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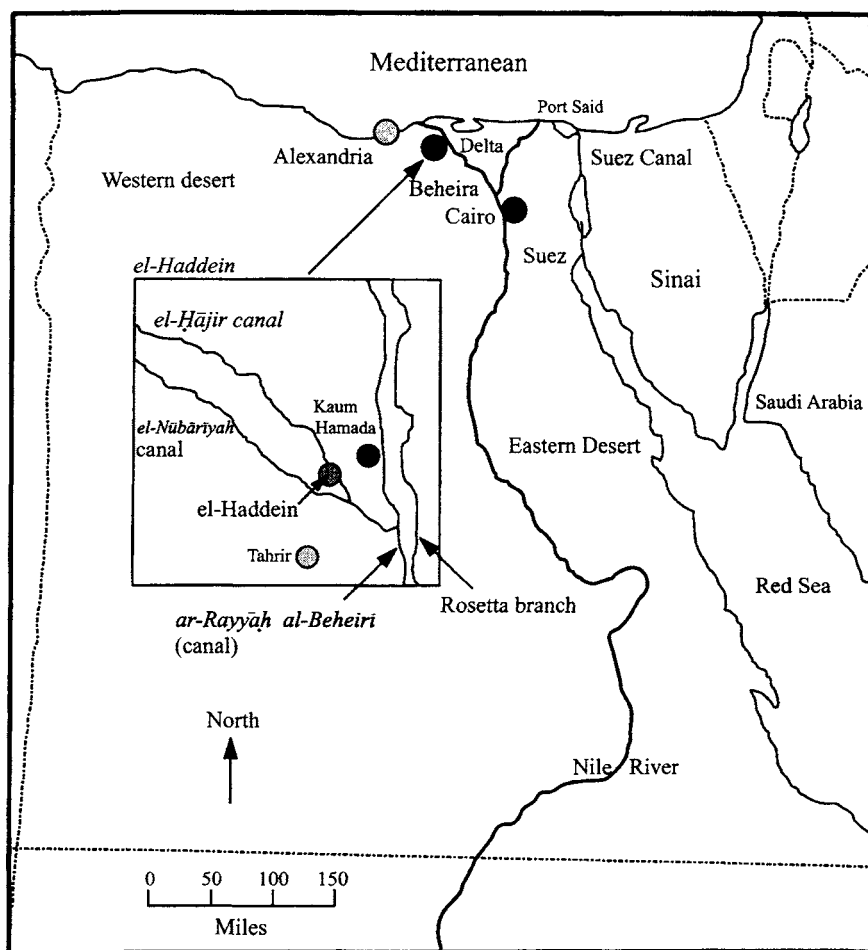
RELIGION AND FOLK COSMOLOGY

Scenarios of the Visible and Invisible in Rural
Egypt

El-Sayed El-Aswad

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Religion and Folk Cosmology



Egypt

Religion and Folk Cosmology

*scenarios of the visible
and invisible in rural Egypt*

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This book is dedicated to
MY PARENTS, MY WIFE, and MY SONS

There is an order in the cosmos but it is not immediately apparent. It requires hard thought and prolonged study to discern it and to construct an image of it. There are many orders below this cosmic order and they are difficult to discern.

EDWARD SHILS, *Tradition* (1981, 326)

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notes on transliteration

The text follows the transliteration system of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* for Arabic words. Except for proper nouns, all Arabic words are printed in italics. Colloquial words and phrases are transliterated as spoken and pronounced by individuals; however, in certain contexts where it is necessary, their meanings, in brackets, are written in standard Arabic form.

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1

Introduction

The folk song below, prayerfully alive, captures the divine unity and oneness underlying the apparent multiplicity and diversity of cosmological, social, economic, and psychological phenomena and presents a meaningful introduction to rural Egyptians' holistic cosmological thought:¹

Water irrigates the trees, but their fruits are not one.

al-maya bi-tisgī ashshajar, lākin aththamar mush wāḥid.

Palm trees are alike, yet their fruits are not one.

wa an-nakhl yashbah li-ba' du lākin aththamar mush wāḥid.

Sea and river are water, but their taste is not one.

wa l-baḥr wa an-nahr maya, lākin aṭṭa' m mush wāḥid.

The sky is highly elevated, but there is not one pillar.

wa as-samā marfū'ah, lākin balā 'amad wāḥid.

All people are created from dust, but their forms are not one.

wa an-nās makhlūka min at-turāb, lākin ash-shabah mush wāḥid.

