

# Sacred Women in Coptic Cinema: Between Faith and Resistance

Lise Paulsen Galal

The present religious revival in the Arab world has not only initiated new politics or individual devotedness and piety, but has also resulted in a rise of mediated religious memories. Hence, as a promoter of a community revival, the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church has disseminated narratives about the Coptic saints to the members of the church. During my fieldwork among the Copts in Egypt in the nineties, I was continuously presented with these saint stories without really taking notice. But, as the storytellers seemed to insist on being heard, I started listening. Meanwhile, I had become aware of the Coptic cinema which since 1987 till today has produced and distributed more than thirty screen versions (in Arabic) about the life stories of sacred figures of the Coptic Church.

In the following, I will argue that the screen versions of two sacred female figures' life stories, Ana Simone and Marina, through the politics of storytelling, are addressing the needs and anxieties of the Copts today. Besides raising questions and giving answers about how to live one's life as a young modern Copt in accordance with Christian morals, the movies seem to offer the Copts not only a possibility to express their minority identity but also to reject, mediate, and negotiate their position as a marginalized 'Other'.

## The Coptic Cinema

Behind the Coptic cinema is the Coptic Orthodox Church which produces and distributes the historical representations of the saints' and martyrs' life stories. The film production is professional with well-known directors and actors from the commercial Egyptian TV and film industry (Shafik, 2007). The films about Ana Simone and Marina are directed by Magid Taufiq. The portrayed saints in the movies are from the Church's early history and

are characterized by their willingness to sacrifice themselves for their belief, exposed as they are to the persecution and torture of the Roman rulers.<sup>1</sup> Ana Simone and Marina represent two different types of Coptic martyrdom: 'martyrdom of conscience' and 'martyrdom of violent death' (cf. Thorbjørnsrud, 1999, p. 87-88). In the film *Al-Qidisah Ana Simone* (i.e. the saint Ana Simone), Ana Simone gives up her status and wealth to follow God, and in the film *Shahida Marina* (i.e. the martyr Marina), Marina dies a violent death because of her Christian belief.

The movie about Ana Simone pictures a princess living at a time where Egypt was Christian.<sup>2</sup> She is represented as very devoted to God and is practicing fasting and praying in contrast to her parents. The parents want to marry her to a young prominent man, but she leaves the palace and sets out for the desert. During her stay in the desert, where she lives with wild animals, she becomes mentally and physically exhausted and she ends up staying in a convent.

Marina is the daughter of a pagan priest during the reign of the Roman emperor Diocletian.<sup>3</sup> Her mother dies and she is raised by a Christian nanny and becomes herself a devoted Christian. In her teens, the local governor desires her but she rejects him telling him that she has given her life to God. He tries to persuade her and even promises to marry her but she stands firm. Despite imprisonment and severe torture she stays a strong believer until the day of her martyrdom.

## Simultaneity of Past and Present

The movies about Marina and Ana Simone tell a story about a historical past where persecution, brutality, and temptation were overcome by the strength of faith. It is, however, a time characterized

by neither idyll nor harmony. Thus, instead of projecting a longing for communal unity and peace to a nostalgic historical past, as many revival movements have done, the movies rather direct the audience towards a universal Coptic Orthodox faith. By presenting the saints and martyrs within a narrative which transgresses time and space, the Coptic movies illustrate how violence and oppression in one era can be transformed into memories in another. Narratives about violence do, according to the anthropologists Das and Kleinman (2001), often have mythical qualities. As the narratives are being lifted out of historical time and space and inscribed in a universal story, they obtain a religious, ontological, or mythical status. In the Coptic movies studied, the narratives about violence are inscribed in a universal story about Orthodox Coptic Christianity. At the same time, the universalism is supported by the construction of simultaneity of time by the use of different narrative and visual techniques.

Firstly, the frame of interpretation is placed in the present. The references to the historical past are reduced to caricatured figures, dresses, and buildings using narrative conventions from Arab historical feature films. The visual appeal is much more important than historical accuracy (Shafik, 1998). In the same way as the movies' moral message holds an allegory about modern life and temptations, especially as experienced by the youth, the historical narratives about persecution and suppression may be analyzed as an allegory of the present.

