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Sectarian Strife and “National Unity” in Egyptian Films: A Case Study of *Hassan and Morqos*

Karima Laachir

Relations between Muslims and Copts in Egypt have been very strained in recent years.¹ Disputes mostly of a nonreligious nature—particularly in poor rural areas where socioeconomic problems and poverty are the main stimulus for clashes—tend to escalate and take a religious form. A recent incident on the eve of the Coptic Orthodox Christmas on 6 January 2010 in the southern town of Nag Hammadi took a turn for the worse, when, for the first time, there was random shooting of worshippers as they were leaving midnight Mass. Six Copts and one Muslim security official were killed. The attack is claimed to have been in retaliation for the alleged rape of a twelve-year-old Muslim girl by a Coptic boy. Violent riots ensued in November 2009 when the incident was reported and in January after the fatal shooting.

The Egyptian government continues to be in denial about sectarian strife and portrays the violence as individual acts. During the debate of the 6 January 2010 incident in the Egyptian parliament, Fathi Sorour, the Speaker of the Assembly and a member of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), stressed that “this was an individual criminal act, like a clash between two brothers living in one home.”² Sorour reiterated the government’s official line that sectarian strife did not exist in Egypt. He claimed that the constitution fosters the equality of all Egypt’s citizens whatever their religion: “Article 1 clearly states that the political system of the Arab Republic of Egypt is based on citizenship, while Article 5 bans the founding of political parties on a religious basis.”³ Most of the time, acts of violence against the Copts are attributed to Islamist “terrorists.”⁴ Sorour rejected any foreign interference in the

1. The term *Copt* refers to the main Christian group in Egypt, namely, that of the Orthodox Egyptian Church. One of the oldest churches in the world, it has its own pope, currently Pope Shenouda III. Relatively small numbers of Christians such as Catholics and Protestants adhere to other churches. In Egypt, the term *Copt* is used to refer to Egyptian Christians whatever their denomination. Discrimination against Christians does not differentiate among them either. Christians in Egypt are not a monolithic entity but are spread across class, gender, and geographical location. It is estimated that they make up 10 percent of the Egyptian population, but no clear statistics as to their numbers are available. For a recent study of the Coptic question in Egypt, see Paul Sedra, “Class Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: Coptic Christian Communities in Egyptian Politics,” in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 10, no. 2 (1999); Sana Hassan, *Chris-*

tians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Sebastian Elsasser, “Press Liberalization, the New Media, and the ‘Coptic Question’: Muslim-Coptic Relations in Egypt in a Changing Media Landscape,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 131–50.

2. Quoted in Gamal Essam El-Din: “Spreading Tolerance,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 21–27 January 2010, weekly.ahram.org/eg/2010/982/eg7.htm.

3. Quoted in *ibid.*

4. The Muslim Brotherhood groups have recently changed their discourse on the Copts and have announced that all Egyptians, whatever their religion, are equal citizens. According to Rafiq Habib, a prominent Coptic intellectual and politician, vi-

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matter, declaring that “everyone should know that Copts are in no way a sectarian minority but form an integral part of Egyptian national cohesion.”⁵ The state promotes public displays of unity and vehemently denies any discrimination against the Copts, who are perceived to be an important part of the national fabric and not a minority. However, the Copts complain of discrimination mainly on legal, administrative, and political issues having to do, for example, with constraints on building churches, family law, and the state’s indifference and failure to confront the persecution and violence against them, as well as a lack of adequate representation in the political institutions.

Egyptian filmmakers have braved the issue of religious tension since the beginning of the new millennium occasioned by the rise in religious violence between the two communities. The Egyptian government is supportive of such a development. *Hassan and Morqos* is the first film to address the issue of sectarian tensions directly and openly.⁶ This popular film, a box office hit in the summer of 2008, was well received by both Copts and Muslims. Its well-known cast of Egypt’s most prestigious actors—the popular comedian Adil Imam and the former Hollywood star Omar Sharif—have ensured its financial success. The film’s simple, straightforward message of national unity and mutual tolerance was clearly aimed at the Egyptian masses. Critics and cinemagoers alike viewed it favorably. In this article, I argue that while *Hassan and Morqos* does not attempt to paint a rosy picture of national unity in Egypt since it openly and comically addresses the mutual distrust and prejudice evident between Muslims and Copts in their religiously segregated communities, it nevertheless perpetuates

