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##### MLA Citation

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THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

الجامعة الأمريكية بالقاهرة

The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HUSS)

**Meanings of Mindfulness and Spiritual Awakening:  
Affliction and Holistic Healing in Contemporary Cairo**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Sociology, Egyptology, Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Sociology-Anthropology

By Sohayla Khaled El Fakahany

Under the supervision of Dr. Ramy Aly  
May 2021

*To Gedo (my guardian angel), Mamita, Vano, Lala, and the joy they bring.*

*To Mostafa Nabil, who I will always remember as sunshine.*

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## Acknowledgments

This piece of work was created at a very turbulent time in my life. It was also a hard time in the lives of those around me. 2020 was a year where people around the world had to set their priorities straight. It was a year full of losses but also gains. It forced almost everyone around the world to think about what matters and what does not.

Here is to the ones who matter to me.

“There aren’t enough words in all languages that can suffice the amount of love I share with my mother, sister, and niece.”

Here is to my family:

- *Mamita!*

Thank you for being understanding and for giving me the space to grow and be independent. The kind of work I do can be very controversial for people in general, but mothers specifically. However, you believed in me and what I do from the start and till this moment. Thank you for being the first person to notice how anthropology made me grow and better understand the world. More importantly, thank you for supporting me and listening to me every step of the way. You have been there and given me attention to things you might find not only uninteresting but also problematic. You are the greatest listener I know because even though anthropology and theory, for example, might not be your favorite topics, you managed to always be keen on knowing what I have to say.

- *Vano,*

My big sis and first best friend. Thank you for introducing me to the realm of spirituality and for sharing your own journey with me. Our conversations and shared interests helped shape this piece of work. You are the spark that initiated my interest in spiritual and alternative healing, and you continue to inspire me every day. I wouldn’t have been here spiritually or academically without your support. Lastly, thank you for bringing *Lala* to this world. She has shown me a kind of love and motivation I never knew existed.

- I do not think I would have reached half of what I am now without my grandfather's teachings and inspiration. Growing up, *Gedo* always called me *el mo3eeda*, the teacher/assistant lecturer, because of my informative tone. Today, I remember his words in every class I TA. I am forever grateful for the role model you are, and I will always look up to you.

“There are friends, there is family, and then there are friends that become family.”

Here is to my chosen family:

- *Alya,*  
Thank you for always being the first person to clap for me for the past fifteen years. Thank you for teaching and reminding me that everything comes and goes at the right time. Thank you for constantly proving to me that with practice, one can do anything. Thank you for every time you told me “you can do it”. You always did that in a weird voice, but it always helped. Thank you for knowing me more than I know myself. Thank you for making me keep in mind that breaks and breathing are essential. Thank you for sharing some of my fieldwork encounters with me and making sure you know all about them when you don’t. In the past years, you were by my side in every single experience. I know that I will always have you to count on in every aspect of my life. Sharing tears of joy and despair with you makes my whole life journey an enjoyable one. You are, and will remain, my ride or die.
- *Mostafa,*  
I do not know what to write to you. I know your beautiful soul is looking down and smiling, which only proves how amazing of a friend you were. Losing you is one of the hardest things I have ever had to go through. You taught and continue to teach me that a little kindness and a smile goes a long way and that achieving one’s dreams is attainable. You also taught me that believing in and staying true to yourself is the most beautiful thing one could aspire to achieve. I will forever be grateful for you and the little time we got to be best friends. This time, although brief, was filled with joy and positivity. For that, I will always miss you and remember you as my ray of sunshine.
- *Salma,*  
Thank you for every time you listened to me whine and complaint about the amount of work I have. Thank you for helping me academically and as an amazing friend. Thank you for helping me get over my creative and writer’s blocks, always. Thank you for always supporting me and being there in the worst of times before the best. Thank you for helping me create Estefham. You entered my life, and before I knew it, I had a friend that I know I will keep forever.
- *Rahma,*  
Thank you for always being the voice of reason and my grounding when my thoughts are racing. We have been friends since we were kids and we both watched each other grow, which makes our friendship extremely valuable. Thank you for being my shoulder to cry on throughout the past fifteen years! No matter what happens, know that I'll always be there for you just like I know you’re there for me. For that, I am thankful.
- *Menna,*  
Thank you for being the best friend anyone could ask for. Thank you for being my secret keeper and the person I trust the most. Thank you for believing in me and therefore helping me believe in myself and in this project.

- *Mayar,*  
Even though we've known each other for a short time, you have become a very important person in my life. Thank you for helping me think of ideas and theories and bringing this project together. Thank you for the countless phone calls and the sleepless nights we spent working on our projects. Thank you for being positive and having a contagious lighthearted energy.
- *Nadia,*  
Thank you for your constant support and for being the great friend you are.
- *Farida,*  
May your beautiful soul rest in power. You have been a beautiful soul, and this continues to affect every person you have met. Your talent and passion will always amaze and inspire me.
- *Zein,*  
Thank you for teaching me strength, courage, and persistence.
- *Asdeka' el kefah,*  
*Noha,*  
Thank you for helping me from day one, literally. You have helped me from my application process to fellowship applications and till the defense. You have the kindest heart there is and you're the most supportive person I know. Thank you for helping me out in every step of the way and for the hour you spent figuring this thesis out with me. Thank you for reading pieces of this thesis and giving me thorough and constructive feedback. In the past few years, you went from being my TA in undergraduate sociology class to being a really close person to my heart. Your dedication, discipline, love for anthropology, and passion inspire me every day. To many more shared successes.

*Salam,*

Thank you for being one of the best things about this academic journey. Thank you for the laughs during and outside of classes. Thank you for helping me make sense of what we're both doing. Thank you for sharing your editing vortex phase with me. Also, thank you for being an amazing company!

*Habiba Ahmed,*

Thank you for believing in me from the first day we met. Thank you for being so kind and generous all the time. Thank you for always being there for me. I have known you since we were teenagers and we both watched each other grow. I am very proud of being the feminist intellectual you are today. So, here's to the growth that is yet to come for both of us!

*Mostafa El-Sadek,*

Thank you for the countless study nights since our undergraduate classes. Thank you for helping me understand anthropology and its theories. Your ideas always inspire



me. Thank you for sharing your space with me during moments of burnout. I can't wait to see where you're going as an academic and an intellectual.

*Mahana,*

Meho.. Thank you for being the great person you are. Thank you for being on this journey since this thesis was just an idea. Thank you for sharing your intellectual and academic ideas and opinions with me.

*Iman,*

Thank you for listening to my never-ending rants. Thank you for supporting me and helping me finish this journey.

- *My colleagues:*

Thank you for always making classes and discussions intriguing and insightful.

- *El Shella,*

*Boudy, Luay, Mandou, and Mizo*

Thank you for sharing the consequences of my burnout. Thank you for making me laugh at times of despair. Thank you for being my people and family. Thank you for your continuous belief in my and this project. Thank you for always telling me "enty adaha", you can do it. Thank you for the blurry nights and for making my time off meaningful and recharging.

"The best teachers are those who teach us where to look but not what to see"

Here is to my mentors:

- *Manuel,*

I want to thank you for your enthusiasm and passion about this piece and witchcraft, in general. I also want to thank you for sharing your knowledge and academic perspective on different theoretical and fieldwork related aspects of this research. I also want to express how grateful I am for your help when it comes to writing styles and the immense amount of knowledge you shared in our thesis writing seminar. This course really changed how I see ethnographic writing and therefore, my work.

- *Munira,*

Thank you for introducing me to anthropology. I've said it before, and I will say it again! I never thought that I'd go through a learning experience that changes my entire life, but thanks to you, I did! Our relationship and how much you inspire me predate this piece. Whenever I saw celebrities or people in general give speeches or acknowledge teachers or courses that changed their lives in college, I felt like these are exaggerated statements that are simply not true. I never thought I'd leave my undergraduate university experience with a completely different perspective not just about academics, but also about the world. I am and will remain grateful for how you and Anthropology have affected my life and overall perspective. Thank you for giving

me my first ethnographic glasses. From your intro class, as a POLS and Film undergraduate student, to this thesis as an MA student, you have consistently been and will remain a role model.

- *Ramy,*  
Thank you for being extremely supportive from the beginning of this journey. Thank you for helping me change what was an idea and an interest to a thesis. Thank you for giving me ways to think about fieldwork, but at the same time leaving me space to grow and investigate on my own. Thank you for introducing me to discourse analysis. Thank you for helping me get through challenges I faced in the field and advising me to continue to interview people and carry on the research even in a pandemic when I felt stuck. The most important things I am grateful for are that you taught me that writing is a process that cannot take a few days and that my voice is important. Also, thanks for sharing the books on your shelves.
- I want to thank my whole department for this amazing and intellectually stimulating program. I joined the program with a brief background in Anthropology, but the classes, conversations, and events were very informative and helpful in bringing this project together. And, for that, I feel very lucky and grateful. I want to also thank the department's admin team, Mrs. Dalia Edris and Ms. Shorouk El Sayed, firstly for their amazing friendship, support, and interest in the project. And secondly for their help in every step of this journey. I also want to thank Hanan Sabea for her interest and support in this project. The time we spent talking about it in the balcony and your office helped shape it. Lastly, I want to thank Hakem Al-Rustom for his continuous support even though he couldn't be on my committee.

“The duty of the guru outside you is to make you aware of the Guru within you.”

Here is to my spiritual mediators and spirit guides:

- I want to thank all my interlocutors for giving me their time and sharing their stories, journeys, and teachings with me. Thank you for teaching me everything from scratch and for being very generous with your time. Thank you for making me understand every method from basic energy and the meaning behind every chakra to techniques of healing and ethics of each practice. Thank you for the excitement and support you have shown to this project. You are the stars of this piece and my spiritual journey.

Here is to the readers,

- I hope this piece inspires you to start your own spiritual journeys and get to know your own selves.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank the universe for creating spaces and opportunities for me to investigate, learn, and grow.

*“Historically, healing is seen to be embedded in religion. The connection between religion and healing, while emphasizing an anthropological approach, considers categories such as (but not limited to): worldviews, religious beliefs, religious and spiritual practices, rituals, deities, and symbols rather than science. Considered holistically, studies on healing depict “healing-as-practice” (framed as praxis: theory and practice integrated) rather than just a phrase, a concept, a cognitive undertaking or even a discipline in and of itself. Positioned in this way, healing is also situated in practices of global institutions, religions, spiritualities, and indigenous communities alike.*

*In doing so, the nuances of healing used as a phrase or concept, as well as the flexibility it has in terms of understanding what matters to humans are illuminated. Healing embraces all dimensions of human life: the physical, psychological, social, and cultural.”*

- Beeler and Jonker  
(2019)

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary Cairo, people turn to various modes of spiritual, alternative, and complementary healing. Some are rooted in formal religious traditions, and others are inspired by new globalized form of holistic healing such as yoga or meditation. What makes these practices more controversial than spiritual healing practices like el-Zar or el-Hadra is the exchange of money for the promise of healing or foreknowledge. Despite the state's effort to crackdown on these practitioners and the services they offer, they remain pervasive. Spiritual healing is often deemed "charlatanistic" by religious exclusivists. The entanglement of these practices with religion creates a threat or provides an alternative to the modes of religiosity supplied by the main Egyptian religious institutions. There is an interesting crosspollination between formal religious ideologies about healing with contemporary hybridized modes of healing. A yoga instructor, for instance, might also position the practice of yoga within a religious lifestyle, whether Christian or Muslim.

In this research, I explore people's motivations in choosing different kinds of alternative and spiritual modalities in relation to affliction and healing. The purpose of this project is to answer the question, what factors affect people's decision of seeking or refraining from pursuing spiritual and alternative practices in contemporary Cairo? Combining preexisting debates and theories with three years of fieldwork and online and on the ground ethnographic research, I aim to delve deeper into the reasons and meanings behind people's choices. These debates include notions of modernity, mysticism, commodification, careerism, ritual efficacy, performance, governmentality, biopolitics, state-society relations, interpellation, and cultural appropriation. The problematic aspect of these notions is that they do not consider the positive impact these practices might have on people's wellbeing. Additionally, most of the literature written on spirituality and rituals is Western in nature and perspective, which creates a gap in the literature when it comes to the position of popular

spiritual phenomena in the Global South. Moreover, the notions above include approaches proposed by New Age thinkers, who critique these modalities through a strict Marxist lens. This lens, although helpful in some respects, is limited because it does not account for discursive formations and the meanings people create through these practices. Additionally, in Egypt, there is a widespread lack of social acceptance that is rooted in financial, religious, and scientific preferences. This lack of acceptance is also supported by the government, which exerts effort to cancel the existence of unorthodox practices. This piece advocates for having a more holistic approach to wellbeing in conversations about affliction and healing.

## Situating Spirituality: Background

Spirituality is believed to provide one with a sense of connection to something bigger than oneself; it provides a path to follow to search for the meaning of life. In comparison to religion, it can be said that spirituality is more individualistic; it has to do with the spirit; the true meaning of being human inside one's inner self. On the other hand, religion focuses on having collective and shared beliefs, rules, and practices. Taylor (2015) adopts Bonvillain's definition of religion, which I find essential to add here: "Bonvillain describes the functions of religion in five ways: (1) explains the world and provides answers for the unknown, (2) provides solace and healing for the exigencies of daily life, (3) motivates and supports societal cohesion, (4) attempts to maintain social control through a system of rewards or punishments reinforced by moral and ethical beliefs, and (5) offers a means of adapting to the environment through regularized, sanctioned practices." With this being one of religion's definitions, it differentiates it from spirituality because being spiritual does not result in social control, and it also does not depend on a system of reward and punishment. Additionally, its practices are not strictly sanctioned or regularized. One can be not religious but has a strong sense of spirituality, a strong sense of connection to the world. Similar to religion, spirituality has always been connected with rituals and healing. There has been a revival to spiritual and alternative healing in this current moment. "The word 'spiritual' originates from the Latin word 'spiritus' meaning 'breath of life.' The spiritual aspect refers to spiritual energy working at a deep level on our spiritual being. The healing involves the transfer of energy; in other words, it is not from the healer him or herself, but the healer links with 'Universal' or Divine energy to channel healing for the mind, body and spirit" (Mason, 2010). Spiritual healing is an example of alternative or complementary medicine/techniques. This mode of healing is traditional and rooted in ancient times, and with the renaissance and the exclusivity of scientific modes of knowledge production and consumption, it was left almost neglected and, in some places, deemed

ignorant, backward, and frowned upon. That being said, there has been a rise in these services' supply and demand during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These modalities have been modernized and hybridized to cater to 21<sup>st</sup> century humans and their needs and expectations.

To understand people's motivations behind choosing different kinds of alternative healers, one must first understand the kind of afflictions that make them seek these services in the first place. I use the word affliction rather than disease or illness for two reasons. The first is that the word itself directly translates to “*Ebtela*” in Arabic. *Ebtela*’ relates to Islam, where it is mentioned in the Qur’an 37 times, and to the Egyptian culture, which makes it a popular and widely used word among the society. In both cases, it means an adverse incident that takes place in order to test one’s trust in God and his power. The second reason I use the word affliction is its inclusivity of physical diseases/illnesses and spiritual/social anxieties. While disease is an abnormal condition of the body or mind that causes discomfort or dysfunction and illnesses is the state of being sick or diseased, affliction is the state of being in pain, suffering, distress, or agony (Sointu, 2015).

“At the start of modern medicine, the ancient holistic paradigm of healthcare that was present in many cultures gradually became replaced by a dualistic approach that separated cure for the body from care for the soul. However, something went wrong. Ironically, the specialized and technical approach of medicine failed in its promise of holistic healing, compassion, and care” (Ajinkya et al. 2012).

There are three main categories of affliction that shape people’s decision to turn to alternative and spiritual healing, which are viewed by science as mystical and traditional modes. These are social afflictions, medical afflictions, and spiritual afflictions, which take the form of anxiety/urge for foreknowledge. Social afflictions can involve warding off what are considered to be social ills, such as the evil eye “*Hassad*” or witchcraft that involves the creation and breaking of spells. Equally, it can involve acquiring/realizing goals and desires like fertility, marriage, and money. Medical afflictions are more complex because they can

result from the lack of means to seek treatment through health institutions and/or the belief in the primacy of spiritual healing and/or Western medicine's failure. People also turn to spiritual healing practices because of the anxiety and fear from their futures, which leads them to consult fortune-tellers, *Arafat*, in Arabic. For example, going for a tarot reading or a cup-reading (tasseography) session unravels aspects of one's experience in the past, present, and future that can help with settling anxieties about uncertainties in the present.

Questions of whether these healing practices 'work' or not are essential; however, my focus is on why practitioners provide these services, their perception of themselves, and their clients' perception of them. I also look at how they are understood by different constituencies in Egyptian society in relation to economics, government, and globalization. This all reflects an understanding of affliction, healing, the body, and the soul. At the start of this research, my primary research question was, "from the perspective of spiritual healers and those healed, how are the body and soul perceived, treated, understood, and practiced in relation to affliction and healing?" However, after going through immense literature and conducting fieldwork for almost three years, I realized that to fully grasp the perception, understanding, and practice of spiritual and alternative healing methods, one must first contextualize these ritualistic practices. This contextualization entailed considering the choices practitioners make in trying to accommodate their clients, the socioeconomic, religious, and cultural backgrounds of these practitioners and their seekers, the pressures and criticism they face by both the government and more religiously exclusivist individuals, and the critique of spiritual commodification and appropriation. These aspects and pressures help in analyzing why people, at large, and Egyptian individuals, in specific, might refrain from or seek these practices. This created a change in my own preexisting perception and hence, my research question. Instead of focusing on the perceptions exclusively, I realized that contextualizing these practices and understanding how people's decisions are formed are needed to answer the question on perception. My main



research question, above, had to be supported by another endeavor, which is shaped by focusing on people's motivations of whether to seek or refrain from these practices. This endeavor resulted in the creation of my new research question, which is "what factors affect people's decision of seeking or refraining from pursuing spiritual and alternative modalities in contemporary Cairo?" The following sections include an analysis of some of the literature, conceptual frameworks, and reflections that complement the background of spiritual and alternative healing, which helps situate the practices in the Egyptian context. However, the literature and conceptual frameworks on spirituality and economic, political, social, and cultural aspects are fleshed out throughout this research because each chapter analyzes different aspects of the practices' position.

### **The Egyptian Soul**

The Middle Eastern and African regions are known for having healing practitioners who include mystical and magical activities in their services; they are known for traveling from one country to another to help people with their struggles via spells, charms, and enchantments. For example, Moroccan traditional spiritual healers are very popular in Egyptian society. Their popularity and numbers are proportional to if not higher than the number of Egyptian traditional spiritual healers. "An individual has biological, psychological, and social dimensions, and yet there is a spiritual dimension, which connects to all of these and contributes to an individual's sense of wholeness and wellness" (Syed, 2003). Spiritual medicine is a very prominent aspect of the Islamic religion. Whether it is healing by the Qur'an, prayers, and/or prophetic medicine, it has been used historically and in modern times and is believed to have miraculous curative properties. Certain Islamic Sufi Sheikhs are believed to cure diseases, infertility, economic issues, educational issues, and demonic possession (Ibid). Sufism, which is the more mystical segment of Islam and helps its followers understand and relate to their reality, purpose in life and get in touch with their emotions and internal conditions. Subsequently, it urges the pursuers

to tune in to the inward provoking of the heart. Sufism passes on a recuperating message that prompts the one genuine love that joins people all around the world (Douglas-Klotz, 2013). These promises of healing are very similar to the ones given by spiritual healers that are frowned upon, cracked down on, and heathenized by the Egyptian state, the media, and the religious institutions.

Ancient Egyptians had faith in enchantment and magical practices. Magic and belief systems were interrelated in Egyptian society for more than four thousand years. Superstition and enchantment shaped the system through which Egyptians attempted to comprehend and control their general surroundings (Budge, 1890). For example, the evil eye is believed in by people in several places in the Middle East; in the Egyptian context, the primary method for protecting evil was magic, especially talismans and spells. In contemporary Egypt, Coptic figures and Al-Azhar Sheikhs are viewed as holy and are portrayed to have the power to heal with several Islamic and Christian methods such as reading certain verses. In opposition to that, other spiritual healing practitioners who do not operate within Al-Azhar or the church's frameworks are frowned upon and deemed illegal, and viewed as threats (Iskander, 2001). Whether a person's sanctity and whether he/she is worshiped as a holy person or rejected as a charlatan is based on authenticating procedures created by power dynamics in the state and, subsequently, cultural norms. Sacredness develops depending on the state's discursive tactics and its social, medical, and religious institutions. In relation to Al-Azhar, one of its main tasks is to give fatwa, a legal and religious opinion primarily given by Muslim religious figures in mosques and religious institutions (Zeilabi, 2017). There is a contradiction in Islam's stance on magic and rituals because religious *fatwa(s)* deem spells and incantations sinful. However, talismans, which are stones and objects, are believed to have magical and supernatural powers are considered part of the Islamic culture and generally popular Egyptian traditions.

Nevertheless, Islam and the Quran still have strict and unchanging views against polytheism, pantheism, and magic (Ibid).

### **Conceptualizing Spirituality: Debates that are Unbound to Time and Space**

The debate on the mystical/mythological mind versus the modern/scientific has been going on for decades. Notions and theories that derive from this debate help understand and unpack its lasting effect on people's perception of different spiritual healing methods. One of the first theorists to contribute to this debate is Lévi-Strauss. Two modes of thought are used to gain knowledge; one is the science of the concrete, which is the mythical thought, and the other is the mode of scientific inquiry, which is the modern thought (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). The former is deemed primitive, and the latter is looked at as modern. While most Western thinkers used and believed in the modern mode of inquiry because it was looked at as an imperceptible new system of knowledge, Lévy-Bruhl (1975) discussed the existence of a binary between two types of thinking. He explains two mentalities: rational and developed, and the other is primitive, prelogical, and mystical.

Nevertheless, Lévi-Strauss (1962) views both modes as valid and equal. In this sense, the knowledge created and believed in by what he calls 'the savage' is equal to and as legitimate as the knowledge created by the scientist. Many theorists, especially anthropologists, have studied magic, mythical logic, and traditional knowledge, focusing on its status and effect in different cultural spaces and communities. One should merge myth and science; the focus, belief, and usage of myth should not cancel considering science and vice versa (Ibid, 1963), which explains spiritualist healers' combining chemical formulas and their knowledge in the services they provide. In this sense, the knowledge created by what Lévi-Strauss calls the savage mind is given validation in communities like the Nuer.

The Western scholars and cultures perceived the Nuer and witchcraft as backward. However, their rituals and traditions, which involved magic, were the primary tool used to

understand their social and political organization (Evans-Pritchard, 1940 and 1976). Rather than looking at modernity through a stagnant lens, Taylor examines Western advancement and Western history and their impact on the modernization of non-Western societies with attention to the possibility of multiple modernities. This notion helps criticize contrasting ideas on modernity and its linearity. While some look at modernity as a category that belongs to the ‘developed’ first world countries, Taylor views different communities as having different kinds of modernities that fit their contextual, temporal, and spatial circumstances (2002). There are some spiritual healing practices that are viewed as modern, like yoga, and others are viewed as primitive/traditional, like spells and incantations. The notion of multiple modernities helps analyze the hybridization of both the primitive and the modern .

### **Are 1992’s Magico-Spiritual Rites 2019’s Alternative Healing Modalities?**

In 1992 Britain, alternative healing methods, especially ones that included using psychic powers, were practiced by the pagan occult. During this period, magic was looked at as attractive and may be beneficial, but it was never taken as an alternative to science. One could say that it was looked at as complementary but not a replacement to science. However, for the occult and Greenwood (2002), magic thinking was a part of a panhuman mode of thought. Magico-religious and magico-spiritual rites combined magical aspects that included control and religious ones that spoke to the deities. In her book “Magic, Witchcraft and the Otherworld: An Anthropology,” Greenwood looks at pagan magic as a tool of communication with the otherworld. The otherworld is explained and looked at as a spiritual domain that coexists with the ordinary every day. “Thus, the otherworld is also the inner world; it is both internal and external – a combination of personal and social experience that involves a paradox of going out of the self to find the self within – and is specifically different for everyone. The otherworld exists within the self” (Ibid, 27). In my fieldwork, there was a similarity between this otherworld and the state of trance people go to during alternative healing sessions such as

meditation. Additionally, the idea of coexisting is also found in my fieldwork where people are conscious and aware in the mundane and ordinary sense, but once they sit on the mat, a spiritual and unexplainable sense of seclusion from the world starts taking place. Also, researching chaotic Cairo inevitably leads to being unstopably distracted by sounds and chaos on the streets. This is also found in Greenwood's experiences as she mentions incidents where she was distracted during magico-religious/spiritual experiences while doing her fieldwork, such as a guy shouting and breaking a beer bottle while carrying out a ritual in London. The pagan's otherworld is closely tangled with this world, the ordinary world, and the way to access it is to go on a journey within oneself throughout shifts of consciousness. In this sense, the otherworld has its own logic and can only be understood in terms of magical experiences. Healing involves destroying one's old self, identity, and ego, moving to the crisis to become one's true self.

One of the biggest goals the individuals in the pagan occult had was to develop the authority of the voice within. In relation to the present, globally, what people are trying to find or seek is inner peace. With the intensity of the high-paced lives people of the modern world are leading, the idea of reaching inner peace is propagated, advertised for, and practiced in our everyday. This is a very vivid example of pre-neoliberal individualism. It is viewed as the ultimate goal of the modern-day person. The way to indeed be in touch with oneself is to go and find one's inner self. The idea of finding oneself is also discussed and practiced in Greenwood's pagan experience. The answer is going to the otherworld by the power of the imagination. Self-spirituality is a concept that Paul Heelas developed in his study of the New Age movement. It explained the transformation in individuals' mode of being caused by socialization to authenticity (Greenwood, 2000, p. 10). In this sense, to find your true inner self, you lose yourself while being in the most active and aware state to re-find your true inner self. You try and become more whole. Old pagan magico-religious and magico-spiritual rites

advocated for mental and spiritual goals, which are similar to modern-day wellness and spiritual places and practices.

While reading Greenwood's pieces written over twenty-five years ago, I found similarities between her work and my fieldwork. These are the nature of the fields, the methodology, the approaches, and the ethnographic encounters and experiences we went through. Most importantly, I realized that we both had the same emotional and affective states in relation to our fieldwork and interlocutors not only when it comes to being immersed and invested emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually in our fieldwork, but also when it comes to the ideas that come up in our heads while in meditation experiences or healing sessions. Greenwood's experiences detailed rituals that are still practiced and felt in today's wellness and alternative healing world. Even if the practices themselves and their names vary, their intentions, tools, and nature are pretty similar. This tells a lot about how people looked at and frowned upon in the old days as magic and paganism is now tolerated and practiced as modern spiritual healing. In the late 1990s, if people wanted to get to know themselves, Wicca or paganism was the way, and it was a way of life.

Contrarily, in the hyper-globalized world, a yoga or energy healing practitioner or student/client can be looked at as more aware than other people who follow modern medicine blindly. This interpretation is based on the class structure because, especially in Egypt, this view on modern spiritual healing is mainly found in the upper-middle class, and even this class has some skeptics that look at these methods as fraud and inefficient. Additionally, nowadays, one can be practicing practices that derive from Eastern alternative religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Zen and still identify as a pious and religious Christian, Muslim, or Jew. On the contrary, in Greenwood's time, if one practices Wiccan or Pagan practices, it inevitably means that they drifted from institutionalized religion. This binary helps in analyzing the hybridized practices that are widespread in Egypt today. These hybridized forms are created

by practitioners to be more available and accessible for people with religious backgrounds. This will be discussed in-depth in chapter five.

### **Seeker-Researcher: A Multi-sited Reflexive-Interpretive Method**

For this research, I conducted an ethnography, online and on the ground, to understand practitioners-client relations and look at how practitioners perceive themselves and are perceived by others. These perceptions are informed by the businesses' aesthetic choices that offer these services make, the economics behind these services that result from commodification, the relationship individuals have with their bodies that are governed and sanctioned by the state, and the hybridity of the services. This ethnography is multi-sited as I visit multiple spaces and carry out an online ethnography. Clifford and Marcus' (1992) explanation of multi-locale/multi-sited ethnographies states that they are ethnographies that are carried in different times and spaces. This definition is limited because although it relates multi-locality to spatiotemporal aspects of the research, what I try to explore is how multi-sited ethnographies mean not only different spatiotemporal aspects, but also 1) different geographies inside the same country and how this applies in urban anthropology depending on the place, locality, and perception. And 2) different platforms of fieldwork, such as online and on the ground. The online and on-the-ground platforms are two different methods that tell different things about this topic. On the one hand, the main reason behind looking at different geographic places inside the same city as multi-sites is that, in contemporary Cairo, researching the contextual, economic, cultural, and social aspects that relate to spiritual healing in the fifth settlement would be very diverse than aspects found in Shoubra Masr, for example. Therefore, in relation to geographies, the difference in the locales is classed. On the other hand, the reason for looking at online and offline ethnographies as multi-sited is that, for example, what a healer or client might say online or in a Facebook post might be different than what they say face-to-face. Another reason is that the online usage of applications that offer spiritual services sheds

light on how technology helped make them more accessible and available to users from different parts of the world. Furthermore, cyberethnography helped in booking appointments and getting access to sessions and, consequently, to my interlocutors.

