thesis discuss how Muslims of rural background relate to sufism on a day to day basis and how that expression is connected to (a contested) Islamic ideology of sanctification and sainthood.

This paper will demonstrate how participating in moulid celebrations, gatherings of dhikr and the veneration of saints are all common day-to-day practices in the villages as a way of living Islam as a grand scheme or greater tradition without necessarily being regarded as extraordinary or requiring a formal affiliation with activist groups or Sufi brotherhoods. By interpreting and examining the empirical material through Islamic theological dogma, the overarching aim is to situate local practice in a larger ongoing Muslim negotiation of what Islam is or demands of the Muslim.

3.1 Research queries

The overarching aim of this study is to situate my ethnographic material in the theoretical framework of Schielke & Debevec (2012) whereby “a religious life is inseparable from the wider course of life,” thus arguing that religion in the rural settings of this study, regardless of its expression, is an everyday affair, a modality of action. By drawing upon the theoretical framework of Schielke, Debevec and Orsi, this paper aims to explore and add to the growing Islamological

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field of everyday religion, by looking at how rural Upper Egyptians in sufí-dominant social environments experience and relate to sufism as a religious tradition without necessarily being formal members of sufí brotherhoods.

Specific research queries will investigate how Upper Egyptians with a rural background relate to islamic traditions and religious practices associated with sufism with special attention to the concept of sanctity and divine grace (baraka). What is the importance of saints in their daily life? How and why is this importance manifested?
4. THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE

This chapter contains several theoretical discussions of the key themes around which this thesis revolves. The aim is not to present a universal theory of how to conceptualise either islam or religion, but to present the reader with a theoretical framework for the ethnographic material presented in chapter 6. In this chapter I will provide a working definition of islam and sufism in contemporary and historical Egyptian context. I will also present discussions on the concepts of everyday religion and islam as a discursive tradition and why they are helpful in studying expressions of islam.

4.1 On tradition and negotiation

Undefined, islam is merely an abstraction. There is nothing self-explanatory in the term and even the idea of islam as a religion is problematic on many levels. Lexically, the arabic noun islām is derived from the type IV verb aslama meaning to submit oneself or to surrender oneself [to God] and nominally it is the Abrahamic religion professed by Muhammad to the Arab tribes of the Hejaz some fourteen hundred years ago which has since then spread to most of the inhabited world.

Time and space suggests thus that any conceptualisation of islam will be problematic because there are several histories, several cultures and several disciplines in which to understand it. Daniel Varisco raises some relevant critique of four modern anthropological attempts of understanding islam as a ding an sich. He puts forth a compelling argument for interdisciplinary studies in which he recognises Talal Asad’s discursive tradition analysis of islam where, in Varisco’s words, “Islam cannot be understood in a synchronic mode.”23

In Asad’s theory, islam exists as a discursive tradition with a conceptual past, present and future. This tradition then influences the future through modification, rejection or incorporation and also the present by linking to institutions, practices and other social conditions. In other words, a particular practice is not islamic in and of itself but may be associated discursively with a conceptual islamic past. Tradition is of course also a question of authority and this is why Asad holds that an anthropology of islam cannot ignore muslim theology. Regardless of historic authenticity, what Muslims claim to be correct practice takes place in a certain islamic cosmology and subsequently in a certain islamic discursive tradition where God, prophets, scholars and saints are authorities.

The focus of this paper is not to explore islamic tradition(s) as such, but to apply Asad’s ideas of a discursive tradition in describing and analysing religious expressions found in the field. It is a well grounded assumption that local religious expressions of islam in Egypt do not permeate in a cultural vacuum but relate to a larger theological tradition, or traditions. To use an expression which has fallen out of grace, Islam in the 21st century is *glocal*. It is, or can be, distinctly local in its expression whilst at the same time relating to a regional, national or global islamic tradition. In that sense, muslims are by default actors when they participate in that discourse but it does not entail that everything muslims do is islamic, nor that everything within a given islamic discourse is practiced by all muslims.

### 4.2 On everyday religion

Although Asad’s theory is both useful and influential it begs the question of why we need a theory concerned with what islam is. Gabriele Marranci for instance has suggested that islam is an

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emotional category and Robert Orsi suggests that religious practice should be understood as relational. Just as people develop emotional relationships with their fellow man, family and friends, they also develop intimate relationships with God(s), saints and other phenomena of religion. In Orsi’s take this also entails that lived religion is as complex as social life ordinarily is with the full repertoire of human emotions at play.

Schielle & Debevec suggest that “a religious life is inseparable from the wider course of life” which calls for scholarly sensitivity for the complexity and even contradictory navigation of people in religious practice. This is not to say that religious practice does not take place within traditions and social dynamics, but it is not determined by them. They state that although religions are powerful normative ideologies offering persuasive truths about how to live, what people actually do with that set of beliefs is a different story altogether.

An academic strategy to solve this problem has been to consider normative doctrinal religion and popular religion as two separate categories. Although it can be put to question under what circumstances ‘religion’ is a sustainable anthropological category, recent recognition has been made that studies need to acknowledge both the way in which religious beliefs affect peoples subjectivity as well as the autonomy of people to make sense of their religious

experience. Rather than religion being either lay vs. specialist or
dogma vs. practice, Schielke & Debevec suggest it is all of them.  

Meredith McGuire has also theorised on everyday lived religion
where she asserts the usefulness of separating the experience of
religious persons from institutionalised dogmatic prescribed religion. McGuire’s study, like many many other studies on “lived religion”
has numerous merits but tends to be limited to the study of
enthusiastic groups or individuals, people who by active choice
participate in religiously defined groups.

Schielke sees no difference in how Muslims “live islam” from the
way they live any other aspect of daily life, be it love or capitalism,
education or nationalism. The great hopes, deep anxieties, and
compelling promises of grand schemes will lead to practical solutions
that need to be put in practice as far as it is possible.

I concur with Schielke & Debevec in that the anthropological
question of what it means to be a muslim cannot be separated from the
existential question of what it means to be a human being.

We do suggest that the elusive nature of religion as part of a complex
ordinary life can be better understood through the notion of the
everyday and through an existential, phenomenological perspective
that grants primacy to the complexity and openness of practices and
experiences.

These theories illuminate the ever present and simultaneous vertical
and horizontal aspects of everyday religion. Lived religion is not just


(2011)

33 Schielke, S. “Second thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam, or how to make sense of Grand Schemes in everyday life” in

34 Schielke, S & Debevec, L. “Introduction” in Schielke & Debevec (eds.) Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of
the individual persons relationship to a present or absent divinity, but also to her social surroundings and in the complexity of the crossroads of the vertical and the horizontal. Gods and saints need also to be socialised into everyday life, as Orsi puts it.35

4.3 On islam: a trinity of islamic knowledges

In institutionalised forms of sunni Islam, like that taught at al-Azhar, islam is explained as having three aspects.36 The theological rationale for this is commonly expressed to have its foundation in the oft reproduced hadith of Gabriel:

One day while we were sitting with the messenger of Allah (may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) there appeared before us a man whose clothes were exceedingly white and whose hair was exceedingly black; no signs of journeying were to be seen on him and none of us knew him. He walked up and sat down by the Prophet (may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him). Resting his knees against his and placing the palms of his hands on his thighs he said: O Muhammad, tell me about Islam. The messenger of Allah (may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: Islam is to testify that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah, to perform the prayers, to pay the zakat [alms-tax or poor-due], to fast in Ramadan and to make the pilgrimage to the House [the Ka’ba in Mecca] if you are able to do so. He said: You have spoken rightly, and we were amazed at him asking him and saying that he had spoken rightly. He said: Then tell me about iman. He said: It is to believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in divine destiny, both the good and the evil thereof. He said: You have spoken rightly. He said: Then tell me about Ihsan. He said: It is to worship Allah as though you are seeing Him, and while you see Him not yet truly He sees you. (...) Then he took himself off


and I stayed for a time. The he said: O `Umar, do you know who the questioner was? I said: Allah and His messenger knows best. He said: It was Gabriel, who came to you to teach you your religion.\textsuperscript{37}

The islamic theological categories of islām, imān and iḥsān have found in muslim history corresponding knowledges or categories of investigation connected to them in the theological headings of fiqh (jurisprudence), kalām (theology proper) and taṣawwuf (sufism) respectively.\textsuperscript{38}

None of these fields of islamic knowledge are uncontested, whether in history or contemporary muslim debate, because they all touch upon that pressing issue of epistemological speculation of God’s will for mankind.

