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Hanan Hassan Hammad

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**Mechanizing People, Localizing Modernity**

**Industrialization and Social Transformation in Modern Egypt: al-Mahalla al-Kubra**

**1910- 1958**

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**Mechanizing People, Localizing Modernity**  
**Industrialization and Social Transformation in Modern Egypt: al-Mahalla al-Kubra**  
**1910- 1958**

**by**

**Hanan Hassan Hammad, B.S; M.A**

**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

To my parents, Layla Abu 'Ammu and Rif'at Hammad,  
and their people; men and women of al-Mahalla

## **Acknowledgements**

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It is very sad that this dissertation came to an end after Professor Ra'uf 'Abbas had passed away. With his generous help during conducting my research in Cairo,

Professor ‘Abbas lived up to his reputation as an emblem of Egyptian generosity and decency. Fortunately his vigorous revision of Egyptian history is still being carried out by his students in the Egyptian Society of Historical Studies in Cairo. Among them, I’d like to thank Professor Nasser Ibrahim for providing me with logistical help even when it put him at odds with the vicious bureaucracy of Cairo University.

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**Mechanizing People, Localizing Modernity**  
**Industrialization and Social Transformation in Modern Egypt: al-Mahalla al-Kubra**  
**1910- 1958**

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Hanan Hassan Hammad, PhD  
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This dissertation tells the tale of al-Mahalla al-Kubra during the transition from handloom crafts to the mechanized textile industry and from a local community to a battleground for the nationalist cause in the first half of the twentieth century. By exploring the relationships between culture, politics, and modern industrialization and how subaltern groups shaped their local experiences of modernity in a setting remote from the central government and the cosmopolitan culture of Cairo and Alexandria, it unpacks the social history of men and women, artisans and workers, notables and *fitiwwat* who were situated between national capitalism and foreign domination. The goal is to write the history of the society from the bottom up and to write a history that is an alternative to the already established histories of nationalism and colonialism. It provides a historical reconstruction and analysis of the process of assimilation undergone by the recruited peasants into urban industrial life and explores the various ways in which they



and the *Mahallawiyya* negotiated living together and dealt with their mutual hostility on an everyday basis. Identity is the core question in this process of assimilation. Did modern, horizontal class relations actually replace traditional, vertical communal and patronage relations? To what extent did the traditional social institutions help or hinder the process of adapting to forms of social life associated with modern industry? I argue that both vertical class and horizontal communal relations co-existed and sometimes competed. In that fluid dynamic, individuals and groups acted and interacted depending on their socio-economic status, communal commitments, conjuncture or the way that a given situation developed, and a shared, often contested, discourse.

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## Introduction

For centuries, al-Mahalla al-Kubra, located in the middle of the Nile Delta, had been one of the largest urban centers in Lower Egypt. Since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a large portion of its population has worked in the textile industry as artisans, merchants, exporters and importers. Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century their silk products were distributed all over the Ottoman Empire. By excelling in the weaving industry the townspeople acquired the reputation of possessing both skills and good taste. Egyptians have a saying, *Mahallawi wa la mit hawi*, one person from al-Mahalla is worth more than a hundred magicians and the people of al-Mahalla indulge themselves by saying *al-hulw Mahallawi sha`ruh gamil wa misawi*, a person from al-Mahalla is handsome with beautiful neat hair. With technical modifications and an increased focus on cotton textiles, the weavers of the town survived the competition with European textiles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Toward the end of the “long nineteenth century”, global penetration into the town intensified when Westerners established cotton ginning industries and financial institutions geared toward cotton exports.<sup>1</sup> Foreigners became more visible in al-Mahalla and the rest of the country, particularly after Egypt was brought under British occupation in 1882. The conflict between rising national capitalists and foreign domination during the interwar period spawned the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in 1927. The company was founded by Bank Misr as the first mechanized textile enterprise in Egypt owned by Egyptians. This development set in motion unsettling transformations in the town's social and economic life. Among these were the immigration into the town of thousands of peasants hired to work in the mill, rapid urbanization and population growth, and a host of new social and economic tensions

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1. The “long nineteenth century” in Egypt is a borrowed expression from Toledano. See: Ehud Toledano, “Social and economic change in the `long nineteenth century`,`” in *The Cambridge History of Egypt: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. M. W. Daly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 252-284.

between the urban population, who called themselves *Mahallawiyya*, or people of al-Mahalla, and the peasant workers who were called *Shirkawiyya*, or people of the company.

This dissertation tells the tale of al-Mahalla al-Kubra during the transition from handloom crafts to the mechanized textile industry and from a local community to a battleground for the nationalist cause in the first half of the twentieth century. By exploring the relationships between culture, politics, and modern industrialization and how subaltern groups shaped their local experiences of modernity in a setting remote from the central government and the cosmopolitan culture of Cairo and Alexandria, it unpacks the social history of men and women, artisans and workers, notables and *fitiwwat* who were situated between national capitalism and foreign domination. The goal is to write the history of the society from the bottom up and to write a history that is an alternative to the already established histories of nationalism and colonialism.

This study provides a historical reconstruction and analysis of the process of assimilation undergone by the recruited peasants into urban industrial life and explores the various ways in which they and the *Mahallawiyya* negotiated living together and dealt with their mutual hostility on an everyday basis. Identity is the core question in this process of assimilation. Did modern, horizontal class relations actually replace traditional, vertical communal and patronage relations? To what extent did the traditional social institutions help or hinder the process of adapting to forms of social life associated with modern industry? I argue that both vertical class and horizontal communal relations co-existed and sometimes competed. In that fluid dynamic, individuals and groups acted and interacted depending on their socio-economic status, communal commitments, conjuncture or the way that a given situation developed, and a shared, often contested, discourse. For instance, workers who acted in solidarity against the administration of the company normally were divided into hostile groups based on their regional origins. Thus, it is not surprising to find that although the poor *Mahallawiyya* were hostile to the poor *Shirkawiyya* on a social and cultural level, the former nonetheless supported the latter's strikes. This argument is an alternative to the structuralist approach that looks at classes as an



economically-based formation and the culturist approach that emphasizes the discursive process in making individuals conscious of their class position.<sup>2</sup>

In the intersection of nationalism and the making of modern working subjects, Egyptian capitalists during the interwar period won the hearts and minds of socio-economically ambitious *effendiyya*. As part of the modern middle class and the educated nationalists, *effendiyya* saw in Bank Misr and its companies, particularly the Misr Company in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, an embodiment of their national success and modernization. Locally, this vision did not gain as much acceptance among the people of al-Mahalla who saw in the Company and its workers as an exterior threat to their community. They deliberately mobilized to evict the *shirkawiyya* and to defeat the Company's parliamentary candidate. Inside the mill, peasants who had just become industrial workers negotiated labor management policies of the national capitalists and selectively chose what and when to resist or adapt to these policies. Both the people of the town and the Company workers identified and re-identified themselves and their communities in relation to each other, and in relation to national and local capitalism rather than in relation to foreign control.

This is not the story of the making of a working class along the lines of E.P. Thompson's classic of English history. It is not about the development of working-class consciousness among factory workers.<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that al-Mahalla's workers at no time possessed a working-class consciousness, but rather that their consciousness was produced and manifested in

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2. For the structuralist approach see Hanna Batatu, *The old social classes and the revolutionary movements of Iraq: a study of Iraq's old landed and commercial classes and of its Communists, Ba`thists, and Free Officers* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); *Syria's peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and their politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982). For this approach with exclusive focus on working class see: Goldberg, *Tinker, tailor, and textile worker: class and politics in Egypt, 1930-1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: nationalism, communism, Islam, and the Egyptian working class, 1882-1954* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987). Based on Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Community", Lockman clearly adopted the culturist approach and emphasized the discursive process in making individuals conscious of their class position. Zachary Lockman, *Workers and Working classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories Historiographies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). In his analysis of the social forces in the Iranian Revolution, Sami Zubaida successfully argues for the importance of political conjuncture or how a particular situation proceeds in forming a specific political position. Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the people and the state: essays on political ideas and movements in the Middle East* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993).

3. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1964).

relation to not only their employers, but often more importantly in relation to their families, communities, and the state. I argue that becoming a worker and an urban dweller was a gendered, classed, and communal experience through which workers did not only identify themselves as being in opposition to capitalists, but also in opposition to each other's communities and even against each other as individuals and groups. The complex experience of transformation from peasants to industrial workers was mapped in substantial part through the interaction between those workers, mostly young males living away from their families, with lower class women who invested in boarding houses and petty businesses geared towards workers' needs. Those women, like others in the town, tried to evade the power of the state and negotiated with communal forces. With little or no exposure to the nationalist feminist discourse, they brought change and even established new patterns of power with males in their households. These women and those workers actively shaped and localized modernity.

### **Historiography Notes**

By tracking the interaction between Mahallawiyya and Shirkawiyya in their peaceful and violent encounters, focusing on how Shirkawiyya adapted to and resisted urban industrial work and life, and exploring how lower class women made a living through property and small business management, I aim to illuminate a historically specific process of becoming communal, classed, and gendered modern, that in turn presents an alternative history of nationalism and imperialism. The focus of the traditional history of nationalism and colonialism on visible political institutions, diplomatic events, and intellectual currents of the high, as opposed to popular, culture has long confined the field of inquiry to upper class males at the expense of studying the role those of other classes or genders played in the historical process. When national Egyptian history tells the saga of success and failure against imperialism, Cairo, where major personas and political institutions were situated, is the central battleground. Other Egyptian towns are occasionally mentioned if they were visited by one of those elite men or became the host of a large scale confrontation for the nationalist cause. In the case of al-Mahalla, its position in the nationalist history is restricted to the tale of the Misr Company, the emblem of national

economic success. The national story prevailed to such an extent that localities tell their own stories as interesting stops in the journeys of the nationalist heroes. It is no surprise that schools, clinics, streets and other public places in al-Mahalla have been named after Tal`at Harb Pasha who founded the bank and the company and whose name also embellishes the commercial center of downtown Cairo. The very name al-Mahalla became associated, in the Egyptian mind, with the Misr Company. Although there have been many companies in the town of different sizes and working in different industries, when the people of al-Mahalla say “as-Shirka”, or the company, just as when Egyptians say Shirkat al-Mahalla, or the Company of al-Mahalla; both mean the Misr Company. The stories of the men and women of al-Mahalla, both before and after the town became a battleground between the national capitalists against European domination, are obscured by this struggle insofar as they do not fit comfortably into the nationalist historical narrative.

Breaking with the orientalist perception of Middle East history as the embodiment of the Islamic spirit, new trends of scholarship began writing the history and culture of the Middle East as the outcome of the complex interaction of material forces and ideological formations. Works on pre-modern Cairo, Aleppo, and Damascus societies by Hanna, Marcus and Grehan respectively, are a few notable examples.<sup>4</sup> Concerning the modern Middle East, modernization and the socio-economic history of social classes, peasants, urban craftsmen, casual laborers, in addition to big landlords and foreigners, have been major historical inquiries. Since the sweeping critique of modernization theory began to influence the field, two approaches have complemented each other in explaining different aspects of modernization and industrialization in the modern Middle East.<sup>5</sup> The first focuses on the state as an agent for industrialization and modernization, and tries to explain why the state had to play that role and/or why the outcome of

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4. Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) and “Privacy in Eighteenth Century Aleppo: The Limits of Cultural Ideals.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18, No.2 (1986), 165-183; James Grehan, *Everyday life & consumer culture in 18th-century Damascus* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> For a strong critique of the modernization theory, see: Dean C Tipps, “Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* XV (March 1973).

this effort was limited.<sup>6</sup> In attempts to provide a history of the nationalist struggle against colonial powers, the second trend focuses on the active role played by the rising national bourgeoisie in building local modern industry despite foreign occupation and their vulnerability to the world market.<sup>7</sup> These works focus on wealthy elites as the local force that had the capacity to be active and interactive. Chalcraft's recent work is exceptional in focusing on how journeymen workers and artisans transformed themselves in the face of increasing competition from European products and the disintegration of their social and professional associations.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the relatively abundant scholarship concerning the working class, both by Arab and western scholars, most of these studies, including the important contributions of Beinín, Lockman, Goldberg and `Abbas, are limited to exploring the history of labor movements and the political activities of factory workers.<sup>9</sup> The social life of workers outside the workplace and trade unions, their interactions with other social groups and communities, and the question of whether or not their experiences were distinct from the rest of the urban population has not attracted much attention.<sup>10</sup> From the Marxist perspective, historians have demonstrated that

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6. Bryan Turner, *Capitalism and class in the Middle East: theories of social change and economic development* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1984), James Gelvin, *The modern Middle East: a history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Deniz Kandiyoti, "Gendering the Modern: on Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity" and Resat Kasaba, "Kemalist Certainties and Modern Ambiguities," in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Resat Kasaba (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 113- 156 and 15-36.

7. Eric Davis was among the first scholars to apply class analysis to show the active role played by the rising national bourgeoisie in building local modern industry despite foreign occupation and their vulnerability to the world market. Ten years later and from a completely different theoretical framework, Robert Vitalis argues that there was no difference between foreign and nationalist entrepreneurs when it came to purely business interests. Yet, both works focus on the wealthy Egyptian elite as the only local force that had the capacity to be active and interactive. Eric Davis, *Challenging Colonialism: Bank Misr and Egyptian Industrialization 1920-1941* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983). Robert Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collided: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Beshara Doumani's work of Jabal Nablus attempts to cover broader local social groups. However, wealthy merchants were better covered than peasants because they left more records and documents. Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: merchants and peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

8. John Chalcraft, *The Striking of the Cabbies of Cairo and other Stories: crafts and guilds in Egypt, 1863-1914* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

9 Goldberg, *Tinker, tailor, and textile worker*; Beinín and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*; Ra'uf 'Abbas, *al-Haraka al-`ummaliyya fi Misr, 1899-1952* [The Workers' Movement in Egypt, 1899- 1952] (Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-`Arabi lil-Tiba`ah wal-Nashr, 1967) and *al-Haraka al-`ummaliya al-misriya fi daw' al-watha'iq al-biritaniya, 1924-1937* [The Labor Movement in Egypt in the Light of the British Documents, 1924- 1937] (Cairo: `Alam al-Kutub, 1975).

10. Based on the autobiography of al-Mahalla worker Fikri al-Khuli, Joel Beinín had modest attempts to deal with relations between workers and people of al-Mahalla. Joel Beinín, *Workers and peasants in the modern Middle East* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 200), 99-114 and "Egyptian Textile Workers: From Craft Artisans Facing

policies and attitudes about Egyptian workers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most often configured them as classed individuals. I argue that the workers of al-Mahalla tended to be communally and geographically-based, in addition to being gendered and class-conscious individuals.

Along with the trend of breaking the totality of a single national history, gender history has emerged and contributed a great deal to our understanding of the complexity of the region. Aside from the ground breaking work of Tucker and a few others, most of the achievements of historians of gender tend to focus on the intellectual contributions of upper and middle class women and/or the legal aspects of women's (dis)empowerment.<sup>11</sup> In the Egyptian context, these important works document and celebrate the Egyptian feminist movement.<sup>12</sup> While debating whether that movement was indigenous or a colonial product, little attention has been given to subaltern women who were carving out their spaces in masculine domains such as marketplaces, workers' lodges, and mechanized factories. The contributions of gender history fall under the genre of intellectual history that has been a vibrant field of scholarship, though limited in its scope and sources.<sup>13</sup>

Aside from intellectual and social histories, the relationship of state and society under the modern state apparatus, informed by western technologies and methods, has been constructed based on Michel Foucault's concepts of the relationship between knowledge and power, or punishment and discipline, both of which focus on discourse analysis.<sup>14</sup> Less work has

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European Competition to Proletarians Contending with the State," in *Covering the World: A Global History of Textile Workers, 1650-2000*, ed. Lex Heerma van Voss ( Ashgate Press, forthcoming).

11. Judith Tucker *Women in nineteenth-century Egypt*, (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Selma Botman, *Engendering citizenship in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

12. Among notable examples: Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and nation: gender and the making of modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995) and Beth Baron, *Egypt as a woman: nationalism, gender, and politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

13. Based on Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" Gershoni and Jankowski's important works on the rise of the Egyptian print culture and national identity are notably important as they intersect between intellectual and cultural history. Israel Gershoni and James P. Jankowski, *Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: the search for Egyptian nationhood, 1900-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 1987) and *Redefining the Egyptian nation, 1930-1945* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

14. Timothy Mitchell and Khaled Fahmy provided narratives of Egyptian history in the nineteenth century. In his controversial work *Colonizing Egypt* Mitchell focused on "ideas and plans" behind controlling the human body and soul, while Fahmy focused on the actual application of those plans. In his book, *All the Pasha's Men, His Army*, Fahmy provides a meticulous account of how peasants were turned into soldiers. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising*

focused on the capacity of seemingly “powerless” subjects to resist the modern hegemonic state through everyday forms of resistance and to reproduce an alternate public sphere.<sup>15</sup>

All these trends, with different approaches and scopes of inquiry, set the stage for cultural history, which is still in its infancy. The educated middle class and self-conscious *effendiyya* as a distinctive social group have dominated cultural history.<sup>16</sup> Questions of identity, gender identification, types of consumerism, westernization versus indigenous authenticity, public morality, and other aspects of social culture in the historiography of modern Egypt seemed to be restricted to *effendiyya*.<sup>17</sup> Baraka’s work on the social culture of the Egyptian upper class is a notable exception, though it is still in the realm of the narrow zenith of the society.<sup>18</sup> The social culture of men and women from the lower classes so far has been relatively neglected. Despite their limited numbers, the *effendiyya* dominated the Egyptian public sphere, being not only visible and influential, but also leaving a huge legacy in print culture, which made writing their history less of a challenge than that of the subaltern groups. Even historians of labor relied on the writings of *effendiyya* who reported their activism for or sympathy with workers causes. How a male or a female factory worker, an illiterate peddler, a prostitute, or a handloom weaver understood his/ her identity in opposition to the state, the community, and the nation have been mostly left out of scholarly inquiry. The communal, gender, class and national identities of these groups have been constructed through the eyes of intellectual *effendiyya* rather than their own. Depending on the stand of a given intellectual, the image of subaltern groups, in

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*Egypt* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Khaled Fahmy, *All the pasha’s men: Mehmed Ali, his army, and the making of modern Egypt* (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2002).

15. Assef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People’s Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), Fahmy, *All the Pasha’s Men* and Chalcraft, *The Striking of the Cabbies of Cairo and other Stories*.

16. Wilson Jacob’s contribution is worth mentioning as a groundbreaking work in constructing masculine identity among Egyptian *effendiyya* as a discursive field. Wilson Jacob, “Working Out Egypt: Masculinity and Subject Formation between Colonial Modernity and Nationalism, 1870-1940” (PhD Diss., New York University, 2005), Lucie Ryzova, “Egyptianizing Modernity: The ‘New *Effendiyya*’ social and Cultural Constructions of the Middle Class in Egypt under the Monarchy,” in *Re-Envisioning Egypt 1919- 1952*, ed. Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson and Barak A. Salmoni (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 124-163.

17. In the field of everyday consumption, Shechter’s work on smoking culture and the construction of the modern middle class *effendi* identity is unique in its inquiry and scope. It compares that Egyptian social group with its encountering stratus in Britain. However, it draws intensively on the intellectual products as a major source. Relli Shechter, *Smoking, culture and economy in the Middle East: the Egyptian tobacco market 1850-2000* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

18. Magda Baraka, *The Egyptian Upper Class between Revolutions, 1919-1952* (Oxford: St. Anthony’s College 1998).

their passivism or activism, was either victimized or criminalized.<sup>19</sup> This is just an example of how depending on the intellectual production of *effendiyya* could be misleading if we try to construct the social culture of other groups through their lenses. Of course more recent work avoids that pitfall and becomes clear in ascribing the constructed identity of a given subaltern group as viewed by *effendiyya* rather than these groups themselves.<sup>20</sup>

### Notes on Sources

This work is based upon the idea that local social groups played a key role in the struggle between change and continuity. Male and female peasants, artisans, and workers were not merely recipients of change imposed by outside forces. They made choices: where to work and live; what to wear and consume; and whom to marry. They negotiated the forces of change imposed upon them, whether these forces were European economic and political domination or rising native capitalism. As would be expected, the archives of the Company, the Department of Corporations in the Financial Ministry, the Cabinet, and other types of central and official sources were consulted. Because this study attempts to write history from the bottom and local people are the focus, I will rely particularly upon local sources that the people of Mahalla themselves produced. This study benefits from a unique combination of archival sources; it draws intensively on the court records and petition files of the ‘Abdin Archive, memoirs and oral history. Court records that have been consulted are from the Misdemeanor, Criminal, Civil and Shari`a courts. Based on a judicial hierarchy, al-Mahalla housed the Misdemeanor, Civil, and Shari`a courts. Those courts dealt with cases from the town of al-Mahalla and its dependant villages. The town and those villages formed one administrative unit named *Markaz* al-Mahalla

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19. History of the Egyptian labor movement has been mostly written by leftist scholars and activists. Workers in this his scholarship, particularly that is produced by Egyptian scholars and activists, are configured as all-time-victims among which heroes emerge. Among other examples, see Taha Sa`ad `Uthman, *Min tarikh `ummal Misr: Mudhakkarat wa watha`iq* [From the History of Workers of Egypt: Memoirs and Documents] two volumes (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1982, 1983). Meanwhile, nationalist Bourgeois historians have given workers little attention and have tended to criminalized workers’ resistance. The best example is Radwan’s work on Tal`at Harb, in which he criminalized al-Mahalla workers for setting fire on the Company and being backward crud. Fathi Radwan *Talat Harb, bahth fi al-`azamah* [Tala`at Harb: A Study on Greatness] (Cairo, Dar al-Katib al-`Arabi, 1970).

20. Michael Gasper, *The power of Representation: Publics, Peasants, and Islam in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

al-Kubra. The unprecedented population growth experienced by the town of al-Mahalla shortly after the establishment of the company in 1927 was reflected in the dramatic increase of misdemeanor cases that took place in the town. Starting with 1938 the records of misdemeanor cases that took place in villages were kept in separate files from those cases that took place inside the town. To appreciate the volume increase in these records, it is worth mentioning that, until 1930, the misdemeanor cases from the entire *Markaz* al-Mahalla filled two files with an average of 200 pages a year. After 1938, the misdemeanor cases that took place only inside the town in any given year filled four volumes with an average of 500 pages each. There was only one Criminal Court and one Appeals Court dealing with all the cases in *Muduriyyat al-Gharbiyya*, Governorate of al-Gharbiyya, in which al-Mahalla is a major locality. Both of them were located in Tanta, the capital of the governorate. The court records are supplemented by petitions sent by inhabitants and workers of al-Mahalla to the Royal Palace of 'Abdin. Those petitions were kept in the 'Abdin Archive scattered between dozens of boxes of petitions from all over the country. Navigating thousands and thousands of these documents is very rewarding. It captures local people not only voicing complaints and concerns, but also reflects their moral values and world views.

Court records were authored by the state and provided selective information about individuals involved in each case. Except the Criminal Court records, they usually followed a uniform formula rather than reflecting the particular details for each case. Interestingly, the court record quoted people's obscene language in most cases as it was uttered, while their other answers were rephrased and converted into standard Arabic based on the followed formula. Most petitions were written by provisional scribes, *kuttab 'Ara'id* since most of petitioners were illiterate. Hence, most of these petitions did not actually carry the concerns and complaints of people in their own words. Sometimes they came in a type of formula developed by those scribes. The petitions of 'Abdin were selectively preserved and we do not know how most petitions were treated by the authorities. However, both the court records and petitions provide a wealth of details on social life, especially in the urban sphere. They are rich in information on



communal networks, work systems, interactions in workplaces and marketplaces, domestic relations, and neighbors' encounters both in public places and private spaces. Yet, both types of records document troubling situations rather than expressing a society in its "normal" circumstances. We have to read against the grain to extract stories of "normal" social interaction and recover people's voice. For examples, we trace material culture, adaptation, and possession patterns through losing commodities rather than acquiring them. We know that workers bought watches and bicycles because they were stolen. We learn they commuted by train because they did not pay the fare. Similarly, we learn about communal solidarity through records of hostility and violent encounters. For example, we learn that workers befriended their landladies because some of them stole household items borrowed from those women, and workers hosted each other, because guests stole from or fought with hosts.

In contrast to the tradition of written memoirs and life experiences left by intellectuals and politicians, there are few such written works by workers. Fortunately two workers of al-Mahalla left two precious accounts. Fikri al-Khuli wrote his memoir, *al-Rihla* or the Journey, while he was in prison in the 1960s. Al-Khuli came from his village next to Tanta to al-Mahalla to work in the Company when he was only 11. Under the monarchy, he was fired and imprisoned in 1942 and never returned to al-Mahalla due to his labor activism. Under Nasser he was imprisoned again for his labor and leftist activism. During his years in the al-Wahat prison he wrote of his experiences in al-Mahalla, about thirty years after he actually witnessed a large part of what he wrote about. Thus he wrote of his past experiences as a child laborer at a time when he was a middle-aged leftist labor activist. `Abdu `Abd al-Rahaman came to al-Mahalla from al-Bihira in 1932 when he was 23 years old. Thanks to his high school degree in textile industries he joined the Company as a foreman. Twenty years later, he also left al-Mahalla for Cairo after his health deteriorated to the point that he became unfit for the work on the shop floor. Unlike al-Khuli who reported his experiences as activism and resistance, `Abd al-Rahaman reported his as a series of surrenders and defeats, not only in the face of the Company, but also in the face of his family and colleagues. Despite his education, his memoir that we have today was actually edited

by the leftist feminist author Asma Halim. It was published in 1977 by a leftist publishing house. Hence, we do not know when `Abd al-Rahman reported his experience nor what Halim filtered or added. Tellingly, despite the differences, the depictions of working and living conditions in both memoirs were almost the same.

Oral histories collected in al-Mahalla have added nuance and flavor to the stories I have extracted from written documents and helped me to understand many of the traditions I had never cared to understand though I grew up in that town. Stories were collected from as many men and women as possible from different classes. I was careful not to interview individuals who knew each other or in the presence of each other, so that I could compare and match different narratives on the same anecdote. Many of these people shared with me personal stories dating back to 1940s and 1950s. However, many of them declined to share their names and very often I preferred not to ask so that I could save them any anxiety. Only Mahmud Khalil, who comes from a notable family, readily shared his family records and private collection. All these stories were not only rich in information, but were also helpful in realizing how those people understood and in which way they liked to construct their own history.

The period under focus stretches between the founding of the Weaving High School in al-Mahalla in 1910 to the beginning of Nasser's nationalization in 1958, a policy that put Bank Misr, the owner of the Company, the Company itself, and several private factories in al-Mahalla under state control. However, tracking particular aspects of the social transformation made it necessary to go beyond the timeframe. The first chapter provides an overview of development experienced by the town since the late 19th century and until the middle of the 20 century. The emphasis is on spatial expansion and the social forces leading this expansion and determining its direction and rhythm. The second chapter deals with the coercive process through which peasants coming to al-Mahalla were turned into industrial workers and urban dwellers. While both the Company and the state were employing particular mechanisms to achieve that transformation, workers actively adapted to and resisted that process. The third chapter covers the labor movement in al-Mahalla and how workers individually and collectively developed new strategies and borrowed from their peasant culture backgrounds to achieve a balance in their relations with the gigantic "nationalist" company. Chapter four deals with the dynamic

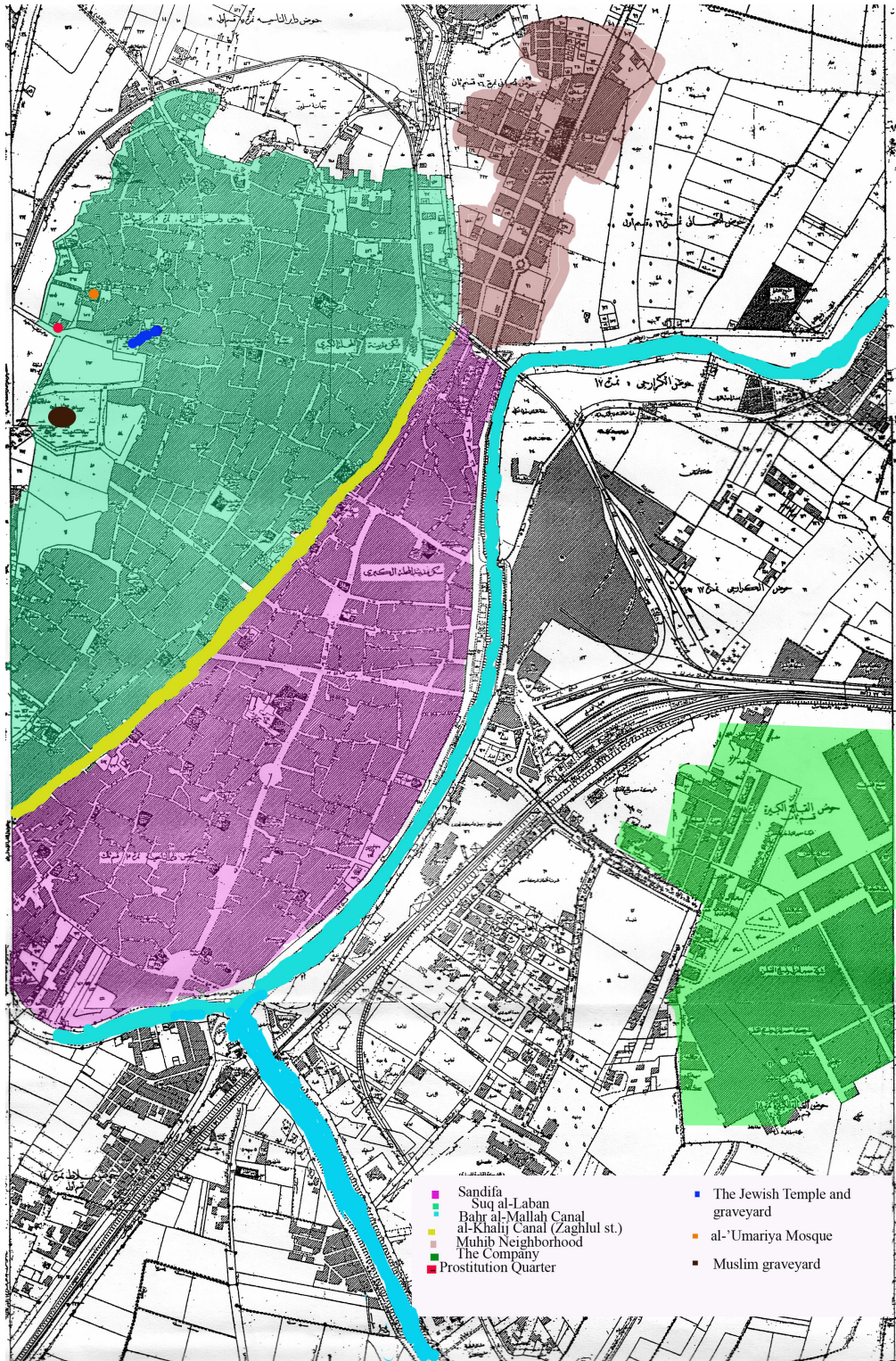
relations among workers along with the dynamics between the workers and the people of the town. It looks at how inhabitants of the town, workers and *Mahallawiyya* defined and then redefined their identity in such a fluid way as to include or exclude individuals and groups from the community. Gender relations in such a rapid social transformation were as dynamic as identity formation. Chapter five focuses on how lower class women participated in such an environment of social transformation through their economic activities. Prostitution in al-Mahalla was an area of intersection where newcomers met the indigenous, the rich met the poor and where national morality and communal traditions were contested. Chapter six portrays life in the red light district since prostitution was regularized in that designated area and how illicit sexuality was practiced after public prostitution was abolished in al-Mahalla in 1943 and the entire country in 1949.

## Chronology

- 1882 The British occupation in Egypt.  
The first regulation of prostitution.
- 1905 Al-Khubiza was designated the licensed prostitution quarter in al-Mahalla.
- 1910 Founding the Weaving School in al-Mahalla and consequently the emergence of the modern Muhib Neighborhood.
- 1914 Khedive `Abbas Hilmi's visit to al-Mahalla to inaugurate the Weaving School.
- 1924 Founding a branch of Bank Misr and its Misr Cotton Ginning Company in al-Mahalla.
- 1925 al-Mahalla Intifada against election fraud, and consequently several activists of the Wafd were imprisoned.
- 1927 Founding the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in al-Mahalla.
- 1931 Founding the Prince Faruq Sporting Club in the Muhib Neighborhood.
- 1935 The British reported labor troubles in al-Mahalla due to workers' harsh living and working conditions.
- 1937 King Faruq's first visit to al-Mahalla and the Company.
- 1938 The first major labor strike in the weaving sections of the Company
- 1942 Legitimatizing labor unions in Egypt. Leaders of the Company's workers were imprisoned due to their efforts to establish an independent union.
- 1943 Labor strike and riots in the Company to protest installing a dependent union.
- 1943 A martial order to shut down prostitution quarters in al-Mahalla along with Egyptian towns except in Cairo and provincial capitals.
- 1946 2000 *musa`ds* in the Company went on strike.
- 1947 The largest labor strike and closing the Company for almost a month.

1948 King Faruq visited the Company and inaugurated its housing compound and hospital.

1949 Abolishment of all licensed prostitution.



Map of al-Mahalla al-Kubra

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Transformation of al-Mahalla al-Kubra in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

This chapter traces how European economic penetration and the state's project for centralization and modernization from the 19th century onward influenced the local community of al-Mahalla and how the active response of the town's community and the rising nationalistic capitalism led to unprecedented rapid expansion and growth in the first half of the 20th century. It argues that the integration of al-Mahalla into both the global economy and the state's modernizing project, and then in accordance with the national capitalist project shifted the economic-financial importance eastward outside the town's traditional neighborhoods. While the process of changes was often initiated by external forces, either from abroad, or from the central government of Egypt, the people of al-Mahalla were able to participate, take advantage of, and in some cases to even lead the expansion process of their town. Encountering European cheap quality textile, handloom weavers of al-Mahalla redefined their market, adopted technical changes, and shifted from silk to more cotton production. Despite the limited financial resources of the lower classes of al-Mahalla, many of them were able to fill gaps created by the profit-driven nationalist industrial enterprise, challenge the power of the state, undermine the agricultural economy through allocating more farming land for housing, and consequently expand the spatial growth of the town beyond what the government had planned and intended.

#### **Al-Mahalla in the Historical Record**

On both sides of a fresh water canal called al-Khalij, the twin towns of Sandifa and Sharqyun developed and expanded throughout the medieval period until they eventually merged, forming the core of the city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra in modern times. The Arabic name al-Mahalla, meaning the place, appeared in the Coptic writings in the seventh century referring to the city, which had been known as Diduseya in the Greek period and changed into Dishayri in

the Coptic pronunciation. 21 The Arabic word al-Kubra, meaning the great or the big, was added to distinguish the town as the largest city among many towns that were named al-Mahalla after the Arab invasion of Egypt in the 7th century. 22 The full name, al-Mahalla al-Kubra, was used by the Arab geographer Yakut ibn `Abdullah al-Hamawi (1179- 1229). 23 Depicting it as a great or large place was deserved since it was actually two cities; Sharqyun and Sandifa. A bridge crossing al-Khalij Canal called Qantar al-Madbah connected both centers until the canal was filled in sometime between 1889 and 1898. 24 Both centers expanded eastward toward another freshwater canal called Bahra al-Mallah and then eastward beyond that canal in the 19th and 20th centuries, particularly with the establishment of the Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving in 1927. Choosing al-Mahalla to situate the Misr Company as the first mechanized textile factory owned by Egyptians reflects the important position al-Mahalla enjoyed for centuries as an urban center with a vibrant textile industry. Ibn Duqmaq (d. 1407) described al-Mahalla as “a big town with marketplaces. It is the seat of al-Gharbiyya region in Egypt (...) in that town there are mosques, schools, lodges, hotels, and gardens (...) It has all sorts of beauty”. 25 The 12th century geographer al-Sharif al-Idrisi described al-Mahalla as “a big city with abundant marketplaces, shops and full of goods”. 26 Ibn Battutah reported that “(al-Mahalla) enjoys a great status and large population. It has beauty everywhere and its name is famous”. 27 Throughout the medieval period, al-Mahalla excelled particularly in silk weaving. 28 According to one of the Cairo Geniza documents, a silk weaving cooperative from al-Mahalla opened a

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<sup>21</sup>Nawal Isma`il, “Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra: Dirasah fi jughrafiyat al-` umran” [The city of al-Mahalla al-Kubra: a study in urban geography], (MA thesis, `Ain Shams University, Cairo: 1965), 4.

<sup>22</sup>Ibn Duqmaq who died 1407 wrote that Arabs named about one hundred towns and villages in Lower Egypt al-Mahalla. Ibn a Duqmaq, *Kitab al-intisar li-wasitat `iqd al-amsar*, V. 5 (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Tijari lil-Tiba`a wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi`, 1966), 82.

<sup>23</sup>Shihab al-Din Abi `Abdallah Yaquut ibn `Abdallah al-Hamawi, *Mu`jam al-buldan*, V.7 (Cairo: Matba`at al-Sa`adah, 1906), 397.

<sup>24</sup> Isma`il, “Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra”, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Duqmaq, *Kita b al-intisar*, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Abi `Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn `Abd Allah ibn Idris al-Hammudi al-Husayni, known as al-Sharif al-Idrisi, *Nuzhat al-Mushtaq fi Ikhtiraq al-Afaq*, V.1 (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafah al-Diniyyah, 1990), 340.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn Battutah, *Rihlat Ibn Battutah*, uniform title *Tuhfat al-nuzzar fi ghara`ib al-amsa r wa-`aja`ib al-asfar*, (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1964) 31.

<sup>28</sup> Ibn a Duqmaq, *Kitab al-intisa r*, 82.



store in al-Fustat and its lower prices threatened the position of the existing corporation in al-Fustat. Other document reports that tax revenue collected from al-Mahalla silk weaving community in the year 1147 was 335 dinars, the same amount collected from Fustat.<sup>29</sup> By the end of the 18th century, al-Mahalla emerged as the largest silk weaving center in the country and its products were distributed all over Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. <sup>30</sup> Despite the differences in the structure and management of large mechanical mills and handloom workshops, the core of the textile craft remained almost the same and the skills required had become part of the heritage of the people of the town for generations. <sup>31</sup>

### **From a Provincial Capital to a Dependent Participant in the Global Economy**

As a part of his ambitious modernization project, Muhammad Ali (r. 1805-1848) established two textile factories in al-Mahalla in 1826 with 120 spindles and 200 looms. Workshops were established to maintain and produce machines. While textile factories established in other Egyptian provinces during that period only prepared the yarn to be woven in Cairo, the two factories of al-Mahalla handled both spinning and weaving of the finished textiles.<sup>32</sup> Machines used animal power, which decreased productivity and efficiency. Both factories were shut down with the contraction of the industrialization project of Muhammad Ali after 1840. On the other hand, the traditional handloom textile industry of al-Mahalla suffered under Muhammad Ali due to his economic monopoly system. Some weavers abandoned their craft and the town altogether, which led to a relative decline of its population.<sup>33</sup> The town lost its position as the third most populous city in the country after Cairo and Damietta, which it had

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<sup>29</sup> S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society; The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, VI (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967), 88 and 116.

<sup>30</sup> P. S. Girard, "L'industrie de l'Égypte" in *Mawsu'at Wasf Misr*, V4, trans. Zuhayr al-Shayib, (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah al-'Ammah lil-Kitab, 2002), 183-184.

<sup>31</sup> Isma'il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 18.

<sup>32</sup> Moustafa Fahmy, *La révolution de l'industrie en Égypte et ses conséquences sociales au 19e siècle* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1954), 26.

<sup>33</sup> Hilmi Ahmad Shalabi, *Fusul fi Tarikh Tahdith al-Mudun fi Misr: 1820-1914* [Chapters on modernization of cities in Egypt] (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah al-'Ammah lil-Kita b, 1988), 19-20.

enjoyed in the 1798 census conducted by the French.<sup>34</sup> Smaller towns, such as Tanta and al-Mansura exceeded al-Mahalla in terms of population increase after one century.

Table 1.1: The relative decline in al-Mahalla’s population comparing to the close by towns of Tanta and Mansura. <sup>35</sup>

City	1798 census	1897 census
Al-Mahalla	17,500	31,791
Tanta	10,000	57,289
Mansura	7,500	37,266

Under Muhammad Ali, al-Mahalla also lost its administrative position as a capital of al-Gharbiyya Province, which it had held since the 13<sup>th</sup> century under the Mamluks.<sup>36</sup> The two Delta provinces of al-Gharbiyya and al-Minufiyya were merged into one administrative unit named Rawdat al-Bahrain under the governorship of Muhammad Ali’s grandson Abbas. The capital of Rawdat al-al-Bahrain was situated in Tanta in 1836 due to its location in the middle of the combined provinces. The position of al-Mahalla deteriorated further when it was bypassed by the first railway connecting Cairo and Alexandria, built in 1856. Incorporating Tanta, the new capital of the province, into the railway route led to the rise of Tanta at the expense of al-Mahalla throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tanta was a much smaller urban center than al-Mahalla, and was less politically and economically important. According to Clot Bey, the top physician under Muhammad Ali, al-Mahalla in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a large center for spinning and weaving, while Tanta was a small town which generated its limited importance from the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of al-Sayyid Ahmad al-

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<sup>34</sup> Sawsan el-Messiri, “Class and Community in an Egyptian Textile Town” (PhD diss., the University of Hull, 1980), 58.

<sup>35</sup> Muhammad Ramzi, *al-Qamus al-jughrafi lil-bila d al-Misriyyah: min `ahd qudama al-Misriyin ila sanat 1945* [the geographical dictionary of the Egyptian cities: since ancient Egyptians to 1945] (Cairo: al-Hay`ah al-Misriyyah al-`A mmah lil-Kitab), 18.

<sup>36</sup> Ramzi, *al-Qamus al-jughrafi*, 17-18.

Badawi.<sup>37</sup> In addition to the spiritual importance of such trips, pilgrims practiced seasonal trade in the town, which helped the town economically.

Before the end of the century, al-Mahalla regained some of its traditional importance as an urban and administrative center in Lower Egypt when the government moved the regional administration from Samanud to al-Mahalla in 1882 and connected Tanta and al-Mansura via al-Mahalla with a railroad.<sup>38</sup> Thus, al-Mahalla housed the administration of many villages and small towns, including Samanud, forming an administrative unit called the *Markaz* al-Mahalla al-Kubra, the Center of al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Samanud and its dependant villages were separated in the 1930s to reduce the bureaucratic load on the booming *Markaz*. Both of the administrative offices and the railway road provided the area to the east of the *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal with a lifeline that stretched parallel to it. Government buildings such as the municipality, the court, the train station, and the post office were located between the eastern bank of the canal and the railway. Informed by modern health considerations and urban planning, the government moved activities influencing public health such as tanneries and the slaughterhouse to the southeastern side of the town far from the bank of the canal. An important development of the area to the east of the *Bahr al-Mallah* canal was the establishment of a cotton market, known as *Halaqat al-Qutn*, in the northeastern part of the new commercial section of the town in 1912.<sup>39</sup> Al-Mahalla's cotton market became one of the most active cotton markets in the country after the Mina al-Basal Cotton Market in Alexandria. Cotton producers from all over the Delta brought their crops to al-Mahalla's market for weighing and sale.<sup>40</sup> These business trips revived al-Mahalla's importance as a middle point between the more populated southern part of the Delta and the arid land in the north. In the Delta, social life and community events on the calendar revolved around the cotton season. Once the crop found its way to the market, farmers concluded

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<sup>37</sup> Clot-Bey, *Aperçu général sur l'Égypte*, V.2 (Paris, Fortin, Masson et cie, 1840), 427-430.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 36, Ramzi, *al-Qamus al-Jughrafi*, 17-18, and Ibrahim `Ali Ghanim, "Muhafazat al-Gharbiyya: Dirasah fi al-Jughrafya al-Iqtisadiyyah" [the governorate of al-Gharbiyya: a study in economic geography] (MA thesis, `Ain Shams University, 1981), d.

<sup>39</sup> Isma`il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 150.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

marriage plans, bought furniture, jewelry, clothing, and other commodities. Porters, weighers, and ginning factory workers along with related professionals found jobs and guaranteed income for the season. This was the time for the industries and commerce of al-Mahalla to flourish. Weavers of al-Mahalla, in particular, were able to market their products to farmers coming to the town for the *Suq al-Talat* weekly market on Tuesdays.

In Ali Mubarak's assessment, al-Mahalla was the largest city in Lower Egypt after Alexandria in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>41</sup> It housed one of the largest Islamic Shari`a courts in al-Gharbiyya, which handled legal documentation of real estate sales, mortgages, inheritance ...etc. In al-Mahalla there were fourteen Islamic *madrasas*, one language school, numerous schools, several Coptic *madrasas*, forty major mosques, many shrines, Coptic churches and a Jewish *Bay`a*, synagogue.<sup>42</sup> With these many educational, religious, and administrative institutions, al-Mahalla was a hub for people from the entire Delta, which made it highly conducive to intensive commercial activities. According to Mubarak, many shops, Khans, lodges and permanent marketplaces operated in al-Mahalla.<sup>43</sup> Its central position in the middle of the Delta and its location on the transportation routes made it the most important commercial point in the Delta. A narrow railway known as the Delta connected downtown al-Mahalla with many surrounding villages; the regular railway connected it with Cairo and Alexandria, and the Bahr Shubin Canal connected it with the Nile and consequently with the rest of the country. The town flourished with its two-story handsome houses with marble tile and glass windows.<sup>44</sup>

Integration of Egypt into the world economy as a cotton producer in the second half of the nineteenth century attracted foreign subjects to reside and invest in Egypt. They did not live and operate only in Cairo and Alexandria, but also in provincial towns including al-Mahalla.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> `Ali Mubarak, *al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiyyah al-jadidah li-Misr al-Qahirah wa-muduniha wa-biladiha al-qadimah wa-shahirah*, v. 15, ed.2 (Cairo: Matba`at Dar al-Kutub, 1969), 59.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> For the presence of foreigners in the Egyptian towns throughout the 19th century, see Hilmi Ahmad Shalabi, *al-Hukm al-mahalli wa-al-majalis al-baladiyyah fi Misr mundhu nash'atiha hatta `amm 1918* [the local administration and councils of municipalities in Egypt since its establishment until 1918] (Cairo: al-Hayy'a `Alam al-Kutub, 1987).

The central location of al-Mahalla in the middle of cotton plantations in the Delta opened the town to new industrial and commercial activities practiced by both Egyptians and foreigners, and led to the emergence of new social elites before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Taking advantage of the railway and the *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal for transportation, ginning factories were established in the eastern part of the town. Six out of the seven ginning factories and two mechanics' shops out of the three operating in al-Mahalla in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century were owned by *Khawagas*, or foreigners. British subjects were among the biggest investors.<sup>46</sup> A British citizen named Carvel owned two ginning factories and another British citizen named Francis owned two shops for the maintenance of ginning machines.<sup>47</sup> The Egyptian Royal family also invested in the industry. The mother of Khedive Ismail owned a repair shop and Prince Husain Pasha Yakin owned a ginning factory.<sup>48</sup> All these establishments were close to the canal and the railway. Other industries also emerged in the eastern part of the town including ice and brick factories, and rice and wheat mills. Consequently other repair shops appeared in the same area. An Italian subject named Journo won a concession from the central government to establish a slaughterhouse compatible to the European health standard in al-Mahalla in 1879. <sup>49</sup> In 1909 the government decided to transfer the responsibility of collecting fees of the slaughterhouse to the municipality of al-Mahalla. <sup>50</sup>

Table 1.2: Foreigners living in al-Mahalla between 1897 and 1947.

Year	Foreigners	British	French	Greek	Italian	Levantine	Turk	Armenian	Others
1897	286	16	30	177	22				41
1907	702	10	20	310	17	204*	126*	2*	13
1917	609	35** *		109		155	282	1	27
1927	596	26	36	413	41	11	19		50

<sup>46</sup> Mubarak, *al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiyyah*, 65.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. The other *Khawaga* owners of the rest of the ginning factories are Matatiyay whose who also owned a palace and large garden, Salim and Habib Bolad, Ibrahim Shafuri and Musa Hanna who also owned a wheat mill. The last three names indicate their Arab, but not Muslim origin, but they carried title *Khawaga*, meaning Westerner, which reflect that they might have been Syrians with European citizenships.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Shalabi, *Fusul fi Tarikh Tahdith al-Mudun fi Misr*, 202- 204.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 207.

1947	323	51	9	183	11	**22	8		39
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Source: Population censuses conducted in Egypt in the mentioned years.

Foreigners also established banks and financial businesses geared toward cotton growers and merchants around both banks of the canal, especially to the north. Among the most active banks in al-Mahalla until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were Carvel, Abikasis, Bill, Silvago, the Belgium, and the National Banks.<sup>51</sup> In 1924 Bank Misr opened its branch in al-Mahalla as the first Egyptian owned bank there. To show their support and endorsement for the nationalist Bank Misr, the Mayor Nu`man Pasha al-A`sar, who was also among the stockholders of the bank, donated one of his residential houses by the western bank of the *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal to house the branch.<sup>52</sup> Actually some carried Arabic names preceded by the title *Khawaga*, which indicated their Levantine and Egyptian, but non-Muslim, origins. Among those Arabo-*Khawaga* who owned ginning factories there were Salim, Habib Bolad, Ibrahim al-Shafuri, Musa Hanna, and Abu Zalzal.<sup>53</sup> Some of those foreigners were born in Egypt but preferred to keep the foreign citizenship inherited from their ancestors, or acquired foreign citizenship as a way to keep or to gain the legal privilege of the Capitulations. When the Capitulation was abolished according to the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty some of them sought Egyptian citizenship to meet the newly reversed legal realities.<sup>54</sup> Among those was the head of the Jewish Community of al-Mahalla, Rujéé Aslan Abikasis.<sup>55</sup> Rujéé and his father Aslan Abikasis were born in Egypt of Moroccan origin. He was among the biggest cotton merchants of al-Mahalla, owned a ginning factory, a bank, and farmland. When the Egyptian state started to empower itself by imposing regulations on foreign businesses and requiring them to hire a certain number of Egyptian

<sup>51</sup> Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 508 "Iltimasat ifraj `ann masjunin" [petitions for releasing prisoners].

<sup>52</sup> Midhat Abu al-Haitham, *al-Mahalla al-Kubra: Mafakhir wa injazat* [al-Mahalla al-Kubra: Prides and Achievements] (al-Mahalla al-Kubra: Majlis Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra, 1996).

<sup>53</sup> Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 508 "Iltimasat ifraj `ann masjunin" and Mubarak, al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiyah, 65.

<sup>54</sup> For political and economic consequences of the abolishment of the Capitulations in Egypt, see Roel Meijer, *The quest for modernity: secular liberal and left-wing political thought in Egypt, 1945-1958* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), particularly the introduction and the first chapter.

<sup>55</sup> This name is the transliteration of the Arabic spilling as it appeared in official documents. Contemporary residents of al-Mahalla who recall Abikasis pronounce his name "Abu Kassis". Unfortunately, the researcher was not able to find any document in Latin letters carrying the name.

citizens, Abikasis considered acquiring Egyptian citizenship. His application was finally granted in October 1946 by the decision of Ismaïl Pasha Sidqi, the Minister of Interior.<sup>56</sup> Leaving the country or acquiring Egyptian citizenship as a response to abolishment of the capitulations, among other reasons, led to a drop in the total number of foreigners in al-Mahalla from 596 in 1927 to 323 in 1947. About 50 of those foreigners who continued in al-Mahalla in 1947 were highly skilled workers in Misr Company.<sup>57</sup>

Table 1.3: The mix of origins, ethnicity, and citizenship of non-Egyptians in *Markaz al-Mahalla* as they appear in the 1917 census under the category of nationality and race.

→ Citizenship ↓ethnicity	British	French	Italian	Ottoman	Greek	Local	Others
Egyptian		31	11			201,423	
British	27						
French		6					
Italians			22				
Greek			9	25	367		
Turk				29		282	
Syrian		3		13		155	
Arabs		29		2		308	
Armenian				1		1	
Others	8	3		72		27	
Total	35	72	42				111

Source: The census of Egypt taken in 1917, Volume II, Ministry of Finance- Statistical and Census Department (Cairo: Government press, 1921).

The wealth and status of foreigners in al-Mahalla was conducive to gaining political power. Some of them held offices in the local government. Despite their small number compared to the local population, they occupied several seats in the Local Council. However, not all foreigners residing in al-Mahalla were rich bankers or wholesale merchants. There were many foreigners who came to work in different types of services and small businesses. Some of these

<sup>56</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 29, “Majlis al-Wuzara’, Wizarat al-Dakhiliyyah 1888-1961” [The Cabinet, the Ministry of the Interior 1888-1961].

<sup>57</sup> Archive Maslahat al-Sharikat, [the Archive of the Department of Corporation], Mahfazah 29.

services and business were geared towards the foreign community itself and some targeted local customers.

Table 1.4: The most frequent professions among foreigners in the city of al-Mahalla at the turn of the century.

Occupation	Male	Female	Total
Bars, cafeteria	50		50
Bankers& wholesale merchants	33		33
Grocer	30		30
Domestic servants	12	9	21
Gove. Employee	8		8
Carpenter	6		6
Tobacco	6		6
Broker	5		5
Cook	5		5
Religious	3	6	9
Shoemaker	3		3
Baker	3		3
Tailor	3		3
Unemployed	34	94	128
Student	6	1	7
Others	6	2	8
Total	213	112	325

Source: Recensement Général de L’Egypte, Tome Premier (Cairo: National Printing Department, 1898).

Table 1.4 shows that the numbers of female and male foreigners were close and most of the females, 94 out of 112, were unemployed. Among foreigners, there were seven students and 34 unemployed males. These figures show that many of the foreigners who came to al-Mahalla at the turn of the century came to stay along with their families, including female and male dependants. Having three men and six women in religious positions shows that foreigners established settled communities. Due to their large number, the Greeks founded a social organization called the “Union Familiale Hellénique”, which was located in Kanisat al-Arwam Street adjacent to the Greek Church by the western bank of the *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal. This was consistent with the overall pattern of locations in which foreigners lived in al-Mahalla. They



were concentrated in modern commercial and residential neighborhoods to the east of the city and did not penetrate the old neighborhoods west of the *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal. Table 1.5 shows that no foreigner lived in the Abu al-Qasim section, which contained the old Suq al-Laban neighborhood, and only two foreigners lived in Sandifa. They were concentrated in new neighborhoods that were either established with the cotton boom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the commercial areas of al-Hanafi and al-Manshiyya where the European style Muhib neighborhood was situated, or with the establishment of the Company, particularly the al-Sharika section. It is no surprise that the al-Sharika section, which means the Company, housed many foreigners, since the Company built apartments and villas on its premises for its own foreign employees. In that part of the town, Christian foreign missionaries founded a Franciscan school in 1890, which served the foreign community and Muslim, Christian, and Jewish local elite decades before the establishment of the Company.

Table 1.5: The distribution of foreigners in al-Mahalla's sections (*Shiyakha*) in the 1947 census.

<i>Shiyakhah</i> (section)	Male	Female	Total
Abu al-Qasim	0	0	0
Al-Hanafi	50	50	100
Al-Mutawali	7	9	16
Al-Manshiyya	24	22	46
Al-Sharika	86	73	159
Sandifa	1	1	2
Total	168	155	323

By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the eastern edge of the town emerged as the modern financial, commercial, and administrative center. Along with these new intensive activities, tiny slums emerged on the outskirts of the town to provide lodging for workers coming from outside the town to do seasonal work in the ginning factories. Two hamlets emerged to house both people and activities that were not welcome inside the town. For example, *'Izbat al-Salakhana*, meaning the hamlet of the slaughterhouse, emerged around the slaughterhouse and tanneries. *'Izbat al-Sa`ayda*, as is obvious from its name, housed southern Egyptians. Many *Sa`ayda*, or

people of Upper Egypt, started to immigrate to the northern provinces of Egypt at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Upper Egypt they were exposed to poverty, floods, and disease, but in urban centers such as al-Mahalla al-Kubra the cotton boom provided them with living and working opportunities.<sup>58</sup> In al-Mahalla dozens of *Sa`ayda* worked in the seasonal ginning industry and in domestic services. They resided in shacks and sheds to the east of the *Bahr al-Mallah* canal. A few *Sa`aida* dominated the importing and distributing of beans and lentils from Upper Egypt to the town. Successful upper Egyptian merchants opened several adjacent shops in the heart of the old commercial area by the Basal Bath in the heart of the populated western section.

### **Al-Mahalla in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Between European and Arab-Islamic Cultures**

Though the integration of al-Mahalla al-Kubra into the world economy contributed to the creation of these new industries and the surrounding slums, the cotton boom also further demarcated the separation between the rich and the poor of the town and contributed to the emergence of wealthy neighborhoods. As in many other Middle Eastern cities, European economic penetration and state modernization based on European models helped divide the city into two sections.<sup>59</sup> There were the traditional quarters that evolved slowly around the medieval urban core and a new European-looking neighborhood. The former was densely populated by the lower classes and its streets were crooked and very narrow with many dead-ends. The latter was populated by wealthy Egyptians and Europeans and enjoyed wide, parallel, straight streets with squares, gardens, and parks.

Traditionally, the rich and the poor among the indigenous people of al-Mahalla shared the same neighborhoods to the west of the *Bahr al-Mallah*. With the cotton boom in late 19<sup>th</sup> century wealth accumulated in the hands of landlords and cotton merchants and led to their exodus to the newly built modern neighborhoods. In 1910 the landowning and cotton producing Shishini

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<sup>58</sup>Salah `Isa, *Rijal Rayya wa Sakinah: Sirah Ijtma`iyyah wa Siyasiyyah* [Men of Rayya and Sakinah: A Socio-Political Biography] (Cairo: Dar al-Ahmadi lil-Nashr, 2002).

<sup>59</sup> For the division between traditional old quarters and modern "European" neighborhoods in Egypt and the Middle East in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971) and *Urban Apartheid in Morocco* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* and Shalabi, *Fusul fi Tarikh Tahdith al-Mudun fi Misr*.

family donated land in the north of the town to build a secondary weaving school. The family moved from the traditional western neighborhood around the Zuhayr Mosque in Suq al-Laban to a new palace next to the school.<sup>60</sup> Khedive `Abbas Hilmi II (r.1892-1914) came to the town to inaugurate the school as a modern landmark in 1914.<sup>61</sup> A new street, named after the governor Muhib Pasha, was built to be used by the Khedive and his companion to visit the school. Muhib Street was the first wide straight boulevard in the town. Honoring the Khedive `Abbas's visit, a similar street named al-`Abbasi was built. That wide straight street stretched from the west bank of the *Bahr al-Mallah* canal to the Wali al-Din Mosque, facilitating movement between the heart of the western traditional neighborhood of Sandifa and the emerging economic and commercial center around the canal banks.

Al-`Abbasi Street quickly became a crowded commercial street where foreigners, who were unable, and probably unwilling, to penetrate the residential areas to the west, established their small businesses such as groceries and pubs. Unlike al-Abbasi, Muhib Street emerged as an exclusive, wealthy residential neighborhood for both Egyptian and foreign landlords and cotton merchants. Few of the indigenous handloom weavers who had profited during World War I joined them. By the 1930s, most of the wealthy families in al-Mahalla had combined economic resources with investment in land, real state, industry and trade, particularly the cotton and yarn trades. Acquiring land, as a sort of safe investment, was a new trend among weavers and wholesale merchants who experienced fluctuation in earnings during WWI and the Great Depression that started in 1929.<sup>62</sup> Around the Weaving School in Muhib Street luxurious palaces and handsome villas marked the spatial separation of the rich and the poor in 20<sup>th</sup> century al-Mahalla. The landlord family of al-Shishini and the cotton merchant Khalil family were among the first families to move to this elite neighborhood. They were followed by rich weavers

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<sup>60</sup> In his biographical dictionary *Inba' al-ghumr bi-anba' al-`umr*, the Muslim medieval Biographer Ibn Hajar al-`Asqalani who lived between 1372 and 1449 mentioned the Shishini family lived in al-Mahalla in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. for brief biographies of several figures of the family in modern period see Muhammad Nur al-Din, *Kitab al-Hayatu al-Wataniyya bil-Mahalla al-Kubra* [The Book of the National Life in al-Mahalla al-Kubra] (Tanta: al-Matba`ah al-Ahliyyah al-Kubra, 1927), 38-57.

<sup>61</sup> Mahmud al-Sharqawi and Muhammad Rajab, *al-Mahalla al-Kubra: tarikh wa-shakhsiyat* [al-Mahalla al-Kubra: History and Characters] (al-Mahalla al-Kubra: Dar al-Sahwah lil-Nashr, 1987), 23.

<sup>62</sup> El-Messiri "Class and Community", 155-174.

such as the al-Ghamri, Qadus and `Abd al-Nabi families. As an expression of wealth, power, and a strong connection with the ruling elite in Cairo, residents of al-Mahalla often received members of the Royal family, top government officials, and European administrators in their homes in Muhib Street.<sup>63</sup> They also dominated the City Council, which was established, along with several councils in different Egyptian towns, in 1890 as a mixed council of Egyptians and foreigners.<sup>64</sup>

The rich residents of Muhib Street lived with ease in two different worlds; European society and culture and a traditional Arab-Islamic society and culture.<sup>65</sup> Like the westernized Egyptian elite in Cairo, the notables of al-Mahalla spent their summers by beach towns, such as Alexandria and Ra's al-Barr, and left their homes in al-Mahalla for their servants to take care of and clean before they came back to town. <sup>66</sup> A piano was an expected part of any newlyweds' household, a luxurious amenity that cost the bride's family about 100 EP. <sup>67</sup> In 1931 they founded the Prince Faruq Sporting Club to become an important hangout for both the Egyptian and foreign upper classes. The club had a tennis court, a large swimming pool, and a luxurious hall for social activities where notables of the town received top national leaders including King Faruq in December 1937 and the Prime Minister Mustafa al-Nahhas Pasha and Wafd cabinet members several times in 1930s. Residents of Muhib Street celebrated Christmas, and New Years Eve, among other Western holidays where everybody participated in the ballroom. Western musical bands and ballet troops were invited to give shows and concerts in the club and

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<sup>63</sup> Among many examples, `Abd al-Hayy Bey Khalil received the head of the International Labor Office H. Butler for lunch in his house in 1932. Abu al-Haitham, *Mafakhir wa injazat*. Ahmad Effendi Kamil received the Prime Minister and the leader of the Wafd Party Mustafa al-Nahhas Pasha in his house in 1938. Misdemeanor Court record 1938. President Muhammad Naguib visited homes of both of `Ali al-Shishini and Abd al-Hayy Khalil in 1952. *Al-Akhar*, September 30, 1952.

<sup>64</sup> Shalabi, *Fusul fi Tahdith al-Mudun fi Misr*, 90. For lists of al-Mahalla City Council members among Egyptians and foreigners see `Abdin Archive, Iltimasat, Mahfazah 508 "Iltimasat ifraj `ann masjunin".

<sup>65</sup> The rich of al-Mahalla in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were not alone in this socio-cultural duality, which became phenomenal in the social life of the urban Middle Eastern elite and cross the Islamic world since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For this socio-cultural duality see: Paul Dumont, "Said Bey- the everyday life of an Istanbul townsman at the beginning of the twentieth century" in *The modern Middle East: a reader*, ed. Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury and Mary C. Wilson, 2nd edition (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 271-288.

<sup>66</sup> While he was gone to the beach in summer 1938, Amin Effendi Hajar's residency was robbed by his servant. Stolen items included clothes and silver wear. Al-Mahalla al-Kubra Misdemeanor Court record year 1938, file 6776, case 2304. Hereafter, these records will appear in this form: Misdemeanor 1938/6776/ 2304.

<sup>67</sup> El-Messiri "Class and Community", 171.

in the Parliament Coffee Shop by the Canal bank.<sup>68</sup> On regular nights, the Club was a male hangout where men spent their time playing cards and drinking liquor. Gambling was an occasional practice though it was illegal and socially unacceptable.<sup>69</sup> Very often the club was turned into a contested space between political factions as much as it was a space for sociable activities and leisure time.<sup>70</sup> Although the elite families of al-Mahalla were interconnected through marriage ties and business networks, politics divided them between the Wafd Party, which enjoyed the highest popularity in al-Mahalla and the entire country between 1924 and 1952, and minority parties that were able to rule before 1952 only with the support of either the British colonial authority or the Royal Palace. For instance, the A`sar family, which was associated with the Constitutional Liberals Party, *Ahrar Disturiyun*, and Unity Party, *Hizb al-Itihad*, had connection through marriage with the Wafdi al-Shishini and Hajar families. Occasionally, the political faction that dominated the board of the club tried to prevent the competing faction from getting in or using its facility.<sup>71</sup>

Meanwhile, the Egyptian inhabitants of the Muhib neighborhood observed Islamic religious occasions such as the Prophet's Birthday and the holy month of Ramadan and the Eids. Their villas were decorated with lights and their doors were opened to feed the poor.<sup>72</sup> Even in their observation of the dress code, they reflected their cultural duality. Most of them, as shown from their pictures at the entrance of the club, wore western suits and ties along with the Ottoman fez.<sup>73</sup> However, a few of them kept the traditional dress of the *Quftan*, a long sleeved outer garment, open in the front and fastened with a silk belt along with a long coat. Their contribution to the community of the town simultaneously reflects their Arab-Islamic association and their commitment to modernization along a Westernization model. `Abd al-Hayy Khalil

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<sup>68</sup> An interview with Mahmud Muhammad Khalil in al-Mahalla on July 5, 2007.

<sup>69</sup> During a royal visit to the town in 1944, individuals complained to King Faruq that the Club has been used for gambling. This complain was taken seriously and the Royal Palace ordered the local government to ban any sort of gambling inside the Club. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 524 "Iltimasat al-Amn" [petitions for security].

<sup>70</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 412 "Iltimasat muwazafin fardi, 1941-1947" [petitions from individual employees, 1941-1947].

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Abu al-Haitham, *Mafakhir wa injazat* and Nur al-Din, *Kitab al-Hayatu al-Wataniyyah*.

<sup>73</sup> See their images in Nur al-Din, *Kitab al-Hayatu al-Wataniyyah*.

Pasha, Abu al-`Aynayn Qadus, and al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Ghamri, among others, contributed to establishing two Islamic *Azhari* schools. They established one primary school in 1943 in the al-Bahlwan area, in the middle of the two twin-centers. A decade later, they donated large sums of money to build a bigger *Azhari* middle school for boys on the far western edge of the city that began to witness rapid urbanization.<sup>74</sup> They also built mosques in their elite neighborhood. These religious establishments were used to publicize charity and paucity of the local elite and to establish good links with the Royal Palace and ruling elite in Cairo. `Abd al-Hayy Pasha Khalil donated large sum of money to establish *Jam`iyyatu al-Muhafaztu `ala al-Qur`an al-Karim*, the Society of Preserving the Holy Qur`an. He invited King Faruq to inaugurate it in 1939, but the King delegated the Prime Minister Ahmad Pasha Mahir to inaugurate the society during his visit to al-Mahalla that year. Almost a decade later, Khalil Pasha re-invited the King to inaugurate the society in 1948 when he visited the new facilities of the Misr Company. The invitation was initially accepted, and then the inauguration was canceled from the program of the royal visit.<sup>75</sup> Qadus family built the Qadus Mosque in Muhib Street adjacent to their villa and sent to the king a petition to allow performing prayers in it.<sup>76</sup> Obviously, such a request should have been sent to the Ministry of Endowment or to the municipality of al-Mahalla. Meanwhile, they advocated women`s education in the Parliament and voiced their demands to the government to build more girls` schools in the town.<sup>77</sup>

Top local government executives, judges, and others created a need for upscale apartments. This provided opportunities for wealthy local Egyptians who sought to diversify their investments in the 1940s. Next to their palaces and villas they built four and five story apartment buildings surrounded by small gardens. Apartments were provided with electricity,

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<sup>74</sup> There are marble stones in both schools carrying names of the contributors along with the amount of their donations. Qadus family who funded building a large mosque in Muhib Street, did not only donate money to the *Azhari* middle school, they also provided architect and construction expertise and services.

<sup>75</sup> “al-Malik zara hadhihi al-munsha`at [The King Has Visited These Establishments], *Akhir Sa`ah*, May 12, 1948.

<sup>76</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 565 “Iltimasat mulakhasat 1925-1952” [summarized petitions 1925-1952].

<sup>77</sup> Majlis al-Nuwab, al-Hay`ah al-Niyabiyah al-Sabi`a, *Majmuat Madabit Dur al-In`iqad al-`Adi al-Thani*, 3<sup>rd</sup> vol [Parliament Record: the Second Parliamentary session, 1940] (Cairo: al-Matba`ah al-Amiriyah, 1940), 2307, 3354, and 3352.

modern drainage systems, and fresh water and were rented to high government employees and petite bourgeois tenants. These units were so highly sought after that landlords were able to double the rent.<sup>78</sup> To keep the area clean and quiet, vendors and grocers were kept out and inhabitants relied on the nearby Sa`d Zaghlul commercial street for their goods.<sup>79</sup> Contrary to the traditional neighborhoods where factories and stores shared the same buildings with private residences, the Muhib area was only a residential neighborhood. The state also played a role in grooming the area as a home for modernization. The government chose it as the site on which to build the Prince Faruq Orphanage and the Faruq Public Hospital and al-Mahalla Ophthalmic Hospital. The three establishments enjoyed modern construction with surrounding gardens. The orphanage taught music and its band offered open-air concerts on weekends and holidays. These concerts were attended by residents of the town for free.

Although the spatial division between the traditional older quarters and the modern neighborhoods was clear, there was no rigid social segregation between their residents.<sup>80</sup> Due to the nature of records on which this study relies, which mostly document conflicts and disputes, available evidence indicates that the appearance of the poor in this Muhib Street frequently triggered suspicion and was associated with disturbances. People in shabby clothes walking around the neighborhood, particularly outside the Prince Faruq Club, were very often objects of suspicion and were even led off to the police station as possible thieves.<sup>81</sup>

One unhappy story that illustrates the complexity of the class conflicts is a love affair between the 18-year old virgin Samira al-Biyali al-Sirgani of Muhib Street and the 20-year old worker `Abdu Mahmud Di`bis who lived in Fu`ad Street, which was one of the workers' quarters. This episode ended in an unwelcome marriage, a quick divorce, and a series of police

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<sup>78</sup> al-Mahalla Civic Court 1947/ 7695/ 762.

<sup>79</sup> Ismai`l, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 150.

<sup>80</sup> The idea of social segregation between both groups was strongly proposed in earlier scholarship on Middle Eastern cities as well as in the writings of Western travelers. However, this idea was contested and disputed in more recent scholarship that proposes more social and financial interaction between residents of both types of neighborhoods than it was previously believed. See Mohamed Elshahed, "Cairo and the Question of Urban Duality in Literature" (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Middle East Studies Association, Washington, DC, November 22- 25, 2008).

<sup>81</sup> Al-Mahalla Misdemeanor Court records.

reports and court cases. To raise enough cash for the dowry, the couple stole the jewelry of Samira's sister-in-law on 23 February 1941. The loot was abundant enough to reveal the wealth of Samira's merchant family. It included diamond earrings, a brooch, and two pairs of gold and ruby bracelets.<sup>82</sup> The love affair was such a scandal that the lovers were married in the police station in the sheriff's presence, and then divorced before the marriage was consummated.<sup>83</sup> The confrontation between the family and the worker never ended and a few months later when they met at the courthouse both sides engaged in a violent confrontation. The worker and his sister slandered and physically attacked two members of Samira's family.<sup>84</sup>

Another illustrative example is that of the 35-year-old Fatima Gabr Mansur. It was natural for her to move from her poor dwelling to join the household of the wealthy al-Samrah family in Muhib Street as a domestic servant. However, a sexual relationship between the maid and one of the young men in the family developed and created a scandal within the family. When Fatima got pregnant, the mother of the man along with her 16 year-old granddaughter beat Fatima, causing a miscarriage. Although the medical report supported Fatima's version of the story, the judge accepted only the version of the two notable ladies because "politeness and natural shyness of women in this class would not allow them to attack the maid". The two ladies denied any assault and accused the maid of fabricating the story because they had just dismissed Fatima from their service due to her bad manners.<sup>85</sup>

### **Guardians and Masters of the Craft**

The cotton boom that attracted foreign investors and introduced new types of cotton industry to the eastern part of the town did not undermine the centuries-long importance of the core neighborhoods to the west of the *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal in Sandifa and Suq al-Laban. These

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<sup>82</sup> The worker was sentenced with 6 months in jail and Samira was sentenced with two month suspended jail for five years. Both paid to the victim 10 EP damage. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6788 / 870.

<sup>83</sup> Misdemeanor 1941/ 6789/ 1880.

<sup>84</sup> The worker and his sister were punished with one month in jail, 1 EP fine, and 20EP damage. Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6918/ 1150.



areas continued to house most of the town's silk and cotton handloom factories and dyers, which had been the major craft among the city's population for centuries.

Table 1.6: People working in textile industry and trade in al-Mahalla between 1897 and 1947.

Year	Textile industry	Textile trade
1897	2,591	
1907	3,802	
1917	3,167	390
1927	4,067	
1937	10,480	
1947	23,370	367

Source: Population censuses taken in the mentioned years

Table 1.7: Textile industry in al-Mahalla 1927

Total textile factories	678
Factories without workers	163
Factories with workers	531 (hiring 3373 workers)
Cotton Ginning and cleaning factories	5
Cotton weaving & spinning factories	175
Silk weaving & spinning factories	10
Wool factories	32
Unspecified weaving factories	338
Textile Dyeing	86

Source: the Industrial and Commercial Census 1927. <sup>86</sup>

Tables 1.6 and 1.7 show that textiles have always been the main craft among people of the town, and al-Mahalla continued to enjoy the top position among Egyptian towns in terms of the number of people working in the industry and the number of operating handlooms. Foreigners did not show any interest in investing in this industry and focused on the more profitable raw cotton trade and various areas of finance. Hence, they did not pose a direct threat to the craft. However, integration into the global economy and opening doors to the flood of

<sup>86</sup> Maslahat al-Ihsa` wal-Ti`dad, *al-Ti`dad al-Sina`i wal-Tijari lil-Mahalla Sanat 1927* (Cairo: al-Matba`ah al-Amiriyyah, 1931).

cheap high- quality European products posed an existential challenge to the handcraft industries. Al-Mahalla's textiles which had been exported to different parts of the Ottoman Empire were affected by the competition of European products. Its main market in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century became limited to local Egyptian consumers who were increasingly confined to members of the lower classes and traditional groups in towns and villages. <sup>87</sup> Al-Mahalla's weavers showed a great deal of adaptation and proved to be the guardians of the craft in Egypt. They made technical improvements and created what was known as "flying bobbin handlooms". Those locally made handlooms were considered half mechanical and were called "*Amsha*". They were the most efficient handlooms in Egypt. <sup>88</sup> They focused on products that met the local taste and affordability such as Ghuzliyyah, Qutniyyah, Alaga, in addition to their trademark product "*al-Mandil al-Mahallawi*" or the Mahalla handkerchief. More importantly, they took advantage of what the cotton boom offered: the cotton. Despite their historical tradition with silk textiles, they gradually shifted to focus more on cotton textiles. This achieved more than one goal. They were better off relying on the locally produced cotton as a raw material than on the imported silk, which had been subject to fluctuation in quantity and prices. They avoided much of the competition with imported silk textiles, particularly when Japan dumped its cheap products on the Egyptian market. Cotton textiles were cheaper, which guaranteed higher distribution among a larger number of consumers across the country. Through these maneuvers, the weavers of al-Mahalla were the largest group in the country and operated the largest number of handlooms in Egypt. They contributed to the self-reliance that Egypt had to adopt during WWI due to the disruption of the import flows.

Table 1.8: The position of al-Mahalla among Egyptian towns in both numbers of people working in textile industry and operating handlooms in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>87</sup> El-Messiri, "Class and Community", 66.

<sup>88</sup> Isma'il "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 34.

The city	Workers	Handlooms
Al-Mahalla	3,183	3,455
Cairo	2,869	
Qalyub	2,405	2,000
Minuf	2,394	
Shibin al-Kum	1,628	
Sanuris	1,530	
Damietta	1,431	390
Akhmim	1,266	450
Bilbis	1,230	
Abu Tig	1,157	
Qus	1,108	
Mit Ghamr	1,084	
Imbaba	1,057	
Tahta	1,035	
Niqada		1,000
Total	45,500	

Source: H. Wells, Note preliminaire sur l'industries du tissage en Egypte. (Cairo: 1910).

Table 1.9: The distribution of most al-Mahalla handlooms between Cotton and silk production in 1910.

Cotton production	Looms	Silk production	Looms
Handkerchief	100	Handkerchief	40
Clothing	2000	Bed covers	20
Towels and covers	200	Male scarves	20
Bed covers	150	Scarves	30
Scarf	350	miscellaneous	190
Total	2,700	Total	300

Source: M. Gordon, Notes on Weaving Industry at al-Mahalla al-Kubra (Cairo: 1910), 34.

Table 1.10: The continuing decline in number of people manufacturing silk and the increase in those who were manufacturing cotton in al-Mahalla in censuses between 1897 and 1947.

Year	Cotton	Silk	Dyeing	Unspecified/other
1897			184	
1907	43	3,112	356	149
1917	480	131		2,180
1947	1152	19		

Source: Population censuses taken in the mentioned years.

Table 1.11: Distribution of people working in textile in al-Mahalla in 1917.

Industry	people
Cotton spinning& weaving	480
Cotton ginning	119
silk spinning &weaving	131
Passemnterie	132
wool spinning& weaving	25
mat manufactures	65
rope, net, & string	12
other textile industries	2,203
Total	3167

Source: The census of Egypt taken in 1917, Volume II, Ministry of Finance- Statistical and Census Department (Cairo: Government press, 1921).

Table 1.12: The decline of number of people working in silk textiles.

Industry	People 1907	1917
Cotton weaving	43	480
wool weaving	32	25
Silk weaving	3,108	131
Trico?	0	132
Unspecified weaving	0	2,180
Total	3,183	2,948

Source: The census of Egypt taken in 1907 and 1917.

### **Misr Company: Expanding “National Success”**

This unique position in the textile industry did not go unnoticed by the rising Egyptian capitalists. The first arrival of Bank Misr to al-Mahalla was in 1924 to open both its local branch and the Misr Company for Cotton Ginning. The Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving, which was established in al-Mahalla in 1927, was not the first company of the Bank, but it was its most successful and fastest growing enterprise. Initially, Alexandria was chosen as the location for the factory, and then al-Mahalla won due to several practical reasons. The primary reasons were: the lower costs for both establishing and operating the company, lower prices for living costs and consequently lower workers’ wages, al-Mahalla’s location in the heart of the agricultural areas and on transportation pathways, the long history of the textile industry in al-Mahalla which provided an expert labor force, the town’s history as the largest center for the cotton ginning industry which would secure the needed cotton, and the availability of a year

round water source and drainage close by the canal to drain industrial waste. Despite these plausible reasons, choosing al-Mahalla received criticism from economists who argued that Alexandria was economically a more suitable location.<sup>89</sup> That criticism did not take into account that Bank Misr, from its inception, adopted a policy of spreading its industrial investment throughout the country, particularly away from the European economic strongholds in Cairo and Alexandria. In his inauguration speech of the Bank Misr branch in al-Mahalla 1924, the founder of the Bank and the Company Tal`at Harb showed a great deal of admiration for the people of al-Mahalla and their commitment to education and industry, particularly the textile industry. He pointed out that 57% of al-Mahalla's population worked in industry, almost one third of the population worked in the textile industry while only 26% worked in agriculture and 17% in commerce, which he considered the ideal balance in economic activities.<sup>90</sup> Considering the friendship between Tal`at Harb and the mayor Nu`man Pasha al-A`sar and the wholesale cotton merchant `Abd al-Hayy Bey Khalil, both of them invested in the Bank, contributed to founding its branch in al-Mahalla and became founders of the Company itself. It's not difficult to realize that both subjective and objective reasons intertwined to make al-Mahalla the best choice for the company.

The contract was signed in 1927 to found the factory under the name "Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving Cotton".<sup>91</sup> That name was changed in 1934 to the Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving.<sup>92</sup> The slight change in the name indicated the rapid expansion that turned the cotton factory into a large compound producing cotton, wool, and silk products. The list of the Company's founders reflects the ambitious rising industrial capitalists such as 'Ali Pasha Islam, the owner of a textile factory in Bani Suwayf, and the cotton merchant of al-

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<sup>89</sup>Ali El-Gritly "Structure of Modern Industry in Egypt" (pHd diss., London University, Cairo: Government Press 1948), 483 and Mona Tewfik Hussein "Regional Industrial Wage Differentials in Egypt 1943-1948" (MA thesis, the American University in Cairo, 1979), 16

<sup>90</sup>Tal`at Harb, *Majmu`at Khutab Muhammad Tal`at Harb* [a collection of Tal`at Harb's public speeches] (Cairo: Matba`at Misr, 1927), 101.

<sup>91</sup>*Al-Waqai` al-Misriyyah* 79, September 19, 1927.

<sup>92</sup>Sharikat Misr lil Ghazl wal-Nasij al-Mahalla al-Kubra, *Marsum `Aqd al-Sharika al-Ibtida'i wal-Qanun al-Asasi* [The Decree of Company's Initial Contract and Its Fundamental Bylaw] (Cairo: Matba`at Misr, 1954).

