

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Berat: Odds and Ends

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Dear Peter;

This should be my last Berat report until I have the opportunity for a subsequent visit. As the title indicates, it consists of material I could not fit into my other reports. But these items add a few more pieces to the mosaic and help make the overall picture a little clearer.

I. Getting from Here to There

Trying to get around in Egypt often produces uncomfortable and frustrating experiences, but rarely boring ones.

If you want to travel from one town or village to another, you have three choices: train, bus, or taxi.

The train is much preferred for longer journeys. The main north-south line runs all the way from Alexandria on the Mediterranean through the Delta to Cairo and then along the Nile Valley to Aswan. First and second class trains are comfortable and reasonably priced. Except for being late a few times and once having to fend off a swarm of flies, I had no bad experiences.

But the Egyptian train system does have its problems. During the summer, there were two accidents involving fatalities on (I presume) third class trains.

On the morning of May 31, I took the train from Alexandria to Cairo. We started to slow down in the Delta north of Cairo, losing about three hours. In one town, we passed a railroad car all crumpled up in front standing on a siding. The June 1 English-language Egyptian Gazette informed me there had been an accident that morning with 10 people killed and 45 injured. The paper attributed this mishap to deficiencies in the signalling system.

A couple of months later, the Minister of Railroads, or whatever, announced that the signals on the line had been replaced.

On June 12, I took the train from Sohag to Cairo. North of El Minya, we began to slow down, losing about an hour. The man I was sitting with, a medical student at Asyut University, said there had been a collision on that part of the line two days before. One train caught up with another and rammed into it. Twenty-seven people were killed, he said, repeating what he had read in the Arabic-language press.

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The student said these railroad accidents occur because 'people lack responsibility.'*

Buses provide another method of travel between towns. I have heard that the bus companies in the Delta, particularly those connecting Alexandria and Cairo, are quite good and provide much faster travel than the trains. I took a bus between El Minya and Asyut and have no complaints, except for the poor state of the main north-south national highway. There was dirt and gravel instead of pavement in some stretches.

The trouble with buses is that they don't always stop in small towns, and if they do, maybe just once a day.

But there are always service taxis plying the paved and dirt roads between all the cities, towns, and villages in Egypt. This service taxi (or 'shared taxi') seems to be a Middle Eastern tradition. North Yemen has it too.

In both countries, the standard vehicle is the Peugeot 504 station wagon. You can fit three people, including the driver, in the front seat, four in the back seat, and maybe another four in the rear storage area. It's cramped, but cheap.

A 15-kilometer service taxi ride from Sohag to El Belyana, which is near Abydos, cost me 50 piasters** with seven other passengers in the car. I paid LE 1.50 for a one-passenger taxi ride to cover the two kilometers from El Belyana to the Pharaonic temple at Abydos.

In rural areas, particularly where dirt roads are involved, the Egyptians use the Datsun or Chevrolet Luv pickup trucks. The Yemenis favor the more rugged Toyota Landrover for their mountainous rural areas.

The owner of a taxi truck will put two benches in the storage area and rig a tarpulin or prefab covering over it. You can fit maybe 12 people back there and three in the front seat. Villagers on their way to market will also manage to pile goats, sheep, crates of chickens, and enormous baskets of produce into the rear section.

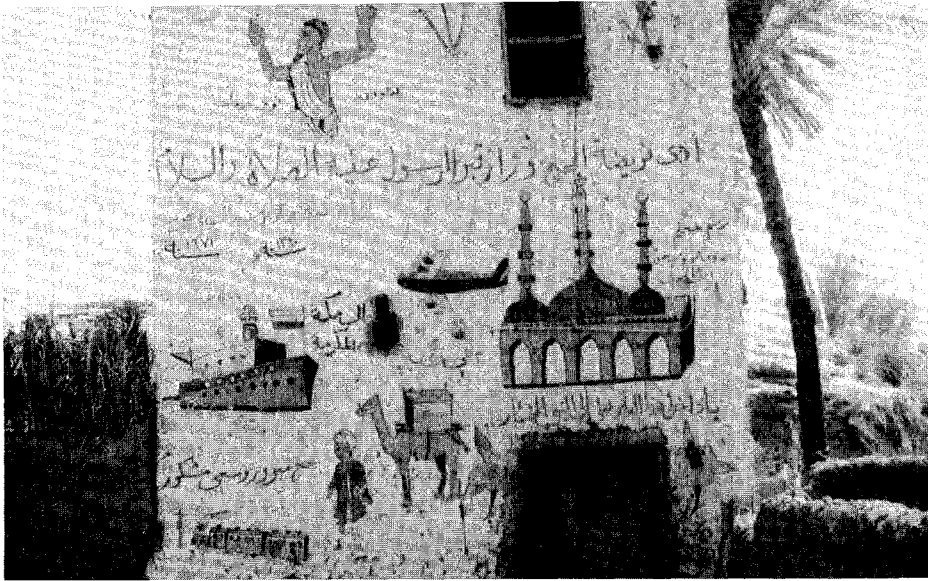
These little truck taxis are tough and versatile. But considering the generally horrendous state of rural Egyptian roads, I would imagine the owner's investment depreciates rapidly.

