

## Minority religion mediated

Contesting representation

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Lise Paulsen Galal

## Minority religion mediated: Contesting representation

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In 2004, *Baheb el-Cima* [I love cinema] was screened in Egyptian cinemas as the first Egyptian commercially produced feature film that placed its story in a solely Coptic environment. *Baheb el-Cima* was inspired by the globally praised Italian movie *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) and with its Egyptian mainstream film language and its unique story, the film was likely to expect some success. However, the choice of a Coptic environment led to protests and legal proceedings. A Coptic priest filed a lawsuit to stop the film for ridiculing the Christian doctrine and Christian believers, and secular Copts protested against what they saw as a uniform representation of Copts as religious fundamentalists (Lindsey 2004). A few years later, another commercially produced film, *Hassan wa Murqus* ([Hasan and Marcus]; 2008) holding a Coptic key figure was released. Contrary to *Baheb el-Cima*, it did not stir up any larger controversy among Copts despite its humorous depiction of Coptic religious practices, among other things. However, some Facebook groups called for a boycott of the film, accusing the leading actor, Adel Imam, for apostasy from Islam because he played – and thus embodies – a Christian theology professor in the film.

In order to understand why many Copts – at least in public – did not welcome *Baheb el-Cima* in comparison to *Hassan wa Murqus*, I look at how the narratives of the films collide and become inevitable zones of struggle in the local political and cultural contexts related to Copts' precarious situation. By examining the story in its context(s) of reception (Siapera 2010: 111), we can better understand how Copts use public imaginaries in negotiating identity and belonging.

In this chapter, I will analyse the local narratives of and responses to the two films in order to identify contested places of minority religion and religious identities in Egyptian public. At the core of the analysis is the ascription of meaning to differences by the films and by the public and how these converge and create

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1 I want to thank the editor Ehab Galal, two anonymous reviewers as well as my colleagues Birgitta Frello and Sara Lei Sparre for valuable comments and suggestions for revisions. Part of this chapter's argument has previously been published in Danish in the online journal *Akademisk Kvarter*.

unforeseen responses. Mediated representations of Copts in Egypt have regularly led to public protests (cf. Elsässer 2010; Iskander 2012a). Thus the protests against *Baheb el-Cima* are part of ongoing negotiations of the display of religion and of Muslim-Copt relations in public, which has led to what Samia Mehrz (2010) has defined as ‘culture wars.’ In order to examine the ascriptions of meaning to differences, the chapter will proceed as follows: First, I give a short introduction to the historical background on the mediations of Copts in Egyptian media leading to the analytical approach of regimes of representation. Second, I introduce the two films followed by an analysis of public responses. The analysis reveals how the films’ narratives of freedom conflate with narratives of the nation, the minority and religion.

### **From silence to noise: the place of Copts in Egyptian media**

*Baheb el-Cima* broke the cinematic silence that until then had characterised the depiction of Copts in film. Despite a huge Egyptian film production of around 2,500 movies from 1920s until the middle of 1990s, almost no movie seriously deals with a Coptic figure (Shafik 1998). In her book on Egyptian cinema, Shafik argues that Copts were represented in rather stereotypic roles until national independence in 1952. After independence they were though more or less non-existent in Egyptian movies. For instance, representations of religious rituals, feasts, weddings and funerals used pictures and words from the Islamic tradition. Depiction of Christian religious rituals and feasts were lacking, as were movies about the Coptic history in Egypt. According to Shafik, the film *Broken Images* (1986), which showed an old Coptic woman’s funeral, was the first Egyptian movie to depict a Coptic ceremony (Shafik 1998: 25).

The silencing of Coptic figures and traditions reflects the attempt by the state to create a national narrative and imagined community by promoting the idea of a secular and modern national citizen (Abu-Lughod 2005). When religion was depicted in Egyptian film and TV, it was as Muslim traditional values and ritual practices, which constructed an image of the Egyptian as being Muslim, although secular (Abu-Lughod 2005; Shafik 1998). With islamisation, the struggle over religion and religious differences also became an issue of the media. Religious conflicts (between Muslims and between Muslims and Christians) became a prevailing issue in the media due to increasing violence in the 1980s and beginning of 1990s (Zaki 1995). After 1994, however, when the religious conflicts peaked, the Mubarak government in Egypt tried to restrain controversial representation, followed by a strategy of positively recognizing the presence of both Muslim and Coptic religious communities (Ibrahim 1996: 26).

