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Boredom and despair in rural Egypt

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Abstract Boredom is a key experience in the lives of many young people in contemporary rural Egypt. With its calm, predictable rhythm of life offering little excitement and surprises, village life is intrinsically monotonic. But monotony as such does not necessarily bore people. It is turned into intense boredom and despair by the presence of strong but unfulfilled aspirations for a better and more exciting life. Boredom and attempts to escape it form an experience and a discourse of life that stand in a strong albeit often unstated contrast to the ideology of Islamic revival. With the stated purposeless and pointlessness of the discourse on boredom, not only the forms of entertainment, but also the very position of entertainment towards the grand projects of religious revival and nationalist progress appears in a different light that fits in neither the secularist tradition of arts and entertainment nor their revivalist contestation and reinterpretation.

Keywords Boredom · Despair · Rural Egypt · Entertainment

> ‘Destiny hit Job with all diseases
>
> Seven years sick and paralysed
>
> Patience is good, Job’s patience healed him
>
> But what irony, he died of boredom.
>
> How strange!’
>
> (Quatrain by Salah Shahin, memorised and related to me by Tawfiq, a young man from Nazlat al-Rayyis)

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Entertainment with and without purpose

Watching Arab satellite television these days, what quickly stands out are the many religious video clips that, following the success of the British singer Sami Yusuf, praise Islam, the Prophet Muhammad, and a happy pious life in the tone of soft pop melodies. Featuring beautiful young women wearing covering but elegant Islamic dress, and handsome and smiling young men with trendy looks and high morals, this genre of religious pop and video clips propagates a mixture of pious commitment and dreams of a life in wealth and excitement. The key feature of such new, 'Islamic' 'clean' or 'respectable' genres of 'art with a purpose' is their claim of having a purpose.

In many ways a twin of the secular project of developmentalist nationalism, the contemporary movement of Islamic revival departs in significant ways from earlier traditions of morality and religiosity in the Middle East. This revival has been gaining ground since the 1970s and by now has become the hegemonic discourse on religion in much of the Islamic world. Morality and religiosity as articulated and practiced in pre-revival (notably but not only Sufi) Islamic practice and social mores have been based on a high tolerance for ambiguity and situationality and did not require a comprehensive moral discipline, be it religious or secular. In consequence, entertainment could make use of a religious idiom without having to promote religious discipline. The liberal atmosphere of *mulids*, Islamic saints-day festivals, is a case in point. The projects of modernity and Islamic revival, in contrast, state that everything must be part of a project of moral improvement (Schielke 2006:105–110). Fun, joy and entertainment for their own sake appear as subversion of the ideal of morally committed citizens and believers striving towards a life in harmony and according to the commandments of God (Bayat 2007). The shift from the earlier general opposition of Islamic revivalists towards arts and entertainment, to the current wave of religiously inspired pop music and television serials, has not changed this primacy of purpose.

This, however, is only a part of the story. Religion and an ideal of a purified, virtuous and pious subjectivity as imagined along the lines of a revivalist conservative interpretation of Islam no doubt constitute things that are very important for young Muslims in Egypt. But these are not always dominant in their dreams, aspirations and everyday practice. To get an idea of the many other things that are equally present in their lives and imaginations, it is useful to have a second look at Arab satellite television as it is being watched (Abu-Lughod 2005).

In Anwar's cafe (cafes in the village are generally known by the name of their owners) in the northern Egyptian village I call "Nazlat al-Rayyis", television is always on. In the past, the cafe had a satellite dish of its own, but now it is connected to the 'central dish' (*ad-dish al-markazi*), an illegal distributor of satellite television via cable, one of the countless small enterprises that have brought satellite television into almost every home in Egypt. Sometimes it shows music channels with video clips of different kinds, both Islamic ones as well as those featuring lots of naked skin and lyrics that tell about love, desire, trust and betrayal. More often it shows movies, sometimes Egyptian ones, but often also Hollywood films. The most popular thing on television, however, is football. Major matches of important teams make the cafe fill up with men watching the game in an atmosphere of intense

concentration. Women never attend cafes in the village. If religious video clips have been successful on satellite television in the past few years, their success is little in comparison to the way European football has swept across Egypt since the establishment of central dish networks. Young men often wear shirts of European teams and everyone with the slightest interest in football has his or her favourites in both Egypt and abroad.

Football is big not only on television. Amateur football is a central part of the daily life of boys and young men, many of whom meet to play every afternoon in the school yards after they have emptied from pupils. In the month of Ramadan an amateur tournament is held with approximately 20 teams from Nazlat al-Rayyis and neighbouring villages and hamlets. Asking young fans and amateurs about what makes football so attractive, the answers show a strikingly similar tone:

> 'It makes time pass' (Tawfiq)
>
> 'It's a good way to kill time'
>
> 'Afternoon is an empty time, and football makes those hours pass quickly'
>
> 'When you're a football fan you live much better than when you smoke marihuana or hashish' (Sayid)

Hashish is, in fact, the most serious competitor of football in the field of entertainment among young men. Walking through the cafes late in the evening, when older customers start leaving, one quickly notes the groups of young men who begin to gather in an atmosphere of nervous expectation. Waiting to be relieved from the observing eyes of patriarchal authority, they meet up and hang around in the cafe, waiting for friends to show up. Some of them pay a visit to one of the many small time dealers that work in the village. Finally, they get up and move to find a protected place to smoke, which they find sometimes in a cafe, sometimes out in the fields, sometimes on the rooftop of a house. If beer was a common drink in Egypt until the 1970s and 1980s, most Egyptian Muslims have stopped drinking beer in the course of the Islamic revival. Since then, the popularity of marihuana and hashish, which unlike alcohol are not explicitly forbidden in Islamic scripture, has skyrocketed. While quantitative figures are not available to me, it appears that a very large portion of men under 30 smoke cannabis occasionally, and that there is a growing group of young habitual consumers (see Hijazi 2005: 32–34).