The stomach (uterus) is the same, but the offspring are not one.

wa l-baṭin wāḥida, lākin al-khalaf mush wāḥid.

Brothers are from the same blood, but their tempers are not one.

wa l-ikhwān yabgu ashigga, lākin aṭ-ṭab' mush wāḥid.

This life is transitory, and all people will drink from one cup (death).

wa ad-dunyā fāniya, wa kull an-nās shāriba min kās wāḥid.

Everything in the universe is created by One God.

wa kull shai' fī-l kaun khālagu ilāh wāḥid.

This is your wisdom in the universe, O God, O One.

wa dī ḥikmitak fī-l kaun yā Allah yā wāḥid.

Recall Allah, O believer, and maintain His Oneness.

udhkur Allah yā mu'min wa waḥḥid al wāḥid.

This study aims to discern the cosmological belief order of rural Egyptians as well as to understand its relationship to their religious, social, and economic lives.² Rural Egyptian cosmology and traditional knowledge³ are profoundly rich and extremely complex and, therefore, require special attention and consideration. Though latent, shared cosmological beliefs influenced by Muslim tradition have played a decisive role in Egypt's social and political history and have manifested themselves powerfully in critical historical moments.⁴ Folk cosmology is the peasant's powerful genius or indigenous paradigm that has helped him endure the tenacious grip of colonialism, the oppression of feudalism, the tyranny of socialism, and the chaos of the open supermarket economy of capitalism. Folk cosmology, in this era of overwhelming globalization, is about authenticity and cultural identity and needs to be explained rather than justified.

"Cosmology" refers to assumptions concerning the structure of the universe, and is extended here to include ecology and society as well as human and nonhuman beings and forces, both perceptible and imperceptible, as constituting integrated parts of that universe.⁵ As Eliade (1957, 22) points out, "If the world is to be lived in it must be founded." This study concentrates primarily on the meaning and structure of the cosmos, *al-kaun*, or the universe, *al-ālam*, in its visible and invisible dimensions as conceived, ordered, and enacted by rural Egyptians.⁶ Cosmology is fundamental in the construction of their thought, identity, and community relationships. The focus, therefore, is not on the private beliefs of each individual as such, but rather on commonly shared concepts or collective representations in which religious and cosmological concepts are fused together. "There is no religion that is not a cosmology at the same time that it is a speculation upon divine things" (Durkheim 1965, 21).

The main concern here is not merely with the intellectual aspects of the cosmological order, but also with the social domains in which individuals locate and define themselves in their relations to others. Put differently, people's cosmologies are dealt with not only as an ideological system, but also as a system of meanings generated and enacted in different courses of public and private scenarios concerned with visible and invisible domains of local community. The term *scenario* is used broadly, incorporating "discourse" as

used in contemporary anthropology with reference to dialogue, negotiation, and debate (Asad 1986, 1993; Bowen 1993; Eickelman 1989; Rosen 1988), as well as to the social meanings implicit in daily practices, rituals, and bodily orientations (Bourdieu 1977). Within this comprehensive sense of scenario, the focus will be on discursive and nondiscursive dynamics of everyday interaction. It is the *living scenario*—not just words fixed in scripture or print—from which Egyptian belief systems can best be discerned. Rural Egyptians are fond of narrating stories in fluent scenarios, rendering their culture as, using Geertz's phrase (1973, 448), "a story they tell themselves about themselves."

The classic works of Lane (1836) and Blackman (1924, 1927) on urban and rural Egyptian communities, respectively, confirm the impact of traditional beliefs and practices on Egyptian lives. More than 70 years ago, Blackman anticipated that peasants' beliefs and related practices would vanish as a result of education. She claimed that "with the spread of education the old customs and beliefs are already beginning to die out" (Blackman 1927, 9, 11). Nevertheless, recent ethnographic evidence shows that despite the growing spread of education, most of these beliefs and practices still persist in rural Egypt (el-Aswad 1985, 1988, 1994). Tradition or traditional beliefs and practices cannot be depicted as being residual categories attached to premodern societies because of the fact that they are historically embedded, in different ways, in all cultures, modern and premodern alike. "Traditions develop because the desire to create something truer and better or more convenient is alive in those who acquire and pass them" (Shils 1981, 15).