In the new millennium, the Mubarak regime increasingly liberalised the media field. As a result, the so-called Coptic issue transformed from being taboo in the Egyptian public to becoming a popular topic (Elsässer 2010: 131). Furthermore, film producers were encouraged to include Copts as cinematic figures (Abu-Lughod 2005; Mehrez 2010; Shafik 2007).<sup>2</sup> This break with silence has resulted in creating and expanding a Coptic public, as argued by Elsässer (2010: 132). This expansion has led to negotiations of the borders of such a public; the contestations over *Baheb el-Cima* can be seen as a consequence. Contestations over representation prevail and are deeply embedded in dominant discourses on Egyptian national identity and belonging that defend a united Egyptian public. In her analysis of the Egyptian state-owned newspaper *al-Ahram*'s coverage of sectarian violence from 2005–2010, Elizabeth Iskander demonstrates how *al-Ahram* reconstructs the Egyptian public as united through different discursive strategies (Iskander 2012a). These strategies are well known in constructions of nationalism, as displayed by Anderson (2010) and Billig (1995). First, the strategy is to choose events from history that confirm the narrative of unity, such as the 1919 Revolution in Egypt, while leaving out the events that challenge this narrative. The second strategy is to blame 'outsiders' for any conflicts between Muslims and Copts by referring to their interference, effectively constructing a 'true' national 'Us' versus 'the Others'. A third strategy is to point at extremists (versus moderates) among Muslims as well as Copts as those who ruin an otherwise harmonious relationship (Iskander 2012a: 33). These strategies are also supported by Coptic actors, such as the Coptic-Orthodox Church, as argued by Galal (2012).

The Coptic Orthodox Church has been a key player in the on-going cultural struggle to define Coptic faith and life. Since the late nineteenth century, this has mainly been a struggle between the Coptic Church and the Coptic lay people (Carter 1986), and with the revival of the Coptic Church in the second half of the twentieth century, it has been the winner of the internal Coptic struggle (Galal 2012). Under the Mubarak regime, the social-political context with regard to Copts' position was generally defined by the regime's and the Coptic Orthodox Church's shared desire for stability. It was thus in their mutual interest to play

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2 Since the beginning of the new millennium, the liberalisation of the Egyptian media market has especially changed TV and film production. Hence, there are now more private Egyptian television channels and production companies. Still, state censorship and different institutionalised forms limiting the freedom of speech and political opposition are still alive (see e.g. Mehrez 2010), as the events of 25 January 2011 and 30 June 2013 have confirmed.

down religious conflict while emphasising sameness in nationality (Fawzi 1998; Hasan 2003; Ibrahim 1996). This arrangement between the state and church played a crucial role in Coptic identity politics and the revival of the Church, of which the late Coptic Orthodox pope Shenouda was the principal architect. Internally within the Coptic community, the key element of the revival was the strengthening of various religious and social practices such as Sunday schools, theological seminars for laypeople, Coptic language instruction, as well as the resurgence of monasteries – all elements that brought the individual Copt closer to the church. As a consequence, institutional changes also provided Copts with a space – or counter public – for being Christians: the Church. The successful institutionalisation explains why the Church has – despite the existence of other Coptic voices and through the state-loyal strategy – succeeded in obtaining an officially legitimate role of defining what it means to be Coptic, and thus how Copts are different from and at the same time the same as the majority of Egyptians (Galal 2012). In constructing narratives on the generic Egyptianness of the Church and by rejecting the interference by people outside Egypt, the Church confirms as an overall approach the unity-discourse (ibid.). However, responses such as those against *Baheb el-Cima* also demonstrate that Copts are placed in an ambiguous double bind between promoting unity while at the same time using increasing public awareness to fight against prejudices and discrimination. As Elsässer argues, the liberalisation has led to acknowledgements of the problems that Copts face but also to increasing sectarian tensions that leave the Copts in a precarious situation (2010: 132). The development illustrates how global media pluralism has strengthened the reach, spread and movement of narratives across borders and diverse media. Thus, full-length versions of both *Baheb el-Cima* and *Hassan wa Murqus* can now be found on YouTube. The transnationality and transmediality (cf. Chapter one of this volume) has led to the circulation of mediated narratives in unstable, multiple and unpredictable directions (cf. Robertson 1993; Hjarvard 2009). As in the case of *Baheb el-Cima*, which is produced by an independent production company (Arab Production and Distribution Company), global media is increasingly released, detached and less embedded in state or other national established cultural institutions than national media traditionally has been (Hjarvard 2009). The advent of pluralistic media not only fosters the freedom of plural representation, but also the freedom to contest and reject representations. Consequently, the role of the Church is increasingly being challenged, not only by filmmakers but also by oppositional forces among Coptic civil society (Rowe 2009; Soliman 2006).

