Among the many stories that graduate students at the American University in Cairo like to gossip about, a favourite is the one about the student who found her husband through a chat room on the internet. After extensive e-mail discussions, the American man flew to Egypt to meet the student and her family. Subsequently, she flew to the United States, accompanied by an older male relative (in some versions of the story her brother, in others, her father). While there, she examined her potential spouse’s house, interviewed his neighbours, met with an official at his bank to see that his financial situation was solid, and generally made sure that he was as he represented himself to be. They married and, as far as anyone has heard, are living happily ever after.

What most Egyptian students find erotic in this story is the idea of using the internet to find a spouse. What most American students find erotic is the student’s ‘intensive’ investigation of her fiancé. But one of the things that makes this story so interesting for an anthropologist is the way it plays with many assumptions about the rational nature of Western modernity. American mediascapes as well as urban foliose are full of cautionary tales about people who fall in love over the internet and abandon everything for love, only to meet with disaster; at least, one of the parties has misrepresented themselves; at worst, they grossly abuse the trust of their internet lover, deceptively, raping or even killing them. These tales reflect extremes of a danger present in most American relationships: because Americans marry for love, there is always the danger of falling in love with the wrong person.

Signs of modernity such as the internet always produce symbolic reflections on authenticity: in this case, how does one discover true love in a mediated romance?

Egyptians, who generally do not marry for love or who marry for love only after ensuring social compatibility between their own and their spouse’s families, would thus appear to be at a distinct advantage in internet relationships. Their ordinary matchmaking practices, this story suggests, may actually offer considerable strategic power in determining the outcomes of relationships generated in cyberspace. The ability of Middle Eastern ‘traditions’ of mediated marriages to be at an advantage in a ‘modern’ form of technologically mediated social relationship draws attention to the ironies inherent in the traditional/modern dichotomy that still structures much of the public discourse in America and Europe as well as the Middle East.

The internet no longer provides the only venue through which Egyptian matchmaking can be computer-mediated. At least three companies offering the use of computer matchmaking services, database-based technologies associated with the West with ‘computer dating’, have appeared in Cairo and Alexandria in the past three years. While the emergence of such services is often seen as part of a general trend toward Westernization, we want to argue in this paper that the particularities of their adoption in Egypt support rather a notion of an ongoing emergent Egyptian modernity that is shaped not by abstract forces of ‘modernization’ but by Egypt’s own particular historical situation. What ethnographic examination of the social use of new technologies can offer debates on modernity and globalization is empirical attention to the way these processes are created through the everyday activities of situated actors pursuing their own goals.

Computer khatbas

The idea of marriage intermediaries is not new in Egypt. The traditional system has always been for the family to play a significant, often dominant, role in determining a child’s spouse. When family and other social networks have proven unable to find a suitable spouse for a son or daughter, Egyptian families made use of khatbas, female professional matchmakers who knew practically everybody in the community. Khatbas were paid a small fee for their services, followed by a large present if a successful match was made. But as cities expanded and apartment buildings replaced small houses, knowing everybody who might be eligible became increasingly difficult. The problem was exacerbated by the migration of many villagers to cities to work or attend college. Leaving the parental generation behind, these migrants were socially and physically isolated from their origins and were developing new sets of norms and values.

In the wake of these changes, new channels for finding marriage partners arose. Newspaper and magazine advertisements searching for mates started to appear in the 1960s (Abu-Lughod and Amin, 1961). Other forms of marriage intermediaries have also emerged, most prominently professional marriage brokerage firms staffed by trained social workers (El-Said, 1995; Rugh, 1994). Concurrent with the appearance of these firms has been an increase in the agency of men and women to play significant roles in their own marriage arrangements. This is not to say that arranged marriages are being replaced by personal-choice marriages. In a recent survey, some 80 per cent of women said their marriages had been arranged (CAPMAS, 1992). Rather, there is an increase in the variety of means available for locating spouses and this variety opens up new possibilities for arranging marital liaisons outside one’s immediate social and family networks. As a result, there are new opportunities for prospective marital partners to exert agency in the selection process.

