Popular Piety

Mawlids & Modernists

Dangers of Fun

In the early 1880s, Egypt was in a state of turmoil. European powers were exerting increasing pressure on the Kheznial government, and escalating political conflicts were about to lead the country to the Urabi rebellion and consequent British occupation. In this moment, a new kind of debate on religion and society emerged in Egypt. Festive traditions and ecstatic rituals that were a central part of the religious and communal life of the country quite suddenly became a problem of national scale, and reforming them a key to the nation's progress. In these views, an old (although throughout much of Islamic history, marginal) Islamic tradition of suspicion towards ecstatic emotional states, ambivalent festive traditions, and anything that would compromise a rigid and purified state of the body and soul, comes together with the radically novel concepts borrowed from European intellectual traditions: society—the organic whole in which different ethnic, confessional and professional groups belong to an organic and interdependent whole; nation—the ideological frame of such society; progress—the linear and rational development of the nation towards a growing perfection and power; and religion—the moral and metaphysical foundation of the society that was to be judged by its ability to serve the nation's progress. Self-evident as these concepts may seem in our time, in nineteenth-century Egypt it was radically new to see elites and commoners, Turk-Circassians and Arabs, Muslims, and Christians as part of one organic whole, and even more new was it to measure religion by its functionality for a secular political programme.

Selective synthesis

Where did this new discourse come from, and why was the opposition to festive traditions so important for it? It cannot be reduced to either the pre-existing Islamic tradition or the colonial hegemony. It was an innovative synthesis of both, attempting to reform society and its religion to stand against the European challenge, and in doing so, creating a new and dramatic split between ‘orthodox’ and ‘popular’ Islam and ‘modern’ and ‘backward’ culture. When European observers claimed Islam to be a backward and irrational religion, Muslim intellectuals replied with a twofold strategy: reinterpreting part of the religious and cultural traditions as the true, authentic heritage that would match European standards and serve as the moral foundation of the nation's progress, while excluding other parts from the modernist project by labelling them as backward superstitions at worst, popular religion and folklore at best, but never equal to the true, at once authentic and modern culture.

Islamic reformism and nationalist modernism, in their shared attempt to bestow religion and society with a rational and progressive spirit, were never based on a simple takeover of European concepts but rather developed in confrontation with and inspired by them, just as they, in their construction of true authentic heritage, never were based on a simple reference to the past but rather invented and interpreted it anew. Its sources of inspiration included the older Islamic tradition of ritual and moral reform, colonial administrative practice, Victorian piety and ethics, and French social theory, but the outcome of this selective reinterpretation was historically new, and cannot be reduced, in causal or structural terms, to any of the traditions it drew upon by evoking or opposing them.

One possible solution to the puzzle of how to conceptualize the complex interplay of pre-existing Islamic traditions, the influence of European intellectual discourses, and colonial administrative practices is to focus on the genealogy of intellectual traditions and administrative practices, i.e., the conditions of their emergence and transformation. The case of one particular transformation of popular festive traditions shows the novelty of the project of modern Islam which drew upon Islamic and European traditions, local and global power struggles without being reducible to any of its sources of inspiration.

Abstaining from sin and the company of the deviant was no longer enough . . .

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Insofar as the genealogy of modern Islam is a case of a major paradigmatic shift it cannot be grasped by the concept of "discursive tradition" introduced by Talal Asad and increasingly popular in Islamic studies. Speaking of Islam as a discursive tradition is a convenient way to say what Islam "is" while avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism, nevertheless the range of the concept is limited. While it can be very useful for understanding the continuity and persistence of certain topics, it is not very helpful for grasping transformations. This is not so much to criticize Asad (who in his work has demonstrated an outstanding ability to trace historical transformations of both the subtle and the dramatic kind) than the inflationary use of "discursive tradition" as a trendy label to trace historical transformations of both the subtle and the dramatic kind. Instead, the concept of genealogy, developed by Foucault and elaborated by Asad, appears to be more useful to detect and analyze both the subtle shifts and the dramatic breaks both of which tend to be obliterated by the successive consolidation of discursive formations (rather than traditions, in this case). This is, as Michael Feener demonstrates in another article in this issue, by no means the only possible approach, and we certainly should not fall in the trap of just replacing one "magic" word by another. It does, however, call to attention that intellectual history should be aware of both the traditions and continuities it deals with, as well as of their often subtle and invisible transformations and reinventions.

**Distinction and exclusion**

The debate on popular festivals shows to what extent the tradition of Islam, its past and present, is invented, how this invention can dramatically shift the lines that mark religion, and how the projection of contemporary discourse to the past can make such shifts largely invisible to later generations. "Invented" does not mean "false" here, but calls attention to the historical shifts of and struggles over Islam among Muslims. By reconfiguring religion to serve the newly invented nation, members of the emerging middle classes claimed power for themselves, and denied it to other groups in society: peasants, the urban poor, guilds, mystical brotherhoods, and the Turko-Circassian political elites. Taking the role of the avant-garde, an elite at once distinguished from the "masses" and committed to their uplifting, nationalist intellectuals could claim the unity of the nation while excluding other contenders from the power to define it. For this purpose, it was necessary not only to create a reading of Islam and modernity that would stand the European challenge, but also to exclude other readings as backward, superstitious, immoral, and erroneous.

Such exclusive tendency has been characteristic of the project of modernity around the globe, and should stand as a reminder that emancipation, enlightenment and empowerment, so much celebrated as key moments of modernity, have been essentially—not coincidentally—accompanied by discipline, exclusion, and domination. And indeed the search for distinction has been characteristic for the aspirants of modernity in Egypt from the very beginnings of the modernization policies, as was noted by Georg August Wallin, a Finnish Orientalist who in 1844 met "one of those scamps whom the Pasha has sent to Europe for study, this one a mechanician, and who have returned half-educated and thousand times worse than before." In the house of a German family in Cairo where both were invited, the discussion turned to the maward procession, a colourful parade which used to mark the transport from Cairo to Mecca of a new kiswa to cover the Ka’ba prior to the Hajj, and Wallin who had greatly enjoyed the procession the same day, was annoyed to hear the Austrian-trained mechanician "condemn and ridicule these customs of his religion, and calling them nonsense."

More than a century later, the distinction through criticism of festive traditions that was undertaken by a member of this (at the time very small) professional class was to become the “normal” point of view concerning religion and society to the degree that its novelty and innovativeness have become invisible, and its adherents able to claim their point of view as the self-evident orthodox Truth.

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**Notes**


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