Re-imagining the global: relocation and local identities in Cairo

Farha Ghannam

Short of a certain threshold of likelihood, only magical solutions remain. Magical hope is the outlook on the future characteristic of those who have no real future before them. (Bourdieu 1979: 69)

‘Praise the Prophet. Once upon a time, there was an old woman who used to live in an apartment that was as small as that tiny table [pointing to the small table in their living room]. Each time the old woman swept the floor, she found either one pound or 50 piasters [an Egyptian pound is worth around 34 cents] that she kept hidden in a place in her window. The old woman was saving to buy a larger apartment. But one day, a thief stole all the money that she saved. She was very sad. An afriit [demon or ghost] appeared and asked the old woman what she would like to have. She asked for a larger apartment. The afriit asked her, “Would you like the apartment to have a balcony?” and she answered yes. He asked her, “Would you like a television set, a fan and a bottle of water?” [describing some of the things that were in front of us in the living room]. The old woman said yes. Then he asked her, “And would you like some pictures of Samira Said and Latifa?” [two popular female Moroccan and Tunisian singers whose posters were decorating the wall of the living room]. The woman again answered yes. The afriit brought all these things for the old woman. She was very happy and cried out of joy. In the same day, however, she smelled the birshaam\(^1\) that was hidden behind the television set which caused her heart to collapse \(\text{gham ala albaha}\) and the old woman died’ (a story told to me by the five-year-old Amal in Cairo, 1994).

Amal’s narrative was contextualized by her family’s attempts to find a larger housing unit to move into from the one-bedroom apartment that she, her four sisters and their parents have been occupying since 1980,
when the family was displaced from their home in the centre of the city and relocated in al-Zawiya al-Hamra in northern Cairo. Amal’s images of the desired home are constructed, as is the case with many other children, from global images transmitted to them through television programmes, school textbooks and visits to different parts of the city. Her dreams, as well as those of her sisters, of the future apartment are informed by the movies and soap operas that they like to watch: a big apartment with a balcony, a spacious kitchen, modern furniture and organized spatial arrangements inside and outside the unit. These images contradict the objective realities of Amal’s life and create desires that cannot be satisfied even through some magical means. Like the dreams of many other low-income people, Amal’s discourse ‘proceeds in a jagged line, the leaps into daydream being followed by relapses into a present that withers all fantasies’ (Bourdieu 1979: 69). Death and destruction is the ultimate answer.

Amal, her family and the rest of their neighbours are not fax-users, e-mail receivers, jumbo jet travellers or satellite-owners. They are part of Cairo’s working class whose experience of ‘the global’ is structured by their economic resources and position in social space. In addition to the many consumer goods, especially television sets, that are desired by people and are becoming signs of distinction, Amal’s family and many other families experienced the force of the global in their displacement from their ‘locality’ in the centre of the city. Their houses were demolished to be replaced by buildings and facilities that cater to upper-class Egyptians, international tourists and the transnational community. In this chapter, I focus on relocation, utilized as part of the state efforts to ‘modernize’ Cairo and its people, to show how global discourses and forces are articulated in contradictory ways at the national and local levels. In the first section, I present a brief review of the history of the relocation of roughly 5000 working-class families from 1979 to 1981 and the state public discourse utilized to justify the project. This discourse strategically appealed to the global in the state’s attempts to implement its different economic policies and to construct a modern national identity. In the second part, I draw on my recent ethnographic research in Cairo, or Umm al-Dunya (the mother of the world) as Egyptians like to refer to it, to map some of the identities that are attached to and formed by Amal’s group to show how the displacement of the local by global processes and national policies brought new changes that paved the way to redefine local communal feelings in ways that help people live in the modern world. I argue that religious identity, as a hegemonic identity in the formation, was consolidated by the changes brought by the global as experienced by the people and as filtered in national policies.
In *Search for Identity* (1978), Anwar el-Sadat presents a strong critique of Nasser’s policies that kept the country isolated from its neighbours and the rest of the world and destroyed Egypt’s economy. To remedy the country’s chronic economic and financial problems, Sadat reversed Nasser’s policies by suspending relationships with the Soviet Union and reorienting Egypt towards the West. He turned to the United States in particular for aid in resolving Egypt’s conflict with Israel as well as the economic and technological development of the country. After his victory in the 1973 war (at least it was a victory for him), Sadat crystallized his new visions and ideas in declaring ‘the open-door policy’ or *infitah* in 1974. This policy aimed to ‘open the universe ... open the door for fresh air and remove all the barriers (*hawajiz*) and walls that we built around us to suffocate ourselves by our own hands’ (Sadat 1981: 12). As he explained to a group of young Egyptian men, Sadat’s *infitah* was motivated by his belief that each one of them would like to ‘get married, own a villa, drive a car, possess a television set and a stove, and eat three meals a day’ (Sadat 1981: 12).

Sadat’s policy strived to modernize the country through speeding planned economic growth, promoting private investment, attracting foreign and Arab capital, and enhancing social development (Ikram 1980). Private local and international investments were expected to secure the capital needed to construct modern Egypt. Egyptians were encouraged to work in oil-producing countries and invest their remittances in the building of the country. At the same time, laws were enacted to secure the protection needed to encourage foreign investors and to facilitate the operation of private capital. Investments in tourism were especially important because they were expected to ‘yield high economic returns and provide substantial foreign exchange and well-paid employment’ (Ikram 1980: 309).