Mahalla `Abd al-Hayy Bey Khalil. It also contains many big landlords who were seeking to diversify their investments in addition to landowners such as Nu`man Pasha al-A`sar of al-Mahalla. Both teams were informed by the 1907 crisis, when the European financial institutes did not support the Egyptian cotton growers in a bad harvest and low price year, and by the WWI experience through which Egyptians realized the need to reduce their reliance on imported manufactured products.<sup>93</sup> That list of founders also reflects the spirit of the liberal era and the inclusive nationalism of the 1919 nationalist revolution. Two of the founders were Egyptian Jews, Yusif Pasha Qattawi and Yusif Shikoril, and three were Christians, Iskandar Misiha Bey, Salama Mikhal`il Bey, and Sadiq Qillini Bey. The only female founder was the feminist pioneer activist Huda Hanim Sha`rawi. The notables of al-Mahalla had their shares; three members of the Khalil family held 750 shares worth 3,000 EP and Nu`man al-A`sar Pasha held 250 worth 1,000. What was shared between the founders of the Company who were landowners or rising bourgeois, from inside or outside al-Mahalla, Muslims, Christians, or Jews, was that they were wealthy Egyptians carrying the titles of Pasha and Bey.

Several reasons helped the Company to achieve its unprecedented success among the Misr Bank companies. There were the favorable and protective policies that the state adopted toward Egyptian products. The state unconditionally supported the company against local contenders. Imported manufactures were disrupted by WWII. Finally there was public enthusiasm to finance the Company's expansion and buy its products. With the nationalist spirit of the era, the public positively responded several times to the Company's calls for raising its capital. In less than a decade, its distributed shares multiplied from 75,000 to 250,000 and its capital increased from 300,000 EP to 100,000.

Table 1.13: The continuing increase in the Company's capital.

Year	Capital	Shares
1927	300,000	75,000
1930	300,000	75,000

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<sup>93</sup>See Eric Davis, *Challenging colonialism: Bank Misr and Egyptian industrialization, 1920-1941* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

1931	500,000	125,000
1936	100,000	250,000
1951	2,000,000	500,000
1961	4,000,000	1,000,000

Table 1.14: The rapid and continuing increase in the Company's operating machinery.

Year	Spindles	Looms
1930	12,000	484
1931	23,000	
1932	35,192	8,104
1937	100,000	2,000
1938		4,000
1944	176,000	4,000
1946	160,000	4,300
1950*	105,904	3,896
1951	115,564	2,547
1952	113,906	2,535

\* The decrease in number of operating looms in 1950 and after was a result of installing more up to date looms.

Table 1.16: The rapid and continuing increase in the Company's cotton consumption and production. <sup>94</sup>

Year	Consumed cotton in Kantar	Produced yarn	Produced textile in yard
1931	22308	843,744 kg.	5,932,960
1932	50,755	2,143,324 kg.	15,965,920
1933	97,143	3,898,155kg.	24,832,040
1934	152,721	5,750,609 kg.	35,104,520
1935	186,478	6,526,698 kg.	31,921,320
1936	281,803	10,716,894kg.	65,197,376
1937	283,393	10,360,939 kg.	
1940	353,360	13,573,375 kg.	84,508,042
1943	5000,000		
1944	426,000	16 million	99,557,280
1945	500,000	19 million	
1948		20,000 tons	85,000,000

<sup>94</sup> Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazl wal-Nasij, *al-Taqrir al-sanawi al-thamin li-majlis idaratiha al-muqadam lil-jam`iyyah al-`umumiyyah lil-musahimin* [Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, the eighth annual report of the board submitted to the general assembly of share holders] (Cairo: Matba`at Misr, 1938) and unpublished Company records titled "*Sijil Tarikhi Sharikat Misr lil Ghazl wal Nasij al-Mahalla al-Kubra*" [Historical Account of Misr Spinning and Weaving Company al-Mahalla al-Kurba]. Hereon it will be cited "*Sijil Tarikhi*".

1949		19,000 tons	94,000,000
1951		16,200 tons	
1952		16,700 tons	
1953		17,700 tons	2,362,205
1954		19,700 ton	2,515,311
1957		20,200 tons	117,016,620
1958		22,100 tons	118,110,240

The state was no less enthusiastic to support Egyptian products than was the nationalist public. In 1932 the Parliament passed a law to subsidize each *qantar* of cotton manufactured by the Misr Company in al-Mahalla and the National Textile Company in Alexandria with 20 piasters. The law was proposed by the Prime Minister Isma`il Sidqi Pasha who was an investor in the NTC.<sup>95</sup> The first protective tariff law was issued in 1930. In 1938, when the unsold products of the Company accumulated to become worth 822,628 EP, the government agreed to the company's request and increased the tariff fee on imported textiles to help the Company sell its stock.<sup>96</sup> Due to updating the machinery shortly after WWII, the same problem reoccurred and the textile production surpassed the local consumption. Then, the government re-increased the tariff in 1948 to help the company sell its products despite the public fear that these measures would cause an increase in prices.<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, the government reduced tariffs on machinery imported for the company from 7% to 1% in 1946 and 1950.<sup>98</sup> The entire tariff was dropped on the company's imported spare parts, chemicals, and wool in 1950.<sup>99</sup> Before the Company's gauze bandage factory started its production, the Health Ministry endorsed the Company's bid for 22,000 kilograms of gauze and 49,550 kilograms of medical cotton worth 10,677 EP.<sup>100</sup> The Company won a similar bid with the Public Health Department in 1930/1931 although the

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<sup>95</sup>Rashad Kamil, *Tal'at Harb: Damir Watan* [Tala`at Hrab: a conscience of a homeland] (Cairo: Suzana lil-Nashr, 1993), 108.

<sup>96</sup>Sharikat Misr, *Taqrir al-sanawi al-thamin*, and *Tanta*, June 1, 1938.

<sup>97</sup>Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazl wal-Nasij, *al-Taqrir al-Sanawi li-Majlis Idaratiha al-Muqadam lil-Jam`iyyah al-Umumiyyah lil-Musahimin* [Misr Spinning and Weaving Company: the annual report of the board submitted to the general assembly of share holders] (Cairo: Matba`at Misr, 1949), 5-6.

<sup>98</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.



price of the product was higher than the bid of the foreign production. The Ministry of Awqaf also preferred the Company's production over the imported medical cotton to supply its ophthalmic hospitals. The Company in these deals benefited from the government's decision to prefer Egyptian production even if it was 10% more expensive than the foreign product.<sup>101</sup> This endorsement and support allowed the company's bandage factory to run out of business the European owned competing factory that operated in Alexandria. Eventually, the Company bought that factory and transferred its machinery to al-Mahalla in 1932.<sup>102</sup> King Faruq endorsed the Company throughout by his frequent visits and by purchasing some of its products.<sup>103</sup>

The government endorsed and helped the Company against Egyptian individuals who happened to be in the way of the Company such as merchants, landowners and the workers of the company itself. The government supported the Company in the face of local producers and merchants and allowed the Company to monopolize the export trade of yarn in 1937. The company had requested this claiming that merchants were driven only by profits and exported the cheap yarn that was designated for local consumption instead of manufacturing it. The government ignored the reverse accusation which was pointed at the Company by handloom weavers who faced difficulties in getting the yarn for their factories.<sup>104</sup> In short, when it came to cotton and the textile industry, the Company, with the endorsement of the government, acted as a state within the state.

The government backed the Company unconditionally against owners of surrounding farming and housing land. Whenever the company needed more land to expand, it used government force to break land purchasing deals with favorable prices regardless of the consent of the original owners. The Company was actually able to evacuate the entire population of the Sa`ayda Hamlet against their will and swallowed their land in 1945 after people resisted

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> In his visit to the Company in December 1937 King Faruq bought some of the Company's products and asked to manufacture fabric for *yashmak*, veils, for women in the Royal family. *Al-Misri*, December 17, 1937 and *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>104</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi* and *Tanta*, June 1, 1938.

evacuation for few years. The workers housing compound, known as the “City of Workers”, was the ultimate land give away from the government to the Company. The 50 feddans on which the city was built was given to the company for free. The government confiscated another 18 feddans around the City and granted it to the Company to allow future expansion. All the Company contributed to that “free town” was 60,000 EP out of the 130,000 EP construction cost. More importantly, this contribution was tax deductible <sup>105</sup> and was heavily used as a propaganda piece to feed the public image of a charitable nationalist company. <sup>106</sup> Government confiscation of land for the Company became a systematic policy based on a government decision during the war of considering cotton factories a public interest. Normally the prices of land around the Company increased due to the intensive construction in the area to house workers and for the Company’s expansion. The Company was able to resist this new reality and only pay favorable prices for land occasionally. Based on being a “public interest”, the Company got the government to confiscate 15 feddans adjacent to the company’s social facilities because the landowners asked for a higher price in 1947. <sup>107</sup> Similar confiscation decisions were made when the company needed some particular land to build railroads between its storage facility and the train station in 1949. <sup>108</sup>

The interruption of WWII and the suspension of all textile imports, along with many other manufactures, was a great chance for the Company to become the major producer of textiles needed for both the local market and the British and allied forces, which increased the

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<sup>105</sup>Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazl wal-Nasij, *al-Taqrir al-sanawi li-majlis idaratiha al-muqadam lil-jam`iyyah al-`Umumiyyah lil-musahimin* [Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, the annual report of the board submitted to the general assembly of share holders] (Cairo: Matba`at Misr, 1947), 7.

<sup>106</sup>For this press coverage see, “Fi al-Mahalla al-Kubra: Madinatun dakhil madina” [In al-Mahalla al-Kubra: there is a city inside a city], *Akhir Sa`ah*, April 28, 1948, “al-Malik zara hadhihi al-munsha`at [The King visited these establishments], *Akhir Sa`ah*, May 12, 1948 and “Jilun jadidun qawiyyin min atfali `umm al-Mahalla” [A new strong generation of children of al-Mahalla workers], *Akhir Sa`ah*, April 21, 1948 . See also *Madinatu al-`ummali fi al-Mahalla al-Kubra: Surah natiqatun tubayin jihud Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazl wal Nasij fi sabil rafahiyyat al-`ummali* [The city of workers in al-Mahalla: An outspoken picture of the efforts of the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company for workers’ welfare], *Akhbar al-Yum*, October 1, 1947 and “Awwalu madrasatin min naw`iha fi al-Sharqi al-Awsat tunshi`aha Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazli wal-Nasij li-awwadi `ummaliha [The first school of its kind in the Middle East was founded by the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company for its workers children], *al-Musawar*, April 30, 1948.

<sup>107</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>108</sup>Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 32 “Majlis al-Wuzara’, mudhakhirat wuzarat al-muwaslat 1918-1952” [The Cabinet, memorandums of the Ministry of Transportation 1918-1952].

company's profits dramatically. For example, in 1940 the British army agreed to any price the Company would ask for its production of 300,000 yards of mosquito net cloth. That deal saved the mosquito net factory which the company had decided to shut down because its production lacked efficiency and quality.<sup>109</sup> During the war, the Company achieved high profits that allowed it to update its machinery once the war was over and to spend millions of Egyptian pounds on social facilities. The distributed profit for each stock jumped three folds from 48 piaster in 1940 to 1, 5 EP between 1941 and 1949. The company never ceased achieving profits. Even during the 1950s when the textile market witnessed a setback internationally and production surpassed consumption, the Company was able to distribute one pound of profit for each stock, worth 25% of the value of the stock.

Table 1.17: Company's annual net profits and distributed stock profit.

Year	Total net profit	Distributed stock profit
1938	69,942	.24
1940	145,364	.48
1941	138,346	.48
1946	458,578	1.5
1947	459,777	1.5
1949	456,740	1.5
1952	60,414	1
1954	604,440	1
1958	1,168,864	1

Source: The annual reports of the board of the Misr Company of Spinning and Weaving submitted to the general assembly of share holders.

### **Immigration Influx and Unprecedented Expansion After 1927**

The establishment of the Misr Company in 1927 brought massive changes to the town far beyond the mode of production. It expedited the spatial expansion of the town along with unprecedented population growth. By the end of 1930 the Company produced its first piece of cloth with 1,000 workers. The number of Company workers continually increased to become 6,500 in 1933, then 10,000 workers in 1935, and 20,000 in 1938, then 27,000 in 1947. Those

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<sup>109</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

workers were recruited from among the poor, mostly landless, peasants across the country. The biggest number came from provinces in the Delta around al-Mahalla itself. Although a few thousand of them came from nearby areas and were able to commute everyday to work, the vast majority of workers had to reside inside al-Mahalla. The population of the town increased in the first decade after the establishment of the Company from 45,642 in 1927 to 63,292 in 1937. The annual population increase was 4.7% for men and 3% for women. The following decade witnessed an almost equal increase of males (8.4%) and females (8.2%). The total population was 115,758 people in 1947, more than two and a half times the population when the Company was established twenty years earlier. Although Egypt as whole was experiencing fast population growth, al-Mahalla was unique in its high growth rate.

The unprecedented increase of the town's population was associated directly and indirectly with the Company. The Company was not only responsible for bringing in 27,000 workers, but also many others who stayed in the town although they failed to get a Company job or quit after a short time. In 1947 the company had about one hundred thousand files for people who had worked for it.<sup>110</sup> In addition to the workers, thousands came to al-Mahalla seeking opportunities in the booming town. The town attracted people from all walks of life across Egypt, including beggars and hustlers from as far away as Luxor and Ismailia.

Table 1.18: The rapid increase in the number of the Company's workers.

Year	Workers
1930	2,000
1932	3,500
1933	6,500
1935	10,000
1937	16,845
1938	20,000

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<sup>110</sup> *Akhbar al-Yum*, September 6, 1947.

1945	27,000
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Source: Company's unpublished records and the Archive of the Department of Corporation.

The Company brought massive and rapid changes to al-Mahalla's map in all directions. Areas east of the *Bahr al-Mallah* canal into the city limit gained unprecedented importance with the arrival of Bank Misr and its factories. First, the Bank founded the Misr Cotton Ginning Company in 1924. Three years later its Misr Company was founded on 32 *feddans* of the adjacent farming land. With rapid expansion, the Company became the largest industrial compound in the Middle East occupying a total of 550 *feddans* by 1950. This space was distributed between factories (233 *feddans*,) housing and services (229 *feddans*), and empty space for future expansion (89 *feddans*).<sup>111</sup> In its rapid growth, the company swallowed not only its surrounding farm land, but also adjacent housing areas such as the al-Sa`ayda hamlet in the 1940s.<sup>112</sup> Supported by the government and making use of nationalist discourse, the Company was always in a stronger position than the previous owners and inhabitants of the land.<sup>113</sup> The Company was even able to convince the government to confiscate privately owned land on the pretext that it was needed for public interests.<sup>114</sup> When the owner was one of its own employees, the Company was in so strong a position in price negotiations to offer less than 15% of the actual price.<sup>115</sup> While the Company was always able to gain land at favorable prices, its

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<sup>111</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. With the support of the government, the Company was able to conclude its plan for buying the land of `Izbat al-Sa`ayda (11,500 square meters) in 1942 for 36,000 EP. Residents of the `Izaba had previously resisted incorporating their residencies into the Company's premises. The Archive of the Corporation Department, Mahfazah 43 "Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazl wal-Nasij" [Misr Spinning and Weaving Company].

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> In 1949 the government confiscated land from two private endowments for the sake of the public interest, *lil-manfa`a al`ammah*. That "public interest" was the Company's need for that land to build a new storage and connect that storage with the train station via a narrow railway. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 32 "Majlis al-Wuzara", wizarat al-muwasalat 1918-1952" [The Cabinet, the Ministry of Transportation 1918- 1952].

<sup>115</sup> "Fi al-Mahalla", *al-Jamahir*, 14 April 1947.

high demand on land drove prices very high in the nearby part of the town. In only a few years the average price of one feddan jumped from 540 EP to 4,000 EP.<sup>116</sup>

The Company accommodated its top administrators and highly skilled foreign workers in a few handsome villas and apartments on its premises. Along with the factory, four apartment buildings were constructed in 1928 to accommodate managers and chiefs along with their families. These buildings added about 17,000 EP to the construction cost of the mill.<sup>117</sup> Two years later, one floor was added to each building. An entire floor was designated for the foreign technical manager and the rest were devoted to housing engineers and foreign skilled workers.<sup>118</sup> In 1934, the Company decided to buy land from the adjacent Bank Misr's Cotton Ginning Company and built more villas, apartments, and administration offices. In these modern handsome villas and apartments, the company provided its top administrators and foreign technicians with all the needed amenities including a swimming pool, a tennis court, and vast gardens. It protected their privacy by prohibiting its blue-collar workers entering or even walking through this part of the Company.<sup>119</sup> Outside the Company fence that protected the top administrators' villas and apartments, a middle class neighborhood appeared around the missionary Franciscan school in close proximity to the Company compound to accommodate its mid-level employees. This new neighborhood, which was called Saba` Banat and Cleopatra, enjoyed wide straight streets but its gardens gradually disappeared. Most houses there eventually shared a similar style as most were three story cement houses, which could have reflected the practicality of the Company housing.<sup>120</sup> In that neighborhood, the Company union built its facility on 1,600 square meters in 1949.<sup>121</sup> By the end of the 1940s most of the southern part of the town, both in the east and west, became either Company property or its workers' dwellings.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Misdemeanor 1943/ 6863/ 999.

<sup>120</sup> Isma`il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 149.

<sup>121</sup> `Amil al-Mahalla, May 7, 1947, 23.

## **A State within a State, a Colony in the Colonized Egypt**

The lack of housing to accommodate thousands of newcomers became a pressing issue. Although the company was aware of the housing problem in the town, accommodating rank and file workers was never a serious concern for its management until the government tried to prepare shelter in al-Mahalla for Alexandrian evacuees during WWII.<sup>122</sup> The Company offered to provide financial and construction help in return for transferring the ownership of these shelters to the Company after the war. Once the government agreed the Company hired its favorite contractor Hasan al-`Abd to carry out the construction at the southern exit of the town after insuring that the design was usable as small apartments rather than simply temporary shelters. Whatever the Company paid for the construction was deducted from its taxes, which made the deal very lucrative for it. For an unknown reason the construction process took years and the war had ended before any evacuees were ever housed in al-Mahalla. The new housing compound was transferred to the Company with no obligation to pay for the land.

The compound proved to be very useful in the public relations campaign during the 1947 strike. The strike attracted attention to the horrific working and living conditions of the company workers. Almost for the first time since its establishment, the Company had to defend its image as a national modernizing enterprise. It invited King Faruq to inaugurate the compound and to show the nation that the company was providing modern, healthy housing to its workers. Many news stories appeared in the Cairo press talking about the modern aspects of the compound such as its school for girls and boys, health clinic, supervised daycare and playground.<sup>123</sup> Interestingly, both workers and people of the town called that compound *al-Musta`mara*, meaning the colony, and *Madinat al-`Ummal*, meaning the city of the workers. The Company's attempt to name it *al-Madinah al-Bayda'*, meaning "the white city", failed entirely.<sup>124</sup> The compound housed about 4000 people; 560 families and 1500 single workers. Interestingly, beds

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<sup>122</sup> *Sijil Tariyki*.

<sup>123</sup> For examples of this news coverage see *Akhbar al-Yum* September 27, 1947, October 1 and 8, 1947, and May 14, 1948. See also *Akhir Sa`ah* April 21, 28 and May 12, 1948.

<sup>124</sup> The Company and its dependant union unsuccessfully urged workers not to use the name "*musta`mara*", the colony, due to its unpleasant meaning and its association with colonialism. *Amil al-Mahalla*, 7 May 1947, 11.

in the single workers' hostels were rented on a shift basis. An account of one of the residents showed that when he was too sick to go to work, he had to leave his bed for the worker whose sleeping shift was due.<sup>125</sup>

Construction of the residential compound dramatically expanded the city limits toward the south. The wide paved streets and open gardens among *Madinat al-`Ummal*'s one- and two-storey buildings made it an attraction for the rest of the city population. While parks and open space were shrinking in Sandifa and Suq al-Laban, residents used *Madinat al-`Ummal* as a park on weekends and holidays. South of the *Madinat al-`Ummal*, the government built a hospital for infectious diseases as a modern health facility replacing the old and small *`Ifna* hospital. Consequently, it attracted more small businesses southward to cater to the residents of the area. A housing cooperation fund was established by the Company for its middle and higher administrators in the 1940s to construct villas in the southern part of the town east of the railway. The villas were spacious and surrounded with beautiful gardens. Only top administrators were able to buy them creating a calm neighborhood for the rich technocrats and bureaucrats. To express the socio-political reality of this neighborhood it was named *Manshiyyat al-Bakry*. This was the name of the new Cairo neighborhood where Gamal `Abdul Nasser lived. Although the newly inhabited south was dominated by the Company's employees, the separation between administrators and workers was kept clear. The latter lived in small one or two bedroom apartments to the west and the latter lived in spacious villas to the east. The railway and the al-Mahalla-Tanta Auto Road ran in between. *Madinat al-`Ummal* offered accommodations to a limited number of workers after more than two decades of struggle between people of the town and the workers over housing. The demand on housing by company workers and those who migrated to the booming town was another factor driving urban expansion once the Company was established. Although both the state and European forces along with their local clients continued shaping the urban landscape, the local lower and middle classes of al-Mahalla claimed

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<sup>125</sup>Asma Halim, *Hikayat `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman* [The Story of `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman] (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Jadida, 1977), 91.



their share in the rapid urbanization of their town during 1930s and 1940s. Despite their limited resources, these local groups, many of them widows and poor women, challenged the power of the state and led to construction and urban expansion in areas and directions beyond those planned by the state. Their construction activities not only led to exceptional expansion of the town, but also eventually led to the disappearance of several rural hamlets and their farm lands around the town. This doubled the city's size in the 1930s and 1940s. It wasn't until late in the 1950s when the state stepped in again to reorganize the town's space, which by then stretched in all directions like the arms of an octopus.<sup>126</sup>

### **Locals against the State, Real Estate against Agriculture**

While the state and nationalist bourgeoisie waved the banner of modernization, the local lower classes were more practical in dealing with changes brought to the town by the Company. They saw opportunities in providing accommodation to the thousands of people who immigrated to the town seeking jobs. Meanwhile, the nationalists, including the top administrators of the company and its shareholders, backed by the central government, were mostly concerned with building their fenced-in modern dwellings, on which the rank and file of Company workers were not allowed to trespass.<sup>127</sup> On the eve of the immigration influx, al-Mahalla experienced a housing shortage. The town suffered from a shortage in houses and rent was very high.<sup>128</sup> The housing problem was primarily in the upscale residential areas and commercial neighborhoods. The influx of workers undoubtedly expanded the problem to the traditional and poor residential areas.<sup>129</sup> The Company accommodated only its top administrators and highly skilled foreign workers and ignored the housing problems of tens of thousands of its Egyptian blue-collar workers for two decades.

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<sup>126</sup> Ismaïl, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 9.

<sup>127</sup> Misdemeanor 1943/ 6862/999.

<sup>128</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 473 "Iltimasat ahali fardi" [Petitions of individual citizens]. The president of "Rent Reduction Committee" Dr. Ibrahim Farhud sent one petition while 178 of al-Mahalla male and female residents cross religion and citizenship, including merchants, civil workers, artisans and farmers, sent another petition. Both petitions were dated on December 16, 1930.

<sup>129</sup> In his petition to the Royal Palace, an employee of Principality of al-Mahalla wanted to be transferred back to his hometown, Tanta, because life al-Mahalla was unbearable due to high living cost and expensive rent. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 411 "Iltimasat muwazafin fardi, 1927- 1940" [Petitions of individual employees, 1927-1940].

Providing cheap housing to workers was a perfect investment opportunity for individuals with limited capital. Women from the lower classes in particular took advantage of this investment opportunity to secure themselves a guaranteed source of income. Shacks and huts were hastily built in areas around the company to the east of the town, particularly al-Salakhanah, al-Sa`ayda, and Abu Gahsha Hamlets. Similar houses were constructed quickly in other hamlets around the town notably in Mahallat al-Burg Hamlet, al-Ruz Hamlet al-Delta Hamlet, al-Ragabi Hamlet to the north of the Company and Sikkat Tanta and Khidr Hamlet to the south of it. Building lodging for workers in these areas was perfect for both workers and real estate investors among the lower classes. It provided workers with cheap accommodations close to the Company, and far from the hostile urbanites. These rural areas provided tenant-workers an environment similar to their home villages.

Table 1.19: The population growth and density in al-Mahalla due to the establishment of the Company in 1927 compared with one decade before its establishment.

Year	Population	% annual increase	Size of the town in Km <sup>2</sup>	Density/Km <sup>2</sup>	Inhabited houses
1917	38,088	1.4	20.5	1,858	5556
1927	45,642	2	20.5	2,226	9401
1937	63,292	3.9	20.1	3,149	15409
1947	115,758	8.3	22.6	5,122	

Table 1.20: The population growth and density in the city of Tanta, the provincial capital.

Year	Size in Km <sup>2</sup>	Population in every Km <sup>2</sup>	Inhabited houses
1917	12.1	6131	13657
1927	7,7	11690	17713
1937	12.4	7682	22333

Table 1.21: The population growth and density in the city of al-Mansura, the other closest provincial capital to al-Mahalla.

Year	Size in Km <sup>2</sup>	Population in every Km <sup>2</sup>	Inhabited houses
1917	8.6	5725	9850
1927	8.6	7404	14151
1937	8.2	8419	16157

Source: Population Census of Egypt 1947, al-Gharbiyya (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Amiriyya, 1953).

Table 1.22: Room density in al-Mahalla, Cairo, and Alexandria.

City	Density
Al-Mahalla	2.4
Cairo	2.3
Alexandria	2.0

Source: the Population census of Egypt 1960.

It was advantageous for individuals with limited capital to invest in real estate in these areas because land was cheaper than inside the town. For example, one square meter in 'Izbat al-Sa`ayda was only worth 0, 93 EP in 1929.<sup>130</sup> This price was less than one third of the prices inside the town.<sup>131</sup> The cheapest construction materials such as mud, unbaked bricks, compressed wood, and tin, were used in construction. The accelerating construction on farm land in these areas massively restructured the economy and replaced the agricultural activities with real estate and small businesses geared towards the poor workers. Owners did not bother to get official permission and gave themselves liberty to violate all sorts of building codes. This took place without government planning and even against the will of the government. Although the government desperately tried to stop losing farmland to housing, its power was very limited in reversing the process due to the heavy demand for housing.<sup>132</sup> In the fever of the construction work throughout the 1930s and 1940s, *al-Manshiyyah al-Gadidah*, meaning "the new neighborhood", appeared in the west and swallowed the gardens that used to surround the

<sup>130</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>131</sup> Isma`il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 147.

<sup>132</sup> The al-Mahalla Misdemeanor court records throughout 1930s and 1940s are abundant with construction violations ranging from building houses on undesignated land without permission to violating building codes and regulations. In most cases owners of these houses were only fined between 1 and 3 Egyptian pounds, which was equivalent to their collected rent in one to three months. Occasionally, the court ordered them to fix the violation but it rarely asked to remove the building. Chapter 6 in this study deals with this issues in more details.

traditional residential areas. This left the southwest neighborhoods without any open spaces, which partly led to its deterioration. Houses in these rural areas were built on land that was not designated for housing.

With their increasing numbers, workers started to penetrate the town and become neighbors of the urban *Mahallawiyya*. The increase in land prices made it more realistic for individuals seeking low-scale real estate investments to build on the outskirts of the town on the western edge of the traditional residential neighborhoods. Despite cultural differences and the social stigma imposed on the Company workers, new workers became tenants in traditional old neighborhoods to the west of the town. Gradually workers started to concentrate in the northwest neighborhoods such as Abu al-Qasim, Suk al-Laban and al-Simsar as much as in the southwest neighborhoods such as Sandifa, al-Warraqa and Wali al-Din. Some handloom weavers, who accumulated wealth during WWII through getting yarn at low fixed prices and selling it in the black market for a higher price, played a role in the town's expansion westward where they built houses and small to mid-level mechanized factories.

Some of them, who aspired to adapt to the mechanical textile industry, moved their industrial activities northeast of the Company where land was still relatively affordable. On the Mahalla- Mansura Auto Road and on the route to Mahallet al-Burg and to Mahallet Abu `Ali, they invested their WWII profits in mid-level and relatively large mechanical weaving factories and other industrial establishments. The location was advantageous due to its access to railway and ground transportation. Railways and auto roads undermined the historical importance of *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal as an important transportation outlet.<sup>133</sup> That canal was eventually moved outside the town in 1960.<sup>134</sup>

With the exodus of the rich and the penetration of the Company workers, old residential areas experienced tremendous social change and rapid expansion westward. Each group of

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<sup>133</sup> Isma`il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 10-11

<sup>134</sup> Baladiyyat al-Mahalla al-Kubra, *Ibtihajan bi-istiqlal al-`am al-thamin lil-thawra al-majida: Baqatun li-awjuh anashitatuha al-mukhtalifa* [Celebrating the beginning of the eighth year of the glorious revolution: A bouquet its various activities] (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Hadith lil-Tab` wal-Nashr, 1960) 9-14.

workers coming from the same village tended to concentrate in the neighborhoods closest to their original homes. For example, workers coming from northern villages such as Batanun were concentrated in the far northwestern neighborhoods of al-Shawafi`iyyah.<sup>135</sup> Those who came from towns and villages south of al-Mahalla such as Tanta and Dinushar resided in the southwestern neighborhoods of Sikkit Tanta, Warraqa and Sandifa.

Cheap houses mushroomed and the appearance of these areas quickly changed. Homes with colorful arabesque wood windows, *Mashrabiyyat*, and with Italian-style long wooden balconies and stairs that were dominant in Egypt in the early 20th century gradually disappeared. The quality of the two- and three-story buildings deteriorated especially to the northwest. Small houses with red brick or mud brick became more common. Like the new buildings in the outlying hamlets, these houses were so attached to each other that no straight alleyways existed. Streets were unpaved, narrow, and crooked with many dead ends. The area lacked gardens or any sort of open space. These narrow streets were occupied by vendors which added crowding and trash to it.<sup>136</sup> Unpaved dirt streets turned into mud in winter when rainwater gathered in the lower parts spreading the smells of mold and decaying garbage. The ground floors in many houses were turned into small handloom factories or dye shops. Coffee shops and fast food stands that catered to single poor workers proliferated everywhere adding more crowding and noise. Some of these places operated without following the legal procedures such as notifying the local government and gaining permission. Some violated closing time regulations and stayed open late at night. Most violating coffee shops and stores operated in areas where workers lived, particularly in Sultan Husayn that ran through the eastern part of the town in the al-`Umariyya neighborhood that was located between Sandifa in the south and Suq al-Laban in the north. In one month, the government shutdown 50 coffee shops, including those that carried an official license, in an attempt to restore some order to the area.<sup>137</sup> The state was largely ineffective in its efforts to impose its power over the population and extend its control over the small businesses.

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<sup>135</sup> Oral history collected by the researcher from residents of the area who witnessed that period.

<sup>136</sup> Isma`il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 149

<sup>137</sup> *Al-`Amil*, March 24, 1947.

Due to the need for services by the rapidly growing population, more coffee shops were opened without attaining the required license.

Table 1.23: Unlicensed coffee shops in selected years.

Year	coffee shops*
1942	23
1944	55
1947	41

Source: al-Mahalla Misdemeanor Court records 1942, 1944, and 1947.

While the rich were leaving the traditional core neighborhoods, more poor came in to make these areas even more crowded and overpopulated.<sup>138</sup> As the traditional areas of the city lost their influential upper-class population and their traditional importance as the industrial and financial center of al-Mahalla, the government did little to modernize them. While the modern areas in the east and north were provided with a new sewage system, the traditional quarters lacked such service. People threw their used water directly into the streets and human waste was evacuated from ditches contiguous to homes to tank-carriages drawn by donkeys and mules. The tin tanks used to transport waste frequently turned over and leaked during their trips inside the residential area on their way to empty their load in the designated locations outside the city limits.<sup>139</sup> Some porters even gave themselves the liberty to empty their carriage load inside the city limits. These accidents imposed a danger of pollution and contagion among people, not to mention the smell.<sup>140</sup>

The government also did little to intervene when the lives of residents of Suq al-Laban and Sandifa were endangered due to spreading sinkholes. Because houses and other buildings were established on old underground water storage tanks, sinkholes and cave-ins were not unusual in the old quarters. For example, a sinkhole formed in Suq al-Laban in 1926 damaging

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<sup>138</sup> Isma`il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 155.

<sup>139</sup> Among many court cases see Misdemeanor 1942/ 6791/ 1519.

<sup>140</sup> Misdemeanor 1939/ 6780/ 2452.

the al-Amir Gawish Mosque and its adjacent houses.<sup>141</sup> Another accident took place in 9 February 1930 causing major destruction and the deaths of several people.<sup>142</sup> The local government did not have efficient experts or equipment to evacuate the victims, which seriously devastated their families who spent nights around the site mourning.<sup>143</sup>

It was not until the late 1950s when the government tried to play a more active role in restructuring the town. It moved the *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal outside the town, built a few hundred apartments on the western edge of the town for the lower classes and expanded the sewage services to more areas.<sup>144</sup> However this was a different phase of the political and socio-economic dynamic in the country after the 1952 Revolution. The state adopted populist policies with the intention, though limited success, to achieve some improvement in the lives of the lower classes. Regardless of the inconsistency between what the state planned to do and what it actually achieved in terms of restructuring the town's space, the last years of the 1940s and the early years of the 1950s witnessed a dramatic drop in the town's expansion. After the 1947 strike, the Company adopted an aggressive policy to update its machinery and reduce its labor force. By 1953, when the newly imported machines were fully installed, the workforce of the Company dropped to only 15,000 workers. To reduce the pressure on the town's housing, the Company gave priority in hiring first to residents of al-Mahalla and then residents of al-Mahalla's dependant villages. An efficient train line also operated between al-Mahalla and Samanud. Thus, more workers lived in their own villages instead of moving to al-Mahalla. Due to the political changes in Egypt and the Middle East, namely the rise of Arab nationalism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the abolishment of the Capitulations, and the end of the British occupation, many foreigners and Egyptian Jews started to leave the country and al-Mahalla. In 1958, the new regime launched new policies that extended greater control over the economy and nationalized large businesses, including Bank Misr and its Misr Company in al-Mahalla. Living conditions of

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<sup>141</sup> "Muqarantun bayna amirayn" [A comparison between two princes], *al-Nissr*, March 30, 1930.

<sup>142</sup> Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 538 "Iltimasat ahwal ijtimaiyyah: 1925- 1951" [Petitions on Social Questions: 1925-1951].

<sup>143</sup> Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 470 "Iltimasat ahali fardi: 1906-1935" [Petitions of individuals citizens 1906- 1935].

<sup>144</sup> Baladiyyat al-Mahalla, *Ibtihajan bi-Istiqbal*, 26, 35.

workers under the new populist regime witnessed dramatic improvement. These developments are beyond the time frame of this study. But before these developments took place, workers and people of al-Mahalla went through complex processes of transformation. To co-exist and to become industrial workers and urban dwellers, they adapted, resisted, and enjoyed what the Company and the town offered them, a long journey that the following chapters deal with.



## Chapter 2

### Modernization with the Whip and the Making of an Industrial Worker

On April 6, 2008 massive police forces were mobilized from all over the Nile Delta to al-Mahalla al-Kubra to contain a dissident movement among the population of the town, particularly the workers of the Misr Company. A group of young educated and middle class people put out a call for a national strike that day. Many of the people of the town preferred to spend the day quietly at home, while the workers of the morning shift went peacefully to work at the Company. Around 3:00 pm, while the morning shift was leaving the Company and the afternoon shift was coming in, the scene of massive numbers of workers was too much for hundreds of anxious soldiers and officers stationed outside the fence of the company. On the pretext that one of the workers threw a rock towards the police, the police fired at the workers. What seemed to be a peaceful day turned into a violent confrontation between the workers and the people of the town against the police and the head of the Egyptian regime. Several public places, including schools, stores, and banks were set on fire. Despite their highly sophisticated weaponry, the police failed to contain the situation. Police continued firing at people randomly, killing a child who was looking through his home's balcony and injuring many others. The wildly angry crowd toppled a huge picture of President Husni Mubarak in a scene reminiscent of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad shortly after the American invasion. In their comment on the scene, the Egyptian bloggers took pride at what the people of al-Mahalla did, because it was "with our own Egyptian hands without the need for US help".<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup><http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGFUAsjTtx4&feature=related>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=En8qt0CpkaY&feature=related>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n61RPTRH3uc&feature=related>

Although many groups across the country showed their willingness to participate in the national strike, only al-Mahalla was confronted with the lion's share of Riot Police forces. Since December 2006 thousands of police with their armor had been stationed in the town to confront a series of strikes launched by the Company workers who were seeking an adjustment to their wages to better balance between their limited income and the continuously skyrocketing prices. Al-Mahalla is not the largest town in the country and is not known particularly for its rebellious politics. But it is the home of the largest factory in Egypt where the largest number of industrial workers gathers under one roof. This is what the ruling elites have cared about since the establishment of the Company in 1927. Aside from usage of cyberspace by the new generation of dissident activists and the advanced weaponry employed by the riot police, what happened in al-Mahalla in 2008 was not much different from what happened in the town in 1938 and 1947 and 1975.<sup>146</sup> Large numbers of workers with limited demands were confronted by the police and army. Since King Faruq, the state has been urging the workers of al-Mahalla to work and not to be engaged in politics.<sup>147</sup> King Faruq and his successors urged laborers to give up any demands, so that they would become modern workers and help the state carry on its modernizing mission. If laborers chose to act against that advice the police and army were ready to act to protect what a court judge called the modern independent nation from "reckless workers" in his depiction of the striking workers.<sup>148</sup>

This chapter traces the labor management policies adopted by the Egyptian capitalists and the state and how workers maneuvered and dealt with these polices since the establishment of the Company from 1927 until 1958. Although it is one Company, it merits being the representative of a nationwide labor management for several reasons. It has been the largest single company and the most successful of the nationalist enterprises of Bank Misr. It has employed the largest number of industrial workers in Egypt. The establishment and the success of the company not

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<sup>146</sup> Obviously the 2008 and 1975 strikes are beyond the time limits of this study. The 1938 and 1947 strikes are dealt with in the next chapter and other parts of this study.

<sup>147</sup> *Al-Ahram*, December 17, 1937.

<sup>148</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1865.

only assured the national capitalists a capacity for industrialization, but also coincided with the state's quest to restructure its power over society and "modernize" its subjects. In other words, making industrial workers went hand in hand with making modern subjects. While building a lucrative project and assuring their share of the national resources, founders and managers of the Company were launching a discourse and applying policies about building a modern society. Did they not bring peasants into modernity? Did they not teach peasants to operate modern machines, take off their *galabiyya* and *qubqab* to wear pants and shoes, learn punctuality, watch the clock, and ride trains? Indeed, they made all these emblems of modernity parts of the daily lives of thousands of workers.<sup>149</sup> However, workers did not passively embrace the emblems of this modern society just because it was imposed upon them. They actively chose between the new and old tools and ideas depending on what served their purposes. A better life for them was not necessarily a choice between "traditional" and "modern." They strove creatively to make their lives easier with a guaranteed income to sustain the family and, hopefully, preserve their possession of a small farming plot. More than that, they also cherished different types of entertainment that were available to them only in the urban towns. They not only developed strategies for survival, they also struggled over the appropriate symbols, to identify their community, and to give meaning to their historical experience.

Both the Company and the workers were selective in adopting new ways and retaining elements from the "traditional" culture to achieve their goals. Neither the national capitalists nor peasants-workers were trying to build or embrace individualism through the transition to modern industry and urban life. Through an army of technical managers, white-collar *effendiyya*, foremen, and guards, national capitalism aspired to manufacture productive, obedient, and punctual workers. By false compliance, networking, evading work, not communicating with supervisors, and distorting the industrial dress code, workers actively adapted to the industrial

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<sup>149</sup> These elements of modern industry, which mark modernity as known in the West, are taken from Mintz's work, in which he argues that modern industrial organization were introduced first in the Carrabin sugar factories in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century long before it was followed in the British textile factories or European industries. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 46-52.

life and choose when to imitate and when to differ from the model of a modern worker-subject as it was imposed upon them by the Company and the state.

I trace here the concept of the worker-subject not as a discursive process, a new territory that has, in any case, been explored recently by historians of culture.<sup>150</sup> Instead I follow the policies and their application through which the Egyptian capitalists, state, and the laborers interacted daily on the shop floor to manufacture modern subjects as industrial workers. This chapter analyzes the labor and management practices that grew out of nationalist expectations and how workers reacted to them in the largest Egyptian textile factory. It is about what the Egyptian nationalists who thought of themselves as modernizers with a vision of how a modern industrial worker should be and how to create one. Central to this is an analysis of the ideologies of nationalism which were used by both industrialists and the state to discipline and control both a labor force and state subjects.

Turning peasants into industrial workers and urban dwellers was a challenge for both the Company and the workers themselves and raised anxiety of the state to control mass workers. Both the state and the national capitalists were seeking obedient, docile, and efficient worker-subjects who submissively followed rules. Obedience and docility were equated with efficiency and productivity in the Egyptian context.<sup>151</sup> Behind the fence of the Company, representatives of the social forces that were shaping modern Egyptian society were interacting. Owners and top managers of the Company were capitalist landlords, industrialists, and politicians. Their managers were educated *effendiyya* who were employing their modern education and training to assure their social mobility and cultural dominance. Then there were thousands of workers who were urban poor and landless peasants. Between the managers and the workers there were groups of employers with supervisory capacity, such as foremen, *ra'is*, production assistants, *musa'id*, supervisors, *mubashir* and *muraqib*, and guards, *ghafir*. With their disciplinary powers over workers and no hope of joining the administrative echelon, they functioned as an insulating

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<sup>150</sup> Notable examples include Jacob, "Working Out Egypt" and Gasper, *The power of Representation*.

<sup>151</sup> Frederick Harbison and Ibrahim Abdelkader Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 74.

cushion between the workers and managers. The intensive presence of the police inside and around the factory signified the state's role in urban control, which was particularly crucial during labors strikes.

### **The Cult of Technology: Western Knowledge and the Nationalist Drive**

Let's start with the simple question; who designed and applied the labor-management policies and on behalf of whom? The Company had a board of directors which delegated administrative responsibility to the managing directors. Their primary function was to represent the interests of the stock holders. The board itself consisted of Egyptian capitalists who held the largest number of the Company's stock. They enjoyed both economic and social status with diverse sources of fortune and power. In addition to holding industrial companies' stock, they owned factories and farmland, worked as top bureaucrats, occupied parliamentary seats, and held the honorary titles of Pasha and Bey.<sup>152</sup> With the rise of the army to power after 1952, those who carried military titles appeared on the board.

Table 2.1: Individuals who rotated in board presidency and membership between 1940 and 1958 and their economic and political occupations.

Names	Economic positions	Political positions
Ahmad Midhat Yakan Pasha	Chairman of Bank Misr	Foreign Minister and a senator
`Abd al-Rahman Hamada Pasha	Chairman of the Company and several other companies, board member of Federation of Egyptian Industry	
Hassan Mukhtar Rasmi Pasha	Prez the Company and Misr Bank	
Dr. Hafiz `Afifi Pasha	Deputy of the Company, Chairman of Bank Misr, Chairman of the Commercial Chamber, Deputy of the Federation of Egyptian Industry	Foreign Minister, Chairman of the of the Royal Diwan
`Abd al-Maqsud Ahmad Bey	Muntadab the Company & Bank Misr	Deputy of the Ministry of Finance
Dr. Fu'ad Bey Sultan	Chairman of Misr Cigarette Company and Board member in several other companies	Senator

<sup>152</sup> The list of the board 23 people enjoyed membership of the board between 1940 and 1958, includes 16 Pashas and 3 beys. The four people who did not carry one of these titles appeared in the board after 1952 and consequently the abolishment of these titles. Two out of these four carried high military ranks.

Sayyid Muhammad Khashab Pasha	Vice president of the Agriculture Society, board member of several companies	Mayor of Assuit, a parliament member
Sadiq Wahba Pasha	Board member of the National Bank	Minister of Agriculture and Senator
Sayyid Muhammad Badrawi `Ashur Pasha	Chairman of Misr lil-Asmida, board member several companies, big landlord	Parliament member
Mahmud Shukri Pasha	Chairman of al-Taslif Bank and Mir Company for wool weaving, board member Bank Misr and al-Sharq Insurance	Senator
Tawfiq Dus Pasha	Board member of several companies	Minister of Transportation, a parliament member
Muhammad Ahmad Farghali Pasha	Chairman of Alexandria Cotton Exporter Assoc., Mina al-Basal Stock Market, Farghali Cotton & Investment Co., and several other companies.	Senator
`Abdul Hayy Khalil Pasha	Wholesale yarn trader, board member in several companies, landlord	Parliament member
Husayn Sirri Pasha		Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Minister of Interiors and Irrigation, a Senator
Muhammad Sharara Pasha		Deputy of Foreign Ministry
Mahmud Muhassib Bey	Chairman of al-Ahliyya Blanket Co.	Senator
`Ali Islam Pasha	Owner of Islam textile factory, Chairman of the Commercial Chamber in Bani Suwif	Parliament member
Muhammad Safwat Pasha		Minster of Awqaf, parliament member
`Abd al-Fattah al-Lawzi Pasha	Manager of Mir Company for Silk Weaving in Damietta	Senator
Hassan Mar`i	Landlord, board member of the Portland Cement Company	Parliament member
Qa`imaqam Ahmad Hamid `Ubayd	General manager of the Company	Army officer, parliament member
Amiralay Engineer, Ahmad Tawfiq al-Bakri	General manager of the Company	Army officer
Dr. Ahmad al-Sayyid Ali		

Sources: Corporation Department files in *Dar al-Watha'iq al-Qawmiyya*, Company's annual reports between 1940 and 1958, and *al-Shakhsiyyat al-Bariza bi al-Qut al-Misri: Dalil al-Tabaqa al-Raqiyya 1941*, *Who's Who in Egypt and the Near East 1950- 1958*.

Both the board and the managing directors were in charge of maximizing the profits for the share holders, but the general and managing directors were more involved in the administrative responsibilities to reach that goal. Those directors were engineers and followed by departmental managers and the section chiefs. In this middle-management group there were staff departments such as accounting, personnel and technical services; they were the modern educated middle class, or *effendiyya*. Top-level personnel were recruited from among government civil service employees who had gained foreign experience through education or technical training. The best examples here are both the general manager `Abd al-Rahman Hamada Bey (later Pasha), and the managing director `Abd al-Hamid Hamdi Bey.<sup>153</sup> Both were formerly top administrators at the Egyptian Railway Company. There was also Abu Sayf Bey Radi who joined the Company in 1947 as a consultant on labor affairs from the Social Affairs Ministry.<sup>154</sup> Their experience in public administration brought with it some assets as well as

<sup>153</sup>The social and professional profiles of both men helps to understand how they reached these high positions in the Company. The Company's general director Abd al-Rahman Hamada Pasha received his education in Victoria College in his hometown, Alexandria, and then received an engineering degree at Birmingham University, England. He became also the Chairman of the Trading Corporation of Egypt, Eastern Electronic Company. He was also enjoyed high positions in several Companies of Bank Misr including vice –Chairman of Misr Engineering Works& Transport Co., Director of Misr for Silk, Misr for Spinning and Weaving Fin Cotton, Beida Dyers, Misr Concrete Development Co, and General Warehouse Co. occupying these multi positions was not only a fruit of his education. He was a member of several aristocratic clubs and social associations where the upper class in Cairo networked such as Muhammad `Ali Club, Amir al-Sa`id Sport Club, Suliman Pasha Club, Royal Yacht Club of Egypt. Until 1948, he carried the title Bey, and then King Faruq granted him title Pasha during his visit to the Company in May that year. He was decorated with Order of Nile. The managing director Abd al-Hamid Hamdi Bey received his high degree in Egypt from the Faculty of Engineering. During his career he traveled to Europe for technical training. he was also the director of the Seté Pour la Vente des Produits Egypt and North East Africa Trading Co. he became a Bey in 1948 and was decorated with the King's Medal. As high technocrats in his class, he lived in the high class neighborhood of Zamalek in Cairo and was a member in Suliman Pasha Club, the Royal Automobile Club d`Egypte, and Amir al-Sa`id Sport Club among others. E. J. Blattner, *Who's Who in Egypt and the Near East 1952* (Cairo: Pual Barbey Press, 1952), 383-4.

<sup>154</sup>The appointment of Abu Sayf Bey Radi came aftermath the 1947 strike. The Company announced that the purpose was to gain from his experience in solving laborers` problems, particularly to improve the communication between workers and the administration. On the other hand, the labor activist and historian Taha Sa`d `Uthman thinks that this appointment was a gift from the Company to Radi for supporting the Company against the striking workers. Taha Sa`d `Uthman, *al-Idrabat fi Misr zaman al-arba`inat* [Stirkes in Egypt in 1940s] (Cairo: al-`Arabi, 1998), 53.

many of the shortcomings of bureaucratic organization. They brought in the national aspiration of creating modern subjects through employing the coercive power of authorities. These top managers, Hamdi and the technical manager Sadiq Ibrahim in particular, were notorious for using physical violence to discipline their subordinates.<sup>155</sup> Meanwhile, they were highly skilled technicians, hardworking and anti-nepotism.<sup>156</sup> The company also sent, at its own expense, some university-educated middle management staff for training at technical institutions abroad. The top two technical managers along with another 28 department managers were sent to Belgium for training in 1928 before the Company started its production.<sup>157</sup> Members of top management were continuously sent abroad to inspect and purchase new machinery, visit industrial establishments and sometimes to attend advanced educational programs. Few top managers in any country spent more time and money keeping abreast of world-wide developments in their industries than did the managing directors and general managers of al-Mahalla and other Bank Misr textile companies.<sup>158</sup> This group of nationalist *effendiyya* who were situated in the middle and top echelons of the Company derived satisfaction from the feeling that they were masters of the secrets of Western technology and could employ them effectively to promote Egypt's industrial development.<sup>159</sup> This confidence was the result of mastering modern western technology coupled with the nationalism drive, although by the early 1950s when the Company had already installed the most up to date western made machinery, the productivity was very limited compared to equivalent companies in Europe. Those who belonged to a type of cult of technology within the Company were not able to see the shortcomings of their management policies and had to hire an American expert whose first line in the report pointed out their failures. He started his report "full production cannot be realized under present conditions because of the chaotic nature of supervisory discipline and the complete absence of production incentives for the worker. The present labor control system in the mill conspires to maintain a

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<sup>155</sup>Tanta August 9, 1944.and Fikri al-Khuli, *al-Rihla* (Journey) v. 1 (Cairo: Dar al-Ghad, 1987), 113.

<sup>156</sup>Tanta August 9, 1944.

<sup>157</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>158</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 50.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.



constant state of tension among the workers and an ever present danger of strife.”<sup>160</sup> That failure in reaching satisfying productivity was not a great surprise. Top and middle managers were good technical specialists but very often lacked formal training, experience or even interest in administrative techniques or in human relations, which was the greatest shortcoming of middle management.<sup>161</sup> Their technical training and expertise made them fond of modern laborsaving machinery, despite the abundantly available workforce, rather than providing those workers with training. They thought that modern machinery reduced the waste of raw materials which was 60% of total production costs. These savings are said to be greater than the savings on labor which were 20% of the cost of production. <sup>162</sup> As a result of their policy of buying the latest and best machinery, the Company doubled its production and decreased its total labor force by 40% after WWII. The drastic reduction in laborers coupled with the reduction in hours of those who continued to work were the main impulses behind the largest labor strike in Egyptian history in al-Mahalla in 1947. The constant firing of workers raised fear, tension, and anxiety among all laborers. Weaving workers who were paid per piece witnessed reductions in their wages although each of them was assigned to work on four looms instead of two. The technology cult recalculated wages considering only the fact that they brought the best laborsaving machines, so that each worker could operate twice as many handlooms. Expecting the worker’s productivity would automatically increase, and consequently his piece work wages might have doubled, the administration exempted the Company from paying wages for one quarter of the production and reduced the wage for each one hundred pieces from 13.5 to 10.5 piaster. Despite their calculations, floating between four machines instead of two distracted the workers and increased faulty production and consequently decreased workers’ wages and fueled their anger. The technology cult among *effendiyya* administrators paved the road for the massive destruction in the 1947 strike, which caused the Company to shut down for a month. The state put its entire

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<sup>160</sup> William Morris Carson, *The Mehalla Report* (Bad res-Sheyn, Egypt: 1953), 1.

<sup>161</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 49.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

apparatus from the police to the army in support of the Company in its endeavor to create the submissive, obedient worker/subject.

Below the section chiefs were the section chief assistants, supervisors, and foremen who in some cases were looked upon as members of management and in others were considered as part of the labor force. This group consisted of salaried employees devoting their full time to supervision. Some of them had limited training abroad. Most group leaders were paid on a monthly basis and considered more or less senior members of the labor force. In its selective modernization, the Company used education as a main criterion for the selection of first-line supervisors. It tended to hire trade-school graduates on the theory that even if they did not have good technical training, they at least had some general education. Literacy was also required for supervisory positions on the shop floor to take attendance, deliver payment checks, and more importantly to read memos and instructions. Due to their young age, lack of technical training, and deficiency in labor-management skills these supervisors tended to employ fear and violence as a main way to manage their employees.<sup>163</sup> This group identified itself neither with the workers nor with the management. A manager said “foremen are filters or insulating pads between management and workers.”<sup>164</sup> These groups were dissatisfied because their opportunities to advance into middle management were blocked due to their lack of university education. The uncertain status and limited promotional opportunities for the first-line supervisors would explain their aggressiveness against workers.<sup>165</sup> On one level they were

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<sup>163</sup> Court records reveal that many supervisors who were teenagers or in their early twenties were reported for severe physical abuse that caused their subordinates injuries. Among many examples, the 18-years old supervisor, *muraqib*, al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Halawani hit al-Sa'id Badawi □Ali during work. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775 /717. The 16-year old supervisor Ramadan Bubbu hit a worker because he sat down after finishing his work. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1165. The 18-year old production supervisor Sarwat Bahgat al-Khuli was involved in Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1203. The 19 year old supervisor, *muraji`*, Bidayr Muhammad Shaqweer along with others, harassed female workers at the end of the shift while they were leaving the company. Misdemeanor 1945/7794 / 2692. Muhammad Ali Ghazuli was only 23 years old when he was a chair of a shift, *ra'is wardiyya*, and got involved in a fight. Misdemeanor 1945/7794 / 2310.

<sup>164</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 51.

<sup>165</sup> Among many examples of arbitrary violence against workers, the supervisor Muntasir Muhammad slapped the worker Ibrahim Sha`ban Qasim on his face because he went to the bathroom. The slap caused the worker a serious injury in his left ear. Misdemeanor 1939 /6779/ 1390. In another case the 23-year old supervisor `Abbas Muhammad Sarhan kicked the worker `Abd al-Hayy Muhammad Shalabi and slapped his face three times because he dropped a bobbin. The worker`s injury in his left ear was so serious that the court judge was outraged and harshly sentenced the supervisor with 3 EP fine. Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 2509.

frustrated and dissatisfied with their status and limited hopes for promotion. They tried their best to emphasize their power by employing violence and aggression against workers. Foremen and other supervisors employed physical violence against workers to train and to discipline them and even to stop workers from employing violence against each others. <sup>166</sup>

Table 2.2: Salaried Egyptian employees in the Company in 1948.

Salary in EP	People
4-4,5	36
6-6,5	28
7-7,5	53
8-8,5	41
9-9,5	128
10-10,5	91
11-15	216
15,5-20	78
20,5-25	27
25,5-30	9
30,5-35	0
35,0-40	1*
40-50	2**
Total	710

\*A German technician

\*\* Technicians from Belgium and Bologna.

Table 2.3: The 13 salaried British subjects in 1948.

job	People	Salary	Total
Diggers	2	31.2	62.4
Diggers	1	37.048	

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<sup>166</sup> The worker `Abd al-Hadi `Abd al-Fattah hit the janitor of his shop floor. The two foremen, *musa`id*, Abu al-Yazid Ahmad al-Qattawi and Muhammad `Ali al-Sharqawi, both lived in Sandifa and were 26 and 24 years old, violently hit the janitor with a bobbin on his eye and with a piece of wood on his head. That caused the janitor injuries. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6788/ 1114. The section chief Yusuf Muhammad Ahmad hit his supervisee `Abd al-Ra`uf Salim al-Tubi to stop him fighting with another worker. Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 2825.

Maintenance inspectors	1	32.172	
Installers	4	32.172	128.688
Installers	1	31.2	
Installers	1	36.064	
Color cook	1	62.4	
Dyer	1	66	
Fire and water	1	35.2	
Total	13		491.172

Table 2.4: The gap between average wages of Egyptians and foreigners in the Company.

	People	%	Salaries	%
salaried Egyptians	1,043	97,5%	331,000	90%
salaried Foreigners	27	2,5%	36,000	10%
Waged workers	21,300		1,630,000	

Source: The Archive of the Department of the Corporations, Mahfazah 43.

Tables 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4 show that the gap between average wage for workers, 6.37 EP a month and 76.5EP a year, average wage for an Egyptian salaried, 26.4 EP a month and 317 a year, and average salaried foreigners.

### **Rigid Discipline and Training on Fear**

Although the Company was quite generous in getting its top managerial and administrative groups training abroad, it invested little time and resources in the training of rank and file workers. Workers would learn by watching others. The philosophy, as described by one of the administrators was: “the worker is like a person who has never been swimming and is thrown into the river. He either sinks or swims purely on the basis of his own instincts”.<sup>167</sup> The general practice was to assign new workers to help the older workers. If the new recruit was a good observer and imitator, he may acquire the skill necessary to perform the job. The older worker was often reluctant to teach the new recruit out of fear that he might be replaced by the

<sup>167</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 84.

younger worker who received lower wages.<sup>168</sup> If the new worker was a relative or came from the same village, the senior worker might take an interest. Training in this case was likely to be based upon personal considerations and kinship. This emphasized the communal bonding and division among workers which fragmented their sense of class solidarity, rather than building a sense of professionalism. Older workers were also abusive to newer ones looking upon them as their assistants. In one of the worst cases, a worker killed another who refused to become his assistant in the Folding Section.<sup>169</sup> With a lack of training systems, older workers often considered those assistants as personal assets and fought between themselves over those assistants.<sup>170</sup> What was very important to learn was to follow orders and to abide by the rigid discipline system.

However the older workers themselves were poorly trained. Performance was measured by the foremen's opinion of the workers. There were no mechanical-aptitude or intelligence tests, nor were there any systematic programs for measuring actual performance even for skilled workers, no standards against which performance could be measured other than the workers' willingness to follow orders and to refrain from acts of insubordination.<sup>171</sup> Since the foremen were themselves poorly trained and quite incapable of developing their work force, their only interest was in maintaining their prerogative to fire those who failed to make the grade by themselves. Foremen tried to keep the workers who did what they were told to do and who did not talk back. The most critical criterion was obedience and docility which seemed to be equated with efficiency. A good worker was one who accepted authority, carried out orders, refrained from talking back to his supervisors, and did not start arguments with fellow workers. To make sure workers were obedient, from the early years the company threatened to fire those who

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<sup>168</sup>Among many cases, the worker Ahmad Muhammad `Isa refused to train Nasr Muhammad al-Sayyad, then the latter punched him. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6789/1362.

<sup>169</sup>- Tanta Criminal Court 1941/ 7448/ 2327.

<sup>170</sup>The 22-year old worker `Isa `Abdullah `Isa wanted to work with his previous work partner. He got into an argument over that with the 18-year old worker al-Sayyid Ahmad Abd al-Hamid Yunis. Quickly, it turned into a fight. `Isa and his brother al-Gharib hit al-Sayyid. Al-Sayyid and many unknown others hit the `Isa brothers. 5EP fine and 1,5 EP damage. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/36.

<sup>171</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 73 and 85.

talked back to supervisors and waived their hands improperly in their faces.<sup>172</sup> It also announced the names of workers who got fired for that reason, so that others would take notice.<sup>173</sup> The Company also adopted a discourse that relations between workers and the top managers were patriarchal relations that should be based on the docility of workers and the mercy of the management. One of the managers wrote: “If workers have demands, they should go to the union, which is capable of extending the kindness of the management”.<sup>174</sup> Another manager commented on the bad relations between workers and their bosses “the duty of the worker is to obey his boss and perform his work faithfully and the duty of the boss is to advise the worker gently as a teacher guiding his student. (...) the worker has to carry on his responsibilities toward his homeland and obey his boss”.<sup>175</sup>

The failure of the Company to delegate authority clearly made each level arbitrary and defensive in its relations with other levels. No one was sure what was expected of him. Supervisors insulted and cursed workers and workers did not have channels to communicate their grievances to higher level managers. When approached by workers they would take the supervisor’s side.<sup>176</sup> Some of those managers themselves were abusive to workers. The first manager of the Weaving factory Sadiq Ibrahim, who got his training in Belgium, was a great source of fear among his subordinates from all levels. While he was passing by on the shop floor, scared workers whispered warnings to each other:

“Sadiq Bey does not like to see machines stopped, he kicks (workers) *Shalut*. All he cares about is seeing machines working. He does not consider if the machine (stopped) because it is broken down or the yarn was torn. Once he gets onto the shop floor, all the world shakes up. Even supervisors, once they see him, run and crazily hit workers right and left, and push off the

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<sup>172</sup>Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 121.

<sup>173</sup>Ibid.

<sup>174</sup>*Amil al-Mahalla*1, November 1947.

<sup>175</sup>“Ayuha al-`ummal: hadha howa al-tariq” [Workers: This Is the Path] *Amil al-Mahalla* 9, April 1948, 3. For similar discourse see Muhammad Muhammad `Abd al-`All, “‘Ajabani min kalam al-`ummal” [Workers` Talks That I Liked] *Amil al-Mahalla* 9, April 1948, 8 and Fathi Ahmad al-Sayyid, “‘Ummaliyyat” [Workers Affairs], *Amil al-Mahalla* 13, January 1948, 13.

<sup>176</sup>Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 8.

brakes even if the machine was broken down. All they care about is not to let the manager see stopped machines. They are frightened of him... he is a tyrannical manager and does not differentiate between a worker or an assistant. If he sees a stopped machine he hits the worker, the mechanics... he likes to kick (...) if a worker complains, assistants and supervisors slap his face". 177

The managing director `Abd al-Hamid Hamdi Bey, who was the second man in the Company after the general manager, was also notorious for his violent attitude against all his subordinates, including white-collar workers and supervisors. 178 Despite their modern education and their aspiration for modernization, Effendiyya of the Company widely employed violence against workers. 179 Equipped with education, high professional positions, and nationalist discourse, they reproduced themselves as patriarchs of workers. This not only created fear among workers; it also created a violent work environment where workers hit their colleagues and bosses. Rather than emphasizing individual professionalism and trigger an individual's ability to produce to be rewarded, it emphasized communal bonds among workers to protect each other in such a violent sphere. Although only some abusive incidents resulting in injuries were reported to the court, records reveal that it was common for supervisors to hit workers because those workers needed regular help in operating machineries or getting yarn supplies. Underreporting of incidents must have been common because the victim was not hospitalized or feared to be fired. 180 Some workers were too afraid to testify against bosses

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<sup>177</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla* v. 1, 113.

<sup>178</sup> *Tanta* June 1, 1938 and August 9, 1944. Among the second line of advisors, there was the engineer Ibrahim Muhammad Gaballah who was the chairman of the *Barm* section. Gaballah was prosecuted for hitting a worker. Misdemeanor 1936 /6768/4316.

<sup>179</sup> For example, `Abd al-Hmid Sulayman, a factory manager in the Company, slapped the worker Hilmi Muhammad Thabit because he left his work 30 minutes before the scheduled time. The worker had to be hospitalized for a while until his ear healed up. Misdemeanor 1944/ 6917/ 66. For a similar case when a section chief hit a worker see Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 2825.

<sup>180</sup> Among the abusive managers, there were Ibrahim Muhammad Gaballa *Effendi* and Mahmud Abd al-Mun`im *Effendi*. Both of them were 23-year old engineers and lived in the Company's elaborate housing. The earlier was the manager of the *Barm* section and was fined by the court for hitting the worker Mustafa Ali Shahin. Misdemeanor 1935/ 6783/4316. The latter hit a worker with a metal shoehorn in his face. Misdemeanor 1940/ 6861/1244. Among many examples of abusive lower rank supervisors, shift chairs used metal tools to hit workers on their heads because they thought workers were neglectful. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794 /3008 and Misdemeanor 1945/ 7795/ 3513. The boss, *ra'is*, Ahmad Muhammad al-Gharib hit the worker Tawfiq `Amir in the weaving shop floor because `Amir was talking to another worker. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/ 832.

who caused their colleagues serious injury and only medical reports supported proved the violent abuse. 181

Violence as a method of passing along the required skills of the craft to apprentices had been widely used throughout history and was culturally accepted, particularly in the handloom weaving industry in al-Mahalla. However, relations between owners of the handloom factories and older weavers on one side and young workers and apprentices on the other side was different from that relation in what was claimed to be the modern Company. In traditional handloom factories and other traditional industries, the owner of the business was the patriarch and his workers, including apprentices, were his children. The patriarch-employer might use violence to discipline his children-workers without considering it humiliation or demoralization because he provided them with more than paid work. He was responsible for giving them different types of material and moral and social support. In traditional industry, workers could borrow money for emergencies and go to the employer's house asking for meals. The employer, known in handloom industry as *Ma'allim*, could cover the absence of the workers' father in social functions such as a marriage arrangement... etc. This was not the case in the modern mill. Supervisors and foremen had a great deal of power; in particular, they were assigned to keep workers away from managers. Physical abuse was a way to impose power and to train workers to abide by their superiors' orders, and often served to cover the foremen's inability to solve technical and work-related problems. It was humiliating and demoralizing. Some workers reacted with violence against their bosses and foremen. Records show that violence between workers and their foremen and bosses and even among workers themselves became part of the culture and daily practice in the mill.<sup>182</sup> The lack of definition of responsibilities and roles allowed foremen to abuse their position and to take bribes and receive sexual services from their subordinates to recommend them for promotion, save them from downgrading, and to cover their

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<sup>181</sup>Dusuqi Hassan Shahin, a section chief, slapped the worker al-Sayyid Muhammad Hassan ten times on his ear, causing him a permanent handicap. Six workers testified that their colleague had had a hearing problem before the incident. However, the medical report proved that slap caused the injury and the chief was sentenced with 20 piaster fine. Misdemeanor 1944/ 6917/ 781.

<sup>182</sup> For the phenomenal violence inside the Company, see Chapter four in this study.



mistakes. <sup>183</sup> Bribery was a way of giving both the worker and the receiving foreman an opportunity to tame ‘the chaotic system of supervisory discipline and complete absence of production incentives for the worker (and foremen).’ <sup>184</sup> Both workers and foremen increased their income and improved their positions. As a worker who bribed his boss said “how could he (the foreman) support his children in school and buy furniture for his engaged daughter unless he takes from me and you? He is not satisfied with what he gets and needs an increase. He has a card to play, he promotes and demotes”. <sup>185</sup> Some workers wrote to the Royal Palace complaining that they were treated unjustly due to favoritism.<sup>186</sup> There was a common belief that favoritism was necessary for promotion. The American expert who conducted a labor analysis in the Company in the early 1950s reported that whether favoritism was widespread was not as important as the fact the workers thought it was. <sup>187</sup> In expecting and accepting bribes, foremen were not violating the “norm” that was established across the managerial hierarchy. Production supervisors and *wazzan*, weighers, accepted bribes from workers who got paid per piece to report that they produced more than they actually did.<sup>188</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla* magazine, the mouthpiece of both the Company and its dependant union reported that this practice was common. Therefore, the administration was aware of it. All the administration had to say about it was how this bribery damaged the honor and reputation of the supervisors and the weighers. Bribes took different forms.<sup>189</sup> While foremen received cash, some high-level administrators used workers for free in their own private business or during construction of their elaborate

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<sup>183</sup> The Corporation Department Archive, File 23, `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 “Iltimasat `ummal jama`i, 1938-1952” [Collective Petitions of Workers: 1938-1952]. In his biography, the worker `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman reported that bribing foremen and supervisors was very common. At least two of his friends and colleagues admitted giving bribes for promotion. One got promoted twice after he offered his boss 5 EP each time. Halim, *Hikayat `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman*, 42.

<sup>184</sup> Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 1.

<sup>185</sup> Halim, *Hikayat `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman*, 66.

<sup>186</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 441 “Iltimasat talab wazifa, 1939- 1944” [Petitions on job requests, 1939- 1944].

<sup>187</sup> Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 16.

<sup>188</sup> “Kuntu Aqul” [I Was Saying], *Amil al-Mahalla* 8, April 1948.

<sup>189</sup> White-collar workers complained that they were fired because they refused to pay bribes to their bosses, while their colleagues who accepted to pay bribes equivalent to their periodical raise were protected when they committed mistakes. The Department of Corporation Archive, Mahfazah 43 “Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazl wal-Nasij December 1942- July 1959” [Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving: December 1942- July 1959].

residencies.<sup>190</sup> Children of workers worked as free servants in some bosses' homes.<sup>191</sup> There were those who received sexual services from their subordinates. Two supervisors were caught having sex with a male worker who was younger than seventeen years old in the Company's bathroom.<sup>192</sup> At least one male worker complained that his supervisor was pressuring him because he refused to provide him with sexual favors.<sup>193</sup> Although it was a single case, it indicates that no matter how weak workers were, there were those among them who were willing to challenge the abusive authority.

Workers obeyed orders to avoid fines. Fear of the supervisor as a symbol of authority was less the reason than a conscious attempt not to deprive family of any portion of income. However, they developed another strategy to avoid abusive bosses. Their way was just not to communicate with supervisors no matter what problem they were facing. This strategy echoes the traditional Egyptian wisdom of avoiding going to the police station if at all possible. The majority of workers learned not to communicate with their supervisors lest they be punished. Thus tensions festered and potential complaints accumulated. In the early 1950s 54.4% of surveyed workers said they did not talk to supervisors about any job problems.<sup>194</sup> This was a demoralizing situation as supervisors should communicate with each worker if a satisfactory level of efficiency was to be realized. From the workers' point of view the complete lack of contact with the supervisor in his role as a company representative bred the opinion that the Company had no interest in their performance. Workers were not interested in productivity either. Even the potentially excellent worker did only enough to get by and to avoid the rigors of the disciplinary system. It reduced all production to the level of the poorest worker rather than raising it to the level of the good or excellent worker.<sup>195</sup> If a machine was broken down, they

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<sup>190</sup> One of the top engineers was fired in 1939 because he used the Company's steel sheets to make gates for his house and made workers participate in the construction work. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 471 "Iltimasat ahali fardi: 1936-1948" [Petitions of individual citizens 1936- 1948].

<sup>191</sup>Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 25.

<sup>192</sup>Tanta Criminal Court 1939/ 7441/ 3571.

<sup>193</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1943/ 7453/ 1542.

<sup>194</sup> Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 4.

<sup>195</sup>Ibid., 2.

tried to help each other to fix it or quietly seek the help of a mechanic.<sup>196</sup> If one of the bosses was passing by, workers turned the broken down machine on and pretended it was operating, which must have further harmed the already damaged machines.<sup>197</sup>

The rigid, yet arbitrary, discipline bred a series of fear relationships between all levels of management and labor. Each told the ones above only those things which would not threaten his job or those things which made his job more secure. He would keep those below him quiet with the only available tools, fear of job loss, demotion, transfer, or fines.<sup>198</sup> This negative pressure had now created a feeling of common cause in the labor force and antagonism toward the Company. This led to a potentially explosive situation wherein management had no forewarning of trouble as grievances built up within the labor force without any possible means of expression, except in the form of labor violence. Under this system, labor violence would continue to be periodic and almost inevitable.<sup>199</sup> Scared and frightened workers were not totally passive. Some of them found ways to evade work and to avoid confrontations with abusive bosses at the same time. In the early days of work, once the clerk added their names to the list of those who had attended and were guaranteed payment for the day some would find a hideout in which to sleep and rest.<sup>200</sup> A worker described what he was doing as follows: "I work only as little as they pay me. I work only for one hour. Once the scribe writes my name to be paid for the day I go to find myself a box to sleep in until dawn. What can I do? It is chaos."<sup>201</sup> Others would walk around between shop floors entertaining themselves by watching others and observing, and even harassing, female workers.<sup>202</sup> Going to the bathroom was a shrewd way to avoid work.<sup>203</sup> Once

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<sup>196</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1943/ 7453/1542.

<sup>197</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla* v.1, 113.

<sup>198</sup> Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 3.

<sup>199</sup> Chapter 3 in this study deals with labor resistance including strikes and violence.

<sup>200</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 102.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> On August 20, 1938, the worker Salim Ramadan spent his morning outside the shop floor harassing female workers. One of his male colleagues tried to stop him, but he ignored him. Several workers hit him to enforce him to stop. Later that day Ramadan brought a group of his friends and got into a violent confrontation with those who hit him in the morning. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/2138.

<sup>203</sup> The worker Muhammad Ibrahim Ahmad hit his colleague Himida `Abd al-`Aziz with a wood clog, *Qubqab*, on his head because Abd al-`Aziz told the foreman that Ahmad was hiding at the bathroom to avoid work. Misdemeanor Court 1937/ 6774/ 3392.

the management realized the trick, it decided to keep all bathrooms shut between eight and eleven in the morning and between two to six in the afternoon. Workers who had to use the bathroom during these hours had to acquire written permission from the supervisor.<sup>204</sup>

*Ghafirs* were assigned to guard the bathroom doors and to allow only workers with written permission to use it. Although the purpose was to keep the work going, it allowed supervisors and *ghafirs* more power over workers. As usual, this power was used arbitrarily creating an explosive situation considering the pressing need for going to the bathroom.<sup>205</sup> Those who really needed to respond to nature's call without going through the hassle of seeking permission simply took care of the problem on the work floor underneath and around the machines. Naïve bosses ordered janitors to clean the floor without realizing the origins of the unbearable smell. Although it worsened the condition of the workplace, where they had to spend 11-13 hours daily, workers again proved their ability to negotiate the company's policies. However a lack of hygiene was a common feature with which textile workers had to live for decades in al-Mahalla.<sup>206</sup>

With the installation of new updated machinery in 1951, the company started to provide a training program designed primarily for training textile operatives to use the automatic looms and for skilled workers engaged in maintenance.<sup>207</sup> Although the outcome of this training is unknown, the lack of communication between workers and their supervisors and lack of production incentives for workers make it unlikely that the training was beneficial. Half of the workers said they did not want a promotion with greater responsibility.<sup>208</sup> By that time, the

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<sup>204</sup> Bosses very often refused granting such permission and abused workers who asked for them. See Misdemeanor 1945/7794/ 2604.

<sup>205</sup> Among many examples for fights over the bathroom, the janitor of the weaving section Mahmud Sayyid Ahmad Zayyan hit Muhammad Yusuf `Isa because the latter refused to give him a permission to go to the bathroom during work. Misdemeanor 1937/6773/ 239. Stress over limited time allowed to use the bathroom, if the permission was ever granted, generated fights among workers. When at-Tab`i Sayyid Ahmad al-Hinnawi and `Azab Basyuni entered the bathroom on 13 January 1938 at night they got into a fought because one of them stayed in longer making the other wait. Misdemeanor 1938/6775 /441.

<sup>206</sup> Ahmad Zaki Badawi, *Les proble`mes du travail et les organisations ouvrie`res en Egypte* (Alexandrie: Société de Publications Egyptienne 1948), 77.

<sup>207</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 86.

<sup>208</sup> Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 20.

disciplinary system that was conceived of to deal with peasants fresh from an agricultural environment continued to be applied to vastly different individuals by 1950s. The majority of workers were well integrated into industry to the degree that the old system had become obsolete and the system produced less and less results and more and more friction.<sup>209</sup>

With the absence of legal protections for workers, the Company's administrators preferred to see workers as an expendable resource, easily replaced by a large pool of ready labor recruited from the countryside. The company never accepted the responsibility for providing safe working conditions. The prevailing philosophy was that the worker had to look after himself and accidents occurred because of worker carelessness or because of God's will. The capitalist modernizers found it convenient to uphold the conventional belief in the Egyptian proverb *al-haris Allah*, God is the guardian. Interestingly, it was workers who pointed the accusing finger at the Company as a reason for work accidents.<sup>210</sup> Some machines were in too bad shape to be operated safely and consequently caused accidents.<sup>211</sup>

Table 2.5: Injuries inside the Company between 1944 and 1950.

Year	Simple injury	Medium injury	Serious injury	Total injuries
1943-1944	2,088	31	3	2,122
1944-1945	1,886	9	3	1,898
1945-1946	2,015	17	7	2,039
1946-1947	2,068	22	2	2,092
1947-1948	1,382	4	4	1,390
1948-1949	1,142	13	1	1,156
1949-1950	1,398	4	-	1,402

Source: the medical report of the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company 1951. 212

<sup>209</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>210</sup>The worker Ahmad Suliman suffered from an electric shock during his work with the power planet at the Company on May 20, 1945. He told his wife that the accident was god's will, *qada' wa qadar*. When doctors amputated his badly burned arm, his colleagues revealed the truth urging his wife to report the public prosecutor. The accident was a direct result of the recklessness of the workers boss who assigned him to clean a shop floor before was sure the electricity was off. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7763/ 2103.

<sup>211</sup>A bobbin jumped out of its track in the machine and hit the worker Zaki `Abd al-Qadir causing him a serious injury in his head. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/ 522. For a similar case see Misdemeanor 1940/6861/ 1413. Al-Khuli reported a similar accident, but led to the immediate death of a worker. Al-Kuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 126- 128.

<sup>212</sup> *Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazli wa al-Nasij al-Mahalla al-Kubra, Taqrir `an al-a`mal al-tibbiyyah* [Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in al-Mahalla al-Kubra: A Report on the Medical Activities] (Cairo: Matba`at Misr, 1951), 43

The Company was not unique among Egyptian enterprises in ignoring industrial safety procedures. In 1954, the accident rate in industry in Egypt reached 20%; one in every 5 workers had an accident.<sup>213</sup> Laborers of all ages worked next to steel furnaces and in hot rolling mills without shoes. The company was neither concerned with the problem of safety nor did it teach the techniques of accident prevention. The cost of human labor and the value of human life were too low to command serious attention to safety. Accidents took place for many reasons, mostly related to dealing with rapid machinery and hazardous materials without appropriate training or appropriate equipment.<sup>214</sup> Related to the lack of safety training, many accidents took place because workers did not appreciate the nature of the industrial environment around themselves. They moved, pushed each other, pushed carts, carried chemicals and operated sensitive machines without paying much attention, which caused injuries to themselves and others.<sup>215</sup> Some workers paid their lives simply due to lack of safety training and procedures.<sup>216</sup> Because many of them were children and teenagers, recklessness was high. Even their moments of joy sometimes ended up with an injury when one jokingly pushed another.<sup>217</sup> The fact that many of them were freshly coming from countryside, they lacked any previous experience in operating machines safely.

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<sup>213</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 87.

<sup>214</sup> For example, the supervisor Lutfi `Abd al-Maqsud unintentionally caused the worker Ibahim Ahmad Fu`ad serious burns when they were both carrying a bucket full of burning acid, *mayyit nar*. Misdemeanor 1939/6779/1086. The two workers Mustafa al-Sayyid al-Gindi and al-Sa`id Muhammad Raslan were pushing a box of cotton. They carelessly injured their colleague `Abd al-Nabi who was standing on top of the box. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6788/ 722. In another accident, the worker `Abd al-Mun`im Ahmad Ragab caused his colleague `Abd al-Karim al-Naggar while he was moving parts of one of the ginning machines.

<sup>215</sup> A 15-year old worker threw a piece of glass containing yarn to his colleague Badawi Khidr on July 29, 1938 causing him an injury. Misdemeanor 1936/ 6776/ 1947. The 16-year old worker Muhammad `Ali al-Kurdi carelessly lift a tin cylinder causing his colleague □Ali al-Qammash an injury on July 20, 1938. Misdemeanor 1939/ 6776/1883. The two 19-year old workers □Ali Mustafa al-Minshawi and Ibrahim Musa Sharib incautiously carried a sharp tool, which fell on Ahmad Abd al-Rahman`s foot causing him an injury. 1936/ 6769/ 3768. The worker Ahmad Muhammad `Abd al-Khaliq incautiously operated a machine while his colleague Ibrahim Salama Hasab al-Nabi was sitting on top of that machine on March 31, 1941. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6788/ 1941. The 19-year old worker Muhammad Hassan threw the bobbin without pay attention, which caused Ibrahim Habib an injury. Misdemeanor 1943/ 6864/2150. For a similar case see Misdemeanor 1943/ 6864/2317.

<sup>216</sup> In one of the worst accidents, a worker jumped on top of cart overloaded with cotton while three of his colleagues were pushing it between shop floors. Workers lost control over the vehicle, which changed its direction and, hit the worker `Atiyya Muhammad Yunus and pushed his body against the wall. Yunus died immediately on August 14, 1935 . Misdemeanor 1935, file 6783.

<sup>217</sup> The 15-year old worker al-Yamani al-Sa`id pushed his colleague Abdul Mu`min Mustafa al-Gindi against the spinning machine causing him injury. 1936/ 6769/3835. The 18-year old worker Suliman al-Mursi Mansur was waving a metal bar in the face of his colleague and roommate Muhammad al-Nuqali while they were joking at work. Al-Nuqali got injured. Misdemeanor 1943/ 6863/1582.

