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## Whose Heritage Counts? Narratives of Coptic People's Heritage

Elizabeth Monier

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Elizabeth Monier

## Summary

This paper examines whose voices narrate official Coptic heritage, what the in-built biases in representations of Coptic heritage are and why, and some of the implications of omissions in narratives of Coptic heritage. It argues that the primary narrator of official Coptic heritage during the twentieth century was the leadership of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The Coptic Orthodox Church is the body that holds authority over the sources of heritage, such as church buildings and manuscripts, and also has the resources with which to preserve and disseminate heritage. The Church hierarchy's leadership was not entirely uncontested, however, a middle ground was continually negotiated to enable lay Copts to play various roles and contribute to the articulation of Coptic heritage. Ultimately, though, alternative voices must operate within the limits set by the Church leadership and also negotiate the layers of exclusion set by society and state.

This paper concludes that the power politics that shaped Coptic heritage narratives at the end of the twentieth century are facing transformations, particularly in new social and communicative spaces provided by new media technology, academia, and the diaspora. Of particular note is the potential of initiatives to harness new media towards the preservation and dissemination of the 'ordinary' experiences of Coptic heritage that otherwise would go unheard or unseen. The value of recording this lived, everyday 'Copticness', alongside the 'official' narratives, is being increasingly recognised, particularly by diasporic communities who are negotiating new relations to their Church, national identity, and faith community. The extent to which such developments will re-shape patterns of omission and inclusion in Coptic heritage narratives will become clearer as the second decade of the twenty-first century unfolds. At present, efforts to address omissions are weighted towards adding to the voices communicating 'Copticness' and not to displacing the dominant, pre-existing narratives or the hierarchies behind them.

**Keywords:** Copts, Coptic heritage, Egyptian history, Egyptian politics, Coptic Orthodox Church

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## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this working paper is not to provide a description of Coptic material culture. The concern is rather to explore the politics of constructing Coptic heritage narratives during the twentieth century in order to unpack some of the resulting layers of inclusion and exclusion. The Copts are an indigenous community in Egypt, defined by both their religious and national heritage. The etymology of the word 'Copt' comes from terms used to refer to Egypt. 'Aigyptos', the ancient Greek name for Egypt, led to the use of 'Qibt' in Arabic and later 'Copt' in English. In pre-Islamic Egypt, the language spoken was a late form of ancient Egyptian referred to as 'Coptic'. As Egypt transformed from a majority Christian country to a majority Muslim country in the centuries following the Arab-Islamic conquest of Egypt in AD 641, the meaning of 'Copt' transformed to mean 'Egyptian Christian' and the Coptic language was gradually replaced by Arabic. There have been attempts in the past to challenge this utilisation of 'Copt' to mean only 'Egyptian Christian'. In 1926, Marcus Simaika, the founder of the Coptic museum, gave a lecture at Cairo University that was later published in the newspaper *al-Muqtataf*, in which he argued that all Egyptians are Copts; some are Christian Copts and some are Muslim Copts (cited in Simaika and Henein 2017: 165). This is a sentiment rarely expressed today, however.

Estimates of the proportion of the population of Egyptians that are Christian range from 6 per cent to 20 per cent but Christians probably make up approximately 10 per cent of the Egyptian population (Hasan 2003: 18). Not all Christians in Egypt trace their roots to a Coptic heritage but among ethnically Egyptian Christians, the vast majority belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church. Copts are not a compact minority found in specific regions only but live throughout Egypt (Chitham 1986). In fact, Coptic heritage and identity is tied to the territory of Egypt in its entirety and the contributions of Coptic history and culture are found throughout the country, as well as in contemporary Egyptian traditions and dialect.

For these reasons, the Coptic case is particularly fascinating and complex in terms of understanding the politics of omission in official narratives of heritage. The social, cultural, and political context in which such a community is embedded influences how a faith community is structured and who speaks for it and how. In addition, the stakeholders involved in knowledge production and cultural heritage practices are multiple, as are the

factors that shape priorities in official heritage preservation and dissemination. In the case of the Copts, official narratives of cultural heritage can illuminate the impact that being a religious minority has on the way heritage is managed in the public sphere and also the role that heritage plays within the day-to-day life of a minoritised community. While this paper focuses on the hierarchies of power behind the dissemination of official narratives of heritage as articulated mainly through the twentieth century, it also points to the growing interest in recording and raising awareness of ‘unofficial’ or daily, lived experiences of Coptic heritage and the opportunities and challenges involved in achieving this as the twenty-first century unfolds.

## 2 Defining heritage

### 2.1 The meaning of heritage

The notion of heritage is a familiar one that we usually connect to notions of history, culture, and identity. According to the Cambridge English dictionary,<sup>1</sup> heritage encompasses features that belong to a particular culture or society and include traditions, languages, buildings, and practices that have historical and continuing importance. These elements contribute to and shape the identity of national and sub-national communities. In this way, heritage supports and legitimates certain conceptions of communitarian identity. At the same time, it should be noted that it is not a synonym for identity. Rather, it contributes material and discursive sources that can support a particular conceptualisation of a communal identity. The notion of heritage has thereby developed beyond the identity of specific peoples to attain to an intrinsic value so that the responsibility for its preservation is seen as a global issue.

Throughout the twentieth century, an international framework has developed concerning the identification and preservation of heritage. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which was founded in 1945, has become increasingly important in shaping the conversation about heritage and coordinating multilateral efforts to preserve heritage. Article 4 of the 1972 UNESCO Convention states that there is a duty to ensure ‘the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage’.<sup>2</sup> The preservation and transmission of heritage is central to the notion, which stems linguistically and conceptually from inheritance. This is also reflected in the Arabic word for heritage (Turāth) which shares a root with inheritance (Mirāth). Through international dialogue on heritage protection, there has been growing acknowledgement that the intangible aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/heritage>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/>.

heritage have been ignored in international law (Blake 2000: 72). During the late twentieth century, this led to the expansion of the notion of heritage to include intangible cultural heritage (Ahmad 2006: 298). In 2003, UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Article 2, paragraph 2 defines intangible cultural heritage as: 'The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage' (UNESCO 2020: 5).

## **2.2 The politics of the production, preservation, and dissemination of heritage**

The history of cultural heritage preservation and the issues surrounding what is protected, by who and for whom, all indicate that heritage is not a neutral category. The focus on monuments and buildings in visions of heritage perhaps leads to the assumption that heritage is fixed. However, scholars of heritage argue that heritage is less a tangible artefact than a 'process by which people use the past – a "discursive construction" with material consequences' (Harvey 2008: 19). Heritage impacts very much on the present because the mobilisation of particular narratives of heritage can act as a resource of power. According to van Doorn-Harder and Vogt (1997: 12), 'Copts feel bound by their tradition because, on the one hand, it emphasizes their original Christian roots and identity, while on the other hand it confirms the teaching of their current leaders.'

