GENDERED NATIONS
NATIONALISM AND GENDER ORDER IN THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY
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The Making of the Egyptian Nation

Beth Baron

Egyptian nationalists start the story of Egyptian nationalism with the ‘founder of modern Egypt’ Muhammad ‘Ali (r. 1805–48), whose ‘national’ army turned peasants into Egyptians. Yet historians have recently challenged that narrative, arguing that the Albanian Mehmet Ali Pasha (the Turkish version of his name) should be seen as an Ottoman vali (governor) who harboured imperial and dynastic ambitions rather than sympathy for an Egyptian ‘nation’.¹ Scholars thus tend to point to the ‘Urabi Revolt (1881–2), which ended in British occupation – or even the anti-imperialist movement that surfaced in the 1890s – as the earliest stirring of Egyptian nationalism.

Yet one key to understanding the origins of the modern Egyptian nation lies in deeper structural changes of the long nineteenth century. During this period, the dominant social formation – the Ottoman-Egyptian household – unravelled, in great part due to the demise of slavery. I argue that the simultaneity of the end of slavery (and the overwhelming majority of slaves in nineteenth-century Egypt were women) and the emergence of nationalism in Egypt is more than a coincidence. Debates over slavery and its demise in practice played a multifaceted role in the making of the nation. The end of harem slavery helped Egyptianize the Ottoman-Egyptian elite, which increasingly intermarried with the local population. The new elite wrestled with the ethnic boundaries of the nation – including Copts, attempting to incorporate Sudanese in a special relationship, excluding Circassians, Syrians, and others – in a process of homogenization common in nation-building. At the same time, domestic slavery stood at the centre of Egypt’s relationship to the Sudan, which Mehmet Ali’s armies had conquered in the 1820s and over which the British and Egyptians later vied for control.

The end of slavery, most specifically harem slavery, also generated a series of debates collectively known as the ‘woman question’ through which questions about the shape of the household, the ‘building block of
the nation’, were worked out. The new nation would not be built on households that included female concubines from the Caucasus, retainers from Central Asia, eunuchs and female domestic slaves from Africa, and patriarchs from Anatolia or the Balkans, but rather on the bourgeois family. That family – Copt or Muslim – would be grounded in Egyptian territory. The ‘woman question’ thus became the fault line along which men and women negotiated ethnic boundaries, cultural identity, and social transformations.

Whereas this chapter argues that the end of slavery helped to turn Ottomans into Egyptians, I am neither an Egyptian or an ex-Ottoman. My forebears fled the neighbouring Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century to escape religious persecution. One set of great-grandparents left Russia with four children, beginning an odyssey that would take them across continents and over the Atlantic, and in the process they had seven more children. One daughter was born in Istanbul, and according to family lore, another was kidnapped there in the bazaar. (In the 1880s, demand for harem slaves remained high while the traditional sources in the Caucasus had been cut off.) My grandfather’s sister was found and returned to the family. She thus did not end her life in the Sultan’s or a pasha’s palace but on the shores of America, where I can contemplate what might have been her fate as well as the fate of those who were not returned to their families.

Transformation of the Elite in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Egypt

Mehmet Ali became recognized as the Ottoman governor of Egypt in the struggle that followed the French withdrawal from Egypt and eventually won the right to pass the position on to his sons. The local Ottoman elite over which he presided remained bound by their loyalty to the house of Mehmet Ali, their commitment to serve in Egypt, and a sense of belonging to an imperial Ottoman tradition. Ottoman was not an ethnic but rather a cultural and supra-ethnic identity. Made up of multiple ethnicities (Albanians, Greeks, Circassians, Kurds, Georgians, Bosnians, and others) and coming from diverse Ottoman territories, this elite spoke Turkish (and thus were often identified as Turks rather than Ottomans) while the Egyptian population they ruled spoke mostly Arabic.2

A core component of the Ottoman elite, especially those members of that elite who rose to high positions of power, were kul slaves. They had been purchased at a young age and raised in the households of powerful persons, who trained and set them on careers in the army and the
bureaucracy. Most prominent among them were Circassians from the Caucasus region who shared ethnic ties and often took pride in their slave pasts, which were seen to provide them with social mobility. Their slave backgrounds bound them to one another as well as to their former owners. In Egypt in the mid-nineteenth century, a government official could think of only two ministers who had not been slaves and predicted that those two might not last long in their positions. Although he may have exaggerated, slaves were clearly quite prominent in the elite.³