Accidents occurring from a lack of safety and training varied from minor injuries to losing a limb or even death. Workers who caused others accidents were prosecuted, while the Company was never thought to be responsible in the court. This was significant considering that the court held the Ministry of Transportation responsible when one of its employers drove a vehicle loaded with rocks without a license caused a road accident where a pedestrian was injured.<sup>218</sup>

The only major issue related to worker safety that the Company took upon itself was workers' clothing. Workers coming from both rural and urban areas wore long loose robes called the *galabiyya*. There were slight differences in the design and fabric between the urban and the rural *galabiyya*, but they were unsafe clothing around machines. The long sleeves and loose hem hung loosely and could be snagged on running machines causing workers serious injuries. Footwear was also a similar problem. On the other side, *effendiyya* of the Company saw in *galabiyya* a symbol of backwardness. They saw in their western pants and T-shirts the normative dress code that should be adopted by all males to become modern. Poor Egyptians went barefoot in both rural and urban areas. With calls for social reforms in the 1940s, several government projects were publicly discussed under the rubric of *mukafahat al-hafa'*, or fighting barefootedness which never materialized.<sup>219</sup> Popular classes who could afford footwear wore types of slippers known as *balgha*, or *bulgha*, and *qubqab*. *Balgha* was made of leather and more expensive. *Qubqabs* were wooden clogs and less expensive. With the new patterns of consumption coming to al-Mahalla with its integration in the international economy and opening up to foreign culture in the nineteenth century, European footwear was introduced and became popular among well-to-do *Mahallawiyya*. By 1917 there were 57 people specialized in making and trading in European-style shoes, and only 13 people dealing with native footwear, *balgha* and *qubqab*.<sup>220</sup> Among those who made and traded in European shoes, there were three foreigners. Ten years later, there were 74 factories to make European shoes, while native

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<sup>218</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/1924.

<sup>219</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla* 2, November 1947, 7.

<sup>220</sup> Ministry of Finance- Statistical and Census Department, *The population census of Egypt taken in 1917*, V. II, (Cairo: Government press, 1921).

footwear factories numbered only 13.<sup>221</sup> *Qubqabs* were still popular among the lower classes. In addition to its lower price, it was suitable for unpaved roads, lasted longer, and did not get damaged easily by water. It was widely used by handloom weavers in al-Mahalla, particularly while at work and was common among workers coming from rural areas. However it was not suitable at all to walking fast on a tiled floor around heavy machinery. It was slippery and therefore more hazardous because workers could fall on machines. For a while, the Company ignored the *galabiyya* issue, but it was quick in forcing workers to give up *qubqabs*, particularly when workers frequently used it to hit each other on the head during their fights.<sup>222</sup> In the early 1930s a worker could be punished, even fired, for wearing *qubqab*.<sup>223</sup> Buying European-style shoes was a dilemma for workers, many of whom could not afford 50 piaster for a new pair of shoes. Some resorted to buying second hand shoes or arranged to pay the price in installments, and many ignored the Company's policies and continued wearing *qubqab*. Stealing shoes from roommates and colleagues became common, but stealing shoes from mosques was a phenomenon.<sup>224</sup> Despite the sacred nature of mosques, those worshipping houses had traditionally been targets for theft.<sup>225</sup> Items such as straw mats and lamps were the usual loot.<sup>226</sup> With the pressing needs for shoes, it became easier for shoe-seekers to snatch them after people took them off to perform the prayers.<sup>227</sup> That practice was the ultimate both for challenging the

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<sup>221</sup>Ministry of Finance- Statistical and Census Department, *The industrial and commercial census of Egypt taken in 1927* (Cairo: Government press, 1931).

<sup>222</sup> The worker al-Sayyid al-Dusuqi al-`Ashri hit his colleague `Abd al-Fattah Isma`il al-Sultanun with a *qubqab* on his head causing him a serious injury. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/1965. For a similar cases see Misdemeanor 1936 /6767/1508 and 1937/ 6774/ 3392.

<sup>223</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 121.

<sup>224</sup>For cases of stealing shoes and clothing among roommates and colleagues see Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/2387, 1945/ 7792/ 1257, 1941/ 6790/1041, and 1936/6766/ 836.

<sup>225</sup>Misdemeanor 1943/ 6864/2118, 1943/ 6865/2716, 1943/ 6865/2911, 1942/ 6791/1245 and 1944/ 6918/890.

<sup>226</sup> In one incident, the perpetrator, who was the 19-year old servant named `Abdu Ahmad Hasaballa, stole a carpet, a mat, and a clock from a mosque at night on December 17, 1929. Misdemeanor 1930/ 4178/ 278.

<sup>227</sup>The 19-year old worker Muhammad al-Badawi Salama stole a pair of shoes of Ahmad Muhammad al-Bishbishi during the evening prayer, *`Isha`*, in al-Hanafi Mosque. Al-Bishbishi quit his prayer and chased the worker and dragged him to the police station. The court decided to punish the worker harshly because "he dared to steal from the mosque which reveals his deep criminal personality" and sentenced him with 3 months in jail with labor. Misdemeanor 1936/ 6767/ 990. The 18-year old worker Mahmud Ahmad al-Shaf`i stole the pair of shoes of □Abd al-Latif Hamzawi in Abu al-Fadl Mosque. The son of the Imam of the mosque, a child named `Add al-Gawwad Shamiyya, testified that his father asked him to watch the mosque goers because incidents of shoe-thefts in the



authorities and providing more evidence of the limitation of culture when it came to survival. Some workers were more creative and simply stole leather from the Company and asked shoemakers to turn it into shoes for them.<sup>228</sup> Many workers saw the company forcing them to wear shoes as just another way for the managers to humiliate them, considering their limited resources.<sup>229</sup> For others, wearing European-style shoes was an obsessive dream meaning social mobility and a civilized look.<sup>230</sup> Many workers were able to challenge the Company and wore *qubqab* until September 1947, when the Company had to renew its threat to punish whoever wore them. This was one in a long list of punishable acts, a list which directly led to the 1947 strike when the memo was posted on the walls. Perhaps worse than the conflict over wearing *qubqab* was that some workers continued to go barefoot due to poverty. After striking workers went back to work in October 1947, the union announced a scheme to “fight barefooting” and encouraged workers who needed shoes to register their names with their section managers until December 10, so that the union would give him a pair of shoes worth 50 piaster for only 5 piaster.<sup>231</sup>

The same memo that banned wearing *qubqab* during work also made wearing a *galabiyya* punishable, which was part of the code the Company had been trying to enforce for years. Not explaining to workers the logic behind the dress code made workers resistant. To force workers to give up the *galabiyya* for pants, the company made it mandatory for each

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mosque were very frequent. The child saw al-Shaf`i putting his *Qubqab* next to one pair of shoes and hid it with a male scarf, *Kufiyya*. Then he preceded all people who were prying in finishing prayer, picked up the shoes and tried to leave the mosque. The child screamed and tried to arrest him. Al-Shaf`i said he took the shoes by mistake, but he had several theft crimes in his criminal record. Misdemeanor 1939/6779/255.

<sup>228</sup>In an interesting case, a white-collar worker noticed that there was a piece of particular kind of leather hanging in a shoemaker store. That kind of leather was imported by the Company and was not used outside it. The shoemaker revealed that the 23-year old Company worker Abd Fattah al-Simsar brought it to him asking to make one pair of shoes. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/967. For more cases for stealing leather from the company see Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/ 1411, 1466, 1498 and 1938/6776/ 2374, 2401, 1408 among many others.

<sup>229</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 121.

<sup>230</sup>The 16-year old worker □Abd Shafi Sa`d Basyuni came to work wearing his slippers, then tried to leave wearing shoes and socks. He actually stole the pair of shoes and socks of his colleague Ahmad □Abd al-Latif al-Sisi after he failed in buying his own. His brother in-law, who was also a Company worker, testified that Basyuni had always dreamed of having shoes, but was not able to afford them. Basyuni had paid a shoemaker deposit to make him one pair and after he failed to pay his due installment the shoemaker broke the deal. Misdemeanor 1945/7792 /1257. See also Misdemeanor 1945/7794/ 2815.

<sup>231</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla* 2, November 1947, 7.

worker to buy one pair of overalls from it every six months. It deducted the price of these overalls, which reached up to 25 piaster each, directly from each worker's wages. Wearing overalls was a totally new type of clothing for most workers and seemed to be odd and uncomfortable particularly for those who came from rural areas. Those workers showed both a willingness and desire to adapt to urban clothing, but still did not welcome wearing pants that much. For them, the best urban clothing was a *galabiyya* with a shirt collar and made of silk, like the *Mahallawiyya* wore. It was close to what they were used to. Some of them were simply uncomfortable wearing overalls, others complained that the pants that the Company sold them did not last for six months and consequently they had to wear a *galabiyya* until the new pair was due. Although the Company claimed that it subsidized these pants to make them affordable for its workers, some workers preferred to sell them and regain what they paid or even make a profit. Stealing work uniforms, either from the Company or from co-workers, and selling them to second-hand clothing vendors was not uncommon.<sup>232</sup> Some workers adapted the clothing by wearing the *galabiyya* over their pants and then simply tucking in the *galabiyya* during the work day.<sup>233</sup> However, even when workers gave in and wore the pants at work, they preferred their *galabiyya* outside work and resisted the coercive uniformity that the Company was forcing upon them. Pictures of striking workers inside al-Mahalla in 1947 showed a mixture of those who wore overalls and those who wore *galabiyyas*, meanwhile pictures of their colleagues who went to their village in Samanud showed all of them wearing only *galabiyyas*. A worker who left for Cairo after he had quit working at the Company in the early 1950s made a comparison between the people in Cairo who preferred western clothing and al-Mahalla's workers "in al-Mahalla men went to the factory in shirts and pants, but after work when they sat chatting in coffee shops, exchanged visits, or strolled in the street they wore *galabiyyas*."<sup>234</sup> The battle over the dress code

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<sup>232</sup> The 25-year old worker Fahmi Muhammad `Abd al-Hadi was caught at the Company's gate hiding two stolen uniforms from two other workers. He was wearing his own work uniform. Misdemeanor 1945/7793/ 1594.

<sup>233</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla* 5, January 1948, 7.

<sup>234</sup> Halim, *Hikayat `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman*, 99-100.

was not merely struggle for survival and workers were not just a group of poor victims. They were making their own choices and struggling over a symbol of cultural identity.

Imposing uniformity on workers was more successful in the company's housing. All the housing units the Company built for some married workers had the same cubical look from the outside and had the same design on the inside. The hostels for single workers were uniform with metal beds and closets. By any standard these lodgings were a real improvement in the quality of life for those who chose to move in. *Madinat al-'ummal*, or the workers' city was less crowded and cleaner than the workers' slums. Units enjoyed electric lights and running water. Playgrounds, paved streets and green spaces made it a recreational park for the people of the town. The healthy environment provided in that "city" was reflected in a lower infant mortality rate among inhabitants of 52 per 1,000 births.<sup>235</sup> The rate in al-Mahalla itself was 186 per 1,000 and 168 per 1000 for the whole of Egypt. The real problem was the paucity of available units. They accommodated only 550 families and 1,500 singles.<sup>236</sup> Although workers living in their villages preferred to commute because rent and living costs in the countryside were cheaper, most workers who lived in al-Mahalla sought company housing because it was clean and cheap.<sup>237</sup> Preference in getting a unit depended on seniority, education, and one's position, among other factors. For the workers who strongly wished for these units, the uniformity was not a problem. They complained that they were not available for all and those who lived there were subject to continual intrusions on their privacy. The contract allowed the Company's inspectors to come in with no previous notice during the day or night, at any time, to inspect the cleanliness of the unit.<sup>238</sup> It held inhabitants responsible for the trees around them. Workers considered these regulations odd, harsh, and a violation of the privacy of their wives, particularly when inspectors showed up while they were at work.<sup>239</sup> This overly controlling policy and uniformity made a

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<sup>235</sup> A. Halawani, "Health Service of the Misr Weaving and Spinning Company at Mehalla El Kobra, Egypt", *Journal of the Egyptian Medical Association* 35, Issue 3, (1952), 157.

<sup>236</sup> *Sharikat Misr, al-a`mal al-tibbiyyah*, 5.

<sup>237</sup> Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 49-72.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>239</sup> "Nazra ya Hamdi Bey" [Kind Attention Hamdi Bey], *Amil al-Mahalla* 3, December 1947, 4.

labor activist from Cairo write that the company concentrated workers under its power and control instead of providing them with efficient and healthy food and medications and “these housing units were designed to be prisons and were worse than fenced prisons and had nothing to do with social progress”.<sup>240</sup>

### **Recruiting the “Obedient” Subject**

The first people to apply the Company’s policy were recruiters and guards. Job seekers gathered every day by the gates to be checked out by a retired high ranking army officer. No forms were filled out. The officer simply pointed at a candidate to be in or out. The arbitrary and haphazard selection process was based on that officer’s experience and judgment in choosing those who would be docile. Applicants who showed particular alertness or aggressiveness were branded as potential troublemakers and bypassed. The same officer decided which section the chosen worker would join. From the records it seemed like youth were usually directed to work in the weaving sections, which required training and acquiring skills. Meanwhile, older men between 30 and 50 were hired for unskilled work as porters or in the pre-spinning sections.<sup>241</sup> The Company hired children as young as ten years old despite the declared policy of not hiring anyone younger than 16 years old.<sup>242</sup> The Misdemeanor Court records mentioned at least 11 and 14 workers under 12 years old in 1938 and 1945 respectively. Teenagers, between 13 and 19 years old, were the largest age group with 188 and 165 in those same years. These statistics only hint at the real practice since the court records mentioned only workers who ended up at the court, mostly as defendants in cases related to other issues. Usually less information would be given about victims. Not all workers had reasons to go to the court nor all of those who were mentioned in the records were identified by age. Even with all these reservations these records are still very valuable in providing information on workers because the Company’s employment

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<sup>240</sup>Muhammad Yusuf al-Mudarrik, *Hawla Mushkilat `Ummal al-Mahalla* [On the Problem of Workers in al-Mahalla] (Cairo: Matba`at al-Shabab al-Hur, 1947), 16-17.

<sup>241</sup> This is based on a full survey for al-Mahalla Misdemeanor Court records through cases that identified workers with both of age and position. Many cases when workers were involved only age or position and sometime neither was mentioned.

<sup>242</sup> *Tanta*, August 9, 1944.

office and its files were burned twice in 1938 and 1947. One can safely conclude that the Company hired many children and most of its workforce consisted of teenagers, a practice which fits the pattern of Egyptian industry, particularly the textile industry in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Official statistics estimated that 15% of the Egyptian workforce in 1927 consisted of minors.<sup>243</sup> A contemporary scholar estimated 20% of textile workers in al-Mahalla in the 1940s were children and most of them worked in the spinning sections.<sup>244</sup> This observation actually is also supported by the experience of the pioneer worker Fikri al-Khuli who was hired along with many other children in a spinning section when he and his friends were 11 years old. Initially, supervisors did not agree to allow him to join the weaving section due to his short height.<sup>245</sup>

Hiring children in the Company was a deliberate policy, not a result of the spectacular expansion of the Company or a byproduct of coercive modernity. Bank Misr, the owner of the Company, expressed its selective modernization project by urging a continuation of the tradition of hiring children in industry to create “a class of skilled industrial workers.”<sup>246</sup> A report from the Bank gave an example of hiring children as young as ten years old in its button factory in Suez “who were doing their job perfectly”.<sup>247</sup> Hiring children was convenient for the Company because they were paid less and were more submissive to the rigid discipline than adults. According to the labor law of 1933, children between nine and twelve were not supposed to work more than seven hours a day; those less than fifteen were limited to nine hours, or eleven hours in the spinning and weaving industry, and both groups were not allowed to work overnight. These regulations were circumvented and children worked up to thirteen hours a day and served on the night shift with the endorsement of the government and the International Labor Office. The given reason was to ensure that adult workers were not deprived of their child

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<sup>243</sup> Harold Butler, *Report on Labour Conditions in Egypt with Suggestions for Future Social Legislation* (Cairo: Government Press, 1932), 9.

<sup>244</sup> Badawi, *Les proble`mes du travail en Egypte*, 77.

<sup>245</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla* v.1.

<sup>246</sup> Bank Misr, *Insha' al-Sina`at al-Ahliyya wa Tanzim al-taslif al-Sina`yya, Mashru` Bank Sina`i Misri: Taqirir mufassal muqaddam li-hadrat sahib al-ma`ali wazir al-maliyya min Bank Misr* [Establishing National Industry and Organizing Industrial Loans, the Project of an Egyptian Industrial Bank: A Detailed Report Submitted by Bank Misr to His Highness the Minister of Finance] (Cairo: Matba`at Misr, 1929), 82-83.

<sup>247</sup> Bank Misr, *Insha' al-Sina`at al-Ahliyya*, 77.

assistants. <sup>248</sup> In his interpretation of the Individual Contract of Employment Law of 1944, an official in the Department of Labor ruled that corporal punishment could be sanctioned provided it was not excessively painful or inflicted without cause. <sup>249</sup>

From the early moments of recruitment, *ghafirs*, or guards, had to practice their disciplinary mission on candidates. They used sticks to line them up in rows and keep them quiet until the *bey* carried out his recruiting mission. <sup>250</sup> Once a candidate was chosen, a file was opened with a serial number to identify him for purposes of payment. Workers realized the trick and showed a great deal of docility until they actually got the job, then they might become less submissive and even talk back to their bosses. One of the general managers complained “when workers get permanent status, the mask dropped and their true nature reveals itself. I can’t understand how some of them change almost overnight from docile, obedient and hard-working people to careless and insolent men.” <sup>251</sup> The arbitrary selection process allowed those who already had joined the Company and enjoyed good relations with their supervisors to participate in the process and get others jobs. Usually workers helped candidates who were from the same village or in exchange for a share of their wages. <sup>252</sup> Occasionally these agreements were not respected and the new worker refused to pay that share, which could lead to violent confrontations. <sup>253</sup> The fact that a rank and file worker was able to participate in the recruitment

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<sup>248</sup> Butler, *Report on Labour Conditions in Egypt*, 11.

<sup>249</sup> Raghieb Butrus, *Tafsir Qanun `Aqd al-Amal al-Fardi* [Interpretation of the Individual Labor Contract Law] (Cairo: Dar al-Ma`arif, no date), 5.

<sup>250</sup> Among many cases when *Ghafirs* caused candidates injuries while they were enforcing them to line up, Misdemeanor 1942/ 6792/ 2649.

<sup>251</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 75.

<sup>252</sup> The three pioneer workers Muhammad Shata, Fikri al-Khuli and `Abdu `Abd al-Rahaman reported that workers helped them in getting the Company job. Al-Khuli interfered to get his friends who helped him joining the Company transferred from the spinning factory to the weaving factory where they got higher wages. Only Shata reported that he had to pay his wage for fifteen days to the worker who helped him in getting the job. Rif at al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-Yasar: Sirra zatiyya li-munadili al-yasar* [The Archive of the Left: Autobiographies of the Fighters of the Left] (Cairo: al-Arabi lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzi`, 1999), 284.

<sup>253</sup> In one of the most violent confrontation over such agreement was between two 25-year old workers from Samanud. `Abd al-Salam al-Sayyid helped his co-villager al-Sayyid `Uthman al-Samanudi in getting work at the Company. `Abd al-Salam thought it was his right to get part of al-Samanudi’s wage, but the latter refused. On 29 August 1939, they met in their way to work and got involved in a violent fight. `Abd al-Salam caused al-Samanudi a permanent disability due to loosing part of his skull’s bone. That defect made al-Samanudi exposed to infection and put his life in danger. Meanwhile, Al-Samanudi also hit `Abd al-Salam causing him a minor injury that required less than 20-day-treatment. Three workers saw the fight, but decided not to interfere and continued their way to work. Tanta Criminal Court record 1939, file 7443, case 1864.

process and help others to get a job was a significant sign of how the “powerless” worker was willing and able to manipulate the rigid system. Notables of the town, including board members, very often failed to interfere in the hiring process and get people jobs. <sup>254</sup> The policy was to ignore recommendations and pay no attention to endorsements of outsiders. <sup>255</sup> After 1940 the Company adopted a policy of giving preference to children of retired or deceased workers, work candidates from al-Mahalla itself, then those who were coming from villages around it. <sup>256</sup> This was mainly to avoid more pressure on housing in the town and to release the Company from any obligation to accommodate immigrant workers. By 1938 the Company started to develop a more sophisticated system to exclude those who had criminal records or suffered from severe health problem. In 1949 it adopted a rigid policy of excluding any candidate with TB or weak sight. <sup>257</sup>

It was common that workers would quit and then come back to rejoin the Company. <sup>258</sup> The greatest incidents of absenteeism were during the first week of employment, the most difficult period of adjustment for the young workers who had never before worked outside their villages. The process of adjusting to the machines, to the foremen, and to the work group was difficult and was aggravated by the lack of an orientation program. Many workers thought industrial employment should not require their presence every day. If they had families with small landholdings in the area, or if a landlord offered temporary work during planting or harvesting seasons, workers, particularly newly recruited ones, might remain in the village for a few days thinking they could resume work at the factory when they were done with the agricultural job.

The mandatory background check and the act of keeping a file with a picture of every worker were supposed to help exclude those who had previously joined the Company. A form

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<sup>254</sup> The board member `Abd al-Hayy Pasha Khalil failed to get a retired soldier a job in the Company. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 441 “Iltimasat talab wazifa, 1939- 1944” [Petitions on job requests, 1939- 1944]. He also failed to get a bankrupt handloom weaver a job in the Company. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 402 “Iltimasat i`anat, 1947- 1949” [Petitions of financial aid, 1947- 1949].

<sup>255</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 73.

<sup>256</sup> Isma`il, “Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra”, 118.

<sup>257</sup> Sharikat Misr, *al-a`mal al-tibbiyyah*, 5.

<sup>258</sup> *Sijil tarikhi*.

was filled out for each recruited candidate with his name, his village or town, *balad*, along with his photo. That form would be sent to the manager of the department in which the candidate was nominated to join in order to decide whether he was a good fit. Then the worker would be sent for a medical checkup to make sure he did not suffer from incurable diseases, such as tuberculosis, and his vision was strong enough. Then a clerk would go through the files of all the previous workers to check whether he had previously worked and or had been fired from the Company. Then his criminal record would be checked with the government records. The candidate had to pay 13 piaster for that criminal record check. If his record was clean he would get the job and receive a worker ID card carrying his name, photo, and serial identification number. The demand for work was so abundant that the Company had to hold the selection session at first every week, and then every month. The Company also made work candidates cover the costs of the criminal background checkup and his picture. In 1947 the cost of such a file was 24 piaster, almost two weeks payment for an average worker.<sup>259</sup> The high cost deterred workers from quitting after a few days of work particularly when they learned that they had to pay the same amount every time they tried to rejoin the Company.

In its scheme of choosing workers, the Company imitated and relied on the state's achievement in controlling and identifying its subjects through bookkeeping. Keeping a file for each worker- subject would make it easier for the Company or the state to track its subordinates and keep them under continuing surveillance. The Company expanded its files after the 1947 strike to include the health history of the worker, and consequently "it became easier for the Company to catch workers who pretended to be sick and those who visit the hospital very often with no excuse" <sup>260</sup> Concerning the criminal history, the Company built files of its workers based on the achievement of the state in making files for its subjects. The workers, who were supposed to be "powerless" subjects, were able to maneuver within the system and prove its limitations. Among the many cases when individuals with criminal records were able to join the

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<sup>259</sup> Al-Mudarrik, *Hawla Mushkilat `Ummal al-Mahalla*, 13-14.

<sup>260</sup> Sharikat Misr, *al-a`mal al-tibbiyyah*, 18.



Company, the case of al-Yamani Zahran al-Gallad provides an insight on the “balance” between the state/ company and their apparatus on the one hand and the individuals who were trying to negotiate the system for their survival. The Company worker al-Yamani was 23 and lived in the work slum of Muhammad `Ali Street.<sup>261</sup> While he was walking around al-Mahatta Street, the largest boulevard in the modern commercial center, on 14 August 1943, he was seen by the policeman `Ali al-Dib who was familiar with his record. The policeman was suspicious because al-Yamani was known for committing *itida`ala al-nafs wa al-amwal*, or theft and violence crimes. He took him to the police station to investigate how he made his living. Al-Yamani said he worked for the Company and a Company ID card number 107 was found with him. The card carried his photo and the name was `Abdulla Ibrahim al-Mansi. Al-Yamani confessed he adopted that new name because he held a criminal record that would have prevented him from getting the job. Company sources indicated he had worked under that name since 18 June 1943. The appointment clerks went through the regular criminal record investigation procedure, *fish wa tashbih*, and the Department of Identification reported that his record was clean, and then he got the job. To show how inefficient the system was, `Abdulla Ibrahim al-Mansi turned out to be a real person living in the village Shunu in the Kafr al-Shaykh province.

The system was not efficient enough and many workers with criminal records and others with a history of joining and quitting were able to go through the system and get hired. The most common trick they followed was to change their names every time they needed to rejoin the Company. The fingerprint system fell short in catching them, unless they were arrested for some other reason.<sup>262</sup> Bribery was a way to pass the medical checkups. Some individuals made a

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<sup>261</sup>Tanta Criminal Court Record 1943/ 7455/ 2731.

<sup>262</sup> When the 18-year old Company worker Hilmi Muhammad Khattab was caught for picking pocket from the woman Batta `Abd al-Latif, police found out that he had criminal record. Misdemeanor 1939/6779/ 47. Similarly, when the 36-year old Company worker Hilmi Hamuda al-Zayyat was caught in July 1938 for an attempt to steal a piece of cloth from the Company, his criminal record had four crimes and consequently was harshly sentenced with 4 months jail in and put under surveillance for 6 months after he served his sentence. Misdemeanor 1939 /6779/ 138. Also his colleague the 28 year old worker Zakariya Ali al-Bilihi was caught hiding a piece of the Company's cloth under his clothes when he was leaving after work in late 1940. By then, he had three crimes in his record. He was jailed for 4 months for his last offence in August 1940. Police records considered him suspected criminal, *mashbuh*, earlier that year. Despite this abundant criminal record, he was able to join the Company and go through the security background checkup. He was also harshly punished with 6 months jail and 3 months surveillance. Misdemeanor

living on faking medical reports and ID cards.<sup>263</sup> Others were able to take advantage of the inefficient bookkeeping process in the Company and added fake names to the payroll lists and got paid for the non-existent people. The Company worker Rushdi As`ad Rufa'il was able to add 20 names to the payroll. With fake ID cards and sealing stamps, he collected payment checks for people, some of whom never existed and others who were real people but had never worked at the Company. His tricks were very successful and he collected 427 Piaster between September 1935 and February 1936 and was only caught by chance by his landlord. When Rushdi agreed with his landlord to vacate his room and leave his belongings until he paid his overdue rent, the landlord found the fake stamps and ID cards. He took them to the Company's guards inadvertently revealing the limitations of the Company and the state in identifying their worker-subjects.<sup>264</sup>

Guards, *ghafirs*, did not just guard the Company's gate from the flood of job seekers. Their main job was also to keep those who had already joined the work force in line. They performed their job through controlling workers' bodies and movements. Employing physical violence and humiliating personal searches, guards pushed workers inside shop floors, and did not allow them to leave their departments even to use the bathroom. Their right to personally search workers was absolute, anytime and anywhere to make sure workers did not keep the Company's belongings. At the exit gates in particular, every worker went through this search daily. Guards searched inside workers shoes and underwear. They even examined the fabric from which the workers' underwear was made, so that a worker would not use the Company's cloth to make it. Although there were workers who hid the Company's belongings, particularly cloth,

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1940/ case 2007. For more incidents on workers with criminal record, see Misdemeanor 1945/7791/ 363, 7791, and 1938/ 6775/ 100 and 775.

<sup>263</sup>Administrators at the Labor Department in the Company learned that some candidates who failed the medical checkup were able to get jobs in the Company without ID cards. After searching workers, the 13-year old worker Ibrahim Muhammad Zarra was caught having a fake ID card with his picture and the Company's seal. The application of that worker had been rejected because he had failed the medical checkup. Unknown individuals sold him the fake ID card with which he joined the Company and got paid. Misdemeanor 1936 /6767/1069. For a similar case see Misdemeanor 1936 /6767/1495. In another case a worker convinced a candidate that he could get him the needed medical report if he gave him 1,5 EP to pay the doctor. He took the money and disappeared. Misdemeanor 35/ 6783/ 4613.

<sup>264</sup>Misdemeanor 1936 /6766/ 852.

under their clothes and in their shoes, the personal search process was humiliating and painful to most workers. A worker described it as a cruel massaging and “some guards wipe their noses in their hands then wipe their hands in the workers pants”.<sup>265</sup> Female workers were searched by female inspectors at the gates. However, when female inspectors were absent, male guards sometimes searched female workers with the consent of the Company police officers.<sup>266</sup> Guards must have expressed their suspicions about the female worker in order to justify the search, nonetheless, the humiliation for the woman was extreme, particularly if the worker was proved innocent.

Twice a month thousands of workers had to line up by a few cashiers’ windows to cash their payment checks. The large number of workers anxious to get paid and enjoy one day off in al-Mahalla or with their family in the village made that day very exciting and intense. In that large crowd, some workers lost their payment checks, some stole their colleagues’ checks, and many ended up with torn clothes or a minor injury after a fight with each other over the turn. The Company did not see a problem in its method of payment or a need to increase the number of windows. It saw wild flocks of peasants who needed to be disciplined to respect order. It was the guards’ big day when they were free in using their whips and sticks on the workers’ bodies. <sup>267</sup> For guards, it was not only a matter of disciplining workers. They shared with workers the same culture and same level of disrespect for order. It was a moment to practice power and assure their status. They favored workers coming from their villages and advanced them in line, which frequently offended others and only fueled an already explosive situation. <sup>268</sup> The Company did not fix its payment system until workers disgraced it for employing punitive methods against them during the 1947 strike. Actually the amendment it inserted was very simple and was suggested by the labor activist Yusuf al-Muddarik; instead of giving each worker a check on the

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<sup>265</sup> `Amil al-Mahalla 5, January 1948, 7.

<sup>266</sup> A guard noticed that the 60-year old female worker Hamida Isma`il `Inab had a swollen thigh. He took her to the office of the Company’s police officer where he searched her. He found a piece of cloth in her underwear. Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 3262.

<sup>267</sup> `Amil al-Mahalla 5, January 1948, 7 and `Abd al-Qudus Sulayman, “Mawqufuna min qadiyatina,” [Our Stand toward our cause] `Amil al-Mahalla 2, November 1947, 11.

<sup>268</sup> al-Mudarrrik, *Hawla Mushkilat `Ummal al-Mahalla*, 12.

shop floor to cash later at the window, they just gave workers their actual payment in cash on the shop floor. <sup>269</sup>

Time has been looked at as an element of modernity, to be accurate, an element of capitalist modernity. <sup>270</sup> Industrial workers have to be committed to work and punctuality. Discipline and punctuation were the way to assure profits for planters and entrepreneurs. Enforcing the concept of time on modern industrial workers brings those who worked in al-Mahalla after 1927 close to those who worked in South Carolina in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these seemingly distant worlds, men, women and children from nearby farms were employed to spin yarn. <sup>271</sup> Egyptian capitalists did not differ much from the planters in the American South; they both looked to secure profits through greater discipline and order and thus embraced at least some elements of modernity. <sup>272</sup> The vast majority of al-Mahalla workers came from rural areas, particularly from the Delta governorates. It was believed that agricultural workers, because of their simple character, may be less inclined to talk back to their supervisors, which was seen as an asset. However, the Egyptian national capitalists blamed these workers for their lack of “industrial traditions.” <sup>273</sup> They excused their use of rigid discipline as being necessary to achieve the noble purpose of teaching workers a new concept of time, to be precise in the performance of tasks, and to adjust to a new social setting. Laws gave employers the right to fire workers due to absence. The Company used that right even when workers were absent due to sickness. <sup>274</sup> In building their stature in the Company, the *effendiyya* emphasized the importance of their role in this disciplinarily process by contrasting their literacy with the illiteracy of workers and consequently the need for the company to hire more literate supervisors

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<sup>269</sup>Ibid.

<sup>270</sup>For development of modern concept of time see Graeme Davison, *The unforgiving minute: how Australians learned to tell the time* (Melbourne; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), particularly the introduction.

<sup>271</sup>See Bruce W. Eelman, *Entrepreneurs in the Southern Upcountry: Commercial Culture in Spartanburg, South Carolina, 1845-1880* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

<sup>272</sup>See Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). For the association between time consciousness and the evolution of industrial urban life see E. T. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism.” *Past and Present* 38 (December 1967), 56-97.

<sup>273</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human Resources for Egyptian Enterprise*, 69.

<sup>274</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court records 1947 cases 1947/ 7695/ 3136, 1947/ 7695/ 3123 and 1947/ 7695/ 2137.

because workers were able neither to write instructions nor follow them.<sup>275</sup> Punctuality was taken seriously and peasant-workers found themselves tied to the clock. In the first years of the Company, possessing watches was very rare. Upper class *Mahallawiyya* owned watches with gold chains and decorated walls in their houses with clocks as signs of wealth more than out of caring about punctuality. The notion of time could be described as task-oriented, which was effective in peasant societies and important for domestic industries.<sup>276</sup> People also divided their day around prayer times and the sun's movement rather than precise hours. Urban *Mahallawiyya* identified time with loose phrases such as afternoon, before dawn, at sunset, or *ghabshat al-Maghrib...etc.*<sup>277</sup> Concepts of time were even vaguer among peasants who dealt with seasons and a work day defined by the hours of daylight. This is not to say that the pre-mechanical industrial society of al-Mahalla did not ever watch the time. Individuals had to follow the hour system whenever they had to use modern facilities which were tied to the system of public time. Watching precise time was the impact of the railway, the telegraph and the pocket watch. For peasants, a lack of punctuality was associated with a lack of mobility from one place to another in a timely manner.

In its early days, the Company called its workers through a very loud siren that was heard throughout the town. The siren meant the Company's gates were open and would stay open for fifteen minutes. The usual scene in the streets leading to the Company during those fifteen minutes was "streets packed with hundreds (of workers). Everyone put his shoes under his arms and put his *galabiyya's* hem between his teeth. Everybody was running like a horse. Everybody wanted to get there before the doors were closed and he would lose his wage for the day. Everybody thinks only about himself (...) some fell on their faces and nobody took their

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<sup>275</sup> Among many examples see Abdul Muni`m Shahin, "al-Sina`at al-Misriyya tatatalab jahdan min al-qa`imin `Alliyha" [The Egyptian Industry Requires Work from Those Who Are Dealing with It], *Amil al-Mahalla* 14, October 1948, 11 and `Abd al-Qudus Sulayman al-Banna, "Mawqifuna min qadiyatuna", *Amil al-Mahalla* 2, November 11, 1947, 11.

<sup>276</sup> E. T. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism." *Past and Present* 38 (December 1967), 60

<sup>277</sup> These phrases were reported frequently in the court records. The phrase *ghabshat al-maghrib* was used in a particular case of murder to describe the invisibility of sunset when the incident took place. Tanta Criminal Court 1940/7444/ 386 and 1942/7450/1843.

hands.”<sup>278</sup> Being on time for work was a huge challenge for the Company and its workers coming from rural areas due to the lack of transportation. For them and their colleagues who lived on the peripheries of al-Mahalla, they had to walk 3-5 kilometers between work and home. Those who failed to respond to the Company’s siren in time were not allowed to get into the Company and were hit with the sticks and whips of the guards to be pushed away from the gates.

Workers perceived the policy of using force to teach punctuality as a systematic policy to break any sense of dignity with the sticks. In his memoir, al-Khuli reported a “battle scene” between guards and late workers:

“The strong will of the workers who insisted on getting in (the company) and to get paid for a workday was able to open one door by force. Workers flew in, happy with the joy of victory. The guards whose hearts were merciless did not accept the defeat. They raised their thin bamboo sticks, like those used by peasants in the donkey/cattle market, and the Sudanese whips which were wrapped with yellow copper cords, and kept on whipping workers collectively. Sticks and whips fell on faces and heads with no mercy until blood came out of workers’ bodies. With this cruelty they were able to disperse the workers and push them out into the street, then they closed the doors with victorious smiling faces”.<sup>279</sup>

Those guards were acting based on the instructions of the officer who was a retired army officer and wearing his military uniform. He told guards “you’ve accomplished your mission. Those (workers) are the garbage of the country. They have to be subordinate so that they get used to not looking around. This trash has to be disciplined; only your work will teach them”. Then he continued with a martial accent “you have to be always alert in you work. You have to make them walk with their heads down”.<sup>280</sup>

Those who succeeded in showing up on the shop floor on time found themselves watching the clock on the wall to count how much time was left before they were dismissed. The habit of looking at the clock impatiently was more apparent among nightshift workers and

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<sup>278</sup> <sup>278</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 111.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 111-112.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 112.

children.<sup>281</sup> It is not surprising that workers hated the clock that dictated how long they had to work, when to have a break, and when to go home. In their strike in 1938, they targeted the clock with their rocks just as they targeted guards and managers.<sup>282</sup> Years after the workers had become accustomed to the modern concept of a 24 hour day, the Company installed a clock tower on its premises and invited King Faruq to inaugurate it along with many other facilities in 1948. The tower was as high as 250 feet and the clock's width was 14 meters. The hands of the clock were well-lit with colorful lamps, so that the workers who lived as far as Samanud were able to see and hear it.<sup>283</sup> That tower functioned as a symbol of modernity and the company decorated its logo with it along with its two huge chimneys. This clock served people of the town many of whom could not yet afford a watch. By the mid 1940s, workers were more tied to precise time in order to follow the work schedule and since many of them commuted by trains. As an important customer, the Company was able to convince the railway line to run trains in accordance with workers' shifts.<sup>284</sup> Since its advent, trains had been associated with the concept of precise time everywhere. Before the establishment of the Company, there were two different train services. The Egyptian Railway connected the town with other major cities such as Tanta, Alexandria and Cairo. The narrow Delta railway connected the surrounding villages and small towns with al-Mahalla and connected the peripheries of the town with its center. It was very vital both for commodities and people, particularly for those who dealt with the town's weekly market. It also facilitated movement, particularly for women peddlers and vendors, those who took commodities such as textiles from the town to villages and those who brought agricultural production for sale into the town.<sup>285</sup> With the increase of the population of the town, it became harder for the train that moved through the town to keep up with its schedule.

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 24

<sup>282</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1865.

<sup>283</sup> `Amil al-Mahalla 4, December 29, 1947, 8.

<sup>284</sup> For relations between the Company and the Egyptian Railway Company, see `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 32 "Majlis al-Wuzara, Muzakirat Wuzarat al-Muwaslat 1918-1952" [The Cabinet, Memorandums of the Ministry of Transportation 1918-1952].

<sup>285</sup> For the social aspects of running this narrow railways inside an Egyptian city, see Salih Kilani, *Tram al-Kahira: Dirasa Ijtima'iyya Tarikhiyya Adabiyya* [Cairo Tramway: A Socio-literary Historical Study] (Cairo: Matba`at al-Madani, 1968).

Delays became more frequent because it had to stop unexpectedly to allow people, cattle, and carts to cross the tracks.<sup>286</sup> The importance of precise time made the train irrelevant to the life of the town and even more dangerous. The people of the town asked the operating company to move it outside the town, then they asked the government to remove it, which took place in 1949.<sup>287</sup> In the frequent accidents of the Delta train, time emerged as commodity. The Company sued individuals who caused the train to stop for five or ten minutes.<sup>288</sup> The importance of precise time among workers was apparent in their tendency to own watches, wall, and alarm clocks, which were precious possessions.<sup>289</sup> These items started to appear in court records as subjects for fights and targets for thefts among workers, particularly roommates by the mid 1930s.<sup>290</sup> In an interesting case, a worker lost his watch. When he tried to buy another watch from a fellow worker, the watch turned to be his stolen one. The seller bought it from a third

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<sup>286</sup> On November 11, 1941, two women and two men were killed and three men were injured when they were crashed by the speeding Delta train. The train driver exceeded the speed limits and did not pay enough attention. After crashing into people he tried to stop the train all sudden, which caused it to flip over. Misdemeanor 1942/6790/ 247. Among many other accidents where the Delta train was involved: On 18/1/1936 the Delta train hit a child. 1936/6766 /595. In another bad accident, a woman was killed while she was crossing the railway on September 19, 1943. Misdemeanor 1943/ 6865/3046. A car driver passed on the Delta railway unintentionally exposed the train passengers to danger. The train stopped and then reached its destination five minutes later than it was scheduled. Misdemeanor 1929/3961/456. The 40 year old farmer Isma'il Muhammad `Abdu of the Mit al-Nasara village let his donkey wander at will on the Delta railway. The train crashed into the donkey killing it, consequently, the train arrived its destination five minutes later than it was scheduled. Misdemeanor 1929 /3961/2247. The water buffalo of the 60-year old farmer al-Biltagi al-Duf crashed into the Delta train, which exposed the train passengers to danger. Misdemeanor 1929 / 3962/1426.

<sup>287</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 32 "Majlis al-Wuzara`, Muzakirat Wuzarat al-Muwaslat 1918-1952" [The Cabinet, Memorandums of the Ministry of Transportation 1918-1952].

<sup>288</sup> The car driver and the owners of the animal mentioned in the above cases were fined by the court for causing the train to be late.

<sup>289</sup> When the worker `Abd al-Salam Ahmad Yunis stole the alarm of `Abd al-Sami` Hammad on March 3, 1941, the latter continued searching for his alarm until he eventually found it two months later in the window of the watch maintenance store of `Ali Radi. Radi revealed that the worker brought the alarm for maintenance, which indicated that the worker needed the alarm and did not have any plan to sell it to others. The worker was punished with one month in jail with labor. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6788/ 1109.

<sup>290</sup> For example, the 22-year old worker Hasanin Husayn Hasanin stole his roommate's *galabiyy*, hat, suit and watch while his roommate was at work. After he went to his village of al-Sinbillawin, he sent the watch for maintenance and the suit to laundry. Misdemeanor Court 1936 / 6766/ 377. In another case, the 25-year old worker Hassan Muhammad Hifida who lived in □ *Izbat Abu Taqa* and the 25-year old carpenter `Abd al-`All □ Abd al-Rihim hit Sahli Ahmad al-Shazli with a knife because Shazli offered too low price to buy a wall watch from the Hassan. Misdemeanor 1938/ 2430. The 19-year old worker Gum`a Sayyid Ahmad `Umara stole the watch of his colleague Muhammad al-Halawani. 1945/6789/ 2770. The 18-year old worker Hashim Mahmud Ibrahim tried to steal the watch of Fu`ad □ Abd al-Hamid Hashshad when they were getting into the Company's playground. Hashim had two theft crimes in his record. Misdemeanor 1945/93/ 71494. The watch and the shoes of the worker Muhammad Sharaf al-Gazzar were stolen together from his room. 1943/ 6863/878. For more watch theft among workers see Misdemeanor 1943/ 6862/274.



person who had actually committed the theft.<sup>291</sup> Female workers also acquired watches.<sup>292</sup> Porters, who were unskilled and the poorest paid among Company's workers acquired watches as early as 1937, which is a self evidence of the importance of precise time for them.<sup>293</sup> Those who could not afford to buy a watch depended on asking those who had a watch. The phrase "*as-sa`ah kam*", what time is it, became as frequent as "*salmu `alaykum*", hello, among people in the streets. At the beginning workers preferred pocket watches with chains, not only to imitate the upper classes, but also because they disliked the wrist watch as having a resemblance to female bracelets. However wrist watches quickly prevailed among workers for practical reasons. They did not wear the western three-piece suits for which the chained pocket watch was designed for. Wrist watches are harder to drop or be snatched by pickpockets and eventually it came with cheaper brands. Workers bought watches of any brand as long as it was affordable and enabled them to know the time. They preferred it to be gold colored with ornamentation, while *effendiyya*, such as teachers and government employees, cared more about the brand.<sup>294</sup> The workers of al-Mahalla were among the first in the Egyptian population to care early on about owning watches. Before WWII, Egypt imported about 125,000 watches from Switzerland every year worth 2 million Swiss francs. In 1947 the value of the 125,700 watches imported from Switzerland had increased to 5 million francs, or 7.2% of Swiss exports of watches. Additionally 80,497 cheap metal watches were imported along with 7,197 gold watches and 12 platinum ones. However until 1951, only 1% of the Egyptian population possessed watches. To realize how early the workers of al-Mahalla were in adopting watches, an anthropologist who studied Kar el-'Elow, a small industrial village by Cairo, between 1960s and 1980s, noticed that workers in that village started to wear watches as late as the 1980s.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6916/1925.

<sup>292</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/1845.

<sup>293</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6774/ 3784.

<sup>294</sup> "Tijarat al-Sa`at fi misr" [The Business of Watches in Egypt], *Al-Ahram fi Khidmat al-Tijara wa al-Sina`a* (later *al-Ahram al-Iqtisadi*), January 13, 1952.

<sup>295</sup> Hani Fakhouri, *Kafr el-Elow: Continuity and Change in an Egyptian Community*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1987), 138.

Despite their rural origins, the workers of al-Mahalla showed a high level of adaptability to the industrial work schedule. They adapted to the nightshifts and took advantage of what modern technology offered them. They acquired watches and used the trains. While the train made it possible for those who lived as far as Samanud to continue living with their families in their home villages, which reduced the living cost, train tickets added a strain on their budgets. They actively took the best and left the worst. Many of them rode the train and did not buy tickets. They challenged the state and caused embarrassment to the Company that had convinced the Railway authorities to run what became known as *qitarat 'ummal al-Mahalla*, al-Mahalla workers' trains. The overloaded train inspectors were forced to play hide and seek with the large number of workers who rode without tickets. Some workers took the risk and rode on the roof of the train which became so popular that workers coined the new term *tastih*, to set on the roof, to describe it. Workers coming from the same village acted in solidarity with each other against the train inspectors, which made the latter's job in collecting tickets or filing reports against those who refused to pay even harder.<sup>296</sup> The Railway authority complained to the company and its union, which were not able to do more than give workers a lecture on honesty and the importance of preserving the collective reputation of workers.<sup>297</sup> Many workers also used bicycles to commute between home and work. The main problem with this solution was bicycles became hot targets for theft, although the Company designated a parking lot where workers chained their bicycles.<sup>298</sup>

It is very hard to estimate to what extent *ghafirs* were instrumental in compelling workers to come to work on time since workers were motivated to be on time to get paid for the day. We also don't know how many guards the Company hired. The company never shared information about its workers and employees with the government or the public. Even when it was a legal

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<sup>296</sup>Among many cases see Misdemeanor 1945/ 7791/ 480, 492 519, and 7795/ 3646, 3656, 3683, 3751, 3754, 3759, 3763, 3782, 3795, 3828, 3838, 3989 .

<sup>297</sup>Abd al-`Aziz `Arafa, "Hadithi Ilayyikum," [My Word to You] *'Amil al-Mahalla* 13, September 1948, 2.

<sup>298</sup>For incidents of bicycle thefts in the company see Misdemeanor 1936/6766/ 655 and 1945/7793/ 866. For incidents of workers committing bicycle thefts outside the Company see: Misdemeanor 1936/ 6766/ 666 and 1939/ 6779/ 655.

obligation to provide the government with this information it resisted for years claiming “we are a hearty national Egyptian Company” and “revealing this information is against the interest of the company”. Under government pressure, the Company eventually provided a list of people on its monthly payroll with vague information about their positions. It divided this group into “technical and writing works” without any specifications. This information was efficient enough for the government that needed mostly to know how many non-Egyptians were among them and whether any of them were simultaneously full time government employees. The chief of the Labor Department Hamid al-`Abd estimated there were only 12 permanent guards in 1947.<sup>299</sup> Apparently this estimate could not be realistic considering that policing the thousands of workers was a major obsession of the Company and the government. For sure there was a large number of *ghafirs* under the leadership of a retired army officer. A sturdy large figure was among the qualifications for the job. *Shaykh al-ghafar*, guards’ chief, al-Sa`id Muhammad Balbul in particular was known of having a scary appearance and aggressive attitude.<sup>300</sup>

Both the Company and the government were obsessed with controlling workers. In 1938, the Interior Ministry was very receptive to the Company’s request for the building of a police station in the southern part of the city near by the mill’s location.<sup>301</sup> In 1947 the Company built another police station on its premises and gave it as a “gift” to the Interior Ministry to operate.<sup>302</sup> Policemen were always visible around the Company and at the routes leading to its facilities to control traffic and push people away from the Company’s gate. The workers complained that those policemen were harassing them with cruelty.<sup>303</sup> All these police forces proved helpless in

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<sup>299</sup> *Al-Ahram*, September 4, 1947.

<sup>300</sup> The Chief of Guards, *Shaykh al-ghafar*, al-Sa`id Muhammad Balbul, who was originally a handloom weaver, had a record of violent confrontations before working for the Company. Misdemeanor 1930/4178/ 630 and 646. Among cases where Balbul was involved in violence against Company workers, Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/298 and 1944/ 6917/513.

<sup>301</sup> Majlis al-Shuyukh, Majmuat madabit al-in`qad al-`adi al-thalith `shar [records of the Senate session during the regular 13<sup>th</sup> season: November 18 1937- November 16, 1938 (Cairo: al-Matba`a al-Amiriyya, 1938) 531.

<sup>302</sup> Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazl wal-Nasij, *al-Taqrir al-Sanawi li-Majlis Idaratihā al-Muqadam lil-Jam`iyya al-`Umumiyya lil-Musahimin* [Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, the annual report of the board submitted to the general assembly of share holders] (Cairo: Matba`at Misr, 1948).

<sup>303</sup> On May 23, 1945 there was a crowd around the Company’s gates and the policeman □ Abd al-Naby al-Mansi was assigned to disband, *tafriq*, the crowd and prevent people, *al-Ahali*, from approaching the gates. The 20-year old worker Ahmad □ Abd al-Rahman insisted on staying by the gate and slandered the policeman calling him “(you are)

the major strikes in 1938 and 1947. In both incidents the Company had to call the town police, which was not able to control the situation in 1938. In 1947, the situation was more explosive and the army was called into the town to restore order. However, the cruelty of the *ghafirs* had sewn anger amongst the workers. Some workers retaliated against the *ghafirs* as many workers also retaliated against abusive bosses. In the worst retaliation incident, a worker killed a foreman on the shop floor in the early years of the Company.<sup>304</sup> The worker was sentenced to only eight years in jail. Individual workers attacked supervisors and *ghafirs* on the shop floor or anywhere on the premises of the Company.<sup>305</sup> Some workers coordinated and launched collective attacks against individual supervisors or *ghafirs*.<sup>306</sup> During the 1947 strike, workers became more outspoken against *ghafirs* and bosses and their use of excessive force. The workers could not exaggerate the abusive practices of *ghafirs*. One of them actually hit a female worker while she was pregnant.<sup>307</sup> Female workers generally were not exempted from violent discipline. Effendiyya, *ghafirs*, and supervisors hit female workers and caused them injuries.<sup>308</sup> *Ghafirs* did not lack advocates among the workers who blamed themselves for being disorganized and

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a son of dog, son of a whore fagot". Misdemeanor 1945/ 7793/ 1865. For another case when the policeman was cruel to workers around the Company's gates see Misdemeanor 1938/6776/2177.

<sup>304</sup>Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 16.

<sup>305</sup> The two brothers Abbas and Ali Fahmy `Isawi as-Su`udi, 27 and 40-year old workers hit the 28-year old *ghafir* Muhammad Musa Khalifa on 23 March 1938. Unknown others joined the attack with and against the *ghafir*. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 975.

<sup>306</sup> The two workers `Ashmawi Muhammad `Ashmawi and `Abd Rabu fought during work. Their boss `Aziz Ghubriyal hit both of them to stop and enforced them to reconcile. `Ashmawi told what happened to his father, who was also a Company worker. The 50-year old father threatened Ghubriyal saying "if you are a real man, *gada`*, go home at ten". After work the son and the father, along with other four Company workers stopped Ghubriyal and demanded him to pay 50 Piaster damage for beating up `Ashmawi. He promised to pay. The following night, they waited for him after the nightshift at the Company's gates carrying sticks and clubs. They took him to a nearby coffee shop and threatened to kill him unless he paid the money. The coffee customers, who heard the threat and saw them waiving their sticks, called a policeman and got them arrested. 1939/ 6779/727. In another case the Company *ghafir* Muhammad al-Sudani hit the worker Hamid al-Shaf'i Ibrahim, his sister Shuq, and another female worker named `Ayysha Hasan Farag. Ibrahim came back with another worker named `Abdul `Aziz Ibrahim Zini and hit the *ghafir* Muhammad with a stick on May 15, 1939 causing him handicap in one of his finger. Tanta Criminal Court records 1939/ 7443/ 1513.

<sup>307</sup>The *ghafir* Ibrahim al-Sayyid Khalifa kicked An`am Mahmud Shahin in her stomach. The court was outraged because the victim was pregnant. Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/224.

<sup>308</sup>The 43-year old supervisor Ahmad Yahuli Ahmad was prosecuted for hitting the female worker Fatima Ahmad `Awad. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6790/729. The foreman `Abd al-Galil Ahmad al-Guhari hit the female worker Mufida Hafiz al-Abyad. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6790/739. The attendance clerk, *katib mrur*, Murqus `Abd al-Malik caused the female worker Zanuba Fayruz Suliman an eye injury when he threw her ID card and copper seal, *khitm*, in her face. Misdemeanor 1942/ 6792/2432.

disrespectful to the rules which obligated the *ghafirs* to use the stick. Some workers though took the challenge and attacked the *ghafirs*. Like workers, *ghafirs* were poorly paid and struggled to meet their needs.<sup>309</sup> Some *ghafirs* were also engaged in incidents of theft from the Company.<sup>310</sup> They abused their positions and conspired with others to steal cloth and other items.<sup>311</sup> Some were caught sleeping during their shifts.

The medical department in the Company was another group to decide who joined the Company and who should continue being employed. The Company generally rejected persons who had such incurable diseases as tuberculosis and serious trachoma. Workers afflicted with bilharzias, ancylostomiasis, minor eye diseases and malnutrition were recruited because practically most of, if not all, Egyptians from rural areas were plagued with these diseases. When the Company executed its first comprehensive health survey for its entire workforce, it turned out that each average worker suffered from three of these diseases. However, before that survey, which was mostly used as a public relation piece after the 1947 strike, the medical section in the company functioned as a disciplinary tool rather than as source of services. In addition to excluding applicants with incurable diseases or sight problems from the appointment process, it was used also to weed out workers who suffered from these diseases while at work. Although it was admittedly insufficient to provide serious medication, workers avoided using its service so that it would not recommend getting them fired for illness.<sup>312</sup> Workers also complained that supervisors did not grant them permission to see the Company doctors until their condition

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<sup>309</sup> When the 27-year old *ghafir* was prosecuted for beating up the worker Muhammad Fakhr, the *ghafir* asked for mercy because his salary was too low to support his many children. However, the court fined him 50 piaster. Misdemeanor 1936 /6769/3946.

<sup>310</sup> For theft incidents in which *ghafirs* were involved see Misdemeanor 1938 case 1720, Misdemeanor 1942/ 6792/ 2658, 1942/ 6792/817, 1945 /7791 / 378 and 390 and Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1945. In an interesting case, a witness testified that the Company *ghafir* Ma`mun Nassar offered to sell him threads several times. Eventually he agreed and paid him part of the price. The witness got so suspicious that he reported the Company's management. A Company employer was sent to attend the meeting between the witness while the *ghafir* was delivering the thread and getting the rest of the price (798 piaster). The *ghafir* was harshly punished with one year in jail because he had a criminal record. Misdemeanor 1936/ 6766/37.

<sup>311</sup> Three guards plotted to steal a huge amount of the Company's cloth. One of them named `Abd al-Majid Maburk threw the cloth cross the wall from his guarding point, while the other two, `Abd al-Maqsud Hasanayn and `Abd al-Salam `Ali Yunus, were waiting outside the wall. Mabruka Ali Hammad who was the wife of the first guard was also waiting outside and put the cloth in her basket. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6789/2174.

<sup>312</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court records 1947/ 7695/ 3136 and 3230. See also al-Banna, "Mawqifuna min qadiyatuna".

deteriorated and then they had to wait in lines while guards hit them with sticks.<sup>313</sup> If doctors recommended a few days off work, he would lose his wages for these days.<sup>314</sup> The Company was not reluctant to fire those who developed medical conditions during their service. They were dismissed regardless of length of service or even the association between their deteriorating health and their work.<sup>315</sup> Economically, it made sense to replace a higher-paid sick worker with a younger, healthier and lower-paid employee. If any worker suffered from diseases such as arthritis he was sent to a medical committee which always decided that the worker was not able to perform the job. Then the company would use that report to fire the worker. This practice was very common, particularly before 1952, and firing workers “did not cause more than slight waves on the surface of the life of the factory”.<sup>316</sup> In the first ten months of 1947, the Company fired 843 workers due to illness, ageing, and disability.<sup>317</sup> With the absence of legal protection for workers, the Company’s administrators preferred to see workers as an expendable resource, easily replaced by a large pool of ready labor recruited from the countryside.

Workers negotiated the hard working and living conditions. They pooled resources to rent shared rooms for the least possible cost and developed a culture of accommodating each other. Despite their hardships and their crowded quarters that sometimes drove them to quarrel, they readily hosted newcomers and helped them to join the Company. They enjoyed whatever they could afford of the urban life’s pleasures. Whenever money was available, they ate vegetables cooked with meat at restaurants or bought falafel and sweet sesame paste for dinner. They went to movie theaters, circuses, coffee shops and *booza* taverns.<sup>318</sup> They enjoyed different sorts of free entertainments such as the concerts of the orphan music band or simply took walks

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<sup>313</sup> *Al-Jamahir*, September 14, 1947.

<sup>314</sup> Al-Mudarik, *Hawla Mushkilat `Ummal al-Mahalla*, 15.

<sup>315</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court records 1947/ 7694 /1528, 1947/ 7695/ 3136, 3230 1947/ 7695/ 3123, 2137 and 2730 among many other cases.

<sup>316</sup> Halim, *Hikayat `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman*, 92.

<sup>317</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla*, November 29 and December 27, 1947.

<sup>318</sup> The 20-year old worker `Abdu Mikha`il Hanna bought a third class ticket to go to the movie theater, but he tired to sit in the first class section to harass women. The manager of the theater asked a policeman to arrest him. Misdemeanor 1941 /6788/1352.

on the main boulevard by the canal banks chewing sugar cane or eating *tirmis* and seeds.<sup>319</sup> More importantly they were not totally passive in the face of the gigantic Company. They created new strategies and borrowed from their traditional culture ways to encounter and resist its policies, to insert a balance into their work relations and to adapt to industrial and urban life. While adaptation was addressed in this chapter, the next chapter deals exclusively with their resistance.

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<sup>319</sup>In an unusual case, a worker got into a fight with the policeman who led al-Mahalla Orphanage Band during a concert. The worker slandered and kicked the policeman. When another policeman tried to arrest him, he violently resisted them and consequently received harsh punishment of one month jail with labor. Misdemeanor 1936 /6766/527.

## Chapter 3

### **Begging, Stealing and Striking: Labor Resistance in al-Mahalla**

On January 3, 1938 the three Company workers al-Sa`id al-Tabbakh, Abd al-Ra`uf `Atiyya, and Muhammad Mustafa al-Qattan sent an anonymous letter by mail to their boss `Abbas Yusri Effendi threatening to kill him and his brother Hassan Yusri Effendi, who also occupied a high ranking position in the Company, unless he increased employee wages in the section entitled Sahb wa Barm in 24 hours.<sup>320</sup> Shortly before sending the desperate letter, the three men led workers of the same section in several attempts to increase their pay. Workers sent a petition to the chairman of the Company and Bank Misr, Tal`at Harb Pasha, and other administrators in the Company. They had also written to complain to the Labor Bureau, which was established by the government as a section of the Ministry of the Interior, then transferred to the Ministry of Social Affairs, to mediate between workers and employers.<sup>321</sup> Before the three workers were convicted and jailed for threatening to kill their bosses, they led a strike in their section of the company. The limited-scale strike succeeded in forcing the company to abide by the new labor legislation and reduce working hours in this section and all spinning factories from 12-13 hours per shift to only 8 hours per shift in mid-1938. However, harsh working conditions, low pay, and the continuation of the 12-13 hour shift system in the weaving factories led to the first major strike in the Company in July 1938.

Those three men chose different types of collective resistance seeking their own and their colleagues' rights. They started with begging the Company's administration, leading a strike, and then threatening to kill the bosses. Between the two extremes of begging and killing, there were other types of resistance employed by workers. Some of these types were collective and

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<sup>320</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1938/ 7439/ 455 and 540.

<sup>321</sup> These letters and complains were used to identify the authors of the anonymous threatening letter by matching handwriting. Considering the history of violent relations between workers and bosses this letter provoked serious investigation. The three workers were sent to the Criminal Court where they were convicted. Ibid.



depended on networking such as forming an independent union, strikes, sit-in strikes and writing collective petitions and complains. Other types of resistance were more individualistic such as absence, quitting after gaining skills, stealing the company's property, evading work, destroying machinery, burning parts of the Company and of course battering, even killing, bosses. Although silent and individualistic attempts to improve hard working conditions and increase workers' gains were more common than collective "loud and hot" resistance, historical writing on Egyptian labor has ignored it altogether. These writings look at workers' resistance as a collective action to achieve the agenda of the "working class". Only Unionism, strikes, sit-in strikes, political activism and similar collective "hot, clean, and loud" actions fit in what these writings consider "class resistance". Stealing, killing, sabotaging, evading work that served an individual worker's agenda have always been absent from these writings and do not fit in concept of resistance. This is simply because most of these forms of resistance are illegal and even "dishonorable" and always seek to fulfill the selfishness of individual workers and undermine working class solidarity. It contradicts the images of the working class as victims and the revolutionaries. Talk of stealing and sabotaging might bring disgrace to the labor activists and historians who are committed to different types of leftist ideologies and movements that believe in and seek the empowerment of workers as a progressive social class. They preserve the history of the Egyptian workers as part of the process of empowering them and emphasize workers' unique and important place in the national history. In neglecting types of resistance such as stealing and sabotaging, these historians and activists apply the legal standard and the social honor code. These codes and laws are mostly produced by social forces trying to undermine workers' rights. It is the same legal system that bans strikes and allows the use of police and military force against striking workers. We should broaden our concept of labor resistance to include every individual and collective action regardless of whether this action is consistent with or breaks laws and transgresses social norms. To paraphrase E.P. Thompson, this is because "morality" is not some autonomous region of human choice and will, arising

independently of the historical process; every class struggle is at the same time a struggle over values. 322

Some types of resistance that I describe echo James Scott's "everyday forms of resistance" among the Indonesian peasants and Bayat's "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" among the urban poor of Tehran.<sup>323</sup> Scott underlines the ability of the poor to resist the "oppressors" by such actions as foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. <sup>324</sup> In the context of pre-modern Egypt, `Ashmawi highlights how the public employed satirical and sarcastic language to resist the Ottoman rulers. <sup>325</sup> Those acts of ordinary and everyday resistance were practiced predominantly individually and discretely but they were well-suited to many workers' needs. They required little or no coordination or planning; they made use of informal networks, often represented a form of individual self-help and typically avoided any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority.<sup>326</sup> To restrict our understanding of labor resistance to unionism, strikes, political activism... etc, misses the point that most subordinate classes have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity. Such activities were dangerous, if not suicidal, and required rarely available organizational skills and negotiating expertise. Most subordinate classes are, after all, far less interested in changing the larger structures of the state.<sup>327</sup> Formal, organized political activity, even if clandestine and revolutionary, is typically the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia. 328

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<sup>322</sup> E P Thompson, *the Poverty of theory and other essays* (New York Monthly Review Press).

<sup>323</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and Assef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

<sup>324</sup> James Scott, "Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance" *The Journal of Peasant studies* 13 (January 1986): 5-35.

<sup>325</sup> Sayyid `Ashmawi, *Sukhriyat al-rafd wa-tahakkum al-ihitaj: `Awam ahl Misr wa-ta`assuf wa-`antazat al-Atrak: Misr al-`Uthmaniyah, 1517-1914* [Sarcastic Resistance and Mocking Protest, the Public in Egypt and the Argent Turks: Ottoman Egypt 1517-1914] (Giza: Markaz al-Buhuth wa-al-Dirasat al-Ijtima`iyyah, 2003). See also *al-Fallahun wa al-Sulta `ala Daw' al-Harakat al-Fallahiyya 1919-1999* [Peasants and Authorities on the Light of Peasantry Movements 1919-1999] (Cairo: Mirit lil-Nashr wa al-Ma`lumat, 2001).

<sup>326</sup> Bayat, *Street Politics in Iran*, xvi.

<sup>327</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, xv.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

Like most subordinates, particularly those who come from rural areas, the workers of al-Mahalla lacked both organizational experience and unity. Their struggle was in the face of a gigantic Company that enjoyed the support of both the local and the national governments. To convert peasants into industrial workers the Company employed rigid disciplinary policies while the workers themselves were struggling to adapt to a new urban lifestyle. The coercive nature of the modernizing process in the Middle East is not a new topic, nor is its limited efficiency or its sincerity.<sup>329</sup> However, workers were very far from being as submissive as the historiography suggests. The vibrant resistance among al-Mahalla's workers has been overlooked in the historiography of the vigorous Egyptian labor movement throughout the 1930s and 1940s. This scholarship focuses mostly on the labor movements in Cairo and its surroundings communities like Shubra al-Khayma, Badrashin, Hawamidiyya, and Hilwan.<sup>330</sup> Its main sources are the documented firsthand experiences of labor activists and what was reported in the contemporary Cairene press, which rarely included al-Mahalla's workers.<sup>331</sup> Some of them even concluded that the labor movement in al-Mahalla was too backward.<sup>332</sup> They blamed the rural origin of al-Mahalla's workers for what they evaluated as a "disorganized and less conscious labor

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<sup>329</sup> Among other examples, see Fahmy, *All the pasha's men*.

<sup>330</sup> Examples for this historiography include: Beinun and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile* and Goldberg, *Tinker, tailor, and textile worker*. The notable exception in terms of paying more attention to al-Mahalla working condition, not particularly their labor movement, is Joel Beinun in a chapter entitled "Fikri al-Khuli's journey to al-Mahalla al-Kubra" in his book *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*.

<sup>331</sup> This historiography includes two types of works; academic research and activists' writings and memoirs. Examples of the academic works include: Sulayman Muhammad al-Nukhayli, *al-Haraka al-ummaliya fi Misr wa-mawqif al-sahafah wa-al-sulutat al-Misriya minha min sanat 1882 ila sanat 1952* (Cairo: al-Ittihad al-'Amm lil-'Ummal, 1967), Nawal 'Abd al-'Aziz Radi, *Adwa' jadidah 'ala al-haraka al-ummaliya al-Misriyyah, 1930-1945* [New lights on the Egyptian labor movement: 1930- 1945] (Cairo: Dar al-Nahdah al-'Arabiyah, 1977), Amin 'Izz al-Din, *Tarikh al-tabaqa al-'amila al-Misriya mundhu nushu'iha hatta sanat 1970* [The History of Egyptian Working Class from Emergence until 1970](Cairo: Dar al-Ghadd al-'Arabi, 1987), Ra'uf 'Abbas Hamid, *al-Haraka al-ummaliya al-misriya fi daw' al-watha'iq al-biritaniyah* [The Egyptian labor movement in the light of the British documents] and *al-Haraka al-ummaliya fi Misr, 1899-1952* [The Labor Movement in Egypt, 1899- 1952] (Cairo: Dar al-Katib al-'Arabi lil-Tiba'ah wa-al-Nashr, 1967). Among enormous examples of the second type of writings see Abd al-Mun'im al-Ghazali al-Jubayli, *75 'aman min tarikh al-Haraka al-niqabiya al-Misriyya* [75 years of the History of the Egyptian Union Movement] (Cairo: al-'Arabi lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi', 1991), Muhammad Jamal Imam, *Ma'a al-Haraka al-niqabiya al-Misriya fi nisf qarn : safahat min dhikrayat Fathi Kamil* [With the Egyptian Union Movement in a Half Century: Pages from the Memoir of Fathi Kamil] (Cairo: Dar al-Ghad al-'Arabi, 1985). The notable exception in celebrating the labor movement of workers in al-Mahalla is 'Uthman's *al-Idrabat fi Misr zaman al-arba'inat*. In this work, 'Uthman devotes a chapter for the 1947 strike in al-Mahalla.

<sup>332</sup> The best examples here is 'Uthman, *Mudhakkarat wa-watha'iq Min tarikh 'ummal Misr* and *Mudhakkarat wa-watha'iq Min tarikh 'ummal Misr: Kifah 'Ummal al-Nasij 1938-1947* [Documents and Memoir from the History of Workers of Egypt: the Struggle of the Textile Workers 1938- 1947] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1983).

movement” and consequently the poor condition of those workers, their low payment, and inability to negotiate.<sup>333</sup> Al-Mahalla was not only far from the Cairo-centered press and politics, but also the everyday form of resistance made no headlines. This chapter shows how the workers of al-Mahalla individually and collectively employed traditional and creative tactics to empower themselves and negotiate the harsh working conditions and poor pay. It starts with “ordinary everyday” resistance, then moves to strikes and unionism.

### **Seasonal Peasants, Skilled Workers and the “Reserved Company Jobs”**

Individual attempts to improve a worker’s arrangements with the company were the most normal and convenient for a worker to think of and to pursue. However, these types of resistance have always been ignored and overlooked in the historiography and even by the company itself, despite the huge losses it caused to the company. The early and most sustainable resistance was to simply quit work after getting valuable training. Already in April 1931, only four months after the Company produced its first piece of cloth in December 1930, the administration started to complain about the phenomenal absence of workers “without reason, which forces the company to train others”. Of course many workers joined the company with the intention of saving some cash and going back to their home villages. However, the bad working and living conditions encouraged more workers to quit. The problem was so acute that the company had to train more workers than it needed to be ready to cover those who dropped out. The shift from handlooms to mechanical weaving in al-Mahalla’s small factories and the opening of weaving mills outside the town and across the country created more demand for trained workers. In 1941 the administration objected that “large numbers of our trained workers leave our factory everyday with one group following another”. This time, the reason was clear and the administration admitted that workers did so “seeking higher wages, but in fact it is temporary”. The company’s loss was two-fold. In addition to losing skilled trained workers, it had to replace them with new workers whose training cost time and money and whose unskilled hands caused harm to the machines and material waste. For example, products with blemishes and flaws due to untrained

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<sup>333</sup> `Uthman, *Kifah` Ummal al-Nasij*, 162.

laborers during the first four months of production were 5,720 pieces of cloth. The company neither tried to understand the roots of the problem nor to motivate workers to stay. Its policy was to blame workers for leaving and to ignore that the wages in other similar mills in Alexandria and Shubra al-Khayma were much higher. The problem continued and the Company decided to “donate” clothes to its workers who had served at least 6 years by 1940. Only 1,100 out of more than 20,000 workers qualified for the “donation”.<sup>334</sup> The absence of workers and their quitting work resulted in a tangible reduction in production in 1943 when the company attributed the phenomenon to seasonal agricultural work and the attractive wages offered by new factories. The idea that workers could prefer agricultural work, which was known to be the lowest-paying, to work in the company revealed the irony that wages for such menial work were still higher than company pay. Ironically, while the company preferred workers with peasant origins due to their “obedience quality” many of those workers considered the company a “reserve job”, meaning they resorted to working at the company only when there was a shortage of agricultural work. There’s no question that poor pay and hard working conditions were a barrier for building loyalty to the Company, just as returning to agricultural work whenever it was available was a way to resist the Company’s “unjust deal”.

The number of people who went through the work experience at the Company by 1947 was one hundred thousand, although the number of actual workers at its peak in 1945 never exceeded 27,000, which indicates that those who left work were several times those who stayed. It is true that some workers were fired for one reason or another but most people voluntarily quit. A survey conducted in 1953, decades after many workers had established social and family lives in the town, showed 43.79% of the workers said they would leave for a better job. The desire to leave was higher among skilled workers. It was 67% among maintenance workers, 64% among spinning workers, and 56% among weaving workers. These groups had special skills that were useful and needed in other industries. The survey conductor reported that an improvement in labor conditions in the mill would eliminate the losses because “(workers) showed a strong

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<sup>334</sup>*Sijil Tarikhi.*

desire to identify with the mill but this is frustrated by the company labor policy, which leads them to believe it considers them as unimportant.”<sup>335</sup>

Those who preferred to quit were always good workers whose opportunities to get better work with higher wages were guaranteed. <sup>336</sup> In the early days of the Company’s existence workers from al-Mahalla itself tended to leave. Al-Khuli reported that skilled *Mahallawiyya* workers, *ustas*, started to leave due to their low wages although their wages and status were higher than peasant-workers. When the *ustas* showed resentment over their unexpectedly low wages, the Company managers told them “the door allows camels to leave” and they left. Going back to the handloom factories was always possible for higher wages and better working conditions. In handloom factories working hours were flexible, there was no night shift, and relations between workers and factory owners were more personal. Quickly, peasants who successfully transformed into skilled industrial workers enjoyed the same possibility of better pay and working conditions. Investing valuable skills acquired in the Company in getting a higher paying job was not restricted to rank and file workers. Technicians who were sent by the Company on training fellowships to Europe were willing to leave to work for higher pay in Alexandria. <sup>337</sup> The company did not see anything wrong in its working conditions and blamed workers for its failure in instilling loyalty among them. Thus, workers protested their low wages, between two and seven piaster a day for skilled spinning and weaving workers in 1931, and horrific working conditions by leaving the mill.

Despite the high rate of quitting, the Company never lacked a sufficient labor supply to sustain production. Those who chose to continue working attempted to enlarge their compensation or simply to reduce their work effort whenever possible. In the early days of work, once supervisors registered their attendance, workers tried to find themselves a hidden spot in which to sleep during their shift. This is not to say that every worker deliberately fell asleep.

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>336</sup> Carson, al-Mehalla Report, 72-3.

<sup>337</sup> Among those employees, Muhammad Ramadan whom the Company sent to Belgium for training in 1928. He worked in the Company until 1939, and then he moved to the Sipahi textile factory in Alexandria for a higher salary. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 401 “Iltimasat Ḡanant, 1943- 1946” [Petitions for Aids, 1943- 1946].

Some workers, especially young children working night shifts, were not able to help themselves falling asleep out of exhaustion and fatigue. When the bosses caught them, they were punished with sticks, having cold water thrown in their faces, or having their faces painted with a dark blue liquid.<sup>338</sup> Going to the W.C. was a shrewd way to avoid work.<sup>339</sup> Thus the management closed the W.C. during working hours, assigned *Ghafirs* to guard its doors and allowed only workers with written permission to use it. Some workers hit their supervisors who refused to grant them such permission.<sup>340</sup> Others hit the W.C. guards to allow them to get in without having permission.<sup>341</sup> Many avoided the hassle of seeking permission and took care of the problem on the work floor underneath and around the machines. They made the shop floor unbearable for their bosses to pass by.

Another trick employed by some wage workers to reduce their work effort was to cause the machine to break down and wait until it got fixed.<sup>342</sup> Those who got paid per-piece increased the reading of the meter that measured their production. Some of those who practiced this did not hold enough mechanical expertise to do it correctly. They either damaged the meter or increased the reading so high it could not realistically be achieved by the machine.<sup>343</sup> The frequency of catching those who changed the reading of the meter proves that the practice was relatively common and others succeeded in increasing their income without the corresponding increase in work. There were also workers who plotted with foremen to overstate the production count and share the payment.<sup>344</sup> This way saved the worker the danger of being caught.

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<sup>338</sup>Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 24.

<sup>339</sup> The worker Muhammad Ibrahim Ahmad hit his colleague Himida Abd al-`Aziz with a hard wood shoe, *Qubqab*, on his head because `Abd al-`Aziz told the foreman that Ahmad was avoiding work by hiding at the WC. Misdemeanor 1937/ 6774/ 3392.

<sup>340</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/6773/ 239 and 1938/ 6775/ 441.

<sup>341</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/6773/ 239 and 1945/7794/ 2604.

<sup>342</sup>The following day the wage system was changed from per production to per day on August 20, 1935, three workers damaged six looms on which they were assigned to work. Misdemeanor 1935/ 4040/ 6783.

<sup>343</sup> The 19-year old *Sahb wa Barm* worker `Abd al-Galil Mustafa Gad readjusted his machine produced more than three thread bundles every hour, while the machine`s highest productivity limit did not exceed one bundle per hour. Misdemeanor 1935/ 6783/ 4189.

<sup>344</sup> "Kuntu Aqul", *Amil al-Mahalla*, April 1, 1948, 5.

Another practice to increase workers' pay was to change the sum of the payment checks to make it higher than the actual amount. According to the company system, each worker got a payment check on the shop floor. Workers cashed these checks at the cashier's window, *Sarraḥ*. From the distance between the shop floor and the cashier's window, some workers tried to forge the written amount of money. Illiteracy was a big barrier in achieving this goal since some workers were only able to read and write numbers, but did not realize sums were written in letters too.<sup>345</sup> Some stole each other's pay checks or found lost checks and tried to cash them.<sup>346</sup> It was noticeable that many workers tried to change fake coins with real ones from the Company's cashier claiming that they got their fake coins in their payment.<sup>347</sup> There is no evidence that those who did so were participating in any organized bands to distribute fake money, although these sorts of bands did operate in the town at that time.

Table 3.1: Theft cases inside the Company.

Year	Reported theft
1938	89
1942	75
1943	65
1944	133
1945	89

Source: al-Mahalla Misdemeanor Court records of the mentioned years.

Among blue-collar workers, stealing the Company's property was the most common way to improve a workers' personal gain out of work, and was even used to fulfill their basic needs, particularly for clothing. Table 3.1 shows the continuing in theft cases committed by workers inside the Company. The table shows only the incidents where the offenders were caught and

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<sup>345</sup> Misdemeanor 1936 /6769/ 332

<sup>346</sup> The company worker Mustafa Sif al-Din lost his payment check worth 120 piaster and reported to the management and the cashier. 20 days later, the 25-year old Company janitor `Uthman al-Sayyid tried to cash the check and said he represented Mustafa. The latter said he did not know `Uthman. Thus, `Uthman was charged with fraud and theft. Misdemeanor 1936 /6769/3420. In another case, the 18-year old worker Fahim al-Hifnawi Nur al-Din stole the payment check of `Abd al-`Aziz `Abd al-Rahman al-Ashqar worth 86.5 piaster and tried to cash it. Misdemeanor 1936 /6769/ 3580.

<sup>347</sup> The 25-year old company worker Hilmi Sa`d Ghubriyal tried to change a fake 10 piaster coin from the Company cashier and he knew it was fake. Misdemeanor 1936 /6769/4060.



sent to the court rather than the actual number of thefts that took place. Much evidence indicates that theft was even more common than what was reported. First there were those who succeeded in leaving the gates of the company carrying the stolen items. The continuation of reported theft by itself indicates that successful theft encouraged others to try. Despite the harsh surveillance system that the Company applied and despite the inspections performed by guards at exit gates, many workers were able to get away with stolen items. According to the system, there were guards by the doors of each factory inside the mill and by the bathroom doors, in addition to the guards by the exit gates. Guards had the right to stop any worker, even during work hours, for inspection. They also opened and searched closets designated for workers to keep their personal items. Body-searches at the exit gate were very harsh and emotionally and physically painful and humiliating for workers.<sup>348</sup> The search was not restricted to pockets, but was extended to the underwear. Very often guards made workers take their shoes off for searches and checked the fabric from which their underwear was made. Female workers were searched by female inspectors at the gates. However, in the cases of the absence of female inspectors, male guards searched female workers with the consent of the Company police officers.<sup>349</sup> Of course, like their male colleagues, female workers committed theft and some of them organized among themselves such practice, although such collective theft incidents were not very common.<sup>350</sup>

Despite all these multi-layered search processes, there were workers who successfully stole.<sup>351</sup> Others were creative and threw the stolen items across the fence, particularly when the

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<sup>348</sup> Workers complained that guards intentionally hurt them and even blow and wipe up their noses in their clothes during the search. *Amil al-Mahalla*, January, 18, 1948, 7.

<sup>349</sup> A guard noticed that the 60-year old female worker Hamida Isma'il Inab had a swollen thigh. He took her to the office of the Company's police officer where he searched her. He found a piece of cloth in her underwear. Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 3262.

<sup>350</sup> In unusual case, four female workers from the village of Kafr al-Sarim were caught by the exit gate wrapping pieces of expensive cloth around their waists and inside their underwear. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6788/ 5.

<sup>351</sup> Among many cases when workers were able to leave the Company with stolen items, the case of Hashim Muhammad Imam is worth mentioning. A policeman saw him in al-Warraqa area trying to sell metal tools. When he asked where he got them, Imam said he bought them from a nearby village. The policeman suspected that he stole them from the Company. A company engineer estimated the tools to be 4, 5 EP worth. The worker was punished with 4 months labor jail. Misdemeanor 1936/ 6769/ 3741. In another case the female worker Zaynab Muhammad Mutawali succeeded in passing the company's gates several times with the stolen cloth. She was a 45-year old widow. Upon receiving an anonymous letter, police searched her home and found pieces of unfinished cloth that was not ready to go for sale yet. Misdemeanor 1936 /6769/ 4044. The 40-year old worker Muhammad Mahmud al-Qutb succeeded in leaving the Company with stolen items several times. Police confiscated threads, cloth, and tools

loot was especially valuable, then picked it up after leaving the mill.<sup>352</sup> Some guards themselves committed theft or plotted with workers to let them go with the stolen items.<sup>353</sup> Workers stole several-meter-lengths of cloth by wrapping them around their waist or legs to avoid the search. In the case of steeling small-size items such as socks, perpetrators hid it inside bread loaves, in their shoes, or in small bundles where they packed their personal belongings.<sup>354</sup> However, not every worker caught stealing was arrested or sent to the court. It was not unusual for guards and bosses to beat the offender and/or make him sign a form for voluntary resignation and give up any right to his pay.<sup>355</sup> In some cases they even let them continue to work.<sup>356</sup>

Table 3.2: Stolen items in the Company in 1945.

