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RURAL CHILDHOODS IN EGYPT'S DESERT LANDS

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Abstract

Based on fieldwork in Egypt's desert lands, this paper discusses rural childhoods in an area experiencing rapid social and cultural change. Since 1987, the Egyptian Government has made new villages in the desert as a means to increase agricultural production and solving problems of unemployment. Many settlers move to the Mubarak villages in order to give their children a good start in life. The desert villages are associated with a type of 'rural idyll'. The process of settling in the desert impacts upon the children's possible pathways to adulthood and their identities and social relationships. Not only do the children grow up in a different physical context, they are also exposed to new norms, values and behaviour that influences their everyday life and shape their identity. Especially the change from living in large, extended families to living in nuclear families as well as women's new roles impact upon the children's lives. The social contexts shaping the desert childhoods are in some ways more similar to contexts in 'developed' countries than in other parts of rural Egypt. The paper ends up by contrasting ideas of rural childhoods in Egypt with those found in 'developed' countries.

I. Introduction

This paper is based on findings distilled from a broader research project, the goals of which are to examine land reclamation and the construction of new rural communities¹ in Egypt's desert lands. While the majority of land reclamation studies deal with the macro-perspective on how to allocate water and money, this project focuses to the micro-perspective, thus dealing with people's life in the new lands, the development of new villages, and the construction of new ruralities. The project addresses how the change of geographical setting reflects upon the socioeconomic conditions as well as in the identities of the desert dwellers. It employs a 'spatial approach' advocated by Müller-Mahn in his study of social change and poverty in rural Egypt. A spatial approach 'provides a framework within which people organize their lives and within which they act today. In dealing with the link between space and agency, geography presents some analytical tools that can bring about sensitivity to the spatial aspects of social phenomena' (Müller-Mahn, 1998: 274). The interest is not in the structuring of space, but in the social meaning of a spatial change. Hence, space, as seen here, has a double significance: on the one hand, it has been created by society, which is leaving its imprints on the geographical surface of the cultural landscape; on the other hand, space itself plays a significant role in the structuration of society because it is part of the framework for social action (Giddens 1984, Müller-Mahn 1998).

Based on interviews with the settlers and participant observations in the villages, the research project addresses issues such as empowerment of women, new rural identities, and social exclusion. In this paper, however, the attention is directed towards children's lives in the new lands. Rather than providing a detailed account of daily life of a desert child², this paper analyses how parents' choice to move to the desert communities and create a new life there affect the possibilities and identities of their children.

¹ It should be noted that the concept 'community' is ambiguous and with special reference to Egypt's old lands, Saad has noted that community '... has no local equivalent in the village' (1998: 37). She explains that the concept obscures the multiple levels of identity and belonging found in villages and further that 'community' often is seen to correspond with a physical boundary of human settlement with a unified collective interest that is not found 'in reality'. I find that this is different in the new lands, but nevertheless use the concept community sparingly.

² In this paper, I employ the term 'children' instead of 'youth' in order to avoid confusing this age group with their parents, who are beneficiaries of the Mubarak Youth Project and often referred to as the graduate youth.

The outline of the paper is as follows: First, a brief introduction to aspects of land reclamation and desert development in Egypt. This leads to an analysis of rural childhoods in the desert lands. The analysis is centred on the context and conditions shaping a new life in the desert and how the opportunities and constraints influences both identity formation and the material standard of living. In the discussion, rural childhoods in Egypt's desert lands is compared and contrasted to childhoods elsewhere in the country and to rural childhoods outside Egypt.

2. Land reclamation and desert development in Egypt

Land reclamation has engaged Egypt for decades. With a growing population and pressure to increase the agricultural production, cultivation has been expanded into progressively more marginal areas away from the fertile soils along the Nile (Meyer 1978, Wolff 1993). The need for more agricultural land in Egypt is in part due to the increasing population. From 1897 to 1999 the arable land to man ratio declined with more than 75% (FAO n.d.). Therefore, an expansion of the *arable* area is pursued. Over the years, however, the scope of land reclamation has varied greatly (Holmén 1991) and it as been seen as a remedy for almost any problem.³

Since the late 1980s, the government's emphasis has been on desert *community* development more than just land reclamation. Hence, the concept of land reclamation is broadened to include development of village communities in the new lands in order to overcome the problems of unemployment, congestion, and shortage of housing in the 'old lands'. Thus, reclamation policies are increasingly being linked with development policies (El-Zoghby 1999, Erian 1997). Present day land reclamation in Egypt can be seen as having four policy objectives:

1. To enhance the agricultural production – the traditional motive for reclamation
2. To decrease population growth in the Nile Valley and the delta
3. To generate employment for graduate youth
4. To alleviate poverty

³ Please refer to Mitchell (1995) and Bush (2002) for a critical discussion of the Egyptian Government's land reclamation policies.

