

## **Women of Faith: Sufi Mystics & American Female Missionary Doctors in the Egyptian Nile Delta 1896-1913**

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In 1882, the British bombarded Alexandria to stop a popular revolution led by the military officer, Ahmed 'Orabi. Orabi and his followers opposed the legitimacy of the Egyptian Ottoman viceroy Tawfiq, demanded local Egyptian participation in government, and higher salaries. The bombardment and subsequent occupation bolstered the viceroy's weakening position which threatened the British investment in the Suez Canal. Burgeoning American Presbyterian missionary activity disseminated from their Cairo base into Upper and Lower Egypt as a result of newly created -yet popularly opposed- British authority. In 1897, the women's Presbyterian board of missions sanctioned two American Presbyterian females to open a women's and children's clinic in the Egyptian delta city of Tanta (Egypt's third largest city). These two doctors joined the local female Sufi healer Sheikha Sabah, to combat illness in Tanta and its surrounding villages. Tanta drew visitors and new residents because of the large annual Sufi saint festival of Sayyid Ahmed al Badawi which provided religious celebrations and promised healing blessings from the saint. The migration and demographic growth that accompanied the internationally known annual saint festival made disease and illness the foremost issue for the Egyptian government, locals, and eventually Christian missionaries. This paper will argue that in the midst of heated opposition to the British occupation, the daily work of managing and healing the sick remained in the hands of women. Specifically, Sufi religious healers and American missionaries collaborated and created a local form of a modern health care.