“Interpretive reflexivity considers social positions within ongoing circuits of communication between researcher and researched” (Lichterman, 2017). While conducting this ethnography, I wanted to focus on my positionality and communication regarding how I deal with interlocutors. I used Lichterman’s interpretive reflexivity and was inspired by Greenwood’s (2002) ethnography to develop a method that would help unpack the questions of this research. Following Greenwood’s method and experience, which also relate to spirituality but focusing on witchcraft, I entered the field as a client/seeker interested in what the practitioners had to say and the nature and technicalities of their practices. Using this technique, I tried to learn detailed technicalities about things I am passionate about and get detailed information about their practices/services. I then had the chance to join more sessions and courses, which changed my positionality from being a client only to being a fellow practitioner. Furthermore, I followed the techniques or what Bernard (2006) calls ‘the skills of a participant-observer.’ His ideas focused on learning the language and building rapport, among other skills, which were central to this research. My fieldwork heavily depended on meeting with several spiritual healers as many times as possible to grasp their point of view. This was achieved by calling the numbers I either found online and/or got through word-of-mouth and/or snowball sampling. Literature and theories have been created about and against spiritual experiences.

In this research, I unpack how practitioners and their clients perceive themselves and how others perceive them. It is epistemologically important to highlight that there is extensive research on spiritual healing practices in different fields such as marketing, psychology, and sociology. As a reaction and critique to the accessibility and abundance of spiritual services,



Bowman (1999) analyzes ‘the spiritual supermarket,’ which focuses on commodification and consumerism. He critiques the accessibility and widespread of the services as an act that devalues the services’ worth and reduces people’s decisions for seeking such services to trivial consumer choices like the ones taken in the supermarket. This sociological Marxist New Age approach is limited as it does not account for the consumer’s agency in seeking these choices and/or the meanings people hold for these practices. Other theorists employ the notion of ritual efficacy and performance in critiquing the practices. This critique is also limited because it does not include the detailed processes practitioners and clients go through to be able to understand the meanings and authentic value of the practices they offer or seek. In my third chapter, which tackles spirituality as service, I use Foucault’s rejection of ideological explanations of concepts to argue that theorists shift their focus from being on materialistic and authenticity to being on meanings and discourses.

The sociological Marxist New Age argument follows the same regime of truth about the availability and commercialization of spirituality as the Egyptian state’s Islamic and Christian institution. In my fourth chapter, I unpack Foucault’s theories of subjectification, biopolitics, and governmentality, along with Althusser’s concept of interpellation and Douglas’ notions on ritual as dirt help understand people’s perception of the services. These notions also explain the Egyptian state’s stance against practitioners, which is a negative one. This is echoed in Egyptian law as it views the practitioners as charlatans, heathens, and frauds. I also analyze the hegemonic media’s discourse to understand why the general Egyptian hegemonic culture refrains and advice against seeking these services. Although this Foucauldian approach helps analyze the state’s hegemonic point of view, it fails in explaining the persistence of the services and their seekers. I call for the adoption of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic analysis to understand how these rituals and practices intertwine with different cultural, social, economic, discursive, and religious roots.

The intertwining of the rituals created religious and spiritual hybridity and syncretism. Both concepts explain how ideas and belief systems travel through time and space and settle in different places in the world. In my fifth chapter, I call for using cultural additivity and the Mindsponge method when analyzing spiritual healing methods because of three reasons. The first is that cultural hybridity does not include contradictory concepts found in the people's pre-existing belief systems and ones found in the new values and ideas they adopt. The second is that syncretism is critiqued because the people who adopt new beliefs betray their original faith and hinder the main religions' integrity. The third reason is that cultural additivity and the Mindsponge mechanism includes the addition of new values and anti-values. This makes it more applicable to the status of spiritual healing services in Egypt because practitioners and seekers mix different practices with people's pre-existing beliefs, such as Islamic or Christian traditions, for their modalities to be more adaptable and appropriate for the Egyptian public.

Introducing these arguments and critiques is important both here and in the chapters because they explain how different theorists tackle the topic at different times. They also help in recognizing the gaps that were left and continue to exist in the literature. Most of the literature is written from a Western perspective, which creates another gap, but the most significant gap is found in how there is very little work on the meanings people hold of the practices they seek or offer. None of the aforementioned theories and critiques account for people's decision in seeking or refraining from these services. Furthermore, none of them explain the persistence of spirituality regardless of the crackdown that happens politically and socially. Theories such as the rhizomatic analysis, discursive formations, and cultural additivity help in explaining why these services are still widespread. However, the reflexive interpretive method, along with Greenwood's and Bernard's participant observation skills, was vital in

grasping these practitioners' and seekers' points of view regarding the meanings they hold for spirituality in contemporary Cairo.

### **More on Method: Participant observation, Conversations, Discourse Analysis**

My participant observation methods are also derived and inspired by Malinowski's (1984(1922)) notes on ethnographic encounters. He states that an essential skill of participant observation is trying "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world." My research focuses on understanding the healers and those healed perceptions and the perceptions of the Egyptian state and society regarding spiritual healing, which is what Malinowski would name the imponderabilia of actual life. I consider people's routines, tones, social lives, friendships, conflicts, likes and dislikes, and the overall behaviors and practices to grasp their point of view on spiritual healing practices. Furthermore, I follow Driessen and Jensen's (2013) method of small talk, where I include and give attention to day-to-day conversations that revolve around this topic because it is a widespread phenomenon in Egypt; most people have some perceptions if not experiences with alternative and spiritual healing. These small talk(s) help include different ideas based on seekers' experiences in relation to this research and have access to several diverse types of healers because some of them do not advertise for themselves and are only reached through previous clients. Another inspiration and advice regarding these recorded/noted in-depth conversations is taking people seriously, which MacClancy (2002) discusses in-depth in relation to Malinowski's notion of grasping the "natives'" (in this case, the healers and seekers') point of view. No matter how long or short a conversation is, taking people's words seriously and respecting their point of view is a cornerstone of participant observation.

Another method I adopt in this research is discourse analysis. Analyzing the hegemonic discourses that are created and recreated in Egyptian society by the government and its

institutions was vital in researching these services positions. There is a widespread view that is created by people with authority like media representatives, government officials, and religious figures, which views them as charlatanistic, heathenistic, and fraudster. I apply different discursive analysis methods such as Social Semiotics, Conversation Analysis, Discursive Psychology, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and Multimodality to analyze the economic, cultural, social, governmental, and discursive experiences and characteristics of Egyptian modernity and spiritual healing. Even though I do not analyze every artifact with a step-by-step discursively, having these approaches in mind while conducting this research helped uncover meaning and how meaning and power interrelate, especially when it comes to state-society relations. That being said, in my fourth chapter, I add a brief analysis of some of the media's representation of spiritual and alternative healers.

The first discursive analysis approach is Social Semiotics, which focuses on social constructs and actions by looking at three aspects: the message, text, and discourse (Hodge and Kress, 2001). It focuses on the message, which is, at most times, intentional and directional, "it has a source and a goal, a social context, and purpose" (Ibid. 294). The second approach is Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology, which helps analyze how power is created in transcripts by focusing on the choice of words or individuals' lexical choices. The last and most important approach is Critical Discourse Analysis, which is, in relation and according to Van Dijk's statement, "a study of the relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality, and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationship" will be used to understand "the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" (2001, pp. 300). In this sense, Critical Discourse Analysis creates a link and connection between power, dominance, and discourse(s). This approach is the most convenient in analyzing how ruling ideas and the ruling class's thoughts, views, and expectations are manifested in our daily lives to maintain the social order, which in this case is the Egyptian cultural hegemonic project that

is disrupted by the existence of spiritual healers. In addition to Van Dijk's ideas on Critical Discourse Analysis, Qin Xie's ideas on News Discourse are significant in critically analyzing the hegemonic media and news. As he states, "information provided by the news reports has the function of leading the public. In the official news reports, due to the influence of factors such as value orientation, there is the ideological content hidden in discourse, which usually tends to be misunderstood by the audience" (2018, pp. 399). In that sense, the idea of cracking down on spiritual healers or initiating campaigns against them is the states' technique to scare the public from seeking their help. Hence, citizens and individuals will start trusting the states' agenda and the states' institutions in providing relief and security, whether socially, physically, psychologically, or even when it comes to their destiny. This not only validates the states' status and power over their citizens but also limits the ideologically "unconventional" options or treatments the public has or might use. The multimodality approach is important to keep in mind because it focuses on how different semiotic modes are combined. It looks at how spoken discourse "integrates language with intonation, voice quality, facial expression, gesture, and posture as well as aspects of self-presentation such as dress and hairstyle." It also analyzes how "written discourse integrates language with typographic expression and increasingly also with illustration, layout, and color" (Van Leeuwen, 2015, pp. 447).

### **Notes on Positionality:**

#### **- Cosmopolitan Studying Cosmopolitans**

This research aims to analyze how spiritual and alternative healing services are situated in Egyptian society's socioeconomic, political, and cultural aspects in this contemporary moment. I am looking at the meanings people hold about healing with techniques that are not necessarily legitimized by Western medicine. I look at how practices reflect different understandings concerning affliction, healing, the body, and the soul. Whether I believe in the modalities or not, their existence, spread, accessibility, and popularity are worth analyzing in-

depth. That being said, I have to note that I am aware that I am studying certain types of practices and practitioners that are mainly shaped by class; a cosmopolitan studying cosmopolitans. I found most of my practitioners online and/or through word of mouth; I am not going to the village's shaman, for example. Also, most of my practitioners work in formalized wellbeing centers or from their houses. Most of them also have social media presence, online communication and are bilingual or foreigners. This is all telling of the kind of class these practitioners cater to. It is a segment of alternative and complementary healing that is accessible to people with money. Much money actually, because a session with a practitioner can cost half a month's salary for the average Egyptian employee. However, these practices and services are across-class in the Egyptian context because similar aspects of these practices can be found for fewer costs, mainly traditional alternative healing and fortune-telling methods, such as tasseography and palm reading. People with fewer resources would seek alternatives to the alternative, meaning that they would look for things that are considered alternative but with more affordable fees. Also, when people believe in these services, they try to make ends meet to attain them. Additionally, the hegemonic cultural perspective on these matters, especially traditional methods, tends to almost always have a connotation with being less privileged, less educated, having less income, being uncultured... and the list goes on. After spending a bit over two years in this field and looking at services that range from street fortune-telling encounters to hip Reiki and energy healing sessions in wellbeing venues, I can guarantee you that these services are not offered and practiced by people who are any 'less' than the ones who call them that. The fact that traditional remedies are now reintegrated into the healing processes of the bourgeoisie can be looked at as a postmodernist push.

- **Spiritual Attunement:  
Shifting Gears: From Skeptic to Practitioner**

"If an anthropologist wants to examine 'magic,' then she or he must directly experience the otherworld."  
(Greenwood 2000, p12)

Personally, I started seeking alternative and complementary healing methods after realizing the limitations of psycho/talk therapy alone and my negative experience with it. Another reason for my interest in these practices is that my family has always been not necessarily religious but spiritual; there was a consensual belief in the unseen. Ever since I was a child, our conversations included topics like energy, the unseen, the mystical, the spiritual, and even ghosts. At first, this interest grew in me out of pure skepticism and doubt. This skepticism proliferated when my sister started having a substantial interest in yoga and energy healing. She traveled to New Mexico for a yoga teacher training course in 2012. My first reactions to her practice were, to say the least, rude in a very disdainful way because I simply thought it was a hoax, especially the whole energy and chanting thing; it was a 'thing' for me for a few years. That being said, I used to ask my friends' parents for a coffee-cup reading now and then or visit a woman in Sinai for a palm reading. Most of the people around me had similar experiences. These were simply fun activities that one does out of curiosity. My curiosity and interest grew as I started analyzing how the unseen realm gets included in our every day, especially as a service; this is where my journey began. My interest changed from being skeptical to being curious about how these 'things' work as services. And yes, like any other service, there are good practitioners and bad ones. And yes, just like anything else, after a good session, my belief grew, and after a bad session, I questioned.

I faced two main obstacles during my research concerning the field itself, and they are both worth discussing here because they are part and parcel of my position in the field. The first is directly related to how energy healing works. Healing is about being on a journey of

becoming better. It is not dependent solely on the practitioner, as one might think. This journey is explained by the facilitators as one that takes place within one's soul till balance and inner peace are reached. The second point is that there are specific details and even a language in the field/industry that I could not have understood without taking courses and becoming 'one of them.' At first, I thought I would be capable of avoiding getting emotionally invested in the experiences I was going through. I thought I could detach myself from the words of a tarot reader or a crystal healer in order for me to not depend on my emotional, spiritual, and physical wellbeing or the terms of different practitioners I visit for research purposes. However, bit by bit, I started having a new position in the field, I started being immersed in my own healing journey. After going to several different kinds of alternative healing sessions that include different modalities, I started becoming a person on a healing journey. Healing in my journey was physical, emotional, and spiritual. Greenwood also thought she could detach herself at least emotionally from the practices she was looking at ethnographically but found that the only way to go native is to experience magical practices. I thought I would understand, experience, and grasp the native's point of view only and then exit the field. It was then clear to me that to be able to do the former, I had to be more immersed and emotionally invested in my research and fieldwork. I realized that one of the most important and intricate details about spiritual or healing experiences is the affective effect it has on both the practitioners and the seekers.

My journey was an affective journey of becoming as I started as a skeptic, developed an interest, changed into being a client, became a person on a healing journey, then switched to become a practitioner myself (Deleuze 1995:171). Even though I started my fieldwork with a failed intention of detaching myself emotionally, physically, and spiritually from the experiences and the field, after the first few field visits, I realized that fully experiencing the affective aspects of healing is a priority in conducting my fieldwork. I started feeling that I am



becoming part of the community and started having my own opinions and even recommendations about whom to go to when you need what. These experiences, along with the accessibility and diversity of courses, resulted in my decision to become a certified healer. One of the challenges I faced while conducting this ethnography is that, before getting their language, when I told the practitioners that I am researching spiritual healing, they expected me to have at least a basic understanding of the spiritual terms they use. While in early anthropology, the idea of learning the language was strictly about learning a language of a different country (Bernard's (2006), in the case of my research, where I am making the familiar strange, I had to learn words and concepts that make up the language used by people in the healing and spiritual industry. This and the accessibility to courses are why I am now a certified practitioner in crystal healing, Reiki, tarot reading, and Quantum-Touch.

Being a woman in this field came with both negative and positive aspects. The positive ones are that I was able to capitalize on the popular idea that "women are the ones who are more likely to be not only interested in such practices, but also conned by fraudulent practitioners." This was highlighted in several conversations with the practitioners themselves in relation to how people might view them negatively and in an Islamic podcast by a Sheikh. Additionally, it is an industry that is believed to be dominated by women, so being a female made it easier for me to become part of the community. On the other hand, the negative aspect is that one of the practitioner's managers, who also happens to be her son, started harassing me after my appointment.

### **What it takes to Study/Become Spiritual: Other Limitations of this Research**

The aforementioned obstacles relate to the field, access, rapport, and other aspects of who I am as a researcher and anthropologist. Whether it is immersion or language barriers, these are limitations that many colleagues of mine face while conducting fieldwork or

ethnographic research. However, other limitations occurred because of the nature of the research and the fact that it has to do with my belief system. I was faced with social backlash as both an academic and a practitioner. Most of the time, I find myself being questioned and put in a position where I must validate what I am doing and why I am doing it. On an academic level, I get that there is always a criterion of how the research is relevant, fits in the literature, fills gaps, and contributes to larger academic/anthropological endeavors. However, these are not the only questions I am asked and therefore have to think of and try to answer. On the personal and general levels, other questions relate to the type of research I am doing arise. I face them almost daily, they are not only posed by people who are helping me academically (like the case is when it comes to the academic criterion), but they are also thrown in my face by almost everyone I talk about my fieldwork with. These questions have two main premises. The first is ‘does what I do even make sense?’ and the second is based on the fact that healing is not a concept that should be taken seriously by Egyptian academia.

Nevertheless, they are expressed in meanings rooted in either societal or religious expectations, norms, and beliefs. These questions range from “do you actually believe in this stuff? Did you try it yourself? Does it work? What did you discover? Did you prove it works? Tell us more about black magic. That’s a waste of your time, effort, and money; it’s all placebo, right? What are you trying to prove? So, you actually got a research grant to go ask for fraudulent services?” Furthermore, they extend to “You’re losing your religion; do you know that? Have you reconsidered and actually thought of the effect of what you’re doing on your relationship with God? Are you a heathen now? Do you harness ghosts and spirits? Did you sell your soul or sacrifice your blood to the devil yet? Do you know that one day these ‘practitioners’ are going to ask you to step on the Qur’an or even burn it? These people are frauds; how can an ‘educated’ person get an MA with a thesis on that?” These are some of the questions people, colleagues, friends, and even people I have met once ask. My answer is that

I am simply in no position to answer any of these questions as I am not here to prove or disprove these practices. My approach and ‘what I’m actually doing’ is vivid and amplified in my primary research question, which is, “from the perspective of spiritual healers and those healed, how are body and soul perceived, treated, and understood in relation to affliction and healing?” Furthermore, my sub-questions help unpack this question by analyzing spirituality and healing.

My chapters unpack these sub-questions, which analyze the context, the economic aspects, the discourses, the government’s perception of the services, and the hybridization of practices. In my [second chapter](#), titled ‘Get that Zen Aesthetic: Creation and Curation of Affective Numinous Places.’ I introduce the Egyptian spiritual and alternative healing scene, kinds of services, sites, and contexts. This helps lay out, in detail, the effort businesses make to get the numinous Zen aesthetic in order to create a brand for themselves. These services are viewed as controversial, which makes the Zen aesthetic insufficient for some of the curious yet skeptical people. This leads to the need for formalization, which results in the creation of careerism, credentialism, and subsequently commodification. In my [third chapter](#), titled ‘Spirituality as Service: Meaningful Actualization, Agency, and Awakening,’ I analyze the New Age Marxist approach, which includes the spiritual supermarket, and critique this notion using Foucault’s discursive formations and focus on meaning. The idea of individualistic belief and religiosity does not apply in the Egyptian context because there are more considerable risks for Egyptians when it comes to following unorthodox belief systems or practices. These risks include imprisonment, backlash, and social heathenism. In my [fourth chapter](#), titled ‘Body Negated; Soul Sanctioned,’ I lay out these risks and use theories such as Althusser’s interpellation and Foucault’s biopolitics, governmentality, and power to unpack the Egyptian state’s perception of spiritual and alternative healing methods. I also introduce a new contradictory wave of lenience that is vivid today. The government exercises this lenience as it turns a blind eye towards healing modalities that are globalized and internationally popular,

such as yoga. Even when all these critiques and drawbacks are resolved on the individual and local level, there is a global critique of the practices. In my [fifth chapter](#), titled ‘The Elephant in the Room: On Cultural-Spiritual Appropriation,’ I discuss the critique of cultural appropriation and argue against using this limited critique in analyzing spiritual and alternative healing. I call for using cultural appreciation and cultural additivity when studying this topic anthropologically because these two concepts are vivid in the fieldwork and they both help understand the meanings people hold for these practices and belief systems. In a nutshell, none of these sub-questions tackle whether these services work or not. I am not here to prove or disprove their validity. Furthermore, the premise of the anthropology of religion and theologians is not to support or crackdown on one religion or set of traditions rather than the other; it is instead an attempt to try and look at how religion, in this case, spirituality, relates to different social institutions/facets and that is what I am doing here.

"You can just continue to float."

– Patrizia, Reiki Master

23/9/2019

*I signed in for my treatment and met the practitioners, Hussein for Access Bars and Patrizia, for Reiki energy healing. Hussein was an Egyptian man in his early 30s, and Patrizia was an Italian woman in her early 40s. They were a married couple and worked together in energy healing. The three of us went to the third floor, where my session was going to take place. We all took our shoes off when we got to the room's door. My session was in a treatment room called sandalwood. The room had a massage bed in the center and two chairs with a table and a frame behind them on the right. On the left side of the room was a water bottle with a couple of steel cups put on a shelf in a big white cabinet. Patrizia left the room, and Hussein gave me a brief presentation about what Access Bars energy healing was and how it works. He then asked me to lay down and started putting his fingers on several points on my head. He also told me that clients usually like to sleep, so if I feel like sleeping, I should. I answered that I definitely wouldn't sleep because I was here for research and needed to get the session's whole experience. Little did I know that meditating, falling asleep, or floating, as Patrizia calls it later in the session, are vital for the experience of energy healing. By the time Hussein finished the Access Bars part of the session, which lasted for 60 minutes, I had fallen asleep and woken up several times. Hussein left the room, then Patrizia walked in, in silence, patted my arms, and told me to continue to float.*

*As I floated, Patrizia placed her right hand on the upper part of my stomach, stayed there for a while, then put both of her hands on my left knee, moved to my right foot, and ended on my chest above my heart. I was surprised because I had an injury in my left knee and had a severe case of nerve irritation in my right foot, which I did not tell her about. She spent most of the time with her hands gently touching the left side of my chest, channeling energy to my heart, which I then understood that means I had an emotional blockage that she was trying to relieve. After Patrizia ended her part and the whole session, which was 90 minutes long, she told me to take my time to get up, which I did because I felt a lot of energy flowing in my body. I didn't want to move. A few minutes later, I got up and sat on the bed. This was not only my first energy session ever, but it was also one of the first times I ever meditated. I was confused about all of the feelings and sensations that were going on inside me mentally, physically, and emotionally. I walked downstairs with both of them, where we sat in the garden and talked about their healing practices and modalities and their motivation for seeking and working with spiritual and alternative healing. After our conversation ended, I went back inside to the front desk to pay.*

## 2. Get That Zen Aesthetic: Creation and Curation of Affective Numinous Places

*"In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. 'Space' is more abstract than 'place.' What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value."*

– (Tuan, 2001)

Curation is the process of carefully selecting, organizing, and presenting spaces to create a cohesive experience. It used to be exclusively associated with museums, art galleries, and exhibitions, but it is now used to create experiences for different spaces both on the ground and online. "Additionally, in a commercial and media environment characterized ever more by profusion and ephemerality, curation has leaped its professional bounds to become virtually ubiquitous in twenty-first-century marketing" (Penry, 2020). Businesses create and curate their online and on-the-ground spaces to send specific marketing messages to their clients and create unique brand identities. This changes curation to an experience that happens on the subconscious level (Ibid). When people visit a museum, they are conscious and aware that the curators of this museum deliberately organized the space to make them have a specific experience with a particular flow. In healing spaces, owners usually have a vision that seeks to give the visitor a sense of numinosity, safety, and comfort. Understanding healing as an experience from the perspective of the healees in relation to the aspects that create this experience is crucial in understanding the healing process itself. Hence, in this chapter, I introduce my several sites using the curation and attention, or lack thereof, to aesthetic details that evoke certain emotions and affective experiences for their clients and visitors. I begin this chapter with a focus on the space and time of the healing experiences of those healed and the creation and curation of healing spaces and then move to introduce aesthetic aspects of distant healing, foreknowledge services and applications, and advertisements that take place online.

*"Almost all of the participants responded that the term healing meant "getting better" or "getting well." Many described healing in terms of being symptom-free (e.g., "getting up and walking around without struggling to breathe" or "I had pain, then I didn't have pain anymore; that is healing"). Some described a healing experience as improving or returning to the state of normalcy (e.g., "leaving the hospital in a better state than when you arrived" and "returning to a state before you were sick"). Two participants understood healing to be something that the hospital staff did to or for them.. e.g., "they got me feeling like I'm back to me" and "they fixed me up"). Two respondents characterized healing as something beyond getting better, getting well, or returning to normal. One participant characterized healing as "God's grace." Another described it as "complete something, improve, become whole," elaborating on this with "learning something new and taking in new knowledge, understanding the world around you" (MacAllister et al., 2017).*

A decrease in a patients' stress levels is felt to increase their healing journey's effectiveness and decrease hospitalization duration. Ulrich (1997) focuses on three main factors that are believed to improve the patients' healing process in relation to the facility's design. These factors are 1) a sense of control, 2) access to social support, 3) access to positive distractions, and 4) a lack of exposure to negative distractions. He also concludes that patients of facilities that give attention to these aspects have a reduced need for pain-relieving medication. Furthermore, MacAllister et al. (2017) carried out an experiment where "participants described a healing space in terms of the physical attributes of the space, the feelings that the space evoked, the familiarity of the space, its relationship to nature, spiritual or religious significance" (123). Patients also identified adequate healing spaces by having aspects as ones evoking feelings of being cared for, serenity, and have an overall sense of home. While in the curation of hospitals, the focus is mainly on the organization, cleanliness, and orderly fashion of both the space itself and its staff. In wellness and healing centers, especially modernized ones, there is an addition of the ambiance. This gives the client a feeling of spirituality, relaxation, and calmness. This is achieved by, for example, adding symbolic aspects to space and burning calming incense on the premise. Another difference in curation tactics between hospitals and wellness places' is that they try to keep patients busy and

positively distracted in hospitals, with the TV being the star in hospital rooms curation. This is one of the few different aesthetic aspects between hospitals and holistic healing spaces and wellness centers, where the mindfulness aesthetic is desired, and thus screens are rarely involved.

It is important to note that the energy and spiritual healing spaces discussed here are created to be shared and enjoyed by people with different religious backgrounds. A meditation session can be carried out in a room with veiled women, men with crosses and facilitated by a foreign practitioner, with no agitation regarding religious backgrounds and beliefs. As a participant, one cannot feel the tension in relation to religion during the sessions; they all come with shared peace and faith in spirituality, energy, and divinity. Even though this is the case on the inside, this peace is not shared on the outside level by religious figures and the states' institutions. Albera and Couroucli (2012) extensively analyze how sharing sacred spaces been a widespread practice in Mediterranean countries. Where in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims, Christians, and Jews shared several spaces. That being said, the idea of cohabitation in religious places of worship does not exist in Egypt today. Division of people creates order, so the coming together of people with different religions under the name of spirituality creates a disorder that is perceived as heathen activities to some and hoax or nonsense to others. This will be further discussed in chapter four. However, in this chapter, I lay out the clients' experiences with the wellness and holistic healing world both face-to-face and online. I focus my fieldwork on five wellness places in different parts of Cairo, two from-home practitioners, and five online applications. I found out about all of the places I visited online because that is the primary tool to advertise their venues and services.



## Numinosity and The City

*"The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its "profane," non-religious mood of everyday experience. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures."*

Otto (1923)

Otto (1923 and 1996) continues to explain that the numinous is a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self." He introduced the term numinous, which has the Latin root *numen* that translates to divine power. The creation of the space that is to be changed into a sacred, numinous place is vital for the exercise of rituals and the coming together of people with similar beliefs. "Space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (Foucault (1982) in Mahon 1992). Space enhances a sense of community, which is vital for spiritual activities. It also gives the people that are considered leaders/masters the power to preach, teach, and guide people towards the path that is regarded as correct, depending on the belief. Ashrams, for Eastern religions, Monasteries, for Christianity, and Mosques for Islam, all have aesthetic aspects that make them numinous or divine. The concept of Numinosity also means a thing that evokes spiritual or religious emotions, directly related to the affective impact these spaces should have on their visitor. In most religions, spiritual awakenings or getting closer to God is achieved by secluding oneself from the everyday life and becoming a Monk, a Nun, a Sheikh, or a Buddha. In the sixties, the idea of becoming a spiritual person or getting on a spiritual journey entailed jumping all in, 'dropping out' of mainstream life. People who belonged to counterculture and wanted to reach spiritual awakenings had to leave everything behind and join or even move to an Ashram in the forest or the desert, preferably in an Asian

country. This created a 'drop out' counterculture where people dropped out of the society or 'normal' life. Contra-culture, or what is now counterculture, is a lifestyle that entails value-conflict with the dominant society and its widespread norms (See Ying 1960 and Roberts, 1978). In 2020, the counterculture of dropping out faded because it did not work for most people due to their busy lives. So, the answer to that was to try and have the Ashram next door.

Since the practices discussed here are Eastern in nature and at different times would require staying for some time in an Ashram, the focus is on how holistic healing businesses try and succeed and sometimes try and fail in providing ashram-like spaces for their clients. This is what getting that 'Zen' aesthetic is. An Ashram is a place for practicing spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation. It is often set outside of the cities or towns in calm and quiet areas for the seekers or visitors to get immersed in their spiritual practices and experiences. While there are no Ashrams in Egypt, wellness businesses try to create aesthetics similar to those found in Ashrams. Nevertheless, there are differences between the typical Ashrams and wellness places' modern ways of operating. First, Ashrams accommodate people for free or for prices that range from \$5 to \$20 per night, including meals, accommodation, and classes. These prices are a fraction of the cost of one session in a center in Egypt. The second difference is found in the spiritual experience one has in both places. On the one hand, in Ashrams, it is an immersive experience, where you go for a minimum of ten days for a course or spiritual growth. On the other hand, in wellness places, you go for a few days a week, and the offered courses require you to attend four to six hours for two to four days.

The timing of sessions has a significant impact on the places and their clients. Most yoga classes are offered during the day, where the first class starts at 8 am, and the last one ends at 7 pm. And most of the sessions, whether group or individual ones and from-home or in a wellness center, are set in the evening. This is because meditation sessions and energy or spiritual healing treatments aim to make people relaxed, connected, and calm. Therefore,

offering these sessions later in the day or at night seeks to make people more at peace or in a better place, energetically, before going home or to bed. This carefully curated scheduling plan is designed to take into consideration the busy lives of people living in the 21st century, which also highlights the minimal possibility of dropping out and going to an Ashram. If people cannot drop out and needs a numinous spiritual space to practice rituals and take classes, they would want it to fit their schedule.

"Generally, aesthetic experience can be defined as a special state of mind that is qualitatively different from the everyday experience. According to Cupchik and Winston (1996), aesthetic experience is a psychological process in which the attention is focused on the object while all other objects, events, and everyday concerns are suppressed" (Marković, 2012). Places that operate in the city try to create an aesthetic experience like the ones offered by Ashrams by making aesthetic choices related to lighting, smells, symbols, and other things. It is no coincidence that all these spaces almost look the same. There are some critiques of the creation of numinous spaces. It stems from Benjamin's (1935) hypothesis that states that when something is democratized or produced on a massive level, it becomes degraded. The critiques extend to claim that the mass production or creation of wellness and healing spaces ends up sabotaging the healing experiences of those healed. The hyperreality concept explains how models are created to replace real or original things; they represent something without its original referent. The hyperreal is created by simulacra, which are copies or replacements of things without an origin (Baudrillard, 1981). According to New Age theorists, spiritual wellness and spiritual healing places are a simulacrum of healing spaces that do not have a specific origin. Consequently, this creates a hyperreality of spirituality and healing that is a sensory simulation of spiritual experiences. These critiques are important to note; however, these ashram-like spaces give their visitors affective and sometimes life-changing experiences that they would not have otherwise.