Media researcher Eugenia Siapera argues that it is constructions of difference – or as she phrases it, ‘differentiations’ – that make the struggle about representation a crucial aspect of globalization. As far as representations have the potential to produce sameness as well as difference, it is these differential representations that feed religious, cultural and political struggle (Siapera 2010). Both *Baheb el-Cima* and *Hassan wa Murqus* produce sameness and differences between Muslims and Copts, however very differently. In order to gain access to multiple constructions of differences, Siapera suggests analysing the ‘regimes of representation.’ The term is inspired by Foucault’s ‘regimes of truth,’ referring to ‘certain ideas and discourses with certain power structures and mechanisms which then sustain these as the ‘truth’ (Siapera 2010: 131). The use of the concept ‘regime’ stresses its degree of regularity and power.

In the following I will look into how different regimes of representation of Coptic-Muslim relations are produced and consumed in specific political and (inter)discursive contexts, and how mediated narratives become combat zones in local (and global) political and cultural contexts. While audience research to a large extent has privileged private and individual negotiations of identity stemming from watching TV and films, I focus on the public struggle over representation and hence identity politics in contemporary Egypt. The Coptic criticism, regardless from which side, is a criticism of what they consider the film’s differentiation of the Christian Egyptian as ‘the Other.’ I do not present a full analysis of the two films. Instead I highlight how the relationship between Muslims and Copts is presented and how Copts, on the basis of multiple difference regimes, are constructed and interpreted as different or/and the same. The public audience responses that are included in the analysis are from newspaper articles and TV debates, as well as from researchers, primarily Mehrez (2010) and Shafik (2007).

## Two movies, two stories about freedom

The movies *Baheb el-Cima* and *Hassan wa Murqus* are both stories about political and religious freedom. *Baheb el-Cima* tells the story of a Coptic family in a Coptic environment in the 1960s in Cairo. *Hassan wa Murqus* tells the story of a Muslim and a Coptic family who cross each others’ paths during a time of religious radicalisation and terror threats in Egypt. Both films particularly ridicule and criticise religious fanatics.

## Baheb el-Cima

The main figure in *Baheb el-Cima* is the six-year-old boy, Na'im, who is deeply fascinated by the cinematic world. To him, movies are the entrance to a world with music, love, sorrow, loss, and sexuality – all things that he starts realizing are part of his family's life. Na'im lives together with his parents and sister in Shubra, a big and popular neighbourhood in Cairo with a large number of Christian residents and churches. By presenting its story in a realist and humoristic form, *Baheb el-Cima*<sup>3</sup> is inscribed in a popular and dominant tradition within Egyptian film production (Shafik 2007). The story of *Baheb el-Cima* is first and foremost a story about the struggle for freedom, especially the artistic freedom, but also the political and religious freedom. The film is also the result of increased freedom, since it would most likely not have been permitted to be screened in Egypt a few years earlier.

The introduction to *Baheb el-Cima* is a kaleidoscopic view of the neighbourhood and the key figures of the film. The view is followed by a voice revealing that the film narrative, as in *Cinema Paradiso*, is the scriptwriter looking back on his childhood from adulthood. The time of the film is 1966–67 and ends with the defeat to Israel in 1967. The pictured memories of Na'im, which include autobiographical elements from the screenwriter's (Hani Fawzi) life, are sweet and nostalgic – an interpretation of the historical past of Egypt. A key topic is that the family is struggling with the father's religiosity. One of the first scenes in the film shows how the father threatens Na'im with Satan and the fire of hell, because he is watching movies and they are according to the father *haram* [sinful] and therefore forbidden. Also the mother suffers due to the religiosity of her husband that makes him reject enjoying life together with his family. An example is that he is keeping the Coptic Orthodox fast, which according to the father means that he cannot have sexual relation with his wife.<sup>4</sup> The mother is a headmaster at a public school, but was previously a keen painter. When by accident an artist discovers her talent, he encourages her to seek freedom and leave the public

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3 Furthermore, the title of the film addresses a broader Egyptian audience, given that the kind of spelling is taken from Egyptian dialect instead of using the more correct form '*al Cinema*'.

4 The Coptic Orthodox Church is the original Church in Egypt and was established in the year 42. More than 90% of Egyptian Christians are Orthodox Copts. One of the dogmas of the Church is fasting, which means that the believer has to abstain from eating animal products for 210 days yearly.

school's Nasserist, oppressive and patriarchal lack of imagination. They end up having an affair.

Na'im represents the child's honest and open-minded view of the world. He watches his father praying and laughs at his anxious and heartfelt prayers. He watches people quarrelling and fighting in the Church. He watches his young aunt kissing her boyfriend, and he laughs again and again. On his birthday, the father forbids the visitors to sing the birthday song and forbids the boy to go to the cinema, well knowing that this is the only thing he wants. Na'im angrily yells: 'kullu haga haram haram' [everything is sinful, sinful]. Thus, free fantasy, art, and human relations are presented as in opposition to religion in its fanatic form as displayed by the father's manner of practicing religion.

