TANTA AS A MOSLEM CENTER

TANTA is situated in the heart of the Delta of Egypt. It is so unlike the modern cities of Egypt that it deserves to be called only a village, and, as the present population is somewhat above sixty thousand, is thus the largest village of Egypt. Tanta can well be called the heart of the Delta because of its location for it lies in between the two branches of the Nile and yet not on either branch. It is the capital of the large Gharbiya Province and is surrounded by farming land that is immensely productive and peopled by about two million Moslems. A wonderful system of canals waters all this section which has become one of the richest in all Egypt.

There are four lines of railways entering Tanta and over forty trains a day bring masses of people into the city. It is stated that over four thousand railway tickets per day are sold here and this number increases out of all proportion at times of the Moulid, or Fair, which, until recent years, was held here and was so largely attended. This Moulid has been well written up by Dr. Swan for THE MOSLEM WORLD (January 1914).

The real reason we claim Tanta as a Moslem Center is because we find here the tomb of one of the most famous of Moslem saints, Sayyid Ahmad al Badawi. He it is who has made Tanta famous. He furnishes us perhaps the best example of saint-worship that can be found in Islam at the present time and his glory does not appear to decline. We may almost say that he is the Heart of the people of the Delta and we can argue that the homage paid to him is nothing short of worship. Though he was only a wandering dervish of a common type whose mind was said to be attracted to God and absent from the body, yet he is worthy of our notice for his influence even to the present day. Very many of the four thousand travelers a day who enter Tanta come for the express purpose of visiting this tomb, and it is said to be the proper thing

for one coming for business to make it a point to go first to the Sayyid to ask his blessing on the undertaking. The Mosque which bears his name and which is built over his tomb is the most prominent spot in Tanta. I have heard a carriage driver rebuked by the occupants of his carriage for his even asking them where they wished to go, for he should have known that they wanted to visit the Sayyid first.

We may well inquire how it came about that Tanta is a Center of so much religious importance. Sayyid Ahmad was born in Morocco more than seven centuries ago about the year 597 A.H. and early migrated with his father to Mecca. Thence he came to Tanta, or Tandita as it seems to have been called then. He came in response to a vision which told him that he was to make his future home in Egypt and no other reason need be assigned.

It is related that, on one occasion, while still in Mecca, he stretched out his arm to Tanta and liberated a boy who had been caught in the horns of an ox, and that boy later became his successor. On his arrival in Tanta he is said to have spent forty days on a roof staring at the sun till his eyes became fiery and swollen, whereupon he called to a boy to bring him an egg to put on his eye and promised to give him in exchange his Green Palm Stick. The boy hurried to his mother and asked for an egg but was told that there was not one in the house. He sorrowfully told the stranger of their poverty and was told to go again and look in their roof room, which they did and found that it was full of eggs. This boy was Abdal Muta'al who had formerly been saved from the horns of the ox and who became the successor of Sayyid al Badawi. The fame of this wonder worker spread and he continued to make his abode in Tanta. The wildest tales are told of his *Karamat*, or miracles. Most of them were wrought for the benefit of Moslems such as the preventing of famines and healing of diseases. No story seems incredible for he had resources of power that other mortals do not have. Once he pointed his finger at a skin of milk that was being carried along the street and it burst at once. When reproached for causing this waste, he

pointed to a serpent that had run out of the skin and so he had prevented harm that might have resulted.

His fame grew till the time of his death in 675 A.H. and so he was buried as a Wali of God. His miracles did not stop with his death but rather increased till his tomb became a shrine visited from far and near. An Indian who made a visit to the shrine was asked how he had heard of the fame of this saint and he replied, that, in India, even the children swore by the name of Sayyid Ahmed al Badawi. Yet people will not confess that they pray to him but only that they beseech him for his aid by reason of his excessive merit. At any hour of the day people can be seen reaching up with their hands to the window of the tomb to take a blessing. The hold he has on the common people is wonderful. Many a Moslem who has ceased to observe the daily prayers still calls on Sayyid al Badawi. The grip of saint-worship is specially strong because saints are to be feared as well as loved. I have heard recently of a local saint whose special gift was his being able to see at an instant the secrets of the guilty heart and so how fearful a man might well be to stand in his presence lest he should be rebuked! How real and powerful these saints must be to their people! It is commonly said that at the time of the Moulid old Sayyid al Badawi leaves his grave and, with his Green Palm Stick, drives in from every direction people who thought to absent themselves from attending.

A volume of three hundred pages has been written by Al Khafagi under the title of Al Nafahat al Ahmadiya which is replete with the wonderful works of Sayyid al Badawi. The book contains legends of many interesting places in and about Tanta which must possess special charm to-day to visitors. The curious might wonder just where on this road to Qahara or in the village of Mahalla did the Sayyid manifest his power. Poems have been written in the Gafiya style using every letter of the alphabet as the final letter of the verses of each particular poem.

The Ahmadi Mosque, with its two slender, pointed minarets marks the site of the tomb of this famous saint and is the seat of the Ahmadi University to which it gives

its name. It is really a branch of Al Azhar and is under the same administration. Of course the Azhar is a more cosmopolitan institution because of the presence of foreign students but those who have visited the two institutions have probably found the Ahmadi a cleaner and more business-like place. The present student population is given as 1800. They are very conspicuous with their peculiar manner of dress and their bundle of unbound pages of books, and their eagerness for learning is a rebuke to us all. The mosque has not been able to accommodate all the school and an overflow building has been built with seventy rooms for classes. It is called the *Ma'had*.

There is an interesting line of bookshops near the Mosque which corresponds to the "Paternoster row" at the entrance to the Azhar.

No doubt much of the popularity of this Mosque-school is due to the presence of the tomb of Tanta's Patron Saint and so the place is a great rallying point for both the learned and the unlearned. Great and small meet together here. Outside are to be seen numbers of beggars and cripples who come in for their share of notice. The crowd opens up to make way for a teacher approaching with all the dignity that his flowing robes can add. A most important object at the Tomb is the collection box which is the receptacle for the money gifts of the devotees of the Sayyid. The making of vows to the Sayyid in times of trouble or need is said to be very common all over Egypt and so they come to pay their vows "in the presence of all his people." Here their greatest need is evident—a Mediator between God and man.

On the railway platform an old man sells for a piaster a kind of candy which he calls "A Blessing from the Sayyid." So none needs to go away without a Blessing. Is it possible that this is the only blessing they receive?

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Tanta.