Invisible Armies: Reflections on Egyptian Dreams of War

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In January 2011, people around the world turned their attention to Cairo's Tahrir Square. The news network al-Jazeera quickly became a window onto the square and surrounding streets, and news reporters became eyewitnesses to historical events. Aware of the media spectacle unfolding around them, Egyptian protesters over the following weeks held up signs in Arabic and English and, maybe unknowingly, staged highly photogenic scenes, for instance when Christians formed a human chain to guard Muslims during their prayers, and vice versa. During the first few days of the uprising, the regime shut down cell phone and Internet networks to prevent activists from communicating, but it could not stop their taking pictures and filming with cell phones and cameras. Every moment was carefully recorded, and today multiple initiatives are collecting films, photos, and audio recordings to preserve them in digital archives. In July 2011, activists set up an open-air cinema at Tahrir Square to screen and discuss footage of the protests. Subsequently video materials became crucial pieces of evidence in the courtroom where the former President Mubarak and ex-Interior Minister Adly were being tried. The Egyptian revolution was a highly visible and "mediatized" event. Its history can and has been told in images.

Easily overshadowed by the revolution's hypervisibility is a different genre of history-telling, one that insists on the role of *invisible* actors in historical events. A few videos have been circulating on YouTube that show a ghostly

horseman in the midst of Egyptian protesters.[1] With the exception of such videos (which were widely met with skepticism), generally invisible actors become visible only in dreams and visions. By extension, those unable to see invisible actors come into contact with them through the telling and retelling of dreams and visions. This essay engages with Egyptian dream-narratives as an alternative, non-secular mode of history-telling. While I cannot gauge the specific effects of supernatural actors in historical events, I follow J. L. Austin's (1962) famous dictum that words can do things, and I will consider here what kinds of things dreams do when they are told. What kinds of space for commentary and critique do dream stories enable? What do dream-tellings allow people to say? How do they reconfigure the very grounds of politics? And finally, what are stories of invisible actors expected to do when they are passed on to me, the anthropologist?

In July 2011, an Egyptian engineer told me about his most impressive experience at Tahrir Square: "It was 27 May, a Friday. I was wandering around Tahrir … I came across an Azharite shaykh who was holding a microphone and giving a speech. He said that he dreamt of the Prophet Muhammad three times while sleeping at Tahrir. The first time, right before the *fajr* prayer,[2] he saw the Prophet at Tahrir, shaking hands with everyone. [The shaykh] woke up, took a microphone and told everyone about the dream. The second time when the Prophet appeared he said, 'Be patient.' The third time he [the Prophet] repeated three times: 'Egypt is a blessed country.'" Besides telling me about the shaykh's dreams, the engineer had also written about them on his Facebook page. In his view, the shaykh's dreams offer a unique perspective on the revolution, one that evades photo and video cameras and does not usually find its way into schoolbooks and history books.

Moving between the years 624, 1956, 1973, 2003, and 2011, in this essay I suggest that dream stories tell a history from below, albeit one that does not fully belong to the dreamers. Dream stories are a mode of (re)claiming history while they at the same time highlight the limits of human agency. Instead of emphasizing the historical role of subaltern subjects, dream stories insist on the agency of invisible forces.

With the exception of the Azharite shaykh's dreams at Tahrir Square, all of the dream stories that I retell here are dreams of war. I was first told about them in 2003, at the time of the Iraq war, when many Egyptians were angry at what

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[1] See, for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORihPQ7xU2k&feature=related, and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWQKOj9Sxkg&feature=related (last accessed 15 Dec. 2011). Although some videos of the ghostly horseman have been viewed by over one million people, most of the comments posted on the YouTube website express skepticism, and only a few Egyptians mentioned the horseman to me.

[2] The *fajr* prayer is the first of the five obligatory daily prayers in Sunni Islam. *Fajr* literally means "dawn." Within Islamic traditions of dream interpretation, dawn is often understood as a likely time for seeing divinely inspired dream-visions.

they perceived to be an unjustified military invasion and many expressed a sense of helplessness. The dream stories themselves, however, refer to different wars in which Egyptians fought. They prophetically announce the Egyptians' victory, and could easily be read as a form of false consciousness or hallucinatory wish-fulfillment. Yet such a reading would proceed from, and reinscribe, a secular understanding of history while failing to consider how dream stories alter what "history" itself means. A more engaged reading has to consider how dream stories speak back to our interpretive frameworks, and must grapple with the ways in which stories of invisible armies undo secular assumptions about time, history, subjectivity, and community.

My interlocutors' dream-tellings are not politically effective in any immediately recognizable sense. Only rarely do dreams result in new political parties being founded.[3] Neither are dreams of war usually calls to take up arms. Yet, while they might not generate any visible action, dream stories in speaking differently about history can reorient their tellers' and hearers' understandings of the present and, perhaps unintentionally, pose a challenge to secular modes of history-telling. In this way they are similar to the practices of self-cultivation that Saba Mahmood describes in her ethnography of mosque study groups in Cairo. As Mahmood notes, "One might say that the political agency of the mosque movement (the 'resistance' it poses to secularization) is a contingent and unanticipated consequence of the effects its ethical practices have produced in the social field" (2005: 35).[4] Ethical practices for Mahmood are "those strategies of cultivation through which embodied attachments to historically specific forms of truth come to be forged" (ibid.). In considering the unintended political effects of such practices, she aims to broaden our understanding of both ethics and politics. I build on this approach, but shift the focus from *embodied* to *imaginary* attachments to historically specific forms of truth. The imagination here, significantly, is not the same as fantasy but rather, within the context of certain Islamic traditions, is more akin to a prophetic mode of knowing, a way of seeing beyond the limits of the visible. Dreams and visions are a key mode of such an imagining.

According to Egyptian re-imaginings and retellings of history, the Prophet Muhammad, saints, angels, and other invisible beings can attend, witness, and sometimes even participate in events that unfold in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Secular histories and ethnographies tend to struggle with such invisible actors although they too do not shun the invisible. Much historiography claims to unravel hidden causes and explains the present in light of the past

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[3] A rare example is the small Egyptian party *Hizb al-Umma*, founded in 1983, which, according to its founder Ahmed Sabahi, was inspired by a dream-vision (see Sabahi 2002 on political dreams).
[4] In Saba Mahmood's account, the women's practices run up against what is perceived as the widespread secularization of Egyptian society, as well as against secular analytical frameworks in Western feminist works. While not the same, secularization and the secular converge in shared assumptions about temporality, subjectivity, and history.

that (at least within linear temporalities) by definition evades our gaze. Common accounts of what occurred at Tahrir Square in January 2011 refer to the role of Egyptian youth organizing in the cyberworld—yet another non-material realm. Others in Egypt point out that the overemphasis on youth activists rendered invisible the crucial prehistory of workers' movements. Scholars in the field of subaltern studies have in various ways tried to make audible the silenced and make visible the invisible. The story of the Prophet shaking hands with protesters, however, brings to light a different kind of invisibility. The Prophet is the kind of force that, according to Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), cannot easily be accommodated by secular historicizing approaches, including those proposed within the field of subaltern studies. The reason, in Chakrabarty's view, is that the very idea of historicizing carries with it peculiarly European assumptions about disenchanted space, secular time, and human sovereignty. Secular historiography leaves little space for invisible actors and at best subsumes them by interpreting them as projections, symptoms, or protagonists in "folk stories." Accounts of invisible armies might thus be read as legitimizing devices or coping mechanisms, or as offering insight into psychological traumas caused by war and violence.[5] "Writing about the presence of gods and spirits in the secular language of history or sociology" is for Chakrabarty "like translating into a universal language that which belongs to a field of differences" (ibid.: 76).

