

Camels, Sand, and Pyramids: Struggles with Tourism in the Golden Land of the Pharaohs

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Abstract

In 2010, 14.7 million tourists traveled to Egypt, generating 12.5 billion dollars in revenue.¹ Egypt is such a popular tourist destination because for centuries, Westerners and Arabs alike have held a specific, solidified impression of the country in their minds. Examining this enduring and pervasive conception of Egypt is the purpose of this research, as this paper investigates how Egypt is being represented to tourists in the 21st century, and how this representation has changed since the nineteenth century when Europeans first began to travel to the nation. Westerners often socialize youth to believe in a timeless image of Egypt, and this ideal has been perpetuated by the Egyptian government in order to generate tourist revenue for its economy. Through a review of historical and social science literature on Egyptian tourism, as well as an examination of the website of the Egyptian Tourism Authority, this paper applies the concepts of the consumption of the “other” and the commodification of culture, colonial nostalgia, Orientalism, and the formation of national identity, within a framework of the politics of culture. The conclusion reveals that the commodification and consumption of the ancient Egyptian “other,” a sense of wanting to return to the glory of the British colonial period in Egypt, and the nation being constructed as an exotic Oriental land remain relevant in 21st century Egyptian tourism. So, while Egypt relies heavily on profits from its tourism industry, it has been fetishized and reduced to stereotypical symbols, which can greatly impact the identity of the Egyptian people. By understanding that the pervasive international cultural perception of the country is antiquated and does not fully represent the modern nation of Egypt, the global awareness of individuals can be raised.

Keywords: Tourism, Egypt, Orientalism

1. Introduction:

For hundreds of years individuals who have had the means to do so have traveled to distant lands, exploring diverse cultures and landscapes. One could ask what motivates this human curiosity to travel, and it has been argued that it is the “tourist gaze,” or the seeking out of authentication and truth in an environment different from the one in which an individual normally occupies, as a way to reaffirm personal identity.² Consequently, individuals tend to only travel to places where they will know what to expect once they get there.³ Egypt in particular is such a popular tourist destination because besides the fact that it is steeped in ancient history, for centuries foreigners and Arabs alike have held a specific solidified impression of the country in their minds.

Historically, Egyptians have presented themselves to tourists in certain shifting ways, promoting symbols such as camels, pyramids, and sand in order to assert and affirm their cultural identity, especially as the nation has emerged from its colonization by the British during the first half of the twentieth century. In all nations there are processes by which certain symbols, cultural discourses, and practices are allowed to triumph over others. This is called the politics of culture, and it has occurred in Egypt as the nation has struggled to solidify its own identity so that it can

promote itself to tourists with a definitive sense of a mystical, mysterious, and romanticized land. This paper will explore the struggles of Egypt over the different effects that this stereotype has had over the course of contemporary Egyptian cultural history.

2. History of Egyptian Tourism:

Thousands of years ago, individuals of many different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds traveled to the ancient kingdom of Egypt, often becoming awestruck by its powerful pharaohs and magnificent art and architecture. The land blended the rich soil of the Nile River with the vast surrounding desert, the relics of the past with the visions of the current pharaohs. In particular, the Greeks, Ptolemies, and Hellenes who initially traveled to Egypt in ancient times, “selected, emphasized, and glamorized the wisdom of ancient Egypt and developed their own version of Egyptian civilization.”⁴ In the ancient world, people did have a certain impression of Egypt, and in some ways, this notion carries into the 21st century. Currently, many individuals travel to Egypt because they expect to be swept away by the ancient mystery of the desert. Interestingly, Egypt’s perpetuation of its own stereotype is evident on the website of the Egyptian Tourism Authority, which frequently promotes its motto, “Egypt: Where it all begins,” and also that, “no place has the magic, mystery, and pleasures of Egypt. Travel to Egypt to discover a world of wonder.”⁵ These statements lead one to question where this stereotype of Egyptian culture originated.

