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Berat: The Copts

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Dear Peter;

All of my Institute reports represent "work-in-progress," but this one more than most.

There are a number of information gaps and uncorroborated stories here. On the other hand, I thought there was enough good material to justify a report at this time.

It has been my experience that each visit to Berat results in contradictory information or new angles coming to light. That will surely be the case with this report on Berat's Coptic community.

I did have one stroke of genuine bad luck. One of my Christian informants had been planning to visit Cairo for a couple of weeks. His visit would have coincided with my last stay there. We had been planning to spend time together, which I saw as an excellent opportunity to go over all this material in a more systematic fashion. I thought he would be more willing to talk about "sensitive" matters away from the village.

Alas and alack. The day I left Luxor for Cairo on the train, he came to the station to see me off. He then informed me that his father had refused to give him the LE 200 necessary to make the Cairo trip. This man is 34 years old, mind you. But like so many unmarried Egyptians, he lives at home and is dependent on his family financially.

I hope I have another chance to talk to him.

In the interim, the following should be of some interest.

I. Historical Background

The word Copt is an abbreviation of the Greek word for Egypt, Aigyptios. The Greeks had apparently modelled this term on the pharaonic word Het-Ka-Ptah, which means "the house of the Ka (soul) of Ptah." This was the name of an ancient shrine at Memphis.

In Arabic, Aigyptios became Gibt. People in Upper Egypt sometimes use the word gipti to refer to Christians. The Arabic word travelled to Europe as Copt during the Middle Ages.

As this word derivation implies, the modern Copts

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Three Coptic priests who look after the 4th century D  ir el-Ahmar (Red Monastery) near Sohag. They whipped those crosses out of their breast pockets as soon as I pointed the camera at them. The fellow on the right had apparently left his somewhere.

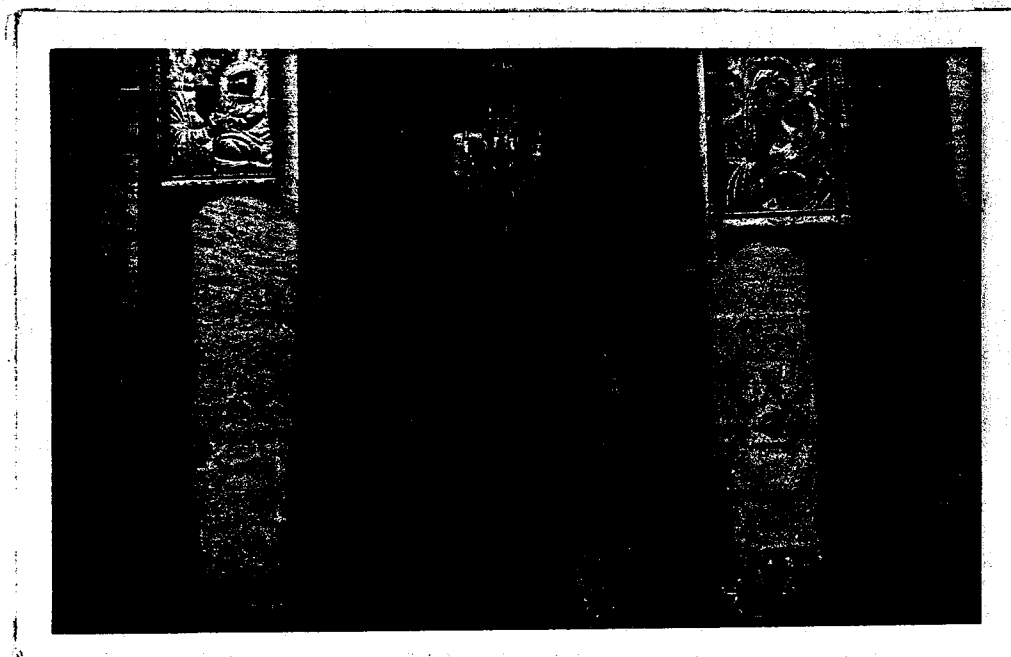
are directly descended from the ancient Egyptians, although they picked up some Greek blood during Ptolemaic and Roman times.*

Large numbers of Copts converted to Islam after the 7th century, so many Muslim Egyptians also have links with the Pharaonic past. Of course, the Muslims picked up much Arab and Nubian blood as well.

I thought the Berat Copts, in general, had more delicate features and smaller bodies than their Muslim neighbors.

The beginnings of Christianity in Egypt are shrouded in legend, the earliest of which has to do with the flight of the Holy Family from Palestine into Egypt to escape Herod's persecution. The story has a Biblical basis (see Matthew 2:13-23), but was elaborated on by Armenian and Coptic traditions. According to the story, Jesus, Mary and Joseph

* Yusef (a pseudonym, like most names in this report) comes from the most respected priestly family in Berat. He said his family came to Egypt from 'Asubia' nine generations ago. He placed 'Asubia' in West Africa. I wonder if he meant Ethiopia, which has its own Coptic church. But then Ethiopia is on the eastern side of the African continent. Yusef has black, kinky hair, but no other negroid features. His skin is light brown.



