

## EGYPT'S FELLAHIN

### Part II: The Ant and the Grasshopper

by Richard Critchfield

July 1976

Times change and cultures change with them. In the traditional anthropological view, culture is what provides human beings with a design for living, with a ready-made set of solutions to human problems so that individuals in each generation do not have to begin all over from scratch. That is, the core of culture is its adaptive function.

Today in Upper Egypt, the 650-mile-long stretch of narrow valley along the Nile south of Cairo to Aswan, the adaptive mechanisms of rural fellahin culture have not yet had time to adjust to the shift since 1964 from basin to perennial irrigation and cultivation which followed the Nile's last flood and the storage of water by the new Aswan Dam. Life in Upper Egyptian villages remains a succession of todays; the Saidis who inhabit the Upper Nile, with all their superstitions and profound belief in the sacred supernatural as found in medieval Islamic doctrine, have a rare capacity for spontaneity, for enjoyment of the sensual, for the indulgence of impulse and use of violence, as well as for the pathos, fatalistic acceptance, and suffering which characterizes a traditional society.

Only gradually being abandoned in the past decade are methods of cultivation which date back to late, and in some cases, early, Pharaonic times: the *saqia* or cow-drawn water wheel; the *shaduf* or well sweep; the *norag* or threshing sledge with eleven iron disks; the *midraya* or winnowing fork; the *fas* or short handled hoe, the basic tool of the fellahin. All but the water wheel, which dates from the Ptolemaic period, can be seen in the ancient tomb paintings and found in the fields of Upper Egypt today. The single new innovation in thousands of years seems to be the diesel-powered irrigation pump and that has been introduced only since the late 1960s.

Such discoveries as the complete archives of a village scribe, Menches, who recorded the day-to-day activities of Kerkeosiris village in 120-111 B.C.,

reveal that the size of landholdings, the cropping of wheat, barley and lentils, the raising of pigeons, and the practice of deeding government land to ex-soldiers have changed little, if at all, in 2,000 years. In Kerkeosiris the control of irrigation water encountered much the same problems as afflict many Upper Egyptian villages today and there were the same complaints that the government did not always provide enough or in time. Menches's description of village disputes and banditry have a familiar ring. Yet the pressures that sometimes seem to overwhelm contemporary Upper Egyptians were fewer in kind and differed by degree. The great break with the past has only come with the Aswan Dam.

\* \* \* \* \*

But this has happened only in the valley south of Cairo. For there are two rural Egypts, Lower and Upper, just as there were in ancient times before the two Pharaonic kingdoms were united.

In the 100-mile-long triangular Delta north of Cairo to the Mediterranean, where about 60 per cent of Egypt's 20 to 25 million fellahin live, the conversion from basin to perennial irrigation, allowing two to three crops instead of just one each year to be grown, took place after construction of a series of dams, canals, barrages, drains and water pumps under the rule of Mohammed Ali and his successors, from 1805 to 1882. In contrast to Upper Egypt, Delta rural society has had a century to adapt both its agriculture and the life style it implies.

The result has been the emergence of a strikingly different way of life in the Delta villages. In contrast to conservative, traditional Upper Egyptians—with their creeds of family honor and vendetta law, their spontaneity, enjoyment, individualism and pursuit of the sensual, their fits of gloom and despair and their deep resignation and

fatalism—one finds the fellahin of the Delta, in general, completely different. They are so quiet and gentle, courteous, industrious, thrifty, striving and future-oriented, with all the psychological repression such traits imply, as to seem to belong to another country altogether.

Part of the difference can be explained by environment. The Delta's people have had much greater historical contact with the outside world, especially the Middle East and Europe, than the inhabitants of the remote southern valley. The blood of foreign invaders—Roman, Greek, Arab, Christian crusader, Persian and Turk—is much more in evidence in a people who are generally shorter, fairer, and much more heterogeneous.

The Delta climate is much milder; except in August it is invariably cool in morning and evening. There is even a little rain whereas Upper Egypt has almost perfectly blue, cloudless skies most of the year. The broad Nile is missing; its two branches to Rosetta and Damietta on the Mediterranean coast are much narrower and less impressive than before the river divides near Cairo and are sometimes indistinguishable from canals. There is an abundance of tall trees—eucalyptus, casuarina, and sycamore; one can never see a distant horizon because of their luxuriant growth, much as in Java or Bangladesh.

There is none of that stark grandeur of Upper Egypt with the wide Nile and the very narrow green valley seldom more than five or 10 miles wide, and the pink cliffs of the desert rising like 1,000-foot mountains on either side, for the Nile Valley is really a trough, cut into the desert floor in pre-historic times. The trees of Upper Egypt, mostly date palms and acacias, are shorter and sparser; the landscapes are more spacious and the desert and Pharaonic temples which seem to rise around each bend in the river are perpetual reminders of eternity and the inconsequence of one man's brief life.

Then there is the Nile itself. Upper Egyptians must frequently cross it in small ferry boats and, especially in the early morning or dusk when traffic is heaviest, these brief journeys invariably seem a kind of rite of passage. The heavy clumsy ferry leaves the bank and heaves through the water so slowly that it is only by watching the bank recede

that you can tell the ferry is moving. Men hang over the sides, watching the river, shrouded in their scarves and tunics, hunched over, chatting quietly or lost in contemplation. It is not hard to imagine they are all sitting on some strange aquatic animal, swimming out to an unknown land. Then the ferry swings out in mid-stream and all too soon is bumping heavily against the landing stage. The fellahin, though they cross the Nile tens of thousands of times in a lifetime, never seem to get their fill of the river, murmuring and lapping against its banks and moving along to many know not where.

In midday there is another Nile as the sun shines blindingly on the water and seems reflected in the air itself, which is pure along the river as it never is in the dusty villages. Its water is of a color impossible to name: it is at once a tender and soft combination of dark blue, silver, and green, a patchwork of liquid sunshine transmuting copper to gold as it crosses from shore to shore. All these seem to combine in a harmony of earthtones exhaling a life-giving warmth. Herodotus called Egypt "a gift of the Nile" but the full glory of this wonderful river can be experienced only in Upper Egypt.

Then there is the Delta's proximity to Cairo, a complex modern-medieval city of 1,000 minarets, the Great Pyramid of Cheops, Saladin's wall against the Crusaders, and Hilton and Sheraton hotels, and Alexandria, a white sun-bleached city that seems to belong to the Mediterranean more than to Egypt. The Delta is more urbanized than Upper Egypt; official statistics say 50 per cent of its people live in towns. But with a population density of 2,300 per square mile and houses and shops almost lining the main roads, who is to say where town ends and countryside begins? In Upper Egypt, where there are no cities of any size, the population is deemed 73 per cent rural.