With all their differences, football and hashish each present to young men in the village a very different framework of entertainment than the trend of religious video clips does. Along with other forms of entertainment popular among young men such as television, cafes, music, weddings, joking, walks, flirt, internet chat and pornography, they are essentially seen as ways to escape boredom and not measured by their purposefulness. Boredom and attempts to escape it, I argue in this article, form an experience and a discourse of life that stand in a strong albeit often unstated contrast to the ideology of Islamic revival. The focus on the cultural battles between secular and revivalist currents in the field of arts overlooks other popular experiences of life and practices of leisure that explicitly deny entertainment having any purpose at all. More than that, these experiences are formulated in narratives which state that life is boring and hopeless, the future uncertain and that the only way out is escape.

In consequence, not only the forms of entertainment, but also the very position of entertainment towards the grand projects of religious revival and nationalist progress appear in a different light that fits in neither the secularist tradition of arts and entertainment nor their revivalist contestation and reinterpretation.

This article is based on an ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in the village of Nazlat al-Rayyis, most recently in February, October/November 2007 and March/April 2008. The people who appear in this article all come from the village and most of them live there. Most of them are men between 20 and 30, have some degree of schooling and belong to what may be described as a rural lower to middle class with great aspirations but modest resources. While many of them seasonally work as fishermen, they all aspire to careers in public sector, trade or as labour migrants in the Gulf or the West.

The studies on rural Egypt have often been dominated by a focus on economical and developmental issues, or, in turn, a critique of the developmental and governmental gaze (Hopkins and Westergaard 1998; El Shakry 2007). While these approaches deserve all due acclaim, my focus here is somewhat different. I am intrigued by the way people in a village explicitly phrase their situation as a rural, peripheral one in juxtaposition to national and global metropolises.

In this article I attempt to interpret the theoretising people undertake about their own situation. Of course, this is not to say that there would be a ready, clear-cut theory ready for the anthropologist to record. But there are topics, phrases, lines of discourse and debates which my friends, hopefully with some success, have tried to interpret and explain to me. This is an explicitly dialogical method of ethnography. Instead of attempting to explain their boredom and attempts of escape from the deductive perspective of an academic theoretical framework, I try to develop the ideas and themes offered to me by the people with whom I work. These are ideas they often have developed in conversation with me. Due to the ethnographic, dialogical nature of my research, I cannot present any quantitative claims on the prevalence and distribution of boredom and despair, nor do I consider it important to do so for the purposes of this article.

In a second step, I take what I call the vernacular theory of boredom as a starting point to critically engage with sociological and anthropological approaches to boredom, subjectivity and the Islamic revival. But to do so, I will somewhat depart from the customs of academic writing by moving to a critical review of current research only at the conclusion.

Feeling bored

Nazlat al-Rayyis is a large village in northern Egypt. Located near the shores of Lake Burullus; much of its economy relies on fishing. Fishermen having historically been more connected than peasants to the cash economy and thus to the general economical and political developments, the village has a tradition of political activism. Inhabitants of Nazlat al-Rayyis also claim that the village has higher literacy and education rates than in most rural areas. An important effect of fishing on the village is the large amount of cafes it hosts. Fishermen meet at cafes to socialise, to hire labour and to make contracts. Their irregular working hours mean that cafes are often open until late hours. With its large size, its flourishing culture of cafes, its amateur football

tournaments and its colourful festive culture which draw many visitors from nearby villages and hamlets, Nazlat al-Rayyis is a lively place by rural standards. And yet almost all young people whom I have asked find it deathly boring.

Boredom comes in different kinds, as people whom I asked about the subject pointed out to me. Young people suffer from it more than children and adults do. It is different in the city from the countryside, as well as in Egypt in relation to Europe. Boredom comes in temporary and perpetual varieties. It is worst in the winter, when the nights are long, rain turns the alleys into mud, and power cutouts are common. But even in the summer, even during holidays or when one is having fun, boredom persists:

> Faruq: 'Boredom's everywhere. It's based on *routine* and monotony. Every day is predictable, there is no change. Everyone suffers from it—there is no one here who is happy and satisfied. It is stronger at certain times—like in the hour before you sleep, when you lie in bed and start thinking.'
>
> Tawfiq: 'That can also be positive, you can start thinking about ways to get out of the boredom.'
>
> Faruq: 'Whatever you do, boredom's there with you. Boredom walks with us, it is part of us.'
>
> Tawfiq: 'Boredom is like your shadow that never leaves you, day or night.'

There is a whole vernacular theory of boredom that describes it as a specific state of being, in many ways echoing the academic theories of boredom that have been developed in the fields of psychology, literature studies, philosophy and more recently the social sciences (Revers 1949; Doehlemann 1991; Meyer Spacks 1995; Svendsen 2005; Matuschek 1999; Goodstein 2005; Mains 2007). The most explicit theorist of boredom among the people I know is Tawfiq, a graduate from medium level education in his early twenties. He argues that in the village every day is a Saturday. Since Friday is the main weekly holiday in Egypt, Saturday is a very ordinary day, a day of no particular qualities:

> 'Every day here is like the other: I wake up, go to work, play football, eat, sleep, wake up, go to work, play football, eat, sleep and so on and on and on. There is nothing new, every day is like other. Assume that today is Saturday. Well yesterday was Saturday, and tomorrow is Saturday, and every single day is a Saturday like the other. I want to get out of here, out of this boredom and lack of prospects, to see things change, to see the unexpected, to travel.'

