The Documentation of the Pilgrimage Arts in Upper Egypt
A comparative Study between Ancient and Islamic Egypt

ESSAM ELSAEED*, SHEREEN EL KABBANI**
* Alexandria University, ** Bibliotheca Alexandrina

ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage was the most sacred trip for the Egyptian. One of the aspects of its celebration was depicting pilgrimage scenes, which represent a tradition of recording the most important moment in one’s life. A tradition, which is very old in the Nile Valley, as Ancient Egyptians were keen to depict scenes of their pilgrimage to Abydos on their tombs. In spite of the complete diversity belief and pilgrimage rituals in Islamic times from that of Ancient Egypt, this aspect continued in Islamic Egypt. The purpose of Hajj (pilgrimage) paintings is to commemorate this sacred trip to Mecca. Unfortunately, this kind of intangible heritage (pilgrimage paintings on houses) is going to vanish, due to lack of awareness. So, this paper attempts to focus on the pilgrimage scenes as to draw the attention to its importance.

KEYWORDS

Osiris, Abydos, Hajj, Paintings, Traditions
1. IMPORTANCE OF PILGRIMAGE IN ANCIENT AND ISLAMIC EGYPT

Since ancient times, the pilgrimage trip, known as Hajj, to Ka’baa was considered the most important trip in the life. After Islam, it became the 5th mandatory duty of this religion, thus the importance of the trip increased, especially after its association with different Islamic mahmals\(^1\) (El Kabbani, Sh. 2005) of which the Egyptian mahmal was the most significant (Figure 1).

We can’t actually trace the beginning of the Egyptian mahmal and obtaining its unique position. Its first indications date back to the Ikhshidi era, which witnessed the growth of the Egyptian pilgrimage caravan, and its power upon the other Islamic caravans (Ibn Taghri Bardi, Y. 1982; Ibn Iyaas, M. 1982). The importance of the Egyptian mahmal with its great celebrations, in addition to its significant and important political role, started from the Mamluk era. It continued during the Ottoman era and totally stopped in 1962. The phenomena of Hajj to holy Islamic places is similar in a way or other with pilgrimage in ancient Egypt, although its concept is totally different, as the ancient Egyptian fulfilled his pilgrimage to deities, while in Islam, Hajj is one of the main principals of the religion.

\(^1\) The Mahmal was the vehicle which was used to carry and transport the cover of the Ka’ba as well as the gifts of the Caliph, Sultan, or Ruler of Egypt to Hejaz during the previous eras. It takes the form of a square wooden frame, hollow from the inside, topped with a pyramidal wooden frame, which ends with a cone topped with a copper crescent with a copper star inside it. The four corners of the square frame were also topped by copper crescents with a copper star inside each. The Mahmal was covered with a red cover decorated in Serma- style with golden and silver yarn. These decorations were so rich that the cover itself was almost invisible. It was also decorated with an inscription band of some Koranic verses in Thuluth script stretching over the four facades of the Kiswa.
2. HAJJ PAINTINGS

In Pharaonic Egypt the pilgrimage phenomenon was closely associated with the belief of resurrection and immortality. Osiris, the god of the underworld, was the god to whom the Egyptians travelled for pilgrimage. They believed that the tomb of Osiris was at Abydos and therefore kings and individuals were keen to travel to Abydos, which became a holy place (Mahran, M. 1989). Although there is no precise word to describe pilgrimage in pharaonic Egypt, but its manifestations are plentiful (Yoyotte, J. 1960).

So, some of the pilgrimage manifestations in Islamic Egypt have ancient Egyptian origins, based on some social traditions and rituals, for example drawings on tombs’ walls depicting pilgrimage to Osiris’ tomb in Abydos, or prayers to him as the god of the otherworld, in addition to various rites with pharaonic origins (Yoyotte, J. 1960), even if they continued in the same trend or differed in a way or other (Frazer, J. 1981) as mummies as well as living humans participated in the pilgrimage to Abydos in the pharaonic era, a matter that gave sadness and grief effect (Issa, A. 1986) – unlike the Egyptian Mahmal in the Islamic era. Abydos pilgrimage trip was illustrated on the individual and royal tombs’ walls showing the man with his wife, and highlighting their customs, as this holy trip was linked by the ancient Egyptian to strict roles in the customs and manners, as well as the hymns and songs (Altenmüller, A. 1975).

