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# **Threads of Virtue**

## *The Ethical Lives of Syrian Textile Traders*

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## Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of ethical concepts and practices among contemporary Muslim textile traders and entrepreneurs in Aleppo, Syria. It draws on Lambek's perspective that ethics is "ordinary": an inherent and pervasive aspect of exchange transactions, such as visits, hospitality, retail transactions and the negotiations leading up to them. Three ethnographic settings are explored – a textile factory in the north of Aleppo; a wholesale yarn market in the centre of Aleppo's old city markets that is also the site for speculative futures-trading; and a retail fabric shop where young salesmen are employed to get the best price they can from their mainly female customers. The moral processes, concepts and accomplishments that emerge in these different settings include affection and generosity; intention and pure-heartedness; substance and trustworthiness; autonomy, dignity and worth; and obligation and moral reasoning. The thesis describes the different ways that exchanges mediate these processes.

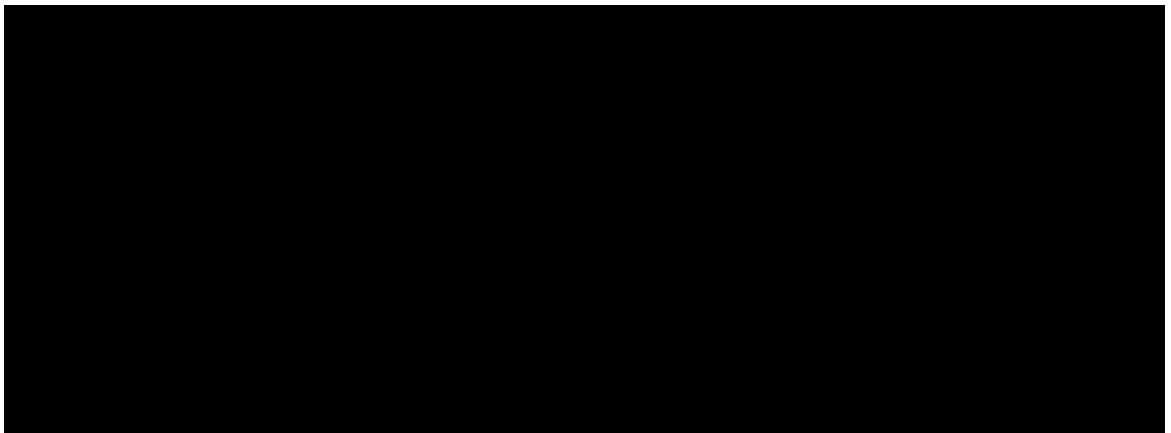
This thesis approaches ethics as a function of life lived with others: an aspect of how one should be involved with others, and how one should manage, limit, extend and orient oneself in that involvement. One theme that emerges is how the relationship between autonomy and generosity is managed in these settings, by actors with differential access to resources. Another is what "sincerity" means: is virtue simply a question of mastering the protocols that govern these exchanges, or is it a matter of the heart? How can social actors tell the difference? Why and when does it matter to them to be able to do so? This thesis also explores the connections between power relationships and ethical practice, arguing that ethics can never be isolated from power, but nor can it be collapsed into it. Moral accomplishments such as generosity, sincerity or affection can be ways of making and organising claims to social status and capital, and of course depend on these things too. However, they also define types of sociality – such as "intimacy" and "continuity" – that are seen as having intrinsic worth.

## **Declaration**

Date: 28 March 2011

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

During my fieldwork I designed and directed a research project that involved members of the Institut Francais d'Etudes Arabes in Aleppo, and the University of Aleppo. This project provided me with data and contacts on which I draw in chapters four and five of this thesis. I describe these arrangements further in the methods section of the introduction.



## Threads of Virtue

### *The Ethical Lives of Syrian Textile Traders*

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## Introduction

### Trading Places

It is December 2010 and I am trying to finish my thesis and do some Christmas shopping. One weekend, I find myself wandering through a shopping centre in the north of Edinburgh. I stop at a stall in the middle of the concourse and try to bargain for a couple of hand-held heat packs – a kind of chemical-based hot water bottle. After over a year in the field studying Syrian traders, I think, I ought to be able to manage this.

I cannot. The woman selling the packs will not compromise, and neither will I. I walk away, circle the concourse, and wander back past for a second attempt. She comes down from £10 to £8, but I have decided that the right thing to do is to stick to my guns at £7.50. I pull out a £20 note and put it on the counter, offering her the ready cash. The tactic misfires: “but you have £20!” she says.

Inwardly my temper rises as I feel the prospect of success slipping away. “It is only 50p difference” I say. But she is not budging. Now I feel petty to refuse her an extra 50p, and am conscious of how forced my smile must look. I am too brittle for this, I tell myself, and take my £20 note back off the counter. “Good luck” I say to her. I am slightly comforted that she looks as piqued as I feel when we both realise that the deal is lost. I am far too proud to change my mind and meet her price. In economic terms, fifty pence is easily forgotten but in the personality-driven dynamics of a particular transaction it can mean a great deal.

It may seem strange to start with a vignette from Edinburgh rather than Aleppo. But my fieldwork did not end when I left the field. Not only did writing-up involve mulling over and imaginatively reliving episodes and conversations from my time in Syria. In addition to this, techniques and orientations I observed and started to acquire there are only now starting to find expression in my day-to-day experience. In the strict sense of the term “participant observation”, I did not really do any fieldwork in Syria: I was studying traders but never traded myself in their shops or offices, or knew what it felt like to bargain and risk from their position.

So in Edinburgh, over a year after returning from Syria, I tried. I was quickly conscious of a pressure to be successful, and the importance and difficulty of being persuasive. I concluded that the worst thing you can do is blindly dig your heels in when you feel like you are losing. You are never less persuasive than when you are brittle and dogmatic; and you must be persuasive, because you cannot force someone to buy or to sell.

This thesis is a study of virtue among Syrian entrepreneurs, traders and salesmen in Aleppo. These are people who are constantly involved in exchanging things, whether money, goods, promises, offers, challenges, favours, visits or hospitality. Their social virtues – such as generosity, dignity, autonomy, charisma, honesty and purity – are aspects of the way that they enter into and conduct themselves in these different kinds of exchanges. But are these virtues simply a question of mastering the protocols that govern these exchanges, or are they matters of the heart? How can social actors tell the difference? Why and when does it matter to them to be able to do so? These are the themes that I seek to explore in this thesis.

This thesis therefore speaks to the anthropology of ethics rather than economic anthropology. Admittedly, the boundary between the two is to some extent artificial. Debates in economic anthropology have touched explicitly on ethical questions – such as the meaning of generosity and altruism (Sahlins 1988, Widlok 2004); the way that capitalist modes of exchange have been conceptualised within local cosmologies of good and evil (Taussig 1980); and the different ways in which moralised and non-moralised spheres of exchange articulate with one another (Parry and Bloch 1989). Several foundational works of economic anthropology, economic sociology and political economy have made implicit or explicit moral claims – about the value of solidarity (Weber 1947, Mauss 1990), the destructively “acidic” properties of money in dissolving social relations (Simmel 1964), or the way that commodity fetishism masks the exploitation of labour by capital (Marx 1988). In many of these works, it is as if the intrinsic worth of human nature and relationships is threatened above all by a wrong attitude towards or conception of economic exchange. It might not be too much to claim that the problem of economic exchange

is *the* moral question in Western philosophy, where selfishness is the basic sin, and greed its most basic bodily expression (Robertson 2001). Moral concern about the potential for selfishness lurking in economic exchange dates back to Aristotle (1962), but may have emerged in a new way as a counterpart to the capitalist ideology of the market (Parry 1986).

Nevertheless, my main interest is not in the moral values and meanings of exchange. I am more concerned to use exchange to ask questions about the ways in which people are ethical, and what it means to be so in particular contexts. Is it more important to perform correctly and effectively, or to harbour the correct inner attitudes? Is generosity, for example, a strategy to accumulate and demonstrate status, or is it the function of a form of sociality such as intimacy that has intrinsic worth? The answer, of course, may be both and may also depend on the context. But either way, virtue as a mundane practice is worth taking seriously as an object of analysis, as for example Hirschkind (2006) and Mahmood (2005) have done. It cannot be reduced to power or desire, as Lambek (2000) argues. This is not a naïve position – it does not deny that power matters. In this thesis I try to show that virtue is practiced in different ways by different kinds of people according to the level and type of power they enjoy – new money and old, wealthy and not so wealthy, well-established or young and ambitious. I also argue that what it means to be virtuous is part of a wider process of political negotiation.

Another feature of this thesis is that it treats virtue as a mundane practice. I diverge from Parry and Bloch's (1989) thesis that economies are best analysed as the articulation of moralised and non-moralised domains of exchange. Rather, I argue that all transactions in this commercial context are opportunities to practice virtue. To explore what ethics might mean in the specifically unheroic and everyday domain of trading relations, I use Lambek's (2010a:1-2) notion of "ordinary ethics": that individuals everywhere evaluate their own actions in terms of right and wrong, and are exposed to others' evaluations; that these evaluations are an inherent part of everyday transactions such as ordinary speech; and that the standards governing

these evaluations are usually unspoken and unwritten. Ordinary ethics is to be found in people's practice rather than in their laws and creeds.

### *Autonomy, Generosity and Exchange*

I explore the theme of ordinary ethics among contemporary Syrian Muslim entrepreneurs, salesmen and speculators working in the textile trade in Aleppo. I focus on three ethnographic settings – a factory owner and his circle of business partners and acquaintances; a market where wealthy businessmen import and trade in wholesale quantities of yarn, and where less wealthy brokers speculate on its price; and a retail fabric shop where young salesmen are employed to get the best price they can from their mainly female customers. The main actors in these settings differ from each other in terms of age, wealth and social status. The idioms in which they sell – the way they describe what they are doing and the values that matter most to them – are also quite varied. In the factory owner's circle, men talk of the importance of "affection" and "charisma"; in the yarn market, the speculators noisily accuse each other of "lying" and valorise "slipperiness"; in the retail shop, the young salesmen talk of the importance of selling with complete autonomy – "what I want to sell, not what she wants to buy". These discourses correspond to the differing nature of the transactions. In the factory circle, relationships between business partners are long-term and supposed to be mutually beneficial; in the speculators' market and the retail shop, they are short-term and either openly or tacitly agonistic.

Because these actors enjoyed different levels of power and real autonomy, so their conceptions of virtue and the way in which they practised it differed. Power and virtue cannot be collapsed into each other, but nor can they be wholly separated. For example, the factory owner's charisma is a condition for virtue, because those who lack it are weak and less able to follow through on their promises. Charismatic entrepreneurs with the wherewithal to gather people and money about them were better able to provide help (*musaa'adeh*) to others, to inspire affection (*mahabbah*), to stand by others (*yaqifuu ilaa janbhun*) and to follow through on promises. Power here is a condition for virtue. So while virtue cannot be reduced to power – acting

virtuously is not just a game to acquire social capital – virtue cannot be considered in isolation from power.

This theme reemerges throughout the thesis. The less wealthy speculators in Aleppo’s main yarn market whom I describe in chapters four and five did not have the means to follow through on their promises to buy or to sell large quantities of yarn. So they made different kinds of promises, involving large quantities of *fictive* yarn. The wealthier yarn traders saw this system as “untrustworthy” (*muu muriih*) and “irregular” (*ghayr nizaamiy*). In other words, those without power found their virtue questioned. In chapters six and seven, I describe the virtue of shop employees whose autonomy and power were limited. Because they were at the beck and call of their bosses, these employees could not control their own time or destiny, and therefore could not claim dignity or offer friendship and hospitality so easily. In order to practice these kinds of virtue, they needed to be “clever”. One employee in particular defied his bosses by making clever excuses to them, and by talking to me in front of them in ways that they could not understand. He did this in order to offer me friendship and hospitality: to invite me to the shop, to leave the shop to walk out of the market with me and to buy me food, to stay out in the evening with me when his bosses tried to call him back to work. Lacking autonomy, he needed to use “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985) such as cunning and a level of deceit in order to practice virtue and assert a degree of autonomy.

Despite these differences, autonomy and dominance were valued everywhere. Everyone knew that the market in which they operated was competitive: it was a “sea where the big fish eats the small fish”. Regardless of age or ability to achieve the ideal, all men recognised the value of being a “personality” (*shakhsiyya*), someone whose purposes were achieved and whose will was followed. “The boss” (*mu'allim*) was someone worthy of respect, who knew his way around, and knew “how to get things done” (*min wayn tu'kal al-kitaf*) – someone who could not be “laughed at” (*laa yandahik 'alahi*) or taken advantage of. If that were all, respect would simply be a recognition of power and autonomy. But it was never difficult to hear or provoke discussion about more recognisably “moral” discourses. The social status of being

worthy of respect (*muhtaram*) implied being honest (*saadiq*), trustworthy and faithful (*amiin*) and generous (*kariim*). According to this discourse, respect was connected to the Islamic shariah; you could not be worthy of respect while also dealing in “unlawful wealth” (*maal haraam*) – profit gained improperly through deceit (*kizb*) or usury (*riba*).

“Respectability” in English has connotations of correct appearances, whereas the Arabic term *muhtaram* (“worthy of respect”) implies admirable inner qualities too. Among the Aleppan traders I knew, it was important to be ethical rather than merely to appear so. Hypocrisy was a serious and mocking accusation. A hidden attitude of envy or resentment was understood to pose a serious risk to a relationship or transaction. What was at stake in material terms was *baraka*, the all important quality of “blessing” that was responsible for profit or any kind of advantage coming easy, and lasting a long time. It was for the sake of *baraka* that traders displayed copies of the Quran in their shops and concluded transactions with routine pious sayings. *Baraka* inhered in ‘lawful wealth’, but not in ‘unlawful wealth’ achieved through deceit or inappropriate pressure. Most importantly, *baraka* was preserved or destroyed through the state of one’s heart towards others. To sell reluctantly, because one was forced to, made the object dangerous for the buyer; envying the buyer because one had sold to him at too low a price destroyed *baraka*; working for a boss or with a partner but with resentment in one’s heart, was dangerous for both; and to give a gift because one had been shamed into doing so was dangerous for the recipient. Ethics might always be read off material surfaces (Keane 2010), but in Aleppo ethics was often understood to emanate from an inner disposition.

So the hidden nature of the heart was a central concern in the moral cosmology of Muslim traders in Aleppo. The heart could never be assumed to be sincere, for good reasons. Selling or working willingly and without jealousy is by definition difficult in a culture where autonomy and success are valued. That another party might enter into a transaction or relationship with a trader reluctantly or with some hidden self-interest was understood to be an ever-present risk. Business partners, after all, want to be autonomous; traders do not want to sell low but might be forced to; employees

want to spread their wings; sons who work for their father want a shop of their own; obligations to give and receive must be met whether one wants to or not. These are imperatives that cannot be avoided, because they constitute honour; they are natural aspirations to dignity and status. Virtue emerges in people's lives as a result of contradictory pressures: to meet more or less compulsory obligations but to do so entirely voluntarily; to be an independent trader with a business of one's own but to keep one's place in a moral network of credits and debts; to be one's own man, and preferably the boss (*mu'allim*), but to respect and defer to one's father or employers; to desire autonomy but to value affectionate companionship with one's business partner; to acquire wealth but to maintain a spirit of generosity with one's transactors.

Among Aleppo textile entrepreneurs, an attitude of forbearance or generosity of spirit (*tasaamuh*) was highly valued in commercial exchange relations. A trader who was "clean-hearted" or who sold or worked "from the heart" (*min qalbhu*) was someone whose dispositions towards his transactor could be trusted: he did not sell enviously or work resentfully, but with a generous and willing attitude. An attitude of forbearance or generosity of spirit did not imply a soft touch; among traders it was a cardinal sin to be taken advantage of or "laughed at". Rather, it meant the attitude of wanting the best for one's transactor once one had settled the price, rather than envying or resenting them for it. Particularly in long-term wholesale relationships, it meant not squeezing one's transactor for every last penny, but making a willing compromise at a mutually beneficial price. Generosity of spirit (*tasaamuh*) was not simply a calculative virtue – a matter of meeting one's transactor halfway. It was a quality of the heart – an "ethical attitude" (Oakeshott 1975) – which in Aristotelian terms can be understood as the disposition in which an act or transaction is accomplished. It would not be virtuous to settle on a reasonable price but with anger and resentment or envy in one's heart. This would be to make a deal "despite oneself" (*ghasman 'anhu*) which is dangerous and not conducive to virtue. Similarly, to fail to reach a compromise out of jealousy or pride is to lack generosity of spirit.

This was precisely the virtue that I lacked when I missed out on the deal in Edinburgh. There is no shame in not reaching an agreement; it may be in both parties' interests not to agree on a price. But to enter or leave the transaction – whether consummated or unconsummated – with jealousy, resentment or pride is to fail to embody that virtue. According to this virtue – which is known among Syrian businessmen as having “good cinnamon” – a trader should not inhabit an attitude of envy, hatred, reluctance or brittle dogmatism. This is not to say that he should compromise at every opportunity. But to transact virtuously – and, in the long-term, successfully – requires a particular kind of engagement with the world. It is not desirable or virtuous to set one's heart against one's transactors, or to make brittle or insistent claims that fail to persuade or to engage with the reality around. Prices, relationships, and ultimately social reality, are made mutually (although not necessarily equally) through engaging in a dynamic and uncertain situation.

Forbearance or generosity of spirit (*tasaamuh*) seems to sit uneasily with the virtue of autonomy. According to the ideal of autonomy, a trader or salesman should strive to assert himself on the world “as he wants”; according to the quality of forbearance and generosity of spirit, he should know how to cultivate relationships, and recognise that prices and relationships are best agreed upon mutually and willingly. This tension can be resolved in different ways. One is to show generosity by offering one's customer a discount from a position of strength, once a price has been agreed. For example, discretionary forgiveness of debt (*samaah*) is a tactic of the factory owner in chapter one, which goes into making his “generosity” (*karaama*). In the retail shop (chapter six), where the salesmen are less powerful and the relationship with the customer is short-term, the tension could be resolved through mature and wise judgement. The salesman should decide at what point to compromise his high price (and thus his autonomy) for the sake of not losing the deal. I argue that this judgement is an ethical act, since it involves balancing competing ideals of selfhood (the autonomous self and the reasonable self). A third way to resolve the tension is by knowing how to get others to come round to one's own perspective “willingly”. For the factory owner, this was a matter of having “charisma” – which was understood as the ability to “gather” (*jam* ' ) others around and to inspire “affection”

(*mahabbah*) or “deference/shyness” (*khajal*). For the young retail salesmen, it was more often a matter of “cleverness” (*shataara*): getting the customer to follow their own ignorance and unreasoned desires and thus be led to agree a high price voluntarily.

So another theme that emerges in this thesis is a recurring tension between the ideals of autonomy and generosity: between the good of asserting one’s own will independently of others, and the recognition that one is inextricably involved with those people. How one should be involved with others – how one should manage, limit, extend and orient oneself in that involvement – is the subject matter of ethics. An important aspect of this tension in my context is the relationship between mastery and sincerity. I consider five broad topics: affection and generosity (chapter one); intention and pure-heartedness (chapters two and three); substance and trustworthiness (chapters four and five); etiquette, dignity and worth (chapters six and seven); and obligation and the Shariah (chapter eight). In some of these situations, it is important to master the rules of interaction, as in Goffman’s sociology (1959), which in this case means to demonstrate status or virtuosity over another or to adhere to the letter of the law. In other situations and for other actors, ethical assessments turn on the question of whether there is a genuine sense of responsibility to another: a proper “heart” for them or an engagement of conscience. In some contexts, both are important. In general, I try to show that these different types of orientation and engagement emerge in different situations and for different types of actors.

### ***The Status of Aleppo and of “Traders”***

Trade among Muslim businessmen in Aleppo is a promising context in which to study “ordinary ethics” for two reasons. First, a culture of trade and small trading partnerships has marked the city of Aleppo through its long history. This cultural tradition is embodied most obviously in the dense conglomeration of suqs (markets) that lies at the heart of Aleppo’s old city. These suqs still attract shoppers, importers and businessmen, and tourists (see Cornand 1994, Borneman 2007, Rabo 2005a,

2005b, 2007 for other recent ethnographic studies of the Aleppo suqs). The alleyways that form the basis of this market were set out in pre-Roman times, and since then the city has served as an important staging post in the Ottoman Empire and on the Silk Route – earning it a mention in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. The fortunes of the city waxed and waned as the Ottoman Empire declined; the city lost much of its regional importance after the end of the First World War, when the mandate powers drew a border between “Greater Syria” and “Turkey” running some thirty miles north of the city. The border cut off the city both from direct access to the Mediterranean sea and from the hinterland it had dominated during the Ottoman Empire.

Nevertheless, the city continued to expand through the twentieth century. Following trends of urbanisation that affected much of the industrial and industrialising world, the city began to reach dramatically beyond the limits of its old walls, from the 1930s onwards. Now its sprawling urban districts are home to some two million Syrians. As Syria signs free trade agreements with its regional neighbours and with the European Union, new industrial districts are springing up at the city limits, drawing in day labourers from the rural hinterland and providing employment to many of the city’s permanent residents. The old city suqs, home to thousands of shops and offices, still centralise much of the local, regional and international trade. These old city premises also often have a role in co-ordinating the manufacturing that takes place in the city’s suburbs and industrial outskirts.

Much of the trade and manufacturing involves textile industries – spinning polyester and cotton, importing yarn from India and the Far East, dyeing, knitting and weaving, and tailoring. Products range from underwear and T-shirts, to trousers and suits, bed linen, sofa coverings and curtains – and are consumed both domestically and internationally. Key export destinations include the Arab world, central Asian states and Africa. Politically, despite the coercive rule of Syria’s authoritarian regime which has monopolised national politics since the 1960s, Syria’s small independent traders and trading partnerships continue to play a pivotal role in the political economy. Since balance-of-payments crisis in the 1980s, the (Alawite) regime was

increasingly turned to the (largely Sunni) business community to boost economic output, generate employment for the country's growing population, and boost currency reserves.

This has led to the development of newly affluent class of entrepreneurs. The textile factory owner I describe in chapter one employs, together with his business partner, around one hundred people. Although he is not part of the military-business elite that has emerged since 1990 in the wake of policies of economic "liberalisation", nor does it make sense to think of him as a "small trader". Given his freedom and ability to travel to trade fairs – during my fieldwork he visited Milan, Istanbul, Tashkent, Dubai and China – these entrepreneurs afford a picture of mobility and flow in Syrian society that is in contrast to dominant representations of Syria as a closed and stagnant country. I recognise, of course, that these entrepreneurs are not typical: they are unusually wealthy and successful. Lawson (2007) noted that only ten percent of registered private companies in Syria employed more than five people. As I argue in chapter one, this unusual position affects the ways in which these entrepreneurs pursue reputations for virtue; the (limited) political trajectories and ambitions of some of these new entrepreneurs also draws attention to an ongoing process of negotiation over the meanings that virtue can have, and the kinds of exchanges that can safely mediate it in Syria's authoritarian environment.

A second reason why Muslim businessmen in Syria provide an interesting environment in which to study "ordinary ethics" (Lambek 2010a) is that trade has for centuries been at the heart of Islamic regulation and ideals as laid down in the Quran and *hadith*. Muhammad, the last and most important Islamic prophet, was a trader, known for embodying the principal trading virtues of being honest (*saadiq*) and trustworthy (*amiin*). In Aleppo, merchants sometimes quoted to me well-known *hadith* traditions such as "the virtuous trader will be resurrected among the prophets". Nevertheless, despite the importance and status of these scriptural traditions, it is important not to essentialise an "Islamic" ethic of trade. One caution against doing so is the importance of customary practice (*'urf*) in the way trading relationships and disagreements are managed. Another is the diverse ways in which

so-called Islamic discourses and practices do and do not enter into trading life. The wealthy entrepreneur in chapter eight performed the Muslim prayer daily and consulted muftis frequently enough to keep their contact numbers in his mobile phone. The industrialist in chapter one, on the other hand, did not do either of these things, at least not to my knowledge or publicly, although he without hesitation identified himself as Muslim.

Especially in Aleppo's old city suq, those traders for whom Quranic language and normativity was an explicit and apparently important part of daily life also emphasised the importance of caniness. This could earn a businessman the semi-approving jocular title of "devil" (*shaytaan*). Indeed, if Sunni traders in Aleppo construct their self-image against an Alawite regime and its cronies (Rabo 2005), they also distinguish themselves from apparently (or overly) pious Muslim scholars. This is further evidence that madrasa-educated men of piety do not have a monopoly on authority about how to live a good life" (Marsden 2008:418). One Muslim trader told me "we will benefit you more than a hundred religious scholars". This was partly to do with the issue of credibility: a dishonest trader soon went out of business, they said, but who could tell if a shaykh was trustworthy or not? It was connected to the issue of risk and hard work: a trader could not afford to spend all day in pious contemplation in the mosque; he had to be hard-working and pragmatically resourceful. It was also connected to an ethic of masculinity among traders in the marketplace which in certain circumstances tolerated a degree of crude joking.

But even in the midst of these jokes, there was no doubt that the world of many Muslim traders in Aleppo, whether in the central suq or the industrial periphery, was thoroughly moralised. That is not to say that all enjoyed unblemished reputations for moral rectitude and respectability; nor is it to say that many took a close interest in scriptural education or sought out the authority of scholars. Indeed, only a minority of the traders I knew told me that they regularly consulted religious scholars and shaykhs on matters of trade, or attended mosque classes or Quran study groups. But for most, notions of God's blessing (*baraka*), divine provision (*rizq*), the virtues of tolerance (*tasaamuh*), of good intentions (*qirfeh*) and a "clean heart" (*qalb nadhiif*)

were a meaningful part of their social world. Most would agree that a virtuous trader was able to “put at ease” (*yrayyih*) his customers and partners through his character and his care for them. These virtues all make good business sense: not being grasping, being able to talk politely and properly to others, having a good heart, and believing that “every transaction was an opportunity for the entrepreneur to assert” his virtue are probably not uniquely Syrian; indeed, they are also reported among Buddhist traders in Sri Lanka (Weeratunge 2010: 341, 335, 348).

It is also of course easy for a trader to “talk a good talk” to a foreign and inexperienced anthropologist who is interested in hearing about virtue. But that in itself is no reason to discount the importance or meaningfulness of local discursive worlds. Gilsenan (1982:177) noted of market relations in a north Lebanese village that

“the suq seldom ever has a singularly economic quality...village and tribal markets at least are not just arenas into which everyone leaps, economic fists at the ready for battle, where anything goes in terms of bargaining, self-interest, profit calculation, and getting as much out of the other fellow as possible. The suq is intensely personal and social. Relations of honor and good faith are as crucial there as are the niceties of local forms of accounting”.

Similarly, I argue that discourses about affection and virtuous intentions are not necessarily empty or cynical cover for a harder-headed, “pure” economic reality. That is not to say that such ideals always determine behaviour when push comes to shove in particular transactions or relationships – I explore some situations where they do not, and where allegations emerge of impropriety or lack of character. Nor is it to say that these ideals are equally achievable by or equally expected of different economic actors. I try to show that “affection” and “good intentions” are a meaningful way of organising and talking about social and moral status among wealthy industrialists – those who have the means to “aspire” – but that less wealthy retail employees prefer to seek after other qualities.

In general, though, an important feature of the social context for buying and selling in Aleppo is that a “trader” (*taajir*) – a person of independent means and reputation –

is a desirable economic, social and moral status. This may be connected to the centrality of trade to the Islamic scriptural tradition, as mentioned above. It is also connected to the realities of Syria's current political economy: most independent traders, particularly those with premises in or near the central suqs in Aleppo, Homs or Damascus, are economically comfortable compared to middle- and low-ranking public sector employees and rural labourers. Syria is still a predominantly agricultural economy, and while businessmen are often seen as morally suspect in rural circles (Weeratunge 2010), nevertheless "trader" (*taajir*) is a respectable term in urban centres in Syria. I sometimes encountered a pejorative use of the term "trade" (*tijaara*) and its epithet *tijaariy* – as meaning "done for a quick profit rather than with any care or attention to quality". And among the less well-off such as lower-ranking public sector employees and taxi-drivers, I sometimes heard complaints that market traders were thieves (*haraamiyya*) because of the large profit margins at which they sold. But in the marketplace and among the bourgeoisie in general, the term "trader" implied someone with social capital: connections, capital and reputation. It meant someone who has financial, social and moral substance.

In Aleppo, to be a "trader" (*taajir*) was to be more than a "seller" (*baa'i*) (Rabo 2005). One wealthy broker modestly insisted that "'trader' is a big word to apply to me!" This remark can be partly explained by the fact that trustworthy brokers were expected not to trade on their own account (since this would raise questions about whose money they were using to do so). But more than this, the designation "trader" was a social status, denoting someone who had a "name" (*ism*), "dignity" (*karaama*), "status" (*makaana*) and respect (*ihтираam*) – things that were quite distinct from the accumulation of wealth. Just as "trader" is a social status that means more than someone who "buys and sells", so "trade" involves multiple exchanges other than goods for cash. Indeed, when I started my fieldwork one of the first things I noticed, and initially found frustrating, was that it was possible to sit in an apparently busy shop or office for a long time without seeing anything that resembled the exchange of goods for cash. With time, I came to think of the mundane business of trade as involving multiple exchanges: exchanges of food, gifts, visits, favours, information,

goods, offers of guarantorship, offers to take another on trust, labour, credit, and particular kinds of sayings and words.

### *Methods*

Geographically, I found myself alternating between shops and offices in the old city suqs and textile factories in the city's industrial suburbs and periphery some five to fifteen miles north and west. Because of the preponderance of yarn and textile traders and manufacturers in Aleppo, that is where I focused my research. I moved between offices in the centre of the old city markets that organised the import and speculative trade in polyester and other artificial yarns, and knitting and weaving factories in the periphery that varied in size between twenty and one hundred or so employees. I also spent time in a retail shop in the centre of the old city markets. The way I took notes developed during my fieldwork and according to the situation I was in. In the early period, I would simply try to remember conversations and observations, sometimes taking limited "scratch notes" on a piece of paper or my phone, and reconstruct conversations afterwards in a nearby café or taxi. I was fortunate to be based at a French research institute some ten minutes walk from the old city suqs, where I was able to type up conversations from my notes (or directly from memory) while they were still fresh in my mind. I found my ability to recall information in this way improved with time, and was often based around remembering specific Arabic words and phrases.

As time went on, I arranged semi-formal interviews where I would take much more detailed notes during a conversation. Often these took the form of lessons and language exchanges: I would provide English language lessons and in exchange would pose detailed questions and direct the conversation as freely as I wanted. These sessions took place in the factory and retail shop as well as in my flat. Finally, in the last month and a half of my fieldwork I started conducting formal interviews with many of the traders whom I knew best, arranging appointments in advance and taping interviews. These enabled me to revisit themes which had been emerging over our months of conversation, and to clarify points explicitly.

I collected most of the information about the wholesale yarn market (and some of the information about sincerity) as part of a project which I organised through the French Research Institute and in conjunction with five students and researchers from the University of Aleppo's Departments of Geography and Philosophy. I designed research themes and questionnaires that focused on the activities on the wholesale yarn market. Then I discussed methods and approaches in conjunction with the students and researchers. We undertook a series of formal interviews with traders in the yarn market, taking detailed notes and typing these up in English and in some cases in Arabic afterwards. I found the participation of the students very helpful for their boldness in approaching informants, their understanding of language and idiom, the protocol of how to conduct interviews, and their supplementary background knowledge about trade in Aleppo. I also found that the contacts I made among traders and brokers during this project were invaluable leads which I followed up later with several more detailed interviews over a period of a few months.

Early in my fieldwork, through the French Institute in Aleppo where I was based as an associate, I was introduced to a middleman called Abu Sulayman who brought me into a circle of textile factory owners and entrepreneurs based in the north of the city. I often spent days accompanying him on his round of social/business visits: he would drive around the city, starting his day at Abdullah's factory, where we would sit with the factory owner and his colleagues and customers drinking tea and coffee, telling anecdotes, and discussing (or, in my case, trying to understand discussion about) the market. We might spend anywhere between half an hour and two or three hours in this factory, before heading to another office, shop or factory elsewhere in the city, and so on. In the afternoons I also often headed into the centre of the old city markets to sit in a retail shop with Majid watching his and his colleagues' virtuosic salesmanship and learning about their interests and concerns. In the evenings we sometimes headed to a billiards and table-tennis club.

For Abu Sulayman, who made his living as a middleman, manager-for-hire and occasional importer, these visits were crucial opportunities to renew relationships,

maintain affection, make new contacts, exchange information and favours, and learn about or propose deals. For me, they functioned in much the same way – although the deals in which I became involved centred not around textile goods, but the exchange of time, interviews and information for English language lessons and occasionally translation services. My Arabic, which I studied formally as an undergraduate at university in Britain, improved with exposure to colloquial Aleppan Arabic and as I took several hours a week of dialect conversation practice with a professional teacher. But whatever business and linguistic functions these visits served for each of us, they were also the affective stuff of which our lives were composed. Although Abu Sulayman was a little more than a decade older than me, we were both unmarried (he was divorced), and as we were both interested in each other's cultures and experiences, we found we had a great deal in common. The relationships started in these visits, as I came to know members of his (ever-expanding) circle, spilled out into other times and spaces: breakfasts, mealtimes, home visits, wedding invitations, evening concerts, holidays to the coast and so on. How far they will develop into the future is still of course an unknown quantity.

From start to finish, my fieldwork period lasted fifteen months over 2008-09<sup>1</sup>. My initial research question was “what do small traders put their trust in when dealing with each other, given the lack of a reliable legal system?” During the course of my fieldwork I also found myself drawn to the question of ethics and the moral concepts and practices that made trade a meaningful, cohesive and predictable activity in this context. However, the question of trust often proved the best route into this subject. For example, one immediate problem of method I encountered was that I did not know the best way to render “ethics” or “morality” into conversational Arabic in order to provoke a discussion. Possible translations included *adab* (etiquette / propriety / morals), *akhlaaq* (morals), *shar‘ / sharii‘a* (Islamic path / law) and *ruuhaaniyyaat* (spiritual matters). The problem was that many of these words cropped up in everyday conversation rarely if at all.

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<sup>1</sup> although in total around two months of this was spent back in the UK. I had also spent around 11 months in Syria previously, in 1997-98, and 2006, although studying Arabic rather than conducting fieldwork.

In time, I found other words that were more useful in directing questions and conversation. These words were often connected to questions of social status, daily provision or risk, and trust. Everyday discourse among traders included phrases such as “his way of dealing with you puts you at ease” (*ta‘aamuluh muriih*). I took this as an ethical evaluation, and drew the perhaps obvious conclusion that to the extent that businessmen talked about ethics in trade, it was often connected to the question of trust. Similarly, the idiom of having a “clean heart” (*qalb nadhiif*) was locally meaningful and had implications of sincerity (*ikhlaas*) and authenticity (*asaala*). As well as the question of trust, a “clean heart” was connected to a moral economy of generosity and envy: to be “clean-hearted” was to sell without jealousy and without squeezing one’s transactor for every last penny: the virtue of forbearance (*tasaamuh*) which I referred to above. “Generosity” (*karaama*) had connotations of “dignity” and “honour”; a synonym sometimes given was simply someone’s “worth” (*qiimeh*). To be generous, reliable and honest meant that one was “worthy of respect” (*muhtaram*) – a word that is entirely free of the staid provincial overtones of the English term “respectable”. Another term that I took as a key part of the moral universe of most Muslim traders in Aleppo was “blessing” (*baraka*): a quality from God that enabled prosperity and that was embodied in material forms of provision such as opportunities to profit, and the avoidance of breakage and wastage.

These issues were connected to a more basic theoretical question. The words which I found failed to resonate in everyday conversation – *adab*, *akhlaaq*, *sharii‘a* – belong to explicit scholarly traditions of Islamic moral and legal science. I was less interested in this discourse than in traders’ tacit knowledge and practice. But tacit knowledge and practice of what? What can legitimately come within scope of a study of the “ethical”? I explore this question below with reference to the recent burgeoning anthropological literature on the subject. I make a distinction between, on the one hand, models that draw a contrast between morality (as rules or rule-following) and ethics (as practice or reasoning), and on the other hand the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics that focuses on standards of excellence and the continual need to exercise different forms of judgement in attaining them. I argue

that the latter perspective, as developed in the work of Lambek (2000, 2008, 2010a, 2010b) makes best sense of my ethnographic material.

### *The Anthropology of Ethics*

Morality and ethics<sup>2</sup> have become the specific focus of anthropological study over the last two decades (e.g. Parry and Bloch 1989, Kelly 1993, Lambek 1993, 2000, 2008, 2010a, Laidlaw 1995, 2002, 2010, Meneley 1996, Howell 1997, Faubion 2001a, 2001b, Shoaps 2004, Widlok 2004, Mahmood 2005, Sykes 2009, Hirschkind 2006, Barker 2007, Robbins 2004, 2007, Evens 2008, Zigon 2008, 2009, Heintz 2009, Mayblin 2010, Pandian and Ali 2010). These attempts by anthropologists to study ethics as a precise object replicate trends in other fields such as political theory to take ethics seriously as a topic of enquiry (e.g. Taylor 1989). This is connected to a wider “ethical turn” in the humanities as noted by Garber et al. (2000) (in Lambek 2010a:5, footnote 10).

This developing sub-field of the anthropology of ethics is a late addition to long history of moral philosophy. Kant (2005), for example, famously argued that ethics consisted of those rules that could be supported by the principle of universal reason: people were obliged to act only according to those maxims which they could desire be applied as universal rules. Nietzsche (1973) argued that Judaeo-Christian ethics represented a “slave morality” which ignobly glorified weakness in order to constrain the strong; human potential could only be asserted once the common fetters of these beliefs had been overcome. The moral philosophy of utilitarianism which so exercised social theorists such as Weber and Mauss also sought to overcome the traditions of deontological moralities by suggesting that actions were good or bad according to their consequences: whether they maximised human good.

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<sup>2</sup> while different authors have proposed different distinctions between “morality” and “ethics”, these distinctions are not consistent with each other. I therefore follow Lambek (2010a) in using the terms interchangeably. The only exception to this is where I engage with the distinctions that other authors (notably Robbins and Zigon) have drawn between “ethics” and “morality”<sup>2</sup>. The general rule I follow is that I make no significant distinction between the two terms in analysing my own ethnographic material.

Anthropology has something distinctive to say to these universalising models through its commitment to observable ethnographic data. For example, Durkheim differed from Kant in seeing moral norms as functions of specific patterns of social organisation that could be studied empirically, rather than as universal imperatives that could be derived from logic. Foucault (1985, 1988, 2000) defined morality as the normative limits of behaviour, and ethics as the means by which individuals chose to fashion themselves after particular ideals. He argued that the models, practices and traditions according to which this self-fashioning takes place vary widely and can be the object of an anthropology of ethics.

However, in anthropology there is no firm agreement on what conceptual work “morality” or “ethics” should do. Archetti (1997) notes that the English word “morality” can refer to a wide array of discourses and practices. It covers a range of notions including responsibilities, rights, rules, sanctions, good and evil, right and wrong (Howell 1997). Within the developing sub-field of anthropology referred to above, some (notably Robbins 2007) distinguish between two general approaches: those that follow Durkheim in construing all normative behaviour as moral and those that restrict the “moral” to actions taken consciously on the basis of reasoning and choice.

Those in the latter camp point out that if all normative behaviour is moral, morality means much the same as culture. On this definition, as Howell (1997) notes, anthropologists have been studying morality for a long time – whether in the anthropology of religion (Evans-Pritchard 1976), law (Malinowski 1926) or studies of cultural values such as honour and shame (Peristiany 1966, Herzfeld 1980). Nevertheless, there now seems to be a developing recognition that the “moral” needs to do more precise conceptual work than this (Robbins 2007, Mayblin 2010). Early anthropological attempts to narrow down the concept included Read (1955), Burridge (1960), and Vogt and Albert (1966). Edel and Edel (1968) distinguished between “ethics wide” – in the sense of the cultural values underlying behaviour – and “ethics narrow”, in the sense of specific obligations.

Models of ethics/morality differ according to whether the main object of analysis is social structure and change (Durkheim 1953, 1973, Robbins 2007), phenomenological experience (Zigon 2008) or practice (Aristotle 1976, Lambek 2010a). Robbins (2007) provides an influential model of ethics drawn from ethnographic study. This model synthesises the two approaches identified earlier: morality as normative action and morality as actions taken after a conscious process of reasoning. For Robbins, society consists of different value-spheres (such as the workplace, family and so on). Within each sphere, people follow rules, mostly without thinking. However, when they find themselves between these spheres, or when a historical event such as missionisation introduces a conflicting set of values, people are unclear what rules to follow. They experience dilemmas and must decide for themselves which rules to follow and which to ignore. Thus, in some cases this behaviour is normative, while in others it is consciously chosen.

A notable response to Robbins' model of moralities came from Zigon (2007, 2009a, 2009b). He conceives of morality not in terms of rules and settled values, but in terms of discourses and dispositions, which are often multiple, fragmented and contradictory, and in constant dialogue with each other. Being embodied, these discourses and dispositions overlap between different spheres of life, such as family and the workplace. Thus, Robbins and Zigon have two different orientations to moral dilemmas. Robbins argues that people face dilemmas either when they get lost in the under-determined spaces between value-spheres, or when a new set of values intrudes and people are pulled in too many different directions at once. Zigon offers a different account of dilemmas. For him, dilemma and change are a constant if low-key feature of everyday life. But sometimes people encounter a situation where the range of discourses and dispositions available to them does not fit the context. In this situation, individuals become acutely aware of the dispositions and discourses that are normally an unthinking feature of their lives. This is the moment of acute dilemma or "moral breakdown".

Both Zigon and Robbins provide interesting and persuasive ways of conceptualising the "moral" in such a way that it does not simply become identical with the "social".

At one level, their accounts are very different. This is partly because they start from different conceptions of social reality. Robbins posits structure and boundedness while Zigon emphasises disposition and connectedness. But it is also because, as Robbins notes (2009), they are trying to explain different things. Robbins is interested in the macro-level of how cultural value-hierarchies attain stability and change, whereas Zigon is interested in how individuals experience and negotiate moral dilemmas.

However, at another level, Robbins' and Zigon's accounts resemble one another. Both seek to combine two divergent approaches to morality, and do so by distinguishing between morality as (often unreflective) normative behaviour, and ethics as conscious choice. The distinction between conventional behaviour and conscious innovation also recalls the broad contrast between structure-led and agency-led approaches to explaining human behaviour. In fact, despite their differences both Robbins and Zigon assume a distinction between stability, harmony and everydayness on the one hand, and conflict, torment and breakdown on the other. Both are interested in explaining the articulation between these two states. At the macro-level, Robbins asks how a stable system of value-hierarchies becomes disrupted. At the micro-level, Zigon asks why an individual experiences "moral breakdown" and what is involved in returning from it to everyday life.

I want to depart from models such as these that draw a sharp distinction between unthinking or reproductive morality on the one hand and conscious or creative ethics on the other. Such a stark separation constructs the ethical self as emergent and free, while it tends to portray norms as accepted unthinkingly. In fact, as Lambek notes "ordinary acts are rarely the mere following of convention" (Lambek 2010a:25). In my ethnographic material, moral rules and ideals always involve an element of judgement, and both judgement and ethical reasoning are constrained or "obligated" in various ways. I want in this thesis to follow a third approach to the anthropology of moralities: one which emphasises the pursuit of virtue and the exercise of judgement.

Howell (1997) has observed that anthropologists of morality have often seemed reluctant to engage with the academic tradition which has the longest history of investigating ethics: moral philosophy. This reluctance is often traced to the father of the subject, Durkheim (1973), who was concerned to distinguish himself from the philosopher Kant's anti-empirical approach. But there is a notable trend of exception to this reluctance. Some anthropologists of religion (Lambek 2000, Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006) and others (Widlok 2004) have drawn on Aristotle's "virtue ethics". Neo-Aristotelianism has been influential among contemporary moral and political philosophers (MacIntyre 1984; Nussbaum 1980, Kosman 1980, Sorabji 1980, Lear 1988, Gadamer 1979, Bernstein 1983, Taylor 1989 – all in Lambek 2000). Unlike the Durkheimian and moral reasoning approaches, this perspective does not seek to define "morality" in relation to a set of rules, values or discourses. Nor therefore does it seek to distinguish between normative and emergent behaviour – between "morality" and "ethics", or between rule-following and reasoning – a distinction which characterises both Robbins' and Zigon's approaches. Rather, it seeks to provide a model of practice. According to this model of action, people are understood to strive for excellence or human good for its own sake in what they do, both (i) according to certain inherited models of what this means; and (ii) balancing multiple considerations.

Lambek's argument (expounded not in *Ordinary Ethics* but in an earlier work (2008)) is that in any sphere of society, there are ultimate standards or incommensurables in reference to which other values and practices are able to be measured against each other. Examples are happiness and human flourishing (in Aristotle); God (in theistic traditions); justice (for political liberals); creative labour (for Marx); and profit (for capitalists). Virtue, in Lambek's model, consists in orienting one's actions towards these meta-values. Behaviour is moral not simply when it follows rules, but when it is oriented towards a meta-value. "Morality" is defined structurally, as a relationship between commensurable and incommensurable values. Indeed, to be "immoral" is to take a commensurable value and treat it as if it were incommensurable. This is the definition of "idolatry" (Rappaport 1999 in Lambek 2008:144).

However, Lambek continues, things are not quite so simple because life typically consists of competing incommensurable values. Since meta-values are by definition incommensurable, there is no logical way to choose between them; one must exercise not choice but judgement. The exercise of this judgement can be called “ethics”. Ethics is therefore never a simple matter of following rules (as in Durkheim’s analysis) or obeying obligations (as in Kant’s philosophy); nor is it a question of making rational choices (as in utilitarianism). Rather, following Aristotle, it is a question of making judgements between incommensurable values. Practice cannot be reduced to the pursuit of a single external good, such as for example financial or social capital. Social actors tend not to focus exclusively on the *value* inherent in result of actions, but also on the *virtue* inherent in the process of practice. Thus, for neo-Aristotelians, the social is a matter of practice and judgement. This perspective contrasts with Durkheim’s conceptions of the social as rule and obligation; with Kant’s model of following the dictates of universal reason; and with Boas’s (1928) notion that actors embody discrete cultural values.

In fact, Lambek extends the neo-Aristotelian model by incorporating Rappaport’s (1999) theory of ritual to explain how specific criteria for judging practice become established in people’s lives. His model distinguishes between two kinds of ethical acts: performance and practice. Performances are ritual acts that establish criteria for making ethical evaluations and states; practice refers to the ongoing ethical judgements that are made possible (but not determined) by these ritual performances. For example, a wedding is an act or performance that “does not determine whether people remain ‘faithful’ or practice ‘adultery’, but it entails that their actions fall under such descriptions”; thus, “practice is rendered possible and meaningful through performative acts” (Lambek 2010b:39).

In this thesis I adopt Lambek’s perspective that ethics or virtue is inherent in all practice. I prefer this approach to models (e.g. Robbins 2007, Zigon 2007) that distinguish sharply between the normative and the conscious: between on the one hand ‘rules’ or ‘discourses’, and on the other ‘reasoning’, ‘choice’ and ‘work’.

Lambek's model of 'ordinary ethics' makes a contribution to wider cross-disciplinary discussions of morality by emphasising that ethics can be tacit in everyday practice – and is not only found in explicit rules, processes of reasoning and easily identifiable dilemmas. This perspective suits my own work because my data is about the mundane practice of trade, the ever-present potential for virtue, the presence of competing ideals and the need for judgment. I also make use of his model of performance and practice to identify traders' performative acts of commitment to ideas of blessing, God's provision and the efficacy of inner attitudes.

### *Outline of Chapters*

Chapter one starts in the industrial northern periphery of Aleppo. I describe a successful and dynamic young factory owner called Abdullah who manufactures knitted fabric for clothing. The chapter puts virtue in the wider historical context of changing political relations between Sunni businessmen and the authoritarian Syrian state. It explores the connections between entrepreneurial charisma and industrial politics in the ongoing *infitah* or economic "liberalisation". As a newcomer who has emerged thanks to this new political economy, the factory owner does not have the benefit of strong kinship relations among Aleppo's wealthy trading classes. Instead, he seeks to establish relationships of solidarity and obligation in part through practising generosity, and by cultivating charisma: the ability to inspire affection. Affective and commercial dynamics are wrapped up together. I consider whether in this context generosity should be analysed simply in terms of the pursuit of capital and status, or whether the dynamic of informality and intimacy is valued in and for itself.

Chapter two explores the question of sincerity and pure-heartedness within the same industrial circles. In these long-term relationships, it is important to sell or work "from the heart". I examine discourses about trust and intention, and argue that these revolve not simply around suspicions of hidden strategy or self-interest, but engage wider questions of envy, loyalty, grudging, reluctance and willingness. I argue that intention should therefore be understood as a dispositional attitude: sincerity in this

context is a relation to others rather than to oneself. I contrast this to Protestant formulations of sincerity, and ask what kinds of self are implied by these different notions of intentionality.

In chapter three the ethnographic focus shifts between the factory in the city's northern periphery and the historic suqs or markets in the centre of Aleppo's old city. It explores the 'moralised concepts' that are part of everyday discourse among many of Aleppo's Muslim traders and shopkeepers: blessing, God's provision, a pure heart, lawful and unlawful wealth. For those who subscribe to them, these concepts define how the world works: behind these concepts is an implicit theory about what kinds of causes lead to what kinds of effects. It is these tacit 'cosmological' ideas about cause and effect, as much as any explicit legal or ethical code, that form the basis of everyday trading morality among many Muslim entrepreneurs in Aleppo. I ask how this cosmology is reproduced in daily life: what are the social practices through which it comes to be felt and known as real. Here I draw on Rappaport's theory of ritual and Lambek's notion of performative ethics.

Chapters four and five provide an account of trade in one particular caravanserai in Aleppo's old city markets, where wholesale quantities of yarn are imported, sold and speculated upon. Chapter four outlines the recent history of the market, and the different time-spaces that constitute it. Yarn is traded in different ways and for different purposes in the market. Temporality is an important theme: different actors project different kinds of future onto the yarn. For some it is an endlessly circulating commercial commodity; for others it is an industrial asset with a complicated social life; for still others it is a speculative fiction that expires within two weeks. In some contexts, honesty and long-term trust are important, in others bluffing and mastery are given more prominence. Moral discourses (for example about the immorality of betting) draw distinctions between these different styles and futures, and also between the different kinds of moral persons who deal in them. Materiality, absence, trust, substance and continuity are the themes that connect the commodity to the different kinds of traders who make a living out of it.

If trust and warm-hearted sincerity is not always at a premium among those who speculate on yarn in this market, nor is it in the nearby retail shop which I describe in chapters six and seven. Other qualities and capacities are important here: etiquette, boldness, autonomy, sharpness and mastery. The young salesmen in the shop value these capacities for their own sake: they are what make working life meaningful, and to acquire them is to gain in masculinity and maturity. However, the salesmen also need to exercise judgment: to balance between the glory of contest and the quieter wisdom of compromise; to draw the line between propriety and impropriety in the way that they push customers towards a purchase. It is not only commercial success that is at stake in these transactions, but the salesmen's dignity and worth, which comes from being able to sell well and thus confirm the customer as a "worthy" (*hashiim*) person who has money to spend and is happy to spend it.

This production of "worthy" customers leads to a comparison between the issuing of fatwas and the fabric trade. Some analysis of muftis and religious authority-figures (Eickelman and Anderson 1999, Skovgaard-Petersen 2004, see also Schulz 2006) has focused on the commercial aspects of "religious entrepreneurship" (Haenni 2002). In a complementary analysis, I argue that retail trading in Aleppo has a strong pedagogical element: the young salesman Majid presented himself to me as a "teacher" who was guiding his customer. Both fatwas and fabric prices are produced in a series of exchanges where a guide (whether al-Azhar mufti dispensing ethical advice or Aleppan fabric salesman selling a wedding dress) aims to elicit a moral commitment from his client. Because of the superior knowledge of the guide, and the relative ignorance or weak will of his client, the mufti/salesman may employ a degree of benign trickery to consummate the exchange and to achieve his commercial/pedagogical objective. The virtue of the al-Azhar mufti, as of the Aleppan fabric salesman, sometimes resides in his ability to achieve an ulterior motive for the benefit of his client or customer.

Chapter eight asks what is involved in resolving dilemmas. It takes specific moral questions and explores how Muslim entrepreneurs approach them. I argue that sometimes virtue is a matter not of pursuing ideals, but of simply striving to cope

within the constraints of one's commitments and beliefs. If virtue in the retail shop is a matter of virtuosic and well-judged performance, in this context it is about managing competing obligations and remaining obedient. Entrepreneurs navigate dilemmas not through free and creative moral reasoning, but through striving to exercise judgement in a faithful way. The tension between mastery and sincerity emerges here too. In agonistic contexts such as speculating on yarn or high-margin selling in the retail shop, mastery is a question of being able to "laugh at others" and "not be laughed at". These confrontations and tricks are understood at some level as a "game" (*la'beh*): that is the register which they properly inhabit. But in a moral dilemma, it is important to be sincere. In this context, to exercise judgment in a tendentious way, in order to arrive at a convenient solution, is to misunderstand the purpose and place of mastery; to "laugh at God" in this way ultimately amounts to "laughing at oneself". Being moral is in part a question of recognising whom one is dealing with, and then inhabiting the appropriate register.

In the conclusion I compare Foucault's conception of ethics as a project of freedom - self-determined self-fashioning - with Lambek's emphasis on ethics as a project of commitment. Freedom and commitment are not mutually exclusive, of course: any meaningful commitment must be entered into freely (see Laidlaw). But if Foucault asks how we become committed ethical subjects, interesting questions can also be asked about how these commitments and ethical identities decay, collapsing into a state of "freedom" where no firm criteria for judging practice can command full and whole-hearted adherence. This is the condition of skepticism, or "withdrawal of the world", identified by Cavell (1988:174-175) in Lambek (2010b:59). Skepticism threatens our presentness to others, because it undermines our "presentness to...[our own] language" (ibid). It is an ever-present problem because, despite our efforts to stabilise our social lives with clear rituals and performative commitments, our inner lives remain both ephemeral and obscure: always in danger of pulling away from, or never wholly living up to, the commitments with which we punctuate them. Ethics might be, as I have argued, a matter of managing our involvement with others, but skepticism means that we can never guarantee how much or for how long that involvement will engage our whole being. The solution, for Lambek, is to

acknowledge the “courage entailed in speaking and acting at all” (2010b:59). I argue that what is required to overcome this "withdrawal of the world" is not courage - how can a virtue precede a commitment to ethical criteria? Rather, what is needed is an absence of reckoning, or a certain kind of trust.

## Chapter One

### The Virtue of the Entrepreneur

Abdullah is the joint-owner of a textile-knitting factory in the north of Aleppo. Unlike the Aleppan suq traders described by Rabo (2005a), he is not from a trading family with a well-established name. Rather, he is trying to build a reputation among industrial and trading circles. Building a name (*ism*) is part of his longer-term project to gain influence and opportunity in the new industrial and political space created in Aleppo by policies of economic liberalisation, through being elected to institutions such as the Chamber of Industry. More immediately, a “name” helps him to enforce commercial obligations and keep customers loyal in an environment where written contracts are rare and where there is no recourse to a reliable system of law.

In this chapter I explore how Abdullah establishes a social and political presence in Aleppo’s industrial renaissance. An important part of this process is “gathering” (*jam’*) traders and associates around him. They visit him at the factory regularly, even when they have no formal business to transact and “stand by his side” (*yaqifuu ilaa janbuh*) in case of disputes or in election campaigns. The regular members of his gathering (*jamaa’a*) are expected to mobilise their own gatherings behind him when he stands for the Board of the Chamber of Industry. Abdullah’s ability to “gather” testifies to his charisma, which is a condition for his ethical standing – since it enables him to provide favours and hospitality, and to follow through on his promises.

In return, the members of Abdullah’s gathering are also expected to remain loyal customers and associates. His closest customers and peers are said to stand in relations of “moral identification” (*mawaanii*) with him. The relationships within Abdullah’s gathering are inscribed in an idiom of “affection” (*mahabbah*). His ability to gather depends on and defines his moral qualities of charisma (*hduur*), his ability to inspire respect (*ihтираam*), and sincerity or clean-heartedness (*qalb nadhiif*). All

these qualities contribute to his standing as an attractive and powerful “personality” (*shakhsiyya*).

Among his closest customers and associates, Abdullah also exhibits the virtue of “intimacy” (*hamiimiyyeh*): that is, he enters into relationships of “moral identification” where barriers of formality are removed, and either side can act or speak with the other’s authority without consulting them first. Either side can make requests or demands of the other party without “feeling shy”. In this context, acts of generosity – responding to another’s requests or demands – should not be seen as a way of accruing social capital, but as a way of recognising the intrinsic value of intimacy and moral identification (*mawaanii*) relationships.

With his closest customers Abdullah also enters into “quasi-partnerships” where accounts are never settled – one party (it can be either, and alternates) remains always in the other’s debt. These relationships of “running accounts” (*istijraar*) symbolise the fact that the two parties are tied together for the long-term: what benefits or hurts one party also benefits or hurts the other. Both types of relationship – *mawaanii* and *istijraar* – approach an ideal of moral identification: a removal of barriers which we can understand as intimacy. This form of connection is valued in itself as intrinsically fulfilling and worthwhile.

But occasionally, when times are hard, visitors to his factory gathering seem to dry up. And Abdullah’s electoral campaign to the Chamber of Industry fails. The intimate moral standing he has cultivated within his own gathering does not translate into political support on a broad enough scale; he loses out to others whose family names command more support across the city’s other trading and industrial gatherings.

### ***Waiting for Visitors***

Abdullah Najih sits in the late afternoon warmth at a table in front of his factory in Liramon, an industrial suburb in the north of Aleppo. He surveys the road with

careful eyes, waiting to see which customers might be approaching. “It is not normal, things so quiet”, he says. “People will come soon, you will see”. Workmen – some of his eighty-strong staff – emerge from the warehouse behind him, and load up a Suzuki truck with rolls of fabric.

Next to him, a white-haired man in his fifties sits silently, his own despondency reflecting Abdullah’s mood. Muhammad is Abdullah’s long-term business partner – his financial backer of some fifteen years – and the joint owner of the enterprise behind them. Despite his wealth, he wears a crumpled brown leather jacket that has seen better days and a non-descript sweater; reading glasses slipping down his nose lend him an academic air.

Abdullah’s clients are not visiting and there are some who are not paying their debts. The table that is usually lively with customers and friends is quiet. They normally visit to socialise, to settle bills, to place orders, to talk about the market. But times are hard, despite Abdullah’s frequent assurances to me that his business is thriving in the face of the international financial crisis. There have been tales of bankruptcies within his trading circle and among his acquaintances, and this affects everyone: it is increasingly common for debts to be paid late.

