Introduction

This report presents the final results of the research study entitled “Transformations of Marginality: Crafts and Craftspeople in Upper Egypt”, one of two components of the Ford Foundation-funded project entitled: “Rural Responses to Globalisation in Egypt”. The mother project builds on previous research projects dealing with different aspects of rural transformation in Egypt (wholly or partly funded by the Ford Foundation). The previous projects were:

1. Social and Economic Impacts of New Egyptian Land Reform Legislation on the Rural Economy. (Ford Foundation)

The above studies mainly focused on the interplay between state policies and local actors. They also documented the (mostly adverse) impact of the Economic Liberalisation and Structural Adjustment Policies (ERSAP) on rural Egyptian society. The present project shifts the conceptual focus to study rural
dwellers in contemporary Egypt within the context of a globalising world, and it focusing on both farmers and non-farmers.

This study on “Transformations of Marginality: Crafts and Craftspeople in Upper Egypt” focuses on the ways in which the poor and the underprivileged sectors are affected by economic, political and socio-cultural forces of global integration, and how encroaching markets impact traditional production and consumption styles. The project builds on the previous studies in two ways. First, it makes use of data gathered but not utilised during the course of fieldwork for other studies. Second, a number of questions emerged during work on previous studies. These questions were tangential to the research focus of these studies, yet they raised important issues relating to the processes of social transformation in rural Egypt. The idea of the present project emerged in response to these questions. Specifically, my work on the consequences of the tenancy law and the mass evictions of a very large number of previous tenants highlighted the both the issue of marginality and of landlessness; focusing on the group that lost land led me to think of those who, traditionally owned no land and were never farmers and to raise questions about the non-agriculturalists in rural society. My work on the assumptions of homogeneity that accompany the use of the term ‘local community’ directed my attention to the various forms of heterogeneity and marginality that exist in rural Upper Egypt, and to think about those who are at either at the bottom of the ladder or who do not fit at all within a society governed by a tribal social organization and ideology. Finally and most significantly, the interest in crafts bears a direct link to my work on trade and
exchange, which made me aware of the widespread manufacture, circulation and use of locally produced “traditional” products and implements. This led me to problematise the persistence of the production and consumption of “traditional” tools and highlighted the importance of looking at the producers of these items, who are almost exclusively members of low-status tribes. Towards the end of the project “Rural Transformation in Upper Egypt: formal and informal structures and institutions”, which involved a research collaboration with two Danish Institutions, an agreement was made with the Moesgaard Museum for Ethnography and Prehistory (Aarhus) to use the research findings of the project to set up an ethnographic exhibition on Upper Egypt.  

The exhibition, which was entitled: “The Nile: Jewel of Egypt”, opened in April 2003 and lasted until April 2004. I was in charge of the exhibition section on crafts, including the collection of various objects from different regions of Southern Upper Egypt. This experience was a direct influence on my interest in crafts and material culture in general, being an important area that remains understudied in Egypt.  

The research problem

This research takes its theoretical cue from Timothy Mitchell’s argument in relation to the unexpected impact of the program of free-market reforms on Egyptian agriculture. He argues that these reforms resulted in farmers:

“…moving not toward the market but toward increased self-provisioning and

1. The two Danish Institutions were the then Centre for Development Research (Copenhagen) and the Department of Anthropology at Aarhus University.

2. This study also owes a lot to Asta Olesen’s superb book Afghan Craftsmen (1994).
protection from the market”. (1998: 23). Whereas Mitchell’s analysis focuses on agriculture, the present study focuses on another aspect of rural society which is the production and consumption of traditional crafts and locally produced tools and implements. There is evidence for the persistence rather than disappearance of crafts produced by local potters, blacksmiths, weavers, sieve makers…etc. This runs contrary to ubiquitous allegations that globalisation is leading to a situation of cultural uniformity and standardisation.³

By focussing on traditional crafts and their producers, this research investigates the following issues:

1. The link between globalisation and cultural uniformisation: To what extent is the alleged standardisation of styles of consumption (often synonymous with globalisation) applicable to Upper Egyptian rural society?

2. Link between globalisation and poverty: why are low status tribes and the villagers they live amongst sticking to their traditional trades and implements despite the significant changes in rural society? What are the significant shifts in this area? What other transformations are taking place regarding these professionals and their professions in the era of globalisation?

3. The ways in which economic and cultural transformations at a global scale are played out at the level of the village and of the

³ In her work on Cairo potters, Kristin Koptiuch argues for the need to problematise the persistence of traditional crafts. (1999:61-73).
household. As these are mainly family “firms”, the research looks at gender and generational aspects of the division of labour in production processes. The research will also focus on the attitude of the new generation towards their families’ professions, and will investigate whether there are generational tensions accompanying the opportunities and constraints of the new global setting.

4. What are the manifestations and the implications of the growing elite taste for “the traditional”, and the very recent state appropriation of traditional crafts through designating them as “national heritage”.

Methodology

This study used qualitative techniques of data collection. It relied mainly on the classical anthropological method of participant observation, in addition to in-depth interviews. Fieldwork was mainly conducted at various locations in villages in the governorates of Qena and Aswan. The starting point of the fieldwork was the village of Manara (pseudonym) in the Edfu area of Aswan Governorate, where I have worked during previous studies and where I have an established rapport and an extensive network of friends. I visited several weekly markets in the region where I got to meet several craftspeople selling their produce. Displays in the weekly markets also offer a good opportunity to get a general feel of the consumption patterns. I have also observed aspects of crafts production in Fayoum, especially regarding pottery and basketry. I have paid
several visit to two Isna villages with high concentration of blacksmiths, and to a hamlet near Edfu with newly settled craftspeople and other marginal groups. A significant aspect of the link between globalisation and traditional crafts relates to their valuation as art by urban and cosmopolitan elites, I conducted a series of interviews with crafts producers, development practitioners and entrepreneurs targeting elite consumption and have visited a number of projects for that purpose.

In addition, I have used material gathered during previous phases, and during work on the exhibition. My familiarity with the region of rural Qena and Aswan goes back to 1997, which offered me an opportunity to gauge social and cultural change to some extent.

**Plan of the report**

The following section gives a general description of the Upper Egyptian village in the regions in which I have worked, with a special emphasis on the tribal social organisation. I shall also describe the groups with whom I worked and their status within the tribal framework. This will be followed by a description of the crafts and their producers, as well as a brief explanation of the work process. This will be followed by a discussion of the impact of globalisation on crafts and craftspeople. In this I shall attempt an explanation for the persistence of the crafts, and present aspects of transformation and the alternative paths craftspeople take. The following section will deal with the issue of the elite demand for traditional crafts and their valuation as art. Lastly, I shall present
some of the state-sponsored projects that have mushroomed lately in connection with the ‘promotion’ of traditional crafts to the status of national heritage.

**Tribalism, craftspeople and marginality**

Tribalism is a distinctive feature of Upper Egyptian society, especially in the three southernmost governorates (Sohag, Qena and Aswan). The extent of the significance of this institution is little known outside this area, and not taken account of except at the time of national elections, especially when tribal-related violent incidents take place. Tribalism remains the central organising principle in Southern Upper Egypt, despite the wide variation in the ways tribalism is conceived of and practiced. As an institution, the tribe performs vital social functions and is often an important determinant of marriage and residence patterns, as well as mediation and reconciliation. Tribal hierarchy is a powerful determinant of status. The fact that the latter is primarily determined through ascription (as opposed to achievement) has significant implications for constraints and opportunities of social mobility.

There is an important link between the tribal structure and crafts production, which is mainly evident in the fact that with certain groups of specialised crafts producers the profession is synonymous with the tribal affiliations. This is the case with potters, sievemakers and blacksmiths (*fakharaniyya; gharabliyya* and *haddadin* respectively). Although these social groups cannot be considered as "ethnic groups" in a strict sense, their place and position in the social structure of the Upper Egyptian village stresses the fact of
their difference vis-a-vis a relatively homogeneous majority. Members of each of these groups live next to each other in different parts of the village, which are sometimes referred to by the names of the respective groups as in the case of Manara village (Aswan). The most obvious sign of their different position vis-a-vis the majority is that there is no intermarriage between any of these groups and the rest of the village. They are partially integrated in the village mainly through sharing in social obligations such as condolences, wedding attendance, and pilgrimage ceremonies, but they also tend to identify with larger structures that exist outside their villages of residence.

Apart from the potters, the blacksmiths, and the sieve makers, Copts can be included in this category, albeit with some reservations. First of all they do not consider themselves, nor are they considered a tribe, although they are incorporated in the village tribal social structure through affiliation with one of the major tribes. Second, they do not have a clear professional specialisation, although in general many weavers (and in certain cases carpenters) happen to be Copts. Another important low-status tribe is the Beni-Hilal. These are not associated with a particular craft. They work in some of the palm-tree products like rope-making and basketry but this is not exclusive to them. There is a large overlap between craftspeople and marginality but they are not synonymous. Beni Hilal and the Hiwan (snake charmers) are low-status marginal groups who are not craftspeople.

Despite their marginality, craftspeople are an integral and integrated part of the village. Since they do not own land (in general), and they have no other
means of survival except their profession, they continue to produce what they know best how to do. The significance of crafts and craftsmen is not in their numbers. In a typical village, there may be one extended family of each specialisation. They are important, however, mainly because of their link to social organisation, and because they are responsible for key features of the village economy and society.

There is a significant point here regarding non-agricultural work in the village context. Where it concerns crafts, it is important to note that a lot of the items manufactured by village carpenters and blacksmiths are directly related to agricultural work. Apart from the regular agricultural tools such as the axe and the sickle, there are tools used specifically in sugar cane cultivation. These include the *masug* used for sowing cane, various cutting tools used for the cane harvest and the wooden ladders used for loading the train carriages with the harvested cane. This demand not only helps sustain the craftspeople and their crafts but also underlines the economic interdependence and intensity of economic interaction within the village. This point has conceptual significance. It is true that the village is not a closed, self-sufficient economic unit. However, too much emphasis placed on the fact that the village is part of a wider economy has tended to obscure significant aspects of internal village dynamics, and the mechanics of articulation with that wider system.

These landless, endogamous groups with hereditary professional specialisation are closely reminiscent of the Indian caste system. Asta Olesen

---

4 I am here not addressing a very important type of non-agriculture work, which is white collar jobs associated with a rising rural middle class.
raises the question of whether ranking among professions and social groups in Muslim society (in her case Afghanistan) can be compared to the caste system of Hinduism. She sees that this only applies at the lowest level of occupations where “endogamous groups carrying out inherited crafts are associated with notions of uncleanliness”, but she argues that this inferiority is linked to the profession not the person because “For Muslim Afghans everybody is born equal before God, and this is not true of the Hindu caste system” (1994: 47-48). Upper Egyptian villagers are equally Muslim, yet the dominant sentiment is clearly contemptuous of the blacksmiths and other groups whose ‘origins’ are considered dubious. Apart from the caste system, the symbiosis that traditionally characterised landless craftspeople and farmers is intriguingly similar to another Indian institution, the Jajmani system, whereby craftspeople receive a portion of the harvest in return for year round services. The Jajmani equivalent in the case of Egypt is the Khuna whereby potters, carpenters, blacksmiths, gravediggers and barbers received a portion of the harvest (mainly wheat, maize, barley and beans) in return for year round services. Many people talk of this practice as obsolete, but this is not correct. It is true that there are a number of aspects of rural change that curtailed it to a great extent. For example, the main service for which the carpenter received the khuna was fixing and providing maintenance service for the then wooden water wheal. Now that waterwheels are largely

---

5 Asta Olesen describes a very similar system in Afghanistan. In this case she explains that artisans whose work is directly related to agriculture such as carpenters and blacksmiths are paid in kind a portion of the harvest at harvest time. They are paid in cash if they provide a service not related to agriculture. Barbers are also paid in kind. (1994: 65) In his authoritative book on material culture in an Upper Egyptian village, Nessim Henein mentions that the village potter was paid the content of the pot in wheat (1988: 33). He mentions the same for the barber who shaves the men once in a week in exchange of half a keila of the harvest of wheat and maize. (1988: 208) Winifred Blackman reports the same, but adds that if the barber offers the service to clients outside the village he gets paid in cash (2000: 174)
replaced by pumps, or when they exist are made of iron made this service redundant. More importantly perhaps is the spread of sugar cane cultivation, a cash crop par-excellence, at the expense of other staple crops. Sugar cane is unsuitable as a khuna payment not only because it is a cash crop but because its only marketing outlet is the state-owned factory which contracts the farmer long before the crop harvest. Interestingly, however, when the government cleared large areas of land of sugar cane in the 90s to allegedly prevent Islamist violent attackers from hiding in the cane, farmers reverted to planting staple crops, and *Khuna* reappeared in those places. In areas where there is no sugar cane in some parts of the Isna regions, blacksmiths families still receive khuna from farmer families.

