

Jakob Lucko
HIST 359

Coptic Roots and Involvement in 20th Century Egyptian Nationalism

The Egyptian national revolution of 1919 was a pivotal moment that facilitated the rise of a powerful territorialist-Egyptian-nationalism. This movement fundamentally relied on defining Egypt as a nation shaped by centuries of cultural accumulation—an enduring national entity that both withstood and adapted to the millennia of historical change it experienced. Central to the territorialist nationalism lies the Coptic community and their unique historical identity. This essay seeks to display the pre-modern Coptic fight for Egyptian heritage and the later 20th century use of the already established Coptic identity in the national revolution of 1919. In essence, I wish to present the similar use of Egyptian history in the respective fights for permanent and integral Egyptian presence—arguing the nationalistic sentiments of the early 20th century relied heavily on the ancient Coptic identity to unify Egypt. However, an understanding of how Coptic became synonymous with Egypt is required first.

It is necessary to begin the discussion with how scholarly work has held and affected the Coptic community. The current estimation of the Copt population varies—the current church records claim their population to be as many as 10 million and official census possibly undercounts them at 3 million¹—it must be noted that the Copts are a small but significant population of Christians in Arab countries, yet are not treated significantly in Western or Egyptian scholarly work.² That being said, as Egypt's indigenous Christians, Copts make up

¹ Kenneth N. Purcell, "The place of the Copts in the imagined future of Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, No. 3 (July 1998), p. 448. Footnote no. 13.

² Paul S. Rowe, "Neo-millet Systems and Transnational Religious Movements: The Humayun Decrees and Church Construction in Egypt," *Journal of Church and State* 49, No. 2 (Spring 2007), p. 333.

about 95% of Egypt's Christian population and around 15% of Egypt's total population.^{3,4} Some historians call the group a "puzzling enigma" in western countries given their unique position as a Christian community situated in an Arabic speaking, primarily Islamic state.⁵ The community is also not homogenous as there are many district sects of the Coptic Church, which could be reason for Western neglect and confusion. However, some historians claim the church fell between the cracks in religious studies "because it was neither tribal nor a product of colonial missionary activities."⁶ This kind of sentiment is not alone and as my research proves, the Coptic identity and history is more intricate than Western and secular Egyptian scholarly work like to suggest. Though "Research on the Copts of Egypt has developed especially rapidly in new directions during the past twenty years,"⁷ and recent studies highlight diverse Coptic voices,⁸ there is still scholarly neglect, differing perceptions, confusion, and stereotyping.⁹ These challenges only add fuel to the already-present discrimination and exclusion to a group that sees itself as "part of Egypt's unbreakable fabric."¹⁰ Their identity has transformed greatly, and the scholarly neglect is evident of their transformation. Moreover, the Coptic presence is synonymous with Egypt and yet their history is distorted and their identity discriminated against. But to further understand why the Coptic identity was central in the 1919 national revolution, a

³ May Massaad, "The Copts of Egypt: State Discrimination and Exclusion," Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies (2011), p. 1.

⁴ Arietta Papaconstantinou, "Historiography, Hagiography, and the Making of the Coptic 'Church of the Martyrs' in Early Islamic Egypt," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 60 (2006), p. 71.

⁵ Nelly van Doorn-Harder, "Finding a Platform: Studying the Copts in the 19th and 20th Centuries," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, No. 3 (August 2010), p. 479.

⁶ Doorn-Harder, p. 479.

⁷ Doorn-Harder, p. 479.

⁸ Vivian Ibrahim, "Legitimizing Lay and State Authority: Challenging the Coptic Church in Late Nineteenth-Century Egypt," in *The Long 1890s in Egypt: Colonial Quiescence, Subterranean Resistance*, ed. Marilyn Booth and Anthony Gorman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 118.

⁹ Vivian Ibrahim, review of *The Coptic Question in the Mubarak Era* by Sebastian Elsässer, *Middle East Journal* 69, No. 2 (Spring 2015), p. 310.

¹⁰ Karim al-Gawhary, "Copts in the 'Egyptian Fabric'," *Middle East Report*, No. 200, *Minorities in the Middle East: Power and the Politics of Difference* (1996), p. 21.

nineteen-century-retrospective-look at the Coptic roots is needed to fully grasp the puzzling Coptic enigma.

