INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Berat Village: An Overview

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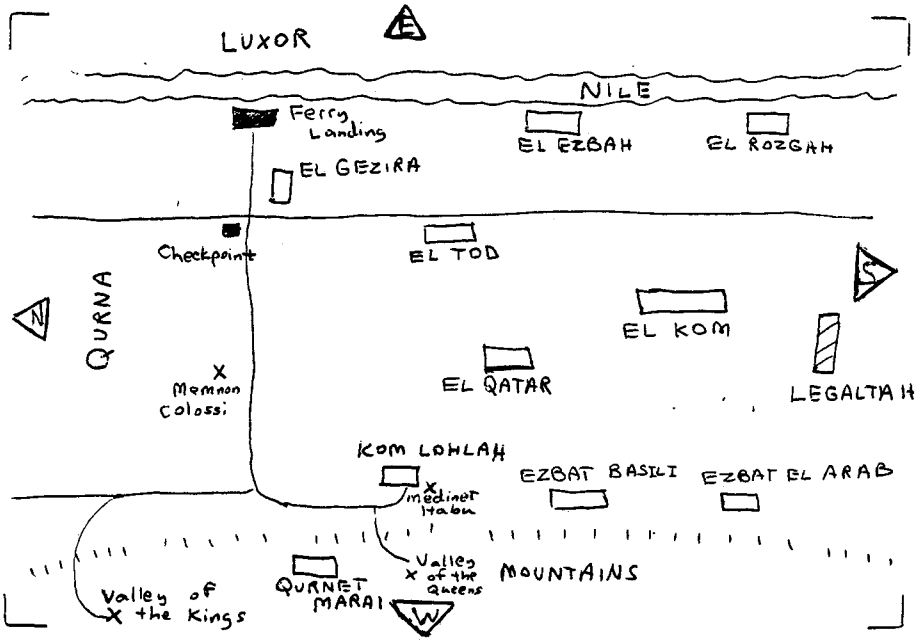
Dear Peter;

What follows are, as I have indicated, preliminary observations designed to give you a feel for various aspects of life in Berat.

I. Introduction

Berat, a village of about 12,000 inhabitants, lies on the west bank of the Nile across from Egypt's greatest tourist mecca, Luxor.

It consists of 10 distinct hamlets: Kom Lohlah, Qurnet Marai, Ezbat Basili, Ezbat el-arab, El Qatar, El Gezira El Rozgah, El Ezbah, El Kom and El Tod. El Kom, the largest hamlet and administrative centre of the village, boasts 5,000 inhabitants. Ezbat el-arab, the smallest, contains only a few resettled Bedouin families.



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The overwhelming majority of Berat's population is Muslim. There are 500 Christians living in Ezbat Basili (alongside 400 Muslims) and about 25 in El Kom. Relations between the two religious groups seem to be congenial.

The boundaries of Berat extend three kilometers from the Nile to the western mountains (Qurnet Marai is perched on the first slope, the only hamlet without piped-in water). The north/south boundaries are about three and a half kilometers apart.

Despite its substantial population, Berat is apparently not listed on any road maps or tourist guides.* Its northern (and probably larger) neighbor, Qurna, is usually so marked.

I spent three weeks in Berat, from June 21 to July 11. My purpose was to interview Berat residents about their lives and work.

Anxious not to attract notice from the local authorities, I lived as an ordinary tourist in the Habou Hotel. This establishment, one of three modest inns on the west bank, is located in Kom Lohlah right in front of the Medinet Habu temple.

The journalist Richard Critchfield had written an extensive study of Berat several years before (Shahhat: An Egyptian. Avon Books, 1978). None of the people I interviewed appear in Critchfield's book.

I relied on three English-speaking informants:

Hussein, 23, a student of commerce at Mansura University in the Delta. He was home for a four month holiday. Although not a farmer himself and not intending to become one, he plans to work for a tourist agency in Luxor after he finishes school. Hussein comes from a farming family and has a keen interest in agriculture.

Mohamed, 29, a farmer. Mohamed earns most of his income from farming. But he also works three months out of each year as a guardian at Medinet Habu. He had picked up some English on the job, but his vocabulary is more basic than Hussein's.