The guardian of the Deir el-Adhra north of El Minya opening the door to the haikal, or sanctuary. Only the columns and lower part of the walls remain from the 4th century. The wooden screen and icons are all recent.

travelled from Ismailia to Asyut (these localities had different names then, of course) before returning the same way to Palestine. Modern-day Copts will often speak of this journey as an established historical fact.

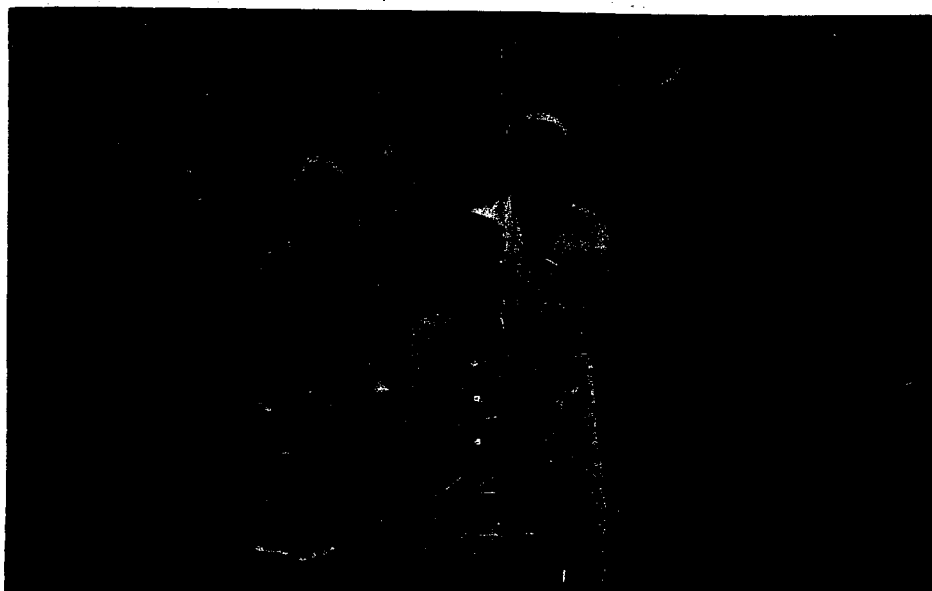
I visited one of the sites that is closely associated with the Holy Family's travels. North of El Minya on the east bank of the Nile is a high desert cliff overlooking the Nile Valley known as the Gebel't-Tair (''Mountain of the Birds,'' because pigeons circle around it). The Holy Family was sailing south down the Nile when a large rock suspended on the Gebel't-Tair threatened to fall upon the boat. But the child Jesus extended His Hand and prevented the rock from falling.* The imprint of His Hand is said to have remained on the rock.

In 328 A.D., a monastery was built on the Gebel't-Tair. It housed a community of monks until the middle of the 19th century before falling into ruin. The Bishop of El Minya completed a substantial renovation of the building in 1938.

I did not see the famous handprint. But I do know that a miraculous oil is produced at the deir.

I visited the church in June accompanied by Michael,

* See Meinardus, Otto. Christian Egypt: Ancient and Modern. Cairo: French Institute of Oriental Archaeology, 1965.



A priestly family living in the village atop the Gebel't-Tair. The man in white is Father Gabriel. His wife and children stand around him. The boy in front is named Mina. He and I spent several hours playing "Jack takes all," a popular card game in Egypt. I had never played it before so he must have let me win some of the games. My friend Michael is on the left. I don't remember if the two priests at the table also live in the village or were just visiting that day.

a Christian undergraduate Geology major from El Minya University. At Michael's request, the deir guardian went into the haikal (sanctuary) and came out with a greasy bottle of oil. Michael dipped a piece of paper into the bottle to collect some of the oil and then put the paper into a plastic wrapper. He said the oil was ordinary cooking oil that had been blessed by the priests to give it special healing powers. He planned to give some of it to his mother and some to an acquaintance of ours, Tadros, who had been unable to come to the deir with us that day.*

* Tadros is a middle-aged man who works for an automobile parts supplier in Cairo. He was raised in the Coptic Church, but switched to Protestantism. This Tadros was a firm believer in the efficacy of holy oils. He told me his wife had been unable to get pregnant for many years. Then one day, a female friend of hers saw an image of the Virgin Mary on the wall of her house. Afterward, an oil came forth from that spot on the wall. Tadros's wife put some of the oil on herself and soon became pregnant. Tadros, who has suffered from a heart condition for many years, did the same. He said he can now walk up 10 flights of stairs where three had exhausted him before.