Abdullah fidgets with the packet of Marlboro cigarettes on the table in front of him, and calls out to one of his staff, “Hmudeh!” Moments later, a short man in jeans and a red jumper appears. “What will you drink?” he asks us. A few minutes later, Abdullah suddenly calls out delightedly, “Welcome Abu Steif!” I had not noticed the car pull up on the street behind me. Abdullah springs to his feet and claps hands with the visitor, a tall stocky man in his late thirties. Around half an hour later, my friend Abu Sulayman and I take our leave. I am left with an uneasy sense of a mixture of activity and languor at the factory. The business of manufacture continued all around us: workers milling around in deep red overalls, loading up trucks, supervisors reporting to Abdullah on production. All of that activity carried on unchanged behind Abdullah who sat facing the street, uncharacteristically languid, waiting, virtually unvisited, and anxiously focused on the street in front of him.

As Abu Sulayman drove me away in his car, he broke the silence to tell me that his friend Abdullah is *haziin* – sad. The reason is that “no-one is paying” their debts (*laa ahad ‘am yidfa’*). Abdullah, the self-made man I had come to think of as capable, authoritative and popular was in a bind: unable to pressure his customers too strongly lest they simply, in Abu Sulayman’s words, “run away from him” (*yahrubuu minhu*) never to return; yet unable to continue being who he was indefinitely without payment. For the moment, he simply had to sit and wait.

Twenty years earlier, as a sixteen-year-old man, Abdullah Najih had started his career as a humble manual worker in the physically tiring, dirty and dangerous work of smelting and shaping gold. Two decades on, he is a successful entrepreneur who wears immaculate Italian designer clothes, and drives a top-of-the-range German limousine. Those formative years, when he gradually built his name and his wealth, had coincided with a period of *infitah* liberalisation in Syria that had enlarged the social and economic space available to entrepreneurs. Although he had started his profit-sharing partnership (*mushaarakat al-arbaah*) with Muhammad some fifteen years earlier backed by family capital of some \$20,000, he was considered to be a self-made man who had “established himself” (*assas haaluh*). He had known how to take advantage of the opportunities for social mobility afforded by the 1990s textile boom in Aleppo, triggered largely by invigorated trade with Russia.

Abdullah’s most important relationship, at least early in his career, was with Muhammad, the white-haired man sitting next to him who had spotted his potential and proposed a partnership. Abdullah’s father had owned some commercial buildings in the southern end of Aleppo’s old city, which provided the family with a rental income. But Abdullah had lost money in early speculative investments and had worked as a low-ranking employee for other men. Then, after returning from military service he had taken an accounting course and moved through a series of positions in tailoring workshops in his early twenties. Muhammad, meanwhile, had inherited a small shop in the prestigious centre of Aleppo’s old covered market. He thrived in the textile boom in Aleppo in the 1990s driven by export to the Soviet Union and

Russia. Muhammad's customers were the owners of tailoring workshops, and it was here that he came into contact with Abdullah. By the mid-1990s he had seen and heard enough about this young man to convince him that he would make a useful partner, being both "energetic" (*nashiit*) and "capable" (*shaatir*). He proposed a partnership whereby the two would combine resources and labour, and share profits equally. Muhammad put in the bulk of the finance, while Abdullah contributed the bulk of the labour, managing the business day-to-day.

At first the two worked out of Muhammad's wholesale shop in the old city's covered markets, importing and buying rolls of fabrics from factories and supplying tailoring workshops which then produced T-shirts, suits, and women's clothes. Each year, they reinvested the bulk of the profits in the business. As they expanded, they moved to a larger shop in the new city. In 2001 the business had accumulated enough capital that they were able to purchase several circular knitting machines which they installed in a factory in a suburb of Aleppo. Four years later, they expanded again, to twenty circular knitting machines. Needing more space, they moved to their current premises in Liramoona. Relocating to the suburb of Liramoona proved to be the right move at the right time. Abdullah was able to negotiate an unusually low annual rent for the premises. Liramoona was about to become a prime site for investment. Private cars, recently imported to Syria and newly affordable to many entrepreneurs, brought the suburb closer to the centre of the city, as did the newly surfaced roads. The municipality bought a fleet of new buses and established a route that ran directly from the centre of Aleppo past Abdullah and Muhammad's factory. All these developments enabled Abdullah to establish the Liramoona factory as the centre of his social networks – the place where he was visited.

### ***Knowing How to Gather***

Geographically, Abdullah is situated in the new suburbs rather than the old city suqs. Socially, he is situated among the "new money" entrepreneurs. He stands in contrast to the traders described by Rabo (2005a) who have a trading name (*ism*) established over generations, and who complain about the influx of new names into their

markets. The trading “name” has taken on new resonances as a form of distinction in response to new forms of “crony capital” accumulation controlled by elites in Damascus (Rabo 2005a). Salamandra (2004) makes a similar argument about practices of distinction in Damascus among the largely Sunni bourgeoisie. In Aleppo, the “old money” large suq-based families have a “history and a biography” (*taariikh wa siira*), in a phrase quoted by Gilsenan (1996:296), who notes the importance of this epithet in rural Lebanon.

The traders described by Rabo are assured of their reputation, and assert it as a form of distinction in the face of the rise of men like Abdullah. The social distinction of the established traders in Aleppo is tied to the material form and history of the old city markets. Their suq shops are the focal point of their social presence (*makaaneh*); traders from this class talked to me of the generations of their own family who had held the shop before them, and of the houses in the next suq alley where they had grown up before the buildings were converted into shops and offices in the 1960s. Often these suq traders displayed in their shops old photographs of the grandfather or male relative who had founded the business several generations ago. Alongside these, sometimes they displayed photographs of long-dead religious shaykhs whom their family had supported financially.

Abdullah has no such claims to distinction. He does not yet have a “biography and history”; he implicitly acknowledges that his family name is not well known when he complains of old well-established trading families that “they abuse their reputation to pay late”. His family does not have an established trading reputation, like the old guard, so there are no photographs of ancestors to display. And while many of his customers are based in the old city suq, he and Muhammad are based in the new city and have moved premises frequently in recent years. But while he is a creature of the recent liberalisation and industrial renaissance, he is not part of the new elite who gain their wealth and advantage through crony connections to the regime in Damascus. How does a newcomer who is between these two groups – an entrepreneur with no established family reputation – establish his social presence in Aleppo’s industrial scene? How does a man of Abdullah’s ambition, for whom

anonymity is a form of “social non-valuation” (Gilsenan 1996), seek to build a name? The focus of his ambitions towards the end of my fieldwork was the four-yearly election to the Aleppo Chamber of Industry. This was part of his project to build a name (*ism*) and influence (*wazn*), a goal he had not yet fully achieved.

Many of the well-established suq families cultivate religious legitimacy and reputation through sponsoring shaykhs and mosques. But Abdullah chooses not to ally himself to particular shaykhs or mosques, or to define his social legitimacy by associating himself with a religious lineage. Rather, he seeks to assert his own charisma and moral standing among his peers by demonstrating the strength of his relationships and his ability to gather others around him.

It is one of the few occasions that I have managed to gain a few minutes alone with Abdullah. He is driving to an arbitration dispute where he is acting as one of the arbiters as a “favour” (*musaa‘adah*) to one of his friends and a member of his trading circle. I am sitting in the front seat and trying to scribble notes as he drives. I recap and fill in the gaps in his life story, then ask him what a successful businessman needs to succeed in Aleppo. He replies immediately, “he must have good relationships, good reputation, and good capital. He must be able to keep account, and he must be able to gather (*laazim bya‘rif yahsub wa bya‘rif yajma‘*).”

At the time I did not understand the meaning or significance of “being able to gather”. I assumed that he was talking about procurement – the gathering of supplies. Later, Abu Sulayman explained that Abdullah meant the ability to “gather merchants around him (*yajma‘ at-tjaar hawlu*)...so that they stand with him. It is a question of charisma.” Abdullah was almost constantly surrounded by other men – customers, associates, friends, employees; he was also sometimes visited by friends and clients who hoped for support, business, or employment either from him or through him. Charisma was understood as the power to gather. The verb “to gather” (*yajma‘*) gives the noun *jamaa‘a*: the people “gathered” around. In Aleppo’s industrial circles, it often referred to those who were loyal or obligated to a central figure. In wider Syrian politics, it has been translated as a “core group” or constituency (Hinnebusch (2008), Kienle (1991)). The factory office in Liramon was the place where

members of Abdullah's gathering (*jamaa'a*) – friends, business associates, and regular customers – came together.

“The more relations a person has”, Abu Sulayman explained, “the more extensive (*muntashir fii'l-'aalem*) he is in the world. It is like when you had that problem by the Citadel. If you had called me or Abdullah, we would have said, who do we know down there, and we would have called them and they would have gone to stand by you (*yaqifuu ilaa janbak*).”

Those who had cultivated a large group following (*jamaa'a*) had a large presence (*hudaar*) in the world. According to this conception, people existed in the world through their connections, and through the obligations and sentiment that bound these others to them. Elyachar (2005:118), in her ethnography of workshop owners in Cairo, describes a similar notion of power and presence. The “mastery” of these workshop owners was said to consist in occupying a space without being there, for example through others tied to him in kin or fictive kin relations, or through the embodied skill of being able to interpret the sounds of an assistant at work from a distance. She defines mastery as “the ability to stabilise, reproduce and extend networks”. The same was true for Abdullah, whose social power was measured by the number of men whom he could marshal behind him: the size of his gathering, and of the gatherings of those who would put themselves at his disposal.

The moral dynamics that bonded these men to Abdullah varied. Each member of an entrepreneur's *jamaa'a* might be connected to him by different forces: by being a relative (*min al-qaraabeh*), by shared interests (*masaalih mushtarikah*), or from a high level of friendship and affection (*daraja 'aaliyah min al-mahabbah*). In all cases, though, there was personal knowledge of the other, and a degree of “affection”. Among his friends, advisers, associates and customers, Abdullah Najih was a first among equals. But to other members of his *jamaa'a*, he was an unambiguous superior. These were men who, more or less overtly, relied on him for their income. They included his lieutenants – younger cousins, nephews, old schoolfriends – whom he had hand-picked to work alongside him. In some cases they took a wage, in other cases they shared income from a particular well-defined venture in a profit-sharing partnership.

### *Industrial Virtues*

Men gathered together around Abdullah for functional and pragmatic reasons. Some depended on him for employment; others for opportunity. But the dynamics that bring them to Abdullah's factory most mornings are not solely functional. Rather, Abdullah's virtues are central to the constitution of this group. "Affection" (*mahabbah*) was central to factory life, and to Abdullah. Charisma was understood as the ability to inspire affection: to gather (*jam'*) people around, to draw (*shidd*) them to his side and into his own projects, who would support him and whom he could trust, by virtue of their affection for him. An idiom of friendship and affection shaped commercial transactions in the factory: a client who arrived to settle a bill with a wad of 50,000 lira (\$1000) in his pocket, would not hand it over immediately. The money would appear only after several minutes of conversation and tea-drinking, and then be transferred into Abdullah's hands discreetly and without ceremony, as if it were secondary to the matter at hand: the social visit was the thing. Abdullah would quickly hand the cash to a younger relative who would take it away to the accountants' office – run by Muhammad's brother-in-law – to be counted. Receipts were rarely issued or sought.

That money came second to the ties of solidarity and affection was a theme that informed narratives that industrialists sometimes offered to me. On more than one occasion, I heard a factory owner recount that he had suffered a misfortune that had bankrupted him – such as a warehouse fire – but in the days that followed, entrepreneurs and associates had visited with gifts "of \$100,000". When I asked, they said that these gifts would not need to be paid back. However these narratives are assessed, they assert that the moral relationship – of mutual affection and solidarity – is more important than purely financial interest. At the same time, these narratives measure the value of these relationships in money: the figure of \$100,000 is if nothing else a claim about the strength of one's moral standing and relationships. Monetary transactions, then, were subordinated – discursively and performatively – within a broader idiom of friendship and solidarity.

This is why it was a problem for Abdullah not to be visited – it seemed to put in doubt, even if only fleetingly, his inner qualities. Similarly, Elyachar (2005) notes that among workshop masters in Cairo, one’s inner qualities mattered in determining one’s public reputation. She argues that it was crucial for one’s reputation to be thought of as someone involved in the creation of “positive value”. To avoid becoming vulnerable to the evil eye, the Cairene workshop masters needed to be involved in relations of affection and solidarity rather than envy or hidden self-interest. Just as Abdullah anxiously assured us that his visitors would arrive soon, Elyachar also notes that “empty spaces lacking sociality are not a positive value” (2005:159) – since they seem to suggest that the person is not involved in relations of affection and good faith.

Men also gather around Abdullah because he is respectable.

It is around noon and the factory assembly is full. Men are chatting in small groups on the sofas. One visitor – in his late thirties – is perched on a small seat directly in front of Abdullah’s desk. I have not seen him before. He is telling a story about a lecherous shaykh at a certain mosque in Aleppo. Abdullah intervenes suddenly, and, possibly mindful of my presence, makes clear that he will not tolerate a story that portrays Islam in a poor light. The visitor tries to continue despite the interruption. But he has been cowed, and his voice becomes quieter. Abdullah speaks over him again, “this is unpleasant talk (*hadiith muu hiluw*). If you insist on continuing, this talk is between you and him, only! (*haal hakiyy bainuh wa bainak, bass*).”

As well as damaging the image of Islam, inappropriate words – slander and false gossip – such as these, broadcast in public, in his presence and in his space risked damaging Abdullah’s reputation. He attempted to restrict their circulation, first by criticising them, and then by classifying them as private and not truly existing in the social space of the gathering. Since this space and social gathering were an extension of Abdullah’s presence, they needed to be kept clean. In this way, he conformed to the model of a man who merited “respect”, who was *muhtaram*.

That Abdullah was the kingpin of the factory gathering was clear in other ways too. He would sometimes jump out of his chair to sit next to one favoured guest, or flatter

him by calling him to sit by his side. He would sometimes let his hand rest on his guest's knee or around the back of his chair, in a mark of companionship (*suhba*); or he might lower his voice conspiratorially as he spoke into a guest's ear. He was both the immobile centre around which the group moved, and its most dynamic element. He would direct activity while seated unmoving at his desk, coolly drawing on a cigarette or issuing brief instructions into his mobile phone. Others, including his business partner Muhammad's son, would move around him, running errands as directed: bringing him samples of yarn and fabric, members of staff, money, accounts, paperwork and refreshments. But Abdullah was also sometimes absent, attending to business elsewhere, and in these cases his absence was felt and remarked upon. The gathering could still form, but only in expectation of his return. Sometimes he would be seated in the middle of an assembly at the factory before springing up and striding off to his car, leaving the room with the words "the room is yours, guys" (*al-mahall mahallkun, yaa shabaab*).

Charisma and the ability to inspire affection were connected to practices of generosity (*karam*). The factory gathering was understood as an expression of Abdullah's generosity, a virtue which his friends often emphasised to me. This was said to be shown in the amount of money he spent on hospitality and entertaining his gathering of customers in evening soirees (*sahraat*). Sometimes, an entrepreneur's office was simply referred to as his "place of hospitality" (*madaafa*). When I asked Muhammad's son why visitors spent part of their morning in Abdullah's *madaafa* rather than vice-versa, he said, "it is a question of generosity. Abdullah is a generous man". Abu Sulayman explicitly linked the factory gathering to tribal customs (*al-taqliid al-badawiy*), saying it derived from the model of a generous tribal shaykh entertaining guests in his tent. The two conditions that an entrepreneur had to fulfil in order to host a *madaafa* were that he should be "important in his trade" (*kabiir fii sana'tuh*) – in other words (in a somewhat circular logic) "always having customers to visit" – and that he was generous (*kariim*). If generosity took the form of hospitality, it could also be evident in the forgiveness or discounting of customers' debts (*al-samaah* – literally, "forgiveness"). Abu Sulayman said that Abdullah was generous to his staff too. According to him, this generosity entered into an economy

of affection and moral emotion which underwrote obligations much more effectively than the law could have done:

Abdullah gives tips (*mukaafa'aat*) to his workers. If there is extra work. Their salary might be 10,000 lira [a month]. But he might give them 12,000 lira if production is up. So if, one night, a lot of goods arrive by truck, they will stay on for him and work until 4 in the morning. There is affection (*mahabbah*). As long as there is affection, you have more rights (*huquuq*) than with the law (*al-qaanuun*). You have the system (*al-nizaam*) and beyond that you have forgiveness (*al-samaah*). This is about empathy...If you have some empathy, you will benefit in the end.

In such a moral economy, the ideal person was someone who had “empathy” (*'awaatif*). This word, often translated as “emotions”, has the sense here of a capacity for compassion and affection, and an ability to connect with others. More or less synonymous with the empathy attributed to Abdullah, was the quality of *'aatifiyyeh*, which might be translated as warm-heartedness. This implied sincerity, simplicity and a capacity for sympathy with others; since it implied an ability to establish morally and emotionally powerful connections with others, it was also a component of charisma. Warm-heartedness was understood to be an excellent moral quality in men – and an aspect of having a strong personality. It was talked about as being typically Aleppan (as opposed to Damascene) and typically Arab (as opposed to European). Petzet (1994:42) notes that empathy, especially with the suffering of others, is a primary ethical quality in Palestinian Arab culture; to lack it entirely is to lack moral personhood. In Aleppo, warm-heartedness, like the concept of pure-heartedness (or “good cinnamon”) which I explore in the next chapter, was asserted as the cause of fortuitous coincidence. Abu Sulayman told me on one occasion:

The person I was sitting drinking coffee with yesterday is warm-hearted (literally: strong in *'aatifiyyeh*), he has a strong personality...we were talking about Talal. I left, got in my car, and just at that moment Talal called and said, ‘I was just thinking about you’.

“Warm-heartedness” here explains what would otherwise seem like a coincidence because it enables a spiritual and emotional connection between the two men. Talal was also understood to be warm-hearted: Abu Sulayman told me, “sometimes I sit reading a letter from Talal and I cry because of the warm-heartedness (*'aatifiyyeh*) in

the letter.” This capacity for warm-heartedness was an important part of Abdullah’s reputation and central to his ability to inspire loyalty and a sense of connectedness among his gathering and his other customers. Marsden (2007) also notes that properly human affection is a register of masculinity, in the context of all-male gatherings.

### *Virtue in its Political Context*

If the virtues of charisma, affection and generosity are meaningful within the arena of industrial electoral politics in Aleppo, we cannot separate virtue from the historical and political conditions that produce and sustain that arena: conditions such as economic liberalisation and the co-opting of wealthy Sunni businessmen by the Alawite regime. My argument here is different from Rabo’s account (2005a) of Aleppan suq traders. Among the businessmen she knew, reputation, or having a respectable name, was largely a matter of not being an Alawite state-crony. But for Abdullah, virtue – having charisma and being able to inspire affection – means something within the limits set down by and continually negotiated with the regime.

The arena for Abdullah’s entrepreneurial virtue is a public and political space. Within this arena, “generosity” and “charisma” are connected to the ability to drum up support and to enforce obligations which are not embodied in written contracts or embedded in kinship relations. Wealthy and virtuous businessmen are often said to command “affection” (*mahabbah*); but “affection” is also a political idiom – the word frequently appears on slogans of support for the Syrian President, for example on billboards and car stickers. This is not to say that the popularity of any wealthy Sunni traders threatens the position of the regime; but their wealth and influence, which has grown since the 1990s, has led to new forms of co-option and opened up new arenas in which virtue matters.

#### *a) Liberalisation and the New Industrialists*

Syria is an authoritarian state whose political regime is dominated by a religious-ethnic minority of Alawites. Most of the population, and especially the class of small and medium traders and entrepreneurs, are Sunni Muslims. For decades after the

1963 revolution that brought the Alawites to power, the regime pursued an official policy of Baathist socialism, often enjoying the patronage of the Soviet Union. The Sunni religious and business community had withdrawn its capital in the wake of the nationalisations of the 1960s (Perthes 1991, 1992, 1994). In order to appease this community and tempt back their capital, President Hafiz al-Asad (1973-2000) tried to co-opt parts of the Sunni bourgeoisie traders by providing some limited spaces for economic opportunity within an otherwise state-controlled economy (Wedeen 1999).

If Baathism had disenfranchised the grande bourgeoisie, the petty bourgeoisie trading class did not dwindle but rather flourished under Hafiz al-Asad (Hinnebusch 1993). His policy of “liberalisation” (*infithah*) gathered pace after a balance of payments crisis in 1986 (Sukkar 1994). In the wake of this crisis, brought on by a falling oil price, an international blockade and the costs of military intervention in Lebanon, the regime first instituted a policy of austerity (Perthes 1995) and then turned to the private sector to encourage national productivity (Hinnebusch 1994). The 1986 crisis also led to a “payments agreement” with the USSR under whose terms Syria was permitted to export goods and textiles to settle its weapons debts. This deal with Syria’s socialist patron led to a boom for Aleppo’s private sector textile merchants.

Through the 1990s, encouraged by a liberalising “Investment Law” in 1991, Syrian and particularly Aleppan entrepreneurs grew in wealth and influence. The Investment Law permitted foreign investment, repatriation of profits, and opened up any area of the economy to private investment, subject to agreement from the Prime Minister (Perthes 1995). While a degree of economic suspicion remained between the Sunni bourgeoisie and the Alawite regime, Hopfinger and Boeckler (1996) and Poelling (1996) argue that after the 1991 Investment Law, private entrepreneurs no longer feared the prospect of nationalisation. While a mass of chaotic business regulations remained and continued to furnish public officials with the opportunity of extracting bribes from traders, some monopolies were dismantled. As a result, new “networks of privilege” emerged that benefited well-connected and entrepreneurial merchants (Heydemann 2004). The textile industry was one sector where new private capital formation was particularly marked; indeed, the establishment of new textile plants in Aleppo’s suburbs led to a significant increase in the manufacturing sector’s share of

capital formation (Lawson 1997). This shifted the relationship between Syrian entrepreneurs and the state. Kienle (1994) argues that elements of the private sector had effectively become a “junior partner” with the regime. While state employment had traditionally been a route to social mobility in Baathist Syria, now the reverse was true: civil servants were increasingly seeking a career as small and medium-sized traders (Rabo 2005a). During this period, new social divisions emerged between, on the one hand, traders who participated in networks of privilege and well-connected elites who had done well out of liberalisation; and on the other, low- and middle-ranking officials who could no longer afford to buy and purchase a home (Perthes 1995, 2004).

Most trading families in the *suqs* did quite well out of liberalisation – by the 1990s they were far better off than ordinary farmers or middle-ranking state bureaucrats, in a reversal of the original Baathist vision. A small number became wealthy as brokers or recipients of state contracts, particularly through access to the Chambers of Industry and Commerce in Aleppo and Damascus. But despite their comparative advantage, many traders, particularly in Aleppo, also felt excluded from the elite networks of privilege. Rabo (2005a) describes attitudes among Aleppan traders towards the business-regime elite that has emerged in Damascus whom they saw as “nobodies” or the “parasitic class” and against whom they defined themselves as “real traders”.

Thus, for some, virtue meant having a “name” or being part of the socially and morally respectable “people of the market”, as opposed to the crony state-connected elite. This is the dyadic picture presented by Rabo. My formulation of virtue and its relation to the state is slightly different. Charisma and affection acquire meaning within the limits set down by (and continually negotiated with) the regime. For example, President al-Asad continued his policy of co-opting Sunni entrepreneurs by enabling them to stand for election to the national parliament from the early 1990s. Abdullah stood for election to the Chamber of Industry in 2008, on a ticket headed by Khaled Ulabi, an entrepreneur who had been elected to Parliament in the mid-1990s.

Abdullah's election campaign was based around dispensing "generosity" and hospitality to potential supporters. Similarly, Khaled Ulabi was known among many businessmen in Aleppo for his generosity. Abdullah was known as a prominent sponsor of Aleppo's largest football club. This represents some change on Hinnebusch's observation (1993) that businessmen may not yet "promote themselves as public figures". Nevertheless, even in 2009, generosity as a political attribute has its limits. As far as I know, no Aleppan merchant has yet penetrated beyond the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, or the National Parliament, to join the President's Republican Palace, for example. Thus the state plays a role in constructing and in limiting the arenas for virtue: why, how and how far generosity may be deployed, and what meanings may be given to it. The same is true of less formal political institutions than the Chamber of Deputies and the Chambers of Commerce. While many Aleppan businessmen donate charitable funds to shaykhs, mosques or mosque-based organisations such as orphanages, clinics and food-distribution networks, there are tight controls on the establishment of such organisations. Generosity is a political virtue, so it is monitored and controlled.

The same principle – that power and virtue are intertwined, each amplifying and setting limits to the other – can be seen in recent economic history in Aleppo. In the 1990s, a handful of (mainly Aleppan) entrepreneurs known as "money collectors" (*jawaami' al-amwaal*) grew wealthy and famous by operating popular coupon-based investment schemes<sup>3</sup>. Some paid out up to 40% return per year. By the mid 1990s, many of these entrepreneurs found themselves prosecuted and imprisoned by the authorities. Official discourses in newspapers and Parliamentary debates deemed them a threat to economic and social stability<sup>4</sup>. Government intervention may well have been prompted by concerns about unstable "pyramid schemes" which were sweeping post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe at the time (Verdery 1995). But the regime may also have been concerned the scale of these entrepreneurs' popular following. Rates of 40% were undeniably "generous", and many ordinary investors

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<sup>3</sup> Al-Jamahir Newspaper, 10 July 1994: "Investment companies"; al-Tishriin Newspaper, 30 June 1995; <sup>3</sup> Al-Ba'ath Newspaper, 27 June 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Parliamentary Debate on Law 8 (money collectors), 6 June 1994, official transcript page 443. See also al-Jamahir Newspaper, 10 July 1994: "Investment companies"

regarded these payouts as vital financial support that in some cases came to replace a salary. These payouts were made under an Islamic idiom of “profit-sharing partnerships” and were glossed by one leading money-collector I interviewed as “social solidarity in Islam”.

*b) Sunni Traders and the Alawite Military Regime*

It is not implausible that claims to Islamic virtue, backed up by financial support and influence, could have disturbed the regime. It is because Sunni traders have their own ideology of Islamic conservatism and their own economic base that they remain a potential threat to the Baath regime (Hinnebusch 1993). This is not just an expression of the fact that the state is officially secular, whereas the suq sees itself as pious. The sectarian divide between Alawites and Sunnis has a religious aspect. The Alawite regime is seen as a deviant sect by the Sunni traders (Salamandra 2004). Claims to authentic Islamic piety can therefore be politically sensitive in Syria.

There is a tense history to relations between suq and state. Although Syria is a secular republic, religious practice and ethics are central to the identity of many of its citizens. Indeed, popular opposition to the regime has, in Syria as in many other Arab countries, often taken an Islamic idiom. Politically active Islamic groups have historically constituted a threat to the regime’s rule and its legitimacy. The former President Hafiz al-Asad faced sustained opposition in the 1970s and 1980s from the Muslim Brotherhood (Perthes 2005). Syria’s military intervention in Lebanon in 1976 generated outright opposition among the Muslim Brotherhood. They strongly opposed Syria’s intervention in Lebanon, and were supported in this by large sections of the Damascus and Aleppo suqs. Aleppo traders closed the market in protest at the economic situation; the army re-opened it by force. The tension continued and culminated in a large-scale revolt by the Brotherhood, centred in the town of Hama. The Syrian armed crushed the revolt in 1982 by destroying much of the city and killing between ten and twenty thousand people (Lawson 1982).

After that low point in the relationship, the state embarked on a programme of mosque-building to assert its religious credentials (as well as its control over religious messages). Such performances of piety have become increasingly important

to religious legitimacy. This is because over the last two decades Syria, again like many other Arab countries, has witnessed an increasing trend of Sunni public piety. Mosque attendance has increased; more Syrians are adopting public markers of piety such as Islamic dress and are listening to Quran recitations in public or to sermons recorded on audio cassettes. The state has tolerated this trend as long as it remains politically quietistic. However, since religious credentials remain central to the simulation of political legitimacy in Syria, the regime remains suspicious of any performances of piety beyond its control, and monitors them closely. It can be dangerous for Sunni traders to advertise their own piety in a way that calls into question the legitimacy of the Alawite leadership.

The historical overview in the preceding three paragraphs suggests an oppositional, dyadic relationship between Sunni suq and Alawite state. However, there is much that makes for stability in this relationship, and reasons to see the relationship as intertwined rather than dyadic. The regime has ensured that many traders in Aleppo's suqs have little reason to upset the status quo. Hafiz al-Asad had made it a priority to appease the Sunni business and religious community, ensuring that economic liberalisation through the 1980s and 1990s benefited the suq merchants, considerably increasing their standard of living relative to that of many public employees. As a result, much of the suq made its peace with the regime. Hinnebusch (1994) argued that the suq in general would support the political status quo rather than any Islamist revolt simply because of the business benefits of stability. Indeed, Islamist political figures tend not to criticise economic liberalisation since it has benefited the suq and much of the Sunni business community. Conversely, while local bureaucrats may use their legal authority and regulations to "extort" money out of particular traders, the regime cannot afford to alienate the suq entirely, since it relies on the acquiescence of its most influential figures. One trader described the regime (*al-sulta*) to me as an octopus with tentacles everywhere – "it wants relationships with the most powerful traders, shaykhs, the people who run the football clubs".

So there is a dynamic process of negotiation between Sunni trading families, represented by prominent individuals, and the networks that run to the centre of the Alawite regime, symbolised by the "Republican Palace" in Damascus. Members of

old trading families who might regard large parts of the Damascene military-business elite as cronies, also talk proudly of their personal relations to particular Ministers or officers. On one occasion, they told me that the son of one police chief had pushed his coercive authority too far in refusing to pay for tens of thousands of dollars of goods he had taken from a merchant in the Aleppo suq. Sunni traders made representations to the Republican Palace and a week later the Police Chief found himself out of a job. Some might complain quietly about certain forms of “corruption” (*fasaad*), but traders in the Aleppo markets also find themselves complicit in the networks of influence that run towards the Republic Palace. They cultivate connections to well-placed members of the regime and support members of their own circles who stand for election to state-approved institutions such as the Chambers of Industry and Commerce.

*c) Defining the Arena of Virtue*

The regime sets the limits – or negotiates them faced with the rising economic and social power of the entrepreneurs – for what the trading virtues of charisma, affection, generosity, piety or connection to the religious establishment can mean, and what kinds of exchanges can mediate these virtues. The regime allows certain forms of exchanges, and prohibits others. In the 1990s, faced with the rising power of entrepreneurs, it opened up space for election to the national parliament, and effectively licensed the disbursement of generosity as part of electoral politics. But it clamped down on “money-collecting” or popular investment schemes and maintained tight controls on other large-scale public acts of charity or sponsorship.

This is not to say that the regime is all-powerful in permitting certain virtues, defining their meaning or even in creating the conditions in which they become meaningful. The interaction between the Alawite military regime and the Sunni merchant classes is always in flux; Bahout (1994) notes that there is a “constantly changing balance of power between the military and the merchants”, with the latter “acting more independently as they have their own resource base”. Because the interaction between the two is always in flux, therefore so are the contexts in which virtues such as “affection”, “charisma” and “generosity” become meaningful. The

interaction between the regime and the merchant classes is regulated by flexible and changeable mechanisms such as access to Parliament and Ministers; and by a proliferation of import, taxation and other trading regulations that are designed to be applied more or less harshly or consistently according to the local political climate.

The “gatherings” I describe in this chapter such as the group of men who meet in Abdullah’s factory office every morning are part of this changeable scene. They are a “mini-arena” for virtue, and for brokering influence. Similar in one sense to the gatherings of notables in their diwans during the French mandate (Hinnebusch 1993:245), they are nevertheless not arenas for political activism, at least not of a kind that would threaten the regime. While traders in Aleppo felt that “the state is not ours” (Rabo 2005a:116), these gatherings should not be understood as a nucleus of potential opposition to the “state” even though they are for the most part constituted by Sunni businessmen and their associates rather than Alawite officials. These businessmen are seeking not to overturn the state or even to trade in spite of it; rather, when they sit down together every morning they are looking to learn about (among many other things) particular regulations and officials – and the opportunities and hazards inherent in them. In the light of that knowledge, they might then seek to co-operate with, take advantage of, bolster themselves against or evade those particular regulations and officials.

As Antoun (1991) and Hinnebusch (1993) argued, it is not easy to understand Syrian society using a conventional class model. The Baathist state, far from breaking down class barriers, encouraged through its policies of liberalisation the formation of a new *grande bourgeoisie* of politically-connected merchants. At the same time, both family and patron-client relationships cut across any clear class boundaries, and connect members of the petty bourgeoisie and others to state officials and even to the regime’s networks. In Hinnebusch’s phrase, Syria is a “close-knit society where networks of talk and rumour...cut across political cleavages” (1993:248). Nevertheless, although Syria is a close-knit society, some have more access to talk and “authoritative rumour” than others. After the murder of a gold-dealer in a nearby suburb, Abdullah told the gathering at the factory one morning, “I have the “talk”/ “low-down” (*hakiy*)

on this". He was asserting a connection to well-placed officers or their business partners, and claiming a strong position in Aleppo's network of rumours.

Gatherings in Aleppo's new manufacturing spaces were arenas in which such talk and rumours circulated; there was no clear divide between commercial and non-commercial conversation. Rather, all such talk and rumour could become a way of asserting power, inclusion or exclusion. Syria's economic liberalisation has shifted economic and political relations between the regime and the trading classes, establishing new networks of privilege. The gatherings of entrepreneurs in Aleppo's factories can be understood as intersecting circles that emanate out from these networks of privilege through different families and market spaces and factory offices. These gatherings or intersecting circles are diversely connected to and excluded from the networks of privilege, and much of the daily business that goes in them is a matter of negotiating and renegotiating those connections and exclusions.

Abdullah's circle (which could expand or retract to include or exclude members of other entrepreneurs' gatherings) was used in other ways too: to share and restrict information about people and prices, to apply pressure in disputes, to arbitrate in more formal disagreements, to buy and sell goods, and to broker deals, job opportunities and finance. The political and institutional context is important here. For many traders in Aleppo, the reputation and accessibility of formal banking and legal institutions is low. Virtues such as charisma, affection and generosity flourish within and because of these conditions. They enable Abdullah to put obligations on others, to generate loyalty in an otherwise low-trust environment, and to gather trustworthy information about others' reliability. These virtues are always embedded in practical problems, and therefore can be studied as aspects of exchange relations. These relations are themselves situated in a particular context within which specific material and political conditions render exchange problematic.

My account of virtue therefore differs from recent ethnographies of piety (Hirschkind 2006, Mahmood 2005) which are mainly concerned with the way that particular communities of Muslims cultivate virtuous inner states. Mahmood (2001a, 2001b, 2003) analysed the way that Egyptian women participants in the Islamic piety

movement make themselves into ethical persons in self-consciously religious settings such as mosques and mosque circles. Similarly, Hirschkind (2001, 2006) focused on the ways in which participants in the Egyptian piety movement used self-consciously religious discourses and practices in order to fashion ethical selves. He focused on the auditory practices of worship: reciting, preaching, and listening to the Quran and sermons – both live and through cassette sermons. He argued that cassette sermons in particular functioned as a moral technology, by enabling those who listened to them regularly to cultivate a “sensitive heart”. Cassettes provided an acoustic arena that honed listeners’ ethical sensibilities, which in turn led to specific “patterns of behaviour” and “practical reasoning” (2006:8).

These studies focus on the making of the ethical self in a self-consciously religious setting: in the physical environment of the mosque, the auditory environment of the sermon, or the pedagogical environment of the Quran lesson. A consequence of Mahmood and Hirschkind’s approaches is that piety comes to be seen as something that happens in self-consciously religious settings. By contrast, I describe virtue as an aspect of practical problems faced by traders, employees and businessmen in Aleppo, such as how to gather support, enforce obligations, make money, and decide whom to trust. Virtue in my account emerges not as an inner state disembedded from such practical questions, but as something that arises (or fails to arise) in particular kinds of social exchanges.

### ***The Achievement of Intimacy: Ethics as a Shared Project***

Abdullah’s virtues played an important role in enabling him to “gather” people around him. These virtues included respectability (in the way he told, commented on and censored narratives in front of the group), empathy, the ability to inspire affection (as demonstrated by the constant flow of visitors to his office) and generosity – shown in the provision of hospitality (*al-diyaafeh*), bonuses, credit, the forgiveness of debts (*al-musaamaha*), as well as by the provision of favours and support (*al-musaa’adeh*), such as acting as an arbiter or an advocate for members of his group. All these practices and beliefs were ways in which he maintained his

position as the centre of his gathering (*jamaa'a*), and his standing as a successful entrepreneur. They all contributed to the simple but powerful fact that men gathered every morning in his office even when most had no monetary business to transact.

This helped him to enforce obligations in an environment where trust in state financial, judicial and coercive institutions was generally low. Hart (1988) argued that West African Frafra migrants who had left their home towns had become detached from the kinship structures that had traditionally given force to social obligations. In their new urban environment they remained socially marginalised and unable to call on state authority to enforce their rights and obligations. As a result, relationships of friendship between the migrants became important in creating social order and making agreements reliable. In other words, Hart suggests a schema whereby trust (inhering in the informal obligations of friendship) occupies a middle position between the formal obligations of kinship on the one side and contract on the other. Similarly, for Abdullah the moral bonds of his assemblies or group following played an important role in making commercial obligations reliable in the absence of reliable kinship networks or state-backed legal channels. For Abdullah, kinship networks were absent or weak; he was not from a well-established trading family and so could not turn to them to guarantee his own or his transactors' credit worthiness. Abdullah's group following provided a network for accessing finance and dealing with default.

The fact that these virtues – affection, generosity, empathy – serve specific ends in the particular political and institutional context of Syria's informal economy does not mean that they are not valued for their own sake, or that they should be analysed purely in terms of power. In the case of generosity, for example, it is not only a means of accumulating social capital, and thus strengthening one's ability to put obligations on others. Rather, in relations that are regarded as "intimate", generosity is seen not as a strategy but as a *response* to esteem. As one person told me,

“if you ask me for something, it means you count me as dear (*bita'iznii*). People are happy if you ask them, [if you ask me] it means I am respected,

appreciated. It means there is intimacy (*hamiimiyya*). It does not happen between strangers – where there is shyness (*al-khajal*).”

If one of Abdullah’s close customers made a request which he knew Abdullah would find difficult to refuse, it showed that he was “not shy” of Abdullah. Rather, he appreciated him and regarded him as an intimate. In this perspective, Abdullah’s generosity was not a strategy in a status competition, but a moral response to his transactor’s boldness. It was not simply an accumulation of social capital, but rather an acceptance of intimacy. For Bourdieu (1977), the giver’s “gladness” could be explained by the accumulation of social capital achieved by putting others in his debt. But Lambek (2000:316) disagrees:

“it is questionable whether actors are the monads so much recent writing implies. People are subjects not simply of powerful institutional discourses or disciplines but of social relations. Habitus ought to be construed not simply with reference to...class and status but with reference to the social worlds of kinship and amity, of dependency and responsibility, of autonomy and connection”.

This is not to say that the dynamics of intimacy were devoid of power relations. Normally an aspiring Aleppan entrepreneur like Abdullah would only accept an invitation or a proposal of intimacy from someone who was “of the correct level” (*min al-mustawaa*). But this perspective, while it can accommodate relations of power and exclusion, is in contrast to many analytical explanations of generosity or sharing. Sahlins (1988) argued that sharing was a form of reciprocity; he called it “unbalanced” reciprocity, in contrast to the balanced reciprocity of barter. Others have pointed out that sharing is not always reciprocal, but supporters of Sahlins’ view argue that what appears to be unreciprocated may turn out to be reciprocated if the time-frame is enlarged, or if the definition of the transacting agents is altered (for example to take account of distributed agency) (Hunt 2000).

Widlok (2004:61) summarises Hunt’s view but then points out that it is often impossible to tell if a transfer is one-way or reciprocated, especially since acts of sharing are often not connected, in the actor’s mind, to any balancing or reciprocal transfer. Widlok argues that it makes more sense to see sharing not as a form of

reciprocity but as an act that is done “for its own sake” – “for the sake of shared enjoyment of whatever it is that is being shared”. He also notes that sharing creates “social groups and shared identities” who share a “moral base of mutual engagement”.

I am sympathetic to Widlok’s perspective. His emphasis on intrinsic value and the possibility of acts being done for their own sake accords with the Aristotelian understanding of virtue that I seek to apply in this thesis. Specifically, I agree with Widlok that it is problematic to assume that all acts of sharing or generosity are either reciprocal or performed in order to accumulate some kind of financial or social asset. However, I would add that the moral dynamics of generosity or sharing are diverse and not always simply a matter of creating shared enjoyment. To put it another way: exactly what it means to create a “shared identity” or a “shared moral base of mutual engagement” needs to be specified. Among Aleppan entrepreneurs, generosity can be a matter of establishing the moral dynamic of intimacy, which is an intrinsic good linked to the value of removing the barriers of formality. In a sense then, intimacy is a joint achievement that involves the appropriate mutual deployment of sentiment and respect. This moral achievement emerges out of a joint performance that is also an aesthetic project. Both sides must observe correct etiquette: they must know how and how quickly to move from “shyness” to “informality”. Those who move too quickly or in the wrong direction are sanctioned and shunned, as in the earlier example about the crude anecdote. Those who never dare to presume on another’s generosity remain hemmed in by formality and obstruct the mutual achievement of intimacy.

This understanding of intimacy – as a joint project that is valued for its own sake – speaks to debates about generosity, hospitality and virtue. As Marsden (2011 forthcoming) has argued, scholarly discussions of hospitality have often wavered between viewing it as a transcendental moral ideal and as an aspect of everyday choice-making or even a strategy for achieving political ends. He suggests that, to the extent that generosity and hospitality are constructed as ideally “spontaneous” and “uncalculating”, they draw their “moral power from their distance from the

everyday”. However, he adds, an alternative analysis would present these virtues neither as pure ideals nor instrumental tactics, nor even something messily in between, but as a skilled performance that has both aesthetic and ethical aspects, where actors judge how far they can press for advantage without “jeopardizing their dignity”. A performance is successful when both parties recognise each others’ skills and their involvement in a shared project. In one of Marsden’s illustrations, this shared project is not only an ethical matter of maintaining dignity, but an aesthetic one where it is important to cultivate attitudes of irony and wit: guests and hosts are both expected to refer obliquely or playfully to the tension inherent in the guest’s role as “honoured prisoner”. In the Afghan context from which Marsden is arguing, the ability to achieve this shared ethical and aesthetic project establishes a bond that is stronger than any notion of national identity.

Adopting a similar perspective, we can argue that Abdullah’s generosity and empathy are neither pure incarnations of primordial cultural virtues, nor cynically-minded strategies to establish his status. Rather, they are well judged performances that require a mastery of both etiquette and sentiment, as well as a constant appreciation of how far particular interactions can be directed towards the achievement of particular ends. The achievement of generosity is both an individual and a joint project. As an individual, Abdullah shows that he is someone on whom certain others can put obligations, and of whom they can make requests, and thus demonstrates that he exists as part of a moral network. But it is hard to separate generosity from intimacy in this context. In opening himself to those who would make demands on him, Abdullah also enters into a joint project of achieving intimacy: the gradual, mutual and well-judged “removal of the barriers of formality” (*ilghaa’ al-haala al-rasmiyya*). This is a dynamic process involving the transition from one etiquette and set of sentiments to another. Hospitality, or the performance of the guest-host relationship, may be the start of this dynamic process of achieving intimacy. This perspective on generosity and hospitality as a joint project sidesteps the question of whether these particular virtues ever exist in their pure form or whether they are always tainted by cynically motivated strategy. The goal of hospitality/generosity is neither simply individual virtue and honour nor cold-

blooded political advantage, but the joint achievement of an intrinsically valued intimacy or identity-in-partnership (*sharikeh*) within which commercial benefits such as trust and financial credit flow to both parties.

Abdullah enters into “moral identification” (*mawaanii*) relationships where others show their respect and affection for him precisely by making requests of him, or by speaking or acting in his place and with his authority but without consulting him. By entering into these relationships, Abdullah remains open to obligation. He also ties himself to his most loyal customers in long-standing moral bonds of “quasi-partnerships”: “running-accounts” (*istijraar*) relationships where debts are never fully settled. Below I explore these two types of intimacy which characterised Abdullah’s relationships with the closest members of his gathering (*jamaa‘a*). I refer to intimacy here in the sense of the removal of (physical or moral) boundaries between two people. The passage to intimacy was understood as a loosening of the etiquette of formality (*raf‘ il-kilfeh*). This passed through different degrees of informality, and resulted in a relationship in which neither party should “feel shy” of imposing on the other, and where it was hard to refuse the other’s requests.

We sit outside the factory in the early afternoon heat. Abdullah sits at his desk, placed on the pavement, with his friend Abu Sulayman to his side. As usual, Abdullah is switching between taking calls and catering to his guests. He offers another round of drinks to the assembled company – *ish tishrubuu?* – “what will you drink?” When the tea-boy appears, Abu Sulayman addresses him in what has almost become a running joke: “bring me a tea and a glass of iced water. Plenty of ice!” No-one talks for a while. In the background, a diesel generator is throbbing, a familiar sound and a reminder of the frequent electricity cuts that Aleppo’s entrepreneurs and industrialists routinely endure. Suddenly, Abu Sulayman tells Abdullah to turn the generator off, since the noise is disturbing him. Abdullah, the undisputed master of this space, complies quickly and meekly, directing an assistant to turn the engine off while they enjoy the tea.

While Abu Sulayman was not wealthy by the standard of most guests, and did not have enough capital to be considered a “trader” (*taajir*), his close friendship with Abdullah – alongside his confidence, “culture” and rhetorical ability – enabled him to take certain liberties in the factory gathering almost as if he were the host. Often he sat in Abdullah’s seat, and used his computer, or even his car. Arising out of this

material interpenetration was a type of moral identification of two persons. That is, Abu Sulayman could assume Abdullah's authority by proxy in certain situations. He might, for example, berate Abdullah's staff for not putting enough ice in his drink, or direct his employees to run small errands for him. Here, he could direct Abdullah to turn off his generator as if he were his equal or superior.

This type of behaviour was explained later as being typical of a "moral identification" (*mawaanii*) relationship. *Mawaanii* referred to a level of close friendship between Abdullah and Abu Sulayman where all barriers and formality were imagined to be removed, where each party could speak or act for the other, or assume authority over his space and belongings. Although there were different levels of "moral identification" which determined just how far this authority stretched, in general parties to the relationship could not refuse the requests of the other. There was said to be *mawaanii* not only between Abdullah and friends such as Abu Sulayman, but also with his closest and most loyal customers, who would never consider looking around in the market for rival goods, or consorting with his competitors. At the same time, the protocol of "moral identification" dictated that Abdullah would not chase up late payments from these customers; to do so would be considered "shameful" (*'aib*).

Moral identification therefore described a form of connectivity between two people that was imagined to take precedence over money or short-term financial interest (*maslaha*). This category, characterised by a sharing of authority and an intimacy of mutual obligation, entered into many relationships between traders. It meant that neither party needed to ask or wait to be asked: there were "no barriers" (*maa fii hawaajiz*), the state of "formality" had been removed (*ilghaa' al-haala al-rasmiyya*), and neither party was "shy" of the other (*laa yakhjaluu min baad*).

Traders who wanted to establish this relationship of informality and intimacy with me said, "don't be shy!" (*laa takhjal*). Abu-Lughod (1985) notes that among Egyptian Bedouin, intimates are those in front of whom one is not "shy" or "modest". The "state of embarrassment or shame" (*tahashshum*) arose only "in

interactions between social unequals or strangers”. In Aleppo, “don’t be shy” meant that either party could feel comfortable making any request of the other. If there was a moral identification relationship between two people, one party was said to “have the authority of intimacy over” (*byimuun ‘alaa*) the other: they could act without consulting the other. I remember a wholesale trader calling out affectionately to one of his trading partners as he walked out of his shop: “you have *mawaanii* over me” (*anti bitmuun ‘alayya*<sup>5</sup>). It was a declaration of affection, a way of saying: “you do not need to ask – just go ahead and do it”.

*Mawaanii* was a form of intimacy that was not grounded in kinship. Abu Sulayman said,

“It is hard to refuse a request if there is “moral identification”. There are levels, but it is more than simply ‘liking’ [someone] (*al-mahabbah*)...There might be “moral identification” between relatives, but not necessarily. Maybe you do not speak to your brother very often, you do not feel that you could ask him freely”.

The intimacy of moral identification meant that accounts “were not kept” of the favours given and received. People said “there are no accounts between us” (*maa fii hisaabaat baynaatnaa*), or “there is no cost/expense between us” (*maa fii kilfeh / takaaliif baynaatnaa*). One man said that “money is the last thing when you have *mawaanii*”. This suggests that money was seen as a way of keeping count, and thus of maintaining formality; symbolically, it ensured a separation between (rather than secured an identification of) moral persons. It ensured that neither party overstepped their authority and intruded on the other party’s rights or property. In this sense, it was the symbolic antithesis of the “moral identification” relationship.

This explains the “money taboo” which I stumbled on one morning in Abdullah’s factory:

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<sup>5</sup> The cognate verb for *mawaanii* is *maana ‘alaa*.

The room was quiet: Abdullah was at his desk, conferring with one of his regular customers, a stocky man in his late thirties, who was close by his side. I was sitting back on a couch chatting with Abu Sulayman, who sat on a nearby sofa. Otherwise the room was empty. Abu Sulayman and I had recently returned from a holiday on the coast; he had driven and I owed him two thousand lira (around \$40) for the petrol. Remembering this suddenly, I took the money out of my pocket and handed it to him. He waved it away, as if I did not owe him anything. I insisted, but he still did not take it, so I dropped it on the sofa next to him. The man sitting next to Abdullah broke off from his conversation and stared at me. Abu Sulayman discretely put the money in his pocket, removing it from sight.

Later that morning, as we visited another factory, Abu Sulayman took me aside and said, “I want to tell you something. When you settle accounts (*tahsub l-hisaab*) between friends, you should not do it in front of others. It should be private (*khaass*).” When I asked him why this was, he thought for a moment and said,

“otherwise people might think there is some [commercial] dealing (*al-ta'aamul*) between us. If there are work accounts to be settled, it can be done openly, but if there are personal accounts, it should not be done in front of others.”

Personal financial relationships between friends were to be kept private; any public evidence of exchanging money in this context was taboo. I suggest that this was because of the value placed on “moral identification” relationships. Any exchange of money between friends suggested that accounts *were* kept of favours done, and thus that the moral identification was incomplete or insincere. Money exchange in such cases was kept private so that the moral identification relationship could continue to be asserted in public. *Mawaanii* was a particularly prized form of friendship, where one party could act with the authority of the other without consulting them, using his property and resources without reserve or embarrassment, and demanding favours without any record being kept of them. This suggests an ideological contrast between impersonal commodity and personalised non-commodity transactions. While some anthropological analysis of gift-giving focuses on its coercive and competitive or at least strategic aspects, what seems to matter here is identification, intimacy and informality. The sharing of authority or resources was not a strategic act intended to change the nature of a relationship or alter the balance of obligation and debt. Rather,

it served to confirm and preserve the nature of an already established relationship. Sharing, above all, kept relationships “informal”.

If “moral identification” meant an absence of relational barriers – such that either party could freely “impose” on the other – it was also often represented as an absence of spatial barriers. Several shopkeepers told me that a visitor who enjoyed *mawaanii* was free to sit in the boss’s seat in a shop or office – next to the cash desk and the account books. And when he was having breakfast in my flat one morning, Abu Sulayman described the “moral identification” (*mawaanii*) between him and me in terms of the absence of spatial barriers:

“it means that I can go into your kitchen, without asking you, raid your fridge, make some food. If you raid someone’s fridge, he will be delighted (*byafrah*), because it means you are not shy of him! (*laa takhjal minhuu*).”

In the absence of “formality”, “shyness” or “barriers” between two parties, requests were seen not as impositions, but as proof of moral identification and thus a source of delight. The value accorded to such relationships helps us understand what is meant by “generosity” in this context. For someone who stood in this relation to Abdullah, to make a request of him was to show that was not shy, and to affirm that one regarded him as an intimate who enjoyed providing and sharing. Generosity for Abdullah is therefore not necessarily a matter of accumulating social capital or racking up credits of delayed reciprocal exchange. Rather, in moral identification (*mawaanii*) relationships, it was a response to and affirmation of intimacy, which was valued for itself.

### ***The Intimacy of Accounting***

One trading practice that seemed to me to reflect moral identification – because it expressed a kind of mutual indebtedness and intimacy – was “running accounts” (*istijraar*)<sup>6</sup>. This meant that accounts between two people were never settled: a customer could buy more goods on credit before he had paid off his last purchase, up

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<sup>6</sup> These were also referred to as *hisaabaat jaariyya* (literally, “running accounts”)

to an agreed credit limit. It meant that one side was continually in another's debt. It was considered an important milestone in the development of a trading relationship. This is not to say that there was complete trust once this stage of "running accounts" had been reached – indeed, it was sometimes said that some customers intentionally built up a good reputation, paying back credit regularly and in full, in order to get to the stage where they were able to flee with a large amount of goods on credit. However, the significance of the "running accounts" (*istijraar*) relationship was marked by the fact that customers who had running accounts were separated in most accounting records from those who did not.

At the earliest stage in a commercial relationship, if a buyer seeking credit was unknown to the seller, all business would typically be done in cash rather than on credit. As a relationship started to form, the supplier might start to provide a small percentage of the order on credit, in order to "try out" (*jarrib*) the customer. If the credit was repaid on time, the percentage of goods supplied on credit would typically be increased. It was at this stage that there could be said to be *ta'aamul* ("interaction") between the two traders: not simply buying and selling (*bay' wa shiraa'*), but bonds of credit and debt, based on some degree of mutual knowledge – and hence the prospect of a longer-term relationship.

The model I am outlining here is a schematic one which reflects the way traders *described* the process of gaining knowledge of a commercial partner. In practice, of course, the stage at which credit was provided in a trading relationship would vary according to the supplier's desperation to sell, the availability of credit elsewhere in the market, the supplier's experience of and taste for risk, and other factors such as the demeanour and self-presentation of the customer.

Abdullah maintained "running accounts" with a handful of his customers. These men, often wholesale traders around the same age as Abdullah, were regular visitors at the factory gathering. They were considered particularly loyal, taking goods only from Abdullah; they were said to be not merely his customers, but members of his group (*jamaa'a*). One of these customers, Sa'id, was in his mid-thirties and owned a

tailoring workshop. I often saw him at the factory gatherings, typically wearing a polo shirt and dark jeans. Because he was a regular and exclusive trading partner with Abdullah, there was a sense in which the two formed a single unit: Sa‘id’s success would also be Abdullah’s; anything that hurt Abdullah would also hurt Sa‘id. Each “served the interest” (*yakhdim maslaha*) of the other; it was as if there was a “partnership” (*sharika*) between them – a kind of moral identification of the sort I suggested characterised *mawaanii* relationships.

Indeed, these “running accounts” relationships were said to be infused with “moral identification” (*mawaanii*) since it would have been considered shameful for Abdullah to chase a debt. In this sense, Sa‘id – like the other “running accounts” customers – had *mawaanii* over Abdullah. However, the flow of credit and the sense of entitlement provided by moral identification worked both ways. Sometimes, Sa‘id would pay for goods up front, and even pay more than necessary, so that his account was in credit. He might do so particularly if he knew that Abdullah needed cash. But aside from these important material needs, the fact of not settling the account was symbolic: one way or another, the bond of debt needed to remain, signifying the continuity of the relationship, and the shared interests.

Abu Sulayman said when I asked him to explain the *istijraar* relationship that “traders hope for ‘good fortune’ from the relationship” and from each other:

Paul: Why do traders prefer not to settle their accounts with one another?

Abu Sulayman: They hope for good things from the relationship (*yatafaa’aluu al-khayr fii’l-’alaaqa*). It means they expect good things (*yatwaqqa’uu al-khayr*) and hope for good things from the relationship. It is a kind of blessing (*al-barakeh*). Traders stay connected with each other (*mawsuuluu ma’a baad*) if they stay linked through their accounts, which are kept open. And it is a type of blessing: if good things come to you (*al-khayr ysiibak*) they come to me too.

Paul: what do you mean by “good things” (*al-khayr*)?

Abu Sulayman: I mean profit, things made easy at work (*al-tashiil bi’l-’amal*), no problems. If you deal with someone who is a good person, you might get some of his *khayr*, his blessing.

Paul: but I could close my account with Abdullah and remain his friend, still benefit from his *barakeh*?

Abu Sulayman: yes, but traders are keen to keep continuity (*al-istimraariyyeh*) in the relationship. If accounts are closed, maybe the customer leaves you. If he hasn't settled his account, if his accounts are hanging on you (*hisaabaatuh muta'allaqin fiik*), he is still with you (*lisaah ma'k*).

In “running accounts” relationships such as between Sa'id and Abdullah, accounts acquired a radically new function in delineating the relationship between two people. Interlocked accounts underpinned a relationship where there was “moral identification” – where either party might provide credit, and where neither could chase up a debt. “Moral identification” was often glossed as a relationship where “there are no costs / accounts between us” (*maa fii takaaliif / hisaabaat baaynaatnaa*). Yet in the case of running accounts, the “moral identification” relationship had come into being, or at least was signalled by, the interlocking of accounts. How to understand this paradox? Accounts can serve to define and quantify separate and opposed financial interests, and thus to keep two transactors apart. But while accounts always quantify credits and debts, in the case of *istijraar* (running accounts) they serve to tie transactors together rather than keep them apart.

Interlocked accounts are the monetary version of “moral identification” (*mawaanii*) relationships: both sides are connected by mutual bonds of obligation from which they ensure – by never settling the accounts – that they are never entirely free. What is prized in “moral identification” relationships is informality (*raf' il-kilfeh*) and intimacy (*hamiimiyya*). Each side can assume the authority of the other, and act without consulting them. In “running accounts” relationships, what is prized is the intimacy of mutual obligation. One of the two parties is always in debt to the other (although the roles of creditor and debtor can and do switch between the two). Both types of relationship – *mawaanii* and *istijraar* – approach an ideal of moral identification: a removal of barriers which we can understand as “intimacy”. This form of relationship is valued in itself, and suggests that we should not always approach generosity as a tactic in a strategy to accumulate capital.

The accumulation of social capital was nevertheless important for Abdullah. He needed to enforce obligations with less intimate members of his community of

customers; and he needed to generate electoral support among the communities of other entrepreneurs – circles which he did not know personally. He was not always successful in doing this. He had cultivated the virtues of respectability, charisma, generosity and intimacy through exchanges with his gathering (*jamaa'a*) of customers and partners. However, he found that the intimacy and affection he had garnered here did not translate into political capital on a broad enough scale among Aleppo's other industrialists. Despite intensive work on the part of his campaign team, he was not successful in his election candidacy. For another four years at least, the influence, opportunity and status that came from being a Board member of the Aleppan Chamber of Industry would have to wait.