One day in August, I decided to visit the sugar cane refinery at Armant, a town located about 15 kilometers south of Luxor on the west bank of the Nile.

Ibrahim (a pseudonym), one of my Berat informants, agreed to accompany me. This was a generous gesture on his part, because he had been to Armant the previous day.

* As far as accidents go, the big story this summer was the sinking of that cruise ship filled with tourists on the river south of Aswan. An incident like that, involving western tourists, gets great international attention. But 20 Egyptians getting killed is hardly noticed.

** There are 100 piasters in an Egyptian pound. The US dollar is worth 81 piasters at the official exchange rate, but brings about LE 1.10 on the black market.



Berat house with paintings commemorating a 1981 haj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. This proud pilgrim travelled by plane, boat, train, and camel. The only method of transportation not shown which he surely did use is service taxi. Local village artists specialize in these stylized drawings.

After each sugar cane harvest, the government-run refinery calls in the growers who sent their cane to Armant. The growers from each town and village are told to appear on a specified day to receive their money.

Ibrahim left his Berat home at 5 a.m. and did not return until 2 p.m. He said he spent most of his time at the factory just standing around with hundreds of other men, waiting. He was very accepting of this inconvenience, whereas a westerner would surely have complained bitterly.*

* Egyptians, particularly rural ones, expect bad service from governmental offices as a matter of course. They get it too. I was in the Luxor post office one day when a large crowd of mostly galabiyah-clad men was trying to get some paperwork processed. The men were all holding identical green official forms. One lone female clerk tried to attend to them, but there was no order to the proceeding. Some men shoved their way to the counter to shout at her; others yelled and waved their arms indiscriminately. Three postal employees sat at a table behind the harassed clerk doing some other kind of work in a bored, desultory fashion. They occasionally looked up to watch with mild interest the unruly scene on the other side of the counter. It did not seem to occur to them that they might assist their comrade. A big, beefy man, apparently a supervisor, came from behind the counter and began screaming at the men, ordering them to form a proper line. When the men balked at this, or protested, he brandished a long stick at them. I have witnessed similar scenes at the Immigration Office in Sana'a. It seems that some government employees in Arab countries habitually treat their fellow Arab customers like dogs.



Luxor policeman trying to extort baksheesh from protesting taxi driver to the amusement of onlookers. The policeman was citing the driver for a traffic violation, but everyone knew what was really going on. I decided discretion was the better part of valor and did not attempt to move in closer for my photograph.

The two of us walked to Berat's hamlet of El Kom and squeezed into the front seat of a Datsun service taxi with a young driver named Abdel Nasser. We waited about 10 minutes for the rear section to fill up and were off by 8:30 a.m.

This truck was a mess. The dashboard was held together by wire. Neither inside door panel had a functioning handle for opening the door. If you wanted to get out, you had to either crawl out the window or have the door opened from outside. No chance for a quick exit from this taxi.

Abdel Nasser drove us over the dirt road leading from El Kom to the paved road which connects the Nile ferry with the west bank tourist sites. When he reached the road, he stopped the truck, crawled out the window, and an older man named Badowi took over as our driver.

As Ibrahim explained it, Abdel Nasser did not have a permit to drive us to the ferry, but Badowi did. Taxis, like all economic enterprises in Egypt, are heavily regulated. The police issue permits to drivers for specific routes. Police checkpoints along the roads keep a close watch on the drivers.

The odd thing about this situation was that Abdel Nasser drove the battered old Datsun well, but Badowi didn't have the vaguest notion of what he was about. Seemingly quite mystified by this machine, he could not keep it from popping out of gear. He also lugged the engine by attempting to drive 20 mph fourth gear all the way to the ferry. It was the most uncertain and jerky taxi ride I've ever experienced.