The Ottoman elite reproduced itself through reliance on the institution of harem slaves and a household structure patterned after that of the Sultan. Just as young boys were purchased and groomed for military or bureaucratic service in the capital or provinces, young Circassian and Georgian girls were purchased and groomed to serve as concubines or wives in the households of the elite. Some were kidnapped and others taken as prisoners in war; many Circassian girls were also sold by their parents, who were themselves often of the slave class, to improve their lot in life. While they constituted only a minority of slaves imported into the Ottoman Empire (the majority were African women), they served as a linchpin in the elite social system. Through such alliances, Circassians in Egypt and elsewhere could keep their ethnic identity intact, and local Ottomans of other backgrounds could keep their distance from the native population. Sometimes these concubines or slave partners came from the households of Mehmet Ali or his sons, who in this way sought to cement bonds of loyalty. Ismail (r.1863–1879) had bound officers to the court by having them marry slaves from his harem; by the late 1870s, at least fifty officers had been married to Circassian slaves from the palace.⁴

The House of Mehmet Ali was not averse to drawing on Egyptian talent as well. The Pasha incorporated Egyptians trained in languages and other skills into the bureaucracy as technocrats, and his son Said (r.1854–63) allowed the sons of village officials to become army officers up to a certain rank. Moreover, a new group of rural notables, who benefited from the privatization of land and Egypt’s entry into the world market as an exporter of cotton, increasingly served in the provincial government. The new rural notables marked their entry into the Ottoman elite by purchasing Circassian slaves and patterned their households after that of the wali.

Consider Muhammad Sultan, the ‘King of Upper Egypt’, who arose to prominence in mid-century as a provincial governor. Serving the viceroys faithfully, he increased his holdings to over 13,000 feddans by 1882, becoming the largest landowner in the region around Minya. He crowned his achievements as president of the Chamber of Delegates
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(established by Ismail in 1866). His household included a wife, a Circassian concubine (Iqbal), several eunuchs, and Egyptian and Circassian companions for his children. Iqbal bore a daughter (Huda) in 1879 who became one of the leading female nationalists and the founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union in the post-war period. Huda relates in her memoirs that her widowed grandmother left the Caucasus with five children (as part of the Russian-forced migrations of the mid-1850s to mid-1860s) and sent Iqbal to live in Egypt. There Iqbal was raised in the home of a patron and later joined the household of Muhammad Sultan. References to Circassian slave mothers among the elite abound; but only fragments of their lives are revealed in memoirs, court records, police registers, and biographical notes. The female slave experience has generally been suppressed from the collective Egyptian memory along with the Ottoman past.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the elite underwent a transformation in a process that proceeded on two converging paths. On one path, native Egyptians from the rural notability became upwardly mobile, increasing their landholdings and finding new opportunities for government employment as Arabic joined French and Turkish as an official language from mid-century. Egyptian notables and a growing corps of technocrats replaced Ottomans in the administration. On the other path, the entrenchment of the Mehmet Ali dynasty enhanced the sense of Egypt’s separateness from Istanbul and along with other factors generated greater local ties on the part of Ottoman-Egyptian officials. The latter set down roots and increasingly intermarried with the local elite, which in turn further diluted Ottoman-Egyptian identity. When Turkish speakers left Egypt, they were not replaced by kul slaves, and those who stayed behind (or upwardly mobile Egyptian notables) could no longer import harem slaves. Thus one of the most crucial factors in the transformation of the elite was the abolition of slavery, which cut off the supply of male and female recruits.

The abolition of slavery in the Ottoman Empire occurred piecemeal over the second half of the nineteenth century. In the face of British pressure to eliminate all forms of slavery, Ottoman officials enacted a series of reforms, not all of which immediately worked. Edicts at mid-century in Istanbul and Cairo prohibited the trade in black slaves; but demand remained high, particularly during the cotton boom in Egypt in the 1860s, and these decrees tended to be ineffective. Ottomans resisted tampering with harem slavery in particular, for it touched on religious sensitivities (Islam permits slavery) and sustained the household structure. In 1877 the British and the Egyptian government signed a Convention.
for the Suppression of the Slave Trade yet delayed the prohibition of the trade in white slaves for seven more years. Harem slavery died out as the sources dried up: it had become almost impossible to procure young white girls after Circassian migrants had been settled in the Ottoman Empire for a few decades.\textsuperscript{10}

Dror Ze’evi has linked the abolition of slavery to the dissolution of elite identity and the formation of official nationalism in the centre of the Ottoman Empire:

Whether or not the \textit{kul} involved in the process realized that they were cutting off the branch they were sitting on, this was the end result of the series of events. By abolishing slavery the core of the Ottoman elite abolished its own definition, its own terms of reference . . . in fact the old elite retracted and made way for a new one . . . the \textit{kul} became a dinosaur, an obsolete remnant of a disappearing way of life.\textsuperscript{11}

Ze’evi argues that the new elite that arose to supplant the old one in Istanbul sponsored state nationalism. In a similar process, the new Arabic-speaking elite that arose in Egypt in the second half of the nineteenth century challenged the old Turkish- and Circassian-speaking elite as well as growing European dominance of Egyptian affairs and sponsored an anti-imperialist nationalism.

**The ‘Urabi Movement, 1881–2**

The ‘Urabi Movement can be seen as the outcome of stresses created in the process of transformation in elite identity as Arabophone groups on the rise sought a share in power with the older dominant elite.\textsuperscript{12} Ahmad ‘Urabi (b.1841 – d.1911), the son of a village shaykh from the region of Zaqqazig, emerged as the leader of the Egyptian army officers. These officers had assailed the incompetent strategies of Ottoman-Egyptian officers that had resulted in defeats in African campaigns.\textsuperscript{13} But now cuts in the officers corps threatened the Egyptian officers rather than their Ottoman-Egyptian counterparts, as ‘Urabi himself later related:

The practice in Egypt was to tend to discriminate by race. And so all the promotions, decorations and rewards went to those of the Circassian race, since they were from the Mamluks [slaves], the paid retainers of either the Khedivial family, or of the aristocracy who were in turn also Mamluks of the Khedivial family. After this faction came that of the Turks and others who were not Egyptians, along with those of mixed origins. Thereafter came those Egyptian by race . . .\textsuperscript{14}
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The army's challenge to the government started with military grievances but soon developed wider political content as 'Urabi and his circle became the core around which discontent with Khedive Tawfiq (r.1879–92) and European intervention crystallized. The rural notables, led by Muhammad Sultan, called for a constitution that would give them a greater role in central government and would check the autocratic rule of the khedive. The rural notables and army officers thus found common cause, for the moment, under the slogan 'Egypt for the Egyptians!'

'Urabi had little time to launch his reform programme, which apparently included the suppression of domestic slavery. (His own wife was of African slave origin; the daughter of Prince Ilhami's wet nurse, she had grown up in Khedive Ismail's harem.) In March 1882, Wilfred Blunt wrote to the British Anti-Slavery Society on behalf of the 'National Party of Egypt' to explain their views. 'I have received the most positive assurances from Arabi Bey, the Minister of War, that he will cooperate loyally in this work, and he has authorized me to say that he will not rest until the stigma of slavery is entirely removed from the Egyptian community.' Blunt distinguishes between the past promises of 'the Turk' in Egypt, and the proposals of 'the Egyptian'. Yet whether 'Urabi was sincere or could be effective is uncertain, for some of the most prominent nationalists had a mixed record on the slave issue. For example, under 'Urabi, Fawzi Pasha, an Egyptian officer who had a record of slave trading, became police chief of Cairo. And when Mahmud Pasha al-Barudi, a prominent ally of 'Urabi and nationalist poet had been Prefect of Cairo Police, a Circassian slave from his household had applied to the British consulate for a certificate of manumission, complaining that Barudi's wife had her tied and beaten. 'Urabi himself later used the metaphor of slavery to describe the condition of all Egyptians: 'where are those who will free the Egyptians from their slavery?'

As the khedive's autocratic hold slipped, the British and French sent gunboats to Alexandria with a threatening note. Riots broke out in June and the British bombed the city in July. Tawfiq then sought British protection and was joined by a number of Ottoman-Egyptian officials and wealthy rural notables. The bulk of the population, however, supported 'Urabi's stand against the British invasion. 'Arabi found some of his most patriotic and powerful adherents [in Egyptian harems], his defence lawyer later wrote. 'The National cause, even in its earlier stages, was warmly espoused by the great majority of Egyptian ladies, and they continued to support it till hope was no longer possible.' The lawyer cites interviews and correspondence with female members of the royal family as evidence. 'We saw in Arabi a deliverer, and our enthusiasm for him knew no
bounds’, said one princess.20 ‘Urabi rallied the population with appeals to al-din wa’l-‘ird wa’l-watan (religion, honour, and the nation) and by declaring a jihad (holy war). Yet he did not frame the contest in strictly religious terms. ‘The Egyptian nation,’ ‘Urabi later wrote, ‘for all its variety of religious affiliation, did indeed do its duty in defence of the homeland.’21 Throughout the conflict, ‘Urabi also affirmed his loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan, for in spite of their resentment of many Turkish speakers in their midst, most Egyptians still felt ties to the Ottoman Empire.