2.1 Orientalism And The Construction Of The Egyptian Stereotype:

In the 1970s, Edward Said attempted to explain the dynamics between the Western world and the Middle East through his concept of Orientalism. Said argued that the world is divided into two parts – the West, or Occident, and the East, or the Orient. Under this theory, the West asserts its dominance and authority over the other nations through its construction of the Orient. Orientalism groups the entire Middle East together based on their common language and religious practice of Islam, without regard for major cultural differences; Orientalism at its core has been used as a Western understanding of the regions of the world that are believed to be distinct from Europe.⁶ Thus, the West depicts the Middle East as having “simulated village life...artistically represented as exotic, as potentially culturally backward, peculiar, and unchanging in the context of modernization.”⁷ Orientalism is certainly applicable to tourism in Egypt, as the idea of a traditional Egypt stuck in its ancient past was constructed and then marketed to nineteenth century European tourists who wanted to travel to a new, exotic place.⁸ One does have to create a stereotype before being able to stigmatize certain individuals with it and use it to promote tourism.

It has been argued that the first individuals in the modern world to acquire the Egyptian stereotype were the early nineteenth century European artists who traveled to Egypt to draw their own renderings of ancient sites; these pencil and charcoal drawings are still seen in many books on ancient Egyptian history today. Essentially, these artists served to show individuals in the West the magnificence of Egypt, and in the process, therefore attracting Westerners to what was depicted as a mysterious desert land. In the context of the time, many Westerners came to Egypt because of its seeming stability, as it was rooted so firmly in the ancient past. Consequently, with so much great change occurring in the early 1800s in Europe and the United States, individuals were drawn to the antiquity of Egypt.⁹ Earlier during the European Renaissance, there was a great interest in ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian texts and artifacts as a means to justify the secular research being done in both philosophy and science, so Europe already tended to look to Egypt as being one of the ancient founders of their modern scientific pursuits. Europeans also greatly respected the Egyptian skill to construct monuments that were able to withstand thousands of years of history with minimal decay.¹⁰

In the nineteenth century, interest in traveling to the Middle East additionally grew because Westerners assumed that the presence of a colonial European power in Egypt ensured that travel there would be safe. With Middle Eastern travel gaining popularity, there was a subsequent rise in the number of travel agencies, and by the late twentieth century, tourism was booming in Egypt and around the world; due to this, individuals needed to find a way to promote their nations to tourists.¹¹ It seemed most promising to market Egypt based on its mysterious ancient past, and since Egypt had such a complex history, it was simpler to reduce it to a few major factors. As a result, such essentializing symbols of nations that emerge are passed down over time not because they are accurate representations, but because they prompt an emotive reaction from the viewer.¹²

Beginning in the 1950s, the portrayals of Egypt came to be perpetuated through the artistic medium of film. The former Egyptian pharaoh Cleopatra was often depicted in films as being a very sensual woman, which added to Egypt’s Oriental appeal. Other films such as *The Ten Commandments* and documentaries like *Pharaohs and Kings*

depicted the Egyptians as evil and cunning, and this is reflective of the general stereotype often promoted today of all Arabs being dishonest terrorists.¹³ Consequently, tourism in Egypt essentially is the “consumption of the ‘other’” in regards to the many stereotypes that exist of the Egyptian people.¹⁴ Later on in the 20th century during the 1970s, Egypt was opened to outside foreign investment by global corporations which had been formerly restricted under former Egyptian President Gamal Nasser’s policies. This new openness to globalization has helped to form a commercialized Egypt today, in which Egyptians not only sell and promote Western goods, but goods that exploit their own heritage.¹⁵