The story of the Holy Family's journey is a popular tradition. The Coptic Church in Egypt officially dates its founding to a visit St. Mark made to the country about the middle of the 1st century. To this day, the patriarchs of Alexandria trace their succession directly from him. In fact, in 1968, the relics of St. Mark were returned to Egypt from Italy and laid to rest in a new Coptic cathedral in Alexandria.

Christianity was firmly established in Egypt by the end of the 2nd century. According to one authority, it reached the Theban plain, where Luxor-Berat is located, by the second half of the 3rd century.* After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313, the fellaheen (peasant) masses of Egypt began converting en masse.

From the 4th century onward, a line of monasteries began forming at the desert's edge along both banks of the Nile. One of these was the Deir Shahid Tadros el-Mahareb (Monastery of St. Theodore the Warrior) on the west bank across from Luxor.

This structure is located in the desert about 200 meters west of Berat's hamlet of Ezbat Basili. It comprises a multi-domed church surrounded by a walled enclosure. There are some stone columns inside the church with Greek crosses embossed on the lower parts that appear to be of some antiquity. But most of the church is built of sun-baked mud brick, the common building material of the region, and is probably fairly recent.**

Local tradition dates the founding of the deir to "Roman times." It would certainly have to be after 303, when Diocletian initiated a great persecution of the Christians.

St. Theodore was a popular Egyptian warrior saint (a soldier in the imperial army?) who is credited with slaying a dragon while in Persia. He was tortured and martyred during the Diocletian persecution.

At the Council of Chalcedon, in 451, the Egyptian church broke with the Roman church. The dispute, as was usually the case at this time, was over the nature of the Trinity, although simple politics entered into it also.

The Egyptians, following the lead of their Patriarch Dioscorus, embraced the Monophysite heresy, which maintained that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were contained in one form, rather than in three separate but related forms.***

Aside from the theological aspects, the break was

* Du Bourguet, Pierre M. The Art of the Copts. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1971.

** By contrast, the Deir el-Abyad (White Monastery) and Deir el-Ahmar (Red Monastery), both near Sohag, are recognizably from the 4th century. Both structures are built of stone on the Roman basilica plan. Their crumbling remains are similar to those that can be found all over the Mediterranean world.

*** Egyptian Copts still enjoy theological arguments. A middle-aged accountant in Cairo once told me all the technical reasons why Mohamed was a messenger of God, but not a prophet. He said that religious controversy is "very important to eastern men," but less so to westerners. "Americans like to work," he said.

significant because it put the Egyptians at odds with the imperial authority in Constantinople. Some scholars maintain that Egyptian disaffection from Byzantine rule contributed to the country's easy conquest by the Arabs in 641.

The Copts suffered only sporadic persecution under the Muslims. They seem to have sustained more martyrdoms during the Roman period.* At the end of the 8th century, they were forced to wear distinctive clothing and were forbidden to build new churches or repair old ones. The Caliph al-Hakim initiated a bloody persecution in the 11th century and destroyed some churches.**

The most damaging aspect of the new regime for the Copts was the Muslim taxation policy. The Muslims were exempt from the head tax so the full burden fell on the Copts. As a result, large numbers of Copts went into apostasy.

By the 9th century, the Copts were in the minority in Egypt, and by the 14th century, had declined to about one-eleventh of the population. And there they have remained ever since, a Christian island in a Muslim sea.

The Coptic language too gave way to Arabic by about the 13th century. Coptic is the last phase of the pharaonic language. It utilized the Greek alphabet and added seven new letters of its own. Most modern Copts know only a few phrases of it taken from their mass. Most of the Coptic mass is conducted in Arabic.

It is now estimated that 6.3 million, or 14 percent, of Egypt's population of 45 million are Christian. There are a few Catholics and Protestants, but most belong to the Coptic Church.

Compared to many minorities in the Third World, the Egyptian Copts have fared well under a post-World War II nationalist government. They are effectively barred from the highest positions in the government or army, but are allowed to pursue other professions and worship as they please.***

The last years of President Anwar El-Sadat brought a severe disturbance to this relatively benign pattern.

* To this day, some Copts have a distinct martyr complex. Rifaat, a Luxor secondary school teacher with family ties in Berat, described the Coptic Church as "the Mother of Martyrs." He told me that Copts are happy when Muslims abuse them. When times are peaceful, the Christians "forget their religion," but persecution unites them, he said. Rifaat is a bit of a zealot, so I suspect he speaks largely for himself in his welcoming of Muslim persecution.

** According to Meinardus, the exteriors of Coptic churches are rather unimposing because "from the end of the 7th century down to the beginning of the 19th century, attacks on Christians by fanatical mobs were of frequent occurrence; and, as the churches were inevitably the first to suffer on such occasions, the Christians covered up all external decoration and walled up the main doors, so that the churches might not be distinguished from the neighboring houses."

*** There are many Coptic doctors, for example. But an American employee of the Egyptian Ministry of Health told me that Copts were systematically discriminated against in the higher reaches of the bureaucracy.