## Chapter Two

### Aromatic Ethics

This chapter is about “cinnamon”: the belief that if a trader sells with “pure intentions”, his customers will benefit. A trader who sells willingly and without envy is said to have “good cinnamon” (*qirfeh kwayyiseh*), “good intentions” (*husn al-niyya*) or to sell “from a clean heart” (*min qalb nadhiif*). This is interesting because it indicates that the ethical attitude with which the trader sells is important. Morality is not simply about following rules, such as “do not lie”. Rather, morality is about the state of one’s heart, which in this case means one’s inner disposition towards another person.

Studies of morality as a cultural value system – for example analyses of Mediterranean “honour and shame” (Peristiany 1965, Herzfeld 1980) have tended to focus on outer behaviour. They have provided moral taxonomies which “have to do with the public evaluation of behaviour, with degrees of conformity to a social code, rather than with hypothetical inner states” (Herzfeld 1980:341). Among Aleppan traders, however, inner intention matters as an index of ethical value. This is similar to what Mahmood and Hirschkind note about contemporary Egyptian piety movements, where the state of a believer’s heart in worship is an important part of being virtuous. They note that valued states of heart include humility, repentance, and pious fear.

However, among Muslim traders in Aleppo what matters is one’s inner disposition *towards another person*. Virtue here is constituted in relation. This is part of my broader argument that we should understand virtue as an aspect of exchange, and as embedded in practical social problems. Moral personhood emerges in this context through exchange, not through disciplines of the self such as prayer, sermon audition or study. However, not all exchange is virtuous, but only that done with a correct

heart. Indeed, it is because virtue is constituted in exchange that the attitude of one's heart becomes central.

I am explaining my research project to the morning gathering at the factory. I talk about the culture of the market, relations between traders, the basis of trust between traders. The assembled crowd listens briefly. Then, as conversation breaks up into smaller groups, one of Abdullah's business partners, who has travelled in from Dubai, addresses me. He is sitting opposite me on a sofa, and is not yet forty years old:

“if you are looking at the culture of trade, you need to understand ‘cinnamon’. How can I explain it to you? Sometimes you will buy from someone, because of it. Rather than buy from anyone else, you will choose that person and keep coming back to him.”

Rather too eager to link cinnamon to trust, I say:

“Because he is reliable, he has a good reputation?”

“No, it is not about reputation exactly.”

“You mean because his goods are better, or better value – that is why you come to Abdullah?”

“No, cinnamon means that you will benefit. You benefit from him because of his cinnamon.”

“You mean he has good social connections, you will benefit from them? He is a powerful person who can help you in the future if you buy from him?”

“Cinnamon, how can I explain it to you...?”

He launches into a more detailed explanation but I do not follow, and to my frustration the conversation moves on.

I was frustrated not just by my inability to follow his explanation, but also because cinnamon was a concept that seemed to elude all the categories I could think of to explain transactions and decision-making in the market: trustworthiness, social capital and economic interest (i.e. seeking good quality at low prices). If cinnamon was none of these things, I thought, it was intriguing but also rather quaint – perhaps a superstition that might provide an interesting flavour to my ethnography but should not be taken too seriously as a motivator of action. But the disturbing ethnographic fact remained that cinnamon was a quality that my informants took seriously. After the concept was explained to me later, I continued to resist its purchase, arguing that I had rarely heard entrepreneurs talk about it among themselves except if they were

prompted by my questions. A common reply to this was that cinnamon “is real and it exists” (*haqiqiyyeh, mawjuudeh*). It was, in other words, a real driver of social and economic behaviour that mattered when money was at stake.

“If you sell something because you are forced to (*ghasman ‘annak*) – you liquidate assets because you need the cash – or if you sell and afterwards see that you missed an opportunity to profit, you sell wishing you hadn’t. If what you have sold is a car, maybe someone will crash in it. That is why, when you sell, people should say, from their heart, ‘I hope you profit from it’. You have ‘good cinnamon’ when you sell from the heart. Most people believe in this. I believe in it. Some people have shit cinnamon (*qirfathun khara*). Some have good cinnamon: any goods you buy from them, you will have sold on before you even receive them!”

Muhyi, textile entrepreneur, 25 years old

“Good cinnamon” comes from being tolerant when you are buying and selling (*al-tasaamuh bi’l-bay‘ wa’l-shiraa*). It comes from not having a “narrow” or envious eye (*‘ayn dayyiq*). And it comes from “honesty” (*al-sidq*).

Majid, fabric salesman in the retail suq, 18 years old

“Cinnamon – you think you will be able to explain this to your students? It is something real, something you feel. You need to feel it. We feel it. When you are here, you feel it. Not everyone knows this word ‘cinnamon’. Maybe no-one knows it outside this market. But even if people don’t know the word, everyone knows about it.”

Hamdi, wholesale yarn merchant, 22 years old.

“Good cinnamon” (*qirfeh kwayyiseh*) was an ethical quality prized among traders in Aleppo and a marker of the inner person. It was said to be the result of having “good intentions” (*husn al-niyya*) when one traded – indeed a trader would sometimes say to a supplier when concluding a purchase “God willing, you have pure intentions” (*inshallah niyyatak saafiyyeh!*). A well-intentioned seller was one who sold “from the heart” (*min qalbhu*). This meant that he hoped that the object he was selling would bring benefit and good fortune to the buyer. His “eye did not linger” on the product – in other words, he did not envy the buyer the profit he would make from it, or wish that he had sold it at a higher price. By contrast, one suq trader in his sixties described “bad cinnamon” by saying that “some people sell to you but don’t want you to profit. They are jealous”. Bad cinnamon was thus a variant of the concept of the “evil eye” – the destructive agency of jealousy. Envy as a force which is

destructive, and whose destructiveness is contagious, may be a widespread characteristic of moral cosmologies. Herzfeld notes of a Greek village that “an envious man negates fortune, and this affects those around him” (1980:345).

In Aleppo, it was not just selling enviously, but also selling “reluctantly”, that was dangerous – for example, if one was forced to sell “despite oneself” (*ghasman ‘anhu*) at a lower price because one needed the cash. The same was true of the attitude in which a gift was given. To give a gift reluctantly, to give because one had been shamed into giving, was dangerous. To do so threatened to sap blessing (*baraka*) from the recipient. For this reason, if there was a possibility that the giver might be reluctant or envious, the gift should be handed over with the term “*mabruuk*” – which meant “blessed” (with *baraka*), and which made receiving the gift acceptable (*halaal*). I discovered this when an impoverished textile trader in the suq admired my watch; he did so on several occasions, and when I offered to give it to him, he said that to take something “through the sword of shame” (*bi sayf al-hayyaa*) was unacceptable (*haraam*); rather, the gift should be given “from the interior of one’s heart” (*min juwwaat qalbhu*) – in other words, with sincerity. Therefore, he could not accept the watch. However, he added, if I wanted to give a gift later, that would be a different matter. When I eventually did offer him the watch, he remained reluctant to accept it until I assured him it was given freely; it was only when I then said “with blessing” (*mabruuk*) that he took it saying “I have accepted” (*qabilt*).

So the attitude in which yarn and textiles were sold, mattered; the “state of heart” or ethical attitude which imbued the transaction was important. Transactions – whether commercial or the giving of gifts – have a moral status of lawful (*halaal*) or unlawful (*haraam*) depending on the state of heart of the doer/giver/seller. A sincere heart makes a gift acceptable, and a transaction desirable. In this cosmology, virtue is constituted in exchange but not all exchange is virtuous - only that done with the right attitude: willingness, generosity (lack of envy): a “clean heart”, or what might be glossed as the felicity condition of sincerity. The discourse about “cinnamon” draws on Islamic ethical traditions about the importance of the ethical attitude in which acts of worship are undertaken: the state of the believer’s heart before God.

The influence of this tradition on Muslim piety movements in Cairo has been noted by Hirschkind (2006) and Mahmood (2005). Both writers note that within these piety movements, actions became ethical when they are done with the correct pious attitude. These attitudes – which Oakeshott (1975) refers to as “adverbial virtues” – include states of heart such as humility, fear of God, gratitude, sincerity, and repentance. Mahmood and Hirschkind are interested in the conscious efforts of pious participants to cultivate these dispositions, through bodily practices and self-discipline. The location of this attitude is the heart. In Islamic traditions from al-Ghazali onwards, the heart is the main organ in the moral physiognomy of the body. There is also a strong emphasis on “intention” (*niyya*) as determining the moral status of acts, both of worship (*'ibaadaat*) and social interaction (*mu'aamalaat*), as Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006) note.

In these Cairene piety movements, piety is primarily constituted by a participant's attitude towards God – her or his heart for God. But what is important in the ethical discourse of cinnamon, however, is relational rather than worshipful piety. Virtue, for the traders I studied, is what obtains between people. It exists against the possibility of deceit, betrayal and the disintegration of commercial relationships. Thus, a sincere heart matters socially not so much in prayer (which is for some simply a source of private benefit) but as the basis of reliable relationships and profitable trade; it is one's heart *for others* that counts. Similarly, the notion of “love” or “affection” (*mahabbah*) refers not to the attitude of a believer before God, but to a virtuous sociality of trust and solidarity between men. God is not absent from the picture – for the traders I knew, the heart is a “spiritual” organ and the basis of honesty is faith in a God who holds people to Account. But it is relationships with people rather than with God that form the problem out of which ethical talk emerges. The Aleppan traders I knew spoke of virtues of the heart such as honesty (*al-sidq*), sincerity towards others (*niyya saafiyyeh*), lack of envy (*qirfeh kwayyiseh*), generosity (*al-karam*), tolerance (*al-tasaamuh*) and authenticity (*asaala*).

Is it significant that an aromatic substance such as cinnamon should serve as a metaphor for this kind of inner virtue or purity of heart? Other conversations I had

with ritually-minded Muslim traders in the suq in Aleppo suggested that aromas and virtues are both connected to the quality of cleanliness (*nadhaafa*). The clean body (*jism nadhiif*) is one prepared for prayer by ritual washing (*wuduu'*). One suq trader told me that the act of greeting someone by kissing them on both cheeks was also a way of detecting, by placing one's nose close to the back of their neck, whether or not they had washed for prayer. Insofar as cleanliness (*nadhaafa*) is one part of purity (*tahaara*), it is a quality that straddles the divide between the physical and moral. A Muslim preparing for prayer, one textile trader told me, becomes pure (*taahir*) not simply by virtue of the physical processes of cleaning the body, but by the intention to be pure which is verbalised at the start of the ritual washing.

So it may be significant that an aroma comes to symbolise inner virtue. Another suggestion that this is significant may be read into the moral geography of the suq. Cinnamon is sold in the Aleppo suq and elsewhere by traders known as perfumiers (*'attaariin*) – who specialise in a wide range of aromatic products, from herbs and spices, to medicines, oils and perfumed soaps. In Aleppo, the “market of perfumiers” (*suuq al-'attaariin*) – is situated geographically at the centre of the covered markets in the old city. The moral geography of the markets may be relevant here: light, expensive and clean products such as perfumes and textiles tend to be situated at the centre of the market complex, while heavier and dirtier products and processes such as tanneries and food markets tend to be at or outside its periphery. This is partly a pragmatic question of access – it is hard to transport bulky and heavy goods to the centre of the market. But it may also be a question of a cultural logic that values sweet-smelling and clean products as suggestive of virtue. Brunschvig (1962:45) notes that in some Islamic textual traditions, the textile and spice trades have a morally superior status.

### ***The Importance of Being Willing***

I noted above that having good cinnamon or pure intentions leads to profit. In the next chapter, I note that having good cinnamon is also believed to lead to fortuitous coincidences. Both of these are illustrations of the same principle: “things come

easy” (*al-umuur sahleh bitijii*) to those who are pure inside. The idiom of “cinnamon” representing inner purity is current in other Arab countries too. In Egypt, someone to whom “things come easy” – who enjoys good fortune and experiences fortuitous coincidences – is said to have “good cinnamon”. What is distinctive about the moral cosmology of Aleppan traders<sup>7</sup> is that the ease is contagious – it transfers with what is sold. It is not only the person who has “good cinnamon” who enjoys good fortune as a result. The benefits also accrue to those who buy from him: they are able to sell on what they buy easily and at a profit; in fact, the goods are said to be sold “even before they buy them”. So we might say that the cinnamon of the seller transfers to the buyer through the material that is exchanged.

The good intentions of the seller, then, might be said to inhere in the material product. The ethical inheres in the transactable substance, understood here as a materialisation of the relationship between the transactors. This is similar to the idea observed by Mauss (1990) that the prestige or the social personhood of the giver inheres in the gift. In gift theory, what is most essential about the person transfers with what they give: prestige in the kula ring (Malinowski 1922); ethical attitude or “good intentions” (*husn al-niyya*) among entrepreneurs in Aleppo. In drawing attention to this parallel between “good cinnamon” and gift theory, I am not of course suggesting that Aleppan entrepreneurs are actually giving gifts; rather, I am arguing that some of the moral dynamics of what has been called gift exchange remain important in these commercial transactions.

The most important of these dynamics is willingness. Among Aleppan traders, a seller who has “good intentions” is one who sells willingly. A product in which the seller’s unwillingness inheres is unfelicitous – it is hard to sell it on, and it will only ever make a loss. There are parallels to this in other traditions. Lambek notes that, among the Sakalava of Madagascar, a sacrificial animal that shrieks on the way to the slaughter is said to be unwilling to give its life, and is spared on the grounds that it would be unfelicitous to slaughter it. Lambek writes that “it is evidently not giving itself willingly and signals that neither is its owner offering it willingly” (Lambek

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<sup>7</sup> Although it may apply to Egyptian traders too

2008:149). Analogously, in Aleppo: a piece of cloth that does not make profit or sell easily is evidently not giving itself willingly and signals that neither is its owner selling it willingly. In Madagascar, an animal that dies unwillingly is dangerous; in Aleppo, a batch of yarn that is transacted unwillingly will bring bad fortune.

Willingness, then, is an important ethical attitude that ought to inhere in whatever material is transacted commercially or ritually. This may also explain why carrion was forbidden in the Jewish Pentateuch law: unlike a sacrificed animal, there could be no certainty that it had given its life willingly. This notion of willingness also finds parallels in commercial transactions among the Sumbanese in Indonesia – where Keane reports that in cultural traditions that dated from before missionisation, a valued attitude in exchange is generosity or “sincerity” (*ikhlas*) (Keane 2002:87, footnote 19). I expect that generosity in this case should be understood not so much as selling at a particularly low price, but as selling (at a reasonable price) with a willing heart.

If Abdullah sells with a benevolent and willing attitude, it is his customers who benefit (in being able to sell the goods on easily and at a profit). Thus, his cinnamon is a way of “looking after, or looking out for, the wellbeing of others” (Lambek 2010a:15). Lambek offers this as a definition of “care”. He also suggests that care, like sincerity, is a “felicity condition” or “an attribute of practice”; he notes that “we ‘take care’ not only to say and do the right thing, but to say and do...them carefully” (Lambek 2010a:15-16). “Cinnamon” may be an instance of such ethical care, because it is oriented to the well-being of one’s customers. Inhabiting the correct attitude when one is selling or transacting can be seen as a form of care for the customer and therefore something that requires work. Thus, we can understand Abdullah’s “good cinnamon” as an index of the continual care with which he must ensure that he treats a customer without envy or greed. This may explain why it makes sense for a buyer who is trying to negotiate a lower price to say, as I once heard: “I have come to you because I know that your cinnamon is good”. Rather than taking this as an agonistic tactic to flatter or shame the seller into lowering his price, we might take it as an attempt to persuade the seller to make himself into a particular

kind of person through the transaction – to inhabit his own dispositional potential for virtue.

For the traders, it is in interaction, rather than in the discipline of prayer and study or the cultivation of an ideal self, that moral qualities become real and can be felt and tested:

Abu Sulayman: These things, the moral emotions (*al-‘awaatif*), are to do with spiritual (*ruuhaaniyya*) things. They are related to faith (*al-iimaan*) and to religion (*al-diin*). They are spiritual things – to do with God, angels, faith.”

Paul: They come from prayer?

Abu Sulayman: We are not talking about prayer. Prayer is something which brings you benefits, within yourself. We are talking about honesty (*al-sidq*) and dealing with others [properly] (*al-ta‘aamul*). This is what concerns me. If don’t know if you pray or not, I don’t see whether you pray or not. I see whether you deal with me honestly and properly. This is much more important than prayer (*haadhaa ahamm bi kitiir min al-salaa*). Abdullah doesn’t pray. But he is generous (*kariim*), honest (*saadiq*), he has a strong faith (*iluu iimaan qawiyy*).

Paul: Are you very religious (*kitiir muhtamm bi’l-diin*)?

Abu Sulayman: I believe, in my heart. It is because of my faith that I don’t lie (*maa bakzib*), I don’t deceive people (*maa bghishsh*), I don’t betray them (*maa baghdar*).

Here, Abu Sulayman refers to Abdullah’s “strong faith” in terms of social virtues – generosity and honesty. These qualities are the result and proof of inner conviction. They are “social” in the sense that they are orientations or attitudes of heart towards other people. As such, they become known through interaction and exchange: “I see whether you deal with me honestly and properly”. What is critical here is the ability to know others; the central problem which makes this discourse of piety meaningful, giving it a reference point in people’s lives, is whether or not others are well-disposed towards one: whether their honesty, sincerity and generosity mean that they can be relied upon.

So Mahmood’s (2005) subjects talked of piety in terms of the state of the heart towards God, whereas mine were interested in the state of heart towards others. This was because they faced the practical problem of knowing what others’ hidden intentions towards them were. The pragmatic context in which they lived – one of

transaction, risk and betrayal – affected their conception of virtue. We might go so far as to say that piety and virtue are not given concepts that can be unproblematically identified in their different varieties in different settings. Rather, they are a function of other aspects of social relationships and daily problems. Talk about virtue emerges out of the practical problem of knowing others.

If this is the case, we should ask of Mahmood’s ethnographic subjects, what is the larger project that they are trying to achieve – what are the practical problems they face – out of which talk about virtue emerges. One possibility is that Mahmood’s subjects are unusual in that piety for them is the specific goal that brings them together, rather than a set of concepts and feelings that emerge out of other problems, such as (among Aleppan traders) how to make commercial relationships reliable and how to make persons knowable. If so, Mahmood’s subjects are analogous to those who form “intentional communities”, for whom community does not emerge “naturally” out of the pursuit of other tasks, but is the conscious goal around which the community is brought together (Brown 2002).

### ***Cinnamon and the Proof of Sincerity***

So for Aleppan traders, virtue is not a self-sufficient ideal floating above the concerns of everyday life, to be achieved or not achieved in the context of worship. It is an integral aspect of a practical problem: how to know others. For those who described it to me, cinnamon was a pragmatic, measurable way of knowing others’ inner intentions: did they want the best for their customers, or were they envious of them? Did they work “from the heart” (*min qalbhu*) for them or were they “inauthentic” (*muu asiil*) in their work and loyalty?

Sincerity is a noteworthy virtue in Syria given the broader political context. Wedeen (1998) argues that Syria’s authoritarian regime aims for compliance rather than legitimacy. It requires citizens to take part in “rituals of obeisance” but no-one is expected to believe that these expressions of reverence are sincere. Indeed, the fact that people are forced to behave as if they are sincere both expresses and helps to

produce the regime's dominance. However, among Aleppo traders, the real inner state of the heart does matter. A trader who sells willingly and without envy is said to have "good cinnamon". Thus, cinnamon was a way of talking about trust. The question of whether or not someone had good cinnamon was an empirical one. An entrepreneur was known to have good cinnamon by the fact that whenever a trader bought from them, the trader profited:

Abu Sulayman, Abdullah and I are sitting in the factory office. I ask Abdullah about cinnamon (cinnamon):

- Paul: Is it real? (*haqiqiyyeh*)  
Abdullah: Seventy percent of traders believe in it. I used not to. Then, eight years ago, a friend of mine who had a circular knitting machine factory like mine – I swear on God's name (*wallaahi 'l-'aziim uqsim billaah*), I give you my word! (*yamiin*) – I sent him some yarn to work with. It [the finished product] cost me four hundred lira a kilo. That was cheap. I put [the knitted textiles] into the market at five hundred lira a kilo. It didn't sell. I lowered it to four hundred and fifty, then four hundred lira – the cost price. Someone took it, and brought it back, he wasn't happy, said it wasn't good. So I gave him a discount, selling it at three hundred and fifty lira a kilo. In the end, do you know how much I sold it for?  
[Dramatic silence]  
Seventy-five lira! And the guy wasn't grateful. People had told me that man's cinnamon wasn't good.
- Paul: Was the fabric poor quality?  
Abdullah: It is not about quality, the quality was excellent (*mumtaaz*). He had good machines.
- Paul: How is your cinnamon?  
Abdullah: Good, thank God

Cinnamon was intensely practical and empirical. Its pragmatics and tangibility were emphasised to me again and again. Hamdi, a wholesale yarn trader in his early twenties who had worked in his father's office in Khan al-Oulabiyya for five years, summed up what I had heard from many traders when he said "cinnamon is something real. It is something you feel. You need to feel it." Salim, a successful yarn broker in his mid thirties, said,

“you sell more easily and with less problems, when you buy from someone who has good cinnamon...you can feel (*talmis*) this. You feel it, not with your hands, but with your interaction (*bi'l-ta'aamul*).”

To sense another's cinnamon through one's “interaction” meant that a trader profited and found selling and other aspects of business became “easy” after he had bought from such a person. The concept of piety deployed by Mahmood to describe her subjects' ethical lives and concerns is bound up with eschatology, judgement and the perfectibility of the heart. By contrast, the traders' notion of cinnamon is concerned with daily needs, profit, fortune and uncertainty. The source of cinnamon is a sincere heart. However, traders' talk was not about the cultivation of such a heart but rather about profit and daily needs. Their emphasis was on the practical outworking of, rather than the inner cultivation of, sincerity. The interior – the state of another's heart – mattered, but it was seen in external things.

The cinnamon concept was a way of measuring and proving sincerity. It was a marker of a certain kind of trustworthiness. Geertz (1979) wrote a foundational study of market trade in Sefrou, Morocco. He argued that, given the varying quality of goods and information, it was vital to assess the reliability of fellow traders. He described the moral concepts relevant to this assessment: *sidq* (the truth of persons), *haqq* (reality), *'aql* (judgement). Among Muslim businessmen in Aleppo, the important moral concepts were *sidq* (honesty), *amaaneh* (trustworthiness)<sup>8</sup> and *qirfeh* – “cinnamon”, a near synonym for “heart” (*qalb*) or “intention” (*niyya*).

“Cinnamon” enables material effects to be read as signs of immaterial causes. Immaterial causes such as envy lead to material effects such as loss. Good will leads to ease; sincerity leads to coincidence; inner virtues (such as cinnamon) become ease and profit for the one's transactors. Thus, cinnamon is a way of making claims about the inner – trustworthiness, intention and virtue. It is a way of making the ethical manifest “on the surface of things” (Keane 2010). Keane argues that book-keeping, gifts and the language of justification can become ways of objectifying the ethical. He argues that the way in which the ethical becomes discernable is always culturally

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<sup>8</sup> While *sidq* denoted the quality of speaking the truth and only making reliable promises, *amaaneh* meant the quality of someone who faithfully kept and returned whatever had been entrusted to them.

specific. We can approach beliefs about “cinnamon” as a discursive frame within which ethical qualities such as “good intentions” and “clean hearts” can be objectified in recognisable forms. For example, an Aleppan trader knows his supplier’s heart by the practical, tangible ease with which he is able to sell on the goods he purchased from him, and by the material prosperity that follows or fails to follow from this.

### ***Envy and Perversion***

This discourse about the heart is therefore relevant to the question of what Aleppan traders put their trust in when dealing with each other, given the lack of a reliable and accessible court system. One answer is family name and reputation (*ism*) (Rabo 2005a). While this is certainly important, Abdullah for one does not have an established trading lineage; he is trying to build his name by cultivating a charismatic presence and a reputation for sincerity of heart. The discourse of cinnamon shows another answer to the question of what traders put their trust in. Rather than family name, the state of a trader’s heart becomes a way of talking about the dilemmas and uncertainties of trust. The “heart” is another idea of moral personhood, which complements Rabo’s analysis of “family name”.

What then do Aleppan traders trust: what makes a “clean heart” or a “pure intention”? I have argued that it is a matter of having the correct relational attitude: generosity and willingness rather than envy and reluctance. This is similar to the importance of “affection” as an idiom of trading relations within Abdullah’s factory gathering, which I noted in the previous chapter. The relational attitude of “affection” implied trust, support, and solidarity; it was not incompatible with self-interest, but was, rather, in opposition to deceit and betrayal. Indeed the discourse of “affection” was often accompanied by talk about feeling “comfortable” or “at ease” (*murtaah*), which had connotations of trustworthiness. Salim, the successful yarn broker, made the link explicit: “when there is affection, you can be at ease with one another (*tartaah ma’a baad*)”. Abu Sulayman made a similar link, referring to an

evening gathering (*sahra*) we had attended in a restaurant where Abdullah had hosted members of his circle:

“when you have friends sitting down together...when there is *hubb* (“love” / “affection”) between them, no anger, no deceit (*ghishsh*), then you get positive energy, and everyone can be at ease (*yartaah*).”

To say that one felt “comfortable” or “at ease” with someone meant that one was inclined to trust them. It was what “affection” felt like. “Comfort” (*al-raaha*) was an idiom of trust<sup>9</sup>, and such it was related to “good cinnamon”. Salim said:

“when there is cinnamon [between you and someone else], you are more comfortable [with them] (*tartaah akthar*)... there are thousands of people in Aleppo who can mend your computer, but let’s say, with this one person you are *murtaah* (“comfortable”), and you find your computer working best after he has fixed it. You say, he has good cinnamon. Some people you find that you are comfortable with (*tartaah li’illhun*), others you don’t.”

Sometimes, having “good cinnamon” for someone was talked of in terms of a special bond between two people. A wholesale yarn trader explained the concept of “cinnamon” – which as we have seen is the outer sign of a sincere or pure heart – in terms of connectivity, using the idiom of astrology:

“you know about the stars (*al-nujuum*)? In spoken dialect you might talk about “good cinnamon”, but scientifically (*‘ilmiyyan*), it is about stars [astrology]...It means two people’s stars go together (*najmhun ‘alaa baad*). It means your star is matched with his star (*najmak ‘alaa najmhu*).”

In other contexts, trustworthiness was a matter of not having any inappropriate agenda or misplaced self-interest (*maslaha*), since this implied that one was not giving affection and loyalty their proper place. Employers in the suq sometimes bandied around the pejorative terms *maslahatji* and *awantaji*, applying them to young employees or wayward sons who made a show of working but skived off at any opportunity. Both terms implied that someone was only ever interested in anything for what they could get out of it. It was perfectly acceptable for traders to

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<sup>9</sup> as were its cognates: someone who is *muriih* (“comfort-giving”) meant someone you feel you can do business with, feel comfortable with – someone who inspires trust. The phrase *irtahtilluh* (“I felt comfortable around him”) had a sense of “I trust him”.

pursue their own interest or *maslaha* – indeed, this word was a synonym for “trade” or “line of work”. But the term *maslahatji* meant someone who had been *uncovered* as having a *maslaha* – in other words, someone who had claimed he was loyal when he was out for himself, or someone who had claimed to be hard-working when in fact he was lazy.

I heard these words applied mainly to employees; they carried a strong normative force, implying that employees should work out of loyalty to the father or to the shop-owner. For example, Salam – an unmarried man in his early 20s – had a reputation for gallivanting around and doing little work in his father’s shop in Aleppo’s old city markets. His father complained to me that he got up to mischief and never did any proper work. On one occasion, he was lounging at the back of the family shop, when his father said he needed someone to run an errand to a different part of the market. Immediately, Salam jumped up and volunteered to go. His father looked unimpressed, and told me his son was an *awantaji*: he made out he was a willing worker but his father knew he had some private interest in going to that part of the market and just wanted the chance to be out of the shop.

Both words – *awantaji* and *maslahatji* – are formed by adding the suffix –ji to another word: *awantaj* – from the French for “advantage” (*avantage*); and *maslaha* – the Arabic for (self-)interest. The terms, which are virtually synonymous, are pejorative and point to the importance of loyalty and sincerity – not to an ideal world in which there is no self-interest or agenda (*maslaha*), but to a work in which there is no hidden or inappropriate self-interest. The pejorative flavour of the words comes not from the terms *maslaha* or *awantaj* but from the force of the –ji, which is an Ottoman Turkish ending that turns a thing into a trade. Thus, *kooma* means hub-cap, and *koomaji* means someone who cleans hub-caps. The suffix –ji carries the connotation of handling or trucking in a thing for the profit that one can make out of it: it connotes pure interest or calculated benefit (*maslaha*)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Professor Yasir Suleiman for the ideas that inform this section: for alerting me to and discussing with me the significance of the –ji suffix, in particular its differential force when set against concrete or abstract nouns.

Because of its connotations of *maslaha*, the suffix *-ji* is at home next to concrete words – words that denote material things. But when set against an abstract noun, the force of contrast with the menial physicality of the *-ji* creates a dissonance that implies insincerity. Thus the words *awantaji* and *maslahatji*, formed by adding *-ji* to purely abstract nouns, are highly pejorative. Other more recent neologisms in this category of words include *islaamji* and *qawmiyyaji* – from the words for “Islam” and “nationalism” respectively – both abstract nouns denoting prestigious concepts. When the *-ji* is added, the words mean someone who “trades in” Islam or nationalism – who pretends to promote them but actually just promotes themselves; they imply, in other words, insincerity. Indeed, one of my informants defined *Islaamji* and *qawmiyyaji* as “someone who is not sincere (*ghayr mukhlis*) in his Islam or his nationalism”. Abstract nouns are inappropriate contexts for the *-ji* ending; adding *-ji* to an abstract noun therefore implies insincerity. This etymological diversion illustrates the relationship between sincerity and *maslaha*: overtones of insincerity emerge when *maslaha* is found in inappropriate contexts. This suggests that inappropriate selfishness has displaced or perverted proper relation.

Self-interest (*maslaha*) is recognised and accepted as the guiding principle of commercial relations in the marketplace. What is not acceptable is to have a hidden *maslaha*, or to be driven by one’s own agenda in a context where loyalty towards one’s employer or father is expected to be the over-riding motivation. In such contexts, one is guilty of having an insincere, inauthentic or “unclean” heart. To have an inappropriate agenda – to be a *maslahatji* or to have a *maslaha* in the wrong place – was, by definition, to be insincere or untrustworthy. It meant that one had failed to maintain the correct relational attitudes of willingness, affection and solidarity in the way that one traded or worked.

Elyachar makes similar observations about the meaning of sincerity and the important of trading and working with a proper regard for others. She notes that workshop owners were said to have a *maslaha* when they pursued “short-term individual interests in the name of the public good” (2005:147). It was of course “legitimate for any craftsman to pursue his own interest”. However, to pursue one’s

short-term interest in a competitive way (*munaafasa*) was linked to the evil eye (*itnafas*). The evil eye meant the “maximisation of individual utility without regard for others or long-term relationships” (2005:149). Elyachar terms this the creation of negative value; it is in contrast to “intensification of personality attributes such as generosity and popularity” which is a mode of creating “positive value” (2005:158). Positive value is created through inhabiting the relational self. Elyachar argues that this was not understood by foreign-funded non-governmental organisations which designated relationships as “social capital” and sought to transform this into immediate monetary gain, in adherence to capitalist logic and as part of a broader neo-liberal project.

In Aleppo, the suffix *-ji* refers to the pursuit of individual interest; when attached to abstract nouns such as “Islam” and “nationalism” – spheres where the pursuit of purely individual interest is illegitimate – a linguistic dissonance is created which carries strong overtones of insincerity. The dissonance of insincerity – having bad cinnamon or incorrect attitudes of relation – is morally dangerous and invites misfortune. Elyachar refers to the same dangerous dissonance when she notes that among workshop owners in Cairo, the “pursuit of individual interest in illegitimate spheres” invited the evil eye (2005:158). “Illegitimate activities” could include the “pursuit of individual short-term gain”, by wealthy individuals, through NGOs. Someone who pursued individual gain at the expense of relations was more vulnerable to attacks of the evil eye (2005:10, 159).

My informants did not talk about the evil eye much, but the spectre of envy, unrelation and unconnectedness were often implicit. For example, wealthy and successful businessmen sometimes recounted a catastrophe that they had suffered, such as a fire that had burned down a warehouse and ruined them. These narratives often ended the same way: the next day “people came to my door with gifts of cash” even up to “a hundred thousand dollars”. In these cases, it is not bankruptcy that is a sign of moral failing (see Krugman 2010); rather, what happens after bankruptcy is a sign of moral standing. This is especially so since fires might otherwise be construed as the result of the evil eye. The calamity of a fire was a potentially a semiotic form

(Keane 2010) that could, according to the cosmology, point to a lack of blessing or *baraka*; the cause could be an envious heart. Pointing out that the fire led to swift and generous offers of assistance suggests that, on the contrary, the trader was at the centre of a web of positive and affectionate relationships (see Elyachar 2005 on relationality as a mode of creating positive value). Claims about generous assistance effectively adduce another semiotic form that neutralises the potentially negative meaning of the fire.

Marsden (2005:64) also notes the moral importance of having correct relational attitudes in a village in north-west Pakistan. He argues that Muslim villagers were judged to be selfish if they lacked sincere affection for others or if their relational attitudes were upside down. He notes that women who nurture animals are not necessarily seen as doing so to care for their household. To “squander affection” on animals can be seen as selfish neglect of one’s children, who are demanding and require maternal self-sacrifice. Care of animals is less demanding than caring for children, and thus a type of indulgence. Such a woman’s emotions are upside down: affection for animals is indulgent and therefore self-interested when it takes precedence over affection for children, which is construed as sacrificial.

This moral discourse is similar to concepts of sincerity among Muslim traders in Aleppo. In Aleppo’s markets, insincerity is a matter of having a *maslaha* which takes the proper place of correct relational attitudes such as affection, loyalty or solidarity. In Aleppo, Cairo and Chitral, this is morally topsy-turvy and invites trouble. Among Aleppan traders, one anxiety was that apparent loyalty, good will or affection might be false – that someone might have a hidden agenda or “interest” (*maslaha*). Anxiety about the (hidden) state of another’s heart is the context for understanding the importance of “cinnamon”.

“Good cinnamon” denotes a healthy relational attitude: a generous and willing disposition which inflects the transaction. An incorrect attitude towards one’s transactor – envy or reluctance, driven by having a misplaced or hidden *maslaha* or agenda – amounts to insincerity. Thus, for Aleppan entrepreneurs like Abdullah, it

was possible not only to speak sincerely or insincerely, but also to sell sincerely – “from the heart” – or insincerely. To sell from a clean heart meant that a trader wished his buyer to benefit, and did not harbour any envy towards him. Again, to work with “authenticity” (*asaala*), from a clean heart, meant to work loyally: without a secret agenda, resentment or ill-will towards one’s employers.

### ***“To Thine Own Self be True?”***

Authenticity here is not a product of historically specific anxiety that one is somehow not being true *to oneself* because of the pressures of multiple roles one must play in modern society (Simmel 1964) or because of the inevitably social (“external to self”) nature of language and materiality (Keane 2006). It is rather the product of a culturally specific anxiety about disloyalty *to others*. The concept of trust in Aleppo emerges in the context of anxieties about envy and resentment. The problematic relation is one’s dispositional relation to others: is A envious of B, or well-disposed toward B? This contrasts with Western philosophical and sociological discourses (see e.g. Locke 1961) which are driven by ideological anxieties about the self isolated from society, or the rational self whose interests are set against the other or the collective. These discourses often address the problem of how to know other people’s true interests and incentives. While this is a pertinent issue in Aleppo too, it does not exhaust the significance of talk about trust and sincerity in this context. Rather, Aleppan traders are equally interested in their transactors’ (or employees’) dispositional attitude towards them. What is of concern in the marketplace is inner envy, reluctance, resentment (or, conversely, willingness and generosity) – as much as hidden strategies to cheat.

I want to compare the Aleppan idea of sincerity as a relational attitude – i.e. an attitude towards one’s transactor – with the Protestant idea of sincerity as a relationship towards oneself – i.e. an isomorphism between a person’s inner self and its outer expression. The idea of the “clean heart”, current among Aleppan Muslim traders, implies a self that is relational and dispositional. In other words, the self consists not simply a set of inner propositions that can be concealed or revealed, but

a set of dispositions-for-another. This is in contrast to conceptualisations of sincerity in the Protestant tradition (Keane 2006) and in Western literary and philosophical discourse more generally (Trilling 1971) where what is at stake is not the subject's orientation towards others but the subject's fidelity to its own interiority. In this tradition, sincerity is "propositional": a matter of forming an inner proposition *ex nihilo* and expressing it accurately. Others serve as witnesses of the subject's correctly formed relationship between inner and outer. But in Aleppo, the "clean heart" is relational: a matter of having a virtuous disposition *for another*. The self – in this case, the "heart" – is constituted, rather than merely witnessed, relationally.

For both Keane's Protestants and Muslim traders in Aleppo, sincerity and the inner self are sources of concern. But as I shall argue, exactly what sincerity means in each case is quite different. For the Sumbanese Protestants described by Keane, sincerity means being true to oneself. Others are important primarily insofar as they witness this truth. Keane (2002:74) notes, following Trilling (1971), that

"sincerity is a way of characterising a relationship between words and interior states. To be sincere, in this respect, is to utter words that can be taken primarily to express underlying beliefs or intentions".

Keane continues that sincerity is "a product of one's desire to make one's [outer] expressions" aligned with one's "interior state" (2002:75). It is the product of a desire to project oneself into the world, for others, in a certain way. The inner, in this conception, has already been formed. So sincerity does not come into being through the process of forming the self in a particular way; rather, it comes into being through the process of expressing in a certain way a self that has already been formed.

Trilling makes a similar argument about Western concepts of sincerity and authenticity, drawing on the literary canon. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare has Polonius advising his son Laertes:

"This above all: to thine own self be true  
And it doth follow, as the night the day,

Thou canst not then be false to any man” (in Trilling 1974:3)

Thus, sincerity is primarily a relation of the self to itself, and only secondarily (“it doth follow”) a relation to others. Sincerity therefore implies autonomy and self-sufficiency. Similarly, Trilling argues that Jane Austen’s favourite characters possess “the sentiment of being, with all that this implies of self-sufficiency, self-definition and sincerity” (ibid 73). Others can be witnesses of one’s sincerity, but insofar as one’s sense of self depends on them, one is inauthentic. Thus, Rousseau “deplored” the fact that “the sentiment of individual being depends upon other people”, and for Sartre this fact led to the “Hell of recognized and experienced inauthenticity” (ibid 102).

### *Dispositional and Propositional Selves*

So in the Protestant tradition studied by Keane, and the literary discourse identified by Trilling, sincerity depends primarily on oneself and involves others only as witnesses to or beneficiaries of this relation. The sincere self is constituted in relation to itself not to others. Such a self exists, at least ideally, as an autonomous entity. It is conceptually independent of others, whose role is simply to witness the self’s fidelity to itself. So too with rational actor theory, where the rational and autonomous self has by definition interests towards itself and against others. I suggest that this construction of sincerity is part of a broader concept of the self as the locus of particular interests, goals, desires and beliefs, which can all be stated as propositions. For example: “I desire to do x”; “I “intend to do y”; “I believe that z is the case”.

Authenticity in the Western tradition means forming these propositions *ex nihilo*: autonomously without any interference from the authority of social convention or tradition. Keane (2006) argues that it is ultimately impossible to achieve this ideal because language, which is always embedded in social convention, inevitably precedes the individual. He suggests that this impossibility leads to the anxiety of the modern subject. Mahmood (2005) has argued that this liberal notion of the self is inapplicable to Egyptian piety movements. Nevertheless, Keane and Trilling each argue that this ideal of authenticity remains dominant in Western intellectual and

literary discourses. If authenticity means adopting these propositions autonomously, sincerity means ensuring that one's outward behaviour accurately reflects these inner propositions.

These ideologies of authenticity and sincerity take shape around what we might call the "propositional self" – the assumption that at the core of the self are desires, interests, plans, and sets of beliefs that can all be stated as propositions. The influence of the "propositional self" can be seen in Western discourses about the market and religion. For example, it underlies rational actor theory and the construction of the market that follows from it. Rational actor theory holds that at the core of the self is a proposition such as "I desire x" or "I want y". It is because different actors have different desires and interests that it is possible to build a model where supply meets demand. From the point of view of the market, the model is thought to capture everything worth knowing about human practice.

The notion of the propositional self also underlies Protestant notions of belief as assent to particular propositions. Religious faith takes the creedal form "I believe that z proposition is true", and sincere faith means a properly inner assent to these propositions or truth-claims. Indeed, Keane (1997:682) argues that Calvinist preachers used language to make propositional truth-claims about the world which they hoped and believed would persuade. They opposed ritual or magical language that worked in other ways, to induce ecstasy or act efficaciously. From their ideology of language we can deduce an ideology of the self: what makes the Protestant self, in the final instance, is inner assent to a proposition.

In a more recent work, Keane (2010:79) argued that the formatting of belief as propositional creeds, which began in the Reformation, laid the groundwork for secular liberalism. He writes that

"the creedal and evangelistic practices of the northern Reformation contributed to the Enlightenment model, which takes the rational capacity for deliberation to be a condition for moral actions. The demand that one be responsible for one's thoughts can translate into a demand that those thoughts be objectifiable, available for rendering in propositional form. But the high

value often placed on the propositional stance towards one's thoughts has become a general expectation within the frame of secularism. As Michael Warner has put it, "the trend toward the personalization of belief in the long history of Christian reform is a trend toward intensification and propositionalization simultaneously, and it is the latter that liberalism stems from."

My argument is that in Aleppo, the concepts of good intention (*husn al-niyya*), sincerity (*ikhlaas*) and a "clean heart" (*qalb nadhiif*), while central to virtue, involve more than the propositional self. It is certainly true that authentic intention in Aleppo is an important part of the inner. In the old city market, one might hear a buyer conclude a transaction by saying to the seller, "God willing, you have a pure intention (*inshallah niyyatak saafiyya*)!" A sincere "intention" also precedes worship and makes it authentic. More generally, "authenticity" (*asaala*) in the market is important and is glossed as "selling from the heart".

But what does "authentic intention" – the thing that constitutes "good cinnamon" – mean? I argue that it is broader than the propositional statement "I intend to do y". It is an inner state that means being well-disposed to another person; hoping for the best for them; selling willingly to them at the agreed price, rather than reluctantly wishing one had got more; having a generous rather than an envious disposition towards them. These are not propositions that are formed against or in reference to the world; they are dispositions that are formed as relations to other persons. This is quite a different notion of intentionality from what Keane and Trilling outline. It is connected to a different notion of self: in Aleppo, the inner self is dispositional, not purely propositional. What concerns traders when they talk about trust and intention are not simply hidden strategies to cheat, but relational questions of envy, jealousy, reluctance, or conversely willingness, generosity and affection: all dispositions *towards* another.

The ideal Muslim trading self in Aleppo does not simply have interests towards itself and against others, as in the reductivist perspective of rational actor theory. Rather, selfhood among Aleppan traders is similar to that among Muslim villagers in Rowshan in north-west Pakistan. Marsden (2005:55) notes that an important part of

being Muslim in Rowshan is having authentic affection for one's fellow villagers. I have argued that Aleppo traders put affection and relationality at the heart of their concepts of living ethically. Ideally, the relationship between managers and employees, business partners, and customers and suppliers should be inscribed in an economy of "affection" (*mahabbah*). Similarly, Marsden notes that among villagers in Chitral in north-west Pakistan, being Muslim is not just about scriptural obligations: the five pillars and *halal* and *haram*. The villagers said that "true Muslims" are not those who pray and fast regularly, but those whose souls "burn for others, whose hearts are "full of affection" – these are "true Muslims and real human beings" (2005:55). The inner that matters is relational, not propositional: it is constituted by attitudes, and not simply plans of action.

This broader dispositional notion of intentionality and sincerity is replicated in other ethnographic accounts. Keane, in a footnote, reports that the Indonesian word for sincerity is the Arabic loan word *ikhlas*, which is "sometimes used to refer to participants in exchange who give generously without having to be forced." He notes in an aside that the notion of sincerity as giving generously without being forced is "quite different" from the Protestant linguistic ideology he is outlining. He takes it as evidence of "an old Sumbanese understanding of the relationship between persons and material things" (2002:87, footnote 19). However, I would suggest that it is evidence of a broader Muslim ideology of exchange. For example, the understanding of sincerity or intention as the relational attitude in which a transaction is achieved (for example, jealousy/generosity or reluctance/willingness) is replicated in north-west Pakistan and Cairo as well as Aleppo. Elyachar (2005), in her ethnography of Cairo workshops, notes a constant concern with jealousy and the evil eye in distinguishing between positive and negative modes of exchange. Marsden, in his ethnography of a Muslim village, commenting on the villagers' ideology of economic exchange, reports that "intention" is spoken of in the same breath as "jealousy":

"People claim that life in the village is dominated by *jealousy and 'bad intention'*... [my italics]. 'Are you surprised, the intentions of the villagers are

bad, everybody wants their neighbours to fail not to succeed, why should it rain?” (2005:59)

Indeed, while in Rowshan an important part of being Muslim is “having authentic affection for one’s fellow villagers”, Marsden notes that “jealousy, greed and suspicion corrupt this authentic affection. There is a consensus that emotions that should define relationships between villagers have become inauthentic and insincere.” Here, jealousy is not an intention in the sense of an inner proposition. It may lead to one, such as “I intend to harm you”. But before it becomes a proposition, it is an inner disposition, an attitude of relation: a hope for others, or a hope against them. Sincerity in these cases – Elyachar’s (2005), Marsden’s (2005), my own, and the sincerity-in-exchange that Keane (2002) notes in passing – seems to refer to an attitudinal virtue (Oakeshott 1975) or disposition. It means the spirit-for-another in which an action is accomplished, rather than an self-sufficient inner proposition that is autonomously adopted and accurately expressed.

My argument makes use of the concept of attitudinal virtue or “ethical attitude” as advanced by Oakeshott (1975) and adopted by Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006) in their analysis of virtuous dispositions among contemporary Egyptian Muslim pietists. However, because Mahmood and Hirschkind focused their analysis on the formation of the self, rather than the problem of exchange<sup>11</sup>, they did not emphasise that inner dispositions are fundamentally relational. Nevertheless, I would argue that the attitudes of heart that accompany the virtuous worship they describe, such as “regret”, “repentance”, and “awe” are not formed not in isolation; they make sense only as relations to other social persons and to God. While I argue that this is true for the Muslim pietists described by Hirschkind and Mahmood, the relational aspect of inner ethical dispositions emerges most clearly when we consider Aleppan Muslim traders who are engaged in the problem of exchange. What concerns these traders in deciding who to deal with and how are states of heart such as envy, jealousy, goodwill, affection, and warm-heartedness (*‘aatifiyyeh*). These are the “intentions” or inner dispositions that determine whether a heart is “clean” (*nadhiif*)

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<sup>11</sup> I have argued elsewhere (Anderson 2011) that the pious formation of the self and society described by Mahmood and Hirschkind can be analysed as a type of linguistic exchange

or not. Clearly they only make sense in relation to other persons: envy *of*, jealousy *of*, goodwill *towards*, affection *for*. This is what sincerity means in Aleppo: the clean heart, like the pious heart, cannot be formed except in relation to another.

Aleppan traders emphasise the importance of relationality in their cosmology. Envy, jealousy and the fear of gossip are a serious concern. In order to ward off the evil eye – the destructive agency of jealousy – and to preserve one’s “blessing” (*baraka*), some traders give voluntary alms (*sadaqa*). One wealthy yarn trader said,

“I believe in the evil eye. Trust me, it is real. I believe this so much. If you are driving a Mercedes, and someone poor sees you, maybe they will envy you. Then bad things can happen to you. So you give *sadaqa* to defend yourself.”

To preserve one’s “blessing”, many traders also rely on other material forms of piety, such as hanging Quranic calligraphic inscriptions and displaying copies of the Quran in shops, and concluding routine transactions with pious sayings such as “God is the Provider” (*Allaahu yarzaq*). But traders emphasise the value of connectivity in other ways too. As I discussed earlier, long-term trading relationships sometimes inhabit an idiom of affective or spiritual connection: the traders’ hearts or (astrological) stars are said to be together, one on the other (*al-qalb ‘alaa baad, al-najm ‘alaa baad*); and there is a flow of “emotionality” or “warm-heartedness” (*‘aatifiyyeh*) between two friends or close trading partners which leads each party to think of or telephone the other at the same time, or to coincidental meetings, as I describe in the next chapter. Such happy coincidences are also held to be signs of blessing (*baraka*) – the divine quality that means that profit comes “easily” and assets last a long time. Connectivity is a way of preserving “blessing” – a site for creating “positive value” in Elyachar’s terms (2005).

Keane (2002) stresses that sincerity is always interactive. However, this is not the same as arguing, as I do, that it is primarily relational. In his analysis, even though selves are always sincere for particular others, the primary relationship that instantiates sincerity is between the self and itself. This relationship is logically prior to social interaction. The relationship to others is secondary to the relationship to

oneself; it serves as a relationship of accountability. The primary virtue in Keane's account of sincerity is not "good will" but "transparency":

"in being sincere, I am not only producing words that are transparent to my interior states but am producing them for you; I am making myself (as an inner self) available for you in the form of external, publicly available expressions...sincerity is a certain kind of public accountability to others for one's words with reference to one's self." (Keane 2002:75).

By contrast, in the relational perspective (which I argue predominates in Aleppo), the logically prior relationship which instantiates "sincerity" is between the inner heart and the other. The dispositional and relational fact comes first: either one is well-disposed towards another, or one is not. The propositional question – does one's outer behaviour reflect one's inner heart? – is of course vital, but logically it comes after and is not prior to the dispositional relation.

### ***Muslim Ideologies of Exchange***

This broader concept of intention as dispositional is, I suggest, widespread in Muslim ideologies of exchange, but has not been emphasised in Western discourses on the subject. On the whole, intentionality has been seen as propositional, not dispositional; as strategic, not relational. Rosen (1995:3) helpfully approaches "intentionality" quite broadly as the "attribution of inner states". This broad definition could include dispositions such as willingness/reluctance which are of such concern to Aleppan traders. But even he then appears to conflate intentions with "motives" (1995:5), which implies a narrower and purely propositional category: inner states which cause action rather than inner attitudes that inflect it.

What are the implications of the propositional and dispositional conceptions of the self for how we imagine virtue? We have already seen that the two conceptions lead to different notions of sincerity. Where the self is propositional, as among Keane's Sumbanese Protestants, sincerity means assenting to a proposition autonomously, and expressing it accurately. Authenticity is a relation of the self to itself, an isomorphism between inner and outer, that is witnessed by others. Where the self is

dispositional, sincerity means something closer to a spirit of generosity: an attitude of wanting the best for another; exchanging with them willingly, not reluctantly or enviously; hoping for them, not against them. Others become not simply witnesses of the self's relation to itself. Rather, they enter into the very nature of the self: the dispositional self is always relational. This is not to say that propositional sincerity is unimportant for Aleppan traders: isomorphism between inner and outer is important; the danger of "hypocrisy" (*nifaaq*) is real. But preceding the question of propositional sincerity is the broader question of one's disposition for another.

Where the self is imagined to contain propositions rather than dispositions, where the self is constructed against the world rather than in relation to the other, it becomes hard to account for generosity, which I argued in the previous chapter is part of a relational dynamic of intimacy rather than purely a strategy to accumulate status or power. Once our theoretical perspective is blinded to disposition, generosity must be recast as a proposition. But what kind of proposition can it be? There are two solutions to this false problem, both inadequate to understanding a context such as Aleppo where intention is primarily dispositional rather than purely propositional. The first is Bourdieu's: generosity, and virtue more generally, is simply another form of social capital. According to this reading, virtue is accumulation by another name. It is a more or less camouflaged form of the proposition "I desire to acquire capital". Like Lambek (2000), I reject this reading as reductive. An alternative theory of practice to Bourdieu's "acquisition of capital" is that personhood and virtue is a state of becoming, rather than an end that one seeks to secure. This is the neo-Aristotelianism championed by Lambek: sometimes people perform an action not to gain a particular end but for its own sake, to continue becoming who they have come to be for and in front of and in relation to others.

The second solution to the problem of how to explain generosity is that it is a heroic negation of self-interest: an anti-proposition, as it were. Such heroism makes sense either in a domain that is constructed in opposition to the market (Parry 1986), or in a religious ideology that anticipates future reward. The problem is that this perspective does not make sense of why Aleppan traders say that generosity and affection are

both an important part of market relations and virtues that are not reducible to self-interest (*maslaha*). We can defend this perspective only by labelling such claims as self-deluding or made in bad faith.

Neither Bourdieu's accumulation-of-capital thesis nor the altruism-as-anti-market perspective brings us to an intuitive understanding of Aleppo traders' conceptions of virtue. The important point is that both solutions are answers to a question that we have to pose only if we exclude from consideration the dispositional aspects of the self. For Aleppo traders, the quality of "good cinnamon" (*qirfeh kwayyiseh*) or "pure intention" (*niyya saafiyyeh*), which is central to virtue, is not simply an inner proposition; and sincerity (*ikhlaas*) and authenticity (*asaala*) do not simply refer to accurate expressions of the interior heart. Rather, they denote relational attitudes that constitute the trader's heart as pure or impure. These attitudes are at the centre of assessments of moral personhood. But this is not all; they also act efficaciously in the world, determining whether the exchange is felicitous or not. This is the subject I explore in the next chapter.

## Chapter Three

### The State of the Heart

In the previous chapter I argued that a feature of trading and employment relationships in Aleppo is uncertainty and sometimes suspicion about the relational attitudes that someone harbours in their heart. Why should the nature of the heart be important? This chapter poses that question in two ways: first from an external sociological perspective and then from an internal cosmological one.

Why should the state of the heart be important? Another way of asking this is “why should it be in doubt?” I noted above that virtue in this cosmology is constituted by the attitude of heart with which the transaction is achieved. That the attitude of heart is important in constituting virtue is similar to what Mahmood and Hirschkind note of Egyptian piety movements. Their analysis focuses on the bodily techniques used to cultivate the correct attitudes of heart. However, their accounts do not explain why the state of the heart should be important, other than that it is so in Islamic traditions.

My thesis is that this notion of virtue as the state of the heart does not just come from a scriptural tradition and its bodily disciplines; it arises out of a set of tensions between different ways of being social. For example, among entrepreneurs and their employees, aspirations to profit, dignity, social status and honour make it almost compulsory to enter into exchanges (of goods, labour, gifts and visits). The compulsory nature of exchange produces the possibility that it happens “against one’s will” (*ghasman ‘anhu*). That another party might enter into a transaction or relationship with a trader reluctantly or with some hidden self-interest was understood to be an ever-present risk. Business partners want to be autonomous; traders want to profit; employees want to spread their wings; sons want a shop of their own; obligations must be met whether one wants to or not. These are

imperatives that cannot be avoided, because they constitute honour; they are natural aspirations to dignity and status.

The spectres of reluctance, envy and hidden interest mean that exchanging voluntarily and with a “good intention” – selling, working or giving “from a clean heart” – becomes constitutive of virtue. So, in contrast to a picture of morality as “automatic” or unproblematic rule-following (Robbins 2007, Durkheim 1973), I argue in this chapter that virtue is seen as valuable because it is difficult and uncertain.

### *Aspirations to Autonomy*

In chapter one, I noted that many commercial and professional relationships among Aleppan entrepreneurs were cast in an idiom of “friendship” and “affection”. But in drawing attention to the prevalence of the idiom of affection, I am not suggesting that trust and “affection” were unproblematic in trading and employment relationships. Rather, the discourse suggests that relationships were often characterised by anxieties about insincerity, disloyalty and hidden self-interest. The acuteness of these anxieties, and the importance of sincerity, reflect the lack of formal contractual obligation and remedy in Aleppo’s informal economy, according to the excerpts below. These excerpts also suggest that loyalty and affection are fragile and far from unproblematic because employees and business partners are assumed to desire autonomy.

Muhyi was a wealthy textile industrialist in his mid twenties. His father was one of Aleppo’s largest private yarn producers. He had invited me to a restaurant his family owned in a fashionable part of town, where he impressed upon me the importance (and rarity) of loyalty. He spoke from the perspective of an employer.

At a nearby table sits one of his father’s employees, a man in his early 30s, broad-chested, wearing a smart grey blazer, jeans, and a spotless thick white cotton shirt. “That guy is the biggest arsehole in Aleppo”, Muhyi tells me. “I’m going to call him an arsehole and see if he turns around...He has been running our office in Khan Oulabiyya for five years. Last year he came to us

and said, 'I want more money or I am leaving you.' That is what happens these days. If any of your employees is any good, he will either steal from you, or want to leave and set up on his own. There is not much loyalty... You know, I have got an idea for a new business, but as soon as I have set it up and got it running, one of my employees will leave and copy me – learning from all my mistakes. What is to stop them? There is no legal system that stops people leaving when they want to....The good ones, the ones with any skill and initiative, will either steal from you or leave you to set up on their own. Why should they stay? Here, everyone wants to be the boss (*mu'allim*)".

Here is a quote from Abu Abduh, a wealthy weaving entrepreneur in his late forties who owned his own factory with twelve modern looms in an industrial village outside Aleppo. His narrative, which describes the dissolution of the partnership, indicates that friendship between business partners can also be fragile, as it disintegrates into envy and distrust. The centrifugal forces prove too strong and there is no reliable legal remedy.

I worked in Arqub for ten years, in a partnership with four brothers. We had knitting looms. I was in charge of buying and selling, and design. The four brothers were in charge of operations, overseeing the manufacturing. We split everything fifty-fifty between me and them. Everything was fine for seven or eight years. There was friendship (*al-sadaaqa*), brotherliness (*al-ukhkhuwwa*), companionship (*al-suhba*).

Then they started to say, why does Abu Abduh get fifty percent of everything? And we had different opinions about how to run things. So we decided to end the partnership. I said, 'ok, it is ending, but there is no reason to fall out. We can stay friends. Let us split everything (*bi't-taqsiim*), you take this, I take that.' But then they wanted to take more than their fair share (*haawaluu yitjaawazuu*). So we went to arbitration.

I thought the case was so straightforward and clear-cut that I didn't care. I took an arbitrator who was recommended to me, but whom I didn't know personally. After a while, the lead arbitrator called me up and said, 'can I see you alone?' I went to see him, and he said, 'where did you get this arbitrator? He is working against your interests. He is deceiving you (*ghashshaash*). So we annulled the arbitration with the court. It was a lot of money at stake - \$350,000.

