Saintly Soap Operas: An examination of three Coptic saint dramas

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"Walk the streets of Cairo or the village lanes in Egypt in any early evening and you will see the flicker of television screens and hear the dialogue music of the current serial (*musalsal)* Read the newspapers and you will find articles and cartoons that can be only understood if you are following these televised dramas. The serials…seem to set the very rhythms of national life."[1]

This statement by Lila Abu-Lughod affirms what anyone who has spent a significant time in Egypt knows, that the serial drama (*musalsal*), whether it is on radio or television, has been and continues to be an important aspect of Egyptian popular culture. Abu-Lughod not only recognizes that the serial is a very popular source of entertainment but that it is a uniting factor for the Egyptian national community.[2]

It is hardly surprising, then, that a medium that is so pervasive and so intertwined in the national consciousness has been coopted by groups in Egypt to disseminate their ideas or ideologies. This study will focus on a specific incidence of this within the Coptic community[3]: the co-option of the *musalsal* as a medium to portray the narratives of the lives of their saints, in effect hagiographies. This is, no doubt, an interesting development from a cultural standpoint because it represents the use of a form of entertainment typically reserved for love triangles, murder mysteries and various other mundane topics. The main goal of this study is to answer why the producers of these dramas have chosen the *musalsal* as a way to present the hagiographies.

[1] Lila Abu-Lughod "Islam and Public Culture: The Politics of Egyptian Television Serials." *Middle East Report* 180 (1993): 25

[2] Ibid., 25

[3] It is important to clarify that when I refer to the Coptic Community and the Coptic Church I am referring only to the Egyptian Orthodox Church and its followers. This clarification is necessary because the terms Copt and Coptic are often used to refer to the entire Christian community in Egypt. I am only concerned with the Orthodox Church because these dramas are the product of this community exclusively.

To help answer this question I have framed my discussion with two brief histories: first, that of television in Egypt, focusing on the importance of the *musalsal* in its development and second, that of the Coptic Church in Egypt. I then move from the general history to an examination of the importance of the hagiography of saints to the reform movement in the Coptic Church and to the creation of a Coptic "imagined community" or, as Paul Sedra puts it, "Coptism".[4]

The next part of my discussion focuses on the films and is divided into two distinct sections. The first section examines the general characteristics of three of these saint dramas directed by Mājid Tāwfīq. I have chosen this director for two reasons. First, he is prolific and his works are accessible.[5] Second, an examination and comparison of works from one director may produce more fruitful results than a comparison of works from different directors. In this section I focus heavily on the language used in these works as well as their production. I also discuss the aesthetic aspects of these dramas and how these dramas are typical iterations of the Egyptian *musalsal*.

In the second section dedicated to these three dramas I look at the shared motifs in these three movies. This examination looks particularly at the characteristics and acts of the saints that are emphasized as well as the characterization of the "other" in the drama.[6]

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[4] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* : *Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Press, 1983) and Paul Sedra, "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations,* 10:2 (1999), pp. 219-35.

[5] The three films that I examine in this study are taken from a collection of around forty saint dramas that are housed at the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania. They were collected by the former head of the Middle East library collection at UPenn, William Kopycki, over a number of years from the Cairo book fair. Although, these films are on DVD's the Coptic Church began producing them in the VHS Era. Majid Tawfiq is the director of 19 out of the 40.

[6] Anthony Shenoda, "*Cultivating Mystery: Miracles and a Coptic moral imaginar*y"(PhD diss.,Harvard University, 2010).

With this focus I attempt to make clear the imagined "ideal" Copt and the imagined "other", as they are portrayed in these films.

Through this discussion of the history and the films, I show that these dramas are an outgrowth of the Sunday School Movement, an internal reform movement within the Coptic Church that began roughly in 1918.[7] Specifically these dramas are contemporary devices used by the Church and friends of the Church to further the Sunday School Movement's three primary goals: ecclesiastical reform, religious renewal and most importantly the reinforcement of community links.[8]

The saint hagiographies are important because they serve as the common traditions that highlight the proud and long history of the Copts. They present in effect founding myths for the Coptic community. However, they are also important because they address the two other goals of the Sunday School Movement: ecclesiastical reform and religious renewal. Through these stories the Church is not only able to emphasize that there is a common Coptic identity but also try to dictate what that identity entails. In my estimation, that identity is, unsurprisingly, focused heavily on piety, prayer, and dedication to the Coptic Church. Given the utility of these hagiographies, it is no surprise that the Church does a great deal to emphasize them. This includes arranging trips to monasteries, printing books about the saints, dedicating art to them and making dramas that re-enact their stories.

