

How post 18th century Egypt's display of heritage creates links to a pharaonic identity

Throughout its lifetime, the geographical location of 'Egypt' has been home to many different cultures and civilisations. It is most recognisable as being the location of Ancient Egypt- a 3000 year long history full of pharaohs, tombs and riches. This culture was seen as one of the most influential throughout the ancient world, as many of its ideas and artistic styles can be found across the Mediterranean. However, this civilisation eventually collapsed following the Roman invasion around 31 BC under Octavian. Between this collapse and the present day, Egypt has gone through various phases and governing changes. 'Medieval Egypt' spanned from the mid 7th century until the 16th century BC, where Egypt fell under the Ottoman rule until the late 19th century. This Ottoman rule began the period of which many scholars call 'Early Modern Egypt'. During this period also came what is known as the 'Muhammad 'Alī Dynasty', which will be discussed later on. Egypt also became a part of the British Empire between the 19th and 20th centuries. Although the 'Kingdom of Egypt' began in 1922, it was still very apparent that Egypt was still under rule of the British forces during this time. This ended in the early 1950s, where the modern-day 'Republic of Egypt' was finally formed. This marked the first time since the civilisation of Ancient Egypt that the country was ruled solely by Egyptians. This fact alone already provides the foundations for modern day Egyptians to relate back to an Ancient Egyptian identity, reflecting in the actions, practices and decisions they make today. Due to this, it is quite apparent that modern Egypt would want to associate themselves with Ancient Egypt- which I will refer to as 'Pharaonic Egypt' for the remainder of this paper- in many ways. This is due to the fact that Pharaonic Egypt was seen as a powerhouse, and had a rich heritage and history throughout. The association between the two cultures could have a political approach, in hopes of portraying modern Egypt as a similar powerhouse. However, this association can simply be modern-day Egyptians being proud of their heritage, as they could finally express their nationalism in an independent country. These displays of heritage will be discussed in this paper.

As I previously mentioned, the Republic of Egypt was the first time in which Egypt was independent, and therefore they would want to link themselves with Pharaonic Egypt in various ways. However, it is apparent to scholars that there was an urge to associate themselves with their rich history before they became an independent state. For example, during the reign of Muhammad 'Alī, there were plans to export an obelisk to Europe. Obelisks were prominent throughout Pharaonic Egypt, as they were found towards the entrance of temples, usually in pairs. The fact that Muhammad 'Alī was in support of sending obelisks to Europe shows how there was little care for Egyptian heritage. However, he faced much backlash during these plans and, in 1836, he agreed to "forbid the exportation of antiquities" and even opened the Cairo museum (Wood, 1998), which houses a vast majority of Pharaonic Egyptian artefacts. Although these plans took a while to be in full effect, the foundations of these plans show that there was a

clear nationalist pride in Egypt, even prior to their independence. In the same journal entry, Michael Wood discusses how many historical works on Pharaonic history proceeded to be written throughout the turnover between the 19th and 20th centuries. These include guidebooks on artefacts and monuments from the Pharaonic age, as well as information regarding hieroglyphics and a general history of Ancient Egypt. What is unique about these guidebooks is that they were mostly written in arabic- the language used in Egypt during the time. This would suggest that these books were made to be read by Egyptian nationalists, rather than educating people from other countries- such as the British empire. Following on from this, the purpose of these books would be to familiarise Egyptians with their own heritage by visiting both museums and physical archaeological sites- such as contemporary temples and cities- rather than “leaving such activities to European tourists” (Wood, 1998). It is also worth noting how scholarly articles written by Egyptian nationalists became more prominent following the discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamun, excavated by Howard Carter in 1922. Egyptologists such as Ahmad Kamal began publishing works on the pharaonic history of Egypt that had been lost for thousands of years. The reason that this particular piece of history was lost for so long is due to the fact that, throughout Egypt, there was no mention of Tutankhamun as a pharaoh. This is due to problems caused by his father during his reign, which led to their lineal heritage being erased from Egyptian history. Therefore, the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb surprised most people at the time, as it seemed to rewrite parts of Egyptian history that were thought to have been complete. One sentence that Michael Wood used in this journal entry is the fact that “Pharaonism identified Egypt as a distinctive territorial entity with its own history and character separate from that of the rest of the Arab and Islamic world”. During a time in which Egypt was heavily influenced by the rest of the Islamic world, having an outlook through which they could both see themselves and be seen as individuals would help them ‘stand out from the pack’ and have their own heritage to associate with. Many native Egyptians agreed with this. Mustafa Kamil spoke of Egypt as “the world’s first great civilized state” (Wood, 1998), while Ahmad Lufti al-Sayyid’s work showed a clear interest towards a “Pharaonic Core” of society that had survived into modern times (Wood, 1998).

However, it is clear that Egyptian scholars were not the only people who sought after association with the Pharaonic World. It is apparent that the Pharaonic influence can be seen through artistic interpretations also. For example, Tawiq al-Hakim’s novel ‘The Return of the Spirit’ portrays themes of the ‘nationalist spirit’ returning to an Egyptian, as well as pointing out the “heritage-stripping power of Western colonialism” (Penguin Publications, 2021). It is also worth noting how many artists during this time began incorporating Pharaonic stylistic techniques. Statues constructed by Mahmud Mukhtar are clear examples of this, mixing modern and pharaonic motifs together (Wood, 1998). It is also very apparent that Saad Zaghlul, known for being one of Egypt’s “greatest nationalist leaders” (Wood, 1998) was buried in a somewhat Pharaonic mausoleum made of granite. All of these examples combined show a clear urge for

modern Egyptians to associate themselves with their Pharaonic counterparts in clear and direct ways.

It is also worth noting how, just prior to the British invasion of Egypt, Pharaonic Egypt was featured prominently in the curriculum of secondary schools in Egypt (Wood, 1998). However, Salama Musa- an Egyptian writer during the period under British rule- mentions how this inclusion in the curriculum changed following the British conquest. Musa mentions how the curriculum in schools during the period under British control avoided the teachings of Pharaonic Egypt, in fears that the information given to the students had potential to “stimulate local national pride”, as well as a “desire for independence” (Wood, 1998). Again, this is another clear example of how the invaders of Egypt dedicated and suppressed the people of Egypt, denying them the nationalist pride and heritage that many Egyptians sought after.

Overall, I feel that the various examples given above perfectly encapsulate the desire for a feeling of ‘belonging’ that many native Egyptians had during the periods of which they were under foreign rule. It is clear that the people of Egypt were fully aware of how rich their heritage actually was, and there was a clear aspiration to associate with this heritage. However, during the periods of which they were under foreign control- most prominently during their time within the British Empire- it is clear that their heritage was suppressed and was not promoted anywhere near as much as it should have been. This can be seen clearly from the mid-20th century onwards, where Egypt was indeed it’s own republic and therefore had control over how the country was governed. The surge in popularity of the Egyptian natives towards their heritage that followed the separation from the British empire clearly shows this. It is also clear that the modern-day approach to Pharaonic heritage is still prominent and encouraged, with mentions and celebratory events associated with the Pharaonic period still being carried out to this day.

Will be expanded on and more content will be added before conclusion, which includes post-imperialist and modern-day approaches to Pharaonic heritage. Reference list will also be added prior to submission