Ali, 25, a taxi driver. Ali has nothing to do with farming and neither does his family. His father is a retired road repair foreman and all his brothers work with tourists. But taxi drivers get around a lot. Ali was a good source for non-agricultural aspects of village life. Although he never attended a university, he speaks English more fluently than Hussein.

It is unfortunate that I have only a smattering of Arabic. I missed a lot that went on around me. My three informants could answer questions like: how much fertilizer did you put on that field? But their English was often inadequate for more complex inquiries like: what difference has the High Dam made in your life?

Collecting information was a very slow, step by step process.

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* Egypt's population being what it is, 45 million, it is hard to be noticed. Jacques Berque, who studied a Delta village of 22,000 inhabitants in the 1950s, wrote: "These 'villages' would elsewhere be 'cities.'" Berat would be a good size town in some other countries.

II. A Changing Technology

Berat is, in some respects, a living museum, like Williamsburg, Virginia, or Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts. You can see people in traditional costumes performing traditional work with the tools of antiquity.

In Berat, the ancient tools include the shaduf (hand-operated well sweep) and meheras (single-bladed plow hooked to two oxen), both of Pharaonic orgin. The sagia (cow-driven waterwheel), a Ptolemaic (4th to 1st centuries B.C.) innovation, is also used.

The shaduf is basically a pole on a pivot. A bucket is placed at one end of the pole and a mud weight on the other. When the operator fills the bucket with water, the weight substantially balances the contents of the bucket, making it easier for the operator to hoist the water up from the canal to the top of the canal bank.

The shaduf is still useful for small, garden-size plots. A man can irrigate a quarter of an acre a day with this device.

Twenty one year old Ahmed, known in the village by his nickname ''Abu Schwall,''* uses a shaduf to irrigate a three kirot** field on the north bank of the small canal running behind El Qatar.

There is a trough at the top of the canal bank in front of the shaduf. A ditch runs from this trough to skirt the edge of Abu Schwall's field.

The field is subdivided into several separate plots by earth barriers. Starting at the plot farthest away from the shaduf, Abu Schwall breaks the barrier and lets the water in to fill the plot. When finished, he closes the barrier and opens the one for the next plot.

It took him an afternoon of sweaty work to irrigate the whole field, which had been planted in corn seed the day before.

To work the shaduf, Abu Schwall dresses in a white T-shirt and torn red pants instead of his usual galabiyah. Standing on a rock in the canal, he lowers the bucket into the water and hoists it back up the bank to fill the trough, all in one fluid motion.

Having briefly tried out Abu Schwall's shaduf, I think the worst problem for the operator would be the monotony of dipping and re-dipping that bucket.

To combat the tedium, shaduf operators sing while they dip. Abu Schwall had learned some English from tourists at his grandfather's inn and translated (rather inelegantly) his song for me: ''It's not hard to him (i.e., the shaduf doesn't mind the work)/ I like it, shaduf/ Shaduf likes the music/ And I like to fill the ditch quickly.''

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* This is a good example of village humor. Schwall is one of several Arabic words for ''sack,'' taliss and zagiba being two others. Abu means ''father of.'' When Ahmed was only two days old, his father dropped a schwall of grain on top of him. At first, he thought he had killed the tot, but Ahmed survived. Ahmed is very proud of his nickname because nobody else in Berat has one like it. ''Maybe a few in Cairo or Luxor,'' he said. I doubt it.

** There are 24 kirots in a feddan. One feddan equals 1.038 acres.

Abu Schwall is a bit of a clown. He claimed to like working the shaduf (''I feel me very good'') and asked me if he could get a job doing that in America.

Abu Schwall working his shaduf

Another Pharaonic curiousity still in use in Berat is the meheras.

The Temple of Ty in Sakkara has a wall relief illustration of one. It shows a team of oxen pulling a single-bladed plow while two men walk behind, one guiding the plow and the other flicking a whip at the oxen.

The Berat version is almost identical except that one man does both jobs: he guides the plow and prods the oxen on.

I walked behind a meheras with a man named Sayid and helped him guide it through a field. I was struck by how unwieldy an apparatus it was.

Oxen may be dumb animals. But they do have minds of their own. It is difficult to keep two of them going in the same direction at the same pace, even if they are yoked together.

