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"Marriage with an absentee:" Marital practices in an era of great mobility

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ABSTRACT

Egyptian communities are increasing in Europe, and Italy is the first European country targeted by a number of Egyptians. While other Arab countries (i.e. Morocco) are experiencing a progressive "feminization of migration", Egyptian migration remains a male-dominated phenomenon. One of the main issues around the big presence of young Egyptian single men in Italy is that of transnational marriages, which migrants engage in with women from their original villages.

In this paper I focus on the families that are created through what I call "marriage with an absentee", investigating the value of transnational marriages both for migrants and for Egyptian women who marry men who are working abroad. I describe those marriages in their organizational aspects—entering into the details of the rituals of the engagement and of the marriage. I also discuss some of the consequences of this practice. I.e., on one hand the creation of a transnational family (characterized by the new bride staying in Egypt), and on the other hand the woman's prospect of international mobility, which can be achieved only through family reunification.

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"Fī-l-haraka baraka"[1]
Egyptian proverb[2]

1. INTRODUCTION

Egyptian communities are increasing throughout Europe, and Italy is the first receiving country (Zohry, 2009). While other Arab countries (i.e., Morocco) are experiencing a progressive "feminization of migration" (Schmoll, 2007), Egyptian migration still remains a male-dominated phenomenon.

The profile of women as first migrants is absent in the Egyptian community for several reasons. Migration to Italy is mostly a rural–urban flow and the collective orientation which created a shared vision of migration in the sending areas can be described as a "patriarchal culture of migration," an orientation which excludes autonomous women's movement (Ferrero, forthcoming). The Egyptian migration chain recruits mostly single young men, and in the case of the city of Turin, which was the starting point of my ethnographic research, they come mainly from the regions of Qalyubeyya and Monufeyya.

In light of these findings, the multi-situated research (Marcus, 1995) that I conducted between Italy and Egypt for my PhD (2012–14) aimed to investigate concepts related to female mobility and immobility within a system that attributes the ability to migrate to men only. This is not to say that Egyptian women do not migrate. However, their movement is conceived of as familial mobility: women are allowed to migrate when their husband migrates or when they marry an Egyptian man who lives abroad.

Migration and marriage are two crucial moments in the life cycle of migrant families. These two social events are also recognized as milestones for the transition to adulthood for young Egyptians. The role of marriage as a transitional element in Middle Eastern societies is crucial because it is the only accepted way to establish a new family (Hoodfar, 1997, p. 52). In more recent times, migration has also become a rite of passage for men: the journey "transforms" boys into men allowing them to experience the world and gain the financial resources to enter into the marriage market. The relationship between these two milestone events leads to a distinction between two types of transnational families: nuclear families existing at the time of migration—when a married man decides to emigrate—and families formed during migration—when a single migrant returns to his country of origin to get married (Ferrero, 2013).

In this paper we will focus on the second type of family, investigating first the value of transnational marriages for migrants and for Egyptian women who choose to marry a man living abroad, second some organizational aspects and rituals of these celebrations, and finally some of its consequences: on one hand the creation of a transnational family characterized by the new bride staying in Egypt and on the other an opening for the woman herself of the prospect of mobility that could be achieved through family reunification.

2. *MIN-NA W-'ALEY-NA*[3]*:* SEEKING A WIFE IN THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Transnational marriages are not a new phenomenon (Hoerder, 2002), but are currently the focus of debate as they are the most widespread form of family formation among migrants and an element contributing to the spread of foreign communities in European countries. The causes lie in the increase in immigration among young single people, but also in the choices of the second and third generations, who, instead of assuming the marriage behavior of their place of residence, often prefer marriages with partners from their country of origin (Kraler et al., 2011, p. 28).

These marriage practices pose some questions: what are the roles of and relationships between the migrant and the family of origin in the organization of these marriages? Are the Egyptian men living in Italy more dependent or more independent than their peers who live in Egypt (Weyland, 1993, p. 163)?

> "I came to Italy in '92 and only went back to Egypt once after four years without thinking about marriage. When I was able to put something aside, my mom and my sister said to me:

[1]To write Arabic words I have drawn upon the transliteration system outlined by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (IJMES) for Standard Arabic by adapting it, since I have mostly transcribed Egyptian Arabic.
[2]An Egyptian proverb that means "Movement is blessing".
[3]An Egyptian proverb that literally means "from us and to us"; it refers to the practice of endogamous marriage. Here it is used in a wider sense, that is the marriage with someone from the same country.