I was not able to do any research on this recent history before I left Cairo, so my chronology of events is hazy. But Copts I talked to mentioned three major incidents that occurred in the year or two before Sadat's 1981 assassination. There were anti-Christian riots in the city of Asyut, in Middle Egypt; three Christian goldsmiths died at the hands of Muslim robbers in the city of Nag Hammadi, in Upper Egypt; and the Coptic patriarch, Pope Shenudah III, was locked up in one of his monasteries.

In El Minya, I met a Coptic accounting student at the university there who said his brother Yousri had been caught up in the Asyut disturbances.

Yousri was a student at Asyut University. According to his brother's story, a Muslim mob besieged the Christian clubhouse on campus. The students were trapped inside.

With two other men, Yousri escaped by jumping to the ground from a wall several stories high. He landed safely, but one of his companions damaged his spine and the other hurt his ankle in the fall.

Pretending he was a Muslim, Yousri joined the crowd of demonstrators and tricked them into following him away from the clubhouse.

The various Asyut disturbances, which included an attack on a police station by Muslim fundamentalists, attracted much press attention at the time.

I have never seen a published report about the Nag Hammadi incident, but several Coptic sources alluded to it. According to the most detailed version I heard, a Coptic goldsmith and his two sons were murdered when a group of Muslims robbed their shop, apparently to finance weapons purchases. The men were caught and put in jail.

Sadat's action of stripping Pope Shenudah of his power to run the church and confining him to a monastery in the western desert is well known. I understand that the pope is still in the monastery, but has resumed his direction of church affairs.

Pope Shenudah's removal from public view has greatly worried the Coptic community.

"His people love him and want him back very much," a university computer science major in Cairo told me. The student complained that the Arabic language press in Egypt had spread lies about the Pope by saying that he had been seeking a "state within a state."

Everyone agrees the situation has become much calmer under President Mubarak. But this student was worried that the Pope Shenudah case had faded from public view. He asked me if Americans knew about it. I had to say that most Americans probably don't know what a Copt is.

The student was understanding about that. He said that "Americans lead very busy lives," unlike his fellow Egyptians, who "watch television all day."

Although Sadat's foreign policy initiatives and his freeing up of the economic system are popular with most Copts I talked to, the late president's handling of the Muslim/Christian

disturbances earned him their lasting enmity. The Cairo accountant was convinced that Sadat had deliberately set the Muslims against the Christians.

Tadros summed up Coptic feeling rather succinctly: "Sadat created a monster, and it ate him."

II. The Village Setting

Berat, a village located on the west bank of the Nile across from Luxor, contains about 10,000 inhabitants, almost all of them Muslim. Out of the 10 hamlets in the village, Christians live in only two of them, Ezbat Basili and El Kom. They have a major presence in Ezbat Basili, where 225 of them live alongside 400 Muslims. In El Kom, Berat's administrative center, some 25 Christians live in one small section of the hamlet surrounded by 5,000 Muslim neighbors.

Even though they are outnumbered in Ezbat Basili, the Christian settlement dominates the hamlet because it is concentrated. The Christian families live in multi-storied structures connected to each other like tenement houses in an area about half the size of a football field.

The Ezbat Basili Muslims, on the other hand, are scattered all over. Their small settlements, usually consisting of one or two families, are separated from each other by fields. Apparently, many Muslims use Ezbat Basili as a mailing address, but actually live closer to El Kom or Kom Lohlah hamlets.

The Christian community centers on the Deir Shahid Tadros el-Mahareb. Living only 200 meters from this important church links the Ezbat Basili Christians to their larger Christian community.

Masses are held at the deir during the week on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. Worshipers come from Luxor and Berat, as well as from the neighboring villages of Qurna and Legaltah. At the masses I have attended, most of the men dressed in shirts and slacks, rather than galabiyahs, indicating a strong Luxor contingent. In fact, the priests who conduct the masses at the deir are from Luxor churches.*

Every January 20, there is a major festival held at the deir in honor of St. Tadros, its patron saint. Local boosters claim that 1,000 people from all over Upper Egypt come to attend this celebration.

* Although deir is usually translated as "monastery," there are no priests presently living there, as far as I know. There are two nuns in residence now. One of them is afraid of every white male foreigner who pokes his head in the door. It seems that a visiting tourist man of forgotten nationality once asked her to marry him. This nun tended to retreat to the kitchen or her room when I turned up because she thought I might be that man returned to pursue her. She is in her late 20s or early 30s and not particularly attractive.

The deir has about 20 small rooms available for visiting pilgrims. These visitors spend the night there on the eves of major feast days.



A view of the Christian settlement in Ezbat Basili. The plowman and the man sprinkling corn seeds in the furrows are Muslim. They are working for a Christian man who owns the land. The al-mihrath plow is used throughout the Arab world and is similar to one used by the ancient Egyptians.