Stolen items	Cloth	Threads	Tools
Frequency	164	23	15

Source: al-Mahalla Misdemeanor Court records 1945.

Regardless of the actual number of thefts that took place, table 3.2 provides us with an accurate pattern for what items were frequently stolen. Workers stole items that were readily accessible, items they needed, such as cloth and threads and soap bars, and items that they could sell for cash. It's no surprise that cloth was the most stolen item. The Company's products, or, as they were referred to by the Cairo press, "banners of Egyptian freedom" were beyond the workers' ability to buy. With the gloom of WWII and the suspension of imports, the prices of cloth along with other basics skyrocketed. One of the most common demands of textile workers

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from his house. His son testified that he had seen his father bring these items very often with him after work. Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 2698. In a collective theft incident, three workers who lived together in one room stole socks and underwear from the Company. Police found the loot in their room and one of them turned to have a record with theft crimes. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2007.

<sup>352</sup> Misdemeanor 1941/6789/ 2174 and 1942/6792/2166.

<sup>353</sup> Among many cases of theft in which guards were the perpetrator see Misdemeanor 1938 case 1720 and Misdemeanor 1945/7791/ 378 and 390, and Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1096.

<sup>354</sup> Among many cases, the 32-year old worker Muhammad Ahmad `Ammar Khayralla hid 6 socks in his bread loaves. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2003.

<sup>355</sup> The supervisor of the weaving section Muhammad `Izzat Shimi caught two workers steeling. He hit them instead of reporting the theft. Misdemeanor 1944/ 6918/ 1017.

<sup>356</sup> The worker `Abd al-Raziq Muhammad `Abd al-Hamid continued to work although his colleague Riyad Mutawali reported that he had stole a piece of velvet. `Abd al-Hamid hit Mutawali for retaliation. Misdemeanor 1937/ 6774/ 3504.

was to allocate a sufficient amount of each factory's products to be sold to its workers at fixed prices.<sup>357</sup> Since cloth was easily available in the Company for workers who needed it, it's not surprising that cloth was the most stolen item.

Interestingly, the frequency of stealing small pieces of low quality cloth exceeded the thefts of large expensive pieces of cloth. In many cases the stolen pieces of cloth were small enough to be hidden in a shoe or inside underwear. Workers picked these pieces of cloth from piles of unfinished or badly damaged cloth that the Company allowed workers to use to clean their hands and the machines. Workers hoped to take pieces home to use as a towel, a curtain or clothing.<sup>358</sup> Many of them were so desperate that they turned these pieces of cloth into shirts and underwear. The Company turned a blind eye to this as long as workers used these handmade cloths only inside the Company. But when a worker tried to take them home, the Company's dignity and its security system objected. This was also the case for the theft of soap bars which reflected the low level of hygiene in which workers lived. Some workers stole trivial items hoping to convert them into something useful. A worker stole pieces of leather hoping a shoemaker would make him a pair of shoes. Another might steal tools, such as scissors, cutters, and nails, hoping to sell them and buy food.<sup>359</sup> Workers also forged and stole food coupons to get free meals from the Company's restaurant.<sup>360</sup> These petty thefts indicate the poverty of the workforce and its desire to satisfy their basic needs which were left unfulfilled by their insufficient pay checks. In most cases sent to the court, workers confessed to taking these pieces of cloth to make themselves underwear or towels as they did on the shop floor. Some confessions revealed that the Company's system was so arbitrary that workers did not know what they were

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<sup>357</sup> `Uthman, *Kifah `Ummal al-Nasij*, 80.

<sup>358</sup> When the Company worker Muhammad `Abd al-Rahman al-Shuhah (Husari) was leaving the Company, he was arrested for stealing a piece of cloth. He said workers were used to sue themselves shirts to wear during the work inside the company. The court did not accept that since the cloth was new. He was punished with one month jail with labor. Misdemeanor 1939/ 6779/ 407.

<sup>359</sup> The 18-year old worker Mustafa Hassan Ghalwash said he stole the Company's scissors to sell it and buy food. His punishment of one month in jail was suspended due to his young age and not having previous offenses. Misdemeanor 1935/ 6783/ 4312.

<sup>360</sup> Misdemeanor 1936/ 6786/ 3342. Children-workers were allowed one free meal a day. Upon receiving their meals, they got a chalk mark on their clothes. To enlarge their portion, some of them wiped the mark and lined up to get one more meal.

allowed to take and what they were not allowed to take. Because many of the Company's workforce were children, "childish" theft incidents were not unusual. For example, when the 13-yearold worker Amin `Abd al-Fadil was arrested for stealing a reel of thread, he confessed that he took the reel to make a kite.<sup>361</sup>

Judges tended to use leniency with offenders due to their young ages, their having a previously clean criminal record, or because what was stolen lacked real value. This is not to say no worker deliberately stole the Company's belongings that were beyond their immediate needs.<sup>362</sup> Actually offenders with criminal records were harshly punished at the court. Because of those offenders the Company started to check the potential workers' criminal records before hiring them. The system was not very successful and some individuals with criminal records were able to join the company workforce, and incidents of theft continued. Firing and persecuting offenders never deterred others from trying. Of course this by itself is evidence that theft was possible with success. Actually we have many cases where workers were able to escape the body search with the loot. Some of them did so several times.<sup>363</sup> Resentment at the low wages and the lack of channels to negotiate wage increases made some workers resort to theft to solve the problem individually.

### **Would Justice Be Obtained at the Courthouse?**

Workers sometimes resorted to the courts for their legal rights. Most cases were from fired workers seeking compensation and severance pay from the Company. They identified the Company as responsible for the deterioration of their health, which consequently made the company fire them. Medical reports both from the Company's doctors and outside physicians diagnosed workers with rheumatism, bronchitis and respiratory diseases, blindness or weak sight, and partial deafness. Some workers sought medical help. Others had to be referred to the medical

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<sup>361</sup>However, the child-worker was punished with two months in jail with labor. Misdemeanor 1936/ 6766/ 884.

<sup>362</sup> For example, Muhammad `Abd al-Rahman al-Guhari who was in charge of granting nails from the Company's storage to different sections upon requests, embezzled 15 boxes of nails worth 15 EP and weighed 31 Kg. it is not imaginable that he was alone in this "heavy" theft especially his two co-workers in the storage and *Shaykh al-Ghafar* tried to help him out by framing two young porters in the same storage on December 26 1940. Al-Guhari was jailed for six months and the two porters were proved innocent. Misdemeanor Court 1941/ 6788/ 360.

<sup>363</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773 2698.

department of the Company because their bosses complained of their inability to perform their jobs. <sup>364</sup> The Company's doctors recommended either that the worker should be transferred to another section where his level of health was not a problem or that his employment would just be terminated. Regardless of their recommendations, the management tended to fire them using the legal pretext that employers might fire those who didn't qualify for work and those whom the employer no longer needed. <sup>365</sup> Workers with medical conditions tended to be frequently absent with and without permission. This made the Company's goal of getting rid of them easier.

The main problem from the workers' perspective was that the legal system did not provide workers with enough protection. The legal right to compensate workers for work accidents was established as late as 1939. This law did not include any rights for workers who were inflicted by one or more diseases caused by the profession. Thus, workers who lost their hearing due to the loud machinery, suffered from rheumatism and varicose veins due to standing up for long hours by the machine, or developed respiratory diseases due to inhaling cotton dust got fired with no rights to compensation. This limited legal right was sometimes frittered away because workers did not enjoy enough legal sophistication to make their case or did not have enough resources to hire good representatives. Some workers were not able to attend the court sessions, thus their cases were rejected. <sup>366</sup> What made things even worse was that they were too sick to go to work, as a result of which the Company fired them. <sup>367</sup> On the other hand, the company enjoyed highly professional expertise to represent it and assure its triumph over workers in court. Examined cases throughout 1947 showed that not one worker won a case against the Company, despite the relative abundance of lawsuits due to firing. This might have explained why workers were cynical and skeptical to the extent of accusing judges and the Labor Bureau of accepting bribes from the company. <sup>368</sup> There was no evidence that this accusation

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<sup>364</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court 1947/ 7696/2468 and 1947/ 7691/169.

<sup>365</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court 1947/ 7696/2468 and 1947/ 7691/2730.

<sup>366</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court 1947/ 7695/ 2137.

<sup>367</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court 1947/ 7695/ 3123 and 3136.

<sup>368</sup> Worker wrote to the Royal Palace complaining that judges and lawyers accepted bribes from the Company in cash and cloth to pass verdicts in favor of the Company into the account of workers. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 "Itimasat `ummal jama`i, 1938- 1952" [Collective Petitions of Workers: 1938-1952]. However, workers were not

was true, although some judges were harsh against workers and expressed clear support for the company as “a national company symbolizing national independence and modernization” or as a source of the worker’s living that should be watched after.<sup>369</sup> While the company hired professional lawyers to represent it, workers could not afford even mediocre attorneys. Very often they represented themselves and were not able to express their case in the right legal terms. Those who were fired due to absences were not able to provide strong evidence that their absence was excused so that the company would have returned them back to work or provided them just compensation. Very often they confusedly filed their cases for “diseases associated with certain professions” and work injuries. The earlier was not covered by the law that limited workers’ compensation to injuries that took place suddenly, during, and directly caused by their work. However, workers never gave up using the lawsuit as a weapon in their battle against the company.

### **Petitions and Appeals to the Rulers and the Nation**

When trying to pressure the Company to improve their situation, workers borrowed from their peasant origins. Petitions voicing collective concerns and complaints always preceded strikes and were even a sign of an approaching strike. Workers, like all social groups across Egypt wrote petitions to the king and different government officials. Writing petitions, *‘ard hal*, to rulers has been a deep-rooted tradition, especially among peasants and the poor in rural areas, since the document known as, *al-Fallah al-Fasih*, the eloquent peasant, in ancient Egypt. It is not a surprise that a large part of the `Abdin Archive’s collection in the Egyptian National Archive, *Dar al-Watha’iq al-Qawmiyya*, is petitions from individuals and groups from all classes, professions, and religions. A scholar estimates that there were roughly one million petitions in

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the only group to be cynical about the fairness of judges of al-Mahalla court. Letters from individuals from the town accused the judge of al-Mahalla court of accepting bribes. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 470 “Iltimasat ahali fardi: 1906- 1935” [Petitions of individual citizens 1906- 1935].

<sup>369</sup>Occasionally, judges decided to harshly punish workers who committed theft and gave them lectures on how they should have been keen to protect the interest of the Company because it was the source of their living. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7793/1503 and 3126. During the first major strike case in 1938, the judge gave workers a lecture on the association between the Company and national modernization and independence. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1865.

that archive.<sup>370</sup> Recent scholarship focuses on petitions of peasants against oppressive local authority as a way to rescue the Egyptian peasants from the stereotype of passivism, fatalism, and hopelessness.<sup>371</sup> With the focus on their “active tools” such as strikes, petitions of the Egyptian workers have been overlooked, although these documents, I argue, are rich in representation of how workers themselves, individually and collectively, appraised their grievances, identified causes, assessed blame, and challenged those whom they viewed as oppressive or abusive.<sup>372</sup> Those petitions directly expressed the views of workers in a very crude and realistic way without mediation from the outsiders who nevertheless may have championed their cause through organized labor movements.

Inspired by their peasant heritage, the workers of al-Mahalla wrote petitions to the King, the government, and the press. Workers employed writing to the press in Cairo more intensively in the mid 1940s. They explained to the Egyptian readers their horrific conditions that were worsened by the wartime conditions and the Company’s policy of reducing its workforce. Workers inflicted with Tuberculosis shared with those readers their suffering and mistreatment at the hands of the Company.<sup>373</sup> This is significant for several reasons. It was different from writing petitions to the king or to government officials, which was personal and seeking help from the highest authorities. Writing to the press reveals workers’ developing consciousness of their being part of the broader nation. They appealed to the national public; to readers whose positions and names were unknown to them but in whose sympathies they were confident. Conveying petitions to the nation and sharing their concerns and grievances through the press

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<sup>370</sup>Imad Hilal, “al-`Ardhal: Sawtu al-Fallah al-Misri al-Muhtajj fi al-Nisf al-Thani mina al-Qarni al-Tasi` `Ashar” [The Petition: the Voice of the Protesting Peasants in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century], in *al-Rafd wa-al-ihitijaj fi al-mujtama` al-Misri fi al-`asr al-`Uthmani* [Resistance and Protest in the Egyptian Society under the Ottomans], ed. Nasir Ibrahim (Cairo: al-Jam`iyat al-Misriyyah lil-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyah, Markaz al-Buhuth wa-al-Dirasat al-Ijtima`iyah, Kulliyat al-Adab, Jami`at al-Qahirah, 2004), 201-249.

<sup>371</sup> Best examples in this recent scholarship are Sayyid `Ashmawi, *Sukhriyat al-rafd wa-tahakkum al-ihitijaj* and Hilal, “Al-`Ardhal: Sawtu al-Fallah al-Misri”.

<sup>372</sup>Kabadayi’s work on how workers used petitions in the late Ottoman Empire is worth mentioning. M. Erdem Kabadayi, “Working for the state in a factory in Istanbul: The role of factory workers’ ethno-religious and gender characteristics in state-subject interaction in the late Ottoman Empire” (PhD diss., Ludwig-Maximilians- Universität München), 56- 101.

<sup>373</sup>“Shakwa la haqqa fiha” [Unjustified Complain] `Amil al-Mahalla, April 1949, 9.

meant workers were trying to influence public opinion, a sophisticated tool that had previously been monopolized by the Company. Under the banner of nationalism and through paid publicity campaigns, the Company promoted an idealistic image of itself in the press. In the mid 1940s, the workers of al-Mahalla took advantage of the Wafd press, which was usually more receptive to public grievances whenever the Wafd Party was not ruling. The leftist press, that was mushrooming though not widely circulated, and the non-partisan press, also expressed workers' grievances. The workers gained so much sympathy that one publication criticized those who ignored the workers' grievances in al-Mahalla as being bought off by the Company.<sup>374</sup> During the 1947 strike, the Egyptian press was divided between the workers and the Company.<sup>375</sup> The prominent daily al-Ahram was noticeably neutral in its daily coverage of the developments. The growing sense of workers that they were part of the nation was more obvious during that strike, when textile workers in Shubra went on strike in support of al-Mahalla, and when individuals from different classes, professions, religions and parts of the country sent donations to the striking workers through newspapers.

Hoping that the monarch and government officials would act as an appeals court, they voiced their grievances and sought intervention on their behalf. Workers complained about being mistreated by the company's administrators, supervisors, and guards. More importantly and more frequently, they complained about being unjustly fired with no compensation.<sup>376</sup> Many petitions reflected the frustrations that workers felt about the lack of legal protections. Some workers wrote that they were fired with no compensation after losing arms, legs, or fingers inside the

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<sup>374</sup>“Bayan li-mandubi `ummal al-Mahalla al-Kubra” [A Statement from Representatives of Workers of la-Mahalla al-Kubra], *al-Jamahir*, September 14, 1947.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> In their petition on 12 April 1946, the two brothers Kamil and Ibrahim Ahmad Qishta complained that they were mistreated and unjustly fired. In a petition on 17 August 1944, Nagib `Awad Shinuda complained that arbitrary treatment of his bosses caused him to lose all his chances to get promotion and periodical salary increase. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 412 “Iltimasat muwazafin fardi, 1941- 1947” [Petitions from Individuals Employees: 1941-1947]. In a petition on 9 March 1937, the worker Mahmud Ahmad Khalid asked to be returned to work at the company. According to him, was fired in January 1937 because he sent a telegraph to Tal`at Harb Pasha, the Bank Misr Chairman, and to `Abd al-Rahman Hamada Bey, the Company's General Manager, concerning the low wages of workers. Mahfazah 419 “Iltimasat ruju` ila al-wazifa, 1935- 1939” [Petitions to return to work, 1935-1939]. More petitions by workers voicing similar concerns and requests could be found in Mahfazah 438 “Iltimasat talab wazifa” [Petitions for job requests], Mahfazah 521 “Iltimasat qadaya, 1938- 1943” [Petitions on lawsuits: 1938-1943] and Mahfazah 541 “Iltimasat ta`widat, 1908- 1952” [Petitions for Damages: 1908-1952].



factory.<sup>377</sup> Workers also complained that they were not paid for times when the administration stopped work or slowed work down due to a lack of parts or energy. During WWII in particular, the company had to stop work several times due to the lack of fuel.<sup>378</sup> Not only did the company not pay its workers during work suspensions, the increase in living costs made workers' lives extremely difficult.<sup>379</sup> Whenever a foreign administrator made such a harmful decision, the workers' grief over losing their pay got mixed in with their national sentiments and they accused the foreign administrator of trying to destroy Egyptian industry and promote foreign production.<sup>380</sup> In 1955 when the company hired a British Colonel named Taylor as an expert in the Wool factory for 2500 EP in annual salary and 500 EP annual bonus, the union of the company in 1955 condemned the company for its policies of continuing to hire foreigners for high salaries and ignoring its duty to create reliable Egyptian technicians to replace them. It accused the British Colonel, a 16 year British Army veteran of excluding his Egyptian colleagues. To prove their point that foreigners had never remained loyal to the Egyptian company since its establishment, the union pointed to a history of foreign employees blackmailing the company and asking for higher pay whenever it experienced "hard times." It

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<sup>377</sup> The worker Ahmad al-`Assal lost his arm in a work accident. He was fired with no compensation, and then he wrote to the King asking for justice. His petition was forwarded to the Ministry of Industry and Commerce. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 491 "Iltimasat `ummal fardi, 1907- 1952" [Petition of Individual Workers: 1907-1952] and Mahfazah 541 "Iltimasat ta`widat, 1908- 1952" [Petitions for Damages: 1908-1952].

<sup>378</sup> In 1940 the Company stopped work at the factory of linen 1940 due to the high price of the raw material. That factory was eventually eliminated in 1947 along with ropes, socks and underwear factories. In 1941 all factories were stopped for four days in January and for three days in May due to lack transportation means to carry the imported fuel to al-Mahalla. *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>379</sup> For example, administration stopped work in "*al-Mabyada*" section between December 5 and 10, 1944 and refused to pay workers full or half payment. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 "Iltimasat `ummal jama`i, 1938- 1952" [ Petitions of Collective Workers, 1938-1952].

<sup>380</sup> Female and male workers of the Wool Factory voiced such complain in their petition to the Royal Court in January 1951 against the British manager of the factory Mr. Parkinson. The Company replied to the Royal Court's inquiry that Parkinson had been a good technical manager of that factory since it was funded in 1938 and he did not make any decision concerning labor or production policies. The Company admitted that it had to reduce work hours in the Wool Factory because of the decrease in available wool raw material, the increase of its prices, competition of imported wool cloth, and consequently the increase of produced stoke in the storage. It claimed that it did its best to reemploy the factory's workers in other sections wherever their work was needed. For the petition see `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 "Iltimasat `ummal jama`i, 1938- 1952" [Collective Petitions of Workers: 1938-1952]. For the Company's respond see: Mahfazah 492 "Iltimasat `ummal jama`i, 1910- 1937"[Collective Petitions of Workers: 1910- 1937], file 5.

described the relations between the company and its foreign employees as “a humiliation that Egyptians had to pay for out of our dignity”.<sup>381</sup>

Although expressing grievances and concerns in this strong “nationalist” language reflected the dominant nationalist discourse of the new ruling regime after 1952, Egyptian workers had a long history of mixing nationalism with their class interests.<sup>382</sup> For example, in 1947 the workers of the sister Company in Damietta, Misr Company for Silk Weaving, expressed their deep resentment against the French technical manager Monsieur Bazane. According to them he repeatedly said “every Egyptian is a stupid donkey” and “it is impossible for Egypt to rely on itself and without France it could not have survived”. They accused him of abusing his power to lay off 300 workers and to shut down some sections of the factory, so that the Company had to use French components.<sup>383</sup>

Workers also wrote petitions to the top administrators hoping they would listen to their concerns and lessen their suffering. Contrary to their expectations, these letters exposed workers to the risk of being fired. This was what happened to a group of workers in March 1937 when they sent telegraphed petitions to the chairmen of Bank Misr and the Company, Tal`at Harb Pasha and `Abd al-Rahman Hamada Bey, concerning their low wages.<sup>384</sup> As a response to a decrease in wages, workers chose to send these telegraphs instead of going on strike. Interestingly enough, the first major strike took place one year later in July 1938. During that strike, an entire weaving section was destroyed and work was suspended in the weaving factory for several weeks. The total property damage was estimated at more than 1,287 Egyptian Pounds.<sup>385</sup> This makes one wonder if listening to their workers’ petitions would not have been less costly and more productive for both the Company and its workers.

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<sup>381</sup> The Archive of the Department of Corporations, Mahfazah 43.

<sup>382</sup> See: Bein and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, the second part in particular.

<sup>383</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 “Iltimasat `ummal jama`i, 1938- 1952” [Collective Petitions of Workers: 1938-1952].

<sup>384</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 419 “Iltimasat al-ruju` lil- wazifa, 1935- 1939” [Petitions to Return to Work: 1935-1939].

<sup>385</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6777/ 1865.

Petitions were the expression of the deep anguish of the workers. And strikes were arguably the result of neglect of these petitions by the company's administration. Similar to what happened before the 1938 strike, a series of neglected petitions arrived at the Royal Palace shortly before the 1947 strike.<sup>386</sup> To avoid the troubles that petitioners might face, some workers anonymously sent their petitions detailing their poor working conditions, long work hours, and poor pay.<sup>387</sup> These petitions did not find sympathetic ears either among top government officials or among the Company's administrators. The result was the explosion in September 1947, which was the largest and most damaging strike in Egyptian history. Police forces from all over the Delta provinces were not able to control the 27,000 striking workers. Only deployment of the armed forces restored calm and order to the town.

Many petitions to the King strongly reflected the mistrust that workers felt toward the state's agencies and the judicial system. They even accused some of them of being bribed by the government. Particular individuals wrote repeatedly to the King about what they thought to be injustices imposed upon them by the Company's administration. Sayyid Sa'id Sharaf wrote beyond his personal situation and complained about what he considered corruption and mismanagement. Sharaf was a unique case due to his education, public interest and awareness. He was able to expand his resentment and agitation toward the company into a campaign dealing with the general policies of the company and the bank together. Sharaf was the most prolific worker writing about the "corruption and mismanagement" at the company.

Although we do not know how the Royal Court dealt with every petition it received from the al-Mahalla workers, there is evidence that the Palace and the government tended to give the administration of the Company the final word. For example, the Royal Palace and the Ministry of Social Affairs readily accepted the Company's excuse for firing the worker Muhammad Salih

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<sup>386</sup> In a telegraph to the Royal Court on April 8, 1946, the worker Muhammad Fikri wrote: "workers in weaving sections 1 and 2 are seeking you to rescue them from low wages". `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 "Iltimasat `ummal jama`i, 1938- 1952"[Collective Petitions of Workers: 1938-1952].

<sup>387</sup> One of these early petitions reads: "workers of the Company suffer from exhaustion and humiliation. They work from 7: a.m. to 9: 00 p.m. for 45 *Milim* (1 Piaster is 10 *Milim*). We ask to work only from 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. for 60 *Milim* payments". `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 491 "Iltimasat `ummal farid, 1907- 1952" [Petition of Individual Workers: 1907-1952], file 32.

al-Turki.<sup>388</sup> The company fired the worker with no compensation because they discovered his criminal record was not clean, an excuse that could have been easily refuted by questioning why the Company hired him in the first place.

However, this was not the case after the regime changed in July 1952. In October 1952 the worker `Abd al-Mun`im Rifa`i wrote to the cabinet associating the increase in the prices of the Company's production with wasting its resources on buying unneeded tools and raw materials. Inspired by the rise of the army as the actual rulers of the country after the July 1952 coup, Rifa`i proposed forming a committee from military engineers and accountants. They would review the company budget, inspect purchasing, plan how to reduce the cost and retail prices of "popular" cloth and curb the managers' practice of abusing their authority to increase their own wealth. That letter was sent to the Ministry of Subsidies, which sent it to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. The latter returned it back to the former in November 1952 due to its "being beyond its concern".<sup>389</sup> The letter is connected to the workers' resentment at the way the company distributed "profit bonuses" among its employees. While the general manager of the company got 10,000 EP, managers of departments got the equivalent of 6-month salary, white-collar workers got the equivalent to 3 months salary, and workers got the equivalent of 6 days wages. A group of workers calling themselves "the United Front for Workers of Misr Company at al-Mahalla" sent a complaint to the Department of Companies at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry describing this distribution as an "obvious injustice" and asked for a share of benefits for workers equivalent to the white-collar workers' share. In another petition to the Department of Labor, the group asked the department to review the bonus distribution policies. However the government officials decided to ignore both letters because they were beyond their capacity and because the company is "heartily Egyptian".<sup>390</sup>

Complaints about favoring particular administrators at the expense of workers continued. In 1955 the president of the Union of Workers and Employees of Misr Company sent a letter to

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<sup>388</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 565 "Iltimasat mulakhasat, 1925- 1952" [Petitions' summaries: 1925-1952].

<sup>389</sup> The Archive of the Department of Corporations, Mahfazah 43.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

the Department of Public Investigation in the Ministry of the Interior, which sent it to the Department of Companies with the “very secret” seal. In that unusual letter, the union reported several cases when the company appointed ex-government officials at high salaries and benefits although these appointees either did not qualify for these positions or were not needed at all. The union gave particular names of appointees along with their salaries and benefits and their professional and educational background to prove their lack of qualification and quality. At the same time the company got rid of whomever qualified for these positions including individuals who had served the company for years. The company refused to increase workers’ wages from 24,000 EP to 32,000 EP a month. The union considered these wage levels to be the lowest among Egyptian companies.<sup>391</sup> The Department of Companies concluded that hiring and promoting were exclusive rights of the administration of the company. However, it decided to send an inspector to explore “what was going on at the company”.

### **Divided Peasant-Workers with no Comrades**

The vast majority of workers of al-Mahalla came from rural areas in the Delta far from the active public sphere and political movements in Cairo. They were mostly illiterate with no previous experience in an organized collective protest movement like those that had occurred in industrial areas around Cairo and Alexandria. They were notorious for being divided among themselves into hostile groups based on geographical origin and their positions and ranks within the Company.<sup>392</sup> Hostility among some groups easily developed into violence, which sometimes made it very difficult to organize workers in a single “class” movement.<sup>393</sup> Workers accused the management of the Company of intentionally encouraging this geographical division and hostility as a way of handicapping workers’ unity.<sup>394</sup> Meanwhile, the Company adopted a policy of weeding out any worker who enjoyed the abilities and aspirations to claim leadership among the workers. The Company did not only prosecute such individuals by firing them or

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

<sup>392</sup> See the chapter entitled “Regionalism, Localism, Nationalism, and Class” in this study.

<sup>393</sup> Beinin, “Egyptian Textile Workers”.

<sup>394</sup> Husayn Hamid, “26,000 min `ummal Sharikat Misr bil-Mahalla bayna istibdad al-ihkariyin wa niqaba mina al-jalladin!,” *al-Jamahir*, June, 2, 1947, 6-7. See also al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-yasar*, 284.

forcing them to resign. It also employed the state's power to remove them from al-Mahalla altogether. Among a long list of individuals who had to leave al-Mahalla and subsequently emerged as strong leaders among industrial workers in their new workplaces there are Fadali `Abd Al-Jayid, Muhammad Shata, Fikri al-Khuli and Ahmad Fahim. The latter became the chairman of the first General Union of the Egyptian Workers and was elected for the Parliament in 1957.<sup>395</sup> Upon fleeing al-Mahalla in the 1930s and 1940s, they all played major roles in the labor movement among textile workers in Shubra al-Khayma.<sup>396</sup> Al-Khuli was imprisoned due to his union activism in 1942 in al-Mahalla. After the 1947 strike the Company was more aggressive in purging activists. In January 1948, the police of al-Mahalla forced 82 workers to leave the town even though an investigation failed to find evidence that they were associated with communism.<sup>397</sup> Among the banished was Muhammad al-Kafuri who emerged as a leader among workers after the 1938 strike. He was an elected labor union member when he was fired from the company and expelled from the town with the police force.<sup>398</sup>

The Company's location away from Cairo's political parties and groups made it difficult to provide the workers of al-Mahalla with experienced, trained leadership or to transfer organizing expertise into the city. There is no concrete evidence that any of the clandestine communist parties and groups that were active in Cairo and its surroundings operated in al-Mahalla during the 1930s and 1940s. Aside from a few sympathetic news reports in leftist publications such as *al-Jamahir*, *al-Tali'a*, and *al-Fajr al-Jadid*, we can't trace serious active roles of communists among the workers of al-Mahalla. Despite the claims of the Company's management and its dependant union about the influences of communism among striking workers in 1947, no worker among those who were arrested after the 1938 and 1947 strikes was accused or convicted for association with communism.<sup>399</sup> The large collection of documents

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<sup>395</sup> `Uthman, *Mudhakkarat wa-watha`iq*, 263.

<sup>396</sup> Al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-yasar*, 283-288, `Uthman, *Mudhakkarat wa-watha`iq* 263 and 298 and al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.3, the last chapter.

<sup>397</sup> "Huna al-Mahalla al-Kubra!" [This is al-Mahalla al-Kurba], *al-`Amal*, April, 28, 1948, 14-15.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

<sup>399</sup> Misdemeanor 1938, 6776 1865 and Tanta Appeal Court 1947/ 7559/ 2338 and 2341. On the Company's claims see *Amil al-Mahalla* 1,2, November 15 and 29, 1947.

compiled by the author and activist Abu Sayf Yusuf covering the period between 1941 and 1957 did not cite any active group in al-Mahalla.<sup>400</sup> The leftist activists that Taha Sa`d `Uthman mentions in his two-volume biography joined the movement after they left al-Mahalla. In his biographical collection, the historian of the Egyptian communist movement Rif`at al-Sa`id mentioned only two communist activists who went to live in al-Mahalla to recruit followers. Both of them were sent by their clandestine groups in the 1950s and no one was reported to operate in al-Mahalla shortly before or after the 1947 strike.<sup>401</sup> This is not to say communist activities in al-Mahalla were non-existent. Because it was clandestine, by nature it is very difficult to estimate its influence. Some activists reported on the conditions of al-Mahalla workers in their press. The leftist labor activist Yusuf Sidiq al-Muddarrik went to al-Mahalla during the 1947 strike to investigate the situation and published a booklet in October 1947. These facts might indicate that there were some sympathizers who facilitated the mission of these Cairene people.<sup>402</sup> There is no evidence however, that the presence of communists played any significant role in labor activism among al-Mahalla's workers. The developments of the strike, which will be addressed below, indicate that it was spontaneous rather than the result of organized activism. A statement that red flags were waved on the Company's fences during the 1947 strike is a wild exaggeration.<sup>403</sup>

Meanwhile, ambitious politicians and parties tried using the workers of al-Mahalla in their ongoing competition for popularity, which neither did workers any good, nor aroused much of their interest. The Muslim Brotherhood recruited followers among white-collar workers. The president of the local branch al-Sawi Habib effendi was chairman of the Labor Office in the Company and tried to recruit more followers among his subordinates.<sup>404</sup> He was very open

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<sup>400</sup> Abu Saif Yusuf, *Watha`iq wa Mawaqif min Tarihk al-Yasar al-Misri: 1941- 1957* [Documents and Stands from the History of the Egyptian Left: 1941- 1957] (Cairo: Sharikat al-Amal lil-Tiba`a wa al-Nashr, 2000).

<sup>401</sup> The two activists are Hilmi Yasin who was sent to al-Mahalla in 1952 and stayed there until he was arrested in 1956 and William Ivraim who was sent to al-Mahalla in February 1954 until he was arrested in November same year. al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-Yasar: Sirra zatiyya li-munadili al-yasar*, 203-204 and 241.

<sup>402</sup> Al-Muddarrik, *Hawla Mushkilat `Ummal al-Mahalla*.

<sup>403</sup> Fu`ad `Abd al-Halim, *Fariqun Anjaza `AMalahu: Hawla nashat al-yasar fi al-Aqalim fi al-arba`inat* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafa al-Jadida, 1999) 11.

<sup>404</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mafazah 533, "Iltimasat Tawa`if Diniyya, 12/19/1906- 5/6/1947" [Petitions of Religious sects, 12/ 19/ 1906- 5/ 6/ 1947].

about his activism, opened a health clinic and led parades carrying the Quran.<sup>405</sup> Recruiting educated white-collar workers rather than blue-collar workers seemed to be consistent with the Muslim Brotherhood's activism in the 1940s. The group was in favor of the Company's labor policies. *Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, the group's voice, adopted the management's story of how and why the 1947 strike broke out including the role of the ill-intentioned individuals who urged workers to reject the union petition to the management and the role of "outsiders" who were conveying destructive rumors among workers against the Company. The paper did not deal with the root causes of the strike and endorsed the management's policy of firing workers because "laying workers off was necessarily due to work circumstances which required cancelation of some positions and transferring the ones who occupied them to other jobs in other sections".<sup>406</sup> Supporting the Company and its dependant union reflects the group's stance toward the labor movement. The paper also was actually defending its own local leader who was handpicked by the management more than once to join the board of the dependant union.<sup>407</sup> Habib *effendi* was re-appointed as a member of the following union board. On the other hand, the management was more suspicious towards Salah al-Din Khalil al-Sharqawi, the local leader of the Jama`at Shabab Sayyiduna Muhammad, which was a splinter group from the Muslim Brotherhood. Khalil joined the Company as a blue-collar worker when he was only thirteen years old. Like the Muslim Brotherhood, the group was welcomed as curbing any communist influence among workers, but the management did not tolerate al-Sharqawi's labor activism.<sup>408</sup> He was outspoken against the long workday, low wages, and arbitrary firing policies. He was accused of participating in the 1947 strike, fired and jailed for two years.<sup>409</sup>

Misr al-Fatah, or the Young Egypt Party, had followers in al-Mahalla. It reached out to educated youth with ultra-nationalist slogans. The organization had a few followers among the

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<sup>405</sup> *Nahdat al-Ummal*, June 25, 1946.

<sup>406</sup> "Harakat al-` ummal fi al-Mahalla al-Kubra", *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, September 7, 1947, 3.

<sup>407</sup> For a broad discussion on the Muslim Brotherhood and the labor movement in Egypt see Sana' al-Misri, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun wa-al-tabaqa al-`amilah al-Misriyyah* (Cairo: Sharikat al-Amal lil-Tiba`a wa-al-Nashr, 1992).

<sup>408</sup> al-Misri, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun wa-al-tabaqa al-`amilah*, 44-45.

<sup>409</sup> For a brief biography of Salah al-Din Khalil al-Sharqawi, see Mahmud al-Sharqawi and Muhammad Rajab, *al-Mahallah al-Kubra: tarikh wa-shakhsiyat* (al-Mahalla al-Kubra [Egypt]: Dar al-Sahwah lil-Nashr, 1987), 64-69.



mechanics who graduated from technical secondary schools and worked as *musa`id* in the Company. The author, al-Khuli, reported he saw a *musa`id* in a militarized parade shouting “God, the King, the Homeland”, but no worker took part in these parades.<sup>410</sup> A small group of its followers who were young educated youth were arrested in 1939 while they were writing slogans on the walls of public places urging a boycott of Jews because of what was going on in Palestine.<sup>411</sup> They were convicted for disturbing the social peace and encouraging hatred against a group of Egyptians. This was the only anti-Semitic incident that was documented in al-Mahalla in the first half of the twentieth century. Apparently, the focus of the Young Egypt agenda in al-Mahalla was not labor issues. However, its leader Ahmad Husain endorsed the workers’ struggle and represented workers who were convicted during the 1938 strike.

The political organization that was aggressively targeting al-Mahalla workers was the Labor Union of the Prince `Abbas Halim. In his quest to build his political stature and compete inside both the Royal family and among political parties, Halim championed the labor movement sporadically in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>412</sup> Fancying himself “the Prince of Workers,” Halim visited Mahalla intending to form a union under his leadership in 1935. The workers, who were desperately waiting for his help against the management of the Company, carried him on their shoulders while shouting “long live the rescuing leader” “long live the conqueror of darkness”.<sup>413</sup> To their huge disappointment, they were not able to understand what he said, because he was not able to speak good Egyptian Arabic. He had spent much of his childhood in Europe and never perfected his Arabic. However many of them were enthusiastically willing to join his proposed union. They rented an apartment in al-Bahlwan Street, centrally located between the Company and workers’ homes in Sandifa and Suq al-Laban, and hung a sign reading “The General Labor Union”. Relations between Halim and the Wafd Party were deteriorating because

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<sup>410</sup> Al-khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 3, 133.

<sup>411</sup> Misdemeanor 1939/ 6780/ 2404.

<sup>412</sup> For Halim and the labor movement during this period see Ra’uf `Abbas, *al-Haraka al-`ummaliya, 1899-1952*.

<sup>413</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 3, 29.

he was breaking away from al-Wafd and trying to form a labor party under his own leadership.<sup>414</sup> The followers of al-Wafd and supporters of `Abbas Halim in al-Mahalla competed to control the house of “The General Labor Union”, which attracted the police to intervene and shut it down.<sup>415</sup> In his political strategies, Halim always had other concerns than keeping his promise to revisit the workers of al-Mahalla. Workers waited for him in 1935, and he never showed up.<sup>416</sup> When Halim reorganized his Labor Party in the mid-1940s, he tried to reach out to al-Mahalla workers again. A branch of the party was established in the town and Mahmud Sabala, one the local notables, chaired it. Halim announced he would visit the town in December 1946, a plan that never materialized. His paper claimed that the government asked him to cancel the visit and he did to save his supporters among the workers of al-Mahalla any bloody confrontations with the government.<sup>417</sup>

### **Were They Really Subordinate Peasants?**

When it comes to unionism and collective efforts such as strikes, we find the experience of al-Mahalla was unique and worthy of attention. The company preferred workers from peasant areas because those workers were believed to be more subordinate, obedient, and lacking in awareness and experience of labor struggle that might be enjoyed by workers coming from urban areas. The company was theoretically right. However the workers of al-Mahalla went through a self-education process, organized themselves, and took advantage of their large numbers to lead a massive movement. The workers of al-Mahalla did not have the luxury of having experienced and educated leaders such as those leftists in Shubra al-Khayma. Al-Mahalla was far from Cairo and Alexandria, the centers for intellectual debate, political activism, and experienced labor organizations. After an 11-13 hour shift, they did not have the time, energy or money to follow the Cairo press.<sup>418</sup> Even those educated workers who came to the Company with experiences and

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<sup>414</sup> Abd al-Mun`im al-Ghazzali, *Tarikh al-haraka al-niqabiya al-Misriyyah, 1899-1952* (Dar al-Thaqafah al-Jadidah, 1968), 179.

<sup>415</sup> “Inqisam fi sufuf al-`ummal” [Division among workers], *al-Muqattamm*, May 16, 1935.

<sup>416</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 3, 50.

<sup>417</sup> *Al-`Amil*, December 1 and 15, 1946.

<sup>418</sup> Illiteracy, which was common among those workers, was not the biggest barrier in consuming printed materials. Since the rise of the popular press in the turn of the century concerned, but illiterate, Egyptians developed a

ideas about unionism and organizational skills, quickly returned back to Shubra al-Khayma and Cairo. The foreigners who sparked the first labor movement in Egypt and transferred some of their leftist ideas and organizational skills to their Egyptian counterparts in Cairo at the turn of the century were different from the foreigners who worked in al-Mahalla.<sup>419</sup> Not only was al-Mahalla different from Cairo and lacked the same level of cosmopolitanism, but also Egypt at the turn of the century was different from Egypt after the 1919 National Revolution. Both Egyptian and foreign workers were generally not at ease together and separate labor organizations became more common than mixed organizations. Egyptian workers aspired to replace foreigners accusing the latter of empowering themselves at the expense of the former.<sup>420</sup> We are not sure about al-Mahalla's foreign workers' history of activism before they came to the town, but there was no evidence that they participated in al-Mahalla's labor movement or even were close to the rank and file workers. Those foreigners were highly skilled, highly paid, and were provided with many privileges by the company. In 1949 they formed only 2.5% of the Company's salaried workforce while their salaries formed 10% of the total payroll.<sup>421</sup> They lived in isolation in handsome villas and apartments provided by the Company on its premises and Egyptian workers were not even allowed to walk around these houses. Under such conditions we do not expect any shared grievances between them and Egyptian workers that might make them participate in any shared protest movement or share any particular resistance expertise. Cultural and linguistic differences must have added more barriers. In fact, the available evidence shows that relations between them and the workers were not friendly and even included hostility. For example, the company worker Muhammad `Abd al-Rahman `Abd al-Radi held his foreign boss Renée Giles responsible for getting him fired. He waited for him outside the Company and hit

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communal way in consuming the press. Among males, one literate person would read the paper out loud and everybody would listen and participate in the discussion.

<sup>419</sup> For the role of foreign workers in the early Egyptian labor movement see Amin `Izz al-Din, *Tarikh al-tabaqa al-`amila hattá sanat 1970*, the first section in particular.

<sup>420</sup> For agitation between Egyptian and foreign workers in a cigarette factory, see Muhammad Jamal Imam, *Safahat min dhikrayat Fathi Kamil*.

<sup>421</sup>The Archive of the Department of Corporation, Mahfazah 43, file 182-2/122.

him causing him an injury in the left eyebrow.<sup>422</sup> Male and female workers of the wool factory accused their foreign manager of intentionally applying a policy that was harmful to them and to the factory.<sup>423</sup> There were accusations in which foreign workers intentionally wasted the Company's resources, they were overpaid, and failed to train Egyptians.<sup>424</sup> Similar hostility was characteristic of relations between foreign and Egyptian workers in other factories, such as the Matusian Cigarette Company in Giza <sup>425</sup> and Misr Company for Weaving Silk in Damietta in 1940s.<sup>426</sup>

However a natural leadership did emerge among al-Mahalla's workers and led them to different types of resistance movements in attempts to improve their lot. The first strike took place in the weaving section in the early 1930s aimed at increasing their wages. The child-worker Fikri al-Khuli launched the strike when he stopped his machines and was then followed by others. The strike was very short and very successful. Instead of 2.5 piaster a day, workers were paid per piece, which increased their payment to a daily average of more than 3 piaster.<sup>427</sup>

From the British sources, we know that workers in al-Mahalla were active in 1935 and caused what the British head of the Labor Office Mr. Graves called "troubles".<sup>428</sup> Eager to organize themselves to relieve their harsh working conditions, the workers of al-Mahalla agreed to Prince `Abbas Halim's call to join his Labor Union.<sup>429</sup> They paid their dues and an apartment was turned into a local branch office. When the Prince came to al-Mahalla, workers were not

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<sup>422</sup>Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1008. In another case the 23-year old worker Muhammad al-Sayyid al-Shatbi, hit *Khawaga* Charlie Yerga. Unfortunately records do not reveal the reason and whether Yerga was the worker's boss. Misdemeanor 1936/6769/3436.

<sup>423</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 "Iltimasat `ummal jama`i, 1938- 1952" [Collective Petitions of Workers: 1938-1952].

<sup>424</sup> The Archive of the Department of Corporation, Mahfazah 43. In his memoir, the labor historian and activist Taha Sa'd `Uthman reports that several of his colleagues who worked at the Company told him many stories on how foreign engineers sabotaged machineries and there was a particular French engineer who used the new bobbins to feed his fireplace. Whether these stories were real or made up is not as important as how they indicate the bad relations between Egyptian workers and foreigners in al-Mahalla. `Uthman *Kifah `Ummal al-Nasij 1938-1947*, 27.

<sup>425</sup> Imam, *dhikrayat Fathi Kamil*, 27-29.

<sup>426</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 "Iltimasat `ummal jama`i, 1938- 1952" [Collective Petitions of Workers: 1938-1952].

<sup>427</sup> Khuli, *al-Rihla*, vol.2 (Cairo: Dar al-Ghad, 1991), 33-57.

<sup>428</sup> Ra'uf `Abbas Hamid, *al-Haraka al-`ummaliya fi daw' al-watha`iq al-biritaniya*, 257.

<sup>429</sup> Ibid.

able to comprehend his broken Arabic.<sup>430</sup> Eventually, he abided by the government request not to return to al-Mahalla and the branch was shut down.<sup>431</sup> Attempts to reestablish al-Mahalla chapter of the Prince's union in 1946 also failed and he canceled his visit to the town, which was scheduled on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1946, and never returned.<sup>432</sup> The workers of al-Mahalla realized they had to depend on themselves and they did so.

The long awaited 8-hour work day was proclaimed in 1938. The Company was not that enthusiastic to conform to the new law and applied it only in the spinning and *Sahb wa Barm* sections in July of that year. Frustrated by the continuation of 11-13 hour shifts, workers of the weaving section had the first major strike in the Company's history. Workers stopped the machines and refused to leave the factory. They were joined by the workers of the repair shops. The situation turned quickly into a violent confrontation between the workers on one side, and the Company's top managers, guards, and a limited police force on the other. Workers used every object they could find at hand to "stone" the other side. The confrontation caused damage to the Company's machinery worth 1287 EP and injured three of the top managers as well as several guards and workers.<sup>433</sup> Work was suspended in the weaving section for a few weeks and 55 workers were convicted of sabotage and destruction. The most important outcome of the strike was a decrease in the workday to ten hours and an increase in wages from 3.5 piaster a day to 5 piaster. The wages of workers who got paid per-piece increased from 6 piaster a day to 12.<sup>434</sup>

The Egyptian labor movement went through a battle in early 1940 to win its right to organize labor unions. The workers of al-Mahalla were not part of that movement. Al-Mahalla's workers started their struggle to form their union as early as 1935. As mentioned, the proposed outside leadership, Prince Halim, gave up on them and pursued his Cairo-centered politics. They

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<sup>430</sup> Khuli, *al-Rihla*, vol.3, 24-35.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid, and *al-Muqattamm*, May, 16, 1935.

<sup>432</sup> *Al-'Amil*, December 1 and 15, 1946. According to this newspaper, which was his union vocal organ, the Prince canceled his visit to al-Mahalla "to save workers a bloodshed after the capitalist government of Isma'il Sidqi redeployed its army forces around the castle of the laborers (al-Mahalla)".

<sup>433</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1865.

<sup>434</sup> Hamid, "26,000 min `Ummal Sharikat Misr bil-Mahalla," *al-Jamahir*, June 2, 1947, 6-7.

continued networking and organizing themselves through meetings in coffee shops and in their slums. The Company was anxious to weed out those who were active among the workers. Mustafa al-Nahas, the Wafd prime minister, had to intervene and contacted the general manager of the Company to kindly ask him to return the dismissed workers.<sup>435</sup> The PM did not miss the opportunity to advise workers to keep calm and distance themselves from troublemakers. Neither the advice of the PM nor the prosecution of the management deterred workers from organizing themselves. Once the law legitimatizing unions was issued in September 1942, al-Mahalla's workers were ready and sent to the Labor Office in Cairo all the needed documents to register their union and to have their freely elected board recognized.<sup>436</sup> The Company was not willing to give in and worked closely with the government to ignore the independent labor movement. While the Labor Bureau ignored all the documents provided by the workers authenticating their choice of an elected board, it endorsed the company's hand-picked union board from among the top and middle ranking managers.<sup>437</sup> A group of workers, including Fikri al-Khuli, did not give up and went to Cairo to press their case with both the government and public opinion. The minister of Social Affairs failed to convince workers either to accept the board chosen by the Company or to divide the board between those who were chosen by the Company and those who were chosen by workers. This group of negotiating workers insisted on an independent board and held a sit-in strike inside the company. Eventually, they paid the price for their bravery in the face of opposition from the government and the powerful Company and were sent to jail for a few months after a hasty military trial.<sup>438</sup> Their voice was not totally lost in the nationalist politics of Cairo. Parliament discussed the demands of al-Mahalla's workers to be allowed to freely elect their union leadership. Pretending to be neutral, the Wafd minister of commerce and industry Mahmud Suliman Ghannam told the Parliament workers were divided between two proposed unions and the government registered the union that represented a larger number of

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<sup>435</sup> *Shubra*, June 25, 1942.

<sup>436</sup> Khuli, *al-Rihla*, vol.3, 165 -179.

<sup>437</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*, and *Nahdat al-'Ummal*, March 23, 1943.

<sup>438</sup> Khuli, *al-Rihla*, vol.3, 172-179.

workers. When workers applied to register their independent union, the Labor Department, responding to the Company's request and in violation of the law, ignored the application until it had formed its dependant union. As usual the Company used the power of the state to impose its handpicked board and with the pretext that there was a large number of workers, and to avoid any troubles, the Labor Department sent 42 of its employees to "supervise" the election in which 17,000 workers cast their votes. To "supervise" a labor election was a second violation of the law that banned the government from any interference in the election.<sup>439</sup> The Company fired some of those who joined the independent union, which must have intimidated others and made them withdraw their membership. The independent union lost a great deal when 'Abdul Hamid Lutfi, a lawyer and chairman of al-Gharbiyya Labor Union, withdrew his support.<sup>440</sup> Lutfi was an activist of the Wafd Party, which was in power at the time. As one of the outsider *effendiyya* politicians based in Tanta, he had to follow the Cairo-centered politics at the expense of the workers. Although the Company won the union battle with the support of the government, the supporters of the independent union did not give up easily. Though many of their leaders were imprisoned after a martial law trial in Cairo and were never allowed to go back to al-Mahalla, supporters of the independent union organized a strike in April 1943. The strike witnessed riots, destruction, and fire. 90 *Qintars* of cotton was burned.<sup>441</sup> Many workers kept their loyalty to the independent union all the way up to 1945 despite their prosecution by the management.<sup>442</sup> Frequently, workers tried to voice their mistrust of the board of the union through the Parliament and press. They wrote to newspapers that were known for their sympathy toward workers accusing the Company of installing a union board after a superficial election during which the managers and their assistants forced workers to vote for the handpicked board.<sup>443</sup> Workers

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<sup>439</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi* and *Nahdat al-'Ummal*, March 23, 1943.

<sup>440</sup> Ramsis Labib, ed., *al-'Ummal fi al-haraka al-shuyu'iyyah al-Missriyyah hatta 'amm 1965* (Cairo: Markaz al-Buhuth al-'Arabiyya lil-Dirasat al-'Arabiyya wa al-Ifriqiyya, 2001), 57.

<sup>441</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>442</sup> The worker Muhammad Fawzi al-Naggar sued the Company and the union for firing him with no compensation in June 1945 after he caught TB. al-Naggar attributed preventing him from any compensation to his loyalty to the independent labor union. Al-Mahalla Civic Court 1948/ 7697/ 521/1947.

<sup>443</sup> For examples of these letters, see "25,000 `Amil fi al-Mahalla Yutalibun bi-Huquqihim," *al-Wafd al-Misri*, June 12, 1946 and "Niqabat sharikat al-ghazl la tumathil al-'ummal," *al-Fajr al-Jadid*, April 17 and June 19, 1946.

never volunteered to pay their membership dues to the Company's dependant union. The Company had to deduct these dues out their payment and this deduction was generally resented throughout the plant.<sup>444</sup> Most workers who were surveyed in the early 1950s expressed their dissatisfaction with that union and their wish not to pay these dues and even expressed their preference to have a union from outside the Company.<sup>445</sup> After the 1947 strike, the Company itself admitted explicitly its need to find a channel to communicate with workers, which meant the failure of that union as such a channel. It formed what it called "Committees to Discuss Complains and Demands of Workers". These façade committees were consisted of representatives of workers in each shopfloor, section, and factories in addition to representatives of the union and administration.<sup>446</sup> However the company did not take the risk to let workers freely choose their representatives.

During and after WWII, conditions of the Egyptian workers, particularly textile workers, were very bad due to the skyrocketing prices, shortage in basic supplies and decrease in employment. Once the war was over and martial law was suspended, strong labor movements broke out everywhere seeking wage increases to meet the high cost of living. In al-Mahalla and more than any time before, the company union failed workers' aspirations to practice any pressure on the company to increase wages, improve work conditions, or even to stop the arbitrary policy of firing and punishing workers. In 1946, workers had to organize themselves to work against two giant rivals. They worked to gain their rights from the Company and to disgrace its puppet union board at the same time. Like workers across the country, they voiced their concerns in the Parliament and the press. Workers tried to take advantage of the political situation in which the Wafd Party was trying to reconstruct its popular support through endorsing some of the labor demands. The popularity of the Wafd Party was seriously damaged when it accepted to form the government with the dictation of the British authority against the will of the

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<sup>444</sup> Hamid, "26,000 min `Ummal Sharikat Misr bil-Mahalla," *al-Jamahir*, June 2, 1947, 6-7 and Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 40.

<sup>445</sup> Carson, *The Mehalla Report*, 27-47.

<sup>446</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla* 7, 1948.



king. This situation allowed the workers of al-Mahalla to approach the Wafd parliament member who represented al-Mahalla to question the prime minister about the validity of the board of the union. They also sent letters to the Wafd newspapers and others publications. They insisted that members of that board were chosen from top managers and none of them were qualified to represent blue-collar workers. To prove their point, they provided the parliament member with a list of positions and monthly salaries of the members and the chairman who was the manager of the Company's cotton stock. His salary was 80 EP. Like all top managers, the chairman of the union, `Abd al-`Aziz `Arafa, was accommodated by the Company in a fully furnished modern apartment of four bedrooms.<sup>447</sup> `Arafa preferred the religious title Hajj, which indicated that he had preformed the pilgrimage to Mecca, rather than the secular title of his social status "*Effendi*". Living in a big luxurious apartment as a bachelor attracted the envy of employees who had to live with up to 20 other people in one small bedroom.<sup>448</sup> While the average wage of blue-collar workers was about 1.8 EP a month, the salaries of members of the board ranged between 15EP and 90 EP a month.

Table 3.3: Salaries of the 14 members and the chairman of the board of the union in 1946.

Salary in EP	15-25	26-35	36-45	80-90
Members	8	2	3	2

Table 3.4: Positions of the 14 members and the chairman of the board of the union in 1946.

Position	manager	sub-manager	department chair	White-collar
Members	4	4	7	1

Table 3.5: Average wage for blue-collar worker who formed the vast majority of the workforce of the Company.

<sup>447</sup> Halim, *Hikayat `Abdu `Abd al-Rahamn*, 71.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 70- 72.

Position	Female worker	worker	Trained technician worker	<i>Usta</i>	Per-piece workers
Daily wage in <i>Millim</i>	52-72	56-104	80-275	220-400	100-156,7

Source: *al-Fajr al-Jadid*, April 17, 1946.

The large gap in income between the members of the board and the workers whom they represented suggests that this board may not have spoken for the interests of the workers. Hundreds of workers signed letters to the press claiming their condition: “became unbearable, the Company does not try to improve their conditions, the government in Cairo and the Labor Bureau in Tanta ignore the misery in which workers live”.<sup>449</sup>

In 1946, two thousand assistants of section chiefs, *musa`id*, went on strike asking for promotions and a well defined pay scale. A lack of organized leadership, divisions among strike leaders and even collaboration of some of them with the administration forestalled the movement.<sup>450</sup> What hurt the strikers the most was the lack of workers support due to the long-term hostility between the workers and supervisors, including *musa`ids*.<sup>451</sup> The lesson was well learned when workers launched the 1947 strike, the largest strike in the history of the Egyptian labor movement. Once WWII was over, the Company worked to update its machinery that had already been out of date when the Company brought it from Europe in 1927. The company had bought these used machines from European factories. Many of these machines were one hundred years old and bought as discarded machines.<sup>452</sup> Additionally, the machinery had suffered from the necessity of training workers, and then from the heavy workload during the war. While the Company was negotiating its plans with the government and European and American Companies to import the needed machines, it started to reduce its labor force. Older workers with higher pay and less energy were among the first groups to go. Workers lacked legal protections, and the

<sup>449</sup>“25 Alf `Amil fi al-Mahalla” [25 thousand workers in al-Mahalla,] *al-Wafd al-Misri*, June 12, 1946.

<sup>450</sup> Hamid, “26,000 min `Ummal Sharikat Misr bil-Mahalla,” *al-Jamahir*, June 2, 1947, 6-7.

<sup>451</sup> `Uthman, *al-Idrabat fi Misr zaman al-arba`inat*, 157.

<sup>452</sup> Al-Ghazzali, *al-haraka al-niqabiyyah 1899-1952*, 225.

Company intensified its policies towards workers who were suffering from health problems associated with the textile industry. Workers suffering from TB, respiratory diseases, or weak hearing were fired with no compensation.<sup>453</sup> Thousands of workers were dismissed between 1945 and 1947. All workers grew worried and feared being dismissed with no rights, not to mention the already harsh working conditions and poor wages. Hardship due to high inflation and high prices struck workers everywhere and there were a series of labor strikes across the country.<sup>454</sup> Diseases associated with poverty and malnutrition such as dysentery and hookworms were very common among workers. Dangerous diseases such as TB were widespread due to malnutrition, lack of hygiene and population density.

Table 3.6: Parasitic infections among workers in 1949.

Disease	Bilharzias	Hookworms	Ascaris Roundworms
Workers	9,707	504	15,556

Table 3.7: Health conditions of the entire workforce of the Company in 1949.

Disease	Inflicted workers	%
Parasites	16,748	77.8
Chest	2,557	12.1
TB	163	.77
Other internal	7,256	34.9
Surgery	9,257	44
Dermatological	3,301	15.7
Eyes	3,144	14.9
Ear and nose	2,165	10
Teeth	2,301	11.4

Source: Misr Company, A Report on Medical Activities, 1951.

Tables 3.6 and 3.7 show the bad conditions of workers' health according to a report issued by the Company in 1951. The report was based on a comprehensive survey of the entire workforce by the medical department at the Company between 1949 and 1950. According to

<sup>453</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court 1946-8, files 7694-7698.

<sup>454</sup> For a list of labor strikes in Egypt during the 1940s, see `Uthman, *al-Idrabat fi Misr Misr zaman al-arba`inat*.

these figures, each worker had three diseases on average.<sup>455</sup> It is noticeable that the rate of occurrence of TB was very low, only 163 cases, which constituted only 0.77% of the workforce. The Company took pride in that low figure and jumped to the conclusion that TB was not as big a problem as it was thought. <sup>456</sup> That conclusion is misleading because the survey was conducted after the Company had already fired thousands of workers between 1944 and 1947, in part due to deterioration of their health. Unofficial reports estimated that 90% of textile workers in al-Mahalla, both at the Company and the small factories, suffered from TB, and 9,600 patients were listed at the sole Respiratory Clinic available in 1946.<sup>457</sup> Although this must be an exaggerated estimate, TB cases were quite prevalent among workers. Workers and *Mahallawiyya* held the Company responsible for it.

Table 3.8: TB death and infection in al-Mahalla between 1926 and 1952.

year	death	cases	note
1926	21		
1929	35	28	
1930	12	11	
1931	5	13	
1932	5	10	
1933	3	4	
1934	15	19	
<sup>458</sup> 1936	13	26	9months
<sup>459</sup> 1937	17	4	months 6
1939	25	42	
1940	33	25	
1941	36	33	
1942	34	32	
1943	43	23	
1944	44	50	
1945	46	89	
1946	46	72	
1947	37	87	
1948	54		
1950	63	68	
1951		57	months 6
1952		37	months 6

<sup>455</sup> Sharikat Misr, *al-a`mal al-tibbiyyah*, 12.

<sup>456</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>457</sup> Mustafa Munib, "al-Mahalla al-Kubra madinatu al-`ummal" *al-Fajr al-Jadid*, March 27, 1946. *al-Jamahir*, September 28, 1947 and May 26, 1947.

<sup>458</sup> The Report on the second quarter of the year is missing.

<sup>459</sup> Reports on the third and fourth quarters of the year are missing.

Sources: annual and quarter annual vital statistics for the mentioned years.

The increase in the rates of TB deaths and infections in the town ultimately reflected the increase in the population of the town. Therefore, it is necessary to compare the ratio with other places in Egypt or the entire country. We also have to keep in mind that many of the workers who fell victim to TB left the town to their home villages and were never registered or counted in al-Mahalla's records. However it was logical for the people of the town, who would not be preoccupied with the ratios or statistics, to associate the increase frequency in seeing TB cases around them with the establishment of the Company. The fact that the Company established a clinic and a hospital for TB and respiratory illnesses were evidence of the widespread prevalence of the disease, particularly among workers. The company tried to avoid responsibility for the problem. It publicized the results of a medical survey. The claim went publicly so well that the Journal of the Egyptian Medical Association endorsed it and hailed the Company for taking good care of the health and sanitation of its workers.<sup>460</sup> The editor adopted the call to rethink the assumption that textile workers were more vulnerable to the TB infection than any other group.<sup>461</sup> That claim contradicted contemporary neutral studies that associated TB and other respiratory illnesses with cotton industries, and which argued that sniffing cotton flexes and dust, along with other factors, contributed greatly to TB.<sup>462</sup>

The number of workers with TB in the survey might be truthful. However, the survey itself was conducted after the Company weeded out workers with diseases, particularly TB aggressively after 1945. Workers who were fired because of their health condition did not have any sort of compensation even those who chose to sue the Company because labor laws at the time restricted the right of compensation to work accidents, not diseases associated with particular professions. At the Civic Court, workers were repeatedly told that TB, arthritis,

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<sup>460</sup>A. Halawani, "the Health Service of the Misr Weaving and Spinning Company at Mehalla El Kobra, Egypt," *Journal of the Egyptian Medical Association* 35, Issue 3 (1952).

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Hassan Sidqi, *al-Kutn al-Misri: Zira`atu wa tijaratahu wa sina`atahu* [The Egyptian cotton: growing, trading, and industrializing It] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahda al-Misriyyah, 1950), 365-368.

deterioration in hearing and sight were not included in the law as being worthy of compensation. Firing sick workers had been a written policy, which discouraged workers from seeking medical help at the Company's clinic. Concerned with their damaged image, the collaborating union publicized the number of workers whom the union had to help because they had been fired due to sickness. The union, which was totally dependent on the administration, did realize that it was actually disgracing the company by publicizing such statistics. Even after firing many sick workers between 1945 and 1947, TB was still disturbing among workers. In nine months between January and September 1947, the Company fired 126 workers because of sickness, 12 because of old age, and 70 because of disability. The union had to provide 930 Egyptian pound as financial help to 103 workers fell victim for TB and incurable diseases. Dr. Hussayn Kamil, who was specialist in respiratory diseases in al-Mahalla, received 158 workers with referral letters from the union.<sup>463</sup> Twenty workers with TB wrote collectively to the press in 1949 complaining that the Company did not fulfill its legal obligations toward them, did not provide them with help whilst they were under treatment in Faruq Public Hospital in al-Mahalla.<sup>464</sup> The management response revealed how little obligation laws required toward patients with regard to this fatal disease. The management said that the Company paid severance pay to those who had worked for it for three years and the union paid 20 piaster a day to each worker for 6 months and between 10 an 20 piaster to his family.<sup>465</sup> What the management was concerned about was getting rid of infected workers. Contrary to Bilharzias and other parasitic diseases, which were still common among workers, TB cases were obvious and the company fired the affected. Even among the 163 cases diagnosed during the survey, only 8 people were returned to work, while 134 workers were fired and 11 people quit.<sup>466</sup> However other respiratory diseases, such as asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia, all of which could result from sniffing cotton dust and working in poor ventilation, were common.

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<sup>463</sup>Isma'il `Ali, "Hall min Sabil?!" [Is there any Path?], *`Amil al-Mahalla*, December 13 1947, 3.

<sup>464</sup> "Ila maslahat al-`amal" [To the Labor Department], *al-Musawar*, March 25, 1949, 2.

<sup>465</sup> *al-Musawar*, April 8, 1949, 2 and "Shakwa la wajha lil haqqi fiha" [unrightfully complain,] *`Amil al-Mahalla*, April 1949, 9.

<sup>466</sup> Sharikat Misr, *al-a`mal al-tibbiyyah*, 75.

TB existed in al-Mahalla before the Company, particularly among weavers. Damp non-ventilated handloom factories were perfect environments in which for the disease could develop. The influx of Company workers into the town with their horrific working and living conditions further promoted the spread of the disease. Poor nutrition, high density, long working hour, non-ventilated shop floors and residency, in addition to sniffing cotton dust and flex for long hours everyday made workers the ideal prey. Also, many of those workers were not in the best health condition when they came from their villages with dysentery, malaria, and other diseases related to malnutrition. In his visit to al-Mahalla in 1932, the representative of the International Labor Office H.B. Butler reported the spread of the disease among handloom weavers and did not mention the company workers.<sup>467</sup> One must wonder if ignoring the horrific conditions of the Company workers and the TB among them had anything to do with the circumstances of the visit. While in al-Mahalla, Butler was accompanied and hosted by the Company board member Abdul Hayy Khalil. In Khalil's house Butler and his committee members enjoyed the local hospitality and food.<sup>468</sup>

A series of limited strikes in 1946 and early 1947 led to a huge explosion on September 2, 1947. In its quest to curb dissidence among workers due to its intensive layoffs, the Company fired 12 workers (*musa'id*) who refused to transfer to a different section, and posted a list of punishable acts. The list banned workers from wearing *galabiyya* or *qubqab* during work, bringing newspapers to work or praying. The already resentful workers exploded in a major strike shouting slogans against the Company. A Company police officer fired several shots, killing one of the workers. This angered the town's police who decided to withdraw from the scene. Meanwhile, the workers' fury became uncontrolled. Between the Company's police and the thousands of angry workers, a great deal of destruction took place, and army units had to come to the town to restore calm. Having more than 21,000 striking workers in one place shocked the country. Even the combined police forces from all the Delta governorates were not

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<sup>467</sup> Butler, Report on Labor Conditions in Egypt, 2.

<sup>468</sup> Isma'il `Ali, Hall min Sabil..?," *Amil al-Mahalla*, December 13 1947, 3.

able to control the situation. Parts of the Company were set on fire and its Labor Office was burned to the ground. Army forces supported with tanks came into the town to restore calm. A number of workers and people in the town were killed and mass arrests were launched. The factory was shut down for two weeks. When workers returned to work on September 17, they discovered that the Company did not have any intention of paying for days lost to the strike. The shock was huge because those workers had lived on credit and owed a lot to grocers, landlords, and neighbors. They went back on strike again the same day. The Company took the challenge head on, shut its doors and announced that there was no plan to reopen at any particular date. Many workers left al-Mahalla and went back to their home villages. The massive strike attracted heavy attention nationwide. The Wafd Party was out of power, which allowed its press to cover the strike and show sympathy towards the workers.<sup>469</sup> The people of al-Mahalla whose businesses had grown dependant on the workers along with the workers themselves pushed the government to pressure the company to reopen. The financial loss to the Company was large and it could not have continued its shut out or replaced its huge workforce. It reopened after one month. Despite the aggressive policy to purge activist workers, the call for strikes was heard again on February 1948.<sup>470</sup> The strike forced the company to take workers' demands seriously. While it continued reducing its work force, wages were increased, granting the workers' housing was accelerated, and a hospital for respiratory diseases was established.

Until the Company established its medical department in 1949, thousands of workers were not receiving any satisfactory medical services. In the early years of the Company, it did not provide any medical help to workers. In 1935, it established a modest clinic for emergencies and work injuries and arranged with some doctors to provide workers with medication and perform necessary operations. In his own evaluation of these services, the managing director of the Company reported "it was too limited to meet the large number of patients, did not lead to a reduction in the number of patient visits, medication costs, medications, nor absences among

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<sup>469</sup> `Uthman, *al-Idrabat fi Misr zaman al-arba`inat*, 115.

<sup>470</sup> The 22-year old Abd al-Qadir Isma`il al-Qadi and the 15-year old Sha`ban Khelifa Sallam were convicted for urging workers to go on strike on February 14, 1948. Tanta Appeal Court 1948/ 7560/ 2613.



workers. It did not stop complaints of limited time to examine sick workers.”<sup>471</sup> In late 1940s, the Company expanded its medical services through several facilities. It established a hospital with a large section for respiratory diseases, added a new floor to the town’s hospital and a section to the public hospital for infectious diseases. The Company killed several birds with one stone. The cost of these establishments was tax deductible and reduced the Company’s expenditures on outside physicians. The new efficient system reduced days of absence for medical reasons from 10.25 days of absence in every 1,000 workdays to only 5.6 days of absence in every 1,000 workdays. This was a result of improvement in workers’ health on one hand and controlling those who used medical visitation as a way to evade work on another. Eventually these medical services were used as a central piece in the Company’s propaganda campaign to fix the damage that was caused by the 1947 strike, through which more attention was given to workers’ suffering and horrific living and working conditions. The campaign succeeded to the extent that the king came to al-Mahalla to inaugurate these establishments, which attracted intensive coverage in the Cairo press. Sympathy with workers and the population of the town was also translated in building one more hospital by Mibarrat Muhammad `Ali, a charitable organization sponsored by Royal princesses. The sympathy of the people of the town with the striking workers was the moment that marked the incorporation of workers into the community of al-Mahalla in what had been a long journey of communal identity formation. That journey is treated in the following chapter.

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<sup>471</sup> Sharikat Misr, *al-a`mal al-tibbiyyah*, 5-6.

## Chapter 4

### Fluid Identities: Localism, Nationalism, and Class

Brought from rural areas across the country into al-Mahalla al-Kubra, thousands of workers of the Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving faced the new challenges of urban industrial life. They were obligated, sometimes under the sticks of guards and bosses, to appear at the shop floor on time and, without any systematic training, to operate machinery for 12 hours a day. They spent the other 12 hours facing the hostile population of al-Mahalla and figuring out how to co-exist with up to 20 roommates in their tiny living quarters. Soon after the town received these peasant-workers, the urban population of al-Mahalla began to call themselves *Mahallawiyya*, or people of Mahalla, and to call the new workers of the company *Shirkawiyya*, or the company people. Inflation, the high prices of food and housing, and cultural differences fueled a mutual hostility which often turned violent.

*Mahallawiyya* who were either involved in the handloom weaving industry or were employed as workers at the company formed bands to harass the newcomers. *Mahallawiyya* against *Shirkawiyya* was not the only communal division that generated confrontations. The Company workers were divided among themselves based on their geographical origins, their positions inside the factory, and their residential neighborhoods. Workers from the same villages clustered in shared rooms in the slums of al-Mahalla seeking familiarity in an alien environment, lower rents, and more importantly for needed security during their trips between work and home. Very often these clusters turned into *'usba*, violently competing and fighting gangs. The leaders of the gangs, *Fitiwwat*, held the group together by threats and the use of physical violence. This

violence was employed not only against competing groups, but even against their co-villagers who refused to join them. *Fitiwwat* as an urban phenomenon had a long history in Egyptian towns including al-Mahalla. Each traditional neighborhood had its own *Fitiwwa*, who was a self-proclaimed and/or popularly accepted protector of the neighborhood.

This chapter traces the communal division between the people of al-Mahalla and workers and among workers themselves. It discusses the emergence and roles played by fighting bands of workers, *`usba*, and their leaders, *Fitiwwat*. It examines how such groups helped workers to adapt to urban industrial life while distracting them from “working class solidarity.” It discusses how and why these different groups fought against each other and sometimes cooperated with one another against the company during strikes. More importantly, the chapter looks at how workers defined themselves vis-à-vis the Company, the *Mahallawiyya*, and even each other. It discusses how the people of al-Mahalla and the Egyptian *effendiyya* looked at the striking workers and the “nationalist company”.

The broad research question addressed here is to what extent modern industrialization changed local urban life and people’s communal identities into a “modern class identity” and to what extent modern social types of organization replaced communal networks. This chapter argues that both horizontal class and vertical communal relations co-existed and sometimes competed. In that fluidity, individuals and groups acted and interacted depending on socio-economic status, conjuncture, and a shared, often contested discourse. For instance, workers who were normally divided into hostile groups based on regional origins sometimes acted in class solidarity against the administration. Thus, it is not surprising to find that although the poor *Mahallawiyya*

were hostile to the poor *Shirkawiyya* on a social and cultural level, they nonetheless supported the latter's strikes.

Both structuralist approaches, which treat class as an economically-based formation, and post-modernist approaches, which emphasize the ideological or discursive basis of class solidarity,<sup>472</sup> take class formation for granted. The difference between them is the relative importance discourse and class awareness play in making a particular group act for their collective interest. It echoes how the Egyptian labor movement historians and activists approached the history of industrial workers. They typically single out workers who did not embrace their "collective class interest" as either traitors or lacking awareness. In this scholarship, al-Mahalla's workers have usually been unfairly categorized as "unconscious and backward" workers whose peasant origins handicapped them in developing class awareness.<sup>473</sup> The focus of this Egyptian historiography and also western scholarship on workers of the Middle East was political activism and major labor movements, such as strikes and unionism.<sup>474</sup> By focusing on workers at their workplace and the political discourse, current scholarship does not sufficiently take into account the broader social context of the workers, thus isolating them from the larger community and underemphasizing the informal social interactions in their daily lives, both inside and outside the factory.

By examining workers' interactions in their daily activities in both the factory and residences, in both their private and public life, this chapter shows how workers looked at themselves as individuals, as social and professional groups, and as part of interconnected communities. It shows that both primordial communal and modern class identity co-

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<sup>472</sup>The best example is Lockman, *Workers and working classes in the Middle East*.

<sup>473</sup>The best example of this attitude toward al-Mahalla workers is `Uthman, *Mudhakkarat wa-watha`iq and Kifah `Ummal al-Nasij*.

<sup>474</sup>For a good critique of the limitation of working class historiography, see Assef Bayat, "Historiography, Class, and Iranian Worker," in Lockman, *Workers and working classes in the Middle East*, 165-210.

existed, and sometimes competed. How a given situation proceeded and developed made a particular communal or class identity more dominant than others. I argue that social conjuncture or the way a particular social situation developed was decisive in which aspect of identity would prevail at any given moment.<sup>475</sup> Company workers, or *Mahallawiyya*, would associate themselves in a particular moment with their religious, geographical, professional group and in the following moment would choose to associate with the conflicting group based on the social circumstances and conjuncture. Joining a modern industrial factory never made workers automatically feel they were glued together as a social class with a well defined identity and set of interests. Instead of looking at primordial communal commitments as “backwardness” that blocked the way to the modern class solidarity, I argue that “class” added more layers or dimensions to several pre-existing identities. This “new layer” co-existed and competed with the pre-existing ones. The pre-existing communal identities were as important as class for workers in their transformation from peasantry to “modern” industrial urban life. The experience of al-Mahalla shows how old social institutions interacted with new modern organizational forms in the process of peasants transforming into “workers”.

### **The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Boom and Its Aftermath**

Until the company was established in 1927, the people of the town traced their origins to *Mahallawi* ancestors. Residents of the town were used to the religious diversity in both of the two core centers of the town. Christians and Muslims co-existed in the southern center, Sandifa, where churches and mosques were side by side. Since the medieval period Sandifa has been a safe haven for Egyptian Copts who were escaping

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<sup>475</sup>In his important work on the Iranian Revolution, Zubaida argues that political conjuncture was decisive in bringing groups from different socio-economic position to one political stand against the Shah in the moment of the Revolution. Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People, and the State: essays on political ideas and movements in the Middle East* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 1993).

persecution from Muslim rulers or leaders of the Coptic community elsewhere.<sup>476</sup> Meanwhile, the northern center, Mahallat Sharqiyun, which became Suq al-Laban in modern times, was predominantly Muslim with a small Jewish community concentrated around the sole synagogue in the town.<sup>477</sup> Although the Jewish community was small, it was one of the oldest communities in the town. Like most of the town's population in the medieval period, Jews of al-Mahalla participated actively in the silk weaving industry.<sup>478</sup> Townspeople from all religions participated in festivals around shrines of saints from the three religions, *Mawalid*, including the annual Jewish pilgrimage to that Synagogue, which they considered just another saintly festival, *Mawlid*.<sup>479</sup>

Since the medieval period, al-Mahalla has been known as an urban center in the Delta. Its importance in the handloom weaving industry increased in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century because many masters of the craft immigrated into the town from the nearby weaving centers of Fuwwa, Abyar and Damietta.<sup>480</sup> With such population diversity, occupation played a basic role in creating the distinction between the majority who were involved in industry and commerce and those who worked in agriculture. Most townspeople were involved in the textile business as craftsmen, owners of handlooms, or were engaged in trade and merchandising of textiles, along with other industries and commerce. However, some city dwellers did work in agriculture. In most cases, their

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<sup>476</sup> Sawirus ibn al-Muqaffa', Bishop of el-Ashmunein, fl. 955-987, *Tarikh batarikat al-Kanisah al-Misriyyah* (Cairo: *Jam`iyat al-Athar al-Qibtiyyah*, 1943).

<sup>477</sup> The 1935 map of the town shows that there was a Jewish cemetery adjacent to the synagogue. Through the last two decades, the synagogue turned into ruins.

<sup>478</sup> S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean society: the Jewish communities of the Arab world as portrayed in the documents of the Cairo Geniza*, Volume VI (University of California Press, 1967-1993), 84, 88.

<sup>479</sup> Oral history collected by the researchers from several of contemporary townspeople. Eyewitnesses assure that Muslim and Christians of the town participated in different types of entertainment outside the Synagogue similar to those practiced during festivals around Muslim and Christian shrines, while Egyptian Jews from all over the country performed their rituals inside the Synagogue. A Jewish scholar considered that "Jewish *Mawlid*" a reflection of the Muslim influence on Jews of al-Mahalla. Jacob M. Landau, *Jews in Nineteenth-century Egypt* (New York, New York University Press, 1969), 45.

<sup>480</sup> Islma`il "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 15.

farming land was on the peripheries of the town and their homes were inside the residential neighborhoods at the closest point to their land. Very often farmers participated actively in the urban economy through the sale of their products such as vegetables, fruits, eggs, milk, and butter. In addition to farming, they practiced simple industries or crafts such as making cheese, spinning wool and manufacturing and maintaining agricultural tools. There were also less basic differences between craftsmen and farmers in such things as clothing and lifestyle. For example, small craftsmen families often shared houses with other families and very often part of these residences were occupied by a small handloom factory or a dyer. Farmers lived in extended families along with their cattle. A craftsman working in the industry considered himself to be of higher status than the peasant who worked on the land.<sup>481</sup> However, there were no barriers in their extensive daily interaction or differences of belonging to the same local community of al-Mahalla. Farmers shared with townsfolk in daily urban activities and habits such as spending leisure time at coffee shops, *booza* taverns, and the prostitution quarter. Some of them sent their children to learn urban crafts and professions, particularly handloom weaving. Intermarriage between farmers and craftsmen was not unusual.

The integration of Egypt into the global economy more or less as a massive cotton plantation in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century opened al-Mahalla to the outside world. Two small and new social groups emerged in the town, *Sa`ayda*, southern Egyptians, and *Khawagat*, or Westerners. Despite the huge socio-economic differences between both transplanted groups, cotton was the cause that drove them to al-Mahalla. Westerners came to invest in and manage cotton ginning factories and financial institutions that mostly catered to cotton growers and merchants. While many owners of these factories

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<sup>481</sup> el-Messiri, "Class and Community", 47.

and banks resided in Cairo and Alexandria, their foreign managers and skilled workers had to actually live in al-Mahalla along with the few foreigners who occupied high administrative positions in the government. The foreign community also included a few physicians, dentists, pharmacists, grocers, waiters, and owners of liquor stores and pubs. Foreigners did not penetrate the core traditional urban centers to the west of the al-Mallah Canal. Most of them worked and lived in the modern commercial areas by the banks of the canal and in al-Hanafi, and al-‘Abbasi streets. The better off foreigners lived in the elite Muhib Street along with the Egyptian notables. The people of al-Mahalla showed a great deal of respect to foreigners and thought they were more civilized and sophisticated.<sup>482</sup>

The other small social group who immigrated to the town with the cotton boom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was southern Egyptian, *Sa`ayda*. Dozens of them came to the town to work in ginning factories that operated seasonally. After the annual ginning season, they either went back to their home villages or stayed in al-Mahalla to work as porters and domestic servants. Limited in number and living in a slum on the outskirts of an uninhabited area to the southeast of the city close to the factories made them almost invisible to the townspeople. However, they were collectively singled out by calling their slum “Izbat al-Sa`ayda”, or the Hamlet of the Southerners.

Unlike Westerners and *Sa`ayda* who started to come to al-Mahalla in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries individually or in a few dozens to pursue their lives with limited social interaction with the vast majority of people of al-Mahalla, the Company workers came massively to the town throughout 1930s and 1940s. They came in hundreds and even in thousands. Their number constantly increased from 2,000 in 1930 to 27,000 in 1945. More people immigrated into al-Mahalla seeking opportunity in the booming town.

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<sup>482</sup>Ibid., 47.



Those newcomers were visible in every inch of the town and interacted with people from all classes. The population of the town increased from 44,000 people on the eve of the establishment of the Company in 1927 to more 115,000 in 1947.

### **The Community and the Outsiders**

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, divisions between the indigenous people of al-Mahalla and the peasants who came to the town to work at the company marked the daily lives of the inhabitants of the town. With the influx of large numbers of workers alien to the town's social life, the people of the town defined their communal identities against and in the face of the newcomers. The indigenous population called themselves *Mahallawiyya*, people of al-Mahalla, and called the new workers *Shirkawiyya*, people of the Company. There was no ethnic difference between *Mahallawiyya* and workers. Both of them were Egyptians and mostly Muslims, although some of them were Copts. All of them spoke Egyptian Arabic, although there were slight differences in pronunciation and intonation that distinguish people coming from urban and rural areas and from Lower and Upper Egypt. However, both groups amplified their socio-cultural differences to justify their mutual hostility. The Company and its workers were seen as a threat and provided the people of the town with a needed "other" against which communal solidarity was defined. The people of al-Mahalla looked at themselves as "civilized urbanites", and looked down on the newcomers as "crude peasants". Horrific life conditions, in which up to 20 workers shared a room with no bathroom and lived mostly on dried bread and pickled cheese enhanced the stigma upon workers.<sup>483</sup> The people of al-Mahalla did not like to be associated with, or mingle with, workers, and refused to let them use the local cemetery to bury their deceased relatives.<sup>484</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 355-382.