Tawfiq has a government job, something many other young men dream of in vain. While very poorly paid, a government job implies health insurance and social recognition, and is a major asset on the marriage market. Tawfiq's job as a health inspector is not only badly paid; it is also completely pointless. Every day he goes to the same state-subsidised bakery where he, with two other inspectors, writes 'condition: normal' into the inspection book and signs his name, whatever the real condition of the bakery may be. Of all the boring routines that make every day a Saturday, Tawfiq hates his job most:

> 'Government employees must feel it stronger than all others. Every day you get up at the same hour in the same bed, take the same bus to the same work, do the

same tasks at the same time, take the same bus back at the same time, sit at the same café with the same friends and talk about the same issues until you go back to the same home where you sleep in the same bed until you are woken up by the same alarm clock to a day that is just the same as the one before it. And you keep going on like that for 60 years. Imagine how many days exactly like the others that makes!'

Tawfiq is not the only one describing the routine of every day being like the other. In fact people brought up this topic over and again when I discussed boredom with them. They do bring in different nuances, however. For Tawfiq boredom is primarily characterised by the lack of new ideas and possibilities to expand one's horizon. Others give more emphasis to economical frustration:

Najib: 'Our life is all about repetition and *routine*, and that *routine* causes boredom: things are the same, nothing changes. Every day is like the other. And you have to work a lot for little money, you work and work, but you cannot get forward because it is not enough. [...] That's why everyone wants to emigrate. They know that if I work in your country and spend ten euros for food and save twenty, in the end that's good money when I come back to Egypt, and I can build up a good life with it. It's all about economy. If they could, everybody here would leave, everybody. Nobody would stay.'

S.: So it's about being frustrated for lack of prospects?

N.: 'Yes, it is frustration (*ihbat*) rather than boredom (*malal*). Nothing changes. There is no improvement. You go to work in the morning, do the same stupid work, sit in the cafe every evening, and there is no change. Only on Friday it is a little different. Then I sleep long, go to the Friday prayer, and then hang around again.'

These accounts of boredom highlight repetition and frustration as the key causes and a perpetual sense of pointlessness and despair as the manifestation of boredom. The boredom people complain about is not the situational boredom everyone experiences sometimes, for example waiting for a bus, listening to an uninteresting lecture, or doing a repetitive and undemanding task at work. It is a more existential state of lack of future and hope, intimately coupled with frustration, and often close to despair. People also see boredom and depression as related phenomena, and on one occasion in my research boredom was associated with the issue of suicide. (cf. Dabbagh 2005: 207–208; 218–220; Vodanovich et al. 1991; Carriere et al. 2007)

The young men do not attribute boredom to saturation by media, consumption and a search for spectacular experiences as some Western voices do (e.g., Klapp 1986: 117–129). Rural boredom is primarily framed as deprivation, not saturation. The only thing that is available in excess is time. Not only are the jobs young men have mostly hard and unpleasant, like fishing, or pointless and lacking challenge, such as government jobs; they also spend relatively little time working. Men hardly ever participate in household work, which is done almost completely by women. So from early afternoon until late night, young men mostly hang around, watch television, meet people, sit in cafes or play football. Cafes are exclusively male, and so are sports and most cultural activities. Women, whose lives are much more

confined to the realm of the house and whose options for leisure are much more limited nevertheless do not appear to complain about boredom the way young men do. Nazli, a mother of two in her mid-twenties, attributes this primarily to the extensive workload women have to handle:

> 'I think they have no time to get bored. They are busy all the time: make breakfast, dress the kids, school, private tutoring, clean, cook, wash, and at the end of the day you are so tired that you just fall in sleep. Their life may be boring and repetitive, with every day like the other, but they have no time to feel bored.'

As Nazli points out, there is more to boredom than repetition and monotony. There is a difference between one's life being objectively boring, and the sense of boredom, an observation which is echoed by Tawfiq, who thinks that only people with the right mindset are capable of being bored:

> 'It's a matter of personality. People can live in boredom without feeling it.'

In other words, while boredom is an objective state of monotony, being bored requires the capacity to aim for more and to become aware that there is an alternative to the monotony.

Boredom, as the young men of Nazla describe it, is indeed strongly related to aspiration and a progressive modality of time. Patricia Meyer Spacks argues that the very notion of boredom as a situation when 'something expected does not occur' is an invention of early modernity intimately related to the linear concept of time (Fenichel 1953, cit. by Meyer Spacks 1995:5; Matuschek 1999: 118–120; 132–133). In a recent anthropological study on young men in an Ethiopian city, Daniel Mains argues for a connection between boredom and the frustrated expectation of progress. (Mains 2007: 664–667; see also Hansen 2005). Their experience shows striking similarity to that of the men in the Egyptian village I studied. Elizabeth Goodstein convincingly describes boredom as a distinctively modern form of scepticism and discontent. But contrary to Goodstein's claim that 'the bored subject [...] cannot perceive that this experience is peculiar to modernity' (Goodstein 2005:18), the young men in Nazlat al-Rayyis are very explicit about their boredom being related to a progressive concept of time where both human history and personal biography appear as processes of constant improvement. The expectation of a better future, they argue, is essential for the frustration about the repetitive nature of everyday experience. This is also the explanation a retired fisherman in his seventies gave when I asked him whether he was bored as a young man:

> 'No, I was not bored. I had to work hard to make a living, from the dawn to sunset, I would work long days at the lake, sometimes even 15 days on a row. There was no time to get bored. But today there is so much more money in the village. When I was young, 20 Egyptian pounds was a lot of money, but today a hundred pounds are not enough for anything. The people need more money, and want more money. And there is less work at the same time. When I was young we would work hard on the lake, and everyone had a clear line ahead of himself. Now the circumstances in the village have gotten much better, and the young people expect them to be even better. But when I was young one wouldn't know of better, one would just work on the line ahead of one.'