The centrifugal forces that ended this partnership were understood to be a common feature of trading partnerships in Aleppo. In the absence of an extensive and accessible formal banking system in Syria, small traders and entrepreneurs often form profit-sharing partnerships where one party (the *katiif*) provides labour and the

other provides finance. But these relationships were often expected to break down when the *katiif* gained enough finance or the financier gained enough knowledge to break away and establish himself independently. The desire for autonomy was always expected to assert itself sooner or later. Muhyi, the wealthy textile entrepreneur in his mid-twenties, told me that his grandfather's partnership was famous throughout Aleppo for lasting a lifetime – most disintegrated after a few years. Even in the most apparently loyal relationship of a son working for his father, the desire for autonomy could express itself obliquely, as in this episode of my fieldwork:

Hamdi sits behind the desk at the back of his father's shop in Aleppo's old city. A few metres away the doors are opened wide to encourage passing shoppers to wander in from the suq. It is January and bitterly cold. There is a small bar-heater by his feet and he is wearing fingerless gloves, but Hamdi is still rubbing his hands together for warmth. He looks tired; he opened the shop early this morning and was kept awake last night by his two young children. A lone customer approaches and makes a small purchase. Hamdi takes the cash and returns some change to the customer with the words "God is the Provider". Huddled over on a seat next to him, I notice a bulge in Nur's sock. He hides his packet of Marlboro there whenever his father is likely to visit, out of "respect" (*min al-ihтираam*) he says. The ethic of respect requires him not to refrain from smoking, but to conceal it clearly. I have come to see Nur's relationship to his father as model of unquestioning filial respect and loyalty. His younger, tearaway brother, not yet married and usually pumping iron in the gym, is known as an *awantaji* – someone who is always out for his own advantage. But Hamdi is different...quiet, uncomplaining, hardworking, and loyal. Then he turns to me and says, his breath condensing on the cold air, "if this shop were mine, I would close it during the winter months and go on holiday." "But", he adds with a rueful smile, "it is not mine".

There are seeds of tension and instability in the relationship between business partners and between employers and employees, and even at some level between fathers and sons. As a result, the key question, as between a trader and a customer, is "what is in his heart?" Is the affection, good will and loyalty sincere? Or is there something hidden? The value of sincerity, or a "clean heart", is the product of ambiguity, or the uncertain construction of social relations. On the one hand is a culturally approved idiom of affection (*mahabbah*), friendship (*sadaaqa*), brotherhood (*ukhkhuwwa*) and companionship (*suhba*). On the other is the desire for autonomy. Therefore, the virtue of sincerity in employment and trading relationships

emerges on a daily basis through stable contradictions: to meet more or less compulsory obligations but to do so entirely voluntarily; to offer hospitality but without self-interest (see Shryock 2004); to be an independent trader with a business of one's own but to value relation ("affection") and to keep one's place in a moral network of credits and debts; to be one's own man, the boss (*mu'allim*), but to respect and defer to one's father or employers; to desire autonomy but to value affectionate companionship with one's business partner. Rabo (2005a) notes that Aleppan suq traders aspire to independence but paradoxically, this independence always depends on others. Similarly, the virtue of cinnamon or pure intention I described in the previous chapter emerges from the tension between different imperatives: to be successful (*naajih*) and to acquire capital (*rasmaal*) and status (*wazn*) but to refrain from envious, grasping or reluctant attitudes.

The contradictions that produce the value of a "clean heart" are inevitable because they are built into culture. Similarly, Lambek (2000:318) implies, following Weber (1958) that cultures contain their own contradictions, or at least "set up specific anxieties". Thus, "the [Hindu] model sets up a golden age that it is literally impossible to emulate"; while "a cultural and economic system of possessive individualism in which one's children and ultimately one's own childhood come to be seen as fundamental property or capital" plays a part in creating "obsession...over child abuse". Among Aleppan traders, these internal cultural tensions or anxieties emerge particularly sharply at certain stages of life – a businessman who has acquired enough money of his own to break free from his financial partner; a mature son still working in his father's shop; a not-quite-mature male employee who is seeking to establish himself as an independent force in the world. It is the last of these three predicaments that I explore in the following case study.

### ***The Difficulty of Dignity***

In a small retail shop in the heart of the suq, Majid is doing what he does best – selling expensive fabrics to wealthy women. He is seventeen, still a teenager, and has not yet left for military service. Nor does he work alongside his father, but is

employed by three brothers to whom he is not related. Despite his young age, he is one of their most talented salesman. He spends long days launching one intense selling pitch after another to a succession of Aleppan women who visit to purchase expensive dress fabrics for special occasions. Sometimes I have sat with him in the shop on holidays when most of the suq is closed; he is there at his own initiative, moving goods from the warehouse single-handedly, decking out the shop to catch any holidaying visitors from Turkey.

And yet, Majid's hard work is something of a mystery. As a non-relative, he has no chance of inheriting a share of the business. He receives no commission on what he sells. Even more mysteriously, despite his hard work, he has regular spat with two of the three brothers who own the shop. They have accused him of not being "authentic" (*asiil*), he says, of not working "from a clean heart". The informal employment relationship – there is no written contract – ruptures with almost predictable regularity. He walks out on them about once a year. The first time was because they had docked almost his entire month's wages for being "five minutes late three days in a row". More recently he walked out on them after a dispute over a cigarette. One of the bosses caught him smoking outside the shop, semi-discretely – he held the cigarette behind his leg when one of the brothers approached. "Get that thing out of your hand!" he was ordered, "or I'll smack you across the chops". "Are you joking?" Majid replied provocatively. "You think I would joke with you?" came the reply. After such an insult to his dignity (*karaama*), Majid felt he had no choice but to leave directly: others might "eat that kind of talk", but he was not going to.

Majid told me the story as we sat in Aleppo's public gardens. He had walked out on his employers after the spat three days ago, and since then had been sitting at home (*baarik bi'l-bayt*) with nothing to do. It was 4.30pm, and we had found a quiet bench away from the main alleys in the park. There was a cool breeze, and we sat under the trees, interrupted only by shoe-shine boys, tea-sellers, and a man selling perfume out of a briefcase. I listened to Majid's story:

"I have worked there five years. I am angry and upset (*za'laan*). Not for the money. Money is the dirt of the world (*wasikh al-dunyaa*).

Money comes and money goes. God is the Provider, and our income is already written (*maktuub*): however much harder I work, I won't get a lira more. The reason I am angry and upset is that I have thrown away those five years. I was brought up in that suq. And because they injured my dignity (*al-karaameh*) – I am not going to take the way Talal talked to me. So I left, picked up my bag, didn't even stop to explain to Imad or Khalid [the other owners of the shop]. I turned my bag inside out so their advert is not showing!

“They have not called me, so I am angry with them (*za'lt minhun*). The other employees told me, ‘it's not right, you must come back and apologise’. I will not come back except if Imad or Khalid calls me. I have left them four or five times before – pretty much once a year. Once they docked me almost all my wages for being five minutes late three days in a row. Talal gave me a bollocking before, he said ‘you are not authentic’ (*maa nak asiil*) – you are betraying us (*takhuunnaa*).”

[“What does it mean, someone who is ‘authentic’?”]

“It means he works from his heart (*min qalbuh*). This is something very important.”

Doubts about Majid's heart for his employers arise because of the contradiction he finds himself in: as a talented young man in the market, it is normal that he should aspire to autonomy, since that is an important part of having worth (*qiimeh*) and dignity (*karaama*). But his desire for autonomy exceeds his power to attain it.

Majid made clear to me that to sell well meant to sell with autonomy – “I sell to her according to my pleasure, not according to hers (*'alaa kayfii, muu 'alaa kayfhaa*)”. As well as asserting his will over the customer, Majid liked to demonstrate his superior position over his colleagues. Status hierarchy was keenly felt in the shop. Majid defended his status within the shop by criticising colleagues and scolding underlings. He boasted to me that he was a “big chief” (*ras kbiir*) in the shop, with three others working under him. His status entitled him to order the younger assistants (*agiirs*) to run around – to fetch water, to pass the phone, to get the metre rule in the corner – while he remained immobile in the centre of the shop. He could scold them harshly: when one of his *agiirs* arrived late one morning, he humiliated him with reprimands for several minutes in front of several colleagues, before sending him home.

Majid's other goal was to gain autonomy by owning a shop, where he could be the boss:

“I will go to military service in a year and a bit. Afterwards, I need to decide what is better – to go into business, or stay a salesman (*saani*) the rest of my life. Hopefully I can work in the shop in the corner, propose to the owner that I work with him, he has the shop, I supply the goods, and we share profits: *as if the shop is mine.*”

Majid frequently pretended to customers that the shop was his. This caused tension with his bosses. But it was necessary, he said, to “put customers at ease”: “if you say I am just the assistant (*saani*), they say, where is the boss (*mu'allim*)? It is best for Muhammad's profit margin that I say I am the boss, and what benefits Muhammad benefits Ahmad [his brother].”

So Majid subscribed to the belief that dignity (*karaama*) comes to him through selling autonomously, through his position in the hierarchy, and through material independence. However, his ability to realise his own dignity and autonomy was precarious: he had a “trade” but no independent wealth. This left him in a vulnerable position. His skill as a salesman was not, as a rule, rewarded financially. Indeed, he sometimes described to me the frustration he felt at working long hours for little reward. Once, alone in the shop late at night with me, he vented his feelings. He had worked into the small hours all week, and was still not permitted a day off or time to leave the shop. His monthly salary had only recently risen to twelve thousand lira; before, it had been only four thousand (\$80). He bitterly described an occasion his bosses had docked him almost an entire week's pay for arriving at work late. He was tired and fed up, and his eyes welled with tears as he asked me “what would you do?”

Majid's bosses did not need to (and periodically did not) accord him any dignity or value. He acted to impose his will on customers, but had constantly to negotiate and evade the will of his bosses. So Majid was in a place of contradiction: valuing dignity and autonomy, but treated without honour and with inferiority as a

dependent. He practiced his autonomy against his customers, and asserted his status above the junior employees. But his bosses could undermine both his autonomy and his status. Gilson (1976, 1996), in his ethnography of rural landowners and managers in a Lebanese village, noted that the managers or staff (*aghawat*), who were over the peasants but under the Lords, subscribed to an honour system that valued independence. However, they had become dependent in new ways. This contradiction led to the prevalence of “lying” or “performing” (*kizb*) – pretending that one was stronger than one was.

Majid similarly relied on *kizb* to defy his weak status. He claimed ownership of the bosses’ shop for himself. He also sometimes lied to his employers who could withhold low wages with impunity and order him back to the shop late at night. Once when I was with him in the evening not far from the markets, he took a phone call from his bosses who wanted him back in the warehouse shifting goods. To protect his time with me, he lied and said he was out of town and unable to get back. I noted above that one of Majid’s bosses insulted his dignity and denied his “worth” by speaking to him roughly and then asking “would I [deign to] joke with you?” The implication was that because of their unequal statuses, there could be no “joking” (*mazh*) in this relationship; but in place of joking there was “lying” (*kizb*). Since Majid does not work for relatives, his bosses know that they cannot expect the loyalty due to kin, nor do they have a written contract to impose. Authenticity emerges under these conditions as a value precisely because there is a contradiction in the socio-cultural system: the salesmen are supposed to aspire to honour and autonomy, but as non-kin they are in a position where they can never fully have it or hope to inherit it. “Working from the heart” is the value that emerges from this contradiction.

This account of ethics diverges from a picture of the virtuous heart as something that people seek to achieve because it is a cultural value discovered and passed down in Islamic tradition and disciplinary bodily practices (Hirschkind 2006). Rather, in my account the value of a clean or virtuous heart is produced by the tension between the ideal of autonomy and the reality of dependence. In trading and exchange relations,

the heart can never be assumed to be wholly sincere. My account also diverges from conceptions of morality (Robbins 2007, Zigon 2007) as harmonious norms or dispositions that people follow unthinkingly until such time as one conflicts with another or with the demands of the situation at hand and creates an ethical dilemma.

Abu-Lughod (1986) suggests that Egyptian Bedouin men who compose poetry to express sentiments that would be considered dishonourable in public in fact prove to society that “adherence to the public honour code, where it is found, is voluntary rather than coerced”. She refers to Riesman’s (1971, 1977) insights about Fulani men who chase women: “by acting against the moral code the individual is demonstrating that he is a free being and that his actions are not automatically determined by social rules and social pressures”. These insights complicate any Durkheimian or neo-Durkheimian picture of morality as unproblematic cultural norms or range of norms that determine action. The point about morality is that it becomes moral by being difficult, and by being submitted to freely. “Freedom” and “torment” – terms used by Robbins (2004) to describe the breakdown of the conventional moral order – are not just characteristics of moments of ethical crisis; they are part of what distinguishes certain everyday norms and ideals as moral.

### ***The Baraka Economy***

According to the discourse about having good cinnamon, the state of one’s heart has external “real-world” effects. A “clean heart” does not just bring a person internal benefits, such as inner peace. Nor are its rewards restricted to the afterlife. Rather, the benefits of a clean heart are enjoyed in practical and material ways. Those who sell “with a clean heart” find that things come easy to them: they enjoy happy coincidences, and their assets last a long time. They enjoy “ease” and “blessing”. And those who buy from a clean-hearted trader find that they are able to sell on what they buy, easily and at a profit. So good cinnamon fits into a set of beliefs about cause and effect – ideas about how the universe operates. The morally charged practices and concepts of envy (*al-‘ayn*), unlawful wealth (*maal haraam*), and almsgiving (*zakat* and *sadaqa*) all make sense within this set of beliefs about cause

and effect. I argue that it is common for beliefs about virtue to fit into a set of beliefs about cause and effect. Indeed, “morality” (good intentions, the state of one’s heart, one’s sincerity) is not primarily a matter of rules or normative behaviour, but must be understood as part of a set of beliefs about consequence.

A common-sense view of trade is that it is a matter of buying and selling: the exchange of money for goods. But I realised early in my fieldwork that it was possible to sit in a busy shop or factory office in Aleppo for a long time without seeing any buying and selling. Instead, I was surrounded by “relational practices” such as paying past debts, making telephone calls, exchanging information, favours, anecdotes, visits and hospitality; exchanging formulaic greetings and pious invocations; even displaying items such as copies of the Quran, Quranic calligraphy and inscribed prayers for and in front of others. Elyachar (2005) argues that workshop masters in Cairo exist not as individuals but as modes of a social network. While I do not apply this perspective to my own work, I do borrow her insight that entrepreneurs are concerned to ensure that they remain embedded in a web of positive and affectionate relationships. In Aleppo, businessmen visit each other, exchange hospitality and take time to do favours like physically attending arbitration procedures. As Elyachar argues, drawing on Callon (1998), such material practices should not be seen as a culture in which the real market is embedded, or as a mindset that gives rise to or shapes the market. Rather, they are the market, which is always embodied, specific and historically contingent (Elyachar 2005:165).

Another way of putting this is that, rather than seeing trade as essentially a matter of buying and selling, we can see it as a relational practice involving many kinds of exchanges. Traders do gloss “trade” as “buying and selling”, but these activities should not be essentialised, as if they are the same everywhere. This is for two reasons. First, buying and selling transactions become what they are as part of a particular morality. That is to say, in Aleppo, “buying and selling” are not just activities where money is at stake. They are also activities where the nature of one’s heart and intention is at stake; where – to borrow Elyachar’s formulation – “positive” or “negative value” is being created. Second, buying and selling often form part of a

tissue that is also composed of other kinds of exchanges, such as visits, marriages, the favours of delayed repayment, the favour having one's credit-worthiness guaranteed by a third party, or of being vouched for in an arbitration. These different kinds of exchanges make sense within a particular notion of cause and effect: a belief about how the world is, where provision comes from, where the important risks are, and how best to guard oneself against them. The positive version of this "theory of consequence" or morality is that good will or sincerity in one's heart leads to good fortune, or the enjoyment of ease and blessing. The negative version of this morality is that envy or deceit lead to catastrophe.

Muhyi was a small retail trader in the new city whom I often visited and sat with in his shop. Several months into our acquaintance, I happened to be walking down a busy street in Aleppo and, for no particular reason, put my hand into my pocket and clasped my mobile phone. Just as I did so, I felt it vibrating, so pulled it out of my pocket and answered it. It was Muhyi. For me, it was a happy coincidence: if I had not put my hand on the phone at that instant, I would have missed the call. When I told him this, he surprised me with the readiness of his explanation:

"You have a pure intention! (*niyyatak saafiyyeh*)...this means that there is honesty (*al-sidq*). In the friendship that is between us, there is honesty. I do not have any motive / interest (*maslaha*) with you, and you do not have one with me. It is just pure friendship, for God (*al-sadaaqa lillaah*)."

Sincere love or affection between two people was sometimes referred to as "love for God" – *mahabbah lillaah*. The counter-example was a relationship that was corrupted by a hidden agenda or *maslaha*. Muhyi told me that "you are a sincere friend, an honest friend, to me. There is no deceit (*kizb*), no self-interest (*maslaha*) between us." Sincerity of that kind enabled a kind of connectedness between two people, which explained what would otherwise seem like coincidental good fortune.

Similarly, "blessing" (*baraka*) explained what might otherwise seem to be luck or good fortune. "Blessing" was the quality which "made things easy", leading to happy coincidences and good fortune. It was the cause of – and was thus outwardly proved by the enjoyment of – abundance and ease. The concept of blessing or *baraka* has

been treated in anthropological literature on Sufi saints (e.g. Gilsenan 1973). In these contexts, it is the charismatic quality of spiritual leaders who are able to bestow God's blessing on their followers. Among Aleppan traders however, *baraka* is the quality that "makes things easy for you" (*tsahhil umuurak*) or makes any asset (food, money, telephone credits) last a long time<sup>12</sup>. *Baraka* was associated with a virtuous inner attitude. One trader said "when someone buys and sells with forbearance (*al-tasaamuh*), God makes things easy for him (*Allaah ysahhil umuuruh*)." By contrast, unexpected obstacles, expensive accidents, and wastage, are all evidence of a lack of *baraka*. Abu Sulayman explained *baraka* to me as follows:

Forbearance (*al-tasaamuh*) means that you give your right (*tu'tii ha''ak*) to others. For example, let's say I owe you 12,000 lira. I give you 10,000 lira, and you say 'that's enough'. It is as if you have given me 2000 lira as a present. You do it from your heart [i.e. voluntarily and sincerely]. You do it out of love (*min al-hubb*). As a result, you get *baraka* – God makes things easy for you. For example, haven't you noticed that some days, you walk in the city, and see none of your friends? Other days, you walk through the city, and bump into lots of your friends? That is *baraka*. God makes things easy for you. Or some days you have 3000 lira in your pocket and you do lots of things and eat here and take taxis there, but at the end, you still have 2300 lira left. Your money seems to last a long time. That is *baraka*. Or other days, it is the opposite: you don't know where all your money has gone.

Thus *baraka*, like good cinnamon, was related to the state of one's heart – to an absence of "hatred" (*kirh*) or a grudging attitude. It was also said to be the result of forbearance (*al-tasaamuh*) in commercial dealings: a willingness to compromise on price or to forgive debts. Blessing was invoked to explain (often apparently coincidental) forms of provision or good fortune that could not be explained in any other way: why goods from a particular supplier sold more quickly or at a higher profit than other goods of an equivalent quality. Or, to be more precise, forms of apparently coincidental good fortune were held to be signs of blessing. Conversely, profiting by unlawful means or with an improper attitude would sap one's *baraka* – so misfortune could be read as evidence of an improper heart or a lack of virtue.

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<sup>12</sup> This notion of "blessing" or "*baraka*" making assets last a long time or "go a long way" has a long history in the religious traditions of the region. The same concept is central to the Biblical story of Jesus feeding the five thousand with five small loaves of bread and two fish, and having twelve large baskets left over (Matthew 14:17-21).

*Baraka* and “good cinnamon” were therefore parallel concepts. Indeed, one trader said that “good cinnamon means that there is *baraka* in buying and selling (*fii baraka bi'l-bay' wa'l-shiraa*).” Abu Sulayman explained that

‘good cinnamon’ is to do with *baraka*. You buy from X and you buy from Y. The stuff you buy from X sells quickly – people come and pay in cash. The stuff you buy from Y hardly sells at all, and only on credit (*bi'd-dayn*). There are religious aspects to this. It means that things come easily (*al-umuur sahleh tijii*), it means that God loves him (*Allaah yhibbuh*)....The most important thing is a clean heart (*qalb nadhiif*) – a heart that doesn’t bear any hatred (*al-kirh*) or grudges (*al-hiqd*).

Although cinnamon is like *baraka*, as an idiom it is not part of an explicitly religious written tradition. In Abdullah’s factory, there are no overt Islamic discourses as in the suq. For the factory owners, managers and many in their circle, Islam is a private matter. Social personhood was not publicly Islamic: prayer, Quranic inscriptions, sayings about the provision of God, visits from shaykhs and invitations to attend Islamic lessons were all features of the life I encountered in the old city suq, but never in Abdullah and Muhammad’s factory. However, in the factory personhood was held within a related morality where warm-heartedness (*'aatifiyyeh*), being generous (*kariim*) and having good cinnamon procured advantages that were similar to *baraka*. Abdullah cultivated his reputation in a moral universe that was related to *baraka*, even when it did not inhabit an explicitly scriptural religious idiom.

My argument is that trading “morality” should be understood in the context of particular beliefs about consequence. I am not arguing that all Muslim entrepreneurs in Aleppo always sought to conform to this morality; but many understood the question of what it was right to do with wealth in terms of the dangers inherent in it. One danger inherent in wealth was envy, and a way to guard against this was to give voluntary alms (*sadaqa*). One Islamically-minded wealthy yarn trader told me “we give *sadaqa* because of the danger of the evil eye when poor people see that we are rich”. A particular danger inhered in wealth that was gained unlawfully – through lying, or by dealing in interest or forbidden substances. Such profit was called “forbidden wealth” (*maal haraam*). Islamically-minded traders said that it would not

last and would bring misfortune on oneself or one's children. If the obligatory alms (*zakat*) prescribed in the Quran were not paid on a portion of wealth, it also became *maal haraam* with all the attendant risks which that implied.

These concepts of envy and unlawful wealth were another expression of the *baraka* belief: if unlawful wealth brought catastrophe and came to a quick end, a virtuous heart brought blessing and ensured that assets lasted a long time. In retail shops in the suq, such as Hamdi's (mentioned in the previous chapter), Quranic inscriptions and sayings were understood to protect *baraka* and also to ward off the evil eye. Elyachar (2005) makes a similar observation about workshops in Cairo, and about the power of relationally-oriented behaviour to preserve good fortune. Most of the suq traders I knew believed that provision or daily income (*rizq*) came from God, however hard they worked. This is similar to the cosmology of workshop life reported by Elyachar. Nevertheless, God was more likely to bestow his blessings and provision on a clean and generous heart. Morality was thus at one level a belief about what helped or obstructed the circulation of wealth. The relationship between heart and blessings is both cosmological, in that it describes how the universe works, and moral, in that it determines the correct action in particular circumstances.

The Aleppan trading cosmology consists of a set of moralised concepts: provision (*rizq*), unlawful wealth (*maal haraam*), a clean heart (*qalb nadhiif*), envy (*al-'ayn*), warm heartedness (*'aatifiyyeh*), good intentions (*husn al-niyya*), good cinnamon (*qirfeh kwayyiseh*) and blessing (*baraka*). In this cosmology, success and virtue are aligned; this is different from perspectives that view commerce and virtue as intrinsically opposed to one another. Similarly, Elyachar (2005) notes that Muslim workshop owners in Cairo believed that wealth came to them best when their trading interests was encompassed by long-lasting moral relationships. Such encompassment was a moral ideal – those who dispensed with relationality in the name of short-term interest, or whose affection was not sincere, were criticised in moral terms. Morality and cosmology are two sides of the same coin.

Therefore, to account for morality in this context, we need to describe the cosmology that makes sense of trade: the way the world is, and the unseen connections between intention and blessing. Morality is more than norms; it is a theory of consequence, of the unseen, that connects selves to others, individuals to societies, and the present to the future. It also asserts a unified logic across different domains of life. Ahmad, a wholesale yarn trader in his twenties, said, “it is not just yarn, this morality. It applies to everything...anything gained in a good way remains strong”. Although trade is a morally charged practice in this broadly “Islamic” context, the morality does not derive from a body of legal rulings – a knowledge of Hanafite law and scholarly interpretations of the Quran. What emerges in my account is a sense of how the world is (notions of provision, blessing, judgement, lawful and unlawful wealth), and how traders' actions and intentions fit into this world (notions of sincerity, charisma and affection, and a clean heart). Ideas about virtue – that is to say, notions of self such as a clean heart and warm-heartedness and notions of value such as the importance of affection – make sense in a wider cosmology: a belief about how the universe is, and what kinds of causes lead to what kind of effects.

Put another way, deontological obligations (such as the obligation to pay *zakat*, or not to lie) do not arise out of nowhere. A Durkheimian notion of morality as social norms does not explain *why* people follow them. Instead, we should conceive of morality primarily as a theory of consequence. For example: “if you are deceitful and envious, you will lose blessing (*baraka*)”. Social rules, then, should be understood as an aspect of the cosmology or theory of consequence that makes them meaningful. This approach complements the neo-Aristotelian perspective on virtue. In this perspective (e.g. Lambek 2008), virtuous action is understood as an aspect of the kind of persons that people have come to be and continue to desire to be. Similarly, a cosmological approach to moral action says, let us understand economic and moral action in terms of the kind of world that people think they are living in – the way they think that the universe works, the hidden mechanisms by which consequence follows action and intention. Morality is not simply a set of norms; it is a particular way to model actions and their effects. This attention to cosmology and beliefs about consequence needs to supplement neo-Durkheimian accounts of morality as norms

that people just adhere to without thinking; and ethics as what happens when norms conflict.

### *The Language of Commitment*

The *baraka* cosmology was strong in Aleppo's old city markets. Hamdi was a retail trader in his twenties with a small but successful shop near the centre of the markets. He and his father told me that it was for the sake of *baraka* that they like most suq traders would usually invoke God's name at the end of a transaction: "God is the Provider" (*Allaahu yarzaq*), or "May God bring back to you the money you have spent" (*Allaahu yu'awwid 'alaik*) were expressions I often heard from Hamdi and his father as customers handed over cash to them. For the same reason they, like most suq traders and entrepreneurs in the periphery, placed a copy of the Quran in a prominent position in their shop. This was usually to be found in an elevated position on the wall behind or to the right of the seat where the owner, manager or accountant sat. Quranic calligraphy inscribed into the shop window, or hanging as a pendant on the wall, expressed a similar logic: they were there to evoke *baraka*. A favourite Quranic phrase I saw displayed in several shops in the suq was "We have laid open before thee a manifest victory" (*innaa fatahnaa laka fathan mubiinan*) (Quran 48:1). It was also for the sake of *baraka* that they inscribed account books with the *basmala* – the words "in the name of God, most compassionate and merciful" (*bismillaahi rrahmaani rrahiim*).

How do these words and phrases function? Although they were routine and "formulaic", they were anything but superficial. Gilson (1982:177) wrote of similar expressions in a north Lebanese village that "the fact that they are conventional, are formulas, are constantly and automatically produced is testimony to their absorption into life and not to a superficiality or insignificance". Hamdi and his father explained that these formulations were to do with ensuring the flow of provision and warding off the potential for envy and its ill effects. The Quranic phrase "we have laid open before thee a manifest victory", displayed above or near the entrance to many shops especially in the old city suqs, is a claim that any success

the shopowner enjoys is from God – and should therefore not be begrudged. Much like the flow of constant visitors to Abdullah’s factory office, these words assert that the space is a site of “positive value” (Elyachar 2005). The implication is that the owner is involved in positive, affectionate relationships and the source of his wealth is legitimate. These words, then, are partly a social statement: a claim about the nature of one’s wealth. This claim makes sense within a particular cosmology, within which some things (such as “unlawful wealth”) are intrinsically dangerous, and others are intrinsically beneficent.

This reading contrasts with an understanding of these words as simply markers of pious identity or public religiosity. As Mahmood notes, some have made this argument about the veil (e.g. Gole 1996, Roy 1994). According to this interpretation, practices such as wearing the veil are an “expression of resistance” against Western hegemony (Rabo 1996) and a “form of social protest against the failed modernising project of postcolonial Muslim regimes” (Mahmood 2006:24). However, interpreting pious words and phrases that decorate shops and transactions in Aleppo’s suq as markers of identity reduces a rich tissue of meaning, risk and virtue into a shallower matter of identity politics. A more sophisticated reading of the veil – and, by extension, of these pious words and phrases – sees them as forms of embodied discipline that produce the virtuous self (e.g. Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006). I would add that they do not only produce virtuous selves but also cosmologies or, more specifically, adherence to a cosmology. That is to say, displaying, embodying and exchanging these words are ritual practices that produce and reinforce a commitment to understanding the world in a particular way. Any belief about how the world is requires acts – such as inscribing parts of the Quran or verbalising statements about God’s power at the end of transactions – in order to make it real. These acts are rituals in the sense of “a set of practices that tries to persuade participants of the way the world is, without acknowledging its own particular perspective” (Strathern 2000).

This reading draws on Lambek’s model of the role that ritual plays in establishing any ethics or morality. Drawing on Rappaport (1999), Lambek argues that ethics

must be “grounded in prior acts” of ritual commitment (Lambek 2010a:18). He gives as an example the ritual act of promising. He argues that illocutionary acts, such as promising, establish criteria that produce future acts and states, by entailing that they fall under certain prescriptions such as “keeping” or “failing to keep” one’s promises (Lambek 2010b:44-45). I apply this model to the pious phrases often heard towards the end of transactions in Aleppan markets. Thus, phrases such as “God is the Provider” (*Allaah yarzaq*) and “God willing your intention is pure” (*inshallah niyyatak saafiyeh*) establish the future as comprehensible according to certain categories. Specifically, these sayings ensure that subsequent good fortune is taken as an instance of God’s will, provision, or a consequence of the seller’s good intentions. Aleppan traders also commit themselves to the *baraka* cosmology in material and bodily ways by verbalising their beliefs about the material effects of God’s will or of having “good cinnamon”. In these ways, they perform adherence to a particular cosmology – a certain way of understanding cause and effect.

It is through these verbal and embodied performances that obligations and morality as a whole gain their force. Lambek argues that one feature of “ordinary ethics” is that it is often implicit rather than explicit. As a concept, it focuses attention not on the explicit texts of theological reasoning, legal rules or professional codes of conduct, but on the tacit, non-intellectualised aspects of behaviour (Lambek 2010a:2-3). I would add to this that ethics involves a natural embodied way of being in the world. A moral cosmology is, as I have argued, a set of beliefs about cause and effect. However, it is also embodied as a set of affective dispositions. Any cosmology, or set of beliefs about how the world is, requires physical and affective commitment. For example, the belief that God’s blessing (*baraka*) determines one’s income (*rizq*), which is common in Aleppo’s *suqs*, depends in part on inscribing Quranic texts on account books and displaying copies of the Quran and related prayers in one’s shop.

These practices, which are done “for the sake of *baraka*”, create physical and affective dispositions. The belief that an entrepreneur who has affection and a sincere heart for others will prosper, embodied through practices of generosity and visiting,

leads Abdullah to feel automatically anxious when he is not visited. Muhyi, the wealthy and Islamically minded young yarn entrepreneur, told me that the most important thing was to be “convinced” (*muqtana* ‘) in the way one acquired and spent money. The word “convinced” (*muqtana* ‘) derives from the same root as the word “religious faith” (*qanaa* ‘a), which was said to result in an automatic and embodied sense of “ease” (*raaha*). Again, I was sometimes told that a virtuous trader feels an instinctive fear about taking “unlawful wealth”, and that even an unscrupulous trader will automatically shrink from making a false oath while touching the Quran. In all these cases, beliefs about the good and bad consequences of these actions were embodied as automatic affective dispositions.

This notion of embodied cosmology is different from the embodied dispositions described by Mauss (1973) and Bourdieu (1984). It does not simply mean that moral actors are constituted by a set of embodied moral reflexes: that a pietist hears a thousand sermons and becomes affectively disposed to repent. Rather, there is some propositional content to the affective state. A cosmology is a set of propositional beliefs about how the world is: what kind of causes lead to what kind of effects; hence, what kinds of causes and effects are worth taking seriously and concerning oneself with. Thus, according to the dominant cosmology in Aleppo’s suqs, deceit, insincerity and envy destroy blessing; generosity and a willing attitude preserve it. These beliefs may not always be clearly articulated, but they are still propositional beliefs; one trader told me about cinnamon: “maybe not everyone knows the word, but everyone knows about it...you feel it, when you are here, you have to feel it”.

I asked at the beginning of this section how phrases which decorate transactions in the Aleppo markets – words such as “God is the provider” – function. Within the terms of the cosmology and from the point of view of the speakers, they honour God. Socially, they are a claim about the nature of one’s wealth – as bestowed by God rather than achieved illegitimately. Anthropologically, they produce adherence to a particular cosmology. The cosmology is embodied, for example in the fear that the virtuous are said instinctively to feel about involvement in unlawful profit (*maal haraam*). It is by committing oneself to this cosmology, in material and bodily ways,

that obligations and morality as a whole gain their force and reality. Morality is not simply a system of norms such as the shariah code into which one is socialised and which one follows automatically and unthinkingly, as Durkheimian accounts suggest. It is a way in which one is involved in the world and makes sense of it.

### *The Banality of Virtue*

I have argued that exchanging pious words can be understood as a ritual practice which produces commitment to a moral cosmology. The sites for these ritual practices range from the inscription of daily account books, to routine sayings invoked at the end of the most minor retail transactions. I now conclude the chapter by arguing that virtue in this cosmology is at stake in mundane exchanges; I argue that this is an exception to Parry and Bloch's thesis (1989) that mundane commercial transactions tend to inhabit a non-moralised domain that articulates with a moralised domain of cosmically significant exchange.

What is important in the "clean heart" morality is the attitude in which a transaction is accomplished. Therefore all exchanges, from gift-giving to minor retail transactions, are potentially constitutive of virtue. Blessing and virtue in this cosmology are at stake in mundane exchanges. This is in contrast to the argument advanced by Parry and Bloch, who suggest that most economies distinguish between short-term (individual, amoral) and long-term (cosmic, moral) transactional domains. They suggest that the work of the anthropologist is therefore to analyse the way in which these two domains articulate with one another. Parry and Bloch argue that there is a consistent pattern across a wide range of societies of a "legitimate domain of individual – often acquisitive – activity, and a cycle of long-term exchanges concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order" (1989:2). They continue that,

“while the long-term cycle is always positively associated with the central precepts of morality, the short-term order tends to be morally undetermined since it concerns individual purposes which are largely irrelevant to the long-term order. If, however, that which is obtained in the short-term individualistic cycle is converted to serve the reproduction of the long-term

cycle, then it becomes morally positive – like the cash drunk in Fiji or the wealth given as *dana* in Hindu India” (1989:26).

It is tempting to follow their scheme, and read market trade (*tijaara*) as the “morally undetermined” space where individual acquisition is a legitimate and laudable goal. The problem is to find a sphere of exchange to which it is ideologically subordinated. One candidate might be the reproduction of Islamic society through the distribution of alms (*zakat*). At first sight, *zakat* appears to be a good candidate for the articulation between the two spheres. It “purifies the evil” (*tzakkiy al-sharr*) in wealth (Benthall 1999) by diverting a proportion of it to reproduce the moral community. Two-and-a-half percent annually of a trader’s working capital is distributed to needy members of the family, the mosque and the poor. This seems to replicate Bloch and Parry’s model: *zakat* appears as the transformational process that connects two transactional orders: the worldly market, and reproduction of Islamic society.

Tempting as this reading may be, the problem is that we cannot read market trade in Aleppo as “worldly”: as morally undetermined or short-term, or as ideologically subordinated to other forms of exchange. In the Aleppan markets, virtue is not produced through a successful transformation of material from one transactional domain to another, but rather needs to be continually achieved in the most minor transactions. As Lambek (2000) argues, morality is not just found in the heroic and flamboyant. A focus on the mundane ethics of minor transactions moves us beyond the confines of the mosque and the mosque circle. For Aleppan traders, ordinary market life is already moralised through the concepts of blessing (*baraka*) and provision (*rizq*). Traders are in the full flow of moral life, perhaps more so than specifically religious figures. Indeed, one yarn trader told me that he would benefit my research into the ethics of trade “more than many religious scholars”. The way to distinguish the pious from the fraudulent was not by seeing them praying, but by the way in which they dealt with (*ta‘aamulhuu ma’*) others in credit and debt relations. Moral personhood is held in a trader’s “interaction” (*al-ta‘aamul*) and the things that connect him to others. According to these traders, virtue is not only attained by

shutting oneself away from work and interaction and risk and devoting oneself to God. Virtue for traders is always social and connected to trust.

Bloch and Parry's collection does not contain any ethnographic accounts of predominantly Muslim societies, and for this reason may not reflect the view that mundane market exchange can take place in a fully moralised sphere. Of course, it is important not to essentialise an "Islamic morality" of exchange. Nevertheless, there are two broad reasons why Muslim traders in Aleppo do not fit into Bloch and Parry's model of morally undetermined short-term and cosmologically significant long-term transactional orders.

First, mundane trade reproduces the moral order. It is the domain where virtues emerge. Several times traders quoted to me the Prophetic saying (*hadith*) of Muhammad that "the virtuous trader will be raised among the Prophets". Sitting in retail shops I frequently also heard pious expressions routinely surrounding small purchases, and, as discussed above, these expressions were made "for the sake of God's blessing". I heard buyers say to a shopkeeper at the conclusion of purchases "God willing you have a pure intention", and shopkeepers or traders make protestations of virtue such as "we don't inflate prices here" (*maa nakhudh al-ziyaadeh hoon*). The heart should be "clean" in every single transaction. It is produced by selling from a generous and willing and honest heart. Blessing (*baraka*) is at stake and highly valued even in fleeting "commodity" transactions (Gregory 1982, Carrier 1995) between unrelated and free transactors.

Trade reproduces the moral order because it is held ideally to be an occasion for mutual benefit. There is no sanctioned area of trade that is purely short-term and acquisitive, where one individual profits at the expense of another. Where trade is seen as being short-term and acquisitive at the expense of others, as for example in speculative yarn-trading I describe in the next chapter, it is severely criticised. According to this ideology (often observed in the breach), relationality – the idiom of affection – should come first and enable the pursuit of self-interest (*maslaha*).

The other side of this coin – that trade should always be about mutual rather than individual benefit – is that it does not detract from virtue that one should profit from it. It is not a problem that one should benefit financially from relationships of “affection” (*mahabbah*). Nor is it a problem that morally virtuous business decisions (such as extending free loans to a trading partner) should benefit the giver. A short-term free loan to a trading partner, known in Islamic law as *qard hasan*, was said to be a “good good thing in Islam, it is better than giving charity”. But it was also recognised to benefit the lender, by keeping the trading partner in business, and thus extending the opportunity for mutual benefit later.

The second reason why Aleppan entrepreneurs do not fit Bloch and Parry’s model is that market trade is held to reproduce the social order. The purpose of *zakat* is to encourage traders to put their money to work and employ others. By reducing the trader’s working capital by 2.5% annually, it provides an incentive to invest that capital productively. The advantage of this is understood to be social: it will provide employment and benefit society. Thus, the aim of *zakat* is not to take money out of the market and transform it into something else; rather, it is to bring more money into the market system which is understood as a key moral institution of society. The market is not a morally neutral short-term transactional order that is subordinated to more cosmically important transactions.

Muslim entrepreneurs in Aleppo present the moral as a ubiquitous feature of trade. It is at stake in every transaction from the most routine retail sale of a commodity to the attitude in which one gives a gift. Thus, there is no distinction to be drawn between a long-term and a short-term transactional order, between amoral and moral, individual and cosmic. The market is already fully moralised. The state of a trader’s heart, made material in the etiquette of speech that surrounds minor transactions, is cosmologically significant. There is no transaction where the state of the heart ought not to matter, or where there is a “concern for pure instrumentality” (Parry and Bloch 1989:29). Parry (1989:66) seeks to “specify the kinds of exchange in which a moral peril resides, and the kinds of exchange from which it is largely absent”. According to the ideology of Muslim traders in Aleppo, this cannot be done. Even in the most

routine transaction, “blessing”, which comes from God, must be preserved and “unlawful wealth” avoided. Morality in this context is not hived off into a discrete group of processes such as giving alms that can transform morally undetermined short-term wealth into purer long-term meaning. Muslim traders know not only that there is one God, but that there is one Day of Account, and one transactional order leading up to it.

## Chapter Four

### Invisible Taiwanese Yarn

In this chapter and the next one, I describe Aleppo's noisy "stock market" (*bursa*). It is an informal system of trading yarn futures that takes place daily in the open-air of a caravanserai in the Old City. This open-air trading is structured as a short-term and zero-sum game, which is very different from the yarn trading which takes place inside the offices of the caravanserai. The wealthy yarn importers and traders who operate from inside the offices distance themselves from the shouting outside: they deride it as a "game for children", as "pure chat", and as an unIslamic form of "betting". They point out that the yarn being speculated on in the courtyard often does not physically exist, and is tied up with a form of money-lending. The whole sorry business, they say, "distorts the image" of the real yarn trading that happens in the offices. In the second of these two chapters, I explore the many reasons why the office-based traders distance themselves from this phenomenon, and the hidden ways in which some of them are connected to it.

These moral discourses are on one level about betting (*qimaar*) and money-lending (*riba*) – both Quranic words. On another level, they are about substance, risk, materiality and time. I suggest that these discourses emerged as part of a historically specific reconfiguration of Aleppo's yarn import market. In the first of these two chapters, I set the scene and explore this historical reconfiguration of the market. I argue that this process produced a set of alternative futures for the yarn commodity, each existing within its own time-space: on the one hand, the "stock market" trading regime in the open-air courtyard; on the other, the slower processes in the offices that surround the courtyard. The moral discourses about substance, risk, materiality and time are ways of distinguishing between these alternative futures and time-spaces. In the next chapter I argue that the current configuration of the yarn market and of the moral discourses that sustain it involves not only distinctions between these different future and time-spaces, but also hidden connections.

“The other day I heard that there is a batch of intermingled yarn (*mta ‘aj*) that has been in the market since 2005! It is going from warehouse to warehouse. The boxes are completely wrecked!”

Muhyi, 26, son of one of the wealthiest yarn manufacturers in Aleppo

### ***The Betting Ring***

It is around 5.30pm in the courtyard of the Khan al-Oulabiyya caravanserai. The caravanserai is one of several in the heart of the city’s complex of historic markets. This one houses some fifty businesses, but they are offices, not shops. The inhabitants of these offices are known for being among the wealthiest traders in the old city markets. Operating as sole traders, family businesses or partnerships, they organise the import and sale of yarn, Aleppo’s most important commodity, supplying the city’s textile factories which account for the bulk of the city’s industrial output and employment.

This particular caravanserai, where I try daily to make friends with the traders, has an unusual status. It is set a little apart from the bustle of the market’s main alleyways and does not even figure on most tourist maps. While the increasing presence of tourists is said to be pushing up property prices of shops elsewhere in the market, this caravanserai is a commercial hub and not a tourist attraction. For most of the day it seems like a peaceful place: there are no crowds, no obvious wares for sale, no mules, no heavily-laden Suzuki trucks squeezing past each other. It is also a male space: apart from occasional beggars or a lost tourist, there are no women.

In the late afternoon, the character of the courtyard changes. The peace of the place is disrupted by up to fifty men – not the wealthy importers and traders who work in the caravanserai offices, but brokers who visit their offices bringing the demand of small factory owners. Some of these men are “brokers” only in name: the only transactions they enter into are small speculative deals with their own meagre capital. They gather in the courtyard of the caravanserai every afternoon, after the *‘asr* prayer, to haggle

over the price of imported Taiwanese yarn. Some refer to them as the *bursa* – the “stock market” – of the yarn trade. They stand on the stone paving in front of the offices of Aleppo’s largest yarn manufacturer, an area perhaps ten metres wide at its widest point and almost thirty metres long.

Office trade has finished for the day and the sandwich maker is packing up to go home; a metal grill makes a loud roar as it is pulled down in front of one of the offices. The men of the *bursa* – the *bursajiyya* – have gathered in the courtyard. Most of them appear to be in their forties and fifties; a few are in their late sixties. They wear cotton slacks and button-up shirts, many short-sleeved. Several of the men look slightly unkempt: non-fashionable stubble, rumpled shirts, heads hanging forward. A few look well off: cleaner, pressed shirts, an upright posture, polished shoes. Then there are the younger men: around ten of them, in their twenties and thirties, all dressed in jeans, trainers, and a T-shirt or a polo shirt.

Men pushing food trolleys enter the caravanserai, like stage hands changing a set. One is selling sugar-coated candies and pistachios. One of the middle-aged men takes a couple of pistachio nuts from the trolley as he wanders past. He does not pay. The caravanserai is edged by stone buildings, and a low sound of general hubbub is echoing against them, like the sound of an audience waiting for an event to begin. A man is begging; he looks old and haggard and grabs the arm of one of the stock marketeers, who shakes him off.

The men are standing in small groups of twos, threes, and fours. Every so often someone breaks off from one group and wanders to another. I overhear some snippets of conversation: “what is the price?” “It’s around 1.75” (*markazu mayn ilaa rub*) – that is, 81.75 lira per kilo. Someone else asks: “have you bought? sold?” Suddenly someone shouts an offer: “I’ll buy fifty. Two and a half”. Fifty boxes of yarn, each containing thirty three kilograms of Taiwanese polyester, at 82.5 lira per kilo. Immediately the small groups disperse and a group of around twenty people forms around the protagonist who has apparently made an offer. He stands in the middle of the group, a space like a stage in front of him, addressing and pointing at a

man on the other side of the space. “Will you buy?” he challenges him. Then he addresses another man next to this one. I do not catch what is said. The protagonist swiftly walks away out of the crowd, which disperses as quickly as it formed.

When the group becomes lively, there is an atmosphere of theatre: men shout, or speak in loud sarcastic voices; they kiss their interlocutors on the cheek suddenly and forcefully, and rush suddenly at them in horseplay. “Three thousand boxes at forty lira!” one man proclaims loudly to another, accompanying his joking offer with a theatrical flourish of his arms. They both laugh. Another man resembling a shaykh, with a gallabiya and a beard, announces his intention to buy; a would-be seller takes his beard and gives it a momentary tug as he leads him away from the crowd to discuss the details in private.

When the market becomes serious, and more deals start to be made, the atmosphere changes: less boisterous theatre, it becomes more subdued and intense. Individuals wander around; groups occasionally form between allies, whispering things into each other's ears for a brief moment. Then a larger circle forms around a prospective deal. People's hands betray the tense excitement. Many of the men hold prayer beads behind their backs, moving them incessantly between their fingers; or they fiddle with their keys, or cigarettes. One man, taller than everyone else by almost a foot, sips from a cup of coffee. He rarely talks or joins any groups, but moves quietly through the crowd, looking on into the circle, occasionally conferring in a quiet whisper with one or two of the men who stand around.

Now it is around six-thirty in the evening and the courtyard is busy. There are itinerant sellers: someone has laid out six boxes of electric razors at the side of the caravanserai on the left immediately as you enter. There is a woman dressed entirely in black who is begging. She says “God is the Provider!” (*Allaah yarzaq*). No-one in my group gives her money, and someone says to her: “May God provide for you”. There is a man pushing a trolley laden with iced bun-sized sponge cakes; many of the men are wolfing them down. Later, a trolleyman passes with sugar-buns, which are soon all bought too. Still later, others arrive with trolleys of strawberries, cherries

and then cucumbers. Two or three shoe polishers replace the electric razor sellers. There is a constant sounds of keys jingling, as hands fidget. There is a sense of anticipation: men chatting in small groups, waiting for things to happen, or dawdling and eating snacks. A tray of five coffees is brought in and distributed amongst the courtyard traders.

I am here with Alaa al-Din, a twenty-six year old studying for a Masters degree in Plant Sciences at the University of Aleppo. He hopes to study for a doctorate in Germany next year. But he is trying to get married too, and has to finance himself through his studies – “everything here is at your own expense” (*‘alaa hisaabak*), he says – which is why he comes to the caravanserai. He works in the caravanserai as a yarn broker and trader, and also participates in the courtyard “stock market”. Now, although I try to stick close to him, he keeps disappearing. I have told him that I want to try trading for myself. One man comes up to me: “will you buy *sadd*?” - a yarn futures contract settled usually after two or four weeks. He laughs. I say, “no, I want *amr*!”<sup>13</sup> He laughs even more loudly and calls out to a friend standing in a small group ten metres away and tries to entice him away: “he is buying *amr* here! A hundred boxes! Here is the Finance Director, the European version!” He tries to make others in the assembled group believe that I am buying.

Alaa al-Din comes back and I ask him “how much money do I need to participate? What is the minimum trade?” I am surprised when he tells me “you don't need any money to participate. There is no cash in the *bursa*.” I am less surprised when he tells me that I cannot buy myself but need to do so through a broker (*wasiit*). The commission is 0.25 lira per kilo for small deals (less than 700 or 800 boxes) and 0.15 lira per kilo for larger deals. The smallest trade is fifty boxes, and the price varies in *frangs*, intervals of 0.05 lira. He offers to act as my broker. We agree there is no real money at stake between us, and I buy a hundred boxes from him at 81.75 lira per kilo. The general price is 82 lira he says, so he has given me a discount. “Now I am your enemy, right?” I ask. “Yes”, he says, and laughs, giving my hand an

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<sup>13</sup> *amr* means a yarn futures contract settled at any point in the next two or four weeks, whenever the buyer decides

affectionate squeeze. We have been holding hands, as if to shake on a deal, for most of the conversation.

### *How the Stock Market Works*

The basis of this *bursa* is the future price of Taiwanese intermingled yarn, Alaa al-Din had explained to me earlier:

“An importer brings in five, ten, twenty containers. Each container has 713 boxes. The shipment takes 25 to 35 days. The importer has three options. If he needs money, he pre-sells to a big merchant. If he can wait, he puts it into a warehouse and waits for the price to go up. But mostly, he sells it through the *bursa*. He fixes the price today, for delivery and payment after 35 days.”

If he does not have the yarn in his physical possession, he can sell *sadd*. In other words, the price is fixed now, but payment and delivery happen at a specified date in the future, usually the 1<sup>st</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> of the following month. If he has the yarn already, he can sell *amr*, whereby payment and delivery can happen at any point up to the 1<sup>st</sup> or the 15<sup>th</sup> of the following month, whenever one of the parties (usually the buyer) decides to realise the contract. The future (*sadd* and *amr*) prices usually differ from the current (*haadir*) price, according to how traders predict the movement of the market:

“*Haadir* is cheapest at the moment, followed by *amr bayaa* [where the seller can choose at any point to realise the contract], then *sadd*, and most expensive at the moment is *amr shaariy* [where the buyer can choose at any point when to realise the contract].”

With *sadd* contracts, which were by far the most common trade in the courtyard during my fieldwork, a speculator can sell yarn which he does not physically possess. This makes it possible for yarn to be bought and sold quickly, and to be “moved around” between traders easily. Alaa al-Din noted that sometimes the boxes change hands ten times over two weeks before any contract has to be settled. *Sadd* contracts also enable trades to become notional. Although *sadd* contracts arise from the practice of material trade – whereby an importer seeks to pre-sell a shipment that is still on the water – they also make it possible to separate the act of sale from material

exchange. This means that trade can become immaterial: if *sadd* contracts enable an importer to sell yarn he owns but does not yet have in his physical possession, they also enable a less wealthy trader to sell yarn he does not yet own. Through the *sadd* contract, the normal temporality of material trade is made reversible: speculators can sell a batch of yarn before they have bought it – and then buy it back (at a hopefully lower price) without ever needing any capital.

This was a common feature of the trades happening around me in the courtyard most evenings. A speculator who had sold Taiwanese yarn that they had yet to buy was known as *mkashif*, whereas someone who had bought yarn and was seeking to sell it was known as *haamil*. Most of the time, the number of *mkashif* and *haamil* traders would cancel each other out in a zero-sum game, as Alaa al-Din explained to me using a piece of paper as we sat in a branch of Costa Coffee in the new town:

“Suppose Paul comes along and wants to sell 100 boxes at 80 lira [per kilo]. Ahmad thinks the market might be going down, so he refuses to buy. But Mahmoud agrees to buy 100 boxes at 80 LS, thinking the market might be going up. The market does go up, and Mahmoud tries to sell 100 boxes back to Paul at 81 LS. Paul doesn’t want to make a loss, and thinks the market will be coming down again, so doesn’t buy. Ahmad however agrees to buy the boxes at 81 LS, because he thinks the market will be going even higher. The market does start to move higher, and Paul starts to get afraid that his losses will continue to grow, so he agrees to buy 100 boxes from Abdullahat 82 LS. Because each box has 33 kilograms of yarn, one lira change in the [kilo] price on 100 boxes is equal to 3300 lira gain or loss [about £45, or a week’s wages for a teacher]. Paul loses 6600 lira, Mahmoud and Ahmad each gain 3300 lira.”

The courtyard trades are made verbally, without the physical exchange of yarn. Another crucial aspect of these trades is that participants do not need to have enough capital to buy the yarn outright, but only to cover any losses they might make over a fifteen-day settlement period. Alaa al-Din explained:

“Everyone “covers” (*yghattiy*) his sales by making an equal amount of purchases, and vice-versa. All the contracts are settled every fifteen days. You have to be in the market on the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month. You will see the market is busy then, with people settling up and paying in cash. You don’t need to be in the market the rest of the time – it is flexible, that is one

reason I like it. Usually, most of the sales cancel each other out (*yuqtal*) within the group and the difference is paid in cash. You don't actually need to exchange the boxes most of the time, if someone actually asks for the boxes, most people think it is a real headache (*waj' ras*)”

Because most of the sales of Taiwanese yarn are expected to cancel each other out – and the exchange of actual yarn is viewed as a “headache” – the physical yarn does not need to exist in any material sense to support the trade. It simply needs to be spoken of as if it does exist. This indeed was often the case in the courtyard: notional boxes of yarn were used to “leverage up” the size of speculative deals. As Alaa al-Din said:

“you might have 100 [real] boxes, but trade in 10,000 boxes. Some trades have reached 40,000 boxes nominally. Maybe there are only around 3000 real boxes in circulation [in every two week period].

### ***The History of the Market: Standardisation and the Emergence of Invisible Yarn***

The courtyard deals were not always dominated by phantom boxes. At one time, Taiwanese intermingled was a staple ingredient in Aleppan textile manufacturing. Subhi was around sixty years old and owned a small factory with two weaving looms. He was also one of the oldest participants in courtyard trading, with thirty years' experience of the *bursa*. He remembered back to the 1980s:

“before the *bursa* started, the most common yarns were *mabruum* and *mahluul*. They were used on mechanical looms. There weren't many brokers here in those days, perhaps four or five. Then Taiwanese intermingled came. People tried it out slowly [on their machines], and after a few years it became very popular. Then the *bursa* started, using it as the basis.”

Courtyard speculation – and trust in Taiwanese intermingled as an instantly tradeable commodity – had its origin in the material needs of manufacturers. The predominance of phantom trades came later, and seems to be connected to the rise of local yarn manufacturing.

When I asked Abu Tonja about the history of courtyard trading, he remembered a time before local production:

“Before, lots of people did it - hundreds. Anyone who wanted intermingled yarn had to buy it in the courtyard. There was a great deal of money going around. The trading was a combination of phantom (*wahmiy*) and real boxes. But there were lots of real boxes, and when you bought, you didn't know if you were buying real boxes or phantom ones! Now, since 1999 we have local intermingled yarns. They are better, and they are guaranteed (*makful*) – any problem on the machines and you go back to the factory direct.”

Initially, traders were cautious about local intermingled as compared to the quality of the imported variety. This led to local yarns being repackaged in Taiwanese boxes. Ibrahim, the wealthy office-based trader, remembered:

“When the local factories started, Taiwanese was more expensive. People used to sell local intermingled in Taiwanese boxes. One person did this, I won't tell you his name. Then he was found out (*inkashaf*). People would say – ‘I have got some “Quwaiqi” – i.e. counterfeit – do you want some?’ It was named after the Quwaiq [an underground river in Aleppo] – subterranean and stinky!”

Soon, however, local manufacturers established a reputation for quality. Khalid Ulabi, the influential textile entrepreneur mentioned in chapter one who headed the team of electoral candidates to the Chamber of Industry that included Abdullah Najih, is the largest local manufacturer. As I discussed earlier, he has gained political patronage with a seat in Syria's Parliament. He is particularly reputed for the quality of his yarns and his offices currently dominate the centre of the caravanserai. His influence in the market grew from 2003 onwards. All the traders I spoke to acknowledge that the prices of his yarns now set the pace for the rest of the market. His office is connected by electronic stock management systems to his yarn factories in Aleppo's hinterland, bringing together information about the numbers of boxes produced and sold.

When I asked his office manager how prices were set in the market, he replied simply “the same way it is set all over the world: supply and demand (*al-'ard wa-l-talab*)”. He pointed to a computer monitor in front of him showing a read-out of the

day's current tally of factory production. The influence of this computerised management system is spread through much of the rest of the market, since several office-based traders use a weekly print-out of his price-list as a reference point for their own trading. More recently Ulabi, as the leading manufacturer, has installed a large flat television screen in his office window looking out onto the centre of the caravanserai, where the courtyard traders meet. Visible to all who enter the courtyard, it shows the prices of all his yarns, and is updated daily. When I asked his son about this screen, he told me that "we are the *bursa* – we set the prices".

The rise of local yarn manufacturers like Ulabi changed the configuration of the yarn market by making availability and prices more predictable and information more freely available. Before, when the market had been dominated by imported yarns, it was not always clear – except to those brokers in the know – which traders had which stock, or what the going price was. Without a centralised point of information about stock and prices, the market or *bursa* consisted in brokers who would meet in the caravanserai to fix prices. Abu Samt's colleague, a wholesaler of yarn, told me:

"In the 1990s, there were only ten or fifteen people importing. The prices of yarn were not openly available (*makshuufeh*). No-one knew what the international price was. The broker (*dallaal*) would go round and ask the importers: what do you have, and what are the prices? One day the price would be such and such with one importer, the next day an importer would have sold out (*naffa* )".

There was another sense in which the yarn market had not been "open" or "transparent" (*makshuuf*) before. Before laws were passed in the 1990s which facilitated international trade, yarn traders had worked illegally or semi-legally. One put it as follows:

"the regime in the 1980s was conservative: the economy was in the hands of the state. You couldn't obtain an import license. But we were importing. You had to buy an import license from those who had a public sector factory and then import in their name...In 1987, anyone caught with more than \$2000 in their pocket got 15 to 20 years. Also if you got caught transferring money abroad. But we transferred dollars abroad to import, and we did so with the state knowing...People were hiding their wealth, until [the current President took office in 2000]. People definitely used to hide their wealth."

Such semi-legality had implications for the way in which information and yarn circulated. One textile industrialist described his experience of buying yarn in the previous era of anonymity:

“Before, the merchant had an import licence (*ijaazat al-istiiraad*) but it was in his maternal aunt’s name or his mother’s name! Imagine – all these women had yarn coming in to the country, and no idea what it was! This was because of nationalisation. The buying and selling did not happen in the merchants’ offices. Now it is different, there are companies (*sharikaat*). But before, the broker was very important. He would come to the merchant’s office with a piece of paper detailing his orders: the type of thread, the quantity, the delivery address.”