## Next Door Ashrams: Wellness and Holistic Healing Places

### 1) Let's Talk Business

"He's *not* *Ahorro* enough."

- Mel

19/12/2019

Wellness businesses and practitioners curate the healing spaces and create an identity both online and in the space to make the clients' experience positive, memorable, and distinctive. I focus on specific chosen aesthetic aspects that make up this identity. These aesthetic choices are name and online marketing content, the procedure of booking an appointment, entrance, lighting and colors, sound and smell, cleanliness and privacy, design and symbols, and staff. I will be giving an in-depth description of *Ahorro Family Wellness* because it offers several diverse services. It is also the most popular, reflected in the number of clients it has and the number of followers on its social media platforms. Additionally, *Ahorro* is the place I thoroughly unpack because I worked there for four months, giving access to business-related aspects.

In this thesis, the names of places and people have been changed for confidentiality reasons. That being said, the meanings behind the names and their origins are still explained because they help in analyzing the social and cultural reasons for the choices of the names when it comes to the healing and wellness places. They also help in understanding people's background and ethnicity when it comes to people's names/identities. I start with analyzing the places' names because it is the first thing clients know about the place they are visiting. *Ahorro* means saving in Spanish. The original name is a Spanish word that translates to health and saving as well. The addition of 'family wellness' to the place's name supports its identity because it caters to both kids and adults. Its services include adult classes/yoga classes, kids' classes, holistic healing treatments and massages, and babysitting services. It is essential to explore the online content in analyzing curation because it forms an aesthetically cohesive

platform that would attract familiar and unfamiliar clients with energy and spiritual healing modalities. There is considerable leverage between *Ahorro's* quality and all other wellness places regarding its brand identity and marketing. It has a whole marketing team for promoting its services and its café. Other wellness spaces' and from-home practitioners' marketing and social media platforms are run by the founders themselves, making their marketing strategies weak. *Ahorro's* online platforms are effective in relation to their posts' consistency and frequency, number of followers (31,485), and the pages' overall quality. Their Facebook and Instagram pages are cohesive when it comes to the font type they use, the colors, and the templates of the pictures they post and the events they announce. Both pages are easily accessible, and booking an appointment is done through them.

The prices of the courses, sessions, and yoga classes are listed online as well. The average prices are EGP 3,500 (\$220) for a certified energy and/or spiritual healing two-day course, EGP 200 (\$13) for a yoga class or a group healing/meditation session, and EGP 800 (\$50) for a one-on-one session. Although *Ahorro's* courses and yoga classes prices almost match the average cost of other wellness places, its one-on-one session prices are relatively higher. For example, these sessions at *Sacred Flower* or *Sanctuary* have an average price of EGP 500 (\$32). The services used to be less expensive, but the owners decided to increase them in November 2019 due to the Egyptian economy's inflation. This increase was announced via email, on the announcement board at the entrance, and announcement boards in the café as its prices increased as well. This led to it being the most expensive wellness and holistic healing place in Cairo. *Ahorro* uses an online business management software called Mindbody to schedule and manage its services. Mindbody has a total of 12,325 registered clients on *Ahorro's* database. Every appointment is registered on this software, and the client receives an email confirming their appointment and a receipt upon paying. The place also offers an 'on account'

option for its regular clients. This gives them the option to pay for their classes or sessions later or conveniently. I came to know this after I took a job there.

*Ahorro Family Wellness* is located at Sarayat El Maadi, the most affluent quarter of El-Maadi, located on the Nile river's Eastside of southern Cairo. El-Maadi is home to many expats, and this shapes the kind of clientele the place caters for. After struggling to park, the first thing you notice is the big fuchsia, specifically 'pink Pantone 246, huge gate. *Ahorro's* attention to coherence and consistency is key in their aesthetic choices, especially regarding the colors they choose for everything, from the outdoor furniture, walls, stairs to the treatment rooms, couches, accessories, and art. When I was asked to do tasks that involved colors, I was given three codes to follow strictly; Pantone pink (246), Pantone green (580), and Pantone blue (635). They/We referred to these colors as 'Ahorro colors,' which created and recreated the place's identity. Although color psychology is not the focus of this segment, in branding, color psychology explains how specific colors impact the clients' impressions of a brand or place (Ciotti, 2019). It explains how individual colors have unified psychological properties, resulting in emotional response (Wright, 2009). Pink represents hope and energy, green communicates nurture and growth, and blue reduces stress and creates calmness and serenity.

As you enter through the big pink gate, you find a sizeable outdoor space with a garden, an art shack, an outdoors kids' playing area, a yoga studio called 'earth studio', a treatment room called 'lavender,' a smoking area, and a seating area dotted with tables and chairs. As you walk into the interior on the ground floor, you are met by a front desk space on the right side with three stacks of pamphlets; one titled holistic treatments, one titled adult classes, and one titled kids' classes. These pamphlets/booklets include all of the services they offer with a small explanation and prices. While skimming through the pamphlets, I saw that it is a three-storey house with natural lighting and indirect dimmed lighting units. I could also smell pastry baked in the café, and I jammed to mainstream pop songs that were played at the front desk area.

While the expected sounds of wellness places are relaxing melodies, *Ahorro* is hip, especially its vegetarian whole food café, which serves vegan and healthy food and advertises fair-trade products. The wholefood café and the boutique that sells natural beauty products, yoga equipment, and sportswear increase the number of *Ahorro* visitors daily. The boutique extends from the ground floor, where the beauty products cabinet is, to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. There is an indoor kids' playing area behind the front desk and in front of it is a restroom with a babies' changing table.

This takes us to the next important aspect of curating a wellness place: cleanliness and privacy. *Ahorro Family Wellness* has over ten cleaners on the premises, with the sole purpose of keeping the place clean at all times. Everything has to be spotlessly clean, from the garden and the café to towels in the bathrooms, floors in the yoga studios, and yoga mats. As you climb the stairs to the first floor, you find two yoga studios, 'Sun' and 'Air,' three changing rooms, the offices for the managers and staff, and a restroom. When you reach the third floor, you find three treatment rooms, named 'Geranium,' 'Sandalwood,' and 'Neroli.' These names are spiritual, in nature, which also gives the place's brand identity consistency. Privacy is necessary to wellness places, especially when it comes to one-on-one healing sessions, the curtains have to be shut, and the room has to be isolated to an extent for the client to feel safe. Each of the four treatment rooms has a massage bed in the center, a big abstract painting, and a big white cabinet with a freshwater bottle with a couple of steel cups. Two of the rooms have two chairs with a table between them. The cleaning staff is also responsible for changing how the treatment rooms look depending on the booked appointment. For example, if there is a hand analysis session, they fold the massage bed and replace it with chairs and a table. If the room is booked for a massage and has chairs and a table, they take out the furniture and replace it with the massage bed. The music played in the yoga studio and treatment rooms is classical meditative, and relaxing, which is very different from the pop music played in the front desk

and café areas. *Ahorro* has nuanced and subtle symbols; there is only a statue of Shiva, the Hindu god of asceticism. The place's logo has intricated details with yogic symbols, yoga poses, and pregnant women.

Finally, an essential factor in the making of *Ahorro's* identity is the kind of employees they hire; the practitioners, the front-desk agents, managing staff, and the helping team. The practitioners vary from service to service; however, most yoga instructors and Chinese medicine practitioners are foreign. The practitioners of other healing methods are a mix of European and Egyptian. The front desk is an aspect worth analyzing in detail, especially that I applied for this job after finding out that they were looking for a 'front-desk superhero.' This takes us to the moment I heard about this vacancy. I thought, 'what better opportunity could I have to gain access to Cairo's wellness and energy healing scene?' Potentially I would be able to interact with clients, practitioners, and people who work there. Even though I ended up working in the management department, I was soon able to understand the criteria *Ahorro* looked for in their front-desk team. This criterion was based on being 'Ahorro enough.' 'Being Ahorro' meant being young, hipster, different, spiritual, and, for lack of a better word, Westernized. All of the front desk team is bilingual. The idea of 'being *Ahorro*' became clearer a few months later when a person applied for an operations manager position, which the place desperately needed. Members of staff often expressed how hard it was for them to get used to him and communicate with him because he was not 'Ahorro enough.' The management staff, the marketing agents, the front-of-house manager, and the café manager are all Egyptians, yet they all fit this criterion. The place is owned by a British couple named Ted and Mel Williams, and they have a third partner called Omneya, who was never there. The helping staff consisted of cleaning staff, cooking staff, and baristas for the café. Almost all of the cleaning staff is of South Sudanese origin, and the cooking staff and baristas are of Egyptian origin. It can be said that *Ahorro* is overstaffed because it is a small space for the number of employees it has.





Figure 1, 2 and 3: Ahorro Family Wellness.



## 2) A Symbolically Heavy Family Business

"Treat and heal your loved ones with no medication or chemicals."

- Lamis Amir

29/3/2020

After spending some time in the field, I found it crucial to take courses in energy and spiritual healing in order to become a practitioner and focus on the imponderabilia of actual life (Malinowski, (1984) (1922)). I took my first energy healing course, Reiki<sup>1</sup> 1, in Sacred Flower Yoga and Wellness. The original name refers to a religious and cultural symbol of purity, self-regeneration, rebirth, and growth. The logo is also colored with the chakras' colors<sup>2</sup>; purple, blue, green, orange, and red. Its services are similar to the ones offered at *Ahorro*, like yoga classes, holistic treatments, workshops, and certified courses. However, it operates on a smaller scale in comparison to *Ahorro*. It has a smaller number of employees, services offered, and practitioners. Its online content is similar to *Ahorro's* with active social media pages on Facebook and Instagram. Appointments are made through Facebook and/or the phone. The place also uses these two platforms to announce its weekly yoga schedules. The prices of the courses, sessions, and yoga classes are available online. These prices are EGP 3500 (\$220) for a two-day certified energy and/or spiritual healing course, EGP 200 (\$13) for a yoga class or a group healing and/or meditation session, and EGP 500 (\$32) for a one-on-one session.

Sacred Flower is located in the 6<sup>th</sup> of October city, a relatively small city in Giza Governorate. It is mainly made up of recently established planned communities such as the Sheikh Zayed City. It is located in a residential area that is less urbane than the rest of the 6<sup>th</sup> of October. On my first visit, I parked in the main street's service lane, where I found a huge

<sup>1</sup> Reiki is a Japanese method of healing. The practitioner channels energy to the healee's body through putting his/her palm on the person's body to heal physical and emotional afflictions.

<sup>2</sup> Chakra are various focal points used in a variety of ancient meditation practices, collectively denominated as Tantra, or the esoteric or inner traditions of Hinduism. Rudolf Steiner considered the chakra system to be dynamic and evolving.

sign that says 'SACRED FLOWER: YOGA AND WELLNESS' with its logo. The venue is a big duplex apartment with a basement. As you walk inside, you find sets of shelves with natural beauty products, crystals, oils, and fair-trade products for sale. Parallel to this, you see two stands for Cairo-West magazine and Diwan bookstores. Next to this is the front desk and in front of the front desk is a small reception area with a couch and a coffee table. The ground floor also has a big yoga/workshop studio, a kitchen, and a restroom. The basement consists of a huge yoga studio that overlooks a garden with a coffee corner. The place relies heavily on natural lighting as every room and studio has huge windows that allow the sun to come in during the day.

From the entry point, you can see a big wall painting with the colors of chakras saying, "I am divine, connected, expressive, loved, strong, creative, and safe." Opposite to this piece is a yellow wall with a big lotus sign and the symbol 'Om' in the middle, and the phrase "OM MANI PÄDME HUM" in English and Sanskrit. Om is a sacred sound in Eastern religions, especially Indian ones; it is considered the sound of the universe. When chanted, it manifests unification and consciousness. *Aum maṇi Padme hūṃ* or in Sanskrit: ॐ मणिपद्मे हूँ is a mantra<sup>3</sup> that manifests compassion and enlightenment. Mani means jewel, Padme means lotus flower, and Hum means enlightenment or awakening. As you walk upstairs, where there are two rooms with signs that say healing rooms, you find a huge red tapestry with a buddha sitting in *Abhaya* pose. The *Abhaya* pose or gesture shows Buddha raising his right hand with the fingers upwards and the left arm resting next to its body. This mudra<sup>4</sup> is a gesture of

<sup>3</sup> Mantra: originally in Hinduism and Buddhism) a word or sound repeated to aid concentration in meditation. "a mantra is given to a trainee meditator when his teacher initiates him" a statement or slogan repeated frequently.

<sup>4</sup> Mudra: gesture or mark. "Yoga mudras are symbolic gestures often practiced with the hands and fingers. They facilitate the flow of energy in the subtle body and enhance one's journey within." Mudras have been an integral part of many Hindu and Buddhist rituals. They are used extensively in Yoga, meditation and dance. Across various disciplines it is said that there exist close to 399 mudras.

fearlessness, where Buddha is in the part of the process that is right after reaching enlightenment.

*Sacred Flower* is the most symbolically heavy place I visited. The Buddhist and Hindu doctrines are very vivid in the aesthetics and curation of the space. This was also discussed when I had a conversation with Lamis and Hossam, the owners. They are an Egyptian couple inspired by their personal experiences with energy and spiritual healing, especially the idea of treating themselves, their kids, and their loved ones with no chemicals or medication. From that came their decision to open a wellness place to make these services more available to the public. During our conversation, they both voiced how Buddhism and Hinduism became a significant facet of their belief system even before starting this business. Unlike the owners of *Ahorro*, Lamis and Hossam also work as front desk receptionists, marketeers, and practitioners at *Sacred Flower*. I have not met employees at the venue other than the practitioners themselves, both foreign and Egyptian. However, one female receptionist and a male cleaner were there during one of my visits. Payments are made at the front desk in cash or card, either before or after an appointment. Interestingly, the card payment receipt states 'Sacred Flower for Human Development, which tells a lot about Sacred Flower's formalization and institutionalization. This will be discussed and analyzed further in chapters three and four.



Figure 4 and 5: Sacred Flower Yoga and Wellness.



### 3) Healing, if God Wills

"I'm a servant of God, sent to help people."

- Heba Anis

25/09/2019

The original name means a place of safety. The idea of naming a wellness place sanctuary gives a sense of security to the seeker of a type of healing that is deemed suspicious. Holistic healing means a form of healing that focuses on the whole well-being of a person; the mind, body, and soul. *Sanctuary's* online presence is less popular than *Ahorro's*, with 6,300 likes on Facebook and only 4,111 followers on Instagram. It uses similar marketing strategies that focus on promoting its schedule and its three regular group healing sessions, which are 1) sound healing and chakra balancing, 2) open your heart Sufi meditation, and 3) moon ceremonies. Resident practitioners give these sessions at *Sanctuary*. Similar to *Ahorro* too, you can book your sessions over the phone or via Facebook. It is located in Zamalek, which is considered the most cosmopolitan district in the Western part of Cairo, and a considerable part of it is on the Nile island. It operates from a two-bedroom apartment on the first floor of a residential building on a main street. Inside, there is a front-desk area, two bedrooms changed to a big yoga/courses and meditation studio space, and a treatment room with a big balcony. The colors of *Sanctuary* are light and straightforward, the walls are predominantly white, and the floors are wooden. However, there is meaningful hand-painted wall art that has spiritual significance as they include the chakras, Buddhist symbols, and Sufi signs. *Sanctuary* also makes sure always to have burning incense and oils in the apartment to provide a numinous feeling to the place.

When it comes to cleanliness and privacy, the place is noticeably small and has one restroom with no cleaning staff in sight. Additionally, being on a crowded main street in Zamalek, with cars honking and people shouting, makes the possibility of having a private,

quiet, and silent ambiance impossible. This is what Greenwood (2000) calls the involvement of 'the everyday' in the practice. Even though privacy is essential in wellness places around the world, it can be said that *Sanctuary* owners chose to have a location in an affluent busy neighborhood to attract a specific kind of clients rather than having privacy and quietness. Without even walking into the place, it was apparent from the Facebook page, the prices, and the location that it had a specific kind of cliental. This kind is one with a certain mentality and outlook on healing, and certainly one with the financial means that allows them to visit such a place in such a location with such high prices. I met only a few employees and practitioners; however, I got the chance to join their regular group healing sessions at least once. Ahed Amr led the sound healing and chakra balancing group session, a middle-aged Egyptian woman. The open heart Sufi meditation was led by Heba Anis, a middle-aged Egyptian woman. *Sanctuary* is a predominantly female space because both clients and practitioners are almost all females. I also met the owner and CEO of the place, Hana Saber. She is an Egyptian woman in her early thirties. It seemed that Hana was the one responsible for public relations, getting practitioners to offer their services at *Sanctuary*, and scheduling the sessions.

*Sanctuary* is the most hybridized site I visited during my fieldwork for several reasons. The first one is that it is located in a highly cosmopolitan neighborhood. The second is that most people there, including the practitioners and the front desk person, are veiled, use Islamic phrases and sayings in their conversations, and relate most healing practices to God's power in an Islamic context. This hybridization of religious beliefs and spiritual alternative healing methods opens up discussions about how these healing modalities came from different parts of the world and resonated in Egypt and on a large scale in contemporary Cairo. Hybridized forms and modalities of energy and spiritual healing will be discussed and analyzed extensively in chapter five.

#### 4) The Crystalized Rooftop

"Crystals do magic."

– Celine Bassem

11/10/2019

Celine Bassem's services are the spark that got me curious about alternative spiritual and energy healing modalities. I found out about crystal healing as a modality and Celine from my sister, Sylvana, who went to seek her help because she had major problems with her sciatica. Even though a medical professional told her that this pain will not go away and that she will have to get used to the pain as she will have to live with it and take pain killers when necessary, Celine treated her from the pain using crystal healing. After I heard this story, I looked for Celine's Facebook page and found it under the name *Celine for Crystals and Crystal Healing*. The original name works in the place's favor as it shed light on the energy flow, which is an essential facet of crystal healing and energy and spiritual healing as an industry. One of the most used phrases by the practitioners is "*Energy Flows Where Intention Goes*," and Celine incorporated this famous adage when she came up with a name for her healing space. *Celine* operates on an even smaller scale than *Sacred Flower* and *Sanctuary*, as it offers only crystal healing services and certified practitioners' courses when available. It also does not operate daily or have a set schedule, as Celine is the only practitioner working there; the center is open only when there is a booked session or offered course. Even though I found *Celine's* page on Facebook, its online marketing content is weak. During one of our conversations, she voiced how the burden of being a banker makes it harder for her to focus on improving and growing the business. The online platforms facilitate appointment booking and provide information about prices. That being said, the costs of the one-on-one sessions are not clarified there.

I drove to *Celine*, which is located in Al Narges district in 5<sup>th</sup> settlement, New Cairo. Celine buzzed me in and told me to come to the third floor, where the roof is located. *Celine* is



on the roof of a residential building. It consists of two rooms; a treatment room and a courses' room. It also has a huge terrace with a calming view on an area that looks like old Cairo even though it is located in one of Cairo's more contemporary cityscapes. When I walked into the treatment room, I found a massage bed, two chairs (a talk-therapy setting), and several display tables/stands with crystals. The treatment room smelled of Palo-Santo incense and had dimmed lights and lit candles. Both rooms have Celine's spiritual and energy healing modalities' certificates, like crystal healing (master level), Quantum Touch, and Reiki. Certification and credentialism are crucial in curating wellness and energy healing spaces because they give the space and practitioners credibility. Formulization of the services is going to be furtherly addressed in chapter three. Even though Celine is the only practitioner, she tries to get visiting practitioners to offer their services. She also explained to me that her modality does not only include crystal healing but also combines talk-therapy/life coaching with crystals and Doctor Ibrahim Karim's bio-geometry<sup>5</sup> healing techniques.

When it comes to pricing; the two-day certified crystal healing course costs EGP 4600 (\$290), the one-on-one session costs EGP 500 (\$32), and the Quantum-Touch two-day course I attended with a visiting practitioner from Lebanon cost \$220, which had to be paid in dollars. Celine also sells crystals as raw pieces or accessories and their prices vary; I purchased two natural crystals, a citrine, and a kyanite stone, for EGP 700 (\$44). I also got the chance to sit and talk with Celine over a cup of coffee on the terrace. We talked about the mixed modalities technique she uses and how she became a practitioner by taking courses with the world-renowned British crystal healer Phillip Permutt in the United Kingdom. I also realized that *Celine* used to offer yoga classes and other spiritual healing practices done by other

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<sup>5</sup> “BioGeometrical shapes interact with Earth’s energy to produce a balancing effect on all energy levels of biological systems. Research into shapes of body organs led to the discovery of the relationship between of organ function, energy pattern, and shape. These patterns called “BioSignatures” produce, through resonance, a balance of energy and immunity that support orthodox and alternative medicine.” (Karim, 2020)

practitioners. Still, at this point, she just offered crystal healing sessions and crystal healing courses (levels 1, 2, and 3). It is important to note that if one were to take the three levels, it would cost EGP 17,600 (\$1100). That price excludes the tools and crystals necessary to practice. I had the chance to take the first level, which covered the basics of the modality and the technicalities of how to place the stones/crystals on the client's body, how to conduct the session, fundamental chakra-crystal relations, and how to clean your crystals. The second level teaches practitioners how to use crystal grids<sup>6</sup> to reach different spiritual needs, such as protection or clarity, the modality's professional ethics, healing room presentation, and client expectations. It also offers recommended reading lists from famous practitioners around the world. The third level certification is the hardest to obtain. It requires the practitioner to have a patient with a tangible physical disease that shows on tests. The practitioner has to give the patient ten complementary sessions that improve the case. Additionally, it requires a lot of notetaking in relation to the patient's diagnosis and symptoms, and a major final exam is taken online. The practitioner then sends all of this material, and if they pass, they get their certificate back directly from the United Kingdom. The prices of the sessions, courses, and crystals showed that crystal healing was for people who belonged in the middle-higher class. As aforementioned, it was offered for people who had to have the financial means and will to pay such high prices for a session or a course. Celine gives attention to the place's aesthetics regarding the music she plays, the smell and cleanliness of the room, bed, bathroom, and client's privacy during, before, and after the sessions.

Wellness places around Cairo are similar in many aspects in relation to aesthetics, services, and cliental. Even though the clients might differ in their religious beliefs or nationality, they come together in shared spiritual experiences. They share 1) a belief in the

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<sup>6</sup> A crystal grid is an intentional arrangement of minerals, selected to represent a particular goal, and then spiritually activated to support that work.

power of spiritual and energy healing and 2) the financial means that allow them to seek such expensive services. The cross-pollination of ideologies and beliefs is very common in these centers or spaces. Many clients can be devout Muslims or Christians yet seek modalities frowned upon by their religions. I will analyze the discourses created around these practices and the hybridization of modalities in chapters four and five.



Figure 5 and 6: Rooms at Celine for Crystals and Crystal Healing.

## From-Home Practitioners

Whilst there is a rise in the number of wellness and holistic healing venues, some practitioners still operate from home. This mode of operation is the most conventional, popular, and expected by the general public. However, it is still viewed as suspicious. The idea of a from-home practitioner is deemed dubious and suspicious as it has long been the case that witches, shamans, and in this sense, people who are considered to be charlatans operate from their homes (Douglas 2002; Bowie 2000, and Greenwood 2000). In the Egyptian context, the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of a Zar, a fortune-teller, or a spiritual healer is the portrayal of these individuals in Egyptian popular culture. From *Raya w Sekina* to *Gana El Bayan Al Taly* to *Yana Ya Khalty* and hundreds of other films and series, the Egyptian media portrays these practitioners in an unsettling manner. The setting usually includes a Sheikh or a fortune-teller, *Arafah*, sitting in a dark smoke-filled room, with lots of candles and an overall unsettling 'occult' atmosphere. Hence, these scenes almost always have aspects of fearfulness, weakness, and confusion regarding the services' seeker. These are mixed with elements of evilness, wickedness, and an overall crafty attitude from the practitioner. Furthermore, the music added to these scenes gives the audience a sense of discomfort and suspicion, even when scenes are laid out in a comedic manner. At the beginning of this research, those around me were constantly worried and advised me against visiting at-home practitioners. I ended up having an irrational, yet very rational, fear that I would either get possessed or imprisoned during one of my visits. The rationality behind my irrational fear will be further discussed in chapter four, where I talk about the institutionalization of the spiritual and the relationship between the government and the practitioners. Chapter four also includes a detailed analysis of the discourses created around these practices by the Egyptian government, religious and medical institutions, and the media. I decided to see what these from-home practitioners and their services are like with all of this in mind.

## 1) Home-made Tarot

*"I tasted the love of the universal mother."*

- Alyah

24/9/2019

I found it strange that even though Alyah is located a few blocks away from my house, I have never heard of her till I stumbled upon her Facebook page, *Alyah Holistic Tarot Readings*. Her page is straightforward and informative. She has a 'Services' section that details the different kinds of tarot readings she offers with their durations. For example, there is a *Life Purpose Reading*, which is 30 minutes, during which she offers guidance to the client in relation to their mission in their life, passion, and suitable vocations. Appointments are made through Facebook or Whatsapp. Alyah is responsible for creating her social media marketing content. She is also the only practitioner there. We live in El Rehab City, an affluent residential compound located in New Cairo. It is one of the biggest gated communities there. The city has low-rising buildings and a lot of greenery. It also has four malls, over five food courts, three shopping and utility markets, and three medical centers. It has a balance between apartment buildings and villas that look identical. This 'city' is considered one of the expensive real estate compounds when it comes to price, which directly affects the kind of clients Alyah has.

Even though the Facebook page is called Alyah Holistic Tarot Readings, she lives and operates in her late parents' house, *Villa Al Mona*, named after her late mother. Alyah insists on referring to the house as *Villa Al Mona* rather than calling the place with the building number. She calls it with the name she gave it. *Al Mona* is an Arabic word meaning desires and wishes, which might be connected to the promised answers Alyah provides her clients with. I parked in front of the villa, and as I walked towards the gates, I could not help but notice three cameras around the entrance. I started walking to the 'reading' room. I then noticed a black

Bastet Egyptian cat<sup>7</sup> statue at the center of the living space on the ground floor. I also heard sounds of Qur'an playing on her music playing system, which I found odd because she did not come off to me as a religious person. So, I asked, and she replied by saying that it was for protection from evil spirits and that even though her connectedness to the Islamic religion was not that strong, she still believes in its power. I continued walking around the ground floor of her place and found a whiteboard with notes. Being a curious ethnographer made me ask about this as well. She clarified that she was giving a past life regression course at her living room the day before. According to practitioners, past life regression is a method that uses hypnosis to recover memories of past lives or incarnations. The practice is deemed unscientific by people with medical backgrounds, as they regard ideas of memories of past lives as delusional. On the contrary, advocates of the practice adhere to beliefs about reincarnation and believe that people undertake past-life regression to pursue spiritual growth or psychotherapy. Alyah's house and aesthetics might sound contradictory to some Egyptians because faith is generally is looked at with a binary-intensive and exclusivist eye. One cannot be a devout Muslim and believe in ideas rooted in other religions, especially those not Abrahamic. This encounter is an example of what I would call a hybrid of belief systems where the Qur'an plays in the same room that has traces of a course about a practice that is viewed as sinful in the Islamic doctrine.

The reading room is relatively small and has a round table with over twenty different types of tarot card decks, a few crystals, a praying rosary-beads, and a Tibetan singing bowl<sup>8</sup>. Next to this table is a couch and a huge pouf chair with a table between them. The room also has huge glass sliding doors that lead to the garden, which provides nice natural lighting. Our conversations and the readings were carried out in English because she lived in Britain all her life and moved back in 2013 when her parents passed away. I also learned that she has been

<sup>7</sup> A pharaonic symbol of gentle protection.

<sup>8</sup> Bells that vibrate and create deep tones that have vibrations that help in relaxation and healing. They are also used by Buddhist monks in their meditation practices.

into tarot cards and fortunetelling since she was a child because she comes from a family of fortune-tellers. All these aspects make Alyah give the clients an overall home-like welcoming feeling and therefore make her services appear less mystical or suspicious. Payments were made in cash. I paid EGP 800 instead of EGP 400 because I stayed for double the time I booked. Her page's services section clearly states that prices 'any extra time will be charged accordingly.' These prices are relatively high to anyone who thinks of the idea of going an at-home practitioner in the conventional sense. This means that Alyah caters to a specific segment of the society that 1) has the mentality of giving the modality importance and trusting its power, and 2) has the means, money, to afford her services.



Figure 7: Villa Al Mona.

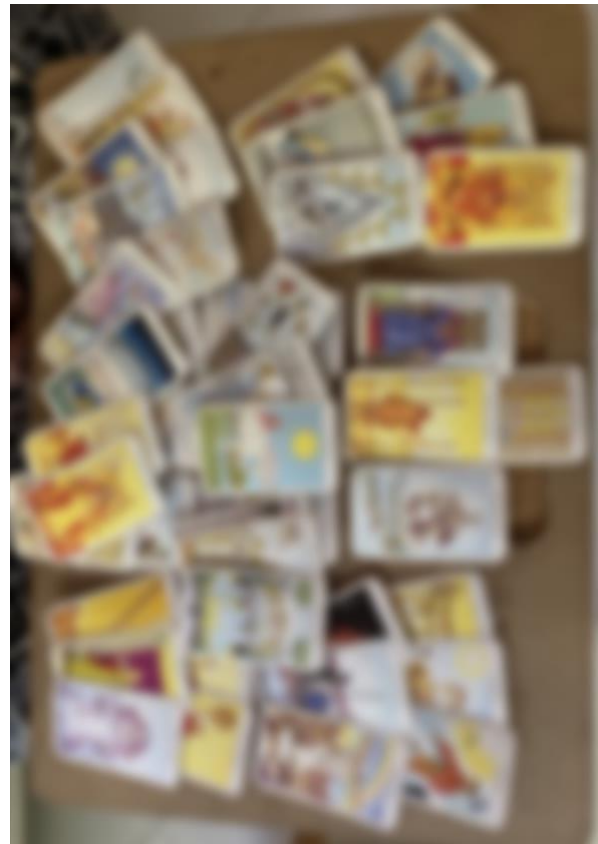


Figure 8: My first tarot spread.