This shows that there are various reasons for opening the desert, and the reclamation policy of new lands continues despite the inherent problems involved in resettling people and cultivating the desert (Adriansen 2003).

The first reclamation projects of desert lands began in the mid 1950s after the revolution. Since then, a number of different groups have benefited both from different government programmes and from projects run by private investors. The history of reclamation is characterised by the development of huge state farms in the desert with thousands of workers (Springborg 1979); *and* by the subsequent failure of these projects and various attempts to subdivide the land between the workers. This means that in the older reclaimed lands, many of the inhabitants are small farmers, former workers from the state farms (Meyer 1995, 1998).

From the 1980s, a new group of people began to settle in the reclaimed desert; these were young graduates, who were granted land under the Mubarak Youth Project. In order to understand this, we have to look back to the 1960s. With free education and the state's employment guarantee to graduates, education became an attractive possibility for young, rural dwellers and the educational level of rural Egypt rose significantly. In the 1980s, it became increasingly difficult to find employment for all young graduates; and since the mid 1990s, when the Government officially gave up the employment guarantee, there has been a high rate of unemployment among young graduates, especially among those living in rural communities (Bach 1998). Therefore the Government launched the Mubarak Project in 1987 and it still has a high profile in the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation (MALR).⁴

The MALR states that the rationale behind the Mubarak Project is that graduate unemployment can be solved by granting the graduates reclaimed land. When a group of graduates with different educational background is brought together, integrated rural communities can be developed. Here the human capital of the youth can be used for developing communities in the reclaimed lands and increase the agricultural productivity by adopting new technology. Subsequently, this will alleviate the population density in the delta

⁴ The number of settlers with the Mubarak Project is approx. 70,000 plus their families. The project will also be responsible for distributing land from the Toshka land reclamation scheme to approx. 500,000 new settlers plus their families and to the same number of people in other so-called mega reclamation projects all over the country. This is why the rationale and outcome of the Mubarak Project have bearings beyond the number of people settled so far.

region and attract investors, small farmers, and auxiliary workers to the new lands, which means that increasingly more desert can be reclaimed (MALR, 2000: 5).

The graduates respond to announcements in the newspapers. According to the ministry, land is granted on the basis of the age (applicants should be under 30 years old), qualification (agricultural degrees are preferred, but all graduates can apply)⁵, graduation year (recently graduated applicants are not considered), gender (men are preferred, but women can also apply), origin (applicants from rural areas are preferred). Applicants working in government or the public sector cannot be granted land and by accepting land, the graduates renounce their possibility to public office (MALR, 2000). Eligible applicants are allotted 5 *feddan*⁶ of desert land and a 1-bedroom house in the adjacent village. When they receive it, the land is equipped with an irrigation system. As all settlers in a certain village are granted land at more or less the same time, they also move in more or less simultaneously, usually within a year.

3. Rural childhoods in the desert villages

Life in the Mubarak villages evolves around agriculture. Almost all of the villages were, at least initially, established to serve the agricultural sector. Today, the picture is somewhat different. But despite the diversification of production activities, agriculture still retains the central role. Even though the villages are of recent origin, their infrastructure and whole construction has the resonance of a farming community. In terms of planning the villages are fairly alike. All houses look alike and are located on a grid. In the centre of the village, shops, schools, mosques, and other parts of the common infrastructure can be found. The fields surround the village, and some inhabitants live several kilometres away from their fields. As the settlements are located in the desert, vegetation is non-existent in the newest villages, but the older villages have escaped their desert appearance and the monotonous houses gained some individuality.