One could argue that people of age tend to look back to their youth in a nostalgic fashion, and that also earlier generations may have been bored. The account above is supported, however, by young men who also argue that boredom came to the village with modernity:

> Faruq: 'The village has changed, the young people have progressed, they have a different look at the world. They see satellite television, and many people travel. They get a different idea.'
>
> Tawfiq: 'The more progress, the more boredom.'

With its calm, predictable rhythm of life offering little excitement and surprises, village life is intrinsically monotonic. But monotony as such does not necessarily bore people. It is turned into intense boredom and despair by the presence of strong but unfulfilled aspirations for a better and more exciting life. The increasing connectedness of the village with global media and migration flows offer imaginaries and prospects of a different, more exciting life, of material wealth and of self-realisation. Village life becomes measured against expectations that by far exceed anything the countryside or the nearby cities have to offer.

Even at the risk of entering highly speculative territory, I find it necessary to suggest that there may be a structural quality to the kind of boredom expressed by the young men in Nazlat al-Rayyis. It appears to be common to peripheral (thus not only rural) milieus around the world when they become more strongly connected with metropolitan flows of ideas, goods and labour.[1] While the people I interviewed explicitly phrased their boredom as rural, other recent ethnographies of boredom report strikingly similar accounts in urban contexts in Africa and South Asia (Mains 2007; Hansen 2005; Verkaaik 2004). They share the existential, desperate sense of emptiness in the face of frustrated hopes. This sentiment seems to be inherently related to the stark contrast of prospects and resources young people at the periphery (be it in terms of geography, demography or class) of great economical and social transformations and promises face.

Escape

Boredom is born out of frustration about monotony, of there being no realistic prospect of progress. But where it leads to is a matter of individual assessment. Tawfiq argues that boredom is good because it makes one sense the need for changes, motivates one to look for change and to work for it. But he acknowledges that boredom does make many others fall into a state of passivity, just killing time and letting the monotony take over their lives.

Tawfiq, like most of the young men, is confident that in the village, he will have no chance to get an interesting job with a better pay, nor will he be able to experience a life that offers him new experiences, ideas and horizons. In his view, the only solution is escape. While his primary aim is to migrate to the West, at the

[1] For a historical parallel from 19th century Great Britain, see Lecky (1903: vol. 1, p. 319).

time of my fieldwork he pursued several plans at the same time, including finding work either on the Persian Gulf or in a tourist resort on the Red Sea.[2]

Almost everybody in the village wants to migrate, be it to the city, to the Persian Gulf or to the West. While for some people this is merely a dream which they like to relish but do not actively pursue, others are continuously busy with different plans to migrate. And since possibilities of legal migration to the West were dramatically curtailed after September 11, most plans are illegal and dangerous. There is often a tone of despair and obsession in the way young men over and over discuss possible ways to migrate, with only a faint idea of what exactly they wish to make out of their lives once there, but a very strong sense that 'here' there is nothing; no chances, no hope, no future:

> 'People are so desperate that they are ready take the risk of dying to cross over the sea [illegally to Italy or Greece on fisher boats]. Their boredom, their unemployment, their lack of hope has gotten them so far. And the political pressure gives an additional share. In Egypt we have the worst government in the world, the worst! It gives the people no chance; instead, it puts more pressure on them. It pushes people so far that they, out of the emptiness (*faragh*) they are in, are ready to take the risk of dying on the way.' (Ibrahim)

While few young people have had the chance to travel abroad, many have migrated temporarily or permanently to Alexandria and Cairo. And while living in the big city is expensive and advancement there difficult, people who have lived in the city regularly argue that it is also more exciting. And yet the desire to migrate does not mean that people wouldn't be fond of their village. Mukhtar Sa'd Shihata, a school teacher who has moved from the village to Alexandria, expresses this fondness mixed with distance in a poem titled *I love you Nazla*:

[...]

I love you Nazla, daughter of so-and-so

I love you and I'll tell you why

I love you, politics and culture

religiosity and pious phrases

I love you, your sons and the flowers of your youth

who always bring you honour.

I love you and fear only a handful of folks

Of course, darling, you know whom:

Those who stay up all night and don't care

who were already on the day I first came to you

high on the mix they smoke

[2] In early 2008, Tawfiq got a job in Bahrain where he currently works—his long-term plan, however, remains to migrate to Europe or the US.

To whom can I complain, Nazla?

I love you, Nazla of the good people

party politicians, fanatics and extremists

I love you, seeing you from afar

Your picture, Nazla, is in my house

in the black of my daughters eye, and in my son's laughter

[...]

In its ironical yet friendly way this poem is telling of the attachment people express towards their home village even if they complain about the narrowness of its perspectives. The final lines of the poem point out at an ambivalence that is characteristic of most people who, periodically or permanently, have moved from the village to the city: they love the village best from a distance.

> 'The strange thing about this village is that when you leave it, you urgently long back, but when you're back you wonder why you returned, and just want to go.' (Hilmi)

Boring as it may be, village life does have many advantages. People who have moved away from the village point out that the closeness to relatives and friends, the low cost of living, and the stress-free pace of life all make the village also a good place to live. The urge to escape does not exclude homesickness and love for one's place of origin. The biggest problem with escape, however, lies in its inconclusive nature. For those who manage to get abroad, escape is a solution, no matter what new conflicts it may produce. But for those who stay behind or return, it actually aggravates the intensity of everyday despair and boredom. By subordinating all activities to merely waiting to get out, the aim of escape itself becomes a factor of boredom.

Killing time

Bored by the monotony and hopelessness of everyday life as they perceive it and focussed on migration as the only real chance of improvement, most young men remain in a state of prolonged waiting. This sense of 'emptiness' (*faragh*) also influences their approach to leisure and entertainment, which they often primarily see as a way to kill time, to fill the emptiness.