Crossing the river on the ferry, Ibrahim and I walked to the Luxor taxi park, where we got into another Datsun service taxi. This one was in better shape. I sat in front with the driver, Mercoil, and a mathematics teacher in the Luxor secondary

school. Ibrahim sat in back.

We had not even gotten out of Luxor when a policeman had us pull over. Mercil got out to argue with him. While Ibrahim joined some other onlookers listening in to the dispute, I took a picture of the scene.

Mercil was furious. He and the policeman shouted at each other for about 20 minutes. Then he returned sullenly to the taxi and we were off again.

Ibrahim told me later that the policeman had cited Mercil for being "overloaded" with passengers (so what else is new?). But there was more to it than that.

Mercil had been paying this policeman LE 1 in baksheesh every three days. But the policeman was now demanding it every day. Because Mercil was resisting, the policeman had a habit of pulling him over every morning, just to cause trouble. He didn't actually give him a ticket.

Ibrahim said that all taxi drivers pay baksheesh to the police. Because they control the permits, the police are in a good position to acquire this additional income.

Apparently, drivers have been known to strike back. Two years ago, a policeman in the nearby village of KOS had been knifed and killed. Nobody was ever arrested for the crime, but popular opinion held that a disgruntled taxi driver had done it, Ibrahim said.

Mercil took us south on the east bank of the Nile to a village across from Armant. We travelled on the main paved north-south highway. From the village, we took a hantour (horse-driven carriage) to a Nile ferry landing.

Unlike the ferry at Luxor, which features three or four solid, well-maintained boats, the Armant ferry was of the bargain basement variety.

The boat would have comfortably contained four or five fishermen, but not the 100-odd passengers it held now. We were sitting very low in the water when we cast off.

The structure of the craft struck me as rickety, particularly in the places where the paint peeled away to reveal old, discolored wood. But more alarming was the wheezing, smoking engine. A grimy plate on it read "Packard Company, U.S.A." The only Packard Company I know of is the one that made automobiles a long, long time ago. This was an automobile engine.

As we gingerly nudged into the middle of the placid river, I began wondering what I would do with my camera and hiking boots, neither of which I wanted to lose when we went down.

I decided I could tie my boots to my belt, by their laces, and then swim with one arm, holding the camera above my head with the other arm. But I never had the opportunity to test this theory.

After we had docked, a young student type walked besides me up the embankment. He had been sitting across from me during the crossing.

"I think you were disgusted with that boat," he said.

Ibrahim and I walked through Armant to the factory, a massive walled complex completely dominating the quiet town.

I had planned to take some pictures inside. But two guards at a side gate told us we would have to apply for permission at the front office. Ibrahim said the factory officials would have to then ask the local police, which would take about two hours.

I did not like the sound of that. I asked Ibrahim if he would mind standing in front of the main gate. I could pretend to take his picture, but instead aim my camera at the looming buildings beyond the gate.*

He would have none of that. He said the government men would catch us and put him in the army.**

I finally had to content myself with taking a picture of a train loaded with refined sugar leaving the factory. Not much of an accomplishment after investing three and a half hours getting there.

But we had a nice lunch of chicken and beans at an Armant restaurant. For the journey back, we took service taxis north up the west bank of the river. The roads on this side of the Nile were unpaved. We ate dust all the way to Berat.

Counting a wait at one village where we switched taxis, it took us about two hours to get back to Berat.

A couple of days later, Ibrahim and I took a short journey into Luxor. We went first to the weekly west bank market near the ferry where Ibrahim bought a small sheep for LE 38. He planned to take it that morning to a friend of his in Luxor who had lent him some money.

After transporting the sheep to the house in Luxor via ferryboat and hantour (you can take a live sheep anywhere if its legs are tied together -- the animal makes as much trouble as a bag of flour), we returned to the west bank. Unable to find a service taxi going to Berat, we decided to take the government-run Mercedes microbus. The fare from the ferry to Berat is quite cheap, 10 piasters, compared to 25 piasters for a service taxi. But the bus makes its runs infrequently and is always overcrowded.

We sat in the bus for half an hour, sweltering in the midday heat, waiting for every available space to be filled. It reminded me of Cairo, where I have been trapped inside a packed bus and unable to get out at my stop.

We almost were trapped inside this bus. When we reached the Berat stop, nobody else got out. Ibrahim and I were sitting in the very back seat. Half of the passengers would have had to rearrange themselves to allow us to work our way to the front door, and they were not about to do that.