As he directed the plow down the field, Sayid made staccato clicking noises with his tongue, flicked his whip over the rumps of the oxen and called out: ''Come, go direct. Stay in the same lane.''

When one of the animals stopped for a nibble on some sugar cane, a frequent occurrence, he would cry out: ''Shut your mouth! Don't eat!''

Hussein insisted to me that the oxen understood Sayid's words as well as his whip.

The saqia must have been a welcome innovation when it was first introduced to Egyptian agriculture. It can irrigate five acres a day.

The saqia consists of two massive wheels set vertically in the ground with only the top halves showing above ground. The bottom portions reach into a deep well. A pole, suspended horizontally, is hooked to these wheels via a

series of gears. A blindfolded ox turns the pole around and around while walking a circular treadmill.

As the waterwheels turn, the clay jars tied along the periphery of one of them scoops up water from the well. On their descent, the jars empty into a trough, which leads into a ditch and out into a field.

Madame Faisa, a widow with two children, co-owns a saqia with her brother Ali, who lives in Luxor. The day I saw it, the saqia was being used to irrigate Madame Faisa's quarter of a feddan, as well as help her wash her clothes in the trough.

Madame Faisa's son Sayid next to her saqia

Sometimes the ox would stop his work. Then, Madame Faisa and the children would make clicking noises, like Sayid the meheras operator. If that failed to do the trick, one of the children would throw a rock at the beast, which usually got him moving again.

These museum pieces, the shaduf, meheras and saqia continue to play a role in Berat agriculture, but only on the periphery.

As one walks the paths of Berat, the steady, robust, chug-chug of the motor pump is a far more common sound than the gentle, creaking, whish-whish of the saqia.

Ten years ago, there were 200 operational saqias in Berat. Today, only three or four remain. The carcasses of abandoned ones litter the Berat fields.

In their place are about 450 gasoline- and electric-powered motor pumps. These are usually jointly owned by two or more villagers, since one would be too expensive for a man owning only a few feddans. Hussein's family, for example, owns an Indian pump, manufactured by the Tata Company, that cost LE 1,200,* a year's income for many farmers.

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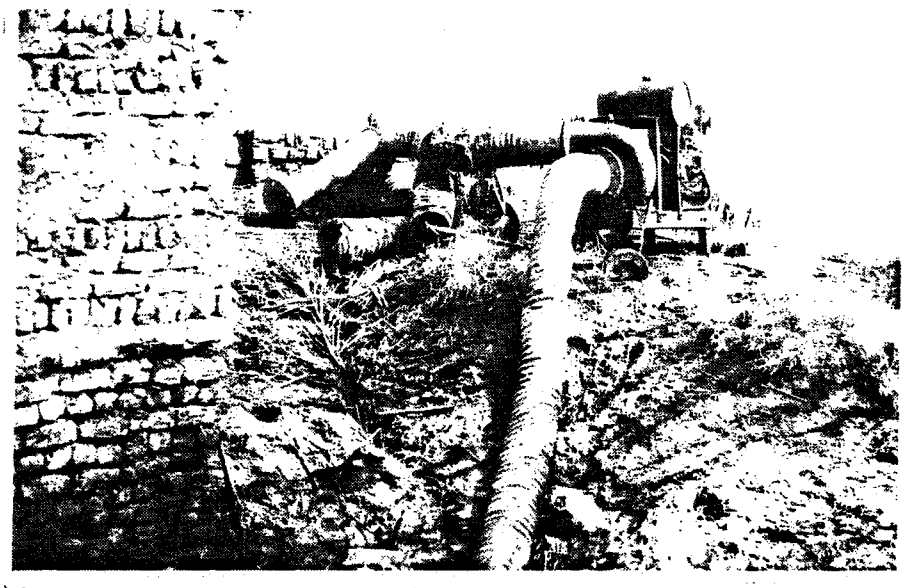
* There are 100 piasters in an Egyptian pound. The U.S. dollar is worth 83 piasters at the offical exchange rate, but about LE 1.10 on the black market.

On the northern outskirts of Ezbat Basili, next to the main irrigation canal, is a shed containing two motor pumps, one a 7½ hp and the other a 20 hp.