There is a range of entertainment and leisure activities available in the village. Aside from playing or watching football, men often sit in their favourite cafe for several hours every evening, exchanging news, talking politics, telling jokes and greeting passers-by. By their public nature, cafes are not suitable for private conversations and a preferred way to meet people in more privacy is taking walks through the village and the surrounding fields.

Unlike sports, cafes and walks which are a male domain, television and music are available for practically everyone. Every house and café has a television set, and

most people have a central dish subscription which allows them to watch satellite television. There is a lively exchange of music on cassettes, internet and mobile phones and a rich fan culture focussed mainly on Arabic singers, and also on movie actors, both Egyptian and Western.

In the past few years internet has become available in the village. While few people have computers, internet cafes have become common in a very short time. By February 2007, there were 13 internet cafes in Nazlat al-Rayyis and two were about to be opened. Internet is not exclusively about leisure, of course, but at least in the internet cafes, entertainment dominates. Music and movie downloads, computer games, internet chat and sex sites are allegedly the most popular features.

Women can go out for a walk just as men can, but women are expected to be going somewhere, while men can legitimately just stroll around. However, Nazlat al-Rayyis has a rich culture of festive occasions which, unlike the male domains of cafes and sports, are also open for women. Once a year, a festive procession on the occasion of *mawlid an-nabi* (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad) passes through the village, on the spring festival *shamm an-nasim* fishermen take their families on boats to the lake for a picnic, and during the canonical Islamic feasts, people visit each other and crowd the parks around the nearby Nile barrage. The most visible forms of festive culture throughout the year, however, are weddings with their festive atmosphere evolving the groom's house for a week before the actual wedding day and mostly female friends and relatives crowding the guest room.

The variety of leisure activities does not sound too boring at first sight. But the way people talk about killing time indicates that even when one sometimes has fun at a wedding, enjoys a good film or becomes completely immersed in the excitement of a football match, in the end it is all the same anyway; there really is not much hope or point in all of it:

> Samuli: But people have different ways to kill time, what about them?
>
> Najib: 'It's always the same: you sit in a cafe, you watch television, there is nothing more, that's it. [...]'
>
> S.: So when you sit and watch television what do you think?
>
> N.: 'Well, if I think at all, what do I think...' (laughs, and does not tell what he thinks)
>
> S.: Still, I try to understand how people handle the situation of nothing changing, there being nothing new.
>
> N.: 'Well, they smoke hashish.'

After this comment by Najib, the discussion, which took place in a wedding, swiftly moved to hashish and the three men present started discussing different new and old ways to smoke hashish, most of them involving different ways of collecting the smoke in a glass, a bottle, a plastic bag or the like. In fact whenever I talked with young men about boredom, they soon took up the issue of hashish. Some stated its popularity as a fact, some emphasised that they do not smoke hashish, while others openly praised its effects. One of the many enthusiasts for hashish is Faruq, a man around 20 who sports long hair (something which used to be out of the question but

has recently become more common in the countryside) and wears jeans, shirts and jackets in a style that clearly leans on global fashion. He and his friends meet almost every evening either in Anwar's cafe, out in the fields or in one of the many weddings where it has become customary for the groom to offer his male friends a *wajib*, a treat of hashish and sometimes alcohol, on the eve of the wedding. Faruq subscribes wholeheartedly to the escape from reality by means of hashish into a temporary experience where things are meaningful, conversations funny, and ideas flow freely:

> Samuli: So what do you do, how do you kill time?
>
> Faruq: 'The best way is with hashish. When you get high your worries fly away and are replaced by good thoughts. It's like living in two worlds, one where you have ideas, your thoughts run freely, you laugh and feel good, and this one we live in.
>
> 'There are moments when time passes quickly, when you are with your friends, and moments and when it doesn't pass—and it is then, when the time won't pass, when you want to smoke. Even just the things you need to do to get to smoke make time pass: You meet up people, you buy hashish, you find a place to smoke it—you don't want to smoke in front of people—that in itself already makes a couple of hours pass.'

Matuschek, in a study on boredom and the experience of time among German youths observes a similar relation between boredom, leisure and drug consumption. For young people for whom leisure time was an occasion for self-realisation, there was no relation between boredom and drug experiments.

> 'If, however, leisure time presents itself as escape from the everyday routine, boredom is experienced as distressing. In this situation drugs can become a means of satisfaction, without which an acceptable leisure time no longer appears as possible.' (Matuschek 1999: 388)

Leisure thus comes in different varieties with different emotional qualities. Leisure as temporary escape from boredom remains dominated by the dictate of killing time. Killing time as an aim and a practice is not only escapist, it is also openly amoral. It does not defy moral or religious values, but it ignores them, stating that in the end, everything's just the same, quite meaningless and pointless. This nihilistic tone is best exemplified by the concept of *hiwar* (plural *hiwarat*), youth slang for tricks, cheats, practical jokes, short cuts and all the other slightly unsound things you do to get money, kill time, solve problems or move ahead.

> Faruq: 'A *hiwar* would be for example if I have cheated you on 60 Egyptian pounds, and when you come to claim it from me I manage to show that you have in turned cheated others for other sums of money and that way make your position difficult so that I can avoid paying. There are other, much bigger and worse *hiwarat* and I must admit that I have been doing some myself. But a *hiwar* is not only about making money, it is also a way to get good laughs.'
>
> Tawfiq: 'There are essentially three *hiwarat*: migration, hashish and girls. But rather keep away from the girls. The problem with the girls is that they enter you into much more trouble than you can handle.'

As Tawfiq notes, flirting is perhaps the most risky of all the ways to make time pass. Making contact is in itself tricky due to the strong social control over women's movement and contacts; it can take a significant degree of 'programming' to arrange for just a phone call. More profoundly problematic, however, is the strong ambiguity of flirtation. It may remain on the level of flirtatious play, but it may also lead to serious and often unhappy love stories. Finally, flirting as a form of *hiwar* implies an amoral approach that implies a significant amount of lying, cheating and concealing. As such, it not only stands in an opposition to the dominant sexual ethics of respect and honour, it can also leave some of the parties involved in a very difficult position. This is especially the case for women.