<sup>484</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla 2*, 12.

On the other hand, workers of the Company felt morally superior over the people of al-Mahalla and did not lack reasons to be hostile to them. For them, the townsmen violated the tradition of hospitality, and urban women did not strictly follow what they considered the social norm.<sup>485</sup> Workers from rural origins were not comfortable with the ease with which the women of al-Mahalla interacted with strange men as tenants, neighbors, and customers. Although female farmers in the Egyptian countryside never followed strict segregation and did work in fields, their social interaction with males outside the family was more limited and they had to dress very modestly including head covering and a long loose robe. In al-Mahalla many women, particularly widows and divorcees, invested in housing geared toward Company workers and often actually lived in the same house with them.<sup>486</sup> Those houses were very crowded and lacked any privacy. To add more complications, nightshift workers were left alone with landladies and other female members of the household during the daytime while the men left to work. Workers looked at those women as “loose”, while male *Mahallawiyya* neighbors tried to force workers to leave by employing violence against them.<sup>487</sup> The company worker Fikri al-Khuli, who came to al-Mahalla and joined the company when he was eleven years old in 1927, speculated that the men of al-Mahalla were attacking workers out of jealousy regarding their women.<sup>488</sup> His speculation seemed to come from his experience because he himself admitted romantic affairs with his landlady and her teenage daughter. His description of the landlady of one of his co-workers as a prostitute in the Prostitution Quarter reflects how those peasant-workers looked at urban women

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<sup>485</sup> For the perception of women of al-Mahalla among workers, see al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v 3.

<sup>486</sup> Hanan Hammad, “Landladies and Industrial Transformation in Modern Egypt” (a paper presented at the annual meeting for the Middle East Studies Association, Washington, DC, November 22- 25, 2008).

<sup>487</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2350.

<sup>488</sup> al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 144.

who were not veiled.<sup>489</sup> Another source of the grudge workers had towards the people of al-Mahalla was the fact that they felt abused by their *Mahallawiyya* trainers. The company recruited local handloom weavers to train their new workers. Those trainers felt free to mistreat workers and to physically and verbally abuse them. The Company, which was depicted in the nationalist press as a “modern national mill” lacked clear guidelines for work relations or systematic informed training. That freed the bosses’ hands to borrow from and employ local tradition and culture that allowed craftsmen to abuse apprentices. These practices intensified the hatred the workers felt towards the people of al-Mahalla.

Economic hardship faced by both groups generated mutual hostility. The people of al-Mahalla accused workers of disturbing the peace and calmness of their town, especially some of those newcomers who could not afford housing and had to sleep by the canal banks, railway road, streets and alleys.<sup>490</sup> Their influx drove up the costs of housing and food. Living expenses were so difficult that a government worker who was transferred from the nearby town Tanta to al-Mahalla in 1938 considered his transfer a punishment because “al-Mahalla is very crowded by workers and the living cost was very expensive”.<sup>491</sup> On the eve of workers’ influx, the town had already been experiencing a housing shortage and people were complaining of excessively high housing rent.<sup>492</sup> The people of the town sometimes had to pay a deposit for housing before construction of the houses started.<sup>493</sup> Accommodating thousands of newcomers made the housing problem more acute. The people of the town held workers responsible for the severity of the

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid, 160-161.

<sup>490</sup> Al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-Yasar*, 284.

<sup>491</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfaz 411 “Iltimasat muwazafin fardi, 1927- 1940” [Petitions from individual employed, 1927- 1940].

<sup>492</sup> `Abdin, Mahfazah 473 “Iltimasat ahali fardi, 1921- 1952” [Petitions from individual citizens, 1921- 1952].

<sup>493</sup> Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1926, case 3113.

problem. It worsened when home owners started to prefer renting their property to workers than to the people of al-Mahalla due to the higher and more guaranteed profit. Workers did not mind sharing one room with up to 20 people, which gave house owners a chance to increase rent. Workers were more committed to work, got paid regularly and consequently paid their rent on time. Meanwhile, most people of al-Mahalla were journeymen and their ability to pay rent on time was not guaranteed. On the other side, workers accused Mahallawiyya food vendors and landlords of taking advantage of them and over charging them.

The people of al-Mahalla collectively harassed workers verbally everywhere using derogatory terms such as “*fallahin*”, peasants, and “*gharraba*”, strangers or aliens. The people of al-Mahalla scorned workers bitterly whenever the latter tried to imitate the former in such behavior as eating in restaurants or wearing silk clothes with Mahallawi design.<sup>494</sup> Most of the people of al-Mahalla wore, like peasant-workers, native Egyptian clothes, which was a long robe called *galabiyya*. However, a slight difference in collars distinguished city dwellers from peasants. Mahalla’s *galabiyya* had a collar similar to the western shirt, while the peasantry *galabiyya*, known as *Fallahi*, was cut around the neck with a long opening down the chest. Provocative comments by the people of al-Mahalla to workers, even when they did not develop into a confrontation, created an environment where workers realized they were not welcome. Until the early 1950s, some workers avoided going to the core residential neighborhoods where the people of al-Mahalla were concentrated.<sup>495</sup> For those workers all their daily life was practiced in the short distance between their slums and the Company to the east of the al-Mallah Canal. That separation made an American researcher in 1953 think that the Canal was a rigid border between

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<sup>494</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihala*, v.2, 60-61, 69-71.

<sup>495</sup> Halim, *Hikayat `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman*, 31.

both communities.<sup>496</sup> Although this observation lacks accuracy, and is even incorrect, it reveals how many workers informed that scholar about their anxiety and fear of going to the *Mahallawiyya* neighborhoods.

The hostility between *Mahallawiyya* and workers in the first decades after the company's establishment developed into violent confrontations. Workers and men and women of al-Mahalla of all ages and professions participated in these confrontations, which took place on both individual and collective levels.<sup>497</sup> Violence between the groups became commonplace in neighborhoods, streets and in the company itself. Upon encountering workers in the streets, the people of al-Mahalla, including women and children, called them *gharraba*, aliens, and *fallahin*, peasants, in derogatory fashion.<sup>498</sup> Fikri al-Khuli reported that women screamed at workers calling them "you who caused salted cheese to be too expensive."<sup>499</sup> A man intentionally stepped on his feet during a wedding procession, *Zaffa* after another cussed all *Shirkawiyya*.<sup>500</sup> Frequently, individual *Mahallawiyya* took advantage of workers while bathing in the canal and stole their clothes and belongings. If the bathing worker was fast enough to leave the water and catch up with those took his clothes, he might be beaten up or stabbed.

Hoping to scare workers enough to leave the town, the people of al-Mahalla formed groups or bands to systematically attack workers inside and outside the Company. Groups of *Mahallawiyya* attacked workers individually and beat them up until the victim vowed to leave the town. Such organized attacks were launched throughout the town and

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<sup>496</sup>W. M. Carson, "The Social History of an Egyptian Factory," in *Readings in Arab Middle Eastern societies and cultures*, ed., Abdulla M. Lutfiyya and Charles W. Churchill ed., (Mouton: The Hague, 1970), 373.

<sup>497</sup>Among enormous court cases see: Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 3154, Misdemeanor 1936/ 6767/ 1518, Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/595 and 1938/ 6767/1019 and 1025, Misdemeanor 1936/ 6767/1683, Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/1913.

<sup>498</sup>Misdemeanor 19 37/ 6770/ 572.

<sup>499</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 29.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

inside the company as well. The goal was never achieved because the company was recruiting more workers for its rapidly expanding factories. Meanwhile, workers employed different tactics for self defense. Workers tended to move in groups rather than individually. Clustering in particular neighborhoods and sharing a room among those who came from the same village made workers' trips between work and homes safer. They even formed counter "gangs" to face the *Mahallawiyya* aggression. Sometimes workers took the initiative and launched attacks. They not only imitated the *Mahallawiyya* tactics in grouping, they also followed long-lived urban traditions of having a *Fitiwwa*, a leader.

### ***Fitiwwat: Protecting the Community and Challenging the State***

*Fitiwwat*, singular *Fitiwwa*, a term which originally meant the protector of the neighborhood, was an inherited tradition from the pre-modern period in al-Mahalla and other Egyptian cities and towns. The *Fitiwwa* of the neighborhood was a physically strong and morally respected man who was capable of leading men of the community, particularly youths and young men known as *Sabawat* and *Mashadid*, to protect its weak residents and protect the entire community against any aggression that might be launched by residents of other neighborhoods. The *Fitiwwa* represented his neighborhood in peace negotiations with other neighborhoods. If negotiations were not successful, violent encounters might be inevitable. Violence even might break out unexpectedly. Wedding parades in urban tradition in al-Mahalla and other Egyptian towns would move from one neighborhood to another under the protection of the *Fitiwwa* of the groom's neighborhood and his following youth, *Sabawat* and *Mashadid*. The *Fitiwwa* of each neighborhood had to come out and greet the parade and its *Fitiwwa*. Part of the greeting was a performance of stick-fighting, *tahtib*, which could quickly turn into a real fight. Even inside the same neighborhood violence marked relations between competing

*Fitiwwat*, particularly between the rising and the falling *Fitiwwa*. This was the case in Suq al-Laban neighborhood when the power of the *Fitiwwat* of al-Bulqini family was expanding at the expense of *Fitiwwat* of the al-Ahwal family. Al-Bulqini, which proved successful against al-Ahwal, got into a prolonged violent competition against *Fitiwwat* from the al-Rashidi family. The competition caused two homicides in different incidents.<sup>501</sup> The first victim fell among the al-Bulqini family in a large scale confrontation between both families and their followers in 1940. A few men were convicted, while others were released. To assure their powerful status and accomplish revenge, one of the al-Bulqini killed al-Rashidi after the latter was released from jail.<sup>502</sup>

The rising modern state and parliamentary politics played contradictory roles concerning *Fitiwwat* as historical urban phenomena. The modern state looked suspiciously at *Fitiwwat* as a potential source of violence and as competitors with the state's power. As protectors of the community, *Fitiwwat* frequently put themselves between communities and the state. The modern state sought direct relations with its citizenry and claimed more power over the society and its (re)structuring. It's no surprise that it considered itself exclusively responsible for policing the population. The experience of al-Mahalla shows how aggressive the state became in undermining *Fitiwwat*. It outlawed many of their practices and punished them harshly for what had been previously acceptable action to "protect" inhabitants of their communities.

On the other hand, parliamentary politics in modern Egypt after the 1923 constitution emphasized the importance of the *Fitiwwat* as mediators between the political elite and the mass of voters. The rich elite who moved to new elite residential and modern commercial neighborhoods needed open channels with the old

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<sup>501</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1940/7444/ 386 and 1942/7450/1843.

<sup>502</sup>Ibid.

neighborhoods where the majority of voters lived. *Fitiwwat* were the natural leadership who were able to mobilize voters in their neighborhoods behind candidates. They were able to keep channels open between voters and candidates by organizing and protecting electoral conferences and parades where parliamentary candidates delivered their messages to potential voters. More importantly, *Fitiwwat* were vital in getting voters to the polling booths and protecting ballot boxes. In this respect, the *Fitiwwat* in Egypt were the equivalent of *Qabaday* in Syria. In the experience of al-Mahalla *Fitiwwat* from the al-Bulqini family frequently led demonstrations in support of candidates from the notable al-Shishini family.<sup>503</sup> With the cotton boom, the landlord Shishini family moved from Suq al-Laban to the new rich neighborhood of Muhib Street. The family was associated with the Nationalist Party, then with the Wafd Party. Their candidates for parliament since the 1923 election were looked at as representatives of the community and the national cause.<sup>504</sup>

The two decades after the establishment of the Company were an exceptionally important time for al-Mahalla's *Fitiwwat*. The communal division between the people of al-Mahalla and workers coincided with the emergence of modern parliamentary politics and the state's anxiety over *Fitiwwat*. It added conflicting sources of strength to their role. *Mahallawiyya Fitiwwat* claimed their inherited responsibility to protect their communities against workers and their Company. For example, the 48-year old *Fitiwwa* Ahmad Shalabi al-Bulqini led a large group of townspeople from all professions and ages in an attack against workers, which caused injuries among many of them in 1936.<sup>505</sup> Among those who participated in that attack were weavers, dyers and a coffee shop

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<sup>503</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/1005.

<sup>504</sup> Nur al-Din, *al-Hayatu al-Wataniyya*, 38-57.

<sup>505</sup> Misdemeanor 1936/ 6767/ 1518.



tender. Al-Bulqini and many of his family were cotton brokers, *Simsars*, who had historical ties with the handloom textile community.

Another attack which shows how townspeople organized themselves behind their *Fitiwwat* against workers took place on December 16, 1937. Workers were on their way to their nearby home village of Bishbish. The people of al-Mahalla were after them until the opportunity to launch an attack came. The bus broke down and the driver asked all passengers to get off until he changed the tire. A bloody confrontation caused at least two workers to be injured, consequently two of the attackers were jailed for one month and fined with 2 EP.<sup>506</sup> *Mahallawiyya* attackers were led by Ahmad and Mahmud al-Ahwal. Both of them were 30 year old handloom weavers and well known *Fitiwwat* in the northern urban core of Suq al-Laban. They lived in al-Tuba Street, in the heart of the area known as “*Suq al-Nawwalin*”, the market of the handloom weavers. Both attacks under al-Bulqini and al-Ahwal emphasize communal solidarity based not only on locality, but also on profession.

### **The Class and/or the Community**

Localism interplayed with professionalism to intensify violence between the people of the town and workers. Handloom weavers, dyers, and spinners were among the most enthusiastic individuals to harass Company workers. Solidarity based on a professional and local community blocked handloom workers from realizing that they occupied similar positions to workers in the company. Both were wage earners and neither owned production tools. Handloom workers emphasized their socio-cultural superiority over workers from peasant origins. They saw them as poor backward outsiders who do not have control over their work schedule and worked 12 hour shifts day and night. They saw themselves in a higher position because they were in their own

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<sup>506</sup> Misdemeanor1938/ 6775/290.

town pursuing the familiar urban life. Consequently, they failed to see those workers as colleagues in the same profession and to realize that the workers actually dealt with more advanced machinery. In sum, handloom workers did not differ from their masters and factory owners in looking suspiciously at the company and perceiving workers as intruding competitors, as much as outsiders. Many attacks reflected the hatred of the people of the town, particularly the handloom community, against both workers and the Company.

Incidents where hatred against the Company and workers was combined were frequent. Among them an attack took place in June 1946. The people of a village, Mahallat Abu Ali al-Qantara, under the leadership of their mayor and uniformed guards employed violence to prevent workers coming from outside the town from reaching the company.<sup>507</sup> The attack caused two deaths and several injuries among workers. The level of violence and frequency of such attacks made workers concerned about the possibility of losing their jobs in the Company, which was their only source of income.<sup>508</sup> Handloom weaving had been a main craft and source of income for inhabitants of Mahallat Abu `Ali, which was a small village that was a normal extension of al-Mahalla. During and shortly after WWII, handloom weavers faced a great deal of trouble in getting their needed yarn. From a strong position, the Misr Company in al-Mahalla, which was the biggest producer of yarn at that time, took over the government position in distributing yarn among handloom weavers at a fixed price. That gave the Company's administration a choice of who got its yarn and at what quantity and who had to buy it on the black market at skyrocketing prices. This might explain why the mayor and his uniformed guards participated in attacking company workers and preventing them from reaching

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<sup>507</sup> "Yadribun al-`ummal" [They hit workers], *al-Wafd al-Misri* June 17, 1946, 3.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

their work place. The target might have been both of the Company and its “alien” workers.

Hatred for both of the Company and its workers together was obvious when townsmen used dangerous materials in their attack against workers on the premises of the company. It was known that there were cotton, yarn, chemicals and other materials that caught fire easily and rapidly were everywhere in the Company. For example, a fight between Mahallawiyya and Shirkawiyya in 1945 started outside the Company and was extended inside. Once workers got into the Company, Mahallawiyya threw fireworks across the fence causing serious burns to one worker.<sup>509</sup> Using fire indicates the willingness to hurt the Company and its workers and that hatred was not only against workers, but the Company itself.

Handloom weavers of al-Mahalla had a history of professional and communal solidarity that was translated into looking suspiciously on modern machinery coming from outside the community. When the Weaving School was opened in 1914 in an attempt to insert modern training into the profession, it had a hard time recruiting students. The local community feared that the school would compete against their production and stopped their children from joining. It took more than a decade until the school was accepted and the school had to pay a lucrative stipend to its students in return for their production.<sup>510</sup> It is not a surprise that handloom weavers feared the competition from the Company. With the spread of unionism after WWI to replace the guild system that was abolished in Egypt in 1896 the textile community in al-Mahalla reorganized themselves and established a trade union named “The Trade Union of al-Mahalla

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<sup>509</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/7794/3154.

<sup>510</sup> “Madrasat al-Nasij fi al-Mahalla al-Kubra” [The Weaving School in al-Mahalla al-Kubra], *al-Nissr*, March 30, 1930.

Workers” in 1919/1920.<sup>511</sup> It was one of 6 provincial unions established that year and one of 42 formed in Egypt that year. Despite its name as a workers’ union, it seemed to be a reorganization of the guild, *Ta’ifa*, under a nationalist banner. The head of the union was Mustafa ‘Abdul Nabi, one of the masters of the craft and an owner of a large handloom factory.<sup>512</sup> It was strongly connected with the Nationalist Party’s Handcraft Union. The party’s activist and lawyer Ahmad Lutfi was present at the union’s inauguration.<sup>513</sup> What brought the nationalist lawyer, the factory owner and his workers together in what was thought to be a working class organization was communal solidarity, not class unity.

Very often communal solidarity surpassed the direct financial interests of individual handloom weavers. During WWII, when yarn became a very expensive commodity and a hot target for theft, the community cooperated to curb the threat. Instead of breaking deals with thieves to buy the stolen yarn at cheap prices, weavers handed thieves to the police and returned the yarn to the victim.<sup>514</sup> Handloom weavers also did not hesitate to interfere in favor of one of their own if he was involved in an argument with somebody from a different profession. For example, a large group of them attacked a lottery vendor with clubs and seriously injured him because the vendor had an argument with one of the weaver the day before.<sup>515</sup>

Choosing communal solidarity over class solidarity was even more striking among the people of al-Mahalla who joined the workforce of the Company. They

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<sup>511</sup> Amin ‘Izz al-Din, *Tarikh al-Tabaqa al-‘Amila al-Misriya 1919- 1929: Min al-Thawra al-Wataniyya Ila al-Azma al-Iqtisadiyya* [On the History of the Egyptian Working Class 1919-1929: from the National Revolution until the Economic Crisis] (Cairo: Dar al-Sha‘b, 1970), 103.

<sup>512</sup>Mustafa ‘Abd al-Nabi held a degree from al-Azhar academy, but he preferred to continue his family tradition in textile industry. He inherited a decent size handloom factory, which he succeeded in expanding it. With the transition to the mechanized textile, he established a new mechanized factory, but kept his handloom for the sake of his handloom weavers. However, whenever an old weaver died, he was never replaced and his handloom was removed, which was a compromise between communal commitment and economic interest. El-Messiri, “Class and Community”, 370- 371.

<sup>513</sup> ‘Izz al-Din, *Tarikh*, 103.

<sup>514</sup>Among many examples see Misdemeanor 1940/ 861/1554 and Misdemeanor 1944/6918/ 1135.

<sup>515</sup>Misdemeanor 1944/6917/757.

harassed their colleagues as much as the people of the town did. Harassing their colleagues who came from peasant origins was a way for *Mahallawiyya* workers and foremen to disassociate themselves from these “crude aliens” and to assure their urban and professional superiority. Working in the same place actually gave them the chance to launch more aggressive attacks like pushing workers in the corner of empty or dark shop floors. In 1938, a group of *Mahallawiyya* Company workers brought a whip and planned an attack on their peasant colleagues. Once the light of the shop floor was turned off, they started their attack while workers were leaving the floor.<sup>516</sup> In another fight on 7 November 1944 *Mahallawiyya* workers used a knife in their attack causing serious injuries to their colleagues.<sup>517</sup>

It was not unusual for workers from al-Mahalla to target workers from particular villages depending on the development of a particular situation between a *Mahallawiyya* worker and his colleagues of other villages. After a series of fights between workers from al-Mahalla and the two villages of Bulqina and Saft Turab, workers from both sides arrived at the company on 7 March 1945 ready for a big confrontation. They were armed with sticks, iron pipes, and knives. The fight started by the doors of the Company while its guards were around and witnessed. Several injuries took place in both sides.<sup>518</sup> Competition at work between al-Mahalla workers and workers from the nearby town of Samanud led to a series of confrontations throughout 1937 and 1938. After each fight, the defeated side sought for a new round of revenge. Following a big battle between both sides just before the `Eid holiday, *Mahallawiyya* waited for another round. On 10

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<sup>516</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/66.

<sup>517</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/799/1-799.

<sup>518</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1114.

December 1937, just after returning from the `Eid break, *Mahallawiyya* waited in ambush on the Mahalla-Samanud road. They caused serious injuries among a Samanud worker.<sup>519</sup>

*Mahallawiyya* workers were committed to their communal solidarity with their townsmen against their “class peers”. *Mahallawiyya* workers along with the rest of the Company workers faced the same administration and the work system and had the same position in the socio-economic structure. Yet, this did not render itself into permanent “class unity” or class solidarity around a common interest. The workers of al-Mahalla had a communal commitment towards their townsmen who felt threatened by the Company and its workers. They even felt the direct competition with their fellow workers inside the Company. They held workers responsible for the increase in living cost and the deterioration in the city’s condition as much as their townsmen did. Choosing between class solidarity and communal commitment depended on conjuncture and how a given situation developed. Hostility towards workers from peasant origins was a way for *Mahallawiyya* workers to disassociate themselves from the social stigma imposed on workers by the rest of *Mahallawiyya* and to reassure their communal solidarity. The long working day in horrific work conditions and through such intense working relations turned the floor shop into an arena for competition and rivalry among workers on a daily basis. Meanwhile, holding the administration of the Company responsible for the horrific working conditions and unfair work relations was expressed in terms of class solidarity in a major collective movement, which normally did not take place on a daily basis. Hostility between *Mahallawiyya* workers and their colleagues at the company was also generated out of a fear of competition and intensive work. it’s not surprising that older workers received new candidates with aggression even before the latter formally joined the workforce. Fear of losing a job for the newcomers sometimes got *Mahallawiyya* and

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<sup>519</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/6775 /234.

their “rivals” who came from outside the town to launch such an attack against work candidates while they were waiting in the “Appointment Hall” inside the company.<sup>520</sup> Work pressure and intensive work relations where a worker from one group held another from the other group responsible for “unfair treatment” by bosses frequently triggered mutual hostility and even violence between both groups.<sup>521</sup> It was more convenient to hold a co-worker who reported a mistake responsible for the consequent punishment, mostly payment reduction, rather than facing the arbitrary punishment system or the unjust supervisors.

*Fitiwwat* workers appeared among both sides. The *Fitiwwa* worker was expected to organize his group to protect followers in the same way any urbanite *Fitiwwa* was expected to protect his community. Some *Fitiwwat* workers actually practiced their role and enjoyed their stature inside and outside the company. The best example to cite here is the worker ‘Ali al-Sayyid al-Safti whose appearances were intensive in the 1938 court records. In that year al-Safti was about 24-25 years old. He was a Company worker, but his identification paper was still carrying his previous profession as a farmer. Most importantly, he was indigenous to al-Mahalla and lived in his own house in the central old northwestern residential neighborhood of al-Warraqa. As a *Fitiwwa*, al-Safti led a group of Mahallawiyya workers against other workers, bosses, and company guards. A worker reported to the bosses that the Mahallawiyya worker al-Hanafi Musa`id al-Baya`a made a mistake. Al-Baya`a lived in his own house in the neighborhood of al-Safti and consequently was under his communal protection. Al-Safti led a group of his *Mahallawiyya* followers and attacked the informant worker for revenge and also to deter any other worker from causing *Mahallawiyya* colleagues any troubles.<sup>522</sup> For a similar

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<sup>520</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/799/ 1-799.

<sup>521</sup> Among many examples, see Misdemeanor 1938/6775/ 83.

<sup>522</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/ 83.

reason al-Safti and his group hit the worker Muhammad `Abd al-Fattah.<sup>523</sup> He also hit a fellow worker named Mahmud Fahmi Darwish while the latter was in his way home after work. Darwish failed to hand al-Safti his Company ID card in time at the Company's gate.<sup>524</sup> Both attacks helped to augment al-Safti's reputation as the feared protector of *Mahallawiyya* workers.

Al-Safti did not fear to interfere on behalf of his fellow workers against Company *ghafirs*, guards. Company guards enjoyed physical strength and great deal of power over workers. The Company set their hands free to employ any method to control workers and allowed them to use their clubs and whips to enforce order on workers by the gates, in the Appointment Hall and by the cashier's windows. They were required and allowed to personally search workers at exit gates looking for any hidden stolen company belongings. The search process included checking inside workers' underwear and shoes. Al-Safti was not intimidated by the guards' power or their whips. When the Company assigned one of the guards, `Abd al-Ghani Hassan al-Mugi, to bring a worker who had allegedly hit a fellow worker, al-Safti led his group and launched an effective attack against the guard while he was arresting the worker.<sup>525</sup> Resisting authorities, interfering on behalf of fellow workers, and gathering followers were signs of his prestigious leadership. However due to that lofty record with violent fights, al-Safti lost his job at the company, but he never lost his position as a communal *Fitiwwa*. He was involved in a series of fights against a handloom weaving family in his neighborhood, which assured his position in the community.<sup>526</sup>

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<sup>523</sup>Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1688.

<sup>524</sup>Misdemeanor 1938/6776/ 1317.

<sup>525</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/1318.

<sup>526</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2084.



## **Fragmented Communities, Fragmented Class**

Confrontations between the people of al-Mahalla and workers brought workers together on one side of the front. That front was deeply cracked by the division among workers from *Mahallawiyya*, who sided with their townsmen, and workers coming from outside the town. That crack led to more fragmentation among workers based on geographical origin. Workers coming from outside al-Mahalla, like *Mahallawiyya*, had their primordial communal identities. Converting them into industrial workers in such a hostile environment made it easier and even necessary for them to reproduce and strengthen their old communal identity rather than building a new one on a new geographical or class basis. Joining the huge modern factory played an opposite role to what was supposedly transforming peasants into a modern working class. Lack of recruiting and training systems in the factory and the coercive work relations between workers and bosses increased workers' divisions based on geographical origins and hierarchal positions.

Most workers were concentrated in slums around the Company to the east of the Mallah Canal and the peripheries of the town. These locations were far from hostile city residents and enjoyed cheap housing. Each group of workers coming from the same village tended to share rooms and to live in the same area. This concentration served several purposes at the same time. Companing each other in their trips to work and home provided them with needed protection and sense of familiarity. Dividing rent reduced their living cost. It also assured communication with their families because whenever one roommate went home, he was able to carry money, messages, and provision of his roommates and their families.<sup>527</sup> Consequently, the communal solidarity

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<sup>527</sup> Although this pattern of communications between workers in al-Mahalla and their families in their home villages was taking place efficiently on regular bases, court records show that it was not always risk-free. In some cases the workers did not deliver the money to the family and the provisions to his coworker

based on their geographical origin was strengthened. Among each group a *Fitiwwa* emerged to lead them against *Mahallawiyya* and other workers groups. Some “regional *Fitiwwa*” gained particular reputations for being strong and feared. Through the 1930s and early 1940s, Muhammad Shata emerged as the undisputed *fitiwwa* of workers from al-Minufiyya Governorate.<sup>528</sup> Those *Fitiwwa*-workers were aggressive in recruiting followers to what a court judge called *'usba*, band, among their colleagues. To avoid any resistance, they used violence against their own colleagues who refused to join. Violence was used to intimidate followers and target recruits as much as to spread fear among rivals. Declining to join in any planned attack against other groups might be considered a betrayal that required punishment. When Raghīb Muhammad Abu Salīm refused to join such a group, *'usaba*, against the people of al-Mahalla, the leader of the group, Ragab Muhammad Shahin, waited in ambush for him outside the Company. While he was on his way home, the latter worker hit him causing him a serious injury.<sup>529</sup>

The urban tradition of *Fitiwwat* was not the only source of inspiration for the rise of *Fitiwwat* among workers from peasant origins. Movie characters were another source for inspiration of particular types of masculinity based on physical strength and the ability to mobilize and lead followers in the face of injustice imposed upon the community by powerful individuals or hostile groups. Watching movies was a totally new sort of entertainment experienced exclusively in Egyptian cities. The effect of the Egyptian and foreign movies on the Egyptian public and the tradition of movie going throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have not been well explored. However, al-Mahalla's records show that movie theaters attracted male and female audiences from all

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and in other cases the group of co-villagers of workers fought among themselves over splitting the cost of transporting provisions.

<sup>528</sup> Al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-Yasar*, 284-288.

<sup>529</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/595.

classes, including workers. Newly arrived peasants must have been fascinated by this type of entertainment that had been already well established among the city's inhabitants. The influence of movies on workers and the ability of some of them to have a sharp or blurred border between reality and what they watched on the screen calls for close attention. William Handley, the U.S. labor attaché in the Middle East based in Cairo from 1945 to 1948, commented that Hollywood had more influence on common people in the Middle East, including the Egyptian laborer than Communism.<sup>530</sup> When it comes to *Fitiwwat* practice, there is evidence that watching movies inspired workers and others to imitate heroic personas. In a summer night on 3 August 1944, many people were laying down outside their homes in the workers' slum of Abu Gahsha Hamlet. About 10:30 pm, the 23-year old Company worker Mamduh al-Sayyid al-Nabarawi led a *'usba*, band, carrying whips and sticks and attacked everybody in their way. They hit men and women, including those who were sleeping outside their homes. Al-Nabarawi himself was carrying something that looked like a rifle on his shoulder and gave orders to his followers to attack. At least six men were injured. However there was no clear reason such an attack targeted everybody randomly. All victims were his neighbors and coworkers. They said he was imitating heroes in movies and shouted "*hubub*", attack, during the attack to terrorize his victims, while his followers were shouting his name. the judge made a comment explaining that the reason for such an attack was "to satisfy Nabarawi's evil lust for criminal leadership and must be harshly punished to be an example for those sort of people who called themselves *Fitiwwat* and to eliminate criminality of those *fitiwwat* and those who might imitate what he did".<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>530</sup>William Handley, "The Labor Movement in Egypt", *The Middle East Journal* 1949, V.3, 278.

<sup>531</sup>Al-Nabarawi was sent to jail of one year with hard labor and 10 EP bail. Misdemeanor 1944/6920/2549.

Nabarawi's case shows the mixed influence of the *Mahallawiyya* model of *Fitiwwa* and cinema as a modern and urban type of entertainment. Meanwhile, the case of the Minufiyya *Fitiwwa*, Muhammad Shata, shows the influence of folklore culture in the Egyptian countryside. In his childhood, Shata was fascinated by heroic stories chanted by *rababa* musicians and storytellers. The persona of `Antara Ibin Shaddad was his favorite to the extent that he named his eldest son `Antara and adopted the nickname Abu `Antar for himself. The story of `Antara was a main source of inspiration when he took up the leadership of workers coming from al-Minufiyya based on the *Fitiwwa* model.<sup>532</sup> Shata's fascination with `Antara, who enjoyed poetic talent and a commitment to a just and egalitarian tribe, coupled with his experience as a factory laborer paved the way for his leadership career in labor activism. He got involved with other activists in establishing an underground trade union. With the gloom of WWII, an emergency law was imposed and police tightened their grip to weed out labor activists. Upon seeing police forces at his door, Shata fled al-Mahalla to Kafr al-Dawar, then to Shubra al-Khayma, both being large textile industrial centers. At this time, Shubra al-Khayma, close to Cairo, was a hotbed for a labor movement influenced by leftist ideas and activism. In his new home, he continued his transformation from a regional *fitiwwa* whose physical strength qualified him to lead a group of workers sharing his geographical origin to a labor movement leader for people sharing class identity and interests.<sup>533</sup> He joined an underground communist group known as the Egyptian Movement for the National Liberation.<sup>534</sup> Interestingly, he used his old ties in al-Mahalla to connect workers in both towns and

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<sup>532</sup> Al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-Yasar*, 283-288.

<sup>533</sup> Al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-Yasar* 283-288.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

mobilized hundreds of al-Mahalla workers to support their striking counterparts in Shubra al-Khayma in working class solidarity.<sup>535</sup>

In al-Mahalla, Shata's reputation as a feared *fitiwwa* was not just a result of his personal qualities of courage and physical power. He was a leader of the largest group of workers from a particular region. Workers coming from al-Minufiyya Governorate were the largest group basically because they formulated their concept of geographical identity province-wide. This was unique among workers from the other provinces who were usually divided among themselves based on the villages and small towns inside the same province. For example, workers from al-Gharbiyya Governorate, which included al-Mahalla itself, were divided among themselves into groups from Zifta, Tanta, Samanud, etc. The Minufiyya workers, large in number and possessing a strong regional solidarity, developed more organizational skills and established the Society of Children of al-Minufiyya in al-Mahalla. There were 2000 registered members in 1950s.<sup>536</sup> Workers from al-Daqahliyya Governorate followed their example and formed an informal society including workers and others in the 1950s.<sup>537</sup> Although that society was not officially registered, its members paid their dues to its leader who kept records. These dues were used to provide financial aid to its members at time of need such as marriage and death. Nevertheless, protection was the primary focus of these societies and they were able to develop a more peaceful mechanism to avoid wide scale confrontation among rival groups. Whenever one of the members got involved in quarrel or a dispute with a worker from another regional group, leaders of both groups interfered to solve the issue

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<sup>535</sup> Ibid., 283-288.

<sup>536</sup> Isma`il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 118.

<sup>537</sup> Information about the Society of the Daqahliyya Governorate is based on an interview with Fathi Sa`ad who was a member in the group. He came from his home village Aga to al-Mahalla to work in the Misr Company in early 1950s. After one decade he moved joined the Nasr Textile Company. By the time of the interview in November 2007, he was retired as a textile worker and had a part time job at the Trade Union of the Textile Workers in al-Mahalla.

peacefully. Financial compensation and public apology could both be possible. If both sides failed to reach a solution, violent confrontation might have been inevitable.

Division and hostility among workers coming from outside al-Mahalla was not less than between newcomers and indigenous *Mahallawiyya*. Communal identity among workers based on their geographical origin competed with their “class solidarity” and fragmented their unity in the same way ethnicity and race divided workers in the United States and Europe.<sup>538</sup> Confrontations between workers from Atmida and Tanbasha villages in 1945 were one of the bitterest sagas. Knives were used by both sides, in addition to clubs and sticks. Several people were stabbed and had to be hospitalized for a long time. Both groups lived in a worker slum of Abu Gahsha Hamlet close by the Company. The immediate reason that triggered those bloody confrontations was not clear and it was unknown whether it started at work or at home. Workers and non-workers from both villages got involved. The people of Atmida attacked a worker from Tanbasha with a knife when the latter was washing his clothes in the Mallah Canal after sunset. The Tanbasha team was mobilized under their *fitiwwa* Ibrahim Muhammad al-Sharqawi who was managing a coffee shop in the same workers’ slum of Abu Gahsha Hamlet. Yet the Tanbasha team sought for further revenge and waited ambush for a group of people from Atmida while they were in their back home after midnight. Knives and sticks were also used and several people were injured from both sides.<sup>539</sup> It was an obvious case of embracing communal identity over working class solidarity.

The bloodiest confrontation among workers groups based on geographical origin broke out between workers from al-Qasriyya and Mahallat Zayyd villages in 1948. Both

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<sup>538</sup> For a broad discussion on how ethnicity and race divided European and American workers see Lex Heerma van Voss and Marcel van der Linden, *Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labor History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), the introduction in particular.

<sup>539</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/7793/2151 and Misdemeanor 1945/ 7791/ 742.

villages were close to each other and were so close to al-Mahalla itself that workers commuted every day to work by a train. Both villages were on the same train route. A small casual fight between two workers from both villages while they were on their way back home by the train invited intervention from the rest of the workers. When the train stopped at the al-Qasriyya station people from both villages got involved. Police arrived to control the situation and, as a precaution, agreed with the train company not to stop at al-Qasriyya the following day. People of al-Qasriyya aborted the plan, piled stones and metals on the railway at their village, and forced the train to stop. Several men and women were killed and seriously injured.<sup>540</sup> Although the communal violence among workers was widespread with the knowledge of the Company, this was the first incident to attract the administration's attention. It asked workers to avoid this "pre-Islamic ignorance" and to remember that "we are all Egyptians and children of Egypt and all divine religions considered this (regional fanaticism) outrageous to God and the homeland".<sup>541</sup> Aside from this "request" there was no evidence that the Company tried to contain this type of violence among divided workers' group. In some cases violence broke out among workers in the presence of the Company guards and police who did not interfere to stop it.<sup>542</sup> Meanwhile, pioneer workers with firsthand experience accused the Company of encouraging hostility among workers based on their geographical origin as a way to handicapped their "class solidarity". This accusation was reported in the leftist press in 1947 and in the biography of the Minufiyya *fitiwwa* Muhammad Shata decades after he left al-Mahalla.<sup>543</sup> A labor activist and historian went as far accusing the Company of encouraging workers from different regions to kill and take revenge, *tha'rr*,

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<sup>540</sup> `Abd al-`Aziz `Arafa, "Hadithi ilaikum", *Amil al-Mahalla*, October 1948, 2.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Among several cases see Tanta Criminal Court 1940/ 7444/ 416.

<sup>543</sup> Hamid, "26,000 min `Ummal Sharikat Misr bil-Mahalla," *al-Jamahir*, June 2, 1947, 6-7, and al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-Yasar*, 285.

from each other.<sup>544</sup> This accusation seems to be consistent with the policies of the American factories' owners who played the racial division card among their workers.<sup>545</sup> Such an accusation seems logical and reasonable considering the systematic employment of violence inside the mill. Administrators as high as the vice general manager Abd al-Hamid Hamdi was known for kicking his subordinates right and left and slapping workers, which might have encouraged violence among workers themselves. The company's system of training and recruiting workers helped to strengthen regional identity. The lack of clear guidelines for what quality should be sought after when recruiting gave those who were already working at the company a chance to help their relatives and friends from their home village to get hired. Similarly, the lack of systematic training made learning dependent on the ability of the new worker to observe more experienced colleagues and the willingness of the older colleagues to teach the new workers. The training policy as one of the administrators described it was "the worker is like a person who has never been swimming and is thrown into the river. He either sinks or swims purely on the basis of his own instincts."<sup>546</sup> Old workers were usually suspicious that the new worker might replace them once they mastered the necessary skills and consequently were reluctant to pass along their experience and training. However, workers from the same village were more interested in teaching each other, which strengthened communal loyalty and ties. This training was not only crucial for the new worker to be hired permanently, but also to protect him from accidents. For many new workers, operating machinery at the company was their first experience with any kind of heavy equipment. The lack of safety procedures exposed the lives of workers to

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<sup>544</sup> `Uthman, *Mudhakkarat wa-watha'iq*, 101.

<sup>545</sup> Lex Heerma van Voss and Marcel van der Linden *Class and Other Identities: Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity in the Writing of European Labor History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), 1-41.

<sup>546</sup> Harbison and Ibrahim, *Human resources for Egyptian enterprise*, 84.



danger. An official report in 1954 estimated that about 20% of the Egyptian workers had suffered a work-related accident.<sup>547</sup>

Communal solidarity and identity was so fluid that each group of workers constantly shifted its alliance and revelry depending on how the situation preceded and developed. An argument between two workers in the same section of the factory turned into a collective fight between workers from Aga and Mahallat Khalaf.<sup>548</sup> Workers from Mahallat Khalaf had previously fought against workers from Mahallat Zayyad in similar circumstances.<sup>549</sup> Workers from the nearby town Samanud collectively fought with workers from the Mit al-Nasara village.<sup>550</sup> Then, they fought with workers from Mit `Assas village.<sup>551</sup> Possession of arms and weapons among workers inside the company and in their residencies became phenomenal. Some of these weapons such as firearms, daggers, and knives were not legal unless their carrier was granted a license. Meanwhile, others such as sticks, clubs, stones, scissors, hatchets, and shoehorns did not pass as weapons. Bringing knives, pistols, stones and clubs to the shop floor was an indication of a planned attack as much as the need for self protection.<sup>552</sup> Sometimes police were alarmed enough to raid workers' houses searching for illegal weapons.<sup>553</sup> Workers, who were mostly young and anxious, did not hesitate to use these weapons against each other, which caused a threat to their own lives. The 18-year old *Mahallawiyya* worker Sambu al-Sayyid Abu Khiriba, lived in his father's house in Waliyy al-Din Street, stabbed

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>548</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/7795/3358.

<sup>549</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/6770/ 239.

<sup>550</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/ 1768.

<sup>551</sup> Tanta Appeal Court record 1949/7570/ 1340.

<sup>552</sup> Among many examples of carrying weapons inside the factory see Misdemeanor 1938/6776/1576 and 1179, Misdemeanor 1937/ 6770/531, Misdemeanor 1941/6788/ 94, Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2259, Misdemeanor 1938/6776/ 2354 and Misdemeanor 1937/6774/ 3447.

<sup>553</sup> On July 28 1938, police searched workers' houses in different parts of the city looking for weapons. Among the foundlings, there were an iron *Buniyya*, brass knuckles and a dagger in a room of two workers. Misdemeanor 1938/6776/ 1937and 1938.

Muhammad Hassan ash-Sharqawi several times with a knife. The victim quit his medication and left the hospital insisting on revenge. His condition deteriorated rapidly and he died before executing his revenge plan.<sup>554</sup> Knives were also the weapon used by the 20-year-old workers Muhammad `Abdullah Ghallab and Gamil `Ali Nassif during their fight.<sup>555</sup> Some workers carried weapons although they could not always use it well. Ahmad Muhammad, from the Magul village, did not hesitate to use a knife against his 18-year old colleague Ibrahim Yusuf Ghallab, who was originally from the Sandalat village. Both of them got into a fight when they met by the Company gate at the end of the work shift. Ahmad was not good at using his weapon. After he slightly injured Ghallab in his left arm and back, the latter was able to snatch the knife and stab Ahmad causing his death.<sup>556</sup> Since Guards and bosses were using their power arbitrarily, it was very possible that they used their authority in favor of their co-villagers and to hurt those who were against them. *Ghafirs* could be dangerous because they were armed with whips and were allowed to use physical force against workers. The guard Muhammad Fadlallah as-Sudani hit Tulba `Abd al-Fattah Abu Diraz with a knife in his eyebrow because the latter had a fight with a co-villager of the guard.<sup>557</sup>

Violence got out of hand and was too difficult to control and caused threats to the people of the town and workers alike. Interestingly, the people of al-Mahalla saw themselves as the ultimate victims of this violence. Security also became a serious issue due to the unprecedented rapid population growth. The way the people of al-Mahalla and their Parliament representative expressed this need reflects the extreme hostility to workers. In June 1937, the Mahalla Senator Hassan `Abd al-Qadir proposed establishing

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<sup>554</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/7793/1620.

<sup>555</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/6770/ 837.

<sup>556</sup> Tanta Criminal Court records 1940/ 7444/ 416.

<sup>557</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/6776/ 2108.

a new police station in the southern part of the town next to the Company and its adjacent Bank Misr Ginning Factory. He justified his request saying “many of the Company workers live in this area and most of them are from different villages with criminal records. Life, honor, and properties of the inhabitants of this area are not secured. Those workers are more than 20,000 and very often they assault people on their way back and forth, while the police station of al-Mahalla is far from this area”.<sup>558</sup> The government was receptive to the request expressing to the Company its anxiety over controlling workers rather than providing security to either *Mahallawiyya* or *Shirkawiyya*.<sup>559</sup> On the 18 July 1938 Parliament session, while news on the first major strike in the company found its way to the Cairo press, the representative of the Ministry of Interior Affairs said that establishing such a police station was essential and the ministry was negotiating with the Company to pay the cost, otherwise the ministry would establish it.<sup>560</sup>

### **Competition, Support, and Enticement: Women Workers Arrived**

Although geographical origin was the clearest dividing line among workers, it was not the only one. When the Company decided to hire women to work in the new sock and underwear section in the early 1930s, hostility arose between male and female workers. Male workers thought that the company was planning to replace them with women and consequently attacked them viciously during their first days on the job.<sup>561</sup> The Company arranged a different work schedule for women, so that they would not meet with male workers at the gates. The women’s shift started at 8:00 am, one hour after the day shift for male workers, and lasted until 5:00 pm, three hours before the night shift

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<sup>558</sup> Madbatat Majlis al-Shiyukh November 18 1937 to November 16 1938, mulhaq 74 [Senate Records: November 18, 1937- November 16, 1938, supplement 74] (Cairo: al-Matba`a al-Amiriyya, 1939), 332.

<sup>559</sup> Madbatat Majlis al-Umma November 18, 1937 to November 16 1938 [People Council Records: November 18, 1937- November 16, 1938, supplement 74] (Cairo: al-Matba`a al-Amiriyya, 1938), 278.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>561</sup> al-Khuli, *al-Rihla* , v.3, 51-64.

for males. Similarly, their lunch break was timed different from the male's break. After the anxiety of male workers to be replaced by women came to an end, sexual harassment against women workers became commonplace. According to al-Khuli, many bosses and foremen took advantage of women working under their supervision and whoever resisted such practices was subject to arbitrary punishment.<sup>562</sup> Records do not show such practices, mostly because female victims themselves tended to hide it. In a society that does not forgive women who lost their virginity even when they were raped, silence was the only viable choice for women. However we know that sexual abuse against young male workers also existed on the premises of the Company. In one case two foremen had sexual intercourse in a bathroom with a male worker who was under 18 years and worked under their supervision.<sup>563</sup> Similar practices took place among roommates.<sup>564</sup> Some male workers openly accused their male bosses of punishing them for refusing to provide them with sexual favors.<sup>565</sup> It is reasonable to think that such practices took place against women workers even with a lack of documentation. However, incidents of verbal and minor physical harassment inside the Company and outside its gates against women workers were frequently documented, particularly because they generated a great deal of violence between workers who were attempting to molest women and those who interfered to protect them.<sup>566</sup> Some women workers had to be accompanied by their male relatives on their trips between home and work for protection.<sup>567</sup> Despite the Company's attempt to separate female and male workers in time and space, male and female workers from outside the town met on a daily basis on the trains during their commute between

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>563</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/6918/1429.

<sup>564</sup> Tanta Criminal Court, 1941/ 7448/ 2231.

<sup>565</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1943/ 7453/1542.

<sup>566</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/6776/2138.

<sup>567</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1941/ 7448/871.

their villages and al-Mahalla. Hostility and harassment took place on board as well as love stories and eventual marriages. In addition to love and attraction, poor workers found their female colleagues to be good candidates for marriage on the assumption that female workers were able to save enough to help with the marriage expenses. Traditionally, families started to buy household articles, particularly kitchenware, for their young daughters to reduce their financial load when their daughters actually got married. Working girls from poor families could usually afford more household items than their unemployed peers, which made them more attractive for poor suitors.

The hierarchal order among workers was another dividing line. Although foremen, mechanics and *musa`id*, assistants, were actually blue-collar workers, they loathed being associated with rank and file workers. Foremen did not have better training or education than most of the rank and file workers. The best education they might have was relatively competent literacy that enabled them to report workers name along with their production and mistakes. *Musa`id*, were the only workers with systematic education and training. They were recruited among vocational schools' graduates and their main tasks were to repair and maintain machines and to train workers. Top managers of the Company were mostly highly educated engineers whose interest and expertise were machinery, not human development. They did not care to develop any rule for punishment and reward, or for work relations among workers and their supervisors. The first policy for these aspects of work management was put forth in 1947, only after laws made it an obligation. Even that policy was so harsh that the entire workforce went on strike once it was publicized.<sup>568</sup> The absence of these rules made each supervisor use his power arbitrarily, including employing violence against their subordinates. This did not only invite more violence between workers and supervisors, but also enhanced the violent

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<sup>568</sup> For details of this policy, see al-Mudarrrik, *Hawla Mushkilat `Ummal al-Mahalla*.

work milieu. Foremen, mechanics, and *musa`ids* used all power in their capacity, including violence, to assure their superiority over and disassociation with rank and file workers. The company itself enhanced this division among both groups. The Company insisted on rounding up all its employees, blue and white-collar workers and top managers in one trade union to facilitate its control over it through appointing only its loyal top managers on the union board. This guaranteed that the board had interests from the workers' interests due to their superior position in the hierarchy. At the same time it encouraged separation between supervisors and workers even in social settings. When King Faruq granted the titles Pasha and Bey to the Company's manger `Abd al-Rahman Hamada and the vice manager `Abd al-Hamid Hamdi, the Company celebrated with two separate parties. One was attended by supervisors and one was attended by a selected group of workers.<sup>569</sup> To emphasize the superiority of the Company's *effendiyya* over blue-collar worker, the Company designated a number of beds in its hospital for white-collar workers, *muwazafin*. Out of 75 beds, 15 beds were designated for several hundred *effendiyya*, while 60 beds were devoted for 21,000 rank and file workers.<sup>570</sup> The separation was followed also between children of both groups. While it was trying to improve its public image after the great strike of 1947, the Company set up sports competitions between children of its employees. There was a competition for children of workers and another competition for children of white-collar workers.<sup>571</sup> Thus, the Company's *effendiyya* were actually defining their identity in the opposition to the blue-collar workers. All these policies divided the employees based on their position in the hierarchy. It was no surprise that when the 2,000 *musa`ids* went on a strike in 1946 for

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<sup>569</sup> "Mushafan mudhahhaban... wa □ulbatani min dhahab" [Two golden Qur`an books and Two gold boxes], `Amil al-Mahalla 11, June 28, 1948,14.

<sup>570</sup> Sharikat Misr, *al-a`mal al-tibbiyyah*, 17.

<sup>571</sup> "al-Hafla al-riaydiya al-kubra bi-munasabat `Eid al-julus al-malaki" [The Great Sport Party for the Royal Inauguration Anniversary], `Amil al-Mahalla 6, 17.

higher wages and special benefits, workers did not support them and their strike failed.<sup>572</sup> This was significant if we compare the support *musa`ids* received in the Shubra al-Khayma textile factories, which allowed them greater success.<sup>573</sup>

### **Religious Communities: Solidarity around a Fluid Line**

Communal solidarity based on religion has its primordial privilege. The people of al-Mahalla have a long history with religious diversity and co-existence between religious communities. Opening the town to globalization with the cotton boom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century did not disturb intercommunity relations. Religious differences among foreigners and the vast majority of Muslims did not incite any communal hostility. At the turn of the century, Christian missionaries established a Franciscan school and a clinic to the southeast of the Canal. The school attracted students among the new rich elite from all religions and ethnicities.

The influx of Company workers and the rapid population increase throughout the 1930s and 1940s did not disturb relations between religious communities. Most newcomers were Muslims and some of them were Christians. There was no evidence that religion was a source of division among Company workers neither inside nor outside work. Although it was unlikely for workers with different religions to share one room, Muslim and Christian workers and *Mahallawiyya* lived in the same house.<sup>574</sup> Muslim and Christian house owners welcomed tenants from all religions. Christians and Muslims from the same village fought side by side against rival groups of workers.<sup>575</sup> There were cases where an individual from one community got involved in a fight with another from

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<sup>572</sup> Hamid, "26,000 min `Ummal Sharikat Misr bil-Mahalla," *al-Jamahir*, June 2, 1947, 6-7.

<sup>573</sup> `Uthman, *Kifah `Ummal al-Nasij*, 115.

<sup>574</sup> In a rare case, the Muslim and the Christian Company workers al-Sayyid Hanafi `Abbas and George Fawzi Suriyal shared a room in Ahmad al-Mansi's house in al-Mahgub area. Misdemeanor 1935/6783/4634.

<sup>575</sup> For example, the Coptic worker Naguib `Abdel Malak Suriayl fought side by side with his Muslims from his village against workers from Samanud. See Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/ 1768.

the other community, but no evidence that religious differences were behind such fights. The reasons behind these confrontations were not different from confrontations between workers from the same religion. During strikes, Muslim and Christian workers went hand in hand. Workers who were convicted for the 1938 strike were both Muslims and Christian. The scene was not different when the people of al-Mahalla chose to express their political stands through demonstrations in 1926, 1930, and 1938. In sum religious difference was a barrier for neither communal solidarity nor class unity.

When it came to relations between religious communities, conjuncture was the most decisive factor. Depending on how a particular situation developed, communal hostility or solidarity prevailed. Two particular cases are good examples. Sami Farag was a young Copt from al-Minufiyya province and worked as a white-collar worker at the Company.<sup>576</sup> He lived with his Muslim landlord family. Upon falling in love with one of his landlord's daughters, he converted to Islam to conclude the marriage. To bolster agitation among the Copts of al-Mahalla, Farag was working in the Company's Workers Bureau under al-Sawi Habib Effendi, who was an active leader of the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood group. That boss was known to be aggressive in recruiting followers for the MB. His political opponents repeatedly accused him of using his position to enforce people working under his authority to join the MB.<sup>577</sup> Copts who worked at the same office did not let the boss approach the young convert unnoticed. They spread the word among their community. The Copts of the town urged King Faruq to deport Farag to his home province otherwise a confrontation between both communities will be unavoidable.<sup>578</sup> Sharing a house between Muslims and Christians

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<sup>576</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mafazah 533 "Iltimasat Tawa`if Diniyya, December 19, 1906- May 6, 1947" [Petitions from religious sects, December 19, 1906- May 6, 1947].

<sup>577</sup> *Nahdat al-Ummal*, 6/25/1946.

<sup>578</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mafazah 533, "Iltimasat Tawa`if Diniyya, December 19, 1906- May 6, 1947" [Petitions from religious sects, December 19, 1906- May 6, 1947].



did not seem different from sharing workplaces. Such relations might have entailed cooperation and did not necessarily bolster any sectarian hostility. Romance and politics raised fears of losing members to the other community and might lead to polarization of the society. This is what happened when affection, religion and politics intermixed in a complicated tangle.

The other case to show how conjuncture was decisive in inter-communal relations is a series of fights in the workers' slum of 'Izbat al-Sa`ayda Hamlet. The Coptic grocer Khilla Shinuda was used to selling foodstuffs to Muslim and Christian workers on credit. One day in 1942 he got into an argument with his Muslim customer `Abd al-Fattah `Abd al-`Aziz over the old dues. Two Muslim neighbors, one worker and one a bank guard, took the side of the Coptic grocer and hit the customer and his wife.<sup>579</sup> Until this moment, religious differences did not play any role in either business or neighborly relations, but the saga continued. In one episode, the wife of the customer hit the grocer's daughter Maryam, which brought on more intervention from both sides. Sectarian divisions emerged among Christian and Muslim neighbors. Workers and non workers from both communities fought along religious communal lines.<sup>580</sup>

Despite all these aspect of prevailing division among workers based on origin, position, and sex, class solidarity emerged to compete and to co-exist with communal identities. The definition of community itself was so fluid that it was defined and redefined constantly. Borders separating communities and unifying classes were never rigid or static. Communal solidarity co-existed and competed with other types of associations and motivation. Among *Mahallawiyya* there was an emerging sense of class to add a layer to their communal identity. Although the government outlawed unions

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<sup>579</sup> Misdemeanor 1942/ 6790/1022.

<sup>580</sup> Misdemeanor 1942/ 6791/ 1629.

along with the first Egyptian Communist Party in 1924, al-Mahalla's handloom workers formed an active union in the early 1930s. The union led a strike with coordination with workers in the nearby town of Samanud and Cairo to renegotiate wages in August 1930. Facing the competition of cheap Japanese products, Egyptian factory owners tried to reduce the cost by reducing wages drastically. Despite the heavy handed policy of the government, workers succeeded in reaching an agreement to reduce wages only from 7 to 6 *mallim* a piece. When employers violated the agreement, workers continued their struggle with the help of the leftist activist lawyer Husni al-Shintinawi. They sent complaints to the Labor Bureau and an agreement was reached.<sup>581</sup>

Despite all communal hostility, both Company workers and *Mahallawiyya* handloom weavers had a moment when they shared class solidarity and attempted to work together. With news coming from Cairo that the Parliament had legalized trade unions, wage earners in al-Mahalla from all professions got together to form a trade union. The Wafdi activist lawyer and a resident of Tanta `Abd al-Hamid Lutfi played role in that unity by building on a previous attempt of Prince `Abbas Halim to unionize Company workers along with wage earners in al-Mahalla in 1935. However, this unifying moment quickly faded away once articles of the law were publicized to make it clear that membership of each union must be restricted to workers from one industry. Workers of any factory who had 50 employees or more had to have their own union. Consequently, workers of the Company had to have their own union. Although the Company workers' right to form their union was undisputable, they quickly realized that they had to struggle against the government and the Company to form an independent union.<sup>582</sup> Supported by the government, the Company insisted in installing its handpicked board for the union.

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<sup>581</sup> Izz al-Din, *Tarikh al-Tabaqa al-`Amila al-Misriyyah 1919- 1929*, 103.

<sup>582</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

Because the Wafd Party was ruling at the time, Lutfi withdrew his support for the Company workers and continued his legal help to others.<sup>583</sup> Trade unions mushroomed in al-Mahalla. There were unions for retail workers, handloom workers, mechanized textile workers, mill and bakery workers, cotton spinning workers and auto drivers among others. While workers of the Company were not receiving much help from their union board, regional division deprived them of the opportunity to get support from their “sister” unions. There is evidence that unions of cotton industries, unions of cotton spinning, handloom, and mechanic textile workers, cooperated with unions of other urban crafts such as the unions of retailers’ workers, mill and bakery workers, and auto drivers.<sup>584</sup> What might have facilitated cooperation between workers of handloom and newly established small mechanized textile factories was that most owners of the mechanized textile factories were owners or previous owners of handloom factories. Many workers of these mechanized factories were previously handloom workers. Consequently, it was easier for workers of both types of factories to feel like they were in the same community or class rather than working in competing businesses.

Though there is no evidence for systematic cooperation between workers of the Company and other workers groups in al-Mahalla on labor issues, it does not mean that Company workers did not enjoy support and endorsement of the people of al-Mahalla in their labor struggle against the Company. Just as workers put aside their regional, positional, and gender divisions during their major strikes in 1938 and 1947, the people of al-Mahalla put aside their hostility toward them and showed appreciation to workers suffering and struggle. The 1938 strike was launched for the 8 hour workday by the weaving sections, and then was joined by the maintenance workshop sections. The strike

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<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

<sup>584</sup> “Mudhakat Niqabat al-Mahalla,” *al-Wafd al-Misri*, June 17, 1946.

witnessed violent confrontations between workers on one side and the police, the Company's administrators and guards on the other. Although the strike was spontaneous and lacked pre-arrangement and organization, class solidarity prevailed. Mechanics and *musa`ids* who usually looked down on rank and file workers cooperated to make the workers' voice heard. Fifty six of them were charged with damaging the property of the Company and causing injuries to its administrators.

Among those who were tried, there were 43 from the weaving sections and 13 from the maintenance section. Though they were mostly under 20 years old, their ages were between 15 and 35 years old. Workers, who had been divided into fighting groups based on origins and position, were unified in the face of the administration and the police. Some names were obviously Christians.<sup>585</sup> More importantly, all workers declined to testify against their colleagues during investigations and at the court. Only Company guards and policemen, particularly a guard named Ahmad al-Tur, testified against workers.<sup>586</sup> After the trial, al-Tur enjoyed a strong position in the security system of the Company, a status that he abused by accepting bribes from those who were seeking jobs at the company. He was eventually caught and convicted for committing theft from the Company. In both the trials of striking workers and the thieving guard, nationalism was a strong wall between workers and their rights and between *effendiyya* and the arbitrary system in the Company.

Looking at the Company for a decade as a symbol of national success and modernization hid the voice of the workers and the flaws of the company's management. The judge proved his commitment to the "national cause" and against the working class by giving workers a strong nationalist lecture. The judge showed his disappointment with

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<sup>585</sup> Toma `Awadallah and Farrag `Abd el-Shahid Wisa among others who carried obvious Christian names and were charged for participation in the strike. Misdemeanor 1938/6776/1865.

<sup>586</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1865.

workers who denied their duty towards the “company that helped and turned them from ignorant men into skilled workers (...) the Company that has been a pillar of our current revival”.<sup>587</sup> In al-Tur’s trial, the judge dismissed al-Tur’s claims and condemned him because what he said “contradicted what we know about that great Company that we have heard only good things about”.<sup>588</sup> Al-Tur’s testimony against striking workers outraged the community of al-Mahalla, both *Shirkawiyya* and *Mahallawiyya*. In his testimony he was, according to the judge who tried him “more enthusiastic against his fellow workers than the administrators of the Company”. Thus, he violated both class and communal solidarity in an unforgivable fashion. Neighbors harassed and even physically attacked him.<sup>589</sup> Being fired from the Company, chased by the police for having a criminal record, and harassed by his community for testifying against workers, al-Tur found his life in al-Mahalla so difficult that he left the town.<sup>590</sup>

The 1938 strike was an important moment of solidarity in the community and among workers. Due to the damage that was caused to the machinery and the building of the weaving sections, this part of the company was shut down for several weeks. That meant thousands of workers lost their income during the closure. Female workers lent money to their striking male colleagues and many landlords and landladies and grocers who sold workers on credit did not ask for their overdue money until workers resumed work and got paid.<sup>591</sup> This solidarity was a sign of the incorporation of workers into the local community and the will of *Mahallawiyya* vendors and landlords to sacrifice their

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<sup>587</sup>Ibid.

<sup>588</sup>Misdemeanor Court 1939.

<sup>589</sup>Misdemeanor 1938/6775/ 825.

<sup>590</sup> After being fired from the Company, al-Tur was convicted in several theft cases. See Misdemeanor 1940/ 6861/2168, Misdemeanor 1942/ 6791/ 1266, Misdemeanor 1943/ 6862/396, and Misdemeanor 1942/ 6790/ 960. Interestingly, al-Khuli named that guard al-Baghl, which means the mull. The right name, al-Tur, means the bull.

<sup>591</sup>Al-Khuli, *al-Rihl*, v. 3.

direct financial interest temporarily for communal relations and for the cause of “justice”. The closer of the Company after the September 1947 strikes was longer than one month and workers were not able to pay rent and had to buy groceries on credit. People of the town, who had a firsthand experience with the hardship in which workers lived, associated themselves with workers against the Company. Of course most of vendors, grocers and landlords, with whom workers dealt with, were also among lower classes. However, their communal solidarity with workers was generated out of their social base, namely being neighbors and friends, rather than class solidarity in restrict sense. Logically, it was not in the financial interest of those vendors and landlords not to collect their dues.

Communal and class identity was very fluid. Although the division between *Mahallawiyya* and *Shirkawiyya* was clear, tangled interests and social interaction between the two groups blurred and redefined the dividing line constantly. Along with the communal solidarity and economic interest that brought *Mahallawiyya* and *Shirkawiyya* onto one side, mutual hostility never completely disappeared. Inclusion and exclusion from the community co-existed and shifted all the time. Conjuncture and how a given situation developed determined which of these two identities prevailed.

Despite their hostility against workers, *Mahallawiyya* felt pity for workers with TB. Al-Khuli witnessed a *Mahallawiyya* woman opening her house asking workers to rest their terminally ill colleague who was throwing up blood in the street until the ambulance arrived to evacuate him.<sup>592</sup> Even among the educated in al-Mahalla, there were individuals who paid attention to the horrific work and living conditions of the Company workers and volunteered to voice their concern in petitions to the Royal

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<sup>592</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.2.

Palace.<sup>593</sup> When workers were facing the Company during their 1938 and 1947 strikes, it was not too difficult for people of the town to associate themselves with workers against the Company. Of course most of vendors, grocers and landlords, with whom workers dealt, were also among lower classes. However, their communal solidarity with workers was generated out of their social base, namely being neighbors and friends, rather than class solidarity in restrict sense. Logically, it was not in the financial interest of those vendors and landlords not to collect their dues. Yet, communality was very fluid. Although the division between *Mahallawiyya* and *Shirkawiyya* was so clear, tangled interest and social interaction between both groups blurred and redefined the dividing line constantly. *Mahallawiyya* landlords undermined the communal commitment for the economic benefits. They evicted their *Mahallawiyya* tenants and replaced them with the *Shirkawiyya* for higher and more guaranteed rent. It increased the hostility of *Mahallawiyya* against workers on one level and opened the community to incorporate those newcomers on another level.

Along with communal solidarity and economic interest that brought *Mahallawiyya* and *Shirkawiyya* into one side, mutual hostility never disappeared. In and out of the community co-existed and competed all the time. Conjuncture and how a given situation developed made which of these two contradicting identities prevailed. Following the 1947 strike, through which *Mahallawiyya* showed great deal of solidarity with *Shirkawiyya*, *Mahallawiyya* continued their refusal to allow workers to use local

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<sup>593</sup> `Abdin Archive Mahfazah 411 "Itlimasat muwazafin fardi, 1927- 1940" [Petitions from individual employed, 1927- 1940]. Among several examples, a petitioner identified himself as a Baha'i teacher asked for improvement in workers' living condition. He wrote that due to their low wages, they suffer from male nutrition and diseases.

cemeteries to bury their deceased.<sup>594</sup> Workers urged their union to build a cemetery to save them such trouble in finding a graveyard.

### **The Beat of Nationalism on the Communal Drum!**

Opening al-Mahalla for the global economy and then the establishment of the Company in the town were simultaneous with the rise of the nationalist politics in Egypt. The establishment of the Company itself into the town by Bank Misr was a product of the rise of the Egyptian nationalism interplaying with the rising Egyptian capitalism.<sup>595</sup> The "struggle" or "conflict" between the national and the foreign capitalists proved to be a discursive process that played an important role in national politics, in class politics especially. Bank Misr and the Company constructed themselves as national industry fighting off foreign domination, but in actual practices, in financial transactions, loans, joint capital, as well as in actual social life, they collided with foreigners and had lots of common interests against workers.<sup>596</sup> The Company never ceased waving the banner of nationalism to achieve practical economic gains starting with increasing its capital, marketing products, encountering its resentful workers, and not ending with resisting governmental roles.<sup>597</sup> Nationalism added a layer to the identity of the people of al-Mahalla and the Company's workers. Away from the heated nationalist public sphere and the center of the political movement and discourse in Cairo, *Mahallawiyya* and

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<sup>594</sup> A worker suggested the Company's union should establish a cemetery for workers and their families because people of the town harass and insult them whenever they needed to use cemeteries. `Abd al-Hamid Muhammad `Abdullah, *Amil al-Mahalla 2*, November 1947, 12.

<sup>595</sup>For the history of the Bank and its association with the rising local capitalism see Davis, *Challenging colonialism* and Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collide*.

<sup>596</sup> For this idea see Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collide*.

<sup>597</sup> To enforce companies to hire more Egyptians and decrease the foreign employment, the state made it mandatory for companies to provide lists of their workforces. The Misr Company in al-Mahalla refused several times official requests to provide such lists between 1943 and 1948 with a pretext that it was nationalist and authentically Egyptian Company, *sharika Misriyyah samimah*. For such correspondence between the Company and the government see the Archive of the Department of Corporation, Mahfazah 43.



*Shirkawiyya* expressed and practiced, I argue, their sense of nationalism through their communal and class commitments. They employed nationalist rhetoric and movements to achieve communal and class interests, which was different from, and even contradicted, the agenda of the nationalist capitalism.<sup>598</sup>

The call for the Egyptian nationalism penetrated the community of al-Mahalla early in the 20th century with the rise of the National Party founded by Mustafa Kamil and during the 1919 Revolution.<sup>599</sup> The National Party with its mixed Islamic and territorial Egyptian nationalism found followers among the elite of al-Mahalla.<sup>600</sup> Both of the landlord al-Shishini and the textile industrialists Abd el-Nabi Families were staunch followers of the party.<sup>601</sup> There was no evidence whether the party was active in the town enough to pave the road for the people of al-Mahalla to participate in the 1919 Revolution based on the national agenda to achieve independence. The people of al-Mahalla suffered during the WWI as much as the rest of the population of the country. People of the town experienced firsthand losing their sources of income through confiscation of their carrying animals by the British authorities and losing their children in the warfront.<sup>602</sup> Such practices fueled their anger toward the British occupation. According to the Egyptian historian Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi, the people of al-Mahalla participated actively in the Revolution after British soldiers harassed a girl from the

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<sup>598</sup> For critical appraisal of the Egyptian nationalism with respect to workers and labor movement see Beinun and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*.

<sup>599</sup> Local nationalist historians of al-Mahalla cite the confrontation between the French forces and the people of al-Mahalla in 1798, which was mentioned in al-Jabarty's as an episode of the struggle of al-Mahalla for the Egyptian national cause. See Mahmud al-Sharqawi and Muhammad Rajab, *al-Mahalla al-Kubra: tarikh wa-shakhsiyat* (al-Mahalla al-Kubra: Dar al-Sahwah lil-Nashr, 1987).

<sup>600</sup> For the rise of the Egyptian nationalism and the view of Mustafa Kamil, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 193-221.

<sup>601</sup> Nur al-Din, *al-Hayatu al-Wataniyya*, 38 and 57 and `Izz al-Din, *Tarikh al-Tabaqa al-Amila 1919-1929*, 103.

<sup>602</sup> Abdin archive, Mahfazah 541 (Iltimasat ta`widat, February 6 1908- January 29 1952) [Petitions for damages, February 6 1908- January 29 1952].

adjacent village Damru.<sup>603</sup> This would make their participation out of defending the community and its honor rather than following the nationalist agenda.

Throughout and after the Revolution, the Wafd Party emerged as the most popular political entity, a status that continued until the 1952 revolution. Many of the landlords, professionals, and industrialists of the town joined it including the al-Shishini family, which was previously affiliated with the National Party.<sup>604</sup> The family has continued its association with the Wafd until today. When the 1924 constitution opened the era of parliamentary politics, the nationalist elite of the town, as cross the country, got divided among themselves in their quest to couple their socio-economic status with the political power under the nationalist banner. The mayor of al-Mahalla Nu`man Pasha al-A`sar, who was big landlord and money lender, quickly split from al-Wafd and joined the Constitutional Liberals Party. The latter supported al-A`sar's bid for the Parliamentary elections against the Wafd candidate Haydar al-Shishini. Al-Shishini won the 1924 round and lost for al-A`sar in the 1925 election.

While the elite of al-Mahalla got involved in the national politics competing over political power, the mass population got involved in it with a mixed communal, class and nationalist impulses. In the Wafd candidates from al-Shishini family, the people of al-Mahalla found representatives of their complex layers of identity and consequently they readily voted for them and assured their parliamentary seat in every relatively free election. Al-Shishini family traces its origin in al-Mahalla back to the fifteenth century and lived until early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the heart of the core medieval town.<sup>605</sup> Even when they moved to the rising elite neighborhood in Muhib Street, their first parliamentary

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<sup>603</sup> al-Sharqawi and Rajab, *al-Mahalla al-Kubra: tarikh wa-shakhsiyat*, 19- 20.

<sup>604</sup> For Wafd activism and support among people of the town in 1920 see `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 588 "Inithkhabat, 1924- 1944" [Elections, 1924- 1944]. See also Nur al-Din, *al-Hayatu al-Wataniyya*.

<sup>605</sup> Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Inba` al-ghumr bi-abna` al-`umr*, 470. Nur al-Din, *al-Hayatu al-Wataniyya*, 39.

candidate Haydar al-Shishini kept his old palace in Suq al-Laban adjacent to Zuhayr Mosque. In his early youth, Haydar, a European trained physician, joined the Nationalist Party along with the head of the family Mahmud Bey Al-Shishini.<sup>606</sup> In addition to the political association with what was considered the militant nationalist party, Haydar was the son-in-law of the National Party's leader Muhammad Farid. With the 1919 Revolution, he joined the Wafd Party and under its banner he easily won al-Mahalla's seat in the first parliamentary election in 1924. The first parliament was quickly dismissed after Sirdar Sir Lee Stack was assassinated and the Wafd government led by Sa`d Zaghlul resigned. In the 1925 election, al-Mahalla's mayor Nu`man Pasha al-A`sar was Haydar's opponent representing the Constitutional Liberal Party. Haydar enjoyed the popular support, while al-A`sar enjoyed the endorsement of the CLP government under Isma`il Sidqi. Announcing the latter as the winner, allegedly with wide scale fraud, triggered a huge wave of popular anger.<sup>607</sup> The angry masses roved streets shouting "batil, maghshush, muzawwar", illegitimate, cheated, fraud. They attacked the police station causing serious damage to its fence, in what contemporary press called the Mahalla Intifada.<sup>608</sup> Haydar and many other Wafdi figures were jailed with charge of causing destruction and urging the public to commit violent protest. Meanwhile, he continued enjoying massive support of the people, which made them vote for his brother Ahmad Bey al-Shishini in the parliamentary election that was held while Haydar was imprisoned. Petitions from all classes asking King Fu`ad to free him never stopped until he was free in July 1926 with the mediation of the Wafd leaders Sa`d Pasha Zaghlul and

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<sup>606</sup> For a brief biography of Haydar and his family see Nur al-Din, *al-Hayatu al-Wataniyya*, 38-57 and 79-155.

<sup>607</sup> Abdin archive, Mahfazah 508 (Iltimasat al-ifrag `ann masjunin jama`i) [Collective petitions to release prisoners].

<sup>608</sup> *Al-Itihad*, April 2, 1925. In his work on the peasantry protests, an Egyptian historian mistakenly cites these troubles as a peasant movement. Sayyid `Ashmawi, *al-Fallahun wa al-Sulta*, 71. The court records and petitions to the Royal Palace revealed that participants in this intifada were urban *Mahallawiyya*, not peasants. Many of them were identified as *effendi*, weavers, or occupying an urban profession.

`Adli Pasha Yakin.<sup>609</sup> The town received him as a hero and several festive were held on his honor. Despite this popularity, the experience of two years in jail seemed to take toll on him. Haydar moved to Cairo where he opened a clinic. To show his commitment to the community of al-Mahalla, he publicized that her would receive patient from al-Mahalla for lower or no charge.

Relations between al-Shishini family and the people of the town was continuation of centuries-long tradition of patronage relations and deep-rooted sense of localism mixed with modern populist nationalism. The family enjoyed its historical status among the population due to its closeness to rulers in pre-modern Egypt and excelling in religious science. The medieval biographer Abu Hajar al-`Asqalani reported that `Ali Waliyy al-Din bin Taqyy al-Din bin Qasim bin `Abd al-Rahman bin `Abdullah bin Muhammad bin `Abd al-Qadir al-Shishini, the resident of al-Mahalla was the *nadim* of the Sultan al-Ashraf Abu al-Nasr Birsbay al-Duqmaqi and the Sultan appointed him *Nazir* for the holy shrines in Hijaz.<sup>610</sup> In modern times they coupled their traditional religious status with modern European education. Land and cotton wholesale trade were their source of wealth. Many of them moved to Cairo to occupy high positions as bureaucrats and professors, but they never cut off their relations with the town and continued owning land there.<sup>611</sup> Those who stayed in the town coupled their nationalist inclination with the commitment to the community through generous donations for public projects such as the Weaving School. After all, they established their prestigious social

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<sup>609</sup> Abdin archive, Mahfazah 508 "Iltimasat al-ifrag `ann masjunin jama`i" [Petitions to release prisoners] and Mahfazah 588 "Intikhabat 1924- 1944" [Elections, 1924- 1944]. Nur al-Din, *al-Hayatu al-Wataniyya*, 97.

<sup>610</sup> Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Inba` al-ghumr*, 470. Nur al-Din, *al-Hayatu al-Wataniyya*, 39

<sup>611</sup> Among those who moved to Cairo, Mahmud al-Shishini who was a professor of electric engineering at Fu`ad University, currently Cairo University. He was also a member of the Supreme Council of Public Work and submitted a report to the parliament in 1947 about generating electricity at Aswan Dam.

status and connection with the modern elite in the Muhib Street and kept their popular social base in the traditional neighborhood of Suq al-Laban.

### **Nationalism, Communalism and Contested Discourse**

The 1944 election was an interesting test for communal identity versus nationalist modernization discourse where the earlier proved the absolute triumphant. When Sadiq Ibrahim, one of the top administrators of Company decided to run the parliamentary election against 'Ali al-Shishini, polarization between the "authentic" al-Mahalla community, *abna' al-Mahalla al-usala'*, versus the Company, as an outsider entity, was clear cut. Upon his return from a training program funded by the Company in Europe, Ibrahim joined the Company as a technical manager in 1928. Although he had lived in the town for sixteen years by the time of election, he knew that being an outsider was his weakness. He was right indeed. Communal solidarity assured the popular vote for the *Mahallawiyya* candidate although the class division between the notable candidate from al-Shishini family and the mass voters was very obvious. Since opening the town, and entire Egypt, to the global economy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, notables of al-Mahalla were growing to be more westernized. They lived in the elite neighborhood of Muhib along with the rich foreign investors and bankers. Socio-economically and even culturally, they were closer to the Company's candidate than to the mass voters coming from Suq al-Laban and Sandifa. However the latter felt strong communal solidarity with "the genuine son of their town" against "the outsider". Although Sadiq Ibrahim, who was highly educated and along with administrators of the Company, was not subject to the *Shirkawiyya* stigma that was only imposed on workers, he was casted during the election campaign as *gharraba*, alien and even *shirkawi*, a company man. What made his situation more difficult was that he represented the government, while al-Shishini represented, as always, the Wafd Party with its majority support. Voters rallied around *Mahallawiyya*

candidate, who was a big landlord and capitalist cotton merchants, against what they saw as the threat of an encroaching outsider on their community who was trying to represent the town nationally. In his effort to approach people of al-Mahalla, Ibrahim had a mosque built.<sup>612</sup> This effort did not bring him closer to *Mahallawiyya*. From early morning in the election day, *Mahallawiyya* mobilized to cast the vote and prevented workers from voting. The company's candidate had succeeded in registering up to male 6,000 workers as voters in al-Mahalla.<sup>613</sup> The rest of the workforce either did not enjoy the right to vote due to being women or under voting age or lived outside the city limits. The Company candidates also convinced the government to create separate polling places for workers close the Company "to protect workers from hostility of people of the town".<sup>614</sup> It was not difficult for *Mahallawiyya* masses to intimidate workers and return them home before they did vote. One of the Khalil notable family pretended to be the sheriff and threatened to arrest workers for carrying fraud voting cards. Unprepared for such challenge and uncertain about the authenticity of their cards, worker gave up and left. Many of those who got to vote voted for the *Mahallawiyya* candidates.<sup>615</sup> Those workers did not have real reason to associate themselves with the Company candidate neither on class or communal bases.<sup>616</sup> *Mahallawiyya* candidates prevailed. It was another situation where communal and class association was fluid, co-existed, and competing identities.

### **Exclusive Nationalism**

The success of the notables over the company candidate does not only demonstrate the power of the communal association, it also demonstrates the failure of

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<sup>612</sup> el-Messiri, "Class and Community", 240.

<sup>613</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 588 "Intikhabat, 1924- 1944" [Elections, 1924- 1944].

<sup>614</sup> Ibid.

<sup>615</sup> el-Messiri, "Class and Community", 240.

<sup>616</sup> For the grudge workers felt toward Sadiq Ibrahim, the Company's candidate, see chapter two in this study.

the Company's nationalist discourse on the local level. The Company and its administrators who won the heart and mind of the nationalists outside al-Mahalla starting with the King and cabinets to *effendiyya*, failed to make a case before the people of al-Mahalla. The judges who gave the striking workers and the stealing guard nationalist discourses on how the Company embodied the national modernization and independence were not alone in this vision. The intensified publicity for the Company as a modern national enterprise and authentically Egyptian Company, *sharika misriyyah samimah* was well received among nationalist, particularly *effendiyya*, who were looking forward national accomplishment. The Company became Mecca for young activists, mostly collage students, who took pride of and formed societies to support the Egyptian industry.<sup>617</sup> *Jama`at `Eid al-Watan al-Iqtisadi*, the Society of the Homeland Economic Day was one of them. The *effendiyya*'s endorsement of the Company was not generated totally from the nationalist discourse. During the wartime whilst the economic crisis was hitting most of the Egyptian population, the Company established material foundation for such support among *effendiyya*. Once a year, it granted state employees coupons to buy its products at fixed low prices, which must have helped those salaried *effendiyya* to partially cope with the hardship. The Company's coupons were sought after starting with clerks until vice ministers.<sup>618</sup> Thus, situating the Company in al-Mahalla dragged the town to a central position in the nationalist discourse and politics whose players were mostly from outside the town itself. Bank Misr, the owner of the Company, imposed the Company as a model for the national success in the Cairo press. Visiting the Company to show support and endorsement was a public relation piece for both the King Faruq and

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<sup>617</sup>*Al-Lata'if al-Musawara*, November 16, 1933, *al-Ahram*, December 12, 1937.