Yet none of this explains the difference in Lower and Upper Egyptian life styles as convincingly as the century's gap in development, the hundred years that separated the two regional shifts from flood to perennial irrigation.

\* \* \* \* \*



Helmi, a Delta farmer, working in his clover field.

The Egyptians have always been trying to tame the Nile. From Imhotep, who designed the first pyramid, to modern British engineers, who built the first Aswan Dam in 1902 and raised it higher in 1914 and 1936, no one had much success. After a destructive flood in 1938, plans were drawn up for a much higher dam south of Aswan. After the delays caused by World War II, the 1952 revolution, and Nasser's disputes with the World Bank and the United States, the dam was finally begun in 1960, under Russian guidance and finance.

The new High Dam at Aswan, which began storing water in 1964 and generating electricity in 1970, was finally completed in 1971. At first universally recognized as being a success, it soon became evident that many of the dam's economic benefits were being undermined by unpredicted social and ecological backlash. Last year Egyptian and American scientists began what they call the most ambitious study of a lake and river ecosystem ever attempted to "measure the Nile" and determine the chemical, biological, and geological factors involved in the composition and movement of its waters.<sup>1</sup>

Although the study is not to be completed until 1980, its preliminary major finding is expected to be that while the dam has helped to greatly increase Egypt's agricultural production and reclaim 900,000 acres of desert land with a promise of irrigating 4.5 million more (almost doubling Egypt's present cultivated area of 5.6 million acres), a steady rise in the underground water table along the Nile threatens large areas with salinity, alkalinity, and waterlogging. This can be combatted successfully with drainage and leaching and massive projects are being undertaken by the Egyptian government and the World Bank.

Aside from the salinity danger, negative environmental effects have included the loss of silt the old Nile flood formerly deposited (20 to 30 feet carried down from Ethiopia over millennia), until the mid-nineteenth century in the Delta and until 1965 in Upper Egypt. There is also the loss of minerals in the Nile water itself, the erosion of its riverbed, the possible erosion of Egypt's Mediterranean shoreline. The loss of a sardine fishing industry is somewhat offset by the creation of a large fish catch in Lake Nasser. The continuing spread of

such aquatic weeds as water hyacinth and the water snails which carry the dangerous bilharzia parasite could be controlled but is not.

Not being studied yet (it eventually will be) is the Aswan Dam's impact, through the recent shift to perennial from basin (or flood, i.e., one crop a year) irrigation in Upper Egypt and the much older shift in the Delta, upon the lives and culture of the fellahin themselves.

What has happened in the Delta suggests that change, providing a culture has a sufficiently long time for its adaptive mechanism to adjust, does not automatically have a negative and disturbing effect on value systems. In Part I of this series, "Beyond the Mountains of Kaf," I tried to illustrate how modernization has led to psychological and social disruption in Upper Egypt. Now, turning to the Delta, I will try to argue just the reverse, that in this case modernization has produced a culture of individual restraint and collective good. Islamic orthodoxy is as strong as in Upper Egypt, but without the heavy freight of medieval superstition. There is a strong work ethic, widespread thrift, extreme courtesy mixed with reserve, and a firm commitment to order, logic, and technical progress. Implicit is the idea that man can, indeed, master his condition. While Delta society may not be much fun, it is remarkably orderly, busy, crime-free, and stable. It suggests that groups of people can successfully adjust within a relatively short period to living together in extremely crowded rural countrysides, even when it means sacrificing psychologically satisfying traditions and some individual expression and personal freedom. The cost paid—aside from the year-round, hard physical labor intensive, nonmechanized agriculture requires—is the fairly rigid rule by conventions, religious restrictions, and obedience to authority that all successful group living requires. At a time when technology and affluence have given Americans an historically unparalleled freedom of individual choice and some disillusionment with order, reason, and technical advance is setting in—that is, there is some return to the tragic view of life—this may sound appalling. Yet there are still many Americans themselves who regard the small church-going town or village, with Puritanical social codes enforced by community pressure and children becoming self-reliant by performing useful chores at an early age, as possibly the most civilized living

pattern our country has devised. The Delta way of life suggests a pattern many densely populated rural societies may find themselves adapting. It provides the authority, binding ties, and customs for a rural life style that works.

My thesis, then, is that if the effect of modernization beside the Nile has been the raucously explosive Upper Egyptian grasshopper, it has also produced a passive, polite Lower Egyptian ant.

\* \* \* \* \*

Egyptians sometimes ask a foreigner if he does not find their rural landscape monotonous. And it is true, especially in the Delta with its flat, fertile expanse and many trees, that the huddled masses of mud-brick houses and spires of minarets, the network of Nile-fed canals and the vivid green of Egyptian clover and wheat against the darker green of eucalyptus and casuerina, seems to go on forever. The Delta's mild climate and abundant sun and water make it a virtual greenhouse producing some of the earth's highest yields in rice, beans, cotton, sugar, onions, wheat, and maize. Yet there is little mechanization and tractors are few (there are about 25,000 in all Egypt).

In the Delta, large numbers of fellahin can be seen working in the fields the entire day, with the exception of the early afternoon when a siesta of an hour or two after the midday meal is the rule. The rest of the time, their long tunics or *gallabiyas* tucked up at the waist, they till the soil with age-old hoes. Unlike Upper Egyptians, who never enter a field without removing their shoes, an increasing number of Delta fellahin no longer go barefoot. Plowing, they lean heavily on the shafts, crying "Ha!" and "Hoosh!" to their buffaloes or pairs of cows, for they use no bridles. Mowing clover or wheat, they bend from the waist, seldom squatting down to work as they do in Upper Egypt, swiftly flashing sickles and rarely stopping for a minute. Delta fellahin have a fierce work ethic and during harvest men may labor 16 to 18 hours a day, working in a very rapid fashion that has no counterpart in most of the world, including southern Asia, China, and sub-Saharan Africa.

Shouts invariably arise from the fields of "Work! Don't speak so much!" or "Leave the stubble clean, *nahdoof!*" "You work like a boy, Ahmed,

not like a man!" There is much less banter and gossip among the field workers than in Upper Egypt; usually what there is concerns the neighbors' marital troubles. One misses the sorrowful songs, more like weeping, which give such a solemn dignity to field labor in Upper Egypt, and the sudden volcanic eruptions of temper and the quarrels.