Entrepreneurship and agency

Modernity doesn’t just happen. It is the result of social actors pursuing their own culturally patterned but indeterminate goals. One of the prime movers of globalization is the activities of entrepreneurs who seek to identify and fill a market niche. The stories told by staff members as to how computer-mediated marriage entered Egypt reflect this. The founders of both services examined here are said to have come up with the idea through personal experiences. The owner of the Alpha Centre said the idea came to him after his family had a very difficult time finding a suitable partner for one of his cousins. He noticed that many young people were rejecting the spouses chosen for them by the family, yet unable to find acceptable spouses on their own.

They live in their cars, or travel a great deal, and generally live at an agitated pace. One of the results is that they become
Acknowledgments. This article has not been written without the assistance of the owners, managers and clients of the computer matchmaking services where fieldwork was carried out. The authors wish to thank Donald Cole and an anonymous reviewer for ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY for recommendations that greatly improved this manuscript.

1. Fieldwork was conducted at four separate matchmaking centers in Cairo. The interviews included lengthy and intimate interviews with service managers and staff, and structured but open-ended categorization with 28 clients. The interviews were conducted almost entirely in Arabic. All translations are the author’s, for a fuller account, including the Arabic text of questions used in this paper, see Abu El-Haj, 1999.

2. Although data from CAPMA is fixed for urban sociology in Egypt, its figures must be taken cautiously. To say one had an arranged marriage is the "correct answer in many social contexts regardless of one’s actual sociality in the marriage process. The converse is also true. What constitutes the category ‘arranged marriage’ is also highly contestable. Every Egyptian has their own marriage story and every one is different. However, the American or British ‘love marriage’ story is different. What degree of agency existed by prospective spouses and their families constitutes a particular class of marriage is obviously extraordinarily interpretable.

3. The names of the centres are changed here.

4. Polygamy is Legal in Egypt but socially disapproved. In general, the prevailing second marriage seems to be welcome as the computer matchmaking services so long as they obey the societal norms.

5. However, both centres reported cases of men who proposed particularly among university students who are already married until after the second marriage has occurred, presumably because of the consensus of disapproval of multiple marriage in Egypt. Managers at both centres say that sometimes applications were carefully for fear that they may end up being rejected, such a significant gift from their prospective marriage partners.

6. Application usually begin by meeting the director of the office and having the service carefully explained to them. The primary purpose of this is to weed out clients who are not serious, in particular, those who believe the centers are a front for prostitution services. Many prospective spouses, especially women, are accompanied by family members. Clients who pay a fee of 40 pounds to fill out an application. The bulk of the questions concern financial matters: occupation, salary, dowry expectations, ownership of an apartment and so forth. Personal information about oneself and family comes next. Not only is it essential to know another’s educational and financial status but usually also that of one’s parents and siblings. Personal qualities – likes and dislikes, favorite activities, tastes, and so forth – make up only a small portion of the applications. The questionnaires also ask informants to describe their expectations in all these categories for a spouse. The information from the applications is entered into a computer database and searches are run either once or twice a week. Male applicants are informed of matches so that they can decide whether or not to initiate contact with the woman and her family. At the Beta Centre, women are also informed of matches as a courtesy, although it is assumed they will not initiate contact.

Once a man has expressed a desire to meet one of the prospective spouses turned up by the search, the service contacts the woman so that she can review the man’s application and determine whether or not to meet him. Initial meetings are usually held at the centres. This chaperone role allows proprietors to protect their reputations against accusations of pandering, and also to ensure that couples do not make arrangements to marry without paying the centre for creating a successful match. One of the services charges a fee of 15 pounds for each meeting ‘to ensure that both parties are serious’ and cut down on frivolous uses of the service. The real payoff occurs only if a match proceeds to an engagement, at which point the male client is expected to pay a fee of about 250 pounds. Note that this fee structure parallels the way traditional mahats are paid. Many clients draw this parallel and treat the sum as a gift reflecting their pleasure in their newfound spouse and exceed the stipulated amount sometimes by hundreds of pounds. Still others promise managers up front a princely sum (in one case recorded during fieldwork, thousands of pounds) for a successful match as an incentive for them to do their best.