Oliver Leaman asserts that muslim scholars in history did not necessarily differentiate between what we would classify as jurisprudence, spirituality and theology.\textsuperscript{39} A case in point is the well-read primer in Maliki jurisprudence al-risāla al-fiqhiyya by the north african scholar Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī (d. 996) which although being an instructive text on correct religious practice, includes a chapter on dogmatic theology.\textsuperscript{40}

There are valid reasons for assuming that the lines between these three aspects of islam were quite blurry from the get go. Some of the subtopics treated in jurisprudence we would not recognise as judicial (like different ritual statuses of water or how to perform prayer) and


\textsuperscript{39} Leaman Oliver, “the developed kalam tradition” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology} (ed. Tim Winter) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010. p. 77

\textsuperscript{40} Sec: Al-Qayrawānī, Ibn Abī Zayd. \textit{al-risāla al-fiqhiyya}. Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami (1997) NOTA BENE: Al-Qayrawānī was also a scholar of Ash`arite theology, which was (and remains) a contested theology, but is to this day taught at al-Azhar as correct doctrine. Qayrawānī doesn’t mention why he has put a chapter on dogma in a textbook of orthopraxy but it may reveal something of the theological debates of his day and age.
others we would not intuitively think of as pertaining to religion (like the desirability to suppress yawning or how to make a sales transaction on fruit yet not ripe). Likewise, in the field of muslim theology there are matters which intuitively appear displaced, like in the creed of al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933) which among other things lists the dispensation of wiping over socks in the act of ablution as a part mandatory muslim beliefs.\footnote{See: Yusuf, H. *The Creed of Imam al-Tahawi*. USA: Zaytuna institute (2007) p. 70}

Blurry lines or overlapping topics aside, both jurisprudence and theology became institutionalised religious categories of study relatively early in sunni muslim history and a number of different schools or methodologies for deriving God’s nature and will for mankind out of religious source texts emerged. By the thirteenth century the number of schools had stabilised into four normative schools of jurisprudence and two schools of theology in instructing and understanding islam.\footnote{Esposito, J. *Islam: The Straight Path*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1998) p. 84-85}

The third aspect of iḥsān had a slightly different development, notwithstanding that it also to some degree was institutionalised, especially in the form of sufi brotherhoods and the production of poetry and other forms of specialist literature\footnote{Eickelman, D. *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. (2002) p. 266}, but also by a presence at religious institutes like al-Azhar, where the polymath scholar versed in all the religious sciences was the ideal well into the nineteenth century, as is demonstrated by Aaron Spevack.\footnote{See: Spevack, A. *The Archetypal Sunni Scholar: Law, Theology, and Mysticism in the Synthesis of al-Bajuri*. Albany: SUNY Press (2014)
4.4 On sufism: a tradition within or without?

Accepting at face value the Azhari definition of sufism as the theological category of knowledge involved with *ihšān*, does not answer the question of what sufism is as an analytical category. Trimmingham has a very rudimentary, but not untrue definition:

The term sufi was first applied to Muslim ascetics who clothed themselves in coarse garments of wool (suf). From it comes the form *tasawwuf* for ‘mysticism’. (...) I define the word sufi in wide terms by applying it to anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this.⁴⁵

Trimingham’s definition is quite open which is as beneficial as it is disadvantageous. On the one hand, it is seemingly true to the theological foundation presented in the Gabriel tradition, but is at the same time so openly formulated that it encompasses any direct and personal experience of God, including that of Jeanne d’Arc and Joseph Smith. Moreover, it fails to address other aspects of sufism such as political and organisational factors. Sufi muslims and the sufi brotherhoods were key components in the anti-colonial struggle in North Africa and Central Asia,⁴⁶ and Arjomand claims that the Shi’ite suppression of sufi orders in post 1500s Persia was due to their perceived political potency.⁴⁷

Clifford Geertz suggested that sufism was a kind of islamic esotericism separate from normative law-bent formal islam⁴⁸ and

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while it could definitely be so, expressions of sufism may also exist in part or in full together with a perceived adherence to “orthodoxy.”

Another modern way of understanding sufism as esoteric is the definite anti-modern modernist and very European perennial sufism of Rene Guénon, Titus Burckhardt and Frithjof Schuon whereby sufism is part of a pre-islamic spiritual knowledge in direct conflict with western materialism. Although intellectually stimulating, the so-called traditionalists influence on sufism in rural Egypt is presumably nil.

Marshall Hodgson presents a theory of an evolutionary sufism, starting out in islamic history as individual asceticism in the seventh to the ninth centuries among literati, gradually developing into a mass appeal and the development or incorporation of practices previously unknown or unheard of. Hodgson’s ideas are interesting in the Upper Egyptian context where many local sufi authorities start out as local holy men and gradually acquire followers which is an interesting echo of the formation of early Coptic monastic ideals and practices.

Mark Sedgwick stresses the point of there not being one kind of sufism but several, and that sufism in Egypt are to some degree parallel expressions of high and low culture. This does not mean that these expressions never intersect nor that they have different origins. Sedgwick highlights a difference between sufism of the educated and the uneducated, which I believe serves as a euphemism for the multifaceted differences in Egyptian society; Social classes, tradition vs modernity, countryside vs city, etc. Sufism, according to Sedgwick,

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does not entail a certain personal piety, but is sometimes found in family tradition or the mere realisation that a certain sufi sheikh is approached in times of distress.\textsuperscript{55}

In summary, the analytical category of “sufism” is as problematic as that of “islam” or “religion.” I therefore suggest for this paper an open definition on the lines of Talal Asad’s ideas of discursive tradition, where sufism is not an essence with a rationale outside of a grand scheme, but always present or represented in relation to “sufism” or “islam.” I further suggest that rather than exploring a universal and categorical definition of sufism, to look for what Eickelman identifies as sufistic practices, meaning practices that are implicitly ideological but expressed more so in sustained practices and myths than in theology. He does withhold that local ritual activities connected to sanctity and sufism are linked with universally accepted (Islamic) rituals.

other elaborations of religious practice, particularly the notion of marabouts\textsuperscript{56}, or “the pious ones” (…) [They] are people, living or dead (dead, that is, only from an outside observer’s perspective), who, together with their descendants, work as intermediaries in securing God’s blessings (baraka) for their clients and supporters.\textsuperscript{57}

What is notable in Eickelman’s account is that he draws attention to the concept of being dead, which he suggests is not such a clearcut line from being alive in a sufi environment.

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\textsuperscript{56} Eickelman’s use of the term marabout reveals that his material stems from Morocco and West Africa where the term is in many ways synonymous with the Egyptian sufi use of the words wāli and sheikh.

4.5 Conclusion

As mentioned in chapter 2 (previous studies), it is well established that sufism, or local practices that can be related to the academic study of sufism, is an important factor in the regional identity of Upper Egypt. This means that sufi practices and remnants of the maliki school of jurisprudence should tentatively be manifest as well as a struggle of centre (Cairo) and periphery. I have in this chapter outlined the analytical framework by discussing the two key themes of tradition and everyday religion, arguing that competing interpretations of islam are not mutually exclusive but parallel. By describing my ethnographic material through the analytical filter of everyday religion and as a part of a grand scheme (discursive tradition) it is possible to understand religiousness in Upper Egypt as meaningful and islamically coherent to the peoples living it, regardless of the chaotic and disparate field in which it plays out. Through Sedgwick we may also presume that sufism in Upper Egypt, at least outside of the major cities, has a characteristic different from the intellectual and high culture-sufism found with city-dwellers and students of theology. Further I have discussed several different theories of a conceptualisation of sufism which I will return to in my discussions in the empirical material.
5. ON METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

The phenomenological methodology applied in this paper is a qualitative scientific approach that focuses on how ordinary unmediated life is experienced. As such it is a research true to the humanities: it is more concerned with description than causality. Indeed, subjectivity and interpretation make up the core of the research. A common strategy for achieving this descriptive image is by participatory observation:

By participatory observation we mean the method in which the observer participates in the daily life of the people under his study, either openly in the role of researcher or covertly in some disguised role, observing things that happen, listening to what is said, and questioning people, over some length of time.58

Davies reminds us that it is assumed that any form of investigation is ‘outside’ of ourselves. Whether we conduct research within natural sciences or social sciences this is to be understood as a premise of the study because whatever we are completely isolated from, that with which we share no contact, we couldn’t possibly study. But, as we share contact or connect to the object of our study the question arises, or should arise, if and to what extent the result is an outcome of the researcher’s presence?59

[R]eflexivity at its most immediately obvious level refers to the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research. [...] While relevant for social research in general, issues of reflexivity are particularly salient for ethnographic


research in which the involvement of the researcher in the society and culture of those being studied is particularly close.\(^6^0\)

Yet, participatory observation is no longer a method exclusively for the study of preliterate societies dependent on subsistence economies. Since it is a suitable method for observing small and relatively isolated social groups, it has thence been utilised for the study of modern institutions as schools, hospitals and prisons and even neighbourhoods.\(^6^1\) Whatever the particular field an individual researcher immerses herself in is, be it a street corner in Bogota, in an Upper Egyptian village or by accompanying the members of the Mevlevi Order of America, the underlying idea is to absorb and participate in that culture until one comes to understand it as an insider. In common anthropological parlance this is referred to as the emic, or ‘native’ point of view.\(^6^2\)

O’Reilly suggests that the relationship between participation and observation is better described by the term dialectic, an “interrelationship through which the two terms work together in practice to produce new outcomes unattainable by each approach alone.”\(^6^3\)

An immediate critique towards the method could be that the researcher, by his or hers mere presence, influences the behaviour of the participants and thus the validity of the study. Firstly most researchers argue for the prolonged stay in the field as a means to minimise the novelty effect of their presence. The underlying idea is that people may only keep up appearances for a limited amount of time. Eventually the ethnographer is socialised into the group to some

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degree and people get on with their everyday habits without restraints due to a stranger's presence.