**Crafts and Craftspeople: people and their profession**

In this study I have focused mainly on potters, blacksmiths, sievemakers and weavers. The following is a brief description of these groups and their crafts.

**Potters**

Pottery is one of the most important crafts in the region, and one which has been continuously practiced for millennia. Pottery production is a specialized hereditary profession, which is passed along generations of the tribal group “the potters” (*el-fakharaniyya*). Members of the potters’ tribe, who claim a unified descent, are dispersed all over the region of Southern Upper Egypt. They share the characteristics of the specialised craftspeople described above in terms of
endogamy, hereditary profession and receiving *Khuna*. Yet, unlike the blacksmiths they do not carry the stigma of a “lowly origin”, as they are supposed to be Ashraaf (descendents of the Prophet).

Within the pottery profession, there is further specialization concerning the items produced, whereby potters of a certain village would specialize in producing only one or two items. Apart from the production process, potters are also traders who circulate the region with their produce, thus contributing to its integration at the level of culture and economy.⁶

The region boasts a wide variety of pottery products that are mainly used for various household needs. Until recently, most cooking pots, water containers and food storage pots were made of pottery. However, modern substitutes made of plastic and aluminum have come to replace a large number of the clay pots. Despite this clear shift, clay pots remain in great demand as will be explained in the next section.

Potters of Manara specialise in making one type of clay pots, namely *azyar* (sing. *zir*), which are large pots used for storing, filtering and cooling drinking water. They are an extended family of about 50 members who live together in one household and breed cattle, in addition to their main profession. Using an inherited technique, mud is treated and mixed with ashes then moulded into the desired shape. These are then burnt in the kiln. The burning takes place once a month on average. They have a big open courtyard in front of the house in which they perform the different stages of this process. The courtyard is also where the animals are kept. They own a donkey, a cow and a water-buffalo.

---

They do not own land, and obtain fodder for the animals through picking weeds that grow in the sugar cane fields. The process of weed-picking is mostly performed by women and children, and is welcomed by sugar cane growers as it rids them of the harmful weeds. Potters of Manara are integrated into one of the tribes of the village (Bayt Yahia). This mainly means that they participate in the condolences obligations by sending a tray of food when someone dies. This also means that when one of their family dies, the tribe to which they are integrated does the same to them. The have many relatives in Edfu city, so even if the deceased is someone who lives in Edfu, the Bayt Yehia tribe sends a “duty” gift of tea and sugar.

Members of the Fakhriyya family complain a lot about their profession because it is tiring and not lucrative, as the demand is erratic and not guaranteed. Besides, they complain especially that their work harms the eyes.

The finished pots are sold inside and outside the village. Within the village, "customers" come to buy the azyar directly. The rest of the products are either sold in the market in Edfu, or is loaded on a donkey and sold by one of the family members to nearby villages. This latter mode of marketing is an important feature of trading circuits in the region. The manufacturing and trade of clay pots is specialised and region-specific. Thus, while the potters of Manara make only azyar, other potters in various parts of Qena and Aswan manufacture and sell other types of pots used for various purposes. These, in turn market them in the same way, vis. either in weekly markets or go around villages with their various products. This pattern points to significant aspects of the culture and economy of
this region. First, the continuing use of clay pots for various consumption activities side by side with the more modern utensils made of plastic or aluminium points to the persistence of certain traditional patterns of consumption, which in their turn provide a continuing support for a number of traditional professions. Second, the circuits of trade generated to market the different types of clay pots manufactured in Manara and the other parts of the region underlines the importance of trade in integrating the region both culturally and economically.

**Blacksmiths**

This is the group with which I worked most extensively. I observed them and interviewed them in weekly village markets and visited and interviewed one family that lives in a village near Luxor. The bulk of the fieldwork with blacksmiths was carried out in two Isna villages that have a high concentration of Blacksmiths. In one village (Deir) there are 14 households, and in another (Ezbet Ezbet Khalil) 35 households. The high concentration in the latter village shall be dealt with further in the section below on Mobility and Marginality.

Blacksmiths are among the lowest ranking groups in Upper Egyptian rural society. The tribal hierarchy places them near the very bottom of the ladder. In the village near Luxor with only one blacksmith family, they are treated with unhidden contempt and interaction between them and the rest of the village is very limited. Apart from their origins being regarded as dubious, belly dancers in the past came from this group. In the Isna villages with a large concentration of
blacksmiths they were much more at ease talking about themselves as a group and freely discussing issues of tribe and origin.

Given the tribal ideology which determines status, it is the issue of origin that carries the greatest weight. Others view them as without origin (*malhumsh asl*), a most devastating label that carries with it an eternal stigma. The blacksmiths version of their origin combines elements relating to their profession with attempts to find themselves a decent place within the tribal hierarchy. Their “myth of origin”, according to them is that blacksmithing is a “profession of a prophet” (*sane’t nabi*). The prophet here is *David*. According to Abu Hussein: “Sayidna Daoud (prophet David) was the grandfather of all blacksmiths. We inherited this profession from him through our great grandfathers. He could catch the hot iron with his bare hands and work it without using any other instrument. Now we use (*kallabat*- tweezers). This is a blessed profession”. Another woman blacksmith (Hassaniyya) told me: “Sayidna Daoud used to put the make the swords and daggers they used in fighting in the old days. After that our grandfathers made the tools for agriculture, the axe, plough and sickle.” The story of their origin and descent does not end there, as they also claim descent from El-Zir Salem, a pre Islamic hero and poet. They believe that their grandfathers came from the Syrian city of Aleppo (Halab), an affiliation that accords with the mostly derogatory name by which they are called: halaba. In combination with these two disparate strands, blacksmiths have been trying to

---

7 Interestingly, Asta Olesen mentions that a group of sievemakers in Afghanistan believe that the metal tools used for making sieves were made by Dawud (Prophet David). (1994: 211).

8 The blacksmithing skills of prophet David and his making of coats of mail is mentioned in the Holy Qur’an.
link themselves in descent to one of the more prominent tribal groups. This attempt was championed by a famous Edfu gynaecologist from the blacksmith family. This is a very rare case of success and upward mobility among this group.

A few years ago, this doctor sponsored a huge celebration in Edfu for their tribe, allegedly the Jaafra. This was met with great resistance to the extent that the director of the Edfu police interfered and obstructed the celebration. The compromise was to agree to holding the celebration on the day of the Prophet’s birthday in order to prevent the blacksmiths from making a claim of belonging to the Jaafra.

Of course the blacksmiths version of their origin is vehemently contested. The following quote of a woman from the Edfu area may give a flavour of this strong anti-blacksmith sentiment:

Zir Salem was a very big Sheikh. He hated the blacksmiths and chased them away. He did not want them to settle nor have any position. They used to put their tents, pillows and clothes on the donkey backs and roam the villages. Each time Zir Salem found out they were going to settle, he would drive them away. If they settled they would be united and strong and would create disturbance. It is only after Zir Salem died that settled and got stronger. Before that they were travellers. Their settlement is a sign of the end of the world. Yes, it is said that the world would come to an end lamma el-ru’yan ye’lu fil bunyan (when nomads erect buildings).

Reem: But I heard they were descendents of Zir Salem
Um Ahmed: They are liars. They even claim to be Jaafra. We the ‘Urubiyiiin (of decent tribal descent) are free; we don’t take from them (referring to marriage). There was a (female) schoolteacher who was Urubiyya like us. She married a blacksmith headmaster of an Azharite school against the wish of her parents. They considered her dead and received condolences.
The blacksmiths have been (and partly still are) itinerant. The “nomads” in the above quotation refers to a number of itinerant groups which many villagers regard as undifferentiated. These include the haddadin, the masalib and the nawar.

Like other crafts, blacksmiths work from their homes, with participation of various family members. The central instrument of the blacksmith is the kur (bellows), which has traditionally been made of a goat’s inside. This is then treated with garad and shabba (acacia seeds and alum). Some blacksmiths can make it themselves but it is usually the leather specialist who does (el-galadani). Then the carpenter fixes it with the wooden edges and the “mouth” made of a circle of wood. This is mainly used as an air pump to rekindle a coal fire, usually in the middle of the entrance to the house, or in the courtyard. The iron is then placed in the coal fire until it is red hot, then it is taken out by a special instrument (kallabat) and hammered with a heavy hammer (mirzaba) into the desired shape. In recent years, the goat skin Kur has been replaced by an electric pump. The older form, however, is still much in use by people who do not have electricity, as a backup in case of power failure, or is used when the blacksmith is travelling to work in another area. Blacksmiths recycle iron which they procure from scrap dealers. They mainly use iron rods previously used in construction as well as old car parts.

There is a division of labour whereby there is the sanayii (craftsman) and elli beyduk (the hammerer). The former is the more skilled, while the latter is a helper. The latter can either be hired for a daily wage or is a partner taking a
percentage of the profit, usually one third. He could also be a household member (e.g. son, brother or nephew) whereby the revenue goes to the common poor of household resources.

**Weavers**

There is a strong tradition of weaving in Upper Egypt but one that has been subject to major changes in the past years. While this craft may have declined due to industrial competition, it is still widely practiced in many places. The skill is passed along generations, and so are the looms. As is the case of the pottery, there is a degree of regional specialization in the items produced. The specialization mainly concerns clothing items.

One important item of woven material that is produced across the region is the birdaya (also called birda or burda) made of sheep wool. The weaving of the traditional birdaya is to a large extent dependent on the common practice of wool spinning by women, who then give the spun sheep wool to the weavers. There has been a sharp decline in the production of this item due to industrial competition. This competition takes two forms: the availability of cheaper industrially produced blankets, and the rise of carpet factories to which raw wool is sold. This latter factor may have had the stronger impact on the dwindling production. Given the Upper Egyptian aversion to waste, wool spinning by women was the main way of making use of the sheep wool. The fact that there is now an outlet for marketing this wool to the carpet factories led to a decline in the practice of wool spinning.
Weavers are mostly, but not exclusively, Copts. Christians are, of course, not a tribe, but in a place dominated by the tribal principle they can be likened to one. In Manara, as in other villages, they tend to cluster together in a certain part of the village. They are attached to one of the major tribes and share in tribal obligations like other regular members.

There used to be a large number of Coptic weavers in Manara but now there are only two looms left, giving the impression of a sharp decline in the craft. This, however, is only partly true, as many of the Christian weavers have moved to the hamlet of Ezbet Salem⁹ near Edfu where cheap land was available. It is interesting to note that even after moving out they still provide services to people in Manara. An elderly woman from Manara told me that whenever she has spun enough wool, she gives it to their relatives and they take it, weigh it and send it to them in Ezbet Salem and bring back the birdaya when it is ready. She told me that most people in the village know how to spin and this is usually what they do with the wool: commission the making of birdayas.

The demand for the birdaya has certainly declined due to competition of cheap industrial substitutes, but it is still far from the danger of extinction. Apart from actually providing a lot more warmth than other types of blanket, the birdaya in some regions possesses a significance that cannot be matched by its modern equivalent, and which makes it imperative for each household to have at least

---

⁹ Pseudonym.
one birdaya. It is vital in death-related ritual, an issue that will be dealt with in a later section.  

But the practice of weaving has undergone significant changes. I went to Ezbet Salem to visit the relocated weavers. There are 4 families of Christian weavers who moved there. They work birdayas only occasionally. They now mostly weave rag carpets which they call (firash sin. farsha lit. spread). These are used to cover the wooden benches, car seats or are used as floor carpets.

According to an elderly weaver, Nassim, he inherited from his father not only the profession of weaving but also the clients the father had in a particular village in the Edfu region. Nassim goes around the village to collect the prepared balls of shredded cloth from the women in the village. The women take the old clothes and cut them in long strips, saw the ends together and wind them into a large ball. He writes the names of each customer on the ball and take the stuff home to weave it. At home, his wife helps him by taking the big balls and taking each line with the same colour and winds it around a piece of wood, which he uses as a ‘shuttle’. After he finishes weaving he goes back to the village and distributes the finished product. In this, he compares himself to a postman.

