

What follows is a photonarrative produced by two of the students who participated in the Department of Religion's Summer 2008 study abroad experience in Cairo. Millie's words appear in **bold**, Jeff's in *italics*.

Jeff and I are sitting on the floor of a balcony overlooking Tahrir Square at one in the morning. The smog makes the hundreds of circling cars look like a big red blur in the distance. Below and to the left is a line of horse-drawn carriages and Lipton ads. Further away lies the Nile and its grand hotels and neon-lit ferries. Even further away is the faint spiraling silhouette of Cairo Tower. Many Cairenes are still out walking with their children.

Jeff and I silently observe two young men carrying fifteen-foot planks. A bus stops. Taxis honk. The bus inches forward a bit as the young men negotiate fare. We silently wonder how they will get their baggage on the bus. Jeff laughs a little.

"What if they weave them through the window... They'll knock everyone off the sidewalk," I say.

One of the men gets on the bus. The other throws the planks on top of the bus. The bus speeds away.

Cairenes are excellent drivers. Traffic is a constant volley of black taxis and mopeds that zip through a wake of grey smog. There are mere inches of space between, behind, and in front of cars at any given moment. There will be three marked lanes and five lanes of traffic with double-parked sedans on either side. There are no speed limits, no crosswalks, and no accidents. "Crossing the street," Dr. Hoffman said, "is a big game of chicken." You simply imagine a lull in traffic and jump out in it. Drivers will honk at you incessantly, even if you're not in the street. They're not annoyed; it's habitual. The honking annoyed the women in our group quite a bit at first. We were told that many young Egyptian men like to mildly harass American women because of the loose Hollywood image and that we should be on our guard. Dress modestly, avoid eye-contact, walk with purpose. We did so and avoided any major harassment, but the honking happened no matter what we wore.

Cairo horns are actually very melodic. Each horn has a different sound. Some have multiple tones. The din of the horns, the engines, and the children laughing make you remember just where you are. Jeff and I listened for different sounds and theorized about their implications. One long blast rang through the smog, and Jeff and I decided that somebody somewhere must have screwed up.

"You know what I think?" I said, because I am always positive Jeff wants to hear what I think. There was another medley of horns. "I think that's just how they say hello."

We were in Cairo for a four-week course abroad on Islam in Egypt, with Professor Valerie Hoffman, a specialist in Islam in the U of I's Department of Religion who had already spent a great deal of time in the country doing research in the past. The course included a substantial amount of classroom time and a number of reading and writing assignments, but its true focus was fieldwork: tours, interviews, and direct experience of Islam as it manifests in its extremely diverse variety of forms in Egypt. During the first portion of our course, we toured a number of historically important Islamic landmarks and monuments in Cairo. Our guide was Dr. Tarek Swelim, an expert in Egyptian artistic and architectural history with a doctorate in Islamic architecture from Harvard University. Dr. Tarek led us through a number of mosques, mausoleums, and other important sites.



Dr. Tarek Swelim

Selected sites visited with Dr. Swelim:



Ruins of Fustat (founded 641 CE) oldest Arab settlement on site of modern-day Cairo.



Mosque of Amr, first mosque constructed in Africa, 642 CE.



Mosque of Ibn Tulun (876-9 CE), oldest mosque in Cairo surviving in its original form.



Balcony overlooking courtyard in Bayt al-Kiritliyya (Gayer Anderson House/Museum)



Mosque of Sultan Hasan (1356 CE)



Mosque of Sultan Rifa'i (1869 CE)



Mausoleum of Tarabay al-Sharifi (1503-4 CE)



Bab Zuwayla (1092 CE)



Al-Azhar Mosque, site of oldest university in the world (970 CE).



Funerary Complex of Sultan Qalawun (1284-5 CE)



Door to madrasa-mausoleum of Sultan Nasir Muhammad (1296-1304 CE)



Tomb of Imam al-Shafi'i, founder of Shafi'i school of jurisprudence (1211 CE).