Christian villagers in Berat contribute their time and labor to help maintain the deir and tend to have a proprietorial feeling toward it. But people from the other communities help out too. I was there one morning when a group of women from one of the Luxor churches arrived to clean it.

In a certain sense, Ezbat Basili owes its existence to the deir.

About 150 years ago, a Christian man named Sheikh Balad Basili decided to relocate his house from El Kom to the edge of the desert.* He owned some land there, but his main reason was to be closer to the deir. Other Christian families then came to settle near him (ezbah is Arabic for "a few houses close together," or a small settlement).

For many years afterward, Ezbat Basili was entirely Christian. The way the Christians tell it, their Muslim neighbors

* This man was chief of the ghafirs (men who are issued rifles by the omda (headman) to patrol the village at night), an office one step below that of omda. His name literally means "Country sheikh Basili," since baladi is Arabic for "country." It is interesting that a Christian could attain such a high post in a Muslim village. Yusef is this man's great grandson, one more indication of his family's prominence in the village.



The Christian quarter of El Kom. About five Christian families live next to each other along this street. The Berat omda's sprawling residence is a little farther down the lane.

made their way in through the back door.

About 25 years ago, Yusef's father, a priest, gave some land he owned in the village to a Muslim man employed as the deir guardian.* As typically happens in Egyptian villages, the man's children built their houses next to his. Gradually, a strip of Muslim houses formed along the eastern edge of the Christian settlement. Other Muslim families settled in the vicinity.

Unlike the Christians, the Ezbat Basili Muslims lack a clear community focus. Since there is no mosque in the hamlet, they have to attend the one in El Kom or the smaller one in Kom Lohlah.

The ones that I know are relatively new to the hamlet, having located there within the last couple of decades. Except for one farmer who owns six faddans, they are landless. But many have been very successful getting a piece of the tourist trade. Because of that, Muslim homes in the hamlet tend to appear more prosperous than Christian ones. Amenities that are common in Muslim homes -- ceiling fans and television sets, for example -- are rarer in Christian ones.

* This is a sign of the amicable Muslim/Christian relations that have historically existed in the area. But the present deir guardian is a Coptic soldier in the Egyptian army. Sometimes he wears his uniform while on duty, sometimes a galabiyah. After the troubles of 1981, the government stationed armed guards at major Christian sites in Egypt.

Some Christians have jobs in Luxor. One is employed by the health department, for example. Several others work for the government antiquities service on the west bank as temple guardians. But no Copts are involved in the commercial end of the tourism industry on the west bank. They don't sell alabaster figurines or soft drinks, peddle pharaonic-style jewelry, or serve as tour guides. They don't seem to be involved in the lucrative fake antiques business either.*

The Christian explanation for this is that they do not like to cheat the tourists, while the Muslims enjoy it.

Yusef's family owns 12 feddans in Ezbat Basili and is the wealthiest Christian family connected with it. They hire other Christian villagers to work their land. Although they still own a house in the village (the old family homestead, now very rundown), they actually live in Luxor, where they own two houses. Yusef spends his "vacations" in the village, where he can escape from his domineering father, but lives with his family in Luxor most of the time.**

The second wealthiest Christian family is Rifaat's. As is the case with Yusef, Rifaat's father is a priest and his grandfather was one. Rifaat's family has a home in Luxor, but maintains a house and land, about four feddans, in the village. Rifaat enjoys visiting his relatives in Ezbat Basili, but finds looking after the land a nuisance. He knows that the men who work for him are taking more than their share of the harvests, but with his schoolteacher job in Luxor, he doesn't have time to watch them more carefully.

One of Rifaat's cousins, the elderly, long-faced, white-whiskered Arustus (derived from the Roman "Augustus"?), owns 15 feddans. Unmarried and childless, he has a reputation in the village for being a Midas. "He doesn't like a wife because he likes money," one Muslim youth told me.

Arustus looks back fondly to the old days when men used the mihrath to plow their land and the sagia (cow-driven waterwheel) to irrigate it. He thinks innovations such as tractors and motor pumps have had a bad effect on modern men. "They're like molodia -- weak," he told me.

Molodia is a green, slimy, spinach-like vegetable much beloved by the Egyptian palate.

Another Christian farmer, Naruz, owns about 10 feddans. The rest own less than that.

One problem the Christians have is that much of their land is located near the desert, where the soil is not very fertile and irrigation difficult.

* However, I did hear a story about two Christian brothers who moved to Cairo from Berat about 30 years ago. They set up a shop to sell charcoal. A Muslim man from Berat who had unearthed some real pharaonic antiques asked them to use their business connections to help him dispose of his treasure. The Muslim man is now one of the richest in Berat because he invested his money in land and commercial activities.

** Yusef, who is 34, does not have a steady job or career. He has rented and then managed small Luxor hotels in the past, but depends on his father to finance these ventures.

III. Relations with Muslims

There is much superficial friendliness between Muslims and Christians in Berat.

