



# Egypt's Fellahin

## Part 1: Beyond the Mountains of Kaf

by Richard Critchfield



### ARAB REPUBLIC OF EGYPT

Nowhere do the past and present collide so emphatically as in Upper Egypt, along the Nile between Cairo and Aswan. There Egyptians feel subject, not master, to fate. The scientific and material power represented by the Aswan Dam has introduced a psychological and social turbulence new to village life.

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Fieldstaff Reports

American  
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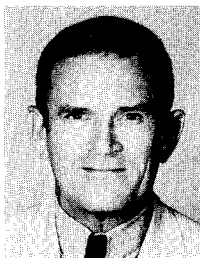
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## EGYPT'S FELLAHIN

### Part I: Beyond the Mountains of Kaf

by Richard Critchfield

July 1976

"Egypt should return to the main principles of our Muslim heritage," Anwar Sadat told this writer in a recent interview. "I don't want the new generation to be a lost generation."

A late, flat sun glittered across the Mediterranean as we spoke at his Alexandria summer residence facing the sea. It was the end of a long day for the Egyptian President and he visibly relaxed as he talked of his boyhood tending cattle and harvesting wheat in his native village of Miet Abu el Koum, 50 miles north of Cairo in the heart of the Nile Delta. He still possesses a small farm there and most of his family remain fellahin. The word comes from the Arabic verb, *falaha*, which means to till the soil. But fellah in Egypt is much more than peasant, or farmer. It also suggests a peculiarly organic relationship with the green, irrigated fields beside the Nile, a way of life imbued with the beliefs of medieval Islam and customs some of which go back to early Christian and earlier still Pharaonic times. "I still have a deep attachment to the land and to my village," Sadat says. It is evident in his thinking.

Sadat is concerned about the cultural impact of Egypt's extremely rapid modernization. Mostly since the 1952 July Revolution, nearly half of Egypt's 37 million people have become urbanized; an actual majority of the populations of Cairo and Alexandria are now first-generation fellahin immigrants straight from the countryside. In the cities old ties and traditions snap. Sadat fears the emergence of a new kind of urban society, one lacking the old spiritual and social balance; he finds evidence of a resurgence of Islamic orthodoxy a healthy sign.

A Muslim revival implies a setback for Egypt's modernizers who are trying to mobilize public support for such family planning measures as sterilization and legislating two-child families

(through a system of incentives and disincentives). The most effective proponent of such population control happens to be Sadat's own wife, Jihan, who argues Egypt must do something drastic to curb a growth rate she describes as "dangerous now and after a while disastrous." Mrs. Sadat is also campaigning to liberalize Egypt's Muslim divorce laws, especially to allow women the right to leave husbands who take second wives, win custody of their children, and receive alimony for more than 12 months.

"She urges me every day, family planning, family planning," Sadat says. "But what can I do? I have done my best. It can't be done by law at all. It's a religious matter. Changes in Egypt come only through education. Only."

Mrs. Sadat recognizes her ideas are too progressive out in the villages. "To change the way of thinking and the mentality of our people," she concedes, "it will take time."

As Sadat told me in the interview, "I accuse my wife of being a philosopher. I tell her, let us look to our community and look to our people and our heritage."

In the following two Reports I shall describe the rural Egyptian "community, people, and heritage" as I found them in two village stays, one for a year in Berat village near Luxor, 450 miles south of Cairo, and the other for three months in Sirs el Layyan, 40 miles north of Cairo in the Delta and just 15 miles from Sadat's own village. The first Report will deal with the mentality of traditional society as observed in Upper Egypt and the second with a comparison between Upper Egyptian fellahin and those of the much more modernized Delta region.

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Shahhat, an Upper Egyptian fellah.

Among the rural Upper Egyptians, or *Saidis*, who live high on the Nile, from Cairo to Aswan, a young school-going generation is being taught that the earth is round and men have landed on the moon.

In most of the world today this would hardly be eventful. Yet most of the children's parents and older brothers and sisters still believe, in 1976, that the earth is flat and surrounded by ocean, which itself is encompassed by the mysterious mountains of Kaf, the abode of good and evil genii. Ours is the uppermost of seven earths and there are seven hells and seven heavens, one above the other.

The teachings of medieval Islam, drawn from the Koran, the Hadiths, the Sharia laws, and popular legends, myths and superstitions, handed down from one generation to the next, still continue to shape the minds of many of Egypt's more than 20 million fellahin. To live among such people, even temporarily, is to accept a kind of Arabian Nights view of the universe and suspend one's disbelief in

the supernatural. The mentality is strikingly different in that people do not automatically, as modern Westerners do, seek logical, scientific explanations.

This is especially true in the Nile Valley, which south of Cairo is seldom more than five to 10 miles wide. Here the isolation imposed by desert has preserved ideas and a way of life little changed since Amr swept out of Arabia in 633 A.D. with 3,500 cavalymen to conquer Christian-Roman Egypt for Islam. In the 100-mile-long, fan-shaped Delta north of Cairo, where six out of 10 fellahin now live, village primary education has been almost universal for two generations. In the Delta, Koranic social codes still govern daily life but many of the old superstitions are fading, though not dying out altogether.

It is in Upper Egypt where the unique and distinctive characteristics of the fellahin mentality emerge the most clearly. This may explain why the best known works on fellahin customs and psychology of this century, such as Henry Habib Ayrout's *The Fellahin* or Hamed Ammar's *Growing Up In An Egyptian Village*, have the more traditional village life of the Upper Nile as their setting. In the Delta, both beliefs in the sacred supernatural and superstitions have been much more influenced by modern education, logic, and science.

At the heart of the fellahin mentality is, of course, Islam, and in describing Islam in Upper Egypt, I shall take care to limit myself to its perception by the fellahin themselves. Religion exercises a much more profound influence upon daily life in Upper Egypt's villages than in almost any other Muslim country outside the Arabian Peninsula itself. Almost half of Upper Egyptian children still do not attend free government primary schools, despite their availability and official claims and statistics. Yet every Egyptian male child, whether he goes to school or not, attends for three to six years a village *kuttab* or traditional Muslim school where he memorizes the Koran and learns to read, write, add, and subtract. A *kuttab* is commonly the open courtyard of a mud-brick house belonging to the teacher (*fiki* or *fqih*), usually an elderly sheikh and quite often blind. With the children gathered around the black-painted wooden slates, the *fiki* squats in the center of the courtyard as, one by one, they sit before him and, rocking back and forth to aid the memory, cry out the day's lesson. Mistakes are punished by a lash on the hand from the teacher's

switch or, in cases of misbehavior, a beating on the bare soles of the feet. As the other children simultaneously practice their lessons out loud, the din may be imagined. Amazingly, a few of the children may memorize the entire Koran, about the length of the New Testament. The *fiki* is also a great fount of myths, legends, and superstitions, as are the children's largely illiterate mothers.

There are the two grand principles of the faith, "There is no diety but Allah" and "Mohammed is his Prophet." Mohammed is believed to have been the last and greatest of prophets, six of whom, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed himself, are thought to have received a revealed law, or a system of religion and morality. Egyptian fellahin are aware, as many illiterate Muslims in countries like Pakistan and Morocco are not, that Jews and Christians are not *kafirs* or infidels but "people of the book" who, until they rejected the teachings of Mohammed, were true believers. Fellahin males may take Jewish or Christian wives who do not have to convert to Islam though their children must be Muslim.