Mausoleum complex of Amir Qurqumas (1506-7 CE).



Mausoleum complex of Sultan Farag ibn Barquq (1400-11 CE).



Mausoleum complex of Sultan Barsbay (1432 CE).



Qubbat Afandina, the mausoleum of Khedive Tawfiq (1894).



The Citadel of Saladin (1176 CE)



Dome of Suleiman Pasha Mosque, first Ottoman-style mosque in Egypt (1528 CE).



Outside of Hosh al-Basha, tombs of the family of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1854 CE).



Mosque of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1833-57 CE)

We had two best friends in Cairo. Our guide for our Egyptology tours was a wonderful young woman named Eman. I remember the first thing Eman ever said to us:

"Hi. My name is Eman. I look like I'm fifteen, but I'm really twenty-eight. Okay? Not fifteen, twenty-eight."

She is fiercely friendly, can read hieroglyphics like a newspaper, and only drinks Nescafe for lunch. We were in love with her.

Our other friend is a man who calls himself my father in spirit. Jeff and I had read about Shaykh 'Izz and heard many stories about him in Dr. Hoffman's course on Sufism, so we were only too excited to finally meet him in Cairo. Shaykh 'Izz is not only a Sufi shaykh, but he is also the founder of a mosque, a school, and an NGO.

When we met Shaykh 'Izz, we were on our way to interview Dr. Ahmed al-Tayyib, President of al-Azhar University. Dr. Ahmed is an extremely important figure in Egypt and the entire Muslim world, and I was extremely nervous about meeting him. We sat in a long row of chairs in the president's waiting room, watching different clerks come in and out of his office. I found ways to fidget--straightening my notes, fixing my hijab. I looked down the row at Shaykh 'Izz. He was fidgeting with a pack of cigarettes. He puffed for a moment and reclined. I felt better immediately.

Dr. Hoffman told me that much of her fieldwork involved waiting. Waiting for phone calls, waiting for people to show up, waiting for doors to open, waiting for someone to say something. After a few of these interviews, I began to understand. Partly out of curiosity, partly out of boredom, Shaykh 'Izz invited me and Jeff to talk to him. We had no idea what to say or how to say it in Arabic.

"I've read a lot about you in classes with Dr. Hoffman. I'm very glad to meet you," Jeff said.

Shaykh 'Izz smiled.

"Me too," was all I could think to say.

Shaykh 'Izz nodded, and a clerk opened the door and informed us that we would wait for the president in his office. They served us lemonade, and a little while later the president came in.

Dr. al-Tayyib greeted Dr. Hoffman, her husband Dr. Hauser, and Shaykh 'Izz. Dr. al-Tayyib and Shaykh 'Izz were old friends. Dr. al-Tayyib's father and grandfather were shaykhs too.

Dr. Ahmed gave us a brief description of his background and education, which was through the traditional Qur'an school and religious primary school system, then al-Azhar university with some time at the Sorbonne. Dr. Ahmed then fielded questions from students, which covered a range of topics from al-Azhar's requirements and hiring standards for faculty and methods of instruction to U.S. politics and foreign policy. Concerning the concept of jihad, Dr. Ahmed al-Tayyib made clear that Islam is not a din as-sayf, or "religion of the sword" and that jihad as warfare is strictly defensive; he stressed respect, cooperation, and the need for increased understanding and dialogue between the Abrahamic religions.



Dr. Ahmed al-Tayyib, president of Al-Azhar University, sitting with Professor Valerie Hoffman and Shaykh 'Izz.

Halfway into the course, we took a fieldtrip to Luxor. Eman arranged it so that she would accompany us and guide our tours. Shaykh 'Izz was also with us, as his hometown is near Luxor. By plane, Luxor is about an hour and a half from Cairo. By train, Luxor is about twelve hours away from Cairo, give or take an hour if the conductor wants to stop halfway and have breakfast with his family.

Some of us wanted to stay awake in the "tea club" car, which had lounge chairs that we swiveled in to old American pop standards, but no tea. We imagined we were in a movie.

