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THE KAMSHISH AFFAIR
CITY OF THE DEAD

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Dear Peter,

Every country in North Africa and the Middle East has its villages or cities that sum up and symbolize struggles against colonial masters or against traditional social relations - Setif in Algeria, Bizerte in Tunisia and Kufra in Libya. To anyone who knows Egypt's recent history - Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike - the small village of Kamshish is a concrete example of the rise and fall of Nasser's revolution in a rural setting.

I faintly knew of some of the events that had taken place in Kamshish when I arrived in Egypt. After living in Cairo for a few weeks I briefly visited the village en route to neighboring Mit Abu al-Qom, the birthplace of former president Anwar al-Sadat. Both places were officially mamnu' (forbidden) for journalists and, I assume, also for people with a more academic bent.

It was not until months later that I fully understood what Kamshish stood for in recent Egyptian history, and how clearly it symbolizes the larger changes that have taken place within Egypt in the last three decades. Even so I was reluctant to write a report on the village. For reasons that will become clear, I was never able to interview the crucial character of what some contemporary Egyptian reports - depending on whose interests they defended - called the "Kamshish tragedy" or the "Kamshish travesty."

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Then about four months ago an academic book appeared, focusing on Kamshish and the broader implications of the little tragedy. Many of my unanswered questions were now solved. I dug up my old notes and was able to throw light on what were previously obscure and discrete elements. Some questions still remain unclear in my mind. But as Peter has so often reminded me, this is just an informal report. And since I consider the Kamshish incident to stand for some of the much larger issues I have been writing about, I thought it would make a nice part of a final report from Egypt in lieu of the more formal essay I have been working on.

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At first sight Kamshish looks much like thousands of other Egyptian villages. Fifty kilometers north of Cairo in Minufiyya governorate, it sports the same collection of dilapidated mudhouses one finds all over the Egyptian countryside. As in most villages, the canal that runs through it plays a crucial role in the daily life of the people. It is a gathering places for women cleaning pots and pans, for exchanging daily gossip and a place for children to cool off in the hot summer months.

Past the mudhouses and the village square are some orchards. A little farther down the road is an effendiyya, an oversized house wealthy landowners often built a few decades ago as a sign of prosperity. The contrast between the villa and the mudhouses symbolizes as well as anything else the deep juncture that for centuries has existed between those owning and those working the land in Kamshish and all over Egypt.

By the 1960s much of Kamshish's land had been owned for over a century by the Fiqqi family. Members of the family became socially and politically prominent at the turn of the century, sending at least one of its members - Al-Sayyid al-Kabir - to the national Chamber of Consultative Deputies (Majlis Shura al-Nuwwab). Upon his death his landholdings were divided according to Islamic law, fragmenting the land among a number of his sons and daughters. During the Great Depression of the 1930s two of his grandsons systematically added to the family holdings, buying land from many small owners who had been forced to dispose of their properties when cotton prices plummeted. From the 1940s on much of Kamshish's agricultural lands once again belonged to the Fiqqis who now ruled the village in a sort of semi-feudal fashion.

One of the families who had been disinherited during the depression was the Maqlads. The hostility between the two families dated back several decades. At one point Al-Sayyid al-Kabir had married Shahinda, a young woman of Turkish origin. When al-Kabir died she remarried one of the Maqlad family, thus ensuring that some of the land in the village went to the Maqlads clan. Although the Fiqqis disputed al-Kabir's will in court, the Maqlads' claim was upheld.

Because of inheritance, the Maqlads' land also fragmented into smaller parcels. These were systematically bought up by the Fiqqis during the depression. By the end of World War II the Maqlads were almost landless. Salah Husain Maqlad, however, never forgot his family's setback at the hands of the Fiqqis. After the 1952 Revolution he seized upon the Nasser regime's socialist rhetoric in an effort to once and for all check the

fortune of the Fiqqi family. But the Fiqqis were well connected throughout the provincial government and managed, at least temporarily, to hold onto their holdings.

Salah Husain had grown up in Kamshish. At a young age he joined the Muslim Brotherhood. When Nasser's RCC (Revolutionary Command Council) announced agrarian reforms shortly after taking power, he became a committed socialist. He led the first confrontation in January 1953 between the landowning Fiqqis and Kamshish peasants. Almost twenty people died. A second uprising took place and Salah Husain was banned from the village. His wife Shahinda (not to be confused with Shahinda, Al-Sayyid al-Kabir's wife) took over the helm of the rudimentary peasant organization her husband created.

Under the first agrarian reforms announced by the RCC, the Fiqqis lost no land. But their political power was diminished when a member of the family was relieved of the village's mayorship. All remained quiet in Kamshish until the creation of the National Union, Nasser's attempt to gain village-level support for his regime. Through newly founded farmers cooperatives Salah Husain and his wife Shahinda attempted to have the Fiqqis' properties sequestered.

All this took place at the time when Nasser' revolutionary rhetoric was at an all-time high. The Arab Socialist Union (ASU) replaced the National Union. Peasants and workers were considered the new vanguard against Egypt's traditional landed bourgeoisie. In 1961 the Fiqqis' land was finally sequestered and distributed among some of the village's poorest farmers. The family was put under house arrest in Alexandria.

