

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Village Wedding

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Dear Peter;

There are, I am told, two kinds of wedding celebrations in Upper Egyptian villages: the decorous and the rowdy.

I recently had an opportunity to witness one of the decorous kind.

The invitation came from Ali, my taxi driver during three days of site-seeing in Luxor. Although he clothes his short and spare frame in a galabiyah, Ali, 25, is the most westernized non-university student I have met in Egypt. With his fluent command of English, and some French, learned entirely by talking to tourists, Ali is relaxed around foreigners and able to talk to them on their level.

During the winter, he works with tour groups in Luxor; in the summer, he hires himself out as a taxi driver conducting tourists around the west bank antiquities. So he gets a lot of practice working with them.

But there is something extra, a personal rapport, he brings to his work. It is my belief that Ali seeks genuine friendships with foreigners. I consider him a friend.

On this particular evening, Ali invited me and a young German couple to attend a wedding celebration in Gezira el Qurna ("Island of Qurna" -- Qurna is the major village on the west bank across from Luxor).

Our first stop was at the house where Ali lives with his wife Nagat and 1½-year-old daughter Sana in Gezira el Berat, on the main road between the Nile ferry and the west bank monuments. Berat is the home of Shahhat, a villager who was the subject of Richard Critchfield's 1978 book Shahhat; Ali is a nephew of Shahhat's mother Ommohamed.

Like other houses in the village I had seen, Ali's had mud walls and dirt floors but, also like them, sported a television set. When we arrived, the family and a neighbor boy were watching an Egyptian domestic melodrama. Nagat went into the kitchen to make tea (since she spoke no foreign languages, this was her only participation in this hobnobbing-with-the-foreigners part of his life), and Ali explained the plot of the soap opera:

A young woman was in love with one man but was scheduled to marry another. Her family had arranged the marriage and she did not care for their choice. But the woman's father was opposed to her choice, deeming the young man unsuitable.

~~The tension in the situation was obvious: the daughter was~~

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anguished, the father grave, and both suitors ardently vehement.

Ali indicated the program would eventually come down on the father's side, with the daughter seeing the error of her ways. As he explained it, the government (Egyptian television is state-owned and operated) likes to shore up public morality by re-enforcing the old Father Knows Best customs.

But the trend nowadays is for people to marry for love, rather than family, reasons, he said. If a boy and girl in the village fall in love and are determined to marry, the family is not likely to intervene, he said.

The wedding we were about to witness was a love match, not an arranged one, although neither family objected, Ali said.

We drove through the narrow, twisting lanes of the village -- more suitable for donkey travel than Ali's rented Renault station wagon -- to the site of the ceremony, the groom's two-story house.

Several long rows of benches had been placed in front of the house. About 150 men were sipping tea, smoking cigarettes and chatting. With walls and other houses enclosing the space on the other three sides, the effect was of a courtyard, now flood-lit by electric lights. A low stage about 10 feet long and an upright microphone had been erected at the front of the gathering.

The four of us sat on a side bench sipping the inevitable tea. I asked Ali if beer was going to be served.

He replied that it was not going to be that kind of a wedding. The word he used to describe this particular ceremony was "religious."

But not all village weddings are religious. That very night, there was another celebration near his own house featuring alcohol, he said.

Ali himself has no objection to beer and hashish taken in moderate quantities. But he very much disapproved of drinking at weddings. He referred to the people at the other party as "dirty." He said their drinking would produce rowdiness and fighting.

It was obvious that nothing of the sort would happen at this party. There was a pervasive sense of politeness and decorum. The groom's male relatives greeted newcomers and escorted them to their seats. The men sat on their benches, walking sticks close at hand, wearing their best galabiyahs and aymas (a skull cap known as a taaya with a white piece of cloth wrapped around it to obstruct the sun), looking as if they were preparing to listen to a sermon, which in a way they were.

Women, as usual, were conspicuously absent. A few preteen girls sat on the ground with some male children in front of the stage, but there were no women on the benches.

Later, as we were leaving, we found women sitting in groups along the ~~darkened alleyway~~ or in the ~~lighted doorways~~. Although they could hear the courtyard action over the public address system, few of them would have been able to see it. When we questioned him about this segregation, Ali said that the women were having their own party, but away from the men.

I still feel that the women were missing something because the singer brought in to entertain the villagers was

visually as well as aurally magnetic.

Known just by his first name, Jamal, this singer came from Isna, about 60 kilometers up the Nile, and was very famous, having performed since he was a child, said Ali. Probably in his early 30s now, he travelled with a four-piece backup band of singers and musicians.

Ali told me that Jamal would receive LE 100 (about \$100) for the night's work (it seems so little that I now wonder if the band was paid separately) and would perform in a neighboring village the following night.

With his dapper clothes and finely sculptured dark brown face, Jamal was certainly the picture of dignified elegance, contrasting sharply with the rough-hewn farmer types listening to him.

Most Egyptian galabiyahs are little more than baggy robes, although the quality of the cloth can vary. But Jamal's galabiyah had been hemmed in so as to closely fit his short but slender form. The color was of the purest dark blue. A red and orange scarf hung down both sides of his neck to his waist.