Paul Rabinow stresses in his monograph *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco* that anthropology is an interpretive science. What he means by this almost-taken-for-granted statement about the nature of anthropological research is that not only is anthropology a way in which human experience can transcend the cultural variants in humanness and make them more familiar; more important though, he writes, is the absolute equality with which the researcher views another culture and his own.

[Anthropology’s] object of study, humanity encountered as Other, is on the same epistemological level as it is. Both the anthropologist and his informants live in a culturally mediated world, caught up in “webs of signification” they themselves have spun.

Rabinow describes anthropological research as cross-cultural. More than being a trial for the researcher who must live the experience of the field with all of the pangs and pains it might (inevitably) bring, it is also a trial for the informant who must learn how to narrate his own culture, self-consciously and objectified, to the outsider.

Something I have reflected about myself in my own fieldwork is how we as researchers do not choose our informants to the extent that they choose, or tolerate us. Even though many of the people I met in Upper Egypt seemed quite flattered with the fact that the I had travelled a huge distance in order to learn something from- and about them, I also found that some people were more willing than others to attach themselves to a researcher. Self-appointed guides to navigate the researcher through a select array of events in the village, town or neighbourhood. Others may appear almost impossible to get the most basal piece of information out of. Yet, a good researcher can also

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interpret the silence of some, as equally significant to the speech of others. Frustrating as it may be, we are subject to accepting this as it is in order to be able to defend our research as ethically conducted.  

In the second part of his book, *On the Dialogic of Anthropology*, Dwyer puts forth Clifford Geertz sentence that anthropology is “not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”

5.1 Problematica

Qualitative research on the Middle East in many, if not all of its forms (observation, participation, interviews, ethnography, phenomenology etc.), serves as a metaphor for colonial knowledge. It serves as a metaphor for an uneven power relation and it is a metaphor for the truth. The metaphor works this way: Research is by definition the production of scientific knowledge. Anthropological research provides the foundation for reports about and representations of the other. In a colonial context, research becomes an objective way of representing the dark-skinned other to the white world.

Fieldwork is a cultural trait of the West in itself but it is rarely linear, structured and organised. The researcher is forced to deal with the field in the social chaos it always appears as for the outsider. Well performed anthropology should force reflexivity onto the researcher which broadens the scope of the study not only to be about the other but about the very culture of looking at the other thus adding to our collective knowledge of the human experience.

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More important is the understanding that objective science, in the positivistic ideal, does not exist. Some subjectivity, some level of contamination and some level of interpretation is unavoidable in any quest for understanding, be that in the natural sciences as well as the social sciences. This is also why more and more ethnographic methods focus on the lived experience of the participants rather than the so-called objective ‘truth’ about a certain cultural phenomenon. A pregnant question is if whether we learn more about islam and muslims by reading the Quran or by observing what muslims say about the Quran?

At first hand Geertz stance about anthropology being an interpretative science is intuitively potent yet the problematic position of the researcher in search of meaning begins with his position as chief interpreter of the other. Not only is this relationship between the self and the other, which is usually amicable, gravely unequal but as Dwyer points out always subject to critique. At worst, in my opinion, it might lead to the anthropological representation of a noble but inferior savage. In the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan we have seen how the US army employed anthropologists in order to better navigate what they label “human terrain”, a feat that many American anthropologists, like Roberto Gonzales, regard not only unethical but also as directly un- anthropologic.69

Rabinow’s experience raises the interesting question about the observatory-participatory dichotomy. If we as researchers ideally are to assume the position of non-persons, accepting peoples every quirk and insult, then we are truly not participating in the field we are observing, which naturally limits our insights into how the participants experience cultural and social reality. On the other hand, interaction in

the form of arguing with our informants (like Rabinow did) may shut us out from even observational status.

An epistemological problem of the preferred methodology which needs to be addressed is the question of what islam is and who's take on islam we humour. True, the theory and method of this paper presupposes the informant’s narration of their religion as absolutely correct in of and by itself, yet the particular interpretation of islam prevalent in the villages is also in relation to another (competing) interpretation. By example, the veneration of saintly persons observed in al-Gurna does not equate it with being a universal islamic practice. As will be demonstrated in the empirical material, a few informants seemed well aware that the village practice of islam was to some degree different from the city's.

Michel Gilsenan highlights the fact that whatever we learn in our textbooks about Islam the religion, islam in practice is quite a different thing altogether. What we find when we go out of the classroom into the field are themes of shock and recognition. Some things we will recognise from our bookish (and normative) learning about Islam. Somethings will bewilder us, appearing unexpectedly or even out-of-place in what we (as informed outsiders) expected to find.

Class opposition, groups and individuals using the same signs and codes but seeing events in quite different ways, concealed significances in social life, complex relations to wider historical changes in power relations and economy. Finally, and not least, it draws attention to the danger of stereotypical images of another society and another religion.70

Most problematic with this paper, in my own understanding is that it suffers from the paradoxical being-there-anthropology-authoritarianism. I spent close to a year in the field, gradually and eventually to some extent blending in to the everyday life of the

people, actively participating in rites, conversing on hopes, dreams and fears, experiencing sickness and death, life and joy. Dressing in traditional clothes, speaking (as far as I was able to) their language and being taught traditional stick fighting and other traditional displays of manliness. And still.

Are all of these impressions, the mere fact that I was there, supposed to make me knowledgeable about Islam as it is practiced in Upper Egypt? Am I an expert on Swedish Lutheranism for the mere reason that I have experienced most of my life in Sweden, dressing like many Swedes do, speaking Swedish like a native Stockholmian and experiencing at first hand most life rituals like birth and death in a Swedish context? The thought is absurd.

Varisco defends ethnographic fieldwork in the anthropology of religion genre by drawing attention to Bradbury’s 1974-1975 account of the Komachi nomads of southeastern Iran. Counterintuitively the Komachi were not found to live the “little tradition” (dogma vs. experienced religion or lay vs. specialist) but very much in a larger
shiite world. “Being there” was not an end in itself but, as Varisco puts it, a way of building a meaningful model of what can be seen from within a give-and-take relation.  

Rather than being read as paper on Gurnawi religion or the otherness of Upper Egypt, my intent is to again broaden the way we conceptualise Islam and Muslims both academically and popularly. I am not an anthropologist as such. Though the word has fallen out of grace, and on perfectly reasonable grounds, I would describe myself as an orientalist. An orientalist who found it necessary to move out of the university library in order to investigate if and how the texts studied are relevant to everyday life in a few villages in Upper Egypt.

5.2 Finding the field

Egypt is is a country of vast contrasts. The contrasts are seen in social class and class awareness, in the city-countryside dichotomy, in

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72 Arabic nisba adjective: قرنوي from Gurna
the male space versus female space, in aspects of tradition and modernity but also in geographical contrasts such as the thin line of productive farmlands on the banks of the Nile and the arid deserts that make up some ninety percent of the country, to name but a few. Together with its long history as a civilisation it makes Egypt an interesting field.

Being married into an Egyptian family, I travelled to Egypt confident that I would be able to make my way into Upper Egypt by personal contacts. My gatekeeper became Abbas. We met in Cairo, where he was a sociology student at Ayn Shams university. Abbas was originally from Upper Egypt and had become a follower of the Khalwatiyya sufi brotherhood during his undergraduate studies at south valley university in Qena.

One day during Ramadan 2012, Abbas told me that we should go meet the sheikh of his ṭarīqa. Apparently he was visiting Cairo and Abbas thought that it would be a good introduction for me, perhaps I could even get the sheikh to endorse my stay. I said yes to his proposal and we rented a car with a driver to get to the place where the sheikh would be. A newly built compound quite far outside of Cairo proper.

We arrived after lunch and some men in the communal house said that the sheikh had yet to arrive. In the meantime we were invited to sit with the sheikh’s son, to whom I declared my intentions with my visit to Egypt. I wanted to learn about Upper Egyptian culture, particularly traditions relating to sufism. We sat for hours in the reception room and I was starting to give up hope of ever meeting this sheikh when a commotion in the house announced something was happening.

Just before sundown a car arrived and people quickly got on their feet, rushing out to the patio while informing everyone that the sheikh had arrived. They lined up and greeted sheikh Muhammed al-Tayyib by kissing his hand. I had taken position last in line and when it was

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73 Sufi brotherhood or dervish order

Brusi: Sufiland
my turn to greet him, I followed suit and kissed his hand, perhaps in a
futile attempt of not wanting to stand out. My dress and appearance
did not fool anyone though and the sheikh looked at me asking me
who I was.