In village Egypt every aspect of life, including humor—and fellahin love to joke—is colored by religion. To call a neighbor a Jew is to imply he is avaricious, to call him a Christian means he is cowardly. Attitudes are ambivalent. It is a sacred duty to fight the enemies of Islam and to the fellahin, despite their lack of a martial tradition and deep fear of leaving their native villages, this means Israel. Yet a fellah will tell you, "Allah must love the Jews for he has given them everything." Anyone seen smoking, drinking water, or eating during daylight hours in the month-long fast of Ramadan is teased and called a Christian.

As in all Islam, the most important ritual and moral duties are prayer, alms-giving, fasting, and pilgrimage. Roughly half the fellahin do not say the obligatory five prayers toward Mecca a day. As in small, church-going communities in the West, the most ostentatiously devout men and women may be miserly and exploitative in their daily affairs. A poor fellah may observe, "What a bunch of hypocrites we have in our village. All the greediest scoundrels dress in clean *gallibyas* to piously go to the mosque on Friday. *El hamdu li-llah!* (Praise be to God!)"

Fellahin believe very literally in the existence of angels and good and evil genii, Judgment Day, and

in future rewards and punishments in Paradise and Hell. A bridge, Es-Sirat, "finer than a hair and sharper than the edge of a sword" leads to heaven. The wicked shall lose their footing and fall into Hell, where their sins will be punished in severe torture by heat and cold. In Paradise, even the lowliest is promised "80,000 servants," "72 wives of the girls of Paradise (or houris)" a tent of pearls, jacinths and emeralds, clothing of green silk, perpetual youth, and every pleasure to gratify the senses.

Immediately after death, two angels, Munkar and Nekeer, will cause the body to sit upright in the grave and will question the deceased respecting his faith. One young fellah of my acquaintance, who was very ill with fever at the time, asked his mother, "If I died right now, the gravedigger would put me in a tomb, would he not? And Munkar and Nekeer would come to examine me?"

"Yes, my son."

"I do many bad things. Like drinking and swearing and quarreling. The two angels would not be beautiful, I think. No, they would have ugly, terrible faces. They would take me by force, beating me all the way down to the seventh hell and I would stay there until all my sins were gone."

His mother tried to reassure him, saying he might go directly to heaven. The young man laughed.

"No, no, no. The angels will ask, 'Do you sometimes drink wine?' If I say yes, they will beat me. If I say no, I become a liar and they must also beat me. Like the police."

The fellahin are also subject to such familiar Koranic law as the ability to divorce one's wife at will (by saying "I divorce thee" three times), inheritance laws that give females only half-shares to those given men, and harsh penalties for adultery, apostacy, and blasphemy. Though the Prophet Mohammed decreed a detected adulteress was to be put to death by stoning—providing there were four eyewitnesses to the act—this is no longer followed in Upper Egypt. Instead husbands, fathers, or brothers usually kill the woman, slitting her throat and leaving her body in the desert to jackals. An unmarried girl who becomes pregnant is also killed by her father or brothers, local police authorities meting out very light sentences in such cases. Yet sodomy between

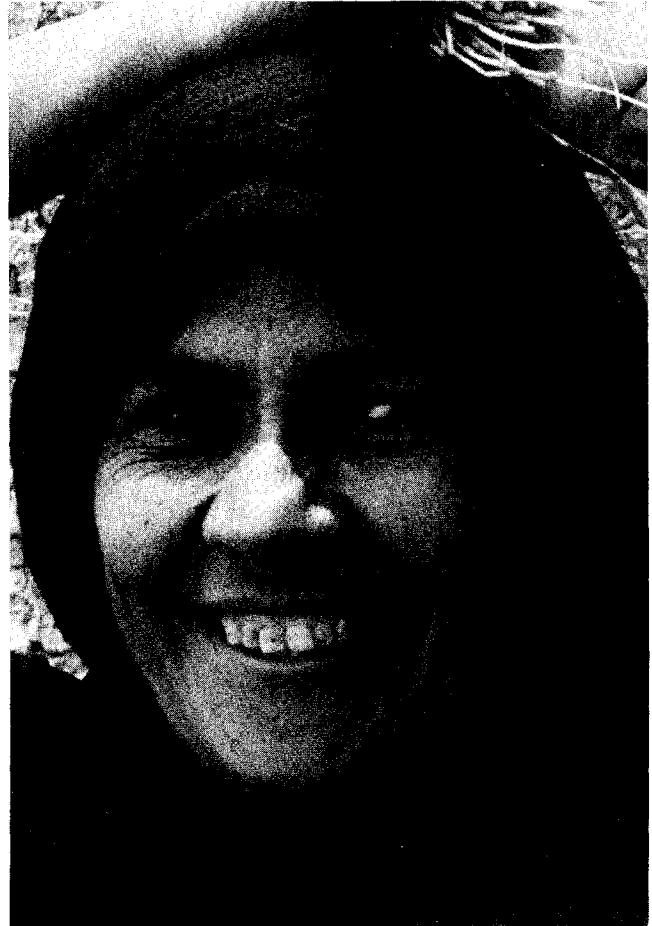
males or with an animal, also punishable by death in Koranic law, is treated lightly and commonly joked about among the men, to the mortification of the Upper Egyptian women. A common curseword in all rural Egypt is "*Yah khawel!*" ("You sodomist!"). (Fellahin constantly curse one another while working in the fields, either jokingly or in anger, most commonly with the words, "May your father's house be destroyed!," "Son of a dog!," "Go to hell!," and "May you burn in the fire." Though serious if used in anger, their most frequent use is in rough banter between friends and hence a sign of familiarity.)

A woman's status, as in many traditional societies, lies in having as many sons as she can. While fellahin show great respect for their fathers, their love for their mothers, even when they are grown and married, is the most noticeable emotional attachment in rural Egypt. If a son is lacking in respect to his mother, the whole village is shocked and concerned. She is the mistress of his household until her dying day; thus an older woman with many sons can wield considerable power and influence.

But sons are vital. Consider the experience of Um Muhammed, a still handsome woman of 45 from the Upper Egyptian village of Berat, a few miles from the town of Luxor, famed for having the greatest assemblage of pharaonic temples and tombs in Egypt. Married at 13, Um Muhammed has borne 20 children, 14 of whom died in infancy or childhood. Her early marriage was happy until two sons, aged eight and nine, fell ill with fever and died. Um Muhammed still believes demons sent by Satan strangled them. Though she had two surviving daughters, Um Muhammed became terrified her husband would divorce her when two more infant sons died.

In her fear, she sacrificed sheep at the tombs of the most highly revered sheikhs in the region. She bought amulets and *hegabs*, magic written charms which, if burned in a pot of incense, are believed by most fellahin to make a wish reality. She even sought the help of Christian Coptic priests locally believed to have supernatural powers. Um Muhammed felt, probably correctly, that her whole position as a woman, wife, and mother was at stake.

Finally in desperation she crept late one night into the walled ruins of an enormous mortuary temple



Um Muhammed.

built by the last of the great pharaohs, Ramses III. There, in a ritual recaptured from the ancient friezes of the temple itself, she went about Ramses' sacred pool seven times, prayed to the pharaonic God, Ammon-Ra, to help her conceive a son who would survive to manhood, and drank of the pool's slimy black waters. The first of her sons to survive was born nine months later.

This episode is not all that uncommon among barren women or the incurably ill in Upper Egypt. Despite 13 centuries of Islam, the six centuries of Christianity and the long millenia of pharaonic paganism have left their mark. If all else fails, fellahin, especially women, will turn to the older religions. Pharaonic ruins rise all along the Nile. Most fellahin will tell you the ancient statues, tombs, and temples are mere piles of stone, yet they are superstitious about them as symbols of life and procreation; in the ancient carvings and paintings the sacred and obscene are often portrayed very close together.