How, then, to deal differently with difference or with what Chakrabarty calls the "heterotemporality" of the world? The solution for Chakrabarty is not to reject "modernity" or European thought but instead to write a history that makes visible its own repressive strategies, one that writes "into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it" (ibid.: 43). I suggest that a model for such an alternative, heterotemporal kind of history is presented in the dream stories I was told; in them, secular historiography is not replaced by myth, poetry, or dreams, but rather angels, spirits, and the dead act *in* and *upon* the material world. Following Chakrabarty, I thus consider the convergence of dreamed history and secular history. It is precisely this convergence that calls for a rethinking of the very scope of politics, history, and agency.

In reading dream stories as an alternative form of history-telling, I accordingly do not intend to romanticize them as a mode of resistance.[6] I rather argue that Egyptian dream-tellings *reframe* the very question of agency and resistance by insisting that history is not made and resisted by human actors alone; invisible forces are also at work. Similarly broadened concepts of history and agency

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[5] Sometimes dreams of war are also used as a lens for understanding political conflicts. See, for instance, studies of nightmares and children's dreams in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict (Bilu and Abra-Movitch 1985; Punamaki and Joustie 1998).

[6] For critiques of the romanticizing of resistance by anthropologists, see Abu-Lughod (1999) and Mahmood (2005).

are found in recent anthropological work on ghosts and haunting. In places such as Vietnam (Kwon 2008) and China (Mueggler 2001), ghosts of those who died in wars or through political violence are haunting reminders of a violent past. Ghost stories appeal to justice even after official history has closed its books. They produce an "oppositional practice of time and an alternative mode of history" (ibid.: 9) and highlight the erasures enacted by secular historiography. As such, they are traces of an excess, something that cannot be fully subsumed, something that speaks back to the limits of secular historiography. Ghost stories can be vehicles of historical revisionism (Palmié 2002). In Vietnam people build shrines for the ghosts of war and perform rituals to keep alive the memories of their ancestors and modes of history-telling that run counter to official narratives (Kwon 2006; 2008). In Egypt, as we will see, alternative histories are kept alive through dream-tellings.

Avery Gordon (1997), in her book *Ghostly Matters*, calls for a post-positivist approach to social life that attends to its ghostly aspects, hauntings, gaps, exclusions, oversights, and absences. She asks what it would mean to be "writing with the ghosts any haunting inevitably throws up," or "to be haunted and write from that location" (ibid.: 7, 22). Similarly, in making the dream stories I gathered speak to Mahmood's call for a widened understanding of ethics and politics, as well as to Chakrabarty's provocative question about the (im)possibility of writing non-secular historiographies, I ask what it would mean to write with the invisible presences that are re-presented in dream-tellings but are never fully accessible to the anthropologist as observer. What would it mean to (re)tell history through dreams?

INVISIBLE ARMIES ACROSS SPACE AND TIME

Writes a U.S. Marine on his blog: "An angel flight is the saddest way to end our time in Iraq because 'angel flight' means that the plane is carrying a 'fallen angel'—a young man or woman who has died and is going home."[7] In army jargon, dead soldiers are angels. They are fallen not in the sense of being banished from heaven, but in a more literal, this-worldly sense: they have died in the war. Stories told in many other geographical and historical contexts, by contrast, revolve not around soldiers as angels but around angels as soldiers. Spectral combats were reported in Italy in 1517 (Niccoli 1990: 61–88), and at the outset of World War I an angelic army reportedly came to the aid of British forces against the Germans in Mons, Belgium (Clarke 2001). The Virgin Mary, too, has often interfered in times of war and political conflict. In places ranging from Bayside in New York to Medjurgoje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Virgin has appeared to believers with political messages, for instance asking three peasant children in Fatima, Portugal in 1917 to pray

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[7] http://www.onemarinesview.com/one_marines_view/2006/12/angel_flight.html (last accessed 15 Dec. 2011).

for the conversion of Russia.[8] More recently, George W. Bush evoked divine inspiration in explaining that God had told him to "fight these terrorists in Afghanistan" and to "end the tyranny in Iraq."[9] The so-called "terrorists in Afghanistan" had themselves been claiming heavenly guidance: Mullah Omar supposedly founded the Taliban movement following a dream in which "God had commanded him to restore order" (Edgar 2004: 22). Last but not least, talk of "spiritual warfare" abounds in (Neo)Pentecostal movements (e.g., O'Neill 2009). Metaphysical and military languages seem to blend around the globe.

In Egypt, too, spectral beings have interfered in national and regional conflicts. The Virgin's apparition in the Cairo neighborhood of Zeitoun in 1968 was quickly interpreted as a politically significant event. Many held that because Egypt's defeat in 1967 prevented Copts from performing the Holy Week pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the Virgin had come to them instead (Nelson 1974). The Coptic Pope Kyrillos VI publicly announced that the apparition was "a harbinger of peace and speedy victory … the salvage of the Holy Land and the entire Arab land from the hands of the enemy (Hoffman 1997: 57). In October 2011, the Virgin Mary was sighted in Cairo and Alexandria, shortly after the Maspero events in which members of the Egyptian army had killed more than twenty Coptic protesters.[10] While apparitions of the Virgin form a central aspect of Coptic encounters with the invisible, in Muslim contexts dreams and visions are the main form of such engagement. Drawing on Islamic traditions of dream interpretation, Egyptians from a wide range of backgrounds understand certain dreams to offer a way of seeing beyond the visible.[11]

The Azharite shaykh at Tahrir Square most likely felt compelled to share his dreams because he understood them to be a *bushrā*, a glad tiding. The Prophet Muhammad's presence in the dreams marks them as dream-visions, *ru'ā* (sing. *ru'yā*), divinely inspired dreams.[12] Distinct from both devil-inspired

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[8] Apparitions of the Virgin Mary have been reported throughout (and beyond) Catholic Europe from at least the fourteenth century to the present (e.g., Apolito 2005; Christian 1999; Claverie 1991; McGreevy 2000; Scheer 2006; Wojcik 1996). On apparitions of the Virgin Mary during the Cold War in particular, see Christian (1984) and Scheer (2011).

[9] Bush made this announcement during a meeting with Palestinian leaders in June 2003. He spoke of a larger mission of "bringing peace" to the Middle East. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/oct/07/iraq.usa (last accessed 15 Dec. 2011).

[10] On the recent apparitions, see, for example: http://theorthodoxchurch.info/main/?p=5401 and http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/507542 (last accessed 15 Dec. 2011).

[11] On the history of Muslim dream interpretation, see, for example, Fahd (1966), Kinberg (1994), Lamoreaux (2002), and Schimmel (1998). On dream interpretation in contemporary Egypt, see Mittermaier (2011). Since dreams can come from three different origins—the self, the devil, or God—categorizing them is an important part of the interpretation process. When seeking help with categorizing and interpreting dreams, dreamers rely on dream manuals, family members, shaykhs, and dream interpreters.