Abbas came to my rescue and explained that I was a researcher
from Sweden who had come to study Upper Egyptian tradition and
sufism and that I was now seeking the sheikh’s permission to come
live in al-Gurna and conduct my study there. This wasn’t of course
entirely true. I had never set out to go to Gurna nor had I decided to
study sufism per se, I had followed Abbas to this spiritual master as to
see if it would be a possibility. Now it seemed that Abbas had limited
my options. I was invited to break fast with the congregation and al-
Tayyib said that we would speak of the matter when we had tea later
that evening.

After dinner, tea was served outside. Several people would
approach the sheikh and sit next to him talking in a low voice which
made it impossible to overhear what was being said. Every once in a
while the sheikh would then raise his voice to one of the men of his
entourage, giving him specific instructions of what to do. “Help this
man find a job, call that man and ask for this.”

As the line of petitioners was thinning out and I thought that my
(involuntary) petition had been forgotten, the sheikh looked at me and
asked me to come over to him. “You will be our guest in Gurna. When
you come there, everything will be taken care of.”

As we were driving home from the compound, Abbas kept
repeating what good fortune I had had. He interpreted what had
happened as a great honour for me all the whilst I was feeling an
increasing panicky feeling of not being in control anymore. I had not
chosen the field but the field had been chosen for me.
5.3 Method

The empirical material was acquired during eight months between August 2012 through March 2013 by means of observation and interaction with peoples in or from Upper Egypt, mainly in The village of al-Gurna and smaller agricultural villages on the West bank of the Nile between the cities of Luxor and Qena.

I did not conduct formal interviews but relied on informal conversations in colloquial Arabic\textsuperscript{74} over longer periods of time. My role as a researcher was never covert although I did participate in religious ceremonies and rites not only as an observer but also active participant. My collected data consists of both field notes, photographs and field recordings, the latter out of which most were lost during an excursion to the red sea.

5.4 Gurna and the informants.

The old village of Gurna (القرنة) does not really exist anymore. It was the village built on the ancient Theban necropolis directly to the South West of the valley of the kings but its inhabitants have been dispossessed (all but one) and moved by carrot and whip to the adjoining or close by neighbourhoods of \textit{al-Ṭārif}, \textit{Ṣeyūl} and \textit{Gabāwī}\textsuperscript{75} yet they have retained their identity as \textit{Gurnāwī}. Today there are three places closely adjacent that are called al-Gurna. There is old Gurna, now an archeological excavation site New Gurna a model town envisioned by famous Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy\textsuperscript{76} and the neighbourhoods of \textit{al-Ṭārif}, \textit{Ṣeyūl} and \textit{Gabāwī} which is also sometimes mentioned as upper Gurna.

\textsuperscript{74} Meaning the main bulk. Some villagers knew English (with two exceptions very poorly) and wanted to use a chance of interaction as an opportunity to practice their English skill.

\textsuperscript{75} Van der Spek, K. \textit{The Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun: History, Life and Work in the Villages of the Theban West Bank}. Cairo: AUC Press (2011)

\textsuperscript{76} Fathy, H. \textit{Architecture for the poor: An Experiment in Rural Egypt}. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1973)
Eventually I rented a house in the neighbourhood of Gabāwī, a deal that was mediated through local contacts I was able to establish early on. I rented it from a man who became one of my informants. Not so much because I chose him, but because he kept insisting himself to be a mediator into gurnāwī culture.

Tariq is in his late thirties and comes from a socially significant family in the Hrubāt clan that according to him trace their lineage to the prophetic companion and Umayyad protagonist Abī Sufyān ibn Harb. His father and grandfather had been village ‘umad (elders), but Tariq’s position in the village appeared to have been somewhat compromised. The reason for this was not discussed openly, but by gathering bits and pieces together I later came to the conclusion that it was most likely related to him breaking social tabus, like drinking alcohol and fraternising with western women. He is married to his cousin with whom he has six children.
Tariq had been working in the tourist industry. An industry which had come to a sudden halt through the January revolution. He and his family still owns a decent amount of agricultural land where they grow gaṣab (sugar cane), mulūkhiyya\textsuperscript{77} and dura (maize). As a side income, he rents out a house he owns but does not live in himself. He lives with his wife and family in the government project of New Gurna. In my first conversation with Tariq, he was keen to present himself as coming from a line of sufis, (I discuss the idea of inherent sufism further into the paper) especially on his mother’s side. He seemed very enthusiastic about my interest in sufism and insisted himself throughout my stay in Gurna, very often at my reluctance, to be my key informant.

Hassan was also from the Hrubāt on his passed father’s side. His mother belong to the Ghabāt clan. Hassan, who was around 27 years old when I conducted my fieldwork was brought up to study but as his father passed he took upon himself to work in order to support his mother and two remaining unwedded sisters. My relationship with Hassan was shaped by a very uneven power-structure whereby I came to know him by Tariq insisting on me hiring him to do some odd jobs around my house. Hassan however seemed less disturbed by this fact than I and he voluntarily kept feeding me information on Gurna and its peoples throughout my stay, without me asking him to do so. Because of his father, who had been a very respected man in the community, Hassan was well received wherever we appeared together in social settings. Hassan lives in Ṣeyul with his mother and two sisters.

\textsuperscript{77} mulūkhiyya: Corchorus olitorius, a green leave cooked and eaten as staple food all over Egypt.
Ahmed is a 25-year old theological student at the local Azhar school. He supports himself by running a kiosk in al-Ṭārif on the main road, just by the local marketplace. He belongs to the Hasasnā clan. He lives in Al-Ṭārif with his parents and siblings. Our contact developed from me stopping by his kiosk to buy a cold drink. He seemed very curious about Sweden and Islam in Sweden so we got to talking on many occasions. I was also invited to his house and met with his brothers and parents.

Dawud is a farmer in Gamūleh. I only met him a few times in connections with moulid and dhikr but he was despite a stern appearance very amicable and hospitable and invited me for lunch to his house in the agricultural village and introduced me to his relatives and closest family. He was keen on introducing me to reading hagiographies and the pleasure of smoking water pipe which was how he usually spent his free time accompanied by friends and family.

Hajj Sahrawi was my next door neighbour. He had reached a respectable but somewhat uncertain age of eighty plus a few. He had agricultural background but at some point gotten a job as security at archeological excavation sites from which he is now retired. He is a natural storyteller (which is not unique in the village) and entertained my wife and me many nights on the dikka (bench) outside of his house where he was living with his wife, son, daughter-in-law and a three grandchildren.

Abbas is not from al-Gurna but a member of the Khalwatiyya order under the patronage of Sheikh al-Tayyib. He resides in Cairo with his brothers where he attends university but is originally from a smaller agrarian town in Qena province.

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78 Chih uses the singular form Hasani (and more common in standard arabic parlance) when she mentions the same clan in connection to the full name of the sheikh of the Khalwatiyya tariqa; Muhammad Muhammad Ahmad al-Tayyib Al-Hasani. I also only heard it in that form involving the sheikh and but the clan in general mentioned in the (dialectal and?) plural form, Hasasna.
5.5 Summary

In this chapter I have accounted for the methodological framework used in the research. I have also demonstrated awareness of the pitfalls and problematics of anthropological fieldwork and representation: structurally as the uneven distribution of power between the researcher and the informant or the risk of reproducing exotica of the anthropological other. I have further confirmed how the phenomenological methodology of this thesis is vested in the idea of interpretation, popularised by North American anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, Paul Rabinow and Kevin Dwyer.
6. EVERYDAY LIFE IN SUFILAND

In this chapter I present my ethnographic and empirical material. I begin by in three sections describe the aural religious landscape of Gurna and what can be discerned from that followed by accounts of local saints and how they are interacted with by people of Gurna. In subchapter 6.3 I discuss the concept of baraka followed by a subchapter on miracles. Subchapters 6.5 and 6.6 revolves around the challenges that local religious expressions are subject to as the world is growing smaller.

6.1 Sufi soundscapes

There are innumerable accounts of what islam (in all of its varieties) looks like. No doubt this is due to the extreme primacy that literal cultures, such as the academic western culture in which this paper is produced, assign to the sense of sight. This insight of visual primacy is not new in the field of anthropology yet remarkably few studies are made on the sound, sense or smell of islam.79

Upon arriving in el-Gurna my first observation of the peculiarities of religious expression was the call to midday prayer. I was

79 For an inspiring exception see: Nelson, K. *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an*. Austin: The University of Texas Press. (1985)
temporarily housed just by the old village, now an excavation site for Egyptologists, having a light lunch in the heat, when the PA-system of a nearby mosque clicked on.

By fiction or by documentary works, the sound of the Muslim call to prayer immediately sets the scene in western depictions of the Middle East. Little effort is put into the fact that the call to prayer has regional as well as theological varieties. The melody of Istanbul is different from that of Banjul, Isfahan and Kuala Lumpur. Shiites have a different wording than the Sunnis and the Sunni malikites have a different call than the other three schools of Sunni fiqh.

The call was performed in accordance to Maliki rite\textsuperscript{80} with very little of the singing quality which can be discerned in Istanbul or the sacred mosque of Mecca. The muezzin used only two notes, a full tone step apart, which gave the call to prayer more of a calling than a singing character. Following the adhan, and this was later observed in other mosques in all the villages of the west bank I visited, the muezzin

\footnotesize{80 See Appendix}
would perform a ritualised open prayer for the prophet over the PA system, known as ṣalawāt.