Consequently, people do not have an equal say in heritage narratives due to a myriad of inequalities present in social and political orders, so heritage narratives can be mobilised to reinforce pre-existing hierarchies of power. Part of the maintenance of these hierarchies involves control over knowledge production and socialisation processes. This suggests why cultural communities are subject to gatekeepers over community knowledge and identity; a reality that leads to omissions in the narration of heritage. As a political resource, heritage can be used to empower or disempower certain actors and certain narratives.

Scholarship on the politics of cultural heritage also notes the existence of stakeholders. These can include governments and other political movements, community and religious leaders, or business leaders. They have different interests and goals that impact on what becomes defined as cultural heritage and how it is preserved and engaged with.

International agendas and archaeological work also have an impact, and this is particularly counted as influential during the colonial period. As argued by Smith (2004: 2), 'The way in which any heritage item, site or place is managed, interpreted and understood has a direct impact on how those people associated with, or who associate themselves with, that heritage are themselves understood and perceived.' This extends from archaeological sites to the establishment of museums, both of which feature in the growth



of heritage tourism and contribute to the way in which the past is imagined in the present and therefore impact on the narration of heritage. In Egypt, the work of European archaeologists contributed to the mobilisation of ancient Egyptian heritage and identity in modern narratives of Egyptian-ness, particularly during the early twentieth century (*cf.* Reid 2003). As Reid notes, it was also Europeans who established committees for the preservation of heritage, such as the Committee for the Conservation of Monuments of Arab Art in 1881 (known as the Comité) and the Institute for Islamic Archaeology in 1884 (1992: 57).

### **2.3 Locating Coptic heritage**

Egypt is a site in which diverse stakeholders have played significant roles in the preservation and mobilisation of heritage. Egypt's location at a meeting point between Africa and Asia, boasting a Mediterranean coast, a central place in Christian, Islamic, and Arab history, a colonial legacy due to British occupation, in addition to the ancient Egyptian civilisation, all lend Egypt a rich and complex heritage. Within this context, Copts are an ethno-religious community that has become minoritised so that it must negotiate an extra layer of bias in interpreting heritage and its role within the state and within the community.

This relative marginality shaped the history of Coptic heritage preservation as it was often overlooked in projects undertaken by the foreign actors who cooperated with the state. Europeans were deeply involved in the movement to study and preserve the heritage of Egypt from the start. However, the focus was on ancient Egyptian monuments and Arab and Islamic heritage, as seen from the committees established in the late nineteenth century. In terms of a hierarchy of value placed upon tangible heritage, Coptic heritage has tended to come lower behind Pharaonic and Islamic heritage. This is also reflected in the teaching of Egyptian history in schools (Ezzat 2021) and in the priorities of archaeological research and touristic projects.

The value of Coptic heritage was often seen by Europeans in reference to the Pharaonic past, thereby perpetuating a sense of relative marginality. It was therefore only later that the movement to protect Coptic buildings and art and other forms of tangible heritage emerged. Coptic monuments came under the remit of the Comité in 1896, a move resisted by the Coptic Patriarch (Simaika and Henein 2017: xiii) and also by a minority of the Comité members. The latter eventually accepted this move after guarantees that no Islamic Awqaf (endowments) money would be used to restore churches. They then approved the admission of two Copts onto the Comité but rejected the suggestion to change the name of the committee to the 'Comité de Conservation des Monuments Arabe et Copte' (Reid 1992: 66). Perhaps as a consequence of this, Coptic heritage has been treated then as a communal heritage rather than a national one historically, leading communal leaders to

shape efforts to preserve tangible Coptic heritage and also to construct and mobilise discursive practices of Coptic heritage.

The resulting privileging of certain voices within the Coptic community, alongside the political and socioeconomic context in which the Church and Coptic community is embedded in Egypt, has set up a series of omissions. The communication of an elitist version of Coptic heritage has been favoured during the twentieth century and has also placed emphasis on formal articulations and tangible sources of heritage over understandings of heritage as it is lived and experienced in the everyday.

As the Coptic community faces the twenty-first century, Coptic heritage is increasingly being located and 'lived' in very different contexts, such as in the diaspora versus Egypt or in urban areas versus rural ones. The failure to record the everyday experiences of Coptic heritage leads to a loss of heritage that is hastened by migration, whether inside Egypt or abroad. There is already a lack of awareness of rural Coptic traditions among the urban population, as detailed in observations made by Bishop Thomas (2004). There is generally a lack of ethnographic work on Copts but even more so on rural Copts versus urban Coptic life, so recording and preserving of such traditions, using academic methods and digital tools, are crucial to stem the loss of such sources of everyday Coptic heritage and to raise awareness of them.

### 3 Copts, Coptic heritage, and the Orthodox Church in the twentieth century

Coptic heritage is a national and a religious heritage (Adly 2019: 76). The quotation 'Blessed is Egypt, my people', from Isaiah Chapter 19, verse 25,<sup>3</sup> summarises this entwining of national and Christian heritage so Coptic heritage is an inseparable combination of religious practice and Egyptian territory (van Doorn-Harder and Vogt 1997: 127). Heo has made a compelling study of the ways in which Egypt is conceived of as a Holy Land (2018: 73) and of how Copts use such spatial imaginaries, often centred around saints, through which to interact with Egyptian spaces. The Coptic Orthodox Church represents the denominational affiliation of the vast majority of the Christian population of Egypt today. Although reliable figures are unavailable, it is often estimated that approximately 90 per cent of Egyptian Christians belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-19-25](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Isaiah-19-25).

Coptic Orthodox Christians also represent the largest Christian community in the whole Middle East and so represent an influential force within Middle Eastern Christianity. They also now have a large diaspora spread globally but particularly in North America, Europe, and Australia, as well as other parts of the Middle East.

Sedra (2014: 491) argues that too much emphasis is placed on the Coptic Orthodox Church. There is indeed a gap in the literature on the other churches in Egypt, but this is indicative of the exclusion that exists in terms of who has control of narrating 'Coptiness' and the ways in which this status quo is maintained. One of the least challenged layers of exclusion in Coptic narratives is the one that marginalises churches other than the Orthodox Church in speaking for Copts or about Coptic heritage. However, I maintain that in a hierarchy of actors in the narration of Coptic heritage, it is the Orthodox Church that remains at the top, leading to the focus on it in this paper. Copts are integrated into Egyptian society, but this does not lessen the Church's role as the main author and keeper of official Coptic heritage.

Febe Armanios (2011: 22) noted that:

although Copts were well integrated within the daily rhythm of Egyptian life, they were a distinct community subject not only to Ottoman-Islamic authority but also to their lay and clerical leaders. Even when politically weakened, Coptic clergymen – from patriarchs to low-ranking priests – have traditionally exercised moral authority over fellow believers.

Although this description applied to Ottoman Egypt, it describes the context in which Coptic heritage narratives evolved during the twentieth century. Due to the central role that the early Church plays in the configuration of modern narratives of Coptic heritage, this section will begin by briefly setting out the main symbolic themes drawn upon, followed by a description of how they are mobilised and by whom, and finally how they are disseminated.