Some 20 men in the hamlet, including Mohamed, own part shares in these pumps. One Christian man holds a few more shares than the others.

At the end of the year, each man pays his contribution to the maintenance of these pumps based on the size of his share and the amount of his land irrigated. Mohamed usually pays about LE 55 a year.



A gasoline-powered pump belonging to Hussein's family

This cooperation extends across religious boundaries. Ibrahim and Sutky, two Muslim farmers, co-own a motor pump with Salib, a Christian. Ibrahim and Salib also cooperate in irrigating a five feddan field, of which they each own half.

Other heavy farm equipment, like tractors and threshing machines, are available for hire to those who can afford them.

One morning, I rode around with Hussein on a Russian tractor* his father had hired to plow a two feddan field. This tractor was jointly owned by a Muslim man and a Christian man, who then hired a third man to drive it.

Electricity, provided by the Aswan High Dam, came to Berat 10 years ago. Now the villagers are able to equip their homes with amenities that would have been unimaginable before: electric fans (the deluxe ones are suspended from the ceiling, a great help against the ever-present flies), washing machines (Hussein tells me they exist in the village, but I have never seen one), refrigerators and televisions.

* There is still in Berat some Russian machinery dating from the early 1970s. Most village tractors are Italian made and have a higher reputation than the Russian ones. Hussein's family owns a Russian water pump. They bought this two-cylinder machine in 1971. The following year, a representative from the Russian manufacturer came to inspect it and give advice in its use. He never came back. Sadat threw out the Soviet advisors that year. The pump still works fine, though.

Television has become very popular in Berat. It is hard to find a peasant house without a black and white set. The hamlet of El Qatar, for example, contains about 50 homes. Hussein estimated that only about seven of these are without television.

I wonder what effect all this television viewing will have on villager expectations. The gulf between the glamourous and prosperous urban life they see portrayed on television and the rather gritty reality of their own bucolic existence is enormous.

Egyptian television dramas are usually set in Cairo and portray people in western-style clothing leading comfortable, western-style lives. If you were ET just landed in Egypt, and all you ever saw of the country was its television, you would have no idea there was any poverty here at all.

Egyptian television and cinema, in general, is overwhelmingly escapist. Slapstick comedies, musical variety shows, and domestic soap operas are the usual viewing fare.

Where peasant life is portrayed (rarely), the villagers are idealized beyond recognition. No mud walls, dirt floors and swarming flies here. Instead, you see tile floors, tapestries hanging from white-washed walls and peasant women looking downright stylish with their gold bangles and necklaces.

What's going to happen when the villagers, particularly the young people, begin to crave the good life?

* * *

The instigator of all this change in Berat has been the Aswan High Dam.

In 1966-67, the dam ended forever Berat's dependence on the ancient basin irrigation system, which was based on the annual Nile flood.*

With abundant water year round, the villagers were able to grow two or three crops a year, instead of just one. Sugar cane became the major cash crop, lifting farmer incomes.

These demands on the existing technology spurred the purchase of motor pumps.

The dam produces more than 75 percent of all the electricity used in Egypt and has allowed the country to complete a rural electrification program in its 4,000 major villages. This brought television and the other amenities to Berat.

''Now life is better,'' said Mohamed. ''All the time is water.''

He could also have said: ''All the time is electricity.''

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* Every year in August, the Nile would flood for 30 days or more, usually rising about 1-1.5 meters above its normal level. The peasants would catch this water in large basins they had constructed. When the flood receded, they would irrigate their fields from ditches leading from the basins. Now they irrigate from large canals and can do this all year round.

III. Crime and Feuds

Like any small community where everybody knows what everybody else is doing, Berat is relatively crime free.

People do not seem to worry about petty theft, for example. A man who sells watermelons in El Qatar will wander off from his stand for maybe 15 minutes, leaving his pile of watermelons in plain view.

I once asked Hussein if anyone ever had their field crops pilfered. He said that if a person needed food that badly, he could ask for it rather than steal it.

Hussein could remember only one case of murder in the last couple of years in the village itself. This was a crime of passion that occurred two years ago.

An enraged husband murdered a man who was visiting his estranged wife at her mother's house. The husband was put in jail.