There was nothing for it. We each crawled out the window and jumped down to the ground.

* This technique works well in Yemen for taking photos of normally skittish veiled women. You have your friend stand in the middle of the street and point your camera at him. Then you suddenly swing it to one side to catch some woman coming out of a shop.
 ** Nothing alarms the average male villager more than the prospect of being drafted into the army. But there are exceptions. I know one young man who said he really enjoyed his stay in the army because they let him drive an American jeep around at breakneck speeds. Riding in a car with this guy is a terrifying experience.



A Muslim couple from El Qatar hamlet in Berat. He is a farmer. He also rides around on a donkey buying eggs from the village women to resell in Luxor. The girl is one of their three daughters. They also have three sons.

We began walking back to the village in silence. After a few minutes, Ibrahim suddenly blurted out, "I want to leave this country!"

I looked at him, not sure of how to take this. Ibrahim has a sly, understated sense of humor. But he looked angry.

Why's that? I asked.

"Too many problems," he muttered. "Problems with the sugar, with the money, with the house ..."

Ibrahim then made one of the most curious statements I ever heard from him. He said he wished he could be alone in a house, without so many people around, just like in the United States.

Too many people in Egypt, I said.

"Yah! Too many people," he agreed.

II. My Brother's Keeper

When I was in Berat, I always stayed at the Habou Hotel, a grandiloquent name for a run-down country inn.

This establishment, run by a man named Sobhy, is situated within the boundaries of Berat's Kom Lohlah hamlet. It is only a 10-minute walk from the Habou to both El Qatar and Ezbat Basili hamlets, where my major informants lived. The location was convenient for me.

There were two other possibilities for lodging. An inn popularly known as "Sheikh Ali's," named after its owner, is located about a quarter of a mile north of the Habou. The Memnon Hotel, run by a man named Hassan, is about half a mile to the east.

Sheikh Ali,* a cantankerous but funny old man, is the only one of the three hotel managers to serve decent meals. His inn is as run-down as the Habou, but he does put fans in his rooms, unlike Sobhy.

At night, tourists and young Egyptian men who work with tourists congregate at Sheikh Ali's to drink beer and talk. It is a lively, busy place.

The Habou, by contrast, is usually dark and quiet at night. Only a few of Sobhy's cronies show up to drink beer or play dominoes. Most villagers I know won't go near the Habou, such is Sobhy's unpopularity in the village.**

A short, squat man with a clipped black mustache and balding pate, Sobhy exudes coldness and formality. It was all he could do to say "good morning" to me, and even then he did not like to look me in the eye. I don't know a single person who claimed to like him.

A pariah to most of the village, Sobhy does not attract a lot of tourists either. I stayed in the Habou for seven weeks and can remember only about five fellow lodgers. None stayed more than a few days. For weeks at a time, I was the only one there. This was during the summer, the low point of the tourist season, but I know Sheikh Ali had some lodgers.

Most of the Habou's tourist trade comes from selling beer or other refreshments to tour groups. Like Sheikh Ali, Sobhy has business relationships with certain tour guides who steer their business his way. But I know one tour guide who had an argument with Sobhy and switched his allegiance to the Sheikh.

* His actual name is Ali Abdel Asoul. In his youth, he worked with some of the famous Luxor archaeological expeditions, including Howard Carter's search for Tutankhamen. He has shown me a German book on archaeology which contains a photo of him as a young crew leader. Even then he was known as "Sheikh Ali." Rumor has it that he made his fortune by keeping archaeological treasures for himself, but this story attaches itself to practically every wealthy man in the area. He is briefly mentioned on page 211 of Hassan Fathy's Gourna: A Tale of Two Villages (Cairo: Ministry of Culture, 1969), which is about an experimental village near Berat.

** Richard Critchfield discusses Sobhy's unpopularity at some length in his Shahhat: An Egyptian (New York: Avon Books, 1978).

There were many times when I also considered switching my allegiance to the Sheikh. But I felt I would be spending too much time walking from the hotel to the village. I preferred to remain within the village proper. I thought I might be better off without the tourist atmosphere of Sheikh Ali's.

But the Habou was trying at times. The sweltering heat in my small, airless room made sleep without a fan impossible. You needed mosquito netting to sleep outside on the upper terrace. Every night, then, I took my sleeping bag downstairs to the main dining hall and slept on top of a long table, which was situated underneath a ceiling fan.

All things considered, I was actually a privileged guest. There was only one guest room in the entire building with a functioning lock -- mine. At least I didn't have to worry about leaving my camera in the room.