### **3.1 The early Church as symbolic source for the modern Coptic heritage**

The collective memory and history of the Coptic community is tied to religious history and practice, and to the territory of Egypt. Several elements associated with the early foundation and history of the Church are central to the narratives of modern Coptic heritage as they were harnessed and developed into a unified and official narrative throughout the twentieth century. A brief description of them here helps to explain the centrality of the Coptic Orthodox Church as the chief narrator of Coptic heritage and the legitimacy accorded to the Church's narrative. These include the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt; the founding of the Church by St Mark, meaning that the Coptic Orthodox Church

is an apostolic Church; the contribution of the See of Alexandria to early Christian theology and to the ecumenical councils that served to define the Christian faith; and the establishment of the practice of monasticism. These elements dominate accounts of the Coptic Church, such as Meinardus' *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* (2002) and Malaty's *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church* (1993).

In addition to this heritage, today's Coptic Church sees itself as a historically persecuted Church, the collective memory of which perhaps contributes to the tendency of Copts to see the Church as a necessary refuge or safety net. Such narratives reinforce the importance of solidarity and loyalty within the community and to the Church because it is this that has enabled the community to survive. The most significant period of persecution was under Roman authority and took place around AD 284 during the rule of Diocletian. This period is known to Copts as the age of the martyrs (*cf.* Heo 2013) and the stories of the martyrs are recorded in the Coptic Synaxarium. According to Armanios, 'Hagiographies of martyrs (or martyrologies) exist as a familiar and living reality within the Coptic collective memory' (2011: 6).

The period of approximately the third until the mid-fifth century is generally considered to be the golden age for Alexandrian theology's contribution to world Christianity. Despite this early role as a central contributor, a split emerged that would entrench the Coptic Orthodox Church's identity as a national Egyptian Church. As a result of a political shift away from Byzantine influence and of theological disputes, the Coptic Orthodox Church emerged as a distinct denomination to become the dominant Church **and** a significant political centre in Egypt. This development was sealed by the dispute at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451. Atiya (1968: 56–58) describes Alexandria's split from the Byzantine Church as a way of gaining Egyptian political independence from Constantinople. This divide was entrenched by the Arab invasion that isolated the Coptic Church from the rest of Christendom within Egypt's borders and the Islamic nation from AD 641.

Between this emergence of the separate Coptic Church and at least until the Arab invasion lies Egypt's 'Coptic Period'. Mikhail (2004: 972) argues that the beginning was undoubtedly during the fourth century but that it is harder to define when the Coptic period ends. He bases his definition on the dominance of Christians in Egypt to suggest that the Coptic period should continue past the Arab-Islamic conquest until the point at which Christians in Egypt were no longer politically dominant. He suggests that Christians and the Coptic language dominated Egypt into the eighth century and probably beyond into the ninth century. A period of greater persecution of Christians under Abbasid rule then led to a notable increase in religious conversions and therefore a shift in the population of Egypt towards Islam and the end of the Coptic period (*ibid.*: 977). Despite the decline of the Coptic language and the loss of 'sacred space' (Swanson 2000: 131), the Coptic Orthodox Church nevertheless survived. This narrative of survival added a further element to Coptic

heritage that both lives on in modern narratives and experiences of 'Coptiness' and strengthens and legitimises the Orthodox Church's voice as both narrator and actor.

### **3.2 The structure and hierarchy of the Coptic Orthodox Church: defining the meaning of Coptic heritage**

Alongside recognising the symbolic sources and historiographies that inform modern heritage narratives, it is also crucial to recognise that the process of configuring and mobilising these narratives will be uneven and usually privilege certain individuals or groups (Littler and Naidoo 2005: 2). Within the Coptic Church, there is a structure and hierarchy that, I contend, shapes the process of knowledge production, dissemination, and inclusion/exclusion pertaining to this question of heritage. Therefore, this section will take into consideration the way that the hierarchy of the Church is structured and the influence this has in determining the prevailing shape of Coptic heritage narratives as it took shape through the twentieth century.

The Patriarch is the head of the Church and the bishop of the See of Alexandria, the ancient centre of Egyptian Christianity. Leadership of the Church is under his guidance, alongside the Holy Synod. The Holy Synod is the highest ecclesiastical body and comprises all the bishops of the Church. According to the 1985 Constitution for the Holy Synod, it was divided into seven committees to aid the efficient running of Church affairs. These deal with issues including pastoral affairs, monastic affairs, and ecumenical relations (Meinardus 2002: 9). The clergy consists of three main hierarchical layers. The top layer is formed of the bishops, then the priests and finally the deacons. Each of these layers is further divided into hierarchical degrees. Only the Pope is able to appoint a bishop or elevate his rank, meaning he remains in ultimate control of any opposing power centres within the Church.

Pope Shenouda III was particularly adept at centring power around the Church hierarchy and during his reign, and voices opposing him were marginalised. This was illustrated most clearly by the disputes between Shenouda and the monk Matta el-Meskeen, as well as the theologian George Bebawi. Such opposing figures were marginalised or, in Bebawi's case, excommunicated. His case was taken particularly seriously because he was a scholar who, from a position outside of this Church hierarchy, challenged the official Church history and doctrines that are considered to be within the exclusive domain of the Orthodox Church clergy.

It is simplistic to equate the Patriarch with the Church and assume that they are homogenous or unassailable. As with any other organisation, the Coptic Orthodox Church represents an array of opinions and agendas regarding the direction of the Church. The close relationship between the patriarchs and the state for most of the twentieth century,

especially during the Shenouda papacy, can obscure this and has perhaps contributed to the lack of attention given to the incident in 1954 when the authority of the Patriarch at the time, Yusab II, was directly and explicitly challenged by a group of lay Copts belonging to the movement known as the Umma Qibtiyya (Coptic Nation). Members of the group kidnapped the Patriarch in July 1954 and demanded his replacement. Their motivation was largely dissatisfaction with the increasing exclusion of Copts from Egyptian political life and the incompetence of Yusab in challenging this (Guirguis 2020: 99–100).

Two relevant points can be drawn from this incident: the main step taken by this movement, with its agenda focused on redressing the lack of influence of Copts in Egyptian national life, was to seek a change of Church leadership so that Coptic status and leadership generally is tied to the strength of its clerical leaders. Second, despite the radical development of kidnapping a sitting Patriarch, this event is given very little attention in Coptic historiography or discourse, demonstrating again the ability gained by the Church mainly in the second half of the twentieth century to maintain authority, and the ability to define narratives pertaining to the Coptic community. It remains the fact today that the Coptic Patriarch is normally the top of the pyramid of power in the Coptic community, particularly during the reign of Shenouda (McCallum 2007).

Additionally, in the context of the Coptic community as a numerical minority for which persecution and survival have become central themes, solidarity (at least publicly) behind the Patriarch and the Church more broadly is often perceived as crucial for the continued survival of the community.