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[7] Dina el Khawaga "The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community and Active Role," in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East* ed. Andrea Pacini (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1998) 178 and S.S. Hassan, *Christians Versus Muslims in Modern Egypt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003:3-13 and 74-84

[8] ibid., 178

In this study I show that the choice of the *musalsal* as the form to portray these saint dramas is an easy one. The *musalsal,* with its use of colloquial language, easy to follow plots and flat characters, provides the ideal form to portray the saint dramas. It is an easy-to-digest form that is able to penetrate all Coptic homes, in Egypt or abroad, and serve as a starting point for a family discussion on the importance of being an active and involved member of the Coptic community.

Television in Egypt

Before I delve into an examination of the saint dramas, it would be useful to frame these dramas within two brief histories: the history of television in Egypt and the history of the Coptic community in Egypt. In this section I will examine the history of television, playing close attention to the role of the *musalsal*.

The important role of the *musalsal* in the lives of Egyptians is perhaps best displayed during Ramadan. This holy month of fasting is a boom time for television serials. In a phenomenon analogous to "sweeps" in United States television, the Egyptian and Arab production companies release their newest and best serials during Ramadan. The companies know that traditionally most families during Ramadan stay at home after breaking the daytime fast and watch television, so there is a large and captive audience looking for new programming.[9]

The result of this ritual is that the common experience of television watching is never more evident to observers and Egyptians themselves than during the month of Ramadan. This is due to the fact that these *musalsals,* besides being welcome entertaining interludes

[9] Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture wars: politics and practice* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 172

between the large *iftār* (the meal that breaks the fast) and the consumption of traditional sweets of Ramadan, serve as starting points for interfamilial debates. It is well established that television has become for the modern family "a convenient social setting in which to talk and otherwise communicate".[10] These debates, which start in the livingrooms of Egyptians during Ramadan, spill out onto the streets and even "travel across continents and well-guarded national borders".[11] The result is that no one connected to Egypt is able to escape the Egyptian *musalsal* during Ramadan.[12] This is ironically true for both Muslims and Christians. Even though the latter do not celebrate Ramadan, they are still witnesses to the pervasive tradition of the Ramadan *musalsal*. In fact in recent years a few of these *musalsals* have focused on relations between Muslim and Coptic communities in Egypt.[13]

The hegemony of the *musalsal* during the Ramadan season points to the general importance of this form of entertainment to Egyptian popular culture and its position relative to popular religious culture. This importance is further emphasized when the disheartening statistics of illiteracy in Egypt are considered.[14] Thus the *musalsal,* like the cinema, is an accessible and easily recognized medium that serves as one of the main socializing factors in Egypt.

Since television broadcasts began in Egypt in the 1960s, the government has been aware of the medium's ability to socialize. In fact, it was the government under the rule of

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[10] James Lull, "The Family and Television in World Cultures," *World Families Watch Television* ed. James Lull (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1988), 17.
[11] Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture wars: politics and practice,* 172.
[12] ibid., 172.
[13] ibid., 174.
[14] The CIA world fact book estimates that the literacy rate is 71.4% Central Intelligence Agency "Egypt" *The 2008 World Factbook* https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html#People (accessed April 27, 2009).

Gamal Abdel Nasser that first invested in television technology as a means of "citizen education" and as "an agent of public information and education".[15] Thus television from its beginnings in Egypt, as in many other post-imperial nations, has been couched in national and political terms rather than the commercial.[16] The addressee of programs on television in Egypt has been the citizen, not the customer.[17] The government's original efforts to use television programming as a way to modernize, mobilize and socialize have had a lasting effect on television in Egypt; television and specifically the *musalsal* has come to be seen as not only a tool of entertainment but also of pedagogy. Most contemporary *musalsal* writers in Egypt have overt or covert goals of education in penning their works. Although lambasted by serious critics as merely escapist entertainment, the *musalsal* has become the staging ground for discussions of the Egyptian imagined community.

It is within this historical context that members of the Coptic community have produced the Coptic saint dramas which are the focus of this study. In essence these dramas are trying to affirm the global Coptic imagined community. The rest of this study will try to show how exactly the films attempt to construct this identity.

The Copts since 1952

The Free Officers movement in 1952 not only marked a significant change in the course of Egyptian history, but also marked a change in Coptic history, with the end of the prominent role of Copts within the Egyptian government. Not coincidentally, the 1952 revolt was a significant turning point in a reform movement that had been taking place in

[15] Lila Abu-Lughod *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,2005),10.
[16] ibid., 10.
[17] ibid., 10.

the Coptic Church since 1918. The Copts' loss of political power and representation in the post-1952 government provided an impetus for many Copts to concentrate their reform efforts on the Coptic Church and join in this nascent reform movement. This movement is generally called the Sunday School Movement and is a useful prism to look at the history of the Copts from 1952 until the present.