Three things stand out to even the most casual observer. There are round, cement cisterns in many of the fields, scattered in long lines a hundred meters apart. These are part of tile drainage systems that have successfully countered the problem of salinity from such constant irrigation. One sees few in Upper Egypt, where salinity is a great and still largely untackled danger.

Then, along the dusty, winding footpaths, there is a steady procession of men leading camels, donkeys, or buffaloes laden with manure or fresh dirt as one or the other is carried from field to village or back again. Great heaps of manure and

dirt lie about the fields and half the Delta's agricultural labor force is engaged in the unceasing task of refertilizing the land with animal manure to replace the minerals and nutrients lost when the Nile stopped flooding a century ago.<sup>2</sup> Also unlike Upper Egypt, in the Delta women can be seen working in the fields, the older ones in long black dresses and the younger in brightly colored red, yellow, or blue gowns, their heads wrapped in similarly bright kerchiefs. In Upper Egypt, women, once they reach puberty, rarely go to the fields and though they go about freely in public, doing the marketing and attending weddings and funerals, they appear in long black cloaks, which, flowing behind and almost reaching the ground as they ride past on donkeys, give them a graceful medieval air.

But the third, most conspicuous important difference is the large number of young men and girls walking about with tattered textbooks in hand, memorizing their lessons. Even the poorest fellahin family in the Delta somehow seems to manage to send at least one or two sons—or daughters—to

Wheat harvesters at rest in Sirs el Layyan, the Delta.



college so that they can emigrate as teachers or skilled technicians to Cairo, Alexandria, or one of Egypt's oil-rich neighboring Arab states. Egypt has had free compulsory primary education since 1952 and those who pass the examinations can continue to get a free university education. That, at least, is the theory. It is true in the Delta, but not Upper Egypt, where only half, at best, of the fellahin children attend free government schools and only a handful from each village reach a university.<sup>3</sup>

Tile drainage, widespread use of animal manure, and universal education—and the urban migration that goes with it—these three visible aspects of Delta villages are outward signs of a society that has adjusted its agriculture to change and has adapted a mechanism to export its surplus children after first equipping them with education or skills.

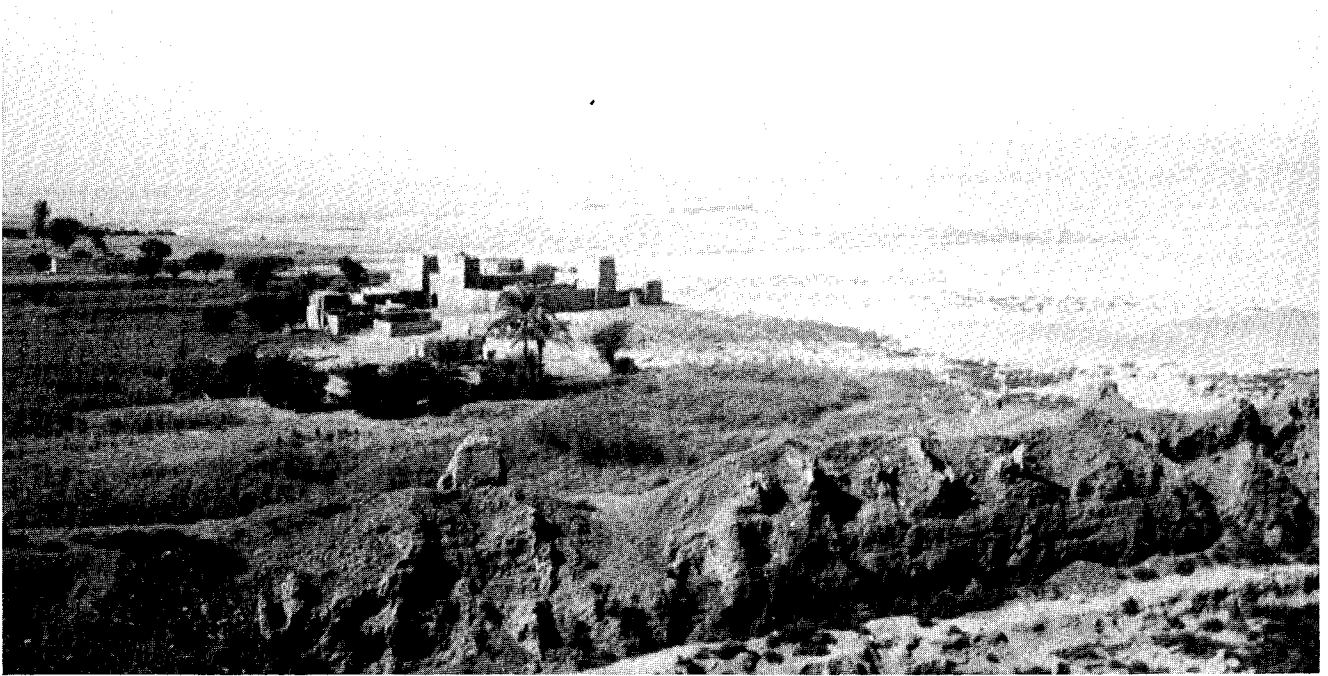
For purposes of illustration, let me take two fellahin and compare their agricultural production, income and expenditures, and psychological outlook. The first, Shahhat, 24, appeared in the first Report in this series. He and his family are the Upper Egyptians I know best since I have known them for two years and lived with them for a year. Fatih, a Delta fellah of 26, I worked beside for a period of 10 weeks. Both became heads of their respective families when their fathers died in 1974 and both cultivate smallholdings of two and a half acres each, just slightly above the national Egyptian average holding of two acres (distributed among 3,211,000 owners, 362,000 of them beneficiaries, like Shahhat but not Fatih, of land reforms in 1952, 1961, and 1965).

Shahhat's village of Berat, 450 miles south of Cairo on the Upper Nile, has a population of about 8,000 spread over 1,300 acres, of which all but 100 are cultivated. Its people live in 11 distinctly separate agricultural settlements, each close to ancestral fields and possessing its own identity. Many fellahin, like Shahhat, in 1965 were deeded two acres at Sombat, a former feudal estate whose owners fled to Rome 24 years ago. Berat itself is an administrative designation rather than a physical place; its "combined service units" consist of an agricultural office, government primary school, and dispensary served by a doctor, and are to be found standing alone near the edge of Sombat estate, a group of white modern buildings in

striking contrast to the mud-brick fellahin houses. The real heart of Berat is the largest of its settlements, El Kom, where the village's largest mosques, its graveyard, community television set, 'omda or village headman, *kuttabs* or traditional Muslim schools, its single opium and gambling den, and its leading shopkeepers, sheikhs, and sorcerers are located.