Nassim mentioned that there are many weavers in Kilh who have turned to trade. They go around villages selling rag carpets and blankets. They sell on credit to people who were their clients when they were practicing weaving. It should be noted that craftspeople are at the same time trades people. One way of coping/adapting to the dwindling demand for the traditional product of the

---

10 This observation comes from the village of Manara. I found that in other places a factory produced blanket can be used instead.
weaver is, apart from diversifying products, turning to trade, and banking on the networks of clients that he had before.

**Sievemakers**

Sievemakers are also a group united by their professional specialisation and by kinship ties. I have worked with three sievemaker families. The first is the only sievemaker family in the village of Manara (Ismail), the second is the family of Abdelwahab¹¹ in the town of Qus (Qena Governorate), and the third is Ghazi¹² also from Qus but not does not come form a sievemakers family. In the village context, sievemakers are considered marginal not just because of their landlessness but because they are considered and primarily defined as outsiders. Their main point of social reference is not the village but their kinship/professional network spread over a large area in Southern Upper Egypt. Like the blacksmiths, they are largely endogamous with a hereditary profession. They occupy an inferior status but are not as stigmatised as the blacksmiths. Sievemakers as a social group have a claim over the profession and consider genuine sievemaking as synonymous with their descent group. However, the secrets of the profession are not guarded and they do accommodate apprentices who later become sievemakers in their own right. But an essential distinction remains between the sievemakers who are gharabliyya descendents and those who are not. This is illustrated in the very strong word that the wife of Abdlewahab uses to describe Ghazi: “Ghazi is a bastard sievemaker (gharabli

¹¹ Pseudonym.
¹² Pseudonym.
lagit). His father and grandfathers were not sievemakers but he learned the profession from one of our relatives.”

Case 1 – Ismail from Manara

Ismail comes originally from Isna and his wife from a village near Qus (both in Qena Governorate), and they are relatives. Ismail says that all the gharabliya (sievemakers) are related through women; that a gharabli always likes to marry into a gharabli family, so it is the women who unite them. It is not very clear how they came and settled in Manara, and the fact that they are outsiders is how they describe themselves and are described. Ismail has two sons and a daughter. One son is blind and the other works with his father. The wife and the daughter help in various stages of the work. This is a craft in which women are substantially involved.

Apart from the various types of sieves (see below), the sievemaker also makes drums and tambourines (tar) both made out of goat’s skin. He procures the latter either from the market, from butchers or through the women of the village. The skin is usually bartered in exchange for a new sieve.

As with the other crafts, this one is also a trade. Ismail and his son go around the villages in the Edfu and Isna areas. They do not peddle in Manara, as people in the village know where they are and come to them if they need their services. In the past they used to use a donkey for going around the villages but now they find they it more efficient to combine the use of cars with walking. They procure the raw material from Kom Ombo, Luxor or Isna. These places are
further afield than their regular marketing network. On such trips they usually combine selling, buying and visiting relatives. The tools they use are scissors for cutting the skin and cloth, various types of needles and a pincer. The tools are usually brought from Girga (Sohag Governorate), which boasts the most skillful blacksmiths in the region.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Case 2 Abdelwahab from Qus}

This family of sievemakers in Qena governorates are relatives of those in the village of Manara (Edfu-Aswan). In contrast to the family of Ismail, the options and resources here are more diversified. Abdelwahab, who defines himself primarily as a sievemaker from the sievemakers’ family (\textit{Gharabliyya}), also worked as a driver in the Sugar Mill. He has seven children who are all working, except for the youngest girl who helps her mother at home. He has a son who runs a shop for computer games, a daughter working in the Principal Bank for Agriculture and Development, a son who took out a loan and opened a photocopying shop, and a son who works in the pulp factory. His eldest daughter, Iman, has worked as an literacy instructor and now she opened a day-care in the village near Garagos in which she lives with her husband the schoolteacher.

Abdelwahab has transmitted the profession he inherited from his father to his own children. He and his wife are grateful to the profession, and credit it with bringing up the children and educating them properly. Here, however, we find the generational tension that typically characterises craftspeople families which manifests itself in the children’s reluctance to carry on with the profession,

\textsuperscript{13} See footnote 7.
preferring instead to explore other career venues. My field assistant Mahmoud Abdelaziz alerted me to a plausible interpretation that members of the new generation are not rebelling against the profession but against their fathers who want to keep them under their control; they find that the only way to escape this domination is by seeking another profession, preferably elsewhere.

In fact, the successful-looking picture that I encountered on my first visit of the educated children with decent-sounding jobs looked bleaker a year later: the computer game shop was closed as the owner wanted to raise the rent and the sugar mill appointment was only seasonal. With two sons practically unemployed it appeared that these will, before long, be working with their father. It often proves that the craft is the more reliable and realistic option to which the son or daughter return after having tried other options.

Abdelwahab takes pride in his skill. He boasts that he is the only one in Qus who can make the leather sieve, the most difficult type of sieve and one that requires a lot of skill and effort. Iman, who is extremely clever, knows how to make this sieve. She explained to me the steps as follows:

The leather sieve is made of camel or buffalo skin. First the skin is salted, then folded, then washed, then spread on the floor to dry. After that the inner side of the skin is scrapped clean of the remaining flesh, then the outside is cleared from the hairs using another instrument. It is then soaked in water till it softens, then it is cut with a sharp knife into one (very) long strip of skin. The result is the string with which the sieve is made. It is usually the women who shoulder the arduous task of preparing the skin. After that holes are pierced in the wooden
ring (tara) using a manual instrument that functions as a drill. The last stage is threading the pierced wooden ring with the skin strip in a process that is in fact a weaving technique.  

As with the potters and blacksmiths, there is an element of mythology connected to this craft. Since the leather sieve is the hallmark of a real sievemaker, it is not surprising that it is the subject of two sievemaker tales. The first one, which Abdelwahab insists is true while his daughter insists it is only a tale, concerns a dispute over a house between a jinn and a sievemaker. The latter suggests to the jinn that he will teach him the craft. If the jinn learns the craft successfully the sievemaker would leave the house to him. If not, the jinn will have to leave. The sievemaker brought the camel leather to the jinn and told him: salt it, fold it, wash it, spread it, clean it, scrap it, cut it. The jinn was desperate and declared his defeat. This is to show that this craft is so difficult that it even defeated the jinn. The other story refers to Sidi Abul Haggag, whose mosque lies within Luxor Temple. The story goes that in a dispute with the pharaohs, they told him he can only take a piece of land equal the size of a camel skin. He outwitted the pharaohs by using the sievemakers technique to turn the piece of leather into a very long strip with which he delineated a huge piece of land on which he is now located.

Other than the leather sieve, there are several other types, each having a specific function. These include the silk sieve (ghurbal sakarota) for obtaining very fine flour, the ghurbal ayyashi to obtain more rough flour, the grain or leather

---

14 This process is strikingly similar to the one described by Asta Olesen for Afghan sievemakers. (1994: 221-230)
sieve (ghurbal ghalla; ghurbal gild) for sieving the grain, the wire sieve (ghurbal silk) for sieving molokhiyya and sesame, and the kurbal (also made of leather) used for sieving the sand used for construction.

**Marginality and Mobility**

The caste-like framework in which low-status social groups, especially the blacksmiths, are embedded places a very significant restriction on social mobility. The overpowering tribal ideology gives supremacy to ascribed status, leaving low-status tribes with an eternal stigma that cannot be erased. This is compounded by the fact that marginality within the tribal structure is strongly correlated with a generalised, class-based marginality, with all the consequent disadvantages and restrictions to mobility associated with poverty. Even in the very rare cases where a person can overcome these two powerful obstacles through luck or exceptional individual qualities and resourcefulness the stigma of tribal inferiority continues to haunt him/her for ever. This is for example the case with the Edfu Gynaecologist who has gone to great lengths to prove a higher tribal affiliation but without much success.

In contrast, and perhaps in relation to the restricted social mobility, marginal groups display a high degree of physical mobility. This is manifested in various ways the most obvious of which is the close link between crafts and trade. Invariably, craftspeople are also trades people, at least to an extent. They either sell their products at home, in the weekly markets, or (with the exception of blacksmiths) as peddlers going around villages within their region or further
afield. The way they conduct their work and market their produce is a hallmark of the circuits of trade and exchange that characterise the region of Upper Egypt. The circulation of these locally produced goods plays an important role in perpetuating a certain degree of cultural homogeneity, which in its turn is instrumental in preserving a reasonable degree of demand for these products. For instance, the fact that different types of clay pots (required for the cooking of different dishes consumed throughout the region) are produced in different villages and circulated across the region reflects both the interdependence among the different villages and the persistence of certain traditional (sometimes even ancient) modes of production and consumption, despite the increasing incorporation into larger systems.

Apart from the association of crafts with trade, two examples of mobility may help shed light on the association between marginality and mobility.

1. Resettlement
The first example concerns two villages I have come across while seeking to meet craftspeople. When I probed into the history of Ezbet Khalil (Isna-Qena) with a high concentration of blacksmiths, I discovered that most of these families settled there over the past 20 years. Some lived in other Isna villages, while others led an itinerant lifestyle, camping under the trees and constantly moving. Some blacksmith families lived in this village in straw huts, then were able to acquire land on which they built houses or courtyards. Being at the edge of the desert, land was relatively cheaper than in other areas. These settled families gradually attracted their previously itinerant relatives to settle with them. The
hamlet also hosts a potter family who moved there from the village of Ballas (a potters’ village), again for the same reason of the cheap land.

In another hamlet near Edfu, Ezbet Salem mentioned above, where I first visited to seek the weavers who had moved from Manara, I found that it is not only Manara’s Coptic weavers who moved but various members of marginal groups as well. The reason that this particular hamlet attracted these newcomers again had to do with cheap land. The land was made available, in the late 70’s for two reasons. The first is that much land was freed following the dismantling of a military airport. According to Nessim the weaver, a conflict ensued following attempts by a large landowner from Edfu to claim squatting rights over the land. Residents of the mother village resisted this move and finally a parliament member interceded and managed to have the land allocated for housing purposes. The second reason for availability of cheap land is that a large area was allocated to Nubians who in their turn offered it for sale\textsuperscript{15}. One member of the weaving family who moved from Manara told me that moving to this area offered the opportunity of living in an owned house with a spacious courtyard where the loom was placed, instead of the small rented house they inhabited in Manara. The same motive applies to other groups such as the Masalib and blacksmiths.

The point in this type of mobility (manifested in resettlement) is its link with a certain aspect of marginality. These groups are non-agriculturalists and traditionally landless, thus their occupations are not tied to a particular place. But more fundamentally than this practical issue, these groups have always

\textsuperscript{15} This was probably agricultural land, part of which was later built up.
considered themselves and been considered as outsiders to the places from which they moved. That is how Ezbet Salem became a village of composed of different kinds of marginal groups creating a situation whereby “nobody here is anybody’s cousin”, as one woman aptly described it to me.

2. Seasonal migration

The other example of mobility concerns the traditionally itinerant blacksmiths. Despite settling, some blacksmiths still practice seasonal migration for work purposes. For example two blacksmith brothers from Ezbet Salem move to the Busayliyya region (Edfu) just before the season of sugar cane harvest which starts in December. They camp there and offer their services to farmers specifically as concerns the manufacturing or fixing the tools used for sugar cane harvest.

Crafts, craftspeople and globalization

After having described the craftspeople and their professions, I now turn to the core question of this research: given the radical transformations that have changed the face of rural Egypt over the past two decades, how are these groups affected, and how come they still exist at all? Over the past two decades, rural Upper Egypt, like other parts of Egypt, has been witnessing a process of rapid transformation. Aspects of this process included increased mechanization of agricultural activity, spread of education and white collar employment, in addition to internal and external migration. Electricity coverage is practically nationwide, and so is television coverage and telecommunications facilities.
Hardly any corner of this society has not been touched and transformed by forces of modernity and globalisation. Obvious markers of this transformation process include the shift to building concrete rather than mud brick houses, the appearance of satellite dishes on a few rooftops, and an increased use of household equipment and electrical appliances. It is these readily visible signs of change that are probably responsible for a fairly widespread view that the Egyptian countryside (including rural Upper Egypt) is losing its character, and that the village is increasingly becoming like the city. Encroaching forces of globalisation are seen as particularly threatening to traditional modes of production and consumption.

There is no doubt that there have been fundamental changes in the character of rural social, cultural and economic life, whereby the dividing line between city and country is becoming increasingly blurred. In addition, cheap imported consumer goods have penetrated even the remotest hamlet of the remotest governorate. The rise of an educated rural middle class has also meant the appearance of new modes of cultural distinction evident in the acquisition of urban style housing and furniture, and in new fashions of dress and life-style. (Bach 1998).

