Friends Watching *Friends*

Friends Watching *Friends*: American Television in Egypt

By

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TO AMIRA

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INTRODUCTION

Writers sometimes begin their work with a single image, not knowing just where that image will lead, and stories often unfold on their own in such a way that the author does not foresee. My research began in this way, with an image that led me on a journey filled with surprising encounters that culminated in what would become the material for my doctoral dissertation. The image was that of the sphinx and his gaze. W.B. Yeats described the image "in the sands of the desert, a shape with lion body and the head of a man" with his "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun." But unlike Yeats' foreboding modernist depiction, the Giza sphinx's postmodern gaze is of Pizza Hut. As I read Alexander Stille's description in his collection of essays, *The Future of the Past*,[1] my curiosity was engaged, and I began a study of American popular culture in Egypt.

With this image in mind, I traveled to Cairo in 2003 as a doctoral student in the Heritage Studies Ph.D. program at Arkansas State University (ASU) to see the odd juxtaposing of the Sphinx and Pizza Hut for myself and to ask Egyptians their opinions about the presence of American popular culture in their society. The Sphinx was the bait that pulled me into a fascinating study that brought me back to Cairo for four more trips to interpret this cultural interface that was graphically symbolized by ancient culture and modern globalization.

From my beginning trip where I interviewed Egyptian women about American pop culture, I identified a media interest that Egyptians had in watching the American television sitcom *Friends.* Just as the Sphinx signified a cultural meaning beyond its material presence, so too did *Friends* stand as an example of the broader engagement that Egyptians have with Western media. By narrowing my focus to a single television program, I was able to examine in-depth some elements in American television that Egyptians identify with to a certain extent. By doing so it brought me insights into the connection between American culture and Egyptian culture, allowing me to have a focal point from which to begin. *Friends* became the lens through which I was able to view aspects of Egyptian society and see similarities between Egyptians and Americans.

By bringing a far-away society closer, it acted as a telescopic lens. Even though we often speak of the global village as if the world at large is now accessible to all, the overwhelming majority of Americans have never

visited any country in the Middle East. Traveling to Egypt and working with Egyptian women showed me that Americans and Egyptians are alike in many ways. Women in both societies enjoy entertainment and have a good sense of humor. Women in Egypt were discerning about the choices they made for family viewing, just as American women are.

The microscope characteristic of the lens permitted me to see smaller parts of Egyptian society, to break it into component parts. By breaking the study into smaller components such as jobs, the economy, entertainment, and relationships, viewed in the context of the shared text, *Friends,* I had a better picture of Egyptian society as a functioning whole. I saw that Egyptian society has been bombarded for centuries from outside forces, yet is remarkably strong. The influence today of what some have termed "cultural imperialism" from the West is certainly a factor, but I found that Egyptians are protective of their heritage and societal values, watching Western entertainment media with a critical eye. They may love to watch *Friends*, but as some of my interviewees noted, they are protective of their identity and careful of outside influences.

Finally, *Friends* acted as a camera lens framing my study in a meaningful context. Since information is processed and understood better within a social and historical background, using *Friends* episodes let me anchor my questions in a time and place. I could have asked many of the interview questions without using episodes of *Friends,* but much of the information would lack unity and contextualization. By having a shared text, I had a starting point with which to frame my inquiries. *Friends* was an excellent choice because it downplays Americans as always being at the top of the power hierarchy. It was a less threatening text than many Hollywood movies that often are seen as vehicles for flexing political muscle and celebrating military power internationally. This was particularly important since I came to understand some of the implications of the inherent power struggle between the United States and Egypt. While Egyptians may not see themselves as competing with Americans in the global political or military arena, they are adamant about maintaining a sense of power and control in their own country concerning the influx of television programming. Egyptians were concerned about making decisions for themselves about the programs that they considered desirable to watch.

By understanding the importance of recognizing Egypt's need to exercise control in their own media, I realized the broader implications in a political climate in which the United States has been losing ground in its standing among people in the Middle East. I did not intend to have a political perspective to my study, but the more I progressed in the project, the more I realized there is an inevitable political angle that is unavoidable.

Journalist Lawrence Pintak notes that since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S., Americans "simply made overt a worldview that had long been present but little acknowledged." Explaining that the September 11 attacks did not change Americans' views of Arabs but simply brought them into sharper focus, he writes,

> Since a *keffiah*-clad Rudolph Valentino first strode across the silent screen, Arabs and Muslims have been Othered in the U.S. society, the subject of stereotype and differentiation. Blinded by their view of Self, most Americans knew- or cared- little about what the rest of the world thought of them.[2]

Pintak's comments are particularly appropriate for this study in that he frames his insights about Arab-American relations with a reference to the cinema. This is fitting in that many of the ideas that Americans and Arabs have about each other come from cinematic media and have since the time of the silent screen, as Pintak notes.

