

## HAMMĀM FOLKLORE DYNAMICS IN CAIRO: LESSONS FROM OPERATION TO REGENERATION

**Dalila El Kerdany**

### **Abstract**

*As time goes on, the number of public bathhouses (hammāms) is decreasing in Cairo, which might lead to the disappearance of an important popular heritage that used to contribute to different aspects of the city life. This paper provides an understanding of some of the factors that threaten the heritage of hammāms, while pointing out to two major factors that might look different in ideology but form a strong threat to the survival of the hammām folklore. These are "Modernization" and "Islamic Fundamentalism". The paper reviews theories in anthropology concerned with the process of "production" and "reproduction" of folklore in general and the traditional public bath in particular. Based on recent field studies that recorded changes in the function of two currently operating historic hammāms in Cairo, Hammām al-malāṭīl (Margoush) in Nahāssīn quarter and Hammām Bab al-Bahr in Bab al-Shareyah quarter, both tangible and non-tangible dimensions of heritage are examined. Finally, the paper discusses future directions in the reproduction of hammām folklore.*

### **Keywords:**

Cairo Islamic architecture; Hammām; Folklore reproduction; building operations

### **Introduction:**

#### **Hammāms: A Threatened Tangible Heritage of Cairo**

The number of Cairo popular hammāms has been declining to the extent that they might become non-existent and just a memory of the past. Early 15th century, Al-Maqrīzī counted 52 hammāms in Cairo, amounting to 80 at the 18th century as stated in the memoirs of the traveler (el-Habashi, 2008). Whilst the scientists of the French Expedition identified 72 baths early 19th century, the Tawfiqī plans khitat tawfiqiya of Ali Pasha Mubarak counted 62 hammāms. In 1933, Edmond Pauty stated, in his book on Cairo hammāms, that there were 47 structures (Pauty, 1933). Historical references unanimously indicated that such hammāms offered basic services. They were important in the different aspects of life, as they supported social, cultural and healthcare activities. This was reflected in their architecture and relationship to their urban context (residential areas surrounding them as well as nearby mosques public fountains or Sabīls) until the beginnings of the 20th century (Ali Mubarak, 1882).

A recent study that attempted to record the Cairo hammāms- among other Islamic monuments- and identified their positions on the maps in the 21st century is the study of Nicholas Warner on the historical monuments of Cairo. Warner identified 17 hammāms within historical Cairo (Warner, 2005). Two other hammāms were identified by Mimar Group as part of its EC-funded research entitled "HAMMAM", outside the area studied by Warner. These are hammām Tanbālī, and Bab al-Bahr, both located in Bab al-Shareyah (HAMMAM 2005-2008). Four other hammāms in Bulāq Abu el-'Ia, were identified as part of the study prepared by Najwa Abdul-Moneim, (Abdul Moneim, 2007). The total number of the hammāms still existent in 2007 is 23, which are in different state of deterioration or collapse. Taking into account that the number of actually operating ones now does not exceed four structures, and comparing such a small number to that of public baths operating until the first half of the 20th century (47), it is clear that historic public baths in Cairo are on the verge of extinction. The few surviving bathhouses are operating under seriously deteriorating conditions. Their physical state is in an advanced state of disrepair with a loss of many of their beautiful original architectural features.

Furthermore, some bathhouses have been restored however, they were subject to technically unsound restoration techniques that are not based on a good understanding of this building type and the vernacular building techniques and materials associated with it. Some have been restored under the supervision of the Supreme Council of Antiquities; others are under the ownership of the Ministry of Endowment (Awqāf) or private ownership.

The location of these building in historical Cairo exposes them to serious urban and environmental pressures- not to be dealt within this paper.

As regards to their tangible and intangible heritage dimensions, these buildings have retained their traditional mechanisms; however, they suffer from poor sanitation and do not attract any longer upper and middle-income groups. Even though the Historical Cairo Authority has been restoring some hammāms- such as hammām Ināl and al-Mu'ayyad, Unfortunately all restored buildings are not used with their original function; they are re-used as venues for different cultural activities such as exhibitions, museums, or concert halls.