This orientation to the global, the outside, or the ‘universe’ as Sadat describes it, required a ‘distinctive bundle of time and space practices and concepts’ (Harvey 1990: 204). Many changes were needed to facilitate the operation of capital and meet the new demands that were created. For example, the growing demand for luxury and middle-class housing for the transnational community and Egyptians who work in oil-producing countries inflated the price of land, especially in the centre of
the city, and increased the cost of construction materials (Rageh 1984). The promotion of private and foreign investment also increased the demand for offices and work-oriented spaces. High-rises proliferated around Cairo, using Western design principles and Los Angeles and Houston, Sadat's favourite American cities, became the models that were to be duplicated (Ibrahim 1987).

Two tendencies were expressed in the discourses and policies of urban planning that aimed to promote the *infitah* policies and to rebuild modern Cairo. The first tried to integrate into the modern city areas of significance to Egypt's glorious past (for example, the pyramids and Islamic monuments), which Sadat loved to emphasize and which were visited by tourists. The second tendency, which is the subject of this chapter, attempted to reconstruct the 'less desirable' parts, especially popular quarters, that did not represent the 'modern' image of Egypt and were not fit to be gazed at by upper-class Egyptians and foreign visitors.

*The state, the global and the creation of the 'modern' city*

Faust has been pretending not only to others but to himself that he could create a new world with clean hands, he is still not ready to accept responsibility for the human suffering and death that clear the way. (Berman 1988: 68)

As part of Sadat's larger plan to restructure the local landscape and build 'modern' Cairo, around 5000 Egyptian families were moved during the period from 1979 to 1981 from Central Cairo (Bulaq) to housing projects built by the state in two different neighbourhoods: 'Ain Shams and al-Zawiya al-Hamra. Bulaq, once the site of the winter houses of the rich, then a major commercial port and later an industrial centre (Rugh 1979), had become unfit for the modern image that Sadat was trying to construct. This area, which over the years had housed thousands of Egyptian low-income families, is adjacent to the Ramsis Hilton, next to the television station, around the corner from the World Trade Center, across the river from Zamalek (an upper-class neighbourhood), overlooks the Nile, and is very close to many of the facilities that are oriented to foreign tourists. The area then occupied by low-income families became very valuable because Sadat's policies, as he proudly announced, increased the price of the land which was needed to facilitate the operation of capital. The old crowded houses were to be replaced by modern buildings, luxury housing, five-star hotels, offices, multi-storey parking lots, movie theatres, conference rooms, and centres of culture (*al-Ahram* 27 December 1979: 3). Officials thus emphasized the urgent need to remove
the residents of this old quarter because many international companies were ready to initiate economic and tourist investment in the area. Expected profits from these investments would contribute to national income and assist the state in securing money to build new houses for the displaced groups (al-Ahram, 27 December 1979: 9). The residents’ efforts to stop their forced relocation did not materialize and their calls upon the government to include them in the reconstruction of their area were denied. Voices that protested the relocation were quickly silenced and objections raised by the displaced population were considered ‘selfish’. Officials emphasized that the benefit of the ‘entire nation’ should prevail over everything else (al-Ahram, 9 July 1979).

The ‘local’ was also displaced to protect the state orientation to the global. The relocation project took place two years after the famous 1977 riots that protested the increase in the prices of basic daily goods, especially bread. Protesters targeted infitah-related facilities such as five-star hotels and nightclubs, and chanted slogans against Sadat’s policies (Abd El-Razaq 1979). The neighbourhood, with its narrow lanes and crowded streets, made it impossible for the police to chase those who participated in the riots (Mayo, 22 June 1981). The relocated group was seen by the state and the state-controlled press as part of ‘a conspiracy organized by communists’ that aimed to distort the achievements of the infitah and their housing became an obstacle to the promotion of Sadat’s policies and to police attempts to crush protest against these policies.

The rhetorical strategies employed by the state were largely based in the appeal to the global. This appeal was manifested by the emphasis on modernity3 and its objectification in material forms, rational planning, the importance of visual aspects and the tourists’ gaze in representing Cairo, the separation of the home from the workplace, international investment, science, health, hygiene, green areas and clean environment, consumer goods and the importance of the productive agent in the construction of a modern national identity.4 The global was strategically used to offer the people a ‘Faustian bargain’ (cf. Berman 1988) which forced the relocated group to pay a high price for Egypt’s opportunity to be ‘modernized’. Using force (police) and seduction (by appealing to the global and offering alternative housing), the project removed them from the centre of the city and deprived them of the benefits associated with the modern facilities and the new changes that promised prosperity for everyone. The group lost a major part of its economic and ‘symbolic capital’, to use Bourdieu’s (1984) term, which was their central geographical location. Relocation destroyed most of the group’s informal economy, altered their access to many cheap goods and services, and destroyed their social relationships and reordered their personal lives.
As previously mentioned, the group was divided into two parts, each relocated to a different neighbourhood away from the gaze of tourists and upper-class Egyptians. One part, the focus of this study, was moved to public housing (masaakin) units constructed for them in al-Zawiya al-Hamra in northern Cairo. The move into these units, which were labelled as ‘modern’, promised to improve the lives of the people and turn them into ‘healthy modern productive citizens who will contribute in the construction of their mother country’ (al-Ahram, 27 December 1979). The state’s project assumed a transparent relationship between space and identity and totally ignored the role of social actors in transforming and resisting its policies and ideologies. Rather than creating a unified modern city, I argue that these policies created a more fragmented urban fabric and paved the ground for other competing collective identities. Religious identity in particular has successfully presented itself as a powerful alternative that can articulate the various antagonistic identities that are constructed in the relocation site.