The sequestration benefited more than two hundred of the local fellahin. Kamshish's persistent problem with concentration of large amounts of land in one family had seemingly come to and end. It quickly became a benchmark against which the aims of the revolution all over Egypt were measured. It became a signpost of the revolution.

For a few months, small dust-ridden Kamshish became the Mecca of the world's revolutionary movement. On 8 March 1965 Che Guevara, the future leader of several Latin American revolts, joined Abdul Nasser in a visit to the village. Jean Paul Sartre and his companion Simone de Beauvoir followed in their wake. Kamshish signaled, at least according to contemporary folk songs, the victory of the fellahin over the village's feudal and reactionary system.

Salah Husain returned to the village and became part of the ASU Ideological Affairs Committee. The rhetoric written up in its pamphlets at the time within the Kamshish committee was consistent with that of Nasser's: praise for the progressive forces in Cuba, Vietnam and Yemen, and condemnation of reactionary capitalism internationally and the Muslim Brotherhood locally. (By this time the brotherhood had been accused of trying to assassinate Nasser and was being persecuted. Salah Husain had quietly dropped his affiliation.)

On 30 April 1966 Salah returned home from an ASU meeting in Cairo where he had been pressing for the confiscation of further Fiqqi property

in Kamshish. Upon entering the village he was shot down and died almost immediately. Within a few days Kamshish was overrun by government officials and members of Field Marshall Amer's dreaded and notorious Military Investigation. Nasser himself was informed of the murder. The leftist Rus al-Yusif and al-Taliah immediately mounted an immense press campaign - presumably with government approval - to forever halt the "excesses of reactionary feudalism." Kamshish in their estimation was a clear indication of the emerging class struggle within Egypt. They called upon the government to side with the struggling masses.

Nasser in response created the Higher Committee for the Liquidation of Feudalism. Both al-Taliah and Rus al-Yusif hailed the action. But they failed to notice that Nasser's initiative concentrated all power to amend "reactionary feudalism" at the national rather than the local level. The difference was a subtle but an important one. By the end of 1966 (and particularly after the defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war) the regime had become weary of many of its own revolutionary slogans (See DJV-1). The rhetoric that had been aimed at the population for several years, was now taking its toll. The masses had retained their fervor but the regime had left some of its pretensions behind.

But it was still too early in Kamshish in 1966 to anticipate a reversal of fortunes. On the contrary, the Fiqqi family suffered a major setback after Ahmed Husain's murder. The regime even dragged some of the older family members back from Alexandria to their ancestral village where they were subjected to abuse in front of the villagers. Throughout the investigation torture was liberally applied. In the end the Fiqqis' villa was turned into the ASU headquarters and the family members subjected to heavy punishment. It seemed as if the stranglehold of the Fiqqis over Kamshish had finally been broken.

To the villagers' dismay, however, Egyptian authorities did not allow a memorial service for Salah Husain to take place. It was the first concrete indication within the village of Nasser's new policy of Law and Order, replacing the prolonged period of revolutionary awakening. Within a few months several more reversals took place. The ASU's local representative, a spokesman for the fellahin, was sacked by the governor. And while Nasser mentioned Salah Husain in his Labor Day speech of 1968, the first desequestrations took place shortly afterward. All of this was alarming to the peasants who saw in the appointment of Sayyid Mari as new minister of agricultural reform a return to the old privileged system.

Under the desequestration of 1967 one of the Fiqqi clan, Muhammad Abdallah Fiqqi, regained most of his properties. Forty farmers in Kamshish lost part or all of their land. By that time the regime had decided to try the Salah Husain case in a regular court, rather than the revolutionary court where crimes "of a political nature" were usually tried. The final verdict failed to convict any of the Fiqqis. Salah Husain's wife Shahinda took up the cause her husband had once led, seeking a retrial and a repeal of the desequestration measures.

By that time Nasser was a sick man. He never ratified the court's decision. But for Shahinda and the fellahin of Kamshish the writing was on the wall. It seemed as if all the accomplishments of the last years had

been to no avail. A last major demonstration was held in the village in February 1969 to prevent Muhammad Abdallah Fiqqi from taking repossession of his lands. They battled for a final fifteen days with provincial and government forces. But in the end the Fiqqis were reestablished in the village. The big villa and the orchards behind the mudhouses were once again Fiqqi property.

Shahinda now became Kamshish's political activist. But the new Sadat regime had little time or patience for the outworn ideology she and her sympathizers espoused. For years she was harassed, often moving from house to house in Cairo to avoid arrest. But the ultimate humiliation was yet to come. To Sadat the treatment of the Fiqqis demonstrated the cruelty of the Nasser regime. Anxious to show the world how Egypt had changed under his rule, a second Kamshish trial took place in 1978. This time the defendants became the accusers. The interrogators of the first trial were now prosecuted on charges of torture and abuse of power. Several were condemned to long prison terms. The Fiqqis also received 400,000 pounds in compensation.

What was on trial of course was the whole state as Nasser had devised it. Socialism itself was now suspect. In the new era of infitah it smacked of communism and hence of opposition to the Sadat regime. As Sadat later wrote in his autobiography, the state under Nasser had trampled upon the dignity of the Egyptian people. But which people was he talking about?