### Hammām Practice is under Fire

During the HAMMAM research project, it was clear that contrary to the situation of the hammām in other cities in North Africa and the Middles East, Cairene public baths suffer from the most advanced stage of deterioration in both physical state and daily usage as well as their reputation. They are perceived as backward facilities which have nothing to do with modernization or as immoral places as a result of religious fundamentalism. These two factors have contributed the widespread negative perception of this building type as a facility for very poor people or a venue for immoral sexual practices. Going to the hammāms has become an outdated habit, despised by many religious people, whilst it represents backwardness and hindrance to development as far as secularists are concerned.

For example, we notice that not a single

popular hammām was built in the second half of the 20th century in Cairo. On the contrary, in some other Islamic countries like Algeria and Morocco, where the HAMMAM project research consortium conducted analyses of historic bathhouses, the traditional public bath is still continuing. In a country like Algeria, the hammām is designed and built in the center of new residential complexes just like the mosque or the market. It is similar to other types of traditional heritage of costumes, singing, music, traditional houses, crafts.... etc, which have suffered consecutive shocks as a result of modernization attempts in Egypt – whether these are due to inside or outside forces. It is likely that Egypt may have faced more profound and intense attempts of modernization as compared to other countries, particularly the liberal movement led by Egyptians themselves with a vision to modernizing and developing their country.

The first shock started with the arrival of the French Expedition to Egypt; a confrontation between a highly technological civilization, particularly as regards to weapons, and a much retarded country as then was the case. Perhaps, the best legacy of the French Expedition was the faithful record by its scientists of all the spheres of life-cultural and natural; in addition to recording all monuments of the country.

The second shock came with the rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha, pioneer of modern renaissance of the country. His policy resulted in the most significant and most powerful change of Egyptian society at that stage. For the first time, the change came from within, internally motivated with a vision to working for the best interest of the nationals and upgrading the

country to first class nation (Muhammad Al-Johari, 2007).

For the first time, efforts transcended cultural and social differences among cults, races and the various classes. Construction of schools for girls was expanded and teachers' capacities were developed; even the first Islamic schools were established to teach the girls in tandem with the Western approach, embracing them all from all classes regardless of their ideological beliefs or social status. Teachers and principals were foreigners (mainly from France and Italy). The emergence of socially and culturally mixed schools was an indicator of how much changes were bequeathed customs and traditions.

Educational missions to Europe to study medicine and war craft at Paris as well as engineering at London and military service at Torino continued. These missions were leading to Egypt's modern renaissance. Modern knowledge and scientific methods developed later were the most important reason for social development, leading to a different view of folklore including hammāms.

The following changes came within the rule of Ismael Pasha, which witnessed the opening of the Suez Canal for world navigation. Ismael Pasha dreamt of turning Egypt into another Europe; he started with Cairo. He established the Ismaelyah quarter to the west of Islamic Cairo or the later known as Khedive Cairo, down town. For the first time in the Orient, a city has been planned and constructed in line with the Western theories in planning; particularly, Haussmann planning of Paris. Even though the planning was western, the engineers, contractors and workers were French, Italian or Armenian, the owners and

investors were affluent Egyptians. Given that this first city, alien to the age old Islamic city and akin to the modern patterns then, particularly the Western as far as design and building were concerned, some conventional patterns of buildings- public fountains *sabīl*, *Kuttāb*, *Wikāla*, *Khans*, *hammāms*, and religious schools *madrasa* with their typical four *iwān*, were excluded; only mosques –*masjid*- and *masjid game'* were maintained. Notwithstanding, these were tinged with the Ottoman style, derived itself from the temple of Aya Sofya (Hagia Sophia), Istanbul, which was converted into a church and then a mosque later on.