Modernity and globalisation are indeed forces of cultural homogenisation. However, this statement is true only up to a point. The story of such changes (the take-over of the Made-in-China plastic culture, or the Coca-Cola American culture) is neither simple nor linear. A closer look at Upper Egyptian crafts and craftspeople reveals that there is an equally plausible argument for the
persistence of local and traditional forms of production and consumption, and that it may be premature to start lamenting a “disappearing world”.

**Signs of persistence in the traditional setting**

A visitor to an Upper Egyptian weekly market would not fail to notice the large number of handmade objects displayed usually by their manufacturers, who spread their products on the ground in front of them. The visitor would also not fail to notice that such objects are displayed side-by-side with other factory-made, often imported, objects that perform similar functions.

We will find various types of clay pots sold either by their manufacturers, or by pottery traders. The latter would tend to stock a larger variety, which they bring from various regions. We would also find pottery items being sold by traders who deal in household stuff in general. Here we will clearly see how these traditional items are displayed side by side with the plastic and aluminium substitutes.

In another display we shall see various iron products spread in front of a man, woman or sometimes child. These items are made by village blacksmiths and are usually sold by various members of the family in the market. In a third display we will typically find various animal accessories (like reins, chains, wedges, sheering scissors…etc). We would also see a couple of sievemakers with different types of sieves performing different tasks from sifting flour for bread making to those used to separate sand from pebbles during the construction.

---

16 This section benefits from work I carried out for the ethnographic exhibition “The Nile: Jewel of Egypt” (Moesgaard Museum 2003-2004). Part of this material appeared in the exhibition catalogue (Saad 2003).
process. We shall also encounter a large number of objects made from the various parts of the palm tree: baskets of various shapes and sizes, floor mats woven from palm fronds, ropes and sweepers made from palm fibre…etc.

A stroll through the market would inform us about the existence and persistence of locally made traditional objects, despite the presence of relatively inexpensive modern substitutes. If we move from the market place to the village we can see these objects in the context of their use whether in rural households or in the fields. In the village, we shall also meet the craftspeople who produce these items.17

The demand for potters’ products may be the easiest to explain because pottery products (some more than others) continue to serve important functions. Given the very hot weather in Upper Egypt, the Zir and the Qulla (both drinking water containers) remain extremely vital for cooling drinking water. Zirs are not only used at home but they are also placed in various corners of public places as “charity” donations to provide cool drinking water for passers by. Aluminium pots have replaced clay pots for carrying water from the Nile or from public taps.18

A number of central dishes are still cooked only in clay pots. For example, the summer staple vegetables: okra and mulukhiyya have to be cooked in the burma. Last but certainly not least, the main body of the most important household item, the bread-baking oven is made of pottery.19 Blacksmiths also

17 For an interesting study on the persistence of traditional crafts in Cairo, see Allam 1991.
18 Early charming photographs of village women balancing the pottery water jar (ballas) on their heads and walking gracefully along the canal are no longer in sight, which is just as well. Aluminium containers, though definitely less charming, are a lot easier for women to carry.
19 This part of the oven is usually made by women potters.
produce items that have vital functions. These mainly relate to agricultural tools (such as axes and sickles and animal accessories such as reins, wedges and chains). Also it has to be mentioned that crafts’ production is integrated with agricultural activity to a great extent. Apart from the agricultural tools and implements manufactured by local blacksmiths, there are several items produced by local carpenters, in addition to the various forms of basketry made from palm fronds, ropes from palm fibre…etc.

Asta Olesen argues that despite threats due to industrial competition, crafts that are linked to agriculture have largely been unaffected due to the low level of technological development in agriculture. (1994: 41) This is not the case in Egypt where agriculture and irrigation have been largely mechanised, making artisanal input in this realm redundant. Tim Mitchell, however, draws attention to some reverse processes that are taking place. For example, he cites the example of a woman farmer in a village near Luxor who abandoned the use of the tractor in favour of a cow-drawn plough due to cost considerations as well as benefits to the land (Mitchell 1998: 24).

But apart from these uses of locally produced artefacts, there is an important dimension to these objects, which is to be found in their symbolic and ritual-related significance. A paradox here is that: whereas craftspeople are in general socially inferior, the objects they produce possess extra-ordinary powers in the field of symbol and ritual.

This is nowhere more pronounced than with blacksmith’s manufactured products. Frank Bliss, who worked with the craftspeople of the oases of the
Western Desert, says that it can be said that blacksmiths occupy an intermediary position between humans and the supernatural powers. (1998: 235). The large needle (*makhyat*) and its made-in-China equivalent are both used for sewing sacks and other heavy material. The *makhyat*, however, is not only used for sewing. When the animal refuses to eat, a *makhyat* is brought and dipped in salt, then used to prick the vein at the top of the animal’s mouth. The blood is thus released and the animal is supposed to recover. This is according to a woman blacksmith from Qena. She also said that it can cure a headache if it is used to scratch the person’s temples. The “bad blood” is then released and the person recovers.

When I asked the same person about the uses of the shorter blacksmiths needle (*massalla*), she described only a ritual function. First she said that if a baby is sick, they soak the needle in water overnight and in the morning the baby is washed in this water. Also the *massalla* is used in cases where a woman’s children do not survive. If an expecting mother has a dream foretelling that the child will die after birth, she definitely needs a *masalla*. Immediately after she gives birth, the placenta is taken and three *messallas* are stuck in it and all is then buried in order to ensure that the baby survives. Again in cases where children do not survive, the blacksmith’s anklet (*hegl*) is used. The baby is to wear the *hegl* for some time in order to protect him from severe diseases.

A woman blacksmith explained to me in some detail how these objects are used:

---

20 Bliss reports that these iron amulets protect against the wrath of the qarina (a female demon) who attacks the foetus or the newborn. (1998: 235).
The woman whose children don’t survive goes to the blacksmith and orders an iron spider, a ring, an anklet, a hazzaza, small scissors and a knife. She wears an anklet and the child wears another, and she also wears the ring. She then goes around the village begging their price from seven people with the name Mohamed saying: give me something so my child would survive. Someone would give her a pound, 50 piasters, or 25 piasters...anything. Someone may tell her: sorry I have no money and would give her some salt. She takes all that she collected and gives them to the blacksmith. The most important thing is that she does not keep anything to herself. All this is to prevent the garina (female demon) from killing the child. The garina can hit the child while in his mother’s womb or after he is born.

Apart from the blacksmith’s products, ritual significance is attached to blankets woven from sheep wool known as (birda; burda; birdaya). These are primarily woven by Christian weavers who are usually supplied with home spun wool. Now, with the availability and widespread use of synthetic factory-made cheaper blankets it would be expected that people would cease to use the birdaya and switch completely to the more modern variant. Apart from actually providing a lot more warmth than other types of blanket, the birda possesses a significance that cannot be matched by its modern equivalent, and which makes it imperative for each household to have at least one birda. It is vital in death-related ritual. As soon as somebody dies, a birda has to be brought in, and one half should be placed underneath, with the other half covering the body. But as mentioned above, this practice only applies in some regions while in others factory-made blankets are used for this purpose.

Apart from the fact that potters have traditionally been undertakers and therefore closely associated with death-related rituals, pottery is widely used in
fertility rites, usually in connection with visits to monuments. In a village in Fayoum governorate, a broken obelisk lay in one of the fields. Before it was removed and placed at the entrance to Fayoum city, this obelisk (locally known as the stone) was a very popular visiting site for infertile women. The ritual consisted of the woman crossing over the obelisk 7 times, then urinating on the stone, then breaking on it a new *qulla.*

Before ending this discussion it may be important to point out that some types of crafts production are not restricted to specialised craftspeople. It is very common for village women to use whatever spare time they have got in weaving baskets, or spinning wool. We also often see elderly men sitting in front of their houses making ropes from palm fibre or weaving palm fronds into mats and baskets. These products are either sold in the weekly market or are kept to be used by the household. The continuing prevalence of crafts’ production may be linked to a feature of Upper Egyptian society and culture whereby natural resources are valued and made use of whenever possible. It may also be argued that poverty plays a role in this aversion to waste.

I shall here digress to briefly describe recycling activities. Apart from being a feature of Upper Egyptian culture, which is characterised by an aversion to waste and a respect for resources, recycling is also a specialised profession and trade and it is often associated with barter. For example we find peddlers who pass through villages collecting used flour or fertilizer sacks in return for a few piasters or some spices. Others may go around collecting broken aluminium pots

---

21 For a thorough account of beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural powers of different pottery items, see Mahran 2007: 84-89.
in return for other products such as glasses or pots. There are also specialised scrap dealers who collect various bits and pieces and then sort them out. They either sell the sorted material to large scrap merchants or they sell the sorted items to the respective recycling factories in various parts of the country.

Some crafts make heavy use of recycled material. For example, blacksmiths use scrap construction iron rods to make various utensils. Also welders go around villages with their tools and they offer their services of transforming old tins into baking trays.

Paper toys and decorations sold in mulids and festivals are invariably made of factory discarded sheets of unused candy wrapping paper. Used candy wrapping is transformed into beautiful home decorations by girls and young women.

Transformations

All through this research I was asking whether or not traditional crafts are disappearing. My question mostly derived from the main question of the research project, namely the impact of globalization on traditional crafts. The implicit assumption focused on the competition of cheap industrial imports (mainly made in China items) and the somewhat related issue of the changing modes of taste and consumptions. An issue that was not raised in the beginning, though is probably the more serious challenge to traditional crafts has to do with the conditions of production rather than the dwindling demand on the consumer’s
side. This issue came up in talking to the blacksmiths who see the biggest problem facing their trade as the sharp rise in the cost of iron, in addition to another big problem which is the authorities’ chasing them away from their stalls in the weekly markets and confiscating their products. This is an example showing that the threat to the traditional crafts and their marginalized producers is not the homogenizing forces of globalization as much as the disciplinary forces of modernity represented in the coercive state instruments. These groups are marginal in many ways. So far I have discussed their marginality vis-à-vis the village social structure in which they occupy a low-status according to the hierarchy of tribal social organization. But they are also marginal due to their limited links with official structures; they share the vulnerability of members of the ‘informal sector’. This not only deprives them of the benefits that come with a job in the formal sector but subjects them to added risks due to the increasing state intolerance with informality.

That conditions of production may be a more serious threat to crafts than dwindling demand made itself strikingly obvious to me when I arrived in Manara in November 2006 to find that the potters’ family had divided up the courtyard land, demolished the kiln and were building a house in its place. The break up of households due to demographic pressure is a fact of rural social life, and it is never easy nor conflict free. Yet in this case it was a particularly dramatic development. The potters household consisted of 3 nuclear families who lived and worked together. Two of the men were brothers, whose sister is married to the third who is their couising (FBS). The tow brothers pushed for the split, asking
for the land to be divided up. It is thus that the kiln had to go. The sister is very upset because they cheated her out of her share but more so because she and her husband did not want to abandon pottery making. When I came back in June 2007, there was no trace of pottery-making at the potters’ place. So what are the alternatives, I asked. The woman is still hopeful that they would be able to resume pottery making somehow. For the time being, her husband will concentrate on his work as a pottery trader. The other two brothers are working in brick-making, a typical work that potters pursue either alongside or instead of pottery.

When I asked if this new development means they are no longer fakharaniyya, they were horrified at my question. The woman said: are we going to disown our origins? Of course not. Even if we don’t practice the profession we are still potters.

In a recent study on pottery in Qena city, Iman Mahran reports that extending water and electricity to an area where potters are concentrated has resulted in raising the price of land, leading the owners to divide up the land and selling most of it that now buildings have been erected and many of the potters were dispersed. The researcher points to a personal dilemma, which is at the same time a development challenge. She is disappointed that, in fact, these services have been introduced through her efforts with the help of the then Qena Governorate Adel Labib. The purpose was to help the potter families and improve their quality of life, but the unintended consequence was detrimental to the profession. (Mahran 2007: 22-23).
To end this section, I will mention briefly transformations in other professions. Blacksmiths cope with changing conditions through diversifying their products. There is little innovation in production technique, but new items are introduced such as the clover chopper. They also In addition, the blacksmiths in the village of Deir supplement their income through the men’s work as contracted labour in the Red Sea mines. As brickmaking is related to pottery, so is mining related to smithing especially that mining relies primarily on different types of hammering, which is the blacksmiths forte. As explained above, weavers switched from woollen blankets to rag carpets.

In the following section, we turn to a very different setting and a very different type of transformation whereby traditional crafts are treated as artistic products and therefore acquire a very different meaning and value.

