

HISTORY and THE PRESENT

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CHAPTER 7

The Two Pasts of Nasser's Peasants
Political Memories and Everyday Life
in an Egyptian Village¹

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In this essay I deal with notions of Time, examining in particular two ways of thinking about the past in an Egyptian village—which I denote here by the pseudonym 'Izbet Imam'.² My effort is to discern how, at the local level of the community, ideas about the past are used to define the community as such and to express a collective image of a moral and political order. Temporal concepts are used to express ideas about experienced, imagined or idealised social orders rather than being empty chronological markers or punctuations of an already patterned existence. Village boundaries and peasant identity are neither given nor taken for granted. They are continuously being created, defined and altered. Notions and practices of time, with their multiple meanings and varied referents, help create and make sense of such existence. They are fields where the personal, local and

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² Izbet Imam is a small village (or large hamlet) in the Governorate of Fayoum. The ethnographic present here refers to the year 1989–90, when the bulk of fieldwork was carried out. The population of Imam then was a little over 800 inhabitants. Apart from that year, I have been going back to Imam regularly for short visits, the last of which was in September 2001.

national levels merge. This essay deals with the way peasants of Imam use the notion of *zamaan*. *Zamaan* means 'then', 'before', or 'past', and is to be distinguished from *zaman*, which means 'time'. In Imam, two main usages of *zamaan* are discernible. These two usages are distinguishable according to the kind of 'present' from which they emanate and with which they are contrasted. One usage of *zamaan* is linked to the issue of identity. It stems from and reinforces abstract aspects of the present, particularly the community's image of its moral and political order. This usage of *zamaan* is marked by employing a concrete event as a divider of Time, namely the well-defined turning point of Agrarian Reform (*Islah*), which was implemented nationwide shortly after the 1952 Revolution. By contrast, the other usage of *zamaan* shows a more immediate and more complex link with the present. While stemming from the concrete concerns of everyday life, it is elusive, ambiguous, ambivalent and abstract. It has to do with the experience and perception of change. In what follows I rely primarily on testimonies of peasants of Izbet Imam.

Zamaan: A Temporal Dichotomy

Agrarian Reform (*Islah*) did not significantly affect Imam but the reform nonetheless was, and continues to be, a momentous event in its history. The significance of Agrarian Reform for people in Imam is not the redistribution of land to beneficiaries so much as the regulation of tenancy relations.³ Laws fixed rent at seven times the land tax in addition to securing the position of tenants *vis-à-vis* landowners, whereby the latter could no longer evict tenants from the land.⁴ The security thus afforded to the peasants justifies to a great extent the enthusiasm they feel towards *Islah*. However, the meaning of *Islah* goes beyond its direct link with secure tenancy. For the peasants of Imam, *Islah* is an important event ushering in a new age; it functions as a major marker of the transition between past and present. When

³ Only four of the residents of Imam benefited from the redistribution of land expropriated from Mursi Bahgat. The heirs of the initial beneficiaries now hold this land.

⁴ This is no longer the case, and the situation has changed, after the Parliament passed new tenancy laws in 1992 giving landowners the right to evict tenants after a five-year transitional period, which lapsed in October 1997.

the history of the community is the focus of the talk on 'past and present', the gradual passage from past to present implicit in the general discourse on 'time' and 'change' gives way to a notion of 'break' or 'rupture'. The rupture is invariably linked to *Islah*. There are two major implications for this link. Firstly, *Islah* becomes a reified symbolic concept, while its present state as a concrete bureaucratic apparatus is ignored.⁵ Secondly, the temporal categories of past and present evoke and connote other 'ideal type' dualities that correspond to images of 'bad' and 'good', respectively.

For the people of Imam, *Islah* means more than the decision to redistribute land or fix the tenancy relations. Originally, *Al-Islah al-Zira'i* (Agrarian Reform) was the name given by the state to the set of measures aimed at reforming the structure of landholding, and hence the power structure in the country. In terms of political rhetoric, it has the same 'status' as the Five-Year-Plan or the Arab Socialist Union. It is natural that a political decision which affected peasants' lives must be remembered and often mentioned. However, *Islah* is not only remembered but its significance has been intensified, and the effects it brought about broadened to include almost all of the attributes of a good life.

In general, it is not my intention to match 'what peasants think' with 'what actually happened'. However, in the case of Agrarian Reform the striking disparity between the two levels is crucial for understanding how peasants of Imam reconstruct their past. From a political economy perspective, the effects of the Reform may be considered extremely limited and do not warrant all the positive evaluation that Agrarian Reform receives in Imam. The same perspective would attribute peasants' misery in the past to land shortage, and to scarce work opportunities rather than to 'feudalism' or to work organisation being based on an estate system. Relying solely on political economy, it would be impossible to understand the centrality of *Islah* in the discourse on change in Imam. On the other hand, the metaphorical and symbolic component of *Islah* would be obscured or go

⁵ It could be argued that the very limited number of beneficiaries contributed to the idealisation and mystification of Agrarian Reform. Only four persons in Imam have to deal with the Agrarian Reform Cooperative, which is situated in another village. For the rest, agrarian reform is not a village reality but a village memory.

unnoticed without setting it against some objective referent. The way in which peasants express what *Islah* means to them helps us understand why it serves as a breaking point with the past. Through perpetuating the metaphor of *Islah* and portraying their past identity as victims of 'feudalism', peasants of Imam establish themselves within 'national history'.

The Age of Feudalism

Most complaints about the past were directed specifically at 'injustice' (*zulm*) and 'exploitation' (*istighal*) due to the dominance of 'feudalism' (*iqta*). The 'ideal type' of the pre-*Islah* phase is constructed from elements of personal experience embedded in a context of Nasserist rhetoric. The use of such rhetoric serves to distance the past from the present and reinforce the idea of 'the rupture'. The terminology of such rhetoric is expressed in a form of classical Arabic which is comprehensible to the peasants yet is quite distinct from everyday language. The use of such words as *iqta* and *istighlal* marks a shift to a different discursive level characterised by a higher degree of seriousness. Appropriating such rhetoric to describe personal or communal experience, moreover, is an instance where personal, communal and national levels are merged.