In this study, the terms "folk," "peasants," "villagers," "rural people," and "*fallāḥīn*" are used interchangeably.⁷ The word *fallāḥ*, however, is not restricted to its occupational definition as an independent or hired laborer who works on his own or another's land, but rather is used as a unifying concept reflecting the social values and worldviews shared by those both born and who live in the rural community. Occupational and economic differentiation among people of the village does not prevent them from identifying themselves with the values of the *fallāḥīn*, or from calling themselves *fallāḥīn*. Those who are not directly involved in the agricultural economy have kin, friends, and neighbors who are. The associations of the concept implicit in *fallāḥ* are so omnipotent that the term itself is manipulated by nonagricultural workers in their attempt to convince the *fallāḥīn* that they share their values.

Yet, Egyptian peasants have been depicted in sociological and anthropological literature as being politically passive, backward, and superstitious, notwithstanding the fact that most Egyptians, including the majority of those who live in urban environments, have their roots in rural society.⁸ Talal Asad points out that studies dealing with Muslims have "no place for peasants. Peasants, like women, are not depicted as *doing* anything . . . they have no

dramatic role and no religious expression in contrast, that is, to nomadic tribes and city-dwellers" (Asad 1986, 10 [emphasis in original]).⁹ Ayrout mistakenly argues that because the *fallāh* "lives in the present, he is neither in a hurry, nor ambitious, nor curious. He is mild and peaceful because he is patient, and patient because he is subject to men and events, and for these very reasons he has become like the Nile, indifferent rather than idle. His mind is passive and fatalistic; he accepts things as they are" (Ayrout 1963, 143).¹⁰ This kind of misleading stereotype of the peasant was also reflected in contradictory Eurocentric statements by Blackman in the discourse of Orientalism that "had the epistemological and ontological power virtually of life and death, or presence and absence over everything and everybody designated as 'oriental'" (Said 1983, 223). It is inadequate for Blackman to state, in one place, that "the *mental outlook* of most of the villagers is *low*. As far as the women are concerned, there is nothing to raise it" (Blackman 1927, 43 [italics added]); and in another, that "Egyptian peasants . . . are as a whole a wonderfully cheerful and content people. They are *very quick of comprehension*, of ready wit, dearly loving a joke, even if directed against themselves, usually blessed with *retentive memory*, light-hearted, kindly and very hospitable" (Blackman 1927, 23 [italics added]).

The point here is that Blackman and those who follow the dominant Eurocentric paradigm are confined to the view that the West or Europe, the center, is definable solely as being opposed to the peripheral non-European societies, depicted as premodern, unsophisticated, underdeveloped, or exotic (Gran 1996, 5). Moreover, the claim that Egyptian peasants are politically passive and indifferent mirrors the bias of the dominant paradigm and lacks substantive evidence.¹¹ Historical accounts have explicitly shown that Egyptian peasants were involved in revolutions such as those of 1882 and 1919 that resisted colonialism and state oppression (Binder 1978; Brown 1990; Burke 1991; Goldberg 1992; Vatikiotis 1985). My argument here is that the life of Egyptian peasants, in general, and their cognition of the world, in particular, need further investigation, detached from misleading impressionistic and ethnocentric generalizations. The principal objective therefore is to explicate the cosmology from below as conceived, reconstructed, and enacted by the unjustly and unjustifiably overlooked Egyptian peasant.

In examining the belief system of Egyptian folk, several questions come to mind. Why do old customs and beliefs still persist? What do they mean to people? Are they considered as superstitions? Do they meet specific needs of the folk? Are they used as a social, intellectual, or cosmological paradigm for mobilizing certain actions and explaining certain events? Are they part of their cosmological order? Are they sanctified or refuted by religious statements? Do they form a kind of folk religion?