Patterns of selection

What do people look for in a potential spouse? Interviews with male seekers at the two agencies elicited six major categories for selection: age, level of education, marital status, financial status, character and physical appearance.

Age. Both men and women preferred to seek a partnership in which the husband is six to eight years older than the wife. Women are more likely to accept greater age discrepancies, but men will rarely accept a wife older than themselves.

Education. In general, spouses are preferred who have the same educational status. Women prefer husbands to have equal or higher educational levels than they do. But education is a crucial marker not only of present and future earning status but of one’s social position and of the potential for one’s children. Not only is possession of a degree relevant, but also which university bestowed the degree and even which faculty within the university.

Marital status. The majority of clients prefer partners who have never been married, but gender disparities exist. While nearly all men insist on marrying a virgin, many women are willing to accept widowed or divorced men provided they have no children. Prior marital status tends to operate as a severe limiting factor on women. Both service managers agreed that widows and divorcees were the most difficult category of women to find matches for. A few women, particularly widows and divorcees, express a willingness to accept a man who is currently married providing his financial status is sufficient to support two families.

Financial status. The higher the financial status of a man, the more desirable he is as a potential mate. Men say they prefer women who have jobs and can contribute to family income.

Character. While most clients offer a set of criteria they look for in a partner – intelligence, cleverness, sense of humour, attractiveness, morals, values, right conduct, piety, mental acuity, hospitalliness – in fact ‘character’ tends to be operationalized as family status. Once a suitor has found a potential match and made his interest known, both families will investigate the other to ensure that nothing can be said against the family’s character.
Explorations of personal character tend to be limited to a few meetings between potential spouses, during which they look to see what kind of ‘chemistry’ they have as a couple.

**Physical appearance**. Both services require photographs but neither will reject a client who declines to supply one. Most clients insist on photographs, and will reject match files that lack one. Men disprefer overweight women. Women strongly reject bald men. Agency managers group bald men with widows/divorced as the most difficult categories for which to find matches.

While these three criteria occur in all interviews, the priorities men and women give to the characteristics they desire in a mate vary by gender. Men emphasize marital status and physical appearance as the two most important criteria in selecting a match, followed by education, age, family status and financial situation. Women selected education and financial status as their top criteria, followed by physical appearance, age, marital status and family status.

A final characteristic mentioned by clients is ‘chemistry’. Most applicants describe the computer as ‘modern’, ‘rational’ and ‘intelligent’. They often have only a limited understanding of how database matching works, even after it is explained to them in their application interview. Using a computer to find a spouse is described by informants as ‘a marriage of minds’, and hence more likely to be successful than a marriage based on falling in love. Nonetheless, those informants who had actually found matches through the computer all agreed that the possibility of finding that person to be present in order for a match to succeed. The first meeting between matched potential spouses functions as a test for mutual attractiveness. One woman who found her fiancé through a computer matchmaking service summed it up, saying there must be ‘a mutual attraction the first time we see each other’.

Sorting the matches can be a complex affair. Agency proprietors notice that the very detail and ‘efficiency’ of the system leads some clients into a consumer mentality in which they enter into a cycle of rejections apparently for fear that making a choice involves risking the possibility of missing an even better match following the week. ‘Applicants start a circle of meetings and refusals; the more matches they get, the more they reject’, said the manager of Beta Centre. Since their primary income derives from successful matches, rather than clients’ continued use of the service, managers create strategies to prevent such cycles. For example, they may not give all the options generated by the computer to applicants at the same time, ‘in order not to confuse them’ by overwhelming them with choices.

**Aspirations for marriage**

One of the reasons for the clarity and regularity of informants’ categorization of their ideal spouses is that they have all undergone the process of filling out the database forms with the assistance of the staff. The act of filling out the application may be the first time many match seekers have ever clearly articulated their ideas of an ideal spouse. The interviews conducted by Abu-Hashish for this study allowed the informants opportunities to reflect on and unpack the meanings of their choices. In the process, certain patterns emerged that are not evident from the statistical picture.