> 'Look, now you are grown up, you have to get married.' I did not know anyone in Egypt because I had been away for so many years and I said, 'see if you can find a girl from good family.' For me, the important thing was to find a girl who was educated, so we would have the same mentality, and religious, which means that she should wear the veil and cover her body. They said: 'The girl you're looking for is here! She is the daughter of *'Ustēz*[4] Mahmoud who lives above us.' My mom and my sister spoke to them and they agreed to hold the engagement party in the summer."
>
> Mohamed

From the very beginning, the role that Mohamed's family played in the organization of his marriage was clear: his mother and sister were the "bridges" to his society of origin and to the family of his future wife, as well as to the prevailing expectation that a man must marry by a certain age.

In Egyptian Arabic a marriage in which the proposal is made by the parents of the spouse is called *gawāz taqlīdy* [traditional marriage], an expression often roughly translated as "arranged marriage." The basic error in this translation is the total elimination of the possibility of individual choice. The involvement of the family should not be considered antithetical to individual choice because most marriages in the Middle East involve not only the wishes of the future couple, but also the responsibility of the family, especially the parents. The marriage choice is shared by a group of people, the extended family or friends of the couple, and the reputation, social status and education of the future couple play an important role (Eickelman, 2001, p. 158). Transnational marriages allow this involvement to be maintained and are symbolic moments in which migrants consolidate ties with their family (Lievens, 1999, p. 719).

> "When a man comes home to get married it means that the family has sought a wife. This kind of control that families have on the lives of migrants reveals a confidence in family that goes beyond the borders and distance. Anyone who is abroad puts the choice of who will be his bride into the hands of his family."
>
> Egyptian cultural mediator[5]

Migrants prefer "arranged marriages" because they feel that this type of marriage is more durable and stable than love marriages and it reinforces kinship ties, cultural norms and identity (Kraler et al., 2011, p. 28). Consequently, migration interacts with marriage practices giving rise to two trends: on one hand the economic independence of men who live abroad can translate into greater autonomy of choice (Weyland, 1997; Peleikis, 2003, p. 125); on the other hand, the physical absence, often prolonged, pushes migrants to lean more on the family, strengthening the position of the parents with regard to the marriage choice and organization of the event.

New technologies, for example, can serve to bring together young people who do not know each other, but they are also the means by which traditional practices are realized in the transnational space. The term *khuṭba iṣ- ṣālūnāt* [salon engagement]—used to refer to an engagement between two people who meet for the first time in the living room of their parents' house—was replaced by *khuṭba in-net* [internet engagement], an engagement in which partners meet through the internet. Nagla told me that her engagement had been organized via the Internet by some *'aqarīb* [relatives] who had arranged a meeting on "Yahoo! Messenger" between her and Nasser. Since neither of them had an Internet connection at home, Nagla was visiting her brother while the young man was at a cybercafe in Turin. The presence of her brother and other relatives around the woman recreated the environment of the *sālūn*, where young people who meet are never left alone. "The call was short-lived because the connection was weak and in Egypt it comes and goes," Nagla told me. She accepted the engagement proposal and got to know the man by telephone; the marriage was celebrated during his next holiday in Egypt.

The use of modern means of communication should not be confused as the emergence of new social practices, but rather as a combination of both traditional and new elements (Peleikis, 2003, p. 126). The *khuṭba in-net*, for example, underscores the role of the family in organizing a marriage, while the man's visits to the country of origin determine the timing of meeting, engagement and celebration. Mohamed continues his story:

[4]Literally this means "teacher," but it is used in general as a title of respect.

[5]A cultural mediator is a person of foreign origins who operates in public and private facilities. The aim of his/her presence is to connect members of foreign cultures to services and institutions in order to find an answer to migrants' needs for integration.

