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Conclusion

A Complete Life

At the end of January 2011, I was working on the final touches to this book. Then a revolution broke out in Egypt, I flew to Cairo on the first plane I could get, and on the first day of February I was on Tahrir Square witnessing one of the gigantic peaceful demonstrations that brought an end to the Mubarak era. There I ran into the same Sheikh Hasan who had hosted me at so many mulids during my fieldwork. Many other Sufis I knew were hesitant about the revolution, in part out of fear of the Muslim Brotherhood, in part owing to their good contacts with the ruling National Democratic Party. But Sheikh Hasan had joined the uprising on its first day, and he had pitched his tent in the middle of the square in what was quickly developing into a veritable tent city of protesters. On this day, an optimistic and joyful mood prevailed in the demonstration that filled not only the square, but also much of the surrounding streets. On Tal'at Harb street where flying vendors were selling peanuts, chickpeas, and Egyptian flags to the demonstrators, I encountered another friend of mine, an architect. He was in an excellent mood and greeted me with the question: "Isn't this just like a mulid?"

A mulid is not a revolutionary event, and a revolutionary uprising has aims and ends quite different from a saint's festival, but there is a shared tone of extraordinary freedom. The revolutionary space of Tahrir Square was not just an expression of a longing for freedom. Like a mulid, it was, in itself, freedom. The reality of postrevolutionary transition

is a troubling and contradictory one, and no future normality in Egypt can possibly match that lived utopian moment of revolutionary freedom. And yet

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precisely because of its exceptional and singular nature, the moment of revolution will remain a powerful measuring stick for Egypt's development for years to come. This festive aspect of the revolution as a moment out of the ordinary that makes the world appear in a different light compels me to conclude this book with some more general thoughts about what the festive moment is about.

A festivity is inseparable from the social world it is a part of. A moment of celebration gains its significance, its value, and its extraordinary character by virtue of the relationship it has to one's general life experience, place in society, and view of the world. And yet---and this is the point with which I hope to be able to conclude this long journey through the many sides of mulids---festivities cannot be reduced to the social world outside them. Precisely herein lies their potential for controversy and scandal, but also their attraction and dynamics.

The problem of festivity, in the final instance, is not only about the history of modern Egypt. It is a more general problem, related to the very way projects of modernity around the world have come to conceive of society as an ordered whole. In such an ordered whole, some parts are central and essential, others marginal and accidental. Festivals, our modernist common sense suggests, seem to be among the marginal and accidental parts. But why is this so? And does it need to be so?

In cultural and social anthropology, the old functionalist view of festivity as an instrument of social cohesion has become credibly contested by a view that shows festive culture as essentially dynamic and contested, productive of social order rather than merely reproducing and mirroring it. It is in this sense that David Guss, working on

festive traditions in Venezuela, argues that

festive traditions, despite claims to the contrary, are in a constant state of flux. Such plasticity often reflects the changing social order in which these events are realized. But they are not simply mirrors, for if they reflect, they also create, and the festive state is one in which new realities are also constituted. Whose reality, however, remains a question, for the flexibility of these forms is derived, in no small measure, from their agonistic and contested nature....To those involved, the stakes are

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high. For, as participants well know, festivals, for all they joy and color, are also battlegrounds where identities are fought over and communities made.¹

In a way close to Guss, I also argue that mulids are a site through which conflicting views on progressive modernity, correct Islam, and citizens and believers' habituated virtues and attitudes are articulated. But this argument is not entirely satisfactory. Am I not slipping back to the functionalist reduction of the festive to the maintenance of social order, only in a more sophisticated version that highlights contestation over cohesion? When I say that the contested nature of mulids is a key to something outside mulids, something that the whole issue is "really" about, am I not ignoring my own point about the mulid's being essentially about festivity for its own sake, a time in its own right, not reducible to an external purpose?