The amoral tendency of killing time and the unsound nature of *hiwar* do not, however, constitute open defiance of dominant moral standards. There is a tendency to keep killing time within minimal limits of religious and communal morality and respect. The preference for hashish rather than alcohol and the attempt of smokers to avoid being seen by older men when smoking are cases in point.[3] Another illustrative case is the disappearance of pornography from the cafes in the past 2 years. Until recently, cafes with a satellite dish would show porn films late in the evening, but on recent visits to the village I noticed that the cafes were now showing football and Hollywood films instead. Asking my friend Isma'il about this change, he gave the following explanation:

> 'From the event of the dish more than 5 years ago until the establishment of the central dish network, many cafes were showing sex films, mainly in winter evenings when people go to bed early and the streets are empty by 8 p.m. The cafetier used to have a regular dish antenna and would buy the periodical card to decode the programme, and the farmers from the nearby hamlets used to come by foot or by bicycle, pay 50 piastres entrance and double price for tea, and watch for a sex film for an hour. The people called this 'charging' (*shahn*) as they would afterwards hurry home to their wives as quickly as possible. But since 2 years, the sex films in the cafes have come to an end for three reasons. First, the central dish has made European football available and extremely popular, and now all cafes show football which draws a lot of public. Second, the sex films in the cafes became a well known issue and drew negative attention to the cafes that got a reputation as bad places. And the people were ashamed in face of their older male relatives. European football offered a morally more acceptable alternative. Third, the decline of porn in the cafes happened at the same time with the rise of internet cafes. Now the people can go to internet cafes instead where you have more privacy than in the cafe.'

An important distinction must thus be made between entertainment with a moral purpose, and entertainment within morally acceptable limits. It is the latter, not the

[3] This is not simply because they would be afraid to be caught. The shame young men feel about doing certain things in view of older men is related to a notion that the young should abstain from acts that would be disrespectful towards older men, such as smoking cigarettes in front of one's father. Smoking in view of one's father or other older male relatives would mean disrespecting them by treating them as one's equal.

first, that the bored young men of the village strive for. Even when they stretch the limits of minimal moral respectability, they also do not want to do the wrong thing (Drieskens 2006).

Flights of fantasy

It would be false, however, to claim that all entertainment and diversion would be purely escapist in nature. The flight of fantasy that goes along with music, film, fan culture, poetry, flirtation and in some ways also hashish is also a site of constructive imagination. The state of waiting can also be a state of dreaming, as some people try to compensate their physical and social immobility by movement on the plane of imagination.

Common sites of such imagination are football fan culture, youth fashion, film, internet and literature. However, the two sources for ideas and imaginaries people most often mention are television and internet. While Arabic serials appear to be the most popular television programme, the young men I know show a great passion for Hollywood cinema. Action is the most popular genre of Hollywood films, but comedy and especially romance appear to enjoy increasing popularity. Although Hollywood films are professionally produced to reach as wide an audience as possible, one has to be familiar with their narrative and emotional conventions to be able to ascribe them emotional realism (Ang 1985: 45). Such emotional recognisability has, as Brian Larkin (1997) has noted, been key to the success of Indian cinema in Africa. Watching films and learning to understand and enjoy them constitute an active exercise of imagination. This imagination, young people in the village tell, is effectively changing the outlook they have on their lives by offering a greater variety of models for emotion and action.

> Tawfiq: 'The media have very much influence on the people's ideas about love. You watch films and they give you ideas.'
>
> Samuli: Does that means that he stories and characters of films are examples of what kind of things are possible?
>
> Tawfiq and Faruq: 'Yes.'
>
> Faruq: 'By the way, I really love to watch television. I can watch it five, six hours a day. But I have to have my peace to watch what I like. I like foreign movies, but the women all watch serials, the serials are the women's programme. There's one film in particular that I really liked, that gave a very strong idea of love. I first heard of it from Tawfiq and then saw it on CD: *City of Angels*. It's a really, really strong film. In it an angel gives up his immortality and his place in heaven and goes to live on the earth as a mortal because he has fallen in love with a woman. But one day later she dies in a car crash. Imagine that sacrifice! He gives up his eternal life because all he wants to is to touch her hair. As an angel he could only see her.'

Both Faruq and Tawfiq were fascinated by the tragic quality and the overwhelming power of love in the *City of Angels*, a Hollywood remake of Jim

Jarmusch's *Wings of Desire*, presents. This image of love is not foreign to Egyptian popular cultural imagination, since Arabic love stories often tell of tragic love that defies all norms (Abu-Lughod 1996: 208–232) The love story of the film is neither entirely familiar nor fully foreign; it touches known literary conventions and personal experiences but shows them from a new, unfamiliar perspective. This makes the film 'strong' from its Egyptian viewers' perspective.

If television and film can offer new horizons of imagination for those who are looking for them, the internet also offers the possibility of interaction. Chat and other forms of virtual encounters are high on the list of features people use on the internet.

> 'Buying a computer and getting connected to the internet really has opened the world for me. I can read books online, I can meet people from around the world online, and I can play games. My favourite recently has been *Delta Force: Black Hawk Dawn* where you can play in a Somalian setting. You can also choose the Somali side to play against Americans, and every time in the past months when I felt upset about reading of George Bush in the news I would take pleasure in shooting and insulting the Americans in the game.' (Fu'ad)

A much smaller group of young people is engaged with literature, especially poetry. While few people read fiction, surprisingly many write. When I noted this observation to Hilmi, a passionate reader of world literature and amateur writer of short stories, he commented: 'Those who read are those who write'. For those who are interested in literature, it is thus not only about consuming, but also about creating literary imaginaries.