But feuds between villages, long endemic in Upper Egypt, are still a problem in the Luxor area.

Berat has traditionally had trouble with Legaltah, its smaller neighbor to the south. Berat residents estimate that about 40 people have been killed in fighting between the two villages in the last half century.

The most recent flareup occurred a few years ago when a Legaltah man murdered and robbed two Berat men. The killer was caught and sent to prison. The police also exiled from the village Berat men who talked of revenge.

About a year later, two elderly Legaltah men were ambushed in a sugar cane field and shot dead. A Legaltah woman who happened upon the scene was also killed. Nobody ever went to jail for this crime.

Since then, the situation has been quiet. But bad feelings remain. Mohamed said flatly that Legaltah people are mish kwayyis (no good).

By contrast, Berat has rarely quarreled with its northern neighbor, Qurna. Mohamed said Qurna people mind their own business, like Berat people.

But this amiability can disappear in a rush.

For several days at the end of June, tourists crossing the Nile ferry to the west bank antiquities were greeted by a suprising spectacle: two dozen Egyptian riot police, outfitted with black helmuts, thick black plastic shields and stout wooden truncheons, sitting at the ferry landing.

The police were obviously bored as they lounged about on the metal benches, smoking cigarettes, chatting desultorily among themselves, or just staring blankly back at the gawking tourists.

It was hard to believe, but these men had a purpose -- to keep Berat and Qurna from tearing each other apart.

Getting the story right was problematic. There is no local Berat Times to sort the facts out, so accounts do proliferate. Several differed in important details. Where

there were these differences, I accepted the version told to me by Ali. Not only do taxi drivers get around, but Ali was involved in the major scuffle, as well as the subsequent peace negotiations.

As near as I can determine, this is what happened:

On June 27, a Qurna taxi driver behind the wheel of a microbus struck a Berat man standing at the ferry landing.

The Berat man was not seriously hurt, but angry words were exchanged. The Berat man called the Qurna man, among other things, a hammar (donkey).

The next day, the Berat man brought a couple of his friends to settle scores with the Qurna man, who was larger than he was. This resulted in a general brawl between Berat and Qurna men near the police checkpoint on the road connecting the two villages. About five participants ended up in the hospital and two automobiles were damaged.

The riot police arrived from across the river to separate the two sides. A police captain was struck when he told the Berat men to move back. They felt the Qurna men should withdraw first. But the fighting stopped.

Ten men were arrested, spent two days in jail, and were each assessed LE 50 fines.

Influential men from both villages, including the two umdas (headmen), held meetings over the next several days and agreed on a fine structure to be self-enforced by each village: LE 200 if a man from one village shouted at one from the other village; LE 500 if he strikes the other man with his hand; and LE 1,000 if he hits him with a stick.

Even these measures were not entirely effective. One day after the fines were announced, a Berat man was assessed LE 200 for yelling offensive words at a Qurna man.

Ali thought his compatriot had been very stupid and found this incident quite funny.

At the root of these village feuds is the ''me and my village against the world'' credo many village men have.

Ali is ordinarily a polite, considerate, even slightly pious person. But his language becomes fierce when he explains his reasons for fighting Qurna men.

''It's like the war between the United States and Japan,'' he said. ''If I see a Japanese person, I want to kill him because he hurts my country.''

''This is my country,'' he said, referring to Berat. ''If I see a Qurna man, I fight with him. If a Qurna man sees me, he fights with me.''

IV. Village Craftsmen

Traditional village crafts are still practiced in Berat, not for the tourist trade but for the local market. Here are descriptions of three of them.

A. Abdullah

Abdullah, a skinny, wizened little man, is 49 but looks 60. His main job for the past 13 years has been the manufacture of hasir (mats used as coverings for couches and chairs). He makes his mats, and rope too, out of the fiber of dried sugar cane grass.

Working at full steam, Abdullah can make two hasir a day. Each one sells for LE 2.25 in the village. Abdullah is one of several local men who do this work.

Abdullah has no children. He and his wife Zeynab live in a small mud hut along a canal on the northern outskirts of El Qatar.

Aside from Abdullah's mat-making income, the couple's resources include a small field, now planted in sugar cane; two sheep; some chickens; and part ownership of a gamoosa (water buffalo).