Small wonder that an event like Kamshish provoked such extended debate on all sides of Egypt's political spectrum. As all symbolic events, Kamshish could be interpreted in a number of ways. It was something all ideologies could feast upon. For the left what happened in 1978 represented the return of privilege and the reassertion of those interests Nasser wanted to eradicate. But for Sadat and those who stood to gain, it was part of an infitah policy in part predicated on the conviction that the socialist excesses should be curbed and that some sort of balance should be restored. It was a statement that in this new society "excesses" like Kamshish would no longer be tolerated.

But what was the alternative for the villagers of Kamshish? A new society that showed the deficiencies of the old? Perhaps above all - uncertainty. And perhaps that is what the village above all symbolizes for Egypt at large. For just as the villagers who gained in the 1960s had little hope that their victory would endure, those who regained their privileges in the 1970s now feel uncertain. It is this drift, this uncertainty about the future at large that explains Egypt perhaps better than anything else.

In A Bend in the River, V.S. Naipaul wrote with great insight about the effects of uncertainty on a society. For the monied elite it usually means flight (personal or capital) from the country. But an even more inviduous remnant is the loss of national identity, of national culture. In most societies that are stalled, millenarianism and a return to trusted (and often nostalgic) values takes place. This, rather than the easy cliches of Arab fatalism or radicalism, explains Egypt's most recent return to fundamentalism. As during the last two centuries, the failure of an ideology was followed by a period of retrenchment.

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For Egypt's elite, then as now, there has always been the possiblity of exit. Even those who remain, however, often adopt what Albert Hourani in inimitable fashion once called a levantine identity, "to live in two worlds within belonging to either." It is against the pretensions that flow from it, and because of its own inability to exit, that traditionalization within the country is taken up by those who feel dispossessed. In Kamshish as in many other Egyptian villages and cities the feeling of dispossession lingers on.

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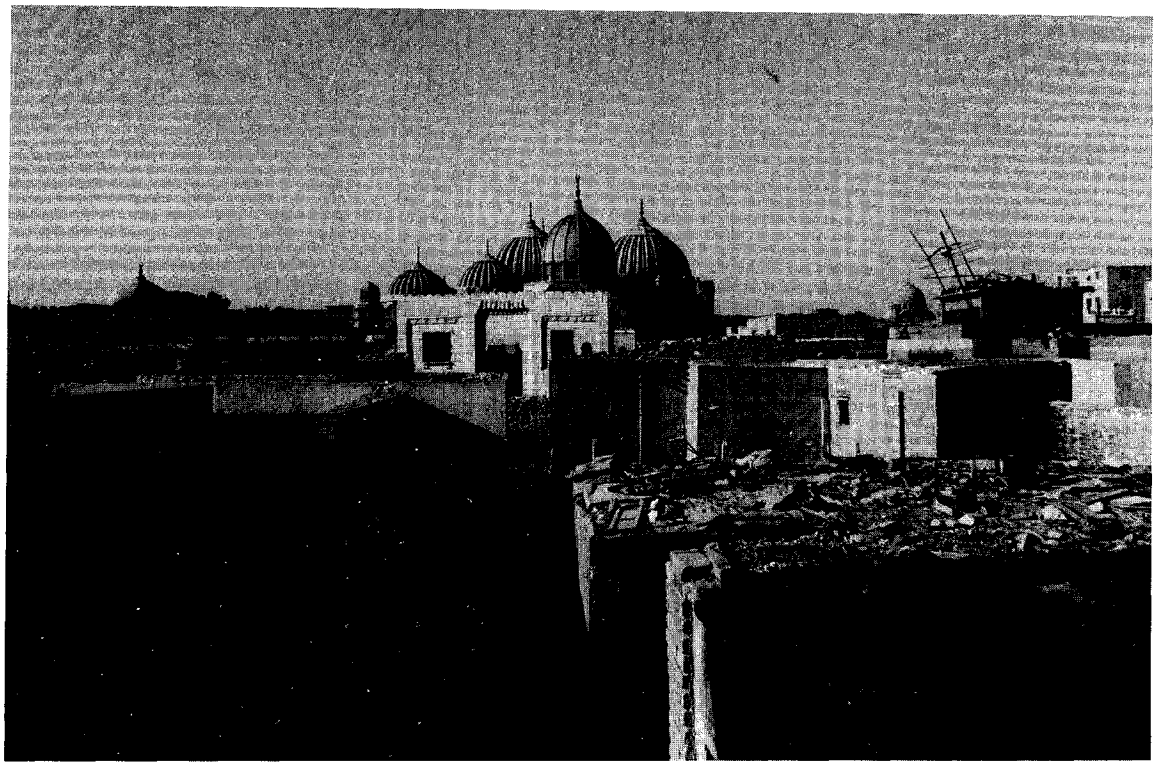
As promised in my last newsletter, I have included in this final report from Egypt another informal story, culled from notes taken while wandering around Cairo. This one deals with a visit to part of the City of the Dead.

Just north of the Citadel Saleh Salem avenue briefly veers eastward, offering a magnificent view of the city's innumerable minarets. From there it dips down until at Bab al-Qarafa it starts to run parallel with the aquaduct that once brought water from the Nile to the Citadel. El-Khalifa is the southern part of Cairo's City of the Dead.