Other alternatives for new patterns were erected like the grand department stores (*Sidnawi*, *Secorel*, *Omar Effendi* and *Addas*), instead of *Wikālas*, as well as modern western schools rather than traditional religious schools. However, patterns such as the *hammām* had no alternatives in the new city; these were totally forsaken even with the extensions that took place later north to the old city- *Abasseya*, or to the west- *Giza* and *Mohandeseen*.

As modern Egypt continued to thrive, especially following the 1952 Revolution, over the past half century, education began to grow popular starting from the first years of kinder garden up to university. It became formal and free without prejudices based on gender, religion or race. A quarter of the Egyptian population – or more – had joined formal Egyptian educational institutions. Taking into consideration that such education, since the rule of *Muhammad Ali*, depended on modern methods mainly derived from the West, this led to influencing folklore to the extent that such education system turned into a melting pot of elements of heritage: different areas, environments and classes. This

resulted into a true and efficient operation of the reproduction of heritage.

Some State bodies, especially during the early years of the Revolution, represented in the popular cultural authority (now called General Organization for Cultural Palaces) of the then Ministry of Culture and National Guidance (now the Ministry of Culture after the separation of the Ministry of Information into an independent ministry), worked on compiling folklore in all walks of life and recording it in specialized encyclopedias. These attempts succeeded in preserving – only in records – some elements of heritage. Notwithstanding, such heritage was then used to promote for new ideas of modernism and socialism. We witnessed some attempts at the reproduction of a local-flavored new type of culture that is dependent on popular themes Westerly-patterned as is the case with music, literature, plastic arts and folklore dance (*Redha's troupe* and the *National Troupe of Popular Arts* are good examples).

On the other hand, the rising waves of fundamental religious streams that have connection to *Wahabi's* ideologies in the Arab peninsula in the 1970s led to challenging national coherence and cultural specificities of local societies. Thus, these connections – though through different ideologies – combined with modernization attempted to defy folklore and led to the pursuit of the idea of *Pan Islam*. As a result, folklore is not viewed with ease; rather resisted under different claims. They called upon forbidding *Sham Al-Nassim* on claims that it is related to pagan beliefs of an extinct *Pharaonic* civilization, same argument holds for *Mother's day*, which coincides with spring, is relevant to that of the *Mazdaism*. Even the customs inherited from *Muslim Fatimids* are not

spared such as self-lashing, an Egyptian habit in celebrating the Prophet's Birthday. There are numerous examples illustrating the opposition of hard-line fundamentalist thinking to folklore. What is of interest here is its opposition to the popular hammām on claims that it is forbidden to be nude even in front of same gender people, there is also the suspicion of same sex relationships which are forbidden according to some verses of the Holy Qur'an – though most of the Imams, have not prescribed a punishment or a penance as is the case with "great sins" or "minor sins" like murder, adultery and theft... etc. It is described in religious thinking as unadvisable "fornication", whose doer is ostracized.

### The Dynamics of Folklore

This study adopts the following definition for the term "Folklore". Composed of two parts "Folk" and "Lore", it is a term which originated in 1846, and coined by English scholar and antiquary William John Thoms (1803–85). It refers to the traditional beliefs, legends, customs of people; or the lore of people. Hammām is a good example of Folklore and Folk-life in Islamic societies. It includes traditional arts, beliefs, traditional ways of work and leisure, adornment and celebrations. It embodies cultural ways in which a group maintains and passes on a shared way of life. Folklore and folk-life are learned and perpetuated within the context of the "group," for it is the shared experience which shapes and gives meaning to the exchange.

The threat to the traditional bath with its moral and intellectual dimensions is leading to the disappearance and extinction of both the intangible heritage of traditional practices and the tangible heritage represented in buildings and tools.