> "When I went to Egypt we got engaged. I talked to her dad and we decided that one year later we would do the marriage contract. I only had a thirty-day holiday and I wanted to split it into two times: fifteen days to do the marriage contract, then I would go back to Italy to apply for family reunification and then, when the invitation was ready, I would return in Egypt to furnish my house. That's what happened: a year later she received a visa to come to Italy. In July, I went to Egypt, we had a wedding party and we stayed at our house for two weeks and then we came to live in Italy and since that day we have been together *al-hamdu li-llāh* [thanks God]."
>
> Mohamed

The relationship between migration and marriage is not only a series of chronological events, but is often also a causal relationship: young people migrate in order to marry. Marriage is an event that requires a large financial investment by both of the families involved and that has been described as an "economic nightmare" (Singerman, 1995, p. 109). It is up to the man to provide a home and part of the furniture, pay the *mahr* [the so-called "bride price"], buy the *shabka* [an amount of gold given to the bride] and pay for the festivities; the bride and her family have to pay for part of the festivities and the *gihāz* or furniture. Many families—especially those less well off—start to accumulate these assets years before the engagement. Since the time of the migration to the Gulf, work abroad has been known as the quickest way to gather the money for a wedding (Weyland, 1993); this link has increased today under pressure from various forces including an increase in the price of luxury goods and *shabka* (Singerman et al., 2003, p. 83). The value of *shabka* may increase as a result of two factors: the higher price of gold and the requests for an increased amount of gold as an effect of migration.

3. MARRIAGE WITH AN ABSENTEE

Whereas for many young men migration has a cause-effect relationship with marriage, for women the causal relationship is inverse: marriage causes migration, because only through marrying men who live abroad can women make their plans to migrate. I define a marriage contract with a person residing abroad as "marriage with an absentee" to specify that its identifying trait lies in its transnational organization, due to the physical absence of the man. After explorig the views of a man who looks from Italy to Egypt as a place to celebrate his marriage, we now analyze the point of view of Egyptian women who see Italy as the provenance of a potential future husband.

Especially in the case of daughters, from an early age parents consider their marriage a concern (Hoodfar, 1997, p. 52). Singerman and Ibrahim suggest that marriage should be considered a social event entrusted with the task of creating a secure environment for women and a suitable one for procreation (Singerman et al., 2003). The adjective "secure" presumes a social as well as economic security. Before consenting to the marriage of a daughter, parents—especially mothers—learn about the reputation of the young man and his religious life. In this process even older siblings, often peers of the suitor, play an important role. The economic aspect of the "security" means that the man is responsible for maintaining his wife and children, even in the case of a working wife. The marriage must therefore be regarded as an "economic and cultural calculation" (Singerman et al., 2003, p. 85). Generally women do not marry a man of lower social status; a marriage with a person working abroad is seen as a positive choice, as it is an economic and social strategy through which women can raise their own status. The economic benefit of migration (real or perceived) represents an investment because it is seen as a means to gain a higher standard of life in the future and can also be a determining factor in the present: migrants can normally provide a more valuable *shabka*, sometimes demand less economic participation by the family of the woman and, above all, generally build more luxurious houses.

It is not uncommon for parents and young women to reject engagement proposals during the year to "wait for summer" and settle on an engagement "with an absentee," seen as an economically more "secure" choice. Weyland contrasted marriage with a migrant with what is referred to in Egyptian as an '*ayy kalām*, or "normal," "unpretentious" marriage (Weyland, 1993, p. 151). In a society where marriages represent one of the areas recognized for achieving, maintaining and strengthening social mobility and growth in a family's social capital (Bourdieu, 1972), marriage to a migrant is the preferred option for many families. A symbol of its desirability are those families in which the practice of marriage with an absentee has been repeated, either by the mother and daughter or by two sisters.

4. FROM *KHUṬBA IN-NET* TO TRANSNATIONAL *DUKHLA*

Migrations restructure the calendar of engagements and marriages (Fog Olwig, 2002), and this fact leads to observation of the relationship between mobility and traditional marriage, understood here in

its ritual form. To make this observation one must specify that the *gawāz taqlīdy* provides a series of moments that define the rituals from dating to marriage:

- *fātiha* ("the opening," is the first sura of the Koran): preceded by informal meetings between the families, this meeting marks the beginning of the engagement. Normally the groom brings a gift of gold that can be a ring, a bracelet or a pair of earrings, although modest ones. The groom and the bride's father read the *fātiha* and shake their hands as a sign of agreement. This is the first official step, though still restricted to the family level. The bride and groom are not normally allowed to appear in public or go out alone together, and can only meet each other at the woman's house in the presence of her parents or older siblings.
- *shabka*: The term comes from the triliteral root sha-ba-ka that refers to the idea of weaving networks. The *shabka* is the amount of gold that the groom gives the bride as an engagement gift and, depending on his economic prospects, can range from a simple ring to a large amount of gold. The delivery of the jewels is a public celebration that is considered the official engagement. This agreement may be rescinded by simply returning the gold received.
- *katib al-kitāb*: is the time of the signing of the *'aqd al zawāj* [marriage contract]. The signing of the act is normally done in the mosque in the presence of a *ma'dhūn*.[6] Women are allowed to attend the ceremony in the female part of the mosque, but the wife is almost never present, and the marriage contract is often signed by her father. This provides public visibility for the marriage, differentiating it from a *zawāj 'urfi*[7] and makes the couple officially married according to Islam. Nevertheless, the husband and wife are not entitled to live together until the *dukhla*, which is not always celebrated immediately after the signing of the contract. Until the *dukhla* spouses reside in different homes and are not entitled to have sexual relations.
- *gihāz* or *'izāl* [furniture]: celebration in which families and friends of the couple move the goods purchased by the bride into the new home, starting to furnish it.[8] The value of the expenditures incurred by the bride's and groom's families is listed in an *'ayma* [list], useful in the future in case of a divorce. In that case, in fact, all goods go back to the person who purchased them.[9] The bride does not participate because it is not socially acceptable for her to enter the house before *dukhla*.
- *henna:* a festival held the evening before the *dukhla*, which the two fiancés hold separately in their own homes. Normally a stage is prepared in front of the woman's house where she sits awaiting the arrival of the *henna*, a black-colored paste obtained by processing an herb and then arranging it on a tray and adorning it with candles and ribbons. The *henna* is prepared at the groom's house and the central moment of the festival is its transport from the man's home to that of the bride. In the past it was used to tattoo the bride and the other women of the family; today this practice has been replaced by the use of makeup and nail polish, and *henna* is distributed to the guests as a sign of good omen. The husband and his guests withdraw immediately after the delivery and the two festivities continue separately.
- *dukhla:* a word that comes from the triliteral root da-kha-la that means "to enter." It is another public celebration held on the streets or in a hall and is the culmination of the ritual after which the couple will be considered married. According to Campo (1991) the word itself contains a double meaning: the man "enters" the bride with the first sexual intercourse, while the bride "enters" into a new home and a new family. Both "entrances" actually should occur on the same day, after the public celebration of the *dukhla*.
- *sabāḥiyya*: a word that comes from the root ṣa-ba-ḥa, which has to do with the daytime and the morning. This event is celebrated the day after the wedding party, when relatives of the couple go to the home bearing gifts and money. The visits from distant relatives and other acquaintances

[6]Notary public who has the task of formalizing marriages and divorces. His presence allow to officialize the marriage according to the law. On the origin of this figure see El-Azhary Sonbol (1996).

[7]A lawful Islamic marriage, but not officially registered. The marriage is permissible under Islamic law when the contract is signed in the presence of one of the *mahram* of the woman (her father, a brother or a man responsible for her) and two witnesses (Uthman, 1995, pp. 54–55).

[8]For an example of the types of furnishings, see Singerman's study, set in the popular districts of Cairo in the mid-1990s (1995, pp. 115–116).

[9]Except in the case of unilateral divorce; when the woman asks for a divorce without the consent of her husband she will automatically lose her assets.

then continue throughout the week following the *dukhla*. This celebration was originally associated with the moment when the virginity of the bride was publicly proven, a task for a traditional midwife (*dāya*), which ended by showing a bloodstained sheet. Currently this custom is rarely practiced, and this verification has become a family task: the parents of the couple wait for a report on the first sexual intercourse, after which they can begin the *sabāhiyya*.

How is the timing of these rituals restructured in the absence of the groom? It is necessary to point out that there is no fixed schedule that determines the rhythms between one event and the following one. Different reasons can lead multiple phases to overlap, lengthening or shortening the time between one celebration and another. The time between the *fātiha* and the *dukhla* can therefore span years or just a few weeks.