In a system where import was semi-secretive, trusted brokers played a central role in establishing prices. This was the origin of the *bursa* in the caravanserai courtyard. Fouad, a small textile manufacturer in his late 50s, who had been purchasing yarn for decades, said:

“The caravanserai courtyard was a place where brokers and others, but mainly brokers – their sons, the people who worked with them – would specify the prices (*yithaddaduu-l-as‘aar*), meeting with factory owners. They would see who had what to sell, how much, and how much demand there was.”

Trusted delivery men and brokers were key parts of the private system that moved cash and materials around in an officially nationalised economy:

“Every big merchant had one or two delivery men (*hammals*). This wasn’t a job that anyone could do. It was like the broker: a job inherited through the family – your son, your cousin (*ibn ‘amm*), or through your neighbour (*al-jaar fi-l-haara*). This guy had the keys to the warehouse – imagine, he actually had the keys to the warehouse! It wasn’t the merchant who went to the warehouse. The *hammaal* would have the goods loaded up in the warehouse, and deliver them to the address he got from the broker. He would get a receipt of delivery (*wassal istiilaam*). He would take this to his boss, the big trader, who would then call up the customer: your goods have arrived? Ok, I’ll send the broker around. He sent the broker to the customer to pick up the cash.”

Since 2000, the state's economic policies have sought to encourage local production of artificial yarns over import. The rise of large local manufacturers made quality more standardised (*makshuuf*). As their presence in and influence over the market increased, the government banned second quality yarns from the caravanserai. Alaa al-Din described the difference between trading first and second quality yarns:

“It is well known that Ulabi's intermingled yarn is around 80 lira per kilo. It is first quality yarn; it is *makshuuf* – you know what you are getting. And the broker's commission is fixed. Second quality yarn is not *makshuuf* – it might be imported or produced locally, but the quality is obscure. They are often cheap offcuts from Europe or America that are bundled together and sold. In trading second quality yarn, it is open to the broker to get what price he can for it, and to negotiate what commission he wants. This process is called *mulaatasha*: the cleverer broker gets more, the one who is asleep on his hand won't get so much.”

So the recent history of Aleppo's yarn market is marked by a shift from imported to local yarns. Over a period of some twenty-five years, from the 1980s to 2009, the social, technical and material configurations that constitute the market have changed. The general story over this period is the transformation of Aleppo's yarn market to an arena that was more *makshuf* – standardised and open. In the 1980s, under Syria's socialist regime, large-scale private enterprise was semi-legal. Entrepreneurs covertly imported yarn but there was little opportunity to establish private yarn factories. Information and materials circulated between known and trusted agents: brokers and delivery-men. This was the basis of the *bursa*.

In 1986, the Syrian government signed an agreement with the USSR which led to a polyester import boom. Politically and economically isolated from the West, Syria relied on the Soviet Union for most of his military hardware in the 1970s and 1980s, but lacking the hard currency to pay for them, came to an agreement in 1986 to settle the debt largely through the export of Syrian textiles. This “payments agreement” lasted until 1991 and was vital for the Aleppan economy: entrepreneurs found themselves enjoying a guaranteed market for textiles, and importers started to amass fortunes by importing the yarn to supply the textile manufacturers. This boom created the context for a speculative market in shipments of imported yarn: brokers and speculators flourished.

This flourishing also depended on the state's renewed policies of *infitah* or economic liberalisation: an opening up of space for private entrepreneurs. The government, facing a rising national deficit, issued import and manufacture licenses more freely and passed laws to encourage private investment, such as the 1991 Investment Law. Large yarn importers traded more openly. The intermingled polyester yarn imported from Taiwan was traded widely as the staple ingredient in industrial weaving. The *bursa* or system of price-setting remained centred on the caravanserai courtyard and the growing circle of brokers who linked yarn importers and textile manufacturers.

A decisive change came when local yarn factories were established and opened offices in the caravanserai. From around 2000, national policies designed to protect the industrial renaissance, and thus to give private entrepreneurs more space to expand and create employment, encouraged entrepreneurs to manufacture yarn locally. Many importers moved into production, and were continuing to do so during my fieldwork; those who lacked the capital to do so complain of reduced profit margins on their imports. The yarn market was being reconfigured. Supply became more regular; quality became standardised as substandard yarns were formally prohibited; prices came to depend in large part on a computerised measurement of supply and demand for the market leader's yarns, and were openly announced on an electronic screen updated daily. By installing the screen, the market leader Khalid Ulabi "became open or transparent (*makshuuf*), announcing to the world, this is my price", one broker told me. His dominant market position enabled his son to claim: "we are the *bursa*".

What happened to the old speculative *bursa* that had been based on imported commodities and networks of brokers? The most important deals were now in locally manufactured yarn, where there was less opportunity for speculation since prices were in the hands of one large local manufacturer. The same dynamics that had created the conditions of possibility for entrepreneurs like Khalid Ulabi and Abdullah Najih to flourish and "gather" thus marginalised the small yarn brokers. The old speculative *bursa* was marginalised - volumes fell dramatically as capital moved

elsewhere. The decline in the volume and profitability of imported yarns meant that courtyard trading became less important in price-setting and less central to the manufacturing process. Faced with local competition, boxes of imported yarn became increasingly detached from the looms and found different routes of circulation. The nature of the courtyard *bursa* changed, according to one wealthy broker: “[the courtyard *bursa*] was now just used to pass boxes around - the boxes moved from warehouse to warehouse and [became] battered and old.”

As courtyard trading became increasingly marginal to the manufacturing process, phantom boxes started to multiply. Subhi, a veteran courtyard trader, said, “since 2000 or 2001, a lot of the deals have started to be imaginary: there is no actual yarn behind them. Beforehand it tended to be mostly actual goods.” Another of the courtyard traders placed the date of the change differently, but told a similar story:

“Around 2004, local production started to dominate. Demand for imported intermingled went down. This took away from the role of the *bursa*. Before, people were buying 4000 boxes a day of imported intermingled. It was the bread and cheese [of manufacture]. People who produce the warp beam (*msaddi*) [which goes on the looms] bought it. Then they preferred the local intermingled – it was cheaper, and good. Now, [people buy] 300 boxes a day [of Taiwanese intermingled] – you might laugh if I tell you [how small the deals are]!”

The discourse about the future implicit in state policies of liberalization, and presented by the well-connected yarn producer who had secured control of the market, as seen in his price ticker screen dominating the courtyard, was about transparency (being *makshuuf*), regularization (being *nizaamiyy*), and a market logic of “supply and demand” (*al-‘ard wa-l-talab*). For the office-based traders, the courtyard embodied an opposite logic. Several office-based traders told me that the courtyard trades were “chaotic” (*‘ashwaa’iy*), “irregular” (*muu nizaamiy*), and “uncomfortable and untrustworthy” (*muu muriih*). It was an arena where brokers could still make large profits through “cleverness” (*mulaatasha*) and “slipperiness” (*bandaqa*). The office-based traders warned me not to take part, as the other traders would “get the better” of me (*ykhassiruunak*).

However, the speculative courtyard *bursa* did not die out entirely. The political, financial and spatial changes involved in creating this regularised future opened up marginalised spaces where there were other futures: small-time brokers became short-term players, trading in abstract financial futures for Aleppo's key commodity. Some theorists of socialism (Poulantzas 1980) and capitalism (Harvey 1989) have argued that they construct particular spatio-temporal domains. For example, capitalism collapses distances, reducing the importance of space, and speeds up temporal processes (Harvey 1989). However, in Aleppo's yarn market, the process of regularization, far from creating a single spatio-temporal domain of trade, produced several. The courtyard became an alternative kind of trading space to the offices, with its own kinds of commodities – closed-box yarn and notional yarn – onto which traders projected a particular concept of the future. Boxed yarn traded in the courtyard would usually not enter the manufacturing process immediately, but would rather be passed on and on for months or even years in increasingly dilapidated but never opened boxes. The future of notional yarn was even more specialized: after two weeks it would cease to exist, even notionally, being cancelled out by a opposing trade somewhere else in the courtyard.

### ***Commodities in Temporal Perspective: The Immediacy of Intermingled Yarn***

As local manufacturers began to dominate, Taiwanese intermingled yarn became increasingly detached from the material needs of textile manufacturers. However, its status as the basis for speculative and even immaterial trade persisted. As we have seen, partly this was because it could be used in a speculative game, where the value of the commodity was constantly projected into an uncertain future. But it was also because intermingled yarn could be used to lend money. This “money-lending” operation depended on a two-part trading manoeuvre known as “flipping” (*qallaabeh*). If the yarn was “flipped” in the correct way, many traders agreed that it avoided the Islamic prohibition of usurious money-lending (*riba*).

I describe the “flipping” *qallaabeh* manoeuvre below. First, I explore a feature of Taiwanese intermingled yarn which makes it suitable both for speculative trade in

the stock market, and for money-lending *qallaabeh* operations. Taiwanese yarn is easily convertible into cash (*sahl al-tawarruq*). It can be redeemed for cash instantly in the courtyard: the seller does not have to wait or substantially lower his price to find a buyer. So Taiwanese intermingled, a commodity with an international trajectory, gains a unique temporal quality when it arrives in Aleppo: immediacy. This temporal quality enables it to enter into particular social processes – speculative trade and the “flipping” of yarn into cash. These processes in turn have certain local meanings: speculative trade involving fictional yarn is viewed by many as unIslamic “betting” (*qimaar*) while “flipping” transactions are generally seen as an acceptable way to avoid the prohibition on money-lending.

“Only around ten percent of Taiwanese intermingled yarn is used straightaway for the machines”, Muhyi the wealthy young yarn manufacturer tells me. “The rest is used for two things: speculative trade (*bursa*) and flipping / money-lending (*qallaabeh*)”. These two processes are connected: a wealthy trader who wants a return on liquid capital can buy yarn for cash and sell it on credit for a higher price. When brokers in the market see a good deal, they buy yarn, perhaps on credit; when the price rises or they need cash, they sell it. The constant transformations between yarn and cash, and the alternation of credit and cash sales, mean that yarn might change hands several times before being “used” in the textile manufacturing process. It is only when one trader decides to buy wholesale and sell retail (less than around 250 boxes) that the chain is broken and the yarn will find its way to a loom or knitting machine. Often, all the people in the wholesale chain know each other, which means that none of these contracts are put into writing or registered with the state.

Trust in the convertibility of intermingled yarn has a temporal dimension: no-one needs to wait to buy or sell it. Like all objects, commodities have their own socially produced time. This is determined by factors such as how long it takes for people to interact with the object (to find, handle, and move it), and how long it takes for the object to perform its function in particular settings. In the case of a commodity, an important aspect of its time is how long it takes for the object to find a buyer or a

seller. Among all the yarns in the market in Aleppo, Taiwanese intermingled polyester count 150 has a particular immediacy about it. Market custom (*'urf*) specifies a payment period for each type of yarn. Alaa al-Din said:

“there are many different kinds and counts of yarn. The kind of yarn determines the payment arrangements. Intermingled yarn, which is the most commonly sold, must be paid for immediately. Spun yarn typically is paid for after seven days [in a *naqdi* or cash contract].”

Rarer yarns, which are harder to sell, tend to have longer payment periods under cash contracts. The fact that Taiwanese intermingled 150 should be paid for immediately reflects its easy convertibility and closeness to currency. Another feature of Taiwanese yarn – which it shares with other yarns – is its fungibility. As a standard fungible product, it is permissible to take full cash payment for it in advance of a future delivery date – a contract known in Islamic law as *bay' salam*. Its fungibility rests on the fact that there is no uncertainty about its characteristics which might give rise to later dispute. It is suitable for *bay' salam* because its characteristics can be fully specified in the absence of the material yarn. Muhyi put this as follows:

“Selling fabric is a young man’s game. You need to convince people about the fabric, the colours, the patterns. You can’t sell fabric without people seeing and touching it. It is different with yarn, yarn is like water, the primary material. You can just sell it, people don’t need to see and touch it to buy it.”

The yarn that is traded in the caravanserai is materially absent and the Taiwanese yarn that is used as a proxy for cash and as a speculative commodity might not exist at all. Boxed Taiwanese yarn circulates between warehouses, but in the caravanserai the sales consist in the exchange of words. They can therefore be made instantaneously and in quick succession. In some cases, a batch of Taiwanese intermingled yarn can be bought and sold several times in a matter of minutes. It can be sold on through a chain of buyers and sellers while the material yarn remains immobile in a warehouse. The yarn is symbolically moved through verbal exchanges.

So these exchange processes depend on the temporal quality – the immediacy – of Taiwanese yarn. This immediacy has several aspects: the fact that it should be paid

for without delay when bought on a cash contract; and the fact that, because it is materially absent, it can be “moved” from one trader to another instantaneously through words. A third aspect of its immediacy, related to the first two, is the fact that it leads much of its social life independently of the textile manufacture process. Unlike other yarns, Taiwanese 150 spends relatively little of its life enmeshed in manufacturing processes, where machines entangle yarn in their own temporalities, requiring them to be transported, unpacked, and literally “re-entangled” with other yarns on the beams and teeth of the looms. Rather, much of its life is spent in storage or transit, either being moved from one warehouse to another, or remaining immobile and being exchanged symbolically as words, where it exists in the shared narratives and imaginations of the traders.

The value of Taiwanese yarn as a financial commodity derives from this independence of the prosaic temporalities and logics of manufacture. This makes Taiwanese 150 intermingled unique among the many kinds of yarn traded in Khan al-Oulabiyya. The value of most yarns depends on technical factors such as whether they break on high-speed looms, and what percentage is wasted as loose filaments of the yarn which detach themselves on the machines and collect as dust on the factory floor. But these logics do not apply in the case of Taiwanese intermingled. Abu Tonja, a wealthy yarn broker, explained:

“imported intermingled is just used for commerce (*tjaara*) - going round and round - and a little consumption, by old factories with old machines like the 707 English looms. It is low quality; [the Taiwanese company] does good quality but the stuff imported here is low quality. It won't last on fast new machines - it breaks.”

An office-based importer underlined the point:

“local intermingled yarn is better on the machines than imported intermingled. But the local stuff is eighty-four lira while the imported stuff is ninety lira. It is all make-believe (*wahmiy*)! Like Yahoo shares: \$300 one day, \$3 the next.”

The distinction between yarn as a (verbally) circulating commodity, and yarn as raw material that enters the complicated and involved social time of weaving, is clear in the metaphoric language of the market. A yarn which has not yet entered the textile manufacturing process is known as a “virgin girl” (*bint biker*); when it is put onto the weaving machine it is said to “get married” (*yitzawwaj*). In marriage, the yarn enters a socially different time: its youthful potentiality as a financial instrument has been lost, but maturity and stability have been gained: the form of the yarn has become fixed. In this new manufacturing time, value is conceived differently: the yarn’s exchange-value as a commodity disappears and a new product, enmeshed in a different set of temporalities, emerges.

### ***Spoken Words and Absent Things: Substance and Falsifiability***

I noted above that the immediacy of Taiwanese intermingled makes it a suitable medium for “flipping” or money-lending operations. In the practice of *qallabeh*, wealthy traders sold yarn – usually Taiwanese Intermingled – on six-months credit, at a price around 18% higher than the current price. The purchaser then “flipped” the yarn into cash, by selling it immediately in the market, usually just under the current price to ensure a quick sale. In this two-part operation, the purchaser effectively borrowed cash from the market, at an annual rate equivalent to around 40%. In some cases, the purchaser sold the yarn back to the original seller, and in some of these cases the yarn was purely notional, without any material existence. In these cases, the fictional yarn was a conceit to enable the practice of money-lending but to avoid the Islamic prohibition on usury. The practice of *qallabeh* was connected to the *bursa* in Taiwanese yarn, and because it increased supply (even if of phantom yarn), it depressed prices.

*Qallabeh* was essentially a financial manoeuvre: the material yarn was a means not an end of the transaction. However, the consensus among traders and brokers was that the material yarn made a moral difference. One wealthy importer said, “if the boxes I get the broker to sell are imaginary rather than real, it is definitely *haram* – *haram haram*.” It was a form of “laughing at God” (*dahhik ‘al Allaah*) or “trying to

get the better of God” (*la‘b ‘al Allaah*). Similarly, Muhyi the wealthy young yarn manufacturer insisted that the yarn should materially exist, and should change hands freely in two separate contracts:

“if they buy yarn from you and sell it back immediately to your son for cash, or to you for cash, it is definitely *haram*. Everyone agrees. Definitely it cannot be a condition of the sale that you sell it back to them for cash. But many, even most people do it like this, without ever having or seeing or without there being the yarn. You never own the yarn.”

All the traders I spoke to concurred with this view: to make *qallaabeh* acceptable Islamically, the yarn should materially exist and pass freely from one person’s ownership to another. But what constitutes a change in ownership? Alaa al-Din said that it was important that the yarn was experienced tangibly, for example through a visit to the factory or warehouse:

“To lend money at interest, to say, ‘pay me 20% interest on this date’, is *haram* and no-one does it. But selling someone something at a higher price on credit, with payments in instalment (*taqsiit*) is ok. It is also ok if someone takes that yarn and sells it for cash immediately. It is *haram* to sell it back to the same person, except if they go to the factory and see it with their own eyes. This happens a lot. Brokers can do this behalf of someone else: they ask – ‘please go and buy yarn for me on credit and sell it for cash and give me the cash’.”

For Muhyi, a material change in ownership was important as it distinguished an acceptable trading operation from a dubious financial one:

“So here is the problem. Let’s say I sell you the yarn on credit. You don’t go to see it, or own it. It stays in my warehouse. You go and sell it for cash to Ra’id. You come to me and say, ‘transfer the yarn to Ra’id’. Before it gets to him, the yarn is lost, or stolen, or destroyed in a fire. Who should bear the loss? It is a question of ownership. You should *own* it [grasping something imaginary in his clenched fist], you should *see* it, it should be an honest trading operation, not a financial operation. You should know you own it. Maybe the next day the price goes up and you have gained. Maybe the price goes down and you have lost. You should be a trader, not a... If you agree that you should bear the loss, you are thinking like a trader.”

Traders know they own goods because they are ready to bear the loss if the market price goes down. This recalls an archetypal illustration many traders gave me of trustworthiness in the marketplace: “the person who has sold, has sold, and the person who has bought, has bought” (*man baa‘ baa‘ wa man shtaraa shtaraa*). In other words, a “trustworthy trader” (*taajir saadiq*) stands by the verbal contracts he has made, even if the price of the goods rises or falls against him before the material transfer has taken place. Being a “trader” is about being ready, if necessary, to bear a loss.

Now let us think back to the courtyard *bursa*. Here, largely fictional yarn is bought and sold by verbal contracts between participants who wish to sell it on (immediately if possible) for a profit. For the office-based traders, the fact that the courtyard deals are often not embedded in a wider material reality or social time means that they are not “proper trade” (*tjaara sahh*). The office-based traders mark this distinction linguistically: courtyard deals are mere “talk” (*hakiy*). The designation of “talk” refers to the pretence of trade: participants might pretend to be buying and selling five thousand boxes of yarn, but in reality they are just talking – they might have only fifty real boxes to trade.

There is an implicit contrast in the office traders’ discourse between the “talk” (*hakiy*) of the courtyard rabble and the “word” (*kalimeh*) of a reputable trader who can back up his verbal commitments with real cash and real yarn. One reputable broker claimed to be well-enough respected in market circles that he could purchase half a million dollars of yarn over the telephone with a single word (*bi-l-kalimeh*). More generally, a powerful trader or any senior male with the authority to issue orders and resolve disputes is said to “have word” (*iluh kalimeh*); to “hear his word” (*sma‘ kalimatuh*) is a common idiom of respect and obedience among male hierarchies in shops and families. The “word” is a symbol of social and moral substance; with *kalimeh* a trader could settle disputes, move people, transport goods, command authority, deploy capital, or purchase yarn. In the case of a senior trader, *kalimeh* had been achieved over several years and within a tightly knit social world.

It was embodied in his use of space, movement, and his sense of time, as I describe in the next chapter.

Yet if the habitus of the wealthier traders implied authority and seriousness, some also indulged in *hakiy*. One trader in another part of Aleppo's markets, sitting in a semi-private circle with his friends, made a derogatory comment about the police – a potentially risky move in Syria's one-party state – and then claimed loudly "I'll say it openly, I am not afraid!". When I asked him afterwards if he really wasn't afraid, he chuckled and said, "it was just *hakiy*!". Here, *hakiy* meant "bluster": talk, perhaps boastful or brave, which was not meant to be taken seriously. *Hakiy* is a special level of discourse, perhaps a kind of entertainment, which is nevertheless not a "lie"; it does not have the status of a truth-claim that could be falsified.

There is plenty of *hakiy* in the courtyard trading. One evening, everyone's attention was drawn together as the general hubbub was pierced by a single voice, shouting to all corners of the caravanserai: "as God is my witness I lost eighty-two thousand lira here, in this khan, seventeen days ago!" The voice belonged to a short man who had just entered the fray. He was dressed differently from everyone else: a long gallabiya robe and a long beard. There were no gasps of horror, only some sniggering. No-one seemed to take him too seriously, there was even a smile playing on the lips of the man who claimed to have been financially devastated. He continued boisterously proclaiming his misfortune, and ended proposing to the crowd: "I need fifty boxes! Who will sell me fifty boxes?"

There was a constant theme of bluffing, "empty talk" (*kalaam faadiy*) and "insubstantial talk" (*hakiy*) in the courtyard, making it hard to tell if claims were true or not. They were recognised as a form of play. When I asked Ahmad why there was so much joking (*mazh*) and "empty talk", he replied, "lack of work" (*qillat al-shughl*). Unemployment led to what the more successful brokers and traders called *hakiy*, a completely inconsequential, substanceless, unfalsifiable kind of talk.

I want to suggest a parallel between *hakiy* as entertainment and *hakiy* as courtyard trading. In the former (verbal) exchange, *hakiy* cannot be falsified. In the latter (material) exchange, losses cannot be borne. In both cases, it constitutes a level of exchange where full responsibility is not taken for what is exchanged. There is no substance; as one young trader outside the caravanserai said,

“Khan al-Oulabiyya is just *hakiy*. People sell a batch of yarn without actually having it in hand, and without taking any cash. It is all *hakiy*. Then the buyer sells it onto someone else, in the same way, perhaps two hours later, or the next day. The price goes up or down, and someone in the chain loses or wins. The actual yarn comes after a month.”

I am arguing that selling something without owning it is like saying something without meaning it: both actions exist in a realm of fantasy, free from material or political constraints or consequences<sup>14</sup>. Conversely, an exchange of authoritative words (*kalimeh*) creates a truth-claim that could be falsified; or a type of obligation where losses could be owned (fully backed by cash). In the realm of authoritative words or *kalimeh*, claims must be falsifiable, and losses must be bearable. In other words, the negative version of the proposition or the transaction must be a possible state of affairs. In the realm of “chat” (*hakiy*), this is not the case: *hakiy* trades or claims belong to a different category of propositions or transactions, which cannot be backed up or capitalised. They are exchanged according to a different logic. It is perhaps no accident that bluffing is a common tactic in courtyard trading. *Hakiy* words exist within their own tightly framed domain. They are followed by a smile or laughter or some element of performance that makes it clear (to all except the anthropologist, in the example above about the police) that they are part of a certain kind of game. Their significance goes no further; they are not meant to be falsifiable.

Thus, outrageous *hakiy* claims made within circles of friends are kept private and insignificant by the joke or entertainment frame. Similarly, undercapitalised bets in the courtyard *bursa* can only be made, and phantom boxes traded, among a small group of participants who subscribe to common rules and parameters of value which

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<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the term *hakwaji*, or someone who indulges in or peddles *hakiy*, was used by some to refer to café-intellectuals who talked (idealistically) about politics but whose talk was considered (materially) inconsequential in wider society.

frame off the *bursa* as a circuit of exchange that follows its own logic. No-one could sell a notional box of yarn outside the courtyard nor could they sell one inside the courtyard unless they were recognised to belong to the group of *bursajiyya*. Real and fully owned boxes of Taiwanese yarn may travel further, by virtue of their materiality. The logic according to which they are exchanged and have value is recognised beyond the caravanserai. Likewise, *kalimeh* words travel further than *hakiy* words, by virtue of their authority, i.e. their embeddedness in other forms of social capital. For example, those with most *kalimeh* in the market might act as arbiters and resolve disputes in matters that have nothing to do with trade.

### *Fantasies of Value and Alternative Futures*

From around 2000, the *bursa* became increasingly disconnected from the wider material and social processes of import and manufacture. Phantom deals started to predominate. These phantom boxes of yarn circulated particularly among semi-employed brokers who were excluded from networks of influence such as the assemblies (*jamaa'aat*) of Aleppo's wealthier yarn and textile entrepreneurs. Because the material yarn circulating in the courtyard *bursa* was fictional, those with relatively little power or capital were able to assert their own desire onto its absent material reality. Participants projected fantasies of value into the absent yarn. They did so through *hakiy* – a type of talking which constituted the *bursa* as a distinctive field of exchange. In other contexts, *hakiy* is a discursive style which is used to imagine an unreal fantasy – see the example above about the *hakiy*-scenario of being able to stand up to the coercive apparatus of the state.

For the marginalized and the weak, there was a kind of freedom from financial constraint in these abstract worlds. In the *hakiy*-world of the courtyard *bursa*, powerlessness in the wider material and social world did not matter. Disembedded from material and social time, participants seemed to be free from inequality, at least within the framework of the game. Alaa al-Din pointed to the fact these kinds of trades enabled those without resources to participate in the market. He implied that, by disregarding the logic of capital and social prestige, it created a level-playing

field: “there is no big boss (*mu'allim*) in the *bursa*. A student can make money out of (*yarbah*) a merchant who is worth millions.” In his own case, it helped him to finance his way through university, alongside his work as a broker.

*Hakiy* trades are an arena for the poor and marginalised; they are boisterous and adversarial, but they also form a domain where transactors will never be called to prove the substance of their claim (to provide the actual yarn); they will never occupy a domain of falsifiability. Unsurprisingly, *hakiy* trades were not considered appropriate for the wealthier traders who had status (*wazn*), capital (*rasmaal*) and work to do. Wealthy traders leaving their offices when the *bursa* was in full swing tended to walk through the throng serenely untouched by the activity around them. Their sons sometimes stopped to chat to brokers in the courtyard whom they knew as friends, but would not consider entering directly into a *hakiy* trade. Similarly, Gilsenan notes that verbal play and mock fighting, while “known in many areas of the Arab world”, should not be carried to excess on formal and proper occasions in the Lebanese village he studied: “too much ‘play’ was not fitting for male assemblies, particularly if persons of rank were present” (Gilsenan 1996:208-9).

Thus, the Khan al-Oulabiyya courtyard is marginalised by power and capital, but is also a space for alternative futures. Its *bursa* is thoroughly produced by but also imaginatively freed from the constraints of power. The courtyard, for all that it appears to be a public space – open-air and boisterous rather than concealed – is in fact difficult for an outsider to enter into properly. I was not able to trade in it, except through Alaa al-Din, who was a known person. As a space of fantasy with its own notion of the future, the courtyard was a private space. By contrast, the apparently private offices of the wealthier traders and importers were easier to enter. They were physically closed off from the courtyard, and anyone entering to trade needed capital to be taken seriously; but those with capital did not need a reputation. Anyone with money could enter into a trade. This was not the case in the courtyard.

My broader argument is that the recent standardisation of the market around dominant local yarn manufacturers has in fact created a plurality of divergent spaces

and futures. In the offices of the Khan al-Oulabiyya caravanserai, the discourse that counted was *kalimeh*: serious talk or proper trade. Exchanges of yarn through the medium of *kalimeh* were relevant to, measured in and constrained by wider material and social processes. In the courtyard of the caravanserai, the discourse that mattered was *hakiy*: informal talk or undercapitalised speculative trade. The traders in the offices dealt in material yarn which, through its presence in warehouses and factories, created a particular kind of time. The office-based traders expressed the view that the materiality of Taiwanese intermingled yarn should assert itself on merchants, mobilising them or their staff, requiring them to take time to visit warehouses, and thus drawing them into a different kind of temporality from the one that predominates in the courtyard. In fact, one way that the materiality of the yarn asserts itself is through the wealthier traders' moral discourses about the wrongness of buying and selling on a commodity without having seen and touched it.

However, not everyone played by these rules: for the courtyard traders, the need physically to procure and touch or see the yarn, and hence to enter a different temporality, was simply a "headache" (*waj' ras*). They avoided becoming entangled in the materiality of yarn which would otherwise require them to take the time to visit it and to have enough capital to own it. Thus notional yarn, through its material absence, created a different sense of time and of the future. A wholesale yarn trader explained to me in his office:

"The people you are talking about in the courtyard who shout at each other, that is quite different. It is *haram* because in Islam you cannot sell something that you don't own. Ninety percent of the time, they haven't fixed (*ma zabbatuu*) with any company to send them goods, they don't have any goods. They don't receive (*la yastalimuu*) any goods. The settlement date is always the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month (*ras al shahr*). It is so exact because they are not waiting for the arrival of any real goods. When you import real goods, you don't know exactly when they will arrive. With them, it is make-believe. It is *haram*. It is just words."

Phantom boxes of Taiwanese yarn, circulating in the *bursa*, create their own kind of time. Disembedded from wider social and material processes, they subvert the normal moral order of trade, according to the office-based traders. By largely doing away with materials and cash and reducing yarn to words, the courtyard *bursa*

disrupts normal trading time: participants can sell yarn before they have bought it. The courtyard *bursa* might arise from the temporal nature of office trading, where the 35-day shipping delay creates the need to speculate on the future price. However, it is the fact that future settlement dates can be specified so precisely in the *bursa* that signals its unreality and morally dubious nature for the office traders. In this unreal certainty, the denial of the risk that the materials might arrive late, the *bursa* creates its own time. If materials through their presence have their own time, materials through their absence introduce a different kind of time.

For the office-based traders, the unreal nature of this time – the unnaturally predictable nature of the future “delivery” and settlement date – means that the courtyard *bursa* resembles a kind of game. They refer to it as a “game” (*la'beh*) for children. For them, the courtyard trades are a game because they are not relevant to, measured in or constrained by material and social processes or the temporalities that these processes impose. The courtyard *bursa* has game-like features: it has its own space (warehouses for example are not necessary), and its own calculus of risk (shipment delays are unimportant, while the intention of one's opponents is central). As a purely financial instrument, phantom yarn constitutes its own framework: disembedded from material and social time, participants can assert their own rules. By contrast, in office-based exchanges, the material yarn asserts itself on traders, needing to be handled in a certain way and embodying the social requirements, desires and demands of others.

Many *bursa* participants also experience the temporal-discursive world of the courtyard as a game or “past-time”: it involves contest, subterfuge, adrenalin, fear, anticipation, and addictive rushes of activity when time flashes by and several deals are made in a few instants. One of the older courtyard participants said:

“Since 2000, or 2001, a lot of the deals have started to be phantom: there is no actual yarn. Before, it mostly involved real goods. Now, people do it as a past-time (*hiwaaya*). It is for making money (*ribh*), of course, but also for a past-time. It is not for work (*al-shughl*).

If the *bursa* cannot be classified as “work” (*shughl*) or as “trade” (*tjaara*), it is because time in the *bursa* is “sped up”; it takes the essence of trade (uncertainty and the potential to make money on price differences), dramatises some features (the potential for confrontation between buyer and seller) and denies other more prosaic aspects (the materiality, effort, the need to accumulate capital and the longer time-scales these imply). Alaa al-Din emphasised to me the instantaneous nature of the courtyard trading:

“A lot of the time, people sell and buy in more or less the same instant [exploiting price disparities in the marketplace]. You can cover yourself, by buying back if you are *mkashif*, and then you can buy some more if you think the market is going up. The market moves a lot. It can go down and up and down again and so on in the same [two-week] session. Over this session, it has gone from 83 [lira per kilo] to 84 to 83 to 82 to 80 to 78 to 79. I sold when it was falling between 82 and 80: I sold 100 boxes at 81 lira and another 100 boxes at 80.75. So now I need to buy back 200 boxes. I considered doing it yesterday, but am waiting to see if it will fall some more.”

Participants in the *bursa* in fact inhabit a range of temporalities: as well as the rush of instant trades, much of the time is spent waiting. Many of my visits to the courtyard ended with disappointment, as few if any deals seemed to be being made. The student who first introduced me to Alaa al-Din, and with whom I conducted several interviews in the caravanserai, said after one hour-long visit: “we didn't see a single deal, they were joking a lot maybe because they are just waiting – maybe one deal per two or three days is all they need?” However, the temporal frame could shift suddenly, as Alaa al-Din explained: “sometimes the market suddenly becomes a real market (*nizaamiy*), with buying and selling”. The excitement of these periods of intense activity, and the anticipation through the longer periods of waiting, combined to create an addictive force: “once you have started, it is hard to stop. People get the bug (*al-suus*).”

The courtyard *bursa* is also structured according to a different daily rhythm from office-based trading. Many of the wealthier office-based traders regretted the fact that market business was conducted between 1pm and 7pm, since according to Islamic tradition it was preferable to rise early and work in the morning, they said. I

often heard the story, in the caravanserai and beyond, that shopkeepers used to come to the market early in the morning to read the Quran. After their first sale of the day, they would refuse to deal with any customers until all of their neighbours had also made a sale. But if the office-traders regretted the passing of this virtuous time and the slippage of office hours to the afternoon, participants in the courtyard *bursa* inhabited an even less virtuous part of the day, arriving between the afternoon and the evening prayer. Brokers and courtyard traders were also less committed to the trading rhythms of the market. Alaa al-Din said about being a broker that: “it’s a good life: you work when you want (*al-dawaam ‘alaa kayfak*). You don’t have to go when you don’t want to, and you don’t have to stay for long. You can do all your work in four hours.” The same applied to the courtyard *bursa*: “it doesn’t take long – you don’t have to be there all the time, and you can just turn up on the first and the fifteenth of the month.”

The courtyard *bursa* and the office trades therefore occupy different temporalities. The courtyard *bursa* is instantaneous, and part-time; profits go and come quickly; and everything is known in two weeks, when profits and losses are realised. In office-based trading, time scales are longer. In contrast to the lulls and instantaneity of the courtyard *bursa*, organising a shipment of yarn requires a good deal of study and planning, the marshalling of capital, the preparation of a Letter of Credit, around thirty-five days for the shipment period, and then an involved process of *takhliis* or customs-clearance. And quite apart from the immediate management of logistics, import requires a hidden backdrop of longer-term processes, such as the accumulation of capital, and the cultivation of relationships with customers and reputation in the market. These processes take place over several years and in many cases generations.

In summary, standardisation did not kill speculation. The reconfiguration of the market around dominant local yarn manufacturers simply shifted the nature and scale of what happened in the courtyard of the caravanserai. The courtyard *bursa* now constitutes an alternative space and set of temporalities to the dominant space-time of the yarn trade in Aleppo. There is no denying that, in financial terms, this alternative

space-time is marginal to economic life in Aleppo. But despite this, for some Taiwanese yarn seemed in an emblematic way to capture something unique about the conditions of possibility in Syria: the relative lack of accessible formal investment and credit institutions, and the resourcefulness of a trading city in these conditions. A commodity with an international trajectory, Taiwanese yarn was an intrinsic part of local practices and meanings in Syria. Muhyi, the wealthy young yarn manufacturer, justified my interest in the yarn one evening as we sat in his brother's up-market restaurant:

“You don't find this *bursa* in Damascus, by the way. It is because there is no [formal] stock market that we have this phenomenon. It is especially [characteristic of] the old city (*mdiineh*). It is [characteristic of] Syria, it is Aleppo, it is the old city, it is Khan al-Oulabiyya, it is one particular kind of yarn: 150/1 Taiwanese.”

## Chapter Five

### The Flipside of Affection

In the previous chapter I argued that the “standardisation” of Aleppo’s main yarn market in fact led to a diversification of alternative time-spaces, each projecting a different kind of future onto the commodity of Taiwanese yarn. In this chapter I explore what the office-traders say about the different time-space of the courtyard *bursa*: that it lacks substance and reality; that it is a form of unIslamic betting; that, because it is an imaginary zero-sum game, it is not socially beneficial – a requirement in Islamic economics; and that the people who participate are here-today-gone-tomorrow: they do not embody the essence of trade (*tjaara*) which is “continuity” (*istimraariyya*).

Through these discourses, the office-traders are by implication making statements about themselves: that their own status and respectability consists in having substance (financial capital, and their sons alongside them) and being trustworthy (having authoritative words, and practicing continuity in their trade). Substance and trustworthiness are both accumulated through inhabiting a particular kind of time: long-term material and social processes (import; long-term and cross-generational trading relationships; ownership of offices) as opposed to the abstract “betting” time of the courtyard *bursa*.

In the courtyard, what is at a premium is the ability to bluff, provoke and get the better of one’s opponent in an agonistic, zero-sum game that is understood by participants as both a public contest of nerve and a “psychological war” (*harb nafsiyya*). Frequent and noisy accusations of duplicity (*kizb*) are gleefully made (“he is an actor! he is pure cinema!”) and fully tolerated. Rather than the fictive kinship of “brotherhood”, it is an arena where “father competes with son”. Rather than valorising “honesty” a premium is put on bluffing and “twisting tactics” (*asaaliib multawiyeh*). The courtyard *bursa* is the flipside of the idealised trading relationship

of affection, honesty, continuity and mutual benefit – it is the inverse of the discourse I encountered among well-capitalised yarn traders and among Abdullah’s factory circle (chapter one). Rather than the official discourse of honesty (*sidq*) and trustworthiness (*amaaneh*), what is valorised in the courtyard is the “muted value” (cf Jacobson-Widding 1997:56) of “slipperiness” (*bandaqa*).

The office-based traders denigrate the courtyard *bursa* as “irregular” (*ghayr nizaamiy*) and “haphazard” (*‘ashwaa’iy*) and as an “untrustworthy” (*muu muriih*) place. In employing these terms, they distance themselves from the muted values and identify themselves with the official discourses of honesty and trustworthiness. But is one reason why they do so that the *bursa* in fact exemplifies the potential for deceit (*kizb*) and short-term zero-sum confrontation that lurks at the heart of all trade? Does the *bursa* dramatise the ever-present potential in their own trading relations for anti-relation? Any sharp discursive contrast between official and muted values should provoke our skepticism. Indeed, these discourses mask some hidden connections between the two time-spaces: some of the wealthy traders and importers orchestrate the agonistic activity of the courtyard from “behind the curtain” – in the calm of their own offices.

### ***Hierarchies of Respect***

The respectability of the traders who occupied offices in Khan al-Oulabiyya was not simply a matter of asserting moral propriety. It was also a question of having substance (*wazn* or “weight”). This meant both the financial substance of capital to back up one’s words, and, for the older traders, having the substance of kin: his son working alongside him in the office. It was also desirable to have a geographical presence in or near the centre of the caravanserai where one could store wealth and welcome guests. The office was both the “site of hospitality” (*madaafa*) and the seat of one’s trading “prestige” (*makaana*). The importance of having one’s own office (see Rabo 2005a) was implicit in the disparaging comment one senior office-based trader made to me about the *bursajiyya* courtyard traders: “they hide in the shadows [of the courtyard] when the sun is hot”.

The man who made the comment, Abu Jasim, was a prominent importer and the sole agent for one of the largest local manufacturers. Whenever I visited him, he was sitting behind a large wooden desk at the back of his office, with his sons sitting in the ante-room near the door that gave onto the caravanserai. Although he was not the richest trader in the market, he was among the most respected. Many referred to him as the “head” (*ra'iis*) of the caravanserai, turned to when an arbiter is needed to resolve a dispute. He was in his sixties, older than most, and also among the most elegant; he wore a smart blue blazer, an open-necked shirt; he had a lip-line moustache and carefully combed hair. Like many of the senior men in this market, he was accompanied by a younger man during our interview. This man mediated our discussion without translating it. He repeated my questions to the senior man and then immediately, word-for-word, relayed to me his answers – which were addressed to the middleman, not to me.

These details contributed to his sense of status, substance and respectability. The market was undoubtedly a dynamic place where social hierarchies and respectability were contested and in some cases ignored. But it was also a place where hierarchy substance (*wazn*) mattered. One of the first things Alaa al-Din did when I met him and explained my interest in the yarn market was to quote a market saying: “there are three kinds of traders: real traders, mini-traders, and people who trade shit” (*al-tjaar tlaateh, taajir wa twaijar wa taajir khara*). Everyone has something to sell, but any market is built on a sense of hierarchy and on differing degrees of respectability. He outlined this to me by describing different categories of brokers:

“There are three types of broker. The first kind has no capital, and is not exposed to any risk. He is like a beginner. He just acts as a point of connection between the yarn factory or merchant and the customer. He visits fabric factories, taking orders, then looks for the best price. They constitute about 35% of the total, and make between 12,000 lira and 125,000 lira a month. The second kind does the same as the first type, but also works with some of his own capital: he might have between 400,000 and one million lira. He has respect (*ihiraamiyya*) and his own customers. He might make between 60,000 and 200,000 lira a month. They make up around 50% of the total. The third kind does not work with factories, he just works with other brokers. Why should he give himself the headache of going to factories every

morning? He has no customers other than merchants. He has the most capital: perhaps three million lira and upwards. He makes money on price rises, and is exposed to the risk of price drops. He buys wholesale in cash, and sells retail on credit.”

There is a progression within the hierarchy: the first type of broker seeks to become the second type, and then the third, when he is effectively no longer a broker but a trader (*taaajir*). The progression is made by accumulating capital, customers and reputation, as well as know-how. Alaa al-Din estimated that in the boom years between 1995 and 2000, around three-quarters of yarn brokers working in the caravanserai became traders. Many of the second and third kind of brokers maintain offices in the vicinity, in neighbouring markets and caravanserais within the old city markets.

In Alaa al-Din’s description of the different categories of brokers, respect is connected to having and risking capital; also, those higher up the chain tend to deal only with other merchants and brokers, and are thus more likely to remain sedentary within the caravanserai, from where they conduct their business. Indeed, if a sense of hierarchy is fundamentally connected to capital, risk, and a sense of what trade is, it is also embodied in space and movement.

### ***Immobility and Presence: the Habitus of the Office Trader***

Abu Samt is praying when I enter. Kneeling on a prayer mat on the floor, he senses my arrival and invites me in with a single word – *striih*, have a seat – before returning to his prayer. He intones the *fatiha*, the first chapter in the Quran, in a barely audible whisper, as I take a seat on one of the comfortable leather armchairs in front of his desk. Directly in front of me, in a framed photograph prominently displayed on the wall, he is shaking hands with the President of the Syrian Arab Republic. On his desk are two calculators, a telephone, and a large ornate Quran housed in its own box. Calligraphic inscriptions of Quranic verses hang from the wall behind his large desk. Opposite them is a large television screen which is switched off during the prayer but which, I remember from a previous visit, had been showing stock market and currency news on *al-Arabiya* channel. Discreetly placed

on the windowsill is another clue to his profession: two rolls, one white and one black, of polyester yarn.

It is five in the afternoon and we are alone in his office. Abu Samt, one of the richest wholesale importers of yarn in Aleppo, finishes his prayer, rises to his feet and returns slowly to his desk. We are sitting in his single-storey, two-room office, near the centre of the Khan al-Oulabiyya yarn market. I guess that Abu Samt is in his fifties, an experienced trader. He, like many of the successful Aleppan traders and industrialists I knew, traced his wealth to trade with the USSR and Russia in the 1980s and 1990s. A key development was the 1986-1991 “payments agreement” with the USSR, as I mentioned in the previous chapter. But Aleppan entrepreneurs continued to benefit from the connection with Russia even after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Lacking banking and commercial relations with most of the rest of the world, Russian importers continued to look to Syrian manufacturers for textiles.

Many traders and industrialists look back on the 1990s and remember profits of three or four hundred percent. Textile traders remember the Russians who arrived in 1991 with suitcases full of dollars: from Russia, also Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine. A handful of the largest Aleppan textile manufacturers used their profits to establish large yarn factories in the city’s industrial periphery and hinterland. Encouraged by new investment laws which exempted certain industrial enterprises from tax for five years, and by tariffs restricting the import of yarn, others followed suit. By the end of the 1990s, men like Abu Samt – who had made fortunes importing yarn from Turkey, India, Malaysia, Taiwan and China – suddenly faced local competition. Imported yarns dominated the market through the 1990s, but by the turn of century, locally manufactured yarns had reversed the pattern and become the commodities of choice in Aleppo’s textile factories.

Nevertheless, import still figures in the business of the caravanserai. Imported artificial yarns arrive mainly from India and the Far East: China, Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia. They are shipped by container to the port city of Lattakieh, and once they clear customs they are driven to the suburbs of Aleppo. Like the now dominant

locally manufactured yarns, they are stored in warehouses outside the old city walls. Some is stored in old industrial quarters like Kallaseh and Arqub, but most warehouses are in outskirts of the city, where land is cheaper and access easier. This is where many of the textile factories are located too: in industrial villages, suburbs and dedicated zones like Kafar Hamra, Liramon, Shaykh Najjar, and beyond into the rural hinterland where the new yarn factories have been established. The governorate of Aleppo, dominated by the city, has a population of around four million; it rivals the Syrian capital, Damascus, in industrial output. Most yarn sold in Aleppo is bought by Aleppan entrepreneurs; some is sold to Damascus, and after free trade agreements within the Arab world and Turkey, to Egypt and Turkey.

The fathers sit at the centre of these networks, and are visited. Men like Abu Samt and his neighbour Abu Ibrahim, in their fifties, have established their businesses, their reputations, and their families. It is their sons who move around between offices in the caravanserai, and who most often man the telephones. Friends, customers and younger traders in the caravanserai visit the fathers and spend a few minutes sharing a coffee or tea and their views on the state of the market: is it “cold” or “hot”; who has brought in what goods, what is their quality; who has paid what, and who is late paying. In many ways, Abu Samt and Abu Ibrahim, in the centre of Aleppo’s old city, embody the charisma of the entrepreneur much like I argued Abdullah does in his knitting factory in the city’s periphery. They maintain a presence at the centre of logistical networks; they are also at the centre of trajectories of visitors. They sit dispensing hospitality to those whom they have gathered around (*jam’*) in their diwan or *majlis*. Like Abdullah, they have a *jamaa’a* or assembly: a group of regular visitors tied to them by bonds of affection, kinship or common interest.

### ***Mimicking Substance***

The social hierarchy of respectability in the caravanserai is a matter of having independent financial capital, geographical presence, kinship and close relations with other “respectable” (*muhtaram*) men. These are all different forms of substance and presence, and are accumulated over time. They are seen and felt in immobility,

quietness and the assembly of people gathered around him. As discussed in the previous chapter, these forms of substance and presence inhere in the language of the trader and make it authoritative: his word (*kalimeh*) matters and should be taken seriously.

However, the *bursajiyya* in the courtyard seem to challenge this hierarchy, and the distinctions that Alaa al-Din drew between the different types of brokers. Like the richest brokers and traders, they sell nominally huge amounts of yarn using only their words; they sell only to other merchants, “amongst themselves” (*bayn baadun*); like the richest brokers, they are continually exposed to the risk that the market will move against them; and they conduct their business in a central space in the caravanserai. However, behind the appearances, the reality is different: the loudly exclaimed deals involving several tonnes of yarn have no substance – the yarn is often weightless and there is no real capital; despite the imposing verbal displays, the levels of capital are among the lowest in the market; according to wealthy traders in their air-conditioned offices, they are simply “children”. Their symbolic challenge to the hierarchy of the yarn traders seems to come in the form of a parody: they ape aspects of the wealthiest traders’ practice, while lacking their wealth, their unruffled poise, or their control of space.

Below I explore what the office-traders say about the different time-space of the courtyard *bursa*: that it lacks substance and reality; that it is a form of unIslamic betting; that, because it is an imaginary zero-sum game, it is not socially beneficial – a requirement in Islamic economics; and that the people who participate are here-today-gone-tomorrow: they do not embody the essence of trade (*tjaara*) which is “continuity” (*istimraariyya*). Through these discourses, the office-traders are by implication making statements about themselves: that their own status and respectability consists in having substance and being trustworthy.

## UnIslamic betting

Abu Samt returns from his prayer and settles himself in the executive chair behind his desk. From inside the quiet wood-panelled and air-conditioned space, we can both hear the combative shouting and joking of the crowd outside. Abu Samt, like most of the office traders I have spoken to, is dismissive of them. They are “children” who have at most fifty boxes to trade; the market is just “talk” (*hakiy*). The noisy bluffing and apparent frivolity of the courtyard traders is not the reason he disapproves of them. More to the point, the yarn which they are so noisily discussing is both weightless and invisible. It is bad enough that *mkashif* traders in the courtyard sell yarn that they do not yet own, and could not afford to buy if they had to. Worse, most of the boxes of yarn they are symbolically moving around amongst themselves do not actually exist in any material sense. Because, as I noted in the previous chapter, most of the sales within the group cancel each other out, there is no need to exchange any boxes or for the boxes to exist.

Abu Samt, and most of the other office-based traders and brokers, say that in their opinion trading in notional yarn is a type of betting (*qimaar*), which is forbidden in Islam. Because there is no real time or material, there can be no sense of value. When I asked Abu Samt how the price of notional Taiwanese polyester related to the price of the real variety, he said: “There is no real price (*si‘r haqiqi*) in my opinion”. The price of imported Taiwanese yarn which was used mainly for speculation and money-lending was in large part “imaginary” (*wahmiy*). The accountant who worked for his neighbour, Ibrahim, expressed a similar view: “these are agreements, not contracts (*ittifaaqiyyaat, laysat ‘uquud*). It is like on Wall Street! Thirty percent is real, seventy percent is imaginary. This is special, isn’t it? Made in Syria!”

Unsurprisingly, those who did take part saw the matter differently. The courtyard market did not consist entirely of notional deals and imaginary boxes. There was a mixture of real and notional boxes; the relative proportion of each varied from week to week as it depended on demand for yarn among small textile factories (and appetite for risk among courtyard traders). In many cases, therefore, the basis of the

courtyard deals was real yarn, with the fiction of imaginary boxes used to leverage up the size of the profit or loss. As Alaa al-Din said:

“you might have 100 [real] boxes, but trade in 10,000 boxes. Some trades have reached 40,000 boxes nominally. Maybe there are only around 3000 real boxes in circulation [in every two week period]. Sometimes there are no actual boxes that end up being sold to fabric factories, and sometimes there are a lot. It depends on factory demand. There are different views about this. Some like Abu Jasim [the “head” of the caravanserai] view it as *haram*.”

Alaa al-Din pointed to a range of views about the propriety of courtyard trades. Some viewed the whole enterprise as unacceptable because of its association with phantom boxes. Others said it was only wrong to sell boxes one did not own (to be *mkashif*). Others argued that it was acceptable to trade in this way if one had the money to buy the goods outright if necessary.

Office-based traders were circumspect about denouncing the courtyard traders in Islamic terms. Maurer notes that in some Islamic traditions, certain financial practices (such as speculation, betting, and insurance) are problematic because they imply a calculative, mathematical attempt to grasp the future (Maurer 2005). However, most office-based traders in Khan al-Oulabiyya were careful not to claim the authority of scholars who could issue an Islamic legal opinion. Often, comments about the practice of trading in notional yarn were phrased along the lines of “I will not call them unbelievers (*maa bidii kffarhun*)...but in my opinion, it is *haram* ...” or “in my opinion, it is no different from betting (*qimaar*)”.

What is interesting, however, is that the office-based traders were not reticent about denouncing the courtyard traders and their activities as substanceless. Most office-based traders and brokers were keen to draw a moral and discursive distinction between the nature of their own business and the “circle” (*halqa*) of people who took part in courtyard trades. A wealthy yarn broker expressed a common opinion:

“they do not express the nature of this market. They tarnish (*yshawwishuu*) the image of this caravanserai. What happens there is the cause, even though on a very small scale, of the global financial crisis (*al-azmeh al-maaliyya al-*

'*aalemiyya*). It is not correct trade (*tijaara sahh*), because they have nothing to sell. It is betting. It is just chat (*hakiy*), just air (*hawaa*'). It is not the Islamic way.'

In summary, courtyard trading was as insubstantial as "air"; it was "imaginary" (*wahmiy*); it was a "game" for "children". They had only fifty boxes but acted as if they had five thousand. Thus the office-traders imply that their own activities are, by contrast, an honest expression of their own "substance" or "weight" (*wazn*).

### Anti-social

Ahmad, a well-built man in his fifties and one of the larger yarn importers, said of the courtyard traders:

"Those people standing outside are not really a stock exchange (*bursa*)...It is wrong (*haram*), because they don't touch the goods. It is *haram* to sell goods without touching them, or seeing them, or without them being yours. They sell from one to another, without actually owning the goods. So there are three people involved in any transaction. Often more – it passes five or six times among them. People don't know where the goods are, or whose responsibility they are. If the goods get burnt, whose responsibility is it?"

Muhammad, a textile manufacturer who also imported and sold yarn from his factory in the industrial periphery, said the same when I asked him about buying yarn on credit and selling it immediately for cash: "it is *haram* if you don't see the goods. You shouldn't sell goods on without having seen them in the warehouse. You need to go the warehouse."

Muhyi, the wealthy young yarn manufacturer, agreed that selling notional yarn was improper. We were discussing the practice of using notional yarn to lend money at interest, through *qallaabeh* deals. In these transactions, a money-lender would sell the notional yarn on six-months' credit at a 18% mark-up on the current price, and then immediately re-purchase it for cash at the current price. The counter-party left the caravanserai with cash and an obligation to repay with 18% interest after six months. This practice, known as *qallaabeh*, was seen as a way to get around the Islamic prohibition on usury (*riba*). Because it involves selling large amounts of

phantom Taiwanese yarn, it depresses the price of the *bursa*. But all the office-traders I spoke to disapproved of *qallaabeh* unless the yarn materially existed, and changed ownership freely and tangibly. Muhyi rationalised the logic of this ethical position as follows:

“I have just thought of another reason, the way I can explain it to myself. If you buy [yarn] from me, and take possession of it, and sell it onto someone else, you call up your driver, and ask him to pick it up and transfer it. You spend four lira on the call. The driver goes and buys petrol to fill up the car. You pay the driver’s wages. All these expenses – telephone, petrol, driver’s wages – go into the economy and support it. You give people work. If you just take money on interest from the yarn trader [i.e. *qallaabeh* with notional yarn], what has happened? Nothing! Usury (*riba*), even very low amounts, means that you are taking money or making money through laziness, and this is *haram*.”

The common thread in all these quotes is that the immateriality of notional yarn is socially harmful, or that it fails to be socially useful. For Ahmad, the yarn’s immateriality makes it impossible to assign responsibility for loss or damage: to ensure that words (verbal sales) are backed up with substance (capital). For Muhyi, the yarn’s immateriality means that the benefit of trade cannot spread naturally through society but rather remains restricted between two parties to a financial operation.

Muhyi disapproved of notional *qallabeh* trading, and by implication all trading of phantom Taiwanese yarn, because it did not enter into a wider material or social process. Most office trading, as I have argued above, partakes of a different kind of temporality and materiality: it takes around thirty-five days to ship the yarn from the Far East to Aleppo. Once in Syria, the yarn sold in office trades requires people, petrol, vans, mobile phone calls and so on to move it from the seller’s warehouse to the buyer’s factory. Because of this materiality, profits are shared among many people, which is part of the ethic of Islamic trade, according to Muhyi. He argued that there was a similar logic underlying the Quranic injunction to distribute *zakat*<sup>15</sup> to the poor:

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<sup>15</sup> *Zakat* was generally reckoned at around 2.5% annually of one’s investment assets.

“It is like with *zakat*. Why pay *zakat*? Partly, it goes to the poor. But also, you know that every year, your money is going to become less [when you pay *zakat* on it]. So it is an incentive on you to put it to work. It is the same with *qard hasan* [a short-term, interest-free loan often given to a struggling entrepreneur to keep him in business]. *Qard hasan* is mentioned in the Quran. It is better than giving charity to poor people, because you are giving the money to someone who will employ others, you are starting a chain of business. They will pay *zakat* on their profits and so on. It is really a good thing in Islam.”

The injunction is to circulate wealth in the economy, not to hoard it or use it to make speculative bets. *Zakat* should be paid on assets that are not circulating. It therefore acts to impose a sociality on them: to encourage them to circulate and create work for others, or divert a percentage of the assets to the community’s poor. Assets which are neither circulating nor subject to *zakat* payment form a morally troubling category of “treasure” (*kanz*). In this moral cosmology, treasure is an asset that is liable to bring calamity on itself or its owner because it is frozen in its own a-social a-temporal universe. By imposing a temporality of material circulation, both discourage hoarding and encourage social processes such as employment and manufacture. *Zakat* is not a form of charity but of community; it is not optional but obligatory. It is against this background of morality that notional *bursa* trading and *qallaabeh* loans become problematic.

In summary, the office-traders do not only see themselves as having substance – being socially significant and respectable; they also see their activities as socially useful. Their substance is embodied in their “word” (*kalimeh*) – their ability to initiate social and material processes: to settle disputes, summon and send out people, transport goods, deploy actual financial capital, or purchase real yarn. In short, their word could move people, goods and money. Similarly, their activities were socially useful because they *moved* the benefit around society: by paying *zakat*, by employing others, and by starting chains of employment. One textile entrepreneur told me, “trade is like a rose. You pick it, and smell it, and hand it to your mother to smell, and your in-laws to smell, and others, and so on. You don’t just smell it and then throw it away.” If authority means the ability to move others, morality means the moving of benefit around a wider social group.

By contrast, the courtyard traders were involved in a zero-sum game. Trading in phantom yarn was also a game in that it had few longer-term effects; most trades were zero-sum exchanges, where a loss for one party was a gain for his opponent. Through trading material yarn, the importer met the manufacturer, the manufacturer met the wholesaler, and the wholesaler the customer. These confrontations were not zero-sum exchanges: when the importer sold yarn to the fabric manufacturer, the capabilities and desires of each party did not cancel each other out. Instead, they became entangled to produce a residual material reality – a piece of woven or knitted fabric – which embodied the results of the transaction and carried them on through the world. In the courtyard *bursa*, most transactions were simply zero-sum exchanges which left no residue. In the courtyard, the capabilities and desires of each party were symmetrical: identical and opposed. If the man who had sold a phantom box of yarn desired and anticipated a one-lira drop in the kilo price, the man who had bought it simply wanted and anticipated the opposite.

### Short-term

When I asked Abu Tonja, a wealthy broker, what the *bursa* was, he said:

“the *bursa* is something you find everywhere in the world. It means prices go up and down. Those people in the courtyard work in a different way. Most are spongers (*murtaziqa*), they are hangers-on (*muta ‘aayishiin*)”.