The meaning of 'feudalism' to the peasants of Imam is unambiguous. It is the phase that existed before *Islah* both in the village and in Egypt as a whole. This terminology is borrowed from the rhetoric of the Revolution, yet there is one major difference in the way it is employed. People of Imam consider 'feudalists' their own enemies rather than enemies of the nation at a macro political level. They are evil mainly because they stood in the way of a secure livelihood for peasants.

Apart from adopting the rhetoric of the Revolution to describe their past, there is another important feature that characterises memories of the pre-*Islah* phase, namely the expression of extreme humiliation. Here, I quote one of the peasants describing the significance of the reform:

The day Nasser died—all the people, and the persons standing in front of you—I was crying so hard, even harder than when my own father died.

We were crying because we tasted bitterness and sweetness. Before the Revolution, I would be renting a piece of land when the owner came at the middle of the crop telling me: 'Go out. I do not owe you anything.' And I wouldn't be able to say anything.

Sami Ahmed⁶ had an estate that he farmed directly by bringing daily labour. He would sit on the road with his overseer next to him and would tell him:

'Abu Ashry, do you know so and so and so? Don't let them set foot in the field. That would be because these people would be a bit old or too young. He wanted only strong young men, like they do in the army . . . So Abu Ashry would sit on the canal and shout to someone: 'Where do you think you are going, you dog?' The man would tell him that he wants to work. Abu Ashry would then send him back, and he would do the same with other men. You would see the sight of the men returning shamefully to their homes and would feel very sorry for them, and God would feel sorry for them. And all this was for a wage of 10 piasters a day. There was no work in those days. There were no factories or buildings like they build nowadays. Only farming . . . Those men who would return to their homes without work, their wives would have to sell something from the house, either a copper pot, or a chicken. This went on until Nasser came and said one should not leave the land he is farming. He helped the people by *Islah*. So of course when Nasser died, should we or shouldn't we cry for him? This song they used to sing for him was very accurate: *Ya rafi' rayt-el Hureyya* [you are the upholder of the banner of freedom]. He is the one who put the big people at the same level with the small people.

This quotation encompasses a number of issues which are essential to an understanding of 'the meaning of *Islah*' for the peasants of Imam. 'Bitterness and sweetness' is only one set of opposites employed to describe the difference between past and present, i.e. before and after *Islah*. The major causes of the 'bitterness' of the old days are the insecure tenancy and the shortage of work opportunities. The 'sweetness' was brought about by securing tenancy relations and, as implied by Kulayb, through the increased options for work outside the village. What is of interest here is the moral ideal-typical categories in which this predominantly economic transition is expressed. A duality often employed to reconstruct the past is that of humiliation/dignity or feudalism/freedom.

⁶ Pseudonym.

Stories of the misery of the past are always very graphic and striking. 'The sight of the men returning shamefully to their homes', for example, cannot be reduced to 'unemployment'. Most importantly, such stories of the miserable past carry the idea of an inversion of a 'natural' order. The village ideal associates the men with the public world and the women with the home. Thus the return of the men to the home, humiliated, and the women's taking up the responsibility of providing for the household by selling their pots or poultry, is an expression of extreme humiliation which amounts to a negation of manhood.

In the accounts of the actual conditions of work, it is clear that the main 'objective' problem was the precariousness of tenancy relations, and the excess of labour supply over demand. This situation resulted in the increased power of the estate personnel and the feeling of peasants that they were at their mercy.

Sabry says:

Zamaan there was *gahl* [ignorance]. There was a man here called Shirbini⁷ who was working as an overseer for the owner. This man used to give us our [money] day by day. He used to humiliate a man for the piaster he was giving him. He used to say: 'Stand outside and ask God to give you 10 piasters. He won't. But if you say: please Shirbini give me 10 piasters, I can.'

Sabry's account of the *nazir's* treatment of the peasants is particularly significant. It carries the common theme of humiliation by estate personnel, but, in addition, the nature of the insult in this case makes it more striking. The nazir boasting that he can do what God cannot is not just a matter of oppression and injustice (although it is that as well). Such a sacrilegious claim of superiority over God is the ultimate in decadence and moral corruption. Sabry's choice of the word *gahl* to damn zamaan is in accordance with this sacrilegious image. *Gahl* does not simply imply an 'ignorant past'. Besides meaning ignorance, *gahl* connotes *Jahiliyya*, or pre-Islamic ignorance of God and true religion.⁸

⁷ Pseudonym.

⁸ Amitav Ghosh writes of the peasants in the Delta governorate of Beheria where he did his fieldwork: 'In their reckoning of time the revolution of 1952

These memories are relegated to a 'past' with no relationship to the present. Extreme humiliation and inverted order help set that phase apart, which in turn exempts such accounts from the severe judgements of honour and shame. This 'temporal remoteness' parallels the 'spatial remoteness' of the migration situation where narratives emphasise the theme of exposing vulnerability. In both cases 'remoteness' is used to cast the blame of humiliation on the 'time' or 'place' rather than the individual or the group. But also the horrific, unnatural and extraordinary content of the memories reinforces the temporal and spatial discontinuity. What was threatened was not only livelihood but a moral order as well.

The Age of Freedom

The image of the world in which the peasants of Imam live in the present is a negation of the pre-reform ideal type. The image of these two phases exist only with reference to each other. What characterises this 'present' is freedom (*hurriyya*), dignity and pride. Freedom negates feudalism and humiliation. This present, antithetical to the pre-Islah past, does not emanate from, nor does it address, the concrete experiences of everyday life. Rather, it is a reflection of the villagers' idea of an abstract moral order. Moreover, and more importantly, this present is not a result of a gradual, cumulative process of transition from the feudal past. Past and present are discrete phases with no temporal link. The present is always juxtaposed to the past as opposite, mutually exclusive ideal types. This abrupt transformation from one 'world' to the other is effected through Nasser and Islah. In order to elaborate on what the present means, two interrelated aspects of the 'present' phase need to be addressed. These are the perceptions of Nasser and the meanings of freedom.