## 2) Channeling Healing

"Doctor, are you free on Saturday?"

– Mamdouh

15/02/2019

For as long as I can remember, I have had the ritual of checking my astrology sign's luck at the beginning of every year. The year 2019 was different because, as I always do, I went on YouTube and searched in Arabic for Geminis' 2019 luck. The search results showed a channel called Al-Jannah. The video thumbnail displayed a woman in her mid-forties giving a tarot reading for every zodiac's astrological predictions for the year. As days passed, Jannah's videos became a monthly ritual, I open YouTube, and her monthly tarot reading videos appear in my recommended videos section. The channel and other online platforms are named after her, *Al-Jannah Channel*. In Islam, *Al-Jannah* means heaven. Its 'About' section has one statement, "we combine the spiritual energy with the energy of the universe, with personal development to get you to your highest potentials." Her videos' description section contains a price list that seems fixed, the sessions' duration in minutes, price in dollars, and service type. These services were 1) urgent tarot reading, 2) tarot reading, and 3) gemstones healing. The description section continues to say that clients can pay for their readings through PayPal and Western Union. The fact that Jannah's services, which are perceived as traditional, superstitious, and pseudoscientific, can be paid for in modern and technologically advanced ways showed one aspect of the cross-pollination between the conventional and the current methods of not only healing but also operating. Jannah has three modes of operating, which are 1) face-to-face sessions, 2) online sessions on skype, and 3) general YouTube videos of readings.

The in-person sessions are offered in her home in Shoubra Masr, and the online sessions are conducted on skype and paid for online. Although the YouTube videos she deliberately and consistently uploads may seem like a free service, online platforms pay their popular channels



for their content. Jannah has a YouTube silver creator award as background in some of her videos. Research showed that YouTube awards this to the channels that surpass 100K subscribers and accordingly have made over \$30K on the platform from ads and views. This method of making money makes Jannah an example of using modern technology to offer services and make money off the internet as a medium. She uses these awards and her master-level Pranic healing<sup>9</sup> certificates in her background, to validate that she is both certified as a master in her practice and popular among internet users. While the curation of the on the ground spaces was the focus in describing the previous places, maybe even more than the online presence, the curation of Jannah' YouTube channel is more important as it is her primary method of making money and clients. During our conversation, Jannah made it clear that her cliental base is dependent on Gulf Arabs that she gives sessions to via skype. That being said, Jannah still offers her services from home at Shoubra Masr. The practitioner's location is a determining factor for the clients' expectations of the services. It works as an indicator that makes them form an opinion about the services before even going.

Shoubra Masr is one of the biggest districts in Cairo. It is a mixed sectarian neighborhood that is located in Northern Cairo. Shoubra Masr used to be dominated by the elite administrators of Egypt. However, it is now considered a poor neighborhood that is Christian-dominated. This location results in an expectation that the monetary value is not as high as either the semi-formalized wellness places and/or the practitioners located at more affluent areas like El-Rehab or El-Zamalek. That being said, the services are unexpectedly the most expensive; tarot sessions are priced at \$30 for 15 minutes and \$80 for 60 minutes, and the combined gemstones and tarot reading service costs \$150 per hour. Jannah also has an

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<sup>9</sup> 'Prana' is the Sanskrit word for life force. It is called 'chi' in China and 'ki' in Japan. Pranic Healing is a revolutionary and comprehensive system of natural healing techniques that uses prana to treat illness. It is a synthesis of ancient, esoteric healing methods that have been rediscovered, researched and tested over decades with proven success by the founder of Modern Pranic Healing, Grand Master Choa Kok Sui.

urgent/emergency appointment option, where she charges \$120 for a 60-minutes tarot reading and \$180 for a tarot reading and gemstones session. The idea of an urgent/emergency option relates directly to the idea of doctors' appointments. It also gives the service a sense of importance, as people can find the need for a reading burning enough to pay double the amount of money to get it as soon as possible. Additionally, she perceives and advertises herself as a doctor. When I called to book an appointment, her assistant and son Mamdouh told me to wait, and I heard him saying, "doctor, are you free on Saturday?" Mamdouh gave me prices that were higher than the ones on the online price list during this call. Even though I hesitated to ask him about that, I decided to do it. He replied that it is undoubtedly not an inconsistency, but the prices on the channel are the ones for skype or online reading sessions, which differ from the prices of face-to-face/in-person readings.

After a long drive from El-Rehab to Shoubra Masr, I parked at a nearby street. This was a thoroughly thought-through decision because the media's portrayal of these practitioners affected me, which left me concerned. So, I did not want to leave a trace for someone to follow me if they turned out to be fraudsters. Following Mamdouh's description, I walked for three minutes to the building, and although the closer I got, the less skeptical I felt, the street Jannah' building was in was very narrow to park in anyways. I got up the stairs, floor by floor, I felt my heart beating faster, and the fact that the light was out on the floor before hers made me more uncomfortable. I called Mamdouh as I reached a black door sprayed in red, silver, gold, and glitter graffiti paint. It was clear that this artistic touch is meant to give a mystical look. The informality of the business started showing in how casual the appointment was. Mamdouh did not answer, although I could hear the phone ring on the other side of the door. A few rings later, I heard his ringtone mixed with Jannah's voice shouting at him. I could not hear what she said exactly, but it was clear that he did not inform her of the appointment. He told her to just open the door, which she did. She looked confused but tried to remain polite. I tried to throw a

joke to break the ice and asked her, "did I come in an inappropriate time?" She laughed and welcomed me inside.

On the left side of the door is Jannah's desk, with her certificates and awards hanging on the ceiling. This was clearly where she films her videos. Her house is an apartment with black and red furniture in her living space, where we sat. In there are plenty of symbolic pieces that rested on her coffee table and in her cabinets. These included pharaonic goddesses, Islamic manuscripts, crystals and gemstones, Virgin Mary figures, and a picture of Jesus Christ. These symbols show Jannah' belief, which is pantheistic in nature. During our conversation, she mentioned that she believes in every religion and takes aspects from both Abrahamic and south-Asian religions to form her belief system, which is incorporated that in her modality. My session went relatively smoothly. However, operating from a heavily crowded residential area in Cairo made the sounds, cleanliness, and privacy aspects of Jannah' space poor. The sounds of barking dogs, people on the street, and her two sons chitchatting were overwhelming throughout the visit.

This experience created a redefinition of longstanding prejudiced ideas about from-home practitioners and unfixed prices. I first thought that this un-fixation depended on the type of service provided, but it turned out to be circumstantial. I paid half of the price I agreed with Mamdouh on, even though I stayed for a longer duration. So, the price clearly depended on the relationship she has with the client. This raises questions about how the services' monetary value is determined and how it reflects how spiritual healers value their services. Additionally, during our conversations, Jannah explained that she operated from a clinic-like space that the government shut down, which made her start her channel and offer her services at home. This was also explained by different practitioners and shows that sometimes they need to play the system to keep their businesses open. These questions serve as the basis for the contestation

between the Egyptian economic, governmental, and medical institutions and individual practitioners and wellness spaces. An analysis of this contestation is going to be in chapters three and four.



Figure 9: A screenshot of Jannah' video's setup



Figure 10: Jannah' door.

## Mindfulness Made Easy: Healing in Busy Modern Times

Technological advancement and the rise in the numbers of social media users and online applications create opportunities and make day-to-day operation easier for businesses. Online spaces enhance marketing, make appointment booking easier, and create space for answering clients' inquiries. These spaces are created in meticulous ways with attention to aesthetics as well. With modernization and demystification being the goal, businesses and practitioners use technology as a tool to familiarize the general public with their services. This section analyzes these online platforms' creation and curation, focusing on applications that offer spiritual and energy healing services. The significance of online platforms and/or applications is that they give anyone access to the service; anyone around the world can seek and benefit from the services of practitioners from different places in the world, as long as they can afford it. This would not have been the case if this research was conducted a few years back where access would have been an obstacle because these practitioners were, and some still are, frowned upon and deemed fraudulent. Finding a practitioner and having the ability to book an appointment with them would not have been as relatively straightforward as it is today. Applications give seekers access to the services online whenever they may please, as long as they pay. This shows how technology directly affects the 'scheduling' aspect of the services because it makes the services accessible 24/7. This all fits under the concept of businesses wanting to bring or create Ashrams next door because it is now not only next door but also one click and card transaction away.

I was looking for tasseography practitioners online and stumbled upon an application called *Kaave* – Coffee Cup Reading. *Kaave* is a Pakistani word meaning diligent search, inquiry, and scrutiny. The application's name shows that it caters to people with inquiries about their lives and helps them find answers. The icon of the application has an old woman holding and looking at a coffee cup. This fits the prejudice created towards traditional modes of

operation for coffee cup reading, which views them as being offered informally by white-haired older women. The steps of getting a reading are simple you: 1) Install the application, once you open the application, a mystical soundtrack plays then 2) pick one of three virtual fortune-tellers, 3) fill in a personal information form, and 4) take pictures of the patterns created by turning your cup upside down for five minutes and 5) upload them. Afterward, voila! You are granted a reading. *Kaave* offers three free virtual coffee-cup readings to its new users. That being said, the subscription rates range from EGP 70 (\$4.40) for a single reading to EGP 2,700 (\$169) for a giant pack that offers 50 readings. The application is created by a company called Didilabs BV, which also owns an application called *Mistik Tarot*. This application operates the same way *Kaave* does. The problematic thing about these two applications is that they are both childish in the sense that the client or seeker gets a reading by a cartoon character, which is similar to the popular horoscope and advice-giving applications that give one-size-fits-all statements and advice. Even though this is the case, *Kaave* has over 10,000,000 online installs worldwide, and it also claims that it had provided over a million readings for people since its start. There are no real practitioners that you get in touch with for help. However, this is not the case for the following fortunetelling applications, *Hazzi* and *Basirly*.

*Hazzi* and *Basirly* are based in the Middle East, and they get the users in touch with real practitioners from around the world. They both offer eight different services (Tarot Reading, Palmistry, Love Consultation, Face Reading, Dream Interpretation, Spiritual Healing, and Horoscopes). *Hazzi* is an Arabic application; the app itself is Arabic, and practitioners are of Arab origin and send the Arabic language readings. It has over 100,000 online installs, and its in-app purchase prices range from EGP 90 (\$5.65) to EGP 5,634 (\$353). The word *Hazzi* means my luck in Arabic, and it shows the purpose of the application. On the other hand, *Basirly* is an application that operates in English solely. Even if some of the practitioners are Arab, they send the readings in English. Its tagline is 'Talk to real psychics live,' which explains the

services it offers. It has over 500,000 online installs, and its in-app purchase prices range from EGP 90 (\$5.65) to EGP 3,500 (\$220). *Basirly* is an Arabic word that comes from the root word *tabseer*, which means insight. It is commonly used in the Levant countries' pop culture, and it directly translates to 'look for me' or 'give me insight'. After installing the application, the user fills in their information, including date of birth and mother's name. The user then selects a service from the ones mentioned above, then a long list of practitioners appears with different online coin prices. These coins are called Basirlees in *Basirly* and Hazzi liras in *Hazzi*. They are bought in packages and paid for online via the App Store or Google Play. When I first installed the applications, I decided to get a reading from each one. After paying for the service, I got an email and a notification saying that my readings are ready. When I pressed the link, I found voice recordings from the practitioners; an Indian tarot reader from *Basirly* and a Syrian tarot reader from *Hazzi*. My reading from *Hazzi* was general and relatively shallow, but the one I got from *Basirly* was precise and informative. Whether these applications work or not is not the objective of this section. The focus is on practitioners' presence online to shed light on the rise of popularity and access to new age spiritual and energy healing modalities, especially for fortunetelling and spiritual consultations.

These applications, above, offer one-on-one or more personal services. However, viral applications offer different energy and spiritual healing services such as guided meditations, meditative music, sleep stories, and talks. While conducting my fieldwork, I vowed to meditate regularly. I started viewing meditation as an effective self-care tool, but I had to find a way to integrate it into my busy days. Self-care is a concept that is used in several aspects of well-being. Koch (2015) looks at spiritual, magical, and alternative healing methods as self-care activities for modern-day people. For some Egyptian millennials, self-care is used to express their interest and prioritization of giving some time of their days to take care of their minds and bodies. Self-care can be achieved in several ways, such as eating a wholesome meal, reading,

doing your nails, applying a facial, going to the hairdresser's, getting a massage, and several other activities that entail giving oneself 'a treat'. In recent days, self-care started to include alternative healing practices such as trying out Chinese medicine or spiritual and/or energy healing to heal some imbalances or mild illnesses one might have (Ibid, p. 438 – 441). During this time, I did not have any time for self-care per se, so there was no chance of meditating every day at home, let alone join one-on-one or group meditation sessions. This was still a commitment with my busy schedule, so I figured that the only way to keep the promise is to install and try out two meditation applications: *Insight Timer* for sleep and anxiety and *Calm* for meditation and sleep stories. After I took a look at the applications, I figured that since I did not have the time to meditate during the day and already had problems sleeping, I should try 'sleep meditation,' which I did.

The first application, *Insight Timer*, has over 10 million users around the world. It is a TIME's app of the year award winner and was named the 'happiest app in the world' by Tristan Harris. The application offers several meditation tools that leading meditation teachers and musicians give. The second application, *Calm*, which is more popular, has over 50 million downloads worldwide and is ranked the 14<sup>th</sup> application in health and fitness according to Apple, which also named it app of the year in 2017. They both offer different kinds of guided meditations, sleep meditations, music, kids' mindful movements, and spiritual courses/masterclasses. They also have free features yet still have 'premium' features that are costly. For example, the full *Insight Timer* option costs \$60 annually, and the premium access to *Calm* costs \$77 annually. An interesting thing I came across is that *Calm* offers a \$400-lifetime subscription package. This package sheds light on the importance of meditation, especially one that is made easy. It shows that some people consider these services as a daily lifelong necessity. After using both apps to help me sleep, I found *Insight Timer* more helpful as its free guided meditation sessions and sleep music tracks are more diverse and more



effective. Now, months after using it, my sleep patterns highly improved. I really cannot tell if it happened thanks to sleep meditation solely or the mixing of healing modalities that I experienced during this time, but it improved. I also recommended it to several people, who also viewed it as effective in alleviating some of their afflictions.



Figure 11: Basirly's palm reading process.

## Is the Zen Aesthetic Enough?

Wellness and holistic healing businesses strive to create and curate spaces that fit the 'Zen' aesthetic to develop a solid brand for themselves and give their clients optimal experiences. That being said, fieldwork showed that even with these businesses' efforts to have coherent and consistent aesthetics, clients still need the spaces to be formalized to trust them. The aesthetics help attract seekers who are already familiar with the practices, but it can be viewed as insufficient in attracting curious and still skeptical people. For some, the solution to this skepticism is formalization. This formalization depends heavily on the credentialism and certification of the practitioners themselves. Now that most spiritual and energy healing practices are globally formalized by organizations that certify the practitioners, certified practitioners have leverage in relation to employment and the number of clients. This resulted in the creation of an industry of healers. This industry will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

### **3) Spirituality as Service: Meaningful Actualization, Agency and Awakening**

The increasing attention given to spiritual and holistic healing practices led to their commercialization and commodification, which then changed them to consumption products. Humans of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seek healing services and buy objects to improve their minds, body, and soul and heal their afflictions. There is an abundance of conflicting literature that analyzes how formalization through commodification affected spirituality and wellness from a Western perspective. This leaves the non-Western view understudied. In this chapter, I outline how Egyptians, who seek those types of services, perceive the different modalities and their abundance and make meanings of their decisions, which helps introduce a classical sociological debate that critiques the availability and abundance of spiritual services. I then juxtapose these ideas, such as the spiritual supermarket, against their critics who support the accessibility of such services and view them as having a positive impact on the greater good. I position myself with the critics of the spiritual supermarket by showing how credentialism and commodification, although available, are hard work. I do this by using my interlocutors' voices of spiritual and energy workers and facilitators and my own experiences. These experiences underline another layer of my critique to the critique of availability and accessibility, where I argue that New Age thinkers tend to over-ritualize these practices conceptually to question ritual efficacy even if individuals do not relate to these modalities as rituals. This also resonates with collective and individualistic performances of spirituality where different people from different cultures carry out similar activities and buy products that reflect certain beliefs and affiliations. I end this chapter by arguing that instead of using Marxist and modernist ideological explanations, it is more holistic and encompassing that theorists analyze the discursive nuances, and the meanings people hold, in the Foucauldian sense, when researching spirituality and how it relates to economics, careerism, commodification, and capitalism.

## Egyptian Holistic Wellness

“*Al Akl Al Saleem Fi Al Gesm Al Salim*”. This is a famous Arabic adage that translates to “the healthy mind is in the healthy body.” parents and teachers of Egyptian children have used it for decades concerning eating healthy. This highlights how it is rooted in the Egyptian culture that both the mind and the body are essential for becoming a healthy person. This concept resonates with ideas that relate to wellness and holistic healing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because, on the one hand, wellness is the pursued goal of being in a state of good health. On the other hand, holistic healing is the merge of teachings found in the energy and spiritual healing modalities with religious and psychological methods. This merger, or what Mijares (2002; 9) calls ‘sacred marriage,’ helps the experience of healing become more profound and consequently more beneficial. Psycho-spirituality depends on notions of universality and inclusion. The goal is to integrate the two concepts, methods, and teachings to create a shift in how people’s perspectives at the world by making them recognize and understand their inherent and core values that derive from human nature and experience. With the rise of attention given to becoming healthy and/or taking care of oneself comes the need for wellness and holistic services and places that suit the seekers’ different needs in Egypt. What healing means with a Western perspective in a Western context is extensively researched and found in the literature. However, the focus on how non-Westerners, especially the Global South, relate to wellness is understudied. The existing literature only focuses on touristic wellness experiences and places from a Western perspective, which is not conversant with how non-Westerners view and benefit from traditional or globalized wellness practices as locals (Annavarapu, 2018). Consequently, there is almost no literature on how individuals, businesses, and institutions in the Global South perceive healing and spirituality, especially in Egypt.

Among several MENA countries, Egypt is known for having several mystical and spiritual practices that people seek healing and wellbeing, such as *El-Zar* and *el-Hadra*. Even though these practices are also deemed unlawful healing practices that fall outside the central cultural and religious doctrines, they are less frowned upon by the Egyptian state because they are not considered services. My focus is on procedures that involve the exchange of money for the promise of healing and/or foreknowledge because the crackdown is on healers that turn their practices into services in exchange for cash. The idea of exchange is prevalent in any discussion of religious, magical, or witchcraft healing in the sense that historically, people exchanged sex and blood for magical and spiritual help. With modernity and the rise of capitalism, the exchange became with money (Bowie, 2000; Bähre, 2002).

The state, with its religious and medical establishments seeks to prohibit these ‘illicit’ practices and practitioners, which will be further discussed in chapter four. However, it is essential to note here that what partly accounts for this deleterious positionality is that some, if not all, these businesses are off the books, meaning that they operate off the radar. (Venkatesh, 2006). “Indeed, following this line of questioning, it may be that by focusing upon alternative spiritualities it will be possible to bring to the fore a wide range of alternative economies, which we will call esoteric economies that have been largely overlooked” (Bartolini et al. 2013). Egypt has many small businesses and service providers that operate and carry out their activities underground to sustain a living because of the complexity of paperwork and bureaucratic processes and the rise in taxation. Underground and informal economies do not necessarily mean that the activities are illegal, but because under neoliberalism, any economic activity that takes place outside of or is not reported to the state is deemed illicit. However, it can be said that there is a grey zone between legal and illegal and formal and informal economies where these practitioners operate (Galemba, 2008). This creates a marginal and liminal position for the practitioners and their businesses where they are constantly forced to

validate themselves. Some businesses give attention to aesthetics, as detailed in the previous chapter. Others use legal paperwork created for and used by human development institutions and sports consulting agencies to operate within the state's structure. Others pursue professionalism, credentialism, and certification to gain legitimacy. These efforts result in these services' pervasiveness regardless of the actions carried out by the state and other constituencies to limit them. The following section focuses on the inclusion of money exchange with spirituality. It is a concern for the Egyptian state today. Still, it has also been an unsettling activity for New Age spiritual thinkers who critique it as a commodification of spirituality tends to devalue the practices.

### **The New Age yet Static**

From staying fit, going to the gym, practicing yoga, to going to a sound healing or a soul reading session, wellness projects and self-care routines are becoming popular interests and demands of the modern-day person. This led to the commercialization of wellness products and services that fit this pursued goal, producing self-identities (See Lasch 1979; Slater 1997; Warde 1994). Even though this notion is constantly critiqued by New Age thinkers that follow leftist and Marxist ideologies, it results in the secularity of belief, which gives individuals a reason and room to seek self-fulfillment and their contentment (Belk et al., 1989). Furthermore, a postmodernist religious perspective adopts an individualistic approach to spirituality as it encourages humans to be 'free subjects' and choose "whatever has diffused through culture, from sometimes disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, to satisfy their requirements for self-development or self-actualization" (Woodhead and Heelas, 2000, 272). This speaks directly to my own experience with diverse hybridized spiritual and alternative healing along with the perception of practitioners and seekers of its modalities as they also divulged that individualism has a direct positive effect on spirituality. During one of my conversations with a popular energy healing facilitator, Heba Anis, she noted that she uses her own modality,

which she created to help people. She explained that “it is a combination of Sufi healing with hypnotherapy, theta healing, grounding exercises that I was gifted by the creator to teach, aura reading that I developed intuitively on my own and physical healing as well through my studying and practice and what God gave me knowledge for.” This conversation showed different layers of the hybridity of spiritual, psychological, Muslim and Eastern traditions. This hybridity is going to be discussed in chapters four and five. However, what is important to note here is how all of these techniques that have been “diffused through culture” are combined in one holistic healing session for the seekers to reach the most effective and, in this case, appropriate experience and outcome that benefits their ‘journey’.

This spiritual and religious individualism pattern created a market for social and spiritual products, where individuals seek and consume self-actualization. Like most markets, the market of spirituality includes both goods and services. Carrette and King sarcastically critique the commercialization of spirituality as they state that “alongside TVs, hi-fi systems, washing machines, IKEA furniture, and designer clothes, you can also have your very own spirituality, with or without crystals! [ . . . ] You can buy your way to happiness with your very own spirituality, cut off from all the sufferings and ills of the world and index-linked to the latest business success [ . . . ] spirituality has arrived in the corporate marketplace. All that is required is a desire to consume” (2005: 53). That being said, Starret (1995) notes that the onset of mass production techniques and the requirements of a market-driven economy have led to the proliferation of objects that can aid an individual’s spiritual journey (See Thomas, 2009). After taking several courses, I found it necessary that I purchase things like crystals, oils, tarot cards, among other things, to be able to practice. If it were not for the availability of these objects in the Egyptian and global market, I would not have been able to help my friends and family or practice self-healing.

Framing healing as a journey might be viewed from a New Age leftist point of view as businesses' and practitioners' plan to guarantee their clients' loyalty and the fact that they will need to come back for more sessions of the same modality or different ones. I argue that even though getting a session or a course frequently results in booking other sessions or buying some crystals and oil, healing is a non-linear process that requires hard work and helps others become better or heal afflictions. So, concepts of workability and becoming help in critiquing the leftist critique of spirituality as journeys. Mijares' (2002) notion of psycho-spirituality tackles how every person has unfinished personal work that needs one's proper attention because "clearly, our external relationships mirror our intrapsychic world. Our psychospiritual work includes listening to, learning from, and healing our wounded unresolved and incomplete feelings", which requires "the recognition that we are all workable just as we are. Workability implies that we are open to our experience, that we are willing to see it clearly and regard ourselves with compassion. When we see that we are workable, we are on the path to uncovering our brilliant sanity" (41). This path of uncovering one's brilliant sanity involves analyzing the inner self. Inner self refers to the humans' spiritual and emotional aspects, which can be considered the person's true nature.

The goal of spiritual healing in 2020 is similar to the pursuit of Pagans in 1992 Britain, where individuals in the pagan occult emphasized the power of developing the authority of the voice within. They stress the importance of giving agency and attention to one's true nature. In the present, there is a universal concentrated focus on finding inner peace. Inner peace is an intentional state of psychological or spiritual serenity that humans try to reach regardless of the possibility of different stresses. With the intensity of the high-paced lives people of the modern world are leading, the idea of attaining inner peace is propagated, advertised for, and practiced in our everyday life. It is regarded as the ultimate goal of the modern-day person. This is critiqued as the commodification of the soul itself, where the stresses of everyday life are



portrayed as the thieves of one's soul. This person's purpose becomes the reclamation of the inner self (Bartolini et al., 2013). That being said, "both the New Age and contemporary magical practices reflect cultural transformations in the West, involving a shift from what some have termed 'paternalistic' authority to autonomous authority – a search within the self rather than acceptance of having meaning conferred externally" (Anthony and Ecker 1987:9; Kohn 1991 in Greenwood 2000: 10).

Accordingly, to find your true inner self, you consciously and intentionally lose yourself to re-find your true inner self. You try and become more whole. "Thus, the otherworld is also the inner world; it is both internal and external – a combination of personal and social experience that involves a paradox of going out of the self to find the self within – and is specifically different for everyone. The otherworld exists within the self" (Greenwood 2000; 27). Alyah, the tarot reader, emphasized the importance of finding one's inner self by doing one's inner work when she told me her story; "I started my own inner work journey. I left my work, which was mainly corporate. I used to work at the GAPP department at The American University in Cairo. I also taught English at Berlitz. They both drained my energy of enjoying work. I was in that space. I could not do this anymore. Something inside died every day. I was in zombie mode. I then started having a 'Alyah where are you' voice that guided me to leave and start focusing on inner work". This reverberates through most of my interlocutors' experiences/journeys.

### **Healing as Delicatessen?**

Being in the corporate marketplace helped spirituality gain attention online, and this rise of technological and online spirituality created unprecedented access to New Age services (Kale, 2004). As aforementioned, technological advancement and online social media platforms helped enhance seekers' experiences, especially regarding access and familiarity. Whether online or in-person, consumption then became a tool for creating self-identities and a

vehicle for experiencing the sacred (Belk et al. 1989). The distinction between consumption at large and the consumption of experiences is found in the role of the affective relationships the clients (seekers) have with the experiences and the emotions they evoke (Campbell, 1987; Illouz, 2009). In spiritual experiences, some of these emotions are stability, calmness, serenity, self-love, and peace. Conservatively, individuals are systematized to find these emotions through teachings of formalized religions. The lack of fulfillment and rise in these individuals' unmet needs led to creating the 'free religious marketplace' (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; 124).

Consequently, Greenfield (1975) and Bowman (1999) claim that the abundance, accessibility, and availability of practitioners and types of services created what they call the "spiritual marketplace" for seekers of healing. The difference between the 'free religious marketplace' and the 'spiritual supermarket' is that the former does not limit spirituality to consumption behaviors and considers the consumers' agency to seek spiritual healing services. Contrastly, under the spiritual supermarket, spirituality is portrayed exclusively as a consumer choice that is relatively superficial and trivial. Rather than viewing the increase of mind-body-spirit mindsets and practices as beneficial for the wellbeing of individuals who suffer from mental, social, and physical afflictions, the spiritual supermarket views this growth as a marker of these services being overly commodified and capitalistic. New Age spiritual thinkers who follow ideas related to the spiritual supermarket add that this leads to losing the practices' actual value.

Classical sociological approach exclusively explains spiritual healing to self-identities, markets, consumerism, consumption, and capitalism. In this section, I outline several ideas of thinkers that argue against this contemptuous view of New Age wellness and spirituality and merge them with the voices and perception of my interlocutors to provide a critique to the critique of New Age spirituality with a focus on the 'spiritual supermarket.' Some of the already existing critiques focus on globalization's positive effect on new age spirituality, some

focus on market dynamics and consumers' agency, and others analyze spirituality's impact in the workplace. Rinallo and Maclaran (2013) criticize the spiritual supermarket concept as it does not consider the process where authentic spirituality is created and recreated with local and global aspects. Aupers and Houtman (2006) directly critique Stark and Bainbridge, and Woodhead's work as they state that "much research into spirituality is sociologically naive and immature. This not only applies to the research of those who are overly sympathetic to spirituality and hence cannot resist the temptation of 'going native.' Perhaps surprisingly, this also applies to the work of those who are highly critical of spirituality" (216). Redden (2016) follows up this argument where he advises against reductive market models and proposes that new age theorists take "the lead from work in other disciplines that increasingly shows how economic, cultural and social life are deeply imbricate." Shaw and Thomson (2013) present a similar point of view from a business and marketing perspective. They tackle spiritual consumerism in relation to uncertainty. They suggest that the uncertainty individuals go through due to the increase of availability and diversity under the spiritual supermarket evokes positive affective impacts on consumers.

Furthermore, the critique of 'the spiritual supermarket' and new age spiritual thinkers includes notions that focus on the inclusion of spirituality in the workplace through an organizational behavior lens. Neal (1999) presents evidence that employees welcome and have an increased positive outlook on the inclusion of spirituality in the workplace. Additionally, spirituality can help heal in the case of individuals in the workplace who suffer from marginalization due to their social identities or relatedness. In this sense, spirituality does not only help the marginalized individuals, but it also helps have an overall moral and socially responsible workplace (Byrd, 2017).