From time to time, I wondered why Sobhy did not invest some money in the Habou and fix it up. It seemed to me that if you were to put locks on the doors and fans in the rooms, repair the broken showers and toilets, do some skillful repainting and put some better furniture in the rooms, you could have a nice property on your hands.

The two-story structure is basically sound. And the location is spectacular. Right across the street is Medinet Habu, a sprawling complex of Pharaonic and Ptolemaic temples. Standing on the Habou terrace, you can clearly distinguish the reliefs on the looming pylons, one of which shows Ramses II (or III, I forget which) about to club some suppliant captives with a mace.

Local gossip has it that a group of wealthy American or European investors made Sobhy an offer for the hotel a couple of years ago, but he turned them down. That seemed strange to me. If he's not going to put any money into it, why not sell it?

Quoting local gossip again, Sobhy seems to make most of his money at other enterprises. From an office in Luxor, he runs a tour bus line known as Habou Transport. These air-conditioned buses are a familiar sight on the west bank, as they scurry about with gawking tourists.

Another possibility is that his real money comes from a trade quite common in the Luxor area but severely discouraged by the Egyptian antiquities service. Who knows?

I certainly felt that the "hotel" aspect of the Habou was secondary to Sobhy. I wondered if he didn't maintain the place as a comfortable residence for his own family and for the income he makes selling beer to tour groups.

In early August, a middle-aged French gentleman named Andre stayed at the Habou for several days. Like me, he could not sleep in his room without a fan, so he took his sleeping bag out onto the terrace to sleep under the stars. He said he didn't mind the mosquitos that much, but three nights of that was enough.

We had breakfast together his last morning there. Inevitably, we began discussing what a dump the Habou was.

Andre had some insight into its problems. He said

he had met a member of Sobhy's family, Mohamed,* in Paris. This Mohamed told him that Sobhy and his three brothers (now two) owned shares in the Habou, which had been part of their father's inheritance. Because of jealous bickering between them, they could never agree on investing anything in the hotel, beyond simple maintenance.

Apparently Mohamed didn't tell Andre some other crucial details, which I found out a little later.

I still find it amazing. But it was not until my fourth week in Berat that I heard about the Mahmood murder. It just never came up. One of my informants finally mentioned it in passing. I checked it out with another informant, who added some contradictory details. But the main outline of the story seems clear.

About a year ago, Sobhy was having an argument in the Habou with his brother Mohamed. Mohamed had always been intensely jealous of Sobhy, their father's favorite. Sobhy had been given both the management of the Habou and ownership of the Habou Transport buses. Mohamed wanted Sobhy to give him some of the buses, but Sobhy refused.

Another brother, Mahmood, got involved in the argument on Sobhy's side. There was a struggle and Mohamed killed Mahmood. Mohamed seems to have spent only two weeks in jail for this crime.

No wonder the Habou has problems.

I have the impression that brotherly relations are often tense in Egyptian families. I know of two other examples of this.

One of the Habou Hotel employees is a boy named Sayid.** He belongs to a poor, landless family in El Qatar. He has an older brother named Badowi.

A couple of years ago, Sayid's father, knowing his younger son would never make much of a farmer, talked Sobhy into taking him on at the hotel. Sobhy pays Sayid a pittance, if that. But Sayid occasionally captures large tips from tourists. He has managed to save up a couple of hundred pounds.

Badowi's only source of income is to hire himself out as an agricultural laborer. The standard wage in Berat for this field work is LE 2.50 for four and a half hours in the morning.

Sayid's father recently asked Sayid to contribute some money to help Badowi get married and build a house of his own. Sayid refused, making his father very angry.

I have been to the family's house to watch television. It was very obvious to me that Sayid and Badowi have no great affection for each other.

* I don't remember if Andre said this was Sobhy's brother Mohamed, or a cousin. We were just chatting at breakfast; I wasn't taking notes or anything. If I had known then what I found out later, I would have paid more attention.

** I don't know how old Sayid is, maybe about 20. The villagers generally refer to him as "the black boy," because of his dark complexion. He had some kind of accident to his head when he was younger and has the mentality of a 10-year-old.



Three sisters from a landless Muslim family in Ezbat Basili. Their father, Fuad, specializes in doing electrical repairs in the village.

Lamei is the richest man in Berat. He is reputed to own about 350 feddans, most of which he inherited from his father Ahmed.

The story of how Ahmed became rich is quite bizarre. And you might say it begins with a quarrel between brothers.