The Sunday School Movement officially began in 1918 under the leadership of Pope Cyril V and Archdeacon Habīb Jirjis. It began as an attempt to oppose the influences of other denominations, such as the Catholics and Protestants who were infiltrating Egypt, and to provide a reform program to cope with the modernization that was beginning to hit Egypt. Jirjis established Sunday schools in Coptic districts as a counter balance to the Catholic and Protestant schools in nearby areas. In addition to teaching Bible studies, these schools taught Coptic rites, the history of the Coptic Church, and the lives of Egyptian saints and martyrs. Jirjis represented the first example of a new generation of Copts who, through the Sunday School Movement, would radically change the Church: he was a modern, educated layperson from a middle-class family who was dedicated to the reform and strengthening of the Church.

Although the Sunday School Movement would be driven almost equally from within and outside the Church it was definitively a modern and middle-class movement. This was a departure from the trend of Coptic political history, which was dominated by the Coptic secular elite.[18] The dominance of the Coptic secular elite came to an end after 1952 with the failure of the nationalist movement, in which secular Copts featured prominently as members of the Wafd party, and with the destruction of their sources of wealth by

[18] ibid., 36

Nasser's reforms. In their stead rose the Coptic Church, which had already begun to modernize and centralize through the reforms that began in 1918. This was a major shift of power and can be seen as the most significant event in modern Coptic history.

Although the church would assume de facto and *de jure* control of the Coptic community, 1952 did not mark the end of the Sunday School Movement, but rather the intensification of the push to modernize and centralize the Church. This intensification is referred to as the "Coptic Renewal".[19] This renewal was very much tied to the Sunday School Movement, but it represented the next stage where the newly educated middle-class Copts, products of the educational reforms of the constitutional period and the new Sunday schools, entered into the service of the church and drastically changed its structure and its role in the lives of Copts.[20] The current Pope of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenūda is an excellent example of the type of clergy produced by the Coptic Renewal.

The renewal movement had two distinct goals: firstly, the establishment of the clergy as the essential nucleus of the community sphere; and secondly, the integration of the faithful into that space, not just on the level of religion or identity but also of daily life. Both of these goals served to unite the Coptic community behind a single force in response to the perceived threat of Islamicization that began to take hold under Gamal Abdel Nasser.[21] The institutional reform of the clergy was inaugurated by the nomination of Shenūda III and was spurred on by a period of decline which the Coptic Church suffered between 1958 and 1962. These institutional reforms of the Church took many forms, but the most essential were revisions to the salaries, allowances, social security

[19] Dina el Khawaga "The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community and Active Role," 183
[20] ibid., 183
[21] Dina el Khawaga "The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community and Active Role,"185

provisions, and the status of the priest's family to restore the central position of the clergy in the contemporary world.[22]

Tied to the consolidation and strengthening of the clerical hierarchy, the Renewal movement sought to strengthen the role the Coptic Church played in the lives of lay Copts in order to provide a strong defense against the two lures of the world that the Coptic Church feared so intensely: the lure of the West and the lure of conversion to Islam or another Christian sect.

For the Coptic Church, the best way to guard against these external threats was not to deny their positive aspects, but rather to show the viability and strength of a Coptic identity. Thus, the Church tried to create the sense in Copts that they are part of a larger community, with which they share not only a common experience in present-day Egypt but a proud and distinct history. In essence, the best way to battle these outside forces was to create the sense among Copts that they were part of an "imagined community". This is exactly what the Sunday School Movement and the subsequent Renewal movement attempted.

Young Copts were the ones most receptive to this new discussion of the Coptic imagined community, because their opinions about the Coptic Church, Egypt and the world in general were less cynical. It is no surprise then that the first major reform was the creation of Sunday schools. These schools represented the first prong of attack to indoctrinate the Coptic youth about the importance of involvement in the Church. Other important practices that were introduced to familiarize the youth with the Coptic

[22] ibid., 183

imagined communit, included trips to monasteries, Bible readings, movie watching sessions and sports activities. The most important aspect of these activities was that they were both fun and informative, for young people are more likely to embrace a message if it is veiled in the pretense of having fun.

Since such importance was placed upon making Coptic identity appealing, the responsibility for much of this indoctrination fell upon the *khuddām:*[23] lay Copts who dedicate their lives to the service of the Coptic Church. During the reform movement they came to serve as the interlocutors between the clergy and the lay Coptic community and thus as one of the main forces behind the reforms of the Church. The *khuddām* were essential in expanding the relationship between the Church and its faithful "beyond the cultural, educational, and canonical sphere to include all actions, gestures, and words of every Copt in his everyday life, not only with regard to his Church institution, but also to other Copts".[24] This interlocutor status was especially important when dealing with the young because the relationship between a layperson from the community and a young person is not so wrought with tension and reverence as would be the relation between the young and a high-level clergyman.