Secondly, the simultaneity of historical past and spiritual present is constructed through a mixture of the rational and irrational. The key figures are historical persons. However, Ana Simone is presented as communicating with wild animals which never existed in Egypt, and Marina is enduring severe torture. In one of the torture scenes, Marina is cut into two by the executioner with a huge saw, but her body heals miraculously after the cutting up. Afterwards, she is seen in her prison cell in the company of a real and gigantic snake moving around her neck without harming her. The scene is followed by a scene with a far from realistic fire-breathing dragon and a devil-like feature. Even burning and drowning she survives. At last, when

the executioner takes her to the desert to kill her, Jesus appears in the sky making the executioner believe in him. One miracle succeeds the other, and the real and the magical are intertwined.

The movies seem to use what has been named magical realism. The genre is often ascribed a specific critical perspective not least due to its narrative conventions with "transgressive and subversive qualities" (Bower, 2004, p. 66). It challenges the dominant power's construction of 'the Other'. 'The Other' is defined by not only being denied political power and power of definition but also by being exposed to the dominant power's construction of 'the Other' as an object of regulation and intervention (p. 68). Hence, the magical realism seems to offer a possibility to express a minority identity because it is a genre that explores and transgresses borders. With the help of magical realism it becomes possible to narrate and visualize the complexity and the silenced aspects of a minority identity.

The potential to express the experiences of the minority by the help of simultaneity is further supported by the use of visual and sound effects addressing the senses and placing the audience in the position of the main characters. The audience is watching Ana Simone in the desert while a meditative music is heard. Nothing is said for a very long time. The audience needs to feel or sense how it is to walk alone in the desert sand and to be lonely in one's otherness. In the film about Marina, the senses and belief of the audience are tested as well. The violent, dramatic, and long-drawn-out torture scenes, displaying the torture in details, expose the audience to the anxiety and pain of Marina. It is the deep anxiety of the oppressed and powerless minority which is only overcome due to a strong faith illustrated by Marina's continuous emotional prayers. Both examples present minority experiences of extreme loneliness in the moment of suffering, but at the same time the option to transgress the loneliness and otherness through the belief in God. The experience of otherness can not be fully shared with the majority. It is the experience which the majority can not sense (Cohen, 2000) and which the official memory can not hold (Das og Kleinman,

2001). It is the story about othering which is closely related to shame and silence. However, the Coptic movies offer a narrative which turns this shame into strength of faith by sharing the experience of otherness with the audience. By replacing the experience of otherness with spiritual strength, the movies offer the Coptic audience a position as acting subjects. It is important to keep in mind that the Coptic cinema is produced by Copts for Copts. The films are distributed within the Church and not to an Egyptian public.

### Memory Politics

The movies about Ana Simone and Marina are used to maintain, to mediate, and to perform a collective memory of Coptic identity, where past, present, and future are interrelated. The stories are not only an intellectual expression of the Church's official history; they are also stories about the present and the future of the Copts perceived by the senses and stimulated by the narrative and visual techniques of the movies and the encounter with the sacred and the spiritual power of the miraculous. Sensing the spiritual meaning reflects the direct connection between the past (the deceased saints and martyrs), the present (the Coptic pilgrims visiting the saints'

and martyrs' tombs), and the future (the potential healing and recovery from suffering).

It is precisely due to the sensuous and magical narrative that the saint narratives are no longer stories about the suppressed, inferior, and passive Copt. They are rather stories about the religious superior, invincible, and active Copt. By presenting transgressive identities, the mediated stories offer the Coptic audience a position as subjects with agency instead of a position as submissive objects of the majority's oppression. Hence, the mediated stories "[...] subtly alter the balance between actor and acted upon" (Jackson, 2002, p. 16). The stories are constructing the believer as practicing resistance against inhumanity, an act by which the victims become human. To take on the position of the martyr is on the one the hand to be passive because one does not avoid the violence, but on the other hand it is to be acting because one insists on maintaining one's identity (as a human being). The martyr let the inevitable happen by choosing to let it happen thereby affirming her agency within the framework of legitimate religious narrative.

Lise Paulsen Galal, PhD, Associate Professor in Cultural Encounters, Department of Culture and Identity, Roskilde University, Denmark.  
E-mail: galal@ruc.dk

### ENDNOTES

1. To venerate the many martyrs dying for their belief, the Copts introduced a new calendar starting with the year where the Roman emperor Diocletian (284-305) took power. By then the era of the martyr (Anno Martyrum) was institutionalized and the Coptic calendar came to function as a memory of the life of the martyrs (the Synaxarion) (Meinardus, 2004, p. 285).
2. In the year 389, Coptic Orthodox Christianity became the official religion in Egypt with the Roman emperor's permission. Egypt was Christian until the Arab conquest in 641 which introduced Islam.
3. Marina is also a well-known and sanctified martyr in the other orthodox churches under the name of Marina of Antioch.

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