3. Analyzing Egyptian Tourism:

3.1 Colonial Nostalgia:

Perhaps most evident in an analysis of Egyptian tourism is the ever-present colonial nostalgia. Some individuals long for the time when Egypt was a powerful kingdom, independent of any European colonial powers; they wish to return to a time when Egypt was culturally pure and untouched by outside forces. However, this time never existed as individuals imagined it to, since in the ancient world cultures were frequently in contact with each other through war and trade.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there are tourists today that experience colonial nostalgia in wanting to return to the luxury and adventure of the British colonial period in Egypt. This could be attributed to the “seductiveness of colonial power,” in which individuals wish to return to this “Golden Age of travel” in Egypt.¹⁷ After all, at the height of the colonial travel frenzy in the early twentieth century, Howard Carter discovered Pharaoh Tutankamun’s tomb. With its wealth of virtually untouched gold and antiquities, this archeological find attracted so much attention that “King Tut” is still a familiar symbol to individuals today. The excavation of the tomb simply added to the fact that, “ancient Egypt was romanticized as a land of mystery, an exotic destination for the rich, where adventurers could come upon fabulous treasures.”¹⁸ As a consequence, the colonial British period in Egyptian history evokes images of white linen, potted palms, and ancient tombs in the minds of Westerners. While the vast sands of the desert are a comfortable surrounding for many Egyptian locals, the Egyptian Tourism Authority describes how, “the heat, sight, and the light of the desert invigorate” tourists in the region.¹⁹

3.2 Invented Tradition:

Invented tradition occurs when certain practices or rituals are believed to be older than they actually are, while in fact such practices have been recently invented for certain political purposes by those in power. In Egypt, there has been a certain element of a warped construction of history at some sites by individuals in order to solidify an Egyptian national identity.²⁰ Invented tradition has occurred all over the Middle East though, and it often leads to the “consumption of heritage.” Consequently, heritage tourism has become popular in Egypt and many other developing nations.²¹ By promoting its heritage to draw in tourists, nations can develop rapidly, earning money and creating jobs for their people. Tourists want the “promise of unique cultural experiences,” so, “many nations...are resorting to heritage preservation, the invention of tradition, and the rewriting of history as forms of self-definition.”²² However, such practices can have unprecedented consequences.

In Egypt specifically, invented tradition occurred in the southern village of New Gurna. New Gurna was created in the 1950s as a planned city so that the Egyptian government could evict residents who had homes near the famous archeological sites in nearby Luxor. The architect of the new village, Hassan Fathy, designed New Gurna according to what he imagined a native Egyptian village would look like, with winding alleys and mud-brick houses. He drew his ideas from architectural styles used hundreds of years earlier in Egypt and applied them to the village, but decades later, his ideas are being used all over Egypt in hotels and other tourist destinations, having become the norm of what traditional Egyptian architecture supposedly looks like.²³ Likewise, a similar phenomenon is occurring in other Middle Eastern nations such as Jordan, where certain hotels are designed to resemble “traditional” Jordan villages in Bilad al Sham. Due to this appropriation and invention of tradition in the Middle East, it is often difficult to determine what is traditional and what is invented. Individuals and governments consume tradition to forge a national identity and to make money, but such a practice can become confusing for native individuals who wish to discover their real heritage.²⁴

3.3 Types Of Egyptian Tourism:

There are many types of tourism in Egypt that appeal to diverse groups of individuals: package tourism, semiformal tourism for backpackers, Arab tourism, and “dark” tourism. Egypt has a long history of package tourism in particular, which solely relies on exploiting Egyptian culture and history in order to make capital. Due to Egypt’s extensive history with package tourism, some individuals have argued that Egypt is the place where “tourism as we know it had been born.”²⁵ Through package tourism, by manipulating individuals’ colonial nostalgia, the commodification of culture can occur, in which elements of culture become bought and sold. This has been quite evident over the past two hundred years, in which objects such as key chains, vases, jewelry, and statues are plastered with the iconic Egyptian imagery of gods and goddesses, or made in an “Egyptian style” with fake gold and the traditionally used Egyptian bright colors of red, blue, and green. Walking through any museum gift shop, tourists can easily find hundreds of these objects to choose from, and these objects have become fetishized, as individuals take sacred ancient Egyptian imagery and attach their own stereotyped, essentialized meanings to it. Tourism in Egypt has simply perpetuated this imagery through the practice of mass producing goods to profit off of tourists.