They greet each other warmly during encounters in the fields or along village paths, friendly banter being the rule. It is common for Muslim men to drop by Christian homes for tea and conversation, although not vice versa. At least one Christian boy joins the Muslim youths in their evening football game.

Both of the doctors working in the village, Dr. Boutris and Dr. Emat, are Christian and accepted by the Muslims. Dr. Boutris particularly is popular with them.*

But there is tension too, and an essential feeling of separation.

Muslim and Christian youths do not socialize together at night. I know of only one exception to that. Two young men used to go out into a field together in the early morning hours and share a bottle of wine. But they discontinued the practice after the Muslim got married. Their friendship, which continues at a reduced level, is a rare one.

The Christian boys never turn up at any of the west bank tourist inns where the Muslim men go to drink. A Muslim friend and I once talked a Christian into accompanying us to one of these places. There were several Muslims there and the Christian was uncomfortable. Afterward, he said he would never go back there again.

I have noticed that when Muslim and Christian men engage in banter or horseplay, the Muslim will often playfully slap the Christian on the back or punch him. But the Christians seem to hold back from that kind of physical display.

A Muslim man named Fuad celebrated his son's circumcision in August with a large hafla (party). As is usual at these haflas, the guests were served a large meal, which they paid Fuad LE 1 for. A group of Christian men came to eat,

* Curiously enough, the Christian villagers don't particularly like Boutris because he seems to lack religious enthusiasm. One Christian man asked Boutris pointblank why he never attended mass at the deir. Boutris, according to this story, apologized and said his work kept him too busy. The Christians also accuse Boutris of being too slow in making house calls. For these reasons, the Christians often seek medical attention at Dr. Emat's government-run clinic in El Ezbah hamlet, about two kilometers away. Dr. Boutris, who lives practically next door in Kom Lohlah hamlet, is grudgingly conceded to be the better doctor. Dr. Emat's wife, also a doctor, administers to women at the clinic, by the way.

Boutris's popularity with the Muslims stems, in part, from an incident that occurred about four years ago. An elderly Muslim man fell ill and consulted Boutris, who gave him some medicine. When the man died, the Muslim doctor who then ran the El Ezbah clinic accused Boutris of malpractice. The village omda was called in to investigate the charges. But the son of the man who died defended Boutris. He told the omda that he had taken his father to other doctors and they had confirmed Boutris's diagnosis. The omda then dismissed the accusations against Boutris, whose reputation in the village was enhanced. I know the son of the man who died. To this day, his confidence in Boutris is unshakable.



A Coptic family from El Kom, nuclear, extended, and probably a few neighbor children as well.

but it was my impression that they looked uncomfortable and left the table hurriedly.

A week or so later, a man named Mohamed gave a small haffa to celebrate the wedding of his sister, Sayida. All of the Muslim guests who attended partook of the meal. But five or six Christian men remained sitting outside the house. They told Mohamed they had already eaten.

When I quizzed a Christian informant about this behavior, he said that some Christians eat at Muslim haflas, and some don't. Until about a year ago, there was no problem at all. But then something happened that put a major strain on Muslim/Christian relationships in Berat.

I got most of the details of this story from a Christian source, although a Muslim mentioned it as well.

About a year ago, a Christian boy from the village went to Cairo, met a Muslim girl, and fell in love with her. He brought her back to the village.*

This scandalized both Christians and Muslims. The village omda came to Ezbat Basili armed with a tape recorder. He took the Christian boy into a room. When they reemerged, the boy had agreed to go to Qena and officially change his religion (Egyptian passports list a person's religion). The boy also ended up having to change the name on his passport to a Muslim one.

Later, he had second thoughts and seems to have gotten his religion switched back to Christian. But for some reason, the state has balked at giving him his old name back. So the poor fellow is stuck with an unwanted Muslim first name on his passport.

Another incident occurred about five years ago, when a Christian woman from El Kom married the brother of the omda and became a Muslim. After only a year, the couple divorced and the woman moved back to her family, becoming a Christian again.

Despite the divorce, the woman and her former husband, who remarried and now has children, are apparently on good terms. During the sugar cane harvest, he lends her workers to help cut the cane on her three and a half feddans. He also lends her money and fertilizer.

But the woman's father was so angry and humiliated by his daughter's apostasy that he moved out of El Kom and took up residence in a small house in the middle of a field outside the hamlet. Apparently reconciled, the woman now lives there with her father, mother, and an uncle.

It is said that the woman plans to move to Luxor when her father and uncle die. She is afraid of living in that isolated spot without a male around.

I have visited this woman twice. She is a handsome, self-possessed person, probably in her late 30s. She looks so calm and respectable that it is hard to imagine her stirring

* Apparently just to introduce her to his family. I don't know whether he actually married her. Neither the Christian nor Muslim source mentioned that. But knowing village morality, I can't imagine that they were just "dating." The Christian source indicated the girl was of dubious reputation. He said she "slept with many men."