In a way, it seems that this book has so far followed two objectives that do not quite fit together. One is about festivals as "battlegrounds," to follow Guss's phrase, crystallization points for social dynamics and struggles. Another, in contrast, is about festive culture as having inherent social significance in itself. In this second

objective, festive experience appears not merely as a battleground of social dynamics, but as a social dynamic in itself. Although I am not sure whether these two objectives can really be reconciled, I do think they share an issue: both have to do with the way in which a festivity creates a temporary reality---a reality that, for a transient moment, can be just as solid and real as the everyday. During this moment, everyday life in turn may come to appear as exotic and transient.

Italo Calvino makes this point in his poetic parable about the two half-cities that I quoted in full in the introduction. In this parable, the half-city with its industry, bureaucracy, and monuments is transportable and transient, marginal to the permanent reality of the fairground. And yet the fairground, too, is only a half-city, and as soon as the refinery, the ministry, and the monument have been packed up on trailers, it "begins to count the months, the days it must wait before the caravan returns and a complete life can begin again."²

Which one of the two half-cities, then, is the real, original one? Is a festival there to provide a rest from daily work, or is daily work there to

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gather money and resources to celebrate a festival? I do not think that a definite answer can be given, but the question itself is worth contemplating because it offers us a clue to the contested nature of festivity. Inverting the relationship between the fairground and the city, inviting us to think about the fair as permanent and the urban infrastructure as temporary, Calvino offers us a key to the problem of festivity: the question of what makes up a complete life.

The question about festive culture and the everyday is, in essence, a question about the human condition. The celebration of a festival is an expression---and an experience---of a sense of being human, magnified by the transient and extraordinary momentum of festivity. Samuel

Martínez argues regarding the rara festival in the Dominican Republic that the festival's excessive and intense "heat" is its main aim: "It is a celebration of excess and, more particularly, of humanity's unique capacity for desiring beyond utility and imagining beyond the reality of our senses."³

Whether mulids will continue to be an important way for Egyptians to accomplish this moment in a complete life remains to be seen. But whatever way the situation will develop, the issue will not be settled. For many Egyptians, new festive traditions have since long replaced the mulid. The intensity of an extraordinary better world continues to accompany summer vacations, football matches, weekend excursions, weddings, Ramadan and 'id celebrations, music concerts, and most recently demonstrations. In different ways, these old and new occasions for the extraordinary continue to face the same question posed by the modernist common sense (although less dramatically than the mulid because they are better adapted to modernist aesthetics): "What is all this celebration good for? Shouldn't you people be working, studying, worshipping, taking care of your families?"

Through their stark contrast to the everyday, festivities of the extraordinary always stand in implicit and often explicit tension to the social and moral order of the everyday. Because of this tension, their festive joy is always to some degree problematic to most forms of moral and social order. However, they are much more problematic for some forms of social order than they are for others. There are different kinds of joy, different kinds of power, different visions of life, and some come together better than others.

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For close to a thousand years, the peoples of Muslim lands across the world have been able to handle the ambivalence of mulids as festivals of the extraordinary because they have shared a sense of religion and a vision of society in which times of celebration appear as legitimate

moments in the circle of life. The moral world in which mulids are embedded does not and cannot command perfection. In this vision of life, things do not have a hierarchic functionality. But it is not a life in freedom. It is marked by material necessity, guided by divine law, and ruled by patriarchal hierarchy and descent. It is an often harsh, sometimes cruel, and at rare occasions beautiful vision of life. But it is not a system, and it is open for much ambivalence, as articulated in the proverb "There is an hour for your heart and an hour for your lord." The mulid is a time for both---and for a few other things as well. It is a crystallization of something that its participants see as valuable, desirable, and good, but that can only temporarily emerge from the bounds of necessity: love and joy. If the everyday has little space for either love or joy, their abundance in the short nights of festivity is only more valuable.

The visions of life expressed in the projects of nationalist modernity and Islamic reform are not opposed to joy and love. In contrast, they entail the promise that a successful nation and a virtuous community of believers will have plenty of both. But their place in life is different. More specifically, their place in a hierarchy of embodied emotions is very different.