They certainly don't look prosperous.

Zeynab is better preserved than Abdullah. But her face is hard and weathered and she dresses more shabbily than any woman I have seen in Berat. Her clothes are always torn in several places. One black dress has a tear in the side that clearly exposes her left hip.

Not only is their house exceptionally modest, but their yard looks like a trash heap. Corn husks, discarded pieces of metal and a nargileh (water pipe) made out of a bug spray can lie scattered about. The door of their hut is made out of scrap metal -- you can plainly see flattened out pails embedded in the surface.

Abdullah told me he likes the simple life of the village because ''there are no problems.'' He said he would not like to go to work in the city where he would ''get tired.''

I told Zeynab I hoped they had a good life as well as a simple one. She smiled impishly, kissed both sides of her right hand and extended it skyward, saying el hamdulilah (Praise be to God) and shokran allah (thank the God).

Abdullah performs his mat-making functions in a small work shed he has constructed next to his house. Open at both ends and roofed over with dried grass and straw, it keeps the sun off him.

The loom with which Abdullah makes his mats is so primitive that his Pharaonic ancestors would probably recognize it. This involves two slender three-foot-long blocks of wood staked into the ground parallel to each other about six feet apart. A third block, called the ''comb,'' which has a line of holes running down its length, is placed between these two.

Abdullah runs a thin rope, through the holes in the comb, back and forth in a pattern between the two blocks. This provides the backing for the mat.

Next, he works strips of sugar cane grass over and under the pattern made by the rope, starting from one block and working toward the other. Periodically, he brings the comb back to compress the grass against the block.

His technique for making rope is even more basic. He kneads the grass into two strands and then intertwines them, continually working in new material.

B. Ahmed Abdel Auti

A clean-shaven young man, probably in his late teens, Ahmed Abdel Auti manufactures the couches and chairs upon which you would place one of Abdullah's mats.

The furniture, constructed out of the hard wood in date palm fronds, is popular in the village.

Ahmed is not a full-time craftsman. He attends a secondary school in Luxor. He makes the furniture in his spare time, on commission. Other men do this work full-time.

The morning I watched him, he was making a chair for a man in Luxor. He would spend the better part of the morning doing it and charge the man LE 5.

Ahmed's workshop is a shady lane in El Qatar. He works sitting crosslegged in the dirt, wearing a light blue galabiyah. His few tools, a pick, wooden mallet and small hand scythe, lie close at hand.

Some of the traffic passing by in the lane was interesting: an old woman swathed in black carrying a loaf of bread on her head * and a small boy wearing a Million Dollar Man T-shirt, red plastic sandals and nothing else.

Ahmed begins by taking a date palm frond and stripping off the leafy part with his scythe. This leaves a piece of hard, curved wood about a foot and a half long. With his hammer and pick, he punches holes in the top and bottom of some of these pieces. When he assembles the chair, he will fit the pieces together without glue.

The finished chair has no back, but provides a sturdy seat.

C. Mahmood

The manufacture of sun-baked mud bricks out of dirt, water and straw is probably the most common of village crafts. These bricks are the basic building blocks of village houses, although some kiln-fired red bricks are used around doorways and other strategic areas (there are many camir (kilns) in the village).

Since people are always building new houses or extensions to their old ones, brickmakers are a common sight. I even saw a woman working with the mud and straw once. Hussein said she was probably helping out her husband.

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* Village women carry all manner of objects on their heads: water jugs, bags of animal fodder, baskets of clothes, etc. But a loaf of bread?

Mahmood, a tall, wiry, middle-aged man with a perpetual squint, specializes in brick making. To support his wife and five children, he also builds houses and raises a few small animals.

I found Mahmood one afternoon making bricks for Abu Schwall, who was building a second story to his house (Abu Schwall's father is an itinerant workman, so the son attends to these matters).

Mahmood had agreed to make Abu Schwall 12,000 bricks at LE 8 per 1,000. He can make about 950 of them on a good day.

At another brick-making operation I observed, a man named Hamdi, who was building himself a new house, had hired a three-man crew to make him 16,000 bricks. He agreed to pay the men LE 10 for each 1,000 bricks.