the state’s official spin on events by laying the blame on “extremists” on both sides, thus exonerating the government from its responsibilities. However, the film poignantly underscores the gap between the official viewpoint of friendship in the two communities and the deep-seated prejudice and mistrust that govern their daily lives. Despite its shortcomings, the film opens up a public space for debate where anxieties can be expressed. It does not silence Coptic “difference” in the name of “national unity,” as Coptic religious symbols and culture are strongly present in the film.

“National Unity,” the Copts, and the Cinema

The Copts in Egypt are not culturally or ethnically different from the rest of the population. The only denominator of difference is religion. Most Copts do not consider themselves a minority; they identify as “Egyptians sharing a national identity with Egyptian Muslims.”⁷ According to Samir Morqos, “Religion is all that remains . . . a minor distinction when you consider that the Copts have taken part in all political struggles. The concept of a ‘minority’ serves to polarize because it sets the dynamic of a minority against a majority.”⁸ Coptic political mobilization up to the 1950s always took place within the framework of the party system; the Copts fought in the anticolonial struggle alongside the Muslim majority and participated fully in the 1919 revolution, in which they were important political players. However, with the military control of power and the overthrow of the multiparty system during the 1960s with the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Copts’ political activism moved in the direction of the church, which meant the destruction of civil society and civil alliance with the majority Muslims.⁹ The Copts

olence against the Copts does not come from the Muslim Brotherhood but, rather, is the outcome of deep-seated prejudice and socioeconomic problems. Rafiq Habib, cited in Michaelle Browers, “The Egyptian Movement of Change: Intellectual Antecedents and Generational Conflicts,” *Contemporary Islam* 1 (2007): 86–87.

5. Quoted in El-Din, “Spreading Tolerance.” The rejection of foreign interference in Egyptian internal affairs is the legacy of the colonial intervention, particularly the 1928 British treaty with Egypt that gave the latter independence while keeping the British “right” to intervene to “defend” minorities. As Nicola

Pratt puts it: “Colonial powers used the question of ethnic and religious minorities in the Arab region as a means of ‘divide and rule.’ . . . The Egyptian nationalist movement, struggling against British colonialism, rejected the notion of Copts as a religious minority in order to unite Egyptians against foreign rule. Until today, it remains extremely difficult to discuss issues pertaining to Coptic Egyptians.” Nicola Pratt, “Identity, Culture, and Democratization: The Case of Egypt,” *New Political Science* 27 (2005): 78–79.

6. *Hassan and Morqos*, directed by Rami Imam (2008).

7. Charles Smith, “The Egyptian Copts: Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Definition of Identity for a Religious Minority,” in *Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 59.

8. Quoted in Karim Al-Gawhary, “Copts in the ‘Egyptian Fabric,’” *Middle East Report*, no. 200 (1996): 21.

9. Samir Morqos, “The Coptic Question,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 31 December 2009–6 January 2010, weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/979/sc101.htm.

were further alienated by Anwar Sadat's regime and the political and socioeconomic changes that since the 1970s have brought an increased Islamization of society into the public space as well as into the state's institutions.¹⁰

The debate on national identity and the role of Islam in shaping it, as well as the position of the Copts as a minority, became problematic in the era of Sadat, who in an attempt to curb leftist activities encouraged the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood groups, which had been persecuted under Nasser. However, the Islamists, especially the radical groups, soon attacked what they perceived as the corruption of the Sadat regime.¹¹ According to Samir Morqos,

When, in the 1970s, the president [Sadat] declared that he was a Muslim president of an Islamic state, it immediately begged questions as to the status of non-Muslims. In the ensuing debate there was considerable discussion of the position of Copts in Islamic jurisprudence, and the term *ahl al-zimma* [non-Muslim subjects] was frequently used. It is from this point that we can date the increasing encroachment of religion in politics, the steady sanctification of public space and a re-categorisation of society on the basis of religious affiliation. Subsequently, Egypt has experienced almost continuous sectarian tension, from the Akhmim incident in 1970 to the present day.¹²