The father abandons his way of practicing religion when he is told that he is seriously ill. He then takes his son to the cinema and goes with the family on holiday. He once again shows interest in his wife and after a short while dies in his home. As Shafik also argues, the film can obviously be interpreted as a critique of every form of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, and hence, also of the increasing islamisation of Egyptian society since 1967 (2007). Those who worked on the movie also suggested this line of interpretation. The director, Osama Fawzi, emphasises that the film is not against the Christians or specific groups, but against extremism of any kind (El-Rashidi 2004a).

Seen in the perspective of what film creators such as scriptwriter Hani Fawzi and director Osama Fawzi face in Egypt, the film may also, as also argued by Mehrez (2010), be seen as a critique of oppression in a much broader sense: the oppression of artistic and individual freedom, as well as of political, cultural, social and religious freedom. Hani Fawzi had previously written the film *Film Hindi* [Indian Film] released in 2003 about the friendship between a Muslim and a Copt and how they discovered that their friendship was more important to stand up for than their engagements to each of their dishonest fiancées, who have the same religious background as them. It took nine years to obtain permission to screen it (Mehrez 2010: 194). During these nine years, the script had gone through an absurd numbers of censorship committees and so many scenes had been removed or rewritten that not much of the original film was left. Mehrez argues that *Baheb el-Cima* might be seen as the writer's critique of the artistic limitations put on Film Hindi (ibid.). Moreover, in the film, it is not only the religious authorities (father and Church), who are criticised. It is also the 'father' of the nation: President Nasser, the authoritarian state and any other kind of patriarchal authority. Na'im literally urinates at the family doctor and later at the church, when he urinates on the priest and the congregation from the gallery. As



for Na'im's father, he gets fired, after which he is interrogated and beaten up by the security police because he as a civil servant had tried to help a poor family. Thus, the father ends up becoming both religious and political disillusioned.

### **Hassan wa Murqus**

In 2008, the film *Hassan wa Murqus* was released. Taking the title of a famous play first introduced in 1945 called *Hassan, Murqus and Kuhein* (cf. Galal 2003), it depicts the difficult friendship between a Muslim and a Coptic man, leaving out the Jewish Kuhein in the original play.<sup>5</sup> The film was directed by Rami Imam<sup>6</sup> and is a screwball comedy with two of the most famous actors in Egypt as well as in the Arab world in the leading roles: Adel Imam and Omar Sharif. As such, it can be considered part of mainstream and commercial Egyptian film production. The two protagonists include a Christian theology professor (Adel Iman) and a faithful Muslim man (Omar Sherif), who independently of each other are asked to change identity due to Islamist terrorists treat against them by the security police. Thus the Christian Adel Iman becomes a Muslim sheikh with the name of Hassan, and the Muslim Omar Sherif becomes a faithful Christian with the name of Murqus. After various complications, they end up becoming neighbours in Alexandria. Since they don't know the other man's change of identity, they take each other's identity as face value believing that they are both either Christians or Muslims. Therefore they meet each other with grand politeness, friendship, and they do not mind that their son and daughter become friends, since they also believe they are the same behind their cover. When they find out that 'they are not the same,' they start to despise and avoid each other. In the end they reconcile and the movie ends by the Muslim and Christian family joining hands walking without being hurt in the midst of a violent uprising against the government in the street.<sup>7</sup>

According to screen writer Yousef Maati, one of the messages he tried to convey is of love (Kneil 2008). Although the movie pictures the mutual mistrust between Christians and Muslims, none of the parties are particularly demonised. Rather it is the religious fanatics who are pictured as hypocrites because they

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5 See also Ibrahim's chapter in this volume.

6 Rami Imam is director and actor and son of Adel Imam. He also directed the TV-serial *Ayza Atgawez* ([I want to marry]; 2010).

7 This was the narrative being true during the 25 January uprising in 2011 in Egypt. Worldwide, the media transmitted pictures of Copts and Muslims joining a common cause at Tahrir place.

support national unity in public but otherwise slander each other. Muslim fanatics accuse Christians of committing treason, while the Christians blame Muslims for discrimination. The security police are also ridiculed as incompetent and a danger to national unity. Since the main message of the film is national unity, and the conflicts are inscribed within human greed and suspicion and not in sectarian strife per se, picturing the conflicts is primarily non-controversial.

### Contesting narratives of Us and Them

The lawsuits filed against *Baheb el-Cima* from both a Coptic priest and secular Copts may, as argued by Shafik (2007), be the result of an allegorical reading of the film. The family and the family's way of life are interpreted by the critics as a stereotypical and generalised presentation of all Christian Egyptians' way of life. By presenting the adultery of the mother as the result of the father's stubborn and fierce observance of the fast, including his sexual abstinence, observing a religious tradition is presented as the direct catalyst for sinful behaviour. Beside the mother's adultery, the more indelicate scenes provoke the critics – for instance where Na'im pees from the gallery of the church and when the young lovers kiss in the church tower (Mehrez 2010; El-Rashidi 2004a).