In both situations, the man who hired the brickmakers was responsible for providing the dirt, water, straw, and a place to work. Abu Schwall used his shaduf to channel a steady stream of water to an area a few yards away where Mahmood prepared his mud mixture.

Mahmood was wearing a white T-shirt and the loose, baggy underwear rural Egyptian men wear under their galabiyahs. He did his work squatting. When he had to move to collect some more mud or move his mold about, he kind of waddled around on his bent, spindly legs.

When enough water had collected, Mahmood mixed it with dirt to create a thick mud. He then sprinkled in straw brought to him by Abu Schwall's sister Suad.

Once he had the mud and straw mixture right, Mahmood took a handful of it, sprinkled on some water from a nearby jar, and slapped it into a wooden mold. Skimming off the excess, he picked up the mold, leaving a new brick on the ground. He then placed the mold next to the new brick and continually repeated the procedure to produce rows and rows of new bricks.

The bricks are then left standing in the sun to dry for about a week.

V. A Village Shrew: Zeynab

Most of the village women I encountered (and I never had a chance to talk seriously to any of them) tended to be very deferential to their husbands when I was around. The wife would serve the tea or lunch for the husband and I and then disappear.

One woman who did not fit this pattern was Zeynab, the wife of Abdullah the mat maker. Zeynab, to put it mildly, was a bit of a shrew. Once the novelty of my presence wore off, she did not put on any airs.

Here are three vignettes to show what I mean:

* Abdullah is squatting in his work shed, stoically making his mats, while Zeynab fusses at him. Hussein tells me it has something to do with a dispute with a neighbor about irrigation (these disputes are common and usually involve a quarrel about who gets the water first, and when).

Not getting any response from Abdullah, Zeynab goes into her house, closing the door after her. Her complaints are still audible on the other side of the door. A few minutes later, relatively calm now, she comes out to chat with Hussein, then goes back in. A little later, she comes out again to tell the dispute story to a neighbor man sitting near the couple's water pump, on the other side of Abdullah's work shed.

Hussein characterizes Zeynab's explanation as ''repetitious.'' The neighbor seems to take it all in very patiently.

I comment to Hussein that Zeynab appears to be a ''strong woman.''

''There is some woman in some houses like that,'' he says. ''There is some polite man (i.e., Abdullah) who is afraid to quarrel with anyone. There is some strong woman (Zeynab) who can speak well and can speak to a man in a strong way to make him understand her.''

Two small boys sit down next to Abdullah to watch him work. Since they are a bit in the way, Abdullah fusses at them, even reaching for a stick to brandish angrily over their heads. The boys laugh at him, but move away a little.

Apparently to keep the boys occupied and out of his hair, Abdullah gives one of them a handmade drum hanging on the side of his shed. The boys happily take the drum and move to the side of the shed, where their donkey is tied up.

This arouses Zeynab's ire. She leaves the neighbor man and goes over to scold the boys. She tells them they should be home with their mother doing some work.

The boys respond that they will do that ''later.''

But a few minutes later, they get on their donkey and leave with the drum.

* Hussein, Ibrahim (a farmer) and I are sitting under a shade tree in front of the canal, not far from Abdullah's house.

Zeynab appears up the path, in the direction of her house, complaining angrily to everyone in sight, including a man passing by on a camel. The man just smiles slightly and keeps on going.

Zeynab comes over to sit next to Ibrahim and tell him the story. Soon, she stands up, still chattering away. Ibrahim tugs vacantly at the hem of her dress and then, with a gesture of disgust, flings it back at her.

Zeynab, wife of Abdullah the mat maker

It turns out that Zeynab is angry because some children have allowed their sheep to stray into her sugar cane field. These children, two preteen girls and an even younger boy, are now standing on the other side of the canal listening to all this, obviously wondering how they are going to get their sheep back.

Zeynab walks back down the path in the direction of her house. Leaving the path, she enters her sugar cane field and begins driving the sheep from it.

The three children quickly cross the canal, by way of a water pipe, and go running after their sheep. They halt a few hundred feet from Zeynab and exchange words with her. She is accusatory, they defensive.

Finally, Zeynab stalks back to her house. The children round up their sheep and herd it past us to El Qatar.

* Another morning when Abdullah is working away on a mat while Hussein and I watch.