Fatih's village of Sirs el Layyan, 40 miles north of Cairo in the heart of the Nile Delta, has 46,000 people divided into 8,000 families. Sirs el Layyan covers 4,000 acres of which 3,600 are cultivated, the average holding being 1.5 acres. Rural banditry has all but disappeared in the Delta in the past 20 years, allowing the fellahin of Sirs el Layyan for the first time to build houses near their holdings in the fields. As a result, almost every family has two houses, one in the village proper where parents, grandparents, and those children attending school or working in the nearby towns live, and another in the fields for those children working the land as fellahin. While exact statistics are nonexistent, local officials estimate nearly 5,000 men work in agriculture (helped by an undetermined number of women), of whom 2,400 or almost half own some land. Another 700 men work in a local, privately owned glass factory, another 300 in a government wheat and rice mill, nearly 3,000 in Cairo (of whom a third commute to the city daily by bus), some 750 in neighboring Arab countries (of whom half have left their families at home), and nearly 900 more as schoolteachers for Sirs el Layyan's 7,000 students (three primary schools, two junior high schools and one senior high school, all coeducational). Sirs el Layyan's "combined social units" include a large hospital staffed by four doctors, a veterinary clinic, a family planning center, a day care center (for 70 preschool children with working mothers—mostly teachers), an experimental farm, agricultural cooperative, and public relief office.

Opposite page, top: A settlement of Berat village (Upper Egypt) showing the sharp line between irrigated land and desert; Bottom: Wheat harvest in Sirs el Layyan, in the fertile Delta.



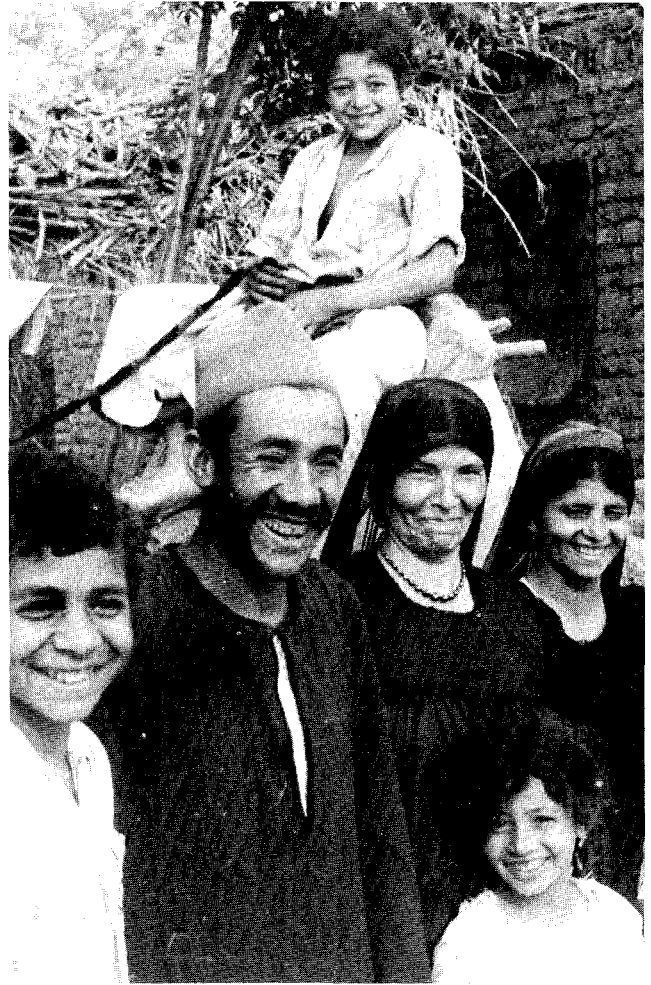


Shahhat making noodles during month of Ramadan (fasting).

### SHAHHAT, THE UPPER EGYPTIAN

Shahhat heads a family of five, including his widowed mother, but also feeds many visiting grandchildren and a steady stream of relatives and friends. He possesses a buffalo, a donkey, and eight sheep.

On his 2.5 acres, Shahhat devotes one acre to sugar cane, netting up to \$600 on this annual cash crop. On his remaining acre of government-deeded land, Shahhat grows either maize, beans, lentils, sesame, or wheat as the local agricultural officer instructs him. After taking some of each crop home for consumption, Shahhat nets an average of \$70 for each, or \$210 a year from this acre. He also earns a net profit of about \$300 selling wine, candy, and vegetables, and cooking vermicelli (*kunafeh*)



Fatih with some of his family. His wife is at far right.

### FATIH, THE DELTA FELLAH

Fatih heads a family of 10, including widowed mother and his wife and feeds no relatives or visitors. He possesses a buffalo, a camel, and four sheep.

On his 2.5 acres, Fatih grows Egyptian clover to feed his animals, and wheat and maize to feed the family, of which a surplus worth \$200 for both is sold each year. Milk is consumed by the family, but his mother churns butter for sales worth \$240 a year. He sells about two sheep a year for \$200 more. If he raises the highly lucrative new cash crop of seed potatoes, he can bring up his total net (after inputs) farm income to \$1,290 a year, making \$650 alone on potatoes.



during the annual month-long fast of Ramadan, bringing yearly cash income up to \$1,200 to \$1,300 a year.

**Agricultural yields:** In Upper Egypt there is as yet no system of using animal manure to replace the Nile's lost silt. Dung is still primarily used as a cooking fuel as in India. Shahhat explains this as a lack of animals in Upper Egypt due to a shortage of clover and other forage. Using only commercial fertilizer, Shahhat applied 400 kilos to both his maize and wheat crops. He harvested 28 bushels of wheat and 34 bushels of maize per acre. Normally Shahhat works from about 7 A.M. until noon and again in the late afternoon, stopping most of the midday because of Upper Egypt's intense heat in the summer months. In June to August, little field work is done.

Shahhat's monthly expenditures are almost twice the national fellahin average. He spends \$10 for meat, \$10 for cloth and sandals, \$12 for cigarettes (he smokes *Cleopatra's*, Egypt's most popular brand at 60 cents a pack), 20 cents for matches, \$12 for sugar, \$12 for tea, \$2 for kerosene, \$1.30 for soap, for a total of \$59.50.

**Education:** Neither Shahhat nor any of his five surviving brothers and sisters (two are married and living away from home) has attended any school but the local *kuttab* to memorize the Koran, which, for two younger brothers, costs him \$4 a month.

