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Folk beliefs in modern Egypt—Sham El-Nessim (Spring Festival) in Hessel-Melig Village as an example

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Abstract

Egypt is considered an Arabic and Islamic country. Approximately 90% of the Egyptian population is Muslim and approximately 10% are Coptic. This fact has had an effect the cultural studies about Egypt. Studies that address the issues regarding folk beliefs and their effect and power in Egyptian society are limited. The folk beliefs in Egypt date back to the Pharaonic eras and Pharaonic religious rituals. Egyptians are still keen to enjoy these rituals, even Muslims and Christians. This study focused on Sham El-Nessim as one of the most important Egyptian national festivals. I have presented an ethnographic study of the manifestations of Sham El-Nessim in an Egyptian village called Hessel-Melig Village. Comparing Sham El-Nessim manifestations in Cairo and Hessel-Melig It was found that Sham El-Nessim's practices and customs, as well as many popular belief manifestations in Egypt, have remained for thousands of years especially in Egyptian Villages.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt -Coptic- Folk religion - Gamal Hamdan -Isis -public religion.

Introduction

In 2007, the author relocated from Cairo to Hessel-Melig Village. For nearly 11 years, from 2007 to 2018, I lived in Hessel-Melig Village. The most interesting aspect of the Hessel-Melig Village is its diversity of culture. The harmonious overlap of Coptic, Islamic, and Pharaonic cultural traditions will be thoroughly addressed in this study. Living in Hessel-Melig Village was a rich and unique experience, as I was able to observe closely many aspects of Egyptian culture that have been lost in many areas of Cairo, particularly the new cities. In many cities, it is common not to know your next-door neighbor, as I did when I lived in Al-Shorouk City (one of Cairo's new cities) for a few years. People in Hessel-Melig Village keep in touch by sharing their joys and sorrows. There has been change in some community values from 2007 to 2018. For example, the author once came across a wedding celebration and a burial on the same street, and a large number of individuals protested that this had never happened earlier. Attending weddings may be a chore for some; however, standing next to a patient or someone who has lost a loved one is something that cannot be avoided. However, Sham El-Nessim's practices and customs, as well as many popular belief manifestations, have remained for thousands of years.

Village overview

Hessel-Melig is a village at the center of Shebeen El-Kom, Menoufia Governorate. It is located 5 kilometers northeast of the city of Shebeen El-Kom and halfway between Shebeen El-Kom and Birkat El-Sabaa (Fig.1). The shared area of the village is 5,066 square kilometers, according to the survey department.

The villagers raise livestock, such as cows and buffaloes. Many village women, married to farmers, make cream, cheese, and butter from the milk produced by the cows and buffaloes. This allows them to achieve financial independence through the money they earn from selling the dairy products or vegetables grown in their fields. The village is famous for the quality of its dairy products.

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Like many other villages in the Menoufia Governorate, Hessel-Melig is known for its

relatively high educational level and low unemployment rates. Many people in the area, both farmers and non-farmers, want to work for the government. Hessel-Melig is famous for the sport of wrestling, and the city has produced several sports champions.

Folk belief in Egypt

In some Egyptian villages, many Islamic and Christian rituals and customs are mixed; the faith of the holy Pious worshippers is deeply rooted among older adults, regardless of whether they are Christians or Muslims. Regardless of age or religion, women are more interested in folk rituals than men; for example, visiting cemeteries and practicing ritual sterility are considered feminine customs.

Ancient Egypt was divided into small provinces, each with its own local divinity, which had temples, ceremonies, and feasts. The residents of the region made offerings to this divinity and sought their assistance, their protection, and happiness. Many studies have been conducted on ancient Egyptian gods and beliefs, such as the study by E. A. Wallis Budge (1904). After Christianity entered Egypt, followed by Islam, the Egyptians, even when there were new religions, could not get rid of the spiritual and cultural responsibilities they had been accustomed to for thousands of years. Therefore, many Egyptian celebrations are influenced by the Pharaonic celebrations, including Sham El-Nessim.

In Arabic, a folk belief is called "Motakad Sha'abi" "Motakad" means belief, while the word "Sha'abi" has a wide range of meanings and is used to classify various social phenomena. For example, Sha'abi is used for random accommodation, traditional food, cheaply priced items, and items of poor quality. It can be said that this is a slightly classist word. Motakad Sha'abi (folk belief) also includes Some of Sufism rituals, agricultural rituals, fertility rituals, and magic rituals. The beliefs and practices of both Copts and Muslims are influenced by unorthodox folk beliefs, with some remnants from the polytheistic era.