The twenty-five clients interviewed, only two did not have a college degree. Managers of the centre say that this is typical, that nearly all clients have at least a diploma or institute degree, most have a Bachelor’s degree and several have advanced degrees. Informants all discussed at length the need for their spouse to have a degree. Women were willing to accept men with higher degrees than their own but never lesser. Men generally concur with this ideal. As one said, ‘If she has all the desired qualities but has a higher educational level, she will look down on me’. Degrees are important as markers of status as well as signifiers of earnings and future earning potential. Above all, for middle class families degrees are crucial markers of upward mobility, separating those seeking modernity and consumer affluence from those content to accept their lot in life. The search for a university graduate involves the desire to create a family that can live the middle-class lifestyle inscribed in contemporary public culture. Such desires are tempered by the knowledge that social mobility in Egypt is generally intergenerational. Marriage aspirations thus involve not only finding people who will make good partners but people who will make good mothers and fathers.

I could never link my fate with an illiterate and ignorant woman. How can I fall in love with someone who has had schooling?’

The comments point to the fact that although children in this patrilocal society draw their primary identity from their father and his family, it is the mother who will be charged with their education and upbringing. Children seek to create marriages that will provide their children with a social background sufficient to allow them to continue the upward climb. An educated family will produce educated children.

But education alone is not sufficient. Informants at the centres were also seeking to create families with incomes capable of purchasing such middle-class amenities as unfurnished apartments, televisions, VCRs and cell phones, of hiring domestic help and of sending children to Egypt’s private ‘language’ schools. Nearly all the men interviewed work two jobs in order to meet the financial ‘needs’ they have set themselves. The money they are currently saving away will be used to pay the shakha (engagement ring), mahir (dresser) and mo’akhar al sadak (deferred dowry) for a wife who will in turn work in some capacity to add to the family’s coffers. The male informants expressed a belief that women are, on the average, better paid than men in most occupations and said they did not mind marrying a woman with a higher salary.

The men interviewed saw ‘modern women’ as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, their educations made them potential wage-earning contributors to the family and (it was claimed) better prepared them for the work of running the household. On the other hand, women’s greater autonomy meant diminished authority for men over the affairs of the household.

A new working woman is free all the time and she makes her husband’s life miserable.

No more S. and S. like old times.’ Even if the man tried he will not be able to control his educated and working wife.

Women using computer matchmaking services say they also expect to continue working and to contribute to the finances of the household. Their preference is overwhelmingly for men who hold positions in the government bureaucracy rather than for men with higher salaries in the private sector, because of the stability of government employment and the health and pension benefits that accompany it. That most government employees will have a second job is almost taken for granted. Many women expressed a willingness to accept a man twenty or
informants were using the computer matchmaking service to seek partners with the same middle-class aspirations they themselves had.

All those I see through my parents at home speak to them, but not to me, so I said maybe I can find a suitable person through the center where my parents might also live.

While any potential partner would have to be investigated by the parents before they give their approval, the computer matchmaking system holds out the promise of creating upwardly mobile families for individuals who might have a difficult time creating such a family using their parents' social networks.

The idea that marriage can be a form of upward mobility is much discussed in the anthropological literature on kinship. The bulk of studies emphasize the ways that the new rich use hypergamy to break through class barriers. But most of the users of computer-mediated marriage in Cairo are not wealthy, nor are they marrying outside their class. They are middle and lower-middle class individuals with upper-middle-class aspirations who make use of computer-mediated marriage as a means of creating families that can function as intergenerational corporate groups.

Conclusion

MODERATION remains a complex and elusive aspect of contemporary social life. Linear theories of modernization and development have lost favor with social scientists but maintain a powerful hold on the popular mind. Alternatives to modernization theories include critiques of it as 'Westernization' or 'Americanization' or 'McDonaldization' and the 'development of underdevelopment'. Another approach is to see modernity as a cultural configuration, in which traditions are invented and tensions between 'the modern' and 'the authentic' play out in social fields marked by discursive struggles for hegemony. Yet a third approach is to examine processes of global flows as producing 'hybrid' institutions, similar yet different, shaped by their own particular historical conditions.