It didn't take long for me to identify resistant attitudes that Egyptians had toward the United States, though they usually differentiated between the government and the people. More than once waiters and people working in the public sector would ask if I was American, and upon hearing that I was immediately said to me that they didn't like George Bush. I once responded, "Well I'm not too fond of Mubarak, either," hoping to defuse any intense political engagement. That was not always easily done. At times I walked out of situations that became verbally threatening, but perhaps the most embarrassing of times was in the Cairo Museum. An Egyptian tour guide was leading a Russian tour through the museum when my Egyptian friend said to me, "Why does he have to talk so loud?" The guide heard us, stopped the tour and walked over to us in the Tutankhamen room that contained the famous mask. After a heated exchange with my friend Hanaan, the guide turned to me and asked if I was American. I said that I was, and he announced to everyone on the tour that he hated George Bush and that Tony Blair was his lap dog. Before I could answer, assuming that I had wanted to, he reached for my hand and kissed it while everyone watched, and with flair added that he loved the American people. Never had it been so graphically demonstrated to me how much Egyptians make the distinction between politics and people. While it felt like a scene from a movie, it was real and it characterized the attitudes of many Egyptians.

So, though I went with no political angle to my study, I soon realized that I could not avoid many of the issues that kept reoccurring in my conversations with Egyptians. In this environment of political controversy

that included the Israeli-Palestinian question, the Iraq invasion and the post 911 suspicions of Middle Easterners, I began the research with little academic study of Egypt. Additionally, I personally knew no one who lived there.[3] I had never been to the Middle East, and had little more than general knowledge that most Americans would have about Egypt. My first trip was an exploratory visit. It was only later that I realized that the work I was doing would become the topic of my dissertation, so the project evolved over a two to three year period.[4]

My credentials in approaching this study were comprised of my experience as a teacher and my enthusiasm for travel. Mark Twain once said that travel is fatal to prejudice, and I knew from my previous trips to Central America and Europe that the cultural experience of living among local people in an immersion experience is the best way to connect with others and understand something of their perspective. As a university teacher, I used my knowledge of textual analysis combined with my years of experience in leading small discussion groups. I spoke no Arabic before going but learned more with each trip and now speak enough to negotiate my way around Cairo exchanging greetings, buying groceries, taking taxies, and other necessities.

I went to Cairo with an open mind. Though there may be no such thing as a dispassionate observer, I had few fully formed notions about Egyptian culture simply because I knew so little about it. Many times people have the mental picture of Egyptian women as either belly dancers or women who are completely veiled in black cloth. While both of these groups certainly exist in Cairo, they are not the majority of women. The majority of women may wear a head covering but among young women it may be paired with a tee shirt and jeans. I came to realize that there was a surprising complexity in Egyptian women's clothing choices, something that many Westerners would do well to understand. I found Egyptian women to be welcoming and funny. The seriousness that I expected to find was more of a media distortion than reality. Egyptian women have much in common with American women, especially in their sense of humor and enjoyment of television and movies.

From the beginning of the study when I arrived in Cairo to the end of the project when I understood so much more about women's lives in Egypt, I actively participated in a diversity of cultural experiences to help contextualize the study. I sought out Egyptian music, literature, and television programs whenever possible. I ate Egyptian food and learned Egyptian words. I read several Arab writers and became an admirer of Egypt's Nobel Prize laureate, Naguib Mahfouz, reading as many of his

novels, short stories, and essays as possible to help me understand more about life in Cairo.

In addition to participating in these varied cultural experiences, I worked in one of Cairo's lesser-known museums, the Egyptian Ethnological Museum, that is maintained by the Egyptian Geographical Society. This work was helpful in framing my study of modern Cairo by providing me a background of Cairo life a hundred years ago when the museum was inaugurated.[5] I worked closely with Dr. Mohammed Safey Abulez, the President of the Egyptian Geographical Society who was in charge of the museum, and I helped to write a visitor's guide in English.

Though my museum work was not intentionally related to my media research project, it became one of a number of situations that helped me learn more about Egyptian life and customs. Many of the experiences that I had in Cairo that at first seemed unrelated directly to the study kept reappearing as I wrote the dissertation, and I realized how so many seemingly random events all fit together like the strands from an intricate tapestry to create an ethnographic picture of Egyptian women.

Before September 11, 2001, apathy or lack of interest was one of the main impediments to meaningful research by Western researchers in Middle Eastern women's issues, but after 2001, fear has perhaps replaced apathy as the leading roadblock. While it is one thing to research articles comfortably in the library or on academic databases, it is another to do research that may be considered risky in countries such as Egypt. Brinda Mehta describes how many scholars were anxious to cancel their travel plans because of concerns about "Islamic terror" shortly after the 2001 attacks on the U.S. especially in light of "Egypt's designation as a breeding ground for terrorists by the U.S. State Department. Mehta laments the reluctance that some scholars show when the possibility of danger arises and says that we, as scholars, should not be accused of "occasional commitment." She notes that we want academic dialogue to take place "within the safe space of rhetoric."[6] However, when the "safe space" is not apparent, academics should not be deterred from their commitment to research.