As for the Islamic hajj, the social influence plays a crucial role in the mahmal and the pilgrimage caravan, as this annual trip was connected to a number of rituals, rites and traditions, which are still living in the folk conscience. It is remarkable that some of the social impacts are still vivid in the minds of the social strata of Egyptian society, especially the popular classes.

One of the folk arts, that flourished and was linked to hajj and mahmal, was hajj paintings drawn on the houses of the pilgrimages. Also folk songs, traditions and rites flourished in turn (El Kabbani, Sh. 2005), and it is believed that all of them have pharaonic origins.

Hajj paintings are primarily a rural art tradition. However they might show up occasionally on city buildings as country people move to urban areas, but these paintings are unrecognized and unnoticed by most city dwellers (Parker, A. & Neal, A. 2009). The purpose of Hajj paintings is to commemorate the Hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca. They reflect this important experience in the life of a Muslim building on an ancient tradition thousands of years old (El Kabbani, Sh. 2005). They are also considered as an announcement that the owner of this house or a member of his family has fulfilled this sacred trip (Hamed, W. 1987).

No one can precisely determine how or when this custom first started. Certainly the idea caught on and has developed in a relatively short time into a flourishing folk art form. This folk art attracted the attention of many historians and European travelers. The scientists accompanying the French
campaign in their work “Description de l'Egypt” gave us a detailed description of the Egyptian celebration accompanying the departure and arrival of the Mahmal, and other Egyptian folk customs concerning the Hajj. They didn’t mention anything concerning the Hajj paintings, although they observed that the Egyptians painted their houses for the departure and arrival of the Mahmal³.

Then in the 19th century Edward William Lane gave us a detailed description of the Hajj celebration. He also noted that the Egyptians painted their houses and shops three days before the departure of the pilgrimage caravan accompanying the Mahmal (Lane, E. 1963). The traveler Girard De Nerval, who visited Egypt in the 19th Century, as well as Joseph Petts or Hajj Youssef and Sophia Lane Paul, described the departure of the Mahmal and the great celebration which was held on that occasion. They also mentioned that the houses and shops were painted (De Nerval, G. 1960; Petz, J. 1995; Lane Paul, S. 2000) which could be interpreted as the very primitive beginnings of this folk art.

These paintings are brightly colored, reflecting the joy for the safe return of the Hajji or Hajja³, especially in past decades when the Hajj was done with great difficulty (El Kabbani, Sh. 2005). They contain a combination of many elements.

The elements of the drawings consist of:

2.1 COLORS

The folk artist used a number of colors which have certain meanings in his paintings. So he used:

- **White color** as a symbol of light, highness and purity. In addition to these symbols, this color had a political significant during the pharaonic era, as it was closely linked to the divine and royal symbols. It was also the symbolic color of Upper Egypt in contrast to the red color signifying Lower Egypt (Ahmed, T. 2004).

- **Red color** to symbolize the joy, happiness and power. While in the pharaonic era it had positive and negative symbolism (Griffiths, J. 1972). On one hand, it symbolized the sun set reflecting the ancient Egyptian belief in life and death. It also indicated the color of the blood, the main origin of life. One the other hand, red signified the color of the sun god and his victory upon his enemies, thus, it reflected the idea of victory (Ahmed, T. 2004).

---


³ Hajji is a male title given to the one who has performed the pilgrimage trip, while Hajja is the female title.
- **Green color** as a symbol of heaven, fertility and growth. It was for the ancient Egyptian artist one of the most important colors that expressed the idea of the resurrection and renewal, which was a main element of the ancient Egyptian belief. It also was linked with fertility, wealth and growth, therefore it was related to the mother deity (Lucas, A. & Harris, J.R. 1992; Ahmed, T. 2004).

- **Blue** was not widely used as it is a dark color. But only the light blue was used to reflect the sky, the water or the wide horizon. While in the pharaonic era, blue was the color of sky and earth. Thus, it is related to fertility reflecting the color of the Nile and the related crops. Also various fertility manifestations were colored with blue (Ahmed, T. 2004).

- **Black color** was not a preferred color in Hajj paintings as it reflects the darkness and evil. So, it was only used as outer outlines of the figures (Aref, I. 2002). In the pharaonic era, the artist regarded black as a manifestation of resurrection from death, as well as fertility; and hence it meant life itself (Ahmed, T. 2004).