The British, however, speedily defeated ‘Urabi’s forces, initiating an occupation that would last seventy years. The occupation reinforced the territorial integrity of Egypt by effectively cutting the province from the Ottoman Empire and transforming it into a ‘veiled protectorate’ under the control of Sir Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer), British agent and consul general from 1883 to 1907.22 The occupation therefore accelerated the transformation in elite identity already underway as the Ottoman-Egyptian elite became further Egyptianized. The nationalist movement, having been dealt a sharp blow, remained dormant until the early 1890s when Abbas Hilmi II (r.1892–1914) helped to rejuvenate it as a lever against Cromer.

The Sudan and Egyptian Identity

At about the same time that the British occupied Egypt, the Egyptians lost their grip over the Sudan. Egyptian administration of the Sudan stemmed from the days of Mehmet Ali, whose southern conquests had been technically for the Sultan and who appointed military governors from among the Ottoman-Egyptian elite. Ismail had enlisted British officers to lead Egyptian troops in the expansion and administration of African territory under Egyptian control; and as part of Egypt’s ‘civilizing’ role, Ismail consented to the prohibition of the slave trade in the Sudan. In 1881 as the ‘Urabi movement gained momentum in Egypt, a young religious leader in the Sudan, Muhammad Ahmad, rallied followers against Ottoman-Egyptian rule. Among the backers of the Mahdi, or ‘rightly guided one’ as he became known, were those merchants and clerics who saw the attempts to eliminate the very lucrative slave trade in the 1870s as an assault on Islamic law and their own livelihoods. They also opposed Ottoman-Egyptian taxation policies. By 1885 the Mahdi’s forces had seized Khartoum, routed the remaining Egyptian troops, killed the ranking British officer, and established an independent Islamic state.23
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Egyptian nationalists did not let go of the Sudan so easily, for as Eve Powell convincingly demonstrates, the idea of the Sudan as part of Egypt had become embedded in the nationalist imagination. Herein lay a central paradox: Egyptian nationalists fought European imperialism at the same time that they sought to regain control of their own empire in the Sudan. Powell shows how this battle was fought metaphorically over the bodies of female slaves. In August 1894, government officials intercepted six Sudanese women destined for domestic slavery in the homes of three prominent pashas, one of whom – the president of the Legislative Council, ‘Ali Sharif Pasha – had earlier called for the dissolution of the Slave Trade Bureau. The military trial pitted the British defenders of the slave women’s right to freedom against the nationalists and their assertion of the pashas’ right to buy slaves as an act of ‘rescue’. ‘Each side fought over these tired women in ragged clothing with the same ideologies and slogans with which they fought over the Sudan itself’, writes Powell. The trial ended in the acquittal of two of the pashas, but a convention in 1895 and a special decree in 1896 enacted stiffer penalties for buyers of slaves. A further feature of the elite Ottoman-Egyptian household – African domestic slaves – became obsolete.

British-led Egyptian forces reconquered the Sudan in 1898: Egypt was now both colonized by the British and colonizer of the Sudan. Yet the British quickly sought to erode Egyptian control of the Sudan, and in 1899 they established the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in the Sudan – a partnership founded on Egyptian funds and British military governors. The linkage of the Sudan and Egypt in a Nile Valley entity nonetheless remained a tenet of the Egyptian nationalists, who did not want to see their empire dismembered. The nationalist lawyer Mustafa Kamil (b.1874 – d.1908) asked, ‘who can praise this policy of force and arbitrariness, which has effectively repudiated the rights of Egypt in the Sudan after we had watered it with our blood and expended therein colossal sums of money?’ Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, another nationalist, spoke of the Egyptians and Sudanese as ‘brothers, or as cousins, all from one mother’.