\textit{Al-ṣalātu wa al-ṣalāmu ’alayk yā sayyidinā rasūl Allāh.}
\textit{Al-ṣalātu wa al-ṣalāmu ’alayk yā ḥabīb Allāh.}
\textit{Al-ṣalātu wa al-ṣalāmu ’alayk yā man ṣalla ’alayk Allāh.}
\textit{Al-ṣalātu wa al-ṣalāmu ’alayk yā man bika yarham Allāh}
\textit{Al-ṣalātu wa al-ṣalāmu ’alayk yā khātim al-rusuli-llāh}
\textit{Muḥammad [unintelligible]}
\textit{’ala nabī al-salīm [unintelligible]}
\textit{ashraf al-khalq, ḥabīb al-haqq, Abu l-Qāsim, sayyidnā…}
\textit{… Muḥammad, salla-llah ’alayh wa al-ḥamduli-llāhi rabb al-‘ālamīn.}

Prayer and peace upon you O our master God’s messenger.
Prayer and peace upon you O God’s beloved.
Prayer and peace upon you O he upon whom God prays
Prayers and peace upon you O he upon whom God bestows mercy
Prayers and peace upon you O seal of God’s messengers
Muḥammad [unintelligible]
over the perfect prophet [unintelligible]
the epitome of nobility of creation, beloved of the truth, father of al-Qasim, our master…
…Muḥammad, God’s prayer upon him and praised be God, Lord of the worlds.\textsuperscript{81}

These ṣalawāt, I subsequently came to observe, would vary in length and in form but they all had in common that they were performed as a direct address to the prophet. The direct address (’alayk) in the first five stanzas is very significant because it relates to a conflicted theological area within Sunni Islam: tawaṣṣul. Tawaṣṣul or wasīla is a theological category meaning plea or solicitation by means of something or someone. The practice and idea of solicitation revolves around the possibility of (in this case) the prophet being able to interact with the world of the living. Belief in the prophet’s intercession (ṣafā’a) on behalf of the believers on judgement day is

\textsuperscript{81} field recording (2012-09-16)
not very controversial amongst Muslims of different orientations but is usually held to be a normative part of belief.\textsuperscript{82} Controversy begins with the idea of interaction between the living and the departed.

When I asked Ahmed, who had received formal theological training, about the addition of \textit{ṣalawāt} after the call to prayer he regarded it as a matter of jurisprudence (fiqh) and not as a particular creedal signifier.\textsuperscript{83} There is evidence suggesting that in 1876 it was common practice in Cairo\textsuperscript{84} where it is rarely performed today. In Luxor town the practice was also nowadays abandoned I was told by several of the people I asked but none could answer as to why. It is a manifest and observable difference between the city and the village. Ahmed does not agree with my observation but claims that public \textit{ṣalawāt} is still practiced in Luxor town as well as in Cairo. The difference, he claims, is that in modern times, the \textit{ṣalawāt} are seen as optional, a matter of preference of the muezzin.\textsuperscript{85}

6.1.1 praising the prophet makes not a sufi

In all the mosques in Gurna, after mandatory prayers many men would stay seated and recite salutations and prayers on the prophet. This took place after any of all the five prescribed prayers I ever attended. The recitation of dhikr and \textit{ṣalawāt} was audible and communal, something which is by most researchers on Islam associated with sufism, if not regarded as the key practice of sufis.\textsuperscript{86}

After a few months I asked Anwar, an elderly man who worked as a guard of a house further down the street from me and who I used to


\textsuperscript{83} Field note 2012-10-15

\textsuperscript{84} Warner, C. \textit{Mummies and Moslems} Toronto: Belford Brothers (1876) pp. 73-74

\textsuperscript{85} Interview 2015-07-26

see in our neighbourhood mosque performing the communal ṣalawāt with the other men if he was a sufi, to which he responded negatively. I asked if the ṣalawāt he participated in after prayer was not a sign of sufism, he said he did not know and that I should ask Abu Hassan who used to lead the dhikr in that mosque, about it. As we continued to talk i got the impression that he understood a sufi as a title of great weight, not (necessarily) someone who just participated in dhikr.87

Another surprising incident was a conversation between Tariq and an older Coptic man, Abu Sami who’s family according to Tariq were close to his. The three of us were having tea and chitchatted about life when Abu Sami said something which Tariq appreciated and exclaimed “Pray on the prophet!” to which Abu Sami replied: “Upon him be prayers and peace.”88 I remember the incident vividly because Christian-Muslim relations were heavily discussed in post revolutionary Egypt both in Cairo and Stockholm and the blurry denominational borders between Abu Sami and Tariq surprised me.

6.1.2 public recitation

Besides audible dhikr and ṣalawāt emanating from the mosques, on Friday’s the air would also be filled with live recitation of the Qur’an. The melismatic recitation style is called mujawwad, in which many of the masters; Minshawy, Abdul-Hakam and Abdul-Basit hails from Upper Egypt, the latter two from the greater Luxor area.89

The public recital is more than just a congregation of believers listening to the word of God. The crowd will respond with encouraging cries of “Allah, Allah, Allah!” or “Prayers and peace on the prophet” as the reciter comes to the end of a line. Out of decorum I never asked if the listeners appreciated the content of the message or

87 Field note 2012-12-16
88 Field note undated. The arabic exchange was: T: Šallā ʿalā al-nabi! AS: ʿalayhi al-ṣalāt wa al-salām
the delivery of the message more, but it’s a fair assumption that it is the form that moved the men more, because I never saw the same reaction to the dryer recitals played on cassettes or radio in taxis or microbuses.

I witnessed similar reactions one night at a concert where a regional and popular sufi poet/singer performed hymnals to the prophet (madīḥ) at an event on the west bank of the Nile. I was invited to the evening by a group of travellers from Sohag who had, like many others, travelled quite far for a night of dhikr as they called it. The concept of dhikr was apparently much wider than my (at that point) preconceived notion.90

6.2 Hallowed grounds: the living dead

Death and the rituals connected to dying have a remarkable longstanding and continued presence around Gurna. The death of a villager is a communal affair and is announced from a portable PA-

90 September 2012. From memory. Recordings (footage, film and audio) of this event were lost in the Red Sea.
system mounted on a moped that drives around the village proclaiming who has died and details of the mourning ceremony, in local parlance known as wājib, obligatory.

The Theban foothills and its surroundings are burial grounds of pharaohs, queens and ancient Egyptians, Christian monks and Muslims. Van der Spek writes:

Egyptologists have described the landscape here indeed as sacred, not simply in recognition of the notion that funerary soil in some way is consecrated and thus sacred ground, but also because of the place that the Theban Necropolis holds in human cognitive evolution.91

There are four shrines in Gurna of which people refer to as graves of the awliya. In the northwestern corner of the muslim graveyard of al-Ṭārif are the mausoleums of Abu l-Gumsān (ب d. 1984) and sayyida Zainab. The very same Zainab allegedly buried in Cairo who is the sister of Husayn and was with him at Karbala. Williams states that she is regarded as one of the three female patron saints of Cairo and the cult around her and her shrine dates back to Fatimid times. There is apparently also a shrine devoted to her in Damascus.92
On the southwest corner of the cemetery, on the opposite side of the road lies the mausoleum of the sheikhs Ahmed al-Tayyib the grandfather (d. 1955) and Muhammed al-Tayyib the father, spiritual founders of the local Khalwatiyya sufi brotherhood.\(^93\)

On the top of a mountain peak overlooking the temple of Hatshepsut in the Theban necropolis, lies Abd al-Gurna who the Gurnawī seem to know very little about though visiting the tomb seeking its blessings is very important to many, especially local women. Kees van der Spek writes that women visit the shrine on their wedding day, ensuring marital happiness and fertility by placing burning candles in a niche. Married women will visit if they haven’t conceived quickly enough, or when they wish to expand their family.\(^94\)

Just as the prophet is spoken to in direct address in the \(\text{ṣalawāt} \), I found that the saints of Gurna were also usually addressed in second person. They were greeted in the same manner as the living, visited

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just like one visited the living sheikh. Sometimes formally, usually with a specific request. Sickness, financial needs, family problems or the want for male offspring were al reasons for visiting one of the saints.

6.2.1 A visit to abd al-Gurna

The first time I visited the tomb, accompanied by Tariq I was told similarly that women would visit the sheikh for seeking the blessings bestowed upon him in order to find spiritually sanctioned protection in their marriages or for the sake of assistance in fertility. Although Tariq was quite well-versed in local history, even taking great pride in it, he or no one else I asked could tell me anything about Abd el Gurna’s origins. When I asked Ahmed, he told me that he was uncertain if both Christians and Muslims visit the shrine for the sake of seeking baraka. As long as I remained in Gurna though, I was under the impression that the shrine was visited by both Christians and Muslims and Ahmed’s reply may indicate that he regarded the practice somewhat unorthodox according to his belief.95

If the shrine is visited by both Christians and Muslims mean something, although it is very difficult to say exactly what. It is of course tempting to conclude like Blackman did that we are witnessing a cult-continuity where Christianity and Islam are naught but latecomers onto an arena where an ancient religiousness dominates culture with an iron fist.