[12] A widely cited hadith (prophetic saying) assures believers that dreams of the Prophet are always true dreams: "Abu Huraira narrates that the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: 'Whoever has seen me in a dream, has in fact seen me, for Satan does not take my form'" (Sahih Muslim,

dreams and dreams that merely reflect the dreamer's wishes and worries, the Islamic tradition conceptualizes the dream-vision as a divine message, one that might be intended for the dreamer, or for others. The dream-vision, tells one prophetic saying, is the only form of glad tiding to remain after the Prophet's death.[13] Muslim dream models hold that the dreamer's spirit (*rūh*) separates itself from the body during times of sleep.[14] The spirit is temporarily freed, and it is freed from the constraints of linear temporality. It can wander future worlds (*mustaqbaliyyāt*) and can mingle with the spirits of the dead who dwell in the *barzakh* and are cognizant of the future.[15] Certain kinds of dreams therefore offer a glimpse of what the future will hold, but dreams can also show how the spirits of people who lived in the past are affecting the present. According to the shaykh's dreams, the Prophet Muhammad, who died in 632, was able to witness the events unfolding in Cairo in 2011, and even to shake hands with all the protesters. For the Azharite shaykh and the engineer who retold the shaykh's dreams, the events at Tahrir Square are radically resignified by the Prophet's presence. By way of dreams, the Prophet speaks to concerns of the here and now, and by reassuring the dreamer, he speaks to concerns about the future.

Myths, saints' biographies, Qur'anic narratives, and miracle stories have similar effects in that they reposition worldly events within a metaphysical framework and rupture linear temporalities. What is particular about the dream as genre is that dreams are accessible to everyone, if not as an experience then at least as a mode of story-telling, and that they tend to be fully engaged with the present. Dreams can more easily shed light on current political events than can Qur'anic verses or anecdotes about the Prophet Muhammad's life, which need to be *made* to speak to concerns of the twenty-first century by way of analogical reasoning. In dreams, the Prophet and other invisible actors directly address the present. Dreams offer a democratic and flexible genre of history-telling.

Which dreams are told, and when, how, and to whom, and what kinds of effects are expected, always depend on the audience, whether it is composed of

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4:5635). Instead of the term "true dreams," I use the term "dream-vision" throughout this essay to indicate that for those I spoke to in Egypt there is no clear line between truthful dreams and waking visions.

[13] For example, Sahih Bukhari, 87:119.

[14] The belief in a temporary separation of body and spirit draws on a Qur'anic verse which states, "It is Allah that takes the souls (*al-anfus*) at death, and those that die not (He takes) during their sleep; those on whom He has passed the decree of death, He keeps back (from returning to life) but the rest He sends (to their bodies) for a term appointed verily in this are Signs for those who reflect" (39:42, Yusuf Ali's translation). Whereas some scholars distinguish between *nafs* (self) and *rūh* (spirit), those I spoke with generally agreed that this Qur'anic verse refers to the spirit.

[15] *Barzakh* is the space in which the dead dwell until Judgment Day. More broadly, the term refers to an in-between space and has been used by anthropologists such as Stefania Pandolfo (1997; 2007) and Vincent Crapanzano (2003) to draw attention to the in-between and the emergent.

immediate listeners or imagined future readers. In Egypt, dream-visions are told in the privacy of homes, in conversations between friends and neighbors, in mosques and saint shrines, to dream interpreters, occasionally in psychologists' offices, and sometimes also in larger public contexts. All dreams retold in this essay were or had been told by Egyptians to Egyptians, but all of them were also told to me, a German-Egyptian anthropologist who was at the time a doctoral student in New York planning to write a dissertation for a vaguely conceived "American" audience. The dreams were given to me as gifts, sometimes with hesitation, at other times with a sense of urgency. Occasionally the tellers expressed the hope that their dream stories might alter Western perceptions of Islam, or give my readers a taste of spiritual insights. At the same time, many of their dreams also comment on concrete historical events, and it is their reframing of history that is my focus here.

In what follows I rely on the stories of just a few dreamers, but my reading draws on long-term fieldwork and conversations with a broad range of Egyptians.[16] During my fieldwork I heard many stories of invisible armies, usually comprised of the Prophet Muhammad, saints, angels, and the dead. Often these armies were literally referred to as *gunūd la tura* ("armies unseen").[17] When asked whether they become perceptible on the battlefield, some explained that the saints and angels take on human form; others said that most people would only be able to feel, not see, their presence; still others emphasized that invisible armies are usually perceptible only in dreams. Ultimately, I was told, the difference between seeing spectral armies while awake and while asleep is a matter of degrees, not of truth.

In an attempt to let the dream-genre inflect my own narrative and rupture habituated expectations about the unfolding of time, I begin with stories of futures imagined in the past, then move through the present of my fieldwork, and then recount a story from the Islamic tradition. Toward the end of the essay I revisit the current present, a time of political upheaval in the Middle East. In the view of those who shared their dreams with me, past, present, and future are never fully separated. They merge, inflect, and alter each other—along with the very meaning of history.

THE SUEZ WAR: "PEOPLE IN THE SKY"

Al-Hagga Mona was seventy-six-years old when I met her in 2003. Born in Isma'iliyya in northern Egypt, she had moved many times before she finally settled in a small town near Safaga on the Red Sea coast. Later the town's

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[16] During my fieldwork in Egypt I worked with dream interpreters and their clients, Sufi shaykhs and their followers, psychologists, psychoanalysts, intellectuals, and many laypeople.

[17] This phrase is in Modern Standard Arabic. Many people I worked with switched from colloquial Egyptian to Modern Standard Arabic when describing in general terms the nature of dream-visions or the art of dream interpretation.

entire population was forced to move elsewhere when the local phosphate factory was shut down. In her "new village," al-Hagga Mona told me, everything is different: people do not ask about one another, and there are no more dreams (*mafīsh ahlām*), or at least she no longer remembers her dreams. Yet dreams have not become an object of nostalgic memories for her; they live on in her stories. A family friend who lives about a two-hour drive away from al-Hagga Mona took me to her since she was known to be a gifted dreamer and dream-teller. After a brief chat about life in Germany and Egypt, we quickly shifted from waking life to the topic of dreams, and Al-Hagga Mona drew on her rich dream repertoire to tell me story after story. Though these stories offered a commentary on history, they also reconfigured the very meaning of history.

In another dream-vision I went to the sea. I'm going to the sea by myself. I found boats, two, they're white. The fish in them are white, and the people are all wearing white clothes. I said to them: "Are these your boats?" They said, "Yes." I said to them: "God willing you shall be victorious." And they're filled with white fish, like silver. This happened before [the war of] Port Said. I said to them "*in shā' Allāh*, God willing, God will render you victorious because you're all wearing white, and your fish are white, and your boats are white. God willing." I left them and I found two boats, these boats are black. The fish in them are black. And I say: "May God protect us from you." And I did this … [She faces her palm toward us in a gesture of rejection, of warding off evil.] Even just from how they look, God will not let them win. Right after that [the war of] Port Said happened. The white boats, the white fish, belong to Port Said. Because in the war of Port Said the pious *awliyā'* [Muslim saints] of God were fighting.[18] It wasn't the army that was fighting. There were people in the sky with swords. If you went to visit [the saints] Shaykh Rabbāh or Shaykh Abū al-Hasan [al-Shādhilī] during that time, no one was in their tombs. There wasn't anyone. All of them were fighting with their swords. Those that were resisting the Israelis, British, and French who descended from their planes to slaughter the Egyptians on the ground, were the men of God, the *awliyā'* of God. People will tell you that there were people in the sky with white clothes. This is what saved them in the war of Port Said. Do you understand? It was an evil attack, very evil. This is the *baraka* of the Prophet.[19] O God, protect us! And make them victorious, o God! Let the Iraqis be victorious, and Palestine! You see? The attackers were from those black boats. They lost. The white fish belong to Port Said.

Al-Hagga Mona leaned back in her chair to catch her breath before continuing to tell us about different wars, soldiers, and invisible armies. The stories rolled from her lips as if she was dreaming the dreams even as she spoke. Although she was bringing her dreams back to life by narrating them,

[18] The *awliyā'* of God are those close to God, favored by God. The term usually refers to the Prophet Muhammad's saintly descendants. While *awliyā'* is frequently translated as "saints," the term's Christian connotations render this problematic. Saints in the Christian context are canonized by the church, but no similar process of formal recognition exists in Muslim Sunni contexts. Despite these differences, for the sake of readability I use *awliyā'* and saints interchangeably.