Ideas that relate to spirituality and human development in the workplace or the social realm at large were prominent in my fieldwork. 'Human development' is similar to wellness

and holistic healing. It is the process where one changes the surrounding material conditions that satisfy their needs to realize their highest physical and psychic, biological and cultural, individual, and social potentials. This notion has not included psychic potentials until recent times; therefore, it did not include aspects of spirituality and/or energy work. However, the addition of psychic powers shed light on its importance. This resulted in the popularity of modalities such as Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). Although considered pseudoscientific from a medical perspective (Sharpley, 1987 and Thyer, 2015), NLP is one of the most popular techniques or modalities today, especially in Egypt. Most of my interlocutors, practitioners or seekers, had consensus on NLP being the fundamental door to self-therapy and other energy and psychotherapeutic modalities. Neuro-linguistic Programming is an experience-based approach that focuses on one's neurology's physical, mental, and emotional parts. It relates them to the language and communicative behavior people have with others or with themselves. NLP helps by letting the individuals perceive their minds as internal systems that get programmed to overcome emotions, thoughts, and ideas that hold them back or restrain them from reaching their highest potential. It can be looked at as a set of skills that help people with afflictions that range from depression, learning disorders, and phobias to allergies and colds (Grinder and Bostic, 2001). Many holistic healing and wellness places operate under the human development umbrella, which is reflected not only in the way they market themselves but also in their bookkeeping (like *Sacred Flower*' paperwork). There is also an Egyptian agency called *Inspira* for training and corporate events; on the one hand, *Inspira* offers different training programs for corporates, such as business etiquette courses. On the other hand, it provides certified courses and sessions in NLP, cosmic healing sounds, and Reiki. The merging of the workplace, organizational behavior, and spirituality is gaining noticeable popularity to businesses today on the global level.

## A Continuation of the Critique of the Spiritual Supermarket

### - Meanings that Matter

The over-emphasis on the importance and effectiveness of modern medicine led to the negligence of wisdom and teachings. Interestingly, the main reason behind the start of *Sacred Flower* was the fact that, as she puts it, “*five years ago, this was not as advertised for or popular as it is today; even my husband thought I am crazy, but I had a sense of bliss after all of my first spiritual encounters especially that it meant that I have the ability and tools to help heal my kids with no medicine. We are not allowed to say, malhash lazma takhdo adweya, you do not necessarily have to take medicine because scientific issues will arise from people with medical backgrounds. I do not give the clients, who for example have depression, healing sessions only, but I rather give them techniques till they give the pills up*”. In holistic healing practices, both practitioners and clients focus on having integrative methods that combine several tools to deal with the healing process as a journey rather than a period that will eventually end.

Like any other service, there are practitioners that have straightforward and positive intentions and others that have unclear and negative ones. Some view it strictly as a service, and others that do it for the sake of helping others. This is the first problematic consequence of the commodification of healing because the experiences themselves can have several effects on the seeker. If the practitioners view it in a strict financial and economic manner, they might take a few two-day courses and start practicing with no enough information that they do not benefit their clients. The common aspect between good and bad healers is that they all get paid for the services they offer. This is the second problematic consequence of the commodification of spirituality and healing because even though accessibility makes room for people to familiarize themselves with beneficial spiritual and wellness options, whether it is a consumer or a spiritual choice, it still depends on their ability to afford the high price of getting or joining

a session. In the Egyptian context, it instead makes it exclusive to the upper-middle class to make this choice. That being said, the problem with this Marxist view on spirituality and commodification is that it analyzes everything with a market-focused and class-concentrated approach. This results in missing essential factors that shape New Age spirituality and seekers' choices, primarily rooted in deeper meanings and discourses that form their ideas. Hence, even though my healing journey was financially overwhelming, it was not at all an easy, passive, or, as Bowman puts it, trivial choice of consumption or transaction that I made.

I argue that even though commodification, hyper-consumerism, and capitalism have had unfavorable effects on holistic healing and wellness, my fieldwork and experiences were bare witnesses of how these modalities' experiences cannot be demeaned and depreciated to superficial or easy consumption choices like ones made in supermarkets. There is meaning behind every choice a seeker makes. This was vivid in Selim', a tarot reader and holistic healing facilitator, who answered my question on why he started seeking spiritual and holistic healing;

*“Awakening, suffering is the key to awakening, detachment of material life. I had trouble when I was 16 where I changed my school and went to a rigorous one. This led to me having chronic high blood pressure that put me in several consecutive comas. I got paralyzed from my left arm. I lost my karate career. I found myself stuck. I lost everything that identified me. I thought to myself, ‘who am I? Everything is gone.’ So, I started rediscovering myself from the beginning, from within. Yoga called for me at this point, when I was 17. During this year, I searched for yoga classes in Egypt and found one in Sinai. I went to Dahab in South Sinai for one day, attended class, and went back. I only had the chance to get a soda, a sandwich and left. At this point, I decided to register for yoga courses, and I watched my mind and personality change a lot as I continued to practice. I mastered my life and my mind”.*

The spiritual supermarket and concepts alike tend to dilute everything to economics, class, and capitalism. This lens does not consider the effect of commercialization on the formalization of these practices and how this relates to the practitioners' hard work and livelihood. I had a hands-on experience of being a service-providing practitioner because I decided to launch my tarot reading service in December 2020. It all happened because of a coincidence where I gave a reading to a friend of mine after I took the course, and he surprised me by creating an Instagram business page for me to offer my services. At first, I was astonished because I was unsure of my abilities since I only read cards for my family and friends, but the more clients I got, the more belief I had in myself. From the start of my journey, I knew that tarot reading is the modality I want to offer to people, but I did not expect to start in 2020. I knew this because of what it meant for me. Since, as aforementioned, talk-therapy did not really help me, my tarot reader really did. She, Alyah, was my inspiration as a tarot reader. The meaning I hold to tarot is very dear to me as I knew a lot of myself during my sessions with several tarot readers, and this is precisely what I wanted my clients to have. Almost all the people who came for readings since then asked me, why tarot? My answer to that was that there are several effects of tarot that just bring comfort to the listener.

I make sure that I let the person sitting in front of me know my three rules of thumb. The first of which is that there is no judgment because the cards reflect the person's current energies and how her/his psychological and spiritual status is affecting her/his daily life. I have always felt judged during counseling and therapy sessions, so creating a safe space is crucial for the person to be able to open up. I always tell my clients that the sessions are between them and their deepest issues; I was just a facilitator. I look at tarot as the cleanest mirror there can be. The second one is that the sessions are entirely confidential. I acknowledge that tarot cards/reading hold a very marginalized position generally, specifically in the Egyptian context. It is frowned upon with reasons rooted in religion, culture, politics, and modernity. So, I make

sure that my clients are confident that the idea they came for a session yet alone what happens during the session, remains entirely between us. The third rule of thumb relates to hard work, so I will keep it to the next section. This section is on meanings, and there is no better way to shed light on the meanings and values people hold and how much they value the sessions we have together than the feedback they send me after. I received so many great and humbling messages after the sessions, but the best two were from a client that texted me out of nowhere saying, "I went to see my therapist today and could not tell him half of what I told you during the session." The other one was from a client's wife, who texted me that she wants a session because her husband has been doing much better after his reading. She told me that his psychiatrist agreed to lower his antidepressant dose ten days after our session because he showed improvement. In a nutshell, the meanings my clients and I hold towards the sessions we have together are so much bigger than economic aspects, and the choice they make to come for a reading cannot be reduced or belittled to a trivial one.

#### - **Credentialism and Careerism: Livelihoods and Hard Work**

While all these sociological accounts and studies are over-concerned with the issue of modernity, aspects that are now directly related to spirituality, such as marketing, online presence, and how these healers operate rather fits in a postmodern frame. Moreover, New Age spiritual thinkers create discourses that tend to secularize, homogenize and oversimplify spiritual practices into social products that people can consume. However, there is an unquestionably huge impact of historical, cultural, and traditional wisdom and religion involved in the choices these seekers of spirituality make (Possamai, 2003). I argue that the analysis of spirituality with Bowman's 'spiritual supermarket,' which is a strictly leftist ideological lens, is limited because it does not take into account the counter-discourses that derive from meanings that reside in the voices of seekers and practitioners that benefit from the availability of these services. In their piece, Aupers and Houtman (2006) discuss how



participants who include spirituality in their workplace and everyday voice that “it takes guts” to find one’s inner self. This was also amplified when one of my interlocutors, the co-owner of *Sacred Flower*, voiced that “meditation is the thing that takes you to a different level of spirituality. It takes it from an abstract idea and transforms it into a practice. Every method and modality works differently for everyone, but you have to be clean as an energy channel. You have to work on yourself.” This significance and meaning of ‘working on one’s self’ is amplified on the ground in the Egyptian wellness industry as the fees for some retreats, sessions, and other services are referred to as ‘contribution’ and/or wellbeing investment. This renders wellness a personal and social asset that people should invest in as much as they invest in education, property, and health.

With the rise of the popularity of alternative healing methods comes the price of the rise of ‘professional,’ ‘careerist,’ and/or ‘market-oriented’ alternative healers. This section focuses on how, although there is a rise in the availability of spiritual and energy healing courses, it does not result in the devaluation or lack of authenticity. It is rather one of the few tools New Age energy, and spiritual healing practitioners formalize their practices to validate their businesses because they not only need the aesthetic and affective space to offer their service, but they also and, more importantly, require trusted practitioners in order to operate. Moreover, it is considered a vital livelihood to most of my interlocutors. On the international level, some associations and foundations serve to formalize practices such as Reiki, crystal healing quantum touch, tarot reading, and the most popular of them all, yoga. These are the International Association of Reiki Professionals, the Angelic Reiki Association, the International Association of Crystal Healing Therapists, Quantum-Touch.INC, Hands-On/ Energy Healing - American Holistic Health, the International Tarot Foundation, the International Yoga Federation, the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT), the International Association of Healing Practitioners, and the Energy medicine professional

association. These are some of the famous associations that operate on an international level and have the authority to credit certificates for practitioners online and via representatives/masters who offer courses in any country worldwide. The credentialism of the practices and practitioners leads to their professionalization, which proliferates these practices' commodification, and the rise of the need for spiritual healing and wellness in this modern moment gave space for more spiritual healing jobs (Bowman, 2002).

Carrette and King (2005) argue that because spiritual practices became a popular commodity in the global marketplace, its definition can be reduced to “a cultural addiction that reflects orthodox politics, curbs self-expression and colonizes Eastern beliefs”. This also relates to accusations of cultural appropriation, further discussed in chapter five. The focus of this section, however, is on how these thinkers and people who follow the same outlook question the authenticity of the intentions of these business owners by stating that these practices have been hijacked by individuals and businesses that profit from the privatization of religion (See Mijares 2002 and Bowman 1999). My conversations with owners and practitioners helped in analyzing and critiquing these unconstructive and limited views. When I asked Alyah about how and why she started offering her services, she said,

*“After I left my two jobs to focus on my inner/self-work, I did not have an income. So, I decided to make money because I do not have capital. I just had the money for courses; I could not sustain myself. So, I asked myself, ‘what do I have in me to start a zero-startup, what services can I offer, what can I do?’ The answer was tarot card readings. I started in 2015, and no one did card readings then. It was always questioned, so I was insecure about my ability. This is why I started with a stupid amount of money; EGP50. I felt insecure. I did not believe in what I was doing. I had issues with my own spirituality. I was too focused for a long time on my mind only, but the spiritual part was lost. Now it is much better! Several friends and even clients said, ‘Alyah, you need*

*to raise the price.’ It took me a long time to raise the price even to match the amount of time I spend on readings both energetically and productively. And I did. When people gave me more money, I knew I should value myself more. A few years later, in 2018, it started picking up, and that is when I can say that it turned into a business/service. That being said, it made me build relationships with my clients that I hold dearly. This changed it into something I enjoy. From then onwards, it became a more regular income because there is generally more public awareness about what I do now”.*

A similar story is Lamis Amir’s story of how she and Hossam Omar, her husband, decided to launch *Sacred Flower*. Her words go as follows:

*“I worked in the Spanish embassy for 22 years, but after the revolution, it was a horrible moment to be having this job. What made it worse is that I got a new boss; I assumed that ‘in other lives’ I was bitchy to her because the moment we met, we didn’t click, and she belittled me. Looking back now, we owe her this moment, me and Hossam, because she was the spark that got us here. During this time, though, I was the only paycheck/income in the house as my husband was laid off because the tourism industry was ruined during the revolution. I had to keep the job because my kids go to international schools; those are expensive! It is funny how I started my journey because I joined my first meditation session because of a Facebook ad. Mind you, it was not popular or ‘trendy’ at this time at all, five years ago. I joined because the sessions’ timing was convenient; they were offered on Saturday afternoons, which was suitable for me. After the first meditation of my life, I had a feeling of blissfulness. I then attended a Pranic healing presentation. All I could think of was ‘howa el donya fiha keda?’ ‘does this actually exist in the world?’ Auras and Chakras; It was like a window on something I did not even know existed opened. The facilitator then said the secret word, ‘you will be able to treat your children without medicine.’ That was it for me. I then*

*started joining courses and meditating regularly. At first, my husband made fun of me. He said things like 'fi shoa tale menek, homa sharaboky eh' 'there is a ray of light coming out of you, what did they make you drink?' When I got more immersed, he said do not 'convert' me. 'Lakom dinokom wa leya diny,' 'you have your religion, and I have mine.' We had a cute relationship where we live and let live. That does not mean that he did not still call me 'a witch'. A few months later, he had terrible pain in his shoulder, and I asked him to open a small window of acceptance and let me do distant Pranic healing for him. 15 minutes later, he called me in complete awe and said, 'what did you do? The pain is gone'. On the same day, I felt like I opened my arms wide, and he did too. We both did a lot of reading and research on the soul journey; he fell in love with yoga. We wanted to open a tearoom café, and we had everything worked out, the suppliers, paperwork, place... everything. Due to several unfortunate events, the plan did not come through. And at this point, we both reached a high level of spirituality that even when things do not work out, we remain strong. Our genuine passion then became to open a holistic healing and yoga center. We were waiting for the universe, telling it 'we are flowing and patient, flow with us.' Sacred Flower already existed, but I have never been there. However, we heard that the old owners wanted to sell it. We went to see the space and thought that its energy had potential, and we decided to make some renovations and open for business".*

These two accounts show how individuals who change their belief to services are not necessarily 'hijacking,' or as viewed by some, appropriating Eastern traditions. They are rather believers in these modalities and their benefits because they risk their livelihoods and incomes to provide these services for different people. From a counterculture perspective, these businesses are owned by middle-class individuals of a family that see a missing piece in the society, in this case, holistic healing, and create institutions and businesses based on their

ideological belief that it is for the collective good. So, a couple like the owners of *Sacred Flower* or *Alyah* has the social and economic capital that allows them to offer such services in a semi-formalized way. These businesses align with their owners' ideology so that they do not just keep it as a practice or an interest; they get certified in specific modalities and hire certified practitioners to offer different services. The fact that the owners and practitioners are middle class people who take an interest/ideology and change it into a service proves that these services can be positioned as a counterculture. The intriguing result of careerism and formalization is that countercultures emerge from seeking alternatives to norms and dropping out of modernity. However, hyper capitalism leaves very little room for dropping out and keeping things capitalism-free. This is also missing in the explanation of the New Age leftist theories. Practitioners, seekers, and owners of alternative healing services initially try to drop out of the mainstream and create their own ideologies and practices, but they almost always end up being forced to operate within the capitalistic and modern strategies (See Roszak 1969 and Martinez 2003). This mode of operation makes these services susceptible to critiques such as the ones created by New Age leftist theorists. These critiques, including Bowman's spiritual supermarket, focus primarily on the drawback of living under capitalism, which results in taking away and leaving behind the hard work and the meanings behind the decision to offer or seek spiritual healing. Another limitation of New Age critique is that it and presents itself as encompassing and inclusive. Even if we are all structures, the everyday and experiences does not stop there. The making of meaning is also missing. The moment at which the middle-class is fracturing and creating new ideologies and institutions, new discourses emerge. There is enough in this new emergence to be disruptive to the mainstream, which is the Egyptian hegemonic cultural project. Indeed, they have affected the mainstream because they affect middle class' expectations and aspirations to involve a certain lifestyle that is healthy by including wellness and activities like yoga and meditation, for example. The critique does not

show that the structures themselves and therefore the discourses continue to change and restructure themselves.

In my personal experience with self-spirituality and healing, I realized that there is no one-size-fits-all remedy to one's affliction; every modality and experience entailed some sort of anxiety unease as it opened up suppressed negative emotions that build up over the years, to release and relief them. However, one of the problems I personally faced was the rise of people calling themselves "healers", both online and in our face-to-face interactions, just for signing up for a course and attending it. When I raised this point during my conversations with several practitioners, they voiced and insisted that they do not accept being called or identifying as healers. Selim put it beautifully when I asked him about the idea of people calling themselves healers as he said, "holistic healing means practice, you teach people to self-heal. No one can heal another person; the person has to be willing to practice". Practitioners who share this mentality would instead be called facilitators, guides, or helpers. These statements shed light on how healers who offer their services intending to help others are, to an extent, different than ones who do it for the credentials, credit, and fame, even though they both offer paid services. Echoing Hossam's idea of being clean as a channel by working on yourself, as a practitioner in the making, I realized that one should heal first before becoming a healer. This healing is not ordinary or easy to reach because it involves facing their darkest thoughts, feelings, and actions along with their weaknesses and fears and working on them to find balance and peace and then start practicing or helping others (Sax et al, 2010). There are also several protective methods that practitioners need to understand and adopt to avoid harming the clients and harming themselves.

As aforementioned, the popularity of alternative healing methods increased the number of courses offered and created a considerable market for practitioners. These courses almost have only one obstacle or burden to join, financial ability. This also came with both negative

and positive aspects. The negative being that, although to become ‘true healers,’ they should be individuals on their own healing journeys as well, it is often portrayed as an easy-to-do job. It is as if the new age allowed anyone who can afford these courses to go ahead and start practicing on different clients. Even though I am aware of the problems with this, I am still pursuing it, which is the positive aspect of these courses' openness to the public. This is because as an outsider, with an interest that derived from skepticism, then a client, I realized that I could not fully understand these practitioners' and their client's perception of the services without becoming one of them. Hence, the availability of these courses, with the help of the financial research grant I got to carry out my research, given that at this point, the only obstacle was monetary, was crucial for this research to come to being.

My livelihood did not depend on the service I provide, unlike most of my interlocutors' livelihoods. However, it did and still takes hard-work for me to offer readings for people. This hard work is because 1) I need to continuously and consistently work on myself to be welcoming, nonjudgmental, and accepting. 2) I need to have a clear mind and be able to offer advice and ways to move forward. 3) I have to be straightforward about the obstacles clients need to face. 4) My third rule of thumb is that the encounters I have with clients are not limited to the readings only. When they leave, I have research, and I assign them homework. These can range from different guided meditations to academic articles, depending on their characters and preferences. This all shows the hard-work it takes to be able to offer just one service. This also does not take into consideration how time-consuming this is. The session itself may be one and a half hours long, but the work it takes before and after the actual reading can another two hours; that is three and a half hours per client. I am not at all here to whine or express discontent about my encounters with clients, but all these aspects show how it takes hard work to be an energy worker of any sort.

## **Nailing Healing: Accessibility and Efficacy**

*Nevertheless, the notion that ritual is ineffective is false, and we can show that it is false. We know that shamanic rituals heal, legal rituals ratify, political rituals unify, and religious rituals sanctify. Rituals transform sick persons into healthy ones, public space into prohibited sanctuary, citizens into presidents, princesses into queens, and according to some, wine into blood. (Sax et al, 2010; 7)*

Popular culture and conversations with people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds in Egypt proved my initial understanding of how spiritual forms of healing, especially those deemed ‘traditional,’ are also perceived as the answers or medicine sought by simpler and pitiable people. This view does not only refer to clients or patients seeking spiritual help, but it also refers to the practitioners. In this sense, these ‘traditional’ practitioners are dealt with as fraudulent and crafty underprivileged individuals who trick their seekers into believing that they have certain powers and can provide easily accessible enchantments that will make their lives afflictions better in a blink of an eye. On the contrary, going to courses that offer different modalities showed the opposite of this portrayal. Individuals take ascending levels of courses to get certified and, in return, pay large sums of money. This is to practice alternative healing on their loved ones or as a service in exchange for money. Going to the courses is different from sessions because they are significantly more expensive, reflecting a more profound belief that people have in these modalities. The rooms of these courses were always filled with 8 to 10 people who come from different backgrounds. The courses were targeted towards females, resulting in the ‘classrooms’ being almost female-dominated. There was no clear response from my interlocutors, whether instructors, business owners, practitioners, and/or clients, on the gendering of healing spaces and practices. That being said, some of the canons or, in this case, masters in Reiki, for example, are men like Abdulrahman Abdallah and Steve Gooch. Also, Ahmed Osman is one of the most prominent yoga instructors and gurus in Egypt today.



Furthermore, the practitioners take pride in having, or in this sense, convincing males to try out some of the modalities or courses. This was clear during one of my conversations with Celine. I took a crystal healing course and a quantum touch course at *Celine*, and when I first walked into the ‘classroom,’ I found Nadine and Yassin. Yassin is a military male in his 40s. I got to know this information because after the courses ended, Celine repeatedly stated that although Yassin spent most of his life working and being part of the military, he believes in energy healing and utilizes it to help heal his family members. Celine’s urge to tell me that and the fact that she did not comment on Nadine’s background showed that it was not very common that a man, let alone a military man, would join such courses. These ideas resonate with ideas of the internalized gendering of alternative and spiritual healing methods found in several accounts of traditional and new age healing in indigenous and Westernized cultures.

“Surveys of ‘patient satisfaction’ show that most of the time, sick people are more satisfied with treatment by ritual healers than by medical doctors” (Sax 2010; 9). Ritual healers help treat afflictions such as depression, bipolar disorder, learning disabilities, joint pain, and even cancer. These surveys show how ritual healers can be compared to medical doctors when it comes to the effectiveness of their treatments and the patients’ comfort and satisfaction. Spirituality is ritualized more often than not, and ritual entails performance. Ritual has been classically identified as “the prescribed formal behavior having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers” (Turner, 1995). This definition has been later critiqued or edited because it relates directly to belief in the unseen. Thus, it does not consider or account for rituals that fall out of the religious context. Ritual is rather a bodily strategy of acting that differentiates some actions from the everyday general actions or as Bell (2009) put it, “at a basic level, ritualization is the production of this differentiation. At a more complex level, ritualization is a way of acting that specifically establishes a privileged contrast, differentiating itself as more important or powerful.” (90) The difference between action and ritual action is that the latter focuses more

on culturally specific strategies that create differences between a ritual and an ordinary action. Formality, repetition, and symbolism are methods used to create a ritual, but that does not mean they are exclusively the only characteristics of all rituals. The most applicable and comprehensive definition of ritual with these modalities focuses on how “it is the framing of the actions, not the actions themselves that make them rituals” (Seligman et al., 2008). While the popular Western outlook on these practices is overly ritualized, the participants themselves do not necessarily identify with the sessions or courses as rituals, “but rather as dancing, or healing, or simply as “work” (Sax et al, 2010, p4).

Teacher training and courses' dynamics open room for discussions about rituals, performance, and, more importantly, ritual efficacy. To become a practitioner, one joins three levels of two-day courses. After completing six days or 36 to 40 hours and a final practical project, one can be able to practice energy and alternative healing modality. People question the practitioners' validity and efficacy nowadays because the duration of the courses is relatively short, and the fact that they are increasingly offered and advertised. Consequently, Mijares (2002) calls it a disturbing tendency for ‘new age’ practitioners to take a workshop or training course, read a few books and automatically ‘open for business.’ This is more than just false advertising; the in-depth inner and outer training and character development required to be exemplars and teachers is a sacred trust. It takes highly focused personal dedication, sacrifice, compassion, and self-mastery to manifest the realities of a true new age” (41). This perspective focuses on the ritualized symbolic expressions of the modalities that the practitioners carry out. That being said, Sax, Quack, and Weinhold (2010) argue that if people are keen on understanding or analyzing the efficacy of these practices, they should concentrate the embodied cognition of these actions (See Asad 1993, Bell 2009 and Bourdieu 1990). I position myself with their work because my interlocutors identify as helpers or facilitators. They do not adhere to the overly ritualized view of healing, and some of them also look at their

services as work. Like any other field or discipline, there is the possibility of having effective ‘good’ practitioners and ineffective ‘bad’ ones. There were practitioners that I swear by and recommend to every member of my friends and family, and there were ones that I specifically asked that they stop offering their services. Efficacy is not only a notion that emerges in situations where people question the validity of the practitioners or courses themselves, but it is also a question that arises in relation to whether the modalities as a whole work or not.

Without even trying the practitioners’ services, some believe that commodification of the practices led to their inauthenticity to the extent that they deem their effect purely dependent on placebo (See Heelas, 2008, Kwan, 2007 and Brody, 2010). Skeptics of spiritual and energy healing always bring up ideas about placebo to prove that the modalities do not work and that it is all in the clients’ or seekers’ minds. However, even modern medicine received backlash with arguments showing more placebo effects than physical ones. Hence, the master level in most certified practitioner courses always requires tangible and testable experiences that prove that the practitioner is at the level that helps heal people’s afflictions bears witness to how these modalities are proved to be effective. The root of the over ritualized critique of spiritual services’ accessibility that focuses on efficacy is similar to the root of cultural appropriation accusations, which I analyze and critique in chapter five.

### **Symbolic Gestures and Talismans: Performance**

Ritual relates directly to performance where the instructors and the students or the practitioners and the clients perform framed actions that carry deeper meanings (See Csordas and Lewton, 1998; Rindfleih 2005; Koen, 2006; McClean, 2013; Davies and Freathy 2014). Relating to spiritual healing, performance has a shared and collective side and an individualistic side. The collective refers to the shared teachings the masters teach in their courses, and practitioners are supposed to follow in their sessions with others. It is then passed down

knowledge of the how-to technicalities of each modality, and it is often compacted in a handout or booklet that is handed out to the practitioners-in-the-making to refer to during and after the course; these include the modalities' ethics, overall healing space setting, procedures, gestures and items to be used during the sessions. All Reiki practitioners, for example, have to start the session by placing their hands on the seekers' belly, breathe and move from there. When it comes to crystal healing, the practitioners have to place the crystals starting from the feet and move upwards to the crown chakra (located on the top of the head). Tarot reading spreads can also be looked at as a ritual where the seekers' energy is transcended to the cards; then the reader uses spreads that paint specific pictures to unpack the seekers' lives and afflictions. Some of the courses include an initiation ritual as well. At the end of both my Reiki 1 and Reiki 2 courses, there was an attunement ceremony where the master connects with spirit guides and other masters on the energetic level to initiate and include the new practitioners to the realm of Reiki.

Furthermore, the instructors and masters carry out most of the courses and sessions in English. This adds another socioeconomic layer because the seekers of these services and people who try these modalities have middle-upper class financial statuses with middle-upper class education where they learn English and become bilingual. This is the status quo to the extent that most studios and instructors that offer Arabic classes view this service as a plus. After shooting, editing, uploading, and offering over 100 English classes, the wellness studio I currently work for (Sukun Studios) decided to launch an Arabic section. Sukun BelAraby is heavily advertised as it was the edge this studio has. Relatedly, the instructors also tend to refer to the 'basic' facets of energy, such as chakras, in a manner that has a normalized undertone to it, which shows that even though there are no strict prerequisites for the courses, there is an expectation of the people who join them to have either tried sessions or done their research about energy-work beforehand. While the Marxist sociological New Age thinkers can look at

these aspects as devaluing of the practices themselves as they serve a certain class, the commercialization and commodification of spiritual endeavors are not a new concept that is limited to New Age alternative spiritual healing practices and rituals only. Every year millions of Muslims travel worldwide to carry out pilgrimage rituals in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. In 2020, the cost of hajj from Egypt costs from EGP55,000 (USD 3,500) to EGP125,000 (USD 8000). While this, from a spiritual supermarket perspective, devalues a ritual that has been perceived as holy since 629 CE, it still carries deeper meaning and significance for Muslims worldwide. It is also interesting to look at the Egyptian state's view on pilgrimage juxtaposed against its crackdown on 'traditional' spiritual healing modalities. I am going to analyze this in-depth using Foucault's regimes of truth in chapter four.

The commodification and increase of access to spiritual and energy modalities led to the rise in the creation and consumption of products used by seekers of these services. This is intricately detailed in Davies and Freathy's (2014) work (See [table 1](#)). The individualistic or personal performance here refers to incorporating spiritual objects in one's every day for the sake of self-therapy or as accessories that carry symbolic meanings (Zaidman, 2003).

“Commercializing a faith-based phenomenon is not a new concept as evidenced by the historic arguments over the sale of religious artifacts.” (Davies and Freathy, 2014; 1187) Different cultures and religions use additional personalized items that reflect particular beliefs and affiliations. Necklaces, pendants, bracelets, clothing, tapestries, and beads are some of the things Muslims in Egypt, for example, use as methods of protection and a sign of piety. Christians in Egypt also have crosses, tattoos, home accessories, statues, and pictures of Christian figures like Mother Mary, for example, to create a symbolic religious identity or show belief in Christianity. Furthermore, the blue eye or Fatma's hand is one of the most popular accessories and is prominent in most Muslim and Christian houses. Egyptians wear and include

these items in their every day as amulets or personal statements about their beliefs. These can all be categorized as talismans, which are stones and objects believed to have supernatural powers. Relatedly, Egyptians who identify as spiritual or believers in energy work use products such as accessories, alters tarot cards, incense, spiritual home accessories, crystals, statues of spiritual gods and goddesses, mantras, mudras, and candles. The use of these talismans is an example of the individualistic performance of spirituality and healing as people consume and use them as self-therapy or protection tools. By the end of my spiritually intensive fieldwork, I found myself wearing six different crystal bracelets, three other crystal necklaces, along with an Isis pendant for healing and protection, and a bio-geometry pendant. And all of these products, regardless of the belief system, are bought and cost money. My attention to detail grew as I also found myself checking strangers' necklaces and bracelets to spot a crystal or an amulet to strike a conversation with them about spirituality and healing. I acknowledge that some might view the practice of using or wearing symbolic talismans that do not directly relate to one's own culture as cultural appropriation, which is another accusation against new age spirituality. This accusation is the overarching theme of chapter five.