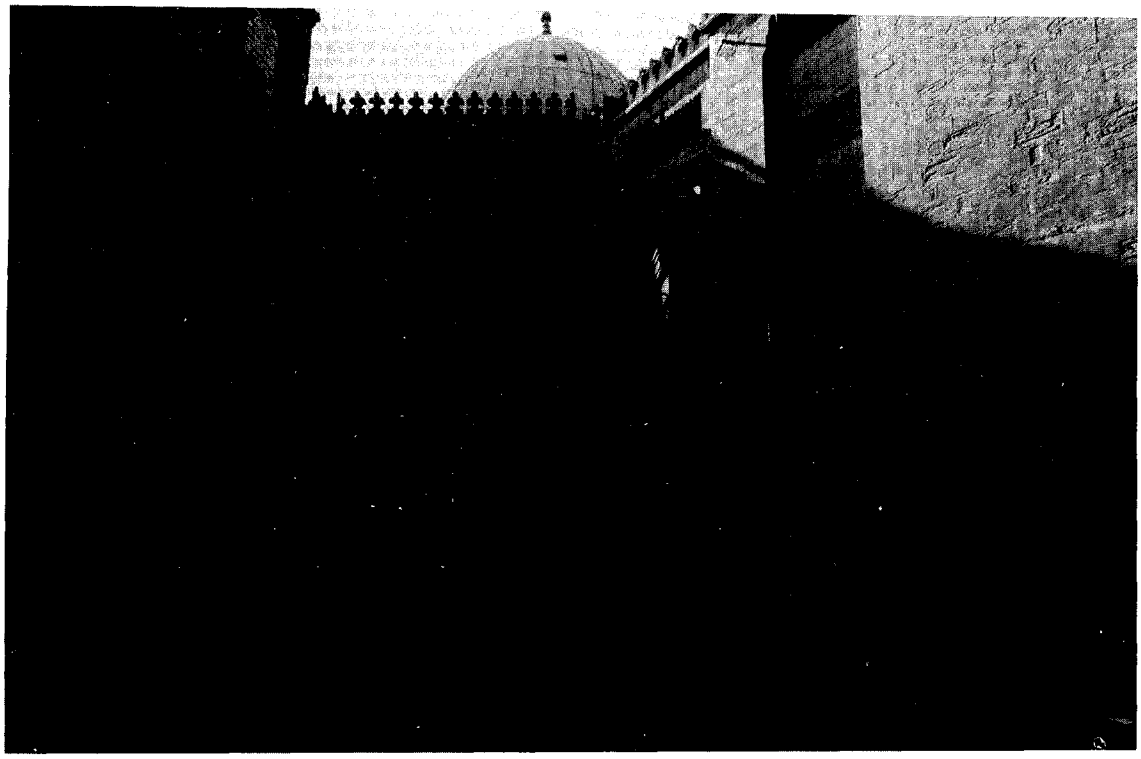
Coexisting side by side within this city are a magnificent collection of Mamluk tombs and mausoleums - and an estimated 500,000 Cairenes. For some time now I have visited these great cemeteries in an effort to systematically take a look at Cairo's Islamic monuments. There is nothing sinister about the City of the Dead. In Egypt the afterlife has always played an important function. In any case City of the Dead may be a misnomer. Its original purpose was the building of mausoleums for Mamluk sultans. At the time the area was still desert. Around the mausoleums grew madrasas (religious schools) and caravanserai. The two most notable examples in the northern cemetary, the mausoleum of Ibn Barquq and Qaytbay, were huge walled complexes to which scholars came to teach and be taught in Islamic jurisprudence. At Qaytbay in the northern cemetery each of Islam's four schools of jurisprudence had its own wing, each scholar his own cell and his own stipend.

In a relatively short period of two hundred years a large number of notable mausoleums, tombs and mosques were built in the City. This great number of buildings, often complete with large colonies of scholars, required a number of people to guard the buildings. The City of the Dead therefore always had a number of inhabitants, even after the power of the Mamluks declined and the desert complexes fell into disuse and disrepair.

Photographs taken in the 19th century show how relatively deserted the area still remained. Pictures taken by Bonfils and other well-known photographers still show solitary buildings surrounded by sand. As Cairo expanded rapidly in the 20th century, however, the cemeteries rapidly filled up with people. Since then the City of the Dead has become a