Since changes brought about by Islah are minimal, and Izbet Imam did not suffer from the 'atrocities of feudalism' encountered in other

(*as-sawra*) forms a division of epochs almost parallel to that between Islam and *Jahiliyya* (the times of ignorance).' 'Categories of Labour and the Orientation of the Fella Economy', *The Diversity of the Muslim Community*, ed. Ahmed al-Shahi (London: Ithaca Press, 1987), p. 120.

parts of Egypt, it is curious that villagers insist that they suffered 'exploitative feudalism', and a 'conspiracy of Pashas', and that Islah delivered them from these conditions. In order to understand the centrality of Islah we have to look at peasants' feelings towards Nasser. The effect of Islah are dramatised in order to accommodate all the gratitude and positive feelings peasants have for him. Islah is considered a personal gift from the President to peasants. What this 'gift' embodies is not only land or secure tenancy. More important, perhaps, is the symbolic content of the gift, reflected in the fact that Islah is locally known as 'The Law of Freedom'.

Peasants of Imam have no glorious past to which they look back or in which they take pride. Islah functions as the chosen time for the 'birth' of this community. It is incorporated as an event of local history to mark the beginning of a communal history and identity that is worth building upon. It is a present not in the sense of the immediate moment, but because it is continuous with such a moment. What is meant by present in this sense is the moral and political basis of the existing order. This is a case where local history is not only modelled along national history but also relies on it for symbols, periodisation and a hero.

This process of 'linking up' with national history is expressed in a generalised peasant voice through which peasants of Imam identify with Egyptian peasants at large. In this context, the community of Imam is part of a much larger community based on a shared peasant identity. Both the humiliation and the deliverance are generalised.

Abu said:

Nasser is the one who established freedom. He is the one who implemented Islah. Otherwise we would have still been slaves to be bought and sold. He issued the Law of Freedom when he saw the peasants being whipped and humiliated. He felt pity for those small people. He felt so sorry for them.

Eweis says:

The Year of Freedom was when Nasser said: 'No exploitation and no feudalism after today.' I can't remember when it was exactly. He said 'the rich and the poor are the same, and the peasant will take his harvest home with him.'

'Freedom' as used by peasants of Imam is associated with its usage as a powerful idiom in the post-independence rhetoric. Peasants share the official expression of the rupture with the past and the beginning of a new age expressed in freedom from the British occupation and the monarchical regime. This corresponds to an integrated vision of the negative aspects of the past.

In Nasserist rhetoric, 'freedom' was linked to the person of Nasser, as evident in the 'official', but also very popular song, 'Nasser *ya Huriyya*' (Nasser: you are freedom). In Imam, freedom from exploitation and feudalism is directly linked to Nasser, whose 'Law of Freedom' ushered in the 'birth' of the community, and of 'the present'. The community in question is not exclusively Imam, as there is a degree of identification with the collectivity of Egyptian peasants. The scene of Nasser 'witnessing' peasants being whipped and humiliated evokes immediacy and personalises Nasser's relationship to peasants in general. So also does his order that 'the peasant . . . take his harvest home with him.' Such 'scenes', in addition to renaming the Agrarian Reform Law as the Law of Freedom, are part of a process of appropriation and redefinition whereby the national symbols are transformed into local symbols.

The Year of Freedom, and Law of Freedom, being very specific events, are referred to by specific, but often different, dates. It is interesting that the frequently used dates are 1956 and 1967, which are the dates of major wars. The arbitrary matching of important dates with important events is very common and points to an interesting link between the village and official discourses. Dates of significant national events enter the village discourse through the media and school textbooks. Aspects of discourse about 'the nation' form part of a special repertoire of significant markers that includes, apart from dates, names of national leaders and select phrases in classical Arabic. When such dates are used the intention is to shift the speech to a level of 'seriousness' rather than to anchor an event in time.

Abu Abdu Fergani:

Nasser issued the law that said the peasant is not to be thrown out from his field. Nasser, God rest his soul, gave life to the peasant. Before him, the peasant was thrown out from his field and home. Then he issued this

law, and his funeral was something no one has ever seen before even for kings. All of us held funerals for him and we were crying so hard that day.

Our country is beautiful, and God made it even more beautiful by sending Nasser to us.

The near-prophetic image of Nasser as sent by God is particularly important. To say 'Nasser gave life to the peasants' is in accordance with the common image of the 'birth' of the community with the advent of *Islah*. This is the chosen beginning of the history of Imam, and Nasser is the chosen ancestor. It could even be argued that people attempt to establish a genealogical link with Nasser through naming their children after him. Kulayb cried for his death more than he did for that of his own father. That he is a local hero is attested to by the fact that peasants of Imam organised funerals in their villages. Um Ayyub describes these local funerals: 'When Nasser died, funerals [broke out] in Fayoum. The people would put the coffin and cover it with white cloth. In every street there was a coffin and women screaming.' There is an important economic aspects as well as an 'ideological' content to the notion of freedom. Abdennabi says: 'In the past people were living in misery. There was no work and there was no money. There was nothing such as going abroad or even going to Fayoum to work. There was no money because the government left the feudalists to exploit the peasants, but now there is freedom.'

Although Abdennabi explains the misery of the past as due to lack of money and work options, he still blames it on the feudalists' exploitation of peasants. Freedom, in the sense he uses it, refers to increased work options, including migration, and the increase in money. Freedom here refers to the economic transition to a more monetarised economy, with the peasants having access to its varied options. What he implies, however, is that it was feudalism that stood in the path of such a positive transformation.