In addition to the clerical hierarchy and Church spaces, monasteries represent an important location and source of symbolic power and culture within the Coptic Church because monastic life and the desert fathers are central figures in Coptic heritage (Armanios 2011: 6). The monks and their way of life are depicted as a living representation of Coptic heritage and the monastery is an important space in which tangible and intangible Coptic heritage come together. They are isolated communities but are not cut off; rather, they act as sites for gathering Copts together for activities such as retreats and celebrating festivals. This gives monks an important role in heritage production, preservation, and dissemination. Additionally, most of the leaders within the Church hail from monastic orders. This history and hierarchy entrench a significant omission in who narrates Coptic heritage: women.

In common with many other Christian denominations, the Coptic Orthodox Church does not permit women to hold positions of clerical leadership in the Church. Although the Coptic Church does offer multiple avenues of participation for women in Coptic community life, opportunities to exercise positions of leadership or power are much more

limited.<sup>4</sup> This is compounded by the gender inequalities that persist in Egyptian society more broadly (Tadros 2016) leading to the overshadowing of female contributions to Coptic heritage. As an illustration, St Anthony is celebrated as the founder of monasticism and al-Masry describes Anthony as ‘The star of the desert and the father of monks’ (1978: 80). But Farag (2009: 112) argues that ‘monastic institutions for women were well established long before Anthony decided to go to the desert. Yet, monasticism is always dated from the beginning of Anthony’s flight to the desert.’ This leads Farag to contend that the focus on the ‘heroic monks’ of the early Church means that female monastics are forgotten and omitted from the popular, official histories (2009: 111).

It must be pointed out that it is not only in narratives of Coptic heritage in which the role of women has been marginalised. Equally crucial is the acknowledgement that women have not been excluded from shaping Christianity and its practice but have in fact contributed in multiple ways throughout history. As Lindner shows, ‘revisionist scholars have repositioned women throughout Christianity’s history in the Middle East’ by revisiting archives and re-addressing prevailing narratives of marginalisation (2021: 398). Van Doorn-Harder’s (1995) book on Coptic nuns is one intervention that brings to light the way women have carved out spaces within the Coptic Church. Tamav Irini, the mother superior of the Abu Saifain convent in Old Cairo until her death in 2006, gained a popular following among Copts, becoming the pivotal figure in contemporary miracle stories (Shenoda 2012: 483–4). She does present an example, if rare, of the ability of Coptic women to become part of the living narration of Coptic heritage and its articulation.

For those Copts, men and women, who do not choose to take the monastic path but still seek to deepen their participation in Coptic life or gain some authority or prestige within the community, there is another interface between the Church hierarchy and its community known as *khidma* (service). Shenoda (2012: 479) argues that despite the clear hierarchy in the Church, the *khidma* interface does provide a dynamic relationship between Church and adherents. At the same time, *khidma* is central to the socialisation of Copts into a Coptic space as defined and controlled by faith and therefore by the official narratives of Coptic heritage sanctioned by the Church.

This service takes various forms and begins with the teaching of Coptic children through the Sunday school system. As these children progress through the system, they themselves might become involved in the teaching of younger children. Others assist the clergy with pastoral activities such as visiting the old or sick. Some Copts will become involved with serving in Church liturgies in roles such as the choir or serving at the altar. The former role is technically open to women though it is rare and only men can seek consecration in the higher ranks of the diaconate. Although there have been some discussions about

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Women Scholars of Orthodox Christianity: Mariz Tadros’, the Orthodox Christian Studies Center, Fordham University, 23 July, 2020, <https://youtu.be/crgcdRZ1d6Y>.

increasing the opportunities for women to perform roles in the liturgy, this is met with resistance due to the entrenched stance against women taking leadership roles in the Church.

However, this matter has seen developments, notably in recent years. There has been an expansion of the role of the *mukarras/mukarrasa*, a rank that is recognised as a distinct role from that of the monk or nun, but which requires a similar commitment to service or dedication that goes beyond the normal participation in *khidma*. The role is open to both genders and involves the person being celibate and dedicating themselves to service. For women, the role of the *mukarrasa* enables them to be dedicated to Church service without necessarily moving to a convent, as they would if taking the role of a nun. They wear similar clothing to nuns and are known as *tasoni* (sister), whereas a nun carries the title *tamav* (mother). A woman who joins an order of *mukarrasat* (plural of *mukarrasa*) can attain ranks of *mosa'ada shamasa* (assistant deacon) and *shamasa* (deacon), but this process takes a number of years and the associated duties correspond with the lower ranks in the diaconate that are available to men. Tasoni Rauth is a *mukarrasa* who started a project for people with physical and mental disabilities and the success of this has provided a model that has been copied in other dioceses in Egypt, leading to an expanding array of roles for women in Church service.

### 3.3 Clergy and lay Copts

Despite the clear hierarchy set up by the influential and symbolic role of the Church, this does not preclude contestation between clergy and lay Copts in other forums. One of the most significant shifts in this relationship between clergy and lay Copts came in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. The start of the Mohamed Ali dynasty in 1805 introduced new possibilities in terms of the way lay Copts participated in life both in national spaces and Church spaces. The modernisation agenda that Mohamed Ali established along with a more defined national Egyptian political entity with a large measure of autonomy vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire, led to opening up new channels of participation in public life for Copts (Ibrahim 2011: 15). This altered the dynamics within the Church sphere as well. An illustration of this is the life of Boutros Ghali, Egypt's first Coptic prime minister. Boutros first worked as a teacher but then held a succession of posts in the Egyptian civil service (Ghali 2016: 3–4). His deep involvement in establishing the Egyptian justice system led him to become the Deputy Minister of Justice until he was promoted to Minister of Finance in 1883, later becoming prime minister (1908–10). The Ghali family remained deeply involved in politics over the century that followed.

This is an exceptional example, but it demonstrates that opportunities for Copts to gain influence outside of the Church, and thereby also within the Coptic community, increased.



This represented a challenge for the traditional hierarchies in the Coptic community. As social and political life in Egypt evolved, the Orthodox Church responded to this by seeking to improve the efficiency and administration of Church affairs. Pope Kyrillos IV (1854–1861) focused on education, both of the clergy and of the Coptic community, and sought to improve oversight of Coptic affairs. As a result, he became known as Abu al-Islah (the father of reform). Three important developments that he introduced were the requirement for Coptic clergy to acquire a higher standard of learning, the founding of new Coptic schools, and the purchase of a printing press in 1859 (Ibrahim 2011: 22).

These developments enhanced the ability of the Church to lead the Coptic community, but the Church then also had to contend with the establishment of an official body that sought to take control of affairs that had until then come under the remit of the Church. The Majlis al-Milli (Lay Coptic Council) was established in 1874 as a parallel institution to the Coptic Orthodox Church with a mandate to oversee Coptic endowments (*awqaʿ*), Coptic schools, and Copts' personal status matters (Tadros 2009b: 270). The Council was rejected by the Patriarch and suspended shortly after its establishment until reconvened in 1883. Thereafter, with the intervention of the state, a compromise was reached that reduced the remit of the Council. However, there was a power struggle for control over the resources of the Coptic Church that continued until the 1950s when the Church once again decisively gained the upper hand in communal affairs.