Fig. 1. Hessel Melig Village Position in Egypt Map.

Sham El-Nessim in Hessel-Melig Village

Since time immemorial, Egyptians have celebrated Sham El-Nessim and considered it the actual beginning of spring. The

pharaohs have celebrated this holiday since 270 BC, when it was called Shamoush. Shamoush is a hieroglyphic word meaning revival of life, because they believed that the beginning of time and creation of the world started from that day (Fig. 2). At a later period, the word "Nasim," which means "breeze," was added to signify the beginning of spring and the moderation of the weather. Sham El-Nessim is considered the Spring Festival. Abbas (1995) stated that, "Sham El-Nessim is a time to breathe in new air, a breath of spring." Lane (1860) called Sham El-Nessim "the Smelling of the Zephyr."



Fig. 2. Part of the Pharaohs' celebrations in Sham El-Nessim¹.

In this section, I am going to write about Sham El-Nessim in Hessel-Melig Village. I spent my childhood and schooling years moving between Cairo and Giza governorates, where families gathered in the gardens to spend Sham El-Nessim (Fig.3). However, my father did not like to go out of the house on the day of the festival because of the severe congestion on the roads and in public places, and the increase in pollution. We used to spend the day at home watching television and the news, and observed with great astonishment the huge numbers in the gardens and parks. I wished I could go at least once to spend Sham El-Nessim in a park. Indeed, my father once took us to a park; however, we did not enjoy the crowds and noise. We preferred to walk by the Nile and then go home.



¹ <https://www.youm7.com/story/2018/3/31/%D8%B3-%D9%88-%D8%AC-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA->

<https://www.youm7.com/story/2018/3/31/%D8%B3-%D9%88-%D8%AC-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%80-%D8%B4%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%85/3721679>

Fig. 3. The manifestations of Sham El-Nessim in Cairo².

The spring of 2007 was the first Sham El-Nessim or Spring Festival that I spent in Hessel-Melig. I heard from the people of the village that "Hessel" means lands designated for Christians, but where Muslims also live. The village has a large number of Christians; however, there are no accurate statistics about the number of Christians and Muslims in the village.

My husband and I got married in the winter of 2006, and we lived in Cairo and visited my husband's family about twice a month. I longed more than my husband for visits to the family and the quiet away from the noise of Cairo. I longed for the beauty of agricultural lands, the richness and cultural distinction that characterizes the village. My husband and I decided to move to Hessel-Melig in the spring of 2007. That year's Spring Festival was very special, and the following Spring Festivals were also fun. Since 2007, I have not refrained from spending the Spring Festival out in the field, except for the holiday following the death of my husband's grandfather in 2011. During Sham El-Nessim, my husband's grandfather told us stories about his childhood, youth, marriage, his son's wedding, the period of his military service, and the time he saw the king when he left Egypt in July 1952. His stories were full of liveliness, warmth, and cultural insights. It was a world completely different from the world of Cairo.

On the day before the 2007 Spring Festival, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law, who were not yet married, told me that they celebrated Sham El-Nessim every year in the field, and asked me if I would like to go with them. It was a fun day. We agreed to go together and I told them that I would bring and prepare the fish. My sister-in-law said she would bring fruits, vegetables, and salads. In Cairo, I did not have to wake up early on the holiday, and I took this custom with me to the village. However, I was surprised that my husband woke me up early, and when I asked him why, he said, "Didn't you say that you wanted to spend Sham El-Nessim in the field? So you have to wake up early." He told me that my mother-in-law had already woken up more than three hours ago. They had brought bread and pancakes. She was now preparing falafel, colored-eggs, and beans (*fūl medammes* (فول مدمس)) (Fig. 4). I thought we would only have lunch in the field; however, I learned from my husband that in Sham El-Nessim they used to eat a breakfast also in the open air. The fragrance of my mother-in-law's bread reached my apartment on the second floor. My mother-in-law lived on the first floor; however, she prepared bread in the basement of the house, which is equipped with an oven and all the kneading and baking tools required for preparing many types of delicious bread. The oven and the kneading and baking tools are among the things that the bride brings to the husband's house. The house's bread room was adjacent to the milk room. Fresh milk and sour milk are stored in this room, which are used to manufacture a country cheese called (*Jibn Qarish* (جبن قريش)). Cream is also collected from the milk and used by my mother-in-law to make butter. In the same room, there is a refrigerator for storing cheese, butter,

and the fresh vegetables that my Father-in-law and my mother-in-law bring from the field. Further inside was a room to store onions, garlic, and potatoes that my mother-in-law and father-in-law had planted; these were sufficient for them and their children. A visit to the basement guaranteed that one would return with fresh dairy, cheese, butter, fresh vegetables, onions, garlic, potatoes, and more.