Um Muhammed's husband did later take a second, much younger wife. Although he divorced her in only two weeks, such an experience is deeply humiliating to Egyptian women. Um Muhammed can scarcely talk about it today, though it happened 20 years ago and her husband died in 1974. At the time she returned to the house of her parents, telling him, "No! Choose one or the other! I'll stay with you no more!" She also went to the village *sheikha*, or sorceress, who prepared a magic written charm and told her, "Don't be afraid. This will insure that your husband is for you only. Not for the two."

These *hegabs* play an important role in village life as the fellahin place great faith in them to solve their personal problems. A *hegab* is a small piece of paper, folded into a triangular shape, upon which unintelligible words are written in red ink. The formulae, though unreadable to anyone but the sheikh who writes them, consist of Koranic passages, some of the 99 names of Allah, together with those of angels, genii, prophets or saints, combined with diagrams, numerals, and even various substances. Girls, for instance, who want a certain youth's heart to burn or sting out of desire for them, will have the sorcerer place inside some sulfur from a match or the thorn of an acacia tree.

In one village family, after a son became moody and quarrelsome, the mother consulted a sorceress and was told to go home and look behind a certain mud-brick near the entrance of her house; it was claimed a malicious neighbor had hidden the *hegab* of a certain sinister Coptic priest there to work an evil spell upon the boy. I happened to be an incredulous eyewitness as the woman rushed home, pulled out a loose brick and, sure enough, found a piece of paper hidden there. It was unfolded, the writing washed out with water, dried and given to the son to burn; soon his normal good spirits returned.

Throughout rural Egypt—and in Cairo too—one sees handprints painted on outside walls to ward off the Evil Eye. In village belief the Evil Eye is possessed by a few, usually well-identified, people who otherwise lead normal lives. Care is taken to protect newborn children and livestock by keeping them out of sight and especially to avoid any compliments—and hence curses—from the Evil Eye's possessors. Since strangers can also have the Evil Eye, small children, despite being cherished by their parents,

are often left exceedingly dirty, unwashed, and shabbily clad. A baby's eyes, whether girl or boy, are often filthy with half a dozen flies buzzing and crawling about each eye, unheeded and unmolested.<sup>1</sup>

Fateh, a fellah and cattle trader in Berat village, and an intelligent, generally popular man, was said to possess the Evil Eye. After a woman had shown him a newborn calf, her buffalo stopped giving milk. The woman complained to Fateh's sister, Bahiya, who told her, "Why did you allow him in your stable? No stranger must ever see a new baby, human or animal. You understand nothing. I dare say you haven't even your wisdom teeth."

"These days I have so many troubles," the woman protested, "I don't know my head from my foot. We demand of Allah but he gives us nothing."

Bahiya's advice: "Send for Fateh at once. Engage him in speaking and then have one of your sons sit near his feet. When he is not looking they must cut a small piece of cloth from the hem of his tunic. Then you must let him know so that he becomes angry. And burn that piece of cloth at the time of Maghreb prayers."

"No, no, I could not," the woman cried, ashamed.

"Then you must catch Fateh. Whether he wants to or not. Pull up his tunic and demand that he urinate on the buffalo. It is the only way."

The woman decided to consult a sorceress instead. "Why spend money?" Bahiya told her. "Are you rich? Do you have ten acres?"

"Allah stays in heaven," she was told. "He will give more than it costs perhaps." The sorceress took LE2 and wanted some hairs from the buffalo's tail. These she wrapped inside a written paper charm and directed it be buried in the stable underneath the buffalo. She also said the buffalo must be milked only by a virgin. When the buffalo remained dry the woman complained, "*Wah!* I lose two pounds and get nothing," but on the third day the buffalo again

1. A fear of trachoma, endemic in Egypt, keeps many mothers from washing or even touching their children's eyes, in their ignorance not aware that this neglect may help bring on the dreaded disease. There is still a great deal of blindness in village Egypt, both among adults and small children, usually just one eye.

began giving milk. It possibly had recovered from a bout of indigestion but such positive results help perpetuate fellahin faith in the written charms.

This same Fateh figured in another episode when after four days of marriage he sent his beautiful, 17-year-old bride, Namat, home to her father's house. Fateh's story was that some enemies of his had put some secret dust into his tea one evening so that every time he looked at Namat, he saw a buffalo's face instead. For days he went about the village telling everyone, "I demand from Allah that those persons who have cursed me shall die and their houses be destroyed! I love Namat and want her back!"

Fateh threatened to try and seize his wife from her father's house by force, but the neighbors persuaded him to catch the father by surprise some afternoon when he came from his fields, enter his house and at once kiss his turban and beg forgiveness. "After that," they said, "the father will be ashamed and let you take your wife."

But it did not go that way. When Fateh entered the house and tried to kiss his father-in-law's turban, the older man sprang up, pushed him away and shouted, "You son of a dog! You are the reason I can look no one in the face! I must change the color of my turban from black to white! You have shamed me before all the village!"

His daughter, Namat, who still loved Fateh, began to shriek and tear her hair and Fateh, as he was seized and thrown out of the house by the men of the family, protested, "But those bastards bewitched me!" The father shouted after him, "I'll never trust my daughter to you, you son of a dog, sending Namat home after four days of marriage! I won't allow women to speak. If I don't run my household, I'm not a man. Fateh, I'll humble you if it's the last thing I do. I'm going to take your eyes in the divorce court, everything I can get. When I get through with you, you'll be lucky to walk through this village like some poor, mindless lunatic!"

So tales of magic potions are not always believed.

Yet it is rare to find any fellah who does not carry some protective charms in the pocket of his *galla-biyah*. These can include rings wrapped with white

string, written *hegabs* or the most esteemed charm of all, a *mushraf* or tiny copy of the Koran. Few fellahin arise in the morning without saying, "Oh, Allah, protect me from Satan."

The belief in genii is sanctioned in the Koran and as such is found among even the most sophisticated modern Egyptians. In the villages it is so much a part of the mentality few men will spit on the ground without a muttered apology to any genie who might be there.

Half-angel, half-man, though inferior in dignity to both, a genie is created of fire but capable of assuming the form of men, brutes, or monsters and of becoming invisible at will. They eat, drink, have sex (with each other or with humans) and die, though most live many centuries. As noted earlier, their principal abode is in the mountains called Kaf, which encircle the earth. Some genii are Muslims. Others, infidels, are usually called *sheytans* or devils, of whom Iblees or Satan is chief. Because they are believed to overhear the conversations of angels when they approach the borders of the lowest of the seven heavens, genii are thought to know the future, thus enabling them to assist sorcerers and magicians. They are believed to inhabit rivers, wells, ruined tombs, temples and houses, underground baths and even latrines, so that some fellahin will utter the words, "Permission, ye blessed," before entering such places.

In Upper Egypt a number of men are married to female genii, including one very respected sorcerer in Luxor who stopped sleeping with his earthly wife after the genie (or *djinnee* as a female genie is called in Arabic) warned she would kill him if he begat any more children. This sheikh is particularly admired (and well paid) for prophesying the future, which the genie is said to tell him when she appears in his dreams at night.

Shahhat, a strapping 24-year-old fellah in Berat village, has been troubled by genii for years. The first appeared to him at night when he was 18, taking the form of a beautiful woman. No one in the village was surprised as several fellahin had been visited while sleeping by such creatures. (A modern psychologist might say it has something to do with the limitation of sexual expression in rural Muslim society.)