Shaykh 'Izz sat down to watch some of us play cards. No one knew what to say to him, partly because Jeff and I had told everyone that Shaykh 'Izz could read minds and talk to the dead, but mostly because they didn't know Arabic.

The next morning, I went to Shaykh 'Izz's sleeping car. He and Eman were talking, and I asked if I could practice my Arabic with them. Eman invited me to sit down, and Shaykh 'Izz took out his wallet.

"Can you read the Arabic on these?" he said, handing me a few business cards.

Eman excused herself to make sure everyone was awake and fed. Someone brought Shaykh 'Izz some tea. I squinted at the hastily-written Arabic on the cards, then turned them over. The other sides had the screen-printed names, addresses, organizations, and phone numbers of some American ambassadors, and the director of the Arabic program at Georgetown.

"That's my friend," he said, pointing to the card.

"Neat," I said.

He said something I couldn't understand.

"What?" I said.

He said something else.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"You are beautiful," he said.

"Oh. Thank you."

"Cigarette?"

Dr. Ahmed al-Tayyib, Shaykh 'Izz, Eman and Dr. Tarek were just a few of the many interesting figures whom we met as part of the course. On May 27 we met with Dr. Muhammad El-Sayed Said, an independent journalist and editor of the newspaper Al-Badeel, or "The Alternative". Dr. Said is strongly critical of Egypt's repressive government; when Professor Hoffman mentioned to Dr. Tarek that we would be interviewing Dr. Said, he remarked, "He's not in prison yet?". Dr. Said expressed a rather negative opinion of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest and most popular NGO, but feels that the Brotherhood is the country's only current hope for a massively popular opposition. Dr. Said calls Egypt essentially a single-party state, with predetermined election results. Other parties have no real influence, and can be made or unmade at will by the state. For this reason, he says, an effective opposition, for which he is still optimistic, will not be achieved through legal means.

Website: <http://www.elbadeel.net/> (Arabic only)

We also met with Doctors 'Aliya and 'A'isha Rafi'a, two sisters from the Egyptian Society for Spiritual and Cultural Research (ESSCR), and organization founded by their father that emphasizes religious pluralism and interreligious cooperation. Their primary teaching is that all religions have as their source and their focus the same absolute Reality, and that the purpose of all revelations is to experience and act in harmony with the element of divinity that is within each person. All religions grow out of the one Primordial Religion, but have deviated from the truth with trends like legalism, dogmatism, and ethnocentrism. The two sisters' father founded the ESSCR after a long period of seclusion and study of religion, and, determining that a personal journey of self-discovery was necessary in appreciating one's inner divinity, established the society to assist others in such a journey. The organization publishes books and journals, holds conferences, offers a "spiritual training system", and has centers in many major Egyptian cities, including Cairo, Helwan, Alexandria, and Aswan.

Website: http://www.esscr.org/m_rafea.htm



Doctors 'Aliya and 'A'isha Rafi'a

Dar al-Ifta is a government institute, established in 1895 CE, in charge of issuing fatwas. A fatwa is an Islamic legal opinion, a non-binding answer by a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence concerning the application of the law to a particular question or issue. A person qualified to issue a fatwa is a mufti, and the Dar is headed by the Grand Mufti, Shaykh Ali Gomaa. We spoke with Dr. Ibrahim Najm, one of the Grand Mufti's advisors and the head of the Dar's media department. Dr. Ibrahim spoke at length about Dar al-Ifta's new telephone hotline and email service, whereby questioners can ask for fatwas twenty-four hours a day from anywhere on the planet, and usually receive an answer within twenty minutes. Since the introduction of these services, the Dar issues between 1500 and 1800 fatwas daily. Questions requiring further investigation are referred to special research councils where they are examined by specialists. In Sunni Islam (Egypt being almost entirely Sunni), there are four traditional primary recognized schools of fiqh, or Islamic jurisprudence, all of which are considered valid for making legal determinations. However, the muftis at Dar al-Ifta consider valid a range of around ninety schools of jurisprudence, both Sunni and Shi'i, many of them quite obscure, giving them a great deal more freedom in their interpretation of Shari'a. According to Dr. Ibrahim, the schools that are used for a particular ruling are chosen on the basis of benefit to society, rather than out of preference for particular schools. Regarding women in positions of religious leadership, Shaykh Ali Gomaa is extremely open to female muftis or even Grand Muftis, but Dr. Ibrahim says that politics obstructs the path of women to such positions, and that Egypt is not politically ready for a female Grand Mufti. Finally, Dr. Ibrahim discussed the challenge to the Dar of "unofficial" fatwas issued by preachers who lack scholarly qualifications, explaining that there is a competition for religious authority with popular television and internet fatwas, and that Dar al-Ifta needs to rise in response to the challenge.