The ambiguity of the definition of national identity and whether religion is its dominant marker aggravates the polarization of Egyptian society along religious lines. The state differentiates between groups and individuals on the basis of their religion, as it is obligatory to indicate one's religion on one's identity card. The increasing Islamization of public space calls into question the unclear status of the Copts in the national discourse and whether they are citizens or *dhimmis* (protected non-Muslim subjects). Moreover, the state's failure to provide necessary social services such as health care and employment for

both Muslims and Copts has created a vacuum filled by the church and some Islamist groups.¹³ The absence of a civil and civic alliance further divides Egyptian society along religious lines and creates communal segregation. According to Samir Morqos, "The absence of mechanisms capable of assimilating people into the framework of the public sphere, a result of the sanctification of public space, combined with the lack of political and civic channels capable of embracing people as individual citizens, has left Copts with no alternatives but to withdraw into their own communities or else establish a defensive, politicised counter-identity, that requires them to behave as a religious or minority group."¹⁴ Moreover, "The decline of shared popular traditions and the rise of religious Puritanism and extremism in both communities have set in motion a process of creeping mutual alienation."¹⁵

So what is the role of popular cinema in this debate on national identity and unity? Cinema has always played an important role in "imagining" the Egyptian nation through its various historical phases; as Viola Shafik puts it, "The Egyptian film industry developed alongside and in correlation with the nation's endeavours to achieve independence, and was involved in crucial social, political, and economic changes and challenges to the position of 'minorities' and to gender relations."¹⁶ The representation of minorities in the Egyptian cinema has changed, depending on "their position within the evolving national narrative" (25). For example, the Jews were portrayed rather positively or in a neutral way before the 1952 revolution—they were seen then as part of the nation. That changed later because of the increased tension between Israel and Egypt and the Jewish exodus to Israel (25–31). Their disappearance from the national scene in cinematic depictions follows "the process of nationalist unification and purification [that] has been

10. Salwa Ismail, "Religious 'Orthodoxy' as Public Morality: The State, Islamism, and Cultural Politics in Egypt," *Critique: Journal for Critical Studies of the Middle East*, no. 14 (1999): 30. Ismail argues that the Islamization of Egypt's public space since the 1980s has been an attempt by the state to counter the influence of the Islamist movements and regain control of the public arena and involves "the enforcement of public morality in the name of religious orthodoxy,"

including the Islamic dress code for women, segregation of the sexes, and censorship against any artistic activity seen as "immoral" (47).

11. Smith, "Egyptian Copts," 72.

12. Morqos, "Coptic Question."

13. Smith, "Egyptian Copts," 77.

14. Morqos, "Coptic Question."

15. Sebastian Elsässer, "Press Liberalization, the New Media, and the 'Coptic Question': Muslim-Coptic Relations in Egypt in a Changing Media Landscape," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46 (2010): 131.

16. Viola Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, and Nation* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 4.

reflected in film stories and film plots” (17). In fact, the title *Hassan and Morqos* echoes that of an earlier film by Fu’ad al-Gazayirli, *Hassan, Morqos, and Cohen*, which includes a reference to Egypt’s Jewish community, evoked through the character of Cohen.¹⁷ Gazayirli’s film appeared in 1954 when Jews in Egypt were going through a difficult time because of the heightened tension between Egypt and Israel and the Zionist activities in Egypt. The trio depicted in the film—one Jewish, one Coptic, and one Muslim—is supposed to affirm national unity.¹⁸ Cohen is referred to as a *khawaga* (foreigner) even though he is portrayed in traditional Egyptian clothing and in the Jewish quarter of Cairo. This reference reflects the beginning of a trend at the time to dissociate the Jews from the national homeland because of their alleged link with the state of Israel and the Zionist activities in Egypt. Cohen, therefore, disappears from the national unity equation as part of a religious minority, and we are left with only the Muslim and the Christian (Hassan and Morqos).