Global discourses and local identities

Since Sadat started his open-door policy, Cairo has witnessed the introduction of new forms of communication, more emphasis on international tourism, increasing importance of consumer goods, and a growing flow of ideas related to civil society, democracy and political participation. Theoretical developments in anthropology and cultural studies have demonstrated that these global processes are not producing one dominant culture but present a set of discourses and practices that are juxtaposed in complex ways in local contexts (Hall 1991a; 1993; Massey 1994; Lash and Urry 1994). Thus, contrary to the old conceptualization of the world as becoming a ‘global village’, local differences and identities are not destroyed but are being reinforced in many cases by global forces and processes (Hall 1991b; 1993; Ray 1993; Massey 1994).

With the growing connectedness between different parts of the globe and with the circulation of global discourses and images facilitated by new systems of communication, the Other is becoming more identified with the self in complex ways. The connectedness and tension between the self and the Other is crucial to understanding how identities are constructed and shift over time and how the Other is simultaneously desired and dreaded. One example can be found in how people in Cairo desire the global (in this case identified as the West) because it is organized, clean, rich and ‘democratic’ and at the same time they distrust it because it is associated with ‘moral corruption’, drugs and violence. The focus on the connectedness and tension with the Other is therefore a
necessary step to theorize the different ways that the global is reshaping local identities and redrawing their boundaries. This focus will enable us to conceptualize local identifications not as static but as always in the process of formation and constructed of multiple discourses and as composed ‘in and through ambivalence and desire’ (Hall 1991b: 49).

‘Globalization’, however, should not be reduced to ‘Americanization’ as some authors tend to do (Hall 1991a; Hannerz and Lofgren 1994). While the ‘American conception of the world’ (Hall 1991a: 28) may be hegemonic in various contexts, people experience the influence of other ‘globals’. People in al-Zawiya al-Hamra not only experience the American culture that is transmitted to them in movies starring Arnold Schwarzenegger but they also experience the global through oil-producing countries where their children and male relatives work as well as through the mixture of people who visit and work in Cairo from different Arab countries. For example, women use oil for their hair that comes from India via their sons who work in Kuwait and collect their wedding trousseau from clothes, sheets and blankets brought from Kuwait; others visit husbands in Saudi Arabia; and many have accumulated electrical appliances from Libya where husbands and sons work. Despite the fact that many of the consumer goods are produced in the West, their meanings are given to them by their users who live in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. For many, consumer goods are investments that can be exchanged for cash when needed. Several families use their refrigerators to cool water during the summer but turn them into closets during the winter to store household appliances. The global is also introducing new forms of identification between the subjects of its processes. People, for example, enjoy watching television, especially some of the global sports events such as the soccer World Cup. Young men and women follow these games very closely; they know the names of the Brazilian, German and Italian players. While watching these games, different identities compete for priority: they shift from supporting African and Arab teams to cheering for third world teams when they play against European teams (Brazil against Germany, for example). People, thus, do not experience the global as a coherent set of discourses and processes that are transmitted from the West to the rest of the world but experience fragments and contradictory pieces that are filtered through other centres and that do not necessarily present a unified ‘conception of the world’. Therefore, ‘the global’, as an analytical concept, should be expanded to include a mixture of images, discourses and goods that are brought to people through various channels such as state-controlled media, commercial video tapes, audio tapes that are distributed by Islamic activists, and consumer goods brought to al-Zawiya al-Hamra by migrants to Arab countries.
It is also important to remember that, as a theoretical concept, ‘the local’ should not be confused, as Massey (1994) and Lash and Urry (1994) argue, with the concrete, the empirical or the authentic or a spatially bounded entity (Urry 1995). I use ‘local’ to mean ‘acts of positing within particular contexts’ (Tsing 1993: 31). People attach multiple meanings to their localities that vary from one context to another. Despite the fact that geographical space is used as a point of reference for several local identities in Cairo, these different contexts share a set of social relationships and identities that include those who are like us (local people) and exclude people who are not like us (outsiders). Thus, when people identify the relocated group as ‘those from Bulaq’, they are trying to exclude them from another collective identity that includes people who have been living in al-Zawiya and identify primarily with it. The relocated people still refer to themselves as ‘people of Bulaq’ despite the fact that they have been living in al-Zawiya for fifteen years. Many also still identify with their old villages and towns that they left more than fifty years ago. In short, there is not one ‘local’ but there are various ‘locals’ that are juxtaposed in complex ways with multiple ‘globals’.