2.2 INSCRIPTIONS AND WRITINGS

The inscriptions and writings accompanying the wall paintings contain the following:

2.2.1 **Certain Quranic verses**, (Figure 2)

- Related directly to the Hajj, such as:
  - “Pilgrimage to the House is a duty to Allah for all who can make the journey” (Quran: Surra 3, Verse 97).
  - “Proclaim the pilgrimage to the people. They will come to you on foot and on every lean camel, they shall come from every deep ravine” (Quran: Surra22, Verse 27).

- Related indirectly to this occasion:
  - “Your Lord has said: ‘Call on Me and I will answer you” (Quran: Surra 40, Verse 60).
  - “Whatever favor you have is from Allah” (Surra 16, Verse 53).
  - “Indeed, We have opened for you (Prophet Muhammad) a clear opening” (Quran: Surra 48, Verse 1).

2.2.2 **Some of the Hadith of Prophet Mohamed**, (Figure 3) for instance:

- “Who visited my grave must be assured of my intercession”.
- “Between my house and my Minbar is a garden of Paradise”.
- “Accepted Hajj has no reward but Paradise”.
Figure 2 – Hajj painting from Naj Saad, Al- Hamidat Village, Menia.
Photograph of the researcher

Figure 3 – Hajj painting from Naj Saad, Al- Hamidat Village, Menia.
Photograph of the researcher
2.2.3 Religious prayers, for example:
- “I testify that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammad is His Messenger”.
- “Here I am at Thy service O Lord, here I am”.
- “Allah is Greatest”.

2.2.4 Some phrases related to Prophet Mohamed:
- “Blessings on Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him)”.
- “Oh Holy Prophet”.
- “Flowers flourish for the grace of Prophet Muhammad”.

2.3 TEXT RECORDING THAT THE OWNER OF THE HOUSE HAS UNDERTAKEN THE PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA, (FIGURE 2) SUCH AS:
- Made his pilgrimage to the god’s house and visited the prophet’s tomb the Hajj…
- Made his pilgrimage to the god’s house and visited the prophet’s tomb the Hajj… (then his name).
- “Accepted Hajj and Forgiven sins”.
- “Congratulations Hajja... (then her name)”.

2.4 DRAWINGS (FIGURE 4):

1. The Kaaba and the Great Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet’s Mosque in Madina.
2. Two pigeons and the Cave of Hira, which are a symbol of the great role the two pigeons had, when they hided Prophet Mohamed and Abou Bakr Al Sedik in cave Thour, and they are also an indication to the pigeons in Ka’ba.
3. A man or a woman praying, as an indication of their prayer in the Great Mosque in Mecca or the Prophet’s Mosque in Madina.
4. Transportation:
   - The Egyptian Mahmal. In spite the fact that it stopped completely during the time of Former President Gamal Abd El Nasser, it still alive in the popular consciousness.

---

4 The feminine title given to the woman who performed the pilgrimage to Mecca.
Camel, which was the main mean of transportation in ancient times.

- As the folk art is considered a mirror of the society, the development of the transportation means was reflected in the Hajj paintings, so the artist illustrated:
  - Train
  - Bus
  - Ship
  - Airplane.

5 Some animals:

- The lion can be interpreted as a symbol of courage (Aref, I. 2002; El Kabbani, Sh. 2005). When a lion is drawn holding a sword in its hand,
it is a sign of a man’s courage, so it is popularly used not only in Hajj wall paintings, but also as a tattoo (Al Gohari, M. n.d). It could also symbolize the intention of the Hajji or the Hajja to face their sins, because after they fulfill the Hajj they return without any sin (Ameen, A. 1999; El Kabbani, Sh. 2005).

- The camel symbolizes the patience that the Hajji or Hajja must have in order to fulfill this hard trip, especially in the old times.
- One or two horses, which had a special position in the ancient Egyptian, Coptic and Islamic art in general and the folk art in particular. The horse is a symbol of courage and the ability of facing danger without any fear.
- Pigeons, which are the symbol of mercy and piece as well as the rapidity.