The climb up to the mausoleum is oddly strenuous, especially in the heat, yet once up the view over the entire west bank is reward enough. The walls of the mausoleum are covered with rudimentary calligraphy of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God together with some very modern religious posters. The bier is covered in green cloth and on top

95 Interview 2014-07-06
of it are two copies of the Quran, a bag of henna and a small birds nest with an egg in it. There is a niche in the wall were small candles are to be lit.

Tariq tells me that a bird has made a nest on top of the bier is a good sign of the high status of the Sheikh. The bag of henna, Tariq continues, is left as an offering by a young bridesmaid for the benefit of her marriage.

Upon entering the grave Tariq greets the sheikh as he would greet the living with saying *peace be upon you* and then read the *fātiha* out loud. Tariq pulls out a thread from the *kiswa*, the green cover of the sheikh’s tomb and explains that every year at the moulid the bier is covered with a new *kiswa* since the people keep pulling threads from it for the sake of the *baraka*\(^6\) it contains.

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\(^6\) For a definition of *baraka* see 6.3
6.2.2 muslim saints or saintly muslims?

Several Gurnawis invoke the intercession of the prophet or one of the saints by calling out: “madad O so-and-so”, or simply madad! Lexically madad means help, aid, reinforcement or assistance from the root verb of madda; to extend or to stretch something. As a theological subject the practice is also recognised under the name istighāta, to appeal for help or tawāṣṣul, to draw near.

The idea of Islamic sainthood is a reality in practice as well as in islamic theology. The mention of saints, their lives and their miracles is a genre of its own⁹⁷ (as it is in Catholicism) but it is also considered fundamental to Islamic beliefs. Al-Tahawi (d. 933) one of the most famous Muslim theologians who also happened to be Egyptian writes in his systematic creed:

١٢٣ و لا نفضّل أحداً من الأولياء على أحد من الأنبياء عليهم السلام و نقول بما نبني واحداً أفضل من جميع الأولياء

١٢٤ و نؤمن بما جاء من كراماتهم...

123. We do not prefer any of the saints over any of the prophets, peace upon them, and we say: Any prophet is more excellent than all of the saints together.

124. And we believe in what is reported of their [the saints] miracles…⁹⁸

Obviously it would be presumptuous to equate the arabic word wali/awliya with what in Christianity is pertained to sainthood, there is for example no rite of canonisation in institutionalised Islam, but with that stated no other word could encompass the term in how it is used in Islamic theology.

⁹⁷ See for instance al-qushayri: al-risala al-qushayriya, Damascus: Maktaba dar saliba. 2000 (original manuscript written around 1045 CE);

⁹⁸ Al-Tahawi, Abu Jafar, A. The Creed of Imam al-Tahawi p. 79 (Author’s translation) NOTA BENE: The text could be read as if the suffix -him (their) refers to the prophets and not the saints i.e. the miracles of the prophets. The interpretation that the statement refers to the saints is done in coherence with other theological texts. This is because of early works (see Ibn Khaffif) ascribing marks of honour/miracles (karamāt) to awliya whilst prophets are bestowed with miracles proper (mu’jīzāt).
According to a Muslim online search engine, the words wali or awliya occurs 35 times in the Quran. In common Arabic parlance, wali can be translated as someone with whom one is conversant, a friend. In the Quran it is used to describe God Himself as well as those who are near Him:

لا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ لا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَخْرُونَ

Hearken! The friends of God [awliya] will not fear, nor will they despair.

Furthermore, non-Quranic text is often referred to be proof of sainthood within Islam. The so-called hadith qudsī (sacred traditions) are understood to be relations from the prophet of what God has said outside of the Quran:

إِنِّي عِزُّ وَجَلِّ الَّذِي مِن عَدَّادِي لَا وَلَدُ وَلَا مَلَكُ

God, noble and majestic, spoke: Whoever is hostile towards my friend [waliyyan] I shall declare war on him.

There is of course no way of determining from the outside whether or not the theological interpretation of wilayya as sainthood is ontologically sound, but the textual evidence for it being an integral part of Muslim faith since early on is abundant and the position that there is no such thing as sainthood in Islam, most likely is an idea spawned in modern times.

Furthermore, the prevalence of cults around sainthood in Egypt, suggests that it is a living tradition well integrated in the heart and minds of people. One event from Cairo springs to mind.

Umm Hashim works as a beautician for the middle class women that hire her to come to their houses. When I met her, she was coming

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99 http://www.searchtruth.com/search.php?keyword=%D9%88%D9%8A+%D8%A7%D9%88&D9%8A%D8%A1%&D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84&D9%8A%D8%A7&D8%A1&chapter=&translator=1&search=1&start=0&records_display=10&search_word=all (2014-08-23)

100 Quran 10:62 (translation by the author)

to my wife’s. She was dressed in an all black Saudi style niqāb, the full veil which reveals only the eyes and has become a popular dress with women of a salafi persuasion in Cairo, or so I assumed. I told my wife that I would go out for a few hours so that Umm Hashim could dress more comfortably. As I returned home Umm Hashim had left, but my wife retold what she had said when they were alone.

As my wife had told her that I was in Egypt in order to study the traditions of Upper Egypt, especially the rites connected to sainthood, Umm Hashim had become enthusiastic. She had urged us to travel to al-Minya where we could visit all the powerful saints of her hometown.

The idea of someone taking an interest in what in middle class Cairo is sometimes regarded as folkish, or low status must have been surprising to her. When my wife said that she had assumed that she was against the practice visiting the saints because of the way she dressed, Umm Hashim replied that she only wore the niqāb because she wanted to guard herself from the sun, her answer revealing that she put no religious significance in her choice of attire.

This episode illustrates the parallel and diverse cultural influences on contemporary Egyptian muslim culture. Umm Hashim effortlessly dressed in what many Egyptians identify as a Saudi influenced dress, whilst retaining a particular Upper Egyptian Minyāwī religious belief.

6.3 Baraka -spiritual currency

Hajj Sahrawi is somewhere around eighty-ninety years old. He lived around the hills of Gurna his entire life, working as a manual labourer and security guard at the many temples around Luxor. He tells me he only travelled occasionally, relating that he went to Cairo twice. The first time was for the wedding of King Faruq I (1951) and the other time for the moulid of al-Hussein, the prophet’s grandson.
who’s head is believed to be buried in the landmark mosque in central Cairo. He says he travelled there without money, paying his way where necessary with *bango*, locally grown cannabis.

When I tell Hajj Sahrawi that I intend to travel to Qena, a larger town an hour and a half by car to the north of us, he asks me to convey his salutations to the saint Sheikh *abd al-Rahim al-Ginawi*, and to read the *fātiha* on his behalf at the sheikh’s grave. The *baraka* one may attain by visiting his mosque-mausoleum complex he let’s me understand is quite powerful. *Al-Ginawi* (d. 1195) was like many other of the Egyptian saints originally from Morocco. Other important Egyptian saints originally from Morocco are Al-Shadhili (d. 1258) and Ahmed al-Badawi (d. 1275). The al-Tayyib family’s roots can also be traced through Morocco.¹⁰²

Upon returning from the *ziyyāra*, my old neighbour calls me and asks me if I met the sheikh, as if he had been alive. I answer affirmatively and Hajj Sahrawy looks relieved and appreciative. I offer him a little gift, a rosary which I purchased at the complex. Both the old man and

his wife thanks me for the gift by invoking blessings upon my name very much according to protocol in Egypt.

*Baraka* literally means blessing or benediction and is etymologically connected to the act of kneeling, or making the camel kneel. It’s a fair guess that all Muslims believe in *baraka*, but it has a special standing in Sufi cosmology akin to perhaps what the force is in George Lucas’ Star Wars trilogy. It is something of an all-encompassing energy that God places where He wills, but it is especially found with the awliya, their belongings and places where they dwell or dwelled. Clifford Geertz connects *baraka* to power as he writes in connection to the Moroccan monarchs:

*Baraka* has been analogised to a number of things in an attempt to clarify it—mana, charisma, “spiritual electricity”—because it is a gift of power more than natural which men, having received it, can use in as natural and pragmatical a way, for as self-interested and mundane purposes, as they wish. But what most defines baraka, and sets it off somewhat from these similar concepts, is that it is radically individualistic, a property of persons in the way strength, courage, energy, or ferocity are and, like them, arbitrarily distributed. Indeed, it is in one sense a summary term for these qualities, the active virtues that, again, enable some men to prevail over others. To so prevail, whether at court or in a mountain camp, was to demonstrate that one had baraka, that God had gifted one with the capacity to dominate, a talent it could quite literally be death to hide.\(^{103}\)

Geertz definition is problematic for two reasons. Firstly it is inconclusive with my observations in Gurna where although *baraka* is vested for example in the Hasasna clan that are the dominant local authority, it appears to be a collective trait more than individualistic. The worldly status of the family is determined by their spiritual status and the *baraka* of the grandfather Ahmed al-Tayyib, passes down,

similarly to DNA, through the generations, reappearing more visibly in some than others, but remains so-to-speak in the bloodline.\textsuperscript{104}

Even more problematic perhaps is that it is doubtful if Geertz definition would make sense to the inhabitants of Gurna, were they to be presented with it.