[19] *Baraka* refers to a special blessing power, attached to people, objects, or places. Both Muslims and Copts use this term.

the dream about the black and white boats had occurred in the past and referred to an event that had taken place forty-seven years before. While situated in the past, the dream foreshadows multiple futures: the outcome of the Suez War (uncertain at the time of the dream but known when she told it to me) and a future yet to be, namely that of Iraq and Palestine.

History books tell us that in 1956 Egypt fought against Israel, Britain, and France over the control of traffic passing through the Suez Canal, which President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser had just nationalized. The Egyptians quickly and unexpectedly won the war, and the president's popularity rose tremendously as a result. But was he really to credit for the victory? Al-Hagga Mona offered an alternative explanation, of which I was to hear many more versions over the course of my fieldwork: the Egyptians were able to prevail because the sky over Port Said was crowded with not only foreign planes but also armies of saints and angels supporting the Egyptian soldiers.

In looking at the white fishermen, al-Hagga Mona is reassured that, God willing, they shall win. Her explanation seems to draw on the symbolic force of the color white. *Because* they are wearing white, God will render the white fishermen victorious, and "even just from how they look," God will not let the black fishermen triumph.[20] Yet the white and black characters are more than symbols; they are not contained within the dream. The slippage in the narrative between the "people [who] were all wearing white clothes" that al-Hagga Mona stumbled upon at the coast and the "people in the sky with white clothes" witnessed over Port Said is no coincidence. While temporally and spatially deferred, al-Hagga Mona partakes through her dream-vision in a collective vision that renders visible the saintly armies during the war itself. The white men in the dream-vision *were* the *awliyā'* just as the foreign attackers "were from those black boats."

Through her dream, al-Hagga Mona narrates a history in which the otherworldly merges with, and disrupts, the this-worldly, one in which acts of injustice and violence are witnessed not only by soldiers and civilians but also by angels, saints, and spectators who are physically absent, such as herself. Far from simply reversing the terms of victory, for instance by proclaiming victorious the Iraqis instead of the U.S. troops, her dream stories reframe the scope of history. By telling her dreams, al-Hagga Mona invites those listening to her (or reading her dream stories later) to re-imagine history along with her, to envision saintly armies fighting in wars, and perhaps also to feel a sense of hope when thinking about Iraq, Palestine, or other places where people suffer violence, whether in the past, present, or future.

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[20]   The Islamic tradition of dream interpretation distinguishes between transparent dream-visions that require no interpretation and symbolic ones that must be decoded. Most dreams I refer to in this essay are understood to be transparent.

THE OCTOBER WAR: SPACES OF HOPE

Al-Hagga Mona took a sip from her tea and continued:

In the war of '73 I dreamed that I went to the frontline. I found the whole army wearing green. They aren't wearing those khaki clothes but green velvet.… I said, "By God, bless the Prophet, such beautiful clothes, what's that? By God, bless the Prophet, you and your green velvet clothes." I went a little bit farther, and I found my son Muhammad who is in the army; he was in the intelligence service for seven years. I looked and found him. "What's that, Muhammad? You here?" And with him were tanks and all that, "By God, bless the Prophet.… You're also wearing green velvet clothes?" He said, "Yes, mom, we're all wearing green." I woke up and I said to them—what did I say to them? "I saw a dream-vision. God will make us victorious, God will make us win." They asked: "Why?" I said to them: "At the frontline all are wearing green velvet clothes, God willing we will win. Even my son Muhammad is with them in the dream-vision." This was in 1973, before the war ended. My son Muhammad came home during his vacation, in the middle of [the month of] Shaʿbān.… I said: "I dreamed a dream for you all, Muhammad, all of you are wearing green velvet clothes.…" He said, "Mom, you made me very happy. May God make it turn out well." I said to him, "God willing it will be good."

History books refer to the 1973 war as the "October War" or "Yom Kippur War." Israel fought a number of Arab states, with Syria and Egypt at their fore-front, and Egypt was able to reclaim the Sinai, which Israel had occupied since 1967. The Egyptians quickly claimed victory, but Israeli forces subsequently almost reached Cairo and were halted only by United Nations intervention. Dis-agreement remains as to who won the war.

Al-Hagga Mona dreamed her dream before the war ended. This dream was not for her but rather for her son and his companions in the army. Her dream was to assure the soldiers of their impeding victory. As in the previous example, the soldiers could have also relied on more publicly available signs. Again, al-Hagga Mona's prophetic dream coincides with a collective vision. As Egyptian soldiers crossed the Suez Canal in 1973 eyewitnesses reported seeing angels and even the Prophet Muhammad above the soldiers' heads (Hoffman 1997). Their presence, like al-Hagga Mona's symbolic dream, foreshadowed (and caused?) the Egyptians' victory. Invisible armies supported the Egyptians in 1956 and 1973, and at the time of our conversation in 2003, they were supporting the Iraqis and Palestinians. Or at least al-Hagga Mona hoped so.

In current political discourse (particularly in the Obama era) hope is argu-ably an overused term. Yet, as Vincent Crapanzano (2003) observes, the social and psychological sciences have given it relatively little attention. He attributes this disinterest to the passivity and resignation that are associated with hope and which run counter to "today's aggressive individualism [and] consumerism that cultivates an instant gratification that is at odds with the waiting-time of hope" (ibid.: 99). But whereas the not-yet of secular hope seems fully in line with the premises of linear temporality, in al-Hagga Mona's stories futurality carries a

different weight. In them, the future *is* and *will be*. As a number of Egyptians pointed out to me, foreseeing is different from expecting. We might *expect* things as a result of what we read in newspapers; based on the information we receive we form ideas about what the future will hold, and these predictions might be right or wrong. Through dream-visions, by contrast, one gains an actual glimpse of the future. Dream-visions do not merely predict future events; future events also *enact* dream-visions. Muslim literatures on the nature of dream-visions illuminate the blurred line between present and future, anticipation and prophecy, dream-dreamt and dream-coming-true. One of the many dream manuals sold on Cairo's streets explains that a dream-vision happens in three stages: (1) it is on the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawh al-mahfūz*) on which all fate is inscribed; (2) it appears on the "mirror of the dreamer's mind"; and (3) it occurs in the "world of real life" (Attār 1992: 5). This three-stage model exceeds an exclusively linear trajectory; it suggests that dream-visions are embedded within multiple temporalities. They are time-less—inscribed on the Preserved Tablet—and occur at particular moments: the moment when they are dreamed and the moment when they come true. Precisely because dream-visions imply a future that *will be* and that simultaneously *always already is*, they offer a space of hope that exceeds mere wishful thinking. Al-Hagga Mona's stories invite their listeners to enter into this space.

Whereas in many dream cultures dreams can create despair just as easily as they create hope, the threefold categorization of dreams in Muslim traditions of dream interpretation largely prevents this possibility. That is, dreams from which one awakens feeling frightened or uneasy are most likely devil-induced or reflect the dreamer's worries and concerns. Such dreams offer no guidance and in fact should not even be told. Dreams from which one awakens feeling happy and relaxed are likely to be dream-visions. Thus, although some dreams can be warning signs, in Egypt dream-visions generally do not create despair but guide the dreamer into the future and offer a different perspective on the present.