The Muslim just said that the boy moved to Cairo and became a Muslim, making his parents very upset.

up so much excitement.

Since both of the above stories are incomplete and not well corroborated, I hesitate to make too much of them.* But taken together, they do indicate the tremendous furor that can result from a cross-religious love affair and the perils associated with such an involvement. This is the greatest single source of tension between the Muslim and Christian communities in Berat because it threatens their religious solidarity.

A Muslim man once told me that a Muslim would be killed if he tried to change his religion. "I know that," he said, even after admitting that such a thing had never happened in Berat.

"I think Christians not do that (kill an apostate) because they are afraid," he said. "But I think Muslim man not afraid to do that."

IV. The Spiritual Realm

Lacking any political power in the village (or in the country as a whole, for that matter), and possessing only mild economic clout there, the Berat Christians retreat for solace into their ancient religious traditions. In this spiritual realm, their priests and saints are linked with the divine power.

Even educated, urban Copts will speak about saints and ancient miracles as if they witnessed them with their own eyes yesterday.

One night in June, I walked into Cairo's northern district of Shubra. Besides being one of the most densely populated places on earth, Shubra is home to a large Coptic community.

A couple of blocks north of the railway station, I glanced down a narrow side alley and was arrested by the brightly-lit frontage of a church. Exterior mosaics rich in golds and blues glittered in the light.

Walking into the almost empty building, I found the interior walls covered with a profusion of murals illustrating Biblical scenes and stories of the saints. The style was basically Byzantine, with stiff, elongated forms, and strong, contrasting colors. But there was also a pronounced idiosyncratic, almost cartoon-like twist.

A young man saw me studying the paintings and came over to chat in English. He introduced himself as Yousri. He said he was a deacon of the church and a computer science student at a Cairo university. He identified the church as having been built in 1963 and dedicated to St. Menas.

I commented on how charming the murals were.** He

* I got all my details of the second story from a Muslim man who is on good terms with the Christian woman. But my Christian sources would not even talk about what happened. One told me I would be "heartless" to ask questions about it.

** Not everyone thinks so. I took a German friend to see the church and he found the murals to be garish and overdone.

said they had been painted in the early 1970s by a member of the church named Magdyfaik.

We stood in front of one mural where an armored man on horseback was spearing a monster that resembled the Tasmanian Devil in the old Bugs Bunny cartoons — it was hairy, had long, vampire-like teeth, and bulging eyes. Yousri identified this scene as St. George slaying the dragon and conceded that Magdyfaik's imagination had "run away with him."

Another painting showed a monk-like figure bent over carrying Christ, who was straight and stiff as a wooden post, on his back. Yousri said this was St. Bishoi (Greek for "bishop"?) and proceeded with sincere conviction to tell me his story.

Bishoi lived with several other priests in a monastery. Wanting very much to see Jesus, the priests continually prayed that Christ would appear to them.

One night, Bishoi received a revelation that Christ would appear at a nearby mountain the next morning.

When dawn broke, all the priests ran off pell mell to the mountain. Bishoi was the last to leave the monastery. As he was walking along the road, he found an old man lying by the side of it. When the man appealed for help, Bishoi picked him up and carried him on his back to the monastery, even though it meant missing Christ at the mountain.

As he neared the monastery, Bishoi could feel the frail old man becoming heavier and heavier on his back. When they reached the monastery, the old man was strong enough to stand up. Bishoi then knew who it was and he bent down to wash Christ's feet.

For the Egyptian Christians, saints and miracles do not end with modern times. Rifaat and I once had a curious conversation after lunch at his family's house in Ezbat Basili. Rifaat said the villagers still talk about the miracles his grandfather, Father Tadros, used to perform.

Here are two of them.

One day, when Father Tadros was travelling in the mountains, he encountered a fierce lion. Being then an old man, Father Tadros had little hope of surviving this encounter. But he prayed to God for help. The Lord gave Father Tadros the strength to kill the lion with his cane.

One day when Father Tadros was travelling about in the valley, he came to a well. He and his donkey were thirsty, but a boy guarding the well refused to let them have a drink. Father Tadros returned to his village very angry. The next day, a crowd of people came to visit him. They said the well had run dry. Knowing about the incident with the boy, they begged the priest to bring the water back. At first Father Tadros refused. But after they continued to implore him, he relented and accompanied them to the well. After he said a prayer over the dry hole, "the water increased more and more."

At least that's what the grandson says.

Later, I mentioned something to Yusef about Rifaat's grandfather being a great saint. Yusef said his own grandfather, Father Mata, was a greater saint. Father Tadros "looked after the money," he said.

To illustrate this point, Yusef told me about an



Christian villagers in Ezbat Basili repairing a water pump. Most people in Berat get their water from wells.

incident that occurred before World War II during King Farouk's time.