From a political economy perspective, as I have suggested, the peasants' misery in the past was caused by land shortage and scarce work opportunities. This perspective identifies the mid-1970s as a watershed, mainly because of the wage-boom due to the open-door policy and migration to oil-rich countries. All this led to the 'opening up' of the village and the increase in work opportunities for the landless peasants who form the majority. From the peasants' point

of view, however, we get a different picture. Rather than the open-door policy, it is *Islah* that is seen as instrumental in bringing about the transition to a more monetarised economy, which is itself conflated with abolishing feudalism. The idea of freedom links these two aspects of change, whereby the present is characterised by freedom from oppression and freedom to choose work.⁹

There is an obvious linking of monetarisation with *Islah* and the abolition of 'feudalism'. It is also interesting to note that the 'increase of money' (*kuṭr el-fulus*) in its link with *Islah* is invariably considered as a positive thing, indicating a better standard of living. This contrasts with the other notion of *zamaan* where the increase of money is always linked to inflation, and there are mixed feelings regarding this issue. Ironically, this improvement in living conditions due to the increase in daily wages, a phenomenon of the mid-1970s, is attributed to Nasser and *Islah* rather than Sadat and the open door.

Among the additional attributes of good life brought about by *Islah* and the Revolution in general are issues related to the notion of 'progress' in mechanisation, education, health and electricity. Contrary to the notion of freedom, peasants regard the notion of progress with ambivalence. Also, the areas subsumed under this notion are perceived as part of a process of gradual change rather than as result of abrupt shift. Although some of the aspects of life associated with progress are seen as a result of 1952 Revolution, they are mostly talked about in the context of the other notion of *zamaan*.

Zamaan: Temporal Continuity

The dichotomous view of *zamaan* rests on contrasting two antithetical and clear-cut images of past and present. This view of *zamaan* represents abstract and ideological aspects like a peasant identity and the birth of the present political order characterised by 'freedom'.

⁹ Amitav Ghosh mentions that the idea of freedom, used by peasants to express the post-1952 present, 'consists primarily in the freedom to work as they please' (op. cit., p. 120). The Beheira peasants that Ghosh worked with, however, had memories of forced labour on land of large landowners and recruitment for the Nile corvee. Therefore the freedom from oppression and freedom to work would refer to the same transition, that of abolishing feudalism.

This dichotomous view coexists with another way in which the past is perceived, a way that is characterised by temporal continuity and by a continuous tension between elements of contradiction existing in both the past and the present. This view of *zamaan*, which is dynamic and practical, deals with experienced and perceived social 'change' in which temporal process is more apparent. *Zamaan*, in this sense, is expressed in a language that conveys the idea of the gradual passage of Time, whose linearity is gauged against other measurable categories such as rising prices or the life stages of individuals.

This *zamaan* of temporal continuity lacks the certainty of the former notion since the central question of which is better, the past or the present, remains unresolved. The main difference between the two notions lies in the different concerns of the 'present' from which they emanate. *Zamaan* of temporal continuity emanates from immediate and practical concerns of present everyday life. The issue that figures prominently in the discourse of this *zamaan* is 'money', which serves as a focus for the tension between 'progress' and 'authenticity'.

Monetarisisation/Inflation

This way of thinking about the past displays ambivalence and rests on a continuous tension between valuing progress and varied options of the present on the one hand, and nostalgia for a past which seemed more comprehensible and under control on the other. This tension is expressed in the context of attitudes towards money.

Change is primarily conceived of in relation to inflation, which is also the context in which the term *zamaan* is most frequently employed. Even people in their teens are thus able to participate in a conversation about how cheap things were 'zamaan'. However, accounts receive more credibility and generally have a stronger impact when told by an older person. The same lines spoken by the same person over and over again about how, *zamaan*, an egg cost one millime might create astonishment and lamentation about the good old days, or generate boredom and despair, but always evokes a characterisation of the present as a bad time (*zaman wihish*). These stories are in fact most often instigated on the occasion of damning present Time. They usually follow a general complaint about the difficulty of life nowadays because of *ghala* (inflation).

Views on the past emanate from the immediate concerns of everyday life, with soaring food prices being paramount among people's concerns. Therefore it is not surprising that a central theme of the reminiscences is the extraordinarily low food prices in the past.

It is easy to overlook 'cheap food' reminiscences and to consider them unimportant. They are often repeated, and are not even employed as part of a more significant anecdote. Whenever the 'cheap food' memory is part of a story, the latter serves no more than a background to the main highlight: *zamaan*, one egg cost one millime. It is the frequency and the stable, almost monotonous structure of such reminiscences that make them all the more interesting.

Food is a central theme in the discourse of social change. 'Cheap food' stories serve as a medium wherein temporal continuity is articulated and expressed. Rising prices provide a measurement of time that moves in a linear way. The earliest point on this scale corresponds to the cheapest period that could be remembered. The rise in prices corresponds to the passage of time. This linear effect implies a continuous Time, with the continuity involving not only the present but the future as well.

Um Nasser:

We used to pay half a piaster for a ride in a cart, then the fare became one piaster. Then we paid 2 piasters for a ride in the service cars, and then it became 5 piasters, then 10. The years follow each other with no gaps in between. They directly follow one another with the increase in money . . . The more there is money, the more the Time raises the prices. The government raises prices, and people say that the government is going to abolish the two-piaster loaf, and will increase the price of flour.

Talking about money is often expressed as '*el-fulus kitrit*' (money has increased), which is mainly an acknowledgment that people can now earn more. They sell agricultural produce at higher prices, wages have increased, work opportunities have, since the mid-1970s, increased because of construction work in cities and migration to oil-rich countries. When the issue of the increase of money is introduced, rising prices are not a simple progression which punctuate a continuous time. Money and *ghala* combined constitute the paradox of inflation. In the past there was little money but things were cheap.