I did face fear on my first and subsequent trips to Egypt. While I do not believe in foolishly putting myself in unnecessary danger, I also believe that researchers have to have some courage in proceeding with work when there is meaningful work to be done. Writing about women in Egypt was important to me because Westerners do not get to hear the voices of Middle Eastern women enough. With so many misunderstandings about cultural groups in the Middle East, we in the West have a

responsibility to try to go beyond stereotypes and media images in understanding and respecting one another.

The experiences I had over the research period and the people that I met and worked with enriched my understanding of Egyptians more than I could have imagined. Though travel to the Middle East seemed risky at the time, and some people cautioned me against going, especially as a Western women traveling alone, the risk was well worth the reward. There were a few serious bombings during this period, some of which targeted Americans, especially the bombings in the Khan el Khalili and Sharm el Shek. My beliefs and perspectives were challenged by my contact with people who held different views from me, but in the end I felt more informed. I was changed by this experience in the way that education should challenge and change people. I had a broader understanding of social and economic issues that are better presented in life than in a textbook. I was able to observe and draw my own conclusions.

Structure of the book: an overview

My book has three basic divisions: the first is a description of my life in Cairo during the time that I did the research; the second is analysis of American media in Egypt and interviews with Egyptians, and the third is ethnographic description of Egyptian life concerning jobs, the economy, and relationships. I begin in chapter one with a description of Cairo, both the physical environment and the people with whom I worked. I explain the challenges that I faced in adapting to life in the Middle East as a woman traveling alone and living in an Egyptian neighborhood. Following this initial description of my setting, in chapter two I give a summary of the original work that I did pertaining to images and influences of the media in Egypt. I use chapter three to present a literary analysis that leads more specifically into Egyptian women's engagement of *Friends*. In chapter four I use information from observation, conversations, interviews, and written research to present some of the more general information that I collected about Egyptian women watching *Friends.* Then going from the broader context to the more specific focus, I use chapters five, six, and seven to present ethnographic descriptions about the jobs, the economy, and relationships, using the *Friends* theme song to identify these three main concerns. I close the study by offering some conclusions concerning my original objective of using *Friends* as a lens through which to view contemporary Egyptian life. In addition I offer my insights into the implications that these findings have in helping Americans have a better understanding of Egyptian people and daily life.

Finally, I offer a bibliographic essay that contains details about the study and a review of the literature.

As I write this book in 2009, I am again reminded of the power of images. I visited Lebanon in the summer of 2009 and met with women in Beirut and southern Lebanon, sometimes in the homes of Hezbollah supporters. Since many Westerners think of Hezbollah as terrorists, they would be surprised at some of the unlikely media and literary images that I encountered there. In one home that I visited where the Shiite women wore traditional clothing, I saw a framed picture of Audrey Hepburn in her *Breakfast at Tiffany's* pose in the foyer of the house. In another family, I visited with an elementary school teacher who showed me the textbook that she uses for teaching English. I was amused to see the familiar images of Frog and Toad, favorites from the Arnold Lobel books that I read to my own children years before. Then, as I was in the home of a family who lived on the Israeli-Lebanese border, I was watching television and saw an advertisement for *Grease*, the musical. The subtitles said that it was the first time for this American show in the Middle East. I was reminded that media images and icons can be clues to understanding what is important to people. While it may be dangerous to interpret too much from them, it may be equally perilous to ignore that these images can represent a commonality among people with marked differences. Whether it is *Friends* in Egypt, *Grease* in Israel, or a picture of Audrey Hepburn in southern Lebanon, there is much to explore in the message and meaning behind the picture.

Perhaps the single most important message that I received and hope to pass on through this book is that it is just as important to see others clearly as it is to be seen fairly and accurately. While books and studies are valuable tools, they cannot compare with personal experience. However, since many will never be able to travel to Egypt personally, I hope this book is able to communicate something meaningful from my own experience.

—Katherine Dillion
October 2009

Notes

[1] Alexander Stille, *The Future of the Past,* (New York:Picador, 2002), 4.
[2] Lawrence Pintak, *America, Islam, and the War of Ideas: Reflections in a Bloodshot Lens.* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), xiv.
[3] I had an academic colleague whose sister had a business contact in Cairo. This was my only thread in the beginning.
[4] My trips took place as follows: May/June 2004; Dec. 2004; May-July 2005; Dec. 2005; March 2006.
[5] One hundred years is an approximate time. The museum went through evolutionary changes that make the actual beginning date debatable, but the early dates include the 1880s.
[6] Mehta, Brinda, *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing,* (Syracus: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 13.