Abbas’ definition of \textit{baraka}, when I ask him, is God’s blessing and increase in all things in life, which he exemplifies with how food for one person through God’s grace would suffice for two. When I ask him about the baraka of the saints and their tombs he says that the graves of the saints are blessed areas because they are parts of paradise. “If you have problems in your life and you visit sayyidnā al-Husayn you will feel that there is something good there and you will feel better. That could never be without \textit{baraka} from Allah and \textit{baraka} from the saints. You don’t have to do anything except to believe in God and the house of the prophet.”\textsuperscript{105} When I ask him how it works more precisely he answers with a simile: “When you visit a normal grave, or when you visit your family you know, if they see you in a good state they will praise God, and if they see you in a poor state, they will ask God to forgive you. This is [how] the \textit{baraka} of the saints [work] also.”\textsuperscript{106}

As far as I could understand the concept of \textit{baraka}, it is for the villagers blessings from the God bestowed upon people, places or objects. More than this, it was also possible to appropriate it by visiting the places or the people that possess it, a notion supported by my extensive visits to saintly tombs in Luxor, Qena, Cairo and other places. Pivotal in interaction with the tombs, is the belief that the saints can to some degree interact with the world of the living and petition with God for the visitors of the tomb.\textsuperscript{107}


\textsuperscript{105} āl al-bayt

\textsuperscript{106} Interview 2015-07-07 (The interview was made in Arabic and English. In direct quotation I have corrected the grammar)

6.4 Spiritual healing and the miracle of Abu l-Gumsan

At my first visit to the shrine of Abu l-Gumsān I was approached by an old lady who it seems had taken refuge in the relatively small and poor shrine which consists of an outer reception with seatings and an inner room where the actual casket of the saint is kept on display raised up above the ground on a wooden bier. As is customary I greet the grave with Al-salāmu ‘alaykum and recite the fātiḥa. The woman then approaches me and asks my business. I tell her that I have come to greet the sheikh. She speaks with a heavy accent as well as having some kind of speech impediment so I was not fully able to comprehend all what she was telling me or perhaps asking me. What I did surprise me though was that she seemed to identify that I was suffering from some kind of pain in the stomach.

Not uncommon for me when I stay in Egypt is reoccurring cramps due to bacteria or amoebas of some kind. This particular day I had again
felt a stinging pain in my bowels which I was planning to cure with the help of eating fermented feta cheese, mish, later. Without warning or without me acknowledging my intestinal problem she quickly jumped to her feet and placed her hands on my back and my belly and started to utter a guttural sound very deep in her windpipe whilst reading the basmala in between the hoarse yawp. From her conduct I interpreted it as if she was pulling something imaginary out of my gut. The process continued for some fifteen, on my behalf, uneasy minutes. When she had finished I was so out of my comfort zone that I failed to ask her about what had taken place but also filled with excitement of having experienced such an extraordinary “anthropological” event. To my surprise and honestly, to my joy I realised as I was walking home, the pain in my belly had disappeared.

Later I asked Hassan about my experience at Abu l-Gumsān and he told me about the woman who was a relative to the parted sheikh, probably his daughter and that people would see her because they believed she had the gift of healing. He said that he had never gone himself but he didn’t respond negatively when I asked him if he could imagine going sometime. He said that he didn’t know so much about Abu l-Gumsān other than that he was a great saint.\textsuperscript{108}

I revisited Abu l-Gumsān with a friend at another time when the woman conducted a ritual for the benefit of my friend getting married. First she asked us what ailment my friend was suffering from, but since he could not think of anything particular, she offered to bless him on the account of in the future getting married. For half an hour she kept reciting the al-ikhlāṣ\textsuperscript{109} section of the Quran whilst placing my friend under the bier of Abu l-Gumsān.\textsuperscript{110} Some two and a half years later he remains unmarried.

\textsuperscript{108} Field note 2012-12-06

\textsuperscript{109} Quran 112: 1-3

\textsuperscript{110} Field note. 2013-01-07/09
After my first visit to Abu l-Gumsân I talked to Hassan about exorcism and what had taken place at the grave. I also showed him my copy of Winkler’s book on spirit possession in Upper Egypt. He said that he had seen it on TV and asked me if exorcism is islamic, meaning that he asked me if I regarded it as compliant with religious dogma. I answered evasively as I didn’t want to influence his response and asked him what he thought. He hesitated for a while, then he said that it is.111

Tariq was able to tell me more. One of the miracle-stories of Abu l-Gumsân he told me several times:

Once there was a great flood. Sheikh Abu l-Gumsân wanted to go to Luxor (on the other side of the Nile) but he had no boat to get there with. Then he saw Sheikh al-Tayyib (it is unclear if he meant the father or the grandfather) who had a boat and was in the process of going across the Nile. He called out to him and asked him to turn around and to give him a ride. Sheikh al-Tayyib responded that they were already far gone and that he could take him the day after. When Sheikh al-Tayyib came to the east bank of the Nile, Abu l-Gumsân was already there. Sitting in a tree top he was calling the takbîr: Allahu akbar. Allahu akbar. That was his miracle. He crossed the Nile without a boat. Then everyone knew he was a saint.112

It is interesting in the story that sheikh al-Tayyib, which is confirmed by Biegman, seems to get upstaged by Abu l-Gumsân. Being from a poorer, uneducated background compared with Al-Tayyib who was an azhari and well-off makes it tempting to see the thaumaturgy of the former as an act of empowerment.

Tariq seemed to have a specially warm relationship with Abu l-Gumsân, for although I never saw him visit the tomb, I many times observed him stopping his motorcycle when he would pass by the shrine only to greet the tomb with the formal islamic greeting, peace

111 Field note 2012-12-06

be upon you. It seemed to me that he appreciated the cheekiness of Abu l-Gumsān in relation to the more sober saint of Ahmed al-Tayyib.

Later I asked one of sheikh al-Tayyib’s followers about miracles, in regard to what I had heard about Abu l-Gumsān and he told me that some people said that the current sheikh, Muhammed al-Tayyib had no miracles, but he has, he assured me in English which he wanted to practice and saw me as good opportunity: “He has so many miracles. So strong miracles. But he hides them. I can see them. I know he can. If he wants to, he can make such a big miracle. You cannot believe.” He never told me what the miracles consisted of though and I didn’t ask because the tone of his voice made me think he was defensive, as if I had challenged the sheikh’s authority by asking about miracles.113

6.5 Against tawāṣṣul: The puritanical ethos of islamic modernisms.

The practice of tawāṣṣul and ziyārat al-magāber is not uncontroversial and without critique. As demonstrated, Lane (1833) and Ammar (1954) are both suspicious of sufi religious expressions being genuinely islamic and they are of course not alone in voicing such critique.

I once asked the son of sheikh Muhammed on the critique of sufism as un-islamic or non-islamic and his answer was very pragmatic much in line of how I generally heard people in al-Gurna reason: “A group of people will sit for an hour and praise and exalt God. How can that be against the religion? If you don’t want to do it, fine! It’s not mandatory. But what harm could it possibly cause?”114

113 Field note 2013-01-03
114 field note August 2012
One incident which reminded me of how controversial sufi practices can be among some Muslims was at a mosque in al-Gurna after noon prayer when I was approached by a man who asked me curiously who I was and what I was doing there. I replied somewhat tiredly that I was a researcher at the university of Stockholm conducting a study about Upper Egyptian culture and traditional customs such as the long standing presence of sufism.

The man seemed aroused at this statement of mine and began a thirty minute long lecture on how sufism was not true Islam. Sufism, he explained to me, was actually not a part of islam at all but a shiite custom which had deliberately been imported to Egypt by shiite agents. In this statement of his was of course the preconceived assumption that shiites were not muslim, at least not properly so. I asked him if he knew that al-Ghazali (d. 1111) had written favourably on sufism to which he replied that there was no connection between al-Ghazali and what ignorant people around here were doing. When I tried to explain that I as a researcher was not really interested in passing judgement on what muslims should or should not do, he answered that a study where I proved how sufism was not properly
Islamic would be more beneficial not only to the world but would increase my standing with God.\textsuperscript{115}

The critique delivered to me was an echo of similar events reported in other parts of Egypt among others by Schielke,\textsuperscript{116} and Gilsenan.\textsuperscript{117}

The critique aimed at ziya\textsuperscript{r}at al-mag\textsuperscript{a}ber and tawa\textsuperscript{s}ul from Muslims is that it comprises the act of shirk, putting something or someone besides God, which is a violation of the dogma of tawh\textsuperscript{i}d; there is no deity save the one God.

