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## **The Positive and Negative Impacts of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) on the Egyptian Intangible Cultural Heritage Social Practices, Religious Rituals and Cultural Expressions**

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### **Abstract:**

*The ongoing outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has created a global health crisis that profoundly altered the perception of people's everyday life practices. This pandemic has contributed to substantial changes in inherited cultures across the world. In Egypt, the widespread of COVID-19 has not only had a critical effect on public health but also all aspects of daily life. In addition to its lethal impacts on human life, the virus has the potential to significantly affect the Egyptian intangible cultural heritage.*

*This paper was started amidst the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus in Egypt, around the second week following the announcement of the confirmed infected cases in February 2020. It focuses on the main positive and negative impacts, resulted from the dispersal of the virus, on the Egyptian intangible cultural heritage practices. It also aims at illustrating the different aspects of changes that have affected the Egyptian intangible cultural heritage (living heritage), how these unprecedented changes have impacted the Egyptians' social practices, religious and spiritual rituals, festive events and cultural expressions, and how the Egyptians have reacted in response to it. Moreover, it highlights the most recent adopted exceptional governmental measures, monumental attempts and impressive efforts to combat the widespread of the virus.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, pandemic, outbreak, positive and negative impacts, intangible cultural heritage, social practices, religious rituals, cultural expressions, traditions.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The outbreak of the ongoing novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) that began in Wuhan, China, December 2019, has turned rapidly into a global pandemic

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causing anxiety, panic, insecurity and depression among the people all over the world (Miller, 2020: 8). It is disseminating expeditiously through close contact and by respiratory droplets produced when people cough or sneeze. It also spreads when a person touches a surface or object with the virus on it, then touches their eyes, nose, or mouth. Recent scientific publications suggest the possibility of the virus's airborne transmission; however, these scientific findings need to be carefully clarified and interpreted (WHO, 2020). The majority of the infected cases came as a result of traveling to afflicted areas or to be in direct contact with infected people (Miller, 2020: 138).

As of 12 May 2020, the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) is confirmed to be affecting 213 countries and territories around the world (<https://www.worldometers.info/Coronavirus/>). Moving to the Eastern Mediterranean region, Egypt is currently listed among those countries struck by the first wave of the novel Coronavirus COVID-19 according to the World Health Organization (WHO) ([https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/Coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200327-sitrep-67-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=b65f68eb\\_4](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/Coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200327-sitrep-67-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=b65f68eb_4)).

### **Paper Methodology:**

To address the key research objectives, this paper used a combination of primary and secondary sources. The primary data is principally based on the author's personal experience and direct observation, while, the secondary sources involve a collection of data and analytical study of information obtained through reputable books, articles, periodicals, newspapers, online articles and reports, official publications, governmental documents, etc.

### **Brief History of Pandemics and Epidemics in Egypt:**

Historically, Egypt has witnessed a series of major pandemic outbreaks since the Pharaonic era till nowadays. These outbreaks brutally affected its human history and the formation of its economic, social and cultural structures as well (Alazzam and Al-Mazyid, 2013: 89-90). The first recorded epidemic in human history occurred in Egypt can be traced back to 3180 BC. According to Manetho, this epidemic was referred to as the Great Pestilence and it took place during the reign of king Semerkhet of the 1<sup>st</sup> dynasty (Bouزيد, 2017: 3). The Amarna Letters, the Hittite Archives and London Medical Papyrus indicated several infectious disease epidemics that affected Egypt and most of the Middle East (Panagiotakopulu, 2004: 273). Moreover, the Ebers Papyrus dealt with epidemic fevers and identified a disease which is today known as Bubonic Plague, caused by a certain type of bacterium called *yersinia pestis* (Krasner, 2019: 7).

In 541 AD., the plague of Justinian was reported from the port of Pelusium, near Suez in Egypt. This pandemic afflicted the Byzantine Empire and particularly its capital, Constantinople, then hit much of the known world at that time including North Africa, Europe, Middle East, Central and Southern Asia and Arabia (Shelley, 2015: 128).

The Black Death plague, as familiarly recognized in European history, reached Alexandria in 1347 (Lotfy, 2015: 552). Its name is derived from the severe black and purple discoloration of the skin, known as *cyanosis*, caused by bacteria in the bloodstream. The Egyptians referred to this pandemic as the Yellow Death or the Yellow Pandemic, in reference to its place of origin, Asia (Borsch, 2009). The plague attacked Egypt once again in 1791 and 1801 during the French Expedition into Ottoman Egypt (Didelot *et al.*, 2017: 3).

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The Cholera pandemic immersed Egypt for the first time in the summer of 1831, started with Cairo then sloped till it reached Luxor (Pollitzer, 1959: 25). Other Cholera waves re-attacked Egypt in 1883, 1902, and 1947, causing substantial numbers of mortality (Shousha, 1948: 354). The last outbreak of Cholera pandemic was interrupted by the presence of Malaria in 1943. The disease intensified in the winter and continued to exist causing several deaths until the Egyptian government succeeded in eradicating it in February 1945 (Snodgrass, 2017: 246). Today, similarities between Cholera pandemic and COVID-19 have been correlated concerning the circumstances and precautionary measures adopted by the government in confronting such diseases. For both pandemics, following certain protocols of long-distance measures, isolation, hygiene and health could protect one from the infection. Much like COVID-19, Cholera exacerbated cultural, economic and social risks as well (Gayed, 2020).