### **A Final Foucauldian Note**

The commodification of spiritual and holistic healing practices has been long perceived to have devalued their meaning. Still, it created opportunities for people searching for ways to heal themselves and others who suffer. New Age thinkers look at this commodification with a Marxist ideology that reduces everything to an economic imperative. Although there is no question that economics relate directly to New Age spiritual services, the notion of 'the spiritual supermarket' tends to narrow down and reduce people's decision of seeking healing to trivial choices that it, to say the least, neglects looking at not only what these decisions mean to these individuals, but also the effect these spiritual experiences have on them. Using only the 'spiritual supermarket' lens to analyze spirituality and its services results in missing

embedded cultural, economic, sociopolitical, and affective aspects that individuals experience during their 'journeys.' These missing aspects are things like meaning, careers, and livelihoods. Additionally, some of these thinkers and their followers tend to overemphasize ritual efficacy in making their claims that accessibility and availability of credentialism and courses devalued spirituality's authenticity. That being said, critiques of ritual efficacy, along with my conversations with practitioners and my own ethnographic experience of taking several courses, contrast this as they all conclude that it takes hard work and guts to become certified energy or spiritual helper.

I argue that in order to analyze New Age spirituality, the attention needs to shift from being on materiality, commercialization, capitalism, authenticity, and efficacy only to being on meanings and discourses. With Foucauldian discursive lens, meanings, language, practices change to belief, words, rituals, and livelihoods (Hall, 2001). While discourse analysis and institutionalization are the focus of the next chapter (4), Foucault's work provides a theoretical framework to my critique of the commodification of spirituality and my overall argument. According to Foucault, discursive formation is the representation of heterogeneous knowledge and meanings of objects and statements. The discursive formation of these services is narrow as they have a relatively small audience. He, moreover, discusses how discursive formations tend to change and be incoherent. Hence, even though the discursive formation of the commodification of spirituality has been negative and resulted in 'the spiritual supermarket,' it provides no meaning beyond market reductionism. That being said, I argue that new and counter-discourses create ruptures that create new meanings and implications for New Age spirituality that is driven by meanings and discourses rather than ideologies.

Furthermore, Foucault rejects ideological explanations of concepts, as they are incapable of capturing the complexities of these experiences by just calling them a

supermarket. If people just look at it as consumer therapy, they would not be anthropologically analyzing or studying the practices. The New Age Marxist argument follows the same regime of truth about the availability and commercialization of spirituality as the Egyptian state's institutions. Specific forces come together and create regimes of truth. Certain institutions propagate the regime of truth in order to maintain law and order. Islam and Christianity, for example, constitute their own regime of truth that follows the teaching of formalized religion. They create subjects and create objects, but they end up shifting because they cannot sustain hegemony for an extended period. This is because other regimes of truth constantly challenge them. It has not been the case that the Islamic and Christian doctrines that have been dominating people's spirituality and beliefs in Egypt get challenged by Buddhist, Zen, and/or Taoist ideas. From the state's perspective, these traditions and modalities are competing for the heart, mind, body, and soul of Egyptian individuals. How the Egyptian state and society perceive, prohibit, and sometimes allow new spiritual and alternative modalities to exist is the next chapter's topic.



## Learning to Sit and Breathe: A Fieldnote

*Breathe in, inhale. Breathe out, exhale.*

*I follow the instructor's voice. Her voice is becoming deeper and warmer. I breathe in. I breathe out. Tingling feelings overtake my body. My body is sitting still cross-legged. That is on the outside. I am still on the outside. My insides are shivering. The movement of energy I always heard of is there. It's moving within my soul. It's dancing with my body. It's dancing with my soul. My mind is struggling. It's struggling to find its place. Should I wander or focus? It keeps going back and forth. Back to reality and things like my to-do-lists. And forth to this beautiful moment of silence. Silence and relaxation are the goals. My mind is unable to get it. It's struggling. It's struggling with this being part of my work. And the necessity of wandering. Wandering was crucial for this to work. I know that! But my mind doesn't.*

Table 1

## Types of retail outlets offering spirituality products.

Category	Products include:
New Age/mind body spirit	Angels, Aromatherapy, Bath, Body Piercing, Body and Skincare, Books, Bumper Stickers, Calendars, Clothing, Crystals, Diaries and Posters, Candles, Cards, CDs, Crystals, Fairies, Gods and Goddesses, Herbs and Resins, Incense, Fragrances, Jewellery, Magical Supplies, Mythical and Magical Creatures, Tarot Readings, Palmistry and Mediumship, Oracles and Divination, Witches and Wizards
Occult/witchcraft	Athames, Chalices, Wands Cauldrons Altar Pieces, Incense and Sticks Incense Powders Oils and Oil Burners Herbs Roots and Resins Tarot, Crystal Balls, Pendulums Ouija Boards Scrying Mirrors and Bowls, Candles and Holders, Altar Cloths Inks, Pens and Seals, Boxes and Chests, Ritual Wear, God and Goddess Figures, Fairy Figurines, Dragons and Gargoyles, Egyptian Statues, Vamps, Runic Pendants, Jewellery and Charms, Magical Pentagrams, Gems And Crystals, Second Hand Books, Blank Books of Shadows, Greetings Cards, Music
Pagan/Wiccan	Aromatherapy, Crystals, Pagan market, (Jewellery, Athames, Chalices, Pendulums, Pentacles, Ritual tools, Runes, Spell Supplies, Spirit Boards, Tarot Cards, Wands) Angelic, (Cards, figures, smudging) Candles, Oils, Incense
Holistic or complementary therapy	Angels, Angel cards, Aura sprays, Buddhas, Beauty and Spa treatments, Bio Energy, Meditation and Celtic CDs, Crystals and Tumble stones, Detox Spa, Holistic Therapies Hopi Ear Candling, Indian Head Massage, Pagan Goddess Pendants, Pamper Parties, Reiki, Reiki and Crystal Workshops
Fetish	Leather, PVC, rubber, sexy underwear, collars, whips, chains; fantasy and role-playing clothes, jewellery, ornaments, postcards hair braiding, fortune telling, crystal balls and tarot cards
Herbalist/homeopathy	Glass Bongs, Books and DVD's, Comedown and Hangover Cures, Essential Oils, Ethno-botanical Herbs, Grinders, Herbal Tinctures, Incense and Holders, Pipes Chillums Glass and Bubblers, Plant Feeders, Presses and Extraction Bubble Bags, Rolling Papers and Blunts, Flavoured Papers and Rolls, Rips and Rolling Paper Tips
Fairy/fantasy/gift store	Fairy doors, fairies, dragons, angels, skulls, candles and incense, jewellery and hair accessories, mugs and glassware, party and dress up, miniatures, key rings and stationery, books, cards and CDs, trinket boxes, soaps and perfumes, decorative art, lighting and steampunk
Fair trade/clothing	Aromatherapy, Baby and Children's Clothing, Candles and holders, fragrant sachets, gemstones, incense and holders, Kids Toys and Gifts, Ladies Clothing, Men's Clothing, Musical Instruments, New Age books, Pendulums, Relaxing music, Tarot cards
National retailers	Angel Cards, Magazines, Figurines

*“Our bodies allow us to occupy space, experience the sensual world and interact with others. We take them for granted as coextensive, coexistent with ourselves; indeed, they are so much a part of us that our bodies and selves seem inseparable. Yet, the way we often think and speak of them implies something different. Each of us has or is a body – but there is a world of difference in verb choice. Do I possess my body? Or am I my body? Who is the I who has a body? How am I distinguished from my body? If I have a body, does that imply I am somehow separate from it? Alternatively, if I am my body, what does that imply about my mind, about my soul? Is my mind subsumed by my brain? Is the mind-body problem, as it is known, a problem confronted by people everywhere, or is it the result of a particular philosophical tradition? Is it the secularized form of Christian body-soul dualism? These are important issues dealt with primarily by philosophers and theologians. I forefront them here to alert you to the way notions of the body and treatments of it, are embedded in wider cultural frames of meaning.”*

- Delaney, C and Kaspin, D.  
(2017; 225)

#### 4) Body, Negated; Soul, Sanctioned

The notions of the ‘free religious market’ and the ‘spiritual supermarket’ portray people’s spirituality and religiosity choices in an individualistic and liberal sense. This individualization and freedom of choice did not well resonate everywhere. In contexts like Egypt, individuals do not have the space to practice their spirituality freely. Belief systems and practices are governed, systematized, and legitimized by the state and its institutions. The bodies, souls, and minds of citizens of such conditions are monitored and regulated by institutions to normalize some spiritual practices and stigmatize others. Foucault’s notion of biopolitics helps unpack how the body is the target of these expressions of power with a new dominance scale (1975). Concerning Egypt, there is a contestation between some of the practices and the prominent Christian and Muslim doctrines created, verified, and advocated by the state and its institutions. Egypt is sometimes described as *dawlet Al-Azhar w el kenisa*, the state of the Islamic Azhar institution and the Coptic Orthodox Church. So, it is not acceptable and often not legal for individuals to seek their belief system outside of these two central doctrines. This chapter focuses on subjectification, which is a result of governmentality, biopolitics, and interpellation. I use these notions to analyze how the body and soul are perceived by hegemonic Egyptian cultural project and, subsequently, many in society. I also use Douglas’ notion of rituals as dirt in order to analyze how these modalities and services are perceived and dealt with as dirt by the state and society. Moreover, I analyze how there is a sense of lack of transparency in the Egyptian Law regarding these practices and how the government uses this unclarity to crack down on them. The indirect laws that are utilized to imprison and sanction practitioners, contempt of religion and fraud, show the state is practicing both its religious and economic hegemony. This shows that the first problem, in the state’s view, is that these seekers create new regimes of truth that might dismantle the religious and cultural hegemonic project, and the second is the exchange of money in the process of healing.

I then look at the contradiction this lack of transparency creates because there is sense of permission and prohibition of practices that is directly dependent on notions of modernity and capitalism. The hegemonic cultural project is echoed in the media's portrayal of these practices. Hence, I create a brief discourse analysis of the hegemonic media that deems those practitioners charlatans. Finally, I end this chapter with a note on the debate between the mystical and the modern, the structural institutionalization of spiritual practices, and the hope for these structures' dismantlement.

## **The Body: Objects of Knowledge, Objects of Power, Objects of the State**

Power, healing, and curing abilities being practiced by agents not ordained by religious institutions cause some people to refrain from seeking such services. This results from either their own belief system and or their fear of the government and social heathenism. It is baffling for the Egyptian state, *dawlet al-Azhar w alKenisa*, that some practitioners can heal the body without medicine, heal the mind without prescriptions and heal the soul without praying in the ways they deem legitimate. The state makes a continuous and consistent effort of exercising interpellation over its citizens; efforts towards making individuals in communities internalize specific values and norms (Althusser, 1970). This interpellation of beliefs and religiosity contributes to people's refrainment of what the state would call 'unstructured' spirituality. Foucault's notion of governmentality also helps situate the position of alternative spiritual and energy healing in the Egyptian context as it can help explain the reason behind efforts made to criminalize them. Governmentality is disciplinarian in nature, but unlike repressive disciplinarian methods, it is dependent on the governed actors' will. The consent and willingness of the governed to both abide by and practice social norms advocated by the state is reflected in the fact that much of the censure, heathenism, and criminalization of practitioners of spiritual and alternative healing happens by everyday people (See Montag, 1975; Al Nasir 1988).

States use both soft ideological power and hard repressive power against these practitioners. This section focuses on the former, and the section 'What the Law has to Say' focuses on the latter. Soft power is evident in Egypt's case as the government uses its educational, religious, social agents and entities that are typically set outside of the state's control to maintain its cultural and social hegemony. "*A'adat wa takalid*," or habits and traditions, are also directly influenced by kinship, the media, among other entities, all echo the same rhetoric and ideology regarding what is prohibited or permitted. The social conduct and

regulation of ideology and the body or corporeal become tools of governance. The state then sees behavior, bodies, and individuals as an extension or projection of its central power. The meticulous supervision and control of everyday life are referred to as micro-physics of power, which are techniques of regulation primarily applied to the body. “Different discursive formations and apparatuses divide, classify and inscribe the body differently in their respective regimes of power and ‘truth’ (Hall, 2001;78). With modernity, disciplinary regulation became an individualized and private tactic; the body and self are then seen as a space for disciplinary and power exercise by the state over its people. Foucault stresses how the state apparatus creates “strategies of relations of forces supporting and supported by types of knowledge” (Foucault, 1980; 194-196). With the knowledge here being spirituality and belief, knowledge and meaning are created and understood through discourse (See Mauss 1973; Bowie 2000; Delaney and Kaspin 2017).

Foucault’s manners of objectification help unpack the relationship between the Egyptian state and how it tries to change individuals living on its lands to subjects and from subjects to objects of the state. He highlights how power changes subjects to objects of knowledge and language. These “manners of objectification” include having power over modes of inquiry, which entails giving science a hegemonic monopoly. Manners of objectification are vivid in the Egyptian context not only when it comes to the supremacy of ‘science’ and ‘the scientific’ over the cultural or the ‘magical,’ but also when it comes to the supremacy of Islam and Christianity. These two doctrines are considered sciences of religion and the arbiters of what can and cannot be learned, exercised, or believed. These manners also include separation and distinction strategies that divide societies into the sane and the mad, but more importantly, the criminal and the law-abiding. In Egypt, if you decide to believe in anything other than Islam or Christianity, especially crystals, energy, and fortune-telling, you have at best been misled and at worst seen as mad, sinful, and a criminal. Criminalization is state led. However,

classifying someone as ‘mad’ for their beliefs seems to be a more social act. The third and most internalized objectification tactic of the state is not exercised by it or its agents. It is, however, exercised by the subjects themselves. They change themselves to subjects by identifying with larger groups or structures; subjectification (1977). This subjectification is a consequence of the ideological state apparatus (ISA), which exercises interpellation to create and recreate normative values and practices through the family, media, education, Law, and the church. Egyptian individuals can believe in only specific standardized religions, rituals, and healing practices. Believers and followers of non-normative practices are penalized by the government, deemed charlatan by the society, and heathenized by religious institutions (Althusser, 1970).

### **Magic as Dirt**

*“A soul inhabits [man] and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.”*

(Foucault, 1975; 30)

While it is common for education to replace the church in contemporary capitalist societies, the Egyptian educational institutions, the church, Al-Azhar, and the family, media, and Law are reinforcers of the state's voice. Moreover, it is also important to note that Islam is perceived and dealt with as a religion or a belief system and as a curriculum; Al-Azhar and its followers give Islamic theology the status of science (See Hoffman 1995; Bano and Benadi 2019). This creates a more significant conflict against spiritual and alternative healing because people who seek these practices face accusations about how and why they do not see Islam as both the scientific and religious answer to all their problems. This creates a more significant conflict because the faith of people who seek these alternative practices is questioned, and, in extreme cases, being excommunicated has real legal and social consequences. According to Foucault’s theory on the utilization of punishment, the body has been transformed into a target of power. Punishment is exercised on the soul in addition to the body. It is as moral and



conceptual as it is corporeal (Foucault, 1975). Consequently, punishment and fear have been instilled in people to affect, control, change and determine their behavior with or without the existence and the presence of authority. Even though human subjects are the ones who create texts and discourses, there are always regulations and limitations that define people's belief systems. The subject is then a bearer of knowledge created by the hegemonic state-created discourses, which forces the individual to directly or indirectly to abide by rules and regulations (Hall, 2001; 79). Power relations and biopolitics change the subject and its relation to its body to an object; an object of power and knowledge.

In contrast to these accounts of regulation for order creation, disorder spoils and grants material for patterns to emerge (Douglas, 2002). Disorder then is the absence of public welfare and healthcare. These absences and overall neglect are some of the causes people seek alternative solutions like spiritual healing or seeking foreknowledge. Consequently, every structure creates liminality (Turner, 1974). The state and its institutions' beliefs and spiritual structure create liminal spaces for practitioners who remain perceived as unstructured and illegitimate. That being said, they persist on working and have seekers that persist on seeking their services. These healing modalities are seen as dirt because of their ritualistically disordered nature (Douglas 2002). Inarticulate powers, being in the weak's hands, creates disorder that falls out of the state's structure. One example of power being outside of the structure is Douglas' notions of the spiritual powers of *baraka*, which is the reverse of witchcraft. Although Douglas looks at the physically weak as the ones with spiritual power, weakness here does relate to bodily strength and political, social, and economic power or the lack thereof. The *Baraka* power does not belong to the formal political structure, the realm of patronage.. Thus, it does not reside and is not vested in the structures or, in this example, the institutions with the higher power. It rather floats within its segments. This notion cancels segmentation in society that is direct; *baraka* does not sit in one place; it can transfer within it.

One can look at it as an informal power because ordinary people who are not religious figures/officials with spiritual power are at the bottom of the social and power pyramid.

It is important to note here that psychoanalysis and seeking psychological help by professionals, whether psychiatrists, psychologists, or therapists, were frowned upon socially in the Egyptian culture. Doctors sometimes create backdoors for their patients to exit secretly. Similarly, patients sometimes faked their identity and used pseudonyms to avoid facing social repercussions of being viewed as insane. This was voiced by several of my interlocutors that seek help. Foucault's manners of separation that include creating binaries between the sane and the mad also help explain this notion where even legitimized psychological doctors and their help were perceived as being sought by insane people. Since religion was seen as the source that encompasses all human needs; the mind, body, and soul, the primary answer to people's anxieties was strengthening your faith, doing more good deeds, and praying. It was not until the 2000s when people started gradually normalizing seeking psychological help. It is also more evident in millennials and the youngsters to be vocal and open about their experiences and their sessions with therapy because some people of the older generations still uphold a position that sees psychological imbalances as shameful. Till this day, some parents still advice their children to pray or 'go back to God' rather than think of seeking psychological help. With this being the history of having social-psychological illnesses, it is not surprising that alternative and spiritual healing are frowned upon on a bigger scale. These alternative methods counter the prevailing social-psychology approach in Egypt, which seeks to resolve peoples' anxieties and differences through either religion adherence or, very recently, psychological and psychiatric intervention (See El Shakry, 2007, 2011 and 2017).

## What the Law has to Say

In Western societies, strictly medical and scientific institutions and their followers frown upon alternative healing practices as they deem them pseudoscientific methods with placebo effects. (Manderson et al., 2016). Although alternative healing is very rarely a part of publicly funded healthcare, there is no institutionalized or legal stance on believers of non-orthodox methods and teachings. Conversely, in Egypt, it is not just an issue of frowning upon these methods; it is a more significant conflict that results in the government's crackdown with its religious and medical institutions on the practices and individuals that utilize them. Spiritual healing, especially practices that are viewed as 'traditional,' involves many ritualistic aspects that are perceived as impure and dangerous (Douglas, 2002). In this sense, these rituals are regarded as unclean based on actual and symbolic power structures; they are viewed as dirt that needs to be cleaned. This purification of dirt is what the authorities/institutions do by portraying 'traditional' spiritual healers as tricksters and charlatans. This repressive 'hard power' is evident as the Egyptian government has the right to imprison and seize any practitioner's money. Consequently, the purification of rituals is believed to shape citizens into being good citizens, while the imprisonment of practitioners of services is believed to protect society against disorder.

The authorities crack down on traditional spiritual healers and foreknowledge practitioners with several methods such as imprisoning them, confiscating their money, reallocating it in government spending, and casting practitioners as fraudsters, tricksters, charlatans, and even heathens. The authorities instill fear and suspicion of alternative healing among the general population, which led me to presume that their services are illegal. The involvement of financial profit in the process is the main reason behind the authorities' detestation. Money made from illicit trade or service providers is unsanctioned money, and the way it is generated outside the regulated economic sphere that is monitored by the authorities

is what deems the industry an illicit economy (Roitman, 2004). That being said, in most of the encounters I had during my fieldwork, practitioners found ways around the system in order to legalize and formalize their businesses. There is some contradiction in the mainstream Egyptian hegemonic culture's point of view and law-enforcement tactics because the system leaves room or creates a grey space for practitioners who offer more 'modern' and fashionable services to operate within the economy but still in a manner that conceals their activities and places them in recognizable and legitimizing categories of business. Although there is no official law against practicing alternative healing, practitioners, especially 'traditional' ones, have always been convicted and threatened by two charges, contempt of religion and fraud (See Peters 1988 and Schank 2014).

The Egyptian government and its laws have an intertwined relation with Al-Azhar as it is its most influential religious institution. Shari'a law is a cornerstone of the constitution; Article 2 states the principles of Islamic Law (Shari'a) and situates it as the principal source of legislation (Lombardi, 1998, 2006). Al-Azhar's aim is "to maintain its institutional autonomy, to preserve its respected status in Egyptian society by maintaining its informal role as the preeminent interpreter of Islamic texts and traditions; and to safeguard and encourage the propagation of Islam" (Moustafa, 2000, pp. 12). Hence, the Egyptian community's hegemonic voice and state views 'traditional' modes of knowledge as inefficient, backward, and sinful. For example, most MENA countries such as ones in the Levant and Gulf regions believe in the evil eye, but not all people believe in healers' power to suppress or prevent individuals from its harm (Gluckman, 2014). class structures and spiritual orientation cause this. This is reflected in Article 98 (f) of the Egyptian penal code covering contempt of religion (izdira' al-din), a Shari'a law dating to 1982. Since the 2011 uprising, "the state has regulated speech under the rubric of protecting religion, provoking public controversy [using this law]" (Culang, 2018). It was initially put in place to prevent secularism after an Islamist militant assassinated al-Sadat.

Its relativity “expanded the Egyptian state’s ability to regulate speech under the rubric of protecting religion” (Ibid). The lack of transparency and implementation of ‘izdira’ changed it from being an anti-blasphemy rule to an ever-expanding tool for prosecution. Mariam Barsoum (2016) wrote a newspaper article on this topic in Ahram online. It goes as follows:

*“Egypt's anti-blasphemy law has been used recently to target several people in high-profile cases, including four Christian students who were sentenced to five years; renowned writer Fatma Naaout who was sentenced to three years; and TV presenter Islam El-Beheiry who was sentenced to one year.”* She continues *“Article 98 (f) criminalizes “whoever exploits religion in order to promote extremist ideologies by word of mouth, in writing or any other manner, with seditious intent, disparaging or contempt of any divine religion or its adherents, or threatening national unity, shall be punished with imprisonment for a period that ranges between six months to five years, or pay a fine of at least 500 Egyptian pounds.”*

### ***Interlude: Estefham and Questioning One's Position***

When I first started as a researcher, most of my friends, family, and acquaintances joked about me getting arrested and prosecuted with 'izdira'. Even though this was a joke, as the adage says, "every joke has a grain of truth." Accordingly, I feared being prosecuted with izdira' al-din just for studying belief systems, practitioners, and services that are not verified by the state. After taking a tarot reading course I decided to start my own small tarot business, *Estefham*; meaning a question in Arabic. My fear accentuated since I now became an accessible practitioner. A few weeks after I launched my service's page, an independent online newspaper called Egyptian Streets asked to interview me about my thesis, spirituality, alternative healing, but mainly about Estefham. I agreed to do the interview because the whole purpose of everything I am doing, academically and personally, is to make these practices and services more accessible. The article's title was "*Meet Estefham Tarot: Demystifying Alternative Healing in Egypt.*" The post's caption was "*Tarot Card Reading is a form of healing that's become more popular in recent years, but it's still quite uncommon, as research indicates that only 17.9 percent of respondents had used some form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine.*" A few hours after Egyptian Streets article got published on social media (Facebook), I was facing a huge backlash. The enraged comments were multilayered. The writer cited several well-known, reputable, and respected theorists, like Carl Jung, who advocate for tarot card reading modalities. This, however, did not stop commentators from viewing the article and method as 'backward' and 'unscientific.' I also stated that I do not tell the future in the article, but people's accusations were always heading in this direction, which made me change the business page's bio to: "If you're here for the future, you're in the wrong place. If you're here for a look into your inner self, look no more!"

I watched as a backlash against me unraveled online, seeing comments that range from "*I am surprised that the Muslim religion approves of this*" and "*satanic garbage. I hope the*

*Christians in Egypt do not partake in this demonic activity” to criticisms about modernity like “It’s not demonic. Some people are still backward in a modern world.” Some of these commentators questioned my whole education and went to say that it “sounds like someone couldn’t find a real job, so they made one ‘healing with tarot cards.’” The article was published on several platforms. So, an undergraduate student at AUC used Twitter to rant about it; she did that for two whole days. An excerpt of her enraged tweets goes as follows:*

*“I’m not about to push my conception of spirituality and CHARGE people MONEY for it and position it as an alternative to hEaLiNg and CONSULT people with my spirituality how they make THEIR lives better, with ZERO qualifications a7a? {fuck} in Arabic. And zero qualifications also includes taking courses from whatever place says it gives courses in a thing that claims is scientific/has real material consequences but isn’t supported by any evidence in the slightest. It’s 2020, grow the fuck up.”*

Ironically, the nicest comment was: *“be careful the Egyptian authorities might come after you for izdira’ or shirk... they are evil little incompetent and intolerant people who will not accept anything outside of Islam being a guide.”* Although this backlash was personal and took a significant toll on my emotional wellbeing, it was telling of what some people think of unseen methods of healing and therapy. These words left me questioning my positionality in the field. It was also counterproductive for this to be my first public debut as both a practitioner and an academic. The anger, accusations, curse words, and aggressiveness I received in the comments section led to my decision to take the article down, which is what I did. I thought to myself, *‘if I want people to get to know these modalities, I cannot get introduced to them as a business or service provider.’*

## Spiritualists or Charlatans?

One of the commentators also accused me of fraud, which is the second crime practitioners, especially ‘traditional’ ones, are often charged with and imprisoned for. Another newspaper article with the title “6 crimes that are not punishable by the Law... get to know them from your ‘legal advisor’” was published in 2020 on El Gomhoreya (the republic) newspaper. It is an Egyptian state-owned newspaper. In it, Azza Kaoud chooses crimes of practicing magic, quackery, and sorcery as her first example:

*The Egyptian Law does not punish crimes of witchcraft and sorcery and does not address them from near or far. However, according to the text of Article 336 of the Egyptian Penal Code, they can be included or fall under the crime of fraud. The punishment then becomes imprisonment for a period of 3 years with work and enforceability. That being said, the situation is different between the Sheikhs who perform legal ruqyah and the charlatans who perform acts of charlatanry and sorcery. Therefore, we must differentiate between two things:*

*1) Those who perform legal ruqyah without receiving financial compensation: Here, they are not legally punished on the condition that their actions do not go beyond the issue of the legal ruqyah. On the other hand, those who perform*

*2) Quacks and charlatans who get money from their victims: The Egyptian Penal Code does not punish the crime of witchcraft and sorcery, but it is included in the crime of fraud. The problem then becomes that the injured (enchanted by him) do not have the right to write any records against the sorcerer because there is no bond between them. Even if he was harmed, it is still a complicated crime to prove.*



*There are deficiencies in the Egyptian criminal Law because it does not address crimes that disturb and destroy the home and family, unlike the Syrian Law, Moroccan Law, and some Arab laws that punish and penalize against crimes of witchcraft and sorcery.*

*Article 336 of the Egyptian Penal Code stipulates that: Anyone who leads to the seizure of cash, bids, debt securities, cleared bonds, or any movable goods shall be punished with imprisonment and fraud. This entails deceiving people of the existence of a false project, a fraudulent incident, or creating hope of a false profit. It also includes taking a false name or an incorrect description. As for whoever initiates the swindle and does not complete it, he shall be punished with imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year, and the perpetrator in the case of recurrence may be placed under police notice for one year at least and two years at most.”*

So, even though there is no law that specifies alternative healing as a crime, izdira’ and fraud accusations, along with my own experience with people’s perception of me as a practitioner, are examples of how crackdowns on spiritual practitioners take place both directly and indirectly. Similarly, more people are pushing for laws against practitioners that offer services that are deemed sorcerous. The following article is an example of advocates for the imprisonment of spiritual healers and calls for a formalized law against them. *“A penalty that can reach the death sentence... A parliamentarian unveils a bill to prosecute quacks.”* This is the title of the article that was published in an online Egyptian newspaper, Masrawy.com. Masrawy is the slang word for Egyptian. The name itself connects this media outlet with nationalism. Moreover, its homepage has a Masrawy Islamic section, which shows the connection between nationalism and religious beliefs, Islamic beliefs. Masrawy is an Arabic Egyptian news web portal, which presents Arabic-language news, commentary, and lifestyle

articles targeted towards the Middle East via multiple social media platforms. The article, written by Ahmed Ali in 2018 and translated below, goes as follows:

*“The Member of Parliament, Mumtaz Al-Desouki, called upon the Prime Minister, Dr. Mustafa Madbouly, for the imposition of severe penalties for practicing acts of charlatanry and sorcery. He urged him to take legal measures to punish those who practice them. He also explained that despite all the swindling and fraud that the sorcerers practice on their victims, the authorities could only charge the accusation of fraud and extortion. And since the physical and sensory evidence on the subject of witchcraft is invisible, the only way authorities can make the fraudsters fall into the trap is flagrante delicto or catching them in the criminal act. Alternatively, they get away with it due to the absence of supporting documents or evidence. Hence, there is absolutely no legal possibility of prosecuting and punishing fraudsters. He explained in press statements that society is in need of further rehabilitation by raising the quality of education and awareness. And that this awareness needs to take into consideration and focus on targeting the groups most vulnerable, who end up falling into the clutches of these charlatans. He added that the Egyptian society needs to rid itself of these negative phenomena as they attract it backward and impede the progress of development. The deputy ended his statement by saying that he is going to submit a bill to increase the punishment for practicing acts of charlatanry and sorcery and that he is going to launch security campaigns to pursue witches in their own home and arrest them. Moreover, he noted that this proposition is going to make the punishment start from fine charges to death sentences, especially in rural areas and parts of Upper Egypt.”*

This article shows that, in 2018, a parliament member introduced a law against ‘practicing magic, quackery, and sorcery.’ Discursively, the lexical choices the writer makes

are noteworthy as he calls the clients and seekers “the most vulnerable” and claims that the practices “impede the progress of development.” Moreover, he adds that the people who are most in need of laws against traditional healing practices are people “in rural areas and Upper Egypt.” The fact that he views and characterizes seekers as most vulnerable shows that the hegemonic culture and the media view these services as manipulative, and that is the reason only the vulnerable are the ones at risk of being deceived. The second choice he makes about development shows the binary that is created between practices that are deemed traditional, coffee cup reading and herbal medicine, for example, and ones that are viewed as modern, like yoga and meditation. It also shows that there is a binary between ‘Eastern’ healing methods and Western ‘verified’ and ‘legitimate’ medicine, which fall under underdeveloped ways of living. He is also particular about the people who need this legislation most, not only that they are the most vulnerable, but also that they are located in rural areas and Upper Egypt, meaning that they are the ones with fewer chances at having an education and are considered backward. Overall, this article sheds light on the perception of the media and government officials on methods of healing that are deemed traditional, their seekers, and the binaries that are created between different modalities and clients.