## 4 Privileging the Coptic Orthodox Church: maintaining a role as both the author and the star of Coptic heritage

In the matter of shaping official Coptic heritage, the Coptic Orthodox Church has the advantage. Coptic heritage is in large part led by its history as a faith community and exhibits, in the language of Bourdieu, significant symbolic power. In Coptic history, the heroes are saints, monks, and patriarchs. In a narrative shaped by the Church's history as spatially and theologically isolated yet surviving through the centuries, the Church is the guardian and repository of the Coptic community. Churches are acknowledged to act as repositories of heritage in other cases as well. Safran (1991: 84) notes that 'the church has played an important role in maintaining Armenian ethnicity'. The Church is also the most visible actor in demonstrating what is different about Copts. Barth (1969) speaks of a boundary of difference between identity communities as representing a central element of in-group definition and operation of social relations. The defence of this in-group and

solidarity around those that are accorded the legitimacy to speak for it is often defended by the group, which can then see dissent within the group as a threat and a betrayal.

This speaks to the Coptic narrative of survival and of a 'Church of martyrs'. This is supported by survey data collected in 2006 and an analysis of Coptic electronic media content and utilisation in the early 2000s (Iskander 2012a: 57–8, 89–90, 131), as well as ethnographic work. As Shenoda (2012: 481) found: 'It is a triumphant Church of wonderworking saints that many of my Coptic interlocutors pointed to as an important redress to their sense of marginalization.' In order to understand how the Orthodox Church maintains its status as the predominant author and subject of official Coptic heritage narratives, this section sets out a framework consisting of three key processes. The first is the positioning of the Church as the legitimate community leader in possession of sources of tangible heritage. The second refers to issues of controlling access to sources of heritage and the third focuses on the means and methods of the dissemination of heritage.

#### **4.1 The Church and attaining/maintaining a position as official narrator**

The hierarchy within the Coptic community is very much tied into the structure of the Orthodox Church. The *khidma* interface that connects lay Copts and the Church hierarchy is important for Copts as a social system as well as a framework for living out the Coptic faith because it embeds a system of obedience to the Church and gives individuals agency in maintaining Coptic identity and practices (Oram-Edwards 2004: 164). This authoritative position and comprehensive framework that shapes the contemporary Coptic community was challenged by a Coptic lay elite in the early twentieth century, and partly in response to this and in line with national developments, this challenge was resisted. In fact, the Orthodox Church was able to subsequently secure and entrench its position even more deeply.

This 'rise' of the Church's leadership role is usually framed in terms of a discussion of reform and revival that proceeded in several stages. The first stage was the reforms instituted by Kyrillos IV and the second was the reforms taken up under Pope Kyrillos VI (1959–1971). The period 1959 is characterised as one of renewal or the reinvention of tradition (van Doorn-Harder 2017: 11). The (re)mobilisation of Coptic cultural heritage was a significant aspect of this process (Rowe 2009: 121), a key illustration being the neo-Coptic iconography genre that was established by Professor Isaac Fanous (1919–2007).

Fanous spent three years studying with Leonise Ouspensky in Paris, during which time he conceived the idea of developing a neo-Coptic style of iconography that is distinguishable from the European and Byzantine styles (Finnestad 1996: 97). He drew on some of the oldest Coptic icons to have survived from around the sixth century and consciously sought to highlight the link between the biblical tradition and the land of Egypt, a connection that

supported and drew on the Egyptian nationalist rhetoric of this period. El Gendi and Pinfari argue that this represented ‘another attempt by the Coptic Church to encourage a cultural, non-adversarial articulation of the arguments on the ancient Egyptian roots of Coptic Christianity’ (2017: 55). Additionally, Fanous’ ability to reform the practice of iconography and the enormous impact he had creating the neo-Coptic style demonstrates that Copts outside the clergy can have a significant influence on tangible Coptic cultural heritage. Fanous acted as the Director of Art at the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies from the 1960s, leading the Coptic iconography development and arguably influencing the entire generation of iconographers that have followed (van Doorn-Harder 2017: 11–12).

This notion of renewal and consolidation of a neo-Coptic heritage under the auspices of the Coptic Orthodox Church was consolidated under Shenouda III’s papacy (1971–2012). Education of the clergy and youth was pivotal to each stage and education is now a crucial part of the dissemination of official Church narratives that will be examined shortly. The main point here is that the reforms undertaken within the Church improved the standing of the clergy and their ability to speak with authority about Coptic heritage, as well as to standardise the narratives and disseminate them among the community. An aspect of this was the expansion of the clergy and their centralisation around the Church leadership, particularly the Patriarch. Under Shenouda, the number of bishops and monks increased rapidly. According to O’Mahony (2010: 75), in 1971 there were 23 bishops and 200 monks, whereas in 2001 there were 49 bishops and 1,200 monks. As of 2021, the number of bishops has further increased to 135 (Ragab and Kamal 2021). This growth increased the visibility of the Church hierarchy and particularly valorises monks and monasteries in Coptic identity as the main source of authentic leaders of the Coptic Church. The organisational reforms undertaken by Shenouda also resulted in ‘the standardization of practices as well as the construction of the Church as a nucleus for Coptic historical consciousness and identity as well as social life’ (Shenoda 2012: 479). This role was enhanced by Pope Shenouda’s relationship with the state after 1985.

Wissa (2021: 179) points out that scholarship focuses on the Church’s role in these reforms, despite the roles played by lay Copts. This illustrates two key issues. First, this reinforces the narrative that the Church is the most visible actor, even though it is not the only actor. Second, the interventions of lay Copts cannot necessarily be seen as challenging the Church for Coptic leadership but often sought to reform and improve the Church’s ability to lead the community, precisely because it is the predominant symbol and narrator of the Coptic community. Movements for reform, such as the Sunday School Movement, sought to strengthen the role of the Coptic Orthodox faith in Coptic life, not to challenge it (Adly 2019: 80–81).

Despite the challenges from lay Copts in the first half of the twentieth century, or perhaps because of them, the Church reformed and adapted in ways that enabled it to maintain

its status and even strengthen it. The resultant leadership role of the Church both supports and is supported by the Church's resources in terms of ownership of material culture and the institutions and means with which to mobilise them in constructing and disseminating official Coptic heritage narratives. In turn, these narratives embed the Church's role as author and main subject of Coptic heritage, enabling the Church to develop and embed its institutional structures and hierarchy further.

This is supported by the fact that the Coptic Church is in control of a large proportion of Coptic tangible heritage or material culture, such as architecture, icons, and manuscripts. These are combined in the Coptic monastic network dotted across Egypt's desert landscape, which form, despite their relative isolation, pivotal spaces in the history of Copts and in the operation of contemporary Coptic life (O'Mahony 2007). They symbolise Egyptian contributions to Christianity and stand as a testament to Coptic survival.