In the case of marriage with an absentee, the most common situation is for the bride and groom to meet during a holiday. Even when they have already seen each other via the Internet or in photographs, the encounter in their home country remains the moment in which they make the final decision, accepting or refusing to proceed with the official celebrations. If the engagement proposal is confirmed, the *fātiha* and *shabka* normally occur during the same holiday. Since the man remains in Egypt for only a few weeks, the decision must be made quickly. If the couple do not know each other, they are often allowed to date and spend more time together than they would in other cases, to facilitate the process of getting acquainted that will continue by telephone after the young man returns to Turin. During the months of absence the migrant arranges to send money to his family, who manage the construction or completion of his house. If everything is ready, as a rule the next holiday will be the moment in which *katib al-kitāb, henna, gihāz, dukhla* and *sabāhiyya* will be performed.

The demands of migrants can expand or contract the "average" times of the celebrations. The first is the case of young men who depart after the engagement but fail to earn the needed money or do not have residence permits that allow them to leave Italy. The opposite situation, much more common, encourages the overlap of different rituals in order to save time and money. Another common way to save time is to go through some of the stages transnationally, such as the *fātiHa*, the *shabka* or *katib al-kitab*. The families agree and recite the *fātiḥa*, or the woman *tilbis is-shabka* [wears the jewellery], or the father signs the marriage contract while the young man is in Italy, so everything is ready for the *dukhla* which can be celebrated during his first visit to Egypt.

Sometimes the writing of the marriage contract is rushed for other reasons: the *fātiḥa*, *and shabka* represent non-binding rituals which one can end simply with a verbal agreement and by returning the amount of gold received. After *katib al-kitab,* however, even if the couple is still not socially entitled to live together, canceling the effect of the contract requires proceeding with a divorce [*ṭalāq*]. Sometimes in cases of marriages with an absentee this stage can be hurried because women and their parents see it as a commitment from the future husband to keep his promise. This is particularly relevant because his absence from the country may be for a period of one year or even more.

A last significant change in the rituals is when the celebration of the marriage itself is transnational and the ritual is extended geographically, starting in Egypt and ending in Italy.

> "A friend of mine did not do military service and cannot go back to Egypt[10], so they [his parents] sent him a wife from Egypt. They did the marriage in Egypt after he sent the marriage contract by way of the consulate. The wife could then apply for a visa, and when she arrived here they celebrated the *dukhla*. Just imagine, he had never seen his wife, and they had only spoken by phone and seen pictures of each other. She came with her wedding dress in a suitcase and had scarcely arrived when they did the *dukhla*."
>
> Ayman

The *dukhla* marks the time when the couple is publicly recognized as married and can begin to live together and have sexual relations. In the case of marriage to a migrant the *dukhla* also marks the recognition of the woman as the wife of a migrant and legitimizes her eventual departure. As we have seen, the traditional inspection of virginity by a midwife is mostly replaced by "family" supervision, in which the groom's parents remain in front of the door or downstairs and wait for their son to confirm that

[10]Military service in Egypt is mandatory. Boys who leave the country before entering the army normally prefer not to go back to Egypt until they reach the age of 30. After this age the military service can be avoided only paying a penality.

everything went smoothly. If this part of the ritual takes place in Italy the groom will call the family home and say *al-hamdu li-llāh* [thanks God] to indicate that the first sexual intercourse has occurred. Only then the couple can actually call themselves married and the marriage ritual is finally concluded; the *dukhla* began in Egypt and spread in space and time to end definitively in Italy with a transnational *sabāhiyya*.

5. NEWLYWEDS WITHOUT *'ARĪS* [*GROOM*]: MANY WAYS OF BEING A WOMAN LEFT BEHIND

Transnational marriages are rarely followed by an immediate family reunification and give rise to families destined to be, at least temporarily, transnational. After marriage to an absentee the new wives of migrants move into the home of the husbands' family, while the husbands return to work in Italy. To date, rural Egypt has not seen a proliferation of nuclear family homes as a result of the influx of remittances. When building a house in the country of origin, migrants tend to reproduce the living model prevalent in the villages: they mostly build a new *shaqqa* [apartment] on a floor added to the *bēt il-'ā'ila*.[11] When they do construct separate buildings designed for themselves and their children, sometimes they are so close to their parents' house that it is difficult to draw the boundaries that separate one household from another. The idea that "modern" economic activities are necessarily associated with a transition from extended to nuclear family is reminiscent of evolutionary theories based on the assumption that economic conditions determine social behaviors in a way that is not influenced by cultural values.