One of the serious predicaments facing the studies of the Arab societies is that anthropologists and Middle Eastern scholars¹² correlate the concepts of orthodox and nonorthodox Islams with elite/folk, formal/informal, scripturalist/nonscripturalist, literacy/illiteracy, and great/little traditions, respectively. These ideological antitheses, however, express the views of those scholars who fail to examine them from the *emic* perspective of the folk people themselves (el-Aswad 1988, 1994). It is not uncommon that "many ethnographers . . . are content to record that their subjects are Muslims and to note ways in which their customs differ from Islamic prescriptions" (Tapper 1984, 247). The terms "folk Islam" or "popular religion" are not accepted or even recognized by folk people or villagers. They imply a less-valued category of religion associated with the majority of mass population, as opposed to the religion of the high culture or elite. "What stands as a consequence of focusing on elites is a dehistoricization of the mass population" (Gran 1996, 4). "Orthodoxy" is a problematic concept viewed and defined differently by scholars. While some scholars take it to mean a set of religious doctrines (Gellner 1981), others see it within a distinctive relationship of power that regulates or requires correct practices as well as condemns the incorrect ones (Asad 1986, 15).¹³ Politically, "orthodoxy" has become identifiable more with the official, institutional, and administrative systems than with religious doctrine. For example, orthodox Islam was used by British colonialism (and is still used by the state) for political and administrative reasons, basically to suppress religious or Muslim groups opposed to them. The *'ulamā*, Muslim scholars mostly of al-Azhar, have been manipulated by the state to justify or legitimize its regime. However, history reveals that *'ulamā*'s submission to the state, during Nassser's secular regime for instance, was superficial, mostly because of the extreme political constraints imposed on them (Zeghal 1999, 374).¹⁴

Dividing religion into orthodox and nonorthodox or *folk Islams* is a contradiction in terms and hardly applicable to the local context of the community. For both elite or literate and popular or illiterate Muslims, there can be only one Islam.¹⁵ The differences that might exist between them are considered here as surface variations of the deeper and hierarchically structured unity. Access to divine scriptures does not necessitate a specialist in religious knowledge. Any person able to read, no matter how simply, has access to the text both individually and collectively. Even those who are illiterate have access to the sacred text through listening to the ongoing recitation of the Qur'an that forms a distinct feature characterizing the atmosphere not only of the local community but also of the entire Muslim world. To be more specific, the sacred text and the interpretation of Muslim tradition are approachable and accessible through various public and private channels including,

for instance, mass media (radio, television), audiocassette tapes, Friday sermons, and attending religious sessions in mosques or inside the house, in addition to daily prayers and funerary rituals (el-Aswad 2001b). Unlike Western societies in which loud noise coming from speakers is viewed as disturbing the peace, microphones hanging on the minarets of mosques are used loudly and assertively at least five times a day for prayer callings, allowing people, men and women, in their public and private spaces to hear them. To overlook such an audio phenomenon is to neglect an essential character of the Muslim community.

It is also irrelevant to accept the distinction between orthodox and non-orthodox Islams as represented, respectively, in the *‘ulamā*, Muslim scholars, and *Sufis*, leaders of religious (mystical) orders, because there is no such distinction in the social reality.¹⁶ Here, one should emphasize the fact that “the membership of the body of the *‘ulemā* was and is in many cases drawn from all levels of society” (Gilsenan 1983, 34). It is arguable to claim that religious scholars, even those of al-Azhar, monopolize religious exegeses despite the fact that they have a great influence in religious public domains. “The *‘ulamā* no longer have, if they ever did, a monopoly on sacred authority. Rather, Sufi shaykhs, engineers, professors of education, medical doctors, army and militia leaders, and others compete to speak for Islam” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 211).

Another problem implicit in that dichotomy is the generalization that Islam is an otherworldly religion and embraces irrational elements such as magic and mysticism (Weber 1958, 1964).¹⁷ Such a statement relegates Muslim culture to an antiquated and inferior status. If Weber views Islamic culture as being otherworldly and in opposition to rational or Western culture, others mistakenly argued three decades ago that Islamic culture was moving away from its religious context. The claim that “Islamic culture like Western culture is being gradually weaned from its religious roots” (Trimingham 1968, 125) raises skepticism and is inapplicable to present Muslim societies.¹⁸ The experience of rural Egyptians, presented in the ethnographic material, puts such a view to the test.

My point of departure is fundamentally cosmological insofar as cosmology encompasses a totality of the universe, society, and person. This study, however, is not concerned with what is so-called “orthodox Muslim cosmology,” which is textual in nature,¹⁹ but rather with the lived cosmology of rural Egyptians as influenced by three interrelated factors: First is the exegeses of the *‘ulamā* concerning the constituents and construction of the cosmos; second is the tradition of sainthood and related beliefs derived from various Sufi orders; and the third factor concerns local tradition and the specificity of the community as it is related to its history, social structure, location, and ecological features. These factors, inseparable in the context of social reality,

are theoretically analyzed (el-Aswad 1994). The cosmology of rural Egyptians represents a uniquely ordered synthesis of many differing views.