The Sudan of nationalist rhetoric contrasted with that of nationalist images, for the rhetoric emphasized male bonds while the images showed female bodies. The Sudanese that most elite Egyptians had known best were female domestic slaves, and the Sudan in post-war cartoons often appeared as a highly sexualized, nearly naked black woman with exaggerated facial and sexual features. Egypt, on the other hand, appeared as a light-skinned, modestly dressed and veiled upper-class woman (no doubt of Ottoman-Egyptian descent). Egyptians tried to incorporate the
Sudanese into the Egyptian nation as ‘minors’, wards of Egypt, to be tamed and civilized. But the British aborted the plan and encouraged the Sudanese to develop their own nationalist aspirations.

**Copts and Egypt’s Ancient Past**

While the issue of the sovereignty of the Sudan forced Egyptians to consider race and culture, the question of the place of the Copts in the national community helped Egyptians to explore and mine the past. At the heart of national identity lies a perception of common descent, of shared lineage, of the relatedness of the community. But which past would nationalists draw from – Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, Arab, Ottoman – to craft that lineage and shape national narratives? Copts claimed direct descent from the ancient Egyptians of Pharaonic times, stressing that they were the ‘real Egyptians’ not latecomers like the Arab tribes who had conquered Egypt. Likewise, Arab tribes in Egypt, many of which had been settled in the time of Mehmet Ali, retained a memory of common lineage. Descent may have been imagined, the actual story quite muddled, but the sense of relatedness, of shared blood, had real power. Egyptian nationalists used various strategies to fuse the lines of Copts and Muslims to create a single lineage of ancient pedigree.

Religious minorities in the Ottoman Empire had been treated as protected peoples, a category of subjects who paid special taxes and faced certain restrictions. They had their own corporate structure as **millet** (religious community) and collectively enjoyed a degree of autonomy: their own religious leaders ran community affairs and administered the religious laws that covered many aspects of life. Anthony Smith suggests that these millets were pre-modern ethnies that had the potential to become separate nations. Indeed, many Christian groups in the empire – from the Balkans to Mount Lebanon – pushed for autonomy or independence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. High concentrations of Copts existed in Upper Egypt – in areas such as Asyut they formed a quarter of the population – and they made up 5 to 20 per cent (depending on who counted) of the population in Egypt. Yet the Copts did not attempt to build a separate state.

Most nineteenth-century Copts were illiterate peasants who shared a spoken language and many customs with Muslims. Coptic women, like Muslim peasant women, were veiled and practised female circumcision, and often venerated the same saints. Coptic men were exempt from the army until the middle of the nineteenth century, when new laws eliminated the special jizya tax and introduced compulsory army service. Some Copts
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profited from Egypt’s changed land tenure laws and her integration into the world market. Those who accumulated large landholdings formed part of the rural notability, which became increasingly secularized in the second half of the century, and Coptic notables and professionals began vying with the religious hierarchy for political leadership of the community and control of its institutions. For centuries the Copts had held a monopoly on positions in finance in the Egyptian administration; but the dominance of Coptic clerks eroded under the occupation. Different segments of the Coptic community proved increasingly receptive to the appeal of nationalism.

Incorporating the Copts into the nation gave contemporary Egyptians a bridge back to the ‘Golden Age’ of Pharaonic times and an apparent physical link to ancient Egyptians. This then enlarged the body of material from which they could draw their symbols, myths, and models. Some of the earliest representations of the Egyptian nation – as early as the 1880s – were of Pharaonic women, and in post-war cartoons such images were common.32 ‘Egyptian women used to study science, speak from pulpits, and govern the empire when women in other countries were still in a state of slavery and misery’, wrote Malaka Sa’d, Coptic editor of al-Jins

Figure 7.1 Egypt represented as a pharaonic woman right after the British conquest. Print in Abu Naddara, No. 3, 1884
The Making of the Egyptian Nation

al-Latif, of women in the Golden Age. Evidence of Egypt’s glorious past was used to advance calls for women’s progress together with national revival.

Hoping to fuse ethnies and overcome divisions between Copts and Muslims, male and female nationalists adopted a variety of kin idioms. They spoke of the ‘sons of the Pharaohs’ and the ‘Mothers of the Nation’. The latter identified women as the bearers and rearers of its future citizens: the nation would only advance with women’s progress and girls’ education. For only educated mothers – Muslim or Copt – would imbue their sons with love for the nation. ‘It is upon you, tenderhearted mother, to instil in your son respect for his beloved nation, which has no dignity without him. The glory of this nation and its misery are in your hands’, wrote Fatima Rashid in an article on ‘Nationalism and Woman’. Writers pointed out the assumed etymological links between umm (mother) and umma (nation) and stressed their special connection. Depicting themselves as ‘mothers of the nation’ gave women a moral authority to engage more openly in politics, and they returned repeatedly to that source of authority and unity.