Old places, new identities

Here in al-Zawiya, you do not find Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Such places can never get any profit in areas like this. People are poor and the money they will pay for one meal in one of these restaurants will feed the whole family for a week if not more. (A male shop-owner who works in al-Zawiya but lives in another middle-class neighbourhood)

To understand the local identities that are in the process of formation in al-Zawiya al-Hamra, it is important to remember that state practices and discourses were based on what Foucault calls ‘dividing practices’ (Rabinow 1984: 8). The project started by separating and stigmatizing the targeted population as an expedient rationalization of policies that aim to modernize, normalize and reintegrate them within the larger community. Not only were the housing conditions attacked by state officials, but the people themselves were stigmatized and criticized. A ‘scientific’ social study conducted to determine the needs of the relocated group revealed, as stated by the Minister of Construction and New Communities, that the area of Bulaq in general and one of its neighbourhoods (al-Torgman) in particular have been shelters for qiradatia (street entertainers who perform with a baboon or monkey), female dancers, pedlars and drug dealers (al-Ahram, 27 December 1979: 3). The ‘locals’ were also represented as passive, unhealthy and isolated
people who did not contribute to the construction of the mother-country and who had many social ills. After resettlement, these publicized stereotypes fostered a general feeling of antagonism towards the newcomers. In addition to repeating the same words that were circulated in the media, residents of al-Zawiya added other stereotypes to describe this group such as labat (trouble-makers) and shalaq (insolent). Women, in particular, were singled out (as they were also singled out by the Minister who described them as dancers or Ghawazi); they were described as rude and vulgar, and were used in daily conversation as an analogy for bad manners.

These negative constructions of the relocated group are supported and perpetuated by the physical segregation of their housing (masaakin) from the rest of the community. Their public housing is clearly defined and separated from other projects and private houses (ahali). Public housing is characterized by a unified architectural design (the shape, the size of the buildings, as well as the colours of walls and windows), whereas private housing has more diversified patterns. This unity in design and shape sharply defines and differentiates public housing from private houses and makes it easier to maintain boundaries that separate the relocated from other groups. In short, neither the discourse of the state nor the shape and location of the housing project enhance the dialogical relationship between the relocated group and other groups in al-Zawiya. After fourteen or fifteen years of resettlement, the relocated group continues to be stigmatized and its interaction with the rest of the neighbourhood is restricted.

The identity of Bulaq With their stigmatization in the state discourse and by the residents of al-Zawiya, and with the hostility that faced them, the relocated population rediscovered their common history and identification with the same geographical area. While people used to live in Bulaq and identify strongly with their villages of origin, after relocation Bulaq became an anchor for the group’s sense of belonging and took precedence over other identifications. The attachment to the old place is not single or one-dimensional and Bulaq is remembered and related to differently by gender and age groups. These differences are beyond the scope of this chapter but it is sufficient here to say that Bulaq is of great significance for most of the group in reimagining their communal feelings. Currently, their public housing is called after one of Bulaq’s neighbourhoods (masaakin al-Torgman) and people express their strong attachment to their old place in songs and daily conversations. Despite the fact that relocation reordered relationships within the group and destroyed a major part of their support system, the old neighbourhood
still structures parts of the people’s current interaction. They still refer to the people who used to live in Bulaq as ‘min ‘andina’ (from our place) which not only creates a common ground for identification but also indicates certain expectations and mutual obligations between the people in the current area of residence. At the same time, Bulaq is the point of reference for their identification with those who still live in parts of Bulaq and those who moved to ‘Ain Shams.

Through relocation, the group lost, among other things, a major part of its ‘symbolic capital’. This is mainly manifested in two important aspects related to group members’ identification with the old location. First, they used to live next to an upper-class neighbourhood, Zamalek. Young men and women, as emphasized by the people themselves and documented in a famous old movie (A Bride from Bulaq), could even claim that they were from Zamalek because only ‘a bridge’ separated (or connected) the two neighbourhoods. People also lost the pleasure and satisfaction associated with looking at the beautiful buildings and knowing that people of Zamalek — and much to their shame, as described by one informant — used to see Bulaq with its old and shabby houses.

Second, the group used to live in an ‘authentic popular’ or baladi area and perceives its relocation in al-Zawiya as moving down the social ladder. In Bulaq, the ‘authentic popular’ quarter, people used to live next to each other, separated only by narrow lanes that allowed close interaction and strong relationships. They remember the old place in the way people used to cooperate and ‘eat together’. Their rootedness in the same place over a long period of time provided people with a strong support system, open social relationships, and a sense of security and trust. In contrast, al-Zawiya is a relatively new neighbourhood. It was mainly agricultural fields until the 1960s, when the area started to expand rapidly with the state construction of the first public housing project. This project housed families from different parts of Cairo who could not afford to live in more central locations. Immigrants (mostly Muslims) also came to al-Zawiya from different parts of the countryside and many live in private housing. The heterogeneity of its population is used by its residents, especially members of the relocated group, and people around them to indicate that al-Zawiya is not ‘an authentic popular quarter’. Its people are ‘selfish’, ‘sneaky’ and ‘untrustworthy’. It is seen as located between baladi and raqqi (upper-class areas) which places it, as described by a male informant, in a tedious or annoying (baaykh) position. Al-Zawiya, thus, is geographically and socially marginal compared to Bulaq.