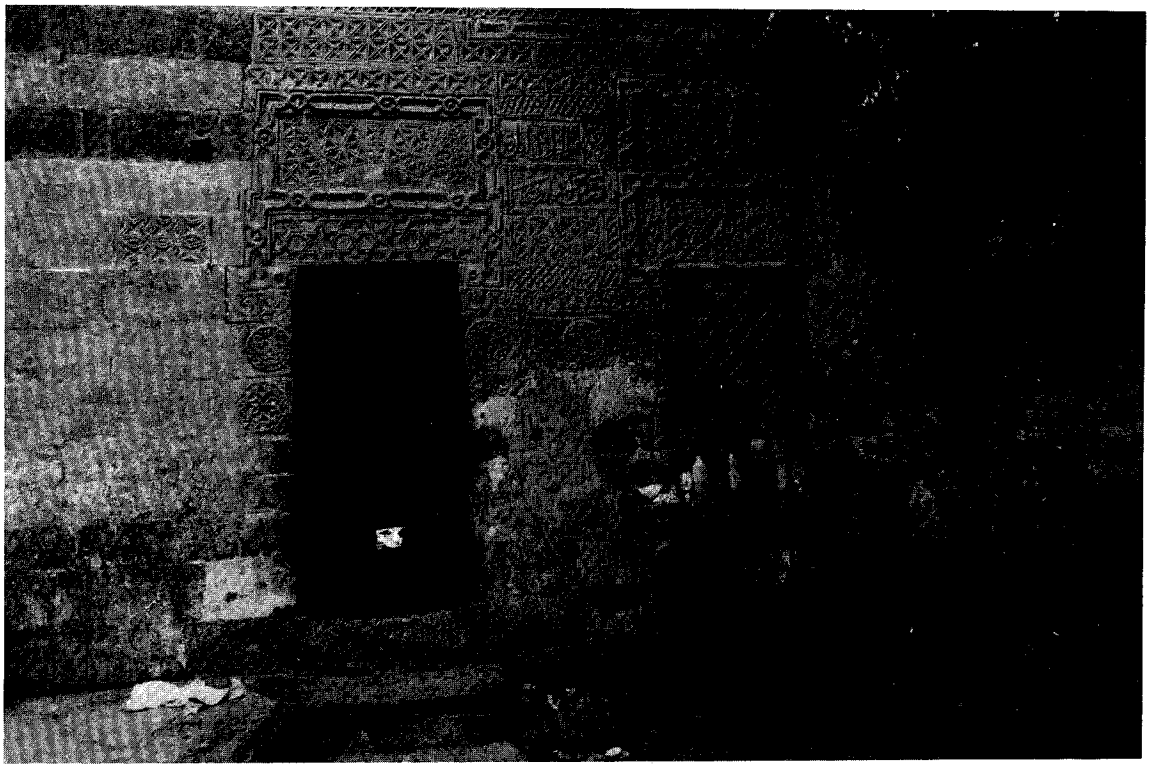


Hosh al-Basha, Tomb of Muhammad Ali Family

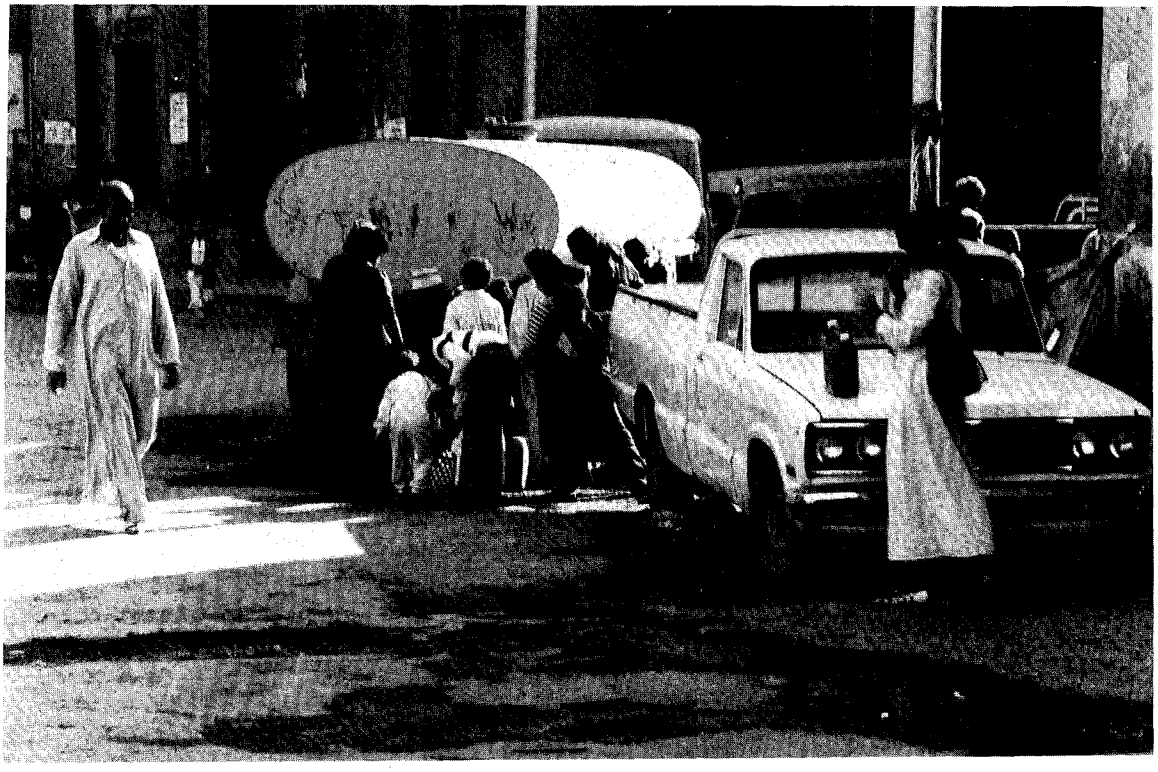


Entry to the Tomb of Imam Shafii

Courtyard with Tombs in Al-Razzaz's Sabil-Kutab



Former Kutab, now private house at Al-Razzaz



Distributing Water in the City of the Dead

veritable city, complete with electricity, transportation and stores.[1]

It was into this warren of small alleys, Islamic monuments and tombs that I ventured once again. For the first mile or so I followed Sharia Imam Shafii, the main thoroughfare that has been cut across the cemetery to facilitate modern transport. On both sides of the street are parts of the cemetery, punctuated here and there with a Mamluk tomb or a minaret. The more immediate view, however, is of a row of slum housing that has spilled over from the cemetery into the street. The view is one of almost