Yet even though dream-visions prophetically announce the future, the future is not set in stone. I will address the issue of unfulfilled hopes and failed prophecies presently; here I simply want to underscore that al-Hagga Mona's narrative does not presume a fixed future. In her words, "God willing" the Egyptians will prevail, and her son calls upon God to "make it turn out well." The future is prophetically announced but still remains out of reach. Thus, the dream-telling, similar to the genre of prayer, is ultimately an act and expression of faith, one that recognizes God's power but that also acknowledges that this power exceeds human knowledge and cannot be petitioned or controlled.[21] Whether intended as such by al-Hagga Mona or not,

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[21] The obligatory Muslim prayer (*salāt*) is not usually understood as an invocation but rather as an act of praise and remembrance (*dhikr*). Nevertheless, even the obligatory prayer allows for the

her stories rupture the premises of secular, linear, "man-made" history by acknowledging God's power, by speaking of saints from the past who are keeping an eye on wars unfolding in the present, by referring to angels who link the present to an eschatological future, and by evoking a future which occurs not simply *after* the present but is also *inherent* in it. The stories offer an alternative perspective on well-known historical events while at the same time insisting on the limits of human agency and understanding.

THE IRAQ WAR: DREAM AS CRITIQUE

When I arrived in Cairo in January 2003 to begin my fieldwork, war was not on my research agenda. I had come to study Egyptian dream-tellings, concepts of the imagination, and practices of dream interpretation. Yet despite G. W. Bush's premature declaration five months later that the U.S. mission had been accomplished, and despite the 800-mile distance that separates Cairo from Baghdad, the Iraq war was to overshadow my fieldwork from beginning to end. It was present in newspapers, on television, in Friday sermons, in politicians' speeches, and in cab conversations. It was on everybody's mind. Journalists, intellectuals, and religious scholars warned that Egypt's citizens needed to wake up and pay vigilant attention to the political developments in the region. Despite these insistent wake-up calls, the Iraq war stopped neither dreaming nor the telling of dreams. Over the course of my fieldwork I heard numerous dream stories—often haunting and compelling—that directly or indirectly commented on what was happening in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A Sufi shaykh in Upper Egypt characterized the war in Iraq as a battle between materialism and spiritualism. He explained that "the Americans" had the advantage of a stronger army and better technology but were disadvantaged by their lack of faith. What they did not know, he continued, was that the Iraqis were not fighting alone. As in 1956 and 1973, God had sent armies of angels who were joined by the spirits of *awliyā'*. Particularly present among the Iraqi soldiers were saints originally from the area, such as the eighth-century scholar Hasan al-Basrī, from Basra, Iraq. But the shaykh also insisted that even saints buried in other countries were so appalled by the injustice being done to the Iraqis that they had left their tombs and traveled to Iraq to join the resistance fight. One potential effect of such stories is to remind listeners (both in Egypt and, by way of my retelling, elsewhere) that the Iraqis were not alone. Stories of invisible armies do not always assure a positive outcome but they do transcend the grim empirical reality unfolding on the ground by emphasizing that no injustice goes unnoticed.

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believer's communication with God, and non-obligatory Islamic supplications (*du'ā'*) more directly implore God for protection, healing, or help in other-worldly matters.

Those hearing dream stories become witnesses by way of listening. Those telling them usually insist that they witnessed also by way of seeing, even while physically removed from the event. The follower of a Sufi shaykh in Cairo recorded the following dream experience: "In the days of the Iraq war: As if I were at the battle front and Sidi Salah [the shaykh] were taking orders from our lord, the Prophet of God, may God's prayers be upon him, and we were executing [these orders]. We were bringing the Iraqis to their houses, and our job was to protect the poor of Iraq [and to make sure they remained] unhurt."[22]

This account refers to a dream or vision—the two are not clearly distinguished within this particular community—and describes how the Prophet Muhammad, the shaykh, and his followers, though not physically present in Iraq, were nonetheless able to protect Iraqi civilians.[23] It is telling that the "as if" clause merges into a past-tense clause in the narrative. While this slippage is common also in dream-tellings in other linguistic contexts where the dream-content nevertheless remains framed as a purely mental event, here the narrative refers to both a visionary experience *and* a real event. The imagined and the real are not dichotomously opposed.[24] Far from being an escape from reality, the imagination allows dreamers to see that, although the Prophet Muhammad died in the seventh century, he is still present in world-history, just as the Virgin Mary is in contemporary Catholic and Coptic contexts. Conversely, Sidi Salah and his followers might physically be in Cairo while their spirits travel to Iraq. Ordinary limitations of space and time are transcended in dreams and visions, but can also be overcome in waking life by those who are spiritually advanced enough. A number of Sufis told me that a true sign of spiritual advancement is the ability to physically be in two places as once. Yet the brief vision-narrative told by Sidi Salah's follower is not intended to simply highlight spiritual strength; it also reminds listeners or readers that, even when physically elsewhere, they too are connected to and morally responsible for the Iraqis' well-being.

The dream story about the Iraq war is preserved in a collectively authored Book of Visions.[25] It is atypical in its hint at the possibility that the shaykh's

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[22] This account is recorded in the group's Book of Visions (see note 25).

[23] Sidi Salah's full name is Shaykh Salah al-Din al-Qusi. He is a charismatic shaykh from Upper Egypt who studied and worked abroad for many years and eventually, after he received a spiritual calling, founded a group in Egypt called *al-ashrāf al-mahdiyya*. He passed away in 2006 but his followers continue on his spiritual path.

[24] Sufi thinkers such as Ibn al-'Arabī wrote, "When God wants meaning to descend to sense perception, it has to pass through the Presence of the Imagination" (Chittick 1994: 75). Some contemporary believers echo such conceptions, dissociating the imagination from fantasy and aligning it with prophecy.

[25] The Book of Visions is an unpublished collection of dream and visions narratives that the shaykh's followers have been collecting over many years. I discuss the nature and content of this book in more detail in an article on prophecy, poetry, dreams, and revelation (Mittermaier 2007).

followers might have *physically* intervened in a war occurring far away. Yet, even when invisible armies seem to have little impact on "history" in the conventional sense, stories about them still offer a twofold critique. First, they allow people to criticize the violence inflicted as a result of international military interventions. In one of her dreams, al-Hagga Mona speaks of the foreign troops that "descended from their planes to slaughter the Egyptians on the ground," and Sidi Salah's followers speak of the need to protect "the poor of Iraq." In drawing attention to violence that is inflicted in wars, dream-tellings appeal to justice, if not this-worldly then other-worldly. While the prospect of Judgment Day looms large in many other religious contexts, the dream stories I collected are distinctive in that they focus not on individual salvation or condemnation but rather tie questions of justice to the historical fate of entire nation-states by speaking of a "blessed Egypt" and Iraqi civilians.

Yet, in my reading of these dreams, they are also critical in a broader sense. They not only express disapproval but also constitute "an art and attitude that interrogates the limits of what is knowable" (Butler and Connolly 2000: 40).[26] As Johannes Fabian puts it, "A truly radical critique needs to address the very concept of rationality, especially the built in tendency of that concept to present itself as outside and above historical contexts" (2000: 4). Dream stories point toward a different mode of knowing, one that relies not on rationality or the senses but instead on the imagination and divine inspiration. Like ghost stories elsewhere, these dream-tellings push beyond the "realm of plausibilities constituted by academic historiographic consensus" (Palmié 2002: 9). They remind the dreamers and listeners alike that human beings are continuously surrounded by both visible and invisible Others and that the present is sealed off from neither past nor future. By highlighting intertwinements between this-worldly and other-worldly temporalities, they comment on the human condition of "being-with" Others (Butler 2005), a being-with that exceeds not only the boundaries of the nation-state but also those of the visible social world, including the lines separating the dead from the living. The stories thus expand "what might be contained within the rubric 'history' beyond deliberate, reflective, autonomous thought and language" (Lambek 2003: 4) and beyond the empirically observable material world.[27] Recognizing the "poetical dimensions of history," as Michael

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[26] See *Is Critique Secular?* (Asad et al. 2009), a recent collection of essays that probes the presumed secularism of critique. In my work I am especially interested in the critical effects of religious imaginations that are not rooted in an autonomous subject and that complicate the line between the "real" and the "imagined" (see Mittermaier 2011).