Writing is perhaps the most imaginative of the forms of leisure available in the village. The relative popularity of writing also means that some people undertake imaginary travels by means of literary experiments. So for example Mukhtar Shihata, the author of the poem cited earlier, who is currently working on a novel whose hero, a man who out of unhappiness joins al-Qa'ida and whose only true friends are the spies set after him by Arab and Western intelligence agencies, travels through much of the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe.

> 'I was refused visa to Saudi Arabia where I was offered a job. Instead, I went there in my novel. And I went to Afghanistan, Chechniya, Russia, Poland and Germany, I met Bin Laden and fell in love with an American-Iranian woman—all that I could do in my novel but I couldn't have done it as a worker in Saudi Arabia.'

There are more ways to approach leisure and entertainment than either revivalist/secular nationalist art with a purpose on the one hand, or nihilistic killing time on the other. Entertainment as an exercise of imagination differs from both in its emphasis on experience and self-realisation. Although the constructive fantasy of imagination can stand in contradiction to the pessimism and despair of escape and killing time, these two ways of dealing with the experience of boredom are by no means exclusive. The same people who claim that nothing has any point anyway at other times can become very excited about something they have heard, seen, or thought of. But an even stronger contradiction exists between boredom and the revivalist promise of hope that religion is supposed to bring into all fields of life.

Hope?

Discussing my research on boredom with Hilmi's circle of friends, one of them pointed out that even if life sometimes gets boring, there definitely is hope:

> 'You must pay attention to that we as Muslims do not feel so much boredom because when you pray regularly, it gives you hope again every time.'

Existential boredom implies a denial of hope. It is, as a friend of mine from Cairo put it, based on discontentedness ('*adam ar-rida*), while the ideology of Islamic piety posits contentedness (*rida*) as a key virtue of the believer (see also Dabbagh 2005: 81). This is a point made explicit by 'Abd an-Nasir, a shopkeeper in his mid-twenties and one of the few young men I know who do not find their life boring and do not want to emigrate:

> 'I'm not bored because I have trust in God, and because I work all day and stay busy.'

> 'Abd an-Nasir's brother and partner in business Muntasir disagrees and says that also religious people can get bored sometimes, and cites a friend of his whose motto is: 'There is nothing new under the sun.' But 'Abd an-Nasir holds to his point of view:

> 'The bored youths, they don't want to work. They sleep from dawn until afternoon, don't work, smoke hashish, and have a mobile phone to call their girlfriend. If they would truly believe in God they would not be bored, because when you have trust (*yaqin*) in God you have hope and you don't feel bored. I work and I thank God for my share (*rizq*) and know that today is better than yesterday.'

There was a time when Mustafa, a good friend of Tawfiq, after a period of personal crisis and in search for a clear orientation let his beard grow and cut his trousers short in the distinctive fashion of committed Salafis. He tried to stop smoking, began praying regularly, and enthusiastically instructed anyone who was willing to listen about the Salafi 'method' (*manhaj*). After a few months, however, he shaved his beard again and returned to smoking cigarettes. While he still holds to Salafi ideas about Islam, he no longer attempts to follow the rigorous discipline of being a Salafi. Sitting in a cafe together one evening, Tawfiq took this as an occasion to enquire:

> 'Say, when you were a sheikh,[4] were you bored?'

> Mustafa: 'No, there was no time to be bored. My day was completely full: Praying on time, waiting for the prayer, preparing, and after the prayer studying: Sheikh Salah gave lectures of Qur'an and Sunna, and I was studying some myself. I was busy all the time. And honestly, I was feeling more relaxed (*bi-raha aktar*) then than now. Now my schedule is mixed up, I delay the prayers according to other things. Back then I was doing everything on time, it

[4] Colloquial expression for a Salafi. Depending on the context, calling a Salafi a 'sheikh' can be both respectful and ironical.

kept me busy all the time. And more than that: It was something I felt good doing. It is the same like when you do work you like: if you have an interesting, demanding work, you will be completely devoted to it, it will take all your time and you won't feel bored.'

Mustafa's comparison of intensive piety with demanding work again highlights that it is not monotony as such but pointless monotony that is at the root of boredom. In consequence, the solution to boredom is doing something meaningful.[5]

'The only thing that really helps against boredom is work. But there is little work. My work (as a cafetier at weddings) is seasonal. I work 2 months a year—the rest of the time I'm unemployed.' (Sa'id)

The meaningfulness of work and of piety is of a very different kind, however. The reward of work, in terms of both money and satisfaction, is immediate and concrete. The reward of piety, on the contrary, is located in the future, mainly in the afterlife in the shape of Paradise, but also in this world as a promise of a life in happiness and harmony.

Some of the bored young men who search escape from reality in diversion and drugs at some point in their lives turn to religion in the search of a steady ground to stand on and a clear direction to follow. Salafi activism, a movement that has few active followers but much ideological influence in Nazlat al-Rayyis, strikingly often draws men who have gone through times of deviance and disorientation.[6]

But if Mustafa found his experience of intensive piety so fulfilling, what made him stop? He lists a number of practical obstacles that made Salafi piety more and more difficult, but in the end he puts the blame on himself, losing the drive and the motivation that one needs to keep up the hope. Although Mustafa still holds to much of his Salafi ideas, and looks back to his time as a Salafi as a very happy period, he does not have the energy to keep up the discipline. With its strict schedule of worship, piety offers an auto-suggestive practice that, day by day, renews hope and gives life a meaning and a direction. But the revivalist/Salafi promise of good and meaningful life only works as long as one has the energy, the commitment and the trust to keep going.