A key word in understanding the differences between what is seen as an ‘authentic’ neighbourhood such as Bulaq and ‘less authentic’ newer neighbourhoods such as al-Zawiya is lama. This word refers to the
growing mixture and gathering of people from different backgrounds who live in the same locality. People from various quarters, villages and religions are coming to live in the same neighbourhood, hang out at the same coffee shop, visit the same market, and ride the same bus. These spaces are defined as *lamin* as compared to a more homogeneous or less *lama* places such as the village and the ‘authentic popular’ quarter based on long established relationships. Being rooted in a certain area, that is, localized in a particular place, allows the development of strong relationships between people. *Lama* is used to classify different localities and points to the difference between a neighbourhood where people know each other by name and face as opposed to more heterogeneous areas where people are strangers and not to be trusted. *Masaakin* is *lama* as opposed to *ahali* housing. Al-Zawiya is *lama* compared to Bulaq and Cairo is *lama* compared to the villages where the inhabitants originally came from.

**Relocation and religious identity**

Hegemony is not the disappearance or destruction of difference. It is the construction of a collective will through difference. It is the articulation of differences which do not disappear. (Hall 1991b: 58)

Despite the significance of Bulaq in how people reimagine their communal feelings, this identity does not facilitate the group’s interaction with the rest of the people who live in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. Relocation rearranged local identities and added to the old identifications: people are now identified with a village (the place of origin), as locals of Bulaq (where they resided for generations), as occupiers of *masaakin* (which is stigmatized by dwellers in private housing) and as inhabitants of al-Zawiya al-Hamra (not known for its good reputation in Cairo). But above all, they are mainly Muslims. Religion, rather than nationalism, neighbourhood and the village of origin, became a powerful discourse in articulating and socially grounding the various identities of the different groups residing in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. Only the religious identity promises to articulate these identifications without destroying them. Displaced families, *ahali* and *masaakin* inhabitants, people of Bulaq and al-Zawiya, rural immigrants, *Fallahin* (peasants who come from villages in Lower Egypt) and *Sa’idis* (immigrants from Upper Egypt), who are largely pushed from their villages to Cairo in their search for work and a better life, as well as residents who moved from other areas of Cairo can all find commonality in religion that is expressed in practices such as a dress code and the decoration of houses and shops.
Islam brings people together on the basis of a common religion. Despite the fact that Muslims do not know each other on a personal basis, religion creates a ‘safe’ space (the mosque), a common ground where they are connected to each other, and a sense of trust and rootedness. This is clearly manifested in how the mosque, of all public spaces, is gaining importance in facilitating the interaction of various groups and the formation of a collective identity. To start with, the mosque’s growing centrality in daily life is manifested in the many modern services that are provided to the people in it. Through charitable organizations (jam‘iyyat khayriyya), the mosque provides socially required services such as affordable education, health care and financial support to the poor. It is also the place where discourses circulate that prescribe and/or forbid daily practices. Above all, it is the most acceptable and safest social space where various groups can meet and interact.

To understand the importance of the mosque, we need to go back to the word *lama*. As previously mentioned, people tend to distrust areas and public spaces that are labelled as *lama* such as the market, the coffee shop and the bus. These spaces are seen as ‘dangerous’ and people are very careful when visiting or utilizing them. Compared to such spaces, the mosque, which is a historical space that is legitimated through its naturalized relationship with religion, is currently being actively articulated to frame the interaction between members of different groups as well as to empower emerging meanings, identities and relationships. Those who are labelled as trouble-makers and rude (people who come from Bulaq and live in masaakin) as well as the untrustworthy and selfish (people of al-Zawiya as described by people of Bulaq) can all meet in the mosque and collectively identify themselves as Muslims.

Thus, the power of the mosque is being currently reinforced through its promise of an equal and unified community out of a heterogeneous urban population. It is accessible to all Muslims and brings them in on equal terms. The unity of prayers and the importance of communal feelings is manifested in the unifying discourse and the similar movements that are performed simultaneously. The Imam leads the prayer and coordinates the movement of all the attendees through his pronounced signals that indicate when one should bend forward on the knees or stand up straight, and so on. Emphasis is placed upon standing in straight lines, very close to other attendees, in a way that leaves no empty spaces through which the devil could enter among the devout and divide their collectivity.11

The feelings that are associated with being part of a collectivity were cited by many, especially by women, as one of the main reasons for going to the mosque. As is the case with most of her neighbours, reloca-
tion shattered most of the support system that connected the fifty-five-year-old Umm Ahmed with friends and neighbours who were relocated to ‘Ain Shams or to different parts of the new housing project in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. Although she used to perform her religious duties on a regular basis in Bulaq, Umm Ahmed’s religiosity gained a different meaning in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. In addition to her adoption of the *khimar* (a head garment that covers the hair and the shoulders), which is seen as the ‘real Islamic dress’, Umm Ahmed began attending local mosques on a daily basis. She explained that she goes to mosques because the presence of other people strengthens her will and provides her with more energy than when praying alone. Currently, Umm Ahmed frequents five local mosques to perform four out of the five daily prayers. For Friday prayer, she usually selects a large mosque, located within the boundaries of the *masaakin* but that is also attended by some worshippers from the *ahali*. She also visits two small mosques that are identified with an Islamic group active in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. She attends these two mosques, which are located in the *ahali* area, to listen to weekly lessons and participate in Qur’an recital sessions. Another mosque, which is located next to the vegetable market in the *ahali* area, is a convenient site for the midday prayer when Umm Ahmed is shopping for the family’s daily food. For the evening prayer, she chooses a smaller mosque on the edge of the housing project that is attended by a mixture of worshippers from *ahali* and *masaakin* areas. She prefers this mosque, as she explains, because she meets ‘wise’ women who like to talk to her. Over the last five years, Umm Ahmed has formed strong relationships with other women from different parts of the neighbourhood, especially from the *ahali* area, who attend the same mosque. If one of them does not come to the evening prayer, she goes with other women to ask about their absent friend. At the same time, the mosque not only brings people together from the same neighbourhood but also encourages people to move from one part of the city to the other. Young men and women, for example, use the city bus to tour the city in their search for the ‘truth’. They cross the boundaries of their localities to go to other neighbourhoods to attend certain mosques where popular sheikhs preach.