The main stratum from which the *khuddām* drew their lessons about the long and proud history of the Copts was from the saint and martyr narratives. Although the Bible was referenced, the stories of saints and martyrs were more useful for asserting Coptic identity because they are distinctly Egyptian. Organized trips to the monasteries, which usually house the remains of a saint, were incredibly important to the education of young Copts. Not only did these trips serve as socializing grounds for young Copts to make

[23] Dina el Khawaga "The Political Dynamics of the Copts: Giving the Community and Active Role," 184
[24] ibid., 184

connections with their peers[25] but they also served as a way for young Copts to construct a map and geography of the Coptic nation distinct from the Egyptian map.[26]

While the monasteries and the places of the remains of the saints served as loci on the Coptic map and destinations for Coptic field trips, the narratives of these saints' lives served both as markers of particular days on the Coptic calendar and as examples of the ideal Copt.[27] Since each day of the Coptic calendar is attached to one or two saints, the telling of their stories is tied overtly to a Coptic time, which is wholly separate from either the Gregorian or the Hegira calendar, a fact that furthers the sense of the Coptic imagined community. The wondrous stories of the lives of the saints place a distance between the Copts of the present and the idealized Copts of the past whose suffering for their faith and devotion to the Church dwarfs anything that contemporary Copts have done. Although these stories have been written down for posterity, they are at their heart an oral tradition.[28] Thus, these stories are best told and not read and this is where the saint dramas, which are the focus of this study, become important. Although there are no doubt great story tellers among the *khuddām* and the clergy alike, the videotaped saint dramas serve as a way to produce a consistent, attractive product, to reach a wider audience and to facilitate the indoctrination of Copts. By taping these dramas, they can leave the confines of the Church and enter the homes of all Copts. Once inside these Coptic homes the watching of these dramas can become a family experience that prompts discussion of the importance of being a Copt and staying a Copt.

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[25] Elizabeth Oram "Constructing modern Copts: the production of Coptic identity in contemporary Egypt." (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2004), 162
[26] ibid., 181
[27] Shenoda, "Cultivating Mystery."
[28] Saphinaz-Amal Naguib "The Martyr as Witness Coptic and Copto-Arabic Hagiographies as Mediators of Religious Memory." *Numen* 41 (1994): 230

The Dramas

In this next section I examine three of these saint dramas, all directed by Majid Tawfiq: *al-Qiddīsah al-aẓīmah Anaṣtāsiyā (The Great Saint Anaṣtāsiyā);* , *Qiṣṣat ḥayāt al-Qiddīs al-Anbā Mūsá al-Aswad(The Story of the Life of the Saint Mūsá the Black);* and *al-Anbā Ruwīs (Saint Ruwīs).*[29] I choose to focus on these three works for three reasons. The first reason was the availability of the accepted story of each of their lives in the secondary literature. This was essential for a comparison between the official version of the story and the one portrayed in the work. The second reason was the contrast between each of the protagonists. One of these saints, Ruwīs, is the standard image of a Coptic saint, i.e. male and stereotypically Egyptian. The other two stories focus on saints that vary from this norm: an African from the south, Mūsá the Black; and a woman, Anaṣtāsiyā. The final reason was that they were released two years apart from each other, in 2003 (*Anaṣtāsiyā*), 2005 (*Mūsá*), and 2007(*Ruwīs*), and therefore these three films demonstrate how Tawfiq's directorial style evolved over time.

Production

Two of these dramas, Anaṣtāsiyā and Mūsa, were funded and produced by the Church of *al-Shahīd al-Aẓīm Mār Jirjis wa-al-Anbā Abrām* which is located in Heliopolis, a suburb of Cairo. Ruwīs,on the other hand, was produced by *al-Markaz al-Quḅtī li-Wasāil al-Īḍāḥ bi-al-Maqarr al-Bābawī*, The Coptic Center for the Ways of Clarification at the Papal Headquarters. Funding for these films indicates that these saint dramas are very

[29] I chose to look at the works of Mājid Tawfiq because he had the largest collection of dramas within the University of Pennsylvania collection

much an activity supported and funded by Coptic Church. One of the producers is a prominent Coptic church in Egypt and the other is an organization with direct ties to the Coptic Pope.

The close link between the church and the production of these dramas is seen in the introductions to each of these films. Before each film a snippet of one of Pope Shenūda's pious remarks on the illegal and immoral nature of copying religious videos and CDs is played. His argument against the illegal copying and distributing of videos and CDs is couched both in moral/religious terms as well as legal terms. It is not only immoral because it is stealing but because it violates the producer's copyright. This explanation, probably taken from one of the Pope's famous General Meetings,[30] is both fascinating as an example of how the Church deals with modern problems and as evidence of how these saint dramas are a product of the Church. In addition, it hints at the economic value of these movies to the Church, which through their sales make a significant amount of money.