The following description of the Coptic religion and culture is written by Bishop Gregorios of Cairo (1919-2001) who was deeply involved in promoting the Coptic culture and played significant roles in inter-religious relations. Bishop Gregorios' definition of the community follows:

The Copts are the direct descendants of the Old Egyptians. Today they form the Christian minority in Egypt whose number is about nine million... "Copt" and "Egypt" were originally one and the same word, ... The Coptic language is the descendant of Ancient or Old Egyptian, the last stage in the long development of the language spoken by Ancient Egyptians.¹¹

Defining the Egyptian Copts is a difficult task and in part the reason for this essay wanting to uncover how the historical roots produced a national and religious identity still standing today. This is to say that some, particularly Coptic figures and authors, regard the Coptic church far older and more historical in Egypt's heritage than other secular historians. This position is benign until it becomes the foundation for a "pure Egyptianism, with all links to the Arab and Muslim identities severed."¹² Although Bishop Gregorios does not appear to argue for the "*Copts are the indigenous people of Egypt, and Muslims are guests*"¹³ sentiment— especially given his role in fostering mutual understanding and respect between Orthodox Christians and Muslims— it is easy to turn the Coptic-indigeneity notion into a full force Coptic nationalism

¹¹ Bishop Gregorios, also states, "'Copt' and 'Egyptian' derive from one and the same Greek word 'aigyptios', the adjective by which the Greek referred to the original inhabitants of the country. From this word were derived the Arabic words 'gibt' or 'qobt' (Copt) and 'aqbat' (the Copts). From the Greek word were derived The English 'Egypt' and 'Egyptian' coming from Old Egyptian through Greek, whereas 'Copt' and 'Coptic' came from the same root originally, but through Arabic." Quoted from "Christianity, the Coptic Religion and Ethnic Minorities in Egypt," *GeoJournal* 6, No. 1 (1982), p. 57, 58.

¹² Azmi Bishara, "Can We Speak of a 'Coptic Question' in Egypt?," Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies (2011), p. 19.

¹³ Bishara, p. 19.

narrative— a narrative used in the 20th century. That being said, the very definition of “Copt” is precarious. For the purpose of this essay, “Copt” is in reference to *the ethnic indigenous inhabitants of the Valley and the religious members of the Coptic Orthodox Church— part of the broader Oriental Orthodox Churches which is to say part of the non-Chalcedonian churches, distinct from the Greek Orthodox Church.*^{14,15,16,17}

As mentioned above, the history and roots of the Coptic community is somewhat confusing, and as I will display in this essay, somewhat misleading. Nevertheless, Coptic history dates itself to the Era of Diocletian circa 284 CE. However, this date only became commonly used in the community after the Arab conquest around 641 AD.¹⁸ Nevertheless the early centuries of the Common Era are central to the self-definition of the Coptic church. This is to say the narrative which the community later associated with is essentially the beginning of Christianity and consequently ties the Coptic genesis into the birth of Christianity— a vital tie given their need for a unique Egyptian Christian identity. Initially, their horoscopes and private inscriptions referred to their roots as simply the *Era of Dioecian* but post Arab-conquest, as the Coptic Community was looking to solidify its presence among the Egyptian Christian

¹⁴ Bishop Gregorius, p. 57, 58.

¹⁵ Bishara writes, “Before inhabiting Egypt, Arabs called the indigenous people of Egypt “the Copts,” and called Egypt “the Land of the Copt”. The term “Coptic” comes from an alteration of the Greek “Egyptos,” the name given by Greeks to Egypt and the Nile Valley. However, the term “Coptic” and “Copts” began to be used in practice to designate “Christian” Egyptians during the Islamic period and after the conversion of the majority of the local population to Islam.” p. 6.

¹⁶ Arietta Papaconstantinou writes, “The Egyptians, speakers of the Coptic language, thus turned into the Copts, the indigenous population of the Valley and members of the Coptic, that is to say anti-Chalcedonian, Church. Thus, the terms defining the group acquired a meaning that was simultaneously religious and ethnic.” p. 72.

¹⁷ Mark Purcell’s straightforward historical positioning of the Coptic community is helpful in placing the community amongst a larger historical framework that is seemingly incongruent with the historical framework propagated by the Coptic community: “Egypt’s Coptic Christians have lived in the Nile valley for more than 19 centuries. According to tradition, they were converted to Christianity in about 60 CE by St Mark the Evangelist. They broke from the rest of the Eastern Orthodox church in the fifth century; the ostensible reason was a theological difference over the essence of Christ, but the split could also be plausibly attributed to a proto-nationalist desire for freedom from the foreign domination of the Byzantine emperor.” Quotation by Mark Purcell, “A place for the Copts: Imagined Territory and Spatial Conflict in Egypt,” *Ecumene* 5, no. 4 (October 1998), p. 434.