CHAPTER ONE

"NO ONE TOLD ME LIFE WAS GONNA BE THIS WAY": ADAPTING TO LIFE IN CAIRO

> "I have lived with people and shared their concerns. Every beat of society's pulse has resonated in my heart and overwhelmed me. Society, politics, daily life… I have lived through every event with the people; their worries and aspirations were my own. Must the writer belong heart and soul to a society? Yes, if he wishes to express something of that society."
> —Naguib Mahfouz[1]

"Cairo is an old woman who was once beautiful," Egyptians say about their city that is at once a display of elegance and decay. Grand palaces and majestic mosques are common sites alongside crumbling buildings blackened by the pollution from heavy traffic. The incomparable pyramids and the mysterious sphinx are juxtaposed with Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken. BMWs drive alongside donkey carts in the streets, as men ride by on bicycles, balancing huge wooden trays of *eish*, or flatbread on their heads as they go. Tourists spend the night in five-star hotels along the Nile, while more than a million Cairenes sleep each night in graveyards. Cairo is a mixture of ancient and modern, rural and cosmopolitan, rich and very poor. Just as someone might try to describe an old woman who was once beautiful, without the personal experience of seeing her, it is hard to imagine. No one could have told me how beautiful and paradoxical Cairo is until I saw it for myself.

The opening words to the *Friends* theme song, "So no one told you life was gonna be this way," signal an overriding theme that permeates the television series: since life is unpredictable, no one can tell you what to expect; you must experience it for yourself. This was my philosophy as I arrived in Cairo in the summer of 2005 with the intent of living on my own in an Egyptian neighborhood and experiencing Cairo life as much as possible firsthand to better understand the social and cultural climate of the women I interviewed. I knew if my writing was to be meaningful I

wanted to feel the "beat of society's pulse," as Naguib Mahfouz called it, by living among the people. By doing so I would come to understand the considerations of class, gender, and politics in a way that no one could have told me or that I could have learned from textbooks.

While I had no grand plan in mind from the beginning of my research, I was able to construct a working model as the project unfolded. Even though the interviews that I held with Egyptian women could have been conducted anywhere, I could not have understood their context as well without immersion in the material, social, and familial culture that Cairenes experience daily. It was important to me to live in an Egyptian flat, eat Egyptian food, attend Egyptian cultural events and visit in Egyptian homes. Though my intent in doing this was to be able to provide ethnographic "thick description," [2] an added benefit to me was that I came out of this experience with a *baraka.* In Arabic[3] this means blessing, and after living in Cairo for two months, my *baraka* included knowing hospitable people, understanding more about Egyptian heritage, and participating in social life that is at once both traditional and changing. My experiences ranged from seemingly mundane tasks such as learning to do my laundry, to the more exigent encounter with armed guards on my way to work, to the more ethereal occasion of listening to the Cairo symphony in the opera house playing the magical Sheherazade Suite.[4]

As I thought about the opening words from the *Friends* theme song, "So no one told you life was gonna be this way," I realized how much these words applied to my new experience of trying to live on my own as a newcomer in the Middle East's largest city. I began my first discussion group by watching and discussing an episode of *Friends*, "The One With the East German Laundry Detergent," that gave us an opening for examining challenges that Egyptian girls face coming into adulthood. This episode of *Friends* describes a seemingly small marker of adulthood, the ability to do your own laundry. We used this episode as a springboard to talk about the ways that Egyptian women assert themselves as they mature and then compared this to the typically Western view of independent women. I realized from the first session that there were differences in starting points: Americans would likely see the desire for independence as a given, but Egyptians would not generally assume the same.

This early *Friends* episode[5] shows Rachel trying to make the break from the security of her parents by learning to live on her own and pay her own expenses with her job as a waitress. The task that she identifies as one that marks successful independence is the ability to do her own laundry. She goes to The *Laundorama* with Ross and confesses to him

that she is a “laundry virgin.” The humor is built on the premise of the spoiled little rich girl who doesn’t know how to sort laundry, choose detergent, or stand her ground when someone tries to take her cart. Rather than doing the laundry by herself, she accepts Ross’s willing help and protection from the laundry bully who tries to intimidate her. This popular episode comically represents Rachel’s lack in two spheres: domestic knowledge and protection from the harsh realities of the world outside the home. It shows how such a seemingly simple task as doing laundry can be challenging to the uninitiated and how the mastery of basic domestic chores is often considered an initiation into adult life. Rachel states, “Ok, I know this is gonna sound really stupid, but I feel that if I can do this, you know, if I can actually do my own laundry, there isn't anything I can't do.” In the end, Rachel ruins her white clothes by accidentally dropping one red sock in the load, thereby showing that even the seemingly simplest tasks are fraught with unexpected problems.

Ross realizes the mistake that Rachel makes with the red sock and tries to protect her from seeing it since he is afraid that she will be upset that she failed at her first attempt to do laundry. Rachel is portrayed as the rich “Daddy’s girl” who has never had to do anything for herself, but has been protected by her family, particularly her father. Ross then becomes heir to the position of protector since her father is absent. Not only does Rachel need help with the laundry, but she needs protection from the bully, an older woman who tries to take away their washing machine and later their laundry cart. At first Ross stands up to the woman and protects Rachel from her; however, by the end of the episode, Rachel has to face up to her ruined laundry and stand up to the bully by not allowing the woman to take their cart. Rachel feels triumphant as she reaches a level of independence that allows her to deal with her lack of ability to manage everyday responsibilities and difficult people. Rather than being an episode about trivial tasks, it is a comic coming-of-age story of how young women learn to deal with the daunting aspects of daily trials and responsibilities while trying to assert a degree of independence.