Shahhat, using a water lift system much like those employed during the time of the Pharaohs.

But Shahhat's genie began to torment him. Night after night she appeared and was so insatiable in her sexual demands he found himself exhausted each morning; he lost weight and had little strength for his work in the fields. At last he confided to his mother, "She is very, very beautiful and wants me to marry her and not take an earthly bride."

His horrified mother consulted an old, blind village sorceress, who told Shahhat, "My boy, if she asks to marry you, it is very dangerous. You must refuse. If you already had a human wife you could accept. But because you are unmarried, even though she can give you all you desire, you will be completely in her power."

She sent him to an elderly Muslim scholar in Luxor, Sheikh el Hufni, who had frequently visited Mecca and possessed a library of ancient Islamic texts. A bent, emaciated, toothless old man with a

snowy white beard, the sheikh demanded advance payment of LE15 (about US\$30) but promised to return the money if his exorcism failed. The amount was equivalent to Shahhat's family's monthly food budget but he sold two sheep at the weekly market or *suq*.

When he returned, the old sorcerer burned some incense, recited a few passages from the Koran, and prepared a written charm. He threaded a piece of string through the tiny paper triangle and told Shahhat to wear it about his neck when he went to bed. "Now if the genie comes," he said, "cry out *Allahu Akbar* (God is most great) and hold out some iron, for the genii have a great dread of that metal. And call out, '*Hadeed ya mashroon!* (Iron thou unlucky one!)"

A few nights later, when the genie came to him as he slept, this time riding upon a white horse,

Shahhat did as he was told. She appeared, as she always did, in a golden haze with her red silk robes billowing about her and her gold necklaces and bracelets flashing in the strange brilliant light. No sooner than he had uttered the sorcerer's words than her perfume became a stinking sulfurous odor, she was enveloped in black smoke and flames, and her face was transformed into the monstrous features of a black, horned devil. In terror Shahhat called, "Allah, protect me from Satan!" as he felt hot, scaly hands seize his shoulders and neck and he was dragged from his sleeping bench onto the floor and outside the house. In the early morning his mother found him lying outside the door unconscious. He told her, "The genie wanted to kill me but I held onto the *hegab*."

About a year later Shahhat was returning at night on his donkey from a drinking party when the animal suddenly balked and would not move. The same black, horned devil appeared in front of him, this time turning somersaults. In panic, Shahhat pulled out his knife, thrashed about with it in the air and by accident struck the donkey. Though only slightly injured, the donkey fell forward, throwing Shahhat to the ground. Dogs from the nearby houses began to bark and when he reached home Shahhat told his family this is what had saved him.

In Shahhat's third encounter, the genii appeared as a *zoba'ah*, or desert whirlwind, which is often seen in Egypt sweeping across fields and the desert, raising columns of sand and dust to prodigious heights. One moment, Shahhat says, there was nothing and the air was still. The next, without warning, a furious wind roared about him, dragging him off his donkey, twirling him about, ripping off his turban, and tearing his clothes. Shahhat fought for breath and feared he would suffocate. Neighbors found him lying unconscious in the road. They revived him by putting crushed onions up his nostrils and splashing cold water in his face. A sheikh with a saintly reputation came and held a Koran over Shahhat's head, telling him the genie had been a *marid*, formed of the blood of a dead murderer. "The *marid* always tries to kill human beings," the old sheikh explained. "It wanted to carry you into the desert to die or down to the Nile to drown."<sup>2</sup>

2. The experience was so frightening to Shahhat, local doctors claimed he had suffered a mild heart attack. I brought him to Cairo to find out, but two eminent specialists disagreed on the question.

Like most superstitious people, the Upper Egyptians believe in propitiating the gods. There are two kinds of celebrations, expressions of gratitude for recovery from disease, a wedding, a successful circumcision, or any sudden good fortune. The first is a *hafla*, which simply means "party." A *hafla* is a wholly secular occasion and may include a feast, dancing by both men and women to Arabic music played by a hired band of musicians with bagpipes, drums, mandolin, flute and cymbals, the performance of a story teller and the drinking of date wine, beer, other liquor, and the smoking of hashish. A *hafla* may last anywhere from one to seven consecutive nights and often leaves the host impoverished.

The story tellers are usually old blind men who sit on an upraised platform before the party-giver's house and accompany their dramatic tale with a single-stringed violin. The favorite romance tells of the many adventures of Abu Zeyd, a black-skinned Arab from the Hilalee tribe of long ago. After an unruly childhood in which he kills his schoolmaster in a burst of temper but somehow masters all the sciences, Abu Zeyd sets out to slay his father in the mistaken belief he is pursuing his father's murderer instead. Though the villagers know such legends by heart, they love to hear them recited and will sit licking their lips and leaning forward, as if to take the phrases upon their own mouths, or will lower their heads and close their eyes as if praying at the mosque. Soon the men are exclaiming, "Allah! Allah!" and as the story teller's voice gains power and assurance from his adoring audience recitations become very dramatic and tense.

Men dance either individually or in pairs. Starting slowly, moving in long, gliding steps, each dancer waves a wooden stave overhead. The musicians quicken the tempo sharply, someone steps into the circle to tie a cloth about the dancer's waist, and he begins to jerk his hips rapidly from side to side and backward and forward in a vibrating, sensual motion that usually brings cheers from the audience. Women usually dance inside the host's house but may also join the men if no male strangers from outside the village are present. Young men may banter with the girls, saying, "Oh, my God, I'm going to marry this and this and this! I'll get a new one every week." "You'll have no success with us," the girls may cry back. "We have other boy friends. We have no time for you!"

*Haflas* often deteriorate into drunken brawls late at night, as animosities rise to the surface after much liquor or hashish is consumed. Usually it starts with one young male relative loudly telling another, "If you speak with those cousins, I don't know what I shall do with you. If anyone dares speak, tell me. I'll stand beside you." Soon fists are flying.

One such typical brawl began at a wedding party I attended. Late in the evening an uncle of the bride rose to declare that, instead of a traditional camel or horse, a taxi would carry the bridal party to the groom's house. Since only one taxi was available, no one but the bride's immediate family was to ride along. "Nobody else try to get into the taxi, please!" the uncle declared. "I know that most of you are drunkards but everyone has some self-respect. We want to finish this wedding day in peace."

As pistol shots were fired into the air and men applauded and jeered, a young man arose and shouted at the uncle, "You are a man without manners! People must respect one another. Did you not send us an invitation to this wedding or did we come by ourselves? Your words insult us!"

"Who are you to speak such bad words?" the uncle replied. "Who are your father and mother? Your father is the biggest drunkard in the village! Everyone knows him! He would sell his moustache to gamble at cards!" In no time, drunk, red-faced and breathing heavily, half the men at the *hafla* were at each others' throats.

The other evening celebration is the *zikr*, or Muslim prayer performance, which only men attend and is completely religious. Liquor, hashish, and even cigarette smoking are banned. A *zikr* usually lasts all night. The performers are sheikhs or revered Muslims, most of them bearded. They face each other in two lines, pray aloud and, as they go faster, create a kind of rapid hum of incantation.

"Oh, Allah, bless our lord Mohammed among the former generations; and bless our lord Mohammed among the latter generations; and bless our lord Mohammed in every time and age; and bless our lord Mohammed among the most exalted princes, onto the Day of Judgment..."