Yet the bonds between Copts and Muslims were not always harmonious. By 1907 competing nationalist visions had crystallized into two major political parties. A secular nationalist version gained currency among a group of landowning provincial notables. Rather than immediate evacuation, this group called for an evolutionary path to independence and cooperation with the British authorities so that reforms could be enacted and limits placed on the khedive’s power. The leading ideologues were educated in law or similar subjects in Europe and adopted the model of secular nationalism current in the West. Their Hizb al-Umma (Party of the Nation) attracted Coptic notables, who saw promise in its platform. Mustafa Kamil had galvanized students and others of the urban middle classes in a more popular movement. He called for the immediate evacuation of the British while still preaching loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan/Caliph. His al-Hizb al-Watani (Nationalist Party) combined territorial affinity with religious identity, although he clearly prioritized the former.

Shortly after launching the party, Mustafa Kamil died, and under his successor Muhammad Farid (b.1868 – d.1919), the party’s paper became more stridently pan-Islamic and anti-Coptic in tone. In a heated atmosphere, a young Watani Party sympathizer assassinated Egyptian Prime Minister Butrus Ghali, a Copt, in 1910. The crisis in relations between the Muslim and Coptic communities reached a peak. The British subsequently muzzled the press and drove Farid and other leading
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Watanists into exile. British policy sought to suppress those they labelled ‘fanatic’ nationalists while encouraging the ‘moderates’, the powerful landowners of the Umma Party who spoke a secular language that they could understand.

The ‘Woman Question’

Religious and secularly oriented nationalists pitched battles over the cultural content of Egyptian nationalism on different manifestations of the ‘woman question’. The bundle of issues touching on education, work, seclusion, veiling, marriage, and divorce that collectively made up the ‘woman question’ thus became the fault line along which cultural adjustments were worked out in Egyptian nationalism. Which symbols would each side adopt? What meanings would they give them? Whose causes would they support?

These debates have been analysed in the context of nationalism, feminisms, and modernity, and are linked directly to the British occupation. Leila Ahmed, for example, sees the main protagonist Qasim Amin as ‘the son of Cromer and colonialism’, a vessel for colonialist rhetoric during the British occupation. Yet I would argue that the debates arose as a consequence of transformations in Egyptian society across the long nineteenth century, in particular the unravelling of elite Ottoman-Egyptian households. Thus the Egyptian ‘woman question’ must be set in the broader Ottoman context, and the debates in turn-of-the-century Cairo should be seen in connection with those carried out in Istanbul. In both cities, and elsewhere in the empire, reformers critiqued elite family structures in order to find solutions to the perceived family crisis. This crisis was in part precipitated by the abolition of harem slavery.

Harem slavery was a defining feature of elite Ottoman households. Its abolition helped speed the Egyptianization of that elite and threw the entire household structure into disarray. Slave or freeborn women of the Ottoman-Egyptian elite may have had different origins but they lived similar lives, secluded within the harem, served by domestic slaves, and often guarded by eunuchs. What would a household now look like in Egypt? The emerging middle classes worked out their own answers in the press from the 1880s and in the women’s press in particular from the 1890s. The earliest founders of women’s journals were Syrian Christians who geared their monthlies to ‘Eastern women’ and opened their pages to female writers. Egyptian Copts and Muslims soon began their own Arabic journals, with such titles as al-Jins al-Latif (the Gentle Sex, 1908), Tarqiyat al-Mar’a (Woman’s Progress, 1908), and Fatat al-Nil (Daughter
of the Nile, 1913). In spite of their diverse ethnic backgrounds, these writers evolved a common format and focused mostly on domesticity. They tended to push a bourgeois family model: a conjugal marriage based on love, a mother dedicated to raising her children, a wife frugally managing her household. Female intellectuals called for girls’ education, which stood at the centre of the women’s awakening in Egypt, yet they differed on the degree to which they endorsed veiling and seclusion.\footnote{The debate became especially vocal at turn of the century with the publication of two books by Qasim Amin (b.1863–d.1908) – \textit{Tahrir al-Mar’a (The Emancipation of Woman, 1899) and al-Mar’a al-Jadida (The New Woman, 1900). Amin had stepped right out of the old Ottoman-Egyptian elite. His father, Muhammad Bey Amin Khan, had been Ottoman governor of Kurdistan, and when that region had erupted in revolt, the Sultan had given him a land grant in Egypt. There he married into the family of Ahmad Bey Khattab and became a high officer in Ismail’s army. Amin had a secular education, which was capped by a law degree in France. He returned to take up a judicial post, joining the circle of reformers working with the British, and married a daughter of the Turkish admiral Amin Tawfiq.\footnote{Yet the world he had been born into had become transformed: the Ottoman elite had solidified its local roots and had become increasingly Egyptianized. At the same time, it looked to Europe for political models and social solutions. There Amin found inspiration, and his bourgeois vision closely corresponded with that of the editors of women’s journals. He pushed for a package of girls’ education, conjugal marriage, unveiling, and an end to seclusion. And he argued that educated women would help the nation develop, echoing a theme articulated in the women’s press.}}