In 2006, Egypt reported its first case of the Avian Influenza (H5N1), commonly known as Bird Flu, in poultry, and then the government declared the virus to be enzootic in 2008 (<http://www.emro.who.int/egy/programmes/influenza.html>). Bird Flu managed to occur until the end of 2013. Meanwhile, detected cases of (H1N1) Influenza, Swine Flu, were revealed in Egypt in 2009, correspondingly with the international spread of the Influenza pandemic (Seef and Jeppsson, 2013: 2). During 2014-2015, an unprecedented increase in the number of human infections of the Avian influenza was frequently observed in Egypt. Such unexpected incidents urged the government to examine the causes behind the infection's proliferation and implement strict preventive measures to combat the of the (Kayali *et al.*, 2016: 379).

### **The Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Egypt:**

The 2020 Coronavirus outbreak in Egypt is a part of the ongoing worldwide Coronavirus pandemic. The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed on 14 February 2020 (Magdy, 2020). According to the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, the total number of Coronavirus confirmed cases is 52,211, as of 19 June 2020 (<https://www.care.gov.eg/EgyptCare/Index.aspx>).

Lurking behind the outbreak of COVID-19 in Egypt prospective devastating consequences on its public health, society and economy as a whole. The widespread of this virus does not only threaten the Egyptian economy, but it also decimates people's lives in an unrivaled approach that has obliged them to incidentally change much of their intangible cultural heritage activities, practices and inheritances in order to adapt to the new-fangled situation.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is defined by UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage as *'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development'* (UNESCO, 2003). ICH is also known as "Living Heritage" or

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“Living Culture” since this type of heritage provides communities with identity and a sense of belonging for people which is unceasingly recreated in response to their surrounding environment. Moreover, its existence and recognition are anchored principally on the human will, and it is transmitted by imitation and living experiences (UNESCO, 2017).

The 2003 convention goes further and identifies five major domains in which ICH is manifested, namely *‘oral traditions and expressions including languages as vehicles for intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship’* (UNESCO, 2003).

According to UNESCO, the importance of the intangible cultural heritage lies within the wealth of knowledge and capabilities that are transmitted from one generation to another. Intangible cultural heritage does not only best represent inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part. It depends basically on those whose knowledge of traditions, skills and customs are imparted to the rest of the community, from generation to generation, or to other communities. Moreover, it is community-based which indicates that the intangible cultural heritage expressions and practices are considered heritage when they are recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it (UNESCO, 2003).

On the local level, the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak has contributed to profound changes in the Egyptian society and abated different aspects of life. Beyond its immediate threat to life, COVID-19 appears to have a severe influence on the Egyptians’ daily life practices, traditions, rituals, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills. The repercussions of this

contagion seem to be significantly reshaping much of the Egyptian intangible cultural heritage through its positive and negative impacts as follows:

**Social Practices:**

Social practices refer to the frequent practices that are habitually performed by the majority of society. Distinctive social practices shape the everyday life of its communities and help to reinforce a sense of identity and continuation, particularly, when they are relevant and recognized by all members of the community. Accordingly, these practices involve different forms of activities ranging from celebrating private or public events, traditional games and sports, and social visits to special gestures and words, songs or dances, unusual clothing and special food (UNESCO, 2003).

In modern societies, social practices are extensively affected by the changes communities experienced as they are principally based on the broad participation of practitioners and others in the communities themselves (UNESCO, 2003).

In Egypt, the panic around the new pandemic, COVID-19, has negatively affected much of its inherited social practices and daily life routines on the private and public levels. In this regard, the Egyptian government adopted several precautionary measures to stem the spread of the virus and mitigate its potential impacts on society (<https://www.care.gov.eg/default.html>).

For instance, the celebration of this year's Mother's Day, 21 March (vernal equinox), was struck by COVID-19 exceptional circumstances. Most of the Egyptian families canceled this day's plans to avoid family gatherings, as a recommended governmental precautionary measure, to limit the widespread of the virus and to protect the elderly, who are particularly vulnerable to a fatal infection. Instead, people shared creative ways, through the use of

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social media platforms or mobile applications, to stay in touch and to celebrate Mother's Day in the time of COVID-19.

It is worth mentioning that dedicating a specific day to celebrate mothers and appreciate their role and status in society is an ancient Egyptian tradition. Indeed, an annual festival, coinciding with the vernal equinox, was held to honor goddess Isis, who represented the ideal mother and wife in the ancient Egyptian mythology (Abdel Salam, 2020). This practice continued to be existing during the Greek and Roman periods, then adopted by the European communities (Bøgh, 2013: 229). In modern times, the Egyptian Mother's Day was initially celebrated in 1956, after the calls of the Egyptian pioneer journalist, Ali Amin, to assign a specific day in which motherhood is commemorated. Later, the idea was transmitted from Egypt to the whole Arab World (Meky, 2017).