The religious promise of hope is easy to hold if not stretched too far, and none of the young men I know would deny their belief in God and their hope in Paradise just because life in this world bores them. Hope as it is presented by (Salafi) Islamic revivalism, however, claims to encompass all fields of life. The power of the revivalist and Islamist reading of Islam lies in its promise that religion is a solution to all problems, public and private. From the point of view of this revivalist promise, there should be no

[5] Another important form of meaningful action could be politics. Almost everybody I know has a more or less well-defined political point of view, and some, albeit few, are or have been active politically, the most likely candidates being the Muslim Brotherhood and socialist groups. However, during my fieldwork I have abstained from conducting research about people's political activism because it could have drawn unwelcome attention to them by State Security.

[6] Narrating a personal history of deviance and disorientation appears to be common to male members of Islamic piety movements (notably Salafiya and Tablighi Jama'at) around the world. For example, Sindre Bangstad (Personal communication, 9 January 2008) has noted the presence of men with a history of addiction, imprisonment and personal crises in Tablighi Jama'at in South Africa.

boredom. Because weariness, boredom and despair are something that religion promises to solve, their persistence and growth implicitly present a form of passive unbelief. While believing in a religious ideology, a person suffering from boredom may not sense the hope that religious practice should give (Raposa 1999: 140).

Liberal Islam is largely restricted to urban intellectual circles, and critique of religion is a strong taboo almost everywhere in Egypt. In the absence of a credible alternative ideology, this lack of trust seldom develops into a general critical attitude towards the hegemonic revivalist reading of religion. The young men who appear in this study all see themselves as believing Muslims and frequently if not regularly observe key religious rituals such as prayer. Their problem, however, is that the field of religious ideology has become almost completely monopolised by revivalist voices that leave little space to legitimately arguing for ambiguity as a normal and acceptable form of religiosity. While everyday life is characterised by ambivalence and short cuts of various kinds, revivalist religious discourse only offers the choice between commitment and deviance—or as 'Abd an-Nasir framed it, between being bored and believing in God.

Conclusions

If many ethnographies of the Islamic revival have focussed on revivalist piety as 'a response to the problem of living piously under conditions that have become increasingly ruled by a secular rationality' (Mahmood 2001: 830), in this paper I have turned the question around and enquired about the problem of living an exciting and passionate life in a society dominated by demands of discipline, both pious and secular. Neither the will to live virtuous lives, nor the dichotomy of secular and Islamic versions of virtue, can be taken for granted if we are to understand how people experience their lives in an age of religious revival, global fantasies and frustrated aspirations. Approaches that too easily juxtapose a secular liberal position to an Islamic revivalist one risk overlooking that most Muslims do not consistently subscribe to either. Both ideologies, we are reminded by Asad (1993; 2003) and Mahmood (2005; 2007), are characterised by the aim to domesticate and discipline the citizens' and the believers' subjectivity, albeit along different lines. While this is no doubt true, too much emphasis on the *aim* of discipline may make us blind to the ambivalence and relative openness of people's biographies and world-views (Marsden 2005). More than that, not only do people argue for discipline at times, and for self-realisation and freedom at others, they also live lives that often lack either.

While revivalist religion promises hope to solve the problem of boredom, boredom in turn marginalises that hope. The state of boredom and frustration remains a negative one, however, characterised by the inability or unwillingness to live out the promises of good and meaningful life, but not articulated in open contradiction to dominant interpretations of religion, morality, social standing and success. When entertainment is framed as 'merely' killing time without a purpose, this also implies that it contains no explicit aim of changing the world one lives in; the choices are escape and coping.

Boredom is not simply nihilistic; on the contrary it is intimately related to the expectation that life should be interesting and exciting, offer new perspectives and possibilities (Meyer Spacks 1995: 24). Young men like Faruq and Tawfiq do not simply state boredom as much as they celebrate it. In their discussions boredom emerges as a distinctive ideology of youth that informs a critique of everyday life and values. As such, it carries a normative tenor of frustrated self-realisation, a value that, while increasingly deemed important by young men, stands in many ways in a tension to communal ideals of respect and obligation and the revivalist ideal of committed and docile pious subjectivity.

In the end, these different moments do not fit together into a coherent picture. Perhaps we really should prefer to account for complexities rather than trying to draw coherent pictures anyway. The same young men who think that hashish is the best way to escape boredom and who resort to short cuts to kill time and to make money, also believe in the promises religion gives of meaningful life now and Paradise in the hereafter, and also strive to gather experiences and to form a unique personality (cf. Gregg 2007: 297–8). But from the point of view of any ideology, religious or secular, that highlights comprehensive discipline for a common sake such ambivalence is dangerous by default (Schielke 2006; Bayat 2007). The boredom of the young men of the village, even in its most nihilistic moments, does not undermine religion in general. Yet their way of being somewhat religious does not follow revivalist lines. Their denial of hope is not a problem for religious dispositions of all kinds; it is problematic only for a religious ideology that describes believers as necessarily committed and hopeful, and makes the internalisation of piety as the primary mark of one's personality a necessary condition of religiosity.

Recognising people's need and desire for fun, diversion and excitement, the movement of Islamic revival has turned towards domesticating these desires. The project of creating Islamic arts as entertainment is an ambiguous attempt to have something of both: some spontaneous openness, some discipline and guidance. But while it can incorporate fun, it cannot give up the premise of purposefulness. Other traditions within Islam can and do offer more space for both fun and boredom, but the revivalist paradigm of religion as comprehensive 'application' of norms and consequent internalisation of a subjectivity saturated by the will and the determination to live for religious goals cannot account for such ambivalence. Most people are ambivalent, finding life pointless at times, looking for new horizons at times and trusting in God at times. This is why the attempt of Islamising arts and entertainment is doomed to a partial success. It is only effective insofar as people search discipline and guidance in arts and entertainment (as they sometimes do), but whenever they resort to them for either killing time, escape from reality, or free flights of imagination, they are no longer subject to the dictate of purpose.

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