The Copts have always been part of the national fabric of Egypt; however, as Shafik argues, “the limitations facing the integration of the Coptic element into the ‘national’ Egyptian narrative were nonetheless visible in cinema.”¹⁹ The portrayal of Christian rituals and ceremonies in Egyptian cinema remains very low-key. Up to the late 1960s, the Copts were represented more often than not as part of the national fabric, religious differences were played down, and more emphasis was placed on ethnic, cultural, and linguistic commonalities.²⁰ This trend toward the affirmation of “national unity” through the denial of “difference” has continued on-screen up until recent times, with very few exceptions. Films produced in the 1990s with Coptic characters all emphasized the rhetoric of national unity; these include Khairy

Beshara’s *America Abracadabra*, which follows the story of a group of young Egyptians—trying desperately to obtain visas to migrate to the United States—and how they have been conned and left stranded in a foreign country.²¹ One of these young hopefuls is a Copt, whose religious identity does not surface in the film until the end when he attends the burial of one of his Muslim companions; he is seen crossing himself in his prayers instead of reciting the Koran. The film, therefore, stresses the similarity among these young people in their search for a better life and reduces their difference to the religious rite. Nadir Galal’s *The Terrorist* presents a strong rhetorical case of how Muslims and Copts are united in their struggle against extremism.²² It shows how a militant fundamentalist renounces his extremism after being influenced by the kind ethos of his host, a liberal middle-class family. This family maintains an exemplar relationship with their Coptic neighbor, who in his love for his country is represented as a patriotic figure. In Amali Bahansi’s *The Switch*, the protagonist is a Copt mistaken for a Muslim and taken to a desert camp where he is tortured.²³ His family is seen praying in a church without him. The film again underlines the strong similarity between the Copts and the Muslims and reduces their difference to the religious practice; it shows how both endured the oppressive regime of Sadat.

Censorship rules in Egypt claim to “protect” national unity by declaring that it is prohibited “to cause a stir or to disrupt confessions, classes, or national unity.”²⁴ However, since the killing of twenty-five Copts during the sectarian tensions in the village of Al-Kush in Upper Egypt in early 2000, the Egyptian government has encouraged the production of dramatic works dealing openly with Coptic issues to promote understanding between the communi-

17. *Hassan, Morqos, and Cohen*, directed in Fu’ad al-Gazayirli (1954).

18. See Mahmud Qasim, *Surat al adyan fi-sinnima al-misriya* (Cairo: al-Maekaz al Qawmi li-Sinima, 1997), 244.

19. Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 42.

20. According to Shafik (ibid., 57), Egyptian filmmakers of Christian background also reiterate the discourse on “national unity” by refusing to make reference to their religious affiliation. For example, Khairy

Beshara and Daoud ‘Abd El-Sayed explain their lack of interest in tackling their religious communities’ issues by their dislike of religious fundamentalism in whatever form, Christian or Muslim. Youssef Chahine, an influential Egyptian filmmaker and a Christian, represented religious plurality in some of his films such as *Alexandria, Why?* (1982).

21. *America Abracadabra*, directed by Khairy Beshara (1993).

22. *The Terrorist*, directed by Nadir Galal (1994).

23. *The Switch*, directed by Amali Bahansi (1996).

24. Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1998), 75.

ties.²⁵ However, “the official discussion of the problems of co-existence has not always been welcomed by the members of the Coptic community. They tended to read the film characters allegorically as representatives of the whole Coptic community.”²⁶ Ossama Fawzi’s film *I Love Cinema* (2004) raises the sensitive issue of Christian fundamentalism in Egypt.²⁷ The story focuses on a young man who resists his father’s strict religious principles by going to the cinema, an act the latter sees as “sinful.” Copts criticized the film because of its open depiction of Christian fundamentalism and its alleged disrespect of Christian places of worship (e.g., by showing a couple kissing in a church and a fight during a wedding ceremony). The film highlights that religious dogmatism is shared by both Muslims and Copts. The more recent film *One-Zero* also caused protests among the Coptic community.²⁸ Among other things, the film raises the issue of divorce among Coptic women through the life of one character who cannot obtain a decree nisi because the church does not allow her to remarry.