Website: <http://www.dar-alifta.org/?LangID=2>

We spoke with Dr. Hoda Saadi of the Women and Memory Forum, an organization of scholars dedicated to educating and informing on issues pertaining to gender, particularly in Islamic history and the Muslim world. The organization was formed in 1997, and all of its members are university instructors. The Forum identified stereotypes concerning women in Muslim and especially Arab society as a major cause of concern, with its root in the scarcity of alternative perspectives. The main aim of the Forum is to produce in Arabic, through interdisciplinary cooperation, sources of knowledge with alternative perspectives. They have embarked upon several projects toward this end. Among these are an oral archive consisting of the recorded voices of various women discussing their experiences, as well as a project to collect and compile biographies of influential women. Another project, called "Let Us Remember", seeks to archive and record the lives of influential 20th Century women who have been largely ignored or forgotten. The group also works to rewrite traditional folk literature from a gender-sensitive perspective, and have begun printing books for children toward this end. The forum seeks to recall the role that women have played throughout Islamic history and change current thinking about women in Muslim society.

Website: <http://www.wmf.org.eg/>

We attended a dhikr in an alley outside the mosque housing the shrine of Sidi 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin. Dhikr, or "remembrance" (i.e., of God) is a Sufi practice, usually involving the continuous repetition of one of the ninety-nine names of God with the goal of producing a trancelike state in which one draws closer to God. Egyptian public dhikrs often also include a musical performance, and serve not only a mystical but also a social purpose, with much of the local community coming out to participate in the experience. The street was converted into a café, and tea and shisha pipes were distributed to customers. Peddlers hawked bread stuffed with a paste that may have been date- or fig-based. The sounds, smells, sights, and tastes combined to produce an effect that was quite intoxicating. The interaction of the singer with the crowd, as he moved among them, singing special verses for those who contributed money to the performers, was delightful to observe. One young child became particularly affectionate toward me and two other members of our group, and a tireless series of hugs was exchanged. Of every experience in the course, the dhikr was probably the most memorable, and the one that affected me the most.



Performers at a dhikr outside shrine of 'Ali Zayn al-'Abidin

Shaykh 'Izz and I became good friends in Luxor. We walked arm in arm through ancient temples and tombs, but we didn't know what to say to each other. It was wonderful, because we didn't have to say much.

"Water?"

He nodded, drank, and patted his chest.

"It's hot," I said.

"Very!" he replied, as we descended into the tomb of Ramses III. It was crowded, and it reeked of ammonia.

"Okay?" we asked each other, periodically.

"Thank god, are you okay?" the other would say.

I forgot the word for smell, so I waved my hand in front of my nose. He nodded and smiled.

"You're nice," one of us would claim.

"And you're nice!" was always the reply.

It was especially hot the day we visited Luxor Temple. In the eleventh century, the mosque of Sidi Abu Hajjaj was erected right on top of Luxor Temple, as the temple had been buried by centuries of silt. The temple was uncovered in the nineteenth century, but the mosque remained, and it now hangs over the entry pillars of the temple.

That day, the minaret was covered in scaffolding. Shaykh 'Izz took us in for a tour. Several men were working on renovations to the mosque, but they all stopped to greet and embrace him.