Zeynab sticks her head out the door, addresses some scolding words at Abdullah, thrusts a tiny chick out of the house and into the yard, and retreats back inside.

Abdullah keeps working on his mat. A young Christian man named ''Louise'' (a corruption of Louis?) has been visiting and Abdullah occasionally addresses a few words to him.

Fifteen minutes later, Zeynab's head pops out of the doorway again to issue more angry words at Abdullah. Then, back in it goes.

Abdullah would just as soon stick to his mats

Abdullah immediately springs up and practically runs to the side of the house, disappearing around the corner. According to Hussein, Zeynab had told Abdullah to move their gamoosa from the back yard to the pen at the side of the house.

He does it, too.

VI. Public Health

Deirut seems to have adequate medical facilities to cope with many of the routine medical needs a villager might have.

Two private doctors live and practice in the village. There is a government-run hospital with doctors and nurses in El Ezbah and a small pharmacy in El Gezira.

One of the private doctors, Dr. Boutris, is a short, slender, young man, usually dressed in a black T-shirt and black slacks to go with his jet black hair. He is a familiar sight in the village, puttering along the paths on his motorcycle.

Mohamed had need of his services one day.

The two of us had been working in his sugar cane field spreading kima (chemical fertilizer). I carried a bag of the white crystals suspended from my shoulder. Mohamed had gathered some in the folds of his galabiyah.

It was an incredibly hot morning. Mohamed seemed to be sweating as much as I was. I was greatly relieved when he called a rest.

Once we had collapsed in the shade, Mohamed didn't want to get up. He complained about a pain in his side. We decided to call it quits for the day.

When I came to visit him the next morning, I found Dr. Boutris and several neighbors at his house. The doctor was seated in a chair sipping tea. Everyone else sat on mats on the floor. Mohamed was stretched out on a mat looking fairly wan.

Dr. Boutris, who speaks English, told me that Mohamed had a urinary infection, had been given a prescription, and would be better in a few days. He was.

But when Ali's father suffered a stroke, which paralyzed the left side of his body, Ali had to go outside the village to find medical treatment. He took his father to a specialist in Luxor.

I asked him why he didn't use one of the cheaper state-run hospitals. Ali said there was no proper supervision in those hospitals, that the patient saw only the nurses, never the doctors. He said his father deserved better than that.

When I saw Ali's father, two months after the attack, he was much better. The paralysis had gone, although he still moved very slowly.

* * *

Of all Egypt's public health problems, the most well known is probably bilharzia, or schistosomiasis. This disease, carried by water-borne snails, is prevalent throughout the Third World, but is especially a problem in Egypt.

According to some estimates, 70 percent of rural males are affected to some degree by bilharzia. The disease can weaken, and eventually kill, its victims. Men are usually affected rather than women because they spend more time in the canals.

The snails, host for the bilharzia larvae, live in the irrigation canals that crisscross the Egyptian countryside. When a farmer steps into a canal, the snails attach themselves to him and the bilharzia larvae burrow into his skin. In the new host, the larvae become worms and begin digging their way through the man's urinary tract, liver or spleen. The bilharzia eggs are passed out in the man's excrement, which often ends up in a canal to begin the cycle anew.

I found Berat villagers to be aware of the danger lurking in their canals, but rather fatalistic about it. What can a farmer do? He has to work with canal water.

One morning, Hussein and I were standing alongside a canal near El Kom. Underneath a nearby bridge, three women were washing clothes and two small, naked boys were happily splashing about in the water.

I asked Hussein if the villagers knew about the bilharzia in the canals. He said they do. Generally, fathers and mothers tell their boys not to play in the canals, ''but small boys will go without their mother and father knowing.''

Because there is no swimming pool in the village, and boys like to swim, they have to use the canals, he said.

There are various drugs to treat bilharzia. Ironically, their very success might be making the villagers negligent. Hussein told me bilharzia is not a problem if treated in time.

He said he had caught the disease when he was 13, from swimming in a canal, but had been cured (Mohamed also caught it when he was young and was also cured).

''Any man can overcome this disease at an early time before it overcomes his body,'' said Hussein.

Let's hope so.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Cline

Received in Hanover 8/8/83