While this episode was a good opening for my *Friends* group, I realized how relevant it was to my own situation in Cairo. When I chose this episode, I was in the United States and took a purely academic interest in it with laundry being the symbol that marked the spheres of cultural knowing and not knowing. However, after I moved into my flat and had to do my own laundry I understood what a powerful marker laundry can be, and what was symbolic in the episode became a real challenge for me. Even though I was no “laundry virgin” as Rachel was, I realized that from

one society to another, a detail as small as laundry knowledge can be daunting.

I was used to having an automatic washer and dryer in the States, but my flat in the neighborhood of el El Muniera had neither. I did have a sink in the kitchen and a clothesline outside on the small balcony. Cairo weather is both hot and dusty, so I had to wash my clothes after each wearing. It took me a while to wash them out in the sink, but what I missed most about the automatic washer was the spin cycle. Having to wring the clothes out by hand meant that the clothes would still drip excess water when they were hung out. The problem was that I was on the third floor, so my laundry dripped on the people below on the sidewalk as well as on the laundry of the people on the first and second balconies. I felt embarrassed not knowing if it would be considered rude to drip water on the passersby below. Not only that, but I was worried that it would be considered impolite as well to hang out my lingerie. Then there was the possibility that I could drop the lingerie as I was hanging it out, and it would land on the street below, to my embarrassment. I completely understood Rachel's feelings of inadequacy as I faced my own laundry challenges in a situation where I risked branding myself as the outsider who lacked knowledge of basic domestic skills.

When I called a friend and asked her opinion she told me that no one minded if the clothes dripped on the sidewalk below because in the Cairo heat, most would welcome it as a nice shower as they walked. She said that when she hung out lingerie she always covered it with a towel to keep it from being on display. As far as dealing with the fear of dropping embarrassing items on the sidewalk below, I took extra care in hanging out lingerie using two hands and two pins to make sure that nothing dropped below.

Later I relaxed about the laundry problems and stopped worrying so much about offending people in the neighborhood. After I was accepted and had made friends, I realized that if I dropped something or dripped water on someone, it was just part of life in Cairo. Like Rachel, I was happy to be independent, and had a taste of participating in material culture in an Egyptian neighborhood. [6] As I was there longer I understood even more of the laundry culture such as hanging clothes out at night. Growing up in the humid South, I was used to women hanging clothes out early in the morning. This seemed to serve at least three purposes: it took full advantage of the day's sun; it kept the evening dew off the clothes, and it smugly announced to the neighbors that you were a diligent, early riser with a strong work ethic. None of these applied in Cairo, and I found

that hanging my colored clothes out at night kept the relentless desert sun from bleaching them out.

The irony did not escape me—here I was working on a Ph.D. and having to learn lessons in some of the most basic areas of life. Learning laundry etiquette was just one of the skills I needed for living in an Egyptian neighborhood. My next lesson would be a harder one on class distinction in Egypt.

Class conflict: a reversal

As an American I am automatically assumed to be in the upper class of the world's population, especially when visiting in a developing nation. This made my class reversal all the more ironic. I became a part of a neighborhood that was not upper class, but I believe that by living there I understood more of Cairo than I ever could have in some of the areas such as Maadi, where many expats live. I didn't begin by living in an Egyptian neighborhood. After staying in a hotel on my first visit, I lived with a family in Shubra on my second visit. They owned two buildings in the neighborhoods of Shubra and el Munira, so I made arrangements with one of the brothers, Rafaat, to rent a small flat from him in El Muniera. My flat was a twenty-minute walk from Tahrir going down Kasr el Aini in the center of Cairo where I was working at the Egyptian Ethnological Museum.

Kasr el Aini runs parallel to the Nile, and the area that is directly beside the Nile, the Corniche al-Nil, is some of the most valuable property in Cairo. Garden City, a neighborhood on the Corniche al-Nil, is a place that Americans often stay, but el Munira on the other side of Kasr el Aini, going away from the Nile though very close geographically, is worlds away in class distinction. It is a completely Egyptian neighborhood as evidenced by walking down the street. Until the residents got used to my being there I had to endure being scrutinized every time I left the flat.

Garden City is mostly Egyptian as well but with the residents being wealthier for the most part. The dividing line between the two areas, Garden City and El Muniera, was my first lesson in class distinction in Egypt. When Dr. Mohamed Safey Abulez, the museum director where I worked, asked me where I was staying, I said it was about a twenty-minute walk from the museum. He immediately said, "Oh, Garden City." When I said, "No, El Muniera," both he and his colleague reacted with raised eyebrows. After I explained my reasons for wanting to live there, they seemed convinced of my reasons for wanting to experience Egyptian daily life from doing laundry, buying groceries and vegetables off the streets, to sitting and visiting with neighbors around me.