"This is amazing," Dr. Hoffman said, gazing at the ceiling, "because the last time I was here, this building was completely finished."

The mosque was instead completely gutted, and the Sufi saint Abu Hajjaj was alone in a corner among dusty lumber.

As we left the mosque and Luxor Temple, we could hear Eman hurrying everyone back on the tour bus.

"Mummies!" she called. Her voice was at once distant, urgent, and motherly as we shuffled over hot sand toward her.



Mosque of Sidi Abu Hajjaj

Eman was having a hard time. She drank little and ate even less while guiding us into the desert. She had sprained her wrist right before we left for Luxor, and her mother had been very sick. Shaykh 'Izz invited us to visit the *saha* of Shaykh Ahmad Radwan right after our tour. Eman came with us, as befriending Shaykh 'Izz piqued her curiosity about Sufism, but she looked very fatigued.

Professor Hoffman, Brad, Kristi, Dave, Chih-Wei, Jenny, Hannah, Jeff, Shaykh 'Izz, Eman, and I piled into two taxis and sped into the countryside. Jeff and I had read about Shaykh Ahmad Radwan. He was Nasser's spritual advisor and a well-known Sufi *shaykh*. He was Shaykh 'Izz's *shaykh* --he helped raise Shaykh 'Izz and later passed spritual knowledge on to him.

"I spent the night here once with my little girl," said Dr. Hoffman as we toured the main room, the dining hall, and the shrine erected over Shaykh Ahmad Radwan's tomb.

"I love this place," she said, "And it's one of the only places where Shaykh 'Izz can't smoke!"

We took off our shoes and stepped into a room that held a six-foot structure of carved wooden screens. Soothing green light peered through the lattices. Shaykh 'Izz took my arm and became silent as he led us around the tomb. He put his fingers to the cherry-colored wood.

"Shaykh 'Izz becomes very... serious when he visits this place," said Dr. Hoffman.

A *saha* is essentially a Sufi hospitality center. We sat in an open-air reception area for about twenty minutes. Eman curled up at the end of one of the benches with her head in her hands. Shaykh 'Izz led us into a small green room lined with couches and a table in the center. We were offered hot, sugary tea. Shaykh 'Izz asked us if we wanted even more sugar. Jeff and I declined. Kristi asked for three spoonfuls.

"Good--I love sugar too," he laughed.

"He loves sugar too," Dr. Hoffman translated.

Shaykh 'Izz took a pack of cigaretes out of his light blue *gallabiyya*.

"I thought you can't smoke in here!" Dr. Hoffman protested, as he offered cigarettes to the rest of us.

Eman was feeling a little better when we got back in the taxis. We talked about places everyone ought to visit.

"If I could live anywhere, I would live in Aswan," Eman said, with a faraway smile on her face.

Aswan is even further south than Luxor, and I wondered why anyone would want to live in a climate more murderous than Luxor's.

"Aswan is so beautiful. There are small islands in the river, and you can take your lunch there and see all the animals. They have, like, giraffes and alligators and hippopotamuses and... I would love to live in this place."

We were pulling closer to Luxor. The narrow road was thickening with carts, mopeds, and beasts of burden. We sped around them, and each car we passed honked at us.

"Nobody does that in America unless they're mad or something is wrong," I said.

"The honking?" said Eman, "Everyone does that here. That's how we say hello."

The most important thing Dr. Hoffman wanted us to take away from this course was the reality and experience of the diversity of Islam and Islamic practices in Egypt. She arranged several Sufi-oriented interviews and trips to demonstrate this aspect of Egyptian religiosity. Sufism, commonly referred to as Islamic mysticism, is stereotyped as a supersition of the poor, criticized as a heretical innovation, and disregarded as marginal to modernization. (Valerie Hoffman, *Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt* (South Carolina: USC Press, 1995), 16-17.) However, Sufism is very prevalent in Egyptian society, and Egyptians may be aware of Sufi concepts without being aware of their names.