As the night deepens, the words speed up, sometimes chanted in a low bass drone and sometimes rising to a shouted hysteria. At times the sheikhs rise

to their feet and rock back and forth, their heads and shoulders pulsating up and down to the rhythm of the prayers. "*La ilaha illa-llah, la ilaha illa-llah...* There is no God but Allah, there is no God but Allah..." Sometimes one of the younger sheikhs will move to the center of the two facing lines of men. The others then begin moving their heads very quickly from right to left, in time to the rapid repetition of "*La ilaha illa-llah!*" Then the man in the center throws his arms about, turns his head in every way and reaches an ecstasy of religious passion. His face becomes red, his skin is beaded with sweat and his neck muscles stand out like ropes as he exclaims in such a high pitch it becomes a piercing scream, "Allah! Allah! Allah! La la la la la la la!" He may, like one I saw, fall down in a faint resembling an epileptic fit, foaming at the mouth and arms and legs twitching.

Aroused and excited by such spectacles, the sheikhs usually become even more agitated, moving about rapidly, violently turning their heads back and forth. Sometimes the village men rush to join them, thrashing their heads and shoulders back and forth, their loose tunics flapping wildly, as they too are caught up in the emotional frenzy. *Zikrs* can be held for any occasion but most frequently are performed when someone begins or ends a pilgrimage to Mecca or on the seventh, fortieth, and hundredth day after a man's death, a custom said to be of Pharaonic rather than Islamic origin.

As in villages the world over, death and marriage are the two principal social events. In Upper Egypt when a man dies, his friends and relatives drop everything and come running from the fields just as they are. Women rush into the house, uttering the swift thrilling Arab ululation known as the *zagreet*, their tongues rippling on their palates to produce an ear-splitting sound used both to express joy (as at a marriage) and lamentation. A widow is likely to scream in the most blood-curdling way, tear her clothes, smear her face with ashes and call to her husband, "Rise, my golden one!" Rise, my master, my camel, my protector!" Men outside walk about in large circles each exclaiming, "There is no strength nor power but in Allah. God have mercy upon him." A dying man himself will utter the final prayers, "To God we belong; and to Him we must return. There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His Prophet." A widow's wailing may go on for days or even weeks.

After death, a man's body is washed and sprinkled with camphor and perfumed with rose water and cotton stuffed in his nostrils and ears, his ankles bound and his hands placed across his breast. He is buried in a white linen shroud without a coffin so that his dust mingles with that of his ancestors in a family burial plot.

Marriage to one's first cousin is considered most desirable, though today many young people depart from this old tradition. The only real taboo in Upper Egypt is marriage with anyone of the Jamasah clan. Jamasahs are outcastes both for being the traditional village water carriers and because, by legend, they were once cursed by the Prophet Mohammed for coming late to an important gathering. (Jamasah in Arabic literally means "those who come by night.")

The village attitude toward love and marriage was best revealed to me when one mother, opposing her son's desire to marry a pretty Jamasah girl with whom he had fallen in love, told him, "No, no, my son! Such a marriage would disgrace us. Suniya is from a bad family. The Jamasahs publicly scorned the Holy Prophet. They are crafty and dishonest. How could we hold up our heads?"

The mother argued, "To marry for love, my son, that is for children. Marriage means you are establishing a household. You must become a real man who looks to the needs of the house and the land, a man who fathers many children and raises them. It means to prosper and lead a decent life so that everyone must respect you." This woman told me that she knew from hard-earned experience that a villager's freedom and dignity depended upon observing the time-honored social codes. The ideal of every fellah was to own land and a buffalo, marry, father children, especially sons, and get along. The mother said she realized young men like her son were ardent, sensual, and romantic but that the heat of such passion cooled all too soon; after 30 or so it was the children, the household, the needs of the land and the family's social position within the village that bound a man and wife together. In her eyes, men were kept in place less by their own virtue than by Koranic law and village social pressure.

Social status may count even more than religion. A woman whose buffalo was repossessed by its owner—she had been feeding it in return for half

ownership—was more worried about the social disgrace than losing the buffalo's milk. "Now I will not be able to go outside the house," she said. "I'm so ashamed. I'm afraid of those gossips. They will say, 'Oh, she must sell her buffalo. Her sons walk proudly but have nothing in their pockets.'"

Violation of the social codes can be severely punished, as demonstrated in the story of Batah, a pretty young village girl who fell in love with a handsome Jamasah and refused to marry her first cousin, Ali. His father, one Hassan, who was the brother of Batah's father, was notorious in the village as a filthy, coarse, dishonest and drunken man who beat his wife, was in continual quarrels and when drunk insulted, despoiled, and terrorized everyone.

One night Hassan broke into Batah's house and tried to carry her off. Batah resisted, screaming. It was a terrible scene. "Be silent!" her uncle shouted, seizing her arms. "You are to marry my son. I shall take you to my house. By God if you do not come, I shall slit your throat and cut you into small pieces. Even maggots shall not find your body. We do not allow women to say no or yes."

Batah's grandmother, Fatnah, an old, half-blind woman, rushed to the girl's defense. Batah's father merely said, "Yes, you speak the truth, my brother. We cannot leave things for the women to decide. You can take her. Be still, my mother-in-law. Do not speak. We want to close this subject."

The old lady ignored him, seized a long knife and drove Hassan from the house, shrieking, "I am an old woman and blind. But if you do not leave my house this instant I shall kill you and stay screaming all the night. There will be no marriage with your son. You and your family go far from us. If anyone tries to take Batah against her will, I shall fight you until I die. Men like you are not real men. Women are better than you."

Though Koranic law requires a girl to give her consent in marriage, this is seldom followed in Upper Egypt. The uncle left, cursing Fatnah, "Your father is a dog, old woman! Why has not Allah taken you? The good ones die and the bad stay alive." For days he went about the village, cursing Batah and declaring, "By the Great God, that girl will never enter my house!"

Hearing this the Jamasah who loved Batah went to the grandmother and declared, "I'm prepared to marry her. I love her and she loves me. I'll pay the money, prepare the papers, and see to everything." Fatnah gave her consent.

Village sympathies, at first favorable to Batah, turned against her when it was known she planned to marry the Jamasah. Everyone told me, "Batah is a bad girl; she is disgracing her family." Her rejected cousin, Ali, was away in the army but there were fears of a blood feud between his family and the Jamasahs when he returned, a vendetta involving killings on both sides.

But Batah was determined and two days before the wedding was to be held went from house to house inviting the village women. Then about three o'clock in the afternoon, we suddenly heard her screaming from the edge of the village. A crowd had gathered and as we made our way to the front we saw Batah lay up ahead in the road. She was unconscious and moaning and her clothes had been ripped off. The soldier, Ali, was crouched over her. He held an army revolver and shouted he would kill anyone who came near. As he turned and ran off into the desert, where he was later caught by the police, we saw he had blood on his hands.

In village custom a bridegroom ends his bride's virginity by breaking her hymen with his fingers before the marriage is consummated. Her mother is present to hold and comfort the girl and later to show a bloody cloth to the village women as proof of her daughter's virginity. The cousin had preserved his family's honor by insuring Batah would not go to her Jamasah a virgin. The episode—a symbolic rape right in the center of the village in broad daylight—was shocking enough but what was more shocking was the reaction of the villagers who expressed more sympathy toward the young soldier than toward Batah, the victim. A courageous girl, she went through with her marriage but no longer dared leave her house after dark.