In addition, before the beginning of Anaṣtāsiyā, there is a brief part where a Coptic priest praises and thanks Mājid Tawfiq for his work on this film and on other saint's biographies. Most importantly, during this speech the priest reveals that the Pope encouraged the creation of these saint dramas. Thus these saint dramas are very much a product of the Church and it would be fair to say that Tawfiq's involvement as well as the

[30] This tradition of the General Meetings was begun by Pope Shenuda before he had been elected pope. These General Meetings consist of a sermon or a reading one a saint hagiography delivered by Pope Shenuda on Wednesday, which is then followed by Shenuda taking questions from the audience on matters both sacred and profane. Sana Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The century-long struggle for Coptic Equality*. 226-8

involvement of the actors and producers, who are all Copts, can be seen as an extension of the *khidma* (lay activism on behalf of the church).

Since these stories are produced under the auspices of the Churc,h it is not surprising that the stories of each of these saints in the dramas replicate almost exactly the accepted version of the story.[31] The accepted versions of the stories come, like many of the stories that comprise the Coptic historical narrative tradition, from the Copto-Arabic Synaxarium (*Kitāb al-Siniskar)*. This book, which was compiled at the beginning of the fifteenth century in Arabic, provides short biographies of saints for each day of the Coptic calendar.[32] After it was first compiled it was not static and the biographies of saints who were canonized after its first compilation have been inscribed in its records. It has become the ultimate authority in the Coptic Church with regards to saints' biographies and has gained an importance close to that of other holy texts. The importance of this text is displayed by the fact that it can even be accessed online in English.[33]

Not only do these dramas show a great deal of fidelity to the accepted version of the saint stories but the portrayal of the protagonist saint adheres very closely to the accepted iconography of the saint in Coptic art. In the introductory segments of the films, Mājid Tawfiq goes so far as to juxtapose the actor dressed up as the saint with the iconic image. In the beginning of *Anaṣtāsiyā*, Tawfiq displays the icon of Anaṣtāsiyā, then "brings it to life" by putting the actress, dressed in full saint garb and in the same position, directly over the image. He then alternates between live action and the icon for a minute while the introductory music plays.[34] It seems to me, when comparing the icons to the images

[31] In fact a Priest is credited in each film for his reviewing of the historical accuracy of the film.
[32] De Lacy O'Leary, *The Saints of Egypt*,(New York: Macmillan Company, 1937) 1
[33] http://www.copticchurch.net/topics/synexarion/index.html
[34] *al-Qiddīsah al-aẓīmah Anaṣtāsiya*

presented in these film, that the costumes for the entire film are based upon the icons. This is not surprising, considering that these icons are perhaps the only primary source that elucidates what early Copts wore.

The fact that these dramas are privately funded by individual churches or centers explains the nature of the costumes and the scenery used. It would be fair to say that these films are low-budget. This critique is not meant to demean the films, but in comparison to films either in the Anglophone world or Egypt they lack a certain professional quality. The costumes, while elaborate and colorful, lack the refinement to make the audience believe that these are the actual protagonists, rather than actors in costume. This is particularly evident with the beards. The many real beards in the movie serve only to make the fake beards look more artificial. It is also obvious that these dramas use only one or two sets for numerous films, and film everything else in the environs of Cairo. The special effects are also very rudimentary. This is most obvious during the fight scenes and when miracles are performed. However, the part of these films that best shows the budgetary constraints is the audio, which sometimes ceases when a change in soundtrack is needed. Although each of these works is around two hours, longer than the typical big-budget film, the comparison to films in either Egypt or the West is unfair because of the huge disparity in budgets. A comparison to *musalsals* is far more apt. Although the budgets of some of the more high-powered and well funded *musalsals* compare favorably to films in Egypt, many of the others function on a low budget similar to the saint dramas.

These dramas not only emulate the *musalsals* in their production quality but also in the tone, acting and writing, which is melodramatic and typical of soap operas. There is a

great deal of yelling, screaming and crying in these dramas. The music is very expressive, at important moments in the films: when something is revealed or something shocking takes places, the music hits a sharp crescendo. The acting is very bombastic with very little subtlety. The characters are very one-dimensional: the saints and the sinners are very easy to pick out from the beginning. In general these aspects can be characterized as what Lila Abu-Lughod refers to as the placement of "strong emotion in the everyday interpersonal world", which is the distinctive characteristic of the *musalsal*.[35] Unlike the production quality, this emulation of the *musalsal* form does not hint at budgetary constraints, but is rather a conscious choice by the directors of the film. Using the *musalsal* form helps provide some levity to the dramas, which are heavily didactic. The Bible is quoted often, as are the psalms, and very little action happens in these two-hour films. Usually there are only about one or two major events that occur in the movie and the rest is filled with the pious acts of the saint, displays of his or her involvement and commitment to the church, and homilies by either the saint or another religious figure on important ideas or values in Christianity. Thus the melodrama and absurdity of some characters, especially the heedless sinners, is really essential to make these dramas palatable to the general lay community.