Paradoxically, the critics on one hand criticise *Baheb el-Cima* for presenting a stereotypical and generalised 'Other.' On the other hand, they reject the family as representative of all Coptic Orthodox Christians, since the marriage is atypical and against Orthodox doctrine because the mother is a Protestant and the father Coptic Orthodox. As for the more secular Copts, they criticise the film from the opposite perspective, rejecting the presentation of Copts being religiously conservative. So, while both groups criticise the film for giving the wrong picture of believers, Church-affiliated spokesmen condemn the lack of true belief, while the seculars rebuff the imagery as too religious. These groups of Copts seem to read the film *oppositionally* – that is in opposition to the dominant narrative of freedom presented in the film. The oppositional reading is one of three decoding positions, suggested by Stuart Hall (1980), who put forward an analytical distinction between the dominant, the negotiating, and the oppositional decoding of audiences. The oppositional reading must be examined in the context of minority-majority relations in Egypt to understand why the dominant position as in the case of *Baheb el-Cima* is rejected.

The lack of Coptic protests against *Hassan wa Murqus* add to the understanding of the potential dominant readings as well as of the influence of the context. A crucial aspect is how the Muslim-Coptic relationship has been defined and attempted to be managed by state, Church and other players. *Hassan wa Murqus*

embodies the dominant unity narrative of national brotherhood between Muslims and Copts in accordance with the narratives of the most powerful players, the regime and the Church. Thus, Coptic religious players do not find reason to object. Neither the Muslim protesters challenge the dominant reading of national unity, but rather question the secular role of religion in society. To understand this contextual embeddedness, I suggest exploring the protests as diverse readings of the two films and their convergence with other narratives. According to Siapera, rejections and acceptances are closely related to how the representation of difference and sameness is interpreted by the audience (2010). In the following, I identify three narratives that are strongly connected with constructions of difference: the right to difference, the right to equality and the right to religion. Obviously, these three narratives are mutually connected, but the focus changes in accordance with displacements between them.

### **The right to difference**

The reason for protesting may be explained not only by resistance to the emergence of new forms of representations, but also by a change in a minority's power of definition. The very limited filmic representation of the Coptic minority in the twentieth century seemed to assign the Copt with folkloristic characteristics and/or depict him or her as a comical, laughable figure (Shafik 2007: 24). These stereotypical portrayals can be seen as stemming from a domesticated difference regime. Siapera suggests three principal strategies for media representation of difference emerging from majority or mainstream media: the domesticated difference regime, the racist difference regime, and the commercial difference regime (Siapera 2010: 147). The domesticated difference regime pictures differences as superficial, reassuring and not threatening to the order of things. Differences are mostly depicted as folkloristic aspects or as elements that denote sameness, or as unthreatening mixtures or hybrids (*ibid.*). The protests against *Baheb el-Cima* suggested that the opponents did not interpret the film as representing a domesticated difference regime, but rather a racist difference regime. The racist difference regime constructs differences as determined by essential biological or cultural characteristics that are unchangeable. Differences within this regime are a threat to the order of things, since 'racial' characteristics of the 'Others' are considered irrational or even violent (Siapera 2010: 147). Thus, whereas the state had aimed to encourage inclusive narratives, Coptic opponents saw a regime that constructed Copts as members of a specific group, whose religion was not only ascribed to the group as an essential characteristic (as criticised by liberal Copts), but also was demonised (as criticised by more religious opponents). Thus, while

the state saw the narrative about the heterogenic Egyptian population as inclusion, Coptic opponents saw the story about the Christian Egyptians as exclusion, and consequently the basis for further suppression, dominance and misrecognition of the right to difference.

The depicting of differences in *Hassan wa Murqus* subscribe to a domesticated difference regime by presenting the differences between Copts and Muslims as a difference in faith alone. This difference is even interchangeable, as the switch between the Muslim and Christian figure symbolises. Moreover, joking over misunderstandings and mutual suspicion supports the reassuring reciprocity, whereas the popular stereotypical representations of Islamic fanatics as laughable and idiotic repeatedly keep 'ordinary' believers free of charge (Abu-Lughod 1993; Galal 2006). Thus, differences are characterised by not being inherently dangerous for society. The lack of predominant Coptic protests suggests that Copts identify with this dominant decoding position. Although the farcical depictions could potentially be decoded as racist, these kinds of depicted differences did not motivate Muslim opponents to accuse the film actor Adel Imam of apostasy for his role in *Hassan wa Murqus*. They did not challenge the represented difference regimes as such, but insisted on the inviolability of religious differences. Religious differences may not be transgressed, not even in the embodiment of an actor. Thus, whereas the *Baheb el-Cima* protesters challenged the representations themselves as misleading or discriminating, the *Hassan wa Murqus* campaigners appeared to challenge principles of representation as such.