I got most of the details from an informant who is related to Lamei. His mother and Lamei's wife are sisters. Another informant, a member of a prestigious Christian family, confirmed the story and added a few details of his own.

Lamei's grandfather, Mohamed, was an omda (village headman). Because of the nature of their position as intermediaries between the villagers and central government, omdas tend to be rich men who get richer.

As often happens, one of Mohamed's sons, Ali, took over as omda after him. Mohamed seems to have preferred Ali over his other son Ahmed, because Ali also received the land. Ahmed was very angry, but could do nothing.

Some men from the village, scandalized by the poor treatment of Ahmed, approached Ali and asked him to give his brother some land. Ali refused.

One day, a "foreign woman" came to the village (neither of my informants could describe her more precisely than that). She was suffering from rheumatism in her legs. Ahmed told her he could help her.

Ahmed took the woman into the mountains and found some "special dirt," which he mixed with water and plastered around her limbs. The woman was cured in two days. She was then

so happy she gave Ahmed much money.*

Ahmed used this money to buy land and animals. Within a few decades, he had become a very rich man. He even took over the omda position from Ali.**

There is one more family quarrel I heard about, although it doesn't involve a dispute between brothers.

During the period between my two major Berat visits, a boy from El Ezbah hamlet tried to kill himself. Ibrahim described him as "not a good boy -- all the time he drink with some people not good."

He did more than that. In a game of kashtina (cards), this boy managed to lose his family's entire sugar cane harvest money, LE 700. When the boy's mother found out about it, there was a terrible confrontation. The boy fled the house, walked into a sugar cane field, and stabbed himself. Some family members found him and took him to the Luxor Hospital.

When the police came to investigate, they asked him if anyone had attacked him. The boy said "yes, two black people."

Everyone in Berat knows that mention of "black people" usually refers to the inhabitants of the neighboring village of Legaltah. These are dark-complexioned people of Nubian origin, who migrated north from the Aswan area about 125 years ago. In the past half century, there have been numerous bloody feuds between Berat and Legaltah residents.***

But the boy's attempt to pin the blame on Legaltah men did not work. The boy's mother came to the hospital two days later and told the police everything. The police took the boy out of the hospital and put him in the Luxor jail.

* Critchfield doesn't mention this crazy story at all. He just says an aunt of King Farouk gave Lamei's father 200 feddans before the 1952 Revolution. At least, there definitely was a woman behind it.

** After Ahmed, the omda title passed to a man from another family, Yassin, who held it for about 30 years. Yassin's son, Mahmood, took over after him and has been Berat omda for the past 15 years.

*** The completion of the Aswan High Dam in the mid-1960s has hastened Nubian migration northward. In fact, the reservoir, Lake Nasser, covered the villages of Old Nubia, forcing the government to resettle the residents in new villages near Aswan.

III. Fool's Gold

Berat is located in the part of the Nile Valley once dominated by the ancient city of Thebes. The western mountains beyond the irrigated plain are honeycombed with Pharaonic tombs, the most famous sites being the Valley of the Kings (where Tutankhamen was found) and the Valley of the Queens.

Berat's hamlet of Qurnet Marai is situated on a mountain slope rich in tombs of Pharaonic noblemen. One of these sites is open to tourists.

The government has long tried to get the Qurnet Marai residents to move back into the valley, because their presence does obstruct access to the tourist sites, but the people have always resisted. The common explanation is that they continue to discover antiquities underneath their houses.*

Berat residents in the valley also discover Pharaonic or Ptolemaic relics from time to time. One young man showed me two pieces of pottery he had found near the Medinet Habu temple. He said they were "Roman." Could be.

A young Israeli woman told me a villager had shown her a mummy's hand. Being a student of Egyptology, she was sure it was genuine.

I have watched an Ezbat Basili farmer plow his field and turn over clusters of minute pottery shards.

With all this treasure lying underneath the ground,** there is inevitably a thriving local market in antiques.

To hear the villagers tell it, you would think that practically every rich man in Berat, except for Lamei and the omda, made his fortune dealing in antiques. Most of these rumors are pretty vague.