We visited Shaykh 'Izz on a Sunday for a scheduled interview about Sufism, his role as a preacher, and non-governmental organizations. We took our regular tour bus to Embaba, a working-class section of Giza. Our driver, Mr. Magdi, let us off on the side of a road, as the bus wouldn't quite fit on the narrow alleys. We lept in front of oncoming traffic as children across the street slowed their games to take a better look our group.

Shaykh 'Izz found us in the alley and led s to the primary school he founded. He showed us several rooms which students of all ages shared each day. It was well into the evening, but a few teenagers shyly waved to us from their class.

We left the school and walked toward Shaykh 'Izz's apartment. We stopped in front of a butchers's shop, and Shaykh 'Izz explained us to the neighbors. Several sheep stood bleating outside of the shop as the butcher hung a fresh rack of ribs above the threshold.

The apartment was a bit small for our group, as Dr. Hoffman had anticipated, but we were all friends enough to sit in a very tight circle around Shaykh 'Izz's coffee table. His wife, Umm Hasan, introduced herself and brought us sugar cane drinks. She wore a beautiful white dress that Shaykh 'Izz brought back from the Hajj.

"You have to drink it quickly, because it turns into alcohol if it sits too long," she said. We had been gingerly sipping what the World Health Organization told us to consider as hypothetical stomach-aches. We drank them down as Umm Hasan brought out hot tea. Dr. Hoffman then asked Shaykh 'Izz to explain some main ideas of Sufism. She also asked him to speak sentence by sentence so that she could translate. He told her that was fine, but that she should keep in mind that it is rather difficult to interrupt that which God inspires.

"All of the heavenly religions revolve around the same truth, which is Love," he said, "Love is what brings the intellect to God. The intellect is a gift from God--it is what distinguishes us from all other beings."

Shaykh 'Izz told us that humans have four faculties--the soul, desire, hope, and ambition--that follow from the things of the earth, from Satan. These faculties tie us to the earth. The opposite of these is the spirit, which is from God. If one rises above these faculties, the branch that is one's spirit connects back to the root that is God. If one does this, God manifests himself and gives one a clairvoyance that he or she can sense in others. God's manifestations increase until God "inheres" in him or her. When God lives in someone like this, he or she is a prophet or a saint.

"I learned that love is the foundation, therefore I love all of God's creations. But what draws me to someone is the spirit, because the spirit is from God. I can sense when someone has a higher spirit."

"Imam al-Shafi'i said this about love: He was asked, 'Have you ever hated anyone?' And he said, 'My heart is filled with the love of God, so I have loved all humans. There is no room in my heart for hatred.'"

Shaykh 'Izz has to speak more practically in his Friday sermons, as he is often called to speak to extremists "who do not understand their religion correctly." All of his sermons are about love--between friends, families, neighbors, and in general.

Shaykh 'Izz then answered our questions about the Sufi path. One of us asked if non-Muslims could adopt Sufi practices or follow the Sufi path. Dr. Hoffman mentioned that, years ago, Shaykh 'Iz would have said that the path to God must begin with Muhammad. Today, he feels differently. He explained that all humans possess spirit, and spirit is directly from God. Therefore, he would have no problem with non-Muslims following the Sufi path, as long as they were guided by a *shaykh*. Because I had spent so much time with Shaykh 'Izz, I asked him to elaborate on discipleship and the shaykh-disciple relationship. He said not all Sufis become *shaykhs*, but a *shaykh* plants good in his disciples. A *shaykh* chooses a disciple who is strongest spiritually to succeed him. He gave us an example:

Shaykh al-Shadhili, a thirteenth century Sufi master and founder of the Shadhili Order, had forty disciples, but only three or four of them became *shaykhs*. When he chose a successor, the rest of his disciples became jealous. Al-Shadhili asked each of his disciples to bring a bird and a knife. He told them to each slaughter the birds in a place where he wouldn't see them. They all came back with bloody knives, except his appointed successor.