Crafts as art- Elite taste and life style

This section deals with a major reason for the persistence, regeneration and sometimes reinvention of traditional crafts. This factor could be termed as ‘external’, in the sense that it is not related to elements in the social organisation in the context of production, but is to be investigated in the context of consumption and demand in settings that are very different from those of production. We are here dealing with the valuation of traditional, hand-made crafts as artistic products that appeal to the tastes of cosmopolitan elites, artists, intellectuals…etc. There are various paths through which Upper Egyptian crafts have found their way to venues such as tourist shops in Luxor and Aswan,
Christmas time bazaars in Cairo hotels and galleries, annual exhibits of development projects, fashion shows in the French Embassy in Cairo, not to mention exhibitions in various European capitals.

Here we move into a very different realm, with another set of rules governing production and consumption. In this respect, a number of Egyptian villages and towns stand out in their association with the artistic production of particular crafts. Most famous among these places are the town of Akhmim in Sohag (weaving and embroidery), Nagada in Qena (weaving), Garagos in Qena (pottery) and Haraniyya in Giza (tapestry). In all these places, the crafts have been brought to their urban sophisticated clientele through outside development interventions of various sorts.

This section particularly focuses on the processes by which these products are brought to their urban clientele, and the new meanings and cultural significance the objects acquire in their “journey”. In what follows, I shall present two cases that represent different types of effort by which traditional crafts are the object of intervention by outsiders, and which resulted in significant transformation in the meaning and value of the objects and their modes of consumption.

In presenting these efforts, I am mainly concerned with their cultural and symbolic significance, that are linked to issues like “taste”, “life-style” and “modes of distinction”. Although the more encompassing political economy context is very important, I am not addressing it directly here. One reason for this is that these development efforts that target traditional crafts are not widespread enough to a
point where they can make a difference at the level of political economy, at least until now. However, because they operate within elite circles they enjoy a degree of visibility, and one that is steadily increasing in proportion to increasing official attention. Therefore, at least for now, their importance as a cultural and symbolic phenomenon exceeds their importance as an economic one.

I would like, however, to present an example of a common but problematic political economy approach to the study of crafts. One common way of looking at the persistence of traditional crafts in a predominantly modern capitalist world is to see these products and their producers as totally dominated by the capitalist system. An example of this view is expressed by Nestor Garcia Canclini in his analysis of traditional crafts and fiestas in Mexico:

Subordinate cultures are not allowed any autonomous or alternative development, and their production and consumption as well as social structure and language are reorganized in order to make them receptive to capitalist modernization. …The survival of traditional fiestas is tolerated, but their nature as communal celebrations becomes weakened amid the commercial organization of tourists' leisure; some artisanal production is allowed to continue, even encouraged, in order to provide additional income for peasant families and thus lessen the numbers of those who migrate to the cities- in other words, in order to “find a solution” to the level of unemployment and injustice created by capitalism to whose commercial logic the design and circulation of crafts are subjected. (Canclini 1993: 8-9).

I find this explanation problematic mainly because it deprives producers of any agency and bestows omnipotence on forces of modernity and
globalisation\textsuperscript{22}. Much of recent research on various forms of marginality and subalternity has been trying to highlight elements of agency and resistance, and these have to be taken into account. I would also venture to propose that products of an artistic nature may have some specificity in terms of their producers’ self-esteem and potential for empowerment.

In what follows, I will present two cases of outside interventions that focused on the promotion of traditional crafts.

A. Classical development: The Association of Upper Egypt for Education and Development

In general, classical development interventions were motivated by a development goal of providing employment opportunities to a poverty stricken and largely landless rural population on the one hand, and a belief in the artistic potential of the villagers on the other. In this respect, we have to mention the efforts of the Association of Upper Egypt for Education and Development, which is a Coptic Catholic association that has worked since the 1940’s in establishing village schools in various parts of Upper Egypt. Alongside its interest in spreading education, the Association’s work in Upper Egypt included three projects for artistic crafts production. These are the Garagos pottery school and factory (Qena), the embroidery and weaving project in Akhmim (Sohag), and the woodwork workshop in Hajaza (Qena). These crafts have gained popularity

\textsuperscript{22} The author firmly denies this (P.45), but his explanation of the coexistence of traditional and modern only confirms the omnipotence of a capitalist system represented in fashion considerations, touristic necessities and interests of the nation state.
among urban art-lovers who eagerly await the annual exhibitions in Cairo and Alexandria.

The Association was involved in the initial phases of the Haraniyya tapestry school, but the real godfather of this project is the architect Ramsis Wissa Wassef who believed in the instinctive capabilities of villagers to produce artistic products. He founded a tapestry school in Haraniyya (Giza) and encouraged his apprentices from the village to be as spontaneous as possible in designing their work. The results were a stunning success, and the Haraniyya tapestry has gained international acclaim for the imaginative designs and high quality weaving. It is worth noting that this village never boasted a tradition of weaving. (Ammoun 1987: 48-56). Among these examples, I shall focus in some detail on the women’s weaving and embroidery project of the Association’s Centre for Community Service of Akhmim.

**Akhmim**

The exhibition of the Centre for Community Service of Akhmim that is annually held in Cairo is an artistic and cultural event that is much awaited by Cairo resident art lovers, be they members of the elite or expatriates living in Cairo. The exhibition is usually held either at the headquarters of the Upper Egypt Association or at another suitable venue. The scene at the opening of this exhibition is a clear testimony to the success and popularity of the products of this Association. Long before the opening time, crowds of elegantly dressed men and women gather around the door. The moment the door opens, the crowd
rushes into the exhibition hall, behaving less elegantly than they look. Their aim is to have a first choice of the famous Akhmim embroidered tableaux. The finest pieces are quickly marked and reserved, and only a few minutes after the two-week exhibition opens, most of the tableaux are gone. Apart from the embroidered tableaux, the exhibition features the characteristic Akhmim textiles in the form of table cloths, bed covers and the like. One of the reasons for the keenness of the customers is that until very recently, this has been the only time when they get a chance to own an Akhmim embroidery that is the product of many hours of work by the women artists of this famous town in the governorate of Sohag.23

Behind this successful experiment is a development project that we shall now present in some detail. The following is mainly based on an interview with Loula Lahham, former member of the board of directors of the Association who was in charge of the Association’s external funding (1982-1988) and later served as the Association’s Media Coordinator (2002-2003).

Akhmim is a town in the governorate of Sohag that lies about 450 kilometres south of Cairo. Due to its presence on the Eastern bank of the Nile, it has long been isolated until recently when the Sohag bridge was constructed. There was a Franciscan Mission in Akhmim that was established in 1869. The Mission left in 1939, leaving their assets, which included what is now the Akhmim Community Centre, to the Coptic Catholic Church. The latter, in turn, gave the place in Akhmim to The Upper Egypt Association in order to start

23 A recently opened artisan’s area in old Cairo, Suq Al-Fustat, features marketing outlets for NGO’s working with craftspeople, including a shop for the Upper Egypt Association where Akhmim products are sold. (See below)
development activities there. The Upper Egypt Association was founded in 1941 by a Jesuit priest, Father Henry Ayrout\textsuperscript{24}, who was a sociologist and the author of a classical book “The Egyptian Peasant”. The Association focused on education, and it has managed (until the present) 36 tuition-free primary schools in four governorates: Minya, Assyut, Sohag, Luxor.

Parallel to the school system, there was a development component that consisted of development work for women, for youth, and literacy classes. The Association started with conventional activities that they thought would address the problems of Akhmim, which were similar to the problems of rural Upper Egypt in general: health, unemployment, and women’s underdevelopment (lack of education and economic dependence). The Association particularly focused on the problem of the poor and uneducated Upper Egyptian women and girls. To this end, the Association sought the help of two volunteers from the GRAIL movement. These were Joke Van Neerven and Gail Mally. They first started to teach girls sewing and embroidery in the conventional Western tradition, but these activities were not very successful. One important activity that they termed “revival of tradition” sought to recreate the older tradition of embroidery of old Coptic and Islamic motifs. The girls were given pictures of these designs and they copied them very skilfully. The turning point was when the volunteer teachers listened to the request of an 8-year old girl who said she wanted to draw. They gave her paper and colours, and she drew a bird. She then asked to

\textsuperscript{24} It was initially called “The Catholic Association for Egyptian Schools”, then the “Upper Egypt Christian Association for Schools and Social Development”, then lately in 1996 its name changed to “The Upper Egypt Association for Education and Development”. According to Loula Lahham, the name changed because the leadership of the Association felt that the name no longer reflected its mission, as it provides its services to everybody and not just to Christians.
embroider her bird, and that is how the famous “spontaneous embroidery” of Akhmim started, and gradually evolved to become an art form in itself. (Loula Lahham- Unpublished paper 2004)

From then on, innovation and free expression, rather than sheer imitation, was encouraged. The imitation of Coptic and Islamic motifs, however, continued until the present, and it is the activity which bears the name “revival of tradition” (Ihya’ al-turath). Besides the spontaneous embroidery and the “revival of tradition”, there is the activity of weaving which came chronologically after, and in response to, the need of the embroidery when materials in certain colours were needed and were not available in the Akhmim market\(^{25}\).

This is a philanthropic project that also believed in the women’s innate artistic abilities. The initial object was to help the women by giving them economic independence. As it turned out, this objective was achieved via discovering the artists within them. The “revival of tradition” in this case referred mainly to recreating (in the form of copying) the ancient motives of Coptic and Islamic designs. As for the hallmark of the experiment: the spontaneous embroidery, it is in fact a new creation rather than an indigenous craft. On the one hand, the Akhmim project banked on an existing tradition of weaving, but also effected a transformation by introducing the “spontaneous embroidery”. The great fame and esteem with which this product has been received is perhaps one

\(^{25}\)Akhmim has, for millennia, been famous as a weaving village, a craft that never really died out. According to Loula Lahham: “Until about 1950, there was about 1000 looms in the village. The loom in Akhmim is part of the house, and is considered as indispensable as the bed.”
factor that contributed to enhancing the value of all Akhmim products, even those not produced in the Centre’s workshop. The persistence and continuing success of this experiment is testimony to the fact that the initiators must have done something right.

The Akhmim Association and its successful experiment continue to be a source of pride for those who work for it, and of inspiration for other development practitioners. A question that intrigues me and which I directed at Loula Lahham is: why did it work? She answered: “I don’t know but maybe because they listened to what people want.” Another factor has to do with the “democratic” aspect of the process, by which the women themselves decide on what they want to produce, in addition to participating actively in the administration of the project.

Apart from Akhmim, the Upper Egypt Association has also sponsored another important project in the village of Hagaza (Qena Governorate) which boasts a large number of carpenters. With the many changes the Egyptian countryside has been undergoing, demand for the traditional carpenter has dwindled. This is mainly because traditional carpenters specialised mainly in building and fixing waterwheels, now largely out of use after irrigation has been largely mechanised. The Hagaza project focused on using wood made from local trees in the creation of various artistic products, that are also displayed and sold at the annual exhibition of the Association of Upper Egypt, next to the Akhmim products. (www.egyptos.com/wood_workshop.html)
B. Nagada: Development Project and Fashion House

Here we move to another example of an external intervention that resulted in a major transformation in another weaving centre: Nagada. Like Akhmim in Sohag, the town of Nagada in Qena governorate has been known as a weaving village for thousands of years. The village was known for producing textiles made of silk, and was particularly famous for the “aba”, a sleeveless outer garment worn by Arab men (Voogelsang-Eastwood & Einarsdottir 2003:98). In the 20th century, Nagada specialised in one specific product: the firka. This product, measures 3 metres X 90 cm, and is woven from artificial silk in geometrical patterns of red, yellow and black (Ammoun 1987:47)\(^26\).

The firka was produced for export to Sudan where it has been in great demand by Sudanese women, for use in ritual occasions such as child birth and male circumcision. The production was controlled by merchants who supplied the yarn, paid the workers for their labour and exported the product to Sudan. One estimate put the number of families who depended on this type of work at 2000. (www.nagada.net).

By the end of the 1980’s, strained relations between Egypt and Sudan has led to stagnation in the export (and therefore production) of this material. Nagada witnessed a major transformation when in the early 1990’s a development intervention by the Canada Fund focused on reviving this craft. This intervention was pioneered by the then Canada Fund coordinator Naela Refaat, at the instigation of Mohamed Omar, professor at the College of Applied Arts.