To understand the responses it is, as argued, necessary to look at the context for representation. Since the national revolutions in 1919 and 1952, the dominant narrative about the relationship between Muslims and Copts has been one of national unity (Galal 2012; Iskander 2012a and 2012b). The secular and liberal ambitions of the regime have fed this narrative. However, with increasing islamisation since the 1970s, the narrative under Mubarak's regime developed into statements that reflected the state's and the Church's shared interest in playing down and opposing sectarian unrest between Muslims and Copts. This strategy has, on one hand led, to an apparently widespread acceptance of the Church and Christianity as a religion. On the other hand it has made the Copts invisible and hence has also silenced the institutionalised exclusion and general discrimination (ibid.).<sup>8</sup> The difference regime of domestication silences the power relations

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8 In general, it is possible to point at the following areas of discrimination of Christians in Egypt: lack of access to certain offices in the state administration and military; lack

as it has a taste for the exotic. As argued by Graham Huggan, exoticism describes ‘a particular mode of aesthetic *perception* – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery’ (Huggan 2001: 13). Thus, exoticism is not only aesthetic, but also political. It is not only about strangeness, but also about familiarity. It is a symbolic system that domesticates the cultural difference by inscribing it with a familiar vocabulary that makes the strangeness comprehensible. The curiosity that the difference arouses functions as ‘a decoy to *disguise*’ power (Huggan 2001: 14). In other words, the domestication of the exotic ‘Others’ involves a disregard for the context and its power relations.

Elsewhere I have argued to name this strategy ‘conspiracy of silence’ because both parties of different reasons to some degree share an interest in silencing an unequal power relation (Galal 2009: 82). Not only is the recognition of discrimination and marginalisation linked to a feeling of shame, but the Coptic Orthodox Church has also supported the national unity narrative in exchange for maintaining a certain degree of autonomy for itself and the Coptic community (Galal 2009; Hasan 2003). The Church has become the official representative of the Copts vis-à-vis the state and has at the same time become as space for a counter-public, in which the minority has been able to practice and live their particular identity as Christians, while they live in the national public as Egyptians. Consequently, the power to define Coptic identity has been left in the hands of the Church, while secular and liberal Coptic voices have been marginalised. Being Coptic has been something practiced within the church, and as Mehrez stresses, Copts have generally been hesitant to present themselves in their particularities outside the church (Mehrez 2010: 192).

The success of the Coptic-Orthodox Church’s hard-won certain degree of autonomy for Copts is closely related to the narrative and thus the construction of Copts as being different from only when it comes to religion, but the same in relation to national loyalty and identity. In this way, autonomy is legitimised by an essentialised religious identity defined by religious authorities. In this perspective, *Baheb el-Cima*’s criticism of religion is not only reprehensible because of its stereotyping, but also because it implicitly challenges the Church’s power of definition. The Church sees this power as the foundation for fairness and

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of representation in parliament; obstacles in connection to building and repairing of churches; and invisibility in the national curriculum as part of the Egyptian history as well as in the media (Fawsi 1998; Ibrahim 1996).

tolerance between the majority and minority. The protests of religious Copts can therefore be understood as stemming from the division of power between state and Church, which during Mubarak had been promoted in the Egyptian public. The narrative of the right to difference is inscribed by Coptic opponents in what could be called a specifically Egyptian form of the modern national state's multiculturalism that has been supported by the state's continuous assertion that Copts are an indissoluble part of the Egyptian national totality. By allowing a film like *Baheb el-Cima*, the state broke – so to speak – the conspiracy of silence. On one hand, *Hassan wa Murqus* also broke the conspiracy of silence by addressing Muslim-Coptic relations. On the other hand, however, it confirmed the hegemonic discourse of national unity despite all disagreements and depicted Copts and Muslims as facing the same challenges. The Copts were not singled out, as the opponents claimed was the case in *Baheb el-Cima*. Instead *Hassan wa Murqus* may be seen as successfully inscribing Copts as a commercial difference regime that embraces differences as long as they can be made into consumables. Differences in the commercial difference regime are seen as style and appearance, which might be sold as a particular ethnic or cultural kind. But can be consumed by anybody (Siapera 2010: 147), as in the case of *Hassan wa Murqus*, which was seen by both Muslims and Copts.