<sup>618</sup>The Archive of the Department of Corporation, Mahfazah 43, files 184/102/4m1, 184/ 102/ 4m2, 184/ 102/ 4m4 and 184/ 102/ 41m6 .

the Wafd leader Mustafa al-Nahas in their competition over the public support.<sup>619</sup> Delegations from India, Sudan and Turkey were invited to the Company and so were representatives of 18 countries participated in the international conference on cotton held in Cairo in April 1948. In his effort to outreach the surrounding Arab markets, Bank Misr endorsed the struggle for Arab causes in Palestine, Syria, Tunisia along with others. Nationalist leaders from these countries such as the Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatly, the Saudi Princes Khalid and Faysal bin `Abd al-`Aziz Al Saud, and the Palestinian leader Hajj Amin al-Husayni. During his visit to Egypt in 1953, the Lebanese president was invited to visit the mill. The Company donated cloth to old people in a Bruit orphanage and exhibited and donated some of its production in Damascus. In July 1946, the Company sent its scout team to a trip to visit Palestine, Lebanon and Syria, which cost the Company 1,000 EP. <sup>620</sup> On the eve of the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, workers of the Company had to fund the Arab nationalism politics of the Bank and the Company. The Company deducted one day wage from each worker as a mandatory “donation for Arabs in Palestine”. The donation compiled 6,000 EP and actually was given to help in entertaining the Egyptian army that was getting ready to leave to fight in Palestine.<sup>621</sup> Although we do not know how workers received the decision of losing one day wages, it is difficult to think they were happy about it. There was no indication that those workers cared much about Arab nationalism and the Palestinian cause seemed to be too far from them to care about while they had their own suffering.

The Company's administrating *effendiyya* had a particular idea about "nationalism" and class relations. *'Amil al-Mahalla*, the mouthpiece of the dependant

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<sup>619</sup> King Faruq visited al-Mahalla and the Company three times in one decade. His first visit was in December 1937, and then went back in July 1944. The last visit was in May 1948, few months after the closure of the Company due to labor strikes in September and October 1947.

<sup>620</sup>Yusuf `Ali Gunaid, “Ala Hamish Rihlat al-Shamm” [On the Margin of the Trip to the Levant], *'Amil al-Mahalla*, December 1947.

<sup>621</sup> *'Amil al-Mahalla*, June 1948.



union dominated by *effendiyya* turned itself into a Jew-hater and did not differentiate between Jews, Zionists, and communists.<sup>622</sup> Through their methods of bookkeeping and publications they adopted exclusive nationalism that put the Egyptian Jews out of its boundaries.<sup>623</sup> The Company's *effendiyya* tried to impose patriarchal relations between workers and the company where both of the patriarch (the Company's management) and the children (workers) belonged to the same nation with one agenda. According to their discourse, if the children/workers had a particular demand they should beg the merciful father/ management who would kindly consider these demands.<sup>624</sup> Tal`at Harb Pasha early on adopted that patriarchal discourse in its crude form. On the eve of King Faruq's visit to the Company, Harb urged workers to continue their regular work routine because "the King will judge you based on your discipline and obedience". He started his speech calling workers *awladi al-a`izza*, my dear children.<sup>625</sup> Al-Sawi Effendi Habib, the head of the Labor office that handled employers' files, was the head of the al-Mahalla chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood. Habib enjoyed full support of the company's administrators who chose him repeatedly in the union's board. He was open about his activism and led the MB rallies.<sup>626</sup> As an indication of his lavish life style, a newspaper depicted him as

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<sup>622</sup> For example for this discourse, see `Ali Maqlad, "al-Shuyu`iya wa al-Suhuniya" [Communism and Zionism], *Amil al-Mahalla* 12, August 1948, 2. Since then, that magazine repeatedly carried anti-Jewish remarks and jocks, particularly in a section entitled as "Idhak ma`a al-`ummal" [laugh with workers].

<sup>623</sup> In the list of its employees, Company's records singled out a white collar-worker named Yusuf `Abdu Yusuf, whose name could be from any religion, pointing at his ethnicity as "an Egyptian Jew". The purpose of this list was to show that the company was complying with the government regulations and the 1947 Corporation Law concerning the foreign employee, thus there was no need to point at any employee's religion. The Archive of the Department of the Corporations, Mahfazah 43.

<sup>624</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla* adopted that language in its entire editions particularly its 1<sup>st</sup> edition in November 1947.

<sup>625</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>626</sup> *Nahdat al-`Ummal*, June 25, 1946.

*Bey*, although he did not officially carry that title.<sup>627</sup> He was repeatedly accused of using his power over his subordinate to recruit followers and provoke Copts.<sup>628</sup>

The nationalist image of the company was also received well among the town's *effendiyya*. The local newspaper, *al-Nisr*, marked the inauguration day of the Company as a "historical day".<sup>629</sup> *Effendiyya* of the town wrote to the press in Cairo proposing including the Company in publication to promote tourism to Egypt.<sup>630</sup> The *effendiyya* of the company themselves wrote that the Company is the modern equivalent of the Pyramids as an ancient Egyptian achievement.<sup>631</sup> Students of al-Mahalla high School honored Tal`at Harb Pasha, the founder of the Company, by adopting his name for one of their sororities. The other sororities were named after the Pharaoh Ramsis and the founder of the Royal Family Muhammad Ali.<sup>632</sup> The school devoted the English section in its publication in 1938 to publicize the national success of the Company and to take pride of having it in al-Mahalla.<sup>633</sup> That celebratory image of the Company did not influence most of lower classes *Mahallawiyya*. Illiteracy, among other factors, was barriers between most people of the town the nationalist discourse.

People of the town had a firsthand experience with the hardship in which workers lived. To rehabilitate the Company's reputation after the 1947 strike, it tried to reach out the townsmen throughout donation for public projects such as building a hospital and a

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<sup>627</sup>*Nahdat al-`Ummal*, June 25, 1946.

<sup>628</sup>Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 553 "Iltimasat Tawa`if Diniyya December 19, 1906- May 6, 1947" [Petitions from religious sects, December 19, 1906- May 6, 1947 ]. See also "Hall sahih? Ila Sharikat Misr lil-Ghazl wa al-Nasij" [Is it true? To the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company], *al-`Amil*, October 24, 1946, 19.

<sup>629</sup> "Al-Yawm al-Mashhud bi al-Mahalla al-Kubra" [The remarkable day in al-Mahalla al-Kubra], *Al-Nisr*, May 22, 1930.

<sup>630</sup> *Al-Musawar* August 27, 1948.

<sup>631</sup>Halim Salib Musa, "Fi Misr sarhan" [Two landmarks in Egypt], *`Amil al-Mahalla*, April 1949, 18. See also "Min `amil ila ikhwanih... ghayra wa wataniyya" [From a worker to his fellows... patriotism and nationalism], *`Amil al-Mahalla* 9, 1949, 19.

<sup>632</sup> *Majallat Madrasat al-Mahalla al-Thanawiyya*, 1938.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*

clinic for TB and respiratory illnesses, and funding the expansion of the city's hospital. The Company also sold its old power stations to the local government, which helped in providing electricity to the newly established small mechanized factories and sold many of these factories its old machines and spare parts.<sup>634</sup> The Company also helped the municipality in public projects such as damping the Mallah Canal, removing the Delta railway, and contributing 7,000 EP out of 9,000 EP the cost of establishing a tunnel for pedestrians underneath the railway.<sup>635</sup> These projects were essentially important since the Canal and the Delta railway lost its important as transportation means with the expansion of auto roads and increase in the railroad lines. The Delta was a narrow railway that connected surrounding villages with downtown al-Mahalla and with the increase in the town population it became inefficient, too slow, and dangerous. While these projects were effective in winning endorsement of the local government and in propagating the company in the Cairo press, *Mahallawiyya* had a different view.<sup>636</sup> They held the company responsible for the spread of TB into the town, both among *Shirkawiyya* and *Mahallawiyya*.

In the eyes of the people of al-Mahalla, this dark and brutal side of the Company's presence outweighed modernization that it had inserted into the town's life. Although the Company introduced local industrialists with basic expertise, machinery, and electricity power that facilitated their transformation to mechanization, large local professional groups possessed reasons to hate that company. Handloom weavers detested the company whenever they failed to have access to its quality yarn at fixed price, in addition to looking at it as a gigantic competitor. Textile salesmen complained whenever their bids to

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<sup>634</sup>*Sijil tarikhi* and oral history.

<sup>635</sup>*Amil al-Mahalla*, April 1949.

<sup>636</sup>The municipality held a "thank you" party for the head of the Company `Abd al-Rahman Hamada Pasha in 1949 for helping out with these projects. "Baladiyyat al-Mahallat Tukarim `Abd al-Rahman Hamada Basha," *Amil al-Mahalla*, April 1949, 8.

buy and distribute the Company's products were not accepted. After giving up on the competition against the Company, more *Mahallawiyya* merchants and salesmen grew dependant on the Company's products of yarn and cloth. Thanks to the huge amount of products with defects, dealing with defected and small pieces of cloth called *fadalat*, or leftovers, emerged as a new type of trade. These products were supposed to be much cheaper than the standard products, so they were sought after by the poor public, particularly during wartime when the cost of living skyrocketed. *Fadalat* dealers were totally dependent on the Company, since the handlooms never produced such cloth on large scale.<sup>637</sup> The more people of the town grew dependant on the Company's products, the more people blamed the company whenever their business witnessed setbacks or they failed to conclude a deal with the company. While they blamed, they revealed that they were subject to the nationalist publicity of the Company. They employed the nationalist image the Company was imposing about itself to show what they thought to be contradiction. In their petitions to the Royal Palace they complained that they were treated by the "Egyptian nationalist Company" in a much worse fashion than they were treated by foreign producers.<sup>638</sup> Some went further and showed the exploitative aspects of the Company and how it overpriced its products, and consequently added burden on their business and their customers. This comparison between the Company and foreign producers, particularly al-Ahliyya Company in Alexandria was also echoed in workers complains.<sup>639</sup>

Workers tried to override the nationalist discourse for their causes whenever it applied. Radio sets in coffee shops were a major source of such discourse for workers, who were mostly illiterate and too tired to engage in major partisan politics. Al-Mahalla

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<sup>637</sup>For the history of the *Fadalat* trade, see `Ashur, *Sina`atu wa Tijaratu al-Aqmisha fi Misr*, 79- 82.

<sup>638</sup>Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 475 "Iltimasat Tujjar" [Merchants' petitions].

<sup>639</sup>Ibid and The Archive of the Department of Corporation, Mahfazah 43.

witnessed an increase in coffee houses with radio sets in 1940s. They used the nationalist discourse to show that the company betrayed the nationalist cause and employed and empowered foreigners. Female and male workers of the Wool Factory voiced such complain in their petition to the Royal Court in January 1951 against the British manager of the factory Mr. Parkinson.<sup>640</sup> Skillful workers complained that their skills and expertise, which would have been appreciated by foreign companies, were ignored by the nationalist company. Some complained that the administration of the Company favored foreign employers on the account of Egyptian workers.<sup>641</sup> Whenever a foreign administrator made an unfavorable decision, workers' grief over losing their payment got mixed with their national sentiments and accused the foreign administrator of intentionally trying to destroy the national Egyptian industry and to promote the foreign competing production. In 1955 when the Company hired a British Colonel named Taylor as an expert in the Wool factory for 2500 EP annual salary and 500 annual bonus, the union of the Company blamed the Company for its policies of continuing the hiring of foreigners for with salaries and ignoring its duty in creating reliable Egyptian technicians to replace them. The union claimed that the British Colonel had served the British Army in India for 16 years and accused him of excluding his Egyptian colleagues at the Company. To prove its point that foreigners never kept loyal to the Egyptian Company since its establishment, the union pointed at a history of foreign employees blackmailing the Company and seeking higher payment to cooperate whenever it experienced "hard shake". It described the relation between the company and its foreign employees as

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<sup>640</sup>The Company replied to the Royal Court's inquiry that Parkinson had been a good technical manager of that factory since it was funded in 1938 and he did not make any decision concerning labor or production policies. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 493 "Iltimasat `ummal jama'i, 1938- 1952" [Petitions of Collective Workers: 1938-1952] and Mahfazah 492 "Iltimasat `ummal jama'i, 1910- 1937" [Collective Workers: 1910- 1937,] file 5.

<sup>641</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 541 "Iltimasat ta`widat, 1908- 1952" [Petition for damages: 1908-1952].

“humiliation that Egyptians had to pay for out of our dignity”.<sup>642</sup> A more sophisticated complaint blamed the Company for what they considered its failure in developing Egyptian expertise to replace foreigners.<sup>643</sup> It is worth mentioning that 2,5% of the workforce of the Company were foreigners and enjoyed 10% of the wages and salaries of the entire employees in addition to free luxurious housing and other benefits.<sup>644</sup> Again this agitation outweighed the fact that the Company helped in different ways the transformation to the mechanized textile industry. The Company sold its old machines to local weavers looking forward to catching up with the change in the craft. Those who mechanized their factories hired company’s workers with their expertise and trainings.<sup>645</sup>

The gap between *Mahallawiyya* and *Shirkawiyya* started to fade away at the beginning of 1950s and almost disappeared after nationalizing the Company in 1960. With upgrading the Company’s machinery in early 1950s, its workforce dropped drastically. The Company adopted a hiring policy that gave priority to people of the town and children of retiring workers. Thus, the number of new workers coming from outside the town decreased. Nasser’s regime guaranteed more benefits and higher living standard for workers. Meanwhile, the old *Shirkawiyya* became skilful industrial workers with reasonably high and steady income. They were able to afford establishing nuclear family and either they got married in their villages, which was more common, or intermarried with *Mahallawiyya*, they lived with their wives and children in the town and consequently grew social roots into the social life of al-Mahalla. Many of them became

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<sup>642</sup> The Archive of the Department of Corporations, Mahfazah 43.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid.

<sup>645</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi* and Oral history.

more grounded in *Mahallawiyya* urban life style. In the ever fluid and shifting identity, they became more integrated in the community of al-Mahalla.

While the national discourse prevailed with the spread of mass media, particularly TV and radios, carrying Nasser's speeches to the masses, the Company played a role in emphasizing the local identity of the people of al-Mahalla rallied around the Company's soccer team in national competitions. As part of its prestigious stature, the Company established a soccer team in 1937.<sup>646</sup> In 1940, a sport committee was founded to oversee several teams including wrestling, weightlifting, basketball and tennis. It hired Salih Muhammad, who had participated in weightlifting in Berlin Olympic Games 1936, to coach the Company's weightlifting team. The Company's teams did well in tournaments among Bank Misr companies. But it was not until the soccer team defeated the Royal Club in al-Mansura in 1948 that the people of al-Mahalla started to pay attention to that team. Soccer was getting popular among the Egyptian populations cross classes. Broadcasting games on radio throughout the 1950s increased the popularity of the game and the public were divided into groups of fans of different teams. Radio sets were common in coffee shops in al-Mahalla in 1940s carrying games and other sorts of entertainment to the local audience. Transistor radio sets that were cheap and mobile became popular in 1950s among lower class Egyptians. Broadcasted soccer games were one of the strongest impulses for having these sets. It allowed local individuals to follow up news of their favorite teams. When the Company's team scored well in the national competitions, the people of al-Mahalla started to take pride of it and dropped "Misr Company" from its name calling it al-Mahalla team. Arousing identity around a sport team was not restricted to al-Mahalla. The Ahli club, the national Club, symbolized the Egyptian nationalism in the face of British and other foreign clubs in Cairo. The irony of

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<sup>646</sup> *Amil al-Mahalla* 3, December 1947, 12- 13.

al-Mahalla case is sport activities that were launched as a symbol of modernity, enhanced the local identity among the people of the town. Fans of Cairo teams mocked players of al-Mahalla by calling them *fallahin*, peasants, in the same derogatory fashion that *Mahallawiyya* had used against *Shirkawiyya*. Interestingly, the people of al-Mahalla proudly adopted the same term, *fallahin*, as a nickname for their team in national competitions.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Work, Property, and Gender Dynamic**

#### **Poor Women Making al-Mahalla Modernity**

The battle between the rising Egyptian nationalist bourgeoisie and European economic and political domination spawned the Misr Company in al-Mahalla and unleashed unsettling transformations in the town's social and economic life. Chief among these changes was the immigration into the town of thousands of peasants hired to work in the mill. The unprecedented population growth both created new demands and opened new opportunities. The people of al-Mahalla responded actively and positively to these developments, taking advantage of the immigrants' demand for housing, clothing, food, and modest types of entertainments and hangouts. Noticeably, women of the popular classes participated in ways that allowed their socio-economic self-empowerment. They became industrial workers at the Company and smaller textile factories, invested in workers' lodging, and set up small businesses such as coffee shops and food carts. In doing so, women in al-Mahalla were venturing into new territories outside their homes to satisfy economic needs for themselves and the community. They were seeking neither the self-fulfillment nor the gender emancipation called for by the educated elite Cairene

women of the day.<sup>647</sup> Working outside the home and investing in property ownership were nothing new for the women of al-Mahalla, or across Egypt. But while more women were performing such investments and works during the exceptional population growth associated with modern large scale industrialization they pursued a new hybrid gender role and actively participated in rapid social transition. To support their kin and to stave off poverty, they remained dutiful mothers, wives, and daughters in the family. Becoming economically independent, those women were liberated from the repressive patriarchal standards of community and kin. Many of them, female workers and vendors particularly, came from the countryside and lived by themselves in the city away from their families, at least until they got married. My argument on hybrid gender role challenges the limitations presented by the two models on which historians rely to interpret the history of working women; the “liberation” and the “family economy” models.<sup>648</sup> The working women of al-Mahalla were neither powerful nor powerless. In negotiating with other social forces, including male households, a patriarchal culture, the state and the community, they were sometimes willful and at other times defeated. In both cases they played an active role and tried to take advantage of developments and changes in the town to obtain socio-economic power.

This chapter focuses on three groups of lower class women whose economic activities were associated with and contributed to the exceptional experience of al-Mahalla in rapid urbanization and industrialization. It traces how women of the popular

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<sup>647</sup> For the history of the Egyptian feminist movement see Beth Baron, *The women's awakening in Egypt: culture, society, and the press* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) and *Egypt as a woman*, part II in particular.

<sup>648</sup> Based on studies of the western women, the “liberation model” suggests that economically independent women have greater liberty than economically dependent ones. See Edward shorter, *The making of the modern family* (New York: Basic Books, 1975). Meanwhile, the “family economy” model emphasizes continuity rather than change in the role of working women inside the family. It argues “neither the emotional nor the economic realities of working class life prepared women to assume a role independent of the family loyalty. Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women adrift: independent wage earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xxi.

classes negotiated both the state and the community. Those groups are landladies who invested in workers' lodgings, female industrial workers, and vendors in marketplaces and street peddlers. Despite their lower status and limited financial sources, those women through active responses to needs of the fast growing community sought and created jobs and a source of income for themselves. They challenged the power of the state and the cultural norms of their community, managed masculine domains and very often undermined the traditional superior status of male in their household and set up themselves as an important player in the newcomers' urban experience. Meanwhile, they pursued their family life as daughters, mothers, and, sometimes, wives.

The women of al-Mahalla were far from the stereotypical image of women in the Middle East as segregated and locked in their homes. Islamic cultural norms were followed, but in a manner consistent with local understandings of those norms.<sup>649</sup> Only women in elite religious families were subjected to treatment like being locked in their homes and not being allowed to talk to male guests unless hidden behind a curtain.<sup>650</sup> Aside from these few women, others from all classes were interacting with the rest of the community as property owners, *waqf* managers, textile workers, vendors, midwives, health-care providers and prostitutes.

Table 5.1: Working men and women in al-Mahalla 1947.

Section	Agri-culture	Industry	Commerce	Personal services	Unclear/unproductive	Un-employed
F	2446	1379	604	32022	2522	6996
M	2670	25423	4206	2277	7319	5902
Total	5116	26802	4810	34299	9841	12898

<sup>649</sup> Afaf Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 22.

<sup>650</sup> Sijil al-Mahalla al-Kubra Shari`a Court from 23 May 1944 to 22 August 1944, *Ahkam Juz`iyya*, vol. 3.

Source: Population Census of Egypt 1947, part 1, Vol. 12 Mudiriyyat al-Gharbiyya. 651

From table 5.1 we find women in the mid-twentieth century were active in all economic sectors. However, domestic services had traditionally been a feminine job. Women from all ages, particularly children and unmarried women took up that profession. The largest group worked in other people's homes for cleaning, cooking, taking care of children...etc. In most cases, those maids had to live with their employers, which made them subject to physical and sexual abuses.<sup>652</sup> They ranked the lowest among even domestic servants. Socially, only prostitutes were lower in status. Married women who took up domestic services tended to specialize in providing particular services such as doing laundry, baking bread, breastfeeding babies...etc. These jobs, such as doing laundry and baking bread, were performed for a few hours during the day and could even be done in the house of the service providers. These women provided their services to so many families that they could not be counted as a personal servant of any one family.

Rapid developments associated with the establishment of the Company and population growth opened doors for empowering women from the lower classes rather than having domestic services as a sole choice. Joining the company's workforce and taking advantage of workers' need for cheap housing, food, clothing, and coffee shops, al-Mahalla's lower class women were able to gain power, challenge the state, and even undermine the status of males in their household as they transformed themselves into house owners, vendors, and wage-earners. Unlike the rich elite women who enjoyed high status based mainly on their familial affiliation, lower class landladies and female

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<sup>651</sup>Maslahat al-Ihsa` wal- Ti`dad, *Ti`dad Sukkan al-Mamlaka al-Misriyyah 1947*, part 1, Vol. 12 Mudiriyyat al-Gharbiyya (Cairo: al-Matba`a al-Amiriya, 1953).

<sup>652</sup>Examples for maids who were subject of severe physical abuse of their female employers see misdemeanor 1938, 6776/ 2043.

workers and vendors strengthened their positions by working, investing in and managing properties and small businesses. Some women were creative in taking advantage of the population growth and the intensive daily movement between both banks of the *Bahr al-Mallah* Canal. For example two widows ran a ferry boat, *ma`adiyyah*, between the two banks.<sup>653</sup> Many women also took advantage of the expansion in roads and railways and sought different types of trade between the town and the countryside. They not only traded in eggs, butter, milk, and other rural areas products, they also took kerosene, cloth, sugar and tea to sell in surrounding villages. Some women took up labor contracting as a profession. They recruited laborers from villages and rode with them in trains to other villages and towns where those laborers worked in agriculture fields or construction sites.

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None of these women possessed sufficient education or sophistication to write or dictate her experiences or perspective. At the same time, they were mostly left out of the official documents and were undercounted in the population censuses. This was not only because those documents were notoriously inaccurate, but also because those women and their community did not appreciate the importance of their contributions and consequently did not bother to inform those who collected data for censuses and other official functions. In official documents and censuses women tend to be reported based

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<sup>653</sup> Because the two women did not follow the appropriate procedure or were granted permission for such services, they were fined and their service was suspended in February 1948. Tanta Appeal Court record 1948/ 7559/ 2218.

<sup>654</sup> Among women labor contractor there was Fatima `Ali al-Dali who recruited workers in al-Mahalla to harvest cotton in the 1945 season in the nearby village al-Mu`tamadiyyah. The field clerk, *Katib al-Zira`a*, refused to hire one of her recruited workers named `Abd al-Muhsin Muhammad al-Dib because he was known to be a "thief". Al-Dib stayed with Fatima until the end of the day. While they were back to the town by the Delta train, narrow railway, he stole her wallet and ran away. He was punished with one and a half month in jail. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7795/ 3389. Another female labor contractor was `Aziza Hassan al-Tiryagi who agreed with another male labor contractor named al-Birins Mirsal al-Sudani to recruit laborers to work in the 1937 cotton season. He was supposed to pay her 3 EP, the 50 % profit of employing those workers. When he paid her only 1,4 EP she sued him and won the case. Al-Mahalla Civic Court Record 1939/ 6612/ 2503.

on their marital status rather than their professions or occupations. In al-Mahalla's court records, for example, very often female defendants were described as virgin, widow, divorced or a wife of a given male, even when they were tried for professional misconduct. Because those women did not have any sort of formal education and of course did not hold any government job, many of them did not think of themselves as working women, with the exception of the company workers. Many of the female industrial workers tended to deny their professional occupation after they quit and got married. Socially, landladies could have been proud of achieving the cherished goal of acquiring property ownership. Meanwhile, they might have understated the fact that they generated income from these properties to avoid real estate taxes or to be subject to construction regulations and other legal procedures. Similarly, female peddlers and vendors also tended to understate their professional status whilst dealing with the government to avoid paying taxes and fees and to avoid being asked to acquire official permissions to operate. Some women might have even been ashamed of their jobs. Spending most of the daytime in the street made them subject to social stigma and to be seen as sexually loose. However, women peddlers and vendors were not at the bottom of the social ladder, a place reserved for domestic servants and then prostitutes.

Despite the lack of sources that carried their own voices, the available sources, particularly court records, preserved parts of women's experiences. Because those records, by their nature, document troubled situations rather than normal daily social interaction, and because they do not reflect those women's point of view, we have to read against the grain. Censuses were used here as indicative rather than a source of accurate figures. When censuses mention women under a particular job, it indicates that women were noticeable in that field enough to be categorized.

## Female Owners before the Company Factor

The first group to be discussed in detail here is lower class landladies during this period of rapid urbanization and social transformation. These poor women only became property owners because they took advantage of the high demand for cheap housing and were willing to replace their copper pots, little pieces of jewelry, and miniscule savings with ownership of a shack or a hut. In these shacks they assured lodging for themselves and their families and secured income through renting off the rest of the place to the company workers and poor newcomers. I argue that these lower class landladies played an important role in shaping new workers' outlook and experience towards urban life, led the spatial growth of the town in all directions, undermined the agricultural economy in favor of real estate investment, and challenged the power of the state in the spheres of urbanization and urban control.

Before founding the Company, investment in real state had always been attractive to women with financial resources due to being easier and relatively safer than investing in business. A list of farming hamlets named after their female owners around al-Mahalla reveals how rich women invested in farm land ownership.

Table 5.2: Farming hamlets named after female owners and the population of each hamlet.

hamlet-owner	Inhabitants	hamlet-owner	Inhabitants
Princess Shuwikar	486	<i>Sitt</i> Guayn Hanim	40
Munira	95	Mary	145
<i>Sitt</i> Fatima hanim Khidr	8	<i>Sitt</i> Oyl Nabilsı	106
Zaynab Hanim	177	Tawhida <i>Hanim</i>	31
Al-Sitt 'Agbana	57	Bahiyya <i>Hanim</i>	86
Hanim al-Shawarby	9	Shams Nur <i>Hanim</i>	45
'Atqa al-Badrawi	89	Wife of Abd al-Qadir Pasha	74
Mary Yusuf Salim	24	Fatimah <i>Hanim</i> `Ismat	52
Fatima <i>Hanim</i> al-Naggari	10	<i>Sitt</i> Zaynab al-Qabbaniyya	114
Fatima al-Shamiyya	25	<i>Sitt</i> Mustafiyyah Butrus	301
<i>Sitt</i> Amina Wahbi Girgis	19	Hamidah	281

<i>Sitt</i> Mubarak	190	Princess Bahiyyah	267
<i>Sitt</i> Tafida Hassan Taha	23		

Source: population censuses of Egypt 1947, part 1, Vol. 12

Table 5.2 shows that women from different religions and ethnicities owned large farming lands where many peasant families lived and worked. Two of them were members of the Royal family with the title “princess”. Almost all of them came from affluent families and were called “*hanim*” or “*Sitt*”, meaning Lady in Turkish and Arabic respectively. Some of those upper class women were living in Cairo as part of the absentee landowners phenomena. For example, when *al-Sitt* Dawlat *Hanim* Hafiz who lived in Cairo was sued by a neighboring landowner in al-Mahalla because her tenant’s practices caused harm to the neighbor’s land, Dawlat appealed the 5 EP damage. Dawlat was found to not be responsible for any of her tenants’ practices.<sup>655</sup> Not all these women inherited their lands. The list identified a landowning woman with her profession as a scale operator, *Qabbaniyya*. That profession, which generated a great deal of wealth, particularly to those who were specialized in weighing cotton, was dominated by men. In 1947 there was one female scale operator in al-Mahalla for 54 males. However, this indicates that some women were able to accumulate wealth through lucrative professions and not all women possessed land through inheritance. Upper and middle class women in al-Mahalla managed endowments, *waqfs*, including residential, commercial and industrial properties. Some of them gained control over *waqfs* after male managers of these *waqfs* proved incapable of performing fair and successful management.<sup>656</sup> Being a female did

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<sup>655</sup> Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1935/ 6548/ 42.

<sup>656</sup> Bahiyya `Abd al-Rahman KafI succeeded in replacing her brother Muhammad in managing their father’s *waqf* in 1933. Bahiyya proved that her brother mismanaged the *waqf*, which included two weaving shop floors rented by Muhammad Amin Labshitin. Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1935/ 6548/ 123. Another female *waqf* manager was Khadra Sha`ban `Attiyya, who managed *Waqf* Hajj `Ali `Attiyya. Khadra sued



not discredit women seeking to manage endowments although very often they had to deal with male tenants and employees. As far as civic court records reveal, female beneficiaries' control over their inherited real estate was never disputed on gender grounds. Women also managed religious *waqfs* that supported mosques. Those female managers made dealt directly with Muslim `ulama and others who served these mosques.<sup>657</sup> We see a close pattern among Jews in al-Mahalla. A wife named Fortunée Mas`uda became the guardian of her husband, *Khawaga* Yusuf Mas`uda and managed all his properties and businesses, although there were males in the family, including the husband's brothers.<sup>658</sup> She dealt with tenants and debtors and employees.

Property ownership was personal and absolute. However, some women of the elite religious families tended to pass the responsibility of managing their property to a male in their household.<sup>659</sup> This was not the case across all classes. It was common for women from all classes to manage their properties on their own. To maximize revenues, enlarge their properties and minimize any damage, they did not hesitate to challenge relatives, neighbors, and the state. They employed both civic and common laws in addition to the Islamic Shari`a to win their case. For example, when the late Muhammad al-Hanafi died he left a 120- square meter house and a huge debt to his beneficiaries. The civic court granted the house to his Christian money-lender Salim Shnuda to pay off the debt. Nafisa Sha`ban al-Hanafi went to court in this case and submitted documents proving that she was the actual owner of half of the house. What she submitted were the documents of a Shar`i waqf, or religious endowment, signed by the late Muhammad al-

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her tenant al-Dusuqi Ahmad `Ayid for overdue rent worth 110 piaster. Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1935/ 6548/ 17.

<sup>657</sup>The manager of both mosques of al-Tuba and al-Ghamri was a woman named Zarifa `Abdullah al-Sihli. Her family was known in the textile trade. Shaykh Yusuf Muhammad Abu Yusuf, the Imam of the al-Ghamri Mosque sued her in 1938 for his overdue salary. She was a tough negotiator and instead of paying 8,4 EP, his full annual salary, she agreed only to pay him 4 EP. Al-Mahalla Civic Court 1938/ 6610/ 351.

<sup>658</sup> Al-Mahalla Civic Court 1944-1948.

<sup>659</sup> Sijil al-Mahalla al-Kubra Shari`a Court from 23 May 1944 to 22 August 1944, Ahkam Juz`iyya, vol. 3.

Hanafi in 15 January 1910. According to her, she owned half of the house and the other half belonged to Muhammad al-Hanafi's beneficiaries who were four sons and two daughters. Shnuda argued that these documents were not for the disputed house, but the legal expert refuted that argument. Then, Shnuda argued that Nafisa's share was her inheritance from the late Father Sha'ban al-Hanafi who passed away 50 years earlier. According to him Nafisa's ownership rights had ended after 33 years, meaning 17 years earlier. The court recognized Nafisa's ownership rights because the late Muhammad al-Hanafi, who owed Shnuda's debt, had recognized Nafisa's ownership rights and this recognition was more recent.<sup>660</sup>

Women did not only own farming land and residential properties, they also owned factories and commercial properties, though they were less than men in this type of real estate ownership. Those female owners usually tended to rent these properties for others to operate and only gained income through rent. Renting commercial properties was not always risk free. Some of those landladies had to take their tenants to the court for overdue rent.<sup>661</sup> Some of these non-residential properties were gained through inheritance. *Al-Sitt* Fatima al-Bastawisi Ahamad Zaghlul who lived in Abu al-Qasim Street and her minor children inherited a carpenter's workshop consisting of a 312 sq. meter shop in al-`Umariyya Street. She sold them to Hassan Effendi Dawud in Abu al-Qasim Street for 50 piaster a meter.<sup>662</sup> There were women who owned and operated industrial properties such as Ihsan Hamuda Tawakul who owned a weaving factory and employed male workers.<sup>663</sup>

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<sup>660</sup> Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1933/ 5828 and 1935/ 6548/ 336.

<sup>661</sup> Kamil Effendi Abu `Arab owed 3 EP worth 6 month rent to the landlady of his shop, Zakiyyah *Hanim* Muhammad Siyam *Bey*. He claimed he paid her 2 EP without receipts. Zakiyyah, who was obviously from a notable family, won the case. Civic Court 1935/6550/1320.

<sup>662</sup> Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1935/ 6548/ 452.

<sup>663</sup>The weaver Sa`d Ahmad Abu Gabal who worked for Ihsan Hamuda Tawakul stole the yarn. He was sentenced with one month in jail. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7795/ 3636.

Employing communal traditions and common laws to challenge male neighbors and family members/ community was the way of 'Adila Mahmud Saqr to win her right to buy an adjacent house to hers in al-'Abbasi according to the legal principle of *al-Shuf'a*, right of pre-emption that allowed her to match the final purchase price of the house. Despite the owner of the house trying a variety of stratagems to prevent his neighbor, Adila from acquiring the property, she was still able to lay claim to the house based on her having made an official claim during the legal period mentioned in Decreto (Decree 23/3/1901).<sup>664</sup> Women owners were not reluctant to go after the local government for their rights. Hafiza Muhammad Salah sued the principality for confiscating 19 meters of her property for only 2 pounds compensation. The court estimated the value of the land at 9.50 EP plus 1.50 for the buildings.<sup>665</sup> The heavy demand on housing associated with rapid population growth in al-Mahalla during 1930s and 1940s unleashed rapid construction. Profits accumulated in the hands of some *Mahallawiyya* out of the black market trade, particularly in yarn, allowed many of them to turn to real estate investment. Women participated in this movement, not only as investors and property owners, but also brokers and developers/ contractors. At least 46 women stepped into that male dominated sphere and worked as contractors. There were 895 male contractors.<sup>666</sup>

### **The neo-Landladies**

Although a few thousand workers recruited to work at the Company came from such close areas that they were able to commute everyday to work, the vast majority of workers had to reside inside al-Mahalla. In addition to workers, thousands came to al-Mahalla seeking opportunities in the booming town. The population of the town

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<sup>664</sup> Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1935/ 6550/ 1289.

<sup>665</sup> Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1935/ 6550/ 1451.

<sup>666</sup> Population census of Egypt 1947, part 1, Vol. 12.

increased from 45,642 in 1927 to 115,758 people in 1947. Only two decades after the establishment of the Company the town's population had increased two and a half times. Out of the 115,758 residents of the town, only 60,961 people considered al-Mahalla their permanent city of residence. However 54,791 people, more than 46% of the population, considered their permanent residence to be outside of the town.<sup>667</sup> That meant that at least half of the population of the town were staying in the town without their families and still kept a strong connection with their home villages.

Since the mid-1920s, al-Mahalla experienced a housing shortage, a problem that became more acute with the arrival of thousands of workers. Houses were so rare that tenants sometimes accepted to pay the down payment before houses were even constructed.<sup>668</sup> Rent became so high that people of the town formed a committee devoted to solving the problem. The committee sent petitions to the King and to the government officials asking for their intervention to regulate rent.<sup>669</sup> The housing problem expanded from the commercial and upper scale residential neighborhoods to all over the town. The cost of living and housing were so high and the town was so crowded that transferring government employees to al-Mahalla from other nearby towns was considered a severe punishment.<sup>670</sup> The Company accommodated its top administrators and highly skilled foreign workers in a few handsome villas and apartments on its premises. Although the management recognized how acute the housing problem was for the workers, the

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<sup>667</sup>Ibid.

<sup>668</sup> Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1926/ 3113.

<sup>669</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 473 "Iltimasat ahali fardi" [Petitions from individual citizens]. One petition signed by the president of "Rent Reduction Committee" Dr. Ibrahim Farhud and one petition signed by 178 merchants, civil workers, artisans and farmers of al-Mahalla. Those who signed were men and women, Christians, Muslims and Jews, Egyptians and non-Egyptians. Both petitions are dated on December 16, 1930.

<sup>670</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 411 "Iltimasat muwazafin fardi, 1927- 1940" [Petitions from individual employees 1927-1940]. In one petition an employee of the Municipality of al-Mahalla was asking to be sent back to his hometown, Tanta, because life in al-Mahalla was unbearable due to high living cost and rent.

Company completely overlooked the housing problem faced by tens of thousands of its Egyptian rank and file workers for more than two decades.<sup>671</sup> It took the Company two decades and two major labor strikes to pay attention to the living conditions of its workers. With huge help from the government it built a housing compound and gave it to its workers for rent starting in 1947. While the workforce of the Company was 27,000 workers, that compound housed only 560 families and 1500 singles.

Initially, the Company promised peasants who were recruited from outside the town to provide them with accommodation. What the company actually provided for its pioneer workers was permission to let them sleep in the Company's courtyards for a few weeks.<sup>672</sup> With the rapid increase in workers and the Company's need for expansion, the Company then made workers find houses on their own. Many workers slept inside bakeries, animal sheds, even in marketplaces, alleyways' corners, beside railway lines and by the banks of the canal.<sup>673</sup> The situation was difficult both for workers as well as for the state that needed to police the town's public spaces. Workers were being arrested for sleeping in open public places such as Bank Misr's warehouse and by the canal and railway as they were considered a threat to the town's safety and peace. <sup>674</sup> Those who spent their nights in public baths were regarded as more suspicious and were subject to punishment for being "vagabonds". <sup>675</sup> Another solution that very few workers resorted to was to build themselves kiosks of wood in slums around the Company such as `Izbat

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<sup>671</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>672</sup> al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 1, 28.

<sup>673</sup> Ibid., 28- 31 and al-Sa`id, *Arshif al-Yasar*, 284.

<sup>674</sup> For example, a policeman hit the worker Ahmad Mahrus and others who went to sleep next to the railroad on April 6, 1938. The worker was seriously injured and needed up to 20 days of treatment. Misdemeanor 1938, Case 899. Four workers aged between 11 and 13 were arrested on May 21, 1936 for sleeping in the shed of Bank Misr. Three of them stole 11 piaster from the fourth. Misdemeanor 1936 /6767/1762.

<sup>675</sup> Misdemeanor 1941/6788/357.

al-Salakhanh.<sup>676</sup> Spending nights in cheap hotels was not a better choice. The police raided these cheap hotels from time to time looking for thieves, drug dealers and other criminals.<sup>677</sup> A description of one of these hotels shows how little it offered workers for the higher rent. Many workers stayed in a hotel owned by the 25-year-old coffee-tender named Ahmad Ibrahim. Bedrooms in the three-story hotel were actually cabins made of wood without ceilings. A narrow corridor led to rooms. Rooms did not have beds, but there were wood bars fixed against the walls to form bunks just off the floor with mattresses thrown on them. The wall separating each two cabins had a window that opened onto both rooms allowing residents in both rooms to see what was happening in the other. The owner of the hotel had the right to go to each room every night to make sure that everyone spending the night there had paid his dues. Yet, residents had the right to receive their friends and fellow-workers as late as 11:00 pm.<sup>678</sup> The housing problem was so acute that some workers lived with their children in such hotels. <sup>679</sup>

The heavy demand for housing encouraged men and women from the lower classes to invest in cheap houses designed to lodge workers. The private ownership of houses was a pervasive, cherished goal, consonant with current social values and economic wisdom. <sup>680</sup> A home, which represented a high proportion of assets, could be converted readily into cash, and thus was insurance against difficult times. <sup>681</sup>

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<sup>676</sup> When the 35-year old worker al-Sayyid Bahlaq was taken to the court for building such a kiosk with no permission, he said he had to because there was no place to live and he was willing to apply for any required permissions. However, the court fined him 1 EP and decided the building to be demolished. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 3234.

<sup>677</sup>Hotels like al-Ahram, where some workers stayed, were so known to accommodate criminals that police raided it very frequent. Misdemeanor 1945, 7792, 1136 and 1152.

<sup>678</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1940/ 7444/ 894.

<sup>679</sup> For example, the 50-year old Company worker Muhammad `Ali Hassan lived with his child Salah in the Khidiwiyya Hotel. That hotle was located in the Mahatta Square. Misdemeanor 1940/ 686/1894/ 1907.

<sup>680</sup>For the attitude towards homeownership in pre-modern Middle East, see Abraham Marcus, "Men and Women and Property: Dealers in Real Estate in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Aleppo", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 26, No.2 (1983), 137-163.

<sup>681</sup> Marcus, "Men and Women and Property", 137-163.

Homeownership also carried the social advantage of emphasizing inclusion in the city's community. The social status of a family that could afford to live in the entire house with no need to offer a part of it for rent was even higher as reflected in the phrase, *sukkan bayt min babu*, or inhabitants of an entire house. This status was generated not only from dwelling in a larger space, but also from being able to protect their privacy. The influx of workers made investing in housing attainable and possible for women with limited capital. The ideal lodging for a worker was close to the Company, far from the hostile city residents, and as cheap as possible. Areas around the Company in the eastern parts of the town, such as `Izbat al-Salakhanah, Slaughterhouse Hamlet, `Izbat al-Sa`yda, Southern Egyptians' Hamlet, `Izbat Abu gahsha, Young Donkey Hamlet, were perfect locations for the new buildings geared toward accommodating workers. Quickly, houses to accommodate workers mushroomed in other hamlets and rural areas to the north, east and around the western edges of the city, such `Izbat al-Delta, `Izbat Raghil, `Izbat al-Ruz, `Izbat Khidr, `Izbat al-Ragabi, al-Manshiyyah al-Jadidah and Mahallat al-Burg. Areas on the outskirts of the core urban centers in all directions such as al-, Shawafi`iyya, Nukrat Sabha, and Di`bis witnessed rapid construction to meet workers' demand for lodging. Although some of these hamlets were far from the Company, they were also far from the urban neighborhoods and each group of workers with common geographical origins tended to concentrate in the same area. Even when workers had to penetrate the traditional neighborhoods, they clustered in particular areas to satisfy their need for security and protection. These rural areas provided workers with an environment close, if not similar, to their home villages. However, due to the intensive construction in workers' lodges, farming land in these areas faded away quickly and those hamlets became more like poor workers' slums and were incorporated into the urban boundaries.

Neither owning a home either as a residence or as an investment was unusual among women in al-Mahalla or the Middle East in general. Female home ownership was a continuation of social phenomena going back to the pre-industrial society. Whereas all women theoretically could own homes only upper class women had the necessary means to do so. The establishment of the Misr company al-Mahalla made home ownership attainable for lower class women. The best example here is the retired prostitute Hanim al-Khashshab who owned a house inhabited by Company workers in 1945, two years after the prostitution district was shut down and public prostitution in al-Mahalla was abolished.<sup>682</sup> The abolishment of public prostitution might have been irrelevant to Hanim's case since she was around 50 years old and expected to retire at that time. We do not know whether Hanim financed her property from her savings or from donations she might have received.<sup>683</sup> However, the demand on workers' lodging helped her to secure a new source of income and to upgrade her social status to a house owner.

Investing in workers' lodging did not require much capital and assured an income for women who had not dreamed of property ownership in either traditional or modern neighborhoods in al-Mahalla, where land was more expensive and construction was subject to state regulations, fees and taxes. It was advantageous for individuals with limited capital to invest in real estate in these areas because land was cheaper than inside the town. For example, one square meter in 'Izabt al-Sa'yda was only worth 0, 93 EP in 1929.<sup>684</sup> Arid salty land on the northwestern peripheries of Sandifa was even cheaper. Up to the end of the 1940s the government was given the land for 5 piaster a square meter.<sup>685</sup>

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<sup>682</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 764.

<sup>683</sup> The government donated about 10 EP to each prostitute to pursue a new profession. Muhammad Khalil informed the researcher that his grand uncle `Abdul Hayy Pasha Khalil donated money to prostitutes to encourage them to give up their trade, an information that was not assured by another source.

<sup>684</sup> *Sijil Tarikhi*.

<sup>685</sup> Oral history.



This price was less than one third of the prices inside the town.<sup>686</sup> Some men and women actually gained the land almost for free by squatting on parts of state lands. After houses were constructed and dozens of people inhabited these houses, it was impossible for the state to reverse the clock and regain the land. The state eventually gave the land to those who occupied it according to the rule of *wad` al-yadd*, or actual possession.<sup>687</sup> The cheapest construction materials, such as mud, unbaked bricks, compressed wood, and tin, were used in construction. Because those areas were initially outside the city limits, they were not subject to the building codes. As a result, ceilings were very low and floors were bare dirt lacking any tiles or covering. Most of these buildings did not have windows, interior yards, drainage systems or bathrooms. Some of these lodges were originally animal sheds and were converted into residential rooms.<sup>688</sup> Running water and electricity were luxuries beyond the dreams of residents of these slums. Contemporary witnesses described workers' rooms as ditches and burrows in huts and shacks.<sup>689</sup> No meals were included and no furniture was provided. The low cost of this investment encouraged women from the lower classes, widows in particular, to invest in these houses to secure an easy and steady income. When required cash for such investment was not available, women raised enough cash by selling copper cooking pots, a piece of gold jewelry such as bracelet and earrings, or other household items. By common law, Muslim wives enjoyed the absolute ownership over the household tools, furniture, and gold, including

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<sup>686</sup>Isma`il, "Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra", 147.

<sup>687</sup> This was the case to the western peripheries of Suq al-Laban, particularly close by the Sadat al-Shawafi`iyya Mosque. An entire neighborhood appeared in this area where most owners were women and most tenants were Company workers. Oral history.

<sup>688</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1052.

<sup>689</sup> Description of these houses is based on several sources including court records, al-Khuli's autobiography, and contemporary press.

jewelry that she had received for her dowry.<sup>690</sup> Traditionally, the husband would sign a list of those household items recognizing his wife's absolute ownership of those properties, thus it was not negotiable in cases of divorce or death. The list also protected the wife's ownership from being subject to confiscation to pay her husband's debt. Even if that list, known as *Qayma*, did not exist, both Shari`a and civic courts of al-Mahalla endorsed this right based on the common law and traditions. In poor families where there was no savings to be invested in real estate, wives had advantages over their husbands. Poor women in al-Mahalla, including married women, traded their household property for residential ownership. By 1947 women exceeded men as real state proprietors. There were 266 women reported as professional real state owners compared to 202 men.<sup>691</sup> Although it is a strong indication that more women enjoyed and depended on property ownership as a source of income, the court records on which this study is based show that this figure is actually an underestimate. Hundreds of women were taken to court every year due to construction violations or they went to court to sue their tenants. A large number of landladies were mentioned in these records when identifying tenants' addresses. The intensive construction boom not only allowed more women to own property, it also opened doors into the male domain of the construction business. Two decades after the establishment of the Company there were 46 women working as construction contractors in addition to the many poor women who worked as construction workers next to men.<sup>692</sup>

Accommodating poor alien workers secured investment opportunities for women with neither large capital nor social status. Owners and tenants shared socio-economic

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<sup>690</sup>See Annelies Moors, "Women's Gold: Shifting Styles of Embodying Family Relations", in *Family history in the Middle East: household, property, and gender*, ed. Beshara Doumani (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 101-117.

<sup>691</sup>Population census of Egypt, 1947.

<sup>692</sup>Construction work was still dominated by men with 895 male contractors. Population census in 1947.

status in the same way they shared living in those low quality houses. Landladies were still poor with limited resources, living in areas that had not yet been incorporated into the city limits. However these women, through building on farming land in nearby hamlets or arid land on the outskirts of the town, were a leading force driving the rapid urbanization of al-Mahalla and undermining the agricultural economy. Although tenancy in shared houses was not unusual in the urban neighborhoods of al-Mahalla, dwelling in these shared lodgings signified poverty and exclusion. Landladies were often no better off than their tenants and shared with them the poor quality dwellings. An example of the new type of landladies is the widow Mansura ‘Abdel ‘Al who built a house to secure a place to live with her children and then let the rest of the space out for rent. Seeking extra cash, she got into a partnership with her tenant Muhammad al-Bawwab in raising four sheep. Mansura owned only two but was assigned to take care of the four. Because she did not keep any receipt of ownership, her tenant claimed he owned all four sheep. Neighbors had witnessed the deal and testified in her favor.<sup>693</sup> While she enjoyed the ownership of a residential property, Mansura had to continue herding sheep, a job that was common among poor rural women.<sup>694</sup> Another good example of this type of landlady is given in al-Khuli’s memoir under the label “a widow from al-Mahalla”. Her house was made of tin in the *Abu Gahsha* Hamlet where she and her children shared the same damp dark shack with workers. She invested everything she had in building that “house” to support herself and her children. The construction was so fragile and the property was so dear to her that she threatened to eject one of her tenants unless he

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<sup>693</sup> Al-Mahalla civic court 1935/ 6549/545.

<sup>694</sup> Traditionally poor women in al-Mahalla, both in rural and urban areas, took hoarding sheep and goats as a profession. See Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2179, 2429 and Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1357.

stopped having many guests. She was afraid the numerous guests would actually cause damage to the house.<sup>695</sup>

The state, which had been playing a central role in re-drawing the map of the city since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, had limited power over the expanding slums where workers residences were clustered.<sup>696</sup> The rapid construction boom due to the high demand for cheap housing allowed the lower class landladies to challenge state power. They built wherever they enjoyed access to cheap or even free land regardless of what this land was designated for. The landladies led the spatial expansion of the town randomly in all directions. A geographer described the town in the 1950s as “octopus arms stretching in all directions”.<sup>697</sup> Very often landladies launched construction without going through the official procedures to gain permission, which enabled them to save fees and property taxes. Evading the constructing permits allowed them to violate all the construction codes. Representing the state, the construction inspectors of the municipality occasionally reported these violations, which led some landladies to the misdemeanor court. Violations ranged from building houses on undesignated land without permission to violating construction codes and regulations, notably low ceilings and lack of ventilation and bathrooms.<sup>698</sup> Using compressed wood in construction exposed houses and their tenants to the danger of fire.<sup>699</sup> Although these violations made tenants live in horrific

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<sup>695</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 160-161.

<sup>696</sup> For the role of the state in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, see the chapter on the Expansion of al-Mahalla in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in this study. See also Shalabi, *al-Hukm al-mahalli wa-al-majalis al-baladiyah fi Misr*.

<sup>697</sup> Isma`il, “Madinat al-Mahalla al-Kubra”, 9.

<sup>698</sup> Among enormous cases of landladies who built rooms without permission and violated construction codes concerning lack of a source of ventilation, *manwar*, lack of bathrooms, and the minimum height for ceiling, see Misdemeanor 1941/ 6789/2426, Misdemeanor, 1942/ 6792/786 and 742, Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/1896 and 2006, and Misdemeanor 1945/ 7795/3945. All these rooms were built with bamboo and/ or compressed wood.

<sup>699</sup> Three adjacent houses in `Izbat al-Ragabi built with compressed wood and owned by the three landladies Farah yusuf al-Nawiwi, Nabawiyya al-Mahallawi and Na`ima Sabbahallah, were burned to ground. The fire started in one of them where its landlady did not make sure that the oven was off after she baked bread in her oven. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6790 /807.

conditions where bugs and flees competed with tenants over space inside damped houses, landlords were only fined between one to three Egyptian pounds. Occasionally, the court ordered them to fix the violation but it rarely ordered the removal of the building.<sup>700</sup>

Managing *Shirqawiyya* housing not only assured high and guaranteed profits, but also expanded landlords' power in their communities and households. It allowed them to undermine their male tenants and family members. The fact that landlords owned the property where their families lived raised those women higher in their household even when they were married. Landladies took on themselves the responsibility to recruit tenants and evacuate the undesirable ones by all necessary means. A wicked, but simple and effective, way to eject an undesirable tenant was to throw his belongings into the streets.<sup>701</sup> Those belongings were usually a few light items such as a mat and a blanket. Some landlords harassed tenants to either force them to pay higher rents or leave.<sup>702</sup> With the high demand for accommodation landlords never lacked tenants. Some landlords were able to recruit tenants for their decrepit disintegrating houses.<sup>703</sup> Landladies felt free to offer the same room to as many tenants as possible. Each group of co-village-workers would negotiate collectively with the landlords to rent a room and share the rent. In other cases, landlords recruited individual tenants and charged each of them separately. The latter system is known as renting "*bil-Ras*", meaning "rent per

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<sup>700</sup>Among enormous cases when the Court asked landlords only to correct the violations, although the construction was executed with no permission, see Misdemeanor 1941/ 6791/1517, Misdemeanor 1942/ 6791/1481, Misdemeanor 1943/ 6864/2282 and 2381.

<sup>701</sup>Among many examples, the tenant Muhammad al-Qaffas did not pay his due rent for a while. His landlady Sayyida Mustafa Qurra, who was a 35-year old married woman, broke into the room and threw his belongings into the street to end his possession of the place. He sued her asking for 5 EP damage. Witnesses testified that his belongings were worth no more than 20 Piaster. The court judged in his favor 50 piaster damage and sentenced the landlady one month jail with suspension. Misdemeanor 1928/ 3118/ 365.

<sup>702</sup> Misdemeanor 1942/ 6792/ 3093, Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 836-841 and 865.

<sup>703</sup> When the 40-year old landlady Hamida Ali Muhammad realized the dangerous condition of her house, she moved out and gave it for rent to many others. The house fell down on December 29, 1940 causing five people from three families to be injured. She was fined 2 EP. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6788/ 451.

head,” which raised the total gross of one room from ten piaster a month before the company to twenty five piaster in 1930. One room in each shack or hut could be offered for rent to up to twenty company workers whose expectations in terms of living standards were low and who traded a high quality of life for a low rent. Their low wages and need to save a few piasters to help their families back home did not allow many of them to look for less crowded and better quality housing. Since workers served at the Company in shifts, roommates divided the sleeping space into shifts around the clock. An eyewitness in 1947 saw 27 workers sharing one room.<sup>704</sup> However, their rooms lacked beds and in most cases did not have any sort of furniture except straw mats to sleep on and boxes and straw baskets to store clothes and dried bread. Thus, al-Mahalla became the most densely populated town in the Egypt. In 1947 the population density in al-Mahalla was 5,122 people per square kilometer. Density was highest wherever workers were concentrated such as in the districts of al-Sharika, Wali al-Din and Suq al-Laban.

Table 5.3: Distribution of the population and residential concentration in al-Mahalla.

Section	population	families	Residenti al rooms	Average family size	People/room
Abu al-Qasim	18,869	4176	7251	5	3
Al-Hanafi	15,884	3566	6798	4	2
Mutawwalli	19,088	4296	7733	4	2
Manshiyya	19,705	4755	8410	4	2
Sharika	19,071	4749	7003	4	3
Sandifa	23,141	5197	9264	4	2
Total	115,758	26739	46459	4	2

Table 5.4: Occupation in the city sections in 1947.

Section	agriculture	Industry	Commerce	Personal	Unclear/	Un-
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<sup>704</sup> `Abd al-Munim al-Ghazali al-Jubayli, *75 `aman min tarikh al-haraka al-niqabiya al-Misriyyah* (Cairo: al-`Arabi lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi`, 1991), 176.

				services	unproductive	employed
Abu al-Qasim	661	3804	577	5633	1426	2828
M	329	2521	471	327	1144	1267
F	332	283	107	5306	282	1561
Al-Hanafi	846	3039	955	4825	1856	1286
M	445	2834	862	400	1271	562
F	401	205	93	4425	585	724
Mutawali	623	3340	1087	5875	1841	2595
M	311	3174	927	347	1428	1124
F	312	166	160	5528	413	1471
Manshiyya	863	4659	795	6073	1775	1841
M	449	4483	716	399	1311	862
F	414	176	79	5674	464	979
Sharika	319	7062	494	5046	1218	1735
M	170	6813	434	345	915	837
F	139	249	60	4701	303	898
Sandifa	1804	4898	901	6847	1725	2613
M	966	4598	796	459	1250	1250
F	838	300	105	6388	475	1363
Total	5116	26802	4810	34299	9841	12898
M	2670	25423	4206	2277	7319	5902
F	2446	1379	604	32022	2522	6996

Table 5.5: Marital status for 16 years old or older in 1947.

Section	Never married	Married	Divorced	Widow	Unspecified
Abu al-Qasim	1893	7297	182	1007	155
M	1335	3643	55	889	43
F	558	3654	127	118	112
Al-Hanafi	2313	5914	139	836	315
M	1704	3073	54	106	146
F	605	2841	85	730	169
Mutawali	2037	7338	106	887	321
M	1431	3671	12	96	124
F	606	3667	94	887	107
Manshiyya	3362	7795	114	822	143
M	2485	4082	46	99	101
F	877	3713	68	723	42
Sharika	3683	7864	105	652	186
M	2218	4639	40	60	159

F	465	3225	65	592	27
Sandifa	2798	9037	183	1233	217
M	2100	4593	62	156	109
F	698	4444	121	1068	108
Total	16086	45245	859	5437	1247
M	12273	23701	269	644	682
F	3813	21544	590	4793	565

Source: population census of 1947.

Table 5.6: The decrease in number of people working in agriculture as an indication of the decline of that sector in the town's economy.

Sector	1917	1937
Agricultural	2,740	2,270
Manufacture	5,317	13,177
Commerce	1,844	3,153

Source: the population censuses of 1917 and 1937.

Although the increase in residential rooms, population, and population density were obvious in all the town's sections the newly incorporated section called *al-Sharika*, meaning the Company, enjoyed particular features compared with other sections, including those older ones. Al-Sharika section included the hamlets where workers lived such as Abu Gahsha, al-Salakhanh and al-Sa`yda. Despite these areas remaining rural in many ways, they lodged the highest number of industrial workers in the town surpassing the handloom textile centers in Sandifa, Abu al-Qasim and al-Mutawalli. Working in industry was the main job of the male inhabitants of this section, which was also the case for all sections. Meanwhile, it had the least number of people working in agriculture and the least number of unemployed or unproductive workers combined. It also had the highest number of never-married people. It was one of the most densely populated sections and with its 19071 inhabitants it surpassed Abu al-Qasim and al-Hanafi and almost matched Mutwalli and Manshiyyah. Despite the larger population, it had the least number of residential rooms after the commercial neighborhood of al-Hanafi.



Consequently, the al-*Sharika* section had the highest population density and it was the most crowded district. The average number of people in each room was 3 which was matched only by the old neighborhood of Abu al-Qasim where the average family size was 5 people, therefore explaining the high density as a result of large families. This was not the case in the al-*Sharika* section where the density was mostly a result of renting off the same room to as many single workers as possible.

Collecting rent from *Shirkawiyya* was more guaranteed than *Mahallawiyya* tenants. Workers coming from peasant areas tended to keep up with their work at the Company and be more stable in both getting paid by the company and paying rent to landladies than *Mahallawiyya*. Local residents, who were used to working in small handloom factories, could not easily tolerate the work system of the Company. In addition to loathing association with the “poor, alien strangers, the *Shirkawiyyas*”, they lacked punctuality and hated night shifts. They preferred working at small handloom factories where their wages were higher and work schedule was more flexible. Due to a periodic lack of yarn or decreased demand on textiles, the productivity of handloom factories was not stable. Because workers were paid for piece work, they did not have to stick to daily working schedules. This also meant they were not assured regular payment and it was normal for them to be late in paying rent. This was not the case for Company workers. Even if a worker-tenant did not pay his rent on time, landladies pursued a set of procedures to collect the overdue rent. They forced tenants to leave and to give up their belongings until they paid their rent. When a tenant refused to leave, some landladies took the liberty to throw the tenant’s belongings into the street.<sup>705</sup> When landladies chose to take legal action against a company worker, the possibility of collecting the overdue money was high because they sued both the worker and the Company. In such cases, the

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<sup>705</sup> Misdemeanor 1928/ 3118/ 365.

court would oblige the company to pay the late rent out of the worker's wages. Thus, *Mahallawiyya* landladies preferred *Shirkawiyya* tenants to their own *Mahallawiyya* and occasionally tried to eject *Mahallawiyya* and replace them with workers.<sup>706</sup> This was a key source of hostility of the *Mahallawiyya* towards the newcomers. Fikri al-Khuli, a pioneer Company worker who came from his home village Kafr al-Hima to al-Mahalla in 1928, reported many aspects of that hostility. In his memoir *al-Rihla* he reported a *Mahallawiyya* woman screaming at him along with his co-workers "son of a dog *Shirkawiyya* (...) you caused us a rent increase. We used to be comfortable; one of us used to live in one room next to ten empty rooms. Any landlady would beg us to rent in her house. Today they throw us out so they can rent (rooms) per head. The entire house used to be for ten piasters. Now they rent it for one pound".<sup>707</sup>

Despite the abundant demand on *Shirkawiyya* housing, managing these properties was not an easy task and required a great deal of strength and power. Theft, violence, and even sexual abuse were frequent among tenants inside these over populated rooms.<sup>708</sup> In such incidents, landladies found themselves in the middle of violence confrontations and even police investigations. When violence went out of control and recalled police intervention, landladies' strategy to contain the situation was reporting the incidents in a softer way than it really happened. The purpose was to evade any potential responsibility

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<sup>706</sup>Violence between tenants and their landladies who were trying to eject and replace them with *Shirkawiyya* was in both ways. For example, the tenant Hanim `Ali `Eid and her 17-year old son attacked their landlady Yasmin Ahmad Yusuf because the latter kept annoying them to enforce them to leave after she had failed to increase the rent. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 836-841. The other way around, the landlady Muntaha al-Ganayni and her family attacked the female tenants Fatima and Zaynab al-Barbari to enforce them to move out. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 865. Similarly the 40-year landlady al-Sayyida Muhammd `Isa hit her tenant Tafida `Awad Mutawali with a *Qubqab*, a wood slipper-shoe, because the latter refused to increase the rent. Misdemeanor 1942/ 6792/ 3093.

<sup>707</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, V. 1, 29.

<sup>708</sup> Among many cases where violence and sexual abuse among roommate workers in their residencies see Tanta Criminal Court 1941/ 7448/ 2231, al-Mahalla Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2290, 2303, Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1254 and 1337, Misdemeanor 1945/ 7793/ 1726 and 2002. For examples of theft among roommate workers see Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/cases 2497 and 2572, Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ cases 1992, 1203, 1204, 1411, and 1545, and Misdemeanor 1945, 7794/ cases 3235, 3378 and 3581.

as much as to reduce expected punishment for the offender.<sup>709</sup> Lack of privacy and security was problematic for both landlords and tenants. Privacy describes the state of limited access to the person, attitudes, and experiences of an individual; it is expressed in a variety of possible restrictions, affecting access to personal information as well as observation, intrusion, and physical exposure.<sup>710</sup> This state was unimaginable and unattainable inside houses where bathrooms, interior courtyards, rooftops, and hallways were shared between dozens of housemates from all ages; between tenants and house owners. Even alleyways were shared among housemates and neighbors when summer's heat forced people to stay outdoors. On those nights neighbors spread mats outside their homes and sat down to chat, eat and then lay down for rest. As Marcus rightly argues that there were a whole set of factors affecting the actual access to privacy and its distribution in the population of eighteenth-century Aleppo, domestic living arrangements, poverty, and population density compromised the access to privacy of al-Mahalla's people.<sup>711</sup> The Islamic norms touching directly on the protection of body, home and women formed only one component in their conception of privacy. Alongside them was a whole range of attitudes and ideals linked with that world's notions of morality and decency, social distance and intimacy, personal autonomy and individualism, authority and community. Not all of them were supportive of privacy. With many people sharing limited-space homes, house-mates were able to see who was in each others' beds, and consequently knew who was responsible for getting a woman pregnant, and knew how a housemate

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<sup>709</sup> The 18-year old company worker Muhammad `Abd al-Raziq hit his roommate Abu Shabanah Muhammad Salim with a hammer on his head causing him a permanent disability. Their landlady Hayat `Ali Karam testified that `Abd al-Raziq used a shoe brush, not a hammer, in the attack. Tanta Criminal Court 1942/ 7450/ 336.

<sup>710</sup> Abraham Marcus, "Privacy in Eighteenth Century Aleppo: The Limits of Cultural Ideals", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18, No.2 (1986), 106.

<sup>711</sup> Factors that Marcus cites as compromising people's access to privacy include domestic living arrangement, neighborhood and group life, population density, the level of government intrusiveness, communication technology, social structure, and the distribution of wealth. Ibid.

liked to make love to his wife.<sup>712</sup> Those who chose to defend their privacy in such intense and densely crowded homes usually found themselves in a violent confrontation with intrusive neighbors and housemates. It was not unusual for landladies to become victims in these confrontations.<sup>713</sup> The lack of privacy was not only a source of violent confrontations, but it also compromised the morality and safety of tenants, landladies, and their children. Although people tended to hide sexual assaults against their children to avoid embarrassment and social stigma, many incidents of molestation and rape were reported by the mothers of the victims.<sup>714</sup> In most cases the defendant was a tenant housemate. Although molesting children was not only committed by some company workers, a whole set of circumstances made it more frequent among them. Most workers were young singles living away from their families and could not afford marriage. They lived and worked in large numbers in limited spaces. Very often adult workers had roommates and co-workers who were still children. This provided a good environment for sexual contacts between males from all ages in residencies and at work.<sup>715</sup> Children of

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<sup>712</sup> Male and female housemates of the 24-year old company worker `Abdullah Ibrahim al-Qilini testified that they frequently saw him in bed with the 17-year old al-Sayyida Mustafa al-`Adawi. These testimonies supported the claims of al-Sayyida`s mother`s that the worker got her underage daughter pregnant without marriage. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7793/ 1686. In another case, housemates testified that their 22-year old neighbor al-Sayyid Shirif sodomized his wife, which supported the wife`s request for divorce. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6789/ 2048.

<sup>713</sup> Among many examples, the tenant `Abd al-Sayyid `Abd al-Maqsud Isma`il came home with several male friends. His landlady Nafusa Ibrahim Khalil was sitting in the hall of the house. She angrily told him he was supposed to warn her before getting into the house with strangers. The tenant hit her causing her injuries. He was fined 1EP. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2355. In other cases confrontations took place because tenants were deliberately listening to or looking at what was going on between landladies and their husbands in their private rooms. See Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2088 and 2080.

<sup>714</sup>Tanta Criminal Court 1940/ 7444/ 1142, 1940/ 7445/ 1132, 1939/ 7441/ 96, and 1939/ 7441/ 32.

<sup>715</sup>Of course there is no documentation for such sexual contact that was accepted from both sides and took place in private. However oral history collected for this study and some reported cases indicate the widespread of such type of sexuality. For example, the child worker `Ali `Abdul `Aziz Farag Isma`il was raped by his 16-year roommate Isma`il Muhammad al-Mayyit although there were many others sleeping in the room including the older brother of the victim. Darkness, density and overcrowd that featured the room in which the incident took place were very common in these workers` residences. Tanta Criminal Records 1941/ 7448/ 2231. The Egyptian labor activist `Attiya al-Sayrafi who in his childhood came from his village in Mit Ghamr to work in al-Mahalla said he witnessed child molestation among his roommates and

house owners and housemates were easy targets for such sexual assaults because very often they were left during the day with a tenant who worked in the Company during the nightshift.<sup>716</sup>

Living with strangers did not necessarily compromise landlords and housemates' security. But because those housemates worked in shifts around the clock, doors had to be open day and night, which encouraged robbery and theft.<sup>717</sup> The situation was worse whenever the house had a small handloom factory or a dyeing shop. This meant more people were in and out the house and occasionally workers of these factories had access to tenants' rooms. In these cases theft was more probable.<sup>718</sup> Clothes, pots, and cash were the main booty in theft committed by robbers and roommate workers against each other and against landlords. Although theft was usually an individual offense, collective theft was not unheard of. In one particular incident, three Company workers from Samanud plotted to break into their old landlady Khadiga al-Ma`sarawi's room where she was known to keep lots of cash. Accidentally one person heard them talking about their plan in a coffee shop and reported it to the police who were able to arrest them while executing the theft.<sup>719</sup>

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he was too scared to sleep in the room. During his visit to his family he told his mother about his fear, and then the mother did not allow him to go back to al-Mahalla. An interview with the researcher.

<sup>716</sup> Among many examples, when the landlady Mansiyyah Mustafa, who was a wife of Muhammad al-Bindari, left her 5-year old son in the house to run some errands. Her 18-year old tenant `Abd al-Mun`im `Abd al-Basit Yusuf, originally from al-Qalubiyya Province, stayed in the house because he worked in the nightshift, while his other roommates left for their dayshift. He took advantage of the situation and took the child to his room and raped him. When the mother came back, she heard the child screaming in pain behind the worker's closed door. The medical report proved the crime and the worker confessed. Tanta Criminal Court 1940/ 7444/ 1142. For a similar case, while the victims were 4 and 7 year old girls, see Tanta Criminal Court 1940/ 7445/ 1132 and Tanta Criminal Court 1939/ 7441/ 96. In a worse case, tenants did not only rape or molest the landlady's children, but also passed venereal diseases to them. While the mother Ghalya al-Sayyid Ibrahim was gone to fill the water jar leaving her 5-year old son and 3-year old daughter in the house, her 25-year old tenant, who was a weaving worker, molested the daughter. His action caused the child minor injury and a syphilis infection. Tanta Criminal Court 1939/ 7441/ 326.

<sup>717</sup> Misdemeanor 1945, file 7791.

<sup>718</sup> Among many cases see Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 1887 and Misdemeanor 1942/ 6791/1667.

<sup>719</sup> Tanta Criminal Court records 1940/ 7446/ 1967.

Landladies of workers' boardinghouses created and managed their houses in such a manner that they, strictly speaking, did not constitute either a wholly private or a wholly public space. With so many tenants from diverse origins and doors open around the clock, those landladies were actually managing a space where gender relations were re-formed, and heterogeneous cultures co-existed and contested inside the same house. The urban culture of *Mahallawiyya* women did not insist on women's segregation and allowed them to cherish their management of the house. The rural culture of most of the male tenants disvalued mingling between men and women outside the family. Culture proved limiting in forming people's daily lives. In al-Khuli's account, he took notice of how a widowed landlady was dressed. In her white short dress that revealed her knees, arms and part of her chest, the *Mahallawiyya* landlady reminded al-Khuli of prostitutes in the red-light district. He contrasted that image with his widowed mother in the village who continued to wear her loose black dress ten years after the death of her husband as a sign of continual mourning.<sup>720</sup> However, these cultural differences neither generated particular confrontations nor handicapped personal and business relations between tenants and landladies.

Through managing those boarding houses and interactions with their tenants, who were mostly young single outsiders, the landladies played a key role in shaping the social dynamic and the workers experiences. The housing was not only poor and cheap; but the doors were open around the clock and there was a host of intense violence associated with a high density of mostly vigorous, exhausted, alien youth. *Mahallawiyya* women in particular, I argue, played a major role in shaping the experiences of the newly arrived peasants in urban life simply because they encountered *Shirkawiyya* housemates more than *Mahallawiyya* men did. Night shift workers would be at home during the daytime

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<sup>720</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 156-162.

with the women of the house, while the men of the house, if they ever existed, were at work. Women, whether they were landladies themselves, wives and daughters of the landlords or other female tenants, had more communication and social involvement with these males. Landladies recruited tenants and dealt with them concerning a whole variety of issues starting with collecting the rent, rescheduling overdue rent, dividing spaces inside the room and the house, occupancy rules, and even with mediation between fighting roommates. The interaction between al-Mahalla's women and *Shirkawiyya* men is more interesting due to the lack of privacy inside the houses. *Shirkawiyya* tenants and *Mahallawiyya* landladies over time developed "friendly" relations when trust and sympathy were well mixed. Landladies did not mind sharing their cooking pots and stoves with their poor single tenants.<sup>721</sup> Some workers felt so comfortable with *Mahallawiyya* landladies that they preferred to keep their precious belongings with them rather than keeping those items in their rooms with other roommates.<sup>722</sup> Some landladies helped newcomers in shopping for clothes and invited them for a meal.<sup>723</sup> Some tenants took care of their old landladies and did not mind helping them in their daily chores even when those landladies had daughters to help.<sup>724</sup> As a sign of support and sympathy in the 1938 strike, some house-owners did not collect rent from unpaid striking workers.<sup>725</sup>

A female managing her property as an investment and residency was the power in the household. Her male tenants had to adapt to a new type of urban housemating patterns where they had to deal with landladies and female housemates on a daily basis. Due to the lack of privacy and security for tenants and landladies, ideal morality was

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<sup>721</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1942/ 7450/ 336.

<sup>722</sup> Misdemeanor Court 1938/ 6776/ 1125.

<sup>723</sup> al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 2, 68-71 and 133- 134.

<sup>724</sup> The 25 year old Muhammad Ibrahim Muhammad, from Suhaj, stayed for free with his landlady Hanim al-Sayyid Halhal. He helped her in the daily chores although she had a grown up daughter. Eventually, he stole 765 piasters from her. Because he had criminal records with theft he was harshly punished with one year in jail with labor. Misdemeanor 1936/ 6768 /3072.

<sup>725</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.3.

compromised. Through interaction between men and women, workers and landladies, *Mahallawiyya* and *shirkawiyya* a new subculture and social network emerged. Landladies were in powerful positions that allowed them to set up and enforce rules for tenants on how to use the property. Some of these rules were as odd as asking tenants not to bring in visitors because “walking up and down the stairs could hurt the building, in which she had invested all what they had”.<sup>726</sup> They acquired legal expertise to know their rights and even to pursue legal actions against tenants. They used all the power they had to recruit and evict tenants. Some landladies claimed the right to be the moral guardian over their tenants. In one case, a landlady volunteered to report to the police that her tenant worker had raped an underage woman he brought to his room overnight.<sup>727</sup> The allegedly raped woman was twenty two years old and she had gone with the worker to his room voluntarily. Some landladies, especially those who were widows, had sexual contact with their young single tenants. In his memoir, al-Khuli talks about his co-worker ‘Abdul ‘Azim having an affair with his landlady, who was a young widow. ‘Abdul ‘Azim, who had readily used the services of a prostitute, felt so sinful and guilty that he turned to strict religious practice for salvation. This type of relationship seemed so widespread that some neighbors attacked workers living on particular women’s properties.<sup>728</sup> Al-Khuli himself had romantic affairs with his landlady, whose husband was sick, and with her daughter. Getting married in his early age and leaving the house was his way to end the adventure and to stop the growing feeling of sinfulness. Al-Khuli speculated that jealousy for women who were left alone at home during the daytime with workers was the impulse behind the *Mahallawiyya* gangs that chased *Shirkawiyya* all over the town using violence

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<sup>726</sup> al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 160.

<sup>727</sup> Misdemeanor 1941/ 6789/ 2040.

<sup>728</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2350.



to intimidate *Shirkawiyya* and to force them to leave the town.<sup>729</sup> Al-Khuli's speculation was not far from reality. For example, neighbors in the Abu al-Hassan neighborhood harassed male tenants of a particular landlady. In one incident, a neighbor named al-Dusuqi al-Nahas was arrested for beating up the tenant worker Hashim Mahmud al-Manawi.<sup>730</sup> Abd al-Halim Muhammad had an unfriendly encounter with his 17-year-old *Shirkawi* neighbor Muhammad Ahmad al-Bayad because the latter continued harassing Abd al-Halim's sister. al-Bayad was fast in his retaliation. With the help of his co-worker `Abdu al-Misri, he beat up Muhammad and stabbed him with a knife.<sup>731</sup>

Despite the hostility the people of al-Mahalla showed towards workers, some landladies tried to marry off their daughters to tenants. Although the residents of al-Mahalla felt superior over the new workers, lower class landladies appreciated the commitment shown to work and get paid on a regular basis, an important quality for a potential son-in-law. Due to the nature of the sources that this study is based on, we do not have information about landladies who succeeded in recruiting husbands for their daughters among their tenants. The records did report when the endeavor did not succeed. For example, the company worker Ahmad al-Dib accused his landlady `Attiyyat `Abdullah of framing him with a crime because he refused to get married to her daughter who was already unlawfully pregnant.<sup>732</sup> Al-Khuli also reported that his landlady offered to let him marry her daughter, an offer that his rural family did not accept due to socio-cultural differences.<sup>733</sup> A more complicated case that generated communal tension among the Copts of al-Mahalla was a young Coptic white-collar worker from al-

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<sup>729</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1,144

<sup>730</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2350. For romance and sex between landladies and their tenants see al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1.

<sup>731</sup> Misdemeanor 1939/ 6779/ 1271.

<sup>732</sup> Misdemeanor 1941/ 6789/ 2040.

<sup>733</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 3, 100-102.

Minufiyya province who converted to Islam to get married to the daughter of his Muslim landlord's family. On May 1947, the Copts of the town urged King Faruq to deport the worker to his home province to avoid a confrontation between the Muslim and Coptic communities.<sup>734</sup>

The landladies were living in a rapidly changing context. Their communal contribution and economic power was itself a product of these changes and their willingness to take advantage of them. Like other modern women, they were neither always willful nor always compliant but instead varied their responses to suit social circumstances in the context of social forces that favored an inferior status for women. Some male tenants became violent against their landladies who asked for privacy. Jealousy made a tenant hit his landlady.<sup>735</sup> Some neighbors resisted letting their neighboring landlady rent her property to workers. In their treatment of women from different classes, court judges proved to be the guardians of the traditional hierarchy. Despite the socio-economically active role of these landladies, judges very often belittled them by calling them "*Hurma*," meaning woman. Judges saved the titles "al-sitt", "al-Sayyida", and "Hanim" for women from the upper classes. They even passed the male title "*Bey*" from the father to daughters of these classes. When it came to notables, especially religious, families, the court physically relocated to the houses of these notable women whenever they needed to deal with them, so that these women would not have to leave their homes. The judges accepted to listen to these exceptionally privileged women inside their homes from behind curtains without even seeing their faces. This happened in a variety of cases from allocating properties for charitable *waqfs* to domestic disputes such as divorce and child custody.<sup>736</sup> In the end poor landladies had the advantage of

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<sup>734</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 533 "Iltimasat Tawa'if Diniyyah" [Petitions of religious sects].

<sup>735</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 3243.

<sup>736</sup> Sijil al-Mahalla al-Kubra Shari`a Court from 23 May 1944 to 22 August 1944, Ahkam Juz`iyya, vol. 3.

being from inside the community and their property ownership enrooted and grounded them more and more. Not all women in al-Mahalla, particularly female workers, had that advantage.

### **Industrial Workers or Women Adrift?**

Modern industrialization opened new horizons for more women to work outside the home. As al-Mahalla attracted men seeking opportunities in the booming city, women also came to al-Mahalla to work in the textile industry and other sectors. Although the first wave of immigration into the town was mostly men, subsequently the numbers of male and female immigrants to al-Mahalla were almost equal. The most likely explanation for the increase in women's immigration to al-Mahalla in the second decade after the establishment of the Company, of course, is that some men who were settled in al-Mahalla just brought their wives or mothers to live with them. Those mothers and wives were nonetheless not the vast majority of female immigrants. The increase in non-married women in the town shows that more single women, whether never married, widowed, or divorced, were also attracted to the booming town. Many of these women actually came to al-Mahalla seeking work opportunities, particularly in the textile industry.

Table 5.7: Male and female population in the first two decades after the establishment of the Company in al-Mahalla.

Year	Male	%	female	%	Total	%
1927	22,492	1,9	23,150	2,1	45,642	2
1937	33,138	4,7	30154	3	63,293	3,9
1947	60,965	8,4	54,793	8,2	115,758	8,3

Table 5.8: Married and unmarried females in al-Mahalla.

Year	Married	Never married	Divorced	Widow	Unspecific	Total
1937	12016	1903	379	3010	24	17332
1947	21544	13813	590	4793	565	41305

It would be a mistake to conclude that women were brought into the textile industry because of the establishment of the Company or even because of the transition to mechanized industry. With the integration of Egypt into the world economy as a cotton plantation, more women of al-Mahalla and the rest of the country worked in the cotton fields and ginning factories. Unfortunately, very often population censuses ignored women and in the best cases, it provides us only with hints that women were active in different businesses as table 5.9 shows.

Table 5.9: Men and women working in the textile industry and trade in al-Mahalla between 1897 and 1947.

Year	Textile industry			Textile trade		
	Male	female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1897	2,591		2,591			
1907	3,715	87	3,802			
1917	3,167					390
1927	4,067					
1937	10,480					
1947	22,311	1,059	23,370	362	5	367

Source: population censuses in Egypt in 1897 and 1947.

As a predominant profession among the people of the town, textile was the industry where men and women cooperated. Although their participation is not visible in the census, women had a large role in that industry to the extent it was considered a

domestic industry.<sup>737</sup> The 87 women who were reported as working in the textile industry in 1907 might have meant only those who worked actually in ginning factories. Women and children were hired to work in the seasonal ginning factories in such large numbers that they were the first group of workers with whom the first Egyptian labor laws dealt.<sup>738</sup> Concerning the handloom factories, women participated intensively in the preparation processes particularly in cotton and wool cleaning and spinning, yarn dyeing and winding. This part of the operation was performed at home rather than inside the factory. Many wives and daughters helped males of the family in operating small textile factories whether these factories were handlooms, dyers, wrapping or pressing.<sup>739</sup> Despite their reportedly small numbers, women in the textile industry showed flexibility and adaptation to changes in the industry and the market as much as men did. When silk was still in its privileged place in the town's economy, women worked in silk textiles. When cotton wholesaling became the most lucrative trade, women also participated in the trade despite the high risk and large required capital. What records never showed was wives financing their husbands' trade in silk and cotton after they raised cash by selling their jewelry and copper pots. At the bottom of the textile ladder, there was straw mat weaving, in which women were also active.