Unfortunately, the 2020 Egyptian Orphan's Day celebrations were canceled this year because of the involvement of the country in a fierce battle against the dispersal of the novel Coronavirus. The idea to have a national Orphans' Day began with an initiative from the Egyptian NGO, Dar El-Orman, the largest charitable organization in Egypt, in 2003. The Orphan's Day became a national occasion celebrated on the first Friday of April every year since its inauguration in 2004. Consequently, the Council of Arab Social Affairs Ministers of the Arab League in 2006 recognized it as a day for orphanages in the Arab World (Kandil, 2020).

Due to public health concerns linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced the postponement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to next year, 2021. Hence, the Egyptian Olympic Committee (EOC) correspondingly proclaimed the suspension of the Egyptian teams' participation in the tournament. The decision was adversely

shocking to the players who have formerly prepared themselves to participate in such a prestigious competition (Abdel-Kader, 2020). It should be noted that Egypt partook 11 times in the Olympic games, making its first appearance in 1912 whilst its last participation was in London in 2012 (<http://www.egyptianolympic.org/history.html>). Meanwhile, the Egyptian Football Association (EFA) has suspended all football-related activities amid the Coronavirus outbreak. Besides, all sports clubs and youth centers were closed according to the Egyptian Cabinet decisions issued on 24 March 2020, in an effort to curb the spread of the virus (Elassal, 2020).

The Egyptian Prime Minister, Mostafa Madbouly, declared a bundle of precautionary measures to restrain the wide dispersion of the virus. Such measures included a mandatory night-time curfew, which is considered to be the first of its kind since 1948, as most of the curfews were often imposed as a consequence of political circumstances and chaotic conditions. Additionally, several villages across the country were entirely quarantined, as heightened measures, in an attempt to halt the rising infection rate of the novel Coronavirus in the most populous areas (Quarantine Egypt, 2020).

Currently, there is no vaccine for the prevention or treatment for the symptoms and illness induced by this virus, therefore, the “Social Distancing” regime has been introduced worldwide. In the context of the recently announced Cabinet precautionary measures, a new recommendation for the “Social Distancing”, or the practice of physical distancing, a term used by epidemiologists to refer to a conscious effort to reduce close contact between people (ECDC, 2020). According to the WHO, social distancing is to maintain at least 1 meter (3 feet) between yourself and anyone else (WHO, 2020). Staying at home, stimulating less travel and the closure of business, schools, universities, clubs, malls, cinemas, cafes, etc., are counted among the various forms of social distancing. Although the social distancing is a

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safety measure formulated to contain the outbreak of the virus, it refrains people from doing what is innately human, which is longing for the presence of people and finding solace in the company of others. It is worthy here to mention that the practice of social distancing is not a newly attained phenomenon. During the 1918 influenza pandemic (Spanish flu), most countries around the globe, adopted quarantine and social isolation to reduce transmission, save lives and mitigate the pandemic's impacts and risks on all sectors (Fong *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, the practice of social distancing has dramatically changed the Egyptian customs and habits related to greetings which mainly involve shaking hands, hugging and kissing. As an alternative, the majority endorsed direct gaze, hand gestures or tapping their feet or elbows against each other in an attempt to reduce the risk of contracting the new Coronavirus and prevent it from spreading any further (Quederni, 2020). The Coronavirus crisis has almost pummeled social occasions, events and gatherings in Egypt. The Cabinet decisions concerning the implementation of the night-time curfew, prevention of groupings and closure of malls, cafes, restaurants, sports and social clubs, gyms, night clubs and some of the hotels resulted in the cancellation or postponement of many social events and commitments such as weddings, *katb ketab* (marriage contract ceremony), engagement parties, *sobo* ' (baby shower) and birthday parties. Even social and family visits, which normally take place during Fridays or weekends, were avoided to restrain the dispersal of the virus (Taha, 2020). Abiding by the governmental precautionary measures, many people used social media platforms to express their anxiety about the current situation and self-isolation that could ruin their social lives. Moreover, expatriates in Cairo and other major cities have reduced their movement between governorates, to check on their families, in fear of contracting the virus (Lotfi, 2020).

As Coronavirus rapidly spread, the accompanying panic increases and people's behavior changes accordingly. It has been proved that the threat of any contagion can evolve and unconventionally alter the human attitudes and physiological responses to ordinary interactions (Robson, 2020). In this regard, the misuse of social media channels plays a major role in the influx of fake news and rumors especially when the contents are sensational. Additionally, the worldwide spread of Coronavirus has carried with it xenophobia and caused a demonstrable rise in stigmatization and racism against the Asian people and particularly the Chinese. For instance, a video was posted depicting a Chinese engineer riding in the backseat of the car when some of the Egyptians start to warn the driver through the window that he will contract Coronavirus, urging him to drop the man off his car. This video sparked outrage among all the Egyptian social media users and as a result, the driver was detained and all relevant videos were deleted (Gamal El-Din, 2020). The Egyptian officials subsequently extended their apologies to the Chinese engineer and a group of Egyptians offered him flowers and expressed their alibis in Arabic and Chinese (Ali, 2020). It should be mentioned that this was an individual incident caused mainly by fear, and that what happened contradicts the Egyptian commonplace manners, attitude and morals which are based on accepting each other and welcoming foreigners and tourists.