**Funeral expenses:** When Shahhat's father died in 1974, his mother borrowed \$600 from the government, using future sugar cane harvests as collateral, to pay for *zikrs* or prayer performances on the 7th, 40th, and 100th days after his death to speed the father on his journey to Paradise.

**Favorite sayings:** Shahhat is high-spirited with a good sense of humor. When someone says "Good morning," he is likely to reply, "Black morning" or if someone asks where he is going to say "Going to hell." When working he likes to sing or shout out "Oh, my God, Allah, help the poor people! Send us a breeze and an army of workers from the sky! Oh, holy Prophet, help us, we are Muslims!"

The Delta land is much richer, especially in Menufia governorate where Sirs el Layyan is situated. Fatih, by applying 400 donkey loads of animal manure mixed with dirt to each acre, and using only 100 kilos of chemical fertilizer, was able to harvest yields of 68 bushels of wheat and 84 bushels of maize. This can, of course, be partly explained by salinity as Sirs el Layyan has an excellent tile drainage system and it is no longer the problem it was when the system was installed 25 years ago. But the Delta people are also unquestionably the more industrious and diligent farmers. They work much longer hours and steadily without a break throughout the year.

Fatih's monthly expenditures come close to the national average for rural fellahin: he spends \$8 for meat, \$10 for cloth and sandals, \$6 for tobacco (he rolls his own cigarettes), 20 cents for matches, \$3 for sugar, \$3 for tea, \$1 for kerosene, \$1.30 for soap, for a total of \$32.50.

Fatih spends \$20 a month sending three younger brothers to school, one of them to a commercial college in the nearby town of Menuf, where he is learning to be an accountant. He plans that the older boy will obtain a government job for a salary of \$40 a month, enabling him to pay for university education for the two smallest brothers.

Fatih spent \$100 on his father's death rites and held no *zikrs*. He has borrowed no money except small amounts from the local agricultural cooperative to buy fertilizer and seeds and these are always repaid at harvest time.

Fatih, like all fellahin, is forever quoting proverbs, but of another style: "Work and let the day pass," "The lazy man is always depressed," "Don't sleep with your wife on days of harvesting," "Time is like a sword; if you cannot cut it, it will cut you."

## SHAHHAT (Cont'd.)

Daily field wages in Upper Egypt range from 70 cents to \$1. Shahhat will never hire out to others but will work in his friends' fields during harvest time without pay.

If he has money, Shahhat will spend it on beer, date wine, or hashish; his often voiced creed is to eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we are dead.

Song made up by Shahhat: (To the tune of a popular Arabic folk song)

Why, why, why, why, why, why?  
 If you have money, your wife  
 respects you  
 And says, "You are the beat  
 of my heart, the light of my  
 eyes. The days without you  
 I go out of my mind."  
 But if your pocket is empty  
 The smell of your sweat  
 Burns her eyes.  
 Why, why, why, why, why, why?  
 Oh, I'll take hashish and opium  
 And be strong as a bull.  
 If a woman is satisfied,  
 Her words are sweet as honey.  
 If she is not, she can roast  
 you like an oven.  
 Oh, I'll take hashish and opium  
 And be strong as a bull.  
 At noonday prayers how I'll soar!  
 But when they pray at Mahgreb  
 And the sun goes down,  
 I'll flutter like a wounded bird.  
 Why, why, why, why, why, why?

Hospitality: Shahhat's mother never tires of saying, "If one is generous to others, Allah will provide." She serves as many as 30 glasses of sweetened tea to friends and relatives each day and the \$24 spent on tea and sugar is the main reason Shahhat's monthly expenses, other than for education, are almost twice those of Fatih. When he grows angry over such extravagance and says, "Are you a sultana? No, you are poor and without clothes," his mother will retort, "You have no

## FATIH (Cont'd.)

When he can, Fatih will hire himself out as a laborer to others. Daily field wages in the Delta range from \$1 to \$2; sometimes at the peak of the harvest season, Fatih may earn \$2 mowing wheat for one man in the morning and a second \$2 mowing it for another at night, if there is a full moon.

Fatih, like most Delta fellahin, never indulges in spirits or hashish; he saves what money he can.

Song made up by Fatih:

Poverty came one day in a *felluca*,  
 And I asked Poverty:  
 What do you want with me?  
 And Poverty said:  
 To live with you always  
 Never let you be happy.  
 Oh, Poverty has a stick  
 And beats me on the head  
 If I see Poverty again,  
 I shall kill him.  
 Oh, hire yourself to others  
 They will kill you with work.  
 But he who fears rats,  
 Cannot breed chickens.

Traditional hospitality survives in the Delta but tea is served less often and in much smaller glasses. Fatih and his mother never quarrel about household expenses, it being assumed \$3 a month each for tea and sugar is a fixed, regularly budgeted expense which cannot be exceeded. Like most Delta fellahin, Fatih's family is careful to live within its means.

SHAHHAT (Cont'd.)

FATIH (Cont'd.)

manners! How dare you shout at me? Allah will not forget me! This is my house and I shall do what I want!" Living in debt is the rule in Upper Egypt.

In Berat, a favorite gathering place for young men at night is a low, dark hovel run by an opium-addict named Mahmood, where men sit about drinking, smoking hashish and, seated on straw floor mats around a low circular table, gambling at cards. With only a dim oil lamp, even the most ordinary faces take on a demonic look and the local date wine, so potent its effect is like suffering from concussion, produces a lot of fellahin joking and swearing with bleary eyes, stupified by the bad liquor and hashish.

In Berat, an unmarried girl who became pregnant was killed by her father to preserve the family honor (he waited until she was bent over a pond washing clothes and held her head under until she drowned). One of Upper Egypt's most popular folk songs is "Shefiqa and Motwali," a sort of Arab "Frankie and Johnnie." Motwali, a young soldier, discovers his sister, Shefiqa, has been seduced into prostitution. Disguised as a customer he finds her and kills her, cutting off her head. Accompanied by a band of musicians, he carries her corpse through the streets and drops it at the feet of his parents, saying, "Here is your daughter." A judge acquits him for having saved his family's honor. "Shefiqa and Motwali" is Shahhat's favorite song and he never tires of listening to it or singing it.

In Sirs el Layyan, there are only three cafés, all open to the street where the clientele, mostly bus and truck drivers, sit about decorously playing dominoes and sipping tea. Beer is sold, but invariably taken home and out of public view to drink. Hashish may be smoked in the early morning hours with the local policeman taking his turn at the hubbly bubbly, as a hashish water pipe is known. Even as innocuous as they are, the cafés have bad reputations and fellahin rarely frequent them, Fatih never.