\(^{26}\) Other sources mention it was made of a blend of cotton and rayon. (www.nagada.net & Voogelsang-Eastwood & Einarsdottir 2003).
Naela Refaat described the objectives of the project as reviving the craft of weaving, as well as helping out a distressed population of weavers who lost their work with the closure of the Egypt-Sudan borders. A main objective of the project was to empower the weavers through creating a weavers’ cooperative to have them market their product independently of the big traders, and to develop marketing links and outlets. It was also hoped that, apart from a cooperative shop, there would be a small museum to display Nagada weaving products (Naela Refaat, Personal Communication 9 March 2004).

The Swiss artist Michel Pastore was solicited by the project, and he introduced new designs, new material and new technique. Pastore based the new designs on the traditional pyramidal motif of the *firka*, a change he describes as “using the traditional as a seed for the modern”. The result was a marked diversification of the Nagada products. At the end of the project the new products were displayed at a large exhibition at the Goethe Institute and met with huge success. From specializing only in *firka* production, now the Nagada weavers were producing different shawls, tablecloth, bedcovers, and various items of clothing. Naela Refaat sees that the extent of the success surprised everyone but now funding had run out and a difficult phase ensued. Further funding could not be secured for the crucial step of establishing the weavers’ cooperative and instituting a viable marketing mechanism, and the project did not materialize as envisioned.

After an uncertain phase, Michel Pastore in partnership with Lebanese fashion designer Sylva Nasraallah started the Nagada fashion house now located
in a posh Cairo neighbourhood. In the beginning they relied mainly on material woven in Nagada. But with time, this started to change to the extent that, at present, only a small fraction comes from there. According to Pastore and Nasrallah, one reason for this is the difficulty of supervising production which is carried out in peoples homes. Another more important reason is the increased diversity of their products and the constant need to renew the models. They still, however, use what they describe as Egyptian traditional material which they procure from factories in different parts of Egypt. Significantly, they have recently turned to other countries, such as India, Turkey and Syria. They only import small quantities, which Sylva Nassrallah describes as “the spice” that adds a special character to their products. (Personal Communiqué, 16 March 2004)

Even the imported material is linked to tradition of the respective countries. Tradition remains a central concept for the Nagada fashion, but we here see a mode of distinction that distances itself from the obviously ethnic creations of other enterprises. This distancing could be heard in Pastore's saying: “Nagada likes the traditional, but does not like folklore.” (Personal Communiqué 16 March 2004)

Now this is a situation where the objectives of the development project were not achieved as initially envisaged, in addition to the fact that the Nagada fashion house is increasingly losing contact with the village. Yet I would still like to argue that this is a hopeful story. This may not be very clear if we only speak with those who undertook this important intervention, but if we speak with the weavers of Nagada themselves, we may get a different picture. In the village,
interviews with the weavers reveal a clearly positive evaluation of the transformation that has occurred in their trade. They point to the fact that looms long deserted in people’s homes are now working again. Despite the decline in demand on the part of the Nagada Fashion House, Nagada products have acquired a name not as traditional products but as quality hand-woven fashion ware. Not least, Nagada supplies tourist bazaars in Luxor, Aswan and Cairo with the distinctive colourful scarves, themselves in a continuous process of transformation. Significantly, weavers today keep copies of the then new designs that Michel Pastore had introduced, and they use them to make new patterns.

The hyperbole often heard that no one in Nagada is now unemployed may not be an accurate reflection of reality, but it is telling of the mood. It may not be easy to quantify the impact of the interventions and the ensuing transformation. I offer, however two snapshots that would give a taste of this positive change:

1. The first is of Yunis, the son of a weaver. He is working on his loom opposite another loom in the same room where his father works. Younis is a diploma holder who decided to learn weaving and make it his profession. He is one of many of a new generation of weavers. Passing down the skills of the craft to subsequent generations is key to the survival of traditional crafts. Not only is it reasonably lucrative, but the contexts of elite consumption, and the valuation of these products as artistic and unique have increased the prestige associated with this trade, which could contribute to this craft’s appeal to members of the new generation.
2. The other case is of a new type of scarf intended for sale in tourist bazaars. Contrary to the more conventional tourist scarves that are modeled after the firka, this is a new product that benefits from Pastore’s new designs. It is of a much better quality, and is sold for a substantially higher price than the conventional ones. It is significant because it illustrates an innovation developed locally, long after the creators of this renaissance had left.

While this is happening, it is important to mention that the production of the Firka has again flourished, after relations with Sudan improved again.

Crafts as National Heritage

This last section addresses a relatively recent phenomenon whereby traditional crafts are becoming the object of official and semi-official attention in an unprecedented way. They are being treated as a valuable part of Egyptian National Heritage (turath misr al-qawmi) and are celebrated in a manner and language hitherto reserved for ancient monuments. This is a development that may have significant implications for crafts production, (and possibly for craftspeople) and I will therefore deal with it in some length. In this section I have not confined myself to the rural setting, but to crafts in a Cairene context as well.

As has been explained in the previous section, traditional crafts have an appeal within a restricted circle of the discerning elite; it is in harmony with and is part of the same phenomenon whereby traditional crafts, ethnic-looking architectural styles, furniture, costumes and jewellery characterised the taste and fashion preference of intellectual and cosmopolitan elites, operating as markers
of distinction; a discerning few un-covering and displaying hidden aesthetic qualities characterising the ‘peasant’ and the ‘popular’ and distinguishing themselves from the upper middle class majority of westernised taste.

Until recently, the concern with traditional crafts and ethnic Egyptian motifs and artefacts has been confined to such circles. The type of consumption of traditional crafts associated with these circles has led to their valuation and their acquisition of a meaning and significance that is different to those prevailing in the traditional contexts of production. Here, I shift the focus from social distinction that characterises the appeal of traditional crafts for members of the intellectual elite to national distinction; from the consumption of traditional crafts as a sign of good taste to their appropriation by the state as markers of national identity. It may be true that dealing with traditional crafts always contained an element of Egyptian identity assertion.27 But with obvious official and institutional backing, they are moving towards a central place in the discourse defining contemporary Egyptian nationalism, and are becoming instrumental in defining and expressing “what we are about”.

I shall attempt to illustrate this development through presenting a number of the state-sponsored projects concerned with promoting traditional crafts. I will mainly address, in some detail, one of these projects, which is the Centre for Traditional Crafts that opened in Fustat (Old Cairo) in 2005. Following that I will briefly describe a number of other projects that have the same concern.

27 For example Asaad Nadim describes them as expressing the distinctive ‘national character’ of the Egyptians. (Nadim n.d: 4).
The Centre for Traditional Crafts at Fustat

In August 2005, the first page of Al-Ahram newspaper featured the following piece of news about the impending opening of “The Centre for Traditional Crafts”: “In a few days, the tourist visiting the area of the religions complex in Old Cairo will be able to visit a new addition to the area’s sites. He will enjoy watching Egyptian craftsmen–ala el-tabi’a (live)- as they create artistic authentic traditional handmade products. This complex aims at protecting these traditional crafts from extinction and disappearance, and will be inaugurated by Egypt’s First Lady within days” (Al-Ahram 17 August 2005)

This Centre is intended as part of a larger project “The City for Traditional Crafts”. It contains workshops for various crafts such as the art of appliqué, wood carving, coppersmithing, stained glass and others. Apart from the workshops, there are administrative offices and exhibition rooms which also serve as marketing outlets. The Centre’s goal is to provide a suitable environment for crafts and craftspeople to practice their trade and to create a new generation of craftspeople through providing training opportunities. This project is the latest in a series of undertakings in a similar vein and for the same purpose. It is built in the vicinity of the Pottery Centre which was inaugurated in 2001 and has goals similar to the Center for traditional crafts.  

---

28 The Department of Traditional Crafts was previously located in Wekalet El-Ghouri but they were evicted in order to have the place restored. This move was a subject of controversy and the monument’s need for restoration was contested.

29 Both Centres are built in a Hassan Fathy style architecture which has come to stand for “traditional Egyptian architecture”
According to artist Mohsen Shaalan, a previous director of the department of traditional crafts at the Ministry of Culture, the Pottery Centre is a “civilised touch on the face of old Cairo… and one future step of many serious and sincere efforts to spread culture and creativity, and recovering Egypt’s cultural standing before the civilised world at the hands of it’s loyal sons.” (www.Alriyadh.com/2005/09/12/article93522.html).

The Centre for Traditional Crafts has been heavily criticized mainly by intellectuals and artists who are opposed to the policies of the Ministry of Culture under its long-serving Minister Farouk Hosny. The attacks on the Minister revolve around the idea that he is only concerned with organizing festivals and high level, high profile expensive events while neglecting real, grass-root level processes of cultural and artistic production.

The attacks on the Minister culminated with the tragic incident of the fire at the Beni Suef Cultural Palace during a festival for amateur theatre, an event which left over 50 dead including the whole jury of a number of theatre critics and playwrights. The event was indeed an embarrassment to the Ministry as it revealed not only a high degree of neglect of safety measures but also the dismal conditions which prevail in provincial sites of culture production. An earlier tragic incident provoked similar anger. This was the murder of one of the most talented Egyptian sculptors Abdelbadie Abdelhay at the hands of burglars. The publicity surrounding the incident revealed the dismal conditions in which the sculptor lived- a one-room house with no amenities in a poor neighbourhood. Both incidents provoked outrage especially from artists and intellectuals who blamed
the Ministry of Culture and its Minister for focusing solely on high profile persons and events while neglecting their duties in promoting culture production at a grass-root level.

The attacks on the Centre for Traditional Crafts should be seen in the light of this ongoing conflicts involving the Ministry of Culture and its embattled Minister. The attacks were spearheaded by artist/ painter Ezz Eldin Nagib, whose relationship to the Ministry and his battles with it go back a long time.

In the following section, I will present in some detail Nagib’s story and his role in promoting traditional crafts within an official umbrella. In presenting this story I hope not only to show an aspect of the roots of the present controversy surrounding the Centre for Traditional Crafts but also to shed some light on the developments and transformations of the State’s approach to the issue of promoting traditional crafts. The following section is mainly based on an interview with Nagib.

_A Cultural Activists’ Story_

The roots of the State’s interest in popular culture, including traditional crafts go back to the late 1950’s. The State’s efforts in this respect include the establishment of a Centre for Popular Art which opened in 1958, the same year that witnessed the establishment of a centre for training and developing traditional crafts in Wekalet El-Ghuri, a Mamluk building in the centre of Islamic Cairo next to Al-Azhar Mosque. This Centre was established during the time of Minister of culture Tharwat Okasha. The Wekala also housed studios for
painters. Placing the contemporary artists next to the traditional craftsmen was part of a policy and vision which Nagib describes as follows:

This was a beautiful system that Tharwat Okasha established as part of the philosophy for work in the area of culture development; that the old and the new interact through living side by side. The idea was that contemporary artists should not only look towards Western culture but to have two sources of inspiration: the Western and the Eastern. Placing the contemporary artists with the traditional (craftspeople) in one “melting pot” in a building over 500 years old would certainly have its influence on them. At the same time this would also influence the craftsmen who have not developed for hundreds of years.

Nagib was one of the contemporary artists who had a studio in Wekalet ElGhuri since the early 1980’s, and was appointed as the Director for the Centres for Traditional Crafts at the Ministry of Culture in 1992. It has to be said that Nagib deserves much credit for reviving the place, which suffered from neglect after several changes in the Ministry’s visions and policies.

In the 1960’s, the training plan of the Centre adopted the training model followed in the traditional workshops whereby master artisans where brought in to teach young trainees (mainly boys) who became ‘apprentices’ in a long-term relationship to the place, the master and the profession. It is significant to note that the key master artisans in today’s Centre are the ones who joined the old Centre as young apprentices.

It is worth a brief digression to mention a few words about Sheikh Taha a master artisan of the art of appliqué who now works at the new Centre for Traditional Crafts, and who had joined in the early days of the old Centre as a 12-
year old boy. Sheikh Taha’s father was a worker employed at Wekatel Al-Ghuri. When he found there were training opportunities there, he brought his son along in 1962. Sheikh Taha remembers these days fondly, and with gratitude to the master artisans (usta’s) who taught him the craft. Sheikh Taha describes his experience during those days as follows:

I joined when I was 12 years old, and there were master artisans who taught us the profession. There were master artisans for all the crafts: appliqué, mother of pearl, metalwork and Khart Arabi. I had a go at all these professions and learned a bit of everything. I (specialised) in the art of appliqué (el-khiyamiyya), and gradually started to develop myself and my work. The (contemporary) artists who were there also helped me. They taught me how to draw and how to introduce new designs and things like that. I remained in this profession for almost 45 years.