In the villages I visited, such a religious expression finds little traction since, as demonstrated in this paper, people are vested in other strong collective identities. A microbus driver I talked to about Salafis and the claim that Muslims were not Muslims enough and that was the solution to Egypt’s problems looked confused when he thought about it. “I don’t understand,” he said. “How

\textsuperscript{115} field note 2013-01-09


The shrine of Ahmed and Muhammed al-Tayyib (Photo: M. Dahlstrand)
could we be more muslim than what we already are? In my opinion we need more jobs.”

As was mentioned earlier a distinct line is drawn on the practice and belief in tawassul, mediation by passed prophets and saints, where the salafi movement question the very concept of sainthood, let alone the possibility for such individuals to intercede after their passing for the benefit of petitioning Muslims. Taken to the extreme, these sentiments have led to the destruction of tombs and mausoleums which some salafi groups see as poles of heretical behaviour by Muslims akin to pre-islamic polytheistic customs.

6.6 Tradition and modernity: the constant future past

Hassan says that he wants to teach his children to ride horses, swim and shoot with bow and arrows, but they should also go to school and get an education. When I ask him if this also applies to his eventual future daughters he answers that he would allow his daughters to travel to Germany on their own, as long as there was trust between them. Trust is the most important thing between people, he says. When I ask him about the use of knowing horsemanship, swimming and shooting with bow and arrows in a modern world he says that it was instructed by the prophet which makes it authoritative in itself and displaying your skills as a rider is an important part of the moulid anyway. He says that Gurna has people with old thinking and people with new thinking but that you can notice change. When I ask him how you can notice this he exemplifies by describing how you nowadays can marry outside the family when before you always had to marry within.

118 field note


120 field note 2012-11-11
Dawud works off the land. He owns land in a small village to the north of al-Gurna. The fertile land which he tills with great knowledge and satisfaction is enough to provide for a small family. What free time he has he spends with his wife, family and friends. His great passion is books and he is an avid reader, especially of hagiographical literature from which he enjoys to retell the miracles of all the great saints. He tries to visit the courtyard of sheikh Muhammed as often as possible. Dawud is also the custodian of his village’s local saint’s tomb attached to his house.

I was invited to his home where we sat for a day speaking about religion and the ways of the people of Upper Egypt. I have edited the following excerpt from our dialogue into a monologue:

Sufis… Our fathers were all sufis. Their fathers were all sufis. They were all sufís before us. But they were sufis by fitra [by nature, instinct] They had no books. They weren’t learned. They were just good people. They worked the land and prayed. They did dhikr together. They didn’t study sufism in school.
Our land is the land of sufism. Egypt and *al-Shām* [greater Syria]. These are the lands of sufism. The saints you ask? Yes, many saints came from Morocco to here. Because they love Egypt. Because the Egyptian heart is a sufistic heart, so the saints are welcomed here.

Yes I know the salafis. We have none here and there are very few of them in Egypt. [At this point I protested a little and asked him about the events in Alexandria where salafis had attacked the shrine of a saint]. You only think that there are many salafis in Alexandria because you listen to your computer all the time! Of course there are those that pay for wahabism to be successful. They pay for it to win. But we are still here.

Our ways don’t change. Because we are all family here. See Musa here. He is my cousin. Our fathers are brothers. How can we change our customs [religious practices] when we are all related? That is the strength of the *Gabīla* [tribe]. We can ward of any outsiders. So we keep our traditions.

To practice sufism is to practice ease. Sufism is relief. They [unclear: Salafis or the Muslim Brothers] do everything according to the letter. That’s not correct. We [sufis] sometimes do good things away from the public eye. Because you should do it, but not for show. They aren’t attentive to spiritual corruption. It’s very bad.

The salafis. They think that success comes from labour. [He used the word ‘*amal* which I understood to also encompass religious deeds] That’s a mistake of theirs. You can’t be successful by your own doing. Sufism teaches us that success is always and only given from God.121

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121 Field note. Undated but written between 2013-02-06 and 2013-02-17
7. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND DISCUSSION

As stated in chapters 1, 2 and 3, the aim of this thesis is to add to the growing academic field of islamology and everyday religion, by recalibrating the research focus away from enthusiasts to, borrowing terminology from Sly & the Family Stone: *everyday people*. This is addressed specifically by investigating how people in a sufi-dominant environment (Sufiland) relate to sufi rites and beliefs.

![Image: Gurnawi with a rosary. Expression of sufism or everyday life?](image)

In chapter 6 I have shown that local sufi traditions of Upper Egypt identified by Hopkins, Chih and Sedgwick, Ammar, Winkler and Blackman are still present in rural surroundings. I have demonstrated how sufism historically and theologically relates to a larger islamic tradition yet is expressively particular to local settings and everyday life in the village. Sufism and subsequently Islam, is not only a vertical presence of God but a horizontal presence of saints, family, clan, state and other social spaces. In accordance with Talal Asad’s theory, local practices are seen or rationalised in relation to a larger discursive tradition.
7.1 Towards a theory of habitual sufism

The people I talked to outside of the sufi brotherhoods did not identify themselves as sufis as such, even when- or if they would regularly participate in the communal dhikr of the khalwatiyya or khaliliyya brotherhoods. There seems to be no unified and universal definition amongst my informants on exactly what sufism is. To Tariq it is a blood connection through his mother’s lineage, an expression and celebration of his mythologic arabic heritage. To Dawud it is the tradition of the land and the tribe, inseparable from other expressions of faith or tradition. To Hassan, a sufi is someone with the qualities of an angel and to Ahmed sufism is optional but desirable practices within a larger and relatively legalistic religion. Sufism, the cult of saints and sheikhs, dhikr-ceremonies and other are organic to how islam is practiced. More than being a *ding an sich*, I observed it as an integral part of being muslim.

Religious graffiti: O ye who enter this house, pray on the chosen prophet!
I do not intend to state that it is impossible to study sufism as such, or that it is nothing at all, or a different practice altogether in different settings without any connection to a greater tradition. With this study I suggest that it is all of the above. It is part of a grand scheme but it is also a very local small tradition, experienced on a day-to-day basis. It is decorating your house with a picture of a saint or joining a group in dhikr one evening. But it is also the art of ṭaḥīb, which is performed (among other times) at the moulid and the mythological history of one’s tribe as well as the ability to ride a horse or shoot with bow and arrows. In short, the lines between what is regarded to belong to religion and what is regarded as not, are blurred. This blurriness suggests that sufism is a broad and contextual concept. In Gurna it is part and parcel of being muslim or even being human. Sufism is an everyday habit.

I would argue that my thesis supports the theory of Schielke & Debevec that religion is a modality of action, a way of living islam as part of everyday life, inseparable from any other aspect of being
human. The Upper Egyptian villagers are imbedded in culture which I believe Bruno Latour would see as “cultures [that] still mix the constraints of rationality with the needs of their societies.”122

7.2 Life among the living dead

It is easy to fall for a description of the differences of religious expression in Egypt as dichotomies of traditional-modern, rural-urban or similar. This can be helpful if the categories are used metaphorically, but as I have demonstrated, categories and phenomena overlap each other. A muslim claiming to practice islam as the first generation of muslims did will still use a mobile phone or read a printed book. The son of a farmer says that the village has eased up on marrying within the family, yet such marriages are still practiced by the men of the village only.

The saints of Gurna are very much alive to the villagers. Not in a metaphorical way but as part of normative belief and practice. They are alive in their graves which creates a constant present past. The religious soundscape reconnect the peoples of Gurna with prophets and saints by means of ascribing agency to the parted. That they are medically dead is of little importance since they can be spoken to or petitioned for help directly. In Sufiland, death is but a physical obstacle, not a final departure from the world of the living. In this sense, Islam is a living tradition in more ways than just as a practiced tradition. Through the presence of interacting saints, the past is ever present and the present is the past. It is not to imply that nothing changes in the villages, but it seems to change in a different pace than in the city.

Like the Nile, life in Sufiland flows on quiescently, but it is not still.

8. Bibliography


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**on the call to prayer and initiation of prayer**

The call to prayer (adhan) is obligatory in mosques and supererogatory congregations.

If a man performs the call to prayer in solitude it is good and meritorious [but not obligatory], and he must perform the initiation of prayer [al-i qa'ma]

If a woman utters the initiation of prayer it is good and meritorious and if she does not there is no harm.

One does not call to prayer before its time except for the dawn prayer and there is no wrong in calling for it [the dawn prayer] in the last sixth of the night.

The call to prayer is: God is great God is great, I bear witness that there is no deity save God, I bear witness that Muhammed is the messenger of God. Then you refrain from raising your voice as the first time and you thusly repeat the testimony of faith and say: I bear witness that there is no deity save God, I bear witness that Muhammed is the messenger of God.  

and if you are calling for the dawn prayer you add here: the prayer is better than sleep, the prayer is better than sleep, and you do not say this in any call other than the one for dawn, God is great, God is great, there is no deity save God (one time)

The initiation of prayer is odd [i.e. not doubled as the adhan]: God is great God is great, I bear witness that there is no deity save God, I bear witness that Muhammed is the messenger of God, come to prayer, come to the [eternal] salvation [of paradise], prayer has been initiated, God is great God is great, there is no deity save God.