

An insight into rural life in Egypt

Five keywords

Egypt
farming
daily life
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Aswan dam

Introduction/ Abstract

Recently I had the pleasure of traveling to Egypt, and more importantly I got to know an Egyptian family that lives in a small village near the town Luxor. I traveled with three other students and my arabic teacher, Ali¹, a member of the family. We spent some hours with them while they showed us around and told us about their typical day-to-day life. My Essay relies heavily on my own perception and explanations by my arabic teacher, who graciously answered my endless questions about mundane life processes, because I could not find any scholarly articles on the particular topic.

My starting point

To understand my point of view that cannot be completely objective, even though I tried, I will explain my personal starting point. I have been learning arabic for the last two years, starting out out of curiosity, then over time scrambling to find the time with main courses and a huge workload that came with them. It never lost it's spark for me though. I am still fascinated with this language that is driven by symbolism and a seemingly never-ending search for meaning between mysterious sentences.

My teacher Ali is Egyptian and has been living in Germany for over ten years now. He had already told us a lot about the country beforehand. It is noteworthy though, that the arabic I learned is equivalent to the german "Hochdeutsch" and Egyptians speak a dialect of sorts. This means that some words were entirely different and while they could mostly understand us, us students sometimes had difficulties understanding basic phrases.

Framework

The family is a typical Egyptian family, which means that the numerous family members live together in a house. Traditionally, the wife moves in with the husbands family after the wedding. The house structure can be extended floor by floor almost infinitely because of the flat roof structures. Each son gets an own floor to live on with his wife and children. The house is called "family house". It is generally made out of clay bricks.

Driving around all of upper Egypt we saw a lot of houses with unfinished roofs and pillars. Ali explained to us that houses do not have a finished roof until the family is sure they do not want to add another floor. The permit to build more floors will run out once the roof is without pillars. Because many families do not have the money to build all floors at once, they will leave the pillars to keep the permit.

¹ I changed all names for privacy reasons.

Meeting the family

Ali has three brothers who live in the house with their families and one sister who lives in Kairo. His mother lives there as well, the father has unfortunately already passed. Each brother has a wife and several children.

When we arrived by car, Mohamed, Ali's older brother, was already waiting by the side of the road, grinning widely. He is significantly older than Ali, and he is the eldest son in the family. He greeted us all with a handshake and friendly eye contact.

This is not to be taken for granted in a country shaped by Islam. A lot of men were uncomfortable to hold or even make eye contact while touching a woman because it is considered too intimate.

Some of the boys greeted us as well, but after a short period of time they were more interested in the car. Our driver kindly offered to drive them around and they left happily.

In front of the house, the women and Ali's other brother (whom we already met) greeted us very kindly with handshakes and lots of smiles. Ali greeted his mother with a hand kiss, which he repeated later, when we said goodbye.

As we were walking around, I noticed that the men were holding hands when walking next to each other and talking.

Upon asking I was informed that it was the norm for men to hold hands to express their friendship and deep affection for each other. Even though I never witnessed this, women also frequently hold hands with other women. Husbands and wives however, do not express any kinds of physical affection in front of other people, as to not make them uncomfortable.²

Affection between men is also often expressed in other ways. For example, they often call each other "habibi" or "rhadin" which both translate to "treasure".

In front of the house there were several wooden benches with cotton carpets on them. Ali told us that the family sits out here whenever it is possible, and that he even sleeps outside on the benches in the summer.

Drinking Chai Tea

We continued on to the next house on the dusty road, where the neighbours live. They also greeted us very kindly. We sat down in on the benches and Ali talked to an old man, the eldest of the neighbouring family home. Not five minutes later, a man brought out a little table and after that, traditional chai tea for all of us. The children of the house sat down next to us and watched us with curiosity.

In Egypt it is the custom to always bring tea to visitors, even if they absolutely refuse it or the family cannot afford to cater to guests. It seemed to me that the black tea is the embodiment of Egyptian hospitality.

I watched the Egyptian men spoon their usual three spoons of sugar into the small tea glasses. It was amusing to observe my own reaction and that of the other Germans to the fact that the spoons

² KulturSchock Islam, p. 40

are served in the glasses, which means that they are each put into the sugar jar when wet. This small detail seemed to different to all of us.