Bolis Basha, a fabulously rich Christian man who lived in the village of Darbiya, once gave Father Mata LE 200.* That was a king's ransom in those days.

Father Mata thanked Bolis Basha profusely. But since he did "not look to the money," he threw it in the toilet. Bolis Basha also gave LE 50 to Father Tadros, who accepted the gift.

When Bolis Basha found out what Father Mata had done with his money, he confronted him and prevailed upon him to accept an even larger sum. Father Mata then distributed this largesse to the poor members of his family.

* Darbiya, about seven kilometers south of Berat on the west bank, was a center of rural landed wealth before the 1952 Revolution and Nasserist land reforms. You can still see there at least one grand old mansion with neo-classical columns and Italianesque balconies. Bolis Basha owned 10,000 feddans, according to Tusef. These properties were located around Darbiya and two other neighboring towns, Armant and Mariss. After the revolution, the government appropriated all the land except for 500 feddans. The family was devastated, but managed to rebuild its wealth. They have few landholdings now, but own several properties in Cairo. One family member has a high post in the Agricultural Ministry, one works for the American embassy, another for a European embassy, one is a doctor, and one woman is married to a marshal in the army (I'm surprised that a Christian could reach such a high position in the Egyptian army).

I also heard about a Muslim man from Darbiya who lost 100 feddans under the land reform. Reduced to poverty, he went mad and now sits in front of his house yelling abuse at Nasser, the Egyptian government, and his neighbors. His son is a religion student at Al Azhar University in Asyut.

Yusef's claims for the eminence of his grandfather should be believed. Father Mata is buried at the deir. The dome of his tomb is higher than that of the church itself.

The whitewashed walls around the tomb are marked with graffiti from pious folks asking the saint's blessings or assistance. One is from a student requesting help in his academic career.

The day I visited the tomb with Yusef, there was a dark stain in the dirt at the entrance. Yusef said a man had slaughtered a sheep there to thank Father Mata for helping him with a problem. The man gave Yusef some of the meat. There are benefits to being related to a saint.

The Coptic Church press has printed a small booklet in Arabic about Father Mata's life. As far as I know, nobody has yet written a book about Father Tadros.

While it is not suprising that Egyptian Christians attribute supernatural powers to their priests, it is remarkable that some Muslims do also.

One Sunday morning after the mass, the worshippers at the deir were sitting around the small courtyard in front of the church eating a late breakfast. Two Muslim women from the village walked in. One was dragging a small boy behind her.

She was dragging him because little Mohamed (an ironic name under the circumstances) didn't want to be there. He let his mother know that by whining piteously and by grabbing hold of furniture and columns. She had to pry him away from these.

While the other woman took a seat near the entrance, the mother pulled her son over to where a priest was sitting. She told him her boy had been playing with some children three days ago when a big dog attacked him. Since then, he had been seeing this dog in his dreams, which caused him to wake up crying.

The previous night, the mother herself had a dream in which a woman in white told her to appear at the deir the next day and have a priest pray over her son. If she did that, Mohamed would not dream about the dog anymore, the apparition told her.

A Christian friend explained to me that "everyone knows a woman in white clothes is St. Mary." Since this particular morning fell during the 15-day long Coptic Festival of St. Mary, the woman's dream had received added credence in her mind.

Whatever his mother thought about the power of Christian priests, Mohamed wanted no part of it. While his mother was talking to the priest, he squirmed and struggled so much she had to hold him down to the floor.

The priest sprinkled some water on both mother and son from a jar someone passed to him. The boy whimpered and struggled with renewed energy, trying to hit his mother. The priest stood up and walked into the church. The mother followed, dragging Mohamed behind her. I could hear his wailing echoing from inside the church.

A few minutes later, there was quiet. The three of them came out of the church, Mahamed very calm now. He sat down next to his mother as she took a place at one of the tables to eat some foul (a bean dish) and bread. A Christian woman was sitting opposite her. The two did not say a word to each other. The other Christians in the courtyard and the second Muslim woman were also quiet.

When she had finished eating, the woman took her son by the hand and, accompanied by the other Muslim woman, left the deir.

About a week before this incident, I had heard about an almost identical case. A Christian friend said a Muslim woman came to his house one morning and asked him where she could find a priest. He directed her to the deir.

The woman had a small girl with her. She told him that the child had been bitten by a dog and was afraid to sleep at night.* The woman wanted a priest to say a "special prayer" for the girl.

The things that go on in an Egyptian village can sometimes surprise you.

Sincerely,

Kenneth Clive

* If Berat seems to be overrun by vicious dogs, well, it is. Egyptian peasants do not care for their dogs as do suburban Americans. They don't put tags on them and let them sleep in the garage, for example. Berat dogs live off table scraps and whatever else they can scavenge. They roam around in packs and frequently get into bloody fights, making a frightful racket. Village men carry staves with them when walking around at night, mostly to fend off these snarling animals.