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<sup>737</sup> See Donald Quataert, "Ottoman Women, Households, and Textile Manufacturing, 1800-1914" in *The Modern Middle East: A Reader*, ed. Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury and Mary C. Wilson (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), 255-270.

<sup>738</sup> Although laws limited women's work to nine hours a day, ginning factories made women work between fourteen and eighteen hours during the season that lasted from October to March or April. H. B. Butler, *Report on Labor Conditions in Egypt with Suggestions for Future Social Legislation* (Cairo: Government Press, 1932), 12-13.

<sup>739</sup> Although population censuses do not show women working in these sectors, there are several cases when customers of these factories sued women along with men over business disagreements. For example, □Ali al-Sayyid al-Dumyati sued both of Shalabiyya Nunu and her husband Muhammad Sharaf who

Table 5.10: Women working in the textile industry in 1947

Industry	Women
Cotton ginning	34
Cotton spinning& weaving	75
Wool spinning& weaving	13
Silk	4
Unspecified spinning& weaving	921
Others	12
Total	1059

Source: population censuses in Egypt in 1897 and 1947.

In 1930, when the Company opened its first product line making medical bandages, it hired female workers to work in that section. However they were not large in number and mostly unnoticeable. During its rapid expansion in early 1930s, the Company started to hire women in large numbers. It hired about two thousand female workers; half of them lived in al-Mahalla. The transition from handlooms to mechanized industry was rapid after World War II. Many weavers who gained large profits in the war invested in moving to the mechanic textile. The transition to the mechanized industry was facilitated and encouraged when the Company decided to sell its old machines and update its machinery. Skilled workers, who accumulated expertise through working at the Company, were available to set up and fix those old machines in the small factories and even manufactured new ones based on their models. The success of the small textile factories encouraged many to buy imported or locally made machines. Like the Company, those small textile factories secured jobs for women. Female workers were preferred due to their lower wages and for their patience in performing particular tasks in the winding, netting, and socks sections. It was not difficult to recruit female workers of all ages among the poor urban and rural women who, in any case, were obliged by their

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operated a cloth pressing and wrapping workshop, *Madaqq*, in al-Shawafi`iyya neighborhood because they sold cloth worth 2844 piasters instead of pressing it for him. Tanta Appeal Court 1949/ 7565/ 403.

economic circumstances to find some sort of work. Joining a textile factory was a good opportunity for them because the work was permanent and the wage was guaranteed. For poor urban women, working at the Company or a small factory was more assured than working as peddlers and more dignified than working as domestic servants. With 32,022 women in al-Mahalla working as maids, domestic service was almost a female only job.<sup>740</sup> The surrounding villages provided a large number of those servants, particularly young girls who lived in the household of their employers. For rural women, factory work was easier than working in the fields all the day under the sun. Moving to a different town for work was not shocking to the rural poor. For decades they experienced the *Tarahila*, migrant labor, when men and women were recruited from the overpopulated villages in the Delta and shipped to work for a few weeks in the cotton fields in far away areas.<sup>741</sup> During these work trips men and women worked for long hours under the harsh sun in summer days and in the cold air in winter.

Female industrial workers in al-Mahalla varied in their origins and their familial association. Some of them were *Mahallawiyya* who were used to urban life and were familiar with the textile industry. Some of them came from rural areas close enough to commute daily and others came from far away areas and had to live on their own in al-Mahalla. Those who came from outside al-Mahalla varied in their motivation to come to the town and join the workforce of textile factories. They were neither all running away from their families, nor all living under their families' power. Al-Mahalla attracted rural

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<sup>740</sup> The population census of Egypt 1947.

<sup>741</sup> For the history of the agriculture workers in Egypt, *Tarahila*, see Sawsan Messiri, "Tarahil laborers in Egypt" in *Migration, mechanization, and agricultural labor markets in Egypt*, ed. Alan Richards and Philip L Martin (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1983). See also Fatima`Alam al-Din Abd al-Wahid, *Tarikh al-`Ummal al-zira`iyyin fi Misr, 1914-1952* [The history of the agricultural laborers in Egypt, 1914-1952] (Cairo: al-Hayy'ah al-Misriyyah al-`Ammah lil-Kitab, 1977) and `Atiya al-Sayrafi, *Ummal al-tarahil* [Tarahil workers] (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqafah al-Jadidah, 1975). In his social-realist novel, *al-Haram* the Egyptian author Yusuf Idris deals exclusively with the moral and material dilemma of a female *Tarahila* worker. Yusuf Idris, *al-Haram* [sin] Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1965).

girls looking for a source of income and a different type of life. Some were fascinated by urban life and hoped the city would provide them with more than the countryside could offer. They hoped for more freedom and autonomy, a more “civilized” and easier life, and less patriarchal family control. The Geniza documents reveal that the desires for urban life in a big town go back to pre-modern Egypt. There was a hope that becoming an urban woman would assure fancier clothes, and all the food, drinks, entertainment and pleasure that the city offered. However, those who came to al-Mahalla to join the Company or the factory did so from a desire for sources of income and an easier life, not looking for an egalitarian society where men and women were equal and enjoyed equal rights to work. In their endeavor to secure a job and income, and not in response to the calls of the Egyptian feminists, they were associated with modernity in Egypt. Those who commuted between their villages and work rode the trains, the emblem of a technological mobile society. Thousands of them worked in a Company that symbolized national modernization and success. Whether working in the Company or in small textile factories, they became the subjects of modern industrial organization and all this entailed of punctuality, discipline, industrial skills and work division based on gender and age.<sup>742</sup>

The Company hired about two thousand women. Women already in industry and settled in al-Mahalla totaled about 13,000 women. However this statistic does not show all the girls who worked in textiles and other industries. Factory owners tended to hide their workers from the state officials to avoid their legal obligations, particularly as many of these girls were under age. An eyewitness in the mid 1940s reported that most female workers in al-Mahalla’s textile industry were between 13 and 20 years old.<sup>743</sup> Some male

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<sup>742</sup> These elements of modern industry, which mark modernity as known in the West, are taken from Mintz’s work, in which he argues that modern industrial organization were introduced first in the Carrabin sugar factories in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century long before it was followed in the British textile factories or European industries. Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985), 46-52.

<sup>743</sup> Mustafa Kamil Munib, *al-Taliah*, March 15, 1946, 7.



and female workers were as young as 9 years old.<sup>744</sup> Most of female workers were unmarried and left work after marriage. In its early years, the company refused to hire married women and fired those who pretended to be unmarried.<sup>745</sup> It also expected female workers to quit working after marriage and it fired them if they did not voluntarily quit. The Company did not want to accommodate pregnant women or nursing mothers. The labor law of 1933 made employers obligated to give women the last months of pregnancy and childbirth off. The Company saw this legal obligation as an interruption that caused a decrease in production. It initially preferred to replace those women with younger and lower paid girls. Later the company realized the loss of their expertise and encouraged them to continue working after marriage, so that the Company would not lose their expertise and replace them with crude untrained workers. The chair of Bank Misr Hafiz `Afifi Pasha announced that the Bank and its Companies were willing to accommodate female workers during pregnancy and at childbirth.<sup>746</sup> After the establishment of the Company union in 1943, the union offered financial help to female workers at marriage depending on number of years she had been a union member. The maximum offered help was 5 EP. In the first nine months in 1947, the union paid 270 newlywed female workers 780 EP.<sup>747</sup> Many female workers took that financial help as a compensation of member fees that they had paid and quit working.<sup>748</sup> In small textile factories, it became customary that the owner of the factory would donate some cloth and money to his female workers at marriage. It was considered a gift although it was

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<sup>744</sup> Ahmad Zaki Badawi, *Les problèmes du travail et les organisations ouvrières en Egypte* (Alexandrie: Société de publications Egyptienne 1948), 77.

<sup>745</sup> Mustafa Kamil Munib, *al-Taliah*, March 15, 1946, 7.

<sup>746</sup> Taha Sa`d `Uthman, *al-Idrabat fi Misr zaman al-arba`inat* [Strikes in 1940s] (Cairo: al-`Arabi, 1998), 25.

<sup>747</sup> Isma`il `Ali, "Hall Min Sabil", *`Amil al-Mahalla*, December 1947, 3.

<sup>748</sup> The researcher learned this through a conversation with a woman who worked in the company until mid 1940s.

understood that marriage ended the female worker's services. If the worker got divorced, factory owners welcomed them back to work. This achieved several purposes. For the factory owners, it was better to rehire an already trained worker even if her wage was higher than an inexperienced young girl. It also showed the commitment of the factory owner to helping poor women in his community. Widows and married women who needed to work but had to stay at home for their young children went to these small factories and collected torn yarn to re-wind it at home for fixed fees. The Company also hired older widows and divorced women.<sup>749</sup>

The Company's policies on firing and hiring married women and the women's preference to quit at marriage indicate that neither the Company nor female workers looked at women's work as a way to achieving modern life or to building an egalitarian society. The national capitalism, as represented by the Company, exploited women as lower paid workers, while it dismissed any responsibility toward working pregnant women, mothers, or wives. Married women had to go home, so that the Company did not have to pay a less energetic pregnant woman or an exhausted nursing mother. Also by the time of marriage, an experienced woman's wage was higher and it was cheaper to replace them with younger and lower paid single girls. When the experience showed the loss of valuable expertise, the policy shifted to keep women after marriage out of economic necessity, not as a progressive policy to empower women and help them to change their gender roles. Many female workers did not see any value in continuing work once they got a chance to be supported by breadwinning husbands. This shows the limitation of the feminist discourse that was mostly concerned with educated elite women. Away from the

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<sup>749</sup> For example Huriyyah Ibrahim □ Abd al-Dayim was a 50-year old widow who worked at the company in 1945. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7795/ 3445. Fatimah Abd al-Galil Darwish was a 30-year old divorced woman when she worked at the company in 1945. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2819. Fikriyyah Muhammad Mansur was only a 16-year old divorced woman when she worked at the Company in 1938. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/ 655.

elite feminists' discourse on women's emancipation and away from the idealized image of the "nationalist modern" company, female workers in al-Mahalla, at least until they got married and gave up factory work, configured their own way of life and paved the way for educated middle class women to prove women's qualifications for equal opportunity.

Whether they lived in al-Mahalla or commuted daily, they went through a different experience from their counterparts who never worked or worked in agriculture and never left the villages. The experience of female workers in al-Mahalla brought them actually closer to the experience of female workers in developed industrial cities such as Chicago and Tokyo.<sup>750</sup> They commuted by train, the symbol of modern mobility, and worked with modern machinery in a factory that symbolized the Modern Egyptian nation. Many of them lived independently from their families, supported themselves, and pursued an urban life. It was their experiences, more than the feminist discourse, that proved the relevance of the Egyptian women to national productivity and modernism. Meanwhile, turning women into industrial workers side by side with men did not mean a total departure from the traditional work division in textiles. In the handloom industry most women worked in preparation, such as winding yarn, while men operated the handlooms. The modern industrial organization in the Company actually emphasized this division and assigned most women to women-only sections such as sewing, netting, and socks sections because, as `Afifi said, women were good at jobs that required patience and good taste.<sup>751</sup> Only female workers worked in preparation, such as winding and the yarn section, though under a male supervisor. Although the Company did not care much about the quality of life for its male and female workers, it was interested in appeasing

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<sup>750</sup> See Meyerowitz, *Women adrift in Chicago* and Elyssa Faison, *Managing women: disciplining labor in modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) chapter 3 in particular.

<sup>751</sup> Mustafa Kamil Munib, *al-Taliah*, March 15, 1946, 7.

the anxieties of the patriarchal society over massive mingling between men and women at the workplace. To encourage women to join the workforce and to fulfill its legal obligation, the Company scheduled women to work only for nine hours according to the law. The Company did not follow these legal obligations with male and child workers who had to work for 12 hours regardless of the laws. Female workers followed a different schedule to assure their separation from the mass of male workers. They started their shift at eight in the morning until five in the afternoon, one hour after the morning shift for male workers and three hours before male night shift. They also had a different schedule for lunch break.

Like their male colleagues at the Company, female workers faced hard working conditions and did not feel they got fair compensation for their work. Some of them stole from the Company to improve the deal, to satisfy their basic need for clothes, or simply because theft was possible. They hid the stolen pieces of cloth in their underwear or wrapped around their waist underneath their clothes.<sup>752</sup> Although the Company installed female inspectors to personally search female workers by gates, some of them succeeded in leaving the Company with pieces of cloth.<sup>753</sup> We do not know how many succeeded, but the continuing theft and the confiscation of the Company's cloth in female workers residences indicate that many succeeded. Work conditions were not that easy. Although the company followed the law in terms of work hours for women, which was nine hours and no night shifts, female workers did not receive sufficient training, which was also the

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<sup>752</sup> Among many cases see Misdemeanor 1938/655/ 6775 and 1945/ 7792/ 662 and 1016, 1945/ 7794/ 2833 2780, 2819, 7794 and 1945/ 7795 / 3445. Defendants in these cases varied in ages, social status, and geographical origin. They were between 17 and 50 years old. At least one of them was identified as "virgin", two were divorced, and one was a widow. Two were living al-Mahalla and one was identified by being from Kar al-Sarim, a village between al-Mahalla and Samanud.

<sup>753</sup> The female worker Zaynab Muhammad Mutawali succeeded in passing the Company's gates several times with the Company's cloth. She was a 45-year old widow. When police searched her house after it received an anonymous letter, they found pieces of cloth that was not finished and not ready to go for sale yet. Misdemeanor 1936 /6769/ 4044.

case for male workers. They had to acquire training by observing others and dealing with gigantic machinery with no safety procedures. Like their male counterparts, they were victims of frequent accidents as a result of dealing with machines or because of untrained movements by another colleague.<sup>754</sup> Their work floor also experienced violent confrontations between workers who were mostly inexperienced and exhausted young girls. Some of these confrontations caused injuries among them.<sup>755</sup> Like their male colleagues, they were subject to the arbitrary power of male guards and supervisors.<sup>756</sup> Those guards would hit female workers even if they were pregnant.<sup>757</sup>

Female workers varied in their dress, but they were mostly modest regardless of their ages, including eleven and twelve year old girls. Urban women wore a *Milaya laf* and rural women wore a *Tarha*, or head veiling. Because these dresses were not practical during work with machinery, they took them off inside the shop floor and wore them whenever they left, either to go to another section in the factory, to the bathroom, or to go home. Despite this modesty some of them had to provide sexual services to male colleagues and supervisors.<sup>758</sup> These services were provided under pressure or sometimes voluntarily as a means of acquiring promotion and protection. The hope of attracting one of the colleagues or a boss as a husband must have been there too. Those who commuted

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<sup>754</sup>Buthaiyna Yusuf got injured inside the company when a worker hit her with a cart loaded with boxes. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2205.

<sup>755</sup>For example the two 15-year old female workers of `Izbat Iskandar, Samira Miligi `Iliwa and Atiyyat Isma`il Musa, fought over the yarn. Misdemeanor 1945/7795/ 3404. The 14-year old Nargis Himida □ Abd al-Latif of Mit `Assas, Samanud, hit her co-worker Fatimah Sulayman with a reel and injured her head. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2566. The 16-year old virgin Hadyan sayyid Ahmad Gad, who worked in the winding section 1 shop floor 2, fought with 16 year old male colleague □ Aziz Sulayman. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2396.

<sup>756</sup>The 43-year old supervisor Ahmad Yahuli Ahmad was prosecuted for hitting the female worker Fatimah Ahmad `Awad. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6790/729. The foreman `Abd al-Galil Ahmad al-Guhari hit the female worker Mufidah Hafiz al-Abyad. Misdemeanor 1941/ 6790/739. The attendance clerk, *katib mrur*, Murqus `Abd al-Malik caused the female worker Zanubah Fayruz Sulayman an injury in the eye when he threw her ID card and copper seal to her face, *khitm*, in her face. Misdemeanor 1942/ 6792/2432. For examples of *ghafirs*, guards, hitting female workers, see Misdemeanor 1938/6776/ 2392.

<sup>757</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/224.

<sup>758</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 3, 96- 97.

by train got the chance to develop romantic relations as well as face harassment. However those women faced a great deal of sexual harassment at work and in the streets.<sup>759</sup> According to al-Khuli, many bosses and foremen took advantage of women working under their supervision and whoever resisted such practices was subject to punishment.<sup>760</sup> The records do not show such practices, mostly because the female victims themselves tended to hide it. It is almost a universal phenomenon that women who undergo sexual harassment often experience a feeling of guilt, fear, confusion, anger, inadequacy, powerlessness, shame, betrayal, and denial. When the harasser is situated in a position of power, it especially intensifies the feeling of helplessness experienced by women.<sup>761</sup> In a society that does not forgive women who lost their virginity even when they were raped, silence was the most viable option for women. However we know that sexual abuse against young male workers did exist on the premises of the Company. In one case two foremen had sexual intercourse with a male worker who was under 18 years old and worked under their supervision in the Company's bathroom.<sup>762</sup> In another case a young male worker spoke up against his supervisor who tried to harass him.<sup>763</sup> It is reasonable to think that such practices took place against women workers even with a lack of documentation. However incidents of verbal harassment and minor molestation inside the Company and outside its gates against female workers were frequently documented, particularly because it generated a great deal of violence among workers who were

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<sup>759</sup> Sexual harassment as a specific concept entered the public usage in the 1970s by women's movement in Europe and the United States. Hitherto, experiences of sexual persecution undergone by women had no names in the period this study deals with. Kamalini Wijayatilake, Maithree Wichramasinghe, Gameela Samarasinghe and others, *Sexual harassment in Sri Lanka: women's experiences and policy implications* (Colombo: Centre for Women's Research, 2000), 1. In the Egyptian contexts, there was no specific law dealing with harassment, a legal vacuum that was discovered recently in 2009 when an Egyptian woman insisted on prosecuting a driver who harassed her in the street.

<sup>760</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 3, 97.

<sup>761</sup> Wijayatilake, Wichramasinghe, Samarasinghe and others, *Sexual harassment in Sri Lanka*, 3.

<sup>762</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1939/ 7441/ 3571.

<sup>763</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1943/ 7453/ 1542.

molesting women and those who interfered to protect them.<sup>764</sup> Some women workers had to be accompanied by their male relatives on their trips between home and work for protection. It was usual for female workers to take trips between homes and work in a group as a means of protection and companionship.

Although they must have varied in their moral codes and modesty, they were all under the stigma of being sexually loose. The phrase *Banat Masani`*, factory girls, was almost equivalent to the American phrase “women adrift” in the early twentieth century.<sup>765</sup> That stigma actually made many of them later on in their life hide the fact they had worked at the Company or a textile factory before marriage. A woman living with her family who wished not to be harassed might have to be accompanied by a male of her family for protection. Again the women were not always powerful or totally powerless. Women who were powerful enough to become wage-earners and modern industrial workers were not always strong enough to stop harassment.

Those women developed social networks to protect themselves and to replace the absence of families. They pooled resources and rented shared rooms, visited each other, accompanied each other during trips between home and work, hung out together in the town’s main street on weekends, and exchanged clothes.<sup>766</sup> On weekends in particular some of them showed their adaptation to urban life and their aspiration for class

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<sup>764</sup> The 19-year old worker Abd al-Maqsud Shaltut was harassing female workers while he was sitting in front of the shop floor inside the Company in August 20, 1938. When his colleague Salim Ramadan tried to stop him, they both got into a fight. Later in the day Abd al-Maqsud and four workers assaulted Ramadan. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2138. Bidayr Muhammad Shaqweer who was *Muragi`*, a supervisor, in the Final Finishing Section, *taghiz naha`i*, when he was only 19 years old in 1945. He, along with other workers, harassed female workers at the end of the shift when workers were leaving the Company. When the policeman Muhammad `Abdul Mun`im tried to stop and drag him to the police station they got into a fight. Bidayr slandered and hit the policeman, while the policeman used cruelty against Bidayr. Both were fined 1 EP. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2692.

<sup>765</sup> For a discussion on the phrase “women adrift” and what entails in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century see Meyerowitz, *Women adrift in Chicago*, 145.

<sup>766</sup> Female workers formed sort of networks and visited each their in residencies. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2421.

promotion by imitating westernized middle class women. They wore western dress that were, unlike *galabiyya*, tight around the waist and gave up the *milaya laf* and *tasrha*. They adorned their hands with watches, wore makeup and carried handbags, which was fashionable only among the westernized middle class and were never used by urban or rural lower class women. The western dress and makeup, which was meant to attract potential husbands was a double-edged sword. This look might have attracted males who shared with them the aspirations to social promotion to the middle class. It also emphasized female sexuality in a westernized fashion and as a result might have called upon the women more sexual harassment or even had upset other women who associated makeup with being sexually loose.<sup>767</sup> The stigma was amplified by the fact that not every female who came to al-Mahalla looking for opportunity ended up with a job. Consequently, among those women adrift there were those who ended up as streetwalkers and were willing to provide sexual services for shelter. For example, the 20 year woman `Aziza Farghali Siyam came from her village looking for a relative who worked at the Company to help her join the factory. When she did not find the relative she went to live with the worker Ahmad al-Dib in his room.<sup>768</sup> The other example is the forty-year-old divorced woman who came from Kafr al-Shaykh. Looking for shelter, she offered her sex services to a married man.<sup>769</sup>

### **Peddling, Vending, and Sweet Tea-making**

When it was twelve o'clock at noon, the machines stopped and thousands of workers had to have lunch at the same time in a one hour break outside the shop floors. Everybody had to rush to buy something to eat with dried bread they brought from home. Across from the factory's gates, there were dozens of female vendors selling pickled

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<sup>767</sup> Misdemeanor 1940/ 6861/ 2322.

<sup>768</sup> Misdemeanor 1941/ 6789/ 2040.

<sup>769</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/1440.



tomatoes and eggplants and bundles of *figl wa Kurrat*, radish and leek, for one *mallim* a piece.<sup>770</sup> The women were also there before seven in the morning selling these foodstuffs to workers before they began their shift. To make sure they would sell all their products as soon as possible, women shouted loudly “tomatoes pickled with garlic... eggplants stuffed with spices”. There were many who created jobs and sources of income for themselves through selling food and drinks or setting up coffee shops and stands. They took advantage of workers who gathered by the Company’s door in a scene that resembled judgment day or *yum al-hashr*.<sup>771</sup> An eyewitness in the mid 1940s reported that around the factories and by the exits of the workers’ slums, many female vendors were selling bread and cheese to male and female workers.<sup>772</sup> This was a solution for women who needed to sustain their families, but did not have any capital or much training or skills. The business was set up in streets, alleyways, around the Company’s gate, and wherever customers could be found. They did not need to rent a shop or to follow formal regulations to acquire permission. This sort of business did not require large investments. They prepared food and drinks in their homes and since customers took the food on the go, they did not need equipment and furniture. For a coffee stand all they needed was several cups, a few water pipes, *Guza*, a gas stove, a few wooden chairs, *dikka*, and a few buckets of fresh and used water. A kerosene lamp, *Kulub*, was used at night for light. By the mid 1940s, with the spread of radios, some coffee shops had radios, which allowed customers to listen to news and music. Whenever there was a concert, particularly Umm Kulthum’s concert, customers stayed as late as 2:00 am, which was considered a violation of the law.<sup>773</sup> Using a radio set in coffee shops required

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<sup>770</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 1, 29 and 63.

<sup>771</sup> The description of lunch time is from al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 1, 63.

<sup>772</sup> Mustafa Kamil Munib, *al-Ba`th 15*, March 22, 1946, 18- 19.

<sup>773</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2389.

government permission.<sup>774</sup> However, coffee shops that used radio sets were real stores, not coffee stands run by a single woman.

Coffee and food stands responded to what workers needed. They offered them cheap, fast and ready products along with recreational hangouts. Booza taverns were another type of hangout among the popular classes, including workers, but there is no evidence that women invested in or operated that type of business. These taverns served local cheap alcoholic beverages made of barley. Although this type of hangout was associated with urban life and was not known in the countryside, it became popular among al-Mahalla workers either coming from the countryside or urban towns. Serving *mezze* with the drink made it an appealing deal for men with a limited budget for food and drink. Labor activists associated the popularity of booza with its appetite suppressive effect, which allowed them to survive on their low wages.<sup>775</sup> Right or wrong, some workers believed that booza helped them go through the long and exhausting nightshifts.<sup>776</sup> Others believed it was nutritious and healthy, and thus the Islamic ban on alcohol did not apply to booza.<sup>777</sup> However, booza taverns provided workers with a place to feel their masculinity as males who physically and financially could afford the leisure of alcohol. They also discussed their work problems and even ways to counter what they saw as injustices at the Company.<sup>778</sup> However, like any alcoholic beverage, booza was a leisure that came with its price; potential violence, potential health problems, the higher cost

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<sup>774</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 3120, 3121 and 3666.

<sup>775</sup> Ramsis Labib, ed., *al-Ummal fi al-haraka al-shuyu'iyya al-Misriyya hatta `Amm 1965* [Workers in the Egyptian Socialist Movement until 1965] (Cairo: Markaz al-Buhuth al-`Arabiyyah lil-Dirasat al-`Arabiyyah wa al-Ifriqiyyah, 2001).

<sup>776</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1939/ 7442/ 1877.

<sup>777</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 2, 23.

<sup>778</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 2, 77-80.

than non-alcoholic beverages, and socio-cultural stigma imposed on those who consumed alcohol among the Muslim population.<sup>779</sup>

Like booza taverns, coffee shops and stands were a male domain and all customers were men. However, it was much easier for a single woman to manage a coffee shop or stand than to manage a booza tavern where violence might have broken out at any moment under the effect of alcohol. In many of these coffee shops or stands the woman-owner was responsible for all the work. She was the waitress, the drink maker, and the janitor at the same time. Preparing water pipes, or *Guza*, required the woman herself to smoke to make sure that the waterpipe worked efficiently, a habit that has been predominantly associated with men in the Middle East. However this did not deter women from managing their businesses. In many cases they did not follow the regulations concerning gaining permits to operate. They turned the streets into a contested sphere both among themselves and between the operators and the state. The state trying to control urban life occasionally shut down coffee stands and sued their female operators. They were so many that the police shut down fifty coffee shops in one day because “they disturb the town’s quietness”.<sup>780</sup> However, as in the case of women building without the state’s permission, the state power was compromised by the massive demands for these businesses and women’s will to negotiate the state’s power. They sought help from notables seeking for popular support. Mahmud Sabala was a local notable who was trying to build his political career on the footsteps of Prince `Abbas Halim through championing the labor movement. He mediated between coffee shop owners and the local government to reopen the coffee shops.<sup>781</sup>

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<sup>779</sup> Among many cases where violence broke out under the influence of booza see Tanta Criminal Court 1939/ 7442/ 1877. In that case one man was killed. See also Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/1888.

<sup>780</sup> *Al-`Amil*, March 24, 1947.

<sup>781</sup> *Ibid.*

Although these places were called *Qahwa* or *Maqha*, or coffee shops, they served mostly tea and tobacco in water pipes, *Guza*. Tea became very popular among the Egyptian population after World War I. The Egyptian poor, particularly peasants, quickly replaced coffee with tea between the 1920s and 1950s.<sup>782</sup> Between 1947 and 1949 Egyptians consumed more than 31 million pounds of tea, which meant each Egyptian consumed about 1.59 lbs. of tea a year. To show how Egyptians increased their tea drinking, Egypt imported 112,563 tons of tea in 1947, increasing to 16,932 tons in 1951 despite the continuing increase in its international prices. The government benefited from that continuing increase in imported tea since it levied a 17 piaster customs fee for each imported kilogram of tea, which added 38.6% to the actual price.

Table 5.11: Imported tea to Egypt.

Year	Tea in ton	Cost in EP
1947	112,563	4,300,000
1948	13,503,	
1949	16,245,	6,237,000
1950	15,971,	6,803,000
1951	16,932	7,690,000

Source: al-Ahram al-Iqtisadi, April 1952

Most Egyptian factories recognized the importance of tea for their workers and provided them with a break when they could consume tea served in the factory's cantina. The workers of the Misr Company in al-Mahalla had to buy tea from stands around the Company's gates and fences during their lunch breaks and before the afternoon shift. Of course many of them drank tea before and after work and during weekends. Through his biography, the Misr Company worker 'Abdu 'Abd al-Rahman complained about the imbalance between his wages and living costs, he had at least one cup of tea at the coffee

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<sup>782</sup> "Tijarat al-Shay fi Misr" [The Trade of Tea in Egypt], *al-Ahram fi Khidmat al-Tijara wa al-Sina`a* [*al-Ahram al-Iqtisadi*], April 1952.

shop every day with his breakfast or lunch. He had another cup whenever he went to the coffee shop with his colleagues after dinner.<sup>783</sup> This cup of tea cup was part of his daily schedule since he joined the Company in 1932. This constant need for a cup of tea provided women with opportunities to invest, work, and generate income. Over time, workers developed associations with particular coffees shops. Relatives and individuals coming from villages looking for a worker would be guided to the coffee shop in with which that worker was associated.<sup>784</sup> The downside of this association was the ease with which hostile rivals could find their targets in coffee shops and stands which turned these places into violent spaces.<sup>785</sup> Being a woman managing such place proved that it could be in itself a source of violence. For example in the al-Shawafi`iya neighborhood, where workers from the al-Batanun village were concentrated, a woman set up a stand to sell cold drinks. The fact that a particular worker came to the drink stand every night in the holy month of Ramadan and talked to the female owner was enough to get the worker beaten up causing him permanent disability.<sup>786</sup>

Coffee shops and fast food stands that sold cooked beans, falafel, molasses with sesame paste, pickled vegetables, sugarcane, and bread were providing services and products tailored to workers' needs. The families of al-Mahalla were less likely to buy these low quality foodstuffs, which cost more than home cooking. Those who could afford to eat out would go to real restaurants. Bread, in particular, was baked at home and buying bread from bakeries entailed a social stigma. Although a piece of bread in a

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<sup>783</sup> Halim, *Hikayatu `Abdu `Abd al-Rahman*, 31.

<sup>784</sup> In her way to Aga Umm Ahmad al-Sunbati stopped in al-Mahalla to deliver a letter to a relative who worked at the Company. She found him at the coffee shop where he was known to hangout. Tanta Criminal Court 1940/ 7444/ 894. See also Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2382.

<sup>785</sup>Two young men were competing to show their physical strength while they were sitting in a coffee shop. A third man hit them while he was under intoxication. Misdemeanor 1945, 7793, 2174. For another fight in a coffee shop, see Misdemeanor 1945/ 7794/ 2420.

<sup>786</sup>Misdemeanor 1945 file 7793.

bakery cost more than that baked at home, buying bakery bread for every meal, which was called *khass* or *suqi* bread, meaning special bread or bread from the market, indicated that the family was so impoverished that it could not secure more than one day's bread consumption. To minimize the living cost, Company workers bought stocks of dried bread and pickled cheese on their way back to al-Mahalla after every visit to their home villages. The regular daily meal of a worker would include bread, cheese and some green vegetables bought from women outside the company's fence. If the stock ran out, they had to buy *suqi* bread and pickled vegetables or salted cheese. Ironically, workers had eventually had a way to get cheaper, homemade bread. Outside the company's fence, along with the extensive food vending, a bread market emerged and was called *Suq Faransa*, the Market of France. In that odd market, beggars, who were mostly women, sold homemade bread that they collected as donations from the people of the town. On luxury days, particularly weekends and paydays, workers bought falafel, molasses sesame paste, cooked fish, or canned salmon. In all cases workers, most of whom were single or living in al-Mahalla without their wives, were not able to afford cooking or brewing tea at home. In addition to the long exhausting work shifts, they did not have stoves, pots, or any other needed materials and equipment for cooking. A sweet cup of tea gave them the joy of dessert and refreshment. The food vendors and coffee stands met their needs exactly.

Like women running coffee shops, female peddlers and vendors of vegetable, fruits, eggs, butter and other foodstuff were seeking opportunities to make a living in the rapidly growing town through responding to the needs of a new and expanding market. More women traded in used clothes and set up their businesses around the Company and on the streets leading to it, in addition to *Suq al-Kuhnah*, or the secondhand market.

Patrons of this clothing market were not only rank and file workers. Some mechanics and Effendiyya bought from these vendors.<sup>787</sup>

Women's appearance in the marketplace and in the streets' vending stands was not an absolutely new phenomenon associated with the immigration influx. But certainly the rapid population growth and having a large number of the newcomers be single males with limited income contributed to expanding women's activities in the marketplace. They also stepped into a new male domain such as coffee shops with all the risks it entailed and performed all the jobs a male coffee tender was expected to do such as smoking a water pipe to ensure it worked right before offering it to the customer. In most cases they did not own or rent a shop or any other sort of commercial property from which they ran the business. They rarely sought permits or followed official regulations to run their business. They challenged the state's power that was trying to control the urban population and space. To maximize their profits as vendors they challenged the state's health and security regulations, and practiced all sort of tricks to cheat on quality and measurement.

Since the market was gendered as a masculine space, these women were forced to contend with limiting gendered expectations. They frequently represented their economic activities as inherently feminine to defend their interest and to allay the threat of their transgressive behavior and to preserve their reputations and status. They employed their sharp tongues against each other, policemen, and communal figures. Meanwhile, they tried to follow the social norm of modesty as a way to survive.<sup>788</sup> The vegetable vendor Zakiyya al-Safti who enjoyed several appearances in the Misdemeanor Court records

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<sup>787</sup>Misdemeanor 1938/ 858, 6775 and 1945/7794/ 2667.

<sup>788</sup> For example, the femal vendor Nabawiyyah `Abdu al-Sayyid, who was a 30-year old widow, stopped the woman Hamida Ahmad al-Barbari from exchanging jocks, *mizah*, with men around her business. Misdemeanor 1944/ 6917/ 647.

between 1930 and 1945 could provide us with a good portrait for such groups of women. Although she was unique in her reappearance in the record, her way of challenging the state and the community, her identifying of her self-interest, undermining the males in her household while keeping up with her duties as a mother and a wife were all shared among women peddlers and vendors. Unfortunately no record kept Zakiyya's own voice for us. What we know about her and women like her come from the court records, which was not in her favor. In these records she always appeared as a defendant and was only quoted in these records by her obscene language in her moments of anger and quarreling. Yet, Zakiyya represents a native working woman of her time and her class.

We are not sure when Zakiyya started her career as a vegetable vendor, but her earliest appearance was in 1929 when there were reported to be 35 vegetable vendors. She owned a house in al-`Ajami, which was on the rural peripheries of Sandifa. She was married to Sabir Sa`id al-Shazli and had at least two children, a boy and a girl. Both her husband and her son worked with her in vegetable vending, but she was the one in charge. She negotiated with customers, porters and drivers who brought vegetables to her stand in the marketplace. Consequently, she was the one who got involved in quarrels and arguments. Casual arguments with those individuals were mostly over prices and fees, but she got involved with others over power and longer term interests. She was not intimidated by men in uniform representing the state or notable women whenever she felt those people were disrupting her business. Among the 15 fights in which she was involved and reported was a confrontation she launched in 1945 against an affluent lady, a fellow male vendor, and a policeman. A rich woman named Zakiyya `Ali Muhammad `Asi, who was widely respected in the community and had the title *Hajja*, allowed a poor man to install a vending kiosk in her property to make a living. That property was an empty piece of land next to her house. The man brought the kiosk to sell little ends (or



vegetables), which Zakiyya al-Safti saw as a threat to her business. She and her children tried to prevent the man from installing his kiosk. When the landlady heard the argument, she came out through her third floor balcony and asked them to let the man make her living. Zakiyya al-Safti slandered the landlady publicly telling her “(you are) whore, prostitute, daughter of a dog, you and your daughter are fucked, you are the wife of a pimp, come down her and I’ll satisfy myself beating you up” and “who could take my place (you) *Labwa* (lioness a metaphor in Arabic for a sexually aggressive woman) the fucked one who let people in one after another for one piaster and one and a half, you’re making yourself *Hagga*, while you went to Madina to fuck and came back”. She slandered the policeman when he tried to interfere. At this time, Zakiyya al-Safti’s bad attitude did not go unnoticed. The judge decided to punish her harshly with one month and a half in jail with hard labor and 5 EP fine because of “her record of fighting and attacking policemen”. Her children were fined 5 EP each and three of them had to pay 15 EP damage to the landlady. So in addition to jail, the family lost 30 EP, more than what they could have made in two months for one fight. Misdemeanor 1945, file 7792, case 924. Zakiyya was the best example of what the phrase *Imra’a Suqiyya*, a marketplace woman, means. *Suqiyya* is a combination of willful and sharp-tongued woman.

Women peddlers, vendors, and those who operated coffee shops and food stands were actually encroaching on a market that was inherently gendered as a masculine space. Their impulse was neither a desire to achieve an egalitarian society as expressed in the contemporary feminist writings nor to break with the traditional motherhood chores. They did not even need to challenge the community over women’s right to work outside the home or abandoning segregation and *Hijab*. Women of the poorer classes usually worked. Their work was taken for granted, not sought after as an abstract right. They were expected to work to help support the family. They did not need to go through the

battle of *Hijab*, simply because they did not wear it. However modesty was highly appreciated. In their observation of modesty outside homes, women from urban and rural families in al-Mahalla differed in their dress code. Urban women wore a black sheet called *milaya laf*, a wrapping sheet, on top of whatever clothes they wore inside the house. Although it covered their bodies from head to toe it was tightened around the waist emphasizing the feminine body tone. Unless the woman held its ends very tight in her hand, very often it slipped down the shoulder and could show woman's arms and expose her bust. This must have happened while women were taking care of their daily chores such as carrying water and shopping. During these daily errands, the wrapping sheet was more a symbol of modesty rather than an actual cover. This sheet itself could have been the most expensive property for a woman. Face veiling was a limited practice only among upper class women who rarely needed to leave their homes and needed to extend their sense of segregation. That veil was a black net that could be decorated with a piece of gold on the nose called *qasabah* or *al-`arusa*, bird. Obviously it was different from the elite Cairo women's veil which was a solid white. Women from rural families wore a long loose dress, the *galabiyya*, and a loose head cover, *tarha*. They were mostly solid black, blue or any other dark color. While working in the field, women sometimes took their head covering off and even lifted their *galabiyya* up. Because the urban *millaya laf* was not practical during work, women working in the market dressed closer to the peasant style of *galabiyya* and *Tarha*, regardless if they came from urban or rural origins.

The working women in al-Mahalla did not give up their traditional gender role as mothers and wives. Very often they took care of their children and nursed their babies while working in the marketplace. Meanwhile, they lived up to the ideals of modern women. They worked outside the home, managed properties, mingled with men, and took care of their families. However, they did not mimic modernity. On the contrary, they

charted the waters of modernity for the more affluent and often self-consciously elite feminists. With no education they assured themselves jobs and incomes, a position that educated women hardly enjoyed before the commitment of the state in 1960s to equality with men and one that is again being disputed on cultural grounds with the rise of political Islamists since the 1970s. Struggling with the state and culture was not restricted to those women who pursued “honorable” ways of making a living. The prostitutes of al-Mahalla during the first half of the twentieth century provided another aspect of the negotiations between the local community, the nation-state, and the rising national discourse, which I treat in the following chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Between “National Purity” and “Local Flexibility”

#### Prostitution in al-Mahalla al-Kubra

The whispers among the crude young peasants who came to al-Mahalla al-Kubra to work at the Misr Weaving and Spinning Company made al-Khubiza Quarter, or the brothel, a visit-worthy wonderland. The eleven-year-old pioneer worker Fikri al-Khuli headed to this red light district in his first weekend in the town in 1928 along with three adult co-workers and two of his boyhood friends who were now his roommates.<sup>789</sup> Although they were afraid to be seen by others from their villages, excitement and curiosity drove them, after sunset, to see the “women who could be hugged, kissed, and .... for two Piasters or less”. Their excursion to the prostitution quarter left al-Khuli and his friends sad, although their visit went peacefully; a prostitute gave al-Khuli an orange and provided her services to his adult friend for a fair price. Despite their moral upbringing that condemned adulterous women to death, they felt deeply sorry for a woman who made her living on selling her body to as many men as possible every night and then had to give the greater share of her earnings to her madam. Her story about a deceptive ex-lover, and her subsequent flight from her village hushed up their condemnation. Regardless of the accuracy of al-Khuli’s account, this experience summarizes the reality of al-Mahalla’s prostitution quarter until the practice was outlawed in Egypt in 1949. That quarter, I argue, was peaceful and well regulated enough to make it an integral part of the town’s society. Contrary to the unlicensed prostitution outside it, al-Khubiza did not generate strong rejection among the townsfolk and brought

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<sup>789</sup>Al-Khuli’s visit to al-Khubiza is based on his autobiography. Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 102-108.

individuals from all social statuses to one place. Al-Khubiza was the meeting point of Christians and Muslims, the rich and the poor, the notables and the rabble, outlaws and law-enforcers.

This chapter traces prostitution in al-Mahalla in the first half of the 20th century as a regulated urban practice until the trade was outlawed in Egypt in 1949. This period witnessed the establishment of the Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving in 1927 until it reached its maximum expansion during the interwar period and employed 27,000 workers. The creation of that company turned al-Mahalla into a battlefield between the rising nationalist capitalists and European economic-political domination and dragged what had been an interior provincial town into a central position in the national discourse. Meanwhile, the Company attracted immigration into the town causing the population to increase triple-fold in less than three decades. Studying prostitution in al-Mahalla during this period of exceptionally rapid growth does not only give us a window on a particular type of illicit sexuality and public morality in a colonial context, it also gives us a hint as to gender relations and inter-communal relations in the invisible marginalized part of an provincial local community and how it was socially transformed. Prostitution was practiced in al-Mahalla long before it was regulated in Egypt in 1882 and before a particular neighborhood, based on these regulations, was designated for that trade in al-Mahalla itself in 1905. While regulations are meant to signify state control over the society, those regulations, I argue, created a sphere for a power contest between the colonial state and the local community, between nationalist discourse and the local way of life, and between public morality and private space. The prostitution district in al-Mahalla continually negotiated rules for its own benefit and survival. The community abided by the state's power whenever it was useful or irresistible and challenged it whenever it was necessary for more lucrative business. When the nationalists prevailed

over the local accommodation of public prostitution and dictated that Egyptian society should be “purified” from prostitution, the local community pursued their “usual” life even if it had to be outside the legal boundaries. Prostitutes in al-Mahalla continued making a living with their bodies. Those who had the inclination for using the service continued to be customers. The rest of the community dealt with illicit sexuality case by case regardless of the nationalist discourse about one virtuous Egyptian nation. The local community actively and continually shifted boundaries on what was public and what was private, what was the state’s responsibility and what was communal liability. Consequently, what was acceptable and what should be resistible changed, regardless of the law or the state’s (in)efficiency in law-enforcement.

Al-Mahalla, like many other Egyptian urban centers, tolerated prostitution long before it was regulated in Egypt in 1882. The health inspection regulation for prostitutes issued that year is considered the first official state recognition of prostitution in modern Egypt after Muhammad Ali banished prostitutes to Upper Egypt in 1836.<sup>790</sup> Western travelers to Egypt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century reported that prostitutes of al-Mahalla lived in “prostitution colonies” or in separate quarters under the control of a matron or *shaykha*.<sup>791</sup> Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prostitutes in al-Mahalla handled their own affairs without state interference, safe from police control and taxation.<sup>792</sup> According to the French Expedition, al-Mahalla was a safe haven for prostitutes from all over the Delta and provided them with more protection from police than did Cairo.<sup>793</sup> The French reported

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<sup>790</sup> For the health inspection regulation, see Wizarat al-Dakhiliyya, *al-Qawanin al-Idariya wa al-Jina`iya*, v. 4 (Cairo: al-Matba`a al-Amiriyya). For prostitution in Egypt in the 19<sup>th</sup> century see Khaled Fahmy, "Prostitution in Egypt in the nineteenth-century," in *Outside in: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East*, ed. Eugene Rogan (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001) and Tucker, *Women in nineteenth-century Egypt*, chapter 4.

<sup>791</sup> Bruce W. Dunne, “Sexuality and the `Civilizing Process` in Modern Egypt” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 1996), 97.

<sup>792</sup> Tucker, *Women in nineteenth-century Egypt*, 151.

<sup>793</sup> Zuhayr al-Shayib, trans., *Mawsu`atu wasf Misr: Dirasat `ann al-aqalim wa al-mudun al-misriya* (Cairo: al-Hay`a al-Masriya al-`amma lil-Kitab, 2002), 91.

that prostitutes roamed inside al-Mahalla freely and from there their matron organized their trips to surrounding areas for business in markets and saints' festivals. Prostitutes were open about their trade and tried to seduce the French soldiers. Khaled Fahmy rightly utilizes prostitution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Egypt as a lens from which to view state policy regarding such issues as public hygiene, morality and public security<sup>794</sup>, and prostitution in al-Mahalla in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is utilized here to trace how a local society negotiated the policies of the encroaching colonial state.

The fact that the health inspection regulation of prostitution was issued on 31 October 1882, one month after the British invasion provoked nationalists to associate state-recognition of prostitution with colonial control. More health and security regulations were issued in July 1885 and July 1896 until a comprehensive decree was issued in 1905. There is no evidence however that the British recommended the legalization of prostitution or proposed to make prostitutes subject to medical inspection.<sup>795</sup> It is true the British soldiers needed protection from venereal diseases, but Egyptians also needed such protection.<sup>796</sup> Despite the timing, these regulations should not be surprising considering the increasing amount of prostitution under both Khedives Ismail (r.1867-1879) and Tawfiq (r.1879-1892).<sup>797</sup>

'Abdullah al-Nadim, who was known as "the orator of the 'Urabi Revolution", waged a campaign against publicly licensed prostitution as early as 1893 and considered the health inspection "a certificate from the government doctors for the validity of

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<sup>794</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>795</sup> Imad Hilal, *al-Baghaya fi Misr: Dirasa tarikhiya ijtimaiyya 1834-1949* [Prostitutes in Egypt: A socio-historical study, 1834- 1949] (Cairo: al-'Arabi lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi', 2001), 201.

<sup>796</sup> For state's concerns about the danger of venereal diseases before regulations, see: Fahmy, Prostitution.

<sup>797</sup> Hilal emphasizes that the intensive appearance of prostitutes in the documents of *Majlis al-Ahkam wa al-Dabtiyat* under both rulers makes it obvious that prostitution was recognized although there was no a particular law or decree. Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 41-42.

adultery”.<sup>798</sup> By accusing the European West of bringing corruption to the Muslim East and violating Qur’anic edicts, he set the tone of religio-nationalist discourse until public prostitution was abolished in 1949. Though calls for the abolition of prostitution were heard across all of Egypt, al-Mahalla’s particular experience allowed the practice to grow as even more women began working as prostitutes, whether licensed or not. Away from the nationalist discourse dominating the public sphere in Cairo in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the experience of al-Mahalla shows how far the local daily life was from the imagined Egypt. The virtuous and united Egyptian nation with its national moral system was an idealized image.<sup>799</sup> The town’s red-light district did not witness resistance from the locals who for centuries had been accustomed to the idea of public prostitutes. Meanwhile the same townsmen oftentimes carried out the responsibility of eliminating illicit prostitution outside the designated area. The migration into town of thousands of peasants, who had never experienced public prostitution in their home villages, did not turn the district into a field for moral contestation with the indigenous urbanites. Some workers even saw similarities between themselves and the prostitutes as they were all driven to al-Mahalla by their need to make a living.<sup>800</sup> The workers who readily used the services of prostitutes nonetheless felt deeply guilty about having affairs with their landladies.<sup>801</sup> In summation both urbanites and peasants dealt with illicit sexuality on a case by case basis and did not universally apply a national moral code.

Although both Egyptian and western scholars agree that the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 supported regulating prostitution, they differ drastically on their perception

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<sup>798</sup> Abd al-Mun`im Ibrahim al-Jumay`i, *Min turath `Abdallah al-Nadim: Majallat al-Ustadh: Dirasa tahliliya* (Cairo: al-Hay`a al-Misriya al-`Amma lil-Kitab, 1994), 13-14.

<sup>799</sup> For the rise of what could be called the national notion of moral behavior see Shaun Timothy Lopez, “Media Sensations, Contested Sensibilities: Gender and Moral Order in the Egyptian Mass Media, 1920-1955” (PhD diss., the University of Michigan, 2004).

<sup>800</sup> al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v. 1, 94.

<sup>801</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-107.



and assessment of these regulations. Egyptian scholars think that the British imposed these regulations to drag Egypt into moral and social decay and Egypt under colonial control was too weak to challenge the European policies that considered prostitution a personal choice.<sup>802</sup> Based on Timothy Mitchell's application of Foucault's framework on Egypt, the American scholar Bruce Dunne thinks that the British regulated prostitution as a way to control the sexuality of the colonized Egyptian and impose what they thought to be their superior civilized moral purity and medical practice.<sup>803</sup> Though both interpretations could be valid, a third possibility is overlooked. Considering that the history of prostitution goes back to pre-modern Egypt, these regulations cannot be understood outside the context of increasing state centralization and modernization, an ongoing process that started before and continued after colonial control. Regulation of prostitution should be seen as a state effort for social control based on European models and techniques. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the authorities' concern on prostitution was informed by anxieties about health and security rather than morality.<sup>804</sup> Regulating prostitution in the colonial state could reflect the need of both colonial authority and the colonial state to play a larger role in regulating and controlling the society. However the nationalist discourse against prostitution and its regulation in colonial Egypt is an example of the blurred line between colonial and anti-colonial hybridity.<sup>805</sup> The colonial authority in Egypt saw a danger in the unregulated existence of prostitution. Prostitution and regulating prostitution created a national-hybrid discourse that adopted European anxiety over security and health mixed with what was thought to be the authentic socio-

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<sup>802</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 94. See also `Abd al-Wahab Bakr, *Mujtama` al-Qahira al-sirri 1900-1951* [The underground society in Cairo, 1900- 1951](Cairo: al-`Arabi lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzi`, 2001) and *al-Jarima fi Misr fi al-nisf al-awwal min al-qarn al-`ishshrin: al-Shawari` al-khalfiya* [Crimes in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century: the back streets] (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub wal-Watha`iq al-Qawmiyya, 2005).

<sup>803</sup> See Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* and Dunne, "Sexuality in Egypt".

<sup>804</sup> Fahmy, "Prostitution," 83, 87.

<sup>805</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 169-170.

religious ideals, and consequently opposed both of prostitution and the colonial authority through labeling the colonizers to be responsible for polluting the “virtuous nation”.

### ***Al-Khubiza*, the “Certified” Prostitution Quarter**

As in other Egyptian urban areas, prostitution became subject to regulation in al-Mahalla at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1896 the interior ministry allowed provincial governors to permit brothels in particular quarters and close any brothels outside these designated spots. In the official documents al-Mahalla’s prostitution quarter was known as *Nuqtat al-Mumisat*, the Point of Prostitutes, or *Hayy al-Da’ara*, the Prostitution Quarter. The public called it al-Khubiza, meaning simply “the brothel”. Al-Khubiza was also used in some other Egyptian towns to refer to red light districts, while the word *al-Was’ah* was used in still others.<sup>806</sup>

Table 6.1: Registered prostitutes in al-Mahalla, Tanta, al-Gharbiyya Governorate, and all of Egypt between 1907 and 1949.<sup>807</sup>

Year	al-Mahalla	Tanta	Al-Gharbiyya	Egypt
1907	37	92		
1917	36	297	365	4243 (111 male)
1927	39		245	3265 (18 male)
1937			171	2787 (18 male)
1947 <sup>808</sup>	83	101	721	4243 (111 male)

<sup>806</sup> Al-Khubiza and al-Was`a were the most two common words referring to neighborhoods of licensed prostitution in Egyptian cities and towns in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While both words became terms, they revealed how Egyptians looked at that profession and its practitioners. Khubiza comes from the root Khabaza, which means to bake. Al-Khubiza was also a cheap vegetable. Whether it was generated from the earlier or the latter, the meaning is associated with cheap and baked mix. For the origin of the term al-Was`a, see Muhammad Sayyid Kilani, *Fi rubu` al-Azbakiya: dirasah adabiya, tarikhiya, ijtimai`iya* [In the Quarter of al-Azbakiya: Socio-literary Historical Study] (Cairo: Dar al-Firjani, 1985).

<sup>807</sup> The table is compiled from Censuses of Egypt taken in 1907, 1917, 1927, 1937, and 1947 conducted by the Ministry of Finance - Statistical Development.

<sup>808</sup> The 1947 census was published in 1953, four years after abolishing licensed prostitution in Egypt. It does not mention any explicit statistics on prostitutes. Yet there were 83 women in al-Mahalla under “unknown profession”, which indicates that they were prostitutes. The category of “unknown profession” appeared only in al-Mahalla, Tanta, and Kafr al-Zayyat where prostitution was regulated.

Source: Censuses of Egypt taken in 1907, 1917, 1927, 1937, and 1947 conducted by the Ministry of Finance - Statistical Development.

Until public prostitution was abolished in al-Mahalla, along with many towns, with a martial order in 1943, just few years before it was abolished in entire Egypt in 1949, al-Mahalla had the second biggest prostitution quarter in Lower Egypt after Tanta, the capital city of al-Gharbiyya. Although the court documents in al-Mahalla prove that homosexuality was not unheard of, no male prostitute was ever registered in al-Mahalla at any time.<sup>809</sup> From table 6.1 we find that the number of registered prostitutes in al-Mahalla was stable between 36- 39 prostitutes throughout the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the gloom of World War II, that number increased to 83, in addition to those who practiced prostitution illegally outside of al-Khubiza. Not unexpectedly, there is no way to estimate the number of secret prostitutes, but the national figures show that the number of women arrested for unlicensed prostitution was three times the number of licensed prostitutes between 1926 and 1936.<sup>810</sup> As in licensed prostitution, secret prostitutes were mostly poor widows and divorced women. Although secret prostitution existed throughout the studied period, there is evidence that more women practiced it during World War II.

Table 6.2: Marital status in al-Mahalla for people who were 16 years and older in 1937 and 1947.<sup>811</sup>

	Never married	Married	Divorced	Widow	Unspecific	Total
Male 1937	6806	12440	255	465	38	20004

<sup>809</sup> Male licensed prostitutes were believed to be effeminate, *Mukhanath*, and were treated same as female prostitutes in terms of licensing process and routine medical checkups. Registered male prostitutes in the studied period were mostly in Cairo, al-Buhaira and Alexandria. Few of them were in Upper Egypt. Hilal, *al-Baghaya*.

<sup>810</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>811</sup> The table is accumulated from the 1937 and the 1947 population censuses.

Female 1937	1903	12016	379	3010	24	17332
Male 1947	12273	23234	269	644	682	37569
Female 1947	13813	21544	590	4793	565	41305

Source: the 1937 and the 1947 population censuses.

Table 6.2 shows that al-Mahalla entered wartime with 3389 widows and divorced women, amounting to about 20% of all women. When we add the 1903 women who never got married, the total unmarried women was 5,292 or more than 30% of all women aged 16 years or older. Ten years later, more women lived without husbands. There were 5383 widows and divorced women comprising about 17% of the female population. When we add the 13,813 women who never got married, the total unmarried women were 19,196 or more than 46% of the female population. Depression, recession, unemployment, shortage of basic substances, high prices and inflation all struck the poor of al-Mahalla and across Egypt. During wartime the Shari'a Court in al-Mahalla witnessed cases of women seeking divorce because their husbands were too poor to support them.<sup>812</sup> Hardship fell on both the material and moral levels. A husband was forcing his wife into prostitution.<sup>813</sup> Stingy poverty made a couple give their newborn baby to a better off family.<sup>814</sup> There were at least two licensed teenaged prostitutes in al-Khubiza during wartime, which is evidence of how economic hardship led to an increase in practicing prostitution during WWII. Many women without sources of income or supporting male breadwinners were left with no choice but to make a living with their bodies. This does not mean every woman who lost her husband resorted to prostitution,

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<sup>812</sup> Sijil al-Mahalla al-Kubra Shari'a Court from 23 May 1944 to 22 August 1944, Ahkam Juz'iya, vol. 3.

<sup>813</sup> Ibid.

<sup>814</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1941/ 7447/ 120.

but dwelling in poverty must have made prostitution and begging feasible solutions.<sup>815</sup> Even those who chose more dignified ways for making their living such as domestic servants sometimes ended up providing sexual services to their masters.<sup>816</sup>

This social privation was not unprecedented. The Egyptian historians Muhammad Sayyid Kilani and Salah `Isa observed an increase in legal and secret prostitution during WWI due to economic hardship.<sup>817</sup> `Isa reports that fourteen-year old virgins applied for prostitution licenses during WWI.<sup>818</sup> In al-Mahalla, along with the economic hardship experienced by many during WWII, there was a rapid increase of the population. Table 6.2 shows the number of potential customers of prostitution grew. There were 6806 and 12273 unmarried men in al-Mahalla in 1937 and 1947. Most of those were young single men who immigrated into the town seeking economic opportunities with the establishment of the Misr Company. At the same time, war profiteers, handloom weavers with access to subsidized yarn in particular, experienced euphoric burst of wealth during the 1940s. This allowed them extravagant expenditures on luxury items and leisure, including the services of prostitutes. The consumption provoked some to complain that the profits of subsidized yarn encouraged “drinking alcohol and violating Muslim codes of sanctity”.<sup>819</sup>

The licensed public prostitution neighborhood of al-Khubiza existed on the periphery of the traditional and most populated area between the Muslim and Jewish graveyards to the west of the canal known as Bahr al-Mallah. It was surrounded by three

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<sup>815</sup> The 20-year old Zakiya al-Shishtawi Qidis and the 35-year old Umm Muhammad Muhammad Khalaf begged people for food after they got divorced. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/ 562 and 1941/ 6789/ 2107.

<sup>816</sup> Two women of al-Samra notable family bat up their 35-year old maid Fatima Jabr Mansur until she aborted her child. The aborted infant was a product of illicit relations between the maid and a bachelor son of the family. Misdemeanor 1944/ 6918/ 1150.

<sup>817</sup> Muhammad Sayyid Kilani, *al-Sultan Husayn Kamil: Fatra muzlima fi tarikh Misr 1914-1917* [Sultan Husayn Kamil: A Dark Period in the History of Egypt 1914- 1917] (Cairo: Dar al-Qawmiyya al-`Arabiyya lil-Tiba`a wal-Nashr, 1963), 154-180.

<sup>818</sup> `Isa, *Rijal Rayya wa Sakina*, 165.

<sup>819</sup> `Abdin Achieve, Mahfazah 525 “Iltimasat al-amnn bidun tarikh” [Petitions for security without dates].

medieval religious landmarks. It was adjacent to the al-‘Umariyya Mosque, a few hundred meters south of the Jewish temple, and a few hundred meters to the west of al-Mutawalli Mosque. Although no information is available about the quarter before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the location indicates it might have been used for the same purpose before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Apparently, this location was consistent with the old tradition of putting prostitutes on the peripheries of the Egyptian towns to guarantee their isolation from the rest of the population.<sup>820</sup> Being adjacent and very close to medieval religious sites also suggests a history long pre-dating regulated prostitution. It was mid-way between Sandifa and Suq al-Laban the two medieval urban centers which eventually combined creating the modern city of al-Mahalla.

Al-Khubiza’s location served perfectly to sustain business and with the expansion of the city in 1930s, it became more integrated in its residential part. Al-Khubiza was on the path of the Delta railway that connected al-Mahalla to the villages and towns as far south as Tanta and Qutur and as far north as Kafr al-Shayykh. It was close to popular destinations such as the Cattle Market and the Tuesday Market. It was also convenient for those who would come to attend the annual festivals of the Jewish al-Ustaz Temple and the Muslim Sayyidi al-Yamani and Sayyidi al-Shishtawi shrines. Despite the religious origins of these festivals, they always attracted seekers and providers of pleasure and entertainment.<sup>821</sup> The French Expedition reported that al-Mahalla’s prostitutes camped around saints’ festivals or *mawalid*. This practice was reported in other Egyptian towns in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For examples, the festival of Sayyidi Ahmad al-Badawi, which attracted the biggest religious pilgrimage in Lower Egypt, attracted prostitutes to the town of Tanta. Prostitutes would come to stay in their tents around the town until the end of the

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<sup>820</sup> It was the same case in Cairo until the modern time when its prostitution quarter became part of its down town.

<sup>821</sup> For illicit sexual practice and popular religion in pre-modern Egypt, see Dunne, “Sexuality in Egypt”, 69-73.

festival.<sup>822</sup> From Tanta they rushed to catch up with the festival of Sayyidi Ibrahim al-Dusuqi in the nearby town of Disuq.<sup>823</sup>

The Point of the Prostitutes was at the lowest point in al-Mahalla. The 1942 map of the city shows railings and stairs connecting al-Khubiza to the al-‘Umariyya and Khukhat al-Yahud vicinity.<sup>824</sup> Across Egypt people used the word *taht*, literary meaning down, to point at prostitution quarters and the phrase “I’m going down” was the polite, implicit way for a man to say he was going to the prostitution quarters.<sup>825</sup> But in the case of al-Mahalla, the same phrase would be both geographically and morally descriptive. Some licensed brothels operated higher up the railing where the most attractive women were offering their services for higher fees. According to al-Khuli, in late 1920s, women in the back brothels cost between one and a half to two Piaster, which was more than the daily wage of many of the company workers, while those upfront cost up to five Piaster.<sup>826</sup> A decade later, prices ranged between two and ten Piaster.<sup>827</sup>

Prostitution was associated with nightlife and the area did not become active before sunset. Darkness provided a cover to customers who were too embarrassed to be seen entering the area. Brothels were lit with electricity and women were standing by the doors on both sidewalks. Through his childish eyes, al-Khuli described the prostitutes he saw as “very tall white women with big eyes, nice noses, full lips, and pretty chins. Their breasts were bigger than the biggest pomegranate and their hair was covering their foreheads. They were wearing see-through silk cloth revealing their bodies. They held colorful flowers with a sweet refreshing smell. They were walking back and forth with

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<sup>822</sup> John Lewis Burckhardt, *Arabic proverbs; or, The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, Illustrated from their Proverbial Sayings Current at Cairo* (London: B. Quaritch, 1875), 177.

<sup>823</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 91

<sup>824</sup> Maslahat al-Misaha, the map of al-Mahalla al-Kubra, plate 918/630.

<sup>825</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 96.

<sup>826</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 103.

<sup>827</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/6775/855.

temptation showing their bodies to those who came to satisfy lust and pay a price. They were distributing smiles among the watchers and between their lips things were sparkling and shining. Each of them was winking with her pretty eyes to whoever she was able to attract. They did all they could to seduce customers.”<sup>828</sup>

Licensed prostitutes in the al-Khubiza were Muslim and Christian Egyptians. Prostitutes from both religions lived in the same brothel under the same madam and received customers from all religions with no differentiation. Records used in this study never mentioned either a foreign or a Jewish Egyptian name for a prostitute. Despite this, there is no reason to think that there were no foreign prostitutes in al-Mahalla, considering the sizable foreign community in the town. Nationwide, foreign prostitutes tended to conduct their business in unlicensed brothels. Covered by the legal protection of the Capitulations, it was very difficult for the Egyptian police to prosecute them for illegal prostitution. The British chief of the Egyptian Police, Sir Thomas Russell Pasha, reported that after his forces had failed several times to get into one of these brothels in Cairo, he had to bring seven armed consular attendants to the locked door of the brothel to obtain entry and enforce the law.<sup>829</sup> Such a mission must have been impossible to achieve outside Cairo. Al-Mahalla’s prostitutes tended to take up names different from their real ones. Sometimes this alias indicated their geographical origin such as al-Samanudiyya, al-Iskandaraniyya, and al-Shamiyya, meaning a woman from Samanud, Alexandria and from Syria. Al-Shamiyya could indicate the Syrian origin or having fair complexion and blond hair. Other nicknames indicated attractiveness such as Sambatik (the French word *Sympathique*). Some aliases were just regular names, which might have

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<sup>828</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, 103-104.

<sup>829</sup> Sir Thomas Russell Pasha, *Egyptian Service: 1902-1946* (London: John Murray, 1949), 182.



meant to hide their real names. For example Fatima Mutwali Shalabi was known as Nagah, Nur ‘Atiyya was known as Su’ad, and Sit Ikhwatha was known as Fawziyya.<sup>830</sup>

Table 6.3: Age distribution of 30 licensed prostitutes.

Age	Prostitutes	%
18-	2	6.7
20-	3	10
25-	3	10
30-	12	40
35-	2	6.7
40-	4	13.3
45-	3	10
50-	1	3.3
Total	30	100

Source: al-Mahalla misdemeanor Court records between 1924 and 1943.

Table 6.3 shows that most of al-Khubiza prostitutes were around 30 years old, some prostitutes were teenagers, and others were older than fifty years old. The youngest prostitutes during the period under study were Husna Adul Mu’ti and Mahfuza Mahmud Zaghlul. We do not know at what exact age they joined the trade, but Husna was pursuing her career in the red light area in 1937 when she was only eighteen years old and Mahfuza was active in 1938 when she was nineteen years old.<sup>831</sup> Both of the teenage prostitutes met the legal minimum age for granting of a prostitution license, which was eighteen. However, their actual age might have been younger than the recorded age, since it is likely that the doctors who checked them for their license applications estimated their ages.<sup>832</sup> Prostitutes in their forties and fifties were not unusual in al-Khubiza, although the

<sup>830</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1940/7445/1573.

<sup>831</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/6774/4006 and 1938/6776/1954.

<sup>832</sup> In many cases doctors overestimated ages of girls upon request of their families to meet the legal age of marriage.

life expectancy for Egyptians during 1930s was about 37 years old and prostitutes in particular were more subject to premature death due to venereal diseases.<sup>833</sup> A physician specializing in venereal diseases reported in 1907 “if you see a prostitute this year you might not see her next year (...) death and diseases take thousands every year”.<sup>834</sup> Statistics estimate that between 36% and 55% of venereal disease patients discontinued their medication between 1925 and 1932, which increased their likelihood of an early death.<sup>835</sup> Surviving prostitutes had to continue working to support themselves if they failed to accumulate savings, which was often the case. Although one prostitute might have received between 8-12 customers every night, most of their fees went to their madams and they were not able to save for retirement.<sup>836</sup>

A few prostitutes were able to leave the area and start a new life despite old age. One of those was Sabha Khattab who got married and owned a coffee shop where she and her husband worked.<sup>837</sup> Five years after Sabha left al-Khubiza, a judge estimated her age to be about 80 years old. Yet, her past did not stop chasing her. When the 25-year old Shishtawi Ramadan Gi'itar was caught robbing her room, he claimed that Sabha's husband framed him because the husband was jealous of his continuing love affair with Sabha. According to him the affair started when she was registered in the prostitution quarter. Due to Sabha's old age and Gi'itar's lofty criminal record including theft and drug dealing, his claims were dismissed and he was harshly punished with one and a half years in jail with labor. Al-Sayyida Sulayman was also an ex-prostitute, but when she got

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<sup>833</sup> Among those there was Mary Habib al-Shami who was 50 years old in 1937. Misdemeanor 1937/6772/1754. Inham Ali al-Disuqi was 40 in 1928, Badi'a Hanafi was 40 in 1930, Hanim al-Khashshab was 45 in 1938 and Sharifa Ahmad 40 in 1938.

<sup>834</sup> Burtuqalis Bey, *al-Bighaa' aw khatar al-`ahara fi al-qutr al-Misri* [Prostitution and the Danger of Prostitution in Egypt], trans. Dawud Effendi Barakat (Cairo: Matba`at Hindiyya, 1907), 47-48.

<sup>835</sup> Bakr, *Mujtama` al-Qahira*, 125.

<sup>836</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 137-138.

<sup>837</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1942/7450/ 547.

involved in a fight with the Jewish businessman Jack Hakim in 1915, he accused her of managing an unlicensed brothel among the houses of *al-Ahali al-Hrar*, the free people, a term that referred to people who were not involved in prostitution.<sup>838</sup> These cases show that while some prostitutes were able to give up the trade, their professional past often haunted them in their new lives. The stigma associated with prostitution made it difficult to give up. On the other hand, the fact that an old retired prostitute like Sabha Khattab end up as a married woman indicates that not everybody in the community outside al-Khubiza was willing to punish or reject women just due to their past. Although condemning sinful women, what was known as *Zaniyya* or *khatiya*, was probably a shared ideal among people of the town, not everybody in the society interpreted that ideal uniformly or lived up to it in the same way. There are those who adopted a different interpretation. They believed that getting married to an ex-prostitute and helping her to find a different path was the ultimate form of mercy. Living in poverty and on the margin of the society might compromise people's ability and will to live up to social ideals and consequently made getting married to an ex-prostitute acceptable. In either case, giving up the trade and gaining acceptance in society was difficult, though not impossible.

Although the law did not allow married women to get a prostitution license, we encounter at least one married woman in al-Khubiza, which indicates that the laws were not tightly applied and prostitutes did not lack means to challenge these laws.<sup>839</sup> Most licensed prostitutes were poor divorced women and widows, but some were never previously married. Runaway girls from al-Mahalla and the surrounding rural areas joined al-Khubiza after losing their virginity and therefore their reputations. Murdering and assaulting women for honor was not unheard of in the region. Umm Muhammad

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<sup>838</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 537 "Ahwal Ijtimai`yya: 1896-1924".

<sup>839</sup> The 22 year old prostitute Nabawiya `Abdu al-Samuli was married to a certain Guda. Misdemeanor 1936/6768/3292.

`Atiyya was severely abused on 18 March 1941 by the head of her family, 'Ali Salih Qulfat, because she continued taking a road that passed a coffee shop where many men used to spend their free time.<sup>840</sup> In the nearby village Samatay the eighteen-year-old farmer Raghīb Ibrahim killed his unmarried sister Sit al-Dar because, according to the court, she wasn't chaste and pure, did not listen to her brother's orders, continued her immorality, *fugur*, got pregnant and threw her infant in a canal. The court treated the brother with leniency and sentenced him to three years in jail.<sup>841</sup> Even if a mother tried to help her "sinful daughter", death might be inescapable. The unmarried pregnant girl 'Abbla Muhammad Sharaf of the nearby village Alabshit died when her mother and a midwife tried to save her by an ill-performed abortion procedure.<sup>842</sup> Premarital sexual relations also led women to prostitution as reported in 19<sup>th</sup> century Egypt.<sup>843</sup> Seven out of ten prostitutes interviewed between 1926 and 1932 said premarital sexual relations with lovers or fiancés was their first step towards prostitution.<sup>844</sup> The pattern of falling in love leading to falling into either prostitution or being killed was so recurring that the judge of al-Mahalla Court warned a "reckless girl" from that destiny.<sup>845</sup>

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<sup>840</sup> After he locked the family out, Qulfat, who was the cousin of Umm Muhammad's father, tied her hands, took her underwear off, burned parts of her body with a heated iron bar and shaved her head randomly. Neither her husband nor her father protested that torture. Although the medical inspection reported all injuries, and although the court considered taking her underwear off and burning parts of her genitals to be sexual abuse, the court treated Qulfat with leniency and suspended the five-year jail sentence. This was because "he was performing his right to discipline her with the consent of her father and husband and because he claimed responsibility and promised not to violate the law in the future". Tanta Criminal Court 1941/ 7448 case 250/950 Biyala.

<sup>841</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1942/7451/847.

<sup>842</sup> Misdemeanor 1926/ 3114/1513.

<sup>843</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 54.

<sup>844</sup> Bakr, *Mujtama' al-Qahira*, 90-91.

<sup>845</sup> When the coffee shop waiter al-Mansi Khalil Baghdadi was caught hiding in the house of his employer Mustafa `Inab at night on 23 June 1936, he revealed that he was in love with his employer's daughter Hayat and she invited him to visit her. As proof, he submitted a photograph of both of them to the court. Hayat, who was under 18 years old, was legally married to "a foreign man" but the wedding had not been consummated yet. The judge warned the offender that continuing this "sinful relationship might destroy Hayat's marriage, damage her reputation, and cause her to slip into prostitution forever or to be killed by the hands of her family." Baghdadi was sentenced with three months in jail with hard labor. Misdemeanor 1936/6767/2449.

Losing the honor of virginity or a breadwinning husband did not lead directly to the brothels. There were individuals known as “*Sahhaba*, m. *Sahhab*” meaning “pullers” whose job was to find those candidates and introduce them to the profession. It seems that the *Sahhabas* worked on a limited scale in the city. Al-Mahalla’s records did not report any recruiting networks for al-Khubiza. In Salah Isa’s investigation of the case of the Alexandrian sisters “Rayya and Sakinah” al-Mahalla was never mentioned among the prostitution networks that connected Tanta, Cairo, Alexandria, Damanhur and Kafr ez-Zayyat.<sup>846</sup>

Retired prostitutes who managed to accumulate some savings tended to own and manage brothels. Those women were legally known as “*Ayqa*”, meaning madam of a brothel, to differentiate them from women practicing prostitution. The latter were called “*mumis*, plural “*mumisat*.” Al-Mahalla’s records do not mention any *Ayqa* who was younger than 45 years old. *Ayqas* were subject to periodic health inspections and could be exempted only when they became 50 years old.<sup>847</sup> The Italian word “*Padrona*”, which was widely used in Cairo’s brothels for madam, did not appear in al-Mahalla’s records.<sup>848</sup> That absence indicates that foreigners did not operate in al-Khubiza nor did al-Khubiza receive foreign customers. Not having a military barracks or British forces in al-Mahalla might have limited the foreign influence. Prostitutes called their madams “*Ma’alima*,” meaning boss. Madams were usually in charge of negotiating and collecting fees from customers. Documents do not show how fees were divided between a prostitute and her madam, but laws and regulations gave madams full control over prostitutes. Egyptian scholars believed that madams took most of, if not all, what their prostitutes made in

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<sup>846</sup> See `Isa, *Rijal Rayya wa Sakina*.

<sup>847</sup> Bakr, *Mujtama` al-Qahira*, 118.

<sup>848</sup> For this term see Bakr, *Mujtama` al-Qahira*, 103-108.

return for providing them with shelter, food, and doctors' fees.<sup>849</sup> Al-Khuli reports that the prostitute who served his friend told them her madam took all the money she made.<sup>850</sup> Court records did not include even one case when a prostitute and her madam got into a fight over dividing the income, which indicates the madam had complete power over the prostitutes, the system was well established and followed in al-Khubiza, or that arguments did not reach the level of physical altercations needing police interventions.

Long history of public prostitution is not the only evidence of accepting the trade in al-Mahalla. Despite its geographical and moral location on the margin of the town, al-Khubiza's customers were a cross-section of the society. It attracted customers from all religious communities and from different social strata. In addition to residents of al-Mahalla, visitors coming to the town for a limited time for business or shopping frequented the area. Al-Khubiza received those who were too poor to get married and well-to-do men who chose to spend their leisure time in that area. Amin Effendi al-A`sar, who came from a prominent family, was a good example for loyal customers among the notables of al-Mahalla.<sup>851</sup> We do not know exactly when he started his trips to the red quarter, but his name appeared in al-Khubiza's records for the first time in 1927 when he lost his watch there.<sup>852</sup> Two years later, al-`Asar was arrested in al-Khubiza because he violently tried to prevent a health inspector and a policeman from taking a prostitute to the police station for health inspection.<sup>853</sup> His intervention in favor of a prostitute might be evidence of his affection. A decade later al-`Asar's name appeared again associated with prostitution. In 1939 his maid, Fatima Muhammad Ahmad, called a policeman to

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<sup>849</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 130.

<sup>850</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 107.

<sup>851</sup> The head of al-A`sar family, Nu`man Pasha, was the mayor of al-Mahalla until he resigned in 1926 to run the parliamentary election. The family was among the big landlords and invested in Bank Misr and its companies. For al-A`sar family biography see Nur al-Din, *al-Hayatu al-Wataniyatu bil-Mahalla*.

<sup>852</sup> Misdemeanor 1927/3117/2378.

<sup>853</sup> Misdemeanor 1929/3961/2398.

arrest Fathi Muhammad ‘Ali because he was suspiciously wondering around the house. ‘Ali who came from Tanta holding an impressive record of 13 crimes turned out to be waiting for a dishonorable woman, *imra’a ghayr sharifa*, he had brought to serve Amin Effendi al-A`sar.<sup>854</sup> Throughout these years and despite the long association with prostitutes, Amin Effendi al-A`sar was a successful businessman, a cotton broker and a landlord. He lived in a big house, *Saraya*. He invested in luxurious housing in the upper middle class neighborhoods and his tenants were effendis and foreigners who afforded 12 EP monthly rent.<sup>855</sup> At the same time, he pursued his social life as a husband and a father.

On the other end of the social ladder the 25-year old driver’s apprentice Muhammad al-Tarabishi was another type of al-Khubiza customer. He lived with his father ‘Amir in one rented room. When he was convicted for robbing a woman’s house in December 1936, he already had held an abundant criminal record. Among his misdemeanors were a conviction for stealing the clothes of his company-employed housemates, not paying for his drinks in Nabiha Salim’s coffee shop inside the Prostitution Quarter, possessing a stolen knife, and stealing a woman’s stove.<sup>856</sup> Between both ends of the social ladder, there were customers from all walks of life, including vendors, millers, weavers, white and blue-collar-workers, and policemen. Some customers visited the area casually, while others developed deep affection for particular prostitutes. Due to competition between a policeman and a mechanic over one prostitute, both men went through a violent confrontation on the premises of al-Mahalla’s police station.<sup>857</sup>

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<sup>854</sup>Tanta Criminal Court 1939/ 7441/549.

<sup>855</sup> Al-Mahalla Civil Court 1947, file 7694, case 762.

<sup>856</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6770/ 387, 392 and 459.

<sup>857</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/1920.

Although frequenting al-Khubiza was casual recreation for most customers, it marked the ultimate symptom of dysfunction in the life of the 20-year-old Iskander Antun Ghattas who was eventually executed for murdering his parents, Antun Ghattas and Shafiqa Yusuf. The social equality of al-Khubiza allowed a friendship between Iskandar and the two brothers 'Ali and 'Abdul Hafiz Ibrahim. Iskander came from a rich landowning Christian family who inhabited a huge house in Sa'd Zaghlul Pasha Street, the commercial center of the town. The two brothers were poor Muslims from the nearby village of al-Mu'tamadiyya, where they had come to be infamous. Al-Khubiza was the only meeting point between the three men. Iskandar's relations with his father were bad due to his failure at school, lack of a profession and his habits of going to al-Khubiza and drinking alcohol. His father's attempt to send him to the army did not succeed. Iskandar's lavish spending pushed him to steal whatever he could get his hands on from his parents' possessions. To hasten his control over his family's wealth, he decided to kill his father. After a failed attempt to achieve his goal using poison, he plotted with the two al-Khubiza brothers to finish the job. After executing the mission on 1 June 1940, they returned to their meeting point in al-Khubiza, where they were arrested.

### **The Peaceful Brothel and the Encroaching State**

According to the 1905 regulations, licensed prostitutes and brothels had to be registered and subject to weekly medical checkups. The license had to be renewed every year and would be temporarily suspended if a prostitute was proved to carry a venereal disease. Each prostitute had a registration file, which included her name, alias, nationality, age, her brothel madam, whether she moved to a different brothel or abandoned her profession and left the Point of Prostitution.<sup>858</sup> Prostitutes had to keep

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<sup>858</sup> For these regulations, see The Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Problem of Licensed Prostitution in Egypt (Cairo: Government Press, Bulaq, 1935), 142-155.



their licenses visible to assure customers that they had kept up with medical checkups.<sup>859</sup> They were not legally allowed to stand outside their houses or to stay in the bars or coffee shops of al-Khubiza at nighttime. Such behavior was considered endangering public morality because prostitutes might have tried to seduce the public. Violating health or security regulations was punishable up to cancellation of the license and expulsion from the area.<sup>860</sup> Police was the state's arm in applying these regulations and assured prostitutes would not miss the weekly medical checkup. Enforcing these regulations were the responsibility of the police which was present in the area around the clock.

Prostitutes were able to negotiate both these rules and the power of the state as represented by police and health inspectors. They neither abided blindly nor insisted on challenging them constantly. To follow or violate rules and to counter or cooperate with the police were always dependant on which way maximized their profits and sustained their business. Peace and quiet were important to sustain business, to attract more customers to the area, and to keep the quarter an integrated part of the urban life of the town. Meanwhile, they needed to get rid of troublemaking customers and intruding policemen. They tried their best to achieve their goals by all means possible, including the power of the state, cooperating with the police, accepting *fittiwat* as a communal source of protection, and eventually using their own power against intruders. Eventually al-Khubiza of al-Mahalla was a relatively calm quarter. In his work on prostitution in Egypt, the Egyptian historian Imad Hilal observed the quietness of al-Mahalla's prostitutes in pre-modern times although many sources pointed at the flourish trade in the town.<sup>861</sup> This observation is still accurate concerning the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There were no

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<sup>859</sup> This information is mentioned orally by people of al-Mahalla who were contemporary of the licensed prostitution. From carrying numbers, *raqam*, visibly, townsfolk generated the insulting word "*marquma*" meaning "a whore".

<sup>860</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 537 "Ahwal Ijtimai`yya: 1896-1924".

<sup>861</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 91.

reports of major crimes or massive violent fights in the area such as those wide scale fights that were reported in the prostitution areas in Cairo or even in other parts of al-Mahalla.<sup>862</sup> Not having a military barracks or British forces in al-Mahalla might have saved al-Khubiza some of the typical violence committed by soldiers and sailors in Cairo and Alexandria.<sup>863</sup> Al-Khubiza was also limited in size and its houses were concentrated in one area, which might have made it easier to police it. Policemen were always prompt to interfere whenever they felt there was a potential confrontation.<sup>864</sup> The entire area was considered a public place where police were able to arrest any intoxicated person before they got out of control.<sup>865</sup>

While the Misdemeanor Court records mentioned the area several times, the Criminal Court records, which include the felony records, did not produce one single crime taking place in al-Khubiza. Because the police were present day and night in the prostitution quarter, it is unlikely that felonies took place and were never reported. The criminal networks whose activities were to kidnap, sell or force young girls into prostitution such as those of Ibrahim al-Gharbi network in Cairo in 1920s and Ragab Muhammad Ragab of Alexandria in 1930s did not exist in al-Mahalla and there are no

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<sup>862</sup>A fight between drunken young men and owners of coffee shops and pubs at the red-light district of Clot Bey in Cairo caused 27 injured and several stores were destroyed. *Al-Ahram*, 3/10/1948. For violence in al-Mahalla outside the Prostitution Quarter in the same period see the chapter on communal and class identity in this study.