¹⁸ Papaconstantinou, p. 67.

communities, the church's impetus transformed into the *Era of the Martyrs*.¹⁹ This facet of the Coptic history is crucial in understanding the transformation of their identity because by associating themselves with the Great Persecution and the early church, the Coptic status was elevated within the Christian communities under Arab control. It should also be worth mentioning that many other Christian groups tried to claim these sacred roots as their own.²⁰ The Constantinian Church and the Meletians for example attempted to claim these roots to position their churches at the heart of the Christian founding.²¹ Even though groups like the Meletians could lay a better claim for being "The Church of the Martyrs," the Coptic church was still able to self-identify with the Christian founding primarily through active myth making—post Arab Conquest—that placed their history congruent with the Christian martyrs and legitimized themselves as the real heir of the persecuted Church.²² Saints, important Christian figures and church leaders like the Alexandrian bishops, Athanasius and Cyril were given Egyptian blood. The same for emperor who persecuted early church figures; and "By making the persecutor Diocletian an Egyptian, the Egyptian Church made for itself a sort of Judas Iscariot, the necessary renegade, the person through whom the founding sacrifice became possible."²³ The community tied countless church figures to an Egyptian and Coptic heritage and by doing so made the early founding of the Christian church a sort of natural ancestor to the Coptic community. Another example is how the title of "the first martyr"—which is traditionally held by Saint Stephen—was contested and claimed for by a young Egyptian figure, Eudaimon.²⁴ However, what separates the Coptic quest for the persecution narrative from the many groups

¹⁹ Papaconstantinou, p. 79.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Papaconstantinou, p. 80.

²² Papaconstantinou, p. 79.

²³ Papaconstantinou, p. 81.

²⁴ Ibid., 79.

who attempted to co-appropriate the martyr roots, lies very much in the Coptic emphasis on topographical details transpired via Christian monasticism.

The established Coptic identity emerged via a twofold ethnic and territorial amalgamation that produced the Coptic myths but also relied on these myths to further establish their legitimacy. In essence, the eighth century Coptic creation and propagation of martyrological narratives was the method of legitimizing that became the result and product of such legitimacy— which is to say Coptic myths established their unique identity while mutually providing the foundation to their myths. The Coptic-myth-to-identity is cyclical in nature through its religious and ethnic fusion of the Copts and Monophysites.

After the Arab-Conquest, the Coptic community had to distinguish itself as a an Egyptian Christian dhimmis.²⁵ The Coptic leaders accomplished this by actively distinguishing themselves ethnically and territorially from the Christian groups in Egypt— a division that had previously only been religious. What had originated as a theological dispute following the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, became the post-conquest foundation for the Coptic separation. This is to say the Chalcedonians— the state church and Roman imperial-favored religion— and Monophysites’— early speakers of Coptic in monasteries— division had already existed since the council, but a post-conquest reinterpretation of this division created a new partition for the purpose of Coptic legitimization.²⁶ Doctrinal divisions within the Egyptian Christian community posed a threat to their unity and consequent survival under Arab control. Thus, Coptic leaders needed to legitimize their identity as indigenously Egyptian. Therefore, the Chalcedonians became associated with the Romans—portrayed as foreign, oppressive, and corrupt in faith—

²⁵ Ibid., 69.

²⁶ Ibid., 84-85.

and the Monophysites became synonymous with local Egyptians— indigenous speakers of the Coptic, oppressed by the corrupt faith.²⁷

“After the Council of Chalcedon, and especially after Justinian’s efforts to bring anti-Chalcedonians back into the sphere of the imperial church, the use of Coptic became a sign of resistance and identity among the non-Chalcedonians. This was partly because early on the language was very common in monasteries, which were to become the pillars of the Monophysite Church.”²⁸

Post-conquest Coptic authors and leaders harkened back to the earlier division to separate speakers of Coptic from the Greek speaking Romans and elites. This simultaneously positioned the Monophysite Church as the legitimate church in the new Islamic order and emphasized institutional continuity— producing an uninterrupted history of the Coptic Church and basis for their myths.²⁹ A distinct Coptic identity was produced, founded in the historical roots of persecution and perseverance.

It is clear that Egyptian Copts were able to create a unique identity through a distinct territorial imagination that used myths, monasteries, and language to solidify their presence in Egypt. However, through envisioning “Egypt as a distinct place that has a unique history, geography and culture... the separate territorial nation has no links (or...only loose links) to the great Islamic community ... to the Ottoman state ... or to the nation of Arabic speakers.”³⁰ The community is not part of the global nation-state system but rather linked inescapably with Egypt.³¹ This fusion is integral in the upcoming discussion of the 20th century nationalist movement.

²⁷ Ibid., 72.

²⁸ Ibid., 84.

²⁹ Ibid., 78.

³⁰ Mark Purcell, “A place for the Copts: Imagined Territory and Spatial Conflict in Egypt,” *Ecumene* 5, no. 4 (October 1998), p. 442.

³¹ Purcell, p. 443.