I liked my flat, and there I could be independent, get to work easily each day, and be able to host my *Friends* group meetings. After learning to use the underground metro, I was able to shuttle back and forth to visit my friends in other parts of the city as time allowed. Um Amal had the tiny grocery store next door to me. The shop was small enough that it closed with what looked like a garage door pulled down to cover the front. Um Amal and her grown children who helped run the store were very good to me, often translating for me when someone came to my door speaking only Arabic. We visited nearly every day, and I could not have asked for a more caring neighbor. Her store stayed open until 2 a.m. with people sitting around drinking tea or sodas and visiting for hours. Next to Um Amal's was a place that butchered chickens; so the chicken I ate was fresh, maybe a little too fresh from the sound of squawking chickens.[7] On the other side of my flat was a small telephone store owned by Mohammed. This was a place that people came and paid money to use the phone, either a mobile or land phone. These shops were common in Cairo since not everyone had a phone. Mohammed was a former bodyguard, so no one bothered me without answering to him. He was very friendly, and I often went downstairs to sit and visit with him and his customers, spending many pleasant hours together. I knew my neighbors in Cairo better than I knew the people next door to me in the States.

The streets were filled with fruit and vegetable sellers as well as people who cooked and sold bean cakes called *tamaya*,[8] a popular Egyptian food. Men on foot walked the streets several times a day calling out, "*Eish*," which meant bread. The *eish balady*[9] was a delicious pita bread, and I learned to make *baba ganough*, an eggplant dip, and hummus to go with the bread. I could buy a bag from street vendors for about twenty cents. I was determined not to frequent the cluster of American fast food places in Tahrir because the Egyptian foods were so much better compared to the monotony of fast food. One day, though, when I was hosting a *Friends* group and didn't have time to cook, I decided I would call for delivery from *Pizza Hut* nearby since they had delivery motorbikes and could get the pizzas there quickly. When I called to order and gave my address as #20 El Mawardy Street in El Muniera, they told me they did not deliver in El Muniera. I was annoyed because I knew that it was a twenty-minute walk. I later understood that it had nothing to do with distance and everything to do with class and money. People in that neighborhood just did not order delivery pizza.

I experienced my first problem with class snobery after the first week of living in the flat. Alaa, a Palestinian American who I met on the plane on the flight over, called to invite me to tea with him and his father at the

Nile Hilton. I had been in El Muneria and Shubra for only a week and had not expected their reaction when they asked me where I lived. Alaa and his father were well-off financially: Alaa was a professional in Florida and his father a retired teacher who worked in United Arab Emirates as a translator. We ordered our tea, and the men smoked *shisha*, a popular water pipe with flavored tobacco, as we talked. When I told them that I was living in El Muniera their shock was evident, but in case I missed it, they both verbalized their disapproval. They could not understand why an American would choose to live in an Egyptian area. Though I was put off by their snobbery, I explained that I could not hope to understand the women I interviewed without trying as much as possible to understand Egyptian daily life. I explained that I had to buy food from the *souk*[10] and haggle with the vendors to know what Egyptian women went through each day in trying to provide food for their families. I had to experience the street sounds outside my window, and hang laundry off the balcony.

After presenting my reasons for living in El Muniera, Alaa's father eventually came to accept the idea and even to embrace it. He told me that I should write everything down so I would remember every detail. Though his father saw the advantage of my choice, Alaa never did. His disapproval was evident, and I was disappointed at his attitude. Rather than show offense, I joked with him about coming to visit to show him how real Egyptians live. By living in a working class neighborhood, I felt the sting of accepting a place among the lower classes, a reversal for an American in a third world country.

This same sting plagued me as well when I invited some of the women to my flat for the *Friends* group discussion. It seems that I was caught in a double bind since middle class women were hesitant to visit a Westerner's flat, and the educated elite from the American University in Cairo (AUC) were afraid to come to what they considered a lower class neighborhood. Because of this class conflict, I was not able to assemble the mixed-class group that I had envisioned. Though the set back was a disappointment, I was glad to find four young women from AUC who were willing to come to my flat and talk with me about the class conflict.

The four women in my group, Ola, Emie, Kadijah, and Hoda, all came from upper class neighborhoods and told me that in coming to El Muniera they were taking a risk. Emie said that if her father knew where she was, he would drive her there and wait in the street below until she was ready to go.[11] Kadija had a nice car and was afraid someone was going to steal it. I usually walked the girls to their car when we finished each session to be sure that they were safe. After two or three meetings, Emie finally told her

father about the research group, and he allowed her to come, though not without calling often to check on her while she was there.

Even with the opposition that I encountered from different sources, I continued to go back to my flat in El Muniera on subsequent trips because I felt at home there.[12] Besides knowing Mohammed, Um Amal and her family I made friends with another shopkeeper, Hoda, as well as the pharmacist and grocer. I went in many of the stores on my street and tried to interact with as many of the people there as possible, but I was aware of trying not to misrepresent myself as anything but a willing visitor to their neighborhood. I was aware of the danger of pushing too hard to be an insider when I was not.