[27] The quote stems from Lambek's study of modes of historicity in Mahajanga, Madagascar (2003). He extends the meaning of history beyond the realm of autonomous thought by highlighting the bearing of history, history as a craft and embodied ethical practice. My focus is not on *embodied* histories but instead on *dreamed* histories. Importantly, for my interlocutors, the imagined is not opposed to the "real" but rather is closely related to a prophetic mode of perception. As a result, their dream stories, too, expand the meaning of history.

Lambek notes, "does not require conceptualizing it in terms of the mythical, the irrational, the non-empirical, or the unreal" (ibid.: 57). Rather, it means tracing the horizons of the thinkable that emerge from alternative modes of history-telling.

One of the things stories of invisible armies make thinkable is that community and belonging can exceed the observable world. Dreams and visions, and their tellings, embed dreamers and listeners in larger webs of significance, woven by futures yet to be but already foreshadowed, and histories already past but still accessible, and sometimes even transformable, through the imagination. They extend the scope of human agency (e.g., by insisting that even when physically in Egypt, Sidi Salah's followers can help Iraqi civilians) and at the same time acknowledge its limits (by pointing out that these followers act not out of free will but by the Prophet Muhammad's orders). By broadening the meaning of community, belonging, and agency, the act of telling, retelling, writing, or listening to dream stories carries political weight. Dreams might not always offer insight into what the future will hold by correctly predicting who will win which wars, but they do comment critically on the present. In the space of dream-tellings, al-Hagga Mona and Sidi Salah's followers call upon justice and share testimonies. In passing on their stories to me, and to my readers, they (perhaps unknowingly) extend the invitation to us to consider what it might mean to think about politics and history also in non-secular terms—to write history with ghosts, spirits, and the dead.

THE BATTLE OF BADR: CONVERGING HISTORIES

When Egyptians dreamed of fighting in Iraq in 2003, and when they sighted angels above soldiers' heads in 1973, their dreams and visions spoke of hopes and foreshadowed futures, but they also brought the past into the present. Imaginations of present and future do not come out of nowhere but instead draw on existing traditions. Whereas Qur'anic evidentiary protocols are fundamentally important in many Muslim communities, dream-visions are special in that they are in their very nature related to the Qur'an. Dream-visions in the eyes of my interlocutors can provide insight into *al-ghayb*, the Unknown, and thus the visions themselves partake in prophecy. Conversely, the Qur'an and hadith affirm the dream-vision's prophetic potential and its role in history.[28]

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[28] In the Qur'an dream-visions are closely linked to prophecy and revelation. For instance, the Prophet saw that he would conquer Mecca long before this occurred. After the conquest the Qur'anic verse was revealed: "Allah has fulfilled the vision of His Messenger in very truth" (48:27). Aisha, the Prophet's wife, narrates in a hadith: "The commencement of the Divine Inspiration to Allah's Apostle [Muhammad] was in the form of good righteous (true) dreams in his sleep. He never had a dream but that it came true like bright day light" (Sahih Bukhari 87:111). Other hadiths confirm that ordinary believers can partake in prophecy through dream-visions, beyond the Prophet's death. To this effect, two prophetic hadiths are frequently cited. One holds,

A key Qur'anic reference point for contemporary stories of invisible armies is the Battle of Badr, the first great Muslim military victory in 624 CE that helped to establish Islam on the Arabian Peninsula. As reported in the Qur'an (3:123f.), only three hundred Muslims defeated about one thousand Meccans in the battle. This was possible, according to the Qur'an and people's frequent retellings of the story, because the Muslims did not fight alone; they were supported by thousands of angels, who in turn were led by the archangel Gabriel. Sufis furthermore told me that in the Battle of Badr the souls of all believers were fighting—believers from the beginning to the end of time. The battle is interpreted as a highly spiritual event, one at once situated in and outside of time. It was recalled, retold, and relived every time my interlocutors spoke of saintly and angelic armies. By aligning wars of the twentieth century with the Battle of Badr, or by suggesting a spiritual connection between different wars, people re-signify the present. As Stephan Palmié (2002: 6) remarks, "The act of establishing relations between past and present [is] a moral endeavor." Significantly, it is not only ordinary Egyptians who evoke the memory of Badr when they speak of the invisible armies that they witnessed in dreams or sighted over soldiers' heads; President Anwar Sadat did the same when he gave the 1973 operation the code name Badr.

When Egyptians in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries speak of their encounters with or sightings of invisible armies, they echo the story of Badr. The Qur'anic story offers a model, a paradigm that forms part of a wider web of intertextual references out of which present-day narratives are woven. This does not mean that Egyptians simply copy such stories or invent their own. Yet the Qur'anic story opens up possibilities for story-telling (and maybe also for *seeing* things like invisible armies, a question that exceeds the scope of this essay). Instead of trying to fit dream and vision narratives into linear models of causality, we might then try to understand them in relation to the evidentiary protocols arising from *other* histories—in this context Qur'anic ones—that speak not only of other pasts but that also "create modes of apprehending [other] futures" (Munn 1992: 115). Different genres of story-telling offer different modes for imagining, inhabiting, and *re-imagining* history. Other dream stories that I heard in Egypt did not simply recount the story of the Battle of Badr, but also actively reconfigured it. Just as the Prophet Muhammad who died in the seventh century can be involved in wars occurring in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, contemporary believers can partake in wars that occurred during the Prophet's lifetime. Neither the future nor the past is unchangeable. Another follower of Sidi Salah recalled the following dream: "I saw something good in my sleep. [It was] the

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"Dreams are one out of forty-six parts of Prophecy," and the other, "Nothing remains of the beginnings of Prophethood except true good dreams" (Sahih Bukhari 87:117, 119).

era of the Battle of Badr. The Prophet of God, may God's prayers be upon him, was between the lines of [his] companions. He directed them with strength and resoluteness, and I found between the lines our lord [Sidi] Salah…. The Prophet of God, may God's prayers be with him, had given him his sword, and our lord [Sidi] Salah received it. Then the Prophet of God permitted him to join the battle." Sidi Salah's followers learn via their dreams that while asleep in Cairo they can be fighting in places far away (Iraq), as well as in battles that occurred centuries ago (the Battle of Badr). Whether prophetically pointing forward into the future or inserting present-day actors into events long past, dream and vision narratives tell a history that exceeds a linear unfolding of events.

Again, the dream stories I was told could easily be read as a form of wishful thinking or as flights of fancy. When the Virgin Mary, angels, ghosts, spirits, or the Prophet Muhammad are relegated to the realm of fantasy, they are quickly subsumed within materialist modes of history-telling and deprived of all agency. Conversely, just as secular historiography can subsume invisible actors, so dreamed histories can subsume this-worldly historical events. A number of Sufis and dream interpreters in Egypt referred me to a hadith which states that life is nothing but a dream from which one awakens at the moment of death. The material world here is encompassed within the world of the imagination. The visible (al-zāhir), as Sufis say, is subordinate to the invisible (al-bātin). Difference can be erased by way of translation in either direction.