But this was just packaging for his voice.

Iridescent in its varieties of tone and pitch, Jamal's voice could communicate soaring passion or plummeting pathos even to someone ~~unable to understand the language~~. According to Ali, he sang religious songs -- one was called "Islamik" -- exhorting the people to live good lives.

Certainly, his performance reminded me of a gospel sing-along more than anything else because of Jamal's call and response routine with the audience. He would warble out a phrase with enormous dramatic intensity, the effect of which was like squeezing water from a wet towel, and then pause, stroking his cheek and throat while the audience shouted back el hamdu li-llah (praise be to God), assalam aleiykum (go with peace) or just aywa (yes).

The bongos and tamborine of the band maintained a lively rhythm to Jamal's phrases and the accordion player added some excruciatingly mournful and dreamy fills.

It struck me that the older men seemed to appreciate the show more than the younger ones. Where many of the younger men lounged about on the benches smoking cigarettes and occasionally smirking at their buddies, the old men were vociferous in urging Jamal on.

One patriarch with a gray Turkish pasha mustache was nearly besides himself with enthusiasm. Several times he bounded out of his seat to thrust some money into Jamal's hand. When he wasn't doing that, he was shouting at both Jamal and the audience.

Ali translated one of these outbursts:

"A child should trust his father, should trust his mother! Sing it again so that my son will trust me!"

On the other hand, there was one young man who also rushed up to give Jamal money. And one of the groom's young relatives was wild with ecstasy, constantly walking back and forth in front of the stage beaming and laughing with joy.

Neither the bride nor groom put in an appearance while we were there, which was from about 9:30 p.m. to shortly after midnight. According to Ali, they were in their separate houses listening to the proceedings. The bride's house was also facing the courtyard, at a right angle to his.

At midnight, the bride would leave her home and go to

live in her husband's house, Ali said. This would actually commence their married life, although the official papers had been signed two days earlier, he said.

Ali said the couple might make an appearance at the party, but he could not promise it. Whether they showed up or not, they would be able to relive that night in future years because several boys had been taping Jamal's performance on large cassette recorders.

After midnight, the crowd began to thin out a bit. One young man, with breathtaking rudeness, kicked his motorcycle into life not more than 30 feet from where Jamal was still singing.

Jamal looked pained and several disgusted young men had to move their bench so that the miscreant could maneuver his way out of the courtyard and go roaring off down the lane.

After Ali told us that the party would be more of the same -- Jamal would keep singing until all the guests had gone home, probably not until 2 a.m. -- the German couple and I decided to leave.

But there was to be one more stop before we reached the hotel.

One of Ali's friends, who had earlier invited us to have supper at his house (unfortunantly, we had already eaten at the hotel), now asked us again to drop by.

Siyeed worked in the mornings as a guard at Medinet Habu, Ramses III's mortuary temple, and in the afternoon built houses. According to Ali, most of the male villagers worked two jobs to make ends meet.

When we arrived, Siyeed introduced us to his wife who immediately disappeared into the kitchen to make cacari, a sweet, cherry-colored drink made from a local flower. The five of us sat on Siyeed's well-cushioned couches and chairs and tried to make conversation.

It was tough going. Sitting there with his lanky legs outstretched and his rather mournful face looking absently about him, Siyeed seemed to be a guest in his own home. The problem was that he could scarcely speak one word in another language. I tried a couple of times to draw him out by asking a question through Ali, but made little progress.

So Ali, the German couple and I drank the cacari his wife made and mostly talked among ourselves in English for half an hour.

The next day, I encountered Siyeed at Medinet Habu. I greeted him with a sabah l-kheer (good morning). But he just asked to see my ticket and waved me through the gate.

It is possible he hadn't recognized me; I was dressed differently.

But assuming he had recognized me, which I think more likely, I still puzzle at the source of his original burst of hospitality.

So far, I have noticed three beasts of burden in Egyptian villages: the camel, the gamoossa or buffalo, and the donkey. Of the three, the donkey is the most common sight.

A camel can be useful for carrying a heavy load of bricks, for example, and the buffalo is in its proper element harnessed to the sagua or waterwheel. But nothing beats the

donkey for carrying man or produce from field to market.

Having once ridden a donkey in a Delta village, I am amazed at how single-minded they can be. One good kick and the animal is off like a wind-up toy. Looking neither to the right nor left, he maintains a steady but rapid clip-clop, clip-clop in the direction you pointed him. You have to practically put a wall in front of him to get the beast to stop.

Apparently, the donkey can also be very independent, as I discovered one day while walking to the Nile ferry.

I had passed the Memnon Colossi on my left -- two massive 3,000 year-old stone figures left sitting for all eternity in honor of Amenhotep III -- when I saw a flurry of movement across the canal to my right.

A black donkey was trotting along the path between the canal and sugarcane fields (this was the time of the sugarcane harvest in Luxor). He had a purposeful air about him as he passed by me and headed towards the western desert mountains.