In Sirs el Layyan, the unmarried sister of one of Fatih's neighbors, Helmi, became pregnant. When the police interrogated her, she named seven village men. One, a schoolteacher, was temporarily arrested, despite his hysterical protestations of innocence. The baby was born but when it fell ill with fever the hospital in Sirs el Layyan refused to treat it, and it died. A doctor, called to provide a death certificate, claimed to find evidence of strangulation and Helmi's sister now faces a murder charge. Throughout the episode, a number of fellahin urged Helmi to kill his sister in the traditional fashion. They said he should "do like Motwali" but Helmi steadfastly refused, accepting the stain on his family's honor.



Fatih, at right, with his friend Helmi. Helmi resisted tradition by refusing to kill his pregnant, unmarried sister, as he was urged to do in the name of family honor.

## SHAHHAT (Cont'd.)

Except for a handful of village fellahin who listen to the radio speeches of President Sadat, few in Berat took any interest in politics. When some youths were conscripted into the Egyptian army, though a few welcomed it and Shahhat said his friends came back literate, with some job skill and were much more aware, most of the drafted boys' parents carried on as if their sons were already dead. One old Coptic fellah who was losing his son asked Shahhat, "What is the news of the army? Is there war? Will my son, Romanni, die? How can he return.

If he does not lose his eyes,  
if he does not lose his arms,  
if he does not lose his legs.  
Romanni is as good as dead."

Birth control: Shahhat says, "Women take tablets today not to get so many babies. People are getting intelligent about the life." But pronatalist attitudes are still strong as more sons mean relief from field labor, protection in feuds, and old-age security.

In Berat, there is still enough rural banditry so that cattle are never left unguarded at night and buffaloes are sometimes stolen.

Openness: Despite their often rough manners, Upper Egyptians tend to be frank and even intimate in discussing their lives and problems.

Attitudes toward money: On this as in so many of their qualities, Upper Egyptians are bundles of contradictions. They are both avaricious and

## FATIH (Cont'd.)

If one walks through Sirs el Layyan during one of Sadat's radio speeches, you can hear it being played in virtually every house. The Delta fellahin are much more politically aware, hear of current news developments, and a few read newspapers. In Sirs el Layyan, the sizable educated middle class, mostly schoolteachers, tend to influence the fellahin with their own middle class, largely urban values. Village youths do not fear conscription into the army, especially as many of them, with higher education, will go in only for 18 months, as officers. Illiterate fellahin must go for five years.

The great emphasis in Delta rural society given to educating children and at least getting one child from even the poorest families into college and the drop in infant mortality because of adequate medical care—the first modern pharmacy opened in Sirs el Layyan this year—suggest the old pronatalist attitudes are fading. Much more could be achieved if government family planning was better funded and more activist.

Buffaloes and cows are often left untended in sheds in the fields at night and a theft of one has not taken place in recent memory.

In the Delta, extreme courtesy and good manners is combined with reserve and even secrecy about one's personal affairs. There is a great deal of gossip, some of it malicious, so that one eventually hears about everything from second parties, but in Sirs el Layyan people do not confide. I worked side by side in the fields with Helmi throughout the trauma about his sister and at a time the neighbors spoke of little else once he was out of earshot. Characteristically, Helmi never once mentioned he even had a sister. The nearest he came was to apologize that he could not invite me to his parents' house (like Shahhat, he lived with his wife in the fields), saying he was not getting along with his mother.

Deltans seem to follow the advice of Polonius, "neither a borrower nor lender be." They are hospitable but modest in what is offered, usually their

SHAHHAT (Cont'd.)

generous, have no scruples about asking for "baksheesh" and yet will spend their last penny to entertain you lavishly, even borrowing from the neighbors. It is rare to be invited to eat without having a repast of roasted beef, chicken, rabbit or pigeon, grape leaves stuffed with rice, some hot dish of tomatoes and potatoes, a salad, sweetened tea and coffee besides. Feasts, like *haflas* and *zikrs*, musicians, dancing, hashish, beer, liquor, magic charms and the rest, may impoverish but they bring joy for the present moment, and that is what Upper Egyptians care about.

A wedding in Berat is an exuberant affair, with dancing, drinking, pistols fired in the air, and usually brawls at the end.

Fights are a way of life in Upper Egypt and few men venture outdoors at night without carrying a heavy stave for self-defense. Some carry knives and a few, pistols. Jail sentences for having killed someone in a genuine feud or excited quarrel tend to be light.<sup>4</sup>

An Upper Egyptian.



FATIH (Cont'd.)

own simple diet of wheat or maize bread, salted cheese, a vegetable or two, raw onions, and sweetened tea.

In Berat, weddings, like all forms of evening entertainment, tend to be dull and decorous, with men sitting on mats outside the bridegroom's house, drinking tea, chatting quietly, and smoking endless cheap cigarettes.

Weapons of any kind, including wooden staves, are no longer carried after dark by the Delta fellahin. Quarrels are very rare and unlike the robust shouting matches so commonplace in Upper Egypt (which may lead to blows or even a bite on the nose), quarrels in the Delta are deadly serious and tend to be vicious, not melodramatic.

Helmi, a Delta fellah.



During my stay in the Delta, I invited Shahhat to spend a week in Sirs el Layyan. The Upper Egyptian, though he admired Fatih's industry, much higher yields, and his ability to sacrifice to educate his younger brothers, gradually became

depressed and said he found the Delta's way of life smothering. "It's like a prison here," he said.<sup>5</sup>

In few rural societies can one find two regions with such strikingly different cultural traits:

### CHART I

#### Traits peculiar to Upper Egypt

Illiteracy widespread and almost universal for women

Lack of participation in major institutions outside of agricultural cooperative and village dispensary

Absence of savings and heavy indebtedness

Fear of military service, leaving home

Hatred of police who tend to be brutal and beat fellahin

Use sorcerers or traditional remedies before hospitals or modern medicine

Mistrust and avoid government or those in high position

Reject middle-class values

Premarital and extra-marital sexual relations not uncommon (though in the case of virgins, there is no penetration)

Sodomy with other males or animals accepted as peccadillo, joked about, but is sensuality not homosexuality

#### Traits peculiar to the Delta

Literacy general among present and younger generation; illiteracy common among older people