Despite the flooded negative impacts and the unexpected side effects of the Coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) on the Egyptian social practices and daily-life routines, several positive impacts have been revealed within the rapid dissemination of this pandemic.

Many Egyptians, overwhelmed by fear of this virus, are abided to the implementation of social distancing, responded seriously to its guidelines and avoided unnecessary gatherings. According to figures released, in June

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2020, by Google Tracker Report, the Egyptians spent 50% less time in places like malls and restaurants, 26% less time at work, 36% less time in parks and 43% less time in transit stations in May than in February (the baseline or the median value, for the corresponding day of the week, during the 5-week period Jan 3–Feb 6, 2020). Google also stated that the Egyptians spent 13% more time in their homes in May than in February ([https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-06-07\\_EG\\_Mobility\\_Report\\_en.pdf](https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-06-07_EG_Mobility_Report_en.pdf)).

It is noticeable that staying at home, as a preventive measure, urges profoundly the reinforcement of family and social bonds. In this respect, the Egyptian *mufti* (Islamic lawman who gives jurisprudence judgement on inquiries and matters of religion), Shawki Allam, released a video advising the Egyptians to look at the positive aspects within the exceptional circumstances of Coronavirus widespread. According to the *mufti*, staying at home can be a good opportunity to reinstate the family's spirit of love, affection, compassion, tranquility and cooperation, and to restore the relations that need to be restored between the family members (Dar El-Ifta, 2020). Also, staying home improves allusively the Egyptians' manners and the individual's feeling of responsibility towards their loved ones and community, which eventually helps in "flattening the curve" of infection by allowing people to recover and hospitals can continue to provide care to families, friends and neighbors who need it. Moreover, it constituted a valuable opportunity to revive some of the Egyptian inherited social practices and traditions, that are partially diminished due to the constant strain and dedication of life and work, such as interacting with the neighbors through the windows, during the night-time curfew, and wiping down baskets to bring groceries and other items to avoid direct contact with people

and counter the prevalence of the fatal virus. Additionally, practicing social distancing and staying home exhorts people to realize the importance of their family, friends and neighbors and thus maintaining vigorous social and humanitarian relations as neighbors started to look out for each other, as they used to be, the youth delivered medicine and groceries for the elderly or infected families, several musicians performed from their balconies to amuse people and lift their spirits during the curfew, and even the household's bond became stronger and closer than ever before (Assem, 2020).

This pandemic evoked the deserted values of closeness, solidarity, fraternity and friendship among nations, cultures and individuals. In this regard, Egypt's Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities lit up the Great Pyramid of Giza with a message of solidarity and appreciation for healthcare workers around the world amid the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak. This message was displayed in Arabic and English, read as "Stay Home...Stay Safe, Thank You to Those Keeping Us Safe". Furthermore, Egypt sent military planes loaded with medical supplies to China, Italy, the U.S., UK and Sudan, in a gesture of support, to help fight against the Coronavirus (SIS, 2020).

Nationally, the responsibility of interdependence appears to be spreading between individuals and across groups who take it upon themselves to act on behalf of others in need to combat this contagion. Expressions of solidarity came off as a common-sense response to this crisis. From this perspective, the Egyptian government launched an initiative called *Ahalina* (Our people) through a community partnership to allocate donations for low-income families and informal employment affected by the repercussions of COVID-19. Online and SMS donations are also available for the public through a bank account belongs to the Ministry of Social Solidarity. Besides, the *Resala* Charity Organization launched the "Charity Challenge" across social media with football players, celebrities, actors, companies and citizens to financially

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support as many families as they can for a month or more during the COVID-19 crisis. Likewise, the NGOs, *Abwab Al-Kheir* and the Egyptian Food Bank, announced their plans for covering the expenses of various afflicted families for the next three months and providing them with the necessary food and supplies (Zaki, 2020).

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the Ministry of Health and Population launched distinctive initiatives such as “Be Ready” and “White Coats” for junior doctors and to train medical and pharmacy students to be ready for supporting the healthcare sector to fight the outbreak of the lethal virus during emergencies (SIS, 2020). Also, the Ministry of Health and Population has set up hotlines and online platforms to provide free psychological consultation and medical support for the self-isolated Egyptians staying at homes and advise them on how to adapt to this unprecedented situation and overcome anxiety over the spread of the Coronavirus (Egypt Psychological Support, 2020).