Further up the path behind him, a mustachioed man in a white galabiyah walked quickly, holding a black strap in his hand. As he passed me, he broke into an amiable but concerned jog. Both man and donkey disappeared into some vegetation.

By and by, the donkey came tearing back down the path, followed a few minutes later by the man. The donkey maneuvered around some men and animals in the field, grazed for a minute, and then pushed on. He crossed the canal bridge onto the paved road about 100 feet ahead of me and turned in my direction.

A fellah sitting under a date palm tree in the field, who had been no help at all when the donkey passed by him, now started waving and shouting at me, implying that I should bring the beast to a halt.

What the hell. I planted myself firmly in the donkey's path and ~~steered~~ myself on a collision course with his looming-pointed ears.

The donkey broke his stride just a bit, saw that I meant business, and immediately plunged down the 10-foot embankment to my left. I scrambled down after him in a flurry of dust and rocks, but the donkey galloped out of reach into the broad green expanse of a clover field.

I looked back up the embankment to see the man jogging along the road heading towards the mountains. He laughed and waved at me. I waved back.

After climbing back up the embankment, I saw the man leave the road, descend the embankment and begin to walk through the field to where the donkey was now enjoying a late afternoon lunch. Stealthily creeping up on him with his strap in hand, the man approached to within a few feet of the animal before the donkey bolted, swung around him, dashed across the field, clattered up the embankment and resumed his journey on the road about a quarter of a mile from where I was still standing. The man, surely a candidate for the Peachtree Road Race, dutifully jogged after him.

The last thing I could see was two specks in the distance: a white one still on the road, and a black one ascending the tan-colored hills to the Gurnet Marai hamlet.

Ali got a kick out of the story when I related it to him. He then told me one of his own, which I pass along as an authentic rural Egyptian joke:

A man owned a donkey that was hopelessly recalcitrant and slow. In despair about how to get more production from his animal, the man looked about him and noticed that cars, which run on benzene, move a lot faster than donkeys.

One day, he appeared at the filling station with his donkey and ordered the attendant to put the benzene in the donkey. The attendant pointed out that the donkey lacked a gas tank, but the man pointed to the animal's backside and said the benzene should go there.

So the attendant stuck the nozzle in the donkey's backside and filled him up with benzene.

As soon as the man kicked the donkey into action, the animal shot out of the filling station like a bullet, throwing the man to the ground.

The man thought to himself: how am I going to catch that donkey now?

So he went back to the filling station and ordered the attendant to fill him up too, in the same place.

Later, the man met some fellow villagers who said they were still looking for his donkey. Racing past them, the man cried:

"Forget about the donkey -- try and catch me!"

Even though the Luxor area boasts the greatest collection of temples and tombs in Egypt, ancient Egypt is an elusive and fragile butterfly in the modern setting. There are too many commercial hands trying to capture her.

The Valley of the Nobles has some wonderful wall paintings of everyday life in Pharaonic times -- farmers collecting their harvests, two women listening to a blind harpist -- with colors as bright as if applied yesterday.

But to get in to see the paintings, you have to run a gantlet of clamoring trinket peddlers thrusting their crude figurines and gilded jewelry at you. At the monuments, the guards rarely leave you alone in their constant efforts to wheedle baksheesh.

Their favorite trick is to point at some inscription and say "cartouche" or "Ramses," thereby exhausting their knowledge of Egyptology, and extend the open palm if you so much as nod back.

One guard in the Ramesseum, Ramses II's mortuary temple, even had the gall to insult me in Arabic when I told him mish jinay (no money). "Look buddy," I shouted, grabbing his wrist, "I bought my ticket. I have a right to be here. You want to take this up with the tourist police?"

His an asif (I'm sorry) was emphatic, if not sincere. At least he left me alone.

In the villages, there are too many modern conveniences: cars, trucks, radios, televisions, Toshiba fans and the like. Far from slipping into Pharaonic times, you find that they probably watch "Dallas" more than you do, which does not help the image of western women in this country.

But there was one morning...

I was staying at one of the two "hotels" on the west bank. Both were actually village guesthouses or inns.

Ali was supposed to drop by at 7 for our excursion to the monuments, but I awoke early, around 5:30. Maybe it was the cool breeze rushing through the window into my room that killed the desire for sleep.

After the torrid languor of the previous afternoon, when the sun bore down from an empty sky, this breeze came as a resurrection.

I walked outside into the courtyard as the first light rose from the Red Sea, peeked over the desert escarpment and gently glided into the Nile Valley.

In the dusky half-light, the misty verdure of the valley was astonishing. I then understood the passionate attachment the Egyptians have always had for it, their cleaving to this strip of life-giving soil slicing through an arid wasteland.

Why take to the sea or ramble through distant lands when your own home is this well-tended garden paradise?

From the courtyard wall, I could see the distant figures of men walking along the narrow paths between their fields and thought of their ancestors through the millenia who began their days in the same way. And as that intoxicatingly fresh wind whished through the fronds of the date palm trees and rustled the leaves of the henna bushes, I felt a sense of companionship with the Memnon Colossi about half a mile away touched through their sightless stone eyes by the same dawn they first witnessed 3,000 years before.