In my analysis of these dream stories I am not arguing that we let one kind of history trump the other, or insisting on their ultimate incommensurability. I do not propose that we should "go native" and start dreaming history instead of doing archival or ethnographic research. That is, I am not calling for a phenomenological engagement with spectral actors on the level of experience. But neither do I attempt to fit invisible armies into the "evidentiary protocols" (Engelke 2008) of the social sciences.[29] Instead, and more in line with the

[29] That is, I neither seek an "objective" nor "subjective" validation of the dream stories. A classical "objective" answer to the problem of invisible actors suggested by early scientifically minded anthropologists—most notably Edward Burnett Tylor (1970)—is to understand spirits as social facts that are real to believers but unreal from the anthropologist's perspective. Tylor offers a causal explanation for the "primitive" belief in spirits: the cause is not the real existence of spirits but an epistemological mistake, a confusion of subjective and objective reality. The belief in spirits is not unreasonable (after all, the spirits of the dead appear in dreams as if they were alive), but the "civilized" mind—one that understands the difference between dream and reality—relegates spirits to the realm of fantasy at the moment it wakes up. Despite anthropology's reflexive turn in the 1970s, different versions of this scientism persist in more recent anthropological studies of dreams. What makes a true engagement with beliefs in divinely inspired dreams and spirits difficult, according to Katherine Ewing, is an unacknowledged "anthropological atheism" which results in a deep-seated "refusal to believe" (1994: 571). Attempting such an engagement, at the other end of the spectrum we find the approach of phenomenologists such as Paul Stoller (1989a; 1989b) and Edith Turner (2003), who argue for taking seriously the spiritual presences in our interlocutors' lives. Instead of approaching spirits as projections of "primitive" minds, phenomenologists try to grasp the experiential aspects of encounters with spirits. One problem with this approach is that it reduces the reality of spirits and dreams to the level of experience and relegates their discursive and social effects to the background.

goals of interpretive anthropology (yet extending its scope to include questions of politics, power, and history), I suggest that in order to grasp the ethical force and appeal of stories of invisible armies we need to consider what kind of history-telling is enabled by dream stories. I therefore have proposed a reading that does not search for hidden material or psychological causes beneath the stories, but rather engages with the invisible in the stories themselves. Only by engaging with the invisible actors via dream-tellings can we begin to consider what dream stories *do* for those who tell or listen to them in Egypt, such as al-Hagga Mona and her relatives, Sidi Salah and his followers, and the Azharite shaykh and the people at Tahrir Square. At the same time, such a reading allows us to consider how dream stories might *undo* our interpretive frameworks and the presumptions of secular historiography.

The very labeling of moments as located in "past," "present," or "future" is misleading because it runs the risk of re-inscribing a purely linear temporality. Yet there remains an excess, something that cannot quite be subsumed. As Erik Mueggler argues regarding ghost stories told in southwest China, despite the limitations inherent to our vocabularies, "Outlines of an alternative temporal strategy emerge from the dissonances of translation, its incapacity to fully render narrated memories as simple instances of a known history, subject to a familiar temporality" (2001: 7). In the space of failed translation lies the critical force of my interlocutors' dream stories. While always already mediated through narration and translation, the dream-telling might then be an ideal "field site" for an anthropology that, instead of using temporal devices to distance the observer from the observed (Fabian 2002), considers how convergent temporalities alter and expand each other. This does not mean losing sight of what we commonly think of as "history," material conditions, or power relations, but it does mean considering how power is reconfigured by dream and vision stories.

THE EGYPTIAN UPRISING: OF RESPONSIBILITY, AGENCY, AND POWER

As I conclude this, in December 2011, Egypt's post-revolutionary future is highly uncertain. History is literally being rewritten. Pages in praise of Mubarak have been ripped out of Egyptian schoolbooks; new chapters are yet to be added. A range of political actors is asserting their presence in the public sphere through election campaigns, press conferences, pamphlets, banners, mosque sermons, graffiti, demonstrations, and strikes. Some Sufis I have spoken to express discontent over the Salafi party's unexpected success in the parliamentary elections and criticize the Muslim Brotherhood for having exploited the revolution without having taken any risks in it. Other Sufis have a different take on the revolution and its aftermath. For them what happened at Tahrir Square earlier this year is not to be attributed to the agency of political activists or the thousands of Egyptians who joined them

in the streets, but rather to a divine will that was enacted *through* the people. A dervish explained to me that God had grown tired of the pharaoh's arrogance, which had culminated in Mubarak's plans to make his son the next president, and so God used the people to dispose of the pharaoh. A woman from Sidi Salah's group told me that she had dreamed of the uprising at Tahrir Square exactly two years before it happened. The revolution, as these versions of history tell it, was an event already prefigured, already dreamed—its significance exceeds the this-worldly.

Discourses of this kind are not exclusive to Sufi circles. 'Amr Khaled, a famous Muslim televangelist, after Mubarak's fall talked on Egyptian state television about having seen God in Tahrir.[30] Mustafa Hosni, another popular Muslim televangelist, recently explained to his young followers that the Prophet Muhammad had already predicted that a revolution was to happen in Egypt in 2011 and that they should ask themselves why God has created them at this particular moment in time. At certain times in history prayer is enough; at other times you are called upon to actively rebuild society.[31] This understanding of a calling—of being created in a particular place at a particular moment for a particular reason—highlights the fact that interpreting history as the unfolding of a divine will does not require abandoning notions of responsibility and human agency. Concepts of divinely ordained fate still oblige believers to carefully think about how to know and live this fate.[32]

Similarly, when one of Sidi Salah's followers insisted that the Tunisian, Egyptian, Yemeni, and Syrian uprisings were all part of a divine plan, and I asked him if this view did not deny agency to the activists who had carefully planned the events as well as the courage of the protesters who had risked or lost their lives, he shook his head and responded that we have to distinguish between responsibility in the spiritual world and responsibility in the material world. Regardless of the spiritual dimensions of our acting (which we often do not know or understand but might gain a glimpse of through our dreams and visions), we are still held accountable in the material world according to this-worldly standards. He then cited a hadith: "Should the Hour of the Day of Judgment arrive and one of you has a palm shoot in his hand, let him plant it, if he can." This hadith, which closely resembles Martin Luther's famous saying, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still

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[30] Moll 2011.

[31] Mustafa Hosni, lecture at El Sawy Culturewheel, Cairo, 3 Oct. 2011.

[32] Parallel though not identical to anthropological debates around structure and agency are philosophical debates around determinism and freedom, as well as theological ones around divinely ordained fate (*qadar*) and human responsibility. That the acceptance of divinely ordained fate does not equal fatalism is also illustrated by Sherine Hamdy's work on Muslim dialysis patients in Egypt (2009). Hamdy argues that *tawakkul*, a Muslim concept of reliance on God, is itself a state that needs to be cultivated. The pious self is embedded in a complex relationship with the divine. It cultivates a state of submission, and in submitting it humbly recognizes its own dependency and God's omnipotence.

plant my apple tree," here means that believers should not take divinely ordained fate as an excuse for inaction, passivity, or unjust actions. Even if, or precisely because, all that happens is preordained, one carries a heavy moral responsibility. Yet while we are responsible, the dream stories recounted here at the same time remind us that even in the material world agency does not lie exclusively in the hands of human actors.

The notion that stories about invisible beings deny or delimit human agency is only one of the factors that makes such stories troubling. Oftentimes Egyptians dismissed dream stories to me as superstitious, unreliable, potentially made-up, or simply too far removed from "true Islam." For instance, a couple of months after I gave my recordings of al-Hagga Mona's dreams to a friend in Cairo who had offered to help me with transcriptions, the latter's husband warned me to be more careful in choosing who I talk to. "People like that," he explained, tend to make up things. He said that because I was not from Egypt and did not know who could be trusted I ended up with liars as informants. This was particularly dangerous, he said, because I was going to take this information back to Germany and the United States where it would be misunderstood to represent Islam.