Saed Al-Masri defined the process of producing heritage as such: "a complex process involving the continuing practices of heritage, so that it remains alive and memorable among a group of people; this does not mean a fixed absolute or a total change of heritage elements; rather it is renewable and accumulative practices of heritage similar to practicing language. Cultural production processes have certain features, most importantly: frequency of use, retrieval and reinterpretation of heritage elements; attempts at selection, re- introduction, modification and alteration of certain practices; interchange and transference among classes, borrowing and adoption of elements; in addition to processes of enriching heritage reservoir by innovation and accumulation. Popular culture production processes are not confined to one of these multiple forms, but include all of them. Cultural production processes are formed through a continual amalgamation between intentionality and spontaneity" (Al-Masri 2002: 16-17).

Muhammad Al-Johari refers to processes implying the concept of (re)production of heritage "the subject of reproduction puts us at the heart of study of dynamic heritage and "Sustainability mechanisms"; trends in the migration of popular elements; mechanisms of borrowing and adoption; as well as mechanisms of rejection, resistance, abandonment and derision; processes of reinvention, renovation and conditioning exercised on old elements in order to adapt them to a new reality, or on imported elements to adapt to a local reality. Production choice among thousands or millions of different popular heritage elements manifests itself in a process of reproduction. Sometimes, reproduction processes may force the adaptation of some popular heritage

elements derived from a bygone era in order to gain ground and live in a new age. Thus, it is inevitable – or desirable – to introduce change as a mechanism for sustainability" (Al-Johari, 2003: 399 – 400).

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the reproduction process is:

1. Continual and sustained
2. Intentional and spontaneous, conscious and subconscious by individuals of society
3. Subject to definite processes and mechanisms, while diverse at the same time.
4. Important and necessary to sustain heritage and maintain vivacity and dynamism.

### Current Dynamics in Two Cairo Hammām

Assuming that popular heritage –folklore- is capable of embracing and digesting change, as well as reproducing new forms that guarantee its sustainability so that such heritage may remain alive among the members of the society adopting it, it is useful to examine elements of change and renewability in such heritage in order to be able to deduce the factors that may allow us to influence future scenarios of hammāms towards their sustainability as an important heritage, while resisting extinction and disappearance.

In her study of the current use patterns of the different spaces of Hammām Bab al-Bahr at Bab al-Shareyah and comparing them to historical studies, Dina Shehayyeb (2006) noticed some changes, like taking off clothes in *beit thani* (second space or room in the hammām) instead of the first space *al maslakh* (changing room), also the addition of showers in the *beit al-harāra* (steam or hot room) instead of using the *tasa*

(pans) for rinsing (HAMMAM 2005 – 2008).



Figure 1: The Entrance of Hammām Bab al-Bahr, Typically Modest. (Source: Sibley, M- AHRC funded project: Historic Hammāms of North Africa@June 2007).



Figure 2: First Room (Maslakh) During Men's time, Used for Changing Clothes and Resting. (Source: Sibley, M- AHRC funded project: Historic Hammāms of North Africa@June 2007).

In the anthropological study conducted by Najwa Abdul Moneim on Hammām Margush (al-Malātīlī) at Gamāliyya District over a period of one year (January – December 2005) with an objective to study changes in operation and practices relevant to popular public baths in



Figure 3 Domestic Utensils for Cooking Inside the hammām, a Contemporary Intervention. (Source: Sibley, M- AHRC funded project: Historic Hammāms of North Africa@June 2007).

relation to their preservation and sustainability under contemporary societal variables. The researcher stresses that regulars and staff are keen on renewal and creativity, so that they can cope with the change and contribute to saving the profession from extinction and guarantee

sustainability. This includes the introduction of some activities that help boost economic revenues whether in favor of the hammām maintenance or staff wages' improvement: charging for Sudanese hennā, selling the Moroccan luffa and some cosmetics, in addition to other services as matchmaking, by keeping pictures of men and women who are interested in marriage. The study also takes note of the change in some of the instruments used and cosmetics as well as the quality of furniture. It was also noticed that the health service and back - to - nature practices in alternative medicine and beautification surpassed other services of the hammām (Abdul Moneim, 2007).