The Egyptian Armed Forces played a salient role in fighting against this pandemic by distributing free masks for citizens at the main squares, subway stations and public transportation, upon the directives of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who pointed out to the necessity of taking all the precautionary measures to combat the spread of COVID-19. Moreover, the Egyptian Armed Forces' companies produced 5000 tons of detergents and sanitizers and 100,000 masks daily, to be sold for the public to secure supplies at low prices and repel any shortage. Meanwhile, military and firefighting vehicles, with an air exhaust system, carried out sterilization operations at the state institutions, religious buildings and crowded areas in an effort to alleviate the impacts of the novel Coronavirus (El-Tawil, 2020). It is worth noting that all the above-mentioned consequences of this ordeal

eventually affirm that social distancing and social solidarity are flip sides of the same coin.

**Religious Rituals:**

Rituals are recognized amongst the main domains of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. They are usually a part of religious or spiritual beliefs (Ubertazzi, 2020: 67). Besides, they involve a remarkable variety of forms including prayers, ritual rites, funeral rituals, ritual events, etc. (UNESCO, 2003).

In multicultural and multifaith Egypt, rituals and festive events overlap with the social practices. Moreover, religion plays a significant role in the life of Egyptians, and it is intermingled with daily activities of Muslims and Christians, the vast majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church (Hansen, 2015: 21).

In the time of COVID-19, religious and spiritual rituals in Egypt have been extensively affected by the outbreak of this virus. Renowned Muslim and Christian figures contributed considerably in urging the Egyptians to take all precautionary measures to contain the widespread of this deadly virus. For instance, the Minister of Endowment, Mohamed Mokhtar Gomaa, clarified that self-isolation and effective implementation of the preventive measures is "a national and religious duty" to halt the spread of Coronavirus since prevention is so far the only treatment to curb the transmission of this pandemic (MENA, 2020). Furthermore, the pope Tawadros II of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark, ordered the closure of all churches and monasteries and the suspension of all ritual activities including the funeral ceremonies, which are enclosed to be attended only by the family of the dead person (SIS, 2020). Indeed, these decisions affected this year's distinctive Coptic celebrations of various religious occasions and forced Christians to

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celebrate it within their homes. For the first time in its history, Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church had to suspend the Holy Week and Easter-time prayers and services in an attempt to restrain the dispersion of the virus. Also, the Egyptian Christians' pilgrimage was deferred this year as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, for the first time in a century, had to close its doors to thousands of Christian pilgrims who came to visit the tomb of Christ (Coronavirus Coptic Christians, 2020).

Amid the rapidly spreading COVID-19, Saudi Arabia locked the holy sites of *Al-Haram* Mosque in Mecca and *Al-Masjid al Nabawy* in Medina, and suspended *Umrah*, small pilgrimage, for fear of the transmission of the virus. This decision shocked the Muslims around the world, most of whom saw the *Kaaba*, Islam's holiest site, empty of worshippers for the first time in their lives. Moreover, the travel plans of thousands of Egyptian Muslims were disrupted and potentially affected this year ahead of the holy fasting month of Ramadan and the annual hajj pilgrimage. It is noteworthy to mention that this was the first closure of the *Kaaba* and suspension of pilgrimage, in 41 years, since the assault of Juhayman and his fellow rebels in 1979 (Trofimov, 2008: 48).

As part of the precautionary measures, the Ministry of Endowment announced the shutdown of all mosques, mausoleums, shrines and Islamic worship places nationwide, starting from 21 March 2020, in an unprecedented move, to slacken the widespread of Coronavirus. For the first time in decades, Friday prayers, daily prayers and other congregational prayers are correspondingly banned. Meanwhile, the *Adhan*, the call for prayer, is performed at the mosques and the *Muezzin*, the Muslim official who summons the call for prayers, added the phrase "Pray at Homes" instead of "Come to Prayer", known as the "*Sad Adhan*" or "*Sad Call for Prayers*"

(Raafat, 2020). It should be pointed out that the earliest disruption of congregational prayer occurred after the death of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) when Mecca was struck by torrents, submerged in mud, and people were unable to leave their houses. Thus, *Abdullah bin Abbas*, the cousin of the Prophet and the Great Companion, ordered in a sermon to replace the muezzin's call "Come to Prayer" with the phrase "Pray at Homes" ([https://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/bukhari/bh1/bh1\\_592.htm](https://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/bukhari/bh1/bh1_592.htm)).

Concerning Friday prayers, there is no specific incident recording its banning throughout the history, however, it might have been canceled during "Al-Mustansiriya Intensity", which afflicted Egypt at the end of the Fatimid Caliph's reign *Al-Muntasir Billah*. Besides, the prayers might be suspended during the prevalent of the "Black Death", in 1347, in fear of gatherings that might further spread the epidemic. Despite the fact that Islam sharia gives a license and orders its issuance of laws to prevent the spread of diseases and epidemics, implement quarantine principles and preventive measures, and prohibit contact with infected people, changing of the prayers call and suspension of prayers at mosques were tremendously distressing and dispiriting for Muslims in Egypt (<http://elazhar.net/feqhux/2/87.asp>).