The mosque is also becoming more open to women in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. This is perceived by some Islamic activists as essential to counter other spaces that are open to women, such as universities, the workplace, cinemas and nightclubs. Women are identified by men as more vulnerable to the influence of global (defined here as American) discourses and practices. Women’s actions, dress and access to public life are seen as threatening the harmony of the Islamic community and as the source of many social ills. Women have internalized these ideas and hold them-
selves, and not men, responsible for the safety of the morals of the community. As women repeatedly emphasize, men are weak creatures and cannot resist the seduction imposed on them by women who do not adopt Islamic dress. At the same time, women can be very active in the construction of the Islamic community. More voices have emphasized the positive aspects associated with opening the mosque to women who, as mothers, sisters and wives, can be active agents capable of altering their own practices as well as shaping the actions and values of other family members. Thus, to contain the destructive potential of women and promote their constructive power in the formation of the Islamic community, more attempts are made by Islamic activists to incorporate women within the mosque. Currently, women, especially those without jobs and small children, go to the mosque on a regular basis for prayer and to attend weekly lessons, while working women usually attend the Friday prayer. Women are also becoming more active in the mosque through their roles as teachers, students, workers and seekers of social, educational and medical services. In addition, more women help in taking care of the mosque and participate in mosque-related activities such as preparing food and distributing it to the needy.12

Globalization and religious identities

It is important not to confuse my previous discussion of religious identity with ‘fundamentalism’, ‘extremism’ or ‘militant Islam’, which have been the centre of attention of several studies (Ibrahim 1982; Kepel 1993). Fundamentalism especially has been the focus of studies that aim to examine the relationship between globalization and religion (see, for example, Turner 1994; Beyer 1994). Such studies limit discussion of the ideology of the leaders of some radical Islamic groups and tend to present these movements as ‘responses’ or ‘reactions’ to the global. The role of ordinary people as active agents in negotiating religious and global discourses in their daily life and the formation of their local identities is largely neglected.

Despite the fact that communal feelings based on religion can be politicized and used as the basis to mobilize the working class (as happened in 1981 in clashes between Muslims and Christians in al-Zawiya al-Hamra), at the daily level religious identity brings people together as connected selves rather than separated and isolated others. It articulates the presence of the group at the neighbourhood level, integrates its members into the mosque and secures a space for them in Cairo. People do not want to relive the past, as some fundamentalists seem to desire, but try to live in the present with its complexity and
contradictions. They hence struggle against efforts of some extremist groups who try to impose restrictions on how they appropriate certain aspects of modernity. Nuha, for example, is a twenty-three-year-old woman with a high school diploma who works in a factory outside the neighbourhood. She hears things on the radio, in the mosque and from her friends and then lets her heart and mind judge what she will follow. She expresses her religiosity in adopting the *khimar*. At the same time, she opposes many of the restrictions that extremists try to impose on people, such as forbidding men from wearing trousers and prohibiting eating with a spoon because, as some argue, the Prophet did not do these things. She believes that had these things existed when the Prophet was alive, he would have used them. So it is not a sin (*haram*) to eat with a spoon but, if one chooses to eat with the hands, one will get an extra reward.

There are moments when people directly reject the ‘American conception of the world’ (Hall 1991a: 28) with its homogenizing tendencies and use this conception to explain the conflict between the state and some Islamic groups. A young woman explained the conflict between the government and religious groups as follows:

The problem is that the government has strong relationships with the United States which hates Islam and Muslims and is trying to spread its ideas and practices all over the world, especially wearing short clothes, the domination of science, and the destruction of religion. My cousin, who is a Sunni, explained to me that Americans have many methods to achieve their purposes, especially through schools. They try to prove that science is better than religion by using the comparative method. They bring, for example, a candle and a light bulb and ask which is better. The first represents religion and the second represents science. Of course, one will choose the second. They also compare two pictures, one of a man wearing a *gallabiyya* [a long loose gown that the Prophet used to wear] with a beard and a rotten look, while the second picture is of a handsome man who is shaved and looks very clean and tidy. Of course, anyone will choose the second. The whole idea is for science to replace religion and dominate the universe. Islam is compatible with science because one can find all answers in it if examined closely. Science should serve religion.