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[1] In a special report I will describe in greater detail the effect of Cairo's rapid growth on several areas of the city. All of the housing in the City of the Dead - and more than 80% of all other housing throughout Cairo is so-called "informal." It means it was built either without permits and - as in the City of the Dead - without ownership of the land. Cairo's housing shortage is so severe, however, that the government has long ago resigned itself to the informal housing phenomenon. I will also have a number of pictures in the special report to illustrate the City of the Dead in more detail.

indescribable poverty. Hovels are built against the walls of tombs. Since there is almost no space available, much of the cooking and washing is performed outside the dwellings. Women throw the washing water into the street where it quickly turns into black mud and stagnant pools of water. As in many popular quarters in Cairo space is at a premium here. Carpenters and blacksmiths are working outside on both sides of the street.

I have ventured out to see only a few of the Islamic monuments today: the mosque and mausoleum of Imam Shafii (after whom the street is named), Al-Razzaz, the small tomb of Hasawati and Hosh al-Pasha, the burial tomb of Muhammad Ali's family.

But more important for my purpose today was the fact that Imam Shafii is considered a muslim saint. Under the egalitarianism of mainstream Islam the concept of saints is not acceptable. All men are equal before God. But particularly in North Africa the phenomenon of wandering holy men (marabouts) who extended baraka (blessings from God) to the local population is commonplace. Their whitewashed tombs are usually scrupulously maintained, often sporting small ribbons scribbled full of devotions that flutter around the doorposts.

In the popular quarters of Cairo Imam Shafii, together with Sayyida Zeynab and Sayyida Nafisa, are venerated as saints. But Imam Shafii was not some simple marabout. It is indeed difficult to understand how he became the popular figure who continues to attract throngs of mostly illiterate worshippers. For Imam Shafii was the founder of one of Sunni Islam's four schools of jurisprudence, a learned man whose subtle interpretations were surely lost on the man in the street. Today Shafiism remains the predominant rite in East Africa, South Arabia, Bahrain and Malaysia.

I had a special purpose in wanting to visit the Shafii tomb on this particular day. For today was Moulid al-Nabi, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, when large numbers of visitors flock to the mausoleum. Once there they will circumambulate the Imam's cenotaph inside the mausoleum, asking for baraka. It was a good occasion to observe popular Islam. As I walked toward the tomb I knew I would not be disappointed. Along Imam Shafii road carload upon carload of women and children passed me by. Children, blankets, food, thermos bottles and soft drinks were piled up on the carts. The atmosphere was a happy one for this was a holiday - an official one no less - and it promised to be a day of lighthearted gossip in the shade of one of the tombs, luxuriating in each others' company.

From far away I could see the roof of the Imam's tomb, crowned by a weathervane in the shape of a boat. (Until a few decades ago the boat was filled daily with grain for birds - but that was before Egypt started to import most of its cereals.) Despite the crowds I briefly managed to lose my way in some of the narrow side alleys. People everywhere had gathered in the streets, sitting on blankets and straw mats. I was clearly an intruder here. But as usual people were too polite to ask what I wanted or what I was doing.

The children, however, showed fewer inhibitions. My strategy is always to engage children in conversations. For once the adults notice them chatting away with a foreigner they will inevitably saunder over to talk themselves. Also, in a culture as child-oriented as Egypt,

friendliness toward children goes a long way in creating goodwill among the adults. Soon then I was overwhelmed by the customary questions - almost always initially in English - "What's your name? How are you?" Once the adults had gathered I asked where the entrance to the mosque was, simultaneously and politely avoiding at least half a dozen invitations to have some tea or lemonade. Questions of this kind in Egypt are inevitably answered by a cacaphony of voices. "Alla tool" they all yelled - straight ahead - all turning in the direction of the proposed route. In inimitable Egyptian fashion a dissenting voice advised me to follow some other street. While I was already fifty yards away I could still hear the argument raging over what the better route was to get to the mosque.

The City of the Dead is in many ways unique. Although it is a crowded area, it is an oasis of rest, even of solitude. There are very few cars and the streets and alleys are - with the exception of the beginning of Imam Shafii street - almost scrupulously clean. The houses are in general relatively new and of adequate quality. Many are built around the courtyards of family tombs and because of the surrounding walls offer a high degree of privacy unknown in most other low-income housing areas throughout Cairo.

At the Shafii mosque a city truck had pulled to distribute water. I walked past the 19th century mosque, an ugly contraption, into the Imam's mausoleum. It is the largest in Egypt, a soaring thirteenth century domed building with an exquisitely decorated dome. When its builders laid out the plans for Saladin he is rumored to have said ""Be lavish in splendor and elegance; ours will be to provide all."

In the middle stands the teak cenotaph of the Imam himself, completely shrouded in a wooden enclosure covered with mats. Around it women were slowly circling the tomb, touching the rugs and praying for baraka. The pillar at the head of the tomb had been worn smooth by hands that have for centuries touched the sura (verse from the Quran) hewn into the white marble.