Traditional chai tea is made by measuring out a teaspoon of black tea into a glass (never a mug!) and pouring the hot water out of a steel jug directly over it. This is why there are always tea leaves at the bottom of the glass. Usually some mint leaves, fresh or in some cases, dried, will be added to the tea before pouring in the water. It is polite to leave a little bit of tea in the glass with the leaves. If you do not leave anything (this also is the case for food), it means that the host did not offer you enough and has left you unsatisfied.

For some reason, Egyptians often think that tourists would rather drink the tea made out of a teabag. To avoid this, we always asked for “chai baladi”, which translates to “tea like the farmers make it”. The Egyptians usually put at least two teaspoons of sugar in it.

One store owner who made us tea later in the week proudly exclaimed upon seeing us: “Clean the glasses one more time! They are germans! And don’t put any sugar in it, they don’t like the sugar!”, which we found very charming.

As Ali told us about his childhood and how he stole fruits from the trees of the neighbour, I noticed a lot of ants the size of spiders crawling around on the ground at our feet. The children walked around us barefoot, while the adults wore sandals.

After we finished the tea, we took a look at their chicks. They had several chickens running around freely in front of the house, while the chicks where in an open cage. They were, in contrast to the adult chicken, well fed. Even though they could have roamed freely, the seemed happier inside the sheltered cage. Omar, the son of Ali’s former professor who was accompanying us for the day, told me that all rural households have chicken that they keep until they eventually slaughter them for food purposes. Until then, they harvest their eggs and use them for one of the traditional breakfasts, an omelette with onions and tomatoes.

We continued the tour of the estate. Mohamed proudly showed us an old machine that they used to drive in the fields. Ali showed us two lush, wide fields. They were growing some sugar cane, one of the most important agricultural products in Egypt. Next to it, they were cultivating a form of clover. In between there was some papyrus that served as a sort of divider. Ali explained that the clover is used to feed their animals. They keep cows, chicken, goats and donkeys. The donkeys are used to transport people and goods. They can also pull wagons.

The Camel Story

Ali told us that they used to have a camel as well. Camels are regarded as very smart and solemn animals in Egypt. This is presumably due to the fact that they are able to travel through quicksand and carry considerable weight.

The camel in question didn’t obey right away and because of this, Ali’s father beat it. He came to regret this very much, as the camel from then on refused to let Ali’s father ride it. Because camels are so tall, it is not possible to just hop on to them. They need to let you on by bowing down their front legs and laying their long neck and head on the ground. Because Ali himself was not involved in the beating, the camel still let him climb on it and would carry it wherever he pleased. This, he said, proved that the camel had an impeccable memory, a distinct character, strong will and could distinguish between the different humans it was living with.

Alongside the small road in front of the houses, there was a small canal. The water looked very murky and not drinkable. Ali showed us a small pipe that went from the canal under the road and to a small enclosure near the fields. There was a small pump that seemed to suck the water from the canal into the enclosure. The water is then used on the fields. There is almost no rain in Egypt. Before they had the automatic pump system, Ali explained, they would use a sort of giant shovel that two men pushed up and down to create the water flow.

Mohamed

Mohamed, the eldest brother in the family, is a tall, smiling man. His eyes are of an unusually bright blue color that is even more emphasised by his dark skin. He has never gone to school, Ali tells us, but he can still speak English fluently and even some German. He learned it just by listening to tourists talk to him and each other in the back of his taxi, but he could converse with us in English easily. He now also has a motor boat and a sailing boat. We were very lucky because on our last day, we got to go on a sailing trip with him on the Nile. I had the feeling that he was very curious about the young students from Germany that his brother brought with him that were always either asking questions or laughing at jokes. He did not ask us heaps of questions, but he did listen in on our conversations we were having on the boat and in the back of his taxi.

Livelihood

The father worked and supported the whole family until some of the sons were old enough to work. The majority of women in Egypt still traditionally take on the housework and raise the children. Only few of them take on a career and work outside of their homes.

The whole family used to work on the fields. They are part of a social group that is called “fellah” which means “farmer”.

Even though there is still a lot more manual labour involved in farming than in Germany, the workload has decreased in the last year due to the family being able to afford more machinery. Now not all family members need to work on the farm, some have other jobs. Like Mohamed, they are profiting greatly off of the tourists that come into Luxor, the next big town.

Still, the small village where they lived does not seem to get that many visitors, as we were observed everywhere we went. They even seemed to recognise our sort of “otherness” through the windows of our car when we drove past. I gathered this by the looks they gave us and by the fact that children started waving at us and nudging each other as to say “look, these people look different from us”.