Alaa el-Habashi, through his study of the technology behind the operation of hammām bab al-Bahr at Bab al-Shareyah, observed basic changes; some were positive, and others negative;

- The mustawqid (burner) fueled by the burning of garbage was replaced by geyser fueled by gas in order to heat water. No doubt, the purpose of such change is to positively reduce air pollution. However, this had a negative effect regarding disposal of garbage in popular districts. It also put an end to stewing fava beans "fūl" in the traditional way.

- Changing the old system of supplying water to the hammām from tanks or water reservoirs daily filled at a higher level, then circulating water in uncovered channels on the roof; to new water tanks connected to the city water supply system with sealed pipes, for transporting water to the bathing spaces. This had a positive effect as regards the level of cleanliness of the water used but had a negative impact as far as the roof of the hammām is concerned. It became a dirty, unattended and poorly maintained part of the building.

- Some internal spaces of the building were painted, particularly beit al- harāra, by two to three layers of oil or acrylic paint; thus negatively affecting the texture of the walls and relevant structure balance.

- Some marble tiles were replaced by ceramics. Also some domes collapsed due to the lack of maintenance and proper restoration or unsound intervention (HAMMAM 2005- 2008).



Figure 4 Poor Quality Water Pipes Insensitively Introduced in the Hammām. (Source: Sibley, M- AHRC funded project: Historic Hammāms of North Africa@June 2007).



Figure 5 Inadequate Changes Inside the Bathing Spaces of the Hammām. (Source: Sibley, M- AHRC funded project: Historic Hammāms of North Africa@June 2007).

Even though no hammāms, in the traditional concept, were built - perhaps ever since the first half of the 20th century - it is evident that the currently in vogue "Moroccan" hammāms are spreading. They are even considered successful businesses in support of institutions specialized in health and/or beautification,

such as health clubs, gyms, and hair dressing salons. Hammāms have also become a luxury facility in five-star hotels, such as the "Four Seasons" hotel. However, most of these "modern" hammāms lack the aesthetics of the traditional ones, with its space sequencing, architectural and decorative elements. They are now more of medical clinics for physical healing than places for spiritual entertainment and emotional serenity.

Dina Shehayyeb (HAMMAM 2005-2008) has carried out a valuable study on some of these hammāms in Cairo, known as Moroccan hammāms, mostly attached to hairdressing salons. The study highlighted that these are minimal facilities consisting sometimes of a steam room only, and lack the qualities of the traditional hammāms, in terms of spatial sequences, that enhances efficient temperature grading from cold to hot and vice-versa. They also lack the variety of architectural and space experiences found in the traditional baths. However, these new facilities provide individual private spaces and therefore the privacy required for women as a result of the fundamentalist religious interpretations that are of Wahabi origins.

There are two interrelated important factors that have contributed to the decay of the traditional Cairene hammāms. First, the popular hammām is an urban facility which is not found in villages and secondly the geographical movements of the population in Cairo, where upper and middle classes abandoned historical and popular areas and moved to recently-planned areas to have been replaced by new rural migrants moving to the city. Consequently, the hammām in popular areas lost its regular and well-off clients, due to their geographical

transfer to other areas. New rural migrants who are introduced to the hammām, do not have the cultural tradition of using this facility, and are not fully ready to defend its survival when necessary.

On the other hand, the middle and upper classes were not keen on the existence of the hammām in their new residential areas for reasons relevant to modernization attempts to which the country was exposed since the beginnings of the 19th century. However, the emergence of the Moroccan hammām three years ago specifically in Cairo, (since 2005 according to Dina Shehayyeb's observations carried out in 2007) was mainly in the residential areas of the upper classes. This is similar to the known anthropological phenomenon of "the urban-rural rule and the reproduction of heritage". This indicates that the city residents have forsaken a large part of their heritage, but not the whole of it even though they invented new forms, alternatives and sorts (Al-Johari, 2007).