The term *murtaziqa* also translates as “mercenaries”, and implies that, in Abu Tonja’s view, the courtyard traders were simply seeking daily subsistence, but were not “of the market”: they did not represent its essence or ethos. Indeed, he also said that the courtyard traders were the “appearance” (*al-manzar*) but not the “inner nature” (*al-jawhar*) of the market, and tarnished its image.

Similarly, Jamal, a yarn trader in his early twenties who worked alongside his father and younger brother, said that what distinguished real traders from the courtyard speculators and other less reputable characters was that traders wanted to maintain a

continuous presence in the market, and to cultivate long-term relationships. They practiced “continuity” (*istimraariyya*), which was synonymous with “trade” (*tjaara*):

“Some people protect their rights by threatening to bring in the police. Others like our father do it with [softer] words: ‘you have a good reputation, I am sure you intend to pay’... so that there remains continuity between us. It is frightening that someone might come into the office who is not intending to do trade (*tjaara*), not intending to do continuity.”

For Jamal, the reason that real traders could be trusted was because of this commitment to continuity:

“If he is a ‘son of the market’ (*ibn suq*), it is easier to get your due from him. I mean *ibn suq* in the sense of someone known in the market, someone who people deal with on a continuous basis (*shakhs muta‘aamal istimrariyya*), he always comes to the market and buys and sells continuously in it. He is a son of the market and belongs to it. He might not have a shop here, but there is continuity in his dealings, in the buying and selling (*fi-l-akdh wa-l-‘ataa*).”

By contrast, the courtyard *bursa* is untrustworthy because it is not characterised by continuity, but by irregularity and short-termism. Jamal said:

“At the start of the year, you always see new faces [in the courtyard *bursa*]: they don’t know the market...a few days ago, I saw someone who hasn’t been there for ten years. He left, went abroad, and has only now come back.”

Jamal’s friend, another young wealthy trader, suggested that the courtyard *bursa* was not about accumulating wealth, but losing it: “we say they will go bankrupt, because they started with no money, and will end with no money”. Another of the office-based traders put it equally as pithily:

“the people standing around outside [in the courtyard] are thought to have a bad reputation – no office, no money, here today gone tomorrow (*ibn mubaarih wa-l-yoom*: literally, “son of yesterday and today”), they can’t implement their promises.”

By contrast, some of the office-based traders boasted of trading partnerships, sometimes with foreign business partners, that were passed from their father's generation to their own.

Through these discourses about materiality, trust, risk, continuity and social benefit, the office-traders are making implicit statements about themselves. Their status and respectability consist in having substance (financial capital, and their sons alongside them) and being trustworthy (having authoritative words, and practicing continuity in their trade). Substance and trustworthiness are both accumulated through inhabiting a particular kind of time: long-term material and social processes (import; long-term and cross-generational trading relationships; ownership of offices) as opposed to the abstract "betting" time of the courtyard *bursa*.

### ***Bluffing and Provocation***

In the courtyard, what is at a premium is the ability to bluff, provoke and get the better of one's opponent in an agonistic, zero-sum game that is understood by participants as both a public contest of nerve and a "psychological war" (*harb nafsiyya*). Frequent and noisy accusations of duplicity (*kizb*) are gleefully made ("he is an actor! he is pure cinema!") and fully tolerated. Rather than the fictive kinship of "brotherhood", it is an arena where "father competes with son". Rather than valorising "honesty" a premium is put on bluffing and "twisting tactics" (*asaaliib multawiyeh*). The courtyard *bursa* is the flipside of the idealised trading relationship of affection, honesty, continuity and mutual benefit – it is the inverse of the discourse I encountered among the office-based traders and brokers in the caravanserai, and among Abdullah's factory circle (chapter one). Rather than the official discourse of honesty (*sidq*) and trustworthiness (*amaaneh*), what is valorised in the courtyard is the "muted value" (cf Jacobson-Widding 1997:56) of being a "scoundrel" (*banduuq*).

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"New boxes!" (*ulab jdiideh*) screams a moustachioed middle-aged man in the centre of the courtyard. He seems to be taunting another man. Others soon

take up his chant. A short shaykh in a *galabiyya* proclaims loudly: “I’ll buy at 81.5!”. Another man responds “sold!” (*bi’t*). Then the shaykh immediately shouts “new boxes!” But the man who wants to sell has none.

Thinking back on this exchange later, I remembered Muhyi’s description of the battered old boxes of Taiwanese yarn that had been passed around from warehouse to warehouse for five years. Ziyad, an eighteen-year old courtyard trader, explained to me: “this is just *jakkaara* – the box doesn’t make any difference, old or new, the yarn is just the same. They just say this to try to make the price move.” I eventually understood that “new boxes” was an excuse to pull out of a sale which the buyer had never intended to complete. The whole exercise was intended as a taunt to the seller: “I would not even buy at 81.5 – so you’ll need to lower your price”.

The courtyard traders glossed *jakkaara* as a “challenge” (*tahaddiy*) or provocation: “it is if I do something in front of you, knowing that you don’t like it, to challenge you or to annoy you.” A mosque built recently in a Christian area of Aleppo, with one minaret for each of the four churches in between which it was built, was known colloquially as the “Jakkaara Mosque”. In the context of the courtyard *bursa*, *jakkaara* meant a verbal assault or challenge. The tone of encounters was often one of jocular sarcasm. One man addressed another from across the courtyard, with a raised voice: “hail, king of the Kaashif” (*yaa malik al kaashif*) – the Kaashif being those who had sold goods they had yet to buy. “The bankrupt!” one of my young friends joked about his colleague, within earshot. “The king!” another joked about him. Voices were often raised to attract attention. One man shouted to another in front of the crowd: “we all know you have oversold yourself by 300 boxes!” Fahd, the student who helped me conduct interviews in the caravanserai, said “there is a lot of sarcasm (*sukhriyya*), to show professionalism, to show people that they are the boss.”

One evening, Alaa al-Din told me there are hardly any “boxes” in the market at the moment: “they all want to buy at the moment, but no-one is selling”. Later, there is a confrontation between a buyer and seller, in front of the crowd: “how much do you

want to buy?” “No, how much do you want to sell?” The seller walks over to us, looks at me, smiles, shakes my hand, and says pointing to the buyer:

Seller: “he is cinema. An actor. *Kizb*. What is *kizb* in English?”

Paul: “Lie”.

Seller: “That’s what he is!” (*haa huwwi!*)

Then he weaves his hand through the arm of the buyer, and leads him off somewhere more private, to a corner, where they discuss something quietly.

*Jakkaara* in the courtyard was, as a style, masculine and agonistic. But it was more than a style – it was a tactic. Sarcastically denigrating others’ prices or goods, or offering to sell at a low price in front of another seller to scare him into lowering his own price, was part of the armoury of negotiation. Alaa al-Din described the zero-sum dynamics of courtyard trading, and the *jakkaara* tactics that these engendered:

Paul: If you are *mkashif* [sold boxes you have not yet bought], when is it best to buy back? If you leave it to the last moment, won’t people see you are desperate and move the price against you?

Alaa al-Din: It depends. If you know someone else needs to sell, and you think the price will be coming down, it is best to wait. But it is true that if you leave it to the last moment and people see that you are forced (*mudtarr*), they will take advantage, and raise the price against you (*yghalluu ‘alaik*). By a lot, sometimes one or two lira [per kilo]. It is a psychological war (*harb nafsiyya*). It is about making others scared that the market is moving against them.

Paul: How do you try to bring the market down?

Alaa al-Din: You offer to sell something at below market price, to someone who you suspect doesn’t have any money. If he doesn’t accept, you know he doesn’t have any money. If he doesn’t have any money, you know he is forced to sell, and you can lower your price when you try to buy...Or you offer to sell something to your friend at a lower price. You know your friend is in the same boat as you. You know that he wants to sell, so he won’t buy. He says no. You do all this in agreement with him. But someone else sees him refuse, and thinks, if he is not buying at that low price, the market must be on its way down. I’d better sell now!

Paul: But how does it work, if they know that is what you are trying to do?

Alaa al-Din: It really is a psychological war. It is like if I say, ‘did you leave the gas on this morning?’ You know you didn’t, you are sure you didn’t, but as soon as you start to think about it, maybe you start to worry.

This is the context for *jakkaara* and the agonism. The verbal challenges are not just for show in a contest of honour; they are intended to undermine inner certainty and force a precipitous move in the market. The tone of the exchanges was thoroughly agonistic. As Jasim, a wealthy young office-based trader told me with a smile, “your strategy will depend on whether you want to make money or to make someone else lose!” Strategies involved bluffing and “deceit” (*kizb*): putting on a show. Fahd, the Masters student who was helping me to conduct interviews, said after one visit to the caravanserai:

“there are a lot of fake deals: people shook hands [as if to make a deal], but he said in the end: I’m not selling! While still holding his hand! There is *a lot* of trickery (*hiila*): don’t play with them! They’ll make you lose, that’s for sure! (*ykhassiruunak, akiid*)...”

Similarly, one of the wealthier importers said the courtyard *bursa* was about:

“how to screw him, how to sell to him without him knowing he is buying from you. When people know you are buying, people do other things to pressure you not to....People are pulling and squeezing each other.”

### ***Muted Values***

Tactics included misdirecting one’s opponents, and concealing (and if necessary “lying” to do so) one’s position. It was also a skill to be able to reveal other people’s positions, or expose their deceit. A buyer might offer a fake deal, and then withdraw at the last moment, simply to discover an opponent’s price sensitivity. Marsden notes that living ethically is about negotiating the hidden and the open. This requires judgement, and how to do it correctly is always contested. He observes that there is a secret underside of tricks and ploys in village life, and that revealing it can be creative. Men hurl accusations of unfair play at one another, and young boys enjoy watching this. The most “devilish” boys even try to provoke conflict by telling lies (2005:65,72,83). Similarly, in the caravanserai courtyard in Aleppo, gleeful

allegations of lying, and strategies to reveal another's deceit, can be a form of enjoyment: it is all "joking" (*mazh*) which has its own unruly aesthetic.

What is at a premium, quite openly, is being a "devil" (*shaytaan*), a "son of the market" who can "open his eyes in oil", and a "bastard" (*banduuq*). A *banduuq* is someone who creates mischief by revealing secrets. "Do you know the difference between a pickpocket (*nashshaal*) and a *banduuq*?" I was asked by a young participant in the middle of the courtyard *bursa*. "Two men go onto a bus to steal someone's wallet. The first man pickpockets the victim successfully. The second man taps the victim on the shoulder and tells him that the first man has just stolen his wallet. The first man is the pickpocket, the second the *banduuq*." A *banduuq* is more dangerous than a thief – his form of mischief-making is to reveal the hidden: something that threatens even thieves.

Most of the wealthy and respectable office-based traders distance themselves from such crude tactics and practices. Boundaries are drawn spatially (between the offices and the courtyard), temporally (the *bursa* gets into full swing as the offices close), and behaviourally: contrast the demure poise of the offices with the rowdiness of the courtyard. The office-traders draw moral boundaries through Islamic discourses about betting, and through linguistic distinctions between substance-words (*kalimeh*) and inconsequential chat (*hakiy*). Another discursive distinction is the moral language of space. According to the office-based traders, their market was "regular / legal" (*nizaamiy*) whereas the courtyard *bursa* was "irregular / illegal" (*ghayr nizaamiyy*) and "haphazard" (*'ashwaai'yy*).

The courtyard (*saaha*) was the space in front of the entrance to the main offices in the caravanserai. As a public and open place, it was an arena for chance encounters. Gilsenan (1982:171) notes similarly that a *saaha* or "place before a shop" in a north Lebanese village was a place where "people may meet and chat...without being in a socially highly defined zone". The nature of interactions there might be described as "haphazard" in a neutral sense of chance meetings. However, the speculative *bursa* in the afternoon had established a routine presence and therefore a claim to be a

recognisable “market”; participants in fact referred to themselves as a “market” (*suuq*). This self-assertive claim transformed a place of “chance meetings” into a regular phenomenon and led the office-based traders, who saw themselves as “the market”, to denigrate the courtyard gathering as “irregular” and “haphazard”.

Dorman (2009) notes that in Cairo in 1992 the Egyptian government used a similar discourse of “haphazardness” to justify state intervention in the neighbourhood of Imbaba. The neighbourhood was “pathologised as ungovernable” by the label “haphazard” (*‘ashwaa’iyy*). The government used the term to justify violent expulsion of Islamists – and then to “rebuild the physical environment and reform its inhabitants”, but also to justify neglect of other areas which did not challenge the interests of the ruling elite. In the case of Aleppo’s yarn market, this discourse is used to denigrate the values, practices and persons of courtyard trading. It asserts that the trade that happens in the offices has nothing to do with the chaotic, untrustworthy, substanceless undercapitalised “deceit” (*kizb*) of the courtyard. It is therefore part of the construction of respectable trade. It is the vocabulary of an entrepreneur who claims to be *muhtaram* – who embodies *ihтираam* or respectability.

If this vocabulary of regularity and respectability is an official or dominant set of values, the terms applied by the *bursajiyya* to themselves form a set of “muted values”. One of the courtyard traders laughingly described the *bursa* futures market to me in a way that seemed to combine pride and self-deprecation: “This is a mini Wall Street, a *bursa*. Small but the same principles as Wall Street...borrowed from Baab Neirab!”. Baab Neirab (see Hivernel 2007) was an old quarter of Aleppo often joked about as being chaotic, threatening and backward – but also resourceful, tough and able to cope in the most difficult of situations. Jacobson-Widding (1997), in an article about the Shona of Zimbabwe, argued that as well as “dominant values” focusing on “guilt, shame and dignity”, there are muted ones. The muted values “lurk behind the facade of the dominant structure of social personhood and morality”.

In Khan al-Oulabiyya, and the Aleppan trading context more generally, the discourse of dominant values is honesty (*sidq*), regularity (being *nizaamiyy*), and

trustworthiness (*amaaneh*). This is the language of the office-based traders. By contrast, the courtyard *bursa* is an expression of the muted values which are necessary to survive in an agonistic context. Some of these words can be insulting in a formal context, but for that reason function well as back-handed compliments. Together, they form a converse mode of appraisal: a set of “muted values” behind the official discourses of respectability. These are the values of being a “slippery bastard” (*banduuq*), someone who is able to “open his eyes in oil” (*mfattah bil maazuut*) – in other words, who has an almost supernatural ability to cope and thrive in difficult circumstances – and someone who can hold his own in “cleverness” (*shataara*) and “deceit” (*kizb*).

The office-based traders denigrate the courtyard *bursa* as “irregular” (*ghayr nizaamiy*) and “haphazard” (*‘ashwaa’iy*) and as an “untrustworthy” (*muu muriih*) place. In employing these terms, they distance themselves from the muted values and identify themselves with the official discourses of honesty and trustworthiness. But is one reason why they do so that the *bursa* in fact exemplifies the potential for deceit (*kizb*) and short-term zero-sum confrontation that lurks at the heart of all trade? Does the *bursa* dramatise the ever-present potential in their own trading relations for anti-relation?

I argued in earlier chapters that long-term trading relationships were conducted in an idiom of “affection” or “brotherhood” where the practice of companionship and the discourse of mutual interest was said to encompass and enable self-interest. The courtyard *bursa* is the opposite: a place where the underside of relationality, the potential for deceit (*kizb*) and insincerity or “twisting tactics” (*asaaliib multawiyeh*) in trading relationships is fully expressed. It is a space where one's own self-interest (*maslaha*) is unmoderated by long-term relationality or sincerity. It is an unashamed inversion of co-operative, mutually beneficial and affectionate relations.

The danger lurking beneath the idiom of “affection” in trading relationships was insincerity or hidden self-interest. Sometimes traders and entrepreneurs referred to this danger. In the factory, Abu Sulayman and Abdullah sometimes complained

about those who had eaten and laughed with them, and then slandered them behind their backs. Such people had “failed to keep the affection” (*maa haafazuu ‘alaa l-widd*). Slander or “speaking against” (*haka ‘alaa*) was a pathological relation that threatened blessing. Abdullah did not tolerate open slander during assemblies at his factory – his moral space – as I discussed in chapter one. Marsden too, in his ethnography (2005) of a village in north-west Pakistan, notes that “a Rowshan person’s relationship to the village should ideally be structured through the heart and compassionate affection...[but] the pretence of friendly relationships – performed by long greetings – is said to conceal a more unpleasant reality”.

The courtyard *bursa* lays bare the potential for deceit (*kizb*), confrontation, short-termism, and narrow self-interest that lurks behind the common trading discourse about honesty, affection, continuity, and mutual benefit. Alaa al-Din emphasised that the courtyard *bursa* was an arena for the pursuit of short-term individual interests:

“Everyone works on his own. Sometimes, you kind of work in a team. But one month they are in your team, the next month they are your enemy. Outside work, of course, they can be your friends – you go out in the evenings together...Sometimes a son might even compete with his father (*yunaafis abuuhu*), especially in the *bursa*.”

This is why wealthy office traders take such pains to distance themselves from the open-air bursa: it is uncomfortably close to the danger that lurks beneath all trading relationships in their cosmology. The noisy outdoor performances that “distort the image” of the Caravanserai dramatise the potential for self-interested confrontation that lies beneath the idiom of “affection”, and the danger that “twisting tactics” lie within a trader’s apparently honest words and sincere heart. This applies to office trade too, where traders conceal the strength or urgency of their desire for items, their price sensitivity, and their stock levels. They speak of having affection for their clients, but this might conceal something else. They give the appearance of wanting to trade “continually”, but this too might conceal something else. Office trading is “a drama of social censorship involved in the maintenance of public order in which people conceal from public attention facts about themselves” (Abu-Lughod 1985).

This drama is what the courtyard *bursa* expresses openly: the potential for *kizb* at the heart of trade. It scandalises because it fails to respect the rules which govern what may be displayed and what should be kept hidden. In this sense, the *bursa* itself functions like the figure of the *banduuq* who, by revealing the hidden, masters the game of confrontation. In the courtyard *bursa*, participants lie blatantly, in a game-like fashion, pretending to be stronger than they are.

There is an inherent contradiction in trade, taken to its extreme in the zero-sum game of the *bursa*: if a trader is selling, it is because he needs money, but he must conceal this need in order to avoid being seen as desperate and taken advantage of. Both sides are forced to dissimulate: to buy while pretending they do not need to; and to sell in the same way. This contradiction is publicly displayed in the *bursa*: gleeful allegations of lying “cinema! actor! *kizb*!” abound. Price is a function of an inner differential – not of material supply and demand, but of confidence and fear. It is a “psychological war” (*harb nafsiyya*) in the words of Alaa al-Din, who participated regularly. Substance takes second place to performance. This arena of *kizb* provides plenty of potential for display and performance (Gilsenan 1996:199). Gilsenan notes that “*kizb* means everything is a show, and this is a world where one puts oneself on show” (Gilsenan 1996:200).

In the environment of the *bursa*, “deceit” or “show” (*kizb*) is not so much an insult or moral sin, but a recognition of the contradiction at the heart of a transactional domain constructed around short-term self-interest and scarcity. The courtyard *bursa* lays open the contradiction and *kizb* at the heart of trade. As a cultural performance, it is an explicit demonstration to everyone that for all the official discourses about affection and clean-heartedness, that is what trust is: built on nothing, or nothing substantial. The wealthy office-based traders disapprove of the courtyard *bursa* because it performs the flipside of what trade should be – long-term, mutual benefit, based on affection and honesty. It reveals what trade is always at risk of becoming, or what it might already be.

### *Hidden Connections: The Bodies of the Bursajiyya*

I have argued that the office-based traders distance themselves from the courtyard *bursa* as part of their claim to substance and respectability; they claim that it “distorts the image of the khan”, and denigrate it as a place that is “irregular” and “haphazard”. This sharp discursive contrast between official values (of trustworthiness) and muted values (of “slipperiness” and “cleverness”) should provoke skepticism. In fact, I discovered toward the end of my fieldwork that these discourses mask some hidden connections between the two time-spaces: some of the wealthy traders and importers orchestrate the agonistic activity of the courtyard from “behind the curtain” – in the calm of their own offices.

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The tallest and quietest man in the courtyard *bursa* stands amidst the crowd. He is in his late thirties, has dark hair and a slight build. I often see him here but he rarely if ever joins in in the courtyard. Often he appears only for a few minutes and then leaves, reappearing again several minutes later. He sometimes whispers in ears but I cannot remember ever seeing him in a confrontation, or trying to buy or sell in front of the crowd. He is never at the centre of the crowd, but often hovers nearby, standing behind a group and overlooking them with his impressive height, drawing on a cigarette or sipping a coffee. Now he takes a handful of nuts from a nearby trolley seller and walks out of the courtyard.

He enters an office in the adjacent *suq*. He bursts into the office but appears to say nothing to the trader sitting behind the desk. He takes a drink of water from the dispenser in the corner of the office without asking permission or exchanging a word, then sinks into a chair by desk, whipping up the phone as he does so. He makes a brief call, then stands and leans over the counter where the trader is sitting inspecting a computer screen. The trader is also on the telephone, waiting to be put through to someone. Then he listens for a minute or two, saying little other than *inshallah*, *inshallah* – “hopefully, hopefully”. He puts the phone down. Another man at the

front desk makes a telephone call and writes out numbers that are being dictated to him from the other end. I am sitting in a corner of the office next to the door. The tall broker, leaning over the counter, exchanges glances but no words with the trader. I see in the reflection of the glass wall that the trader shakes his head, indicating in my direction, as if to say “what the hell he thinks he is doing here, I don’t know.” It is an awkward moment but despite the silences I have learnt one thing: this enigmatic broker who keeps his own counsel works both in the courtyard and in an office.

I visit another office in the caravanserai. It is around half past seven in the evening. I am in a large wood-panelled room, with an expensive desk right at the back. Behind it sits Hmudeh, a wealthy importer, in a rotating director’s chair. I sit on one of the low armchairs lining the walls. Opposite me are two visitors: the branch director of an international bank and his assistant. All four of us chat in English for a while. Then they leave and I am left alone with Hmudeh. He is around fifty years old, and wears a ruffled but luxurious blue shirt with the top two buttons open. He orders a well-dressed younger man, who sits in the front section of his office, to bring me a glass of tea, then, as the interview progresses, another glass, and finally a juice. For an hour and a half I quiz him about his career, and about credit, reputation and trust, about import routes, about the production process for yarn, about the history of the market. He looks relaxed throughout, slumped comfortably in his chair. Finally I ask him about the courtyard *bursa*. He smiles as if he cannot believe I am so interested in this subject:

Hmudeh: The game is played by the bosses in the offices. Not all offices, some of them. It is just *mta’aj* (intermingled) – *hal’at* (“rings”) we call it, because of the Olympic hoops on the boxes. The game is played out there [in the courtyard], but planned in [the offices] by the bosses. It is executed out there, not in here – it couldn’t be. The centre of the game is outside. If I have 10000 boxes – I do not do it of course – but let us say I have five people, my people, secretly in the market. We play the game behind the curtain.

Paul: Really?

Hmudeh: This is not my business, I don’t actually do this of course. Let us say I have goods, and I want the price to move upwards from 80 lira to 85 lira. I send my people on a buying spree. When people think there is demand

in the market, that one of the bosses is buying...the price goes up. Then suddenly I order ten people to go and sell [all] my goods.

Paul: the same people who did the buying?

Hmudeh: Maybe the same people, maybe different people. The game is played behind the curtain. There are let us say five people in my team. It is secret, but people know who they are.

Paul: Do people know who is with which boss, who is with who?

Hmudeh: Yes. But it is not like that. I know he is one of that boss's fellows, he depends on that boss. But at the same time, he is free, he is not limited to that boss, he can come here [in his own right] and I can sell to him, or not. There is nothing to stop him coming to me, and buying from me. I have to decide if I sell to him or not.

Paul: That's very interesting, I have never heard this before.

Hmudeh: Everyone needs their person in the middle of the field to know what is going on, their broker in the middle of the market, and that is why you have come to me. It is like playing chess. I can show you one guy here, a friend of mine, he has a mind like a chess board, he is the best at this game. It is about...how to screw him, how to sell to him without him knowing he is buying from you...

For me, this information was a revelation. I thought back to Abu Samt, to the calm silence of his office and the contrast with the noisy evening crowd outside. I thought back to the many other contrasts that I had drawn in my head, and that had been drawn for me, between office trading and courtyard trading. Doubtless, many office traders did maintain their moral distance from the courtyard *bursa*. But here was evidence, if Hmudeh was as credible as he seemed to be as he talked to me in my native language, of hidden connections between the two sets of spaces. Although this was the first time I had heard these connections laid out so clearly, they were later confirmed to me in a number of interviews, including with one of Aleppo's wealthiest yarn manufacturers who explained how he had cornered the market in Taiwanese yarn through a spider's web of brokers in the *bursa*. I had spent months moving between the two spaces, noticing the differences between them, and wondering how absent yarn could be the cause of so much passion in the courtyard. But behind the bluster and apparent disorder of the courtyard, and somehow

immanent in all its noise, the carefully planned strategies of absent men met in the bodies of the *bursajyya*.

## Chapter Six

### The Sons of the Market

In this chapter and the next I argue that growing up in the market is a process of acquiring professional skills which are moral capacities and dispositions: boldness, eloquence, integrity, mastery, etiquette, autonomy, and finally judgement. Even practical skills such as proficiency in the market lingo are moral capacities to the extent that they enable these young men to demonstrate mastery and autonomy in the way that they sell. I focus on a seventeen year-old called Majid who like many of his young colleagues has “grown up” (*trabbaa*) in the market – having worked there since the age of twelve. Majid is employed as a salesman in a small retail shop in Aleppo’s old city markets which sells expensive dress fabrics. I describe the way he sells in this shop, and analyse the “ordinary ethics” that are an important part of the way he transacts with his (mainly female) customers.

The retail shop is a place where Majid and the other young salesmen grow up and become educated. They refer to it as such, as a kind of school of ‘hard knocks’ which is “tougher than school”. Growing up and becoming educated is a moral process; it is a matter of acquiring capacities: boldness, eloquence (*balaagha*) and the ability to be successful (*naajih*); manliness (*rjuuleh*) and integrity; cleverness (*shataara*) and tactics (*asaaliib*); and a secret market lingo, which exemplifies the ideal of being able to read one’s customers but to avoid being read by them.

Developing these capacities and skills is a necessary part of acquiring the identity of a “son of the market” (*ibn al-suuq*). The young salesmen say that the reason they chose to work in this market in the old city *mdiineh* is that it was reputed for the wiliness (*bandaqa*) and cunning (*shataara*) of its traders. I argue that these capacities are a way of belonging to the market for the junior employees who lack any other form of belonging such as a shop or kinship connections in the market. They are a kind of a property for the property-less.

In the final section of this chapter, I explore another moral disposition which Majid was expected to acquire: etiquette. This is an embodied habitus, based largely around language: knowing how to talk to the customer and knowing the right “styles” to use for particular customers, since what is appropriate for one may not be for another. There are however two caveats to this. First, the customer must be worthy of respect. She or he must be a serious customer – preferably wealthy, but above all willing to spend. Second, etiquette, far from being simply a means of “secular self-cultivation” (Yeung 2010), was also a professional skill that could be used coercively, to put pressure on a customer, dominate the transaction, and establish Majid’s autonomy as someone who sold “according to my pleasure, not theirs”.

### ***Becoming Bold***

Majid, the salesman I knew best, was seventeen years old. He had left school at the age of twelve, but was bright and ambitious, and had a fondness for learning foreign languages. He often asked me to write out the words to his favourite western pop songs in one of his exercise books, and we would translate them into Arabic together. Majid lived in a lower middle-class part of old Aleppo, with his parents and twin brother. His father owned a small workshop, and his older brother had a successful shop in a middle-class suburb of Aleppo. Majid had preferred to work in the old city, which he appreciated for its cosmopolitan atmosphere and the famed shrewdness of its traders. He had been in the shop for five years, arriving at the age of twelve as an errand-boy (*ajiir*), and progressing to become, as he said, a “tradesman” (*saani*). This meant that although he was an employee rather than an owner or the “boss” (*mu’allim*), he had a particular skill: he knew how to sell to customers. However, this skill was an amalgam of different capacities. He described to me the different capacities he had acquired during his five years at the shop.

“You mustn’t be shy. You must know how to speak in front of the customer (*addaam az zaabuuneh*). Joke with her, laugh with her. You must be able to laugh and joke with them, even though they are women. If you just hold the goods up to them, they will not buy them! Don’t be shy. This is the most important thing. When I started, I was twelve, just reaching maturity (*sinn al buluugheh*), I was really shy in front of women. I had to learn to leave that behind on becoming grown up / eloquent (*baaligh*)” (Majid, salesman).

The salesmen said that boldness was required in order to “catch” (*sahb*) the customer from the crowd and bring her into the shop. Boldness was particularly important because most of the customers were older women. But while he and his colleagues - confident salesmen in their late teens and early twenties - all agreed on the importance of being smooth-tongued and confident, they also surprised me by saying that when they first arrived in the market, often around the age of twelve, they were painfully shy. Boys were used to being deferential, particularly in front of older women unrelated to them. Majid’s friend Yasir, a confident and wealthy salesman in his mid-twenties, said he used to be tongue-tied in front of women, and other adults, even to the extent of being unable to carry out simple tasks like buying vegetables from a market stall.

Twelve is a significant age – often the time when men are said to attain *buluugha*: physical and social maturity, although the word can also be translated as “eloquence”. For the young salesmen, many of whom were recently boys themselves, maintaining the right kind of discourse with their female customers involved the right mix of boldness, eloquence and propriety – all aspects of social and moral maturity. Eloquence was important after the boldness of the initial gambit: salesmen sought to entice customers into their shop, and then to sit down and inspect goods. They did so using styles of “joking” (*mazh*) and “chatting” (*hakiy*).

Although these styles were necessarily casual, the task of acquiring them was not. They were a necessary skill that not everyone had mastered. Majid claimed that:

“one of the people who works here has been here ten years, and is still not successful (*naajih*). He gets shy in front of customers. He speaks to them, but it is often off the subject... Some people older than me, they don’t have the chat (*hakiy*), they get embarrassed. To stand in front of a customer – I was doing that in my first month. Selling not just satin, but a whole evening dress. Abdu [his boss] got all the salesmen together at the end of the day. He asked each of us, ‘how much did you sell?’ Ten thousand, each of them. ‘He’, he said pointing to me, ‘has sold forty thousand! If I had to choose, I’d take him, thirteen years old, above all of you!’”

The proof of manhood here is boldness: being able to stand “in front of the customer” (*qaddaam al-zabuuneh*) without shyness. Another quality which it was important to acquire was integrity. Peteet (1994:34) notes that “elaborate, well-defined rites of passage to mark transitions from boyhood to adolescence to manhood are difficult to discern in Arab culture”. Indeed, when I asked Majid when a “son of the market” attained “manhood” (*rjuuleh*), he told me that there is no specific age – it is whenever his “word is not two words” (*kalimatuh muu kalimatayn*) – in other words, whenever he was honest (to his employers and colleagues) and his promises could be relied upon. One feature of integrity was not betraying the bonds of solidarity with other shops in the market which obliged salesmen not to quote a customer who had already bought in a neighbouring shop a price lower than they had paid there.

Alongside “manliness” or integrity, another ideal was a certain type of “cleverness”. For the salesmen, the old city was a place where one came to learn by having one’s eyes opened. One said that he had arrived “with eyes glued closed (*mghammad*), like a young cat, you can’t see or understand anything, but after a few years your eyes are opened (*mfattah*)”. He also said:

“The old city is the centre. The most powerful merchants in Aleppo come from the old city... I started when I was thirteen. By the time I was eighteen, I had had my eyes opened. In five years I learned (*bakshuf* – literally, ‘uncovered’) the language, the secrets, the trade.”

These salesmen regarded themselves as the “sons of the market” (*abnaa’ al-suuiq*) – a term that connoted skilfulness and a close association with the market. In several cases, these salesmen – who were aged between seventeen and thirty – had in fact grown up in the market, having worked there from the age of twelve. They regarded it as the place of their education: one that was more rigorous and demanding (*abshi’*) than a normal school. A distinction was sometimes made between two types of trader. One industrialist told me: I will take you to the refined (*raaqiyy*) merchant, and to the one who can open their eyes in petrol! (*mfattah bil maazuut*)<sup>16</sup>. This latter phrase indicates an almost supernatural ability to thrive however difficult the

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<sup>16</sup> A more vulgar version of this phrase was “traders who can open their eyes in shit”

environment. It applies to those who had grown up in the market, and had had their education there rather than at school. According to these salesmen, the old city markets provided an education that was superior to what pupils learned at secondary school. When I asked whether every apprentice salesman learned to open his eyes, or whether some failed, one said:

“they all learn. Because of the pressure of work. It is much more intense (literally: “uglier”) than a school here. It is like a school but more intense. If you don’t get things right, you get humiliated (*takul bahdaleh* – literally “eat a scolding”), punished, shouted at. It is like military service. You get it not just from the boss, but if there are ten people in the shop, you get humiliated by eight of them. Then you get embarrassed (*takhjal*). In the end, you become successful (*naajih*).”

Masculinity is acquired through undergoing and surviving a gruelling and even demeaning process of training. It is an “ugly” (*bashi‘*) or harsh process that also opens one’s eyes to the world in all its cosmopolitan variety. Majid’s comparison to military service (which he began about a year later) is interesting, since ethnographies of military service in Israel also argue that it enables a maturing process, shaping “the attainment of personal, professional and social attributes associated with self-growth, and expansion of horizons” (Kaplan 2000:136). If Majid proves himself in agonistic contest with the customer, military service in Israel inculcates an ideology where “combat activity is construed as the ultimate test of masculinity” (Kaplan 2000:137).

### ***Slipperiness and Belonging***

Toughness was not the only quality that was valued. Majid also prized the ability to “catch on quickly” (*yastaw‘ib*) and thus become “successful” (*naajih*). But this implied not only intelligence, but a certain kind of wiliness, for which the old city *mdiineh* markets were famed. Majid said

“my brother has a shop in Salamiyya [a suburb of Aleppo]. I can go to my brother, to work with him, if there are problems here. But I prefer the old city (*mdiineh*) because of its savviness (*shataara*). I started here in this shop, because my dad and my boss’s dad used to be partners... My father didn’t

work in the old city. He has a workshop with machines, looms. But I wanted to work in the old city. Because of the wiliness (*bandaqa*) and cunning (*shaytana*: literally, being a devil).

Someone who is known for wiliness and slipperiness (*bandaqa*) was called a *banduuq*. This was a crude and dangerously insulting term in a formal context: it literally meant “bastard”. However, among friends and it had a positive sense of “someone who is very clever (*zakiyy jiddan*), he can get things moving (*byiharrik*), he is a bit of a devil (*shaytaan*), he can do anything”. It was sometimes used as a crude equivalent for the “master” (*mu'allim*) and meant someone who was dangerous, who should not be played with, someone who could not be outwitted (*laa yandahik 'alaihi* – literally, “laughed at”) because he knew the tricks even better. Elyachar (2005:154) also argues that “trickery and clever moves” (*hiyal*) have a “hallowed place in Egyptian and Arab popular culture as a whole”. One of Majid’s friends and colleagues in the shop said:

“a *banduuq* is someone who has not one but seven tongues in his mouth. He is like a vessel who makes a sound wherever you strike it – put him in any situation, and he will know what to do. Whatever the customer is like – if he is angry, he can match that style...if he tries to be clever, he can be cleverer...if the customer tries flattery, he can outdo him in that too. Whatever you try, he is a *banduuq*.”

The implication is that the relationship with the customer is agonistic – an encounter of wits. What was important was the ability to match and outdo one’s customer. This applied not just to styles of selling, but also to knowledge of languages. Majid prized the ability to understand what others were saying against their will – while keeping his own conversations private:

“I had an Iraqi customer today – and so that I wouldn’t understand he was speaking to his wife in Turkish. I could speak it too, so I answered them in Turkish. He switched to speak in English with his wife. I answered them in English. He couldn’t believe it. He had three languages, English Arabic and Turkish and I could answer him in each.”

Gilsenan (1976) notes that in the Lebanese rural context, there are two structurally opposed kinds of people who each have an almost supernatural ability to read the inner souls or truths of others: the blessed shaykh and the cursed (*mal'uun*) person.

This is similar to the Aleppan urban context. As I mentioned above, those who had “grown up” in the market and had their formative education there were said to be able to “open their eyes in petrol” (*mfattah bi'l-maazuut*). This had the sense of being able to thrive, almost supernaturally, in difficult situations, but also being able to see into their customers and see through their tactics. Sometimes the *banduuq* was referred to as a “rascal”, literally someone “cursed” (*mal'uun*). This conveys a sense of supernatural ability and insight.

Equally as important as the ability to read others is the ability to avoid being read. This capacity was exemplified in knowledge of the secret lingo of the market. The lingo, known among traders as *haziy wa bukh*, is particularly associated with the stretch of Aleppo's old city markets where Majid worked. It was generally not understood outside the market. The salesmen said that the main purpose of the lingo was to enable them to talk about prices and trading strategies in front of customers, without the customers understanding. For example, after a customer walked in, Majid might mention casually to his colleague “we went to the farm last week in Kafar Hamra for a barbecue. Ahmad brought twenty watermelons!” The key to this apparently extravagant code was simple: ignore the context, and multiply the figure (“twenty” in this case) by fifty. His colleague understands “sell to this customer at 1000 lira a metre, minimum”. This code was used to pass information between shops about what price they had paid elsewhere.

The lingo was used to construct a domain of privacy and even intimacy between salesmen, and to demonstrate their cleverness. Majid described to me an occasion when he had been faced with a customer who, it turned out, knew how to speak the lingo. The point of the narrative is that he still managed to outwit his customer.

“You get your meaning across with just one or two words. That is being a wily operator! [*bandaqa*]. Once a guy came from Suq as-Sabun. Muhammad said to me: [in the lingo] ‘sell him something expensive, 2500 lira a metre’ (*‘haziy al-toob namra khamsiin mawduu‘ hashiim’*). The customer said [also in the lingo]: ‘don’t sell the customer that, I don’t want anything expensive, and I can speak the lingo!’ (*‘laa tahziy at toob wa maa bidii hashiim, bahziy l bukh’*). I said, ‘of course Sir, at your service’, and I called up Malik and said: ‘I sent fifty rolls of that new satin to the warehouse yesterday, and you sent

me back twenty-five. Twenty-five? Are you being serious?’ So he [the customer] didn’t understand at all, even though he understands the lingo. Each shop has its own tactics. You for example, you know the lingo, but if I speak in front of you, quickly, in my own style, it would be difficult for you to understand (*sa ‘ab tifhim ‘alayya*).”

These skills and characteristics – boldness, eloquence, manliness, integrity, cleverness and the lingo – were in part a way of belonging to the market. They were a way of asserting a connection to the place, especially for those who lacked material assets (such as a shop) or family connections there. Alongside the length of one’s experience in a particular market, these skills and characteristics were a way of asserting one’s identity as a “son of the market” (*ibn al-suuq*).

In Rabo’s (2005a) ethnography of Aleppan traders, the term “the people of the market” (*ahl al-suuq*) refers to those who have a “shop of their own”, and who have a reputation or name (*ism*) that is generally seen to be tied to the market. The salesmen I knew best did not fall within this definition, since they were mostly employees on a weekly wage, and not working with their father or a close relative. They did not tend to have strong relations in the suq to property owners. Majid was related to five families in the suqs, but he said: “we don’t visit them – we are not very close”. His monthly salary was now 12,000 lira a month (around \$240), equivalent to a low-ranking civil servant – but since his only expenses were packets of Marlboro cigarettes and visits to the billiards club with his friends, he managed to save most of his salary. He said he had put aside 200,000 lira (around \$4000), which he hoped to use one day to start a business of his own, trading luxury fabrics. For the moment, however, he was simply an employee.

How did these young and property-less employees belong to the suq, and assert that belonging? For the older and better established traders, owning a shop, and cultivating a family name, were ways that they could be of the market. For the younger employees who lacked tangible property, language skills including use of the *hazi* lingo were key forms of savviness (*shataara*), and ways of defining and belonging to the market. The market lingo, not a shop, was their property, and an anchor of their identity in the market. While established shopowners tended to

dismiss the *haziy* lingo and other private forms of communication as childish or worse, it is possible to see these non-conventional languages as accessible forms of private property for those who had no other material connection to the market.

Gilsenan (1996:206) notes that by claiming secret knowledge, people in a structurally weak position could make themselves count “in a world where they did not count”. They created a sense of self by laying claim to a hidden domain that others did not know. Similarly, Majid and his colleagues talked of *haziy wa bukh* as “our language”. They said that it is “not transparent” (*ghayr makshuufeh*) in front of customers, but only among traders. It was a language which they, being in and of the central market, understood but which outsiders did not. Gilsenan (1982:190) argues that “seeing without being seen is knowledge, perhaps even power”. For the salesmen, the private lingo could also be a way of making others foreign: with enough inventiveness, a phrase in the lingo could make even a trader from a neighbouring market as uncomprehending as a foreigner.

Finally, the lingo was a way of asserting intimacy between the salesmen. Lingo words were, like the *ghinnawa* poems described by Abu-Lughod (1986), designed to remain private. Majid frequently told me that the lingo he taught me was secret. To be let in on it was a privilege and a way of constructing our friendship as a close one. Majid and his colleagues did not just use the *haziy* lingo to discuss prices and customers, but also to talk about sensitive subjects that exposed their vulnerability. At the end of one evening I spent with them in billiards club, Majid and his friend Salim used the lingo to discuss their feelings of shame at being bested by another friend’s insistence on always paying for their evening’s entertainment. It was precisely by breaking these barriers – by using a private language to confide to someone feelings of vulnerability or shame – that intimacy is built. Similarly, Abu-Lughod notes that intimacy is constructed by sharing private poetry between a man and a woman (1986:253).

For Majid, acquiring professional and linguistic skills is a way of investing one’s life with meaning and imagining possible futures. Marsden (2009) describes different

ways that Muslims in north west Pakistan come to develop their potential and invest their lives with significance. He argues that going on local tours is one such way, in contrast to the “embodied scriptural disciplines” to which Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind’s (2006) subjects – “piety-minded individuals in urban settings” – have submitted themselves “in the face of secular modernity” in order to “achieve their potential”.

For Majid, languages open up an imaginative space in terms of which he can imagine his future and come to understand himself. He listens to English pop songs which he gets me to transliterate and then help him translate into Arabic because that is the person he is becoming – someone adept with languages and cultures, someone who wants to travel, to know the world. He and his young colleagues see themselves as cosmopolitan, and – in a stationary sense – well-travelled: the world comes to them, making them experienced and cultured. In the old city markets, they are in daily contact with many different kinds of people – foreigners, and different ethnic and linguistic groups within Syria. One salesman said that their stretch of the market

“is in the middle of the suq, and the middle of the city. “Buying and selling in the old city is unlike buying and selling elsewhere. Because you mix with so many people here (*mukhaalatat an-naas hoon*). You get Arabs, foreigners, Kurds, villagers, from everywhere. Because you are living alongside (*mu’aayasha*) people in this way, you learn how to interact, how to buy and sell. Your mind is opened (*fii infitaah fii dhihnak*). Your way of thinking becomes wider, because you are dealing with all these different kinds of people, you learn how to talk with them. Like you, you have come here, and you have seen new things and learned things that people in England don’t know. It is the same here, we are dealing with people from all over.”

Similarly, Marsden (2009) argues that by going on local tours, young Chitrali men “train themselves in locally valued modes of inhabiting and perceiving their world. They hone their capacities to be witty, funny and clever – thus to evade the multiple claims that will be put on them by fellow villagers.” Similarly, acquiring foreign and secret languages provides Majid with a kind of internal mobility – each language opens up an imaginary space in which he can not only evade the understanding of his customer; it also opens up a space in which he can move and in terms of which he can imagine a future. In a sense, these languages structure imaginary spaces for those

without material resources, in which the future is theirs to define – much as I argued the imaginary *hakiy* (“chat”) trades did in the courtyard bursa in Khan al-Oulabiyya.

### ***Manners and Energy: Showing Respect***

In the final section of this chapter, I explore another moral disposition which Majid was expected to acquire: etiquette. I argue that Majid prides himself on his etiquette (*adab*) and “styles” (*asaaliib* – which also translates as tactics). According to a common stereotype in Syria, the “Aleppan trader” (*al-taajir al-halabiy*) is known for his distinctive skill and style. Traders and salesmen, especially in the old city markets (*mdiineh*), distinguish themselves from traders in less prestigious commercial areas and cities by their *adab*, which has the sense of morals and manners: both etiquette and propriety. This is evident in the polite and refined way in which Majid and his colleagues address their customers, their skills of deference and respect, and most of all the energy and care with which they ensure that the customer is the focus of their attention. Not all of Majid’s colleagues know how to speak to the customer or have mastered *adab*, but recognition in the shop is a matter of acquiring these embodied skills and dispositions, which enable a salesman to evoke the right kind of interaction with the customer. A shopkeeper or salesman with poor *adab* might give a customer the impression that she is unwanted or even a nuisance. What is at a premium in the shop where Majid works, then, is not warm-hearted sincerity towards the customer but *adab*: etiquette and propriety. This is an embodied habitus, based largely around language: knowing how to talk to the customer and knowing the right “styles” to use for particular customers, since what is appropriate for one may not be for another.

There are however two caveats to this. First, the customer must be worthy of respect. She or he must be a serious customer – preferably wealthy, but above all willing to spend. Such customers are, in the private lingo of the markets, *hashiim*: “good” or “respectful” – related to the Arabic word for shyness or deference (*tahashshum*). If, on the other hand, the customer visits the shop simply to “amuse themselves” (*tasallaa*), or to compare prices (perhaps having already bought somewhere else), or to flaunt her body, they are, in the market lingo, *hatiit* or “bad”. This lingo was used

to share private assessments of a customer's character and purposes between salesmen in the shop, and between shops, sometimes in front of the customer. If a customer was judged lacking, the lingo phrase was *dallij* or *dallij al-toob*. This could mean "unravel the roll of fabric", but also had almost the opposite meaning of "get rid of the customer" – because they are not worth the effort. This was because they were judged too poor to buy, or a time-waster not intending to do so: in either case, they were not worth the effort of the selling routine, or of the salesman's *adab*. These assessments of customers could be passed between shops using the lingo. The salesmen also made other moral and social assessments of customers. If a transaction failed and a customer left the shop without agreeing a price, they might sometimes be deemed *hatiit* or bad. Their taste might be called into question (even at the cost of apparently denigrating the shop's own stock): "did you see the colour she chose? Unbelievable! Such poor taste".

This comment is related to the second caveat to the principle that a trader needed to cultivate the moral disposition of good etiquette. The caveat is this: etiquette, far from being simply a means of "secular self-cultivation" (Yeung 2010), is also potentially coercive. In this retail shop, the flipside of etiquette is coercion: sometimes gentle, sometimes less so. If necessary, Majid intentionally mixed his deferential tone with harsh and provocative statements, where he felt that he needed to assert control over the customer. Having initially asserted himself on the moral high ground as a tradesman (*saani* ' ) of etiquette and propriety, whose role was to guard the shop's reputation for being "respectable" (*muhtaram*), he could use this to shame a customer in the heat of a transaction that was not going his way. For Majid, etiquette (*adab*) was a moral disposition that needed to be mastered through learning how to speak well to a customer. But it was also a professional skill that could be used coercively, to put pressure on a customer, dominate the transaction, and establish Majid's autonomy as someone who sold "according to my pleasure, not theirs".

Majid almost invariably started his selling routine in the same way. He would stand at the threshold of the shop, greeting passers-by and inviting them into the shop.

Inside, the rolls of brightly coloured cloth are carefully stacked and displayed from the bottom of the walls to the top to entice customers. The rolls of shiny satin, brightly coloured silks and embroidered gauze are normally sold in retail quantities to women – a metre or two of fabric cut off the roll in the shop. The prices reflect the fact that the goods are for special occasions; some fabrics sell for over 4000 lira (around fifty pounds sterling) a metre, and there is often a high profit margin. Prices are not fixed or marked, leaving plenty of opportunity for salesmanship.

We stood together at the entrance to the shop, surveying the passing stream of visitors in the alley at the centre of Aleppo's old city covered markets, and wondering who to "catch" (*sahb*). Once Majid had succeeded in inviting customers in, he would ask them to climb the stairs at the back of the shop. He would linger at the bottom of the stairs, and when his customers had reached the top, he would wait another couple of seconds and then charge up after them. The stairs led to a second chamber, directly above the first, but larger and more decorative. It was around two metres deep and seven metres wide, and cut in half by a waist-high wooden bench which ran the length of the shop. The salesmen stood behind the bench, in a long and narrow cramped space against the wall. In front of the bench six chairs were arrayed, facing the salesmen. All four walls were covered in stacks and shelves of different coloured satins and delicately embroidered gauzes, that reached from the floor to the ceiling.

As he arrived in a burst of energy at the top of the stairs, Majid would invite his customers to sit down, in a gentle but directive voice. Hopping nimbly over the bench, he would reach to a panel of switches at the side of the shop, and turn a dial up to full power, making the overhead lamps shine with suddenly powerful intensity, flattering the shop's array of shiny satins and sequined fabrics. Once he was sure his customers were properly seated in front of him, Majid would ask in a polite, well-enunciated but somehow urgent tone, what they were looking for: *ish laazimkun?* what are your requirements?

Usually his customers wanted a dress for a special occasion, and were looking for a combination of fabrics – a vibrant satin or silk underlay, with an embroidered and sequined gauze overlay. The two were chosen separately. Majid would waste little time in selecting different items to propose to his customers, pulling a roll of gauze off a shelf behind him. The rolls of gauze were wrapped around a *shabak* – a small light wooden board. He would take one off the shelf and fling it expertly into the air, twisting it as he did so; as it spun in the air, the gauze would unwrap itself. After he had caught and relaunched the roll a few times, more than a metre of fine embroidered gauze had appeared on the bench in front of him. Before long, Majid had laid out three or four other different samples on the bench in front of his audience, or hung them up behind him in a colourful display. Next, he would select a satin to put behind the gauze. Half consulting and half advising the customers, he would select a colour to set off the design on the embroidered gauze to its best advantage. Often Majid, wedged behind his seller's bench, would order Suhail, the shop's *agiir* or errand boy, to climb up the shelves (unaided by any ladder) and retrieve a particular satin or silk. The *agiir* was smaller and younger than Majid. Although he was equally lithe, any perceived slowness or dullness on his part would be rewarded with a playful smack over the head from Majid's metre rule, eliciting laughter from those customers who were happy to enjoy the show.

Physical energy was an integral part of the selling routine. It was intensely felt in this narrow and crowded arena. Since the customers sat immobile on low seats, it was an energy that was entirely dominated by Majid and his assistant. It could be seen in their athleticism – their lithe, rapid and masterful movements as they climbed over the bench, up the shelves, down the stairway. But it could also be felt in the vigorous and unforgiving way in which Majid twisted and tossed the cloth in the air in front of his audience. During these moments, all attention was on the cloth which, as it caught the powerful light, was the only thing moving in the room.

All movement and speed in the shop was so thoroughly monopolised by the salesmen that the customers seemed at moments to be nothing more than an audience. The setting itself added to the sense of theatricality: the colourful fabrics, spread out or

hung from the shelves like a backdrop, the lights raised and dimmed before and after the performance, and the wide wooden bench marking off the stage and separating Majid from his customers. But as the transaction progressed, Majid tried to draw them into the action, to make them protagonists. He hoped that the customers would comply in his direction of events, because they played a crucial role by introducing the money. A successful transaction is transformative: the customer moves from anonymous spectator to engaged protagonist to partner in an exchange, a relationship that is transitory but nevertheless sealed by the final act: the handing over of the shop's business card.

Majid and his colleagues prided themselves on the versatility and social knowledge that enabled them to speak not only effectively but properly with a range of others. This was a key part of a trading morality. They described the initial part of the encounter as *tarhiib* (welcoming), which was usually mixed with “*tahshiim*”: a lingo term meaning to treat customers with deference. This involved using a gentle tone of voice and polite expressions such as “please have a seat”, “how can I help you madam”, “my pleasure”, “you are most welcome” (*tfaddlii, ish laazimik khaalatiy, tikram 'ainik, miit slaameh*). While these may seem like conventional forms of politeness in English, they were often mentioned within the retail market, and more widely in the old city, as an important repertoire to acquire, and one which many traders were not able or accustomed to using.

*Adab* also implied turning the shop upside down for the customer. This is the mark of the proper salesman; one woman told me that one shopkeeper has “terrible morals” (*akhlaaq zift*) because although he is honest, he treats the customer gruffly and neglects the proper dignities: he will not make an effort to show his wares, and gives the impression that the customer is a nuisance: indecisive or ignorant of her own desires. Faced with the same conception of his largely female customers, Majid turns his shop upside down for the customer, thus treating her with dignity by making her the object of attention, energy and focus as she deserves.

### *Elegance, Entertainment and Complicity*

Selling then is a moral process of showing *adab*: it is about knowing the correct manners. An important part of this is knowing the right way to talk to the customer and the correct phrases to use. *Adab* in this case does not imply warm-hearted sincerity. It is more a matter of performance and propriety than inner attitude. It is, nevertheless, moral – those who fail to perform properly are said to have “terrible morals”. In the example above where one woman said that she hated visiting a shopkeeper whose “morals” (*akhlaaq*) were “awful” (*zift*), she did not mean that he was dishonest, but that he did not know how to speak to her as a customer. He gave the impression that she was unwelcome and a nuisance. She preferred going to a different shop, where the trader had “sweet talk” (*kalaam hilu*) – even if he charged more and was known for his flattery.

It might seem strange that honesty and sincerity were not necessarily the basis of successful transactions in the shop. But this is not to say that Majid and his colleagues deceived customers through the elegance or force of their sales patter; rather, there was a dynamic of complicity where customers were understood to want to be treated with a certain attitude and manner, and were happy to enter into a play of entertainment and flirtation in which illusion was an acceptable element. In Majid’s shop, transactions lived or died by the salesman’s manner and propriety of engagement rather than by an assessment of his sincerity, trustworthiness or warm-heartedness. Sincerity is not always a central social requirement; it emerges as such in particular conditions, such as liberal democratic politics and its ever-present concern about the dangers of fraudulent language (Shklar 1984, Runciman 2008).

Both Runciman and Shklar recognise that certain forms of hypocrisy are inevitable in democratic politics, and Shklar therefore advocates a kind of complicity, or at least a greater tolerance of hypocrisy in politics. Her justification is that other vices – such as cruelty, or hypocrisy about hypocrisy – are worse. However, she does not, as Runciman (2008:4) notes, offer any advice about where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of hypocrisy. Perhaps, if insincerity is to be

regulated, aesthetics is one way to do it. In Majid's shop, an elegant and convincing performance given *for the benefit* of the customer makes complicity possible – so that the question of deceit never arises. Complicity was important in the courtyard yarn market (*bursa*) too. Here, as I argue in chapter eight, an aesthetic of “agonism followed by revelation” distinguished between acceptable and unacceptable forms of deceit. Tactics in the *bursa* often involved bluffing and “provocation” (*jakkaara*). This was partly for strategic reasons, to induce irrational fear in a “psychological war”. But it struck me that bluffing and *jakkaara* often continued despite the probable knowledge that they were a bluff. In these cases, performance and contest were enjoyed for their own sake. Bluffing and *jakkaara* lay somewhere between entertainment and strategy.

Another related form of entertainment which I saw I saw among traders and their associates across Aleppo's markets and beyond, was to bluff or make a claim when others knew, or suspected but were not totally sure, that they were being fooled. I attended one dinner among a circle of wealthy textile manufacturers and traders where the centre point of the evening's entertainment was a spontaneous performance: one of the most socially confident men in the group made ever more outlandish claims about himself which the group delightedly entertained and challenged but appeared unable to disprove. This was known as *za'bara*, which was defined to me as “a lie in which the audience is complicit and which they find pleasant (*hilu*)”. Similarly, a wealthy textile industrialist in his mid-twenties told me that he dealt with one person in business because he enjoyed his quick wits, even though he could not trust him: “he is a complete arsehole, the biggest in Aleppo. But even though you know he is lying to you, you like to do business with him”. For this entrepreneur, it was entertaining to hear the way his trading partner spoke and interacted: aesthetic pleasure “excused” the lack of straightforwardness.

In Majid's shop, the rule that governed the game was *adab* – etiquette. As I have argued, this should not be understood as honesty or even trust, but a kind of charm or style. It was an embodied habitus, but based largely around the correct use of language. Majid prided himself on talking to a customer appropriately, and knowing

the correct “styles” (*asaaliib*) to use with her. His skill was to bring customers into a “pleasant illusion” (*za‘bara*) – for example that the fabric was desirable because it was expensive. The transactions were performances in which most of his customers chose to be complicit and to find pleasurable. The relation of “morality” (“do not lie”) to commerce is complex precisely because in trade, some illusions are acceptable: those in which one’s transactor is voluntarily complicit. In the shop, this depended on the salesman’s having a good “style” and repertoire of tactics (*asaaliib*) and acting with propriety (*adab*). Trade in this context was part honesty and part illusion; part agonism and part complicity. Deciding where the boundary lies between truth and morally serious lying is a complex matter that requires ethical judgement. I explore this issue further in chapter eight.

### ***Coercion and the Paradox of Propriety***

Majid’s selling routine took place within strict bounds of propriety. He and his colleagues prided themselves on their ability to maintain and defend the proper forms of interaction. Propriety was a mark of their social distinction. On one occasion, when children walked through the market insulting each other in loud and coarse voices, one salesman said to me, “it is shameful. I never use insults, not out loud...women are around.” Majid and his colleagues, as “sons of the market”, saw themselves, like many in the old city, as responsible for ensuring that the bounds of propriety were not overstepped within the shop. They were critical of women in body-hugging clothes who, they said, “come not to buy but just so that you can look at her. She works in a casino, a nightclub...we should get rid of her for the sake of the shop’s reputation (*min shan suma‘at al-mahall*)”.

Guarding the limits of propriety was also a question of appropriate concealment. Etiquette involved not only knowing the right way to talk to the customer, but also knowing what it was appropriate to hide from them, and how. The secret market lingo was used in order to maintain decorum in front of customers:

Majid: we say “Abu Raaj” [the “father of Raaj”] to mean the lavatory. Everyone in the market knows this. I’m going to see Abu Raaj, we say.

Paul: Why do you say that?

Majid: It wouldn't do to shout out "I'm going to the toilet" in front of a customer. It's not right.

The salesmen gave similar explanations regarding conversations about food (*tahshim* in the market lingo). The lingo was an essential part of propriety since it enabled Majid and his colleagues to ensure decorous relations with customers, by creating backstage space for conversations that could not properly be conducted in front of outsiders. Their propriety expressed itself in a love of obliqueness and indirectness. On another occasion when I was sitting in the shop, two salesmen argued with each other in front of a customer, but addressed everything they said to a third younger member of staff, as if they were scolding him, to camouflage the fact that two men were in fact arguing with each other. They explained later that they used this form of misdirection in order to avoid making the customer feel uncomfortable. One said that this type of communicating "is like playing billiards...you hit the ball in one direction against the cushion, because you want it to go in another direction".