3. SOME TRADITION AND RITES LINKED TO THE EGYPTIAN MAHMAL:

Some traditions and rites were linked to the departure and arrival of the mahmal. In spite of their simplicity, these traditions show how the phenomenon of mahmal was deep in Egyptian conscience and express their high respect. Its camel travels to the most holy places, Mecca and Madinah, holding the cover of Ka’ba, has ancient origins in the ancient Egyptian depiction of the caravan holding Amon’s statue in his journey from Karnak Temple to Luxor Temple (Mahran, M. 1989). Perhaps the most important of these habits are:

- Taking blessings by touching the mahmal or just by seeing it, and the ones couldn’t, threw their napkins to the servants of the mahmal after putting some coins or meat, as to get blessings. The reason for that action is that the mahmal, without the camel, was located during the pilgrimage time in the Great Mosque of Mecca as well as inside the copper shrine of the prophet’s masoleum. This could be compared with the action of trying to reach the deity shrine in the pharaonic era, as to get the god’s blessings and gain the personnel inner peace that he will live in heaven during his other life (Barta, Y. 2013).

- Kissing the camel’s pad to get blessings, a tradition mentioned by the Mamluk historian, Ibn Taghri Bardi, who said that in 788 AH/1386AD, 2 commandos attacked the Sharif of Mecca while kissing the camel’s pad screaming that his is the sultan’s enemy (Ibn Taghri Bardi, Y. 1982; Ibn Iyas, M. 1982).

---

– Kissing the leash of the camel by the governor, for example in 1901 the Khedive of Egypt kissed the camel’s leash and was followed by the Chief Judge and some of the attendees (Refaat, I. n.d; Ameen, A. 1999; Helmi, I. 1988).

– The habit of smoking while the mahmal was passing, a habit which caused various confrontations between the Egyptians and the Marrocan pilgrimages, who considered this habit against the Islamic duties.

– The most interesting and weird tradition associated with the Mahmal is employing a man or a woman named “the father/ mother of cats” to travel with the caravan (El Batanoni, M. 1995; Helmi, I. 1988). The reason for this is really mysterious and unknown! Could it be possible to eat the food remains? On the other hand, it could have a pharaonic origin related with the cat goddess Bastet, whose worship place was Tell Basta and her worshippers came from all over Egypt to celebrate in her temple (Mahran, M. 1999; Omar, M. 1989). So, the important and unique significance of cats in the ancient Egyptian heritage can’t just be ignored, and this could explain why modern historian couldn’t understand the role of cats in the caravan.

4. CONCLUSION

Since ancient times, the Egyptian considered the pilgrimage trip as the most precious trip. Although the Egyptian travelled to Abydos for his pilgrimage, a matter which is completely different than pilgrimage in the Islamic era, however, various rites and rituals are still vivid in the Egyptian conscious. This is reflected in the hajj paintings on the houses’ walls, which have a pharaonic origin.
REFERENCES


AL GOHARI, M., *Mausoua’t Al Tourath Al Sha’bi Al Arabi (Encyclopedia of the Arabian Folk Legacy)*, Cairo, n.d.


AMEEN, A. (1999), *Kamous Al Adat wa Al Takaleed wa Al Ta’abeer Al Masreya (Encyclopedia of Egyptian Rites, Traditions and Expressions)*, Cairo.


EL KABBANI, Sh. (2005), *Al Mahmal Al Masri fi Al ‘asreen Al Mamlouki wa Al Hadeeth (648-1372AH/1250-1957AD)* (The Egyptian Mahmal during the in the Mamluki and Contemporary Times), Master Dissertation, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Alexandria University, (unpublished work).


GIRARD DE NERVAL (1960), *Rehlah Lel Shark (Trip to the Orient)*, translated by Abd El Salaam, K., Cairo.


the documentation of the pilgrimage arts in upper egypt

(Pilgrimage Graffitis) "Folk Arts Revue 20, Cairo, p. 12.


Issa, A. (1986), Al Hajj wa Al Siyarat AL Ganaezeya wa Al Ramseyah fî Al Manaser Al Masreya Al Kadima (Pilgrimage and the Funeral Visits and the Symbolism in the Ancient Egyptian Scenes and Texts), Master Dissertation, Faculty of Archaeology, Cairo University, (unpublished work).

Lane, E. (1963), Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, London.


Petz, J. (1995), Rehlat Joseph Betts, known as Al Haj Youssef, to Misr, Mekka and Madina (Trip of Joseph Betts, known as Haj Youssef, to Egypt, Mecca and Medina), Cairo.

Refaat, I., Mera’t Al Harameen (The Mirror of the 2 Sacred Mosques), Cairo, n.d.