The opposition to the ‘global West’, however, is not sufficient to explain the growing importance of the mosque and religious identity in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. There are complex local and national forces juxtaposed with the global to produce religious identity. State oppression, the daily frustrations in dealing with state bureaucracy, alienation, the fragmentation of the urban fabric, and the ability of Islamic groups to utilize various discursive strategies that mobilize people are as important
As manifested in the services that are being attached to the mosque in al-Zawiya al-Hamra, certain global discourses and consumer goods are negotiated and appropriated. For example, to avoid state censorship of discourses circulated in the mosque, Islamic activists use cassette tapes to distribute the religious discourse to a large segment of the urban population. Especially for illiterate men and women, tapes provide a powerful means of communication that brings popular preachers (that is, those who are believed to tell the ‘truth’) from the mosque into the home, the workplace, the taxi and the street. These can be replayed until their meanings become clear to the listener. Women can also pass them on to friends and relatives. On several occasions, women gathered to listen to such tapes and expressed strong emotional reactions to the descriptions of death, the horrible torture of the grave and the soothing visions of heaven.

Various Islamic groups, however, relate differently to the global in general and the West in particular. While there were some Islamic activists who attack the influence of the West on the dress code and practices of Muslims, a major part of the lessons that I attended in the mosque as well as tapes I heard in al-Zawiya al-Hamra did not attack the West but emphasized the horrible nature of torture that unbelievers would go through in the grave and in hell, and, in contrast, the rewards that are awaiting the believers in heaven. Women who do not adopt Islamic dress are singled out and detailed descriptions are presented of how they will be hung from their hair and breasts while huge snakes bite their bodies as they are grilled in hell. Women shivered, cried and prayed hard asking God to protect them from the horrible torture that is awaiting unbelievers. These graphic descriptions contextualize the critique of people’s ‘un-Islamic’ practices and the ‘medicine’, as one sheikh said, that is provided to heal the ills of the current situation and to win the eternal heaven. The prescribed medicine is to go back to God, ask for his forgiveness, and live according to his commands.

Although the emphasis on the dress code can be seen as a rejection of the influence of the West, I would argue that gender distinctions are the centre of the restrictions applied to women’s dress code. Another interesting example could be found in how people negotiate their definition of Islam and modernity. Their rejection of many of the ideas that are circulated by some religious extremists is clearly manifested by the struggle over some consumer goods such as colour televisions, VCRs and tape-recorders which are rapidly becoming signs of distinction. Many
families participate in saving associations (*gam'iyyat*) to secure money to buy these goods which are also seen as investments that can be easily exchanged for needed cash. Just as Amal, most people dream of consumer goods and better living conditions that television brings to their homes without objective means to satisfy them. Many families try to solve Ramadan puzzles (these are usually presented daily by popular Egyptian performers) and collect the covers of tea-bags and chocolate bars to mail to the manufacturer in the hope that they may win a ‘dish’, a familiar English word that is used to refer to the satellite dishes that are spreading in upper-class neighbourhoods, a VCR, a washing machine or a gas stove. Among all the consumer goods that people use, Islamic groups centre their struggle against the television set. This struggle can be interpreted as ‘rejection of modernity’, but such an analysis fails to see how other aspects of modernity are being selectively incorporated in the struggle of these groups. They use the fax machine, the tape-recorder, the computer and many other modern facilities to achieve their aims. To understand the struggle over the television set, one should look how this medium is being used in people’s daily lives.

Television is one of the most popular goods that people incorporate as one of the basic elements of their daily lives. Except for very few people with extreme religious beliefs, there is no housing unit in al-Zawiya al-Hamra without a television set. Each family, regardless of its income, owns a television set that is the centre of attention of all the family members. The television set is a powerful medium that conveys to them many experiences and values that can be described as global and brings the Other closer than ever to the self. The television set and the mosque are competing with each other to connect Muslims in different parts of the world. People of al-Zawiya al-Hamra are connected with other Muslims whom they have never met and who are not assumed to be identical duplicates of the self but are identified as the Other that is closely connected with the self. It is the force that binds people of this neighbourhood with Muslims who fight in Bosnia, Afghanistan and Chechnya. Young men, who are frustrated with the state’s restriction on their participation in fighting with the Bosnian Muslims, circulate stories about God’s help and support of the Bosnians. People talk about invisible soldiers (angels) and unidentified white planes that bomb the Serbs. Islam, thus, is becoming a force in localizing the global and globalizing the local. The distinction between Muslims who live in al-Zawiya al-Hamra and those who live in the rest of the world (such as the Bosnians) is blurred. On the other hand, television is blamed by Islamic groups for corrupting the people, silencing them, and distracting their attention from God as well as from what happens in their country and the rest of
the world. With the total state control of this powerful medium, various Islamic groups do not have any option but to denounce its role in society and try to forbid it.