Another aspect of these dramas that makes them accessible to the general Coptic community is the use of language. The majority of the dialogue is in a very colloquial Egyptian Arabic. In addition, this use of Egyptian colloquial is another aspect that ties these dramas to the *musalsal* tradition. Since they began the Egyptian *musalsals* have been well-known across the Middle East for their use of the colloquial Egyptian dialect. Although the colloquial is used for most of the dialogue, it is not used exclusively. The

[35] Lila Abu Lughod *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of television in Egypt*. 116

less accessible Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used in three contexts in these films: personal prayer to God; quoting from the Bible and the Psalms; and explanations of doctrinal elements of Christianity. Thus, the interjection of MSA into the dialogue establishes a dichotomy between the earthly and the heavenly, and between the profane and the holy. The establishment of the colloquial as the common "low" language and the MSA as the "high" language is a trope that reverberates in almost every aspect of Arabic culture, so it is not unusual to see it used in the same way in these dramas.[36]

A third use of language in these dramas that is interesting is that although these dramas are completely in Arabic, they are subtitled in English. The fact they are subtitled is displayed clearly and emphasized on each DVD case. The accuracy of these subtitles is adequate and although they are filled with awkward English phrasings, these hardly ever obscure the meaning. However, the degree of accuracy is not as important as the fact that the producers of the film felt it was necessary to put English subtitles into these films. In addition these subtitles cannot be turned off, which they usually can be in other films, so they are not an option but rather a part of the film. The prominent position of English subtitles in these films indicates that these films are directed not only at Copts in Egypt, who would not need subtitles, but towards the Coptic Diaspora, which has large representation in three English speaking countries: Canada, the United States and Australia.[37]

After looking at some of the aesthetic aspects of these dramas I would like now to focus on the stories of the movies themselves. I have already mentioned that these stories

[36] Niloofar Haeri, *Sacred Language, Ordinary People*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 50
[37] Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity,* Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1999. 129-32.

adhere closely to the accepted version of the story, thus an analysis of how the plots in the movies compare to the accepted version of the story would not be productive. However, since the stories from the Synaxarium are generally short and were not written with their later adaptation to films in mind, Tawfiq and the writers had to adapt and expand upon these stories. Therefore, I think an analysis of the major themes and motifs in these films would be useful.

Fasting

One of the major motifs of the three films is the emphasis placed on fasting. Each of the saints is rigorous in following the fast days. They are so steadfast in their fasting that they sometime become weak and faint, but are of course revived by the succor of the Lord. One example of the saint's extreme commitment to fasting comes from *al-Anbā Ruwīs*. After arriving in a certain city, he is housed by an archdeacon of the local church in a storeroom. This deacon forgets about Ruwīs in the storeroom for three days, without providing him any food or water. When he does return Ruwīs has fainted from his intense praying and lack of sustenance. The deacon offers Ruwīs some water, but before he can drink any he realizes that it is a designated fast day, and refuses the water, to the shock of the deacon.[38] The steadfast commitment of the saints is framed by their general commitment to an ascetic life. None of the three eats or drinks very much in general, only what is needed to sustain them. It is emphasized often in the films that Ruwīs and Anaṣtāsiyā eat nothing but dry bread and salt.

The commitment to fasting and the general ascetic attitude to consumption is no doubt part of the stories of all the Coptic saints contained within the Synaxarium. It is one of the

[38] *al-Anbā Ruwīs*. Video Recording. Cairo: taqdīm Niyāfat al-Anbā Rūwīs, murājaat Niyāfat al-Anbā Rūfāīl 2007

main devices of creating distance between the average Copt and the saints. The distance created and the wonder injected into these stories by the extraordinary acts of the saints make them both entertaining and meaningful.[39] Although this commitment to fasting is an integral part of the saint stories, fasting is given a preeminent position in these dramas and is emphasized often. The position afforded fasting in these movies, I believe, is an active maneuver to emphasize the importance of the fast to the audience. This emphasis is needed because fasting, like other food rituals in other religions, is an essential tool for creating a Coptic group identity.[40] The Coptic Church proscribes fasting for a large number of days a year, which can seem burdensome to the modern Copt.[41] Emphasizing the importance of fasting in these dramas is a tool to encourage Copts to fast on all the required days and thus participate in Coptism.