Through the schisms of early Christianity and the centuries following the Arab invasion, monasteries played a 'crucial role as bastion of the Coptic faith and identity' (Werthmuller 2010: 104). In their buildings, they preserve an ancient way of life, acting as a living museum. Churches similarly represent Coptic architecture and house Coptic art and other material forms of 'Copticness'. The liturgies and other religious rituals that are performed in these spaces enact Coptic heritage and preserve the Coptic language. Since the Church succeeded in resisting attempts by the lay Copts to take control of Coptic endowments and finances, the Church remains in ultimate control and bears responsibility for the preservation and display of much of this material heritage.

One way the Church has contributed to preserving this has been to cooperate with the state in opening Coptic sites as touristic destinations. An example is the renovation of the site at Matariya in Cairo where there is a tree that is part of the narrative of the Holy Family's exile to Egypt. Mary is said to have rested in the shade of this tree. The renovations to the site and other sites that are identified as marking the route taken by the Holy Family in Egypt have been undertaken by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (*Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2020a). The Church has also sought the expertise of archaeologists and conservation experts from abroad, such as in the conservation work undertaken on artwork in St Anthony's monastery undertaken in cooperation with the American Research Center.<sup>5</sup> Another example is cooperation with the Levantine Foundation, a charity registered in the UK and in Egypt, which partially funded the construction of a library for ancient manuscripts at the monastery of al-Surian in Wadi Natrun in 2013.<sup>6</sup>

The Church has undertaken multiple projects itself to preserve and display Coptic material heritage. The Coptic Orthodox Cultural Center was opened in 2008, its goal to 'preserve

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<sup>5</sup> *Resurrecting the Monastery of St. Anthony*, American Research Center in Egypt, [https://artsandculture.google.com/story/tgXBRiolve\\_Dg](https://artsandculture.google.com/story/tgXBRiolve_Dg).

<sup>6</sup> [www.thelevantinefoundation.co.uk/?p=14](http://www.thelevantinefoundation.co.uk/?p=14).

the rich Coptic heritage' and also to 'incite new generations to cherish a sense of identity and awareness'.<sup>7</sup> The centre, located by the cathedral in Abassiya, Cairo, houses the St Mark Library, a museum, and spaces for events and training. The museum houses a permanent exhibition of Pope Shenouda's personal belongings. The Coptic ME Satellite channel is also broadcast from there. The library at the centre was inaugurated on 26 January, 2010. In addition to the library of the Coptic Orthodox Cultural Center, there are a further three important libraries, all located in and around the patriarchal cathedral; the library of the Society of Coptic Antiquities, the library of the Institute of Coptic Studies, and the library of Coptic Clerical College.

There are also a number of museums based at the patriarchal cathedral site in Cairo, a place that itself symbolises the faith and heritage of the Copts (van Doorn-Harder 2017: 1). The Coptic Cultural Centre includes a patriarchal museum with a permanent exhibition of Pope Shenouda. There is a plan to open a Coptic museum at the patriarchal cathedral in Alexandria as well, which is to be funded by donations to the Church (*Al-Masry Al-Youm* 2020b). Church spaces are abundant and the value of adding places such as libraries and museums within these spaces is clearly recognised. This diversifies and enhances the Church spaces as sites in which Copts can interact with heritage, underlining the Church's custodianship of this heritage.

#### **4.2 Church as gatekeeper: issues of access**

Although in some cases, the Church itself has opened spaces to exhibit Coptic heritage within the Church context, other forms of material heritage, such as rare manuscripts and other archival and written materials, remain in locations that are not openly accessible. The Church is therefore in control of access to these materials, and how and when they are displayed or used. This reinforces the Church's role as a guardian of Coptic heritage and also enables the Church to preserve its influence in the framing and operation of heritage narratives. The location of materials is one aspect. Many of the libraries are of course established inside or close to churches. Four of the main libraries are all within the Coptic patriarchate in Cairo. There are small libraries and other documents in many of the larger churches. Monasteries are also home to manuscripts and other forms of material culture. There are important libraries at the Monastery of Anba Maqar in Wadi Natrun and Mar Mina Monastery in Maryout.

However, information about the contents of the various libraries and access to them can be vague. Issues have been raised about access, particularly by scholars. Monasteries can be difficult to access, not only because of their locations but also because they normally require permission to enter. A Copt wishing to visit a monastery, for example, for a period

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<sup>7</sup> [www.copticccc.org](http://www.copticccc.org).

of spiritual retreat, may seek permission via his or her priest. While men can stay overnight in monasteries, women will not usually stay. Access to their libraries and especially to rare manuscripts can be very difficult and the system of gaining permission can be unclear. According to Sedra, 'access to the Patriarchal Library in Cairo is carefully controlled and generally denied to all but the most trusted members of the church' (2014: 496). This is a major barrier to scholars of Coptic studies and to the analysis and dissemination of knowledge.

Access is also complicated by the lack of an accurate catalogue of materials and the moving of manuscripts. One experience is described by two New Testament scholars (Monier and Taylor 2021: 19, fn 75). They describe their efforts to locate a manuscript listed in a catalogue of materials held in the old patriarchal library in the Clot Bey area of Cairo. They were informed that the manuscript had been moved after many materials suffered water damage in 1986 and 1990. A number of manuscripts were relocated to St Mina Monastery and other monasteries. Similar experiences have been confirmed by other scholars of Coptic history.<sup>8</sup> This relocation was supposed to be temporary until a process of restoration and digitisation was finished but the timeline to return the materials to more accessible libraries is unclear. The authors were informed that the materials would eventually be moved to the Coptic Orthodox Cultural Center in Cairo. Recent news regarding the opening of a Central Coptic Patriarchal Library in 2021 suggests that such manuscripts and other important materials will be consolidated here. This library is based at the monastery of St Beshoy.<sup>9</sup>

### 4.3 Dissemination of official Coptic heritage

The control of access to sources, especially written ones, supports the Church's position as the main author of heritage narratives. To consolidate the Church hierarchy as the official source of Coptic heritage, these must also be disseminated to the community in a managed way. This reinforces the socialisation process that operates in Church rituals and through the *khidma* system. Through education and dissemination of materials, 'Copts young and old learn about the ascetic late-antique desert fathers as well as the martyrs from the time of Diocletion's reign over the Roman Empire to the present day' (Shenoda 2012: 481).

The earliest reforms to the Church in the nineteenth century involved improving education for the clergy and Coptic children. Transmitting history and framing it for contemporary communities is central to the inheritance aspect of heritage. This perhaps explains Shenoda's particular attention to young people, as illustrated by the establishment of a

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<sup>8</sup> 'Women Scholars of Orthodox Christianity: Febe Armanios', The Orthodox Christian Studies Center, Fordham University, New York, 18 December 2020, <https://youtu.be/CPOq5Sjd9d4>.