Participation in wide spectrum of government institutions

Accumulation of savings and little indebtedness

Acceptance of military service, outside travel

Respect for police and cooperation with them; police brutality rare

Use hospitals and modern medicine first

Readily accept government authority; frequently turn to it for assistance

Accept many middle-class values; pay lip-service to most

Little sex outside of marriage; strong community pressure and surveillance against it

No evidence of sodomy either practiced or socially tolerated, but hint of true homosexuality in few individual cases

#### Traits found in both

Low wages  
Lack of property ownership among two-thirds of fellahin who are landless; tiny holdings of one or two acres among owners

Chronic shortage of cash and frequent buying of small quantities of essential commodities, matches sugar, tea, soap, etc., as need arises. Fear catching disease in hospital, suspect lack of sanitation

Little if any membership in political parties; little social organization. Yet strong sense of community and identity with native village, area of origin, and tribe

Marriage universal; no homosexual subculture in Western sense

Traits peculiar to Upper Egypt	Traits peculiar to the Delta	Traits found in both
High toleration for pathological behavior	Low toleration for behavior departing from established norms	Feebleminded considered saintly
Marked sibling rivalry and competition for maternal affection	Much more support given siblings and less consequent dependence upon maternal affection	Mother-centered families despite father's outward dominance and public show of male authoritarianism
Women caught sinning against sexual conventions (adultery, premarital pregnancy) killed by fathers or brothers	Social ostracism against women caught sinning against sexual conventions; killings rare	
Strong feelings of helplessness and inferiority masked by show of <i>machismo</i> ; slight sadistic strain	Comparative confidence; little sense of inferiority; little apparent need to prove masculinity by reducing others to inferior status	
Open, gregarious	Reserved, secretive	Gossip about neighbors, often reveal their most carefully kept secrets
Seldom, if ever, visit Cairo or other urban centers, or if they do keep to cafés and hotels frequented by those from home village and region	Frequently visit Cairo and Alexandria; sophisticated awareness of city life and its ways	
Discriminate against certain tribes for historical and superstitious reasons	No discrimination against any particular social group	Very friendly, hospitable toward foreigners, especially Europeans
Lack of impulse control	Strong self-restraint	
Strong present-time orientation	Future-time orientation	
Little ability to defer gratification	Plan, save, and sacrifice for future at cost in present enjoyment	
Sense of fatalism and resignation	Belief problems should be challenged and solved, not accepted	
Widespread belief in male superiority; women do no field work	Greater equality between sexes; women work in fields, are seldom veiled in public	
Provincial and village oriented	More nationally oriented	Suspicion, mistrust of neighboring villages

Traits peculiar to Upper Egypt	Traits peculiar to the Delta	Traits found in both
Highly sensitive to status distinctions	Class conscious; distinct social stratification	
Quick recourse to violence and rapid reconciliation with opponent	Seldom use violence; repressed; Nurse grudges	
Deep belief in magic charms, sorcerers, demons, genii, and the powers of Satan for evil and Allah for good	Superstitions discarded or hidden; not openly admitted; greater observance of Islamic ritual and outward piety	Strongly orthodox Islamic faith
Proud, individualistic, courageous except fear authority but tend to disobey it	More humble, conformist, highly responsive to group social pressure, obey authority but do not fear it	
Fairly open society except for marriage	Closed society	
Marriages arranged, often with first cousins	Love marriages increasingly common	

In considering such traits, it should be kept in mind that none, taken alone, is indicative per se of either an Upper Egyptian or a Delta fellah when it comes to specific individuals. It is their conjunction and their patterning among large numbers of people studied over a considerable period of time that define the difference between the two fellahin cultures in the Nile Valley and Delta.<sup>6</sup>

The families of Shahhat and Fatih make almost identical cash incomes of just under \$1,300 a year, but their different subcultures determine radically different spending patterns. The more advanced methods of cultivation, their much higher level of literacy, their exposure to the mass media, their proximity to the cities and influence of their middle class rural neighbors, make the Delta fellahin much more aspiring to upward mobility than the Upper Egyptians. As they become more class conscious and increase their participation in local government institutions they become much more of a political force; there is a disproportionate number of Egyptians of Delta village origin in the

Cairo government and indeed Sadat himself is one of them.<sup>7</sup>

A culture develops mechanisms that tend to perpetuate it, especially in what happens to the world view, aspirations, and character of the children of each new generation that grows up in it. But it also has adaptive mechanisms that adjust, slowly or rapidly, to change. We know from such studies as Edward Lane's "The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians,"<sup>8</sup> first published in 1836, that the Delta culture when the shift from flood to perennial irrigation came a century ago was very similar to what we find in Upper Egypt today. The improved educational and economic opportunities Egypt hopes to offer in the next decade or two suggest Upper Egypt itself will be transformed into something resembling the Delta pattern.

History marches on. Yet it should be noted that the Upper Egyptians, with their strong sense of fatalism, are less driven and less anxious than the striving fellahin of the Delta, trying to make a



better life, especially for their children, in the face of tremendous odds. (Where will all those educated students go?)

Somehow the Upper Egyptian grasshopper—explosive, fiery-tempered, full of joy and laughter,

pain and despair—has an extraordinary capacity for a robust, avid, intense, living of life. This now seems to be lost forever to the docile, hard-working, ever-aspiring Delta ant.



#### NOTES

1. This \$1.2 million, five-year study, begun in February 1975, is headed by Egyptian scientist Mustafa Hafez and by Dr. Khalil H. Mancy, an Egyptian-born professor of environmental sciences at the University of Michigan. It is being funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Ford Foundation and is being conducted by the Egyptian Academy of Scientific Research and Technology and the University of Michigan. Dr. Mancy, commenting on the adverse publicity given the dam, told me, "The international debate on the Aswan Dam has shown a certain insensitivity to Egypt's need for food. We're stuck with the dam and have to make the best of it. What we need to do now is to take a long, hard look at its positive and negative aspects and do something about them." I have dealt in detail with the dam's impact on the fellahin in the May 1976 issue of *International Wildlife*.

2. These are differences of opinion on the relative value of the heavy application of animal manure in the Delta. H.A. Tobgy, Egypt's under-secretary of agriculture from 1958 to 1973 and presently the Ford Foundation's agricultural adviser on the Middle East, contended in an interview that it is negligible. The Delta fellahin think otherwise. Since Egyptian clover to feed the Delta's livestock population extends over almost half its agricultural area, or 2.8 million acres, this would seem a vital area for scientific investigation. Dr. Tobgy told me that since 1966, 600,000 acres have been diverted from wheat and cotton to clover. It might be noted 400 donkeyloads of manure equal 15 cubic meters, the usual per acre application.