While package tourism does dominate Egyptian tourism, there is also a “semiformal” tourist sector in which Arab tourists and European students and backpackers come to Egypt as individuals instead of as part of large planned groups. Within the semiformal tourist sector, these individuals stay in small, cheap hotels, traveling to Egypt’s famous sites by train or bus. Interestingly, semiformal tourists are more likely to encounter and interact with Egyptian locals than most other foreign tourists.²⁶ These semiformal tourists are drawn to Egypt by means of the guidebooks and advertising meant to attract them, and once there, though they stay in less expensive hotels and interact more with the locals, they still expect Western comforts while in Egypt.

Egypt is often associated with death, considering its connection to mummification, pyramids, and its elaborate ancient polytheistic religious idea of the afterlife. It has been argued that this “mummification has a transcultural appeal because of the primacy of death in human thoughts.”²⁷ Due to this, the appeal of dark tourism in Egypt is not surprising. Dark tourism is essentially based on the notion that individuals like to visit places associated with death, such as sites where massacres or battles occurred, burial grounds, tombs, or death camps.²⁸ Besides giving individuals a thrill, these dark tourist sites additionally act as spaces for, “social, spiritual, and political reflection.”²⁹ With this dark tourism in Egypt, beyond the commodification of culture, the “commodification of anxiety and doubt” is also occurring.³⁰ This is evident as not only are Egyptians making money off of tourists’ interests in these sites, but from the sale of such products as fake mummy figurines and sarcophagi as well. This raises the question of whether modern Egyptians themselves are in fact “obsessed” with death, or whether they are simply profiting on their ancestors’ focus on it in the twenty-first century, as they continue their search for who they are as a people and a nation after British colonialism.

3.3.1 tourism by egyptian locals and other Arabs:

The tourism by locals within a country is important, but it is often overlooked in discourses on tourism. In Egypt, there is an Arab tourism sector in which locals and other Arabs often interact with the landscape and advertising different than foreign tourists. Arab tourism in Egypt emerged much later than foreign tourism to the land, and while many different groups of people have visited Egypt since ancient times through trade and warfare, individuals rarely came for leisure; beginning in the 1920s, elite families from Arab nations such as Iraq and Syria began traveling to Egypt for such purposes. In the 1960s, more varied groups of Arab classes began to come to Egypt, and this tourism sector has continued to grow. As the Middle Eastern oil economy grew, Arabs accumulated more wealth and traveled to Egypt in large numbers. However, Middle Eastern conflict in the 1950s and 60s led tourism in Egypt, and most other Arab nations, to decline. Once conditions were more peaceful in the mid 1970s, tourists began to return to Egypt in large numbers.³¹ Today, Arab tourists mostly come to Egypt from Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

Similar to those backpackers in the semiformal tourist sector, Arab tourists typically come as individuals or families, and not with packaged tours. Usually, they travel by plane and arrange their own transportation with taxis around the city, staying in the more expensive hotels that are intended for foreigners or renting their own apartments. Many Arab tourists are groups of young men traveling together who come to engage in the nightlife of Egyptian cities by going to the casinos and restaurants. Unlike foreign tourists who flock to Egypt’s famous ancient sites, Arab tourists typically avoid these areas. Most Arabs will go to the pyramids at Giza, but they avoid the

Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The main motivation of Arab tourists to travel to Egypt is to have an enjoyable time, and not to visit ancient sites overcrowded with foreign tourists. Many Arab men and women also enjoy the relative freedom they are afforded in the country, mostly in traveling around Cairo and Alexandria.³² There has been a shift in Arab tourism recently though, as nations like Turkey and Morocco are attracting the Arab tourists that would normally stop in Egypt on their way to European vacations. Despite the revenue they produce, the Egyptian government also tends to dislike Arab tourists because they view the Arab presence in Egypt as individuals unfairly flaunting their wealth and ability to travel there. However, this resentment may be displaced, because Arab tourists spend a great deal more money in the tourist market in Egypt than do foreign tourists.³³

3.3.2. dynamics between egyptian locals and foreign tourists:

Tourists often travel to Egypt believing that it “has not changed for thousands and thousands of years.”³⁴ Due to this, tourists tend to look at the nation from a distance, not wanting to disturb or destroy its antiquity with their modernity. In this sense, Egypt is often considered, “an antithesis to modernity,” and consequently, by visiting ancient sites and tombs, tourists can feel as if they have been transported back into ancient history.³⁵ Foreign, and even Arab tourists, Orientalize Egypt; when they travel there, they wish to be part of Egypt’s past, not part of its modern present, since individuals “do not travel to find similarities, but difference.”³⁶ As part of the modern world, tourists want to experience a different, ancient time in Egypt to feel more at peace with themselves, and it is this lack of modernity that supposedly drives individuals to want to travel to developing nations.³⁷

In regard to the dynamics of tourism, the tourism sphere and the work sphere are often separated in nations, and the further a tourist can be from the work sphere, the higher their status becomes as compared to the native worker.³⁸ Interactions of tourists with locals can thus become problematic because in tourists’ attempts to “do as the locals do,” tourists often feel sympathetic towards the natives. Individuals therefore essentially, “appropriate ancient Egypt and leave modern Egypt to its wretched inhabitants, the tourists encapsulated in a bubble that minimizes their interaction with the natives.”³⁹ This is evident in that many travel writers discuss from a point of view of a Westerner who has infiltrated a native society, and then attempts to act as a local in a type of “ethnomasquerade.” In the overlapping of tourist and local space, tourists can feel power in their ability to fool others into thinking they themselves are a native.⁴⁰ For these reasons, foreign tourists in Egypt rarely interact with locals. Tourists are typically far removed from the average spaces negotiated everyday by native Egyptians, and they examine this local space from afar. When foreign tourists in Egypt attempt to act like locals, they problematically assert their dominance, feeling ethnically superior, which may remind Egyptians of their past oppression under the British colonizers of Egypt.

One important reason why tourists and locals in Egypt remain separate is that foreign tourists in Egypt, whether from the West or other Arab nations, are usually much wealthier than the Egyptian locals.⁴¹ Tourists do bring a great deal of foreign money into Egypt, from which the nation benefits, but because of their contributions, Arab tourists in particular may have a type of cultural power over Egyptians, as was aforementioned. In regards to certain illegal activities, Egyptian authorities will not prosecute Arab or Western individuals for partaking in them, while Egyptians would be prosecuted if caught doing such acts. This leniency is given to foreign tourists to keep them returning and contributing money to Egypt’s Gross Domestic Product.⁴² These issues have become more evident as years go on, as more sites are opening to tourists, and more tourists are visiting the nation. Beyond the famous site of the pyramids at Giza, tourists are beginning to discover the other pyramids at Dahshur and Abu Sir. Catering to tourists’ sense of colonial nostalgic adventure, many tourists are encouraged by travel authorities to venture outside of Cairo and Alexandria to see smaller, less popular tombs and pyramids. Other tourists enjoy venturing across the desert to visit the oases, and as archaeology uncovers more finds, tourists flock to these “new” sites as well. While some of these sites are well prepared for masses of tourists that infiltrate them, many are not.⁴³

4. The Importance of Tourism in Egypt:

Egypt markets itself to tourists by promoting its ancient history, but recently Egypt has been struggling to attract the tourists who have flocked there for hundreds of years. Since tourism accounts for about eleven percent of the Egypt’s Gross Domestic Product, it is important to maintain the profits from foreigners who bring in the currency that circulates throughout Egypt.⁴⁴ Despite the efforts of Egyptians to repress the recent conflicts and revolutions in the Arab World, tourists are still being scared away. One man who planned to visit Egypt with his wife even stated that he probably will not travel to the Middle East in the future because “it’s a troubled part of the world that’s not

necessary to visit.”⁴⁵ Many individuals seem to hold this same view, as in 2011 many airlines, tour companies, and cruise ships ended their stops in Egypt. In hearing about the unrest in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, Western tourists are nervous to travel to the Middle East, and coupled with the recent U.S. conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, many individuals see the Middle East as being incredibly unstable. Decreasing travel to Egypt may even affect travel to nearby countries like Jordan, where tourism makes up fourteen percent of its Gross Domestic Product. It will take time to see how much of an impact the unrest has on the tourism industry as a whole. Travel agencies and Egyptian tourism authorities have tried to stress that what is occurring in the nation is a civil protest and not a war, so it will be interesting to see how long tourists avoid the region.⁴⁶