The Oven

The family has an outside oven made out of clay. In it, they take mud and burn it, which makes it another texture. They then use it to build houses. They also burn the remains of their sugar cane harvest and use the ash to fertilise the fields. Ali described it proudly to us as a form of “recycling”.

The women

The women, as I already described, all greeted us outside with the men. They were very friendly and shook all of our hands as well. But they did not say more than a hello. After that, they listened attentively, yet did not take part in the conversation, leaving all the talking to the men. They all wore hijabs, as did almost every woman we encountered on our trip, and wore long clothing. After

talking about it with the other female students, we discovered that we all had the same feeling towards the women: a tingling feeling of curiosity that was reciprocated by them. I imagine both sides were thinking “I have heard so much about your way of life that is so different from mine, is it true what I read and heard?”. Sadly, I did not get to speak to any women during the trip, really. Since they are generally more excluded from public spaces and excluded from conversations while men are present, I did not get to have any one-on-one conversations with women, let alone ask them such deeply personal questions about their life.

Since the country is so deeply influenced by Islam, it is technically allowed for a man to have up to four wives, provided the first wife gives her consent.³ Ali told us that in the region where his family lives it is generally frowned upon to have more than one wife and that it is not really practised anymore.

The big dam

The Story of this family can not be properly told without the context that is the Aswan dam. There is an Egypt, a life, before and after the dam, Ali explained to us. The dam was built in the 1960s. This created the Nasser Lake which holds about 130 square kilometres of Nile water. The smaller, older “low dam” did not have the same impact on the population in the region.

Life before the dam was drastically different. Because of the annual Nile flood, there was no way to build permanent residences in the Nile Delta. Since the fertile Nile land is abruptly followed by the desert, humans have had to accept this and live an unsedentary life. Egyptians lived in big tents by the Nile and moved every year when the flood came. The land where they were was the land they cultivated their crops on. Ali's family, a family of farmers, also lived this way.

There was also no way to purchase the land like it would be done in western countries.

That is, until the dam was built. It resulted in less water, but there were also no more floods. People started building houses and purchasing land. Farmers needed to find a new way to fertilise their land, since without the Nile floods, there was also no more Nile sludge. Because of this, they started using the ash from harvested crops. This is why the regions around the Nile can seem so unfinished - it is not that long ago that the people there even started building the villages they live in now.

The farmers in the region are very attached to their land. This is why all newer projects to move some people into the desert by building various canals have failed.⁴ Residents of the area do not want to leave - they associate the Nile and the fertile land next to it with good luck and prosperity.

Climate change and other threats to the established way of life

There are many threats to the way of life in upper Egypt that I do not want to go into in great detail. But already climate change is threatening their way of life. It is getting persistently hotter year by year. Temperatures in the summer easily reach over 45 degrees Celsius. This threatens the agricultural production and thus the livelihood of many people there. Additionally, there is a dam planning to be built in Ethiopia, further up the Nile. Such a dam would result in significant water loss of the Nile in Egypt. If this were the case, an outbreak of war between the countries would be highly likely.

³ Ägypten, p. 170

⁴ Reisegast in Ägypten, p. 35

However, the Egyptians do not speak of these things. After I asked Ali if they speak about it in private, he told me that was not the case. I do not think this happens out of negligence. However, this is just a small facet of how the government in Egypt has managed to limit the discourse about more controversial topics. Ali told us that Egyptians do not let strangers enter their home and they do not talk about sensitive topics with anyone but their family because they are scared of the Egyptian secret service that still has secret operatives in the civilian population.

Conclusion

Egypt is a country that almost everyone in the western world has an opinion about, whether they were fascinated with the ancient pharaohs of old Egypt as a child or have watched the Arabian Spring and its consequences closely. I tried to enter my experience with the least prejudice as possible. Ali really did his best to show us the normal life that takes place away from mass tourism as it is practiced in cities like Hurghada. I knew that he has succeeded, because when we arrived on the estate of his family, I felt like I had dropped into a different world. I have tried to describe my experience by describing the seemingly little things like the making of tea that all in all make up the daily life of this family. I perceived them as curious, incredibly friendly people. After glancing into their life for a bit, I feel even more like we live in different worlds, of which big parts, especially the female part, still are inaccessible to me. To explore these parts of their life, if ever, I would have to spend a lot more time with them.

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