### **Hiding in Plain Sight: A Brief Discourse Analysis the Hegemonic Media**

I found over 30 newspaper articles with titles like “the imprisonment of Al-Sheikh(a) ‘name’ for fraud.” The use and abuse of the word Sheikh is problematic because it is a credential that is supposed to be used exclusively for guides of the Islamic religion. However, the media uses it, along with its feminine synonym ‘Sheikha,’ to describe practitioners that have been deemed fraudulent. One of the most shocking titles I came across is written by Mohamed Ibrahim and published by Al Youm Al Sabea’ in 2018. The title is “*The Fall of “Sheikh Kirolos” after Making a Fortune of 18 Million pounds from Quackery*”. There are many layers involved in this title. Chronologically, first, the idea of falling is a metaphor that

shows how Kirolos, who is deemed a charlatan, had a high position in his business and profited a lot from “deceit,” but the government was able to make him face his fall. Second, the decision to call him “El Sheikh Kirolos.” On the one hand, El Sheikh is a Muslim title that is primarily and almost exclusively used to describe Muslim religious figures that, most of the time, operate under Al-Azhar. Hence, using it to describe a person who is a Christian and, by virtue of his practice, deemed as a charlatan is considered problematic in any other context. However, the hegemonic culture and subsequently the media calls spiritual healers Sheikhs. The article claims that he is known as Al Sheikh Kirolos. The writer uses quote-unquote when referring to him as Sheikh; in popular culture and stylistically, this is meant to show sarcasm. In a nutshell, the article and the government look at Kirolos Demyan as sarcastic material, and with the sarcastic quote, the writer was able to interiorize him and reduce any social status he had amongst his customers and social circle. Then the title continues with “after Making a Fortune of 18 Million pounds from Quackery”, mentioning a considerable amount of money proves how credible this person was and how much trust his clients had in him to the extent that he was able to gather this enormous amount of money from what the writer calls quackery. The idea of quackery opens a space to discuss how people from the inside (clients and spiritual healers) view him as a coach and his practices as methods and techniques healing, but people on the outside (the media, government, and religious figures) call these methods quackery and deceit. This relates to Van Dijk’s (2001 and 2015) idea on headlines and leads, which are used mainly in news reports and articles in order to grab readers’/audiences’ attention; they are also characterized by being exaggerated lightly or heavily. The wording of the title is deliberately chosen to grab the readers’ attention by using words like “El Sheikh,” quotation marks, and the addition of the exact amount of money, which is a lot, to the headline. This is just the title. The article, which is one of many, goes as follows:

*“The Public Funds Investigation Department was able to capture the most dangerous charlatan/imposter in Egypt, who is known by the name “Al Sheikh Kirolos” with fraud charges related to tricking and deceiving citizens in all Arab countries. This started when information circulated to General Aly Soltan, Head of The Public Funds Investigation Department, which showed that there is an individual called “Al Sheikh Kirolos” who deceives citizens and seduces victims from Arab and foreign countries under the impression that he is a spiritual healer who specializes in treating physical and psychological diseases and he was able to seize/takeover their money. The research and investigation team, with the leadership of General Assem Al Dahesh, the head of the Anti-counterfeit unit of the Public Funds Investigation Department, was able to verify the information and found out that the suspect is “Kirolos D.F”, who is 22 years old with a Thanweya Aama and resides in one of the Ben Yasser buildings in Al Omranyea Al Gharbeya in El Giza. The investigation revealed that the accused claimed his ability to treat all organic and psychological diseases with cosmic energy and obtaining scientific certificates from international and Egyptian universities and institutes. The accused also established fraudulent sites and accounts on Facebook in the name of the spiritual healer "Kirolos Demian" and published some of his videos, in which he shows some of the spiritual healing methods he uses. He also shows his ability to treat " sexual infertility, renal failure, heart disease, back pain, diabetes, cancer, visual blindness, paralysis and pressure" and psychiatric and neurological treatment, taking several apartments rented in Cairo, Giza, and Alexandria to practice his activities by manipulating patients. He also announced the granting of training courses in spiritual therapy and received large numbers of victims in Arab and foreign countries estimated at 30 thousand dollars a month and reached a fortune of 18 million Egyptian pounds. The review of bank remittances showed that it was from "Jordan,*

*Syria, the UAE, Libya, Palestine, Qatar, Tunisia, Iraq, Ireland, America, Canada, and Switzerland." Following the legalization of the procedures, Lieutenant colonel Amir Al-Babli, the officer in charge of counterfeiting crimes, prepared a security plan for the accused was seized. He found 24 certificates in the name of the defendant attributed to Egyptian and foreign universities that state that the accused has a Ph.D. in the field of Spiritual Healing, which was wholly forged. This all was in addition to a large number of accessories used by the accused in his crimes as tools for the monument and dagger along with seven credit cards and a laptop computer, which has all the work of the accused. He admitted to what is attributed to him, pointing out that he engaged in criminal activity four years ago, and his monthly income is 30 thousand US Dollars. A copy of the incident was sent to the investigation authorities."*

The article, translated above, is one of the many articles that are written on the government's crackdown, arrest, and the fall of many "daggalin" charlatans in Egypt. News articles clearly create an othering factor between the government (the officials who carry out the operation) and not only the perceived-as-guilty but also the readers who differ with those with power. This othering of spiritual healers by the media and government falls under the ideological square, which creates division. In this case, the binary is created between the righteous actions carried out by government officials and the wicked actions carried out by practitioners and seekers (Van Dijk, 2015, pp. 474). The wording of the article is chosen to modulate or reduce the intensity of the negative and sometimes violent actions of state representatives, as mentioned in Van Dijk's ideas on analyzing passive sentence structures and normalizations, which is then used in order to modulate or reduce the intensity of the negative and sometimes violent actions of state representatives. On the other hand, the idea of The Public Funds Investigation Department being the responsible agent in arresting him is interesting because his

money was taken by the government as part of national public money. So, the government's crackdown on an individual that heals people, whether this information is accurate or not, is normalized because this individual simply does not follow the conventional and legalized methods of healing.

Overall, the whole article, with its layout, is full of lexical expressions and wording-choices that create negative assumptions about Kirolos and his actions/case and positive assumptions about the government and its officials. In Vin Dijk's words, ideological square. This also relates to how Kirolos is portrayed as an individual that deceives and seduces victims in order to take their money. There is a sense of othering between the moral General Aly Soltan, who was able to capture him, the vicious Kirolos, and his vulnerable and gullible patients; this is evident in the choice of words like "deceived" and "seduced" that describe the seekers of his services. Moreover, othering is also evident in the lexical choices where the writer states that procedures were legalized, which is juxtaposed against the perceived as the guilty's certificates that were fully forged. Another discursive aspect is implications and presuppositions, which involve stating facts that are not necessarily true in order to give value to the social issue being discussed; this is shown in the statement, "*Kirolos Demyan was involved in tricking and deceiving citizens in all Arab countries.*" The writer and governmental officials also decided to claim that he is involved with people from 'all' Arab countries, which is logically impossible. A more important note is that The Public Funds Investigation Department was the main actor in the fall of El Sheikh Kirolos, which makes it clear that, when prosecuted, practitioners face charges that relate to fraud.

The crackdown on spiritual healers puts them in a precarious marginal position. Consequently, it puts their seekers in a similar one, not only because of their relationship and, to an extent, their dependence on them but also because of the lack of general public

welfare. One of the main reasons for social and medical afflictions in Egyptian society is the state's failure to provide adequate public welfare such as medical and financial assistance. When it comes to the social affliction Egyptians have, it is a result of the deteriorating economic status and hyper-inflation the country is currently going through. The lack of social and/or medical assistance by the Egyptian state is one of the main reasons citizens seek traditional spiritual healing and practices that are viewed as magical in order to heal or improve their standard of living physically. Another interesting category of practices to look at is fortune-telling, which also relates to the adverse circumstances people face. One of the reasons behind seeking foreknowledge is being in a time and space of uncertainty. This uncertainty and ambiguity for the future and what is yet to come causes affliction and anxiety that people try to decrease or resolve by seeking the services of fortune-tellers, who are also looked at as illicit actors and fraudsters by the Egyptian state. They might resort to different/alternative kinds of power because not only practitioners but also clients are generally marginalized people, especially if their affliction is driven by unfortunate social or financial statuses that are caused by socio-political structures.

### **Practitioners, Permitted or Prohibited**

While the body is still governed by both the ideological state apparatus, utilizing its institutions, and the repressive state apparatus by the crackdown using its Law, there is still room for more popular practices for seekers to pursue and practitioners to operate. The subject is produced within discourses, is the bearer of knowledge produced by the discourse, and subsequently submits to rules and conventions. In this sense, the ideas of inclusion of Eastern traditions in static religious individuals' life are permitted, within boundaries, in 21st century Egypt. There are slight changes in state structures, which empowered new modes of spiritual activity in welfare production. This is created by the pressure of globalization and



neoliberalism, where individuals from different countries advocate for and adopt different spiritual practices and belief systems. In Western contexts, “historical churches and their administrations are undergoing change due to structural changes in society, and there are new forms of religious body emerging” (Gauthier and Martikainen, 2013). This affected the long-upheld status quo in Egypt because we now see the surfacing of more hip and globally popular healing modalities and spiritual lifestyles.

The most popular of which is practicing mindfulness, whether it is via yoga or meditation. Mindfulness is now portrayed as the modern person’s goal in many contexts and advertisements. For example, on several highways, there are massive billboards with a silhouette of a woman sitting in a yogic/meditation lotus pose, cross-legged. When you slow down to have a better look at it, you get to see that it is an advertisement for a residential compound called “Ajna,” which means the third eye in Sanskrit. This concept and its South Asian origin are foreign to most Egyptian citizens. However, the choice of name sheds light on how Egyptian luxurious and upper-class real estate compounds use elements that relate to it in their artistic direction and marketing strategies more cosmopolitan and hip members of the society are going to not only try and understand the meaning and the concept behind it but also appreciate it. I asked Celine, the crystal healer, about how she thinks people perceive her and her practice and, in this sense, her belief. The bottom-line of her answer, below, was present in the answers of most of my interlocutors.

*“A few years ago, most of the people would laugh at all what we are talking about and seeking here (energy healing). These modalities simply did not make sense to them. Then, they would say that what we are doing is simply meaningless, and we just do it for the lack of knowledge and/or simply to waste time because they viewed it as something that simply does not add or help in healing anything related to people’s illnesses/afflictions.”*

She continued to say that, in the past, the general opinion was that all that she is doing does not work. In contrast, now, she and other people have helped others recover from serious illnesses that are both psychological and physical. Additionally, her modality being fashionable on the global level made her gain popularity and legitimacy amongst different people. While some people situate energy healing as an efficient mode of healing, others view it negatively.

“It is ignorant,” said one of my interlocutors, who identifies as a pious religious Muslim. My answer was that most of my interlocutors, who both seek and practice these modalities, are well-educated and have good professional positions. She answered by saying, “*enty fakra eny ba’ool gahlin donya? La dol gahlin b denhom!*” This translates to, “do you think I am talking about them being ignorant when it comes to the world? They are ignorant when it comes to their religion.” I stayed silent as several ideas came to mind, but the clearest of all was the idea that people not only look at it as trivial, but they also relate these modalities directly to being related to people who have little to no faith. This resonated with me because, during several sessions and incidents, practitioners and the clients followed very religious discourses, from the words they say during the sessions to the way they market themselves. This is meant to make it more relatable to the general public who undermines them. I was very interested in Islam’s view on the issue, so I called Al-Azhar’s Dar Al Ifta. Al Azhar is the main advisory institution for social and legal decisions, and its Dar Al Ifta, House of Advisory, is considered at the forefront of Islamic institutions that speak the tongue of the Islamic religion in the Arab Republic of Egypt and support jurisprudence research among those working in it in all countries of the Islamic world. It was created in 1895 to strengthen and connect contemporary Muslims with the origins of their religion, clarifying the features of Islam and removing the confusion about their religious and worldly conditions, revealing the rulings of Islam in all that has come to modern life. I called their phone service to ask about Islam’s position and perception of energy healing. The Sheikh’s reaction was confused. So, I decided

to ask him about practicing yoga, which is more popular. He replied by saying that “*yoga is fine as an exercise, just as long as you do not believe in it.*”

Hoax, fraudulent, heathens, charlatans, criminals, sorcerers, abnormal, mysterious, meaningless, inferior, inefficient; these are some of the ways a large segment of the people describe spiritual and alternative healing. This has direct roots in the debate on the mystical/mythological mind versus the modern/scientific one, which has been going on for decades. Notions and theories that derive from this debate arise in several parts of my research because understanding and unpacking it shows its lasting effect on people’s perception of different methods of spiritual healing. Lévi-Strauss was one of the first theorists to analyze how there are two modes of thought that are used to gain knowledge. One is the science of the concrete, which is the mythical thought, and the other is the mode of scientific inquiry, which is the modern thought. While the majority of Western thinkers used and believed in the modern mode of inquiry because it was looked at as an imperceptible new system of knowledge, he views both modes as valid and equal. Accordingly, the knowledge created and believed in by what he calls ‘the savage’ is equal to and as legitimate as the knowledge created by the scientist (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). One should merge between myth and science. The focus, belief, and usage of myth should not cancel considering or using scientific methods of inquiry, which explains spiritualist healers’ decision of combining, for example, chemical formulas and quantum physics and/or numerology with their traditional knowledge in the services they provide. The knowledge created by what Lévi-Strauss calls the savage mind is given validation in communities as well, like the Nuer. The West’s perception of the Nuer and witchcraft was negative because they viewed them as backward. However, their rituals and traditions that involved magic are used to understand their social and political organization (Evans-Pritchard, 1940 and 1976).

There has always been a contestation between how modern medicine is scientifically proven and how spiritual healing has no proven way that relates to causality. In Egypt, this binary relates to healing when it comes to how the state and society look at alternative traditional modes of healing as practices done by illiterate and backward-minded members of the society that resort to services provided by imposters, charlatans, and fraudsters (See L vy-Bruhl, 1975, Bowie, 2009 and Douglas, 2002). Although Western medicine is considered to be the most advanced, there has been a global turn towards alternative healing solutions that were presumed mystical. It is also important to note that this makes these alternative modalities not only sanctioned by the state’s ideological and repressive state apparatus in Egypt, but also by a ‘global cultural appropriation police.’ These two constituencies are different in the sense that the former comes from a conservative ideology and the latter positions itself as very progressive. They both carry out this sanctioning in their own ways, but they are still both in of policing cultural flows and hybridity, with are derived and invested in ideas of authenticity. The Marxist view and its critique of the spiritual supermarket also carries out sanctioning tactics where the choices are viewed as materialistic and lacking meaning. The difference between the Western and Arab contexts is that in the former, it is a debate, but in the latter, it is not only a stigma but also a crime to use or become a spiritual healer. In a nutshell, regardless of the fact that people increasingly turn to and trust spiritual and alternative healing in modern days, a large number of members of Egyptian society still look at these modalities and practices as invalid.

### **Conclusion: The Mystical Modern: Hybridity and Discourse**

Egyptian society is a particularly fascinating one to study because of the binary that is created between traditional methods of spiritual healing, which are deemed backward and superstitious, and more modern methods, which are perceived as exciting and fashionable. The religious, health, and educational institutions centralize and standardize forms of healing to

specific aspects only that fit not only the Islamic and Coptic belief but also the current moment where Egypt is trying to fit in by modernizing or accepting some practices such as yoga or energy healing. In that sense, there is an element of hybridization between what is believed to be mystical and modern when it comes to spiritual healing in contemporary Egypt. At first, it was assumed that there is a law that administers and backs up all of these widespread crackdown efforts on spiritual healers in relation to spirituality itself and how these practices can contradict the accepted religious doctrines. However, there is no legal stance or Law that relates directly to charlatanism. The criminal offense used against them applies to all underground actors that carry on unsanctioned economic activities or operate businesses out of the legalized economic sphere. Even though practices such as yoga and energy healing are looked at as outside of the created structure, mainly Islamic/Christian doctrines, they are still left to operate informally. Yoga and energy healing are interesting examples to look at, as they are rooted in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, which are set outside of the belief and spiritual structure created by the Egyptian state and institutions. That being said, the fact that it fits in the more extensive structure the Egyptian state wants to maintain is to try and stick with its traditional Middle Eastern roots and fit in and go with the modern globalized moment. This makes the structure turn a blind eye towards the contradiction in not cracking down on yoga and energy practitioners.

The hybridization of what is believed to be modern and traditional spiritual healing practices also shows how there are no static binaries between the two categories; practitioners and their seekers/clients find a dialectical movement inside the structure/anti-structure binary (Turner, 1975). The informal legalization of the 'modern' healing practices creates opportunities for the practitioners who offer different services such as spells, attraction, and incantation to play the system. Their liminal position gives them the power to challenge, if not overthrow, structure. In a nutshell, categories are not supposed to be analyzed linearly because

the idea becomes limited and static when one does so. Each idea should be looked at as a network, or a part of a network that is connected with other things and understanding these related aspects is crucial in understanding the idea itself. This is what Deleuze and Guattari would call the rhizomatic analysis of ideas (1987). Applying this method while analyzing traditional spiritual healing/healers in contemporary Egypt would mean that we look at religion and spirituality to understand where these concepts and practitioners stand in the society. There is no single root for practices as they intertwine with other social, economic, discursive, and religious roots. This rhizomatic analysis helps unpack the pre-created spiritual categories. While the scientific and 'enlightened' lens encourages the creation of binaries, the rhizomatic one not only enables us to think of these things with a non-scientific lens but also gives room for thinking about the deconstruction of the structures that seem static and unchanging.

There is a new discourse that continues to be created; the hybridized forms of spirituality, which allow individuals to free themselves from long created regimes of truth. These hybridized practices continue to be juxtaposed against two counter-discourses. The first is the institutionalization and the social heathenism of the modalities, where people who want to maintain particular social and religious status quos by thinking that afflictions can be exclusively healed by exercising, praying, and visiting doctors. The second, which is the next chapter's (5) topic, is cultural appropriation. Hybridized forms are created in order for these practices to survive under the sanction and monitoring of Egyptian bodies. That being said, globally, these forms of healing are often accused of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation occurs when privileged individuals inappropriately and disrespectfully adopt aspects from disadvantaged minority cultures. I argue that even though cultural appropriation helps question privileged people's intentions and lack of respect for minorities, it is a limited accusation when it comes to spiritual practices. This accusation is limited because it does not take into account that 1) the traditions and teachings were created in order for humans to

understand and benefit from them across time and space and 2) the process of getting certified or going to a healing session entails a sense of respect and appreciation to the rituals and their cultures.

*“The skepticism here, in Egypt, comes from a more religious perspective and root rather than a scientific one. What I do is that I answer the questions depending on the person’s level of awareness of the work I do, tarot reading, holistic energy healing, and life coaching. I talk to them in a fairly logical way. For example, some of the people relate it to the story of Harut and Marut, found in the verse 102 of al-Baqarah, The Cow in the Muslim Qur’an. They were angels in Babylon, ancient Persia, who came down to earth and taught humans magic and sorcery. I answer by saying that the cards are simply not that old, Harut and Marut old, maybe there were similar things at the time, like talismans of something, but the tools themselves are neutral. How you use them and what you do is what matters; it’s about the person. Black magic or not, it is based on the practitioner. In a nutshell, I tell them that if the principle we share and follow is that God is all-knowing and has created everything, then God created this modality (tarot) and knows that people use it in this way. And we also believe that God is all capable, and we believe in the idea of b ezn rabena, with God’s permission. If we agree on this aspect, then I won’t be seeing things he doesn’t want me to see.”*

- Alyah, Holistic Energy Practitioner.



## 5) The Elephant in the Room: On Cultural-Spiritual Appropriation

Individuals around the world use different spiritual and healing practices that are rooted in different religio-cultural traditions. Religious and cultural traditions shape the way people practice spirituality and healing methods. The adaptability of spirituality led to the existence of different hybridized forms of traditionally existing spiritual practices. Many consider hybridity a form of cultural and spiritual appropriation. “Cultural appropriation can often seem morally problematic. When abstract schemas are filled in with details from actual events, we often find misrepresentation, misuse, and theft of the stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized” (Matthes, 2016). This definition of appropriation helps one understand critiques against the rise of accessibility and availability of practices, in general, and spiritual rituals, in particular. It is considered unethical cultural appropriation when the appropriated cultures receive more harm than good. This can occur when practices are taken for granted with no understanding of their values. That being said, the same cannot be applied to spirituality. It is inapplicable because 1) traditional wisdom was created to be used by all people at all times and 2) spiritual seekers and practitioners have to understand and study the intricate details of their practices to be able to offer their services. This chapter provides an alternative approach to what is critiqued as spiritual and cultural appropriation. I start this chapter by introducing the theories of hybridity and syncretism, which are critiqued for their limitations. I then analyze the difference between adoption, adaptation, and appropriation. Afterwards, I suggest the implementation of the notion of cultural additivity and the Mindsponge mechanism in order to navigate the adaptation of spiritual practices. Considering that not all use of symbols is backed by understanding and respect, I assess the stylistic choices made by individuals, as fashion and art are the primary industries that get accused of appropriation. In the last sections, I use Eastern traditions’

objectives and glocal yoga to critique cultural appropriation accusations. Finally, I end this chapter with recommendations on how to avoid cultural and spiritual appropriation.

## Hybridized or Syncretic? Authenticity and Origin

Hybridity occurs between mixing traditional and modern ways of healing, as discussed in the previous chapter. It also occurs by mixing methods and tools found in different religions to develop modalities that fit the instructors' already existing beliefs and the overall belief system of the society. Practitioners adopt certain practices and make them adaptable with their Egyptian(ess) and affiliation, whether it is religious or cultural. "Hybridity in cultural globalization has been used to refer to the mixture of cultural forms, characterized by fluidity rather than fixedness, in-betweenness rather than purity, and opening a transcendent or expansive space of cultural interpenetration" (Kraidy, 2006) (See Bhabha, 1994; Kraidy, 2002; Wang and Yeh, 2005). This mixture was first used by biologists and then moved to be used in linguistics and race theories. In recent times, the concept of hybridity has been used in several academic fields and brought up in conversations about ethnicity, identity, globalization, and interculturalism. It can also analyze spirituality in this contemporary moment because there are new emerging belief systems that people adopt. These systems are created by combining different religio-spiritual concepts and coming up with people's meanings. "Post-colonial scholars play an important role in reframing the term hybridity beyond the earlier historical fixation on racial mixing, colonial society, and immigrant communities. This is because scholars now uphold that culture is innately hybrid, no single culture has remained pure amid globalization" (Vuong et al., 2021). However, the concept of hybridity is limited because it does not take into account the contradictions that the sources of the main religions might have. One example of these contradictions is the belief in past lives, which is evident in spiritual traditions. This is, however, considered sinful and is forbidden from even being considered legitimate in Christianity and Islam. The interesting aspect to highlight in the Egyptian context is that even though practitioners and seekers might wholly understand the traditions and their meanings, they do not adopt these practices' root religions, such as Buddhism. It is very

uncommon for someone to wake up one day and suddenly decide to stop being a Christian or a Muslim in order to become a Buddhist or a Taoist.

With the limitations of the notion of hybridity comes the need to adopt new concepts when analyzing the status of alternative and spiritual healing modalities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of these less problematic concepts is syncretism. It encompasses the idea that these syncretic beliefs are derived from contradictory sources. Religio-cultural syncretism is similar to creolization, which is creating languages by blending diverse ones as it is the creation of belief systems that emerge from combining cultural and religious aspects from different religions. It is important to note that even though syncretism is directly related to religion, it is used here to analyze practices and micro-beliefs. There has been a global spiritual turn towards practices that are categorized as Eastern, such as meditation and energy healing. This turn encouraged people to mix their own religio-cultural beliefs with diverse spiritual practices (Gavrilova et al., 2018). It reached Egypt, and with Islam and Christianity being the central belief systems, people have syncretized religions that merge between their backgrounds and the new ideas they are exposed to and decide to follow (See Heelas and Woodhead, 2005).

Religious syncretism can occur for various reasons. One of which is that several religions exist in proximity and function in the same setting or community. Under globalization and the effect of technology and social media, which help transfer ideas, beliefs, practices, etc., spiritual practices travel and are adopted by people with different backgrounds. The problem with religious syncretism is that, according to critics, those who take in new views and beliefs betray their original faith. Ferdinando (1995), for example, views the concept of syncretism as elusive because he believes that it changes the primary facets of religion by practices that belong to other places or systems. According to him, this results in a 'fatal compromise of the integrity of the main religion.' Egypt has a similar exclusivist approach to religion, which

makes this critique resonate here as well. Even though Islam is influenced by Arab culture and Christianity stems from Jewish culture and the Roman Empire, they are not categorized as syncretic religions because they are not derived from contradictory roots. So, religious syncretism is both frowned upon and sinful in the Egyptian context because it is seen as a betrayal of one's religion.

On the other hand, non-exclusivist approaches to belief, not religion, give room for people to incorporate and add different traditions and practices to their main ones. Almost no religion or very few ones are entirely pure or free from traces of syncretism with other belief systems (See Vuong, 2016; Vuong & Napier, 2015). This non-exclusivist view also helps unpack the position of Eastern traditions in the Egyptian context because even though people adopt new practices, they do not let go of their older beliefs or identify differently when it comes to their religion. They add some concepts from the Eastern philosophies to their already existing Middle Eastern, Islamic or Christian, ones. That being said, betraying one's main religion can result in perilous consequences, and syncretism tends to be appalling for the Egyptian state and society. So, as a reaction to the critiques of hybridity and syncretism, I position myself with the new concept of cultural additivity.

### **A Call for Cultural Additivity: What Eastern Wisdom and Traditions Add**

Cultural additivity is a relatively modern concept that explains the acceptance and rejection of new cultural values. The newness of the concept allows it to distance itself from the heavy negative historicity of hybridity and syncretism. This allows it to be applied in more extensive and more diverse contexts. It also focuses on merging traditions, values, and anti-values, which helps avoid the already created binary between what is original and what is foreign in cultural studies. Finally, I use this concept because, unlike hybridity and syncretism, “cultural additivity” presents a model with greater clarity and applicability, supported by the

multi-filtering information mechanism of Mindsponge. The mechanism is based on the understanding that cultural values, in general, are deeply rooted in our mindsets, surrounding which are values from other individuals and institutions”. Mindsponge is “a mechanism for explaining how an individual absorbs and integrates new cultural values into her/his own set of core values and the reverse of ejecting waning ones” (Vuong et al., 2021). This helps explain why Egyptian practitioners mix and match concepts of Islam and Christianity with Eastern traditions and the idea behind rejecting concepts that do not adhere to their ‘original’ religion. When I asked several of my interlocutors about how they introduce new concepts that might seem contradictory to their clients, most of them answered with “depends on the person’s level of awareness.” This level of awareness relates to the Mindsponge mechanism because it explains how people in different stages of their lives accept or reject new values. This was clear in Alyah’s answer, which was on a deeper level because she started introducing me to Grave’s concept of spiral dynamics<sup>10</sup>. This model’s non-hierarchical nature helped analyze how one might accept certain aspects of new norms and values of a tradition and still reject others.

Buddhist traditions are gaining popularity in this spiritual turn because it is viewed as a belief system compatible with several spiritual cosmologies. Hence, it spread and syncretized with different local customs across different continents. “Asian religious traditions, particularly Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, or other minor religions, are syncretic by nature. They are categorically integrative and responsive of tenets of other religions. This world view has encouraged amalgamation of ideas and tenets of a religion to the other” (Thapa, 2017). It is very hard, for example, for the ordinary person to spend a lifetime meditating. This leads to people taking the practice itself and incorporating it with their religious systems and everyday lives. Religious institutions are giving way to spirituality because of the demand people in

<sup>10</sup> Spiral dynamics is as a non-hierarchical model that analyzes development in relation to people’s, organizations’, and societies’ value systems.

contemporary capitalist societies have for these services. Based on several sources, including my personal experience and conversations with seekers of Eastern practices, some people find spiritual practices more effective in relation to needing to have agency of their bodies, feeling connected to something bigger, and expressing themselves on a level that is more holistic and free than worldly religious' methods (Coakley, 2000). These traditions are perceived as ones that offer compensation for the framing of the body in the Abrahamic religions. It is about self-care and looking after ones' self, but it is also about taking control of the choices one makes towards one's body and soul (Markula, 2004).