4.1 Tourism In The Formation Of Egyptian National Identity:

Tourism can also serve to solidify a national identity of native peoples to a land. In Egypt, native individuals are, “inheritors of a socially constructed past,” who are forced to appear to still live in their ancient society while struggling with the problems of the rapidly modernizing world.⁴⁷ Some Egyptians even feel that their identity is not their own, but instead one that has been pressed upon them by colonization and globalization through a process of complicated “Egyptianization.”⁴⁸ In the past, with wars and struggles against a common colonizer, Egyptians felt united. Now, with the lack of such broad conflict like British imperialism, Egypt supposedly has a weak national unity that needs to be reinforced by a solidified cultural identity.⁴⁹

In this Postcolonial era, Egyptians are attempting to remember and deconstruct their colonial past.⁵⁰ Postcolonialism involves understanding the social and political contexts in which people were oppressed, so during this period, while Egyptians may have gained political freedom from their former European colonizers, they have not achieved a complete independence of thought. Long after colonizers departed, Egyptians have maintained many of the European economic and political structures left in their nation, and one could argue that the commercialization of Egyptian heritage is simply another legacy of the British colonial past in which the colonizers profited by representing Egypt in a certain way to tourists.

4.1.1 dynamics between the first world and third world in egyptian tourism:

A Third World nation often faces the difficulty of attempting to adopt “First World” practices without disrupting its native culture. First World nations however have simply constructed developing nations as the other and only want to consume their environment and their resources. Consequently, First World nations feel that they are guardians to the “less developed” Third World, so they can send tourists there.⁵¹ Of course, these Western tourists have the expectation that natives will act out the culture they assume them to have.⁵² When this occurs, First World nations play quite a large role “in maintaining, preserving, and restoring much of what is today considered the built heritage of many Third World countries.”⁵³ Due to this, Egyptians did adopt Europeans’ representation of themselves as their identity for certain reasons. Accordingly, when Egyptians emerged from colonialism they did not have much to cling to in order to rebuild their nation except their ancient heritage from before they were colonized and the representations that the West had forced upon them.

5. Conclusion:

Typically, social groups dislike being stereotyped, so it is intriguing that a culture can have the capacity to perpetuate its own stereotype in order to make money. Of course, it is not only Egypt that engages in this practice, but nations all over the world that market their cultures to attract tourists and therefore make money from foreign nations. While Egyptians are struggling to find their own personal identity among those that have been forced upon them, it can be simplest to embrace common stereotypes. However, when national and cultural identity are concerned, this can be a very damaging process, as millions of individuals can forget their true history and heritage in the world if they rely solely upon their stereotype. By marketing one’s culture, such as occurs in Egypt, individuals must to an extent solidify and internalize the stereotype of their culture, and this stereotype becomes perpetuated into the future if it is not stopped. Heritage should be celebrated and used as a tool to analyze the present and future, not as an entity to be commercialized and marketed.

It is important that citizens of Western global superpowers such as the United States deconstruct how they view the nation of Egypt. Westerners often have a type of “mummy mania,” which drives them to become attached to ancient Egyptian culture. When foreigners experience this, the questions must be asked: Why are individuals so

attracted to ancient Egyptian culture? Are individuals attracted to the stereotype of ancient Egypt or the modern nation itself? What is the true Egypt? The truth underlying such queries is that all places are being constantly re-imagined over time. So, beyond simply making these initial inquiries, one must look further and ask: What does authenticity really mean? How authentic can any place really be? It is difficult to discover the true nature of any society that is so diverse and includes millions of people; Egypt in particular is a multilayered society, of which one cannot focus on just a single aspect. While Egyptians themselves may be uncertain about their identity, having spent so much time being pushed and pulled by outside influences telling them who they are and who they should become, it is the perpetuated stereotypes about the nation that mask Egypt's complex and dynamic history.

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