Fig. 4. Sham El-Nessim foods⁴

I woke up and prepared the fish. My husband brought juices and soft drinks, and my father-in-law was busy preparing his tools, tea, and Ingredients for some hot drinks that will be made on coal.. Although I do not like tea very much, field tea tastes special (Fig.5). We all we moved toward the fields. My father-in-law brought a large, thick rope. I marveled at him, even though I knew for what it was. In the field, there is a large mulberry tree with abundant shade. My father-in-law brought a plastic mat from one of the rooms located in the field and laid it out. The weather in April was good, especially under the shade of this wonderful tree. Neighbors in nearby fields also began to prepare. Everyone greeted their neighbors and the other people they met. Every time my father-in-law and mother-in-law introduced me to some people, I remembered some and forgot most. However, I memorized our neighbors on the right and left of our field, my father-in-law's cousin, who lives with his children, sisters-in-law, and grandsons in a four-story building that they built in front of the field, and another neighbor—everyone called him uncle Abdo.

² <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/2149762.aspx> حدائق القاهرة تستقبل الزائرين احتفالاً بشم النسيم | صور 29-4-2019

³ Stew of cooked fava beans served with olive oil, cumin, and lemon juice. The origin of the word "medammes" refers to the way in which the beans were cooked in ancient Egypt, the same way

which was widespread until recently in many Egyptian villages, by burying the pot of beans in fuel and ashes until maturity. The meaning of the word "buried beans" in the ancient Egyptian language is "tams" and it has been transformed into Arabic to "medammes".

⁴ <https://egyptiangeographic.com/ar/news/show/227>



Fig. 5. Tea on coal.

I used to see him visit us to smoke the Gooza⁵ (Fig. 6) with my father-in-law. I thought he was a relative. However, later I found out that uncle Abdo was a Christian. My father-in-law also asked him about his daughter and whether things were fine with her husband. Uncle Abdo told him that he did not like her husband's behavior. My husband's father prayed for her happiness and for her husband to receive guidance. Shortly after, the rest of uncle Abdo's family arrived. My father-in-law's sister, her husband, and her children also joined us that day. Her husband loves jokes and has a good sense of humor; everyone enjoys his company. They exchanged greetings with uncle Abdo's family. Everyone started preparing breakfast. Before breakfast was served, my mother-in-law and uncle Abdo's wife exchanged the pancakes and some of bread they had prepared for breakfast.



Fig. 6. Gooza in the past and present.

My father-in-law brought lettuce from the field, cleaned it, and prepared it for eating. Uncle Abdo also brought green onions, and the two exchanged lettuce and green onions (Fig. 7). I was touched by this sight. In Cairo, I had many Christian friends, as did my mother and father at their respective workplaces. We loved them a lot. However, exchanging

food was a rare act. Some Muslims do not like to eat food made by Christians. My father also heard from a Christian friend that some Christian people think that they should not talk about their familial problems in front of a Muslim. Despite the good relations, there were hidden psychological barriers; I did not find the same in the countryside. Many situations, in addition to the one described above, made me feel that human relationships in the countryside are different. Breakfast was over; my father-in-law made tea for everyone and prepared the Gooza. It was then time for the role of the thick rope; my father-in-law used it to make a tree swing for the children.

After breakfast, the children started playing on the swing. My husband and I went for a walk among the fields. Some young men were fishing, and the girls went to collect flowers or for a walk. Everyone gathered again for lunch, and the evening session continued until nearly sunset, when everyone returned to their homes. Everyone exchanged conversations and drank their favorite drinks. Sometimes, some young people volunteered to buy ice cream for the whole Family. Grandfather narrated old stories. For everyone, this day was an opportunity to recharge their energy and deepen friendly relations. There was no difference between Muslims and Christians, rich or poor.