It is important to assert that one cannot deny or underestimate the great influence the *‘ulamā* have had on the peasant construction of the cosmos through ongoing interpretations and reinterpretations of the *Qur’an* and Muslim literature. These interpretations are made simple and intelligible so as to reach a great number of people. They are delivered through the national media and published in simply written and inexpensive books.²⁰ Much of their thought is concerned with the dominant religious theme of *al-ghaib*²¹ (the invisible, the divine secret, the unknowable) and such related issues as the creation of the world, man’s place in it, the potential means for improving social conditions, fate, death, resurrection, the afterlife, magic, envy, blessing, invisible beings (souls, spirits, jinn), and unseen forces without and within human kind. It is true that this orthodox discourse aspires to be authoritative. However, because “authority is a collaborative achievement between narrator and audience, the former cannot speak in total freedom: there are conceptual and institutional conditions that must be attended to if the discourses are to be persuasive. That is why attempts by social scientists at rendering such discourses as instances of local leaders manipulating religious symbols to legitimize their social power should be viewed skeptically” (Asad 1993, 210). The *shaikhs* or *‘ulamā* possess information that, by definition, their followers may neither possess nor fully understand. However, the major patterns which organize the concepts dealt with in this study can indeed be found in the discourse of ordinary peasants and religious experts alike. This is not a matter of simple political or economic domination—it is a matter of collective representations refracted in individual beliefs and worldviews that subordinate politics and economics within the larger whole.

In summary, through focusing on the folk cosmology of rural Egyptians, this study avoids the problematic consequences of applying the misleading terminology of folk Islam. That is, we can address the folk cosmology within a Muslim context without generating further contradictions implicit in the “folk versus orthodox Islam(s)” argument. The fundamental thesis here is that rural (Muslim) Egyptians are deeply influenced by the overarching Muslim sacred cosmology. But the cosmological view of both Muslim intellectuals and common persons, which endows them with a unique imaginative sense of engagement with a transcendent and superior reality, accentuates the theme of a divine, cosmic, invisible higher power surpassing any other. Such a belief represents an inexhaustible source of spiritual and emotional empowerment, which may be in certain critical circumstances politically mobilized. Within this context, the peasants’ political resistance to British colonialism as well as to state domination can be viewed as a religious or holy struggle, a *jihād*.

The Ethnography of Invisible Domains

This study contributes to both general anthropology and Middle Eastern scholarship. What distinguishes this from contemporary ethnographic monographs is in its concern with the neglected topic of the social and symbolic implications of the cosmology, with its visible and invisible spheres, of traditional societies, particularly those of rural Egypt. More generally, except for textual cosmology, studies that deal with Middle Eastern cosmologies as lived by the people themselves are scant. Moreover, compared to the rich anthropological studies of the invisible dimensions of human experience (Graham 1995; Hanks 1996; Irvine 1982; Keane 1997; Metcalf 1989; Stoller 1989; and Wiener 1995, among others), little attention has been given to the ethnography of invisible domains in the Middle East although they overwhelmingly dominate people's everyday lives. Invisible things and unseen forces are flatly depicted as superstitions and never considered as critical aspects of identity, society, and the cosmos (el-Aswad 2001, 2002b).²² People's perceptions of themselves and of the worlds in which they live have been given less attention than their political ideologies and economic activities. Moral aspects of Middle Eastern people, including honor, generosity, and hospitality, for instance, have been mostly studied either as part of the politics of domination and manipulation or as being isolated from the holistic (cosmological) context within which they acquire their meaning. Within this broader framework, this work is a departure from the limited inquiry of the moral features of people, to focus on the cosmic and holistic views of their lives.

At the theoretical level, there is not a generally accepted cross-cultural method or theory for investigating and comparing patterns of thought, cosmology, and worldviews. Structural anthropology is limited by its formal, synchronic, and abstract nature. Cognitive anthropology is confined to the formal, abstract, and taxonomic aspects of natives' thought. The connection between systems of meaning and action is not clearly defined in much of symbolic anthropology in which more attention has been given to moral or ethical dimensions than to the cognitive.²³ In its emphasis on the social structure or society as the sole model of universal categories, classification, and religion, Durkheim's sociology (1965) overlooks the semantic aspects of social phenomena. The claim that the body is the existential ground of culture and self (Csordas 1990) emphasizes one aspect, the visible or corporal, at the expense of the other, the invisible. The argument that "embodiment" is "an intermediate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Csordas 1994, 12) deflects attention from the discursive, speculative, and reflective domains of human experience.