Muslim burial rituals and traditions were modified to adapt to the Coronavirus pandemic. Strict limits set a constraint on burial attendants at the graves. To stem the spread of the virus, the funeral prayers and gatherings at mosques were consistently prohibited. On the other hand, the celebration of several religious and spiritual occasions, events and traditions were restricted, such as the traditional celebration of this year's Moulded EL-Sayeda Zeinab, *Leilet Al-Isra' Wal-Mi'raj*, which takes place on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Rajab, scheduled for 20 March 2020, and marks the night that Allah took the prophet Muhammad on a journey from Mecca to

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Jerusalem and then to heaven, and mid of *Sha'ban* night or *Bara'a* night (<http://ar.awkafonline.com/?p=92561>).

Sadly, all preparations for the holy month of Ramadan this year have been canceled in order to contain the spread of the pandemic. The closure of mosques and the suspension of prayers continued in line with the prohibition of *Tarawih* Prayers, special prayers that are performed in the evening during Ramadan, *Itikaf*, staying in a mosque for the last 10 days of Ramadan (çakmak, 2017: 1551) and *Lailat Al-Qadr* prayers (Night of Power), the night which Qur'an describes as better than a thousand months (Robinson, 2013). Also, large charity tables for *Iftar*, an evening meal eaten by Muslims to break their fast after sunset during Ramadan, and *Suhoor*, a meal that fasting Muslims eat before sunrise during Ramadan, were barred. In addition, the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs called on the abolition of this year's Islamic Thought Forum, which takes place annually during Ramadan in the Imam Hussein Mosque Square, and for the ban on all public religious gatherings or symposia in any of the directorates during the holy Islamic month. It is worth mentioning here that Ramadan is not only a month of fasting and worship, but also a month of strengthening family ties and social solidarity (Soliman, 2020).

The Egyptian Muslims celebrated this year's *Eid Al-Fitr*, the festival of breaking of fast, amid unprecedented restrictions and preventive measures due to the widespread of COVID-19 and the persistent increasing numbers of the infected cases. *Eid Al-Fitr* is the first of the two canonical festivals of Islam (*Eid Al-Fitr* and *Eid Al-Adha*) that marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan and celebrated during the first three days of Shawwal, the 10<sup>th</sup> month of the Islamic calendar. The Egyptians practice different habits, rituals and traditions concerning the first day of *Eid Al-Fitr*, however, the majority

of Muslim men, women and children eventually gather in mosques and outdoor areas to perform *Eid* prayers, about two hours after sunrise, and listen to *Eid* sermon. After finishing the prayers, Muslims visit their families for breakfast which mainly involves *Kahk*, stuffed cookies covered with powdered sugar. Children, who wear new clothes, receive the *Eideyah*, a small sum of money to spend on all *Eid* activities, from elderly relatives (Abou-Samra, 2011: 170).

Pointing out to the repercussions of COVID-19, this year's *Eid Al-Fitr* congregational prayers were canceled and according to Al-Azhar, it can be performed at home and individually without requiring *Eid* sermon. Also, all family visits were restricted by imposing a nationwide curfew starting at 5 pm and banning travel between governorates. Furthermore, shops, malls, beaches and parks were closed and public transportation was suspended for six days to avoid gatherings and consequently slacken the rapid spread of the virus (Alaa El-Din, 2020). Such exceptional circumstances and strict measures wiped all signs of traditional joy that mark the Egyptian streets every year to celebrate *Eid Al-Fitr*, most notably the cancelation of *Eid* prayers, which lead some people to launch an initiative, through social media platforms, to perform the prayers at the balconies and pray for an end to the spread of Coronavirus (Eid Prayers at Home, 2020).

On the other hand, the Coronavirus outbreak in Egypt seems to have its own positive impacts on the society represented in spreading mercy and compassion between people and bringing both Christians and Muslims together against this pandemic (Christians and Muslims United, 2020). In this regard, the charity house of Al-Azhar, Egypt's highest Islamic authority, has allocated EGP 200 million (\$12.7 million) to tackle the consequences of the Coronavirus crisis. Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Church, to which the majority of Egyptian Christians belong, has also donated EGP 3 million to

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the fund dedicated primarily to the purchase of ventilators. Meanwhile, the Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt granted EGP 2 million to the fund, Egypt's Evangelical Church donated EGP 1 million and the Armenian community bestowed EGP 1 million to the “*Tahya Masr*” (Long Live Egypt) fund which is mainly concerned with efforts against disasters and crises (SIS, 2020).

### **Cultural Expressions:**

Cultural expressions are resulted from the creativity of individuals, groups or societies and have cultural content as referred to in Article 4.2 of the *2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (UNESCO, 2005). According to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, festive events are considered one of the main fields in which ICH is evidently manifested. Festive practices are a key part of public life, open to all members of society and closely linked to a community's worldwide perception of its own history and memory while reaffirming their identity and traditions. They took place at special places and specific times and range from being casual events to formal arrangements with significant, political and economic or social meanings (UNESCO, 2003).