Much of this essay has been given to the Coptic grasp for ancient roots through active Coptic mythmaking under the Arab Empire. The phenomenon of distinguishing the Egyptian entity resurges almost identically in the 20th century. Although the Egyptian nationalist movement became active in the 1890s, the First World War and the British protectorate over Egypt fueled the movement to a breaking point.³² That breaking point and “immediate trigger of the nationwide unrest in spring 1919 was the arrest and deportation of Sa’ad Zaghlul, leader of the Egyptian nationalist movement... A day after the arrest of Zaghlul, Cairo erupted in a series of protests.”³³ The protests were ironically filled with Western ideology of self-governance and democracy— principles the West conveyed, but did not extend to colonies or protectorates. In his letter to Woodrow Wilson, Sa’ad Zaghlul expresses that “These principles—which were declared in the name of the American people as the basis of a democratic and a durable peace— have become so deep-rooted in the hearts of the whole Egyptian people that they revolted, unarmed, for the application of these principles to their country.”³⁴ Widespread Egyptian rioting was met with British colonial state military force seeking to restore law and order via collective punishment.³⁵ The fight for decolonization is a multifaceted process and its totality is out of the scope of this essay. However, I wish to display one broad aspect of the Egyptian fight against British rule— unity under an Egyptian identity.

It should be mentioned here that many of the revolution leaders were prominent Coptic notables within the revolutionary Wafd Party. In the period leading up to and during the

³² Israel Gershoni, "The Evolution of National Culture in Modern Egypt: Intellectual Formation and Social Diffusion, 1892-1945," *Poetics Today* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1992), p. 325.

³³ James E. Kitchen, "Violence in Defence of Empire," *Journal of Modern European History / Zeitschrift für moderne europäische Geschichte / Revue d'histoire européenne contemporaine* 13, no. 2 (2015), p. 252

³⁴ Letter, "Saad Zaghloul to His Excellency President Woodrow Wilson" (June 6, 1919) from *The Wilson Center Digital Archive*, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/letter-saad-zaghloul-his-excellency-president-woodrow-wilson>

³⁵ Kitchen, p. 259, 260.

revolution lay Copts achieved high political positions. For example, “Two Copts succeeded in becoming prime minister: Boutros Ghali Pasha (1908-1910), and Yusef Wehbeh Pasha (1919-1920),”³⁶ and Coptic priests like Qummus Sergius held significant power within the community by the time of the revolution.³⁷ Prominent Coptic figures within the Wafd Party led revolutionary nationalistic movements, and their participation is most noteworthy for this essay. This is to say that while the Coptic identity had already placed their identity within the historical genesis of Egypt, their willingness to extend the Egyptian identity across religious lines speaks to the necessary Egyptian unity required to fight the British but also speaks to the privileged position of Copts being “part of the Egyptian fabric” which allowed the community to establish a broader Egyptian identity.³⁸

Nevertheless, the 20th century Egyptian identity can be simply defined with the “the image of the cross and the crescent flag intertwined, symbolizing national and religious unity.”³⁹ Furthermore the revolutionary Wafd Party’s Constitution of 1919 expresses the previously mentioned fusion between the Egyptian ethnic and religious identity: “The Egyptian Wafd derives its powers from the desires of the Egyptian people, as expressed directly through its representatives in the legislative bodies.”⁴⁰ The same unity-narrative shines through when Qummus Sergius said, “I would rather have every single Copt die and Egypt live,” in a sermon at the Al-Azhar Mosque.⁴¹ The flag, the Wafd constitution, and Qummus Sergius’ sermon to an

³⁶ Bishara also states: “Since 1883, a custom was established to appoint one Copt in every cabinet, the number rose to two for the first time in 1924 when Saad Zaghlul formed his cabinet,” p. 9.

³⁷ Ibrahim, “Legitimizing Lay and State Authority,” p. 128.

³⁸ Karim al-Gawhary, p. 21.

³⁹ Ibrahim, “Sailors, Merchants, Migrants,” p. 41.

⁴⁰ David S. Moore, American University of Beirut (Lebanon) ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. “The Wafd Party of Egypt, (1936-1945), “Appendix to Chapter 1: The Wafd Constitution of 1919,”” p. 151.

⁴¹ Karim al-Gawhary, 21.

Islamic-Christian audience all display how Egypt put its historical differences aside and unified itself under an Egyptian identity.

The historical narrative of Coptic resistance to foreign domination under the Arab-Empire provided a foundation upon which their role in the national movement of 1919 could be built. The Coptic myths and consequent fusion of ethnicity and religion provided the necessary historical example for 20th century Coptic revolutionaries to do the same and blend the religious and ethnic lines in the formation of a powerful Egyptian identity. The 1919 revolution relied on unity; and the Coptic community's distinct Egyptian heritage proved essentially useful in creating a national image that demarcated Egypt— though diverse in religion— as distinctly and inherently Egyptian.

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