Wives who remain in Egypt while their husbands are working abroad, the so-called women left behind, reside in the *bēt il-'ā'ila* of their husband. This category of women is very heterogeneous and only direct observation in the field may suggest elements useful for differentiating their experiences.

> "All the women of the village tell the same story and the same problems: the first is that of relations with their husbands' family because when the husband is away, there are always problems. The second is money and the third is that of the distance. With the distance sometimes there are problems between husband and wife and also between the father and children."
>
> Sugud

The issues raised by Sugud are common to many women, but are rooted in different family situations and personal conditions that contribute to blurring the lines with regard to generalizations (Amin et al., 1985; Brink, 1991; Zohry, 2006; Abdelaal, 2011; Binzel et al., 2011). The experience of non-migrant women is defined by either subjective variables or by a series of objective variables that define the contexts in which the individual experiences take place.

The following table presents six variables relevant to the experience of the wives of migrants, followed by three modes in which the variable may occur, ordered from "disadvantageous" to the most "favorable."

ECONOMIC OUTCOME	"failed" migration	"maintenance" migration	successful migration
POLITICAL STATUS OF MIGRANT	illegal/emergence phase	temporary permits	residence card/citizenship
LIFE CYCLE STAGE	newlywed	wife with small children	wife with older children
RELATIONSHIP WITH FAMILY OF ORIGIN	geographical distance/ rare visits	frequent visits	residence with family of origin
HOUSING CONDITIONS	*bēt il-'ā'ila*	*bēt il-'ā'ila* without inlaws	Independent family
EXPERIENCE IN ITALY (WOMAN)	never	temporary visits	returned after long period

The context analyzed is characterized by migratory movements that find their main justification in economic factors; thus the economic conditions of the migrant clearly have repercussions on the living

[11] *Bet* means house, and *il-'ā'ila* means patrilineal lineage. The expression can thus be translated as "family home" and indicates houses, even mansions, which are home to only members of the same lineage, basically a set of parents with sons and their families.

conditions of his wife. In the case of extended families, economic interdependence is strong: they eat together, share the expenses of everyday life and invest collectively in projects such as building a house, marriage or migration of one of the family members. Contributing to the costs according to their own ability, each subfamily[12] is called on to do its part. In cases of the migrant's economic success, his subfamily fulfills its expectations through remittances. But when the money sent is rare or insufficient, the wife's work is the only contribution and she will have less chance to escape the demands for involvement in the economic activities of the family.

These reflections show that aspects of migrants' vulnerability—be it economic vulnerability or otherwise—have repercussions on their wives. For example, a man without papers lives abroad in a condition of extreme vulnerability (Saad, 2007, p. 21) because the absence of a residence permit limits his chances of obtaining a long series of rights in the host country, including a regular job and the ability to enter and leave the country or reunite his family. This situation has an impact on his family and wife, who often faces not only the lack of money, but also the lack of prospects for family life. The impossibility of reunification, the absence of visits and lack of remittances affect the daily experience of women: the vulnerability of male migrants reaches beyond themselves and reflects onto their wives, who thus become weaker within the family structure.

Another factor that influences the experience of women in Egypt is the stage of their life cycle. The social mobility that spouses acquire through marriage is not immediate because living in a *bēt il-'ā'ila* the husband remains, at least temporarily, under the authority of his father while his wife goes from her mother's authority to her mother-in-law's control (Delaney, 1991, p. 186). The life cycle is an important element in the transformation of women's experience, and its relevance increases for the wives of migrants since restrictions with regard to freedom of movement and autonomy in decision-making—typical of the post-marriage phase (De Haas et al., 2010)—are underscored in the absence of her husband (Zohry, 2009). The first phase of the life cycle of a new bride is a delicate period, especially when the woman is not linked to the husband's family through a previous relationship.