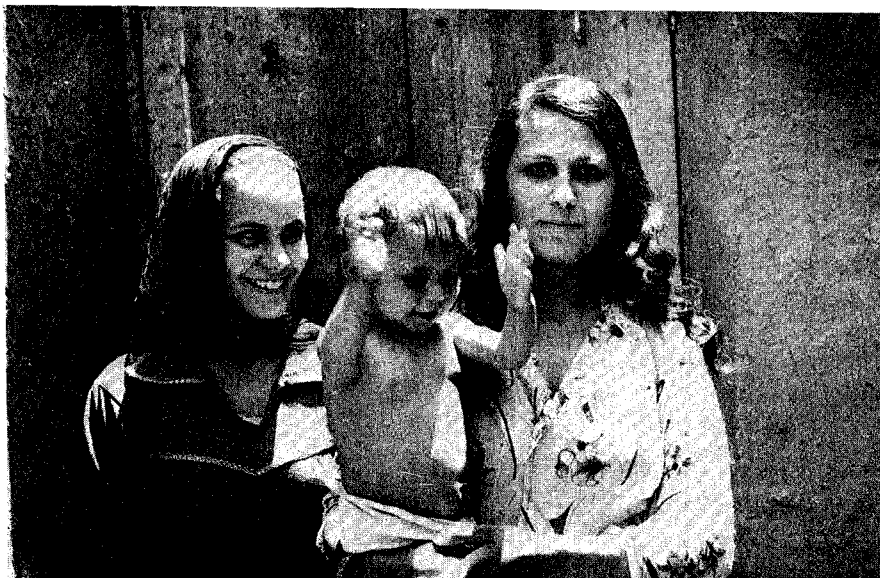
But there is one story I find credible. Two of my informants told it to me and their details closely matched.

There was a Muslim man in the village who was very poor. He was so poor, in fact, that he accepted charity from one of the Christian priests. His older brother gave him two feddans so he could build himself a house.

One day, he was digging within the Medinet Habu grounds for earth to make tooba (sun-baked mud bricks) for the house. This was in the days when there were no guards to prevent

* Hassan Fathy mentions in his book the various tribes in the Qurna-Berat area. One is the Horobat, from Qurna, famous for its tomb-robbing activities. "There was a fourth tribe, the Baerat, which lived mainly in the neighboring village with this name while a small number of families lived in Gorent Mora (Qurnet Marai), one of the hamlets of Old Gurna. They always kept themselves rather apart from the Gournis, and in fact came under the mayor (omda) of Baerat."

** Archaeologists working in the Luxor area have told me that a large number of tombs in the Theban necropolis remain to be excavated. But the cost of opening these tombs is now so prohibitive, they might remain undisturbed forever. These tombs might have been plundered in ancient times, like the others, or might still contain gold. Nobody knows.



Houda, a young woman from Ezbat Basili whom I consider the most attractive in Berat, with her son Wa'el and sister-in-law Sayida.

that kind of thing.

While he was digging, the man found 10 kilos of gold jewelry. His first wife died (of shock?) a few weeks after the discovery.

The man went to see two Christian brothers from Berat who owned a charcoal shop in Cairo. The brothers took him to an antiques dealer.

Every couple of months, the Berat man took a small quantity of his gold to Cairo to sell to the merchant. He used the money to acquire much land, remarry, buy a small shop, and become one of Berat's most wealthy men.

The mother of one of my informants and this man's wife are sisters.

Some men who attempt to dispose of antiques are not so lucky. There is the story of the farmer from Darbiya, told to me by Ibrahim.

One day, this farmer unearthed a Pharaonic statue which was about one meter high, while he was plowing his field. He tried to sell it to another man in his village for LE 2,000. The man offered him LE 1,500, but the farmer spurned the offer. Angered by this, the man went to the police with the story.

A police captain from Luxor wearing civilian clothes came to visit the farmer. He offered the farmer LE 3,000 for the antique. He said he would give him LE 1,500 on the spot, and the rest when he had taken the statue to his home in Luxor.

The farmer agreed and dug up the statue from where he had reburied it in the field.

Carrying the statue in a sack, the two men set off for Luxor. At the ferry landing, they were intercepted by waiting police.

Instead of making his fortune, the farmer from Darbiya was fined LE 500 and sentenced to two years in jail.

Alongside the trade in real antiques, there is an even brisker trade in false ones.

It is not uncommon for a tourist on the west bank to be propositioned by a man who pulls a Pharaonic figurine out of a paper bag and says, "For you mister, LE 200."

If you're smart, you'll bargain him down to LE 4 and take the stone idol home as a souvenir -- call it an example of local craftsmanship.

Some people are not smart.

The prospect of picking up an actual Ptolemaic coin for LE 10 was too enticing for me to resist. The darn thing looked old. It was kind of bluish. Isn't that what oxidation does to old metal?