Fig.7 The manifestations of Sham El-Nessim Breakfast in an Egyptian Village ⁶

Results and Discussion

In the Egyptian and Arab worlds, religions tend to be divided into revelation religions (e.g., Islam, Christianity, Judaism), non-revelation religions (e.g., Buddhism, Shinto), and folk beliefs. However, ancient Egyptian practices still have an impact on Egyptian society, and elements of these ancient Egyptian beliefs may be found in the habits of both Muslims and Christians. As Gamal Hamdan (1967) explained, the Egyptian Coptic religion is the Egyptian version of Christianity. It is an expression of the compatibility between ancient Egyptian religions and new Christianity. Egyptian Christianity has a unique character. This reminds me of a dialog I had with an Egyptian friend of mine about Isis; a story about a protective mother, Isis, and her son, Horus, which is very similar to the story of Virgin Mary and her son

⁵ Gooza is widespread in the Egyptian countryside. It is an instrument for heating, vaporizing and then smoking either tobacco or flavored tobacco (called ma'assel). The smoke is passed through a water basin—often glass-based—before inhalation. It is called Gooza because in the past the water basin

was made out of an empty coconut (Gooz Al-hend In Arabic جوز الهند).

⁶ <https://sharek.almasryalyoum.com/cities/luxor/444321/التاريخ>
يروى حكاية اسمها «مصر» في شم النسيم
أبريل، 9 2015

Jesus Christ.

As for Sham El-Nessim, in the Pharaonic period, the Egyptians ate salted fish and vegetables. In ancient Egypt colored eggs symbolized the creation of life from inanimate objects, and some Memphis papyri depicted the god "Ptah"—the god of creation in ancient Egypt—sitting on the ground in the shape of an egg that he formed from inanimate objects; hence, eating eggs on this occasion was one of the sacred rituals of the ancient Egyptians (Fig. 8). They wrote their prayers and wishes for the New Year on eggs and placed them in baskets of palm fronds that they hung on balconies or tree branches to enjoy the blessings of God's light at sunrise; they believed that this would fulfill their wishes. With the beginning of an interest in sanctifying the Nile, the ancient Egyptians showed great ingenuity in preserving fish, drying them, and making salted fish; it became one of the traditional foods in the celebration of the feast during the Fifth Dynasty. This practice was described by Herodotus, a Greek historian, who visited Egypt in the fifth century. These traditions are noticeable, and there is a greater desire to retain them in the countryside rather than in cities. The rural community's social cohesion was one of the factors that contributed to the long-term maintenance of these customs.

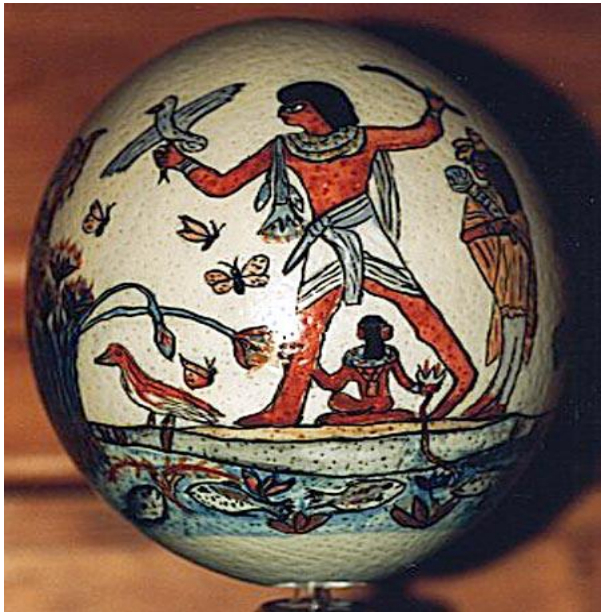


Fig. 8. Eating the colored Egg was also pharaonic custom.

Conclusion

This study focused on Sham El-Nessim as one of the most important Egyptian national festivals. The study presented ethnography of the manifestations of Sham El-Nessim in an Egyptian village called Hessel-Melig. It was found that Sham El-Nessim's practices and customs, as well as many popular belief manifestations in Egypt, have remained for thousands of years especially in Egyptian Villages. Women are also more interested in folk rituals than men. When Sham El-Nessim manifestations in Cairo and Hessel-Melig were compared, it was discovered that Sham El-Nessim manifestations in Cairo and Hessel-Melig are not the same. The most significant distinction between Cairo and Hessel-Melig was the pattern of human relations. The villagers were more appreciative of interpersonal relationships. Another distinction is the contrast in atmosphere between the bustling metropolis and the village, which has more green spaces and

opportunity to enjoy nature.

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Competing interests

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