This is a phase of adaptation and mutual understanding in which the newcomer plays a subordinate position as the only outsider in the family context. Control over women's mobility is an element by which husbands and their families measure the power established in the early stages of marriage. Control loosens over time, especially after the birth of the first child, but in the absence of the husband it remains totally in the hands of the family and acquires a symbolic value. Closely related to the issue of mobility is that of relations with the woman's family of origin. This is another issue that affects the experience of women left behind because their parents' home, more than an emotional reference, is also a place for the maintenance of their rights, as a shelter for women in case of problems with their husbands' family.

The last two elements that affect the female experience are the internal organization of the *bēt il-'ā'ila* and whether or not the woman has had any previous experience abroad. Women living in Egypt are not just those who have not been reunited, but also those who have returned after a phase of life in Italy with their husbands. Experience in Italy—especially if they were there for a long time and were well integrated into the surrounding context—affects the way of life of returning women because family conduct maintained in Italy leads to changes in housing practices and in the marital relationship. Women in Italy get used to a nuclear condition and begin to attribute new meaning to the private sphere; as a consequence they can have difficulty giving this up after returning to Egypt.

The description of some of the factors affecting the condition of the migrants' wives in Egypt illustrates the existence of elements that act as a cushion for social change and that explain why the potential transformation inherent in the condition of single woman normally does not become a challenge to the patriarchal system (Kaser, 2008, p. 242). In rural Egypt new housing arrangements, new forms of work, new access to mobility and new social disparities coexist with the reproduction of extended families and social hierarchy. Nonetheless, this general finding must not reduce the description of female *immobility* into a single category.

[12] "A basic family unit residing within an extended household" (Khadr et al., 2003, p. 147).

6. CONCLUSION: IS MARRIAGE WITH AN ABSENTEE A MIGRATION STRATEGY?

What sort of experience is "marriage with an absentee" for an Egyptian woman? Some of them agree to such a marriage for reasons that are predominantly economic or from external pressures, while others are fascinated by the image of a man who has left the country, experienced life abroad and can ensure them a better future and a visa for Italy. Especially among very young girls preference for men who live abroad depends on the imaginary ideal of Italy, which seems to overshadow concerns about the consequences that can follow. Many do not seem particularly interested in knowing if they will soon be reunited or not. For women, marriage with an absentee is a source of mixed feelings: hopes and illusions are mixed with concerns about the fact of marrying a man they know little about and with whom they probably are not going to share the early years of marriage.

The literature on migration from Arab countries considers the psychological impact that remittances have on men without analyzing what effect they have on women, as if women were less influenced by imagining other lifestyles. For this reason, perhaps, Egyptian women continue to be uniquely described as wives who follow their husbands. Remittances sent and stories told when migrant return affect young men encouraging them to imagine themselves as "potential migrants" and fueling the migration chain; in the same way they act on women – and the families of the young women involved in organizing a wedding – pushing them to imagine themselves as "potential wives of migrants."

> "My sister had had other boyfriends, but she did not want to stay in Alexandria because she had this dream of leaving Egypt. So when George arrived she agreed to marry him because he was living in Italy."
>
> Mary

When considering the aspirations of Egyptian girls, one should not forget that marriage with a person living abroad is also a hope for a journey that they could otherwise not accomplish. Mary's words in fact suggest a strategic use of this marital union. Can we therefore conclude that these unions are viewed by women as a migration strategy (Lacoste-Dujardin, 1992, p. 98; Ambrosini et al., 1994, p. 19; Salih, 2003, p. 38; Ahmed, 2010, p. 7), the only viable way to migrate in a patriarchal culture of migration without breaking the rules and social hierarchies?

The women I met in Italy are likely to describe themselves as wives who have embraced the plans of the man they married. Doing so they avoid confrontation with the dominant ideal of a woman, wife and family that describes the man as the *mobile* part of the family and the woman as the *immobile* part. Field experience suggests, however, that the option of marriage with a migrant can take on other meanings, and while some women endure the choice of marriage others take advantage of the opportunity: "I wanted to come to Italy, so when this man asked for my hand I was happy!" Alia said. "If I had not wanted to come to Italy, I would not have married the man who is now my husband," says Ferial. Reflections on marriage with absentees lead to the affirmation that, even in a rigidly gender-characterized migration system, women have access to mobility by moving within the norms that govern gender roles and planning their migration in the form of *family mobility*.

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