The Case of *Hassan and Morqos*

Rami Imam’s *Hassan and Morqos* is the first-ever film in Egypt to adopt interreligious tension and bigotry as its main subject. The film centers on the character of a Coptic priest, Boulus (played by Adil Imam), and a Muslim spice trader, Sheikh Mahmoud (played by Sharif), who both find themselves threatened by fanatics in their own respective communities because of their views against extremism. The government decides to protect them in a radical way by giving them and their families new identities: thus the Copt becomes the Muslim Hassan, and the Muslim becomes the Copt Morqos. The film explores the comic situations that emerge out of this religious mix-up while showing the alarming segregation and prejudice between the two communities along religious lines.

The film starts with a conference on national unity which a number of Coptic and

Muslim priests, in their traditional attire, are attending to debate the issue. In the background, several journalists are covering the event; a reporter from a public television channel announces with great enthusiasm how this fifty-first conference marks the mutual friendship between the two religious communities “in the land of the Cross and the Crescent.” However, against the backdrop of the reporter’s triumphalist, politically correct discourse, the mask drops when we overhear expressions of mistrust between the two communities expressed in the private conversations of four delegates, two from either side. The Copts complain of their lack of access to equal rights, their exclusion from senior government posts, and the legal constraints on building and refurbishing churches, whereas the Muslims satirize the idea that the Copts are an oppressed minority by referring to their control of the economy and the private sector. On an official level, we hear the leaders of the two religious communities making grand speeches reiterating the state’s official vision of unity, friendship, and respect between the two communities. They both blame extremists for the religious tension. This scene of empty rhetoric ironically illustrates the chasm between the supposed official thinking on the “dialogue” and friendship between the two communities and what is happening at the grassroots level, that is, the mistrust and prejudice that reign among the populace. Later in the proceedings, it is these same four delegates—who complained earlier about the hypocrisy of the event—who lead the cheering and the clapping with shouts of “Long live the Crescent and the Cross.” Although the film subtly criticizes these sanctimonious gatherings that reinstate the government’s official viewpoint while failing to delve into the real reasons for the Copts’ anger and Muslim hostility, it adopts the official line that sectarian tension is caused by extremist actions on both sides. This explanation conceals the regime’s failed economic, social, and political policies that have destroyed participatory citizenship and created

25. Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 61.

26. *Ibid.*, 60.

27. *I Love Cinema*, directed by Ossama Fawzi (2004).

28. *One Zero*, directed by Kamla Abu Zekry (2009).

greater poverty and competition over scarce resources, especially among the lower classes.

The film stresses the notion of the loyalty and patriotism of the Copts, as Boulus, a priest and professor of theology (known as Hassan in his new identity), condemns Coptic extremists during the conference and even brands them as un-Christian and un-Egyptian, a denunciation that results in attempts on his life. He refuses to bow to pressure to leave for the United States, a clear statement of the patriotism and loyalty of the Copts for their homeland, Egypt. The episodes concerning the attempts on Boulus's life by Coptic extremists are considered "unrealistic" by Coptic critics who argue that Copts never use violence to pursue their political causes in real life. However, what is significant is Boulus's reference to Coptic extremists, mainly those living abroad, who stir up problems and "tarnish" the reputation of Egypt. Again, the film falls into the trap of reiterating the state's and the church's official line on the issue. The official Coptic establishment in Egypt distances itself from the activism of Copts abroad, particularly in the United States, where criticism of the oppression of their communities is used by "Copt publicists and their political allies . . . to justify intervention and criticism of the Egyptian government."²⁹

When the two disguised families move to a mixed religious neighborhood, the fragility of the rhetoric of national unity becomes apparent and the public display of political correctness falls apart. The two communities seem to be clearly divided and segregated along religious lines. The Christians are prepared to rent their apartments only to fellow Christians and the same goes for the Muslims. Alliances between the two communities are based solely on their common religious affiliations. In their disguised religious identities, Morqos and Hassan are witnesses to the mutual bigotry, stereotyping, and mistrust present in their own communities. Even their friendship and affection for each

other is based on the fraudulent belief that they belong to the same religious group. Therefore their friendship and their partnership in business, which was so upsetting for many members of their communities, was itself flawed. The film focuses on human relationships and how they are shaped by religious prejudice, but it ignores how these relationships cannot stand apart from other social, economic, and political factors that are at the root of the problem.