At present, money is abundant but things are expensive. The unresolvable question of whether the past or the present is better poses itself at this juncture. No attempt is made at synthesising a more harmonious or coherent attitude towards this issue (or indeed towards many others). Contradictory statements are articulated in full by the same person, often at the same time.

The causal link that Um Nasser establishes between inflation (*ghala*) and the increase of money is not very common. It is more common to regard *ghala* as an independent force, which is at times personified with the use of verbs like 'ghala moved on', 'ghala descended upon us', or 'ghala turned the world upside down'. However, people talk a lot about money and *ghala* in conjunction with each other. They juxtapose the two elements of the 'inflation paradox' in a continuous comparison between past and present, which reflects the precariousness of the present and apprehensions concerning the future. When talking about the past in this context, they often portray it as a time when a balance existed between prices and goods. Such balance which cannot be achieved at present, is accounted for, not by the cheap prices of the past, but by the fact that at that time money had *Baraka* (blessing).

Um Nasser:

Zamaan was better than now. Now the money has increased, but *ghala* descended upon us. Money is abundant, but things are expensive. One wonders about the future. In the beginning, we could buy everything for 35 piasters, but now the 10 pounds has no *karama* [dignity/miraculous power]; it is not [compatible] with the time . . . People now are surviving; whether things are cheap or expensive they say that '*el-irish ktir*' [money is abundant]. Zamaan was a comfortable time. Today is still better than the past times. Zamaan is gone, and my time is the present—isn't one supposed to bend with the wind?

Um Eid:

Zamaan things were cheap but money scarce. My husband used to work for 30 piasters a day, and we were managing. Today a man earns 10 pounds a day but they don't have *Baraka*. There is a lot of money but when you look at the things you can buy with the 10 pounds it is nothing. Zamaan there was abundance, and we saw lots of good things. A kilogram

of meat cost 50 piasters, and our children could eat. Now this poor generation is deprived.

Um Ayyub:

Now is better than zamaan because money is abundant and [we sell the produce for more] . . . But zamaan was better because you could buy so many things for 10 piasters. Now the money does not have any *Baraka*. Zamaan the money was *mabruka* [blessed]. Now money is abundant but things are expensive. When one had a five-pound note in his pocket it was like a thousand pounds. One could go and buy lots of things: clothes and meat and fish. But *ghala* turned the world upside down.

Baraka, a term mostly, though not exclusively, used by women is a key notion for understanding how peasants deal with this paradox. *Baraka* works either on the little money to increase its purchasing power or on the goods to increase their utility value.¹⁰ When *Baraka* is used, stress is placed on its association with the past to make it kinder and more familiar rather than on the specific economic function it performs on the goods or the money. The way Um Nasser expresses the loss of power of the 10 pounds ('the 10 pounds has no *karama*')¹¹ illustrates the idea that money possessed miraculous power in the past. The double meaning of the word *karama* (dignity/saints' miracles) corresponds to the double sense in which money lost power. The 10 pounds not only lost its purchasing power, and therefore its dignity, but also its magical power and ability to perform miracles.

The past here does not refer to a specific phase, but to an undefined earlier time when life seemed under control. Perhaps very few people would be able to tell whether the actual living conditions were better then or now, but few people would disagree with the popular proverb: 'what you know is better than what you do not know'. The familiar past is often contrasted with the unknown future. Farag: 'You never know what is going to happen tomorrow. Yesterday was better than

¹⁰ For an interesting analysis of the link between *Baraka* and popular perceptions of plenty in the Arab World, see Nadia Abu Zahra, 'Al-Tasawwur al-Sha'bi lil-Gu' wal Shaba' fi Ba'd al-Bilad al-'Arabiyya' (Popular Images of Hunger and Plenty in Some Arab Countries), *Alif*, 7, 1987.

¹¹ This is Um Nasser's unique expression. In general, Um Nasser's language is highly colourful and creative.

today. The day that passes is better than the coming one of which you do not know what is going to happen. And today is better than tomorrow.'

Farag's words are applicable not only to time but to places, people, occupation, or any unknown situation. However, it is important to note that such 'conservative' views do not influence action to any significant extent. They form part of a 'traditional repertoire' whose elements enter into the process of negotiating certain types of action or of justifying lack of action when it seemed rational to have undertaken it.

The unease associated with the idea of '*kuṭr-el-fulus*' (the increase in money) has another reason, apart from its link with inflation. '*Kuṭr-el-fulus*' stands for increased and varied options for work. The real question becomes: what has one to give up in order to arrive at a share of this money? This question mainly faces members of the younger generation, be they landless or near landless peasants, or diploma graduates who cannot hope for a job to suit their qualifications. The most obvious option is travel, either to Cairo or to oil-rich countries. This abundant money is beyond the boundaries of the familiar. The serious question is: to leave or not to leave? When stating that 'money is abundant', there is always the apprehension of parting with the familiar: the past and the village.

The notion of the abundance of money is also closely linked to that of the market. Exchange and wage-labour relations within the village are also considered part of 'the market'. However, the idea of 'seeking work in the market' has a more specific meaning that mainly refers to a labour market for a diverse range of jobs in urban centres. There is ambivalence regarding this issue. On the one hand, 'the market' can be a place (or a situation) where honour is compromised. Abu Mahroussa's words illustrate this aspect of 'the market': 'there are many jobs but only those who go to the market with their faces shamelessly uncovered can find work'. On the other hand, admiration is often expressed for the 'entrepreneurial' qualities of those who can find their way in the market. These opposing views do not inform decisions and actions so much as justify situations in retrospect.