In a country like Egypt, with a rich diversity of cultural expressions, the recent outbreak of COVID-19 appears to have an immediate threat to the entire cultural calendar of the country, compelling cancellations and suspensions of various venues and some of the society's biggest cultural events, occasions and arrangements. In an attempt to counter the dispersal of Coronavirus, the Cabinet announced, on 24 March 2020, a number of precautionary measures to curb the virus including the suspension of all activities that require large gatherings, or those that involve the movement

of many citizens between governorates, until further notice. Consequently, different aspects of cultural and public life have predominantly disappeared. Cinemas, theatres, galleries, art forums and other social and cultural venues were closed. Moreover, major festivals and concerts were suspended and canceled amid uncertainties surrounding the pandemic such as Luxor African Film Festival (LAFF), an annual festival that was initially launched in 2012. This festival was supposed to be held from 6-12 March 2020, however, it was suspended and the judging committees continued to watch and evaluate the rest of the films in their hotel rooms. The closing ceremony was also canceled and instead, a mini-press conference was held to announce the winning films and prizes. Additionally, the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of Sharm El-Sheikh International Theater Festival for Youth, scheduled to take place on 1-7 April 2020, was postponed. The festival brings together young theatre practitioners, playwrights, and theatre academics from Egypt and the Arab world. Also, the planned concerts for famous Egyptian and international singers were halted in line with the cancelation of *El Sawy Culture Wheel* for their shows and events, as did several cultural institutions such as Goethe (Egypt Independent, 2020).

The Cairo Opera House has announced the abolition of its courses, shows, concerts and cultural activities until further notice. For instance, the *Awladna* International Art Forum for the Gifted, a forum for children with disabilities, with the participation of 36 countries around the globe, has postponed its 4<sup>th</sup> edition scheduled on 20 March 2020. The D-CAF, one of Egypt's most anticipated cultural events of the year, has also been adjourned. It should be noted that D-CAF is an annual arts festival packed with performances, exhibitions, concerts, screenings and workshops related to local and international arts. Moreover, it is the first international multidisciplinary arts

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festival of its kind in Egypt, and this year marks its 9th edition (<https://d-caf.org/>).

The movie and television industry has also been struggling to respond to the outbreak of COVID-19. Some production companies have reduced the number of working teams and shooting days, while others have completely suspended their work in fear of the spread of the deadly virus. Similarly, several TV series and programs have been particularly affected by the approach of Ramadan, the annual peak season of TV series and drama in Egypt. Besides, Netflix, which has a large audience in Egypt, has announced the suspension of all its productions (Moheb, 2020). Indeed, the decision of postponement and cancellation of festivals, concerts, forums, films, TV series, programs, etc. was shocking and frustrating for people who spent several months preparing for such events and it has also massive financial implications for all those involved.

In response to the spread of COVID-19, many local festivals, celebrations and private and public gatherings have been halted this year. For example, the celebration of this year's *Sham El-Nessim*, which took place on Monday, 20 April 2020, has been canceled. *Sham El-Nessim*, which is an Arabic translation of 'Smelling the Breeze', is a national festival and holiday celebrated at the time of the Coptic Easter. Traditionally, every year during *Sham El-Nessim*, the Egyptians used to hang out in public gardens, zoos, riverboats, parks, beaches and clubs to celebrate the beginning of spring. However, the situation this year was entirely different since all shops, malls, restaurants, public gardens and beaches were completely closed down and public transportation was also suspended all day long to contain the dissemination of the lethal virus. Originally, the name of this festival is derived from *shemu*, the harvest season in the ancient Egyptian calendar. The

ancient Egyptians celebrated the *shemu* picnicking on the Nile while coloring and eating eggs, the ancient Egyptian symbol of rebirth. It should be noted that modern Egyptians continued to retain the same ancient practices and traditions concerning the celebration of *Sham El-Nessim* until nowadays (Falola and Jean-Jacques, 2015: 393).

Additionally, the celebration of the 38<sup>th</sup> Sinai Liberation Day was canceled. Sinai Liberation Day is a national holiday that marks the liberation of the peninsula of Sinai from Israeli occupation. The anniversary of the liberation takes place on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April every year, continuing the tradition that many Egyptians celebrated the day when Egypt retrieved Sinai in 1982. On this day, the Egyptian president, the Minister of Defense and senior commanders of the armed forces visit the Memorial of the Unknown Soldier, where the late President Anwar Sadat was buried after his assassination in the 1981 podium accident, and lay wreaths to honor the military personnel for their sacrifices which led to the seizure of Sinai to the Egyptian sovereignty. Likewise, the Ministry of Culture used to organize several cultural events and performances every year to commemorate the Egyptian victory (SIS, 2020).