One remarkable characteristic of the Mubarak villages is that they do not have a ‘natural’ population distribution. On the contrary, the majority of the inhabitants belong to two discrete groups: parents who moved to the new communities and their children. Under the Mubarak programme, beneficiaries have to be under 30 years of age and have a degree. This

⁵ Most degrees seem to be recognised. The only exception I have found is that graduates from the religious university, Al-Azhar, are refused on the grounds that they are guaranteed a position within the religious system.

⁶ One *feddan* is 0.42 hectare.

means that all people who are granted land at the same time is more or less within a five years age difference, 24-29 years old. In a certain village, all have been granted land at the same time and all adult inhabitants are consequently of more or less the same age. Many move there at the age of 30 either with young children, or they have children shortly after settling in the new village. In most villages, there is a lack of the teenagers or the adolescent age group. Hence, we are only now seeing the first generation of children to be born and grow up in the Mubarak villages.

These children grow up in a socio-economic and environmental context which is quite different from the one that their parents grew up in. In the desert communities, there are very few youngsters who the children can learn from, consequently their parents become a very important source for identity formation. Hence, the parents' perception of life in the new lands as well as their ability to create a way of life there will influence the children profoundly. As the majority of the inhabitants are graduates, the Mubarak villages also reflect the role of education in shaping new contexts and identities.

What are the settlers, i.e. the parents' perceptions of life in the new lands? The fieldwork showed that the older the village, the more content were the inhabitants. This is not surprising as the older villages had far better infrastructure and more services such as schools, health clinics, etc. Although there were quite different perceptions of life in the new lands, there was an unexpected consistency in issues of importance for establishing a good life. When asked about the positive aspects of living in the new villages, there were three issues that came up in almost every conversation: There is space; the air is clean; it is peaceful and quiet.

This was in contrast to the old lands, which are described as crowded, dirty, stressful, and noisy. Furthermore, for quite a few their relocation to the desert had involved a higher material standard of living, especially a bigger house. All aspects were valued highly in regard to bringing up children and the new lands were seen as a space of opportunity for giving the children a better start in life. In this way, the desert resembles rural England analysed in a study by Valentine (1997). She describes how parents of Wheldale have an understanding of rural idyll where their children can enjoy their childhood away from the social stress and spatial constraints of the city.

Especially women equaled the new lands with new opportunities. Here the social norms and rules of the old lands can be negotiated and redefined. As all graduates – irrespective of gender and civil status – can apply for land, a number of women own desert land. Some of these women are not married; few live alone, others with a family member, for instance a

brother. In the new lands, women can be involved in all types of work in the fields, this is not the case in the old lands, where tilling is perceived to be men's work and women only participate if there is a severe lack of labour.

Hence, children in Egypt's new villages grow up in what could be labelled 'homogeneous villages'. This homogeneity is caused by the special selection criteria of the Mubarak Youth Project beneficiaries. The villages are not homogeneous in terms of race or religion⁷, but all beneficiaries have a similar background – being graduates, having an agricultural background and interest, being of the same age. Also, many graduate men marry graduate women and graduate women can be granted land, thereby rendering a higher number of educated women in the new villages than in Egypt in general. Hence, the children grow up in very homogeneous villages – in a country marked by class, gender and other social differences.

The different organisation of agricultural and social activities in the new villages extends the field of legitimate opportunities, especially for women but it also influences the daily life of children. One woman explained that when women participate in the cultivation of the fields, there is a need for somebody to take care of the children. As the majority of the graduate families are nuclear families and they live far away from the rest of the family, there are no grandmothers to take care of the children. This means that there is a need for kindergartens and the involvement in the market economy makes it possible for some families to pay for child care. In one of the villages, women had been competing over making the best kindergarten and one of the interviewees had had to give up. Other women have started their own businesses such as growing and arranging flowers for decoration or sewing clothes. Some of these opportunities are present because the gender roles are lived in a new space; other opportunities are due to the educational level of women in the new lands. But the bottom line is that the children of the desert villages are exposed to values, norms and behaviour that is quite different from those in the old lands.