3. It is estimated current drainage projects are still meeting only one-fourth of the need if the salinity threat along the Nile is to be successfully combatted.

4. Because quarrels, or what is called a *shakel*, play such an important social role among the easily excitable Upper Egyptians (also the Cairenes but not the Deltans), I should probably provide an example. Two fellahin were pushing a heavy freight wagon down the tracks during the sugar cane harvest and wearying, began to accuse each other of not pushing hard enough. One began cursing the other's father and he retorted by cursing his companion's mother. As they menaced each other—but continued pushing the freight

car—the dialogue went like this: "Your religion is bad!" "Your father's religion is bad!" "You are the son of an evil one!" "Shut up, you donkey!" "Donkey!" "Why... May Allah smite you to pieces!" "Go, burn in hell fire!" "May your father burn first!" "Pig!" "Pimp!" "Son of a dog!" "Bastard!" "Push you lazy son of a dog! You are dirty and your father is dirty!" After some minutes of this, one of the fellahin became so enraged, he stopped pushing and threatened to hit the other, shouting, "May your house fall down! May all your neighbors' houses fall down! May all the houses around them fall down! May all the houses in your sight fall down! It's a black day I ever said I'd work with you! I may get ruptured and you will be to blame!" Yet once they had pushed the wagon to their field, the animosity was over. They laughed, embraced and kissed, and went to work. That evening when they met on the road they greeted each other with great affability: "I congratulate you on your safety!" "I hope you are well." "Peace be upon you." "On you be peace and the mercy of Allah and his blessings." "Welcome to you. Come to my house and drink tea." The next day in the field they were quarreling just as violently as the day before.

5. The gradual psychological development of an Upper Egyptian is dealt with in a new book, *Shahhat, an Egyptian*, to be published next year. In the original draft, completed in September 1974, Shahhat is prepared at the end to turn his back on tradition and leave his village for a few years to seek employment outside. In mid-1976 I had to rewrite the ending after discovering, with some shock and sadness, that Shahhat was surrendering to tradition and fatalism. After rereading the manuscript, however, it became clear to me that this was the inevitable philosophical resolution for a fellah, no matter how rebellious he has been in his youth.

6. Some Egyptians claim Sirs el Layyan cannot be considered representative of the Delta because in 1947 it was the first Egyptian village to receive such social services as an agricultural cooperative, dispensary, and secondary school and later was chosen as the site for the Arab States Fundamental Education Center which trains officials from Arab nations. Having visited many Delta villages I do not find such a claim valid as today Sirs el Layyan is not as progressive as many other Delta communities and ASFEC has

no organic relationship with the fellahin in the surrounding countryside. The only significant difference between Sirs el Layyan and villages in, say, the northern Delta, is that it lies in the region of Egypt's deepest silt deposits and richest soil.

7. Sadat's Delta village background has greatly influenced his thinking. In an interview in Alexandria on June 10, 1976, he described his strategy for Egypt's development from now to the year 2000 as one centering on agro-industry. He feels that Egypt's level of education is too low and its traditions too agricultural to follow the Nasserist formula of heavy industrialization or to emulate the Japanese model as his own planning commission urges. In the next quarter-century, Sadat hopes to double Egypt's present 5.6 million acres of irrigated land, by adding another 4.5 million acres of desert land to some 900,000 already reclaimed using water made available by the Aswan Dam and by reclaiming an additional unspecified amount by exploiting the desert's underground water reserves. "Agro-industrial complexes," he told me. "This is the future of Egypt. By the year 2000, I aim to first put new, reclaimed desert land into agro-industrial complexes, and then, bit by bit, the entire Nile Valley." He said he hoped gradually to shift the valley out of grain production and into high-value cash crops like fruit, vegetables, dairy, and poultry for export to Europe and the oil-rich Arab states. "You know we are living now on only 4 per cent of our land and 96 per cent is desert," he went on. "Lately some of the oil companies have struck water and that is more precious to us than oil. If we can raise the land we live on from 4 to 10 per cent, you shall see new cities in the desert, new irrigated lands." He wants to make Egypt self-sufficient in everything but wheat, which could be imported from the West or Syria, Iraq, or the Sudan. "Wheat is no longer economical in Egypt," he said. He is currently initiating his long-term strategy in the Giza region north of Cairo, around the Suez Canal cities, and in several regions in the Western Desert.

He said he is eager to go ahead with this development strategy and hopes a Middle East political solution can be found in the creation of a compromise Palestinian state composed of the West Bank and Gaza strip. "This would be a very happy solution," Sadat said, "and myself, I'm working on it."

The Egyptian President, who spoke English in the interview, told me he welcomed a resurgence of Islamic orthodoxy as "we should return to the main principles of our Muslim heritage." He said he fears the emergence of a spiritually rootless urban poor if Egypt industrializes and urbanizes too quickly, one which might drift away from the core of its traditional culture, Islam. (Cairo, for instance, still has almost no street crime.) He believes population control cannot be legislatively imposed from above but must come through the spread of education. In the end, he said, "it is a matter of religion." During my stay in Sirs el Layyan I visited Sadat's village of Miet Abu el Koum which was 15 miles away and found it very similar. Sadat seems deeply aware of the kind of cultural changes I have been describing in this Report. Few of the Egyptian elite have such village roots or exhibit his grasp of the need for gradual change so that fellahin culture has time to adapt and still preserve the main principles of its value system.

8. Despite being written 140 years ago, Lane's study remains the best guide to fellahin traditions. Lane spent three years in Egypt, 1825-1828, and returned again 1833-1835. He was a fluent Arabic speaker, wore local dress and, in that marvelous way of nineteenth century English scholars and explorers, immersed himself in Egypt's culture in a way few foreigners have since. Today one can largely discard his observations on government, clothing, industry, and laws, but when it comes to religion, superstitions, magic, character, music, public recitations and festivals, death and funeral rites he is describing the life Upper Egyptians still live today. His book is indispensable to anyone seeking to understand how these fellahin think and feel. Henry Habib Ayrout's *The Fellaheen*, first published in 1938 and then rewritten and republished in several editions (the last, 1961 edition, is the best), also stands up when comparing its observations to actual life, especially in the psychology of the fellahin, although Ayrout is clearly, though he does not say so, writing only about the Upper Egyptians. Hamed Ammar's *Growing Up In An Egyptian Village* (1954) is the fullest account of village life but it is set in Aswan, where customs differ from the rest of the Nile Valley.