At the educational level, COVID-19 has caused a nationwide educational disruption impacting millions of students, learners and researchers. On 14 March 2020, the Egyptian government announced the closure of all schools, universities and educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of this pandemic. It should be mentioned that this suspension has been the first to take place since the 2011 and 2013 revolutions. Dealing with the termination of private and public schools and universities, measures to secure the academic future of students have implemented distance learning techniques to substitute the Egyptian traditional methods of education. Thus, the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, alongside with the four Egyptian telecom companies, provided free access to the websites of

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the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, which are equipped to provide the educational content necessary to complete the distance learning process without any additional financial burden on parents (Alaa El-Din, 2020). The abrupt change to online learning has brought its own challenges and opportunities since the application of digital learning is relatively recent in the education reform strategy, almost three years now. However, the majority of students reacted favorably to this newly adopted technique and engaged more successfully and more conveniently from their homes. Moreover, it puts an end to the private lessons phenomenon which has been a controversial issue particularly over the last two decades (OECD, 2019:89).

Starting from 3 April 2020, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities launched virtual tours for museums and different archaeological and heritage sites, through its websites and social platforms, in cooperation with different scientific and archaeological institutions. This unprecedented initiative aims at encouraging people to stay home to help “flattening the curve” from one side and promoting Egyptian tourism nationwide and increasing Egyptians' awareness of their cultural heritage from the other side (Ahmed, 2020).

The Egyptian Ministry of Culture broadcasted its concerts, theatre performances, cultural events and lectures through its YouTube channel. These releases are part of the e-initiative of the Ministry of Culture, “Stay at Home, Culture is between your Hands”, which aims to bring cultural events to online audiences amid the current shutdown of theatres, cinemas and concert halls over the Coronavirus pandemic. This initiative offers the opportunity to further explore much of the Egyptian's oral traditions and benefit the most from this dark situation (Omar, 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 has proven to record many positive impacts on the technology systems in Egypt and how people dealt with it. For instance, the deadly virus has increased the demands for prompt development of Internet services in Egypt as the majority have resorted to remote work from home and distance education. The improvement of the Internet services also supported and accelerated the previously established governmental plan for “Digital Transformation”, particularly as the global technology system will be changing accordingly after the end of this crisis ([http://www.mcit.gov.eg/Digital\\_Government](http://www.mcit.gov.eg/Digital_Government)). Apart from offering electronic government services and financial transfers, the Egyptians have unexpectedly reacted positively and adapted with this sudden and spontaneous alteration, which may be contradictory to other inherited social and cultural traditions and practices. It seems that COVID-19 has encouraged people conjointly to use the Internet and digital tools for communication, not for confrontation. Besides, it has developed new channels for research and learning, as several esteemed universities, institutions and libraries have introduced free online courses, workshops, seminars and books amid the outbreak of this pandemic.

The widespread of COVID-19 raised the Egyptian cultural awareness as a large segment began surfing the Internet, searching for the appropriate precautions and practices to cope with and protect themselves against the virus during self-quarantine. They also obtained knowledge on food, healthy diet and nutrition to help maintain the immune system strong. Moreover, many have been acquainted with yoga, meditation and breathing exercises, to help relieve anxiety, while others have practiced walking, cycling, running and working out in the public gardens, particularly with the closure of gyms and sports clubs.

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On the other side, COVID-19 revived some of the inherited cultural practices in Egypt, after its use was decreased in the past years, to combat boredom during the night-time curfew. Many youth and kids start exercising kiting from the roofs of their houses or in the nearby gardens. As the sun sets, the Egyptian sky is seen filled with colorful kites with various designs and sizes. It should be noted that kite flying was one of the most important ancient games practiced by the older generations in Egypt, particularly in the spring season due to the strong and continuous wind flowing during this period. The revival of this traditional game emphasizes on the interaction between the older and the younger generations through better administration of the game and its rules. It also represents how some of the cultural practices and traditions remained in the social collective memory and effortlessly transmitted from one generation to another for the sake of its preservation. The exact origin of kites is not known; however, it is believed that they were flown in China more than two thousand years ago and then spread to Arabia and Egypt (Randolf, 2017: 21).

### **Conclusions:**

Certainly, the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus, COVID-19, has significant social effects on Egyptian society causing life to be temporarily disrupted without knowing when normality will return. We are still amid the stress and confusion of the Coronavirus pandemic, therefore, its future potential positive and negative impacts on the Egyptian intangible cultural heritage cannot be precisely estimated or expected due to its diversity and richness. Despite the fact that this pandemic has negatively impacted much of the Egyptian intangible cultural heritage, it has rather unexpected positive effects as it enables the revival of some of the neglected or abandoned social practices, religious rituals and cultural expressions, and the realization of its

necessity and importance in the formation of the Egyptian identity. Additionally, the inherent precautionary measures to combat this pandemic, represented in staying at home, self-isolation and the imposed curfew, urged the Egyptians to rediscover their tangible and intangible cultural heritage through the initiatives launched by the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. It also encourages people to adopt new practices, promote adaptability, resilience and demand for person-to-person connections.

In conclusion, this ordeal comes to remind us of the value of the spirit of cooperation, authenticity, unity, social solidarity, self-discipline, responsibility, optimism and patience. Moreover, the Egyptians' sense of patriotism for the governmental efforts, Armed Forces, healthcare sector, appreciating all small pleasures in life and revival of the abandoned inherited practices are amongst the benefits to come out of this unprecedented situation.

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