People are capable of articulating different discourses within their religious identity without seeing contradictions in being oriented to the global and attempting to enjoy what it offers, and being rooted in their religious and local identities. A twenty-year-old factory worker, who was born in Bulaq and was relocated with his family in 1980, dreams of having enough money to buy a villa in Switzerland for skiing during the winter, another villa in India where he will hire singers and dancers to perform for him as he has seen on video tapes, and of a palace in Saudi Arabia to facilitate his performing of pilgrimage every year. As Hall (1991a; 1993) emphasizes, with identity there are no guarantees. The openness and fluidity of identities and the multiple discourses that are competing to shape them make it hard to guarantee whether an identity is going to be inclusive or exclusive.15

Conclusion

Paradoxically in our world, marginality has become a powerful space. It is a space of weak power but it is a space of power, nonetheless. (Hall 1991a: 34)

I have tried to show in this chapter how the articulation of global discourses and processes is producing contradictory identities at the national and local levels. By destroying old neighbourhood relationships, stigmatizing and physically segregating the relocated population, the project that aimed to construct modern subjects has paradoxically produced antagonistic local identities that empowered the basis of a collective identity which is based on religion. I have also aimed to show the important role of active social agents in mediating the different global practices and selectively articulating certain global discourses in the formation of their local identities. Social agents face the global in collectivities rather than as individuals and the struggle between the local and the global is not simply taking place in ‘human minds’ (Goonatilake 1995: 232). In general, although ‘new regimes of accumulation’ (Hall 1991a: 30) are appealing to the individual, alienation, racism and uprootedness are being faced collectively. In fact, being part of a collectivity is necessary to feel at home in the modern world with its rapid global changes. Thus, the local is not passive and local cultural identities are not waiting to be wiped out by globalization as some authors suggest (see, for example, Goonatilake 1995).

Amal’s dreams should continue to remind us that people experience
the global in structured ways. It should also draw our attention to the fact that many of the writings on globalization are conducted by people who feel at home in the global and tend to celebrate the growing efficiency of transportation, electronic communication and the growing connectedness of the globe (see, for example, Friedland and Boden 1994). The freedom of travel, however, while experienced by the privileged, is denied for millions of people who find borders of the global (especially, the USA and Europe) closed to them. The relationship between the local and the global cannot be brushed aside by assuming that they are ‘articulated as one’ (Friedland and Boden 1994: 43). Such statements reduce the complexity of the interaction between the global and the local and ignore the asymmetrical relationship that is still central to this interaction. The analysis presented in this chapter points to the need for more attention and sensitivity to the structured nature of globalization processes. When people experience the global as a violent attack on their cultural identities and self-images, it is not strange that they do not embrace global discourses and its representatives (such as international tourists). In short, more attention should be devoted to those who live on the margin of the marginal: those who are displaced in their own ‘culture’ and the millions who cannot find solutions to the growing number of desires that are brought by the global except through magical means, death and destruction or religion that at least promises them a better life and the glories of eternal existence in Paradise.

Notes

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1. The birshaam is a type of drug that is believed to be produced and circulated by the USA and Israel; it is a pill that is taken orally and not sniffed as Amal implies.

2. This phrase should not be taken to mean that the globalization and modernization of Cairo started with Sadat’s policies (for a detailed description of Cairo’s history, see Abu-Lughod 1971). Modernity, however, became a national project for Sadat and his policies were based on a strong orientation to the rest of the ‘universe’. The experiences of many Western countries from the United States and Canada to France and West Germany continue to inform the construction of Cairo.

3. Words such as hadith (modern or new), ‘asri (contemporary or modern) and madani (civilized or refined) were widely used in the state public discourse.

4. Fifteen years after relocation, no hotels or luxury buildings have been constructed in this area. Many argue that the plan to rebuild the city centre died with
Sadat who was killed a few months after the relocation of the residents of a small part of Bulaq. The piece of land that was evacuated is currently used as a parking lot.

5. For example, one can now watch CNN in Cairo if supplied with cable services, and satellite dishes are added to the roofs of upper-class residential units.

6. See Mitchell (1988) for an analysis of such constructions under the British colonization of Egypt.

7. As previously mentioned, with the death of Sadat, the removal of the rest of Bulaq stopped.

8. Baladi is a complex concept that signifies a sense of authenticity and originality. It has been discussed in several studies. See, for example, Early (1993) and Messiri (1978).

9. Although people strongly identify themselves as Egyptians, the state definition of ‘modern’ Egyptians is exclusive. Different groups are not seen as contributing positively to the construction of their country and the state believes that its task is to cure them of their social ills and pathologies in order to turn them into ‘good Egyptian citizens’ (Ghannam 1993).

10. Let us not forget that Sadat tried to present himself as al-Ra’is al-Mu’min or ‘The Believing President’.

11. In the women’s section, which I had access to, the Friday prayer was coordinated by a woman who made sure that we were standing correctly and made room to squeeze in newcomers.

12. Despite the incorporation of women, the mosque is still a highly gendered space. It manifest and shapes the ways in which gender is constructed. Inside the mosque, women are spatially separated from men, their access to the mosque is conditioned by the absence of their menstrual period, and within its confines they are required to wear long and loose dress and to cover the hair and chest.

13. Al-Sunniyyin (singular Sunni) is used in daily life to refer to Islamic activists who are considered strict followers of the Prophet’s traditions or Sunna.

14. It is important to remember that, although these processes take place at the neighbourhood level, they are part of the transformations that Cairo and Egypt in general have been experiencing in the last two decades.

15. The relationship between Muslims and Christians, for example, in al-Zawiya al-Hamra is very complicated and beyond the scope of this chapter. Religion also plays a central role among Christians who live in al-Zawiya. The church serves a similar role to that of the mosque in bringing Christians together. There is also a strong tension between the two religious groups that resulted in clashes between them in 1981.

References


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