"Why didn't you slaughter the bird like I asked?" asked the *shaykh*.

"You told me to find a place where you couldn't see me, but I couldn't find one," the student replied.

The *shaykh* hugged him. "Now they will understand why I have chosen you."

A disciple must have permission to be a *shaykh*, but as long as you have given an oath to a *shaykh*, you are his/her representative. Therefore, Shaykh Ahmad Radwan speaks through Shaykh 'Izz.

"If you ask me a question, I am listening for the answer along with you."

Shaykh 'Izz's cell phone rang.

" *Salam 'Alaykum* . Who is this...? Darling! How are you?" He put his hand over the phone. "It's Eman."

Everyone got excited. She was in a taxi on her way over, but she was unfamiliar with the neighborhood. Fifteen minutes and three questions later, Eman staggered into the room.

"How did you guys even find this place? You're Americans!" she panted. She greeted the children and kissed Umm Hasan. "The taxi driver said, 'Are you sure you know where this house is?' and I said, 'Yeah, I'm a guide!' But I didn't know. I got so scared walking down this part, so I called Shaykh 'Izz."

Eman and Shaykh 'Izz started talking about Sufism. As the conversation became a bit heated (but friendly nonetheless), Dr. Hoffman offered to translate, and Eman offered to elaborate. Eman felt that there is no such thing as Sufism. Sufi beliefs and practices are Islamic, Eman agreed, and she agreed with Shaykh 'Izz on many things. But, how can there be such a thing as Sufism if the Qur'an made no mention of the word? The prophet never called himself a Sufi, so how could Sufis claim a spiritual link tracing all the way back to him?

These are familiar criticisms of Sufism--but Shaykh 'Izz explained that Sufi beliefs are all derived directly from the Qu'ran and Sunna. The conversation became even more rapid as Eman took in all that Shaykh 'Izz had to say, but it was time for us to go.



The *zar* is a ceremony and "spirit possession cult," which entered into Egyptian practice from Sudan.

"The majority of participants in the cult are women. Participants usually suffer from some physical or mental malady that is believed to be caused by spirit possession--a spirit who 'rides' the patient....The goal of *zars* is not to expel the spirit but to placate or cultivate a relationship with the spirit by fulfilling the spirit's demands to hold an elaborate feast, wear certain clothes, perform a sacrifice, and dance to the rhythm that belongs to the particular spirit." (Valerie Hoffman, "The *Zar* in Egypt," 1.)

Often, the ceremony is a cathartic experience which heals the woman through the power of God. *Zars* are illegal in Egypt, so the ceremony we observed took place in the very upstairs room of an apartment building.

We met Shaykh 'Izz, Umm Hasan, and their son Husayn at the hotel. Shaykh 'Izz went through the bus to shake hands with everyone. He said down in the back with Jeff and me.

"Hi," said Jeff.

"How are you?" asked Shaykh 'Izz.

"Thank God!" we said.

"Thank God."

We rode in silence for a minuet or two.

"I brought a big stick," said Shaykh 'Izz, tapping the floor of the bus with his leather-bound cane, "with which to drive away Satan!"

Though Shaykh 'Izz views the *zar* as a kind of therapy, he knows that a *zar* has the potential to go wrong and attract unwanted presences.

The *zar* was a small informal gathering of women, and ensemble of drums, flute, and voice, and our strange looking group. We sat on the floor against the wall and passed water around. The band played a slow rhythm and the singer started coaxing a young woman in a pink dress to stand up and dance. She placed a sheer scarf on her head for modesty and started to dance. As the rhythm quickened, so did her movements, until the music became so intense that she threw herself to the floor. The band stopped and helped her to her feet. She sat against the wall and closed her eyes. There was a beat of silence, and everyone else resumed their conversations while our group digested what it just saw. After a few minutes, the band played another woman's rhythm.