The Coptic criticism of *Baheb el-Cima* may appear paradoxical, since the film wanted to make visible an otherwise cinematically neglected minority. The film portrays a struggle for liberal ideas of freedom, including recognition of religious pluralism, hence promoting the right to difference. However, disagreement occurred over the right to define 'the difference.' Part of the Church establishment did not have any intention of giving up this right; some of the liberal Copts saw this as their chance to maintain their rights. The internal dispute within the Coptic community furthermore stresses that the issue at stake is about how to organise differences in a multi-religious Egypt. Whereas the Church insisted on a multiculturalism that essentialised differences, protecting the Church's legitimate right to define 'its essence,' liberal Copts wanted a form of multiculturalism that left room for the individual to define his or her religious identity. As for the protesters against *Hassan wa Murqus*, the multiculturalism they defend is a multiculturalism that not only essentialised differences, but was also based on an extreme interpretation of Islam as constitutive for organising differences.

## The right to equality

Whereas the protesters against *Hassan wa Murqus* did not defend the right to equality, it was a vital element in the protest against *Baheb el-Cima*. The

accusations towards the actor Adel Imam in *Hassan wa Murqus* for apostasy articulated a discourse of purity and superiority of Islam over Christianity. No claim of equality was put forward by Muslim protesters, who rather claimed privileges for Muslims. The protests against *Baheb el-Cima* also addressed Coptic relations to Muslims. Thus, the religious Copts found that the film was subscribing to the global narrative of the clash and contrast between Islam and Christianity, as elaborated in Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* (1996), which posits that the chief sources of conflict in the contemporary era will be cultural and religious reasons. While this narrative contradicts the Egyptian story of national unity and close ties between Muslims and Copts, it seems to be activated by suspending the conspiracy of silence. Paradoxically, loosened control in the media has created room for an increasing number of racist statements about each other's religions (Hulsman 2010). In the eyes of the Coptic opponents, Muslims – and not only the state – have not demonstrated mutual understanding and respect for each other's religion. Hence, critics argue that the film's director, Osama Fawzi, who is a convert from Christianity to Islam, had 'abandoned his roots and adopted a staunchly anti-Christian stance' (El-Rashidi 2004a). Characteristically, the individuals behind the film were accused of aiming to deepen the gulf between Muslims and Christians. At the same time, this narrative was particularly vigorous because it addressed a Western audience. Thus, another of the protesters' lawyers, Gabriel, stated:

[...] given the image it is portraying to the world. The last thing we need at this time in political history is a negative, and false, portrayal of sectarian relations in this part of the world. The director is clearly trying to stir things up in the West – to create even more antagonism than there already is. The West is ignorant, and would swallow this as fact in an instant. (El-Rashidi 2004b)

Seen from this perspective, the film appeared as an example of Muslims' hateful representations of Christians. The danger of this representation was explained by referring to western ignorance and thus possible misplaced intervention. Consequently, the narrative of religious conflict appeared double-sided. As for internal relations in Egypt, it was used to claim equality for Muslims and Christians alike when it came to religion. Vis-à-vis external relations with the West, it was used to emphasise the national risk of mediating such narratives. Particularly since the 1990s, this kind of mobilizing the risk-of-western-intervention narrative has been a widespread strategy among supporters of the conspiracy of silence as soon as specific violent clashes between Christians and Muslims have taken place (Galal 2009: 145). Evidently, the objection of the lawyer is embedded in the dominant discourses also presented by Iskander (2012a: 33), which construct

outsiders (the West) and extremists as the actors who potentially steer up sectarian conflict. Thus, the message appears to be that Egyptian media and film should not feed into this.

## The right to religion

Narrating the right to difference and the right to equality inevitable converges with the narrative of the particular status of religion. As the Coptic lawyer, Morcos Aziz, who filed the lawsuit against *Baheb el-Cima* on behalf of the protesters, stated:

We are not against freedom but it should not be against the doctrine. This movie mocks the Christian doctrine (El-Rashidi 2004a).

This idea of the exceptional position of religion is not – as in the statement given above – about bringing Copts into opposition to Muslims. On the contrary, according to Mehrez, protesters tried to mobilize ‘our Muslim brothers’ against the film (Mehrez 2010: 204). Once again, the narrative of the religion’s inviolability is introduced, as seen in several Egyptian court cases on literature, films or practices filed by both Muslims and Christians. A Muslim lawyer, Nabih Ahmed El-Wahsh, who supported the Coptic protesters, stated ‘even as a Muslim I don’t accept this movie. The slamming of any religion is wrong, and we reject it. There is no difference between extremism in Islam, in Christianity, in Judaism. The film reflects a condemnation of Christianity’ (El-Rashidi 2004b).

The protests against *Hassan wa Murqus* also arose from an alleged attempt to protect religion, as protesters encouraged people to boycott Adel Imam, because ‘[t]his man is promoting conversion to Christianity’ (El-Hennawy 2008). Without being particularly articulate, they were referring to Islamic law on apostasy, thus maintaining the superiority of religious law (or doctrine) over practices of modern popular culture. In other words, the right of religion trumped the actor’s right to the role he was casted to play.