<sup>9</sup> 'Mesat. al-Film al Tasjili "al-Maktaba al-Babawiya al-Makaziya"', 26 November 2020, <https://youtu.be/r-OJx-r6-PY>.

dynamic youth ministry under Bishop Musa in 1980 (Meinardus 2002: 6). Education and also the standardisation and publishing of information have formed the focal point of Church initiatives to disseminate official approved materials on Coptic theology, history, and identity and consolidate specific notions of Coptic heritage.

Among the most significant developments in supporting dissemination was the Sunday School Movement. The pioneer of the movement was Habib Girgis, an archdeacon who was himself a product of the Great Coptic School established by Kyrillos IV (Suriel 2021: 156). He established the first Sunday school in 1900 and established a Sunday School Committee in 1918. The purpose was to institute a uniform system with a standardised curriculum that penetrated all areas of Egypt and by 1938 there were 85 Sunday schools with approximately 10,000 students (Suriel 2017: 68–69). A Sunday School Magazine was set up in 1947 to support the movement, which contributed to the evolution of a greater awareness throughout the community of Church history and Coptic heritage (Sedra 1999: 224). Sunday schools feed new members into the *khidma* system and operate together with the Youth Bishopric to organise a comprehensive schedule of activities that offer social activities, trips, and retreats.

A further mechanism of supporting this socialisation of Copts into the Church-led communal system is the use of publishing and media. The importance of publishing was understood early on by Kyrillos IV who imported one of the first printing presses in Egypt in 1859. Church ownership of the resources to publish and disseminate printed materials has been a crucial aspect that combines the elements of status and legitimacy and possession of resources and access, along with the ability to disseminate. The Church has been able to provide materials for the Sunday schools and to produce vast amounts of materials on Coptic language, history, and teachings, enabling it to bolster its voice and shape Coptic consciousness (Asa'ad 1993: 77). Publishing and media engagement increased particularly under Shenouda. The Church expanded its publishing arm to include television and new media. Under Shenouda, a weekly papal address was established that was later broadcast online and via satellite television. Shenouda also wrote a weekly column, both in the Coptic newspaper *Watani* and in the semi-official newspaper *al-Ahram*. He established *al-Keraza*, the Coptic Orthodox Church's official magazine, in 1965. Shenouda remained the editor-in-chief of *al-Keraza* until his death and it acted as the voice of the Pope to Copts throughout Egypt and the diaspora (Iskander 2012a: 29, 81). The magazine published Church news and Church commentary on national affairs and has a section on pastoral suggestions to encourage reader participation (*ibid*: 88, 90).

As well as such magazines, the Church invested considerable resources in publishing books which were distributed through churches or its own bookshop *Maktabat al-Mohabba* or via the Youth Bishopric, for example. During the 1980s and 1990s, music cassettes, such as *Ihki ya Tarikh* ('Speak to us History') were influential and Coptic films,

available on video or to view in churches were also popular. These supported the dominant narratives of Coptic history and connection with contemporary 'Copticness'. The lyrics of *Ihki ya Tarikh* recall the martyrs and saints of the past, their faith and sacrifices.<sup>10</sup> Such songs that were directed at Coptic children, had a large impact on the socialisation of Copts into the narratives popularised by the Church revival movement, which mobilised the stories and images of saints and martyrs as central to understanding Coptic heritage.

Although not all films were produced by the Church directly, they required approval and an interview with a Christian film maker reported that the Church is responsible for supporting the industry (Mikhail 2015). Due to their content being largely focused on depicting stories of saints, such films cannot be shown outside Church venues. To circumvent this spatial restriction, the Orthodox Church saw the potential of establishing satellite television channels. Satellite television became influential in the Arab world from the late 1990s, especially with the impact of the 'al-Jazeera effect'.

## 5 Copts and the Egyptian nation in the twentieth century

This section will set out a chronology of how Copts in the twentieth century have situated themselves within the Egyptian nation, and the impact of this on the official articulations and narrators of Coptic heritage. The previous sections have discussed the ways in which the Coptic Orthodox Church features in, and reproduces, narratives of Coptic heritage. However, these are not produced within a vacuum. The wider social and political context in Egypt has a considerable role to play in the operation of Coptic heritage and which narratives are mobilised and which excluded. Although Copts and the Church are aware of the limitations of the national context in which they are numerically a minority in terms of religious identity, they do not see themselves as a minority in national terms (Tadros 2013: 105–9). This is a formulation that is largely accepted in modern Egypt and is illustrated in the following quote of Pope Tawadros II, Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church:

*We are a part of the soil of this nation and an extension of the pharaohs and their age before Christ. Yes, we are a minority in the numerical sense, but we*

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<sup>10</sup> 'Tarnima Ihky ya Tarikh', Evronia Azer, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrspKA9uRhU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrspKA9uRhU).



*are not a minority when it comes to value, history, interaction and love for our nation.*

*(al-Ahram 2013, unpaginated)*

The framework of a national partnership between Copts and Muslims is a central narrative of the modern Egyptian nation. This position developed through the twentieth century, and it is important to understand this partnership to uncover a central process of inclusion/exclusion impacting on who narrates Coptic heritage; that is, the lens of Coptic status in the Egyptian nation and society. The relationship between Copts and the nation determines aspects of heritage that have become part of national life through their formal presentation by individuals and institutions recognised as authoritative by the state and its political elite.

### **5.1 National unity and the Copts, 1900–1952**

At the start of the twentieth century, Egypt was a country occupied by the British and nominally part of the Ottoman Empire and Islamic Caliphate, though with a special autonomous status under the rule of the Mohamed Ali Dynasty since 1805. This hybrid identity and political system gave Egypt a unique place in the Middle East, leading it to follow a slightly different social and political trajectory than other parts of the region. The intellectual debates of the time often dwelt on questions of identity and patriotism (Wataniyya). As a result, debates regarding relations between different religious and ethnic communities in Egypt were quickly developing by the start of the twentieth century. Two Coptic-owned newspapers were established in the late nineteenth century, and they played a prominent role in debating national issues and publicising Coptic concerns vis-à-vis the nation (Iskander 2012a: 26–7). As with the whole press industry at this time, readership was limited for social and economic reasons and access to the means of production of newspapers still more so. Nevertheless, Coptic socioeconomic elites were fully engaged in shaping and responding to the debates of the day (Atta 2007).

Perhaps exacerbated by the occupation of Egypt by the ‘Christian’ British, there was sensitivity towards the idea that Copts sought power disproportionate to their numerical size in the nation. After Coptic notable Boutros Ghali became the first Coptic prime minister in 1908, such sentiments increased in the public space. According to Kelidar (1993: 12), Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Jawish led a press campaign against Boutros Ghali and Copts, printing an article entitled ‘Islam: A Stranger in its Own Home’. The assassination of Ghali in 1910 further increased tensions, leading to the convening of a conference known as the Coptic Congress in 1911, during which Copts aired their concerns. The responding ‘Egyptian’ Congress rejected the concerns and saw them as confirming the argument that public Coptic activism threatened the unity and identity of Egypt.