Especially for a pretty girl, village codes can be very hard. She grows up in a sexually charged atmosphere. On most matters of sex married women speak as openly as do the men, often discussing the most intimate physical details of their married life with each other. A girl is also subject to constant flirtation and lecherous looks and remarks. Yet she

is expected to be an angel and a virgin on her wedding day or pay severely. This strange mixture of male authoritarianism, license and sensuality, combined with the threat of harsh retribution if a woman is caught sinning, creates a peculiar air of tension in Egyptian villages. The battle of the sexes goes on in little ways as well. Some men never address their wives as more than, "*Yah mara!* You woman!" and are forever putting them down. I have seen men strike girls for serving tea to a female guest before a man.<sup>3</sup>

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Father Ayrout, the Egyptian Jesuit who wrote so well about the fellahin, once observed that though "they have changed their masters and their religion, their language and their crops, they have not changed their way of life." Ayrout felt that despite successive conquests by Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks, English and French, the legacy of 3,000 years of Pharaonic civilization, 600 years of Christianity and 1,300 years of Islam had formed one of the world's most enduring cultures. He asked, "How can we explain this physical stability, this psychological and social changelessness, this enduring extraordinary sameness in a race of men?" Ayrout, writing before the construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s, opposed any modernization, arguing it would "destroy the organic relationship between the fellahin, the Nile and the soil."

The big change in Upper Egypt came in the mid-1960s when the Nile Valley was permanently enclosed by dikes, just as the more populous Delta had been a century earlier.

In Berat village, where I lived, a new water channel, the Ramses Canal, was built past the fields as part of a new irrigation network from Aswan. The government offered \$400 Russian deisel pumps for \$200 down; richer villagers bought them, supplying their poorer neighbors with a day's water for \$1.75. A nearby feudal estate was broken up and its land redistributed, with most of the villagers receiving two-acre plots. But the government kept this land

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3. Yet Egyptian women are a plucky lot and never seem to weary of fighting back. A great many village marriages, even if arranged, end up based upon mutual affection, compassion, and need. But until Egypt's women win more rights, especially through the spread of village education, it seems unlikely population control can succeed in the countryside.

under its control, telling the new fellahin-owners what and when to plant, providing them with free water and credit for seeds, fertilizer, and labor; it bought back a quota of each harvest at low prices.

Now, with year-round irrigation which replaced the Nile's old annual flood, three crops instead of one could be grown each year. Chemical fertilizer produced at Aswan, *Nitrokima*, was sold at \$3.70 for a 50-kilo sack to replace the lost minerals and nutrients formerly deposited along with a fresh fertile level of silt by the flood waters.

In Berat village, as the new government land was a mile away and dealing with an agricultural inspector involved bribes, delays and quarrels, a new class of peasant entrepreneurs emerged. Usually former serfs who lived nearby, they now protected the crops, dealt with the inspector, and provided a few services such as plowing and watering in return for one-third of each harvest. Most of the village men were prepared to give this; otherwise they would have had to sleep in the fields to watch them.

In 1970 a new sugar refinery was opened and the government told the new deed holders to plant one acre of sugar cane each year. Since the net profit from an acre of cane ranged from \$250 to \$450 and villagers also grew three crops a year on their second acres of sesame, beans, maize, lentils or barley, yearly cash incomes tripled in 1971, many families earning more than \$1,200. One villager, Lamayee, who managed to evade a 50-acre legal ceiling by distributing titles among his brothers, farmed 200 acres, netting a \$20,000 profit each year on sugar cane alone. Lamayee predicted to me (later in an interview Sadat said almost the same thing) that in another 10 to 15 years the Nile Valley would no longer produce grain and fodder. He spoke instead of moving into fruit, vegetable, and seed production, raising high-value cash crops for export to the other Arab states and Europe. Typical of the newly prosperous class of *kulak* fellahin, Lamayee said, "We will do what is good for Egypt. And to make much money. We can do anything once we have the experience." Lamayee, who employed 50 day laborers, already spoke of his "labor problem" and mechanizing as soon as possible.

Most of the poor villagers violently disagreed with him. "No!" they would exclaim. "We must eat from our own labor and our own hands, Lamayee. Never

depend on the other countries! Can our animals eat fruit and vegetables? Can our families? My buffalo must be fed from my own land. Why should I depend upon others?"

"If the government gives us flour for bread," Lamayee argued, "we can do anything it wants."

"Never!" came the common response. "The fellahin can never agree! Those officials in Cairo sit in a chair and have no experience. Can a minister take my hoe and cultivate my maize? No, he can only read books. Let us forget Cairo. We want the good things here."

Yet living standards have risen. Now meat and poultry are eaten by village families one or two times a week. Many youngsters refuse to eat the maize bread that has traditionally been the villager's staple food.

Expectations have risen even higher. The villagers borrow large amounts, \$300, \$400, to pay for funerals and weddings, losing their sugar harvests for one or two years ahead. When the time comes to buy fertilizer and other inputs there is no money to be had and they go deeply into debt.

Bilharzia, long a common disease in Upper Egypt, has reached plague proportions as the snails which carry the parasite multiply in the new canal system. Almost three-quarters of the village men discover blood in their urine but have no choice but to wade into the canals to wash their buffaloes and sheep and water their fields. Aquatic weeds such as water hyacinth, now that the sun can reach their roots through the siltless water, flourish in the canals, though these can be cleared away.

Coming from the fields on a hot day, thirsty and covered with dust, a broad canal with the water reflecting the blue of the sky can look maddeningly inviting. "So if I get bilharzia, I get bilharzia," says a fellah, stripping off his clothes and plunging in. "I'll go to the hospital and get a rest."

Amr, a conscientious father, is forever beating his small sons for going in the canal. "I told you you will get bilharzia!" he shouts from the canal bridge. "Mahmood, you can read books? Ismail, you can recite from the holy Koran? If you don't want to read books or learn from the Koran, then finish! *Khalass!*

From now on you can help me in the fields!" His wife comes running. "No, no, my husband!" she cries. "They won't go again. Let them go this time, my husband, for my sake."

In the past two years in Berat, crop yields have started to fall. The fellahin, unaccustomed to year-round pump irrigation, do not understand that too much water raises the underground water level. When it reaches four feet below the surface, it stifles roots and turns plants yellow. Many mistake this for a weakening of the soil because it is no longer replenished each year by new silt left by the Nile floodwaters. As one fellah told me, "It was a great mistake to build the Aswan Dam. The government thought it would get more food, but the soil becomes weak. The cane was not good this year. It was a great mistake to stop the yearly flooding of the Nile."

This very abrupt change only a decade ago after 10,000 years of unchanging subsistence cultivation has put intense strains on the village social fabric. All but the poorest or most fiercely traditional fellahin have abandoned the old pharaonic water wheels and well sweeps, which one man handled himself, in favor of the new deisel pumps, most of them jointly owned and providing water for others. This requires a kind of cooperation new to village tradition and there are frequent quarrels which can lead to blood feuds.

One afternoon I came upon Zacharias, a poor Coptic Christian sharecropper, running toward a dike, a hoe raised to break the earth apart. He was pursued by an old woman and a boy who shouted, "No, no! You cannot stop the water coming to our land!"

"I paid the same as you! My land is closer to the canal! I shall water first!"

"You cannot!" cried the boy, raising his own hoe as if to strike Zacharias.

"I can," the Christian thundered back. "My maize is drying up!"

The old woman threw herself at Zacharias, screaming, "I won't let you take our water, you devil!" Soon they were all shouting at once. "I'll hit you! Get away or I shall go to prison for what I shall do to you!" "I'll cut off your head, Zacharias!"

"Stop it, woman! Get some sense into your head!" Neighbors managed to separate them with cries of "*Malesh!* Let it be forgiven!" but such quarrels over irrigation water are not uncommon since deisel pumps were introduced.