The case of Sheikh Taha is significant for two main reasons. First, it is an illustration of the symbiosis between contemporary art and traditional art that characterised the early experiment of the state’s sponsorship of traditional crafts. Second, the 45 years of Taha’s career point to an element of continuity that is embodied in his person, his work and the craft of appliqué in general. This continuity, however, is not matched at the institutional level, the story of which reflects many ups and downs.

Here we go back to Naguib’s account to the situation at Wekalet Al-Ghuri at the time he took charge in 1992. Naguib uses a dramatic metaphor of a “clinical death” to describe the condition of the place at that time. He says: “It was there, and looking from the outside as if it exists and functions, but the fact was it was completely dead”. The condition of the place as described by Naguib reflects
the changing visions and priorities of the state’s cultural policies. Contrary to the care and attention paid by the Ministers of Culture to traditional crafts in the sixties, subsequent years witnessed a neglect of this sector. This neglect was mainly reflected in a serious deprivation of financial and technical resources that threatened the central purpose of the initial efforts, namely to create a new generation of craftsmen who were to be trained at the hands of the old master artisans. Naguib describes the situation as follows:

The craftsmen who were there in the early nineties were the remnants of the young trainees who joined the place in the early sixties. After thirty years they changed from being apprentices to being trainers without trainees. The state no longer allocated a budget for training a new generation of craftsmen, nor to bring in skilled craftspeople from outside. This resulted in a situation whereby those who came in during the sixties became the trainers, the trainees, the producers and the employees at the same time. These people were, moreover, state employees who received really meagre salaries, whereas if they crossed Al-Azhar street to the other side, they would find Khan El-Khalili where they could work at the workshops there and receive the equivalent of their monthly salaries in just one week. Thus most of them played this ‘double game’: they would come to Wekalet el-Ghuri in the morning, sign their name and drink their tea, then cross to the other side and work at a private workshop until the afternoon when they go back and sign their name again and leave.

Naguib had a vision for reviving the sector for traditional crafts whereby he saw that “popular culture” should be treated by the state at an equal footing with “official culture”. By the latter he probably meant what the Arts’ Sector of the Ministry of Culture considered to be high culture: museums, galleries, artists’ ateliers, collections of select paintings of well-known artists and international
exhibitions and festivals. He saw that these same channels should be made available to traditional craftspeople/artists.

There are various ways in which Naguib tried to realise this vision. A brief description of his attempts would throw light on the development of the state’s relationship to traditional crafts, as well as give a flavour of the practice and politics of culture production in contemporary Egypt. I have to mention at this point that while Naguib may be a controversial figure on the scene of arts and what could be described as ‘culture activism’, there is no disagreement about his qualities as a fighter for realising his visions.

Naguib’s efforts were directed at confronting bureaucratic obstacles as well as trying to raise the profile of traditional arts within the Ministry of Culture in order to secure the resources needed to revive the sector of traditional arts and crafts. The most important obstacle that faced him in this task was not just the lack of funds and the lack of a specific budget allocation for the activities of his department, but also the bureaucratic regulations that did not allow the centre to keep the revenues from the sale of the crafts produced. This obstacle resulted in depriving trainers, trainees and producers from any incentives. Naguib tried in many ways to get around this problem to the extent of bringing the issue to the parliament which finally approved changes that resulted in allowing the Department for Traditional Crafts to keep 50% of the revenue from the sale of the products. Naguib describes the year following this decree (1994-1995) as one of a great boom. Yet it was a short-lived stage, as what he saw as an abuse of this stipulation by other departments led the Ministry of Finance to cancel this decree.
At another level, Naguib tried to make traditional arts and crafts appealing to the Ministry of Culture and to bring the work of this sector closer to the priorities of the Ministry. He explains this attempt as follows:

I tried to make Wekalet Al-Ghuri attractive for the media in order to get the attention of the Ministry which is always attracted by ‘the lights’. They are fond of festivities and ‘cultural noise’ (al-dagig al-thaqafi). I thus managed to turn Wekalet Al-Ghuri into a ‘condition of cultural noise’: theatre, concerts, folk music…etc. With each of these events we included an exhibition for traditional arts and crafts side by side with an exhibition for contemporary arts, thus bringing back the relationship between the two forms of art.

Nabuib saw that these attempts bore some fruit, but he remained in search of “a radical solution”. To that end he established an NGO for the promotion of traditional crafts and craftspeople. This NGO, named ASALA (authenticity), will be dealt with in a separate section below. Suffice it now to mention that establishing this association as a way of bypassing bureaucratic obstacles provided for a great degree of financial and administrative flexibility.

The last thing Naguib did before his retirement in 2001 was to attend the celebration for laying the cornerstone for the present Centre for Traditional Crafts in Fustat (Old Cairo). Naguib has many reasons for dissatisfaction and even bitterness about this place which opened in 2005. He had earlier envisaged this place as a step towards creating a City for Traditional Crafts, but now sees that the place falls short of fulfilling this dream. Another related reason for his bitterness is that the establishment of the present building coincided with the evacuation of Wekalet El-Ghuri because of what he considers to be a pretext of its need for restoration.
Naguib is someone who had specific visions and strong views, and he had invested much in trying to realise them. It is therefore understandable that he would be opposed to a project that he initiated but did not see it completed the way he wanted. However, and as mentioned earlier, he was one among a group of artists and intellectuals who levelled harsh criticisms against the Centre for Traditional Crafts. Criticisms continued, and even intensified after the Centre for Traditional Crafts, together with the Pottery Centre were relegated to the administration of the Fund for Cultural Development, a move that seemed to me to have created a more positive situation (see below). For example a story in the daily Al-Misry Al-Youm reads: “Pottery-making is withering away at the Fustat Centre, under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Culture (Heba Hassanein. Al-Misry Al-Youm 16 March 2006). In another article, very strong language is used against the decision to move the craft centres to the directorship of the Fund for cultural Development. In an article entitled “The latest Catastrophes of the Ministry of Culture: the sale of traditional crafts”, the art critic Mohamed Kamal says that this decision is nothing but an attempt to empty a culture that spanned thousands of years of its content, and change it to a shopping centre. Kamal sees that, as in other countries like India, Morocco and Tunisia, Egypt should have a Ministry for traditional crafts. He considers that among the benefits of these crafts is “a deep spiritual benefit that could protect us from extremism and terrorism that spread when we let go of our creative specificity at a time when culture is becoming a ‘popcorn culture’.” He links this situation to the policies of the present minister of culture Farouk Hosny who is “not concerned with the
history and traditions of this nation as much as he is concerned with his useless festivals. This ministry is killing our identity.” (Radwa Usama. Al-Karama 16 May 2006)

The First Visit

My first visit to the Centre in October 2005 confirmed the views expressed by the sceptics. The two centres of Traditional Crafts and Pottery occupy impressive grand buildings. The marketing outlets or showrooms on the ground floor feature samples of the centre’s products of fine workmanship. But there was an air of a museum, and the products looked more like permanent exhibits. My impression of a “stalled process” was confirmed when I interviewed the official responsible for marketing.

The person responsible for the marketing said that the most important activity takes place in exhibitions “that represent Egypt abroad”. Other than that, there are bureaucratic obstacles that make the flow of production and marketing very slow. This makes it difficult to accommodate requests for large orders. Such orders are usually taken by the Centre’s craftsmen as private business to finish in their own workshops outside.

Talking to the craftsmen in their workshops on the storey above the shops confirmed an impression that the place weighs under a typical Egyptian bureaucratic administration. Y. who specialises in the art of appliqué told me that practically all the craftsmen working here either own private workshops in or near khan el-khalili or work is small family firms and market their stuff over there. This
dynamic echoed to a large extent the situation at Wekalet el-Ghuri as explained by Ezz El-Din Naguib in the previous section. Whereas Naguib saw this as in illustration of a ‘pathology’ resulting from specific state policies, it could also be argued that the existence of the traditional workshops in the area may be the more stable and reliable guarantor of continuity and persistence of the production of traditional crafts.

Y. is contracted for L.E. 160 per month (less than 30 u.s. dollars), and does not have fixed employment. He is accepting these conditions in the hope that he will be a permanent state employee. He admits he is not productive on this job, and that he mainly works with his father after hours. He showed me a beautiful piece of his work and said: “it takes me one month to finish this piece when I work here, whereas for my private work I finish 2 per week”. There is an obvious lack of incentives, especially that the craftsmen do not get any percentage of the profit. The marketing specialist said that these are the government laws and they cannot be changed.

Apart from the lack of financial incentive, the craftsmen I met objected to the way they are treated. They see themselves as creative artists rather than craftsmen (fannan mesh herafi). In a place where classical hierarchy between administrative and manual work operates, they are seen as inferior to the administrative staff. Y. said: “If the state was really sincere about promoting crafts, this place would not have 70 administrators and 30 craftsmen.”

At the time of my first visit, the project was only a few months old. It appeared then that the triumph would be for traditional bureaucracy rather than
traditional crafts. Rather than working towards its stated goal of rescuing traditional crafts from extinction, this apparatus in fact relied completely on the existence and stability of a continuous working tradition. I expected, however, that it would continue to receive official backing and be hailed as a success as long as it was able to fulfil the more pertinent goal of representing Egypt abroad, or just ‘being there’ as a ‘civilised face of Egypt’.

The Second Visit

A little over a year after my first visit, I paid a second visit to the place in December 2006 to find a completely different situation. A major restructuring process took place whereby the Centre was removed from the Art Sector of the Ministry of Culture (Qitaa Al-Fonoun Al-Tashkiliyya) to the Fund for Cultural Development (Sunduq Al-Tanmiyya Al-Thaqafiyya). Though the latter is also part of the Ministry of culture, it is a semi-independent organ that operates with a higher degree of administrative and financial independence.

The most significant aspect of the restructuring process is the appointment of a craftsman as the new director for the Centre for Traditional Crafts. Wael Abu Zeid, the new director, is a carpenter who hails from a family specialised in traditional Arab carpentry. This appointment took effect in November 2006, less than one month before the interview I conducted with him. According to what I saw and what he said, this was naturally a state of transition to a new situation. The significant changes at the top had not yet been translated into changes that could be felt at the level of the everyday functioning of the place. Abu Zeid said
that they are now in the process of designing a new work plan for the Centre. The craftsmen I talked to expressed cautious optimism though no tangible change had been felt yet.

Due to the transitional state the Centre is going through, it is not possible at this point to determine the actual changes in the work process. However, I would still like to mention a few words regarding the restructuring of the Centre. As mentioned, the most important aspect of this process is the decision to appoint a craftsman as the director of the Centre. This decision carries a symbolic weight that cannot be ignored. In addition to this appointment, all the members of the administrative staff that weighed over the Centre in the previous phase were sent back to Wekalet Al-Ghuri. Abu Zeid mentions that this staff had actually been seconded to work at the Centre while it was administered by the Arts’ Sector of the Ministry of Culture. Now that the Centre is being administered by the Fund for Cultural Development and that the restoration work in Wekalet Al-Ghuri is completed, the seconded staff went back there. These two decisions in fact address the main point of criticism that was levelled against the Centre and are the main reason for an air of optimism that this may be a new era reflecting a different vision and attitude on the part of the state.

Apart from the symbolic significance of Abu Zeid’d appointment, his case is illuminating for this discussion being an official employee who is also a product of the traditional system of apprenticeship within a family firm. Although he does not mention the word, Abu Zeid talks of a symbiotic relationship between the traditional and the official context of crafts’ production. He sees that the state-
created institution benefits from having master artisans who were trained over many years in the traditional way. They are guardians of the secrets of the profession that were handed over to them by their families or their masters. On the other hand, he sees that a place like the Centre for Traditional Crafts is beneficial for the trade. The traditional way of crafts’ production is practised within families that specialise in certain professions. This leads to a situation whereby the various trades are closed within the particular families. The Centre provides the chance for “opening up” the profession and spreading it widely among people who come from different places. He also sees that the Centre’s mission in training a new generation of craftsmen will benefit the work in the traditional workshops as it would provide them with well-trained craftspeople to work with them.

The symbiotic relationship between the traditional the official context has many manifestations. Abu Zeid is conscious of the way the two worlds feed into each other and considers himself lucky to be in this position that bridges them. It is significant to mention that he considers his stay at the Centre temporary. He will ultimately go back to his family workshop.

**Suq El-Fustat**

Just a few metres away from the Centre for Traditional Crafts, we find Suq El-Fustat, described in the brochure distributed to visitors as a “medieval-style market (containing) 47 stores earmarked for local artisans and handicrafts.” The purpose of the market as stated in the brochure is to provide space for producers
or NGO’s that support the production of traditional crafts, especially the ones that are “on the verge of extinction”.