Although, the way of life for children in the new lands is different from that of other children growing up in rural Egypt, they do suffer from some of the same problems. Schools with too few teachers and lack of a good teacher-pupil interaction is for instance a widespread problem in Egypt (Elkamel 2005). Education is valued highly by most Egyptians, even more so in the Mubarak villages where the majority of the inhabitants are graduates themselves. All the interviewees reported about lack of good schools and absentee teachers. For some, these

⁷ In fact, the new communities have both Muslim and Christian inhabitants.

problems were so acute that they had decided to break up the family and let the mother move back to the old lands with the children in the hope that they would get a better education there. Apart from the obvious problems involved in splitting up the family, it is also paradoxical considering that many argued that they had moved to the new lands in order to give their children a better start in life.

Also, the lack of services and infrastructure influences the everyday life of the children. Lack of clean drinking water and reliable health clinics is primarily a problem in the newer villages, but these problems together with the lack of good schools were mentioned by a number of the settlers. Shortage of clean drinking water makes people sick. In some villages, this problem is so acute that some children have been sent to the old lands because they are considered too fragile to stay in the new villages.

Many of the interviewees complain that they miss their family and friends from the old lands and the feeling of remoteness is accentuated if the services and infrastructure are poor, and if they have had to split up the family. Although, the new villages may not be very far away in terms of physical distance, there is a sense of living in the periphery, especially if there is no public phone and poor transportation. Hence, the new lands may seem promising for young parents, but they do encounter some difficulties in constructing the desired rural childhood.

Children are not needed as a labour force in the new lands as the type of agriculture which is profitable there is less labour demanding and more demanding in terms of technology. For some, however, it is a problem that agriculture in the new lands is very demanding in terms of initial investments. Many feel they have been caught in a trap where they cannot make the land profitable and they cannot go somewhere else. One man summed up his situation:

“I have fallen into this trap of taking the land 12 years ago. I thought it was paradise and this was my chance to have a secure life for my children. But I discovered that I need to spend a lot on the land before it gives anything and this is difficult when I have children to support and I do not have a second source of income”

While the new lands become a ‘space of poverty’ for some parents, many still perceive the desert villages as a ‘space of opportunity’ especially for giving their children a good start in life.

4. Discussion and concluding remarks

While Egypt's new lands are rural, they are so different from the old lands that these areas cannot be considered one rural category. Instead the desert villages become the remote areas. Only approximately 4% of Egypt's 1 mio. km² are inhabited, this is the fertile land along the Nile and the area along the Mediterranean coast. With a population of around 70 mio., the populated areas have a population density of approximately 1750 per km². This means that rural Egypt and urban Egypt is next door so to speak and consequently the rural-urban dichotomy is not that relevant in Egypt. Instead, the important divide is Upper versus Lower Egypt, where upper and lower refers to the flow of the river Nile. Upper Egypt begins a few hundred kilometres south of Cairo and is the poor and 'traditional' part of the country. Lower Egypt is the northern part of the country including the capital, Cairo with its soaring app. 20 mio. inhabitants.

However, the majority of the reclaimed areas are located at the margins of existing land, so even these areas are not necessarily remote in absolute terms, but in the mind of people, the desert communities have a connotation of remoteness and not least of being different. Also the settlers had a perception of living far away from everything. For instance they complained that there was 30 km to the nearest hospital, a distance that does not seem far to most rural inhabitants of neither the developed nor developing countries.

In the new lands, life is quite different from life in the 'old lands'. In the former, people predominantly live in nuclear families, which is very new in Egypt. Also, a number of women in the new lands have paid work or work in the fields leaving childcare in the hands of kindergartens. This is also a new development. In the old lands, people live in extended families, usually having relatives around for taking care of children. Hence, for the children growing up in the new lands, life is quite different from that of children in other rural areas in Egypt. In many ways, their experiences in terms of family life are more similar to their peers in urban areas than in rural areas. The social context shaping the lives of children and young desert dwellers is in some ways more similar to conditions in developed than in other parts of rural Egypt, especially in Upper Egypt.

This paper has attempted to shed light upon rural childhoods in an area experiencing rapid social and cultural change. The process of settling in the desert impacts upon the children's possible pathways to adulthood and their identities and social relationships. The parents are very important for shaping both the material and the social reality of the children growing up

in the desert, because they are the first generation being born and bread in the Mubarak villages. In terms of the changing values and norms, the Mubarak villages may come to resemble rural settings in developed countries more than in rural Egypt.

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