Violence also erupts during the sugar cane harvest when the government fails to provide enough freight wagons. Sometimes stacks of harvested cane can lie several days in the sun, losing half their value for the farmer (but not the government factory.) In Berat, there was a near riot one day near the end of the harvest when an engine bringing freight wagons was two short. A government official ran about crying, "One for one, men! Each man take only one wagon! Mohammed, your father is a dog! Leave that for Ala Adeen, you greedy bastard!"

"By God," one fellah shouted at him, "we shall load our wagon even if all the cane fields flow with blood!"

"Take it then, Suleiman. May your house be destroyed!" Soon fellahin from the surrounding fields were beating each other with wooden staves and their fists to try and seize wagons. "If anyone comes near this wagon, I'll kill him," one man shouted. "All your fathers are dogs! This wagon is mine!" As one fellah told me afterward, "My God, many necks will be broken because of this sugar cane. Why can't they provide enough wagons for all?"

In pre-Aswan Dam days the normal village economic unit was a man, his wife, their children, a buffalo or two cows, some sheep and goats and a donkey with an average land holding of just over an acre. By working to help dam the Nile flood in August, allowing the water to spread over the land from September to November and then planting a single grain crop to be harvested in April, a family grew enough for its subsistence. From the sale of milk, cheese, eggs, vegetables, sheep and goats at the weekly *suq* or market, a family earned the \$100 or so a year it needed for such essential commodities as cotton cloth, matches, plastic sandals, cooking oil, kerosene, soap, sugar, and tea. There were also the age-old supportive systems of mutual rights and obligations among extended families and such services as loans without interest and hospitality without cost.

Now money is required for fertilizer and other inputs. Many villagers do not realize higher agricultural incomes depend upon higher expenditures; there are frequent family fights over extravagance. The old feudal landlords are gone but new peasant entrepreneurs and *nouveau riche* landowners like Laymayee are emerging to fill their place; they show little of the old paternalism but think largely in terms of economy of operations and monetary returns. And they have the money to bribe petty officials and the police for special protection and privileges; during the cane harvest Lamayee got his sugar safely loaded and off to the refinery first.

There is a rise in retaliatory crime, taking the form of banditry or pilferage against the newly rich. In Berat village, Hagg Abd el Mantaleb is such a man, a miser who has bought large amounts of land. He runs the village shop and most fellahin are deeply in debt to him; sometimes when debts grow too high, he goes to court and tries to seize their land. One night three men, stark naked and their bodies greased with oil, with black hoods covering their heads, awoke Hagg at 2 A.M. by prodding his head with the barrel of a pistol. One of the thieves demanded the key to his strongbox and another the key to a certain bedroom cupboard where his wife kept her jewelry. Hagg later refused to discuss the robbery but it was rumored the thieves had made away with LE5,000 (about US\$8,000).

The local police inspector came, asked questions in a mild, even tone, heard one villager after another and dismissed each with a muttered, "Get out." He soon hurried off to the village inn where he was seen being served free beer and discussing his own affairs. Village speculation turned not on whether the thieves would be caught (distrust of the police being pronounced in Upper Egypt where fellahin suspected of crimes are regularly beaten up by the local constables), but who had informed them where Hagg hid his money. "Who?" old Yussef, the village gossip would cry, "Hagg's enemies, that's who! Every man in the village is in debt to him. Who else?"

Old Yussef is to be avoided. In the village cafe he is forever trying to corner a listener and will go on and on. "Well, all right, you see, I'm willing to buy that sheep of my own free will at the *suq* today, *el hamdu li-llah*, not bothering anybody, and in an evil hour up comes that Hoseyn from Qurna, you

know, the uncle of Mahmood the donkey driver, and he...." But when younger men complain about the many changes brought by Aswan it puts old Yussef's mettle up. "No, no, you are just babies," he will squawk. "You don't know the old days. In the past we grew maize and wheat and ate all of it. Now we cultivate cane and so many new crops and get much money. Now the government treats us as human beings."

"But now there are twice as many people as before."

"True. But everything has doubled. Before one hundred persons cannot find anything. Now two hundred can find everything. Radios, telephones, taxis, we eat and drink much. In the old days we ate chaff. Do I not speak the truth?"

"If I had an atom bomb," someone jokes, "I'd drop it on this village and start over."

"Allah won't give it to you because he knows that."

Old Yussef groans. "Allah won't give me money because he knows I'll do everything bad with it." He chuckles, going into a coughing fit.

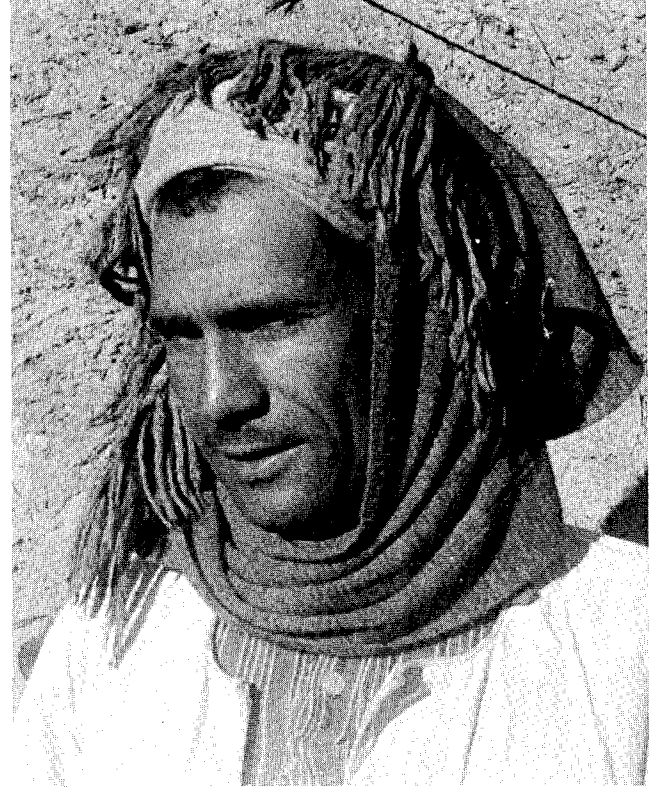
"So tomorrow we die," another man calls. "Everything is from Allah."

"*El hamdu li-llah*. Praise be to Allah!" old Jusef exclaims loudly, as if to show he is as pious as the next.

A few of the villagers are sobered by the changes they see all around them. Ahmed, a remarkably handsome fellah who was unusually staid and thrifty for an Upper Egyptian, told me, "Most fellahin spend much, entertaining everyone who comes along. They spend everything they have. But times are changing. The village is not like what it was when I was a boy. In the past if you hadn't a loaf of bread in your house, you could demand one from your neighbors without shame. You could enter any house to eat. But in the past there were fewer people. Now we have doubled in number in Egypt. And now every person has to see to his own problems. And cannot always look after their neighbors."

"Allah will provide," his neighbors protest.





Faces of the fellahin: Old Yusef (left) and Ahmed.

"Yes, of course, everything is from Allah," Ahmed goes on. "But a person must also look to the future himself. We do not know what will happen in another five years, another ten years. There will be many people then. Is my speaking wrong? By your fathers' souls, speak the truth. For when I look around, I am very, very sad. You must love the person who makes you see the truth and weep, not who makes you laugh."

Yet most of the villages voice a vague, baffled sense of the old reassuring stability vanishing; no one is sure what will take its place. The recent increase in scientific and material power, as represented by Aswan Dam, ironically has increased the psychological and social turbulence in the villages of Upper Egypt, rather than diminishing it.