Praying

Another major motif in these films is the primacy of prayer. At least one quarter of each of these dramas is dedicated to characters praying. The prayers fall into three main categories: prayers for forgiveness; prayers for intercession or help; and prayers of thanks. Regardless of the intention of the prayers, praying is an intense and emotional action. Most, if not all, of the characters, are in tears or near tears when they pray to God. These dramas not only emphasize the primacy of prayer in the lives of all Copts but also the efficacy of these prayers. The main message delivered about prayer in these dramas is that prayer is the solution to all major problems because God is listening and is responsive. To emphasize the responsiveness of God to the Copts' prayers, these dramas

[39] Saphinaz-Amal Naguib "The Martyr as Witness Coptic and Copto-Arabic Hagiographies as Mediators of Religious Memory." 233
[40] ibid., 233
[41] The number of days in a year that necessitate some form of fasting is 250 Oram 183

portray prayers to pagan gods as powerless. This is made particularly clear in *The Story of the Life of the Saint Mūsá the Black*, where at first he starts as a sun-worshipping pagan, but when his sun-god is unresponsive he softens and soon accepts the idea of one God. He so fully embraces the power of God that he is seen an hour later into the film proselytizing about the efficacy of prayer in dealing the problems of daily life.

The Other

The use of major motifs in these dramas plays well into the conception of the imagined ideal Copt. The intensity and absolute commitment of these saints to the Church, emphasized by these major motifs, establishes the paradigm of the ideal Copt which all other Copts should strive to emulate. This paradigm of the ideal Copt is further accentuated and clarified by the presentation of "the other", i.e. non-Copts in the movie. Each of these movies portrays specific "others". In *The Great Saint Anaṣtāsiyā* the "other" is the Emperor Justinian and his loyal servant. The dichotomy between Anaṣtāsiyā and Justinian is interesting because Justinian was Christian. However, in this film he is Christian in name only. He never prays, fasts, goes to church, or does any of the other things that in the world of these Coptic dramas would characterize him as Christian. Although his selfish actions eventually force Anaṣtāsiyā to abandon her desired life in the convent, Justinian is not portrayed as evil. He is characterized as a man who expects all of his desires to be fulfilled because he is unable to control them. Once he sees Anaṣtāsiyā, he must have her.

In fact, we find out that he and the empress are in a loveless political marriage and that for the first time in years his heart beats with the love for Anaṣtāsiyā. If this story was not

framed by the Orthodox Coptic world, the setting I have described would form the basis for a dramatic love story. However, this story is set in the Coptic world and thus Justinian is bound to his wife, for divorce is illegal in the Coptic Church.[42] Also because this story is framed by the tenets of Coptic orthodoxy, Justinian is a profligate sinner for not controlling his desires, and for contemplating three forbidden acts: divorce, adultery and polygamy. Thus the portrayal of the other in this instance specifically clarifies the importance of marriage and its inviolability to the ideal Copt.

The "other" in *The Story of the life of Mūsa the Black* is the godless pagans who worship the sun, including Mūsa before his conversion. These pagans are portrayed as wild, lawless sinners, who, like Justinian, are slaves to their passions. They pillage and steal indiscriminately and value only their carnal passions. However they are not beyond redemption in this film, and perhaps Mūsa is the best example of this. Although he has committed all of these misdeeds, he is not shunned by the members of the church but rather embraced. Through a process of prayer, good deeds and intensive liturgical studies not only is Mūsa able to reform, but he is able to become a preeminent member of the clergy. This is the case for all of the pagans in this film, who are all converted. The ease with which the pagans are converted not only emphasizes the theme of the inherent goodness of man, but also shows that the difference between a good Coptic member of the church and a lawless pagan is not that big. What is required for a pagan to be forgiven and become a Copt is prayer, liturgical study, fasting and a commitment to the church. If these proscriptions are the keys to leaving paganism, then a Copt without these things could just as easily regress to paganism.

[42] Sana Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The century-long struggle for Coptic Equality*. 20

The most interesting portrayal of the "other" comes in the film *al-Anbā Ruwīs*. In this film the other is the Mamelukes who ruled Egypt in the late Middle Ages. It would seem reasonable that since the Mamelukes were Muslims, their portrayal would be handled with a delicacy that the depiction of pagans and heedless Christians would not require. However, the Mamelukes are by far the most evil and mean-spirited of the "others" that are present in these three movies. They force Christians to convert, harass Christians for the *jizya* (poll tax) and other taxes and the Mameluke governor of Egypt even tortures and embarrasses Rūwīs when he refuses to cede to his authority. In addition, the Mameluke governor is more bombastic and angrier than Justinian. The portrayal of the Mamelukes shows no regard for the delicate and often testy relationship between contemporary Copts and Muslims. However, this overt demonizing of a Muslim character in the film is permissible because of the type of Muslim he is. It is mutually agreed upon among all Egyptians, whether Muslim or Christian, that the Mamelukes brutally ravaged Egypt. Thus, the portrayal of a tyrannical and evil Mameluke does not raise the ire of many Muslim Egyptians. The film would be far more controversial if it vilified the regime of the Arabs in Egypt before the Mamelukes or Turks.