Also, I knew the man who sold it to me. He worked (you might call it that) at the Habou. I couldn't imagine he would dare to swindle me when I could get back at him so easily.

I discovered later that this man would do anything for money to buy himself some beer or French brandy.

Although I bought it, I was wary. The next day, I showed the coin to Ibrahim. He looked at it critically, rubbed some spit on it, and handed it back.

"Mish kwayyis," he said.

Ancient metal, I learned, absorbs moisture instead of repelling it. Also, a man in Qurna with a lathe turns these out by the hundreds.

The culprit reacted calmly when I confronted him. "Why you angry about LE 10?" he asked. "I pay you tomorrow, don't worry."

"Tomorrow" stretched into two weeks as he repaid me in dribblets. I never did get that last LE 1 out of him. I decided to leave him that as baksheesh. Malesh.

IV. Knowing One's Place

It often happens that one overlooks something that has lain long under one's nose. When the discovery is made, it can come as a great revelation.

I was sitting with Ibrahim one night at a circumcision hafla (party). As is usual at these events, men were sitting on benches listening to the singer and his band, smoking cigarettes, chatting, and drinking tea or Cokes.

I don't know what put the idea into my head, but I suddenly thought: Why are none of these men wearing glasses? Eye disease is endemic in Egypt. So is bad teeth, for that matter.

I could not remember ever seeing a village man or woman wearing glasses. If these people can afford television sets and electric ceiling fans, surely they can afford glasses.

I asked Ibrahim about it.

His response was that village men do not wear glasses because they are afraid other village men will laugh at them. Glasses are okay for the city, but not for the village.

The same was true of pantalons (Egyptians use the French word), he said. Whenever Ibrahim went to Luxor or Cairo, he always wore a galabiyah. If his friends ever saw him in pantalons, they would make fun of him.

The situation is reversed for an educated village man, or one who works with tourists. One of my informants was a young man studying commerce at a university in the Delta. When we walked around the village, he always wore a galabiyah because he felt "freer" than in pants.

But if I wanted to take his picture, he insisted on returning to his house to don a shirt and pair of slacks.

Ibrahim has no education beyond primary school and considers himself a farmer, despite his part-time job at a Pharaonic temple. He does not own a pair of pants, except for shorts to play soccer in.

And if he did, he certainly wouldn't go to town in them. He knows his place.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

Appendix: Egyptian Jokes

During my five months in Egypt, I met two men who liked to tell jokes. One is a Christian who works for an auto parts supplier in Cairo; the other is a Muslim Berat taxi driver.

I pass along four of their jokes here, the first two from the Christian, and the second two from the taxi driver.

To my mind, these jokes reveal a little something about Egyptian attitudes towards their own country and some others.

1. The difference between an American hell and a Russian one.

A man dies and goes to heaven. But it's a mistake. A panel of judges tell him he's in the wrong place and will have to go to hell. Would he prefer an American hell, or a Russian one? The man doesn't know what to say. An old man comes up to him and advises him to choose the Russian hell -- "because you can't get fuel or firewood and nobody works."

2. The difference between American democracy and Egyptian democracy.

Two friends, an American and an Egyptian, are arguing about which is best, American democracy or Egyptian democracy. To prove that the American democracy is better, the American takes the Egyptian to the White House. He stands at the gate and yells for Reagan to come out. When the president appears, he calls out, "You're no good!"

We have it even better, says the Egyptian. So he takes the American to Mubarak's palace, stands at the gate, and yells for the president. When Mubarak appears, the Egyptian shouts at him, "Reagan's no good!"

3. Where's the driver?

A group of Egyptians go to London for a visit and ride on a double-decker bus. They sit on the top deck. Presently, they come down the stairs to sit on the lower deck. An Englishman asks them, why the change? "Oh, there's no driver up there," says one of the Egyptians. "We wanted a bus with a driver."

4. National virtues.

Reagan, Mubarak, Gemayel, Mitterand, and Khomeini are at a conference. They each get to say what's good about their respective countries.

Khomeini: Persian rugs.

Gemayel: Gardens.

Mitterand: Pretty girls.

Reagan: The American police.

Mubarak (after a thoughtful pause): Well, I have an Egyptian boy who f***s a French girl on a Persian rug in a Lebanese garden without being watched by the American police.*

* This is a rather typical joke for my taxi driver friend. But if you excuse the vulgarity, note that the whole point about the American police is that they don't watch you. Egyptians can't say that about their police.