In Western contexts, due to the primacy of the scientific rationale and focus on economic choice, people resort to creating hybridized healing methods. This adaptation was made to minimize backlash and social criticism from the financial and scientific communities. In Egypt, the same processes are carried out, coupled with the fear of social heathenism and/or political crackdown. This, in turn, leads practitioners and service providers to merge religious and psychological concepts with spiritual practices to make their services more acceptable by the general public. This is what I call techniques of localization. Examples of these techniques are modalities like Heba Anis' Sufi healing and Yomna El Kassas reiki sessions that do not require touching the client. These two examples show how fixated traditions to specific groups of people, religions, and cultures become intercultural and interreligious. In the case of those two modalities, it is Eastern philosophy mixed with Middle Eastern beliefs.

“Existential anxiety has intensified, and medications, while often helpful in the short term, are not an absolute solution. People need to know that they are more than a problem needing to be fixed or a diagnosis to be treated. Psychotropic medications are helpful for those who experience extreme states of anxiety and depression. Far too many physicians view these drugs as cure-alls and take little time or interest in the “circumstances” impacting their clients' feeling states.” (Mijares, 2002)

Modernized Eastern methods of holistic healing are propagated, advertised for, and practiced profoundly in Egypt today. Holistic in this context does not only mean mixing modalities of energy and spiritual healing, but it also means merging religious and psychological methods with spirituality. Mijares (2002) calls this the “sacred marriage,” which helps the healing experience become more profound. Psycho-spirituality depends on notions of universality and inclusion. The goal is to integrate the methods and teachings of both concepts to change the perception of clients, patients, and humans on healing journeys in general. This integration leads to a shift in how one looks at the world by making them recognize and understand their inherent and core values derived from human nature and experience (Ibid; 9).

During the current moment, people look at ways to heal themselves and others who suffer. However, the focus is usually on modern medicine, which therefore neglects traditional wisdom and teachings. To reach healing, both practitioners and clients should focus on having integrative methods that combine several tools in order to deal with the healing process as a journey rather than a short and finite period that is goal-oriented. “Even though psychology has contributed a great deal to understanding human behavior, it has generally operated within a limited paradigm” (Ibid; 4). As a result of the limitations of psychotherapy, therapists failed to connect on a deeper spiritual level with their patients. Research shows how spiritual beliefs and practices have positive and practical effects on psychological therapy. During these modern times, most people face the problem of not understanding their inherent value or purpose; they do not have a sense of intrinsic worth. One of the main problems people living in the modern world face is alienation and lack of meaning in their troubled lives. With the rise of capitalism, this state of trouble is rooted in striving for being a perfect machine. Unfortunately, even though spiritual traditions and practices focus almost solely on getting one



in touch with the inner self, psychological therapy neglects these traditions because they are deemed backward or unscientific.

***Interlude:***

***Unfinished Personal Work; Healing is Non-linear: A Personal Reflection***

One of the main reasons I focus my research on complementary and alternative healing methods is my negative personal experiences with psycho/talk therapies and their limitations. My sessions were always about my problems, which to an extent, helped me. However, I felt like talking about my problem also manifested them in my head and my every day with nowhere to go. I started seeking alternative, complementary, energy-related, and holistic methods due to the inadequacy and limitation of talk therapy I personally experienced, as aforementioned. I humbly did not feel connected or that it, talk therapy, “worked.” The reason might simply be that my therapist was not a good one. Still, all I know is that psychotherapy alone was limiting because it opened up layers within myself, but it, unfortunately, did not help me re-find the balance to get healed. It pointed out the problems but did not have experiential and hands-on answers that would help me cure whatever mental and psychological issues I was going through. Not that alternative methods gave clear and/or easy answers to my problems, but it at least offered practices and techniques on how to work on them. More importantly, I’ve always viewed the strategy or technique psychology works sometimes create a binary where it looks at people as normal and tries to help the “abnormal ones” become normal again problematic and often disturbing. Unfortunately, this was a prominent aspect in my own experience, and it, by default, failed to take into account deeper parts of the human experience. It’s popular in psychology that the client/patient has to acknowledge the problem then start working on it. Concerning my experiences and perspective, this mode of healing just works on the issues that go on during the time the person decides to seek talk therapy. Once you stop going to see your therapist, you likely stop working on yourself. After experiencing different

healing methods that all fall under the category of alternative, complementary, and/or energy healing, I believe that healing is a journey that cannot be related to time, space, external factors, or people. Healing should start and come from within and continue to happen until the person finds peace inside. Mijares has similar perspectives on how on the one hand, depression is looked at as a case that needs to be fixed by talk therapy or medication. Still, on the other hand, in a “psycho-spiritually oriented community, he or she is not placed in a diagnostic category based upon a pathological view of human experience. Difficult psychospiritual experiences are believed to be passages associated with spiritual awakening, rebirth, and transformation and are tended as such by the community.” (Ibid, 2002, p. 9)

With psycho-spirituality, the human psychological and mental imbalances and abnormalities are perceived as the start of a non-linear personal journey that results in new beginnings rather than downfalls or phases. Consequently, psycho-spirituality helps shed light on how every person has unfinished personal work that needs one’s proper attention because “clearly, our external relationships mirror our intrapsychic world. Our psychospiritual work includes listening to, learning from, and healing our wounded, unresolved and incomplete feelings”. Mijares also discusses that it results in “the recognition that we are all workable just as we are. Workability implies that we are open to our experience, that we are willing to see it clearly and regard ourselves with compassion. When we see that we are workable, we are on the path to uncovering our brilliant sanity.” (Ibid, p. 41) Using this mixed method, psycho-spirituality, can change afflictions to healing and transformative experiences.

### **Accommodation, Adaptation, or Appropriation**

Whether these practices are analyzed using notions of hybridity, syncretism, or additivity, they face accusations of cultural appropriation. Despite the fact that globally, adapting traditional teachings and practices makes them more accessible and acceptable,

practitioners and seekers are often called out for cultural appropriation. Some theorists also refer to this as the hijacking of Eastern traditions (Bowman, 1999). Cultural appropriation is explained as the inappropriate adoption of certain cultures' and subcultures' icons, customs, aesthetic standards, practices, etc., by members of other cultures or societies. The culture that is being appropriated is marginalized and subordinate to the appropriating one. Appropriating also occurs without understanding or getting to know the original meaning of the practices and rituals; it is the unacknowledged use of people's beliefs, which changes them to less meaningful popular culture aspects with less nuanced meanings than their original ones. Art and fashion are the primary industries that are accused of cultural appropriation across time. It comes with "misrepresentation, misuse, and theft of stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized" (Matthes, 2016). In alternative and spiritual healing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a thin line between cultural adaptation, appreciation, and appropriation. The teachings themselves are created for people to adopt them and reach their highest potential. This premise of adoption and universality makes it susceptible to accusations of cultural and spiritual appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is avoided by understanding the value and meaning of the symbols to make sure that they are being used appropriately and beneficially (Hsiao-Cheng, 2019). You appropriate a culture when you use it without understanding its value and traditions, but if you thoroughly study and understand these aspects, you can benefit from them. Either by helping yourself, others as an instructor, or the cultures of these traditions by giving back to them. I end this chapter with a section on how to benefit from Eastern traditions without appropriating them negatively. However, for this section, I use experiences of taking energy and spiritual healing courses and yoga teaching trainings to argue against accusations of cultural appropriation and with cultural appreciation.

I joined several energy and spiritual healing courses over the past three years. During these courses, we were taught every detail about the modality we were studying. This included its history, tenets, core beliefs, main figures, and its ethics. This appreciation of each modality's intricate contextual and historical aspects shows that the instructors/practitioners and the seekers are not practicing cultural appropriation against the main traditions or cultures, which are predominantly Eastern. Yoga is another example of widespread spiritual practices during this time. It is important to note that most of the teachers and modality's instructors have had their training in India, Bali, and other Eastern countries where community members that are considered members of the cultures were happy and accepting of the fact that these teachings are going to be taught in different parts of the world.

*“Yoga is a set of physical and mental practices which originated in India between 200 BC and AD 200. In its original Indian version, ‘yoga was a philosophically grounded set of practices designed to facilitate spiritual enlightenment’ (Strauss, 2005: 5). Yoga emerged from the Sanskritic cultural mould as well as from the three great Indian religious traditions: Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism (De Michelis, 2008). From a classic perspective, yoga is designed to transcend ‘ignorance and train the embodied mind to experience Truth’ (Alter, 2004: 4), and is thus deeply entrenched in Hindu spiritualism. Yoga has been a dynamic practice, meaning there is tremendous variation in how it is practiced” (Askegaard and Eckhardt, 2012).*

There is a ‘Glocal Yoga’ movement that is taking place transnationally and transculturally. Unfortunately, the movement can be viewed as both cultural appreciation and appropriation, depending on the practitioners’ and the seekers’ intention and the meanings they give to it. Yoga’s popularity and the traction it is gaining, in general, is due to the idea that it is seen as a workout and a way to remain fit. Even though yoga is a very spiritual practice, especially types like Kundalini, some still practice it as a workout routine with no intention of understanding the meanings behind the poses they do, the kinds of breathing techniques they adopt, or the flows they follow. This is what leads people to view practicing yoga as cultural

appropriation. This change of the practice from being a spiritual one to being a sport-based workout shows less respect and understanding of its core beliefs. That being said, people who practice regularly or join yoga teacher training programs have a clear awareness of what the practice is, its philosophy, and its roots.

Like many other spiritual healing practices, yoga has been created to travel and transcend across space and time. Even the creators of some of the types of yoga traveled to propagate it in several parts of the world. This is the reason several masters and yogis offer yoga teacher training programs. These programs show the appreciation of the meaning of yoga and the positive effects it can have on one's life. Even though I have not joined a yoga teacher training program, all of the yoga teachers I have had conversations with explained that they had to study yoga philosophy as part of their training. Whether Hatha, Vinyasa, Kundalini, Ashtanga, or other types, almost every yoga instructor understands the roots of the practice they teach. These roots include the main traditions and beliefs of the creators of the method and the intention behind practicing it. As voiced by the several yoga teachers I talked to, yoga has changed their lives. It provided them with feelings of strength, safety, serenity, grounding, and community. Moreover, even when people start it as a sport or workout routine, the more they practice, the more they delve into, the deeper meanings of the poses and breathing techniques. This change of perception about yoga and meditation by practice is vivid in Lamir Amir's opinion. She stated that "everything now changed especially when it comes to yoga and meditation. At first, people take it as a sport, and then they start practicing chanting and meditating. They also have to meditate in Shavasana<sup>11</sup> at the end of each class, where they learn about energy flow. The idea is that there is a learning sequence that leads people to learn, understand, and accept."

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<sup>11</sup> Shavasane is a yogic pose that promotes relaxation and spiritual awakening. It is usually the last pose of a yoga practice/class.

## **Spirituality, but make it Fashion: Stylistic Choices**

If you live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then the chances are that you both have experienced cultural additivity and have appropriated some cultures. The sooner is acceptable because it entails that you respect the meaning of the values you adopt. The latter is problematic because it shows that you do not understand the beliefs of the practices or symbols you use. With the growth in the popularity of energy and spiritual healing comes the popularity of its Eastern-rooted symbols and artifacts. Therefore, there is also an increase in the growing market of spiritual products, as mentioned in chapter three ([table 1](#)). Another problematic that results from this continuous growth are the appropriation of spiritual symbols. From intellectual property, practices, food, music to artifacts, symbols, medicine, decoration, and tattoos, almost everything can be seen as acts of cultural appropriation. Spiritual products are now part and parcel of healing and wellness spaces' aesthetics. Nearly all of the ones I visited have boutique spaces where they sell oils, candles, natural remedies, herbs, crystals, incense, and other spiritual products. I understand that sometimes people overdo their spiritual personas individually. They sometimes buy jewelry, clothes, tapestry, decor, candles, incense, and other things with symbols that carry more profound meanings than the ones they know. However, the decisions made by most of my interlocutors and my own experience with buying and using spiritual-related products have extensive and profound significance and effect on our lives and every day. I, among most people, buy products such as crystals and oils to enhance my energy and work on several afflictions that I face. For example, I burn and drink lavender to get better quality sleep. This has helped me overcome my chronic insomnia for several years now, and if it was not for it, I might have still been struggling with poor and bad sleeping patterns. It cannot be the case that my usage of these things can be reduced to appropriating Eastern traditions with no understanding or respect. On the contrary, I am very grateful that I had the chance to explore this world because it changed my life, just like it did for so many other people.

## Conclusion: Learning from Ancient Wisdom

Concepts of hybridity and syncretism can be used to analyze the status of spiritual and alternative healing modalities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That being said, they are both critiqued for being overly generalized and for hindering the origins of main religions. Consequently, I advocate for using cultural additivity and the Mindsponge mechanism to analyze the spread of spiritual practices because it helps unpack the mixed methods practitioners use to make their modalities more acceptable and adaptable to Egyptian society. Unfortunately, regardless of the approach, one adopts to analyze the spread of these practices, the practitioners and seekers are commonly accused of cultural appropriation. Like several fields, such as fashion and/or art, some people and businesses fall into appropriating spiritualities and cultures. Accusations of appropriation are similar to ones made by New Age leftist approach when it comes to efficacy and the spiritual supermarket. Nevertheless, it is more common that spiritual individuals understand and appreciate the roots of their practices. Since appropriation is about a lack of respect and understanding of the roots and history of the practices, the case here is the contrary because learning each modality or even going to a class/session expresses a form of respect and appreciation to it. Both activities also include learning the main facets of the modality, which lets the seekers understand the meanings behind the practices they use. Additionally, this respect is also vivid in how some people's livelihoods and wellbeing depend on the survival of these practices. For some Egyptian practitioners and seekers, this respect and appreciation also includes risking imprisonment.

I have found myself in several situations where I may be unintentionally practicing cultural appropriation. In order to avoid cultural appropriation and to pinpoint whether or not something is being culturally appropriated, I have a set of questions I often ask myself to keep myself in check. I start out by asking myself about the intention and goal of the action I am taking. I then ask myself whether or not I am just following trends without exploring the

practice's history and meanings. Next, I examine the level of respect I have for these cultures. I also consider the feelings of the people that come from the culture about my participation. Furthermore, I need to consider whether or not I am being stereotypical. It is important to ask whether I am using the products and items in the sacred way they are supposed to be dealt with. Giving credit where credit is due is also necessary, ensuring that the sources are properly and clearly communicated. Finally, it is vital that I ask myself whether or not I understand the cultural significance of the symbols and practices I am adopting. Although this comprehensive set of questions has often helped me, I have also found myself to be lacking at some points on different occasions, which, although initially frustrated me, is now something that I consider a steppingstone towards progress and more respect afforded to different cultures.

Just like I do not leave my tarot-reading clients with open-ended questions, I have worked on developing some steps that can help people avoid appropriating spiritualities and cultures, instead of just pinpointing the common pitfalls people tend to fall in. After asking the questions above and getting to understand the underlying intention behind the practices I am participating in, I have become more concerned with real life actions to stand as a testament to my respect. For example, I am keen on giving credit to the origin of the symbols I am using, learning and get services from members of the culture itself, attending authentic events that are organized by members of the culture, and supporting small businesses that are owned and benefit these members rather than adding to the profits of businesses that mass produce and appropriate these cultures.



## 6) Conclusion: Behind the Scenes of Awakenings

On the one hand, economic risks, fear of imprisonment and social heathenism, and accusations of cultural appropriation are factors that affect people's refraining from pursuing spiritual and alternative practices. On the other hand, there are more meaningful motivations behind people's drive to seek these methods and, therefore, to share them with others. One of the more prominent ones is the lack of trust or efficiency in modern Western medicine. The overemphasis on prescription pills, the excessive surgeries and interventions, and the tedious physical therapies were all factors that pushed seekers from the norm to the niche. Others were born into families that had, for their own reasons, abandoned normalized methods of healing long ago. Hence, these practices remain pervasive and get more popular every day. The increase in the availability and accessibility of these services shows that there are meanings people create and recreate towards them. Analyze and taking those meanings seriously is crucial because holding on to them is hard work. It takes hard work to believe in these modalities and to continue to use them because, along with the factors above that affect their decisions, 1) the dynamics of the courses and sessions entail getting on a deep healing journey, 2) getting courses and sessions can be a financial burden, 2) people sometimes let go of their stable jobs to start small wellness businesses, which makes 3) their livelihoods dependent on offering these services. In the case of Egypt, this hard work also includes a risk of imprisonment and social heathenism.

Investigating the perspectives on spiritual and alternative healing methods in Egypt and analyzing the probability of their survival has been challenging, enlightening, and encouraging. Given my time in the field or realm of healing, I often wondered if what I was doing was sustainable and whether people's decision in seeking these services was impulsive or genuine. Among many Middle Eastern and African countries, Egypt is known for having mystical elements with Pharaonic, Islamic, and Christian roots. That being said, mysticism has its

boundaries because it is allowed and prohibited by the state. While I generally found that methods of healing the body, mind, and soul through these unorthodox practices are prominent, they were often looked at as lacking the accreditation necessary to be deemed legitimate. This lack of legitimacy is vivid in the state and society's cultural and religious position. It is also evident in theories that critique the globally growing spiritual turn. Some of these theories critique these practices from a scientific approach and on an ideological level as they are rooted in mentalities that give primacy to science and derive from the old yet lasting debate of the mystical vs. the modern. That being said, this binarily heavy view continues to be contested by new emerging mystical yet modern practices (See Lévi-Strauss 1962; Lévy-Bruhl 1975; Evans-Pritchard 1940 and 1976; Taylor 2002; Greenwood 2002).

The existing literature helps analyze the status of spiritual healing services in Egypt. However, there are still gaps because most of the literature is Western in nature and analytical perspective. More importantly, the theories do not account for the meanings people hold for these services or the factors that might encourage or discourage people from seeking them. By adopting the reflexive interpretive method and Greenwood's and Bernard's skills of participant observation, I was able to analyze the factors that shape people's decisions and the perceptions that arise from these decisions. This method also helps in comparing and contrasting the conflicting theories that exist in the literature and the on-the-ground ethnographic encounters, which are the backbone of this piece. As mentioned above, I am aware that I am studying a small and limited segment of society because of the expensive financial nature of modernized practices. That being said, these practices are still pervasive across sectarian and class divides because there are more affordable for people with fewer means. Consequently, the discursive formation, discussed here, is narrow because these cosmopolitan services have a small audience.

From the start of this journey, I was very drawn to spiritualists who were able to turn global phenomena into local businesses. The rise in the number of online wellness, foreknowledge, and mindfulness online applications shows a widespread appreciation and demand for these services. Whether they were yoga studios or holistic wellness centers, business owners exert a great effort into making seekers' experiences as authentic, numinous, and personal as possible. This then led to the need to perfect the Zen aesthetic, which shapes these experiences through creating and curating numinous places. In this multi-sited ethnography, I analyze the aesthetic creation and curation decisions made by five wellness places, two from-home practitioners, and five online applications. Wellness place's owners buy candles, décor, crystals, beads, and other items necessary in providing each specific healing service. One of the obstacles these businesses face is that this creation of the Zen aesthetic might be sufficient in sustaining the already existing demand of believers and seekers of these services, but it can be insufficient in attracting new clients who are skeptical. The applications have their own technological and stylistic aesthetics as well. However, they also have their limitations because even though some of the applications connect people with practitioners around the world and give people easier access to mindfulness activities and practices such as guided meditation recordings, other applications still have childish elements to them and give one size fits all answers to people's questions and inquiries. From home practitioners face a different obstacle because they are considered even more informal than practitioners who operate in systemized and wellness places that seem formal to the public. My visits to both places created a rupture in the binary between formal and informal because the services they offer are similar, and the practitioners in both locations were certified to practice. In relation to certification, lacking the ability of attracting skeptics and the limitations of having only the Zen aesthetic led to the need for formalization of these services through credentialism and certification. On-the-ground services, whether in a wellness place or a practitioner's home

or online, need credentialism and certification in order to gain more legitimacy and appeal to a broader audience.

Even though this formalization creates growth in the services' availability and easiness in their accessibility, it is critiqued for causing the commodification of the spiritual, which consequently creates a 'spiritual supermarket' (See Belk 1989; Bowman 1999; Greenfield 1975). The idea of the spiritual supermarket reduces people's decision of seeking these services to trivial ones made in the supermarket. The meanings people hold for these services and the discursive formation they have are not considered. This lack of consideration and acknowledgment is echoed in most New Age Marxist and leftist sociological theories. This approach is contested, theoretically, because of its staginess, immaturity, and how much focus it gives to reductive market models (See Rinallo and Maclaran 2013; Aupers and Houtman 2006; Redden 2016; Thomson and Show; 2013). This New Age approach is also critiqued by real-life examples of the positive impact spirituality has on psychological illnesses, workplace dynamics, and healing processes (See Neal 1999; Byrd 2017; Ulrich 1997; MacAllister et al. 2017). While the theories above are sufficient in critiquing the spiritual supermarket and similar limited and limiting notions, my critique is rooted in how the consumption of experiences create an affective relationship between the seekers and the emotions that are evoked by the experiences (See Belk et al. 1989; Campbell 1987; Illouz 2009). This affective relationship is evident in most of my interlocutors' experiences with spirituality. The New Age approach does not recognize this affective experience and therefore does not consider the takes hard work it takes for both practitioners and clients of these services to seek spirituality and start their own journeys. Moreover, some people's livelihoods depend on offering these services and some people's wellbeing is dependent on their access to healing sessions.

The New Age Marxist approach is echoed in notions of ritual efficacy and performance.

Theorists that analyze spiritual healing using ritual efficacy strictly, adopt an over ritualized

approach. Skeptics of spiritual healing modalities use ideas rooted in ritual efficacy, such as placebo, in trying to provide a reason for their rejection (See Heelas 2008; Kwan 2007; Brody 2010). To study rituals, it is more encompassing and analytical to study the embodied cognition of rituals (See Sax 2010; Sax, Quack, and Weinhold 2010; Asad 1993, Bell 2009; Bourdieu 1990). This embodied cognition is evident in the dynamics of the healing sessions and courses. While some might call this performance, in the spiritualists' point of view, it is "dancing, healing, or simply work." (Sax et al., 2010; 4) (See Csordas and Lewton, 1998; Rindfleih 2005; Koen, 2006; McClean, 2013; Davies and Freathy 2014). The meanings and discourses people hold for spirituality are the reason practitioners continue to offer their services regardless of the rejection of strict scientific and religious institutions and individuals. In the Egyptian context, this rejection is not only a social repercussion but also a political one.

Foucault's rejection of ideological explanations of concepts also helps in forming a counter critique of New Age critiques. New Age thinkers have a regime of truth towards the negativity of availability and accessibility of spiritual services. This regime of truth focuses primarily on materiality, commercialization, capitalism, authenticity, and efficacy. To anthropologically analyze spirituality, the focus needs to shift from being on the above to be on meanings and discursive formations. This limited regime of truth is shared by the Egyptian government and hegemonic culture. An exclusivist religious approach to religion is propagated in order to maintain social order. That being said, this regime of truth is unsustainable because new regimes of truth, such as Eastern practices, continue to emerge in Egyptian society.

Foucault's notions of manners of objectification, governmentality, and biopolitics and Althusser's concepts of interpellation and the ideological state apparatus help in unpacking the reason the state cracks down on practitioners. Spiritual and alternative healing methods are rejected by the Egyptian state because they are new regimes of truth that challenge the government's hegemonic cultural and religious project. Even though human subjects are the

ones who create texts and discourses, there are always regulations and limitations that define people's belief systems. The subject is then a bearer of knowledge created by the hegemonic state-created discourses, which forces the individual to directly or indirectly to abide by rules and regulations. The notion of biopolitics highlights how the subject's body becomes an object and a target of knowledge, power, and the state. This all leads to the censure and criminalization of most unorthodox belief systems. Criminalization is state-led. However, classifying someone as 'mad' for their beliefs is a more social act. Notions of interpellation, the ideological state apparatus, and governmentality help unpack the reasons behind the society's rejection of spiritual and alternative healing modalities (See Foucault 1975, 1977, 1980; Althusser 1970; Hall 200; Montag 1975; Al Nasir 1988). Due to the Egyptian cultural and religious hegemonic project, members of the society share a negative perspective on unorthodox methods.

In Western contexts, the main barrier these methods face in winning the average individual's trust is the lack of belief in the unseen and the primacy of science. The stakes are higher than just being deemed 'backward' in Egypt, where the more prominent barrier is the fear of social heathenism and governmental imprisonment. The government cracks down on practitioners due to 1) the need to implement its Egyptian cultural and religious hegemonic and 2) the money exchange that takes place in seeking spiritual and alternative services. Both soft power and hard power are exercised to sanction the bodies and souls of Egyptian citizens. Hard power is evident in the imprisonment of practitioners regardless of the lack of direct laws against them. Practitioners are imprisoned under ambiguous laws of contempt of religion and fraud. This lack of transparency in the law gives the state more power to implement its hegemonic project. Soft power is evident in the state's exercise of interpellation on its society. The medical, educational, scientific, political, and media institutions are used to shape citizens into believing the primary religious doctrines and scientific data only. A discursive analysis of the hegemonic media and news shows that the lexical choices, messages, and semiotics used

in several newspaper articles are created in order to establish power and dominance of the ruling hegemonic thoughts, ideologies, and expectations. Therefore, they exercise interpellation over their citizens into manifesting these hegemonic ideas in daily life in order to maintain social order. Whilst the stakes are high when it comes to practicing rituals that are deemed magical, there is still a rise in the accessibility and availability of these services. That being said, there is a sense of hybridization and mixing that takes place in order to make these services more appealing and appropriate for the Egyptian public, which has an almost exclusivist approach to belief systems.

To be able to offer or navigate spiritual services in Egypt, one must adopt new discourses. Practitioners and service providers accommodate their clients by mixing unconventional modalities with preexisting religious and cultural ideas in order to be able to operate in Egyptian society. While I call these modalities hybridized forms, the notion of hybridity is limited when studying spirituality because it does not consider the contradictions that may exist in the sources of the religions or systems that are being mixed. Therefore, some use syncretism in order to analyze religious mixes. Religious syncretism is also limited when analyzing belief systems because, even though it considers contradictions, it fails to explain how individuals can keep their main religion but continue to add to it from different belief systems. Syncretism entails letting go of one's religion to adopt a new hybridized one. That being said, this is not the pervasive motivation in Egypt, nor is it the reason practitioners mix their modalities. Furthermore, hybridity and religious syncretism face critiques that are also rooted in the notion of ritual efficacy. The critiques view hybridized forms as lacking truth, authenticity, and purity. Therefore, using cultural additivity and the Mindsponge mechanism is more analytical in studying the mixing of different values, traditions, and practices. Additionally, this concept and this mechanism help explain why people might accept some facets of an Eastern belief system, for example, but not others. It also helps explain why it is

popular in Egypt that people remain to identify as Christian or Muslim regardless of finding solace in more Buddhist practices, for example. Whichever concept is adopted in studying hybridized forms of healing they are still critiqued and accused of spiritual and cultural appropriation.

Spiritual and cultural appropriation accusations are perfunctory and have a cursory nature because cultural appropriation means having a lack of respect for the culture and its practices. A simple analysis of the process of healing, energy healing courses, and yoga teacher training can prove that spiritualists, especially practitioners, must understand the philosophies and histories of the modalities. They, therefore, practice out of respect and appreciation of ancient wisdom and traditions. That being said, I understand that not all use of symbols and practices is backed by understanding and respect but reducing people's choices and the meanings they hold to cultural appropriation gives an overly generalized perspective on spiritual healing. This generalized perspective and unsound cultural appropriation accusations fail to acknowledge the hard work people go through to offer or navigate these services. Similar to the notion of the spiritual supermarket, they do not consider the meanings people have for these practices. Some people spend large sums of money to seek these services, some depend their healing processes on them, some let go of their stable jobs to open new small businesses, some risk being deemed heathens, heretics, and frauds, and some risk imprisonment. I argue against erasing all these meanings and obstacles and replacing them with ideas that these practitioners' and seekers' choices are trivial, inauthentic, and lack efficacy, and therefore are examples of cultural appropriation.

The research I conducted and the time I spent in the field of spiritualities. during the past few years, gives insight into the position and status of holistic and alternative healing in Egypt today. These previous chapters answer the main question, how are the body, mind, and soul are perceived, understood, and treated in the Egyptian context? More importantly, the



theories, controversies, and debates that are discussed in this piece help unpack how spirituality and healing are globally and locally perceived and sometimes critiqued. These more extensive notions help in situating the services in general and their place in Egypt in particular. As aforementioned, this piece contributes to the extensive literature in the anthropology of magic, the unseen, consciousness, religion, among other subfields. It also contributes to the small literature there is on spiritual healing services in non-Western places and the Global South.

In this project, I also aim to call for utilizing anthropological methods when studying people's belief systems as they are one of the few ways one can understand the meanings people hold for what they believe in or practice. For future work on spirituality, whether in anthropology, economics, marketing, or any other discipline, I urge my fellow researchers and academics to take into consideration the deeper meanings people hold towards seeking spiritual practices that are viewed as an alternative. Rather than reducing their decisions to numbers, market charts, and trivial choices, one should instead listen to people's opinions and perceptions in order to have a holistic view of healing. Furthermore, I suggest that people, in general, should further analyze people's choices before accusing them of cultural appropriation because it has been proven that getting on a healing journey or offering spiritual services entails a sense of appreciation for ancient traditions and wisdom.

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