The market is part of a larger endeavour that started in 1999 for the purpose of upgrading this part of Old Cairo which boasts a concentration of Egypt’s most significant religious monuments including the Mosque of Amr Ibn Al Aas, the Hanging Church and a Jewish Synagogue. It was, however, a dilapidated slum that was in a great need of upgrading. A rehabilitation project was initiated by the Ministry of Tourism and entrusted to architect and restoration expert Mona Zakaria (Al-Ahram Weekly 18-24 January 2001 Fayza Hassan). This upgrading project was in fact a great success and is to be considered a model one. In addition to fulfilling its objectives in upgrading the area and providing it with much needed services, the project managed to integrate the inhabitants of the area in the implementation of the changes and not to disturb their daily lives while the work was being done.

Suq El-Fustat is beautifully and thoughtfully designed by a talented and dedicated architect who also possessed a holistic vision. Apart from the purpose of supporting traditional crafts, Suq El-Fustat was intended to offer the tourist a more respectable and decent alternative to the ‘bazaar’ where quality is not guaranteed, and the prices are not fixed. Unfortunately, the place seems to be suffering from the ills of ‘package tourism’ that is the norm now in Egypt. Despite its very close proximity to important tourist attractions, there are hardly any tourists visiting the place. One of the problems is that tourists are not allowed to wander on their own because of security directives (Al-Ahram Al-Iqtisadi 25
October 2004). Another problem again relates to ‘package tourism’ where the
tour leader controls all the movements of the tourists. According to Mr Mohamed
El-Tonsi, who works in the administration at Suq El-Fustat, the biggest problem
faced by the Suq is the tour leader who only directs tourists to shops that give
him a commission. The commission is first of all too high, and second it is against
the principles of the place, according to Mr Tonsi.

Asala

As mentioned in a previous section, the NGO named ASALA (authenticity)
was established by Ezz el-Din Naguib in 1996. The NGO, which focuses on
promoting and reviving traditional crafts was created for the purpose of
bypassing entrenched bureaucratic hurdles. Interestingly, it has been founded by
Ezz el-Din Naguib in 1996 while he was serving as Director of Traditional Crafts
in the Ministry of Culture. He says: “Establishing Asala was a necessity, as
traditional crafts were not really on the Ministry’s agenda. This led to a
deterioration in the craftsmen’s conditions… Those of them working (for the
Ministry) do not really work, and when they do they cannot find the necessary
raw material, and if they do they do not find the suitable compensation, and if
they do they do not find the right marketing mechanisms. When that exists they
do not get any benefits from the sale of their products, as all the proceeds go
back to the State treasury” (Naguib 2004:9-10) (paraphrased). These are
Naguib’s direct motivations for establishing the NGO. But these reasons are
specific only to work within the Ministry of Culture. More generally, the motivation
for founding the NGO is to “rescue traditional crafts from extinction”. This is not just an end in itself but is a means in a crucial battle. “In order to be salvaged from the dangers of cultural globalisation that is creeping towards us, we have to sweep the dust off the sources of our cultural identity”. (quoted in Asala 2004:3).

While Naguib was in office, Asala was involved in a symbiotic relationship with the Ministry of Culture. The presence of the NGO ensured great flexibility especially regarding the marketing aspect. Apart from that, the NGO provided training and organised exhibitions. According to Naguib, the fact that the NGO relied on the existing physical and administrative resources of the Ministry of Culture meant that the greatest part of the profit went to the producers, thus providing them with a much needed incentive.

The most significant achievement of this association is the production of “the Encyclopaedia of Traditional Crafts”, which is a thorough work of documentation carried out by folklorists and ethnologists. While Naguib was in office, the NGO benefited from using the Ministry’s resources; (place, administrative staff and high-level representation in its events). Now that Naguib is retired it is deprived of most of this. It is not clear what will become of Asala. But in all cases, the Encyclopaedia represents a valuable and enduring result of Asala’s work.

“Women, the guardians of tradition”: The Talli Project

---

30 The first part was funded by the Agha Khan Foundation and the second part by the Ministry of Culture (p.11)
In 2003, the National Council for Women, headed by Egypt's First Lady established a specialised committee for launching a project entitled: “Al-Mar’a Hafizat al-Turath” (Women, the guardians of tradition). The first activity of this Committee was the project to document and develop the art of talli (Asfour 2004:4).

Talli is a form of embroidery using silver or gold-plated metallic threads on silk, cotton or tulle material. It was a craft traditionally practiced by women in Upper Egypt, especially in the governorates of Assyut and Sohag. The stitch is complicated and requires special training. Talli is embroidered in special motifs derived from the local environment.

The work of the Talli project consisted mainly in documenting the existing talli work, both in the villages where it is still practiced and in the specialised museums where talli products from previous generations are kept. One important objective was to collect and preserve the traditional motifs in order to use them as guides for future work.

This endeavour combines a gender concern, a development concern, and, above all, a concern for preserving traditional culture as national heritage. These objectives are expressed as follows:

“The goal of developing the art of talli is to revive it and develop it in order for it to become an economic activity that would be useful for those who practice it and those around them. Yet the higher goal is to preserve it as an authentic Egyptian art, and to prevent meddling with the inherited motifs that characterise this folk art and give it its specificity.” (National Council for women: 69) In a personal
communiqué with the document’s author and project director, Dr Nawal El-Messiri, she highlighted the importance of preserving the traditional motifs, being the essential component of the folk tradition; it is the motifs which gives Egyptian talli its identity and distinguishes it, say, from Indian talli. She sees that an outside intervention can suggest and instigate new uses or functions for the product but any change in the motifs should emerge spontaneously from the creators of the art form as a reflection of changes in their society that they experience and interact with.

The project culminated with an exhibition of talli art that was held in May 2004 and inaugurated by the First Lady and other State dignitaries.

Although the project as initiated by the NCW has now ended, the impetus it has given to promoting this art created a momentum; the women who were involved in the project were eager to continue, but there was a problem with marketing. Due to the efforts of the project’s director Nawal el-Messiri and the support of the Egyptian Folk Tradition Society, a marketing outlet was established at the Society’s premises in Cairo. Messiri, however, sees that the local market has been almost saturated, especially given that Talli pieces are pricey due to expensive raw material and the long time it takes to produce the pieces. She sees that in order for this process to realise its full potential there has to be a next step of entrepreneurial intervention towards exporting this product.

The Talli project is an experiment that is to be taken seriously. It seems to have benefited from a fortunate combination of factors:

1. High level official sponsorship
2. Delegating implementation to high calibre specialists
3. Integrating the social scientific aspect of documentation with the development component
4. Realistic and practical goals, especially the focussed scope in the sense of concentrating on one art/craft in a specific region.

In addition to the Talli project, the “Women the guardians of tradition” committee of the National Council for Women has also undertaken a project to document and revive the traditional embroidered costumes of Sinai Bedouins.

**Conclusion:**

In this study, I have tried to shed some light on an important but under-researched segment of the rural population in Upper Egypt. In particular, I have tried to analyse the ways in which forces of globalisation impact the life and work of craftspeople. I tried to show that the production and consumption of rural traditional crafts are organically connected, whereby production responds to local demand in the context of enduring cultural practices in Upper Egypt. In the context of rapid social change and encroaching forces of globalisation, it may seem anomalous that such local products are still largely part of people’s everyday life. But these products remain in demand, either for their practical or symbolic attributes. In addition to that, demand for these products may be an indirect way in which the villages support their marginal populations.
The characteristic features of Upper Egyptian society contribute to the persistence of crafts production and to conserving local modes of production and consumption. Crafts and craftspeople of the region, in their turn play a major part in perpetuating the cultural character of this region. This region is often described as “conservative”, which refers mainly to strict cultural norms and morality. Here I want to draw attention to a different aspect of this designation, that of “conserving”. This society conserves not only morals but also social relations, social institutions, in addition to objects and the ways they are used. By no means is there an aversion to change or accepting the new. It is that the new does not easily replace the old but coexists with it, thanks to the exceptional ability of the society to accommodate many layers of social practice.

Craftspeople tend to adapt, as much as possible to social transformations, and upheavals, but of course not indefinitely. I here go back to the example mentioned above of the researcher Iman Mahran who helped extend water and electricity to a group of Qena potters only to find that this raised the value of land leading them to sell it and abandon the profession. Situations like this one pushes us to an uneasy hypothesis: that poverty is positively correlated with enduring traditional modes, including crafts production. Preserving traditional crafts is, of course, a noble cause, but how can this goal be harmonised with the more important goal of improving the standard of living of the poor and marginal producers?

One track to be explored in this connection concerns the valuation of crafts as art. This is a path of transformation that carries promise, though
needless to say it is not a panacea. I chose to explore this path where production and consumption are externally motivated, creating a momentum that simultaneously preserves and transforms crafts. One important point I would like to stress in this respect concerns particularly the elite demand for traditional products. It is true that globalisation drives towards homogenisation, yet it is precisely this trend which has given rise to greater needs for distinction. In this respect the “traditional”, the “local”, the “authentic”, the “handmade”…etc. acquire greater importance and a higher value.

It could also be argued that traditional crafts function as a marker of social distinction and “good taste” is not confined to the realm of individual choice, but has implications for modern forms of nationalism. I therefore tried to document the relatively recent phenomenon whereby traditional crafts are becoming the object of official and semi-official attention in an unprecedented way. The examples I presented may vary in their vision, scope and degree of success. However, apart from their focus on traditional crafts, they share at least some degree of official backing and the fact that they have been active during the past few years. Traditional crafts now represent an emerging avenue for the expression of contemporary Egyptian nationalism as indicated in their increasing prominence in official discourse and in the many state-sponsored projects targeting their promotion and preservation. Through an analysis of these projects and the discourse surrounding this ‘revival’, I have tried to question the ubiquitous claim that these crafts are on the verge of extinction, and to show that
the existence and stability of a continuous working tradition is indispensable for any degree of success these projects may boast.

The state’s recent concern with reviving traditional crafts is necessarily linked to a discourse on national identity. It is significant that the Akhmim embroidery project, which started as a local women’s development project, has increasingly acquired a national significance, with the First Lady opening the 1996 exhibition and, more importantly, the Akhmim Centre has recently become a source of gifts for State guests which signifies that these products are now considered as fit markers for national identity. (Loula Lahham. Personal Communiqué 16 January 2005)

I have earlier discussed an example of a political economy-informed approach to the analysis of crafts’ production in a globalised world. My most important reason for distancing myself from such explanation is that this is a view that promotes cynicism. It is not fair (and perhaps not very responsible) to brand development interventions (for example) as just instruments of the capitalist system. In describing and documenting development, entrepreneurial, or state-sponsored efforts to promote traditional crafts, I have tried to take seriously the motivations of those in charge of the external interventions. This is a domain that is fraught with anomalies and contradictions. Rather than embarking on an exercise of spotting such contradictions, I instead chose to highlight these efforts and shed some light on their positive aspects.

I did mean to present hopeful stories. But, of course, we should not be triumphant. There are dilemmas associated with interventions of this sort. One of
them relates to the power, interests and knowledge that go into defining the
traditional as heritage worth preserving, and further decisions that have to be
made regarding which aspects are to be transformed, and in what ways.
References

“ASALA Association and the past, present and future of traditional crafts.” Asala
No.1, December 2004.

Al-Ahram Al-Iqtisadi 25 October 2004

Allam, Itimad. *Traditional Crafts and Industries between change and stability* (in

Ammoun, Denise. *Egypte des Mains Magiques*. Institut Français d'Archeologie


 Changed Social Relations" in *Directions of Change in Rural Egypt* (ed.
Nicholas Hopkins and Kirsten Westergaard. Cairo: The American

University in Cairo Press. 2000 (First published 1927)

Bliss, Frank. Artisanat et artisanat d’art dans les oases du désert occidental

Brissaud, Philippe. *Les Ateliers de Potiers de la Region de Louqsor*. Le Caire :


Fayza Hassan. Al-Ahram Weekly 18-24 January 2001

Français D'Archéologie Orientale. 1988

---------, *Poteries et Proverbes D’Egypte*. Le Caire : Institut Français
D’Archéologie Orientale. 1992

Koptiuch, Kristin. *A Poetics of Political Economy in Egypt*. Univeristy of


Nadim, Asaad. Traditional Arts and Crafts from Cairo. Prism Series 3 n.d.

Ministry of Culture Foreign Culture Information Department.


www.egyptos.com/wood_workshop.html
www.nagada.net