Other women were sitting along the walls, seemingly lost in thought. An occasional stray cat would wander into this atmosphere of quiet and prayer, ignored by the people inside and by the doorkeeper who - for a small monetary consideration - lifted the rugs on the tomb so that I could see the cenotaph. Immediately two or three women rushed in to take a look also but the doorkeeper kept them at a safe distance until they also paid some money.

Against the wall that faces Mecca a number of men were performing their prayers. The kibla at the Shafii mausoleum has three arches. In the 19th century it was discovered that it did not face Mecca exactly and a new, smaller kibla was erected in the corner - this time facing the holy city correctly - but everyone ignored this latest addition and prayed as if ignorant of the mistake.

On the way out I had a little chat with the gatekeepers who inquired if I was muslim. I sat down and took a sip of tea from one of their glasses. At the pronouncement that I was Christian they looked much relieved, saying that Christians and Muslims are brothers, and perhaps thankful that I was not an atheist. I also left them 25 piasters each for

guarding my shoes, and pushed on toward the sabil-kuttab of Radwan Bey al-Razzaz.

Sabil means fountain in arabic and kuttab school. They can be found all over Cairo, built at a time when piped water had not yet made its entry. Men of means usually commissioned them as a sign of piety, civil sense and to increase their fame. Some are architectural gems. Many are badly preserved, in part because of lack of money. But even those connected to the mosques did not always appreciate the delicacy of its architecture. Here is how Ibn Jubayr described one local preacher's delivery of the khutbah , the sermon delivered on Fridays:

> "When he had ascended the pulpit, at the first step, he struck it with the end of his scabbard a blow which those present heard as it were a call to silence. He did it again when halfway up, and a third time at the end of his climb."

One can only imagine what a repeated treatment of this kind must have done to the delicate stucco of the pulpit...

The one I was looking for had by all accounts deteriorated and as I was groping my way toward it along a number of muddy and tiny alleys, I had expected nothing more. The narrow unpaved alley, its bottom deep in shadows while the top of the surrounding houses were bathed in the brilliant white light of Cairo's midday sunshine, suddenly opened up into a little square where some women in black milayas were sunning themselves and cleaning vegetables. My appearance caused a little uproar. I heard them speculate on my nationality. The general consensus was that I was American. When I asked them where the sabil-kuttab was they burst into laughter, a mixture of embarrassment that I had understood their conversation and because I was so ignorant as to not recognize the building right in front of which they were sitting.

Since then I have discovered again and again that few people in the City of the Dead were aware of what the momuments really represented. Everyone knew their names and where they were located. But no one really knew their history or their former function. When I would dig out my illustrated guide they would point at the pictures giggingly. When I asked them how old the momuments were, they would inevitably guess centuries later than their real building date. Their surprise at the age of the buildings was only surpassed by the fact that a khawaga (foreigner) had appeared out of nowhere with a little book in his book, with heavily accented arabic (they would rock with laughter at every silly mistake I made and often, to tease me, would respond to my questions by repeating that mistake. Once at the Barquq mausoleum where I made a particularly funny gaffe, the guard recognized me weeks later and recalled the mistake to the merriment of a throng of visiting relatives. I hurried up the minaret at that point) and with a knowledge that to them seemed almost encyclopedic.

The sabil-kuttab of Al-Razzaz was located in a little courtyard, past a flight of stairs that led to what must originally have been the height of

the building. The momument itself was in bad disrepair but its new function was interesting. Little remained from what must have been a magnificent set of buildings. After a minute its current "owner" appeared and I asked his permission to enter into the courtyard. What had once been an exquisite sabil had been converted into a home for his family. Its outside walls were covered by the delicate carved arabesques chiseled in stone for which Mamluk buildings were famous. Ahmed and his family were living among the splendor of a bygone age, with little realization of the treasure they had inherited.

The little courtyard in which I stood was filled with tombs. Between them a collection of geese and ducks and chickens were running back and forth, agitated by my presence. On one of the tombs a number of loaves of freshly baked baladi bread had been spread out to cool off. Above the house the remnant of the old kuttab ceiling was visible, the gilded panels of its magnificently coffered ceiling now exposed to the dust and the wind. The past and the present had incongruously but inevitably blended into one. As the owner's wife hung up some washing on lines strung between the stellas of two tombs I walked back out.

The women were still sitting on the steps outside. I continued down the dusty alley and asked a couple of children where the Tomb of Hasawati was. They led me to it, a small tomb that has recently been restored by the Antiquities Department - in my estimation in a very bad fashion so that it looks like a lump of concrete. Or, as the Islamic architecture historian Cresswell once wrote about another restoration, it now has a "mean and modern appearance." Six hundred years' accumulation of garbage and sand have heightened the road to over nine feet above the original entrance to the little tomb.

As I was descending the little retaining wall toward the door, a couple of young men peered over the railing above me. They were dressed in what in the West would function as a pair of pyjamas. But here they were worn around by men in their neighborhoods and exchanged only for slacks and a shirt when traveling into downtown Cairo.