The dynamics of heritage on the societal map have been a factor of strength and sustainability. Perhaps an illustrative example of that factor can be evident in observing what happens in the reproduction of heritage as regards to fashion and the emulation of classes of each other – fashion travels from upwards to downwards and vice versa. In the Egyptian countryside, young women tend to wear headscarves as a symbol of conservative Islamic behavior in the same way women in the city do city. They do not any longer wear galābeyas and tarha (traditional hair cover) as their mothers and grandmothers used to do (Abaza, 2007).

Considering the famous architect Hassan Fathi's work, it is clear that serious attempts have been made at reproducing the heritage of conventional architecture. Inspired by the local heritage in order to create a new local architecture, his main motivation was to create solutions for housing problems for the poor in Upper Egypt. There was an urgent need to house those who have been harmed by the construction of the High Dam, those coming from the expansive migration processes of the residents of Nubia and those being evacuated from old Gournā village. The experiment proved that local residents, especially in Gournā, were not accepting the new mud brick houses even though they were respectful of their architectural heritage that was more responsive to the their local environment in terms of construction materials, appropriate environmental design, and use of items and symbols of the local culture. Hassan Fathy architecture was however embraced by a well-off educated class. It maintained the beauties and originalities of such architecture in the houses it commissioned as holiday and leisure second homes. As a result of their choice, Hassan Fathy's creation did not die away; it has become now a form of heritage that is being renewed by his followers whether in tourist environmental architecture or an idol to be transferred to rural agglomerations adjacent to some resorts like Tunis Resort nearby Fayoum.

Nowadays modern hammām has different urban connections than in the past; it is now separate from both the mosque and the sabīl -public fountain- (these three heritage structures are associated with water which used to be transferred manually or on the back of some animals, before the realization of modern infrastructure networks). Thus, it has become

more used in hotels, health clubs, gyms or hair dresser salons. The hammām is currently related more to beautification and health functions than to social or cultural needs as it used to be. Secondly, this new economic coalition between the hammām and the other activities is supported by another category of consumers that have substantial purchasing power. Thirdly, it is no longer an economic institution with religious commitments as it used to be, whether in application-the realization of the purity required for performing religious rituals, given that such purity can be fulfilled in most homes now- or financial dependence on endowment institutions such as awqāf, charity and others. It has been proved that it depended on these at least to attain sufficiency as the case used to be.

### Discussion on the Reproduction of the Hammām:

Based on the aforementioned, the paper will give some suggestions and orientations that may help to regain the vitality of the intangible heritage of the hammām.

1) The economies of operation, restoration and maintenance of the hammām are evidently playing a major role in retaining its tangible and intangible heritage. Given that it is used to be dependent on certain religious, social and economic institutions, the need today is to define new relevant associations. Old associations are currently confined to maintain its heritage and renew its function as a result of social, economic and cultural change.

2) It is important to conduct necessary studies on ways to promote the hammām activity with

open-mindedness without preconceived ideas regarding target groups. It may be best to start with a study of the social categories that are more prone to change in order to achieve quick outcomes that maintain the tangible heritage currently threatened by extinction. On the long run, this would help attract the other categories.

3) Hammām, whether in the past or present, depends on the support of certain social classes and professions. They control relevant sustainability dynamics. Thus, the social, cultural, economic and developmental study of those is essential for the determination of sustainability factors.

4) The technology for the operation of conventional hammāms needs to be modernized as far as methods of operation, maintenance, environmental performance, hydraulics, sanitation and restoration of such exclusive archeological building type. This requires more research and experimentation, particularly as regards sustainability, provision of energy and water, relation with the surrounding society; in addition to methods of restoration and maintenance, especially retaining the materials and techniques that proved successful in the traditional practices of the past.

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