The Politics of Daily Piety

In the film, in a significant scene on the politics of daily "piety" and public religiosity in Egypt, representatives of the Muslim and Coptic communities pay a visit to their supposed religious fellows, Hassan and Morqos—who both live in the same building on the same floor—to "bless" their apartments and their children and to establish the fact of their belonging to their respective communities. The visits take place at the same time, and therefore the camera moves between the black-robed priests with their prayers and incense in one apartment and the white-robed Muslims with their prayers and incense in the other. Camera close-ups in this particular scene show the uncomfortable faces of Hassan, as he is "Islamized," and Morqos, as he is "Christianized." The heavy aroma of the incense and the competing passionate prayers coming from the two apartments attract the attention of the neighbors from the two communities. This religious demarcation, portrayed in a comic way in the film, shows how religion becomes the sole marker of identity and how it is flaunted through religious dress codes and symbols, which polarize and divide mainstream society while denying cultural commonalities between the two communities.

The film invests considerable time covering the trip of Boulus and his family in their new Muslim identity to El Minya, a province in Upper Egypt with a large Christian population and a place associated with religious strife and

29. Smith, "Egyptian Copts," 60. Smith argues that "Official Copt alarm is understandable given the exploitation of this question by evangelical Christians in the US, allied to dissident Copts but also linked occasionally to right-wing pro-Israeli forces in Congress, which seek levers to influence American policy makers against current Arab allies of the US" (61).

conflict.³⁰ Boulus, also known as Sheikh Hassan, is mistaken for an influential religious preacher by the fellahin, or peasants, who welcome him wholeheartedly and even seek to appoint him as the imam of their village mosque. Of interest in this episode is the way that the peasants are satirized, particularly through their daily piety and their search for fatwas, or religious decrees, to govern every aspect of their daily lives. While they are pictured as hospitable and generous in their welcoming of Hassan and his family, they are shown as naive in their basic understanding of religion and piety and superstitious in their absolute belief in the blessing of a “holy” man such as Sheikh Hassan. In other words, while the fellahin are represented as holding the “true” values of Egypt, such as hospitality and generosity, they are still in need of education and enlightenment. This characterization may imply that the “ignorance” of the peasants and their excessive religiosity explain the religious strife in El Minya, but it again glosses over the real issues of poverty and competition over scarce resources in Upper Egypt. Later in the film, when Sheikh Hassan’s host in El Minya coincidentally meets him and his family in a Cairo restaurant dining with Morqos’s family, he is shocked and perplexed to discover that Sheikh Hassan befriends a Copt, an indication of the host’s narrow-mindedness and intolerance. Lila Abu-Lughod in her study of Egyptian television dramas and their depiction of peasants in Upper Egypt refers to the “mischaracterization of rural life” and how “the representation of rural peasants as ignorant and in need of education has a long genealogy in Egyptian political life.”³¹ The rural Copts are spared such a comic take on their daily piety. However, although the Muslim peasants are drawn as “simpleminded” in their understanding of religion and the way it rules their lives, when security forces arrest Sheikh Hassan on suspicion of terrorism, the peasants are shown staging a major protest

using powerful slogans about the injustices of the government.

Whither “National Unity”?

Hassan and Morqos defy their respective communities’ resistance to their friendship and set up a successful business together. For a while, we witness an ideal alliance between the two friends that transcends religion. When the love story between Girgis, Hassan’s son, and Fatma, Morqos’s daughter, is uncovered, the two families are forced to flee the neighborhood for Alexandria, where they share a flat together. Their masked friendship becomes stronger and the difference between them is reduced solely to their religious rites. Here the commonality of the Egyptian lifestyle is emphasized through shared cultural practices of marriage, food, and popular culture. However, their friendship falls apart when they realize their real religious identity. In a crucial scene in the film, the camera moves between the two families still sharing the flat but withdrawn into separate spaces as they reveal their reaction to the discovery of the others’ true religious affiliation. Prejudices are reiterated and national unity and friendship collapse and are replaced by mistrust and fear. It is left to the young people, Fatma and Girgis, to remind their parents of the love and friendship that exists between the two families. In fact, the love story between Fatma and Girgis is the result of the parents’ masking their religious identities, but what is its significance in the film?