Propriety, however, is not always benign. Making the customer the object of attention, energy and focus as she deserves, by turning the shop upside down to find the perfect fabric for her, is both an example of trading *adab* and a way of gently obligating or coercing her into making a purchase. Sometimes this coercion could be less gentle. Faced with a customer who appeared unwilling to make a decision, Majid treated her politely at first but then coercively. Of medium height and slim build, Majid moved quickly and athletically around the shop. Sometimes he wore baggy tracksuit trousers and a sports T-shirt, balancing the ever-present large scissors in his back pocket. But normally he dressed in fashionable jeans and T-shirt, and gelled his hair, and in the warm weather wore flip flops to work. He had pale skin, and large dark brown eyes, and while many of his female customers referred to him as their "son", they also found that his voice could switch suddenly from its soft and gentle tone to a much more forceful and demanding one.

After the deferential politesse (*tahshiim* in the lingo) involved in the welcome, his style might change abruptly. Behind the propriety and decorum, the salesmen had quite another agenda. Majid said,

“as soon as the customer has sat down, I own her. She is my property. I can sell to her according to my pleasure, not according to hers (*‘alaa kayfii, muu ‘alaa kayfhaa*)”

Indeed, a contrasting style to the deferential way of speaking was “scolding” or “humiliating”. Known in the lingo as *tangii*<sup>17</sup>, this referred to a way of shouting or speaking harshly at a customer to control the bargaining process. It was used to immobilise customers who appeared on the verge of leaving the shop without buying anything. The salesmen explained that they use this technique in order to shock the customer and stop them in their tracks, and pressure them to sit down. This gave them a few moments to change tack, offer a new product or price, or devise a new line of argument. I saw several examples of *tangii* during encounters with customers, and they often happened suddenly, representing an abrupt change of the young salesman’s tone from soft and sweet to urgent and indignant:

“I offer 4000 [lira per metre] and you say 1000? Are you laughing at me [*tdahhik ‘alai*] because you think I am young? I have been brought up in this shop, I know.”

The dynamic of coercion was never far from the surface in these performances. Indeed, the very discourse of politeness and respectability can become suddenly coercive.

“[with a raised voice] You offer 1000 and then you walk out like that, turn your back on me? This is a respectable shop, you cannot behave like that [*haadaa mahall muhtaram, maa bsiir*]...[modifying tone slightly] If you would like something cheaper, I have cheaper things, please, have a look, take a seat! [*tfaddalii, shuufii, brukii*].”

Particularly important was knowing how to switch between a “welcoming” or “deferential” style to a “scolding style”, and back again, as appropriate.

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<sup>17</sup> *Tangii* is pronounced with a hard “g”, uncharacteristically for Levantine Arabic.

Manipulating the rhythm and tone of the discourse was a way to control the customer. Majid explained that, “this is the scolding style (*tangii*’), but at the same time it is deferential (*tahshiim*). You mix the styles. Then, as soon as she [the customer] has sat down, I own her (*malikthaa*).”

This etiquette (*adab*) was socially specific: the salesmen talked differently to those of different classes and ethnicities – a deliberate proof of their social knowledge and versatility.

Majid addresses a man of slight build walking past his shop, who wears a red kuffiyeh, an abbayeh tunic, and some light stubble. Majid explains to me that he is a “shawiy”, or an itinerant “Bedouin”:

“I’m talking to you sir! You walk away when I am talking to you? Is that how you behave? When I’m talking to you?”

When the customer walks in sheepishly, and Majid orders him abruptly to take one end of a roll of cloth and help him unravel it: “open it up, I said, open it up!”. This is unusual – he never usually allows customers to participate in the manual labour of the shop, and is usually at pains to ensure that they remain immobile spectators.

In her article on manners and ethics, Yeung (2010) explores late nineteenth-century etiquette manuals in North America. She argues that these provided secular tools of ethical self-cultivation much as Hirschkind (2006) argued that pious speech could not only reflect a pure heart, but also act to transform it. Etiquette was a “means by which certain moral dispositions could be acquired and cultivated” – and foremost among these dispositions was sincerity. My perspective on etiquette in the shop where Majid works is different. Here, etiquette is not primarily a matter of inculcating “sincerity”, and in fact can be used coercively. Etiquette certainly was a moral disposition: it was the embodied ability to treat a worthy customer properly: by making her the object of energy and attention; by speaking to her correctly using “styles” (*asaaliib*) appropriate to her; and by knowing and guarding the limits of respectable behaviour in the shop. However, each of these aspects of etiquette had a coercive underside. By making the customer the focus of attention and turning the shop upside down for her, an obligation was put on her to purchase. The “styles” that were used to speak to a customer could also be used to create illusions of value and desirability, to lead her into self-deception and even to “trick” her (*khadaa*’). Finally,

etiquette was not only a matter of knowing and guarding limits of respectable behaviour, but also enabled the salesmen to impose limits on the customers' negotiating styles and thus to seek to control the negotiation.

The moral aspects of propriety and these coercive undersides were mutually intertwined. Indeed, even the rough scolding style – intended as coercive pressure – had rules and principles and was hedged around with careful limits. One of the salesmen explained that, “this is the scolding technique (*tangii'*), but with style (*usluub*). It is based on principles, scolding has rules (*min usuul, at-tangii' ilaah usuul*). You can't say, ‘you idiot, get out of the shop!’ (*yaa ablah, ruuh min l mahall*).” Knowing these limits, and how to manoeuvre within and between them was a key skill. Thus, propriety could be used coercively but coercion needed to live within the limits of propriety. Paradoxically, Majid needed both to respect and enforce limits but also to push them. He needed to balance politeness and coercion, autonomy over the customer and compromise, a strict avoidance of “lying” and the skills of “trickery”. His skill as a salesman was to work within these limits, both pushing the boundaries and pulling back in time before the transaction with the customer collapsed. Managing these various balancing acts in the heat of a transaction required judgement, which, like etiquette, was both a moral disposition and a professional skill.

## Chapter Seven

### Making Customers Worthy: the Pedagogy of Commerce

The capacities of boldness, cleverness and etiquette which were prized by these retail salesmen were all part of the agonistic skill of selling. The young employees used these capacities to persuade, if necessary by coercing and shaming the customer. They were an intrinsic part of the project to “sell as we want”. To do so was to demonstrate virtue, since autonomy was a form of social honour, valued for its own sake. Lambek (2008:151) argues that virtue ethics makes most sense of most societies, including our own: “we do strive much of the time to do what is right and with respect to standards of excellence... We do this because we have learned to care about both the practice and the outcome”. Following Lambek, I analyse Majid’s selling in this retail shop as a moral practice. That is, in practising boldness, propriety, cleverness and autonomy, he and his colleagues are not *only* seeking to be successful or to display their cultural capital. They are also striving for excellence for its own sake.

Majid’s standards of excellence – which define what it means to sell well – are culturally situated and gendered. Lambek argues that practices (such as raising children, being pious, embodying spirits, playing string quartets, or writing papers) are distinctive cultural phenomena with their own criteria. They “provide orientation, motivation, and pleasure, and make life absorbing, worthwhile, and even exciting” (2010a:22-23). For Majid, boldness, cleverness and propriety are ways of demonstrating worth within a particular understanding of gender and kin relations. In these relations, male autonomy over women is valued and ought to be demonstrated for other men. I draw some parallels between the practice of selling well in the retail shop and the “glorious deed” of triumphing in an agonistic poetry contest, as described by Caton (1990). In the case of the salesmen, economic status makes a difference to what it means to sell well. Those without the advantage of wealth are

more likely to understand excellence in terms of the “muted values” (cf Jacobson-Widding 1997:56) of “cleverness” and “slipperiness”.

However, selling is not simply a question of showing off one’s skill. Virtuosity in agonism must translate into a successful purchase. Describing bargaining processes in a market in Morocco, Geertz wrote in 1979 that participants had a “moral obligation” to “triumph over their functional opposition” and thus “render the process successful”. As I noted in the introduction, a recurring theme in my thesis is the tension between the good of asserting one’s own will independently of others, and the recognition that one is inextricably involved with those people. Ordinary ethics in this context is a question of how to be involved with others: how to manage, limit, extend and orient oneself in that involvement. In the retail shop, the young salesmen must combine a demonstration of autonomy with a consummated sale – or at least they must move from one to the other. This involves managing an unpredictable encounter with the customer where each side makes a series of temporary price offers or commitments. The way in which the customers and salesmen make, precipitate and disavow these commitments is an ethical skill. Finally, I argue that selling involves not just managing an involvement with others, but also managing the self: balancing competing ideals of autonomy and compromise in order to effect a sale. Virtue and commercial success both emerge as a matter of finding the golden mean.

### ***The Honour of Not Compromising***

Majid and his colleagues outlined a range of techniques they used to control the customer. As discussed in the previous chapter, one tactic was to speak harshly at customers who appeared on the verge of leaving the shop without buying anything. Another technique was to “fry” (*sal*) or “agitate” the customer – to keep moving them around, like meat frying in a hot pan. This meant showing them a range of goods quickly, one after another. The salesmen used this constant moving and change as way of trying to maintain control over the encounter. Majid, relaxing with

me downstairs in the shop after he had completed a sale to three men from Urfa in Turkey, said to me:

“I told Hamzi, you need to fry the Turkish guys, or they won’t buy. Frying means like with potatoes or chicken: you keep moving the pan so they don’t stick, you keep the pace up, show things and talk and sell quickly, before he stops and thinks.”

The salesmen “fried” customers by switching rapidly from one style to another, until the customer became their property (*milkiyya*), and they could then sell to them “as and how we like”. This emphasis on autonomy indicates that the encounter with the customer was conceived of in agonistic terms. Majid said,

“she won’t buy unless she bargains you down. Give her the best price straightaway?! These days, you would never sell anything like that. She won’t buy unless you lower the price in bargaining, so she is spoiled (*mudallaleh*). Especially the mother-in-law. She needs to show she is skilful (*shaatira*), that she can break your price.”

Other tactics of control involved the ability to silence and to immobilise customers. Majid said that it was important to “silence the in-laws” (*sakkit li hmayyeh*) in order to prevent them from interfering in the selection of items, since this could lead to transactional paralysis and no sale.

So it is clear that Majid’s skills serve a purpose in the context of an agonistic confrontation. There was an ever-present degree of competitiveness between Majid and his colleagues as to who could sell highest and quickest, and dominate the customer best. But Lambek, drawing on Friedman (1990), argues that even practices that take place in competitive arenas may not be explained by the logic of acquiring some form of social or financial capital. He argues that when the practice is as important as the result – when sportsmanship, playing music, being graceful or elegant or skilled or generous is for its own sake, even within a wider arena of competition – then a purely economic analysis is inappropriate (2008:146-7).

Lambek's version of virtue ethics – that we strive to do the best we can because we have learned to “care about both the practice and the outcome” (2008:151) – is an alternative theory of practice to Bourdieu's “acquisition of capital”. Majid's behaviour is not just showing off (acquiring capital) through the agonistic way he sells, it is also a way of deploying his capacities. Lambek (2008) argues that Bourdieu's account of human action ends up looking like economics. It is about attaining certain ends – achieving “symbolic capital”. According to Lambek's perspective, which draws on MacPherson (1973:4-5), the human being is not a consumer of goods and utilities, but someone who can flourish through activity. What is important is not accumulation but deployment (and thus enjoyment) of “uniquely human” capacities. This, I suggest, is the best way to make sense of the virtuosic selling in the retail shop, rather than Bourdieu's pursuit of status for the sake of economic or class motives.

For example, Lambek (2008:147) refers to Friedman's ethnography (1990) of “competitive dressing” in Brazzaville, Congo. For the “competitive dressers of Brazzaville”, elegance is “a moral practice and not to be reduced to a mere quest for distinction”. Here, Friedman argues, clothes become “constitutive of who their wearers are”. This is because “the relative values of the clothes and their labels subsists in a wider context... of Congolese understandings about catching and maintaining power” (Lambek 2008:147). Similarly, for someone in Majid's relatively weak structural position, “skilfulness” (*shataara*) makes sense as a virtue within broader Aleppan understandings of power and honour as something that is gained through asserting one's autonomy. I explore this idea below through the concept of the “glorious deed”.

These standards of excellence – which define what it means to sell well – are situated both culturally and economically. They are a form of demonstrating honour (*karaama*), worth (*qiimeh*) and autonomy (selling '*alaa kayfuh*) within a particular understanding of gender and kin relations. Peteet (1994:34) argues that “Arab masculinity (*rujulah*) is acquired, verified and played out in the brave deed, in risk-taking, and in expressions of fearlessness and assertiveness”. For Caton (1990), this

means triumphing in agonistic oral display, which is a means of acquiring social honour for Yemeni tribesman. Abu-Lughod (1985:251) notes that ‘real men’, for Bedouin in western Egypt, are those who are not controlled by fear; similarly, Peteet notes that the masculine ideal for Palestinian men is to “command obedience from others while they themselves resist submitting to others’ control” (Peteet 1994:34). Bourdieu (1977) observes that among Algerian Berbers, a man gains honour by launching a challenge at someone deemed capable of responding to it, and to deem them capable is to confer honour (Peteet 1994:34).

However, ‘challenge and riposte’ was not the only way of achieving and conferring honour. As Abu-Lughod (1986) notes, social personhood and honour are achieved in different ways and to different extents by people according to their structural position. Elyachar’s definition of mastery, namely “the ability to stabilise, reproduce, and extend...networks” (2005:142), applies to Abdullah. His social presence depends on his capital, and the number of his machines which determine his Chamber of Industry quota ranking and his position at the “top of the industry” (*ras al-sinaa’a*). His presence also depends on his relationships: those he can gather round him, the influence (*wazn*) he has with them and the affection or loyalty which he inspires among them. He does not need to enter into agonistic confrontation; the idiom of his exchanges is quite different, at least in public. As Rabo (2005a) notes, bargaining is by no means common in the Aleppo markets. However, it is a feature of the market where Majid works. In contrast to Abdullah, Majid’s professional identity depends not on wealth or substance (*wazn*) but on having grown up in the old city markets, and proving his talent and quickness through boldness, cleverness, mastery of language, and force of personality. For him, mastery means the power to “control”, agitate, misdirect and to silence in an agonistic encounter.

These capacities are deployed within a culturally specific ideology of honour and autonomy. While aware of the danger of simply reproducing the tropes of agonistic male honour and female shame in the Arab world, nevertheless I want to compare Majid’s performance in a transaction to the “glorious deed” of the Yemeni poets described by Caton (1990) who compete in a contest of semi-spontaneous eloquence

and wit. Like the *balah* poets described by Caton, the salesman when he faced his customers was on show and at risk. For a salesman face-to-face with a customer, any kind of weakness, shyness or failure was simply not acceptable:

Muhyi, a tall eighteen-year old salesman, follows a customer up the stairs. As usual, Muhyi is dressed in dark jeans and a striped button-up shirt that emphasises his height. He says to Majid in *haziy*: “shut up, don’t say a word! She is my customer!” Majid turns to Suhail and says: “shall I shut up and say nothing, or humiliate him?” We sit in silence and watch. All eyes are on Muhyi as he tries to make the sale.

Majid told me later: “if you have a customer in front of you and they have money to spend and you don’t sell...it is unthinkable, it is just not an option. The boss and the people round you won’t tolerate it.... ...To spend a long time with a customer and not sell is very bad. It feels awful.”

Like Caton’s poets, the salesman is “alone against the world”. Majid stands alone, unaided by his colleagues who are a critical audience. Similarly, Caton’s poet “must rely on his own spontaneous resources; he is alone facing the world.” Majid’s insistence that he stood “in front of the female customer” – the position in which honour was gained and in which he stood against the world – mirrors an embodied conception of mastery among Cairo workshop owners as described by Elyachar (2005:109):

“the ability to ‘stand at the machine’ is the statement of mastery...the ability to physically stand at the machine, the tools of labour in hand, and direct the workshop and the labour process. He who ‘stands at the machine’ is...master of the workshop. Only a master can ‘stand at the machine’ with no one to oversee his labour”.

As with the Yemeni poets, Majid’s agonistic transactions are a mean of seeking “dignity” (*karaameh*) by demonstrating that he is able to sell “as he wants”. This sense of dignity is vulnerable. Not only is it sometimes painfully unrecognised by his bosses, as I argued in chapter three, but it is also always at stake in the assessments of his peers. He must boast about his achievements after the sale, and if the transaction goes wrong and he fails to sell, he is exposed to mockery and humiliation (*bahdaleh*).

Later, he grills Muhyi, in *haziy* even though there are no customers present. “Did they buy? How many metres? How much?”. Muhyi replies in code: “yes, three metres, at 2250 lira”. Majid: “2250?! Are you telling the truth? You’re lying!” Muhyi: “it’s the truth!” Majid tells him again he does not believe him, then as Muhyi is disappearing down the stairs, Majid takes the metre rule and tries to hit him over the head. Majid is smiling as he puts the metre rule back in place. “I don’t believe him, he’s lying”, he tells me.

The pressure that Majid and his colleagues felt indicated that they were held accountable – not just through the numbers in their pocketbooks but also through the observation and narration of their performances. They themselves, by taking part in the creation and circulation of these narratives, helped to sustain the shop as an arena of performance. The way they sold – their eloquence or shyness, the length of time they took, the price they settled at – was either watched by, or quickly reported to, peers and the bosses. Indeed, the salesmen watched each other’s performances, enquired after the results, and narrated these events afterwards.

Majid gains honour through selling high and negotiating hard with the customer. He must match and overcome the way his transactors talk, but without offending against propriety (*adab*). Caton (1990:112) argues that poetry becomes a type of “glorious deed” when it is performed as a “challenge and response”. He notes that in such agonistic poetry, the tribesmen must criticise the way the style and choice of words of their opponent, without deviating from the strict metrical requirements of the encounter.

Majid and his colleagues, like the poets described by Caton, had to show themselves as masters of time and rhythm, which in this case was gendered. They needed to ensure that the transaction stayed moving along quickly, conforming to an ideal rhythm. He and the other salesmen were always conscious of the time that particular transactions took; this was part of the way in which transactions were subsequently remembered and narrated. The salesmen felt under pressure to consummate the transaction relatively quickly, and would criticise each other if they did not. This sense of time was gendered because the salesmen said that most women were indecisive or prone to waste valuable time because they wanted nothing more than to “entertain themselves”. Unless a fast rhythm was kept up, the customer was liable to

sink into indecision. The risk for the salesman was that the encounter became simply a form of entertainment (*al-tasallii*) for the customer – a spectacle that led nowhere.

Dignity, then, or “honour” must be “achieved over and over in glorious deeds” (Caton 1990). Majid regains his honour through the daring way he sells, and he fashions himself after the event by boasting to his colleagues. The narrative logic required that he was, and was said to have been, in control of the sale, the materials, the customers, the stage, the rhythm: that he sold “according to his pleasure” (*‘alaa kayfuh*) – what he wanted, the way he wanted, and in the time that he wanted. This is a “transaction over one’s social self” (Gilsenan 1996:198). The sale itself is a transaction both over materials, and also a transaction in which one’s self is tested and emerges dialogically with the female customer’s self.

Majid argued that:

“Women are different from men. Men come in, ask how much is this, that and the other, then they buy or don’t buy. Women ask you to get everything out, and whatever you show them, they always want a different colour, something different. They don’t like anything. They get you to turn the whole shop upside down. This is why skilfulness (*shataara*) comes in. You need to know how to get them to like things”.

In Majid’s case, the moral self is clearly gendered in the shop<sup>18</sup>. The honourable self is constructed through the language with which men, or those who are becoming men, misdirect opponents; according to their own narratives, the salesmen “force”, “agitate”, “silence” and “possess” women “according to their pleasure”. Majid also used gendered tactics in negotiation, for example throwing doubt on their femininity: “are you so tight-fisted, like a boxer (*mulaakimeh*)?” This is in line with the broader gender ideology in the Arab Middle East, in which a man’s honour is measured by the control he exercises over his female relatives (Caton 1990).

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<sup>18</sup> Melhuus (1997) argues that morality is always gendered: the moral standards and ideals expected of men and women differ from one another, and to be moral implies, to some extent, “being a man”, or “being a woman”. Others have pointed out that morality is not always gendered; among the Brazilian Catholics that Mayblin (2010) studied, men and women face the same dilemmas and challenges side by side.

Women, far from being mute customers, would often engage in the banter with decorum and style. On one occasion, a woman in her thirties wearing typical conservative female attire (a black hair veil and long wide black overcoat) was pondering whether or not to buy. I tried to encourage her to buy, telling her “these are nice goods”, and she replied “your presence is nicer” (*wujuudak ahlaa*). Shops and market places were one of the few arenas in the city where women and young and unmarried men could legitimately engage in conversation. More often than not, the women were unaccompanied by their husbands or other men. The shop was an arena in which women, accompanied by their mother or a senior female, were able to engage in friendly or even flirtatious banter with the salesmen, who were often a few years younger than them. On one occasion, one of Majid’s colleagues, a salesman in his late twenties, was selling to a group of four Aleppan women: one appeared to be aged around fifty, the other three in their late twenties or early thirties. After having shown the group several varieties of fabric, the salesman addressed the young woman who was weighing up different options:

Salesman: what does your husband think? Is he waiting for you?

Customer: but I haven’t got a husband! [chuckling, looking at the other women].

Salesman: this one brings out your beauty! [Handing her a piece of embroidered gauze (sometimes he would lean over the bench towards her body and throw it over her shoulder)]

Customer: [stands up, holds it up against her body, which is covered in a loose-fitting black overcoat]

Salesman [slightly later in the transaction]: you remind me of my sister! I show you a hundred things, and finally you say, I like the first one, but with a different colour behind it!

Customer: How many sisters do you have?

Salesman: Two. But I have married them off [literally: “got rid of them” – *khallast minnun*].

Customer: They are married?

Salesman: Yes, and they married outside the country! Our home is just for me and my brother now. Except when our parents come back twice a year.

Majid’s normative view of gender, whereby female customers needed to be directed by him in their choices, and forcibly encouraged to make a purchase, since they had no will of their own, in fact rarely corresponded to the dynamic of interactions. Majid often found himself locked in protracted negotiations which he did not always

manage to bring to the conclusion which he sought. However, the ideology enabled and required Majid, a young unmarried man, to say that he asserted his will over the woman and thus that he acted “as he wished” (*‘alaa kayfii*). Sometimes the woman might play along, pretending to have surrendered her will to another person in the room – but this was often her mother. One Aleppan customer once commented with a laugh at the end of a negotiation: “I have five children and I still buy as my mother wants! (*‘alaa kayf immii*)”. This public deferral to the mother sets the stage for a contest in which Majid confronts the senior woman in the buying party for control over the younger woman. This is how he sometimes described the dynamics of transaction, promising that he would show me “how to keep the mother-in-law quiet”.

### ***“Unworthy Customers” and the Art of Disavowal***

For Majid and his colleagues, selling involved more than establishing one’s own honour through agonistic display. Achieving the sale also required managing their involvement with the customer. How one manages one’s involvement with others – extending or limiting it, and cultivating attitudes towards them – is the subject matter of ethics, as I suggested in the introduction. In Majid’s retail shop, where customers and salesmen were usually unknown to each other, the process of involvement was compressed: the options available to each party were restrictively defined in relation to a series of price offers, and the entire social negotiation from introduction to purchase took place within a short space of time, usually around thirty minutes or less.

In this compressed and tightly defined environment, the ethical involvement between customer and salesman was a mutual process of expressing and stabilising intentions. The encounter with the customer started with an existential expression of intention on the part of the salesman, to ‘stand in front of’ the customer, and to achieve a sale. This originating intention established the dynamic for the interaction that followed. The negotiation then proceeded by a series of price offers, which established

temporary commitments which could be revoked by leaving the shop and re-entering it.

However, the negotiation could always fail – in part because the customer’s intention to buy was always in doubt. Customers who did not bear serious intentions, but were merely there to “entertain themselves” (*byitsalluu*) were judged “unworthy”. Therefore, in the selling process, the salesman sought both to establish his own credibility by following through on his initial intention and commitment to sell, and to establish the credibility and worthiness of the customer by verifying that their intentions had been serious all along.

Through crossing the shop’s threshold back into the alleyway, the customer could at any point cancel the negotiation and retain worthiness by revoking the specific commitment to purchase they had made in any previous price offer. However, such a “disavowal” had to be made credibly within the stream of practice. Ethics in this context was a process of expressing and verifying intentions: making commitments or disavowing them in a credible way. Moral worthiness was a matter both of serious intention, and of the ability to *perform* rituals of commitment and disavowal successfully.

It was a quiet day in the market, during the Eid celebrations. Many shops were closed, indeed the whole of Suq al-Alwan was locked up, forcing the salesmen to move stock through the night into a second shop in another part of the market that belonged to the same owners. Majid had spent the early hours of the day draping fabrics from the ceiling and the high shelves. All this effort had been made because several thousand Turkish visitors had been rumoured to arrive in Aleppo over Eid. Visa restrictions between the two countries had been temporarily lifted to mark the Muslim holiday, and as a sign of the developing relations between them. But despite these rumours and the efforts of Majid and his colleagues, the market was quiet. It was midday.

Suddenly a tout alerts the young salesmen that a group of well-heeled shoppers are on their way. There is a flurry of activity in the shop. I am asked to move to the back of the shop: to the boss’s chair behind the desk: off-stage. From where I sit, I feel the anticipation: what are these customers like? Will they enter the shop? What are they looking for? Will they realise if they are charged over the odds? Will they buy? Three Turkish men walk in. They are in their late forties or early fifties and well-built, with an assurance that

comes from their physique and their expensive if casual clothes. One points at a roll of satin and asks the price. Majid begins to talk, but as soon as he mentions a figure, all three customers immediately leave the shop feigning disgust. Majid calls after them, lowering the price quickly from 400 lira, to 350, 300, and then 250 lira a metre.

Forty minutes later, the men return. This time they start bargaining in earnest. They know how to play with the threshold of shop, offering a price and then stepping over the threshold into the market, leaving them free, morally uncommitted to the price they have just offered, and able to offer a lower price when they step back over the threshold.

I noted in the previous chapter that a salesman's boldness was an important capacity. It was the aspect of the salesman's character that initiated the selling process. This boldness has the force of commitment, since it establishes a serious intention to sell. Salesmen certainly follow a fairly routine script, at least in the opening stages of the encounter, but the boldness with which they do so serves to put the encounter with the customer on a particular trajectory. In describing this act, Majid emphasised that he spoke "in front of the customer" (*qaddaam iz-zaabuuneh*). He said that this required nerve. I argue that it required nerve not simply because he was performing a script in public. Rather, to maintain this position – to "affront" the customer – was an act of initiating something. It declared a serious intention to sell, and thus defined a new situation, however routine or repetitive that encounter might seem in retrospect.

In making that declaration, Majid put himself at stake – not only his time, but also his ability to follow through on what he had started. It was because of the seriousness of this act, that salesmen across this particular market devoted effort to establishing whether a customer was worthy (*hashiim*) of the encounter or not. An "unworthy" (*hatiit* in the market lingo) customer might either be poor, or simply intending to waste time and "amuse herself" rather than make a purchase. Information about the worthiness – the seriousness and the intentions – of particular would-be customers was exchanged between shops in this part of the market using the private lingo. Those customers who entered into a shop and started a negotiation but did not make a purchase were sometimes denounced after they had left. Thus, negotiations in this retail shop were not simply an economic encounter of supply and demand, or a battle of wits between calculating actors. Rather, the salesmen understood these encounters

as a moral process where intentions were declared, and commitments made to following up on those intentions. These encounters were routine but nonetheless morally significant. This perspective explains the salesmen's evaluation of some customers as worthy and their denunciation of others as unworthy.

To initiate a moral encounter required boldness. Majid said: "You mustn't be shy. You must know how to speak in front of the customer (*qaddaam iz-zaabuuneh*). Joke with her, laugh with her". Boldness was required in order to "catch" (*sahb*) the customer from the crowd and bring her into the shop. However routine it was, this act of initiation or "beginning" (Arendt 1958) had a moral force. That is, the moment Majid addresses a passing customer in the alleyway outside his shop, he is also committing himself, within a relationship with his customers and his colleagues, to being judged against certain ideals: acting with boldness, selling with propriety, and gaining autonomy over his transactors.

Gilsenan (1996) argued that the defense of social honour among male Lebanese villagers depended on issuing an appropriate challenge and avenging an insult. The man who avenged the insult (a wound inflicted by a social inferior) was required first of all to express his fierce enthusiasm (*hamaasa*) to defend family honour. The performance of *hamaasa* in effect commits that man to being defined in terms of whether or not he carries out the vengeance. To perform *hamaasa* is to express serious intention and therefore (once made public) to make a commitment to a moral order within which he will be judged to have achieved his intention or not. His intention is expressed in ritualised behaviour – making certain insults, trying to rush off immediately to avenge the wound, and using special vocabulary (such as "slaughtering" or *dhabh*) which sanctify the imminent act and his own role in carrying it out.

Although the context in Majid's retail shop is quite different, there are parallels between the two situations. In both cases, honour is at stake in the culmination of a finite series of exchanges between parties who are in some sense opposed to one another. In both cases, one party takes the burden of performance on himself, under

the eyes of the collective. In both cases, he then makes a commitment to consummate the exchange through an initial ritualised expression of youthful male enthusiasm or boldness. His status among his own collective is determined by whether he can confront the opponent and then by whether he is said to have followed through on this commitment without overstepping the bounds of propriety.

We can apply Lambek's (2010b) model of performative ethics to understand this. This model distinguishes between two kinds of ethical acts: performances and practice. Performances are ritual acts that establish criteria for making ethical evaluations, descriptions, and states; practice refers to the ongoing ethical judgements that are made possible (but not determined) by these ritual performances. For example, a wedding is an act or performance that "does not determine whether people remain 'faithful' or practice 'adultery', but it entails that their actions fall under such descriptions"; thus, "practice is rendered possible and meaningful through performative acts" (Lambek 2010b:39).

In line with this model, the boldness with which Majid approaches a female customer wandering past him in the market alley is an initiating act that establishes, like a ritual, that what follows will be evaluated according to certain criteria. What is at stake in the subsequent practice of the sales negotiation is Majid's worth (*qiimatuh*), his manliness (*rjuuleh*), and his identity as son of the market (*ibn al-suuq*) – all moral qualities and identities. He achieves these anew in each transaction by a successful sale. But this is not merely a question of exchanging cloth for money. It is achieved, in Majid's terms, by following up on his boldness, and fulfilling the criteria his boldness has established: by proving his ability to make them buy "as I wish, not as they wish" and selling by demonstrating his cleverness (*shataara*).

Within each transaction, the stream of practice is punctuated by new performative acts – price offers that establish temporary commitments not to renege on that price. If broken, these commitments reflect badly on the character of the person who made them. A price negotiation is a dynamic process that involves making a series of temporary commitments. Lambek (2010b:56) notes that "if performance establishes

the criteria by which subsequent practice is engaged and valued, so too practical judgement generates new performances, that is, relatively formal acts and utterances that recalibrate the criteria and shift the ethical context.”

However, the temporary price commitments made in the course of a negotiation not only extend but also sometimes disavow previous commitments. Not only does practical judgement generate new performative acts of commitment, as Lambek notes. More than this, some of these performative acts exist precisely to cancel previous commitments. These “acts of disavowal” cancel the power of the obligations established by previous price offers. For example, some of Majid’s customers (such as the three Turkish men in the ethnographic excerpt above) cross the threshold of the shop back into the alley in the course of a negotiation; this is a performative act that de-commits them to any offer they have made in the course of the negotiation so far. Ethics is not just about commitment, but also socially recognised forms of disavowal or graceful exit.

Since crossing the threshold back out into the street is an act of disavowal, it becomes a tactic in the repertoire of the skilled negotiator to hover around the threshold just inside the shop, since when performed in the right way, this implies that one’s highest offer thus far may be about to expire. Knowing when, how and how often to use this tactic so as to retain performative credibility is in itself a question of judgement. Ritual performances do not just establish criteria for subsequent practice, they also themselves emerge from practice; how they do so (another example is how people make oaths in the course of a negotiation) is a matter of finesse and judgement where ethical credibility is at stake.

Oaths were an important tactic in the repertoire of verbal and moral play but needed to be used with propriety (not coarsely), at the right moment (not too early), and not too often. I discovered for myself some of the subtleties involved in this play when trying to refuse Majid’s hospitality on one occasion. He had been persistently offering me a coffee, and then a fruit cocktail. I kept refusing by using the casual assertion *wallaah* – literally “by God”. He continued to pressure me and picked up

the phone as if to dial for a drinks delivery. I interpreted this as another play that tried to move the game towards what he wanted to achieve. In the contest over whether or not I would accept the hospitality, there was one move which worked suddenly and completely. Instead of saying “*wallaah*”, I said “*wallaahi*”. The addition of the “i” transformed the phrase into formal Arabic. This made it into a formal oath. Immediately, Majid stopped offering and put the phone down, saying with a smile, “Ok. If you swear (*tuqsim*), it is hard to go against it.”<sup>19</sup>

If ethics in Lambek’s model (2010b) is about commitment, an ethical skill is knowing when to commit oneself and when not to. This suggests that we should pay attention to the ritual acts and performances that disengage actors as well as those that commit them, and the forms of judgement involved in performing ritual acts credibly at key moments within the stream of practice. Ethics does not just depend on performative acts of commitment, but also socially recognised forms of disavowal or graceful exit. In this sense, ethics is an art: not simply a question of remaining faithful to one’s obligations, but deciding what obligations to make, and when, and which to defer or evade. The way in which parties negotiate prices with one another – that is, how and when they choose to commit, evade, disavow or appear about to do so – requires judgment that is both practical and ethical.

### *The Virtues of Compromise*

Majid described selling to me as a battle of wits, which I have suggested means cleverness in the way he discerned and stabilised intention and elicited commitment. It was also an assertion of his will, through which he asserted autonomy and gained dignity. But eliciting commitment while demonstrating autonomy required not only mastery of the customer; it also required mastery of the self, which was a function of maturity. It was demonstrated in the exercise of judgment. For example, judgment

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<sup>19</sup> Inflecting the oath “by God” into formal Arabic – a linguistic move known as “*kasr al-haa*” – was often used in the market in arguments and negotiations, or to assert the truth of narratives that others doubted. It usually had a decisive effect on the course of the dialogue: even if the interlocutor did not believe, or capitulate to, the speaker who had made the oath, he would usually refrain from contradicting it directly.

was required to determine which styles of selling to use; how to push and harangue particular customers; and when to pull back and compromise. On the one hand Majid needed to assert his autonomy and dignity; on the other, he needed to keep the customer and consummate the sale.

For Lambek (2000), morality is about the ongoing exercise of judgement in personal practice, according to particular circumstances and balancing multiple considerations. The judgement involved in deciding what a particular ideal or rule means in any situation – for example, what the virtue of “moderation” means in a given dilemma – can be an ethical act. This means that ethics pervades everyday practice in a way that it cannot in models (such as Robbins’ 2007) that define ethics (or the “morality of freedom”) as the resolution of conflict between different values or value systems. In the Lambekian perspective, norms always require practical judgement: what does this single rule mean for me in this particular situation?

In Majid’s case, judgement was required to determine how far he could push a transaction without overstepping the traders’ norms of propriety. He was expected to demonstrate “cleverness” and even “trickery”, but also said that it was important not to lie. Often, in the heat of a transaction, he found himself pushing boundaries. One physical move that could turn or define the course of the encounter was the cutting of the fabric. The salesmen often carried large fabric scissors in their pockets, and when a transaction was reaching its conclusion, they would wield the scissors and prepare to cut the required length of fabric from its roll. While the cutting of the fabric signified the consummation of the transaction, it was not always done by clear mutual consent. The salesmen sometimes used the move, while a customer was still trying to bargain down the price, as a way of forcibly concluding the negotiation. On one occasion, the (female) customer objected to the move. The salesman relented slightly and said, “what price will you give me then, considering that the cloth has now been cut?” In this case, the customer stood her ground and refused to continue with the purchase.

In another case, however, the customer was not so strong-willed. Although I was not present, Majid narrated the encounter to me afterwards, as we shared a taxi home after a night of playing pool. Although it was a narrative of success, he also seemed concerned that he might have overstepped the bounds of propriety:

Majid: I am afraid that the customer might come back tomorrow and get me into trouble. I forced her (*ajbartuhaa*).

Paul: what do you mean, how did you force her?

Majid: I forced her. I cut the cloth.

Paul: what happened?

Majid: She was hesitating. She'd said, 'let's do it' [*tawakkaltu 'al allaah* – literally, 'I've put my faith in God']. Then she hesitated, but I cut anyway. Ten thousand lira.

Operating at the edges of propriety, Majid could find himself in difficulty if he made a poor judgement. He needed to dare in the way he sold, but also find the 'golden mean' between caution and foolhardiness. This required a constant embodied judgment that he was not always capable of. The following narrative is a continuation of the negotiation involving the three Turkish customers:

New visitors enter the shop – a well-dressed Turkish woman, around forty years old, with her teenage son and daughter, and two male relatives around her age who stand near the entrance to the shop and say nothing. Majid offers her a single piece of gauze and one-and-a-half metres of satin for 4500 lira. She hesitates, says it is too expensive, and offers a slightly lower price. Majid makes a show of weak reluctance, and quickly accepts. But one of the woman's male relatives senses something is not right, and starts insisting on a much lower price. The woman gets cold feet, despite Ahmad's urgent entreaties to re-enter the shop, and offer to sell at 3000 lira.

Majid's two colleagues start to urge him, in the *haziy* lingo, to sell, to give in and accept the customers' price: '*ihziyy!* Sell!' But Majid is holding out for a higher margin, seeking to prove his virtuosity. The woman continues to hesitate outside the shop, and for a moment it looks like she will re-enter under pressure from Majid's continued spiel. In the end it is her teenage daughter who acts decisively and pulls her mother away.

Majid comes back into the shop, furious. As if he has been suddenly released from the adrenaline of his high-energy performance, he slumps into the chair with such force that he sends the ashtray on the table and all its contents flying onto the floor. The other shop assistants, Salim and Hmudeh, start picking up the pieces, quietly re-rolling all the rolls of satin and fine gauze on

the table. Majid remains despondent and muttering, licking his wounds on the chair. Afterwards, he complains to me bitterly that he should not have been urged to sell cheaper to the three Turkish men. He directs his anger against Hmudeh, whom he blames for pressuring him:

“I sized up the customer in the first two minutes. He doesn’t know how to do this. I said, ‘five thousand lira’. She said, ‘too much’. I said, ‘three thousand?’ She said, ‘ok’. So I showed her something cheap, and she was going to be happy. That is part of the shrewdness, being able to size up the customer in the first couple of minutes.”

After the failed sale, Majid and Hmudeh sparred with each other. They were about the same age, and it was Majid who launched the challenge, known as *jakkaara*. As often happened, the provocation was not made directly, perhaps because propriety demanded it, or because obliqueness was a valued skill in itself. In this case, the challenge passed through me:

Majid says to me, about Hmudeh and right in front of him, “he is no good at selling!”. The *jakkaara* continues for a while – “he doesn’t know, he has some way to go yet” – but Hmudeh does not rise to the challenge. In fact, it is Salim, whom Majid likes and respects more, and whom he hopes to go into business with in the coming years, who steps in when tempers have calmed. Again in front of everyone, he talks to me about Majid, “he is a good seller, good with customers...” The praise from the older man has its effect. Majid lowers his eyes and says “thank you” quietly. He is obviously chuffed. But Salim tempers his praise with some criticism that also serves to justify Hmudeh’s position: “but you should sell, even a bit lower. We need to sell these goods Majid!”

Salim consoled Majid but also gently reprimanded him. “We need to sell”, Salim says. In other words, it is not just Majid’s personal glory at stake, but also the economic logic behind the shop’s existence (which has implications for them all) that should be weighed. There are two logics that need to be balanced to achieve the good, and only the mature know how to balance them – the logic of personal glory, and the logic of self-control or mature reason. In Arabic, mature reason is known as *‘aql* – the “faculty of understanding, rationality, judiciousness, prudence and wisdom” (Altorki 1986:51, in Peteet 1994:34. See also Rosen 1984).

Majid's dilemma, then, is how hard to push the customer; how high to pitch the prices. He requires a constant sense of judgement to strike this balance in the midst of a negotiation. This is not about thinking or reasoning, but about feeling and acting in the moment: it is an embodied judgment. Knowing where to strike the balance in practice in any particular encounter relies on skill, wisdom, experience and moderation. It is not just a strategic judgement, but rather a balance that needs to be struck between two ideals: selling high earns him personal glory as one who sells autonomously "just as he wishes"; a lower-risk compromise is in the interests of the shop as a whole. Selling well is not just a matter of mastery and autonomy; it is also about embodied judgment - finding the mean.

Moral practice requires continual judgement, and this is a function and condition of full social maturity. If growing up as a "son of the market" (*ibn al-suuq*) requires Majid to acquire boldness and then mastery in selling, and if mastery is a means of acquiring honour, full maturity demands that he does not take the game of honour too seriously.

Trade in this retail shop is a matter of pushing the logic of contradictory interests between salesman and customer as far as possible, and then stepping back in time and making a sale before the customer walks away. Being able to get away with a high price is part of autonomy and dignity, but being able to treat the encounter at some level just as a game makes a salesman truly mature. This explains Salim's intervention as the older man, in a tone of reasonableness, after Majid flew too close to the sun.

As with the *balah* poetry described by Caton, selling is an exchange where one "pursues honour". Caton notes that "when people lose sight of the fact that it is just a game, someone steps in to calm them all down." The problem is that the "contest of honour, if followed to its logical conclusion...may explode into violence... The solution to this problem is...to be able to channel passion into controlled and stylised violence [of the poem]. This involves the "construction of a certain kind of self". Caton's conclusion is that the tribesman, in "constructing the *balah* poem, constitutes

himself as...capable of containing violence in the symbolic game of honour” (Caton 1990:109). Similarly, transactions in the retail shop are a matter of containing the agonism of the encounter between salesman and customer. Majid must produce and then contain the coercive energy of the transaction. Selling successfully involves masking (if possible) and then openly mastering (if necessary) the agonism of the encounter, through cleverness (*shataara*): the styles and tactics (*asaaliib*) of the sales patter and techniques. Geertz (1979), writes of Moroccan traders that

“the main principle in bargaining is that participants should conduct themselves vis-à-vis one another so as to render the process successful. They have more than a material desire to triumph over their functional opposition; they have a moral obligation to do so.”

Siegel (1969), describing market trade in Atjehn in Indonesia, suggests that the traders are concerned to make themselves into rational (and therefore moral) beings through successfully negotiating profitable deals. Success in trade is connected to moral excellence, which is imagined as the ability to restrain one’s natural passions (*hawa nafsu*) through the exercise of reason (*akal*). Through cultivating the restraining powers of reason, traders become more canny and alert and resist the urge to take bad risks. If cultivating *akal* is an ethical practice, so is the act of exchange itself. Siegel notes that traders create themselves as proper Muslims through successful acts of exchange, by completing trades that are directed by the use of reason.

In Majid’s retail shop, the ability to do this within the context of an agonistic encounter is the virtue of the consummate trader. It is difficult to achieve and liable to failure. Underneath the agreeable style so highly prized by salesmen in this market, there is a coercive energy which ideally leads to glorious deeds such as successful sales with high profit margins, the demonstration of autonomy and thus the achievement of “dignity” (*karaama*). But it can also lead to the infringement of propriety – implicit in Majid’s anxious references to having “forced” a customer. And it can lead to the loss of a customer and to recriminations after a failure: Majid’s bitter complaints about advice he was given by a colleague who “doesn’t know a thing”. The coercive energy of the transaction was evident in the released tension of

the failed sale that sent the ashtray flying – a moment when the latent conflict of that encounter erupted into particularly noticeable physical energy.

Majid must both dominate a transaction and stay within the bounds of propriety (*adab*). He must pitch high and if necessary negotiate very firmly, but not lose the customer. He must be clever but not actually “lie”. He is always pushing boundaries of propriety – occasionally he admits that he “forced” (*ajbartuhaa*) the customer to buy by cutting the cloth before a price had been agreed. This can all go wrong, if he loses a customer or if she comes back to complain and he faces “humiliation” (*bahdaleh*). In the flow of an adrenalin-filled sales pitch where Majid feels that his “worth” is at stake in front of others, his art requires a constant embodied judgement. He must dare but also find the golden mean. This judgement is a professional skill, because it involves an assessment of one’s customers. But it is also moral, because it involves balancing and interpreting the moral ideals of boldness, reason and autonomy. The exercise of this judgement is a marker of his maturity. The stage of social maturity that he has reached is not quite complete: he has not yet married, he does not own a shop or his own business, and he has not yet left for military service. He does not yet have responsibility for others; his income from the shop is his own to save or dispose of as he wishes: “my only expenditure is these cigarettes”, he said, neglecting to mention the constant food and drink that he bought for me.

### ***Growing Up as a Moral Process***

Majid has been through a process of “growing up in the shop” (*al-trabbii bi-l-suuq*) in which he has acquired moral dispositions and capacities. The first thing that he learned was to be bold and eloquent (*baaligh*) – a word that also denotes male social maturity. He learned to have solidarity with other neighbouring shops in the way he deployed the secret lingo – a matter, he said, of acquiring “manhood” (*rjuuleh*). He learned to moderate his new-found boldness by mastering the “styles” (*asaaliib*) of selling that constitute both cleverness (*shataara*) and propriety (*adab*). These are all aspects of being a man in the context of this market place.

Manhood here is not a function of passing through explicit rites of passage (Peteet 1994), but is rather demonstrated through everyday acts of proving one's worth, autonomy, reliability, discernment and cleverness in relations with others. In other words, manhood is attained not through heroic rituals, but through 'ordinary ethics'. For Majid, becoming a mature salesman and trader, as the older colleague's public intervention showed, is finally about learning when and how to moderate himself or, in the case of dealing with his bosses, his cockiness. On this scale, Majid is not quite as mature as Salim, because he takes the game of honour too seriously. Indeed, it may be significant that Majid was not yet twenty years old, which is the age that Palestinian males begin to acquire judiciousness (*'aql*) according to Peteet (1994:35). Salim, by contrast, is in his mid-twenties, and plays the role of the mediator in the situation described above: the "preserve of well-respected" men (Peteet 1994:38).

Majid working in the shop, like Abdullah working in the factory, grows into a recognised succession of roles and identities, acquiring and discarding sets of moral or ethical responsibilities and freedoms as he passes through stages of physical and social growth. It is possible that Abdullah had cultivated a reputation for being a scoundrel (*banduuq*) when wheeling and dealing in his early career, before he acquired the capital and relationships necessary to establish himself as an industrialist with a "group following" (*jamaa'a*). Majid, as an unmarried young man without financial trading assets or family responsibilities, does not manifest his male-ness, either among peers or to other groups, in the same way as does Abdullah who has become a man of substance. However, even Abdullah has not yet completed all stages of social growth. When he was preparing for his campaign to stand for election to the Board of the Chamber of Industry, an intimate member of his group following asked him "would it not be better to wait for four years, until you are forty?" It may be significant that this was the age at which Prophet Muhammad is believed to have started to receive revelation from the Angel Gabriel.

Either way, the Aristotelian perspective on morality (as exercising judgement rather than following rules) makes it possible to depict growing up as a moral process. Unlike a Durkheimian notion of morality as rule-following, it allows conceptual

room for moral development. As the salesmen become more mature, the standards of excellence they strive for changes; so does their judgement – the way in which they recognise and locate the golden mean. Indeed, Majid and Salim, at different levels of maturity, position themselves differently with respect to risk-taking. In a neo-Aristotelian model, maturing can be a moral process, but it is hard to see how it could be with a Durkheimian model – other than simply by saying that more mature people are more inclined to follow social norms, which does not seem adequately nuanced.

Maturity or moderation can be understood as a meta-ideal, or a relationship to an ideal. Majid's job is to master the game by embodying the right cultural ideals, but then not to take the game too seriously. To subjugate himself entirely to the logic of the game – striving to sell high at any cost – not only risks failure, but shows a failure to master himself. Caton (1990) makes a similar point in relation to the logic of honour in poetry competitions in Yemen. There is perhaps a parallel here with the virtue of forbearance and tolerance (*tasaamuh*) described in the introduction. The ideals of moderation and tolerance both make sense against a background of dogmatic conceptions of virtue.

### ***Of Fatwas and Fabrics: the Virtue of Hidden Intentions***

“Human kind cannot bear very much reality.” (T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”, 1968)

In this chapter and the previous one, I have described a transactional environment where relationships are short-term and generally agonistic. Here, the self-depictions of the salesmen celebrate the “muted values” of cleverness and cunning. I intended this as a counter-point to the depiction of Abdullah's factory circle as an environment where relationships are longer-term, and where discourses of “affection” and “purity of heart” organise moral and political status among aspiring entrepreneurs. The contrast between these two sets of depictions speaks to the question I raised in the introduction: is ‘virtue’ simply a question of mastering the protocols that govern particular exchanges, or is it a matter of the heart? Where is it more important simply

to master the rules of interaction, and where should there be a sincere sense of responsibility to the exchange partner?

In the factory, entrepreneurs talk of inner disposition and its beneficial consequences; in the retail shop, the salesmen boast of performative skill as an end in itself. This is why I suggested in the previous chapter that Majid's shop is an arena where warm-hearted sincerity is less important than etiquette and propriety. In the retail shop, it is mastery of etiquette rather than an exchange-partner's inner disposition that establishes the ground for what we might call 'retail trust': the minimum mutual respect needed to sustain the interactional script. Indeed, one informant said that she preferred a retail trader whose flattery was clearly insincere to one who was honest but discourteous.

Now I argue that this putative opposition between 'mastery' and 'sincerity' needs to be transcended. The relationship between the two is not an 'either-or' question. Hirschkind (2006) and Mahmood (2001b) have already problematised this relationship, showing that mastery of the correct outer form of worship is an ethical discipline necessary to cultivate a sincere heart. Yeung (2010) makes a similar argument regarding the performance and inculcation of sincerity in a secular setting. My argument is different: I suggest that certain kinds of ethical engagement require a combination of sincerity and insincerity. This paradoxical combination is characteristic of an ethical engagement known as pedagogy (*tarbawiyya* in Arabic).

Moral pedagogy sometimes requires that the guide, by virtue of his superior knowledge and his social role vis-à-vis the disciple, cultivate a benign and indeed virtuous ulterior motive. Sometimes the guide can only achieve his objective by keeping the full extent of his knowledge and the precise nature of his intentions hidden. In order to do so, he must master and even manipulate the disciple. This is because the disciple (or customer) is understood to be morally weak or ignorant, and unwilling or unable to make for themselves the commitment that the guide (or salesman) knows would benefit them, and sincerely wishes for them. I illustrate this argument by comparing the strikingly similar pedagogical dynamics of two

ethnographic examples: a mufti in Cairo producing a fatwa for a couple about to divorce, and Majid guiding a customer towards purchasing a fabric for a wedding dress.

In his ethnography of fatwa production in Cairo, Agrama (2010) argues that when a mufti issues a fatwa, he is often engaging in pedagogy. He provides a moral education known as *tarbawiyah*. Agrama notes that a mufti might interact in different ways with different fatwa-seekers, sometimes even issuing different answers on similar questions to different people. This was because the purpose of the fatwa was not to reproduce correct doctrine, but to deal with the situation at hand in the best way by helping the seeker on a journey of self-cultivation. This prefigures the argument I make in the next chapter: even in deontological ethics, virtue is not simply an unproblematic adherence to a fixed moral code, but rather requires judgment to take account of human complexity. However, the point I want to draw out here from Agrama is that muftis who undertake this pedagogical project are sometimes represented as having an ‘ulterior motive’ (although Agrama does not use this term or specifically analyse this aspect of the encounter). For example, in a well-known story,

“a mufti was once asked if a killer might repent and receive forgiveness. He replies that it was not possible. Asked the same question by another man, he replied in the affirmative. When confronted by the contradiction, the mufti said that, “As for the first – I saw in his eyes a desire to kill [someone] and I prevented him from it; as for the second – he came in surrender, having already killed [someone] and I did not cause him to despair” (Reinhart 1993:13, in Agrama 2010:13).

The mufti’s ‘ulterior motive’ is totally benign; in fact, it is virtuous. But nevertheless, the Mufti’s virtue – the empathetic engagement with the seeker and the heartfelt concern for his emotional and ethical needs – is, necessarily, hidden. In this sense, there is a degree of insincerity about the engagement: if either the first or the second seeker in the quote above knew the mufti’s real motives, it would be harder for the fatwa to achieve its ethical purpose.

Whether or not the story Agrama relates is apocryphal, its popularity suggests that the paradox – of virtue hiding itself, of heartfelt engagement wrapped up in masterful manipulation – is celebrated. Thus, the question I posed in the introduction – is mastery of form or sincerity of purpose more important in behaving ethically? – must be seen as overly simplistic. Certainly, in some cases, a manipulative mastery of form may be a condition of ethical achievement – as for example where Majid and his colleagues use it to assert their own autonomy and dignity. And this appears to contrast with the importance of affection, relation and trust which is the official discourse that organises social status in Abdullah’s circle of wealthier entrepreneurs. But in some cases, as Agrama’s ethnography suggests, virtue can involve both sincere empathic engagement and a hidden level of mastery. The mufti’s pedagogical motive is necessarily ‘ulterior’.

There are strong parallels between the hidden pedagogical motives among the muftis narrated by Agrama, and the way Majid represented to me the way that he sold. Majid’s made explicit his aspirations to pedagogical authority. When I suggested to him that his role was to be an “actor” in front of his customers, he agreed only half-heartedly, before suggesting that a better analogy was a “teacher”. At the time I struggled to understand why a teacher was a better model of Majid’s behaviour than an actor; all I could see were elements of performance in Majid’s selling routine. But a comparison with Agrama’s analysis of the pedagogical element in the interaction between mufti and fatwa-seeker is instructive. The mufti seeks not only to provide an acceptable solution to the fatwa-seeker’s particular problem, but to provide moral guidance. There is a series of exchanges between mufti and seeker which culminates in the fatwa being issued. The mufti does not simply provide a pre-fitted doctrinal solution but engages in a process of interaction where the fatwa emerges in some sense mutually, “within the range and limits” (2010:13) of possibilities.

The negotiation of price between Majid and his customers can be read in similar terms. Of course, there are important differences between the two contexts. What is being socially produced in one set of exchanges is ethical advice; in the other it is a price. Nevertheless, the similarities are instructive. The fatwa-seeker should come

with an open admission saying “I don’t know my way about” (Agrama 2010:13). While many customers or price-seekers sought to mask their ignorance and trick the salesman, Majid told me that the customer who got the best price was one who admitted their ignorance about price and quality and threw themselves on his mercy. In other words, the best price was achieved when a customer accepted Majid’s pedagogical authority from the outset rather than challenging and seeking to subvert it.

There are other similarities too. The retail salesmen prided themselves on their “tactics” (*asaaliib*) through which they were able to put the customer at ease, match his or her style, and then overcome it. It was important to be able to “joke with her” and “laugh with her”, and then to change styles abruptly – from deferential to haranguing, from encouraging to shaming, and back again – in order to consummate the transaction and achieve the pedagogical purpose of the transaction. Similarly, the mufti, too, needed to be an expert in “the shifting use of fear, laughter, and rebuke”; tailoring these different responses to the character and situation of the fatwa-seeker was “part of a pedagogic process” (Agrama 2010:10) designed to inculcate moral intentions and desires in the person facing the dilemmas.

In both contexts – the retail shop and the fatwa council – the seeker / customer is led to accept the fatwa / price through a mixture of encouragement, admonishment, pressure and even trickery. This is where the skills and judgment of the salesman and mufti emerge most clearly: the “ability to find the right words at the right time” (Agrama 2010:14). I described above how Majid used a symbolic act (cutting the cloth prematurely) suddenly to shift the frame of the transaction and pressure the customer into committing herself to a price and thus consummating the transaction. Compare Agrama’s account, below, of how a mufti secures a reconciliation between a husband and wife in a divorce case. Instead of wielding the fabric scissors to cut the cloth for a wedding dress, the mufti uses the symbolic act of swearing on the Quran to avoid a divorce and reunite estranged spouses. Although the contexts of wedding and divorce appear symbolically opposed, the pedagogical tactics are

strikingly similar: the mufti uses the Quran, like Majid used the scissors, to shift the frame of the transaction and precipitate a moral commitment from a wavering client:

In another case, again a matter of divorce, a mufti counselled the couple for a long time, discussing the virtues of patience and forbearance, even and especially in the difficult times that they had claimed were an excuse for their marital conflicts. The husband was finally made to utter the words of reconciliation, repeating the words told him by the mufti. In this case, the mufti had him place his hand on the Qur'an, and repeat an oath never to pronounce divorce again. As the man began to repeat, the mufti suddenly withdrew the Qur'an: "now don't swear if you can't be sure that you won't do this again." The man became anxious and insisted on repeating the oath; the mufti relented, and they continued, but the mufti added words to the effect that the man would perform all five daily prayers. The husband, after repeating these words – a promise to pray – began to cry silently; his voice shook as he finished, lips trembling, repeating the mufti's words. The mufti in this instance was using the event of reconciliation to extract a promise from the husband to perform his prayers. (Agrama 2010:11).

In the case of the mufti, the purpose of the pedagogical process is to produce better Muslims (Agrama 2010) who accept the advice and implement it; in the case of the fabric salesman, it is to produce worthy customers who accept the price and make the purchase. In both cases, worthiness is achieved as the guide (the mufti or the salesman) formulates and stabilises the intentions of the seeker (the fatwa recipient or the customer, respectively). The guide uses his canniness and performative skill to elicit and then formalise the commitment of the fatwa seeker or customer.

But the most interesting similarity between the two contexts is the factor that seems intrinsic to ethical pedagogy itself: the quality of obliqueness. The mufti sincerely wants the best for the fatwa seeker, but because of his superior knowledge and experience he must employ a mode of obliqueness to achieve his intentions. Performative mastery and sincerity are inseparable in a pedagogical context. This seems to be a feature of other theistic pedagogies, such as the parables which Jesus narrated to his often confused disciples in the New Testament gospels. I argued above, drawing on Agrama's ethnography, that the mufti's pedagogical motive is necessarily 'ulterior': if the pedagogy were direct and straightforward, it would often be ineffective, understood in the head but not accepted in the heart. Transparency is

not always a virtue: moral pedagogy is achieved not through the transfer of information but through the eliciting of moral commitment. As Majid said, “it is not enough just to hold the fabric up to her. You must talk to her, laugh with her, joke with her...otherwise she will not buy it”.

It is possible that ethical guidance must inevitably be oblique in a view of human nature where the will is weak and the capacity for moral truth limited: where “human kind cannot bear too much reality”. Majid certainly believed that his customers were often led astray by their own ignorance: they desired a fabric simply because they were told it was expensive. His customers’ lack of knowledge and inability to control their own desires justified his own position as “teacher” and enabled a certain level of manipulation or obliqueness in the way that he led the customer to desire the fabric. It is in the nature of both a customer and a disciple not to know everything; moral guidance and commerce can only be practised when certain social actors consent to entrust themselves to others who are recognised to see more about them, and about the path that they are following, than they themselves do. This applies whether that path is following the *sunna* of Muhammad, or negotiating the purchase of a fabric.