This problem surfaced as a subject among women in my *Friends* group. In one discussion as we talked about fasting during the month of Ramadan,[13] Emie expressed disapproval of non-Muslim Westerners living in Egypt who fast at that time. Though it seemed like a kind of sympathetic participation to me, I could see that she was offended by Westerners who tried too hard to be part of Egyptian society and saw it as a way of Westerners culturally experimenting with something that was sacred to Muslims. I learned from this example that while participation in the culture would provide me with educational benefits, where issues of heritage and religion are concerned, I had to be sensitive to complex issues concerning Muslims and their perception of Westerners. I did not want to give the impression that I was reducing sacred practices to fodder for an academic study, nor did I want to be thought presumptuous by passing myself off as someone that I wasn't.

I observed class distinction often during my research. I understood that generally the elite do not co-mingle socially with the middle classes who in turn do not socially co-mingle with the lower classes. One seatmate on my first flight to Egypt mistakenly told me that Egypt had only two classes, the upper and lower. Apparently he had missed everything that has happened since the Revolution, or Coup d'Etat of 1952, when Egyptians experienced tremendous change from a British-run government with a puppet king to a representative democracy. Under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the country underwent radical socialist changes that have resulted in a large and varied Egyptian middle class.

My research involved only women from the middle and upper classes because they were better able to communicate their opinions about media with me. This experience of living in El Muniera helped me to understand the difficulties a media researcher faces in trying to cross class lines. I was never able to have a mixed class *Friends* group. While my study involved women from both the elite and middle class simultaneously, I

sensed that they were not comfortable meeting together for discussion. Egyptians do have regular class interaction, but it is usually restricted to business situations rather than social situations. Since my focus group involved social interaction of visiting and eating together afterwards, I sensed a hesitation on the part of some women to mingle with those outside their own social circle.

Gender distinctions

Just as the flat in El Muniera became a lesson in class differences, the metro that I rode to work each day and my work at the museum presented opportunities to observe gender distinction in Egypt. I rode the metro to work because the walk was difficult carrying the equipment that I needed each day at the museum.[14] Taxis were another option, but they often got stuck in traffic jams. With the ticket price at seventy-five piasters,[15] the metro was the best choice, especially since public transportation can be an ethnographic study in itself.

When acquaintances heard that I was riding the metro each day, they were often as disapproving of it as they were of my living in El Muniera. They told me that the metro was transportation for the masses and that "it smelled of fish." Smelling of fish was just a way of saying that common people rode it. That was all the more reason for me to ride it since I wanted to observe common people and interact with them.

Metro cars are separated by gender in the first two cars that are reserved for women. Though I preferred to ride in the women's car, because of limited space it was not always possible. The cars were very crowded, and it was rare to get a seat anywhere. In cars with both men and women, men did not always give up a seat for a woman, though occasionally they did. I had read warnings in guidebooks stating that in crowded cars some men would take advantage of the situation and try to get too close to women. Though I rode the metro hundreds of times, I never had any trouble with this until my fourth trip to Egypt. After one unpleasant incident I went out of my way to get to the women's cars or to wait for a less crowded train. This was a good safety practice as well since I got my arm caught in the door once trying to fit into a crowded car. It was an embarrassing incident, but three men forced the door open to release my arm. In grateful humility I thanked them, and we all had a laugh about it.

My presence as the only Western woman on the car usually drew attention.[16] Though I wanted to blend in with the other women, it was not possible. I saw that most of the women on the metro wore the *hajab*, so I

reasoned that if I wore the *hajab* and Egyptian clothes, I could blend in and draw less attention to myself. I asked my translator, Ahmed, about this. Ahmed was a member of my Egyptian family and gave me straight answers on everything, and he told me this was not the case that I should wear the *hajab***.** He said that if I dressed this way, it would cause even more attention because then people would wonder why this American woman was trying to look Egyptian. After he told me this I did some research and found out that there is a completely different mindset between East and West as to dressing in a foreign country. While Westerners may take a "when in Rome" approach and enjoy dressing in native clothing, Middle Easterners would see that person as someone dressed in a costume and think it odd.

Mamoun Fandy explores this difference in the Western and Middle Eastern attitude about dressing native in a foreign country:

> A Westerner who adopts "native" dress is cross-dressing, that is deliberately wearing the clothing of those he perceives to be less powerful - which marks him as eccentric or "in costume." He is expected after all to wear the dress of his own country even when he travels, because it is the clothing of the more powerful group. In contrast, an Arab in a western country is perceived as normal when he is in western dress and in costume if he wears the clothing of his own country. [17]

I concluded that dressing Egyptian would not only make me look "in costume" but could be interpreted again as being condescending, depending on the situation. However, there were times that I chose to wear a modified head covering,[18] especially if I was with people who felt uncomfortable being seen with a woman whose head was not covered. I had to decide in each situation what was best. I also bought some Egyptian short tunics to wear with pants but was careful not to appear to be in costume.