The use of the other in *al-Anbā Ruwīs* highlights the Egyptianness of the Copts. The Copts' sense of Egyptianness is often overlooked in studies of the Coptic community in Egypt, but it should be noted that the Copts, while sharing the basics of religion with the West and non-Arab world, feel a far greater sense of loyalty and support for Egypt. An essential part of the Coptic identity is that they are Egyptians who are Christians, not Christians who live in Egypt.[43] Specifically, this film highlights the Copts' Egyptian

[43] Sana Hassan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The century-long struggle for Coptic Equality*. 204

identity because it shows that they too, like the Muslim Egyptians during the time of the Mamelukes, were exploited and abused.

Intended Audience

This study has examined most of the defining characteristics of these Coptic saint dramas, including their production, language, historical background, major themes and motifs. With such an in-depth analysis it is possible to attempt to construct who might be the intended audience of these films. One useful hint at the intended audience is the use of English subtitles in these films. Although these subtitles make it easier for Western scholars to study these cultural productions, I am confident that they were not placed in the films for this purpose. A much more likely reason for the inclusion of subtitles is that these films were not directed solely at the Coptic community in Egypt but in fact were directed at the global Coptic community. This community includes three large immigrant populations in the United States, Canada and Australia. Directing these films at the immigrant community makes sense because these Copts are removed from the seat of Coptic power and thus the church's hold on them is tenuous. Maintaining a strong connection with these immigrant communities is important because they continue to play a defining role in Coptic affairs both in Egypt and on the international stage.[44]

The films' use of the tropes of the *musalsal* also points to a wide global audience since the *musalsal* is so widely watched and transcends economic, educational and geographic barriers. The heavily didactic nature of these films and their prominent display of Coptic ceremonies seem to indicate that these films were directed at a younger audience. While I agree that at their heart these films are intended to serve as a tool of indoctrination, I

[44] Paul Sedra "Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Modern Egyptian Politics." 230-1

think that the directors and producers of these films intended for these works to be viewed by young people in the company of either their family or church elders. The theological discussions in the films are advanced and opaque, and necessitate explanations from someone well versed in the traditions of the church, be that a member of the clergy or an elder member of the family. Thus these films were made to be the starting points of discussions either among family member or members of the same congregation, be they in Egypt or anywhere else in the world, about the particulars of being a Copt and being an active member of the Coptic Community.

Conclusion

The three films which I have examined in this study, as well as the thirty other Coptic saint dramas archived at the University of Pennsylvania, should not be considered derivative works of Coptic propaganda published in response to Islamic fundamentalism. Nor are these dramas a cry of despair directed at the countries of the developed world in hopes that they will save their fellow Christians. Rather these works are the products of a long process of reform within the Orthodox Coptic Church in Egypt that began in 1918 and continues to take place to this day under the names of the Sunday School Movement and the Renewal. These movements' two main goals were to centralize and consolidate the power and leadership in the hands of the Coptic clergy and to increase the presence of the church in the everyday lives and thinking of its followers. In essence these two movements hoped to place the hhurch at the center of the lives of all Copts.

These works are also not directed at the Western world in hopes of eliciting support for the Coptic community. Rather these works are writte,n directed and produced by the

khuddām and members of the clergy and are directed at fellow Copts in both Egypt and the global Coptic community. They draw upon a long and distinct historical tradition of the Coptic saints in an attempt to fortify an imagined Coptic community and a sense of "Coptism". These films are one of the many tools the clergy and the *khuddām* use to accomplish this goal. They attempt to construct this imagined community by establishing the ideal Copt through use of certain motifs and themes and through the portrayal of the "other" in these films. The "other" is not always Muslim: in fact in two of the movies I examined the "other" was not Muslim. The other in these films, while sinful and profligate, is not demonized. These films are not intended to emphasize the evilness of the other. Rather these films are intended to emphasize the strength and virtue of the Coptic forefathers.

Although these dramas focus exclusively on the distinct Coptic history, they also portray the Copts as distinctively Egyptian. All the stories, regardless of their actual setting, are placed within a familiar Egyptian context. This means not only the scenery behind the actors, but also the characters that are placed in the background of these saints. Familiar tropes from Egyptian culture, like the uneducated *fellāhīn* (peasants) or the greedy '*umda* (village head) appearin these movies to set a distinctly Egyptian frame.

These films also draw heavily on the tropes of the Egyptian *musalsal*. They are characterized by their very colloquial Arabic language and their exclusive use of melodrama in the presentation of characters' emotions, whether they are saints or sinners. The use of this supposed "low" form of culture form can be seen as a continuation of the tradition established by the Egyptian government at the inception of television in Egypt, where television is not seen as a primarily commercial venture but rather as a means to

educate the public. That is not to say that the producers of television in Egypt, or the producers of these films specifically, did not have any economic plans,[45] but rather to say that their primary purpose was the education of the target audience.

[45] On some of these films their price is clearly displayed. In addition it has been cited previously that these films provide a needed source of revenue for the Church.

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