The attitude of fatalism—Allah will provide—is closely allied to tradition and acts as a barrier against change. In modern societies we take it for granted that nature and social conditions can be mastered. But in societies such as the Upper Egyptian, with the exception of the Aswan Dam and the harnessing of the Nile's old flood, little mastery

over nature has ever been achieved. Dead children are strangled by demons sent by Satan. Good health is Allah's will. Such things as the high rate of infant mortality, for example, are considered predetermined, so attempts to change practices that might reduce the rate are inhibited. What is a reasonable adjustment to a hopeless situation serves to maintain its hopelessness. The search for explanations to natural phenomenon and human behavior is not to be found in modern scientific logic but in the sacred supernatural.

During my stay in Berat village, Shahhat, a fellah previously mentioned for his troubles with genii, fell very ill with fever and had a dream. The illness came just after the exhausting sugar cane harvest when Shahhat, 24, had been almost overwhelmed by the quarrels and fights, money worries, bribes, and delays.

In his dream, he found himself in a graveyard, wandering about in the old torn black tunic he habitually wore. His head hurt as if demons from Satan were clawing and howling inside his head and he was sobbing and crying like a demented man, cutting himself on the sharp gravestones.

Then there appeared before him a bearded man in white who called to him, "Who? Who are you, Shahhat? Who are you, oh Beggar?<sup>4</sup> Come, come? Why do you dress in the black rags of an unclean spirit? Here, enter here!"

And they passed through an enormous gate and at once the air was pure and cool and filled with a dazzling light. From this light emerged a second man, also bearded, but golden shafts of light pierced the space about him and Shahhat could not see his face. They took his black rags and burned them and gave him a white tunic to wear; the second man tied a green silk sash around his waist. Then they led him forward into a great garden with miraculous trees and flowers and fountains where Shahhat was filled with a sense of holiness he found impossible to describe. He heard a great chorus of voices rise in a thunderous shout, ecstatically crying, "*Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar! God is most Great!*" Shahhat too joined in, shouting praise to Allah and running past the flowers and fountains, crying with an inexpressible joy.

When he awoke his mother interpreted the dream, saying the first man was the Angel Gabriel and the second the Prophet Mohammed himself. It was he who tied the green sash about Shahhat and who exorcised the demons that tormented him by burning his old black garment. She believed the dream to be a good omen.

Some days later Shahhat and I went out to spend a day climbing across the empty, desolate hills of rock and sand in the Libyan Desert. Most villagers have a horror of the desert, with its silence so total every footfall reverberates loudly on the gritty earth. Shahhat said he liked to imagine himself living there, one lone man, a tiny speck, all alone in limitless solitude. "A Bedouin lives the best," he told me as we walked through the gray dunes of the Sahara. "He can hunt and eat and think much. Not like in the village where noise is always going round in your head like a radio. A Bedouin can take his freedom. Not anyone to keep asking him, 'Why do you do this? Why do you do that?'" A man who tills his fields is always poor. He is always tired from cutting fodder, plowing, weeding, and harvesting. And when he lives in a village and becomes a villager, there is much speaking, gossiping, and quarreling.

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4. *Shahhat* means "beggar."

If two or three Bedouins lived alone in the desert, they would take care of each other and love each other much."

Shahhat's imagination painted for him this picture of a free life he had never lived, as if he dimly recalled things heard about Arabian life long ago or had inherited this vision of freedom along with his flesh and blood from his Bedouin ancestors. In the evening we returned to the high desert ridge where steep cliffs fell down to the Nile Valley's western bank. The houses and trees, the flat green plain against the darker green of the winding Nile, were welcome sights after the barren desolation of the desert. Somewhere down in the valley a donkey made a doleful braying noise and there was a vendor's faint, wailing cry, "Onions, sweet as honey!" The light was fading but to the north, around a bend in the Nile, we could see three *fellucas*, their full sails looking graceful and white. The ruins, canals, and roads were so diminished and the people who moved about such tiny specks, one felt a sense of omnipotence and release. "Oh Nile, make my strength as your depth," Shahhat said, quoting an old proverb. He called the Nile el Bahr, the sea, and said there was a saying that he who once drank of its water forever yearned to be beside the Nile.

Shahhat spoke of the changes brought by the Aswan Dam: the incessant field work, the diesel pumps, the fights to load sugar cane, the emergence of the Lamayees and Hagg Abd el Mantalebs, the feuds, frustrations, and rising expectations. "Perhaps they should blow it up and let the Nile flood again," he joked.

As we sat and talked darkness fell, the village lights below blinked on one by one, the moon started to rise and around the houses and trees and dark ruined temples and the Nile began to flow a sea of thin, moonlight-soaked mist. And—what remains most vivid in my memory—wisps of vapor, white as ghosts, floated slowly across the wheat and cane fields. It was as if the whole Nile Valley were made up of black shadows and wandering wisps of light. To anyone looking down from the cliffs, the Nile and its valley must have always looked the same at night, even in the days of the Pharaohs.

Shahhat was staring up at the incredibly star-filled desert sky. He told me he felt as if Allah

himself were close, looking down on the valley, just as we were, from the sky. He imagined it was from here that the angels kept watch and saw all that was going on below. We listened for a time and heard the faint sound of a bagpipe playing a wedding tune and then the wail of a mourning woman. Someone had married and someone had died. Shahhat went on, saying that however powerful Satan was with his genii and demons and however lustful and violent they made men like himself, at least here on the high desert ridge all was peaceful and Allah ruled unchallenged. He said all the valley was waiting to emerge into goodness on Judgment Day, just as the sun would rise in the morning over the Arabian Desert. I thought how his ancestors worshipped the sun, building their temples on the east bank of the Nile where it rose, and their tombs in the cliffs below us on the west bank where it set.

"Everything is from Allah," Shahhat said. "We cannot decide anything. Everything we are is from him. Our lives are already written. He will show us the way."

We started back to the village, traversing the steep cliff so that the moon shone sometimes in front of us, sometimes behind. The jackals out on the desert began their hideous, derisive cries as if to mock Shahhat's words. He paid them no attention.

Upper Egyptian fellahin today, faced with the many assaults on their values I have described, do not master their condition. But a few like Shahhat do identify it. They see the contradictions between their poverty and their expectations. They are aware of the raucous explosiveness of their fellow

villagers as their lives are enormously complicated by the Aswan Dam and the perennial irrigation it has brought in its wake.

Shahhat speaks longingly of escaping it all by going off to live like a Bedouin in the desert. But he knows this is fantasy. Instead he accepts the fate that Allah has given him.

Things are what they are, perhaps unrelenting and absurd, but they are Allah's will. He has no choice but to make the best of them. It is this insight into man's condition, that he is the subject not the master of his fate, that is the great psychological divide in the world today. While true of a great many poor villagers, it is strikingly exemplary of the Upper Egyptian fellahin. To anyone with this mentality, order and reason are limited and technical progress alone cannot enlarge them. Upper Egyptians are remarkably affable, humorous and cheerful in their social behavior, but theirs is essentially a tragic view of life. Man is at the mercy of forces beyond his control and it is a short way to the grave. For do not hidden demons and genii, blind fate, the solicitations of Satan, and the fury of one's own blood await every man in ambush at the crossroads?

Nowhere do the enduring past and ominous present collide quite so emphatically as along the upper Nile. Amid an isolation imposed by the desert, a way of life, until just a very few years ago, had remained as stable as the bottom of a deep sea whose surface waves were lashed by storms. In 1976 the twentieth century edges closer. But it is still far away, still in another time and space, way out there somewhere beyond the mountains of Kaf.