Most women in Egypt who adhere to Islamic guidelines for dress outside the home wear a head covering that covers not only the top of their head, but wraps under the chin, covering the neck as well. Sleeves need to be long enough to cover the arms, and the legs must be covered to the feet, even in the hottest Cairo summers. Some women take a more extreme version of this dress and cover the hands and face with black fabric. The most extreme version of this has a woman's eyes covered with black sheer fabric that barely allows her to see where she is going. I saw women dressed this way even in the summer. Many women choose to wear the head covering with a tunic, but it is not uncommon to see some Egyptian women dressed in Western style clothing with their hair styled and uncovered. I settled for wearing long skirts or pants with long sleeves. In

hot weather these clothing restrictions, along with the lack of air conditioning most places, cause the majority of people to go about their business early, stay home in the middle of the day, and resume activities late at night. It is not unusual for shops to stay open until well after midnight in traditional neighborhoods. This pattern also affects mealtimes with breakfast typically at 10:00, lunch at 5:00, and supper at 10:00 P.M.

Many Egyptian businesses follow this work schedule, and the Egyptian Ethnological Museum where I worked had a similar pattern. They opened early in the morning but closed at 2:30 each day without re-opening until the following day. Gender questions were not an overtly present issue in the museum, but it was plain to see that few women worked there and that those few who did were in secretarial roles. Dr. Abulez, the museum director and President of the Egyptian Geographical Society, had been a minister in the Egyptian government under Nasser. Dr. Abulez represents the best of Egyptian and European traditions. While he is thoroughly Egyptian in his manners, customs and speech, he is fluent in French and English. Dr. Abulez oversaw my work in the museum and always treated me with the utmost consideration as a scholar. I realize that my status as an outsider affected the way that Egyptians viewed my gender. It was never very clear whether or not to extend my hand when being introduced to a man, but I learned to judge by the situation and take my cue from the individuals that I met.

My confusion over just what was acceptable concerning gender expectations among Muslims was the source of a small gaffe on my part, but a good story for my friends. I was staying for several days with a family who usually greeted each other and their friends in the Egyptian way of three kisses on the cheeks. If they were particularly glad to see someone there were two rounds of kisses on the cheek along with the greeting, "Wahashtini, habibti." [19] Trying to emulate what I thought was the custom, when a close friend of theirs came to Shubera and was introduced to me, I gave him the greeting that I thought was appropriate, a kiss on each cheek. Though he looked surprised I only found out later, as my friends were having a hearty laugh, that this friend was a sort of Muslim cleric and very traditional. He was mildly shocked by my greeting and told one of the brothers later it was the first time something like that had ever happened to him. Though I was mortified by my mistake, I learned to err on the conservative side after that. Still it gave everyone a good laugh and something to tease me about for months to come.

Gender differences whether in the metro, at work, or in social situations are ever-present undercurrents. The coffeehouse two doors

down from my flat was an inviting place to have a cup of tea, or smoke a *shisha* with friends—as long as the friends were all men. Even something as simple as ordering a cup of tea can be complicated by gender lines. While there are some teahouses in which women are welcomed, many of the small coffee shops in Egyptian neighborhoods are still for males only. No signs are necessary—it is visibly obvious. Though I doubt that I would have been asked to leave, I never tested it to see. I rarely experienced any inappropriate treatment as a woman, certainly no more than in any other country to which I have traveled. Still I tried to respect the division of space along gender lines.

Politics in Cairo

Before I left the states for my fist trip to Cairo, some well-meaning friends told me to avoid the subject of politics while I was there. What they meant was to avoid discussing the subjects of Israel and Palestine as well as the presence of the U.S. in Iraq. I assured my friends that my interest was purely cultural, and I would avoid being pulled into any political discussions. I look back now on my naïveté and realize that to go to Egypt and avoid politics is to say that you are going swimming but you are not going to get wet. While the majority of Egyptians are not political activists, most are politically sensitive and like to discuss issues, especially those involving the United States. By the time I had finished my final trip I realized that it was impossible to avoid politics there because all aspects of my life were affected by the political milieu. From bombardment by political images, to heated confrontations, to armed guards on my way to work, to potential wire-tapping, to the make-up of my *Friends* group, I could not ignore the influence of Egyptian politics. It was a program constantly running in the background. Through my work in Cairo I came to understand that culture and politics are always connected, not just in Egypt but everywhere.

After I finished my first day on the job at the museum, I took the metro to Shubra to visit my friends. As we were visiting, two of the women told me that I should not go to my job the next day because it was not safe. They explained that there was a "polling,"[20] and said that I might be shot. This was news to me, but with my work ethic I was not about to call in the second day of a job and pretend to be sick. I was not sure what all the problems were about, but I was sure that I was going to work regardless of the political unrest. My two well-meaning friends both stayed home from work the next day as I went to my job. I later found that the situation involved a referendum on May 25, 2005 that President Mubarak proposed