Tackling the sensitive and taboo issue of interreligious marriage has always caused huge controversy and is rarely approached in Egyptian cinema.³² The television serial *Awan-Al Ward (Season of Roses)*, which appeared in 2000–2001, caused a stir within the Coptic community because of its depiction of the life of a Christian woman married to a Muslim man in defiance of the pressure of their families. Their daughter, because of her mixed religious background,

30. The violent clashes between the two communities at the end of the film take place in the urban center of Alexandria.

31. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 72, 75.

32. Two previous films have tackled the issue, and in both the “loss” of a Christian woman in such relationships was emphasized. The film plots represent a version that Muslims are fairly comfortable with, and that is marriage between a Muslim man and a Christian woman, a union that is allowed under Islamic law but not the reverse. When the film *Shaykh Hassan* appeared in 1954, it caused a great deal of contro-

versy because it explored the marriage of a Christian woman to a Muslim man, a tragic story that ended unhappily with her death. Another film, *An Encounter There*, based on a love affair between a Muslim man and a Christian woman, was not successful when it came out in 1976, for the characters retreated to their faith under community pressure. For a detailed analysis, see Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 46–47.

faces difficulties finding a husband. Some of the violent clashes that occurred between the two communities in the past were because of the marriage of Coptic women to Muslim men. *Hassan and Morqos* does not push the boundaries of interreligious marriage but conforms to the accepted “national” version, that of coexistence without intermarrying. The film dwells on the interfaith love story between Fatma and Girgis, who nurture their relationship because they think that they both belong to the same faith. However, once their real religious identities are revealed, they leave each other immediately. In parallel with their love story, another develops between their two friends, the Muslim Ahmed with the Coptic Nancy. Girgis is furious at learning that such a love affair exists and reminds Ahmed angrily that this type of relationship will cause problems. Yet Ahmed is confident that nothing is wrong since his religion allows him to marry a Christian woman. This position subtly reveals the legal imbalance that the Copts find themselves in, since Muslim men can marry Coptic women under Islamic law but Muslim women cannot marry Coptic men unless they convert. *Hassan and Morqos*, therefore, reestablishes the religious boundaries after the episode of the cross-religious love affair between the two young protagonists. It affirms the dominant version of national unity and “depicts each religion recovering its ground after the threat of ‘miscegenation,’ and marks out the social borders between the two communities that should be upheld under any circumstances.”³³

In this process of national unity, the role of women, therefore, is kept under strict control as faithful and dutiful wives, mothers, and daughters. Coptic and Muslim women are represented as the maintainers of national unity, but at the same time, they are the ones who define the community boundaries. National unity in *Hassan and Morqos* is led by men, who decide the terms of this unity. Women appear in the film only as objects of “protection,” who can only marry within their own religious group. As Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias argue suc-

cinctly, national discourses promote the control of women’s bodies as reproducers of both ethnic and national groups;³⁴ women are the mothers of the nation charged with transmitting the national cultural heritage. It is women who ensure and maintain the distinction between the nation or the group and its “others,” and hence women’s sexual conduct is closely controlled. Therefore, they are the focus of protection. As Deniz Kandiyoti puts it, “The association of women with the private domain reinforces the merging of the nation/community with the selfless mother/devout wife; the obvious response of coming to her defence and even dying for her is automatically triggered.”³⁵ *Hassan and Morqos* reaffirms that views on women are similar for both the Copts and the Muslims (despite their different family laws), that women are perceived as loyal wives and obedient daughters and not as active agents within the nation.

If national unity in *Hassan and Morqos* does not fully incorporate women’s agency as independent players, it also does not silence Coptic voices and culture.³⁶ It is the first popular film to stress the inclusive difference of the Copts and their religious practices. The film exposes the Copts’ rituals and prayers, places of worship, symbols, and religious use of language—for example, the Copts’ use of “in the name of the Cross,” or *Rab*, instead of Allah, and the use of the cross to bless and protect one another—and other details of Coptic Egyptian cultural practices. Christian symbols are represented positively. The Copts’ places of worship are strongly present in the film, which opens up with a scene of a church (with Bouulus and his son praying inside) and a mosque where Sheikh Mahmoud leads the prayers. This pluralistic representation of national religious diversity is new in popular Egyptian cinema; in fact, the film emphasizes the similarities in religious practices between the Muslim and Coptic communities: their daily piety and their passion for religiosity. The film manages to portray religious differences not as competing or conflicting truths but as cohabiting subcultures of the

33. *Ibid.*, 47.

34. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, eds., *Women–Nation–State* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

35. Deniz Kandiyoti, “Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20 (1991): 434.

36. Coptic religious culture and symbols are rarely shown onscreen. Their “difference” is silenced to keep the rhetoric of national unity. See Shafik, *Popular Egyptian Cinema*, 56.

nation. In other words, “the nation is presented as the framework within which religiocultural difference occurs.”³⁷

The cross-religious love story has already caused clashes between the two communities in Cairo and forced the two families to move to Alexandria, where their real religious identities are discovered. This removal of the mask is followed by the two families witnessing violent clashes between their communities. Again the camera moves equally between the two groups in their exchange of prejudice, this time in the mosque and then in the church, as the religious leaders mobilize the masses to violence. The camera zooms into the church where we hear the Coptic priests fomenting the feeling of anger among the believers by pointing out that Muslims regard Coptic properties and women as lawful bounty and that the Copts must not turn the other cheek till they are strong enough to defend themselves. In a parallel movement, we hear in the imams’ sermons that it is theologically forbidden to have any dealings with the Christians, whose religion is not accepted by Islam. These inflammatory discourses are presented in the film as the cause of the ensuing violence, and, in a way, the real issues of economic, social, and political grievances are glossed over. In the midst of the violence, Boulos (Hassan) saves the wife and daughter of Sheikh Mahmoud (Morqos) from a fire, and both families decide to walk hand in hand through the violence while receiving blows to the face, an allegorical scene that reinstates the theme of national unity despite all the ordeals and violence suffered by the two communities. The film ends not happily but positively, on the hopeful note that national unity will survive its current perils if mutual prejudices and stereotypes can be challenged and better community relations established.

Conclusion

Hassan and Morqos raises the issue of the fragility of national unity and religious cohabitation in contemporary Egypt. The film still clings to the idea that Egypt’s problems—on this occasion, sectarian violence—are caused by irrational extremists who threaten national unity

and not by the state’s failed policies and lack of vision. It seems that even though the Egyptian government encourages cinematic works that openly discuss religious strife in Egypt, it still prefers versions that consolidate its own interpretation of the issue, which is to blame the violence on the “fanatics” of both sides. The film stresses the general trend in Egyptian cinema to represent the “extremists” as “the other” of the nation, the other who threatens its very existence. This position, of course, legitimizes all sorts of oppressive government policies that curtail political dissidence and allow police brutality to go unchecked. In fact, in *Hassan and Morqos* a sympathetic view of the security services and their struggle against “terrorism” is presented.

However, the film highlights a breach in the official discourse of national unity and the deeply ingrained religious and social prejudices. It also underlines the danger of religious segregation and how religion has become the dominant marker of national identity, which further alienates communities and destroys any possibility of civil alliances. The film’s discourse on national unity tends to reiterate stereotypes about women as objects of “protection” and the biological producers of the community’s boundaries; it also adheres to an elitist view of the peasants as simpleminded people whose understanding of religion is naive and superstitious. Yet it freely and positively depicts Coptic religious symbols, places of worship, and culture and makes the space of the nation an inclusive one where religious differences coexist peacefully. The film also stresses the importance of shared Egyptian popular culture.

Moreover, because of the absence of a vibrant civil society that generates debate and communication between various groups of people in society, cinema in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world plays an important role in provoking those debates by raising issues that are then taken up by the national media outlets. *Hassan and Morqos* may be seen as an attempt to create debate and open an exchange of views on the sensitive topic of sectarian strife and mutual religious prejudice. It is important to raise awareness through all channels and institutions

37. Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood*, 179.

that Egyptian society consists of both Muslims and Christians. Said Morqos argues that unless there is a reconstruction of participatory citizenship and civil alliances as part of a political reform and equal citizenship rights are granted to the Copts on a de facto basis, this current abyss will not change.³⁸ S

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