It was only really with the establishment of the Wafd, a political party led by Saad Zaghloul, and the outbreak of the 1919 revolution in Egypt that the political scene changed enough for Copts to become involved in the nationalist movement (Tamura 1985: 111). The Wafd party included Copts, most notably deputy leader Makram Ebeid. This led to a period of increased Coptic engagement in national politics (Hasan 2003: 39). The symbolism of 1919, particularly the cross and crescent images carried during protests, is a key framework in modern Egypt as an enduring narrative of the Egyptian nation (Iskander 2012a: 98–99). It includes Copts in national narratives but also limits any challenge to this status quo. As such, alternative conceptualisations of Egyptian identity, and the status of Copts in this, are resisted by the embedded political culture and hierarchies.

## **5.2 Revolution, authoritarianism, and Nasser, 1952–1970**

This situation was consolidated in the early twentieth century. After the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, there was a resurgence of pan-Islamism in Egypt's political culture. By the 1930s, the Wafd was weaker and one of the points upon which it was attacked was the prominent role of Copts in the party (Carter 1986: 161–5). While elite Coptic figures continued to play high-profile roles in Egyptian politics, national life was becoming generally less inclusive. The outbreak of the Second World War and the continued presence of the British contributed towards the fraught political climate. However, it was the Free Officer's Revolution in 1952 that introduced the biggest rupture in Egyptian national life. Under Gamal Abdul Nasser, Egypt's public sphere shrank as the state took control of political life by banning political parties, and of the press by nationalising newspapers.

The lay Coptic elite who had been able to carve some space for Copts in national life and therefore have a greater role in influencing Coptic communal life and identity, were subsequently squeezed out. With the narrowing of public spaces, religious spaces offered an alternative. This period marks the start of what some scholars call the Coptic retreat from the public space into the Church space. This led to a shift in the voices representing Coptic heritage and interests in public life because: 'From 1952 on, the inhibition of Copts' voices in civil society increased the church's political power, and it developed into the undisputed voice representing the Coptic community' (Tadros 2009b: 269). Samir Soliman also points to the 1952 revolution as a turning point for Coptic political representation. In the first post-revolution election held in 1957, no Copts won a seat (2006: 135).

Under Nasser, a system of blocs that could be co-opted to support his regime was established. The Coptic Orthodox Church, symbolised in the person of the Patriarch, was one of these blocs. In what some describe as a neo-millet construction (Rowe 2007: 331), a pact between president and Patriarch gave Copts a voice at the state level as an entente between the nation and its Copts (Tadros 2013: 61). This relationship between president

and Patriarch appeared to embody the national unity discourse and became the only publicly acceptable narrative of Muslim–Christian relations in Egypt. As a result, each institution aided the other to control and obscure resistance and limit alternative spaces (Sedra 2014). Alternative voices did not entirely disappear, but they were marginalised through various processes of ‘othering’ supported by the entente (*cf.* Iskander 2012b).

### **5.3 Political Islam and the Church–state pact, 1971–2011**

Egypt underwent a further shift after the death of Nasser and the ascendancy of Anwar al-Sadat to the presidency. This is viewed as the catalyst for an Islamisation of public life (Shehata 2010). As Islamists mobilised and became increasingly vocal in public spaces, the Coptic Patriarch resisted the increasing invisibility of Copts. In 1971, Sadat amended the Constitution to include Sharia as a source of law and, in 1977, Sadat proposed introducing Sharia law provisions. Pope Shenouda’s reaction was to call for a national fast among Copts and Sadat failed to introduce the provisions. This introduced a central Coptic religious practice into the public space as a political tool wielded by the Church.

Similarly, Pope Shenouda announced that he was ‘cancelling’ Easter in March 1980 after a series of bomb attacks on churches. In 1981, Sadat ordered Pope Shenouda into internal exile at a monastery in Wadi Natrun. The Coptic Church leadership had attempted to push the boundaries of what was seen as acceptable in the national political space, leading to removal into the Church space.

This situation persisted until 1985, when Shenouda returned to office under a new president, Muhammed Hosni Mubarak. Shenouda then pursued a very different relationship with the state that much more closely resembled the pact between Nasser and Kyrillos VI. In return for public expressions of support and careful management of official Coptic media discourses, Pope Shenouda was recognised as the representative of a defined Coptic community. In an interview with Anba Beshoy, secretary of the Holy Synod in the Egyptian magazine *al-Musawwer*, he acknowledged that the Church leadership believed Copts followed Pope Shenouda’s political injunctions and that the state saw this as a shortcut to dealing with its Coptic citizens (Scott 2010: 69). This came at the price of failing to address the social and political issues involved and of marginalising voices from inside the community, such as those calling for more to be done to address discrimination against Copts or challenging the right of the Church hierarchy to speak for the whole Coptic community.

For other parts of the community, Shenouda’s prominent role at the state level only justified his leadership of the Coptic community. With his position legitimised in these different spheres, his authority was consolidated and voices opposing him were resisted on the basis that the security of the Copts was at stake. Shenouda was seen as the

protector of Coptic faith, heritage, and security and to challenge his authority to speak for Copts was, for many, akin to betraying the community and laying it open to attack. This situation continued for much of the rest of Mubarak's rule. At least until some dissatisfied voices began to rise, as a part of the general national climate of frustration that was to feed into the Egyptian uprising of 2011 (Monier 2014).

#### **5.4 An overview of demographics and social norms in twentieth-century Egypt**

As a national indigenous community, the Coptic community and its structures are shaped not only by its specific history and Church laws and traditions, or relationship with the government but also by the society in which they are embedded. The social and economic challenges faced by Egypt are experienced by Egyptians of all religious affiliations. Although Christians are a numerical minority and their visibility in the public sphere is set within certain boundaries and narratives about the nature and identity of Egyptian society, Copts are very much integrated into Egyptian social and cultural norms that are influenced by Arab and Islamic heritage as well.

According to Zeidan (1999: 55), Egypt has experienced great economic and social dislocations which have impacted on welfare services and infrastructure during the second half of the twentieth century. The particular factors outlined here are the substantial demographic changes that have taken place throughout the course of the twentieth century and gender issues, for their relevance in understanding shifts in society that impact on who is omitted and included in Coptic heritage narratives. Substantial demographic shifts in Egyptian society are seen by the 1930s, driven at least partly by accelerating urbanisation and mass education (Elsasser 2014: 40). Egypt also experienced a massive growth in population, which has increased at a consistently higher rate than other states in the Middle East. The population issue was noted in 1930 but the first policy on population growth was not adopted until 1960. According to the national charter issued by Nasser in 1961, population growth was acknowledged as a significant threat to Egypt's economic development (Hopkins and Ibrahim 1997: 85–7).

The spatial maldistribution of the population was also noted as a challenge by the 1970s but a ministry for population and family was not established until 1993. By this time, the rapid rural to urban migration pattern had caused the population of Egypt's first and second cities – Cairo and Alexandria – to soar