Immediately upon introducing myself I was invited to tea at the house of Muhammad, the youngest of the two. This time I agreed to the invitation. As is customary, our entry into the house was announced at the door so that the women had time to disappear into one of the adjacent rooms or to some neighborhoods friends for the duration of the visit. The apartment into which I was admitted barely contained two rooms, customarily shared by Muhammad, two brothers, a sister and his parents. In one of the rooms a small gas stove was standing in one of the corners. Since his parents were visiting relatives in Alexandria the small flat was able to contain us all - Muhammad, two of his brothers, his friend Ahmed and myself. I caught a glimpse of Fatima, the only daughter, as she hurried down the steps to wait out my visit with some friends. There was only one chair available in the room. It was given to me as their guest of honor and everyone else piled up on the double bed which took up most of the space. In the corner a large color TV set sat incongruously on a laundry basket. A soccer game was in progress, featuring Zamalek and some other Egyptian team. The room was dense with cigarette smoke.

Since it was noontime Muhammad insisted that I eat lunch. I feebly

tried to resist, remembering several other enforced meals that left me with an upset stomach for several days. I also knew my protestations would be politely but firmly overruled. A small table was pulled from under the bed and was soon covered with a huge display of fried rice, mutton stewed in some kind of evil-looking gravy, beans in tomato sauce, pickled olives and potatoes. It was a meal meant for several people. But as their guest I was to stuff myself until I almost dropped dead... after which Muhammad and the other men would eat.

The meal was characteristic of many I had eaten before in lower-class restaurants and homes - heavy with grease, the mutton marbled with large chunks of fat. In these poorer neighborhoods where meat is often a luxury, large amounts of fat are consumed along with the meat. Indeed, it is highly insulting not to partake of what to our Western taste is at best a disagreeable substance. Fortunately my hosts were absorbed by the soccer game and I was able to hide some of it under the mound of rice. With some deftly chosen excuses I finally pursuaded them that I could not eat any more. The little table was moved over toward the bed and the four men finished what I had left.

Once the meal was over conversation shifted toward life in the City of the Dead. As a young university graduate in electrical engineering but with no army service behind him yet, Muhammad's life was in limbo. After the obligatory twelve months he seemed unlikely to soon land a job. Almost three million of his peers are in a similar situation and their ranks swell every year by almost 500,000. Most university graduates who obtained their degrees in 1982 still have not found employment. And what if Muhammad landed a job? With no connections and without graduate schooling he seemed likely to end up working for the public sector, earning perhaps as little as 80 pounds per month ($50) for several years.

He pointed at the walls around him. "The City of the Dead is filled up. This small apartment now costs 10,000 pounds. I need to buy one before I can get married. But how can I earn that much? My brother is already thirty-two and has not even saved half that much." I had heard the same story over and over again, in apartments even smaller than this, with even more people living in them. Inevitably the conversation turned toward employment opportunities and the United States. It is perhaps a sign of desparation that in a culture where hospitality is highly valued for its own sake, direct pleas for help in gaining employment overseas is now a readily asked question. Could I find Muhammad a job in the United States - "anything at all?" Did I know someone at the embassy who could facilitate the visa process? As usual I promised I would do all I could. Muhammad wrote down his address in shaky, large letters on a piece of paper and I wrote mine on a separate sheet. Everyone seemed relieved when the sheets were exchanged.

By mid-afternoon the sky had already started to darken and we all went out to take a walk around the neighborhood. Deep inside the City by now, a stranger with knowledge of arabic "and a doctorate from America" was a real thrill. For the next couple of hours I found myself dragged from house to house, introduced to friends and relatives of Muhammad, drinking once again an almost impossible number of Sport colas and Miranda orange drinks, hugging babies that had been sleepily lifted from their warm cradles to be

photographed with what - judging from the amount of crying - must have appeared to them as a real strange duck. Unfortunately the soft drinks induced numerous trips to bathrooms that often were little more than a small area in one of the rooms, separated by a blanket. As a result whole families gathered in another room for the benefit of my privacy, and it felt oddly embarassing to return to the beaming glow of this assembled audience all smiling in my direction as I reemerged.

The housing was uniformly of fair quality. In comparison to what I had witnessed a few weeks before in Mounira Al-Gidiida (see my note concerning my SPECIAL REPORT at the end of this newsletter) the area was very clean and the social cohesion of many of the neighborhoods has seemingly been preserved.

We walked toward the neighborhood cafe. Through the arches of one of the tombs I could dimly see the pink and orange outline of Hash al-Basha's five cupolas. It was too late however to visit them now. Night had fallen quickly and the City of the Dead was dark, except for the moonlight and an occasional bare lightbulb strung across the street. It was uncommonly quiet and peaceful. There was no noise of traffic, none of the irritations of other parts of Cairo. In the dark we walked slowly back toward the Shafii mosque, now lit up by neon lights strung along the minaret, past al-Razzaz with its ducks and geese and the richly decorated ceiling and the bread cooling off on the old tomb. At the grocery store a neon light had been strung above a large painting of Sadat, and he glowered at us from beneath a green army cap. A few men were playing backgammon at the corner cafe. It took a while for the bus to arrive and we all chatted. Finally the bus arrived and we said our goodbyes as old friends. Moments later I was being transported toward the center of the city again. Soon the noise and the cacaphony of Cairo's traffic picked up. The magic of the City of the Dead disappeared and I arrived at Midan Tahrir with its everpresent traffic.

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My upcoming SPECIAL REPORT ON CAIRO will deal in greater detail with urbanization in the city, including a look at its impact on population, transportation, housing and the care for Cairo's Islamic monuments. It will also contain a number of B&W pictures taken during my nine month stay in Cairo.

All the best,

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