The introduction of computer matchmaking services into Egypt could be forced into the binary mould still favored in popular discourse, if not in the social sciences. Such a theory requires us to imagine that the practices described in this article are part of a transitional stage from a 'traditional' social system to a 'modern' one or, conversely, from an 'authentic' marriage practice to a borrowed 'bourgeois' practice. And indeed, this concept of modernization is very real to those participating in the computer matchmaking practices. The entrepreneurs describe their markets as arising from the passing of traditional ways of life in the urban metropolis, and they describe Egyptian 'traditions' as obstacles in making their business successful. But if computer matchmaking is seen as a transitional form, such theories require us to imagine a future Egyptian in which the strategies, familial marital practices of the past and present give way through the inevitable forces of modernization, rationalization and Westernization to a future of individualist, love marriages on the Euro-American model: a scenario that must strike anyone familiar with Egypt as absurdly naive.
African art in Brussels

RAYMOND CORBEY

This article sketches the primarily African tribal art scene in Brussels, a former colonial metropolis, and its emergence in the course of the twentieth century. It is based on a number of formal interviews and frequent informal contacts with Belgian and foreign dealers, a close monitoring of the goings-on in and around the Brussels tribal art galleries since 1995, archival and historical research, and the sparse scholarship available on this particular subject.

Many hundreds of Belgian and foreign collectors of ethnographies regularly satisfy their hunger by visiting a number of galleries specializing in art tribal, primitive kunst or art premier, around the Grote Zavel square (Place du Grand Sablon) in the centre of the bilingual Belgian capital. Several dozen dealers do business around the Grote Zavel, either through galleries or as marchand en chambre - behind closed doors. Some of them live in Antwerp or in the provinces, but for them too the capital is where it happens. A few thousand of collectors and foreign dealers visit the yearly Grote Zavel 'open days' in June, when some twenty-five local galleries and an equal number of foreign dealers, hosted by them, show their treasures (illus. 1). This has been a yearly manifestation of the Belgian Association of Dealers in Tribal Art (BADNEA), since 1990.

That the following look behind the scenes of the Belgian tribal art market (cf. MacCain 1988 on Great Britain) deals only with a small part of the history of western dealings with ethnographies becomes clear when glancing through Who = Who in African Art, a reference work which alphabetically lists and shortly describes no less than twelve thousand twentieth-century dealers, collectors, scholars, curators, consultants, explorers, missionaries, artists, auction experts and other individuals who somehow have, or have had, something to do with African art (Van Rijn 1999). On the other hand, Belgium was the main channel through which the fabulously prolific and beautiful ritual art from the Belgian Congo and other parts of Africa reached museums, collectors and auctions in north-Atlantic societies, and is presently third in rank among the global centres of tribal art trade, after Paris and New York. In that respect, this small country's tribal art scene is not so insignificant.

The colonial period
A few kilometres to the East of the Grote Zavel, in Turnhout, is the Koninklijk Museum voor Midden Afrika, a spin-off of the 1897 international exhibition there, with collections from that area that are unequalled anywhere in the world. Some 250,000 items cover more than a hundred and fifty ethnic groups — Vili, Luena, Kota, Luba, Mangbetu, Ngbaka, and so on — in the Congo basin, each with its own art style. Well-known specialists in the ethnography and material culture of that area such as Joseph Maes, Frans Oeterechts, Albert Maesen and Huguette Van Geluwe were attached to the museum. The other specialized ethnographic museum in Belgium is the much smaller Etnografisch Museum Antwerp, which was formally established in 1952 on the basis of ethnography held by the city of Antwerp in an earlier museum, the Vleeshuis, and has some 70,000 artifacts from all over the world in its charge. Missionary museums or missionary collections were put together in this predominantly Roman-Catholic country by, among others, the Jesuits in Heverlee, the Holy Cross Fathers in Diest, the White Fathers in Mechelen and Antwerp, the Redemptorists in Antwerp, the Scheut Fathers in Brussels, and the Capucins in Ixelles. All these collections are part of the legacy of the Belgian colonial activities in Central Africa, which ended at the beginning of the 1960s.

Since about 1920, there have been many small exhibitions...