Rebuttals to Amin came from religious nationalists such as Mustafa Kamil, Fatima Rashid, and her husband Muhammad Farid Wajdi. While they endorsed women’s education, they opposed some of Amin’s other reforms, arguing that Islamic culture should provide the models for women and the family. This group generally came from the middle classes, not the highest ones where harem slavery had been most articulated, and continued to look to Istanbul for models rather than to Europe. The ‘Woman Question’ illuminated a cultural split and difference in religious orientation between the two nationalist camps, a split that became clearer with the emergence of the Watani and Umma parties.

One of the most contentious aspects of the ‘Woman Question’ was marriage: Should families arrange marriages? Should the couple be allowed to meet beforehand? Should romantic love have any role in the relationship?\footnote{In the early 1890s at the age of thirteen, Huda Sultan was}
married to her cousin and guardian ‘Ali sha‘rawi (whose children by his first wife were older than her) in order to keep the family lands intact. In the mid-1890s at the age of eighteen, Safiya Fahmi (b.1876–d.1946), daughter of the Ottoman-Egyptian politician Mustafa Fahmi (who had a long record of Cabinet appointments before and after the British occupation), married Sa‘d Zaghlul, an ambitious lawyer about twenty years her senior. These marriages followed established patterns of consolidating alliances among elite households. But in 1904 the marriage of Safiya al-Sadat to Shaykh ‘Ali Yusuf challenged convention and resulted in a trial that sparked a national debate.

Shaykh ‘Ali Yusuf came from a humble background but had risen to national prominence as the editor of al-Mu‘ayyad, a member of the General Assembly, and a confidant of Khedive Abbas. Having amassed wealth along the way, he sought a new marriage to a woman from a notable household. The youngest daughter of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Khaliq al-Sadat, popularly revered leader of the descendants of the Prophet, had caught his eye. Her father agreed to the match but postponed the wedding for years. Safiya then took matters into her own hands and agreed to go ahead with the ceremony in the home of a relative, claiming that she was of age and able to give her own consent to marriage. Upon learning of their contracted marriage, al-Sadat went to a religious court to have it annulled on the grounds that ‘Ali Yusuf had tricked her into marriage and that he was of inferior social standing. The court ruled in favour of the father and annulled the marriage. Safiya returned home only when a secret agreement had been worked out that she could marry ‘Ali Yusuf in her father’s presence after some time had elapsed.44

The court case became a national drama, drawing heavy coverage in the press and sparking heated exchanges. Many sided with the father and his right to determine his daughter’s fate; others took offence at the personal attacks on the renowned journalist. The controversy also led to a major rift between Mustafa Kamil, who attacked his rival ‘Ali Yusuf in the pages of al-Liwa’, and the khedive, who intervened in support of his propagandist.45 The case touched at core cultural issues, challenging both social hierarchies and patriarchal authority. The road from ethnie to nation was a rocky one involving the renegotiation of power relations and fundamental social structures.

After the abolition of harem slavery, the harem system slowly and sometimes painfully disintegrated. Patterns of socialization were reworked in the process. Women in elite households had previously been educated within the confines of the harem in ‘in-house’ schools. Now they went outside to partake of more public forms of schooling, and they often used
nationalist rhetoric to justify this and other activities. Gender segregation had been an important feature of Ottoman households with separate spaces (the harem) and special dress (the veil) for women. But fashions changed and many elite women adopted Western dress (which they concealed with long cloaks when they went outdoors). The face veil remained one of the last vestiges and main markers of the old Ottoman order, and it increasingly became a symbol of cultural contention.