The ideal order of modernity and reformist Islam is based on the hierarchic functionality of things: some are essential, some serve what is essential, some are unnecessary. Joy, in this understanding, should have a constructive function and serve the progress and education of society. It should not be excessive, it should not be an occasion to bend or invert norms, and it should not become a purpose in itself, or else it threatens to banalize and compromise the grand and by definition stern ideals of the nation and its religion. The joy of mulids can put developmentalist modernity and reformist Islam in peril because it does not have a function, a purpose, a sense of direction, nor can it be described in the framework of any grand ideology of perfection. Hence, the people

celebrating mulids have come to appear idle when they should be productive, restless

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when they should be calm, subversive when they should be conservative, and reactionary when they should be revolutionary.

This judgment is, in essence, aesthetic. Although the mulid is usually an impressive spectacle, it is not necessarily about appearances: from the mystical point of view, it takes place in the invisible realm, and there is no certainty about the way the appearance of people at the festival relates to the mulid's various meanings. But from the modernist and reformist point of view, the danger that emanates from festive joy is essentially visible: ecstatic movement, crowds, mixing of sexes, eating and sleeping in a mosque or in a tent, eccentric dress, lower-class style. Over and over again, appearances (mazahir) are the primary issue. They matter because they are equated with beliefs and attitudes. People critical of the festivities point at people sitting in a tent and sharing a plate of food and refer to the scenery as "beliefs" (that is, the enactment of false beliefs). Government officials order removal of the tent to the back streets and describe this measure as raising the sophistication of the citizens' consciousness. This form of struggle over the structure and values and society---and the power to determine them---through the bodies of people and the social space they inhabit can be described as the "politics of habitus": the association of ideology with embodied practice as well as the contestation and redefinition of the two as interconnected fields. Following Bourdieu's notion of habitus but highlighting its political aspect, this definition of the struggle of habitus means that questions about the common good are always aesthetic, and, in reverse, the aesthetics of public space, piety, and festivity are fundamentally political.

The notion of consciousness (wa'y), which in modernist

discourse routinely appears as the opposite of the festive joy and ecstasy of mulids, clarifies this point. Consciousness as the distinctive virtue of the Egyptian project of modernity is a moral and affective capacity based on the ability to perceive a specific kind of relationship between ideologies and attitudes, on the one hand, and embodied practices, on the other. Embodying this aesthetics of consciousness is what marks the "religious, rational, civilized human" who is so central to the reformist and modernist project.

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Perhaps the most central feature of the aesthetics of being "conscious", at least in its 20th century variant, is a general tone of seriousness combined with the search for definite, authoritative, and clear truths. Truth, for the "conscious" taste, must speak in clear and solemn tones, whereas fun and ecstatic emotion are considered a distraction that, legitimate though it may be, should be kept either strictly separate from the realm of truth or clearly subordinate to it.⁴ This distinction is the source of middle-class reformists and modernists' skepticism toward ambivalence; their search for strict and clear boundaries; their indignation about chickpeas, sweets, and children's play at religious occasions; and their need to state that they "have nothing to do with religion."

Not an opposition between state and civil society nor a division between Islamists and secularists, but rather the competition between different visions about what makes up a complete life forms the central line of conflict in the contestation of mulids. At the core of these visions lie different understandings of the body and the subject. On the one side stands an understanding of an essentially ambivalent life made up of different legitimate parts, without a definite hierarchy beyond the supreme authority of God. On the other side we see a fragile hierarchy of the intellectual and the carnal, whereby spontaneous emotions and bodily pleasure appear as something dangerous that must be contained and

guided to serve a purpose. In this second view, ambivalence--- the characteristic feature of festivities of the extraordinary---becomes a danger, an anomaly, an error that must be overcome and replaced by clarity.

But as my architect friend's comparison of the demonstration with a mulid reminds us, the ideal of "consciousness" may not have the last word, and the actual effort of changing the world is often a much more spontaneous and playful business than modernist ideals indicate. There is good reason to doubt whether the vision of seriousness and clarity in absence of ambivalence evoked by "consciousness" will ever be realized except for in short moments. The attempts to overcome ambivalence will more likely produce different moments of ambivalence, different expressions and experiences of the extraordinary.