This fear of transgressions in the form of Muslims becoming Christians (even if only as actor playing a role) or Christians becoming Muslims was also the reason for protests against the *musalsalat* [drama series] *Awan al-Ward* [Time of the Roses] that was broadcast during Ramadan in January 2000. The television serial was a result of the state’s encouragement to include Copts as mediated figures and presented a Coptic leading figure (Abu-Lughod 2005: 176ff). However, instead of creating tolerance towards diversity, a Coptic lawyer filed a case in order to get it prohibited, because the female main character converts into Islam in the end (ibid.). Since Coptic Christianity doctrine does not condemn apostasy,



the protest reflected the convergence between the right to difference and right to religion. Religious differences are not to be touched; they should stay as they are and people converting – even only as fictional figures – is perceived as a threat towards the order of things.

In the eyes of the religious protesters, issues of human and minority rights are a question of the right to religion more so than the individual's right to religious freedom. It is the right to establish authority or authoritative interpretations legitimated by religion.

In this context, it is crucial that the legitimacy of this claim is strengthened by the state surrendering the power of definition to the Church, as well as keeping up religious-based laws on apostasy. Moreover, the state censorship appears to support such claims by its reluctance to deal with these issues. All films in Egypt face state censorship, but when the topic refers to religion, the sensitivity of the censors in order to avoid public protests is bigger than when it comes to other subjects. For such cases, Mehrez describes how the state censorship committee hands over the case to a specific committee set up for the purpose of avoiding problems itself (Mehrez 2010: 205). The argument is that the religious question may create religious responses, and in the case of *Baheb el-Cima*, the last committee of many included religious authorities from the Coptic Church. This last committee, however, never came into function (ibid.). My argument is that in order to understand such diverse public responses to mediated representations of Copts and Muslim-Coptic relations, it is necessary to examine the influence of hegemonic discourses institutionalised by powerful institutions like the State and the Church. Furthermore, it is vital to look into how the same institutions legally or bureaucratically support protests of the kinds examined in this chapter.

## Conclusion

The portrayal of united Muslims and Christians against the backdrop of the country going into pieces in the end of *Hassan wa Murqus* is very similar to the images that have been broadcasted by Egyptian state television since the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. Thus, hegemonic discourse is very much alive and has been used in particular sensitive situations to calm down conflicts. Thus videos celebrating a diverse and unified people were transmitted during and after the Maspero tragedy in October 2011 in which 28 people, among them two Copts, were killed in clashes between Coptic demonstrators and military in Cairo. After the removal of the Egyptian president Morsi in July 2013, the same images were also in use. During this same period, violent clashes between or attacks on Copts have increased without any serious attempts by the state to restrain such

sectarian clashes. The most serious attempt has been to elect the former field marshal Sisi as the country's new president in June 2014, by the support of the State. Consequently, it is likely that official and publically legitimate portrayals of the relationship between Muslims and Copts in Egypt will follow the same lines as previously by emphasising unity. The Maspero tragedy furthermore constructed one of the victims, *Mina Daniel*, as a victim of the people's revolution and not as a victim of persecution of Copts. Thus, the tragedy was inscribed in the unity discourse. At the same time, however, another Coptic victim was given his own Facebook site in memorial. On the site, he is depicted as a Coptic martyr, thus associating him with other Coptic martyrs who historically have been victims of Muslim persecution.

In addition to these examples and the two films *Baheb el-Cima* and *Hassan wa Murqus* illustrate how the liberalisation of media and detachment from state institutions invites for diversity in media use as well as media representations leading to negotiations of power of definition. The pivotal point for the protest against *Baheb el-Cima* was the struggle for the power to represent Egyptian cultural, religious and current identity. It was definitely not only a struggle for a specific representation of the minority; it was also a struggle for the authority to represent and define. What I have tried to argue is that the Coptic opposition against *Baheb el-Cima* is not just a matter of a clash between global liberal narratives of freedom against local regressive narrative of religions. Narratives of difference, freedom and religion converge in the mobilisation of support from particular others. In this process, different pairs of differences are produced: minority versus majority, Muslim versus Christian, non-religious versus believer. Because of the displacements between them, the Coptic Orthodox Church is able to ignore that the film primarily depicts Protestant Christians when it refers to the clash-of-religion narrative as valid for all Christians who are victims of the same narrative. At the same time, within the ontological narrative of religion, it may claim that the marriage between protestant and orthodox Christians is against the doctrine and hence non-representative.

The different narratives of difference and sameness used by the opponents are embedded in an on-going struggle over Egyptian identity. The filmic representation illustrates that the narrative about a culturally pluralistic Egypt does exist, but the extent to which this story can be told or must be silenced faces difficulty as long as it is considered to contest the national narrative of unity and religious ontological narratives.

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