In response to foreign critiques and attacks by Egyptian reformers, religious nationalists clung to the veil. 'This veil is not a disease which holds us back. Rather it is the cause of our happiness,' wrote Fatima Rashid. 'And we will guard it carefully and do all that concerns us from behind this beloved veil that is our symbol and the symbol of our Muslim grandmothers.' The veil worn by the Egyptian elite in the early twentieth century was a white yashmak that had originated in Istanbul. Egyptian peasants had their own style of veiling: they pulled a headscarf across the face when the situation demanded. The Cairene newspaper al-'Afaf (Modesty) featured a drawing of a peasant woman standing between a river and palm trees with the pyramids and a sphinx in the background on an early cover in 1910. The woman has a light veil drawn across her face that revealed the contours of her features. That veil was darkened a few weeks later after the journal had come under attack. Al-'Afaf and the religious nationalists behind the newspaper supported veiling as a sign of modesty and moral virtue as women became a marker of cultural purity.

The more secularly oriented nationalists adopted the veil as a cultural symbol with a markedly different meaning. From turn of the century, they called repeatedly for unveiling, and, sure enough, a trend toward unveiling had begun: minority women stopped veiling, younger girls never started, and veils became lighter over time. 'Women are not the only ones who are veiled in Egypt', asserted Abd al-Hamid Hamdi, the editor of the newspaper al-Suffur (Unveiling), founded in 1915. 'We are a veiled nation.' The goals of the paper were 'the creation of a literary awakening aimed at freeing the mind, delivering Egyptian nationalism from weak elements, and freeing woman from the chains of ignorance and unsound traditions.' The veil became a metaphor for both backwardness and virtue as women came to stand for the nation.

Conclusion

Through the long nineteenth century, the elite in Egypt underwent a metamorphosis, from local Ottoman-Egyptian or Egyptian. In the early
stages, harem slavery (and the purchase of Circassians in particular) had been crucial in maintaining elite identity for Ottomans or attaining it for ambitious Egyptians replicating the household structure of the khedivial courts. The abolition of slavery and the practice of intermarriage sped the transformation of the ethnic composition of the elite. This meant both that more Egyptians had climbed up into the elite and that Ottomans were becoming more assimilated into the Egyptian population. Their Egyptian-born descendants became Arabic speakers, and although they may personally have been proud of their Turkish ancestry, they publicly renounced the Ottoman past. The nationalist movement arose in part in reaction to ethnic tensions as created in the transition as Arabic speakers pushed for promotions in the army and more power in the central government. While the ‘Urabi movement itself was aborted, the underlying transformation of the elite was completed in the following decades.

But now a British occupation sat perched in Egypt, presenting a new set of overlords. Moreover, that overlord competed with Egypt for control of the Sudan, a source of domestic slaves for elite households. Sovereignty of the Sudan remained a tenet of Egyptian nationalism even as the British edged the Egyptians out. As the bid for restoring the Egyptian empire – or a Nile Valley entity – failed, only territorial Egypt with her own Muslim and Coptic inhabitants remained. Egyptian Copts and Muslims could not literally join in one family, but they could figuratively. Here the familial metaphors produced by male and female nationalists – particularly ones of motherhood – helped the two communities to combine lineages. This gave Egyptians a myth of continuity from antiquity to the present and helped to fuse collective memories. The debate on the cultural content of Egyptian nationalism found its clearest expression in the issues that collectively made up the ‘woman question’. Female intellectuals helped to craft some of the symbols and to shape the debates, and women fought in both the religious and secular nationalist camps.

Notes

1. Toledano, E. (1990), *State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, introduction. For a comprehensive critique of the nationalist discourse on Mehmet Ali and his army, see Fahmy, K. (1997), *All the Pasha’s Men: Mehmed*
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25. FO 407/127, No 91 Rodd to Kimberley, Cairo, 31 August 1894, 56-8; FO 407/127, No 98, Rodd to Kimberley, Alexandria, 14 September 1894, 62; FO 407/127, No 121 Rodd to Kimberley, Cairo, 16 September 1894, 72–3.


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32. See, for example, Abu Naddara 7, no.9 (1883), 100; Abu Naddara 8, no.3 (1884), 142; al-Musawwara al-Lata’if (29 March 1920), 4; al-Musawwara al-Lata’if (11 July 1921), 7; Baron, B. (1997), ‘Nationalist Iconography: Egypt as a Woman’, in J. Jankowski and I. Gershoni (eds.) (1997), Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East, New York: Columbia University Press, 105–24.


38. Ahmed, L. (1992), Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of


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