When everyone got a bit more used to each other, the women invited our group to dance. The group played a slow beat. We politely refused to get up until Kristi shrugged and leapt to her feet. The *zar* participants were delighted. Shaykh 'Izz tapped his cane on the floor and called to God. Then, he too got on his feet and helped Umm Hasan up. Shaykh 'Izz danced over to me and held his hands out.

"No, really, I'm okay," I muttered.

He ignored me and pulled me to my feet. Some of us danced in a circle around Husayn while the rest of us took pictures. The music stopped, and everyone went back to their seats and conversations. One of the women who seemed to have organized the *zar* was very interested in us and our experiences in Cairo, as her own daughter was working in Washington D.C.

The *zar* was quite tame compared to some of the *zars* Dr. Hoffman had seen, which were more intense and involved animal sacrifice. The informality of the ceremony had us wondering if we had intruded or if this particular *zar* was put on for our benefit (and theirs, as we donated some money to the band). The *zar*'s informal and clandestine character indicated that the *zar* may be a dying practice, which made the experience that much more special.



Photo by Kristi Lueker

We went to the *moulid* of Sayyida Nafisa on our last night in Cairo. Jeff and I had learned about and seen footage of *moulids* in Dr. Hoffman's classes, and we were excited to actually experience one. A *moulid* is like a huge Sufi carnival with games, treats, public *dhikrs*, and other events. This *moulid* took place in commemoration of the Prophet's great-granddaughter, who is an important saint in Cairo.

Once again, we piled into the bus with Shaykh 'Izz, Umm Hasan, and Husayn. The mosque of Sayyida Nafisa was adorned with colored lights and displays, and many families were out playing, praying, and drinking soda. We entered the mosque and separated. A group of men did *dhikr* in a circle in one corner of the main room. The women followed Umm Hasan into another room under which Sayyida Nafisa was buried. Several women and children sat beside the green-lit gold screen, whispering their hopes and concerns to Sayyida Nafisa. Scraps of paper lined the inside of the screen. Umm Hasan wove her fingers into the green glow and prayed--she was seven months pregnant then.

We regrouped and walked to a small Sufi hospitality center run by a woman with whom Dr. Hoffman and Shaykh 'Izz were friends. She was out of town, but Shaykh 'Izz wanted to visit anyway. We drank more soda and played hand-slapping games with Husayn.

"Shall we go play?" Shaykh 'Izz asked as he saw us out.

We followed him out into the alley, but there was a commotion nearby. Shaykh 'Izz told us to stay put, and he walked toward the conflict. The men of our group followed him anyway. Members of a funeral procession were shouting at a wedding party for holding a celebration too close to the funeral date. Shaykh 'Izz came back and led us through the fray back to Sayyida Nafisa.

We followed many people into a large tent. People sitting in chairs, on rugs, and standing against the walls were listening to a man recite praise poems to God and the Prophet into a microphone. To his right was a line of men seated who were descendants of Muhammad. We sat on the floor near the back with a few women who held out their hands when the poet recited a particularly beautiful line. Husayn sat in the back with us, playing with our cameras, but he fell fast asleep in Tarana's lap after a few long poems.

One of our tours with Tarek was of the Gayer Anderson Museum--a fabulous example of Arabic and Islamic design. The museum was an enormous maze-like house with beautifully restored furniture, paintings, and tapestries. The complex also had a courtyard and a wishing well. Even though it was 95 degrees outside, the house was quite cool for its ingenious network of windows, screens, and marblwork that amplified every breeze.

"There is a very interesting thing about this house that we're going to see soon. You'll forget everything you've seen in Cairo except for this one thing," Tarek said.

We finally climbed onto the roof, which was also wonderful as it was surrounded by more wooden screens bearing the names of God and the Prophet.

"Okay, everyone come closer. I'm going to show you the one thing you will remember from this trip."

It's very easy to detect Tarek's sarcasm, but he couldn't have been more wrong.

"See that?" he said, pointing to one of the screens. "You know the movie 'The Spy Who Loved Me'? Well, you know the scene where James Bond knocks a guy off the roof? They filmed that right here!" he said, grinning.