## Chapter Eight

### The Dilemmas of Wealth

This chapter is about the formation of ethical problems and opinions. It stresses the role of obligation in reasoning and in the formation of moral judgments and decisions. Some anthropologists have placed the emphasis on the freedom that is a precondition for ethical thought and practice (e.g. Laidlaw 2002). Robbins (2007) and Zigon (2009) use ‘freedom’ to characterise a domain of moral practice. Robbins (2007) argues that ethics (or the “morality of freedom”) is a domain where “no single norm guides behaviour”, and where “people are highly aware of having freedom to choose”. Similarly, Zigon characterises the ethical moment, which is produced by a conflict between divergent moral dispositions and demands, as an open space in which to creatively engineer a new disposition. While these are undoubtedly fruitful perspectives, in this chapter I place the emphasis not on freedom but on obligation. I argue that ethics can be a matter not of freedom and creativity but of striving faithfully to discern in what ways one is obligated. In the examples I present, Aleppan salesmen and traders reason morally before making a decision, or justify their stance through moral argument, sometimes after consulting a mufti who issues a fatwa (ethical advice / religious legal opinion). In all cases, these subjects feel themselves obligated to, and desire to remain within, a stable moral world.

#### *When is a Lie a Lie?*

Muhyi was a 25-year-old wealthy and successful yarn entrepreneur in Aleppo. He performed the *salaat* prayer several times a day while at work, and stopped the car once when driving out to a restaurant to pray at a nearby mosque. He consulted muftis on certain ethical questions which arose in the course of his work and personal life. Muhyi was also rich. He travelled abroad regularly on business and for pleasure, often staying at five-star hotels. His father employed several hundred people, and had set his son up in business. Muhyi did not work in the old city *mdiineh* markets, but in a large yarn factory in the city’s periphery which his father

owned. His father also maintained several offices in the old city markets, including one in the centre of Khan al-Oulabiyya. Muhyi visited these premises when he had to, but made no secret of the fact that he felt uncomfortable there. Several times he made this generalisation to me: “the people in the *mdiineh* do not know haram and halal. I hate going there. They think it is clever to lie: they call it *bandaqa*.” He believed that glamorising sharp-practice as *bandaqa* or believing that one was “clever” was no excuse for lying:

“The problem is that these people in the suq, the ‘sons of the market’ (*abnaa’ al-suuiq*), they like to think they have been born in the suq. They are proud of being clever, being liars, cheating. That is why the old city markets (*mdiineh*) are known as being a den of thieves. It is to your credit if you make a lot of money out of someone. This attitude is particularly a problem with the ‘sons of the old city’ (*abnaa’ li mdiineh*) who are around 40 years old, older than my generation but younger than my father’s generation.”

In the courtyard bursa in Khan al-Oulabiyya, however, (where many of the participants were around forty years old), *bandaqa* and bluffing were expected tactics. More than this, they were justified within the agonistic frame of the transactions. It was quite common to make a false offer to buy or sell, and to withdraw from the sale at the last moment, simply in order to discover an opponent’s intentions and buying position. As the 26-year-old broker and courtyard participant Alaa al-Din said,

“You offer to sell something at below market price, to someone who you suspect doesn’t have any money. If he doesn’t accept, you know he doesn’t have any money. If he doesn’t have any money, you know he is forced to sell, and you can lower your price when you try to buy”

In the bursa, bluffing is acceptable because both sides know that it is part of an agonistic game. What were the moral rules framing this arena of discourse? When was it acceptable to bluff? My friend Alaa al-Din, the yarn broker who had introduced me to the *bursa*, drew quite careful moral distinctions in this area. As we sat in Costa Coffee in a plush part of the new city one weekend, he outlined the morality of bluffing:

“If there is no purchase or sale, it is just a joke (*mazh*), that is okay. It has a point though (*ilu maslaha*). If there is a sale just for show, that is *haram*! Sometimes you get fake deals (*safaqat wahmiyya*) – done by thieves (*haramiyya*). If the actual price is 16 lira, they pretend they have done a deal at 20 lira in order to push the price up. This is *haram haram*. Someone who does it is a bloody liar – we call them *shay’ir*. If you actually make a fake sale in front of people that is *haram haram* – if there is actually a purchase and a sale.”

According to Alaa al-Din, it was acceptable to offer a false deal to an opponent in order to discover his position, but not to stage a false sale in order to move the market. Why was it acceptable to make a fake offer to sell, but not to perform a fake sale? Perhaps it was because the goals differed: in the first case, the fakery was an attempt to elicit information; in the second case, it was an attempt to move the market, which seems more serious. But equally as importantly, an acceptable bluff involved agonism and revelation. In the former case, the bluff was part of an agonistic contest which quickly resulted in the revelation of certain things: the opponent’s position in the market and his price sensitivity; the fact that the offer was a bluff; and which of the two parties had managed to outwit the other by executing or correctly anticipating and parrying the bluff. By contrast, with a fake sale there was no agonistic contest that pitted one party against another in a battle of wits; and the fakery might never be revealed.

Elements of agonism and unveiling were present throughout Aleppo’s old markets. They were a common feature of the courtyard *bursa*, but they also occurred in the traders’ offices to some extent. Ibrahim, twenty-eight years old, was a yarn importer and trader. Sitting in his father’s office in the centre of the caravanserai, he told me that the *bursa* was uncomfortable and untrustworthy (*muu muriih*), as well as irregular (*ghayr nizaamiy*). This was a standard line I heard many times. Then, as I was sitting on his sofa, a young man entered his office and stood at the threshold. Ibrahim asked him casually, “do you have any spun yarn?” The visitor replied that he did not. There was a pause, then both smiled and laughed.

When the visitor left a short while later, I asked Ibrahim what had just happened. He smiles and says, “twisted tactics” (*asaaliib multawiyyeh*). When he had asked the

visitor for spun yarn, Ibrahim had only been pretending to want to buy – in fact he had wanted to find out how much supply there was in the market. The visitor had yarn, but said he had none, because he had guessed the real reason for the query. Their shared laugh had acknowledged the fact that both sides were speaking tactically, and that each side had guessed the other's tactics. The encounter felt casual and good-natured to me, and ended as a shared joke.

In this case, questions and claims made by each side were not morally serious “lying” that would imperil their all-important reputations for honesty and trustworthiness (*sidq*); they were simply “tactics” (*asaaliib*). These exchanges escaped the censure of moral seriousness because the shared laugh framed them off within their own discursive domain. The final shared smile was a performative frame that made clear that the game was up: the encounter matched the pattern of agonism that ended in revelation. Its significance went no further.

### ***Sincerity and Betrayal***

In the previous chapter, I noted that Majid and his colleagues valued “cleverness” and “slipperiness”. One form of cleverness was to lead a customer into convincing herself of the desirability of an item on the basis of false assumptions about its value, without actually lying. This was justified on the basis that the customer was seen as more or less ignorant and the encounter was seen as a contest of wits: “if she is trying to be clever, we can be cleverer”. The relationship between the salesman and the customer was represented to me not through the discourse of sincerity or warm-heartedness, but as a contest:

Majid: You are allowed to profit, because another day you will have to take losses. You can trick her (*takhda 'haa*) because she tricks you.

Paul: How does she trick you?

Majid: She says she wants something cheap, but actually she wants to buy high quality. So you open something cheap and quote a high price. You open something low quality (*khafiif*) and say it is three thousand [lira]. If they say, ‘I am looking for something better quality’, you say: ‘I have this, it is very nice, but it costs five thousand. Should I show you?’ If they say yes, you know their pocket is five thousand lira. Then you open something that is still

low quality, and say it is five thousand. They think it is better because it costs more. Then you let them bargain you down a bit. This is skilfulness (*shataara*).”

Paul: I understand

Majid: But you cannot lie – a single untruthful word, a single word, makes all the difference between *halal* and *haram*.

Hamzi: If you say “it is French”, when actually it is a French copy from Korea, it is *haram*. We say, “this is a French model”. But if she agrees to pay a lot for it, that is okay. We asked the shaykhs and they said that contracts between two people are lawful.”

The implication is that where the encounter is agonistic, there is more flexibility in determining what counts as acceptable tactics. By contrast, where the relationship with the customer was constructed as non-agonistic, different rules applied:

Majid: if the customer tries to fight and be clever, we will fight and be cleverer. But if they say, ‘sell to us according to your generosity (*‘alaa karaamatak*), give me something good for this price’, then it is different.

Majid said that he would not deal “cleverly” with customers who threw themselves on his mercy in this way.

Agonism, then, is taken to justify bluffing and trickery in the courtyard *bursa* and in the retail shop. However, in both cases it is noteworthy that those who justify these things also allege that other practices are unacceptable. In the *bursa*, Alaa al-Din said that “if you actually make a fake sale in front of people that is *haram haram*” – and someone who did so was a terrible liar (*ashay’ir*). In the retail shop, Majid said that “a single untruthful word, a single word, makes all the difference between *halal* and *haram*”; he and his colleagues freely admitted trickery but insisted on several different occasions that they made sure their language was strictly truthful: a French-style copy would never become a French fabric in their sales patter.

Precisely what makes someone a morally unacceptable “liar” (*kazzaab*) depends on implicit understandings about the nature of a relationship and the rules governing transactions within that relationship. In Majid’s market, a certain kind of solidarity was supposed to characterise the relationships between neighbouring shops. In many

cases, salesmen from different shops would co-operate with each other to prevent customers discovering that they had paid a higher price than they needed to.

Majid: you sell this cloth for 900 lira [per metre], for example, ok, but it exists everywhere in the market, the same thing. It is sold elsewhere for 200 lira. You can't let the customer know this. Some come from Bab Neirab [an area of the city with a rough reputation], they are Kasaawiy [the name of a tribe], you have heard of them? They will come and fight, they will turn over the whole shop. So I get someone to follow the customer when they have bought something, someone working with me but standing next door in another shop.

Paul: I have never seen you do this.

Majid: You don't notice. We use people who were standing to the side, or in a different shop. You send someone they haven't seen, to see if they stop at another shop to enquire about the price. If so, they say to the neighbour [in the market lingo] 'quote the customer a high price to get rid of them' (*dallij al-toob*). Or they say to him [in the lingo]: 'I sold that customer goods for 2500 lira per metre' (*haaziy toob khamsiin*). If the customer hears it is for sale much cheaper somewhere else, they'll come and really have a go at you (*nagga*). There'll be trouble (*darar*).

The private market lingo was thus used to pull the wool over the customer's eyes by ensuring they were quoted artificially high prices throughout the market after they had made a purchase. It might be thought that this amounted to a form of deception. However, the opposite was the case. Within the market, the lingo existed as part of a moral code of neighbourhood solidarity. The person who betrayed this bond was a "liar":

Paul: do all your neighbours go along with this?

Majid: if your neighbour quotes a lower price anyway, he is not a trader, that is well known, he is a child (*walad*), a liar (*kazzaab*)! He's young (*sghiiir*). All traders in the market know this.

Paul: so there is no competition between the shops?

Majid: there is competition between traders: you can undercut your neighbour, but you can't quote a lower price to a customer if your neighbour has already sold higher, if your neighbour has told you of course. If he hasn't told you, it is his fault (*al-haqq 'alaihi*). But each trader is free to sell his

goods at the price he wants, cheaply if he wants, even at a loss. It is his capital. Maybe he needs the money quickly.

In this context, a “liar” was someone who betrayed a supposed relation of solidarity. Telling the “truth” to a customer (by quoting a normal price to a customer who had already bought in a nearby shop) could constitute such a betrayal; conversely, quoting an artificially inflated price was not “lying” but simply conforming to the normative model of “manliness” (*rjuuleh*).

So what constitutes deceit is contestable and depends on understandings about where a bond of trust exists or does not exist; how that trust is expected to manifest itself; and precisely what kinds of verbal manoeuvres are acceptable within the terms of a transaction. As the contrast between Majid’s relationships to his customers and to his neighbouring shopkeepers shows, an act is only a betrayal if the relationship it “betrays” is understood to be predicated on loyalty, sincerity or “generosity” (*karaameh*). The social construction of “betrayal” is explored more fully in Turnaturi (2007). In the case I described above about neighbourhood solidarity in Majid’s market, what might appear to be misleading customers about the price of one’s goods is actually a way of *not* overstepping boundaries defining a relationship of honour with one’s peers. As Kelly and Thiranagama (2010:1) note, “any act of treachery can also be a potential act of loyalty to another cause”.

Similarly, the example above about “twisting tactics” in the nearby yarn market shows that local rules of engagement are important: sharp practice might not be construed as betrayal or deceit if agonism is expected. It is where those rules of engagement differ between parties to a transaction that morally serious allegations of lying emerge. Hence, those who might be accused of lying may well regard themselves as obligated not to lie, and as having properly observed those obligations. For all that Muhyi and other wealthy entrepreneurs might decry sharp practice (*bandaqa*) in the old city markets as “lying”, those in the courtyard *bursa* and the shop who valorise *bandaqa* put a strict requirement on themselves and others not to lie. Even those who seem to be taking liberties and “lying” may in fact believe that they are being ethical, and that part of ethics is the obligation not to lie.

### *Flipping Yarn and Reasoning Well*

In Khan al-Oulabiyya, the practice of “flipping” yarn (*qallaabeh*) which I described in chapter four, could be a financial manoeuvre or conceit to enable money-lending. In these cases, it was designed to work around the Islamic prohibition on usury (*riba*). This typically involved wealthy traders selling yarn – usually Taiwanese Intermingled – on six-months credit, at a price around eighteen percent higher than the current market price. The purchaser then “flipped” the yarn into cash, by selling it immediately in the market, usually just under the current price to ensure a quick sale. Thus, the purchaser effectively borrowed cash from the market, at an annual rate equivalent to around forty percent. In some cases, the purchaser sold the yarn back to the original seller, and in some of these cases the yarn was purely notional, without any material existence.

While it was a common practice, many wealthier traders distanced themselves from yarn-flipping, especially where it involved high levels of interest, compound interest (in cases where the principal was not paid off after six months), or notional rather than real yarn. Abu Wasta, an office-based yarn importer in Khan al-Oulabiyya who was around fifty years old, said “this is not right, it is loan sharking, it is *haram*. If the boxes [of yarn]...are imaginary rather than real, it is definitely *haram* – it is *haram haram!*” Those who practised *qallaabeh* – selling yarn on credit at a high mark-up and buying it back immediately at a lower price with cash – presented a complicated appearance of doing the right thing, but were really only fooling themselves. In reality, they were simply “loan-sharking”. The yarn-importer continued:

“[*qallaabeh*] is *haram* if you take more than five percent or seven percent. The rate tends to be eighteen percent over six months or thirty-six percent over the year. This is usury (*riba*) – more than usury! Sometimes it is done with imaginary boxes – this is *haram haram!* How can you say this is *halal* because it is lending boxes, but lending money at five percent in the bank is *haram?*”

Abu Wasta said that those who claimed that they were not falling foul of the prohibition on usury were effectively “laughing at God” (*dahhik ‘al Allah*) or “trying to get the better of God” (*la‘b ‘al Allah* – literally, “playing against” God). At this point, he put his right arm up over his head to touch his left ear, and said “*qallaabeh* is like doing this”. This was the trademark reaction of Juha, a fictional character who was the butt of many jokes for his stupidity. The joke went that a room full of people were asked to touch their left ear. Everyone raised their left hand to their left ear; everyone except Juha, who without thinking extended his right hand over the top of his head to touch his left ear. It is an unnecessarily awkward contortion for what is a simple request. Juha is someone who does not see the obvious; he is ignorant because he is blind to what everyone else sees. When Juha contorts himself in this way, his right hand (the favoured side of the body in Arab Islamic cultures) touches his left ear (the less favoured side of the body). Because it is the right hand that appears to act, superficially the action is *halal*; but in reality the action engages a less favourable reality. In this case, the action therefore illustrates a kind of false piety, where Juha is fooled by the appearance of rectitude. It also implies stupidity: in his false piety, Juha fools only himself. To laugh at God is to laugh at oneself.

When Abu Wasta characterised the money-lenders in this way, he was effectively saying that their ethical reasoning – the process by which they convinced themselves that flipping invisible yarn was morally acceptable – was in fact tendentious: ignorant at best and insincere at worst. In other words, an important question for traders is whether or not one’s ethical reasoning is done in the right way. Is “rightness” discerned in line with a properly formed conscience, by someone who “fears God” and “knows haram and halal”, or is it done falsely, tendentiously and ignorantly? By implication, it is possible to reason with a false consciousness, or even worse with bad faith: to accord too much weight to one’s own desires, anxieties or needs – to be led into fooling oneself, or “laughing at God”. The possibility of bad faith means that moral reasoning is not an arena where one acts in pure creative freedom. Rather, ethics is a question of working out how one is obligated.

Adopting a model such as Robbins' (2007) or Zigon's (2009) that makes a dramatic conceptual separation between morality and ethics, we might say that actors are either following moral rules such as the shariah, or engaging in practical reasoning and choice, which is a matter of ethics. In Lambek's (2000) reading, by contrast, there is no morality without ethics: any single rule or model of excellence requires judgement. Abu Wasta's characterization of yarn-flipping suggests that the way in which judgment is exercised is itself open to ethical assessment according to whether it fits in with the spirit of the shariah. A dramatic conceptual separation between "morality" (as rule-following) and "ethics" (as moral reasoning) does not account for the fact that subjects assess moral reasoning ethically; they assert that moral reasoning should be constrained and shaped by a sense of accountability and obligation. Reasoning well requires judgement: a properly formed conscience; a fear of God; and a cultivated sense of haram and halal.

### ***The Moral and the Non-Moral***

"You cannot find haram and halal in the old city markets (*mdiineh*). People might try to convince shaykhs to tell them that what they are doing is halal...Shaykhs are like calculators. The answer they give depends on the information you put into them. You must put in information that is truthful (don't try to fool them!) but also information that is relevant to your situation."

Muhyi, 25, yarn manufacturer

"The act of describing a situation, and thus determining that there's a decision to be made – is itself a moral task. It's often *the* moral task. Learning how to recognise what is and isn't an option is part of our ethical development."

Appiah (2008:196)

Moral dilemmas are not given as clear conflicts between unambiguous norms. Rather, the identification or presentation of the dilemma is itself a moral task, as both the quotes above suggest. The ethnographic excerpts in this section show that the identification, presentation and tackling of a dilemma is believed to require a virtuous disposition. These excerpts present ethical problems that arose in the life of an Aleppan yarn entrepreneur seeking to follow the Islamic shariah. Here, the need

for virtue – the virtuous disposition that makes correct judgement possible – emerges in the context of a deontological system. This complicates any opposition between “virtue ethics” and “deontological ethics” (see e.g. Zigon 2009).

One reason why the act of describing a situation is often *the* ethical task (Appiah 2008) is that it is often difficult to separate out the moral from the non-moral. This is because ethical judgements are inextricably linked to other kinds of crises. Ethics is not simply a matter of choosing between conflicting rules or principles. Most “ethical dilemmas” – for all that scholars often frame them in terms of conflicting moral principles – are in fact an inchoate mix of different kinds of fears, worries, desires and aspects of the heart, many of them not particularly “moral”.

Zigon (2007) presents an ethical dilemma where a Christian Orthodox Russian woman boards a train without a ticket and is unsure whether to pay a (lower) bribe or a (higher) fine if confronted by a ticket inspector. I argue that the “moral” in this situation, while it appears in Zigon’s analysis to be about the conflicting principles of honesty and financial self-preservation, is in fact inevitably wrapped up in other matters of the heart, such as the woman’s anxiety about being forced to make such a decision in a situation of public confrontation. The “moral” question of conscience and the “non-moral” question of public anxiety run into one another. In this particular case, where the issue of public anxiety is resolved, the resolution of the “moral question” immediately and automatically follows. I conclude from this that moral dilemmas are never *simply* a question of conflicting principles; and solutions to those dilemmas involve a broader conception of the “good” than simply privileging one ideal above another. In this case, the solution was a matter not of resolving conflicting principles, but rather dealing with anxiety. Moral dilemmas and solutions, in other words, are as complex as the human lives that contain them.

Jarrett Zigon describes the dilemma faced by the 51-year-old Christian Orthodox Russian woman living in Moscow as follows (2007:143-144):

One evening in the spring of 2003 Aleksandra Vladimirovna and I were speaking about how one must sometimes accept a disconnect between one’s

moral ideals and real-life ethical dilemmas. I asked her how she deals with this disconnect in her own life. She responded:

A.V. I pray and ask the Lord to help me. This is the best solution. I can give an example. Either every week or twice a month I go to the country to visit my aunt and I go by train. And I came and there was a large line for tickets and if I would have bought a ticket I would have missed the train, and so I just got onto the train. But if you have to pay a fine for this on the train, then often you can just pay something like 20 rubles to the person and they are satisfied and they go on their way. But if you say – well I want a receipt or something – then you have to pay much more. And many people just give 20 rubles and they are quite happy. And I thought of the situation and I decided I was ready to pay to go to see my aunt. And I prayed to the Lord to help me. And then I also thought that if no inspector comes by, then I will give the money that I saved to some charity or something. But I didn't want to feel embarrassed. And then no one came, so I took the money and gave it to someone, some beggar or church or something. Because I thought that this was not my money any more, this is how I solved it for myself.

Jarrett And by praying this helped you come to this solution?

A.V. I don't know how, but I didn't have to be embarrassed by inspectors, I didn't have to decide whether to pay the bribe of 20 rubles or to pay the fine, which is much more. So I decided, ok, I will pay the fine, this is the best. But fortunately I didn't have to face this situation. But I knew, because as God disciplines me, I knew that if I didn't give the money to someone and just saved it I would be punished.

Zigon writes that

“this situation...involved two ethical dilemmas. Not only did Aleksandra Vladimirovna need to decide whether to pay the fine or the bribe, she also had to decide what to do with the money once she did not have to pay anything”.

In other words, Zigon analyses the situation as a question of choosing between conflicting principles: on the one hand, the costly principle of honesty (paying the fine rather than the bribe / giving the money away to charity); on the other hand, the principle of financial self-interest (avoid the fine / keep the money). But another important aspect of the dilemma stressed by Vladimirovna is the desire not to be embarrassed or flustered in public. Any ideal solution to this dilemma, from her point

of view, would involve not having to be “embarrassed by inspectors” and, in particular, not having to make an ethical decision under such circumstances.

Vladimirovna believes that in response to her prayer, God provided her with a solution to her situation. The solution that she implies she received from God was not being told which of the two principles – costly honesty or financial self-interest – to follow. Indeed, she made that decision for herself: “so I decided, ok, I will pay the fine, this is the best”. Rather, the solution to her dilemma was that she did not have to make this decision in public and under the glare of the inspector:

Zigon: “and by praying this helped you come to this solution?”

Vladimirovna: “I don’t know how, but I didn’t have to be embarrassed by inspectors”.

The resolution of the ethical dilemma was as much about this psychological ease and comfort as it was about deciding between conflicting principles. Indeed, once her former issue of psychological ease had been dealt with, the latter issue of conflicting principles almost decided itself.

So the “moral” in this situation, while at one level it is about conflicting moral principles, is also inevitably wrapped up in other matters of the heart such as Vladimirovna’s anxiety about being confronted (by a person and a decision) in public. In the idiom of Aleppo traders, Vladimirovna needed to feel “comfortable” (*murtaah*) – a term I explore below in the context of discerning one’s conscience. For Vladimirovna, the emergence of that feeling of comfort marked the resolution of her dilemma. Feeling comfortable had two meanings in this situation: the sense of having a settled conscience once she had decided to pay the fine, but also the sense of being released from the anxiety of making an ethical decision under pressure in public. The point I want to stress is that both these senses of being “comfortable” are inextricable: when one issue is resolved, the resolution of the other immediately follows. The “moral” question of conscience and the “non-moral” question of public anxiety run into one another. Moral dilemmas are never simply a question of conflicting principles; and solutions to those dilemmas involve a broader conception of the “good” than simply privileging one ideal above another. Moral dilemmas and

solutions are as complex as the human lives that contain them. This reflects the point made by legal anthropologists that complete justice, as a lived concept, is never simply a question of legal rules, and as a result is always elusive or “just over the horizon” (Kelly and Dembour 2007:17).

For all that we might like to narrow down the “moral” so that it can do particular conceptual work, the “good” in any situation is experienced not only as uncertain, but as more than simply ethical. Again, this is close to Aristotle: his notion of “flourishing” or “happiness” (*eudaimonia*) characterises what life actually seems to be like – better than an account of the ethical as simply the resolution of conflicting moral norms. Neo-Aristotelianism accommodates a broader conception of the good than a model of morality as rule-following. Indeed, models that construct morality as rule-following or normative behaviour, and ethics as the conscious work necessary to resolve conflicts, do not adequately account for the experience of dilemmas. This is because dilemmas are not simply given as conflicts between norms; rather, judgement is required to decide whether or not one is facing a dilemma, what kind of dilemma it is and what norms apply to it.

Most moral crises, then, are aspects of other kinds of (perhaps financial or emotional) crises. These non-normative influences on action, such as the desire to be comfortable or not to be anxious in public, are always in play; the moral always runs into the non-moral. One corollary of this is that any attempt to separate out a moral question and to reason through it ethically is, if a necessary process, also an arbitrary and unnatural one. Any attempt at clarity – any attempt to decide what is relevant and what is not – requires some abstraction from the humanity of the situation. Any attempt to define a moral question and reason through it ethically is therefore a process that is itself subject to judgement in ethical terms: does one’s definition of the situation, and the way one reasons through it, take into account all ‘relevant’ factors? Is it too narrow or too broad? Is it unduly influenced by ‘irrelevant’ concerns? These are always contestable questions of wisdom and judgement.

I apply this perspective to some examples of ethical debates and dilemmas described to me by Muhyi, the 25-year-old wealthy and successful Aleppo yarn entrepreneur. Both Muhyi and his father regarded themselves as committed and practicing Muslims. The dilemmas and Muhyi's comments about them suggest that the identification and framing of ethical questions, as well as the way he reasons through them, are all contestable issues which themselves require a good moral disposition: a properly formed conscience or heart, and a fear of God. As we saw in the example above about "flipping" yarn, it is possible to reason and to justify oneself sincerely or insincerely – with a "clean heart" or "laughing at God". A virtuous moral disposition is needed to distinguish between the two.

### *The Obligation and Comforts of Conscience*

Reflecting the point made at the beginning of the chapter, Muhyi does not characterise ethical dilemmas as a space of creative intellectual freedom; he stresses not complete detachment from norms, but an obligation to stay faithful to their sense and spirit. By stressing obligation, I do not wish to be misunderstood: I am not saying that moral decision-making requires no critical or reflective ability. Far from it: Muhyi's notion of individual responsibility combined with a wariness of shaykhs put an obligation on him to be critical and reflective. Critical engagement with his situation was required precisely because he was individually responsible before God. But we cannot understand this responsibility without understanding the particular notion of obligation that it entailed. Muhyi felt himself obliged not only to act properly but – a necessary corollary of this – to exercise his intellectual engagement in such a way that it was infused by proper judgement or conscience.

Muhyi: On one occasion, we were thinking of opening a gym. I was not sure, I thought to be sure I will ask the shaykh. He said it is *halal*. I said, 'but people will come with shorts above the knee.' It is *haram* to show above the knee. He said, 'that would be *haram*, but you can put up a notice asking people not to wear clothes like that.' But you cannot run a gym like that. So we didn't do it. Can you imagine that opening a gym would be *haram*! That is *tahriir al halal*: suspecting as *haram* things that you wouldn't think. At the end of the day, you need to feel in your heart that what you are doing is *halal*. Imagine, if one shaykh says something is *halal* and another says it is *haram*,

and if you do it thinking it is *halal* and I do it thinking it is *haram*, then if it is *haram*, God will punish me but not you.

You need to feel it is *halal* in your heart. But not just feel, ok, it is *halal*, because you want in your heart to make money. No, you must really feel it is *halal* and be convinced.

Paul: Your intention? (*al-niyya*)?

Muhyi: Yes. There is something inside you that knows that something is *halal* or *haram*. But it is not enough to feel it is *halal*. You also need to have the judgement (*al-hukm al-shara'iy*) from a shaykh. And then to feel it is *halal*. If all the shaykhs tell you that something is *halal*, but in your heart you feel it is *haram*, you should follow that. Otherwise, what happens if it turns out to be *haram*?

Muhyi wanted “in his heart” to make money. Being unsure of the correct course of action, he sought the advice of a shaykh. But Muhyi was not content simply to follow a shaykh’s advice unthinkingly:

Not all shaykhs are good, of course. Like priests. Like people everywhere. A shaykh is a person at the end of the day. At the end of the day, the responsibility is yours: the Account is between you and your Lord (*al-hisaab bainak wa bain rabbak*). Shaykhs are like calculators. The answer they give depends on the information you put into them. You must put in information that is truthful – don’t try to fool them – but also information that is relevant to your situation. Otherwise they might conclude that you are doing something *haram* when it is actually *halal*.

I argue with shaykhs. They say it is *haram*, I say, why? They say, because of this verse in the Quran (*aaya*). I say, but that verse doesn’t refer to what I am doing. You need to ‘take the reasons’ first of all. And you need to be educated before you go the shaykh. But most people are not.

Muhyi argues that he needs to exercise his conscience and his judgement to decide what to tell the shaykh: how to frame and explain the dilemma. He will be held accountable for the way in which he exercises his judgement as much as for the way in which he follows the shariah code. Muhyi implies that a Muslim is obliged not only to act properly but – a necessary corollary of this – to exercise his intellectual engagement in such a way that it is infused by proper judgement. The ethical capacities of sincerity and good judgement are a necessary part of living out a

Muslim life, regardless of the fact that religious scholars are available to offer their own solutions to particular dilemmas.

Even when the opinion of religious scholars on the shariah appeared clear, Muhyi argued that judgment was required: was he considering the correct rule or not? What did the rule mean in this situation? Was his action breaking it or not? The same issue of judgment applied to the previous cases in the yarn market: in arguing that flipping invisible yarn was morally acceptable, or that “twisting tactics” were an acceptable form of “cleverness”, were traders beyond the pale or not? If Muhyi was unsure about the correct course of action, and unwilling or unable to surrender all authority to a shaykh, how did he go about deploying his judgment? The answer is that he reasoned within the terms of an embodied cosmology; and the reliability of his judgment depended on his having previously inculcated a virtuous disposition that had properly internalised this cosmology. In both respects, his reasoning was characterised by a sense of obligation. He was obliged to exercise judgment virtuously, according to his conscience and in knowledge of the sovereignty of God.

I referred in the previous chapter to Agrama’s (2010) account of the production and reception of fatwas in the al-Azhar Fatwa Council in Cairo. The ethnographic context Agrama describes is similar to Muhyi’s engagement with the shariah as narrated in this chapter. Like Muhyi, Agrama’s subjects behave ethically not when they demonstrate or act in the light of “creative freedom” – an ideal which, as Agrama argues, is part of the ideology of liberal thought. Rather, they do so by striving to cope within the constraints (and possibilities) of a conception of time and virtue to which they are already committed. The job of the mufti, who issues the fatwa, is not to creatively reconcile an archaic tradition to a constantly changing modernity (the predominant scholarly representation). Rather, it is to cope within a set of constraints and ideals to which both he and the fatwa’s recipient are or should be committed. Hence, Agrama argues that “it is more appropriate to say that the fatwa is about what the mufti is able to say, in good faith, to fatwa seekers about what they should do, *within the range and limits of doctrine* as well as overall conceptions of an ideal Muslim self” [my italics] (2010:12-13). Whether or not the mufti is able to do so in a

way that remains faithful to the norms of ethical discipline (*adab*) governing the production of the fatwa is itself an issue where his own virtue is at stake.

Ethics emerges here, both on the part of the fatwa-seeker and the mufti, through seeking an ideal, which is in turn a matter of negotiating obligation and remaining faithful. Much as I describe for Muhyi, Agrama's subjects aim to remain faithful to a tradition in the way that they negotiate the desires and constraints of the situation at hand. It is in the refusal to innovate improperly – to refuse a too-easy solution – that virtue is proved. Agrama notes that those who had received a fatwa “tended to follow it even if this caused them difficulty or some unhappiness” (2010:4). He asks how the fatwa, which is not backed by any power of enforcement, comes to have this authority. Rather than ascribing any pre-formed notion of authority to Islamic “tradition”, he argues that the fatwa is authoritative because it helps subjects on a journey of self-cultivation that they want to be on. It is, as it were, part of the project that defines their lives. At the centre of this project is the pedagogy and discipline of developing and following a conscience – the same point stressed by Muhyi. This explains the point observed by Agrama that “in those instances in which I saw people seek a second fatwa, it was often because they had received one in their favour, which yet somehow made them feel uncomfortable” (2010:5).

This observation finds a parallel in Muhyi's comment below. We can infer from Muhyi's comment that the existence of the shariah as a body of rules, and of religious scholars as a body of rule-interpreters, does not alter the fact that the ethical life is a life lived among others. More than rule-compliance, it is a matter of interpreting and following one's obligations to others and to God. This is not seen as a license to “wriggle out” of the rules, but rather as a guard against doing so. It is in opposition to perspectives that would distinguish between ethics as problematic but occasional work, and as morality as ubiquitous but essentially non-problematic rule-following. Muhyi said:

This question of haram and halal is something you feel, you don't just follow it. You start to feel it. Most people might say such-and-such is ok, but I don't feel comfortable with it, so I don't do it. I do not say it is haram, but I do not

do it, I don't feel *comfortable* [my emphasis]. By the way, when you say shaykh, you shouldn't just ask any shaykh, seventy percent are not real shaykhs, they are just doing it to be rich or to have people like them. Ask someone you trust, and don't just accept what he says. Ask why, ask for reasons. He should give you a hadith from the Prophet, God's peace and blessings be upon him.

Three quarters of shaykhs say that "flipping" (*qallaabeh*) [material] yarn is ok. But this is a slang word, maybe many shaykhs have not heard about it. I don't feel *comfortable* [my emphasis] selling [yarn] on six months' credit (*wi'di* – literally: on a "promise" contract) to people who will sell it on for cash immediately. If they have a condom factory, for example, and want to buy yarn from me, I don't feel comfortable. It is like giving them money. If I know it is for an honest purpose, they are going to put in on their [knitting or weaving] machines, ok.

The application of the shariah to real-life situations requires therefore not simply a knowledge of rules and a deductive capacity for thought, but also the capacity for felt judgement. Arendt (1958) distinguishes between thought and judgment: the former is "neutral" and aspires to be "objective"; the latter is "perspectival" and "situated" (Lambek 2010a:26). Lambek quotes Benhabib (2003:191) who elucidates the difference as follows: "thinking requires autonomy, consistency, tenacity, independence and steadfastness", whereas judgment requires "an interest in the world and in the human beings who constitute the world, and a firm grasp of where one's own boundaries lie and where those of others begin". Any system of rules or deontology, in other words, requires not simply the application of thought (or an appeal to others who will think on one's behalf), but the cultivation of wisdom and judgement.

The cultivation of this judgement enabled Muhyi to feel "comfortable" about decisions. Although most of my conversation with Muhyi was conducted in English, the normal Arabic word for "comfortable" was *murtaah*; the word had the sense of a feeling of rightness, often in respect of a decision that needed to be made. Another Arabic word with a related sense that Muhyi also used was *muqtani'*, which meant feeling "convinced" or "content" about a decision: having an inner sense of conviction that it was the right one. The word *murtaah* however had both a moral and a non-moral sense. It was talked of as applying to a range of situations: the result

of discerning and following one's conscience over ethical decisions; the feeling of making a wise investment or purchase; the result of praying for forgiveness; and the feeling one had when one trusted another person. Ethical decisions might involve an amalgam of all these issues: trust, profit, security and divine judgement. In other words, the moral and non-moral were often wrapped up together in a single decision, as I argued earlier.

To exercise judgement properly, one's feeling of being *murtaah* about a decision should be precipitated only by the right kind of conditions. Muhyi should feel "right" or "convinced" about a decision not merely because a shaykh had given him a legal ruling, but because it was in line with Muhyi's own inner feeling. Even inner feelings could be deceptive; as Muhyi said, "[you should] not just feel, ok, it is halal, because you want in your heart to make money". Such deceptive inner feelings could lead someone to frame a situation tendentiously when consulting a shaykh. In order to trust one's own inner feelings, one's sense of being *murtaah*, Muhyi needed a virtuous disposition of discernment. This was referred to as knowing or having "haram and halal", or "fearing God" (*byikhaaf Allaah*). Muhyi said:

There are four levels of halal and haram: *tahriir halal* which means "extra halal" – taking extra pains, trying your best to be as halal as possible. Then there is halal. Then there is *tahriir haram*: being haram but trying not to be too haram all the time – most people are here. Then there is haram. It is very difficult to be halal if you are not brought up that way, if you are brought up with deceit (*kizb*). But if you are brought up that way, it is not difficult.

Everyone desires money, every individual in the world. And everyone – I am talking about Muslims – has a fear of God. But some people have only a small fear of God. They get some money through usury (*riba*), and because they are getting money, that makes them happy, so they take more.

Thus, For Muhyi, a cultivated sense of what it meant to be a good Muslim – "knowing halal and haram", and "fearing God" – was necessary for a sense of rightness to emerge. According to Muhyi, the fear of God was almost a precondition for virtuous action, given the temptations of making money unlawfully. It competed against the natural and universal disposition to "love money". The fear of God was a disposition that needed to be inculcated by education; being brought up in an

atmosphere of “deceit” undermined the possibility of virtue. However, the fear of God was a disposition that existed by degrees: it could be strong or weak.

Another disposition, related to the fear of unlawful wealth, was fear of the consequences of unlawful wealth (*maal haraam*) and trust in the positive consequences or blessing of lawful wealth. The dispositions of fear and trust regarding consequences were set against the disposition to love instant, easy money – the universal disposition that required no trust or fear. Muhyi stressed not only the obligation to follow one’s conscience, but also the sense of consequence – of opportunity and risk – that was attached in his cosmology to lawful and unlawful wealth:

If I earn \$1000 and you earn \$200, maybe the \$200 lasts longer. You save money, you wake up early, so get the bus not the taxi. Your son works hard at school so you don’t need to bribe the teachers. You are happier and spending less; I am less happy and spending more. The difference is blessing (*baraka*). The Prophet said that halal money, even if it is a smaller amount, it has so much meaning. You don’t know how God makes everyone work for you without you knowing. He makes you wake up early, he makes your son clever, he makes your wife a good seamstress so you don’t waste money. God is generous (*Allaahu kariim*). Don’t think it is from your efforts that you are successful.

My friend wanted to take a loan from a bank. I said ‘it is haram’, I said ‘pray to the Generous One, he will make things right for you’. And then he got the money. I gave it to him as a free short-term loan (*qard hasan*). If the money has blessing, you are happy, even if it is less. You are ‘convinced’ (*muqtana*) about it, you have contentment (*qanaa ‘a*) in it. If you take money in a haram way, it is haram money.

Do you know the difference between generous (*kariim*) and the Generous One (*al-kariim*)? If I give you something, maybe I am generous. But it is nothing compared to the generosity of God. All generosity comes from God – He is its source. It is like we say a mother is kind (*hanuun*). But the Kind One (*al-hanuun*), imagine all the kindness of all the mothers in the world, who have ever been, and it is much more than that.

A *qard hasan* loan – with no interest – paid back whenever you can, perhaps six or seven months – has benefits, in both lives. For him, the bank would have been better – he would have the money for longer, not just for six or seven months. But halal money is not haram money, and haram money is

money without blessing. And money, whether it is haram or halal, all goes. It is better to spend it being convinced (*bi'l-qanaa'a*) about how you spend it.

A Muslim with a virtuous disposition should also be moved by fear of the Day of Judgement, or Day of Account. Muhyi said:

If you bribe a shaykh to give you the answer you want, or ask the question in a way to try to fool the shaykh, you are just laughing at yourself in the end. God will hold you to Account, so why are you bothering to bring in the shaykh? It is not the shaykh that makes things haram or halal. The Account (*al-hisaab*) is yours.

Moral reasoning in this explicitly Islamic context was the process of “distinguishing between halal and haram” (*hallil wa harrim*). Muhyi did not view this as simply a matter of consulting and following shaykhs. Nor was it simply a matter of applying one’s expertise or knowledge of the rules. It was, rather, a process that took place within a certain cosmology – or set of beliefs about how the world is, and about cause and effect, or provision and consequence. God was “the Generous One” (*al-kariim*) – the source of all provision. “Lawful wealth” led to happiness, efficient economy and other forms of blessing. But God was also to be “feared”; “unlawful wealth” led to wastage, unhappiness and disaster; Both lawful and unlawful wealth had eternal consequences on the Day of Account.

This cosmology makes sense of Muhyi’s moral reasoning, giving it a context and a logic. He emphasises the importance of blessing (*baraka*) and impending judgment or Account (*hisaab*). The embodied feeling of contented rightness or “conviction” (*qanaa'a*) to which he refers emerges within an internalised set of beliefs about cause and effect. As I argued in chapter three, the *baraka* belief is built around the knowledge that “anything you get in a good way remains strong” and that “God will hold everyone to account”.

Muhyi’s ethical reasoning is guided as much by his beliefs about *baraka* as by a detailed scriptural knowledge of legal traditions of *fiqh* or consultations with shaykhs and muftis. He exercises his judgment within a universe filled with *baraka* and framed by the Account, and within a body that has learned to value and fear some

things more than others. This attention to cosmology and a theory of consequence needs to supplement neo-Durkheimian accounts of morality as norms that actors adhere to without thinking; and ethics as what happens when norms conflict (e.g. Robbins 2007). One weakness of this view of morality is that it does not explain where the form of ethical reasoning that characterises ethical moments comes from. Following Lambek, I argue that it is the internal logic of a cosmological model – the need to preserve *baraka* and prepare for the Account – that makes sense of the norms in the first place, renders them powerful, and also demarcates what counts as acceptable ethical reasoning when the norms require interpreting.

This embodied cosmology – the instinctive logics of fear and desire that constitute belief in *baraka* and the Account – does not only shape how Muhyi navigates ethical questions. It also positions him and others who adhere to it in a vast network of causes and effects. This cosmology encompasses their social relations (according to the state of their heart towards others), their economic circumstances (*rizq* or ‘daily provision’) and their fate in the afterlife. The moral is never only moral, to be confined to a discrete domain of life or set of prescribed activities or rules. The cosmology in which explicit moral rules are embedded is, rather, an embodied sense of how cause leads to effect, of what is worth worrying about and hoping for, and therefore of how the self is involved in the world.

## Conclusion

### Skepticism and Ethical Foolishness

#### *Ordinary Ethics*

The term “ordinary ethics” (Lambek 2010a) suggests that ethics should be understood not as a discrete domain of activity, but as an aspect of all practice. It is a function of life lived with others; thus ethics both emerges from and necessarily implies involvement with others. Pels (2000) makes a similar point when he argues against an audit-based approach to the ethics of anthropological fieldwork. He proposes that ethics should be understood as always emergent – negotiated in each and every situation. Any notion of ethics as purely rule-following denies the contingency of everyday life and relationships. He argues that such a conception of ethics, by focusing on the systems (guidelines, rules, systems of oversight and governance) that regulate and monitor behaviour, rather than on the behaviour itself, serves to depoliticise relationships: it replaces a concern for equality and sympathy with a concern for correct governance and appropriate systems. Against this conception of ethics, Pels argues that we cannot rely on systems to make us ethical; we must rather become *involved* in human situations and continually negotiate the way we respond to them.

I have written my thesis in light of this concept of “ordinary ethics” and the perspective that the ethical – whatever it might mean substantively in local terms – is a function of life lived with others. In my research, it emerges as an aspect of social exchange, and always in relation to practical problems. This suggests that we should study ethics in connection with those specific material and political circumstances that make particular types of exchange problematic. To put it another way, ethics always implies involvement with others, but the terms and dynamics of that involvement vary. The factory owner Abdullah carries out his business and seeks to

develop a political presence in Aleppo's industrial renaissance by navigating a moral economy of "affection". His respectability and charisma depend on the ability to gather obligated peers and dependents around him; and to demonstrate and inspire appropriate forms of "shyness" (*khajal*) and "affection" (*mahabbah*). Abdullah's trustworthiness depends on a reputation for sincerity: a "clean heart" and "good cinnamon". Here, a sincere heart or good intention is understood as an attitude towards others.

Majid, by contrast, is more concerned to demonstrate his "worth" by selling boldly "in front of the customer", and by his "cleverness" in an agonistic relation. Rather than sincerity, the form of care that is appropriate to his involvement with his customers is "propriety" (*adab*), which can involve concealment and coercion. To act well, he must sell autonomously, "as he wishes" (*'alaa kayfhu*). He strives to do so not merely to gain prestige, but because these are the ideals that orient his life and imbue it with significance. He must also deploy judgement to determine not only how but how far to pursue the ideal of autonomy and glory in the face of other concerns. Life is a question of pursuing ideals and judging practice, not following norms.

However, the ideals towards which Majid strives depend on acts of ritual commitment which establish them as criteria for assessing practice and ultimately for judging personhood. This is Lambek's point – and his addition (drawing on Rappaport's analysis of ritual) to a purely Aristotelian model of virtue. I argue that as well as establishing ethical ideals or standards which can serve as criteria for practice, these "performative acts" also produce allegiance to a particular cosmology, or a set of beliefs about what kinds of causes lead to what kind of effects, and thus what kind of actions are worth worrying about. These cosmologies are culturally produced and are embodied: actors know instinctively, even before they have put it into words, that "whatever is gained in a good way remains strong"; that "unlawful wealth leads to catastrophe"; that "a clean heart" leads to "blessing"; and that God "holds all people to Account". My more general argument is that all virtues or notions of value depend on such cosmologies or theories of consequence. These

cosmologies underlie and shape ethical reasoning as much as they do apparently normative behaviour. Thus ethical reasoning is not so much a domain of “free” and “creative” behaviour, as a matter of working out how one is obligated.

Actors produce allegiance to these cosmologies through routine statements, which hedge everyday transactions in shops and offices in Aleppo, such as “may God give you blessing”; “God is the source of provision”; “God willing, your intentions are pure”; and “I know you have good cinnamon”. The extent to which actors genuinely, rather than superficially or hypocritically, internalise these beliefs as affective moral dispositions, is said to depend on education and upbringing. Those who have internalised them are said to have a “clean heart”; to “fear God”; and thus to be capable of moral judgement and discernment: to be able to “distinguish between right and wrong” (*harrim wa hallil*).

Because ethics is an aspect of exchange, the (intangible) *attitude* in which the exchange is conducted determines its moral value. A sincere or “clean-hearted” transactor is not simply someone who does not intend to cheat, but also one who exchanges generously and willingly, without envy or reluctance. Such “good intentions” can be read by their material effects: the material ease and profit that accrue to those who deal with the clean-hearted merchant. For Aleppan traders who live and transact within this cosmology, such ease and profit are the material signs by which they “read ethics off surfaces” (Keane 2010). I also argued that these attitudinal virtues – of willingness and loyalty in labour, of lack of envy and generosity in transaction – are particularly valuable because they emerge in the face of contradictory cultural ideals. If honour is gained through autonomy, wealth and success, what kind of person does it take to work willingly for and transact generously with another? This perspective is in contrast to models that view normative behaviour as essentially harmonious and unproblematic.

### *Freedom and Commitment: From Foucault to Lambek and Back*

Foucault (2000) put freedom at the heart of his model of ethics. He proposed a model of ethics as self-fashioning, where subjects freely choose what kind of person they wish to be, and then voluntarily subject themselves to disciplines (or “ethical technologies”) in order to achieve that personhood. The freedom of the ethical subject consists in the possibility of choosing the kind of self one wishes to be. Laidlaw (2002) agrees that meaningful ethical action presupposes some kind of freedom. Commenting on Foucault, he argues that

“wherever and in so far as people’s conduct is shaped by attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person, because it is as such as person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live, to that extent their conduct is ethical and free.” (2002:327)

He continues that an “anthropology of ethics will only be possible – will only be prevented from constantly collapsing into general questions of social regularity and social control – if we take seriously, as something requiring ethnographic description, the possibilities of human freedom” (2002:315).

The notion of virtue which I have used in this thesis is similar to Foucault’s model of ethics. For Foucault, ethics involves striving to become a certain kind of person. In neo-Aristotelianism, virtue is likened to “the good entailed in stretching one’s capacities or the pleasure of playing well” (Lambek 2010a:21 summarising MacIntyre 1984), or realising “the image of the good life” (Friedman 1990). I applied this perspective to the chapter on the retail shop, portraying Majid as striving to attain standards of excellence in the way that he sells. However, I am reluctant to characterise all virtue as the practice of excellence or the ongoing achievement of ethical mastery. Sometimes people are not striving to stretch themselves, to find pleasure in acting well, or to attain standards of excellence; they are simply trying to cope – and are being no less ethical for that.

Laidlaw (2002:327) suggests that actors strive to “make of themselves a certain kind of person”, and do so “with reference to ideals, values, models, practices,

relationships and institutions that are amenable to ethnographic study”. But I argued in the chapter on dilemmas that subjects are committed to understanding their lives and actions within the terms of particular cosmologies. Therefore, there is a sense in which, when they face difficulties or dilemmas – and therefore in much of their everyday life – entrepreneurs are not so much striving after excellence, but simply trying to manage, within the terms of the cosmology to which they are committed. In these cases, their behaviour is shaped by the practical and cosmological risks and obligations inherent in the universe in which they are committed to living, rather than by any project to become a particular kind of person. Most bluntly, in navigating ethical dilemmas, Aleppan entrepreneurs like Muhyi are not trying to “become Muslim” but to obey God.

Some might argue that this distinction is a confirmation rather than a critique of Foucault’s model of ethics. According to this point of view, Muhyi is trying to obey God only from an emic point of view; from the etic point of view, he has indeed set himself the task of becoming Muslim. In choosing the obligations entailed by that project, he is exercising the fundamental ethical freedom involved in being a subject. That surely is the Foucauldian position. It seems to me that there is a secular bias in its epistemological hierarchy: in privileging (as etic) the category of subjectivation over the category of obedience, which (as emic) remains a cultural peculiarity rather than a condition for generalisable knowledge. Nevertheless, the category of subjectivation enables us to ask: what is involved in moving from a position of freedom to a project of commitment? That, in effect, is Foucault’s question: how do we become subjects, committed to certain ideals?

Lambek effectively poses the question the other way around, asking what is involved in moving from a project of commitment to a position of freedom. By freedom I mean here the absence of obligation, the lack of attachment to any clear and convincing ethical criteria for judging practice. Drawing on Cavell (1988), he observes that commitments to ethical criteria are not indefinitely stable, but may decay into doubt. For example, I portrayed Majid’s act of selling in terms of Lambek’s twin categories of performance and ongoing practice. The initiating

performance of approaching a customer establishes, like a ritual, that what follows will be evaluated according to certain criteria. What is at stake is Majid's worth (*qiimatuh*) and manliness (*rjuuleh*). He achieves these by following up on his boldness, and fulfilling the criteria his boldness has established: by proving his ability to make them buy "as I wish, not as they wish" (*'alaa kayfii*) and selling by demonstrating his cleverness (*shataara*). But is Majid always so certain about the virtues of boldness – of "not being shy" – and the value of selling "as he wants"? Do these ideals ever start to lose their purchase on him? Is he ever left following a script he knows well, but without fully inhabiting the ideals that make sense of it? If rituals produce commitment to a certain ideology<sup>20</sup>, does the coherence of this commitment ever fade?

This is the condition of skepticism, or "withdrawal of the world", identified by Cavell (1988:174-175) in Lambek (2010b:59). Skepticism threatens our presentness to others, because it undermines our "presentness to...[our own] language" (ibid). It is an ever-present problem because, despite our efforts to stabilise our social lives with clear rituals and performative commitments, our inner lives remain both ephemeral and obscure: always in danger of pulling away from, or never wholly living up to, the commitments with which we punctuate them. Ethics might be, as I have argued, a matter of managing our involvement with others, but skepticism means that we can never guarantee how much or for how long that involvement will engage our whole being. The solution, for Lambek, is to acknowledge the "courage entailed in speaking and acting at all" (2010b:59).

Lambek calls this the problem of skepticism, which amounts to a "withdrawal of the world" (Cavell 1988:174):

"what if skepticism creeps into performance or practice, if criteria are no longer ambiguous or disambiguating (or, conversely, too discriminating), if felicity conditions lose their authority, become fragmented or incoherent, if practices are no longer satisfying or sufficient...These are problems...of

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<sup>20</sup> Kaplan (2000) argues that combat service for young Israeli males serves as a ritual that produces men. This rite of passage secures commitment to a certain ideology of masculinity, within a wider ideology of Zionism.

genuine human paradox. Cavell describes the condition as “the absence or withdrawal of the world, that is, the withdrawal of my presentness to it” (Lambek 2010b:59).

### *Courage, Foolishness and Trust*

Lambek is surely correct that these are universal human problems. The challenge for ethnography, as a type of writing that seeks to represent cultural distinctness, is not to ignore the way that the appeal of that distinctness might fade for precisely those people we expect to embody it most. This creates a dilemma: ethnographic representations must present a coherent logic, but must also reflect the fact that interactions and exchanges are not always meaningful, satisfying or internally truthful. What if Majid plays a script and exemplifies its ideals well, but finds it hard to say that he is wholly committed to it? That is not to say that the script or the actor is deceitful or insincere; on the contrary, deceit and insincerity have their own clear logic and truth. Rather, it is to say that our attitudes and intentions – and thus the way we are involved with others – are often simply ephemeral and obscure to us.

To become social facts, capable of being reckoned with in the social world, our attitudes and intentions must emerge from this obscurity and ephemerality; they must be attached to, and become an aspect of, some word or act. But that attachment is always fragile. This is because our inner lives remain ephemeral and obscure despite (and even in the midst of) our attempts to punctuate our social lives with ritual and performative acts. What then can we say about ourselves truthfully? Commenting on the act of apology, Lambek (2010b:58) argues that:

“despite the evident and positive effects of acknowledgement, apology, and forgiveness, it sometimes rises to consciousness not only that the proclamation might be at odds with what we feel but that the very predication is difficult or impossible to make; that we cannot get to the bottom of where we stand or who we are, of our original or current intentions or deepest desires; that the right words or even the criteria for knowing, saying, or doing something are absent. An account of ethics must recognise [this].”

My account does not explicitly recognise this, and so it leaves a gap. Perhaps this gap is inevitable, as Majid did not seem given to existential doubt, maybe as a function of

his age. Even where his own warm-hearted loyalty to his employers was in doubt, it was unambiguously, non-skeptically in doubt. Majid always seemed to know where he stood, and what he stood for, and he made this provocatively apparent to his employers and in front of his customers on several occasions. This of course may be due the fact the data he presented me with were narratives and representations, where ethical meaning had already been achieved – where the identity of the hero and the standards that make him heroic were already certain.

However, as Lambek rightly argues, the ethical life is not always characterised by such apparent certainty. Having laid out his model of ordinary ethics as consisting in performative (ritual, illocutionary) acts which establish criteria, and of ongoing practice which is evaluated in the light of these criteria, he argues that because subjects experience skepticism, the model runs up against the edges of ethics. Having asked “what if skepticism creeps into performance or practice, if criteria are no longer ambiguous or disambiguating”, he concludes:

“how could one have an answer for the disappointment of criteria? Only by concluding that ethical insight must *begin* in mourning the loss of the world – and thereby recognising the courage entailed in speaking and acting at all” (2010b:59).

I find this conclusion almost completely compelling, not least as an argument against the fundamentalist rigidities that a performative ethics of ritual commitment might otherwise produce. Lambek nicely argues that the potential for skepticism about the authority of performative acts shows the courage that is involved in speaking and acting in the first place. But can the virtue of courage always be involved in speaking and acting – that is, in performatively establishing commitments to particular ethical criteria? If such acts are courageous, they must be so in relation to previously established ethical criteria that allow them to be recognised as such. Are the acts and utterances that established these criteria also courageous? To avoid an infinite regress, there must somewhere be an initiating ethical act or utterance that is less obviously virtuous.

If this seems like casuistry, let me turn to an ethnographic example. Young (2010) describes a group of Christian nuns called the “Sisters of Zion” living in Jerusalem who “in a land where there are more ways to be righteous than one can shake a stick at...have chosen the path of unrighteousness”. She notes their willingness to show solidarity with different sides, even at the cost of breaking the law; but then she also notes that they do not adopt a political position or engage in anything that might be seen as activism. She argues that this quietism is not a survival tactic but the expression of a “deeply held theological position” that does not “assume one’s rights must be protected against another’s” and that does not “worry about the chains of reciprocity that must assume a return to one’s self of that which was forfeited. In other words, one need not be calculating or politically astute” (2010:362-3).

Young characterises this ethical life as a willingness to live as a “fool”. By this, she means that the nuns give up on chains of reciprocity and even the attempt to be virtuous; they do not address themselves to the tasks of “conscience” or “politically astute” judgement; “in absolute trust” they give up “trying to be good” (Young 2010:363, quoting Milbank 1997:231). Young’s ethnography may therefore be an exception to Lambek’s argument that Aristotle’s conception of virtue and practical judgement makes best sense of the way most of us live our lives (2008:151). In this case, Aristotle’s “middle path” might be the point at which that model finds the limits of its usefulness.

Clearly this is a different ethnographic context from the one I have described in this thesis. But I want to take the concept of ethical foolishness and use it to address the problem of skepticism that Lambek raises. “Foolishness” might be the best way to characterise and understand performative acts in Lambek’s model of ordinary ethics. That is, we might consider the act of entrusting oneself to such an extent that one commits oneself in the face of uncertainty as, necessarily, “reckless”. And practice – since it involves an implicit decision to continue to act in the knowledge of that initial “foolishness” – must also be qualified in the same way. Such a notion of “ethical foolishness” is in effect the existentialist quality of “absurdity” (Kierkegaard

1967, Camus 1955, Sartre 2000) translated into a more optimistic – or at least more trusting – idiom.

Admittedly, foolishness is less Aristotelian than courage. Aristotle would always prefer the golden mean of courage to its twin vices of cowardice and foolhardiness (Lambek 2000:314; 2008:145). Therefore, as a way of out skepticism, or as a mode of renouncing perpetual disengagement, foolhardiness is less obviously virtuous than courage and wise judgement. However, the acts of commitment that make virtue possible in Lambek's model may require more (or less) than courage. His model of ordinary ethics requires, I suggest, the meta-virtue of trust rather than the Aristotelian virtue of moderation or courage. The decision to speak or act seriously, to establish one set of ethical criteria rather than another, to embody one moral cosmology in preference to another, may require recklessness – literally, the absence of reckoning; or, in other words, an attitude of trust. The foolishness of commitment may be a precondition for the ethical life, or the life worth living.

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