His unease springs from the insight that stories can take on a life of their own and be interpreted in a variety of ways. He is worried not only that al-Hagga Mona might have lied but also that her stories could be taken to reaffirm the stereotype of the "irrational Muslim." His solution is for me to not talk to people "like that" and instead stick to established sources: the Qur'an, hadith, and well-known scholars. Against such voices of doubt, the prophetic potential assigned to dream-visions within the Islamic tradition allows ordinary Egyptian Muslims—including people like al-Hagga Mona—to claim access to divine insights. An illiterate housewife and an Azharite shaykh can both speak of having been visited by the Prophet Muhammad. Dream stories can be contested or dismissed as contrived but are ultimately neither verifiable nor disprovable. They provide a genre (and possibly a mode of experience too) that circumvents social hierarchies and allows history to be retold from a variety of vantage points.

It is not only Egyptians who are uneasy with the possibility that nearly anyone can claim prophetic insights; audience members in North America and Europe, too, sometimes meet dream stories with skepticism, which usually takes one of two forms: either the stories are interpreted as inherently *disempowering* or as dangerously *empowering.* In the case of al-Hagga Mona's dreams, skeptics might say that the hope offered up is delusional and that the critique her stories enable is ineffective. After all, in many cases the presence of saintly and angelic armies seems to have made little difference in outcomes. In 2003, although invisible armies were supposedly supporting the Iraqis, Baghdad fell. Similarly the Prophet's supposed presence at Tahrir Square did not protect the protesters in any measurable way. So, does

reading dream-visions and apparitions as a space of hope and critique mean giving in to an illusion? My interlocutors would respond that historical events that seem to fail to live up to a prophetic promise are meaningful in ways that exceed human understanding—Baghdad's fall here becomes part of a larger, divine plan that is not fully comprehendible (yet). Another response to disappointed hopes is to insist that justice unfulfilled on earth will be realized in the hereafter. Here the invisible armies are rendered into witnesses, ones that in turn are witnessed by the dreamers and indirectly by those listening to their stories. Although spectral witnesses do not count in war crime tribunals, they evoke the promise of otherworldly justice.

Other skeptics point out that dream stories are problematic not because they are disempowering but, on the contrary, because they can be dangerously empowering. Whereas al-Hagga Mona tells her dreams and visions from a sub-altern position, Sidi Salah inhabits a position of authority, one that is continuously affirmed and reinscribed by his followers' own dream-tellings. Confronted with legitimizing dreams, some have warned me not to romanticize religious imaginations. After all, had not G. W. Bush justified the invasion of Iraq by claiming that he had received a form of divine inspiration? And should not the emergence of the Taliban better be understood within the context of Cold War politics and international interventions (Mamdani 2004) rather than divine ones?

When engaging with stories of the invisible, it is important to consider from which positions of power they are told and what kinds of actions they justify. Historically, dreams, visions, and apparitions have done all kinds of things and they allow people to make all sorts of arguments. In many Catholic contexts, for example, seeing the Virgin has exhorted believers to pray, do penance, and try to reform their communities. By contrast, in most of the Muslim contexts that I describe in this essay, dreams and visions do not call for particular actions but rather offer a genre for commenting on history. I do not claim that this commentary is somehow truer than linear accounts, and my point is not that dreams, visions, and apparitions always result in peace, justice, or social equality—that dreams are inherently *good*. What I do suggest is that dream stories revolving around invisible actors offer a critical commentary as well as insights into a different understanding of history. For these reasons they deserve our imaginative engagement.

Some of those listening to the Azharite shaykh's dreams in Tahrir Square, too, may have dismissed them as made-up, irrelevant, or illusionary. Others might have warned that such stories are a precarious distraction from the dangers the protesters were facing. Again others perhaps enjoyed the idea of the Prophet's presence in their midst. A few might have, like the engineer, retold the dream-visions later on. While I have no way of tracing the various afterlives of the shaykh's dream stories, I suggest that dream-tellings, by bringing together seemingly incommensurable modes of history-telling, reconfigure

the very scope of politics. Instead of insisting that these stories are ineffective within a given secular framework of history, or that they are dangerous legitimizing devices, we might then consider how dream stories, like ghost stories elsewhere, appeal to justice in ways that cannot fully be captured by empiricist and secular modes of history-telling. Seen in this way, the very act of infusing the present with hope via dream-tellings is itself a significant political act, regardless of whether the dream's promises are fulfilled in this world or not.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A HISTORY OF THE DREAM

In retelling history via dreams, people do not simply shift from a "secular" to a "religious" framework. Reaching beyond a secular/religious divide, their stories also resonate with what Walter Benjamin calls "profane illumination." In his *Arcades Project* (2002), Benjamin calls for an awakening that is not dichotomously opposed to the dream state. The new mode of doing history that he proposes is rather a history of the dream, a history through the dream. In his brief essay titled "Dream Kitsch," Benjamin points out that we have yet to write the history of the dream. In his words, "Dreaming has a share in history. The statistics on dreaming would stretch beyond the pleasures of the anecdotal landscape into the barrenness of a battlefield" (1996: 3). I have engaged here with Egyptian dreamed histories of wars, ones that illuminate waking life but are not fully subsumed by it. Dream stories offer a commentary on what it is to be in the world, not only but perhaps especially at times of war and violence. Being in the world here is a being *with* Others, including invisible forces such as spirits, saints, and the dead. Dream-tellings introduce a space through which to think and speak about the presence of the departed and spiritual entities in contemporary, past, and future events. They can reorient people's understandings of historical events, be they wars that occurred in the past, the revolutionary present, or the future of Iraq (as well as of Egypt).

Rethinking history via dream stories does not require that we stop paying attention to material conditions, unequal power relations, or violence and suffering. Those I worked with in Egypt are deeply embedded in and affected by material conditions, geopolitics, and global capitalism. Although dreams and visions allow for a convergence of multiple temporalities, they are not dichotomously opposed to linear history. Prophetic dream stories depend on some kind of linearity in order to make sense, and conversely the progress narrative of linear history is itself often motivated by a utopian dream or by the desire on the part of the scholar to awaken from a nightmare (as when accounting for colonialism or the brutality of war). Many secularly inclined commentators have called the Egyptian revolution a dream come true.[33] Instead of dismissing

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[33] For example, the opposition leader al-Baradei on 11 February, after Mubarak's resignation, spoke of a dream come true. Wael Ghoneim, the twenty-eight-year-old Middle East marketing manager of

dream stories as a form of false consciousness or as manipulative devices, we might then ask how a different take on the imagination can help us understand the critical force of dreams more broadly. Tahrir was dreamed by religiously minded *and* secularist dreamers. The history of Egyptian secular political dreams, too, remains to be written. Perhaps stories of invisible armies such as those presented here can offer a first small step toward such a different kind of history—a history of the dream and a dreamed history.

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Google whom some early on named a spokesperson for the revolution, after being released by Egyptian security forces, emphasized in a television interview that many ordinary Egyptians had simply been dreaming of a life in freedom. For twelve nights in prison, he told the reporter, he sang the Egyptian song *Ahlam Maʿaya* ("Dream with me") in his cell and to the prison guards. See: http://articles.cnn.com/2011-02-09/opinion/husain.ghonim_1_egyptians-egypt-last-week-arab?_s=PM: OPINION (last accessed 15 Dec. 2011).

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