<sup>863</sup> Foreign soldiers roaming the prostitution quarters in Cairo and Alexandria were a major source of disturbance. For example, Australian and British soldiers during WWI committed massive violence in one of Cairo's red-light districts in April and July 1915 when many people were injured and properties were damaged. See Kilani, *al-Sultan Husayn*, 172-173. A Finish sailor killed a prostitute in Alexandria in 1937 and the Egyptian nationalist Muhammad Farid reported that a confrontation between Egyptians and three British soldiers in the prostitution quarter in Alexandria caused a political crises. Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 89. Several stories and movies show Egyptian nationalists targeting British soldier in red-light quarters in Cairo and Alexandria during WWII. Yusuf Shahin's autobiographical movie *Iskindariyya Laih* is a good example.

<sup>864</sup>As soon as a policeman heard the prostitute Mahfuza Mahmud screaming for help, he rushed to her and arrested the abusive customer Sayyid Abdul Khaliq Salama, who was 23 years old. Misdemeanor1939/6780/1703.

<sup>865</sup> Misdemeanor 1929/3961/323.

cases related to such groups.<sup>866</sup> There is no indication that the people of al-Khubiza had business relations with the prostitution quarters outside al-Mahalla.<sup>867</sup>

Table 6.4: Prostitutes who were frequently involved in misdemeanors.

Name	Age*	Period	Misdemeanor
Nabawiyya Abdullah Sai'd	30	1936-1938	7
Sharifa Ahmad 'Abdu	30	1936-1939	4
Hanim al-Khashshab**	25	1936-1938	3
Badr Sayf al-Din	31	1936	2
Amina Fahmi	30	1927	2
Al-Sayyida Mursi Ibrahim	22	1926-1936	2

Source: al-Mahalla Misdemeanor Court record 1924-1945.

\*Age as reported in the first case.

\*\* Her age was estimated to be 45 in 1938. Despite the wide gap between 25 and 45, inaccuracy in estimating people's age from all walks of life was not unusual.

Table 6.5: Misdemeanors in al-Khubiza in 1924-1943. Years that are not included meant no misdemeanors were reported in these years.

Year	Slander police	Hit by police	Fights with/ among customers	Internal fights	Drug	Other	Total
1926	0	0	0	0	1*		1
1927	1	0	0	0	2**	1***	4
1928	2	0	0	0	0		2
1929	0	0	0	0	1	1****	2
1930	1	0	0	2	1		4
1936	3	0	3	0	0		6
1937	3	0	1	0	0		4
1938	1	0	6	2	0	1*****	10

<sup>866</sup> For the case of Ibrahim al-Gharbi see Russell Pasha, *Egyptian Service*, 179-181. See also Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 119-124. For the case of Ragab see Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 125-126.

<sup>867</sup> A letter from a resident of al-Mahalla in 1915 mentioned that an ex-prostitute in al-Mahalla had an aunt running a brothel in the prostitution quarter in Tanta. Even if this information was correct there is no indication that the two family members were involved in business relationship in both towns. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 537.

1939	1	1	3	0	0		5
1941	0	0	0	1	0		1
Total	12	1	13	5	5	2	39

Source: al-Mahalla Misdemeanor Court records. Years that are not included meant no misdemeanors were reported in these years.

\*The defendant prostitute was proved innocent.

\*\* One prostitute named Hanim Fahmi was convicted in both drug cases.

\*\*\* A policeman found a watch of one of the customers and kept it for himself.

\*\*\*\* A customer resisted a health inspection and a policeman who were trying to take a prostitute.

\*\*\*\*\* A prostitute stole a customer's wallet.

Table 6.4 and 6.5 shows that only 39 misdemeanors were reported in the area in almost two decades. Less than two misdemeanors a year took place in al-Khubiza, while a full survey of al-Mahalla Misdemeanor Court records shows that the court witnessed, on average, 2,000 cases a year between 1935 and 1945. The chance of reporting anything going wrong in this area was also much higher than any other part of the city because of the constant police presence. Fights among customers, among inhabitants of al-Khubiza, and between customers and prostitutes took place less than once a year. These fights were limited and resulted in no more than minor injuries. Nobody ever had to be hospitalized due to any of these confrontations. Interestingly, one prostitute named Nabawiyya Abdullah Sai'd was involved in 7 incidents, forming a little more than one fifth of the total misdemeanors in two decades. Three prostitutes were involved in more than one third of the cases and six prostitutes were involved in more than half of reported misdemeanors. This indicates that the vast majority of prostitutes, inhabitants, and visitors in the area tended to avoid trouble and respected regulations. It might also indicate that most of them were able to keep good relations with the police to avoid

reporting minor security violations they might have committed. Good relations with the police could have been achieved through bribes, offering free services and drinks, and cooperation. Inhabitants of the Khubiza area showed a noticeable level of cooperation with the authorities over crimes such as murders and drug networks. With the cooperation of prostitutes, waitresses and bartenders of al-Khubiza, the police were able to arrest Iskandar and his partners on the same day the three of them killed Iskandar's parents.<sup>868</sup> The prostitute Sympathique was the key witness in arresting the heroin dealer 'Abdul Mu'ti al-Sayyid al-Alfi who was using his 10-year-old daughter in distributing heroin. With Sympathiques' cooperation he was convicted and sentenced to two years jail with hard labor, a 400 EP fine, and he was banned from running a coffee shop for another two years.<sup>869</sup> Sympathique whose real name was Ra'ifa Ibrahim Muhammad had a history of heroin abuse. Five years before this incident she was arrested and sentenced to 6 months jail with hard labor.<sup>870</sup> In addition to Sympathique, only another two prostitutes and a prostitute boyfriend, *Khalil*, were reported to use heroin.<sup>871</sup> Contradicting Egyptian scholarship that associates prostitution quarters with drug and alcohol crimes, inhabitants of al-Khubiza were cautious in dealing with illegal substance, which was taken very seriously by the police during that period.<sup>872</sup> One of those three was also charged with selling the drug.<sup>873</sup> This indicates that illegal drugs were probably not consumed in the

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<sup>868</sup> Although he was Christian, the court punished Iskandar with death penalty only after the Muslim Mufti of al-Gharbiya was consulted. His partners were punished with life prison. Tanta Criminal Court 1940/7445/1573.

<sup>869</sup> Misdemeanor 1935/ 6783/ 4053.

<sup>870</sup> Misdemeanor 1930/ 4178/ 664.

<sup>871</sup> See Bakr's chapter on "prostitution and other things" in his book *al-Mujtama` al-Sirri*.

<sup>872</sup> For an example on how the Egyptian scholarship associates drug abuse with prostitution, see Bakr's chapter on "prostitution and other things" in his book *al-Mujtama` al-Sirri*. For war on drugs, particularly heroin, during the covered period see: Russell Pasha, *Egyptian Service*.

<sup>873</sup> The 30-year old prostitute Hanim Fahmi, known as *al-Shamiya*, was arrested with heroin twice in 1927 in less than one week. On June 13 she and the butcher Mahmud al-Qabani were arrested for heroin and cocaine possessing and dealing. Three days later she was arrested again for heroin possession. She was

area more than in the rest of the town. Actually, it was part of the overall city-wide patterns since, once heroin consumption was treated as a misdemeanor in the Egyptian law code, all cases were reported between 1926 and 1935. During this period, heroin addiction was at its peak in the town and Egypt as whole.<sup>874</sup> With the police campaigns to crack down on heroin dealers, heroin consumption witnessed a drastic reduction in the town and al-Khubiza area as well. There is no evidence that Hashish replaced heroin in al-Khubiza although its consumption became widespread in the town in 1940s.

This cooperation with the police was crucial for al-Khubiza's survival. As in the prostitution quarters across the country, al-Khubiza attracted criminals and outlaws. In the murders of Antun Ghattas and his wife, the son met and recruited his partners in al-Khubiza.<sup>875</sup> Escorting criminal partners to al-Khubiza, paying fees for prostitutes' services and buying alcoholic beverages were all traditional treats, especially when these partners were beginners or coming from outside the town. Whenever police were searching for a runaway criminal, it was usual to start the search at the prostitution quarters where they usually found the target.<sup>876</sup> On the other hand, prostitutes benefited from police as a source of protection against troublemaking customers. Once the on-duty police heard a prostitute screaming for help, he rushed to rescue her from the abusive customer Sayyid Abdul Khaliq Salama. In doing so, the policeman was also hit by Salama, who was 23.<sup>877</sup> Of course alcohol was served in pubs and coffee shops inside al-Khubiza. Since the entire area was considered a "public place", alcohol consumption did not lead to disturbances or unrest as portrayed in Egyptian movies. The police were

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sentenced with 6 months in jail with hard labor for the first case and with one year in jail with hard labor in the second. Misdemeanor 1927/ 3116/1434 and 1464.

<sup>874</sup> Russell Pasha, *Egyptian Service*, 222-227.

<sup>875</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1942/ 7451/ 847.

<sup>876</sup> Police arrested Ibrahim Abu al-Su`ud who stole his roommates' clothes and money, in al-Khubiza the same day he committed his theft. Misdemeanor 1937/6773/ 710. See also Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 144-145.

<sup>877</sup> Misdemeanor 1939/ 1703/ 6780.

prompt to stop any potential confrontations generated by troublesome drunken customers. For example, police quickly arrested the 25-year-old driver apprentice Muhammad Muhammad al-Tarabishi when he refused to pay for his drink in Nabiha Salim's coffee shop inside the Prostitution Quarter.<sup>878</sup> Aside from one case where a 26 year old miller was arrested due to being intoxicated in public and forcefully resisting the on-duty policeman, violent drunken crimes were totally absent.<sup>879</sup> Interestingly misbehaving while intoxicated was not unusual outside al-Khubiza in the traditional areas. Most of these troublesome drunks indulged themselves with a concoction of fermented barely dough known as *Booza*.<sup>880</sup> The licensed taverns in which it was served, (called also *Booza*, p. *Bowaz*), attracted crowds among the lower classes mostly in Sandifa, to the southwest of the city.

However, prostitutes challenged the state's power whenever it was important to get their business done. No surprise that the most repeated offenses in al-Khubiza, like everywhere else in the town, were generated out of the social control process imposed by the state. Due to the large responsibility of the police in imposing regulations, prostitutes occasionally showed resistance to the police and health inspectors. Despite their weak position on the margin of the society, prostitutes resisted the state's power as represented by police whenever this resistance was possible to maximize their business. Regardless of regulations, prostitutes normally made themselves visible in revealing clothing outside their homes to win customers. They resisted policemen who tried to push them inside their houses, evacuate them from bars and coffee shops in al-Khubiza, and drag them to the police station for inspection or investigation.<sup>881</sup> This resistance never exceeded verbal

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<sup>878</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6770/ 392.

<sup>879</sup> Misdemeanor 1929/ 3961/ 323.

<sup>880</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6919/ 2344.

<sup>881</sup> Misdemeanor 1929/3961/2398.

abuse such as calling a policeman “son of a dog pimp”, “you ain’t worth a donkey,” or “your report (against me) is worth 5 piasters the same as I pay to get my shoes shined”.<sup>882</sup> The purpose was to get more business without triggering bitter confrontations with the state that might have gone beyond their ability to face. However, few prostitutes dared to challenge police authority repeatedly and attacked them verbally. Agitation between some policemen and some prostitutes caused the latter to fell victims of violent policemen who occasionally attacked prostitutes with clubs even while they were in their houses.<sup>883</sup> Some policemen abused their authority over prostitutes and tried to frame them for fake misdemeanors such as drug possession.<sup>884</sup>

Prostitutes used available communal sources of protection and support whenever needed against the intruding state and customers. A loyal powerful customer such as Amin Effendi al-A`sar could be a source of help in resisting health inspectors and policemen. <sup>885</sup> *Fittiwwat*, or protectors of the neighborhood, were another source to protect prostitutes. The interference of *fittiwwat* might have both eliminated violence through intimidating troublesome customers and challenged the state’s power to protect subjects and apply laws. <sup>886</sup> *Fittiwwat* from the al-Bulqini family interfered repeatedly in favor of prostitutes. This family was known through the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a judge put it in 1936, for being powerful and feared among the people of Suq

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<sup>882</sup> In an unusual case three prostitutes verbally abused an on-duty policeman calling him “son of bitch fagot pimp.” Misdemeanor 1936/ 6768/ 3044.

<sup>883</sup> On July 31, 1938 the policeman Labib Dakruri along with another man assaulted the 30-year old prostitute Sharifa Ahmad `Abdu while she was sitting in her house in al-Khubiza. Although she was injured, she reconciled with the attackers to reduce their punishment to only 50 piaster fine. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/1953.

<sup>884</sup>For unknown reason the on-duty policeman wanted to retaliate against the 22-year old prostitute al-Sayyida Mursi Ibrahim. After harassing her with a pretext that she was standing outside her house after midnight, he claimed that she had heroin in her pocket. In an attempt to support his testimony, his boss testified that he himself brought two cocaine tickets from her pocket that night. Due to this contradicting testimonies and considering the unfriendly relation between the prostitute and the policeman, she was proved innocent. Misdemeanor 1926/ 330/ 3112.

<sup>885</sup> Misdemeanor 1929/ 2398/ 3961.

<sup>886</sup> See the chapter on communal and class identity in this study.



al-Laban, al-Shirif, and al-Mutawali neighborhoods, on whose peripheries al-Khubiza was located.<sup>887</sup> In one case three members of the family hit a customer who refused the service of a prostitute due to her high price and in another case one of al-Bulqinis hit a troublemaker on behalf of a prostitute inside al-Khubiza.<sup>888</sup> Outside the quarter one of the al-Bulqinis hit a certain Copt named Ramsis Nashid twice because of “women reasons”.<sup>889</sup>

None of these cases indicated that the al-Bulqinis were getting paid for their intervention. It is unlikely that the al-Bulqinis did so for money since most of them held profitable positions such as cotton brokers and real estate owners. Their intervention might have aimed at imposing and emphasizing their status as the ultimate indisputable force in the traditional northwest al-Mahalla neighborhoods including al-Khubiza. This position might have gained them prestige among the women of al-Khubiza and around the town as well. In one case, the al-Bulqini member intervened on behalf of a prostitute and attacked Muhammad al-Ahwal, a *fittiwwa* who was declining in that period.<sup>890</sup>

Prostitutes themselves occasionally resorted to the use of violence against customers to protect their interest as well as falling victim to violent customers. Fees were the primary source of fights between prostitutes and customers. Although fees were usually negotiated in advance, prostitutes and customers occasionally disagreed after providing the services, which might lead to a beating for the customer.<sup>891</sup> The prostitute

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<sup>887</sup> Misdemeanor 1936/6769/3160.

<sup>888</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/6773 and 1936/ 6767/1689.

<sup>889</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/6774/ 2432.

<sup>890</sup> Abd al-`Azim Ibrahim al-Bulqini, bat up Mahmud Muhammad al-Ahwal, who was a member in another fitiwwat family, for the sake of a prostitute named Zaynab `Abdul Fattah Muhammad. Misdemeanor 1936/ 6767/1689. When he was 22 years old in 1927, the judge described al-Ahwal as a gangster, *`Usbagi*, because he along with unknown others hit four school students. The court chose to punish him harshly with one month in jail. Misdemeanor 1927/ 3115/ 875. In 1929, al-Ahwal was convicted with possessing an illicit weapon *Boniyya*. Misdemeanor 1929/ 3962/1518.

<sup>891</sup> The 30-year old Nabawiya `Abdullah Sa`id hit her customer `Abd el-Fattah with her slipper-shoe and bit him because he refused to pay her 10 piaster. He insisted on paying two piaster according to their agreement. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/ 855.

might get help with her colleagues, madams, and servants in such a mission.<sup>892</sup> Although stealing customers' money was believed to be a common practice, such incidents were not very frequent in al-Mahalla.<sup>893</sup> Since prostitutes did not have a say in choosing their costumers, they had to serve aggressive visitors and fell victim to their violence.<sup>894</sup> In an unusual case, while she was sitting inside her house, a prostitute was attacked by a man who was hired to beat her up. He used a club in his attack causing the prostitute injuries on her head, nose, and eyes, which healed up quickly. Unfortunately, documents did not show who hired that person and what the motivation was.<sup>895</sup> However, the case shows how vulnerable prostitutes were. Sometimes business was so competitive that prostitutes fought each other to win customers.<sup>896</sup> In two cases prostitutes, madams, and their male servants were involved in fights.<sup>897</sup>

There were no registered male prostitutes in al-Mahalla and male inhabitants of al-Khubiza' worked as servants, bartenders and waiters. The women of al-Khubiza enjoyed the freedom of living with their lovers, *Khalils*, in a relationship close to "marriage without legal documentation". While the woman in this relationship was the breadwinner, *Khalil* provided a prostitute her need to be with a "loving husband".<sup>898</sup> An official report in 1935 described *Khalils* and pimps, or *Qawwads*, as parasites making

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Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773. One of al-Khuli's co-workers said he witnessed prostitutes beating up a customer with slippers and stripping him naked of his clothes because he failed to pay full price. Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 103.

<sup>893</sup> The only reported theft case was when the 40-year old prostitute Nabawiya Yasin `Isa stole her customer's wallet. Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776 /1536. Al-Khuli's co-workers warned each other from being robbed by prostitutes. This indicates that theft was more common than it was documented. Robbed customers might have been reluctant to report incidents to avoid social embarrassment. See also Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 140.

<sup>894</sup> Misdemeanor 1936/ 6767/1788 and 1938/ 6776/ 1551.

<sup>895</sup> Misdemeanor 1936/ 6767/ 1788.

<sup>896</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6772/ 1754.

<sup>897</sup> Misdemeanor 1936/ 6769/4210 and 1930/ 4180/1698.

<sup>898</sup> Bakr, *Mujtama` al-Qahira*, 109-110.

their living on prostitutes.<sup>899</sup> In Egyptian historiography, violent pimps, bullies, *baltagys*, and abusive *Khalils* occupy the center stage of the prostitution quarters in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>900</sup> By this account, *baltagy* (*p. baltagiyya*) were the actual rulers of the quarters. They imposed themselves as self-proclaimed protectors of prostitutes and brothels, even against the will of those “protected”, in return for cash and free services and drinks. They blackmailed prostitutes and madams and threatened disfigurement with acid or razors against anyone who resisted their authority.<sup>901</sup> This morally driven scholarship harmonizes with novels and films carrying the same image and sometimes uses them to prove the point.<sup>902</sup> It does not lack of support among western scholars who suggest that criminalization and regulation contributed to the development of a prostitution underworld in which the women themselves surrendered much of their power to their male guardians.<sup>903</sup> Even in licensed practice, regulations focused almost exclusively on the protection of clients from diseases; the condition under which prostitutes sometimes worked as virtual prisoners of their pimps.<sup>904</sup> Fahmy cites few cases of trouble between

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<sup>899</sup> Taqir lajnat bahth mawdu` al-bigha` al-murakhas bihi bil-qtur al-Misri (Cairo: al-Matba`a al-Amiriyya, 1935), 50.

<sup>900</sup> Although prostitution was not the scope of his studies, the Egyptian historian Muhammad Sayyid Kilani pioneered dealing with prostitution in modern Egypt in his works *Fi Rubu` al-Azbakiya*, “*as-Sultan Husayn Kamil*, and *Tiram al-Qahira*. Historical studies dealing directly with the topic did not appear until the first decade of the 21st century. These works are: Hilal, *al-Baghaya fi Misr*, `Isa`s *Rijal Rayya wa Sakina*, and Bakr’s *Mujtama` al-Qahira al-sirri* and *al-Jarima fi Misr*. However, history of Cairo prostitution quarters was the focus of enormous popular writings including: Ahmad Mahfuz’s *Khafaya al-Qahira* in 1958 and Husam Hazim’s *al-Jawza wa-al-sarir wa-al-mishnaqa: Dirasa `ann tijarat al-jins wa al-mukhaddarat wa al-qatl fi qa` Misr*, 1974. Among many other novels, prostitution was a main theme of Naguib Mahfuz’s *Zuqaq al-Maddaq*, and *Bidaya wa nihaya* and Yusuf al-Siba`i’s *Nahnu la nazra` al-shawk*.

<sup>901</sup> The Egyptian writings on the topic widely cite the case of belly dancer Imtithal Fawzi who was killed by a *Baltagi* gang led by Fu`ad as-Shamy in 1936. The gang murdered the woman because she refused to pay for their “imposed protection”. See Bakr, *Mujtama` al-Qahira* and in Hazim, *al-Jawza wa-al-sarir*.

<sup>902</sup> Hilal’s and Bakr’s works are good examples in this respect. For movies focusing on Cairo prostitution quarters see: *Khamsa Bab*, *Darb al-Hawa*, *Shawari` min Nar*, *Risala min Imra`a Maghula* among others.

<sup>903</sup> Tucker, *Women in nineteenth-century Egypt*, 155.

<sup>904</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

pimps and prostitutes in “the evil brothels” before regulation.<sup>905</sup> Although this scholarship is valuable and bravely steps into a field that had previously been overlooked in Egyptian historiography, it does not pay adequate attention to the reality outside Cairo and Alexandria. <sup>906</sup> Al-Mahalla is a good example of how the social dynamic in the Egyptian urban centers could be different from the two biggest cities. Al-Mahalla was much smaller, enjoyed less wealth, attracted less foreign adventurers, and had a less cosmopolitan culture. It’s perhaps no surprise then that al-Mahalla’s court records do not support the Cairene and Alexandrian image of an inherently violent prostitution quarter.

Al-Mahalla’s records do not mention any incidents of bullying prostitutes or madams by pimps, *khalils* or *baltagies*. Between 1924 and 1943, there was only one case when a prostitute was hit by her *khalil* and another case when a prostitute had to pay for her *khalil*’s heroin.<sup>907</sup> In the first case the prostitute forgave and reconciled with her *khalil* and in the second the prostitute did not show any grievance over her financial burden. The little we know about *Khalils* in al-Mahalla does not make all of them the typical unemployed “bully” portrayed in the literature. For example, ‘Abdul Hayy Muhammad Beybars, who was *khalil* of the prostitute Na’ima Hamuda Ibrahim was a white-collar worker, *muwazaf*, in the Janaklis Company.<sup>908</sup> However, it is likely that incidents of bullying might have taken place in al-Khubiza, but were never reported either because prostitutes and madams never brought in the police or the policemen themselves considered it an internal disagreement among inhabitants of the area that did not call for official intervention or referral to the courts. One can surmise that violence, if used, did not reach a high level such that would have inevitably brought it to the attention of the

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<sup>905</sup> Fahmy, “Prostitution in Egypt”, 96-97.

<sup>906</sup> Despite the extreme value of Bakr’s work, he mistakenly claimed that there were no designated areas for prostitution in Tanta or al-Mahalla. See Bakr *al-Jarima fi Misr*, 235-6.

<sup>907</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/6775/ 227 and Misdemeanor 1935/ 6783/ 4053.

<sup>908</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6775/ 227.

courts. Not reporting intimidation is evidence that the women of al-Khubiza were powerful enough to curb male authority and to keep up with security regulations for their survival. Keeping the area safe and calm was not only crucial to avoid provoking the state's intervention, but also to make the district attractive to locals.

The relative quietness of the prostitution area was not disturbed by the influx of thousands of peasants into the town to work at the Misr Company. Licensed public prostitution was never experienced in the Egyptian countryside where people were more religious and tended to get married at an early age.<sup>909</sup> Some newcomers visited the quarter as soon as they got into the town and even before they had jobs.<sup>910</sup> Although half naked women in public, offering sex for money, was a big shock for many of them, there's no evidence that any confrontations or clashes took place between them and the inhabitants of al-Khubiza. There was not a single reported incident inside al-Khubiza in which one of the Company workers was involved. Fikri al-Khuli wrote that despite the huge shock he and his co-workers felt during their visit to al-Khubiza, some of them used the services of *Banat al-Wa'd*.<sup>911</sup> This term was a nickname for prostitutes which meant daughters of fate, a metaphoric expression that these women lost control over their own destiny. Al-Khuli and his friends thought one thing was common between themselves and those women; they all left their villages to al-Mahalla to follow their predestined fate.<sup>912</sup> Workers associated themselves with prostitutes in their inescapable fate of alienation and suffering.

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<sup>909</sup> Sharikat Misr, *al-A`amal al-tibbiya*, 69.

<sup>910</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 710.

<sup>911</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, v.1, 106.

<sup>912</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

## **Clandestine Brothels, Streetwalkers, and the *Ahrar* Neighbors**

Secret prostitution by definition challenges the power of the state and of the morality of the community. Looking at clandestine brothels in al-Mahalla in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century helps us to understand how and why individuals and groups were able to defy security and health regulations and, more importantly, to re-assess the relevance of the national and religious discourses in defining public morality. Contrary to the licensed prostitution, clandestine brothels operated underground outside law boundaries and in unwelcoming community. This gave a leading role to men to protect the business. Men making a living off prostitution were more visible in secret brothels *Bayt Sirr* outside al-Khubiza where power, intimidation, and strong social connections were needed to sustain business against the will of resentful neighbors and police. These brothels not only offered their own prostitutes, but also allowed casual prostitutes to bring their customers to the house and provided secret lovers with a space to meet. Some men tried to recruit prostitutes for their secret houses through marriage as in the case of Yaqut ‘Ali Ibrahim whose wife sought for divorce shortly after marriage because he wanted her to work as a prostitute.<sup>913</sup> Those men were simultaneously the owners, managers, pimps, and protectors of the brothel. The man could be the pimp of his mother as in the case of 25-year-old Sabri Radwan who told police “my mother is a whore, it is not my business.”<sup>914</sup> He was involved in a secret prostitution network, which included the house of a woman named Farida Farag Yusuf, where his girlfriend Ghandura worked. When Ghandura was caught, Farida refused to let her come back to work at her place. To get rid of Farida and impose his power, Radwan unsuccessfully tried to frame her for drug

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<sup>913</sup>Secret investigations supported the wife’s claim and the court refused the husband’s request to return her to his house against her will. *Sijil al-Mahalla Shari’a Court, Ahkam Juz’iya* from 23 May 1944- 22 August 1944, volume 3.

<sup>914</sup> *Misdemeanor 1942/6790/ 834.*

possession. Before that Radwan was vital in sustaining Farida's brothel. Her neighbors knew she ran her house as a secret brothel, but never reported it until police investigated the allegations of drug possession. Radwan and his mother were good examples of how secret prostitution was able to challenge the state and the community through strong connection and intimidation. When he was arrested for possessing Hashish and opium and for misleading the police, his mother mobilized "witnesses" to testify that a police informant named Mutawali was actually responsible for the entire case. The judge dismissed their testimonies because "it is easy for a woman like her with all her connections to bad friends and favor seekers who would not be hesitant to render her favors".<sup>915</sup> Neighbors admitted that they knew about the secret trade, but never dared to report the police.

A certain 'Ali Mahmud Nassar provides us with a profile of a male "secret house" owner and how that business helped him in different ways.<sup>916</sup> In addition to his secret business he held a series of low government jobs. From September 1933 to April 1934 he worked as a temporary guard, *ghafir*, in the cotton market *halaqat al-qotn*. He was reappointed to the same job from September 1936 to May 1937. Eventually he succeeded in getting a permanent job at the municipality to work in the city parks in May 1937. His daily wage was 5.5 piaster. One must question how a person like him succeeded in getting a government job every time he got fired from another. The answer might be related to his secret brothel. Located in the business center of the town in Kanisat al-Arwam Street, his brothel might have attracted mid-level local government officials and other well-connected individuals. In that street he was a neighbor of several important associations such as the Union of Cotton Ginning Workers, the Union of Handloom

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<sup>915</sup> Ibid.

<sup>916</sup> Information on Nassar is based on series of correspondences between the Royal Palace, Ministry of Interior Affairs, al-Gharbiyya Governorate, and al-Mahalla Police. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 475 "Iltimasat Shakawy, 1936-1952" [Petitions and complains, 1936- 1952].

Weaving Workers, and the Union of Workers and Employees of Retailing Stores.<sup>917</sup> Even when he was fired in March 1938 because he was caught stealing and selling the potted plants of the parks, he was able to get the notable and Parliament member Abdul Hayy Khalil Bey to interfere on his behalf. This is not to say that he had a personal relationship with Khalil Bey, but he was at least connected with those who gave him access to that influential man. Khalil Bey, who would shortly become a Pasha, was a wealthy cotton merchant, landlord, and member of several of Bank Misr's industrial companies. He was known to be pious, played a key role in establishing two major Azhar Islamic schools in 1940s to 1960s, and built a sizable mosque in the center of the town.

Nassar, who was most probably illiterate, sent a letter to the Royal Palace playing on the political disagreements among the ruling elite. He accused his former boss, who fired him, of insulting the King and the King's family to the Wafd leader Mustafa al-Nahhas. Al-Nahhas and his party were at odds with the King and the Royal palace and the boss was a family member of al-Nahhas. It is unimaginable that Nassar came with such an effective letter without guidance from people who understood politics well. The petition did the trick and attracted enough attention in the Royal Palace that the local government of al-Mahalla was asked to investigate. Contrary to what Nassar was aiming at, the investigation revealed that Nassar was a pimp running a brothel in his own home and lost him any sympathy.

Why did people resort to unlicensed brothels when it was possible to get a license to practice prostitution and to run a legal brothel? Secrecy is not the real answer. Although people called these brothels "*Bayt Sirr*" or "secret house," they were never actually secret. Neighbors and others must have known, as would have customers and casual prostitutes. Unlicensed brothels provided all sides with more advantages than al-

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<sup>917</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 536 "Iltimasat Tujjar".



Khubiza did. For prostitutes, it was advantageous to skip documentation of their moral and social failings, saved them from constant police surveillance, and to avoid the medical check-up. The medical check was not only painful and humiliating, it also potentially deprived the prostitute of her work and income for months, and even years, if she were proved to be infected. For the secret brothels' owners and managers, it was more lucrative. Unfortunately we do not have an estimate for the fees of al-Mahalla's secret brothels, but the prominent Egyptian author Luwis 'Awad gave an account of his personal experience in Cairo's licensed and unlicensed brothels between 1933 and 1937. In his autobiography, he reported that licensed brothels cost between 5-15 piasters and the unlicensed brothels cost between 25 and 50 piasters.<sup>918</sup> Certainly, both groups cost less in al-Mahalla. Since al-Khuli states the cost for al-Khubiza prostitutes was between 1.5 and 5 piaster in the late 1920s or early 1930s, and records showed the cost went up in the late 1930s to be between 2 and 10 piasters, we can estimate that a prostitute in the unlicensed brothel might have cost between 5 and 25 piasters in the same period. As expected, secret brothels did not have to pay taxes, registration fees, or medical costs. They operated outside al-Khubiza and attracted better off customers. In addition to the stigma on al-Khubiza, it mostly consisted of poor houses and wooden huts. Some customers preferred apparently cleaner women in cleaner places and were willing to pay more. They disliked being served by women who were also available to porters and shoe shiners. This assured higher fees and better social connections for the brothels' owners. Theoretically, there was a big risk for customers to contract an infection from unchecked prostitutes. Practically, this risk was not much higher than dealing with licensed prostitutes who served unlimited numbers of customers every night and contracted

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<sup>918</sup> Luwis `Awad, *Awraq al-`Umr: Sanawat al-Takwin* [Papers of the Life Time: Shaping Years] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1989), 550-551.

infections between the weekly medical checks.<sup>919</sup> Meanwhile, a secret brothel was capable of responding to special personal tastes of customers such as providing virgins and younger girls.<sup>920</sup> Such demands could not be served in al-Khubiza since it was subject to regulations that prevented girls younger than 18 from getting a license.

Records show no one was prosecuted in al-Mahalla for managing a secret brothel. The Misr Weaving and Spinning Company claimed that al-Mahalla had many secret houses that caused outbreaks of venereal diseases among its workers.<sup>921</sup> As in the cases of Radwan's and Nassar's brothels, it was obvious that al-Mahalla's police were aware of the illicit activities of these places but never tried to intervene. Radwan was prosecuted only for drug possession and misleading the police, while Nassar was never prosecuted despite all the investigations into his secret trade and the official report that the local government sent to the Royal Court. The police of al-Mahalla seemed to be incompatible with the nationwide policy of cracking down on secret brothels. A survey of one newspaper in 1939 shows that police raided secret brothels repeatedly in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, Tanta, and Assuit.<sup>922</sup> Bribes could be a possible answer although there is no documented evidence aside from a national report in 1935 warning of policemen being bribed by prostitutes, pimps, madams, and customers to turn a blind eye to the violation.<sup>923</sup> That report was based on the realities of Cairo's prostitution quarters. Al-Mahalla's police might have been intimidated by the powerful connections of brothel managers or just overlooked the unlicensed brothels thinking it was not a big problem. The rapid urbanization and population growth the city experienced during that period, and the pressure of policing the country's largest number of industrial workers must have

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<sup>919</sup> The Report of Prostitution, 17 and Burtuqalis, *al-Bighaa' aw Khatar al-'Ahara*, 33-34.

<sup>920</sup> Misdemeanor 1940/ 6861/ 2180.

<sup>921</sup> *Akhbar al-Yum*, al-Naru Fawqa al-Mahalla al-Kubra wal-Haqiqa Tahta ar-Ramad, September 6, 1947.

<sup>922</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 191.

<sup>923</sup> *Taqrir al-Bigha' al-Murakhas*, 49.

created more challenging problems for police than did the more mundane problem of secret prostitution.

It also might have been easy for the police in al-Mahalla to overlook the secret brothels because these brothels operated quietly where neighbors were more tolerant, intimidated, or ignorant of their right to request closing these houses.<sup>924</sup> In the cases of illicit brothels examined here, the role of men was very crucial in recruiting prostitutes and providing them and their brothels with protection. While doing so, they were willing to break laws and challenge the social norms. However, they used “soft” means in achieving their goals such as concluding legal marriages, misleading police, sending false reports to the Royal Court and abusing their social connections with powerful figures. Violence was not one of their means as far as records reveal. In all cases, people who were involved in secret prostitution successfully struck a balance between available, but illegal, business opportunities while carefully not provoking the state’s iron fist.

There were also unlicensed prostitutes without male protectors and managers, which actually made them more vulnerable to a hostile world. There were streetwalking prostitutes who took upon themselves to find their own customers, conclude deals, and provide their services. Those women were known as *saramiha* and their practice was known as *sarmaha*. *Saramiha* prostitutes did not only need a place to provide their services, but some of them desperately needed shelter. The forty-year-old Fatima Muhammad Ahmad offered the twenty eight year-old plumber Ahmad ‘Abd as-Salam Muhammad her services for a place to sleep. The only place available to him was a single room where he and his wife lived. Believing that Fatima was a stranger in al-Mahalla, the wife accepted to let her share their room. During the night, the wife realized that Fatima was also sharing the husband. The husband failed to keep his shocked wife calm by

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<sup>924</sup> The Report of Prostitution, 14, and *Taqrir al-Bigha’ al-Murakhas*, 37.

beating her up. Her screaming brought in the neighbors and the night policeman. In court the man and Fatima both confessed to their sex for shelter deal and were convicted of committing adultery.<sup>925</sup>

Hotels were possible places for occasional prostitution, which made spending the night in particular hotels a huge risk for an honorable woman.<sup>926</sup> *Sarmaha* seemed to be so common that many women could have been mistaken as prostitutes seeking customers in the streets. When women refused or ignored offers they might be verbally or even physically abused. When Zakiyya Ibrahim went to the canal to fill her water-jar, she faced the worst danger. Although she had her son with her, two Misr Company workers thought she was seeking a customer and did not accept “no” as an answer. She got stabbed with a knife.<sup>927</sup> A similar situation was faced by Nagiyya Husayn al-Hindi who was beaten up with sticks by several men because she ignored their offer.<sup>928</sup> Namisa ‘Abdul Rahaman al-Bustani got the 27-year-old barber Rifa’i Ahmad arrested for harassing her whenever she passed by his shop. He insisted she was a prostitute and accused the on-duty officer of using her services. His groundless accusation caused him to pay Namisa and the officer 1 EP damage and 15- day- jail for harassing the woman.<sup>929</sup>

Individual women sometimes resorted to a limited scale practice of secret prostitution where they quietly and cautiously received one customer at a time in their

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<sup>925</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/1440.

<sup>926</sup>This misunderstanding caused Umm Ahmad al-Sunbati to face a rape attempt by the hotel owner. She stopped in al-Mahalla to deliver a letter to a Misr Company employed relative. Her relative thought it was too late to let her continue her trip along with her baby to the nearby town of Aga. He suggested that she stay at the same hotel where he stayed and paid her room rent. The hotel owner wanted to take advantage of the woman whom he thought to be one of the “usual prostitutes”. Once her relative left for his night shift the owner broke into her room and tried to have sex with her by force. Workers staying in the hotel and their visitors rushed to rescue her. One of the visitors took the woman to spend the night with his family and they all blamed their colleague worker for letting his female relative woman spend the night in a hotel. Tanta Criminal Court 1940/ 7444/ 894.

<sup>927</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/6776/1195.

<sup>928</sup> Misdemeanor 1938/ 6776/ 2187.

<sup>929</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/417/ 3557.

private homes.<sup>930</sup> This practice did not only challenge the power of the state, but also, and more importantly, challenged the community. It threatened to blur the line between where illicit sexuality could be accepted and where had to be rejected and between what was public and what was private. This practice always recalled the intervention of the same community that had proved tolerant to al-Khubiza, regardless the state's power and efficiency to act. Though al-Khubiza was easy for people to avoid, ignore, or even accept as a historical reality, having an unlicensed prostitute as a neighbor or a housemate attracted more attention and invited intervention. Townsmen, who might have thought that public licensed prostitution in al-Khubiza was the business of the state and the government, could not ignore having a secret prostitute as a neighbor. They thought eliminating such practice was their responsibility. This responsibility was easier to fulfill when the practitioner was an individual unmarried poor women than it would have been to protest a secret house managed by intimidating men. The way people resented unlicensed prostitution in their neighborhoods does not only reveal their selectivity in when and who they resisted, it also signifies their will to manage their community regardless of the power of the state. In doing so, they did not recognize women's privacy and extended their concept of what was public to include women's beds and bodies.

Customers tried their best to sneak into the women's rooms unnoticed. They went through windows by climbing walls, waited in the chicken coop or hid on the rooftop until all the housemates had closed their rooms.<sup>931</sup> Sometimes they were caught hiding or while entering or leaving the woman's room. Men in these cases were punished for

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<sup>930</sup> Misdemeanor 1926/ 3114/1695 and 1927/ 3116/ 1063 and 1584.

<sup>931</sup> Hassan al-Mulla was punished with three months jail because he entered the house Badi`a Khalaf al-A`ma to commit a crime. The house was owned by a woman named Khadra Ibrahim `Uda. Al-Mulla sneaked to the rooftop, but the neighbor Ahmad Yusuf `Uda caught him. Misdemeanor 1930/ 4181/2233. The 40-year old unemployed Hassan Ahmad an-Nadi was punished with one year jail with hard labor and 3 EP fine for getting into a house to "commit a crime". Landlords did not accuse him of theft but his intended crime became obvious when he confessed he came to meet the wife of one of the tenants to pay him debt. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7791/ 753. For a similar case see Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 2360.

breaking into women's houses with the "intention of committing a crime". The "intended crime" was explicitly or implicitly understood, as one judge said: "it is obvious that the man came with the intention of committing *Fahisha* (adultery)".<sup>932</sup> Upon catching them, customers always begged neighbors not to disgrace them in public.<sup>933</sup> Men and women might also try to protect themselves by blaming each other. Men claimed the women invited them and women accused the men of committing shameful actions. When the 20-year-old merchant 'Abd el-Wanis Higab Mahrus was caught in the house of Ratiba 'Ali Saqr, the latter claimed that he laid down in her bed and pinched her thigh in an attempt to wake her up.<sup>934</sup> It was the other way around when the 37-year old merchant Muhammad Hassan Haniyya was caught in the room of the newly divorced Amina Salim Hassan on 20 January 1937. He claimed that she had invited him and they had had sexual relations for several months. To prove his claim he disclosed marks in her genitals. Because Amina was proved not to suffer from gonorrhoea, which Haniyya had, the court made him pay her 3 EP damage for defamation and punished him with two months in jail.<sup>935</sup> This case in particular shows to what extent a woman's body could be exposed to public discussion in a community obsessed with protecting women's honor and chastity. The examination of a woman by male investigators and physicians and the subsequent public discussion of her genitals shows how the community violated its own ideals through a practice that, at least theoretically, aimed at protecting these ideals. It also shows the fluidity of the value system of the society. In some cases the community embraced covering fallen women and in others it readily violated women's privacy on all levels. It made no difference if the woman was a prostitute or a family member who

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<sup>932</sup> Misdemeanor 1939/ 6779/ 475.

<sup>933</sup> Misdemeanor 1939/ 6779/ 475.

<sup>934</sup> Misdemeanor 1927/ 3117/ 2530.

<sup>935</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6770/ 692.

chose to walk by a place where men hung out.<sup>936</sup> In both cases, the community was trying, at least theoretically, to protect its women.

The contest of power between prostitutes, the community and the state became more obvious after the 1943 Martial Order that banned public prostitution in all Egyptian towns except Cairo and the provincial capitals.<sup>937</sup> That order abolished licensed prostitution in al-Mahalla. It coincided with a rapid social transformation associated with unprecedented population growth, wartime hardship, and an influx of wealth in the hands of war profiteers. The ban was a direct fruit of the national campaign against prostitution in which there is no evidence that the people of al-Mahalla participated. The “complete success” of that campaign came in 1949 with a law that abolished all prostitution in the entire country.

Neither the martial order, the law, nor the nationalist campaign made prostitution disappear from the life of the town. They mostly enlarged the number of prostitutes who had to maneuver to operate outside the legal limits. Like any other professional group, prostitutes tried to make their voice heard in the public sphere to make a case for their right to make a living. They wrote to the government and to the Parliament asking to reverse the order. The prohibition was never lifted. The community in al-Mahalla continued its selectivity and treated illicit sexuality case by case based on social ideals and practical reasons. Some prostitutes, particularly the older ones, succeeded in finding a different source of income such as investing in houses and opening coffee shops. For example, in 1945, the ex-prostitute Hanim al-Khashshab owned a house in which Company workers lived.<sup>938</sup> Records estimated al-Khashshab’s age in 1938 to be 45,

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<sup>936</sup>see Tanta Criminal Court 1941/ 7448 case 250/950 Biyala

<sup>937</sup> For that martial order see Ighlaq Buyut al-Da`irat [Closing prstitutes’ houses], *Nahdat al-`Ummal*, March 1943.

<sup>938</sup> Misdemeanor 1945 case 674.

which means she was about 50 by the time of al-Khubiza's closing. It was not clear that retired prostitutes funded their real state and coffee shops through their savings or by accepting donations from notables of the town.<sup>939</sup> However there were those who continued to practice, which explains the increased frequency of misdemeanors associated with streetwalkers in the court records after the banning.

*Sarmaha* and other types of prostitution was the choice for determined young widows and divorced women. One of those was `Attiyyat Ahmad `Allam who was younger than 18 when she was arrested in 1945. At that young age `Attiyyat was already married, had practiced illegal prostitution, and suffered from gonorrhoea. She would have been the perfect candidate to join the trade had not Khubiza been shut down. *Sarmaha* led `Attiyyat to settle for several days with the young Coptic merchant Elias Bishara Sa`d. Sa`d told his single apartment-mates that `Attiyyat was his aunt, but one of them unexpectedly came home during the day and saw them in a compromising position and insisted to take her to the police station. Interestingly, the court doctor reported that `Attiyyat, who was still married to an unknown person and admitted to having sex several times with Sa`d, was still a virgin because her hymen was thick and able to stretch during intercourse. Her sexual history was revealed by her infection with gonorrhoea. Due to her young age, she was considered a victim of sexual abuse, but the judge called her a "morally reckless girl who deceived young men like the defendant".<sup>940</sup>

*Sarmaha* was common after banning the trade and prostitutes were willing to provide their services anywhere. A policeman caught the 27-year-old divorced Busayna Muhammad Ibrahim delivering her services to the 25-year-old chef Hassan al-Shishtawi

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<sup>939</sup> In an interview with Muhammad Khalil, he said his grand uncle `Abdul Hayy Pasha Khilil donated money to the Khubiza prostitutes and organized meetings between them and some `ulama to convince prostitutes to give up. The researcher was not able to verify this information from another source.

<sup>940</sup> Elias was convicted with sexually abusing a female under 18 with her consent and for circumstances his 3 months in jail sentence was suspended. Misdemeanor1945/ 7793/2187.



al-Ghubari in a restaurant where he worked on 25 October 1945. Both of them were convicted with committing an indecent act in public, *fi'l Fadih 'lani*, and were sentenced with three months hard labor and a one pound fine.<sup>941</sup> In one case, we find three women went together on such a customer-hunting mission in 1945. At least two of them had a history with prostitution that goes back to the pre-banning era. Although one of them was able to win a customer who agreed to pay her 5 piasters, she tried to steal his wallet when he brought it out to pay. The customer, who might have been an Egyptian Jew named Michele Atagry, called the policeman who caught the three of them.

The youngest woman was the 22-year-old newly divorced Bahiyya Rizq al-'Isawi. She had no criminal record, which indicates that the other two just succeeded in recruiting her after her recent divorce.<sup>942</sup> The oldest one, the 35-year-old Sabha Hassan Gad el-Haq, got the severest punishment and was sent to jail for six months. The severe punishment was not only because she was the one who actually provided her services to Atagry and tried to steal his wallet, but also because of her criminal record of theft and debauchery, *fisq*. However, this case shows the lowest point of Sabha's social and "professional" life. At that point she had been divorced twice. Her first marriage produced a son, who was old enough in 1944 to help his father selling *foul* and other street food. The 50-year-old ex-husband did not allow Sabha to see her son. When she accidentally saw them selling food in the street and tried to talk to the boy, the ex-husband and his current wife hit her, tore her clothes off and beat her on her genitals.<sup>943</sup> Though supposedly a handloom weaver, her 19-year-old second husband was actually a gangster, who headed a band of thieves which included his two wives. Both wives were caught in October 1940 carrying brooms stolen from a Greek grocer. The grocer had not

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<sup>941</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7791/ 21.

<sup>942</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1195.

<sup>943</sup> Misdemeanor 1944/ 6917/ 505.

reported the theft because the stolen items had only trivial value.<sup>944</sup> Participation in such a pathetic theft indicates that Sabha was not making good money out of secret prostitution despite all her skills. Throughout the period between February and September 1940 she had succeeded in recruiting four young girls for unlicensed prostitution and was taking them to unknown men. She was convicted of moral corruption and urging the four minors to commit debauchery and fornication, *fisq wa fugur*.<sup>945</sup> In 1941 her criminal record was enhanced with another two thefts and a conviction for inducement to commit adultery.<sup>946</sup>

The third woman, Na'ima Mustafa Abdullah, was mistakenly reported to be a wife, but was actually a 25-year-old widow. Yet her criminal record went back to 1937. She had committed her most recent offense only a few days before. *Sarmaha* brought Na'ima from her home in Sandifa to Hammam al-Basal Street, close to al-Khubiza. She shared several drinks with the 22-year old waiter 'Ali al-Gamal until both of them got totally drunk. By 1:30 a.m. they were so noisy in the street that the police had to arrest them. Na'ima added to her record one more offense when she insulted the policemen and bit two of them.<sup>947</sup> The records estimated Na'ima's age two differently. In one report she was 25 years old and was estimated at 30-years old in another although both reports were in the same year. It means that when she committed her first offense in 1937 she was either 17 or 23 years old.

In this case, the three women were bold to challenge the state and the community in their quest to make a living. They took advantage of the inefficiency of the state in policing the streets. Had not one of them stolen the wallet of a customer, they would not

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<sup>944</sup> Misdemeanor 1940/ 6861/ 2315.

<sup>945</sup> Misdemeanor 1940/ 6861/ 2180.

<sup>946</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/ 7792/ 1195.

<sup>947</sup> Misdemeanor 1945/7792/ 1171.

have been caught. Similarly, a woman named Sayyida provided her services in the street to a 21 year old man named Disuqi Bakr Hammad. When a policeman caught them hugging, Hammad offered him a bribe to let them go, a deal which the policeman turned down. Hammad was charged with attempted bribery of a policeman, an offense that the judge treated with leniency due to Hammad's young age and clean record.<sup>948</sup>

Other women received customers in their homes. Considering the lack of privacy in shared houses, it was almost impossible to fool housemates. Neighbors of Nabawiyya Ibrahim in al-Mutawali Street noticed that Ahmad Muhammad al-Mahdi was paying her frequent "suspicious visits". On the night of 26 September 1943 they waited for him and beat him up. He was injured so severely that he had to be hospitalized for days. The judge explicitly endorsed the neighbors' action although what they did undermined the state's role in applying law and order. The judge said that due to the circumstances the court treated those who beat him up with leniency and fined each of them only 0,5 EP, which close to no punishment and was the least fine the research came across in records covering 25 years. The court made them pay him 1EP damage, only 10% of what he had asked for.<sup>949</sup>

The laws gave *al-Ahrar*, a legal term of art referring to those people who do not practice prostitution, the right to drive any prostitute out of their neighborhoods.<sup>950</sup> Yet, it was unusual for neighbors or landlords to try ejecting a tenant for that reason.<sup>951</sup> Probably

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<sup>948</sup> Hammad was punished with 1 EP fine. Misdemeanor 1945, case 1003.

<sup>949</sup> Misdemeanor 1943/6865/ 3099.

<sup>950</sup> Khaled Fahmy suggests that the term *al-Ahrar* refers to dominant classes, classes that would later appropriate the terms 'society' and nation. See Fahmy, "Prostitution," 90.

<sup>951</sup> The female tenant Inshirah al-Mahdi Isma'il won a liable case against her landlord `Abd el-Hamid Shihata. Shihata tried to enforce her to evacuate her rented apartment in his house so that he could give it for higher rent. He prevented Inshirah from entering the house and slandered her in public telling her "(you're) a whore, daughter of dog, making the apartment a secret house, and bringing men in". In addition to paying 5 EP damage to Inshirah, Shihata had to pay 1 EP fine. Misdemeanor 1944/ 6920/ 2919. A similar case was won by the woman tenant Diya' Muhammad Ghanim against her male housemate Ibrahim Darwish in 1943. When Diya' returned home late and her housemate refused to open the door for her, she asked a neighbor to convince him. The housemate slandered her saying loudly: "she went to prostitute

they followed the cultural norm that considers covering up women and not disgracing them a virtue as implied in the Qur'anic phrase "God is the Merciful and Veiler". This sort of piety made getting married to an ex-prostitute and forgiving a wife for prostituting herself possible, even if it was rare.<sup>952</sup> One of those was Sabha Khattab who got married and owned a coffee shop where she and her husband worked.<sup>953</sup> Fahima al-Sayyid resorted to secret prostitution to support herself and her daughter after her husband al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Samman abandoned them. When her husband went to where she and their child lived he found her providing her sexual services to the Christian Halim Yassa Mikha'il. Although he called police, he gave up his right to sue Fahima for adultery at the court.<sup>954</sup> In a similar case, the husband of Ratiba 'Ali Saqr gave up the same right at the court.<sup>955</sup>

Ideals were not the only impulse in covering neighbors who practiced prostitution. There were more practical reasons for neighbors not to take legal action. Even when police were serious about a prostitution allegation it was not easy to prove. It was enough for Zaynab Muhammad al-Shahawi to say that she refused to sleep with the 27-year old fish-vendor Ahmad al-Mutawali Abu al-'Aynyn to make the legal allegation against them collapse at the court. Ahmad entered Zaynab's house by climbing the walls with intent to commit adultery with her. The court concluded there was no punishment for "intention to commit adultery" and consequently both of them were innocent.<sup>956</sup> The case shows the limitation of legal deterrence. The existence of secret brothels shows the balance between

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herself and expected as to be her doorkeepers. (you) fuck and are fucked to feed your husband." Although he denied, many witnesses testified they heard him and he was fined 1 EP and paid 2 EP damage to Diya'. Misdemeanor 1934/ 6864/ 2139.

<sup>952</sup> For this notion see: `Isa, *Rijal Rayya wa Sakina*.

<sup>953</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1942/7450/ 547.

<sup>954</sup> The only charge was filed against Halim Yassa Mikha'il was offering a bribe to the policeman to let him go without taking him to the police station. He was fined with 3 EP. Misdemeanor 1945/ 7793/ 1537.

<sup>955</sup> Misdemeanor 1927/ 3117/ 2530.

<sup>956</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 2360.

the community and unlicensed prostitution. Both sides were willing to ignore the states' power. When the local community chose to actively deal with illicit prostitution, it tended to undermine the state, an approach that proved to be more effective considering the limitation of laws and inefficiency of the state's agencies. Waiting in ambush for her customers was an effective strategy for destroying the business and making prostitutes voluntarily leave the neighborhood. Meanwhile, an open and official police report might have made subjected the complaining neighbors to retaliation, which might have amounted to simply verbal harassment. Ahmad 'Ali Rashwan and his wife were subjected to such retaliation after he testified against his 26 year old neighbor Nabawiyya Muhammad Mas'ud. The police investigation was launched due to reports about Nabawiyya. Once she left the police station she went along with her mother and sister to Ahmad's house where they cursed him and his wife viciously.<sup>957</sup> The three women screamed at the couple calling them "whores and sons of bitches." They told the wife "we went to the (police) station and came back honorable, not like you. My son was fucking you downstairs while he (your husband) was upstairs. He (your husband) makes his friends fuck you." Although these kinds of retaliation do not appear repeatedly in the investigated records of al-Mahalla, Egyptian popular culture has always warned about messing with a *qahba* (whore). There are two Egyptian proverbs: "when a *qahba* becomes your enemy she confuses you, then lays all her vices on you" and "the *qahba* is master of her neighbors".

### **The Vicious Circle of Venereal Diseases**

In an attempt to discredit its striking workers who gained huge public sympathy in 1947, the Misr Company claimed that its workers used the services of the prostitutes and

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<sup>957</sup> Misdemeanor 1937/ 6773/ 2896.

3000 of them had caught venereal diseases.<sup>958</sup> The Company was trying to hold workers responsible for what a scholar described in 1947 as appalling work conditions and low wages.<sup>959</sup> The Company's claim came as a huge exaggeration of reality. A health survey held by the Company's Medical Department, which was established in 1948 as one of the direct fruits of the 1947 strike, revealed that only 60 workers had venereal diseases.<sup>960</sup> The survey was conducted from July 1949-September 1950. Among those, 44 suffered from Syphilis, 15 had either acute or sub acute cases of gonorrhoea and one had a chronic case of gonorrhoea. The only reported female case was a woman worker who suffered from inherited Syphilis.<sup>961</sup> There were no reported cases of Donovanosis, Lymphogranuloma venereum, or chancres. Finding only 60 cases among more than 21,000 surveyed workers was a big surprise to the authors of the report, who wrote "it is a wonder in such a (industrial) working environment since a large number of workers is always the best (candidate) for venereal disease spread."<sup>962</sup> The report attributed that to the rural origin of most workers. Coming from villages, where sex outside marriage is a shameful sin, the workers were more religiously and morally conservative. They preferred to marry at an earlier age than those who came from an industrial environment. Suffering from venereal diseases was so shameful among the workers that they secretly sought medical help away from the Company's medical facilities and even outside al-Mahalla. A worker had to be hospitalized in the nearby town of al-Mansura for several months. Because he preferred to keep his condition secret he did not report the real reason for his absence. Consequently, he was fired with no compensation because of his unexcused absence. Although he submitted all medical reports to the court and the judge

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<sup>958</sup> "al-Nar Fawqa al-Mahalla" [al-Mahalla is on Fire], *Akhbar al-Yum*, September 4, 1947.

<sup>959</sup> A. el-Gritly, *The Structure of Modern Industry in Egypt*, (Cairo: Government Press, 1947).

<sup>960</sup> Sharikat Misr, *al-A`mal al-tibbiya*, 70.

<sup>961</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>962</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

showed his understanding why the worker kept his condition secret, the worker lost the case against the Company.<sup>963</sup>

Table 6.6: Death caused by Syphilis in al-Mahalla between 1926 and 1951.

Year	Death of Syphilis
1926	4
1927	4
1928	2
1929	3
1930	7
1931	6
1932	5
1934	2
1941	1
1942	2
1944	5
1947	1
1948	1
1950	1
1951	1

Source: the annual and quarterly reports of Return of Birth, Death and Infectious Disease in Egypt of the mentioned years.<sup>964</sup>

Table 6.7: People seeking medical treatment in the venereal disease clinic in al-Mahalla between 1939 and 1949

Year	Patients	City population
1939	2,889	63,292
1947	12,989	115,758
1948	9,578	
1949	16,896	

Source: `Imad Hilal, al-Baghaya fi Misr, 188.

<sup>963</sup> Copy of Civic Verdicts of al-Mahalla Civil Court 1947, file 7694, case 3136.

<sup>964</sup> Ministry of Finance- Statistical Department (Cairo: al-Matba`a al-Amiriyya bi-Bulaq).

However, venereal diseases were a very serious concern in al-Mahalla and the rest of the country. Available statistics show that Syphilis caused deaths even after penicillin came into use in venereal disease clinics in Egypt in 1946. Tables 6.6 and 6.7 show the strong connection between the rapid population growth due to the establishment of the Misr Company and the presence of syphilis in the town. The death toll reached the highest point between 1930 and 1932 when the town started to receive the immigrant workers. The number of deaths declined afterward, except in 1944 when the number of the Company workers reached its peak. The spread of venereal diseases was so alarming that the government established a special clinic inside al-Mahalla in the 1930s, in addition to two clinics in the nearby towns of Tanta and al-Mansura. The number of patients seeking treatment in al-Mahalla's clinic witnessed an annual increase, which was consistent with the situation in all the similar clinics in the country during the same period.<sup>965</sup> The continuing increase of patients treated in al-Mahalla's clinic might have been caused by the continuing increase in the town's population and an increase of popular awareness and the courage to report to the clinic. Yet, not every patient sought proper medication. Prostitutes in particular, who were clearly the most vulnerable social group for infection, tended to resist health inspections and treatment for obvious reasons. They were always afraid of losing their work, and of course their income, and to be overloaded with the medical costs. Spending one day in the venereal diseases' hospital cost 4 Piasters a day and regulations made this cost a shared responsibility between the prostitute and her madam.<sup>966</sup> Before penicillin came into use in 1946, treatment required

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<sup>965</sup> Ibid.

<sup>966</sup> Bakr, *Mujtama` al-Qahira*, 107.



between seven weeks to several years.<sup>967</sup> Prostitutes with venereal diseases in an early stage could have succeeded in hiding the early symptoms by using a particular lotion.<sup>968</sup>

Egyptian historians rightly point fingers to prostitutes as responsible for the spread of venereal diseases. Venereal disease was a vicious circle. Prostitutes passed infections to their customers as much as customers passed the infection to the prostitutes. Al-Mahalla's records show that prostitution was not the only source of the infection. Several men who were charged with raping and molesting young boys and girls had the disease and in some cases passed the infection to their victims.<sup>969</sup>

Morality and national dignity, more than fear of venereal diseases, were behind calls for the abolition of licensed prostitution. These calls were driven by events outside al-Mahalla. Since al-Nadim's outcry, calls for abolition were tangled up with the nationalist struggle against the British authority and the Capitulation system. The Nationalist Muhammad Farid wrote that because of the Capitulations the French Consul turned himself into the guardian of immorality and fornication, *fisq wa figur* in Egypt. This was because the consul suspended official decisions banning belly-dancing and enforcing public modesty laws in coffee shops owned by wives of Moroccan men holding French citizenship in 1894.<sup>970</sup> Farid, along with the nationalist newspapers, was provoked by a fight that took place in the prostitution district in Alexandria in 1895 between three British soldiers and some Egyptians.<sup>971</sup> The same year, a group of 'ulama suggested banning Muslim women from dancing in public places and from walking

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<sup>967</sup> Ibid., 122-128.

<sup>968</sup> Burtuqalis Bey, *al-Bighaa' aw Khatar al-`Ahara*, 33.

<sup>969</sup> Tanta Criminal Court 1935/ 7440/ 125 and 1939/7441/e 326 and Misdemeanor 1935/ 6783/ 4145 among other cases when children molesters passed venereal diseases infection to their victims.

<sup>970</sup> Muhammad Farid, *Mudhakkirat Muhammad Farid: tarikh Misr min ibtida` sanat 1891*[Mimors of Muhammad Farid: history of Egypt since 1891], ed. Ra'uf Hamid `Abbas (Cairo: `Alam al-Kutub, 1975), 210.

<sup>971</sup> Ibid., 229.

indecently in streets, particularly during *Mawalid*.<sup>972</sup> Simultaneously to the revival of the nationalist movement under the leadership of Mustafa Kamil, Dr. Burtuqalis Bey published his book “Prostitution and the Danger of Whoredom in Egypt” in 1907. The journalist Dawud Barakat, who would become the editor of al-Ahram Newspaper, translated it into Arabic and published it at the expense of the author in the same year. Barakat explicitly accused the foreign press of ignoring the book when it was published in French because it conflicted with their interest in the Capitulations.<sup>973</sup> Indeed, the book persuasively shows that thousands of old European prostitutes who because they had contracted venereal diseases were banned from practicing the trade in their own countries subsequently came to Egypt to practice their profession under protection of the Capitulations. “They collect a fortune out of fornication and debauchery and distribute diseases right and left with no deterrent or fear of a ruler.”<sup>974</sup> From the religious and medical standpoint Burtuqalis Bey suggested to ban all licensed and unlicensed prostitution and to eliminate all Egyptian and foreign prostitutes.<sup>975</sup>

In the spirit of the national revolution of 1919, Shaykh Mahmud Abu al-‘Uyun launched his campaign against public prostitution in 1923 with the support of al-Ahram’s editor Dawud Barakat.<sup>976</sup> Abu al-‘Uyun had actively participated in that revolution and was arrested among the members of the “Black Hand Society” that planned to assassinate whoever violated the revolutionary strikes.<sup>977</sup> Cases associated with prostitution such as “Rayya and Sakinah” and “Ibrahim al-Gharbi” attracted national attention between 1920

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<sup>972</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>973</sup> Dawud Barakat, translator intro in Burtuqalis Bey, *al-Bighaa’ aw Khatar al-‘Ahara*, 2.

<sup>974</sup> Burtuqalis Bey, *al-Bighaa’ aw Khatar al-‘Ahara*, 20

<sup>975</sup> Before that book, Dr. Burtuqalis wrote a treatise on “protecting health from the venereal diseases by the Islamic Shari`a” in 1900. Ibid., II.

<sup>976</sup> Muhammad Rajab Bayumi, *al-Nahda al-Islamiyya fi Siyar A`lamiha al-Mu`asirin*, v.1 (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam; Beirut: Dar al-Shamiyya, 1995), 204.

<sup>977</sup> For Abu al-‘Uyun’s biography, see Jamal al-Din Mahmud Abu al- al-‘Uyun, “Abi al-Shaykh Abu al-‘Uyun” [My father Sheik Abu al-‘Uyun], *Majallat al-Azhar*, January and February, 1987, 632-640 and 778-784.

and 1923. The intensive press coverage of such crimes engendered concerns about a moral crisis among lower class Egyptians.<sup>978</sup> Abu al-‘Uyun’s campaign was an expression of that concern as he wrote that al-Gharbi’s case provoked him to wage his campaign.<sup>979</sup> That campaign continued for more than a decade and included dozens of articles, several books, and meetings with ministers.<sup>980</sup> The biggest support his call received came from feminist activists and the Christian ‘Abd al-Fadi al-Qahirani, the manager of the Nile Christian Press and the founder of the Society of Oriental Purity.<sup>981</sup> Egyptian Feminist Union and others argued that the presence of legalized prostitution in Egypt dishonored the nation and made its abolition a priority.<sup>982</sup> In addition to writing for the press, sending petitions to the Royal Court and the cabinet, corresponding with police and the governor of Cairo, al-Qahirani and his followers handed out pamphlets and booklets to prostitutes in downtown Cairo urging them to give up their profession in favor of purity and dignity. Although he and his followers received much hostility and heard lots of outrageous ugly words from prostitutes, it’s doubtful these printed materials had any influence on prostitutes, since most of these women were illiterate.

The nationalist mood of the small secularist westernized intellectuals in 1920s was not all in favor of Abu al-‘Uyun’s call. ‘Abbas al-‘Aqqad, Salama Musa, and Fikri Abaza were among prominent opponents of ‘Abu al-‘Uyun’s call.<sup>983</sup> *Al-Siyasa* and *Ruz*

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<sup>978</sup> Shaun T. Lopez, "Madams, Murders, and the Media: *Akhbar al-Hawadith* and the emergence of Mass Culture in 1920s Egypt" in *Re-Envisioning Egypt 1919- 1952*, ed. Arthur Goldschmidt, Amy J. Johnson and Barak A. Salmoni (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 373.

<sup>979</sup> Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 206. Hilal also cites the international reports about traffic of women and children through Egypt as a reason for Abu al-‘Uyun’s campaign. 205.

<sup>980</sup> See series of Abu al-‘Uyun’s articles in *al-Ahram* entitled “*Madhabih al-A`arad*” [Slaughtering honor] between 20 November and 27 December 1923 and “*al-Bigha` al-Rasmi*” on 12 April 1926. Among his books on the subject, *Safha Dhahabiya: Ara` wuzara` al-dawla fi al-Bigha`* in 1928 and *Mushkilat al-Bigha` al-Rasmi* in 1933.

<sup>981</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 539.

<sup>982</sup> Beth Baron, *Egypt as a woman: nationalism, gender, and politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 51.

<sup>983</sup> Bayumi, *al-Nahda al-Islamiyya*, 205 and Hilal, *al-Baghaya*, 224.

al-Yusuf, along with other publications, rejected the abolitionists' call. Al-Siyasa, in particular, accused Abu al-'Uyun of lurching his campaign to serve the King's ambition to become the Caliph of Islam in return for increasing his monthly salary as an Azhari teacher from 14 to 25 EP.<sup>984</sup> However, these calls did not lack supporters among the local councils of some towns including Banha and al-Mansura in Lower Egypt. The experience of the town of Shibin al-Kum did not encourage the Interior Ministry to execute the abolitionist proposals. When the governor of al-Minufiyya abolished public prostitution in Shibin al-Kum in 1908, clandestine brothels mushroomed causing an outbreak of venereal disease. The same governor had to reopen the prostitution district to counter the danger.<sup>985</sup> This shows that the lower-classes, to whom the prostitution districts catered in urban towns, were not really ready to take actions appropriate to the abolitionist campaign. Alarmed by the outbreak of venereal diseases, the Committee of Public Prostitution concluded in 1935 that public opinion was the main obstacle for abolition.<sup>986</sup>

Interestingly, British officials who were in charge of the Egyptian police forces were open about their dislike of public prostitution and their inclination to eliminate those districts. Russell Pasha's account for the prostitution districts in Cairo in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is an actual discourse against the trade, in a language that was not much different from that employed by anti-prostitution Egyptians. Taken together, the British and the Egyptian discourses concerning public prostitution in Egypt in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century exemplifies the transformative process which the colonized and the colonizers undergo together to reach a hybridized outcome.

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<sup>984</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-1.

<sup>985</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>986</sup> *Taqrir al-Bigha'*, 13-14 and 51.

Debates about public prostitution and the crime-news coverage contributed to building an image of a virtuous Egyptian nation.<sup>987</sup> The expanding activism of the neo-*Effendiyya*, who came from the lower-classes and a more conservative social culture than the previous rich elite, in the political arena in the 1930s moved the Egyptian nationalism closer towards the Arab-Islamic culture.<sup>988</sup> Inhabitants of areas close to the prostitution districts in Cairo, Alexandria, and al-Mansura sent letters to the king describing the awful moral and health conditions of their neighboring prostitutes.<sup>989</sup> Opponents of public prostitution among the neo-*Effendiyya* collected thousands of signatures across religions and classes calling for the outlawing of prostitution and the shutting of licensed brothels in 1940s.<sup>990</sup> In 1939 the Parliament discussed one of its members' requests to abolish licensed prostitution, fight secret prostitution, tighten police control over dance halls, and theaters, take action against women who were going out on the streets to seduce young men, and to apply gender segregation on the beaches.<sup>991</sup>

None of these thick volumes that were preserved in Dar al-Watha'q al-Qawmiyya came from al-Mahalla although residents of towns as close as Fuwwa, Dusuq and Aga and as far as Asyut and Aswan signed a nationwide petition. We can't assume that the people of al-Mahalla refused to sign. They might have not heard of the signing campaign or those who were aware of it were not enthusiastic about joining it, which opens the question about the relevance of national discourse to a local community. However, one

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<sup>987</sup> Lopez argues that lower classes were not only the object of the crime news, but consumed them, which contributed to a new mass culture in modern Egypt based on a notion of acceptable public behavior. Lopez, "Madams, Murders, and the Media", 373.

<sup>988</sup> For the continuing change in the Egyptian nationalism due to the effendiyya's activism see Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian nation*. For the Islamic component in forming the identity of the effendiyya see Michael Gasper, *The power of Representation: Publics, Peasants, and Islam in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>989</sup> `Abdin Archive Mahfazah 539 and Mahfazah 471.

<sup>990</sup> `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 539.

<sup>991</sup> Majlis al-Niwab, al-hay'a Niyabiya al-sab'a, dur al-in`qad al-thani, session 14 Feb 1939. (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-Amiriya, 1940), 950.

petition came from the Islamic Society for Fighting *al-Bida' wal-Munkarat* in al-Mahalla al-Kubra in 1937. The Society was able to collect about 150 signatures among merchants, weavers and 'ulama.<sup>992</sup> The Society asked King Faruq to abolish prostitution from Egypt along with other "sins" such as alcohol consumption, gambling, indecent dancing and obscene acting. It employed quotations from the Qur'an and Hadith to convince the 18-year-old king who had just succeeded his father and showed signs of a religious inclination. Nothing in the letter was specific to al-Mahalla, its prostitution quarter or to the fear of venereal diseases.

The case of al-Mahalla proves that when it came to people's daily lives on a local level, the nationalist calls had their limitations. Urbanites, who were accustomed to public prostitution and newcomers who had never experienced prostitution in their home villages were not bothered or disturbed by al-Khubiza. Within both groups there were individuals who patronized al-Khubiza prostitutes and those who ignored it. Meanwhile they did not accept the illicit sexual practices of those who were not expected to commit sex outside marriage. Neighbors often carried out the responsibility of arresting and even punishing customers who sneaked into the rooms of unmarried women. Anxious about single workers living in the same house with an unmarried landlady, neighbors drove tenants out of that dwelling.<sup>993</sup> Workers who readily used the services of al-Khubiza prostitutes felt sinful because of sexual affairs with their landladies. Some of them found redemption from the deep feeling of guilt by involving themselves in religious groups.<sup>994</sup> One worker refused to allow his roommate to receive his fiancé.<sup>995</sup> Another roommate insisted on dragging a streetwalker to the police station once he discovered her real

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<sup>992</sup> □Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 206 "Jam`iyat Islamiyya: 1907-1950".

<sup>993</sup> Misdemeanor 1945, 7793, 2350.

<sup>994</sup> The example here is one of al-Khuli's co-workers named Abd el-`Azim Shiha.

<sup>995</sup> Misdemeanor 1943, 6864, 2187.

trade.<sup>996</sup> In brief, in daily life, local people treated individuals and social groups and looked at social activities on a case by case basis. Women of the public prostitution district were categorized differently from women outside it. In the eyes of the townsfolk, al-Khubiza women were doing a particular trade like any other<sup>997</sup> or as a worker put it “not sinful because it is allowed, it is not stealing, we pay them money.”<sup>998</sup> In accepting public prostitution and dealing with secret prostitution, the people of the town and the prostitutes themselves were active shapers of their lives rather than mere subjects of the law and the state’s power. While al-Mahalla had its role in the story of public prostitution in modern Egypt, the nationalists dictated laws for how Egyptian society should deal with illicit sexuality. Prostitution didn’t end in the town because of the 1943 martial order banning public prostitution in al-Mahalla, nor was it stamped out by the 1949 banning of licensed brothels in all of Egypt, nor even by the anti-prostitution law in 1951. The profession continued in existence because there were prostitutes willing to continue their way of life and there were customers who were willing to pay for the service and even challenge the state. These laws and orders did succeed at eliminating al-Khubiza as a vibrant part of the city and it gradually faded from the memory of the people of al-Mahalla.<sup>999</sup>

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<sup>996</sup>Misdemeanor1945/ 7793/2187.

<sup>997</sup> This expression is borrowed from Karin van Nieuwkerk, *A trade like any other: female singers and dancers in Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

<sup>998</sup> Al-Khuli, *al-Rihla*, 94-93.

<sup>999</sup> Among dozens of people of the city whom the researcher randomly asked about al-Khubiza only three people recalled the area. One man is about 90 years old witnessed al-Khubiza, an old woman lives close by al-Khubiza and recalls seeing its women carrying their licenses, and a younger man who still lives in the area itself and knows some of its history.

## Conclusion

In April 1914, the headmistress of the al-`Afaf Girls School in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, Fatima Darwish Effendi, was busy making her schoolgirls memorize chants to repeat during the Khedive `Abbas Hilmi's arrival to the town on May 1.1000 Fatima Effendi graduated from the Saniya School in Cairo in 1907 and was sent to educate al-Mahalla's girls by the man handpicked by Britain to be Minister of Education. The same man would later become the heroic leader of the 1919 Revolution, Sa`d Pasha Zaghlul. In a few years the enrollment of the school increased from about 20 to 175 girls and Fatima Effendi trained them to impress the Khedive when he came to town to inaugurate the Madrasat al-Nasij, the Weaving High School. The construction of the Weaving School started in 1910 on land donated by the landholding Shishini family. Training its graduates in the modern textile industry, the school helped to qualify al-Mahalla to house the Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving in 1927. The school was connected with the train station with a wide, straight boulevard. Around the school and the boulevard, the Shari` Muhib, a European-style neighborhood, emerged to accommodate both the rich foreigners who helped to coercively integrate the town into the global economy and the rising Egyptian capitalists whose wealth and status were organically part of that coercive integration process. The other group that inhabited the Muhib Neighborhood was the state officials and technocrats, the effendiyya.

The Weaving school and its surrounding neighborhood, the anthems of the schoolboys and girls, and the Khedive's visit marked the modernization project of al-

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<sup>1000</sup> Information about Fatima Darwish Effendi is based on her correspondence with the Royal Palace between 1914 and 1915. `Abdin Archive, Mahfazah 410 "Itilimasat muwazafin fardi, 1907- 1926" [Petitions from individual employed, 1907- 1926].



Mahalla as it was envisioned by the state, the rising capitalism and the nationalist educated effendiyya. At the core of that project were modern industrialization, European-style urbanization, and educated men and women chanting their love for one nation under one state with one ruler. The visit of the last Khedive of Egypt to al-Mahalla was the first visit of its kind by a ruler of Egypt in modern times. It was the moment for the locals to proclaim that they were part of a “national community” whose majority of members lived outside their town. Chanting their nationalism supported the quest of the Egyptian bourgeois, in al-Mahalla and beyond, to enlarge their share of the country’s wealth and diversify their economic sources by investing in modern industry. It was the moment to open the town to national politics after it had already been opened to the state’s centralization and coercive integration into the global economy since the 19th century. After the 1919 National Revolution, the town became a focal point in the nationalist discourse due to the spectacular success of the Misr Company for Spinning and Weaving, the largest and the most successful enterprise of Bank Misr. The establishment and the success of the Company not only assured the national capitalists a capacity for industrialization, but also coincided with the state’s quest to restructure its power over society and “modernize” its subjects. In other words, making industrial workers went hand in hand with making modern subjects. While building a lucrative project and assuring their share of the national resources, the founders and managers of the Company were launching a discourse and applying policies about building a modern society.

Both Egyptian capitalists and modern middle class effendiyya adopted a nationalistic discourse that defined the national identity against foreigners, particularly the colonial power and western investment. In reality, as this study showed, Egyptian capitalists identified their interest in opposition to the people whom they called a nation. They generated their wealth and built their socio-economic stature through exploiting

workers and manipulating political power. Like capitalists across the country, capitalists in al-Mahalla cooperated with the same foreigners, whom they discursively opposed, in managing and running the successful company. They lived together in elaborate neighborhoods and socially mixed with them in the same hangouts, drinking, listening to music, networking and breaking deals. Enthusiastically, effendiyya embraced the ideology of nationalism and also discursively identified their national identity against foreigners. On the shop floor though, armed with knowledge of, and training in, western technology, they turned themselves into national patriarchs whose right and duty were to discipline their children to make them modern. Whether out of a fascination with the “opposed colonial West” or out of the needs of industrial capitalism, modernity for effendiyya was to apply a western dress code and manipulate western technology. They carried “the modern man’s burden to civilize” workers and make them “modern”. Through fear and physical abuse, they were recruiting and training workers to be docile and obedient. Those urban effendiyya were actually identifying themselves as being the “modern norm” against the “backward rural” workers. Some of them, particularly in the lower professional ladder, identified themselves against workers out of fear of being demoted to the rank and file workers and out of hopelessness of any upward professional status.

For their part workers were not totally submissive and passive. They picked and matched from their traditions and the new culture and cautiously chose when, how, and what to adapt or resist. They learned to operate modern machines, to follow precise time, to possess watches and alarms, and to ride bicycles and trains. However, they did not embrace the emblems of this modern society just because it was imposed upon them. They actively chose between the new and old tools and ideas depending on what served their purposes. By false compliance, networking, evading work, not communicating with

supervisors, distorting the industrial dress code, striking, stealing and sabotaging, workers actively adapted to industrial life and chose when to imitate and when to differ from the model of a modern worker-subject as it was imposed upon them by the Company and the state. A better life for them was not necessarily a choice between “traditional” and “modern.” They strove creatively to make their lives easier with a guaranteed income to sustain the family. They not only developed strategies for survival, they also struggled over the appropriate symbols, to identify their community, and to give meaning to their historical experience. During their violent resistance and soft adaptation, workers did not identify themselves only in opposition to capitalists; they identified themselves in opposition to effendiyya, the state, the Mahallawiyya, and each other. In their new urban life, depending on how a particular situation developed, they continually identified and re-identified themselves based on geographical origin, communal association, gender, and class solidarity. On very few occasions, they used nationalistic discourse, but only against their abusive foreign bosses to express direct interest or grievance.

Workers were not the only group whose lives were overshadowed by the birth and the success of the Company out of the nationalist-capitalist impulse. The Company brought change to the lives of many people of al-Mahalla whose engagement with that enterprise was neither nationalist nor necessarily concerned about question of modernity. Although they saw in the Company and its workers an outside threat to their community, many people of al-Mahalla cherished the economic opportunities made available to them due to the exceptional growth of their town. They identified themselves based on their communal association in opposition to the newly arrived workers more often than they did with the “nation” in opposition to colonial powers and foreigners. They participated in national politics, such as parliamentary elections, based on their communal commitment, and sometimes to defeat the “nationalist Company” rather than for a

nationalist agenda. While providing new workers with accommodations and services, the people of the town identified themselves as different from those workers, gharraba, as much as workers identified themselves against the people of the town and even against themselves based on their original communities. While they exchanged hostility with urban Mahallawiyya, workers enjoyed whatever they could afford of the urban life's pleasures. They imitated Mahallawiyya in their dress, in dining at restaurants, going to movie theaters, circuses, coffee shops and booza taverns. They enjoyed different sorts of urban entertainments including strolling along the downtown boulevards window shopping.

Noticeably, the women of the poor classes participated in ways that allowed their socio-economic self-empowerment. They became industrial workers at the Company and smaller textile factories, invested in workers' lodges, and set up small businesses such as coffee shops and food carts. These women pursued a new hybridized gender role and actively participated in rapid social transition. To support their kin and to stave off poverty, they remained dutiful mothers, wives, and daughters in the family. Becoming economically independent, the women were liberated from the repressive patriarchal standards of community and kin. Many of them, female workers and vendors particularly, came from the countryside and lived by themselves in the city away from their families, at least until they got married. They challenged the power of the state and the cultural norms of their community, managed masculine domains and very often undermined the traditionally superior status of males in their household and set up themselves as an important player in the newcomers' urban experience. Meanwhile, they pursued their family life as daughters, mothers, and, sometimes, wives. They were seeking neither the self-fulfillment nor the gender emancipation called for by the educated elite Cairene women of the day. At the lowest point of the social ladder there were prostitutes who

against all odds were willing to adapt to regulations as much as their quarter was accepted in the periphery of the society. The Cairo-based nationalist discourse over public morality, which was triggered in opposition to the colonial state's regulating prostitution, was irrelevant to both the inhabitants and visitors of the red-light district in al-Mahalla until that discourse succeeded in changing public policies against legalized prostitution. Shutting down the district led to its rebirth in illegal prostitution.

Contrary to the upper classes and the educated middle class, the effendiyya, who were consciously concerned with the question of modernity along western lines, the subaltern groups were charting the path to their own localized modernity. Workers, weavers, prostitutes and lower class men and women formulated their own identity, gender relations, and moral system. They did not mimic modernity; they localized and personified the already hybridized modernity.

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## Vita

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