If people remain ambivalent as to how they feel towards monetarisation, there are other areas in which they definitely prefer the past. With aspects of the past that are not directly expressed in terms of

inflation, metaphors related to food and eating are often employed to describe change. The change in Time has much more to it than the inflation paradox. The abundance of money, and therefore the pursuit of money, are seen as a threat to the basis of the community itself. The following quotation is important not only because it reveals this point but also because of the eating metaphor, and the relationship of perception of zamaan to the personal zamaan of the life cycle element:

Um Bahr:

There is a big difference between zamaan and now. Zamaan people were content with each other. People used to sit on one *tabliyya* [eating table] and eat together, and life was calm and things were abundant. Now there is ghala but there is money. Zamaan people were good to each other. There was no going astray from a mother or a father, nor was there separation from them, but there was little money and the atmosphere was stagnant. Now things are expensive, but there is money. Zamaan there was abundance but no money. But now, thank God, you find that every young man goes out to work and earns money, and there is more giving and taking than before. But now every one pursues his way on his own . . . Now no one stays with the other. This is the way things are today . . . The features of the time changed a lot than before [*el-zaman ma'almu itghayyarii*]. Before, suppose I cooked, my pot would be dinner for my family, and two or three of the neighbouring families. Now you find that every one is secluded in his home. People don't mix together any more. There are crowds now but no one knows the other. Even your son wouldn't know you. Even my children don't know me now. I am speaking about myself. A person wants to know me only if he needs me, but if one does not need me he wouldn't care about me. I don't know why the time has been turned up side down and its features changed so much.

With perceptions of experienced change, views of past and present are much coloured by and interwoven with personal nostalgia and current problems. Therefore, what is often expressed as an attribute of old times is in fact based on experiences or memories of a particular stage of the life-cycle of an individual or a family.¹² The words of Um Bahr should be seen in this light. While saying: 'I am speaking about

¹² Cf. Michael Herzfeld's idea of 'structural nostalgia' whereby in 'each generation, people attribute the superior qualities of the past to its more perfect

myself', she is also making a statement about Time. She said these words shortly after her son and his wife moved out to a new house while she and her unmarried daughter remained in the old family house as part of the separation ('*azl*') arrangement with her son. Although '*azl*' is very common in the life cycle of rural households, mainly because of demographic pressure, its occurrence is never welcomed, especially by members of the older generation. It is not regarded as a natural or inevitable development and is almost always justified on the basis of conflict among the women. In the case of Um Bahr, '*azl*' was due to continuous conflict with her daughter-in-law, aggravated by the fact that the latter still had no children even after three years of marriage. This separation was against the wishes of Um Bahr, and she felt so hurt that she boycotted her son's house. Her anger was not unfounded, since the family house is large enough. Also, a major reason for this move was that her son had built a new red brick house using the money he earned in Iraq. Talk of the past reflects an increasing tension between the old and new generations since the latter are the ones who have actual or potential access to the newly opened venues for making money. The fact that Ahmed could force a separation arrangement on his mother because he could afford to is a sign of 'time turned upside down': it signifies a weakening of the authority of the older generation. From the elders' point of view, the changing time, and especially the pursuit of money, is causing the breakdown of the community.¹³ For their part, members of the younger generation often contest the golden age image of the past which is propagated by the older generation as a way of criticising this generation itself.

adherence to a set of structural rules and principles for the conduct of social life.' *A Place in History: Social and Monumental Time in a Cretan Town* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 75.

¹³ Lila Abu-Lughod traces 'a new sort of generational conflict' in Bedouin society to the new possibilities of economic independence available to young men. She links this conflict to the emergence of 'a discourse of defiance by young men' in which singing and listening to love songs plays a part. 'Shifting Politics in Bedouin Love Poetry', *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, ed., Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 39.

There is, in fact, an important generational element concerning the issues of 'enlightenment' and 'progress'. Although there is no clear-cut association of past with old or present with young, discourse on past and present occasionally betrays a polarisation along generational lines, and values associated with particular times are appropriated by, or assigned to, one or the other generation:

Abu Ashraf:

Zamaan people were content because there was *kheir* [plenty/good] and these things, but they were frustrated, though, because there was very little money. It is true that things were abundant, and as they say one kilo of meat cost 25 piasters, but many people could not afford that. Now there is lots of money and more enlightenment than before. People now read and write. In the past anyone who could hold a pen and write his name would be called *ustaz* [professor]. Now there is awareness [*wa'i*], and people educate their children.

Abu Ashraf, who is thirty-five and works as a driver and cook, expresses a latent tension between generations. The younger generation often express scepticism at the extent of the prosperity in *zamaan*, especially since 'cheap food' stories are used by elders to establish a supremacy over the younger: 'we have seen things that your generation will never see'. The young attempt to challenge and discredit the 'cheap food' myth in favour of the notion of 'abundant money', but again the opposition is never stated in clear-cut terms, or as if an established truth.

Nur, who received his commercial diploma one year earlier, was unable to find a suitable job, a situation he shared with the majority of the educated youth of the '*izba*'.¹⁴ Like his peers, he found himself in a particularly difficult position because he could not make money unless he gave up the prestige associated with his education. This prestige can only be fulfilled by obtaining an office job as a government employee, something for which a graduate may have to wait up to seven or eight years. Nur worked for two years in Iraq as a peddler

¹⁴ A person would count as being educated if s/he at least finishes high school, obtaining either the general certificate or a specialised diploma. The majority of the educated youth of the '*izba*' are holders of a commercial or agricultural diploma.

and agricultural labourer, jobs not considered fit for an educated person. Although he does not renounce his membership in the village community, he shows signs of aspiration for an honorary urban status. He says: 'Zamaan, one could not study except under the light of the kerosene lamp. Now we have electricity, which has made the youth of the 'izba into doctors, journalists and lawyers. Good people came out of here. What do we call this? Progress.' For Nur, youths with prestigious occupations are a sign of progress. But although the educated youth of the 'izba particularly emphasise their identity as the generation of electricity and progress, cherishing the idea of the progress of the present time is by no means the monopoly of the young. Educated youth are a special source of pride for the whole 'izba.

Similarly, as the old express pride and satisfaction at the 'progress' that characterises the present, the young also partake in the nostalgia for the communal past of the 'izba.

Bakri:

All the days of zamaan were good. Zamaan, Nasser, Nur and I were together at school. We spent all our time together. But now we never sit together because life now is full of burdens, and one needs to go and earn money. Zamaan, when we were young, we spent the best days together. We studied together, and we spent all our time together. But now, Nasser is running to earn his bread, and I am the same.

Nur: The good thing about zamaan is that we used to gather together. The whole month of Ramadan all friends would be together. Now when Ramadan comes one goes to sleep immediately after being tired all day.

Nasser: What is tiring you?

Nur: Money. I need to go out and work and earn money.

As in the case of Um Bahr, memories pertaining to the individual's life-cycle enter perceptions of the past. The personal and the communal converge, and nostalgia for schooldays is indistinguishable from nostalgia for a communal past.

Nur's mention of the change associated with the month of Ramadan brings out a significant element regarding the perception and use of cyclical time and recurrent events. This is very different from what Françoise Zonabend recounts of the French village of Minot where, at a time of great change, the community stressed cycles and 'the

phenomenon of things that "return"¹⁵ in order to create an effect of stability and changelessness. In Imam, cyclical time is used to reinforce rather than undermine change. Ramadan of the present is not Ramadan of the past. Even the return of the seasons does not evoke repetitiveness and stability, and phrases like 'winter now is much colder than before' are very common.

Nature vs. Progress

Ambiguity and contradiction extend to areas other than attitudes towards money. A tension between health and nature on the one hand, and elements of progress on the other also figures prominently, and is very much analogous to the Baraka/money tension. The following is a typical example of such attitudes in the perception of change as progress.

Abu Mahrousa:

Kheir [plenty/good] disappeared since the day they invented those poisons. Those pesticides spoil the agriculture and spoil human beings. All crops now are sprayed. Everything we eat is polluted. We become poisoned . . . Also our cattle eat the sprayed food and they became ill . . . Zamaan, the buffalo produced 9 or 10 pounds of ghee a week, but now the greatest buffalo does not produce more than two pounds. Today a woman would not allow her child to eat a piece of ghee lest the pound would fall short. Thus she would be depriving her son of nourishment and causing him to be weak . . . Zamaan, my father would drink a pound of ghee. Today I haven't the strength of my father who is 84. When he shakes my hand I feel he is like a young man stronger than me. Now I wouldn't be able to drink more than three spoonfuls of *samn* [ghee]. The peasant of zamaan, when he steps over my foot, I think it is a buffalo that did it. That is because he never used to wear shoes except on feast days. But today the peasant would wear shoes while irrigating his field, and he would still be cold and miserable. Zamaan, everything worked by Baraka. When a child had fever, they would massage his body with curdled milk and cover

¹⁵ Examples of talk about 'things that return' in Minot: "Since the arrival of motor cars, marriages between cousins are happening again . . ." "People these last few years are attending Mass again"; "Ladybirds have returned to the gardens!" *The Enduring Memory: Time and History in a French Village*, trans. Anthony Forster (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 138.

him and put incense next to him, and that was it. Peoples were simple and behaved according to instinct. That was because medicine had not advanced. There was no medicine like today . . . But then, God was generous with us, and blessed us; science progressed, and now there is a health unit in every village.

The structure of this quotation and the formulaic language used show that the ambivalence is largely superficial. The peasant is not 'torn' in a situation of choice between a traditional and a modern way of life but is faced with inevitable forces of change, and has to 'bend with the wind', as Um Nasser says. The apparent contradiction is due to an attempt to express and talk about cherished memories of 'good life' without appearing reactionary or defying the hegemonic discourse of progress.

The content of Abu Mahroussa's argument is that in the past people ate better food, had better health and were stronger than nowadays, and there was *kheir* (abundance/plenty). His argument is constructed as a series of logical deductions from a 'scientific' fact. The causal link is stressed between the spread of pesticides and the decrease of ghee output per buffalo. When he talks about the traditional treatment of a sick child and justifies it by the lack of modern medicine at that time, this marks a transition to a different kind of language that is triggered by association rather than logic. This transition reveals an apologetic and defensive tone, and is a prelude to the formal salute of science and modern institutions of medicine.

These arguments are effective in preserving a positive image of the past, but not because of 'scientific proof', logical reasoning or causal links. The persuasiveness resides in certain key words that immediately connote and convey an image of the 'good life'. The past is associated with *kheir*, *Baraka* and *samn*. *Kheir* is not just the quantity or the nutritive value of the ghee. The disappearance of *kheir* entails not only the weakness and ill health of men, but also women depriving their children of nourishment, which points to the moral aspect of the notion *kheir* that literally means 'good'.

The use of *baraka* here is particularly significant. There is a difference between something having *Baraka* (*fih Baraka*), and something working by *Baraka* (*mashi bil-Baraka*). In the former usage, *Baraka* is an unambiguously positive term. In the latter usage, *Baraka*

still retains the inexplicable power to bring about good and 'make things work'. However, this is a usage that mainly implies a contrast with the calculable and the scientific as positive qualities lacking in those who rely on *Baraka* to run their lives. The tension emanating from the double meaning of this usage of *Baraka* triggers the shift to the language of progress.

Here, I give another example of the tension between nature and progress:

Fathi: The situation today is different from the situation zamaan. The peasant is now related to the age (*irtabat bel-marhala*). Now there is civilisation (*hadara*). In the past there was ignorance. There were no machines. The peasant used to hold his axe and work the whole day without finishing even one *kirat*, while now the machine would work 7 or 8 *feddans* a day while the peasant is resting.

Abu Said: But now the peasant's health is not what it used to be zamaan.

Fathi: This is because we used to eat pure ghee. There were no insecticides and poison . . . zamaan, the peasant liked to depend on himself for tilling the land. My father and I once tilled one *feddan* and a quarter, but now I could not even do 1/8th of a *feddan*. We used to eat wholesome food at home: ghee, eggs, and milk and all these good things. It was nourishing food that did not contain any impurities. Then we would take off to the field . . . There were no taps at that time. We used to purify the canal water with alum, and would drink it. There was health, and there was no bilharzia.

Reem: There wasn't?

Fathi: Bilharzia never died. It has always been there, but we did not know about it, and as long as you do not know about a disease it will never affect you.

Reem: How is that?

Fathi: This is what happened. We had never seen any one die of bilharzia. The situation in zamaan was different from these days . . . zamaan was nicer [*ahla*] than today. There was a taste to life, although there were many bad things but life itself had a taste. I mean there was ignorance but there was no cheating or hypocrisy. For example there was no vegetable fat like we see nowadays. We were all living on natural products. Life itself had a taste and a good spirit, and zamaan, a friend was a friend [*sahib*],

meaning a friend. It was not like now when people become friends only if there is a benefit.

Here again we find the combination of the different languages of authenticity and progress. Platitudes and axioms about modernity follow or precede a contrasting account of nostalgic reminiscences, the significance of which is obvious only to those who shared in it. This combination forms a pattern for talking of 'change as progress'. Contradictory statements are blatantly set side by side. Talk of the golden age of health and purity gradually loses momentum to give way to an explicit appreciation of the attributes of modern times, or vice versa. Judgement of past and present is suspended in this continuous tension.

Fathi begins with the formal acknowledgment of the value of progress exemplified by mechanisation and civilisation. Abu Said's comment on health in zamaan is not a challenge to a controversial statement as much as a cue for Fathi to switch to the other level, a switch anticipated and expected in this almost standardised way of talking about progress. As in the case of Abu Mahroussa, the health and strength of the past were due to pure food especially *samn*¹⁶ (ghee). *Samn baladi* embodies almost all of the positive qualities attributed to the past. It is a symbol and agent of kheir and purity. It is a source of health and the ability to drink it is itself a sign of good health. The appearance of vegetable fat (*nabatin*) is a sign of deterioration and is considered cheating. It is fake and artificial. There is a link between the appearance of nabatin and the disappearance of true friendship. Food and eating-related metaphors are common in describing change. 'The taste of life' seems particularly appropriate in linking pure ghee with true friends, as opposed to vegetable fat and false friends which are both signs of 'cheating and hypocrisy' and modern times.

Is the authenticity discourse of 'taste of life' and 'true friendship' any more genuine or expressive of what peasants 'really mean' or what they 'really feel' than the more formalised and hegemonic discourse

¹⁶ On the centrality of animal fat to Middle Eastern cultures from a culinary perspective, see Sami Zubaida, 'The Taste for Fat', *Mediterraneans*, n.d., 2 & 3, pp. 300-9.

of 'civilisation' and 'progress'? None of these discourses is more 'real' than the other, neither does one exist without the other. The discourse on change is inconclusive, and rests on the continuous tension between these two very different languages. Though volatile and potentially refutable by one another, they persist. Combined, they provide a discursive medium for the perpetual negotiation of changes related to matters of everyday experience.

In his article, 'Our Modernity', Partha Chatterjee presents examples of nineteenth and twentieth century writings on reminiscences of pre-modern India. In these examples, superior moral and physical qualities are attributed to members of earlier generations. Despite describing such comparisons between 'then' and 'now' as 'factually baseless' Chatterjee sees in them an important commentary on the way India has become modern. He argues that: 'There must be something in the very process of our becoming modern that continues to lead us, even in our acceptance of modernity, to a certain scepticism about its values and consequences.' According to Chatterjee, this scepticism is linked to the colonial history of Indian modernity, and the pre-modern golden age accounts reflect a refusal to accept the assumption of a universal modernity.¹⁷

Despite the striking similarity between Imam's peasants' expressions about the golden past and those Chatterjee quotes from the nineteenth-century-writer Rajnarayan Basu, I think that the former expressions, especially in their display of contradictory sentiments, cannot be solely explained as a commentary on a particular historical experience. It could perhaps be that this ambivalent attitude towards the past may have universal relevance. The essential problematic is neither identity-related nor culturally specific, although the terms in which it is expressed are, naturally, local. It has to do with attitude towards Time rather than History. This attitude is best described in Jerry White's words:

There is a constant and contradictory struggle within us about the place of the past in our understanding of the present: it was a golden age when things were better and since when things have gone steadily downhill; or,

¹⁷ *The Present History of West Bengal: Essays in Political Criticism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 196 and 204.

and often in one and the same breath, it was a bad time, when things were hard, since when there's been a time of progress so that we've all got it easy now.¹⁸ (emphasis added)

Although past and present are described in contrasting adjectives this in no way constitutes a clear dichotomy of good and bad. Progress and money of the present coexist with *kheir*, *Baraka*, and the good health of the past as strands of the ideological tension which echoes the tension in society as a whole, resulting from a rapid economic and social transformation: diversification of economic activity away from agriculture, and especially having to leave the village. The village is increasingly 'opening up', which results in threats to a previously taken-for-granted peasant identity. I am not arguing that a homogeneous, conflict-free peasant ideology ever existed, or that the present worldview is a mirror image of economic transformations. The uncertainty resulting from such transformation is echoed in the discourse on change; neither is uncertainty itself new, but the vocabulary and categories in which it is expressed are partly supplied by aspects of a particular economic transition. The coexistence of contradictory values underlines a tension resulting from a tacit acceptance of an inevitable change entailed in the increasing pressure to abandon the familiar and the need for an overt pursuit of money. The esteem with which 'traditional values' are regarded leaves an outlet for members of the older generation and, generally, those who are unable to benefit from modern options. The preservation of such values provides recourse for making failure respectable and defeat honourable. Attributes of the temporal categories of past and present can be transposed onto the spatial constructs of a familiar, kinder core of the village on the one hand, and the vast and impersonal outside world with its varied options and promise of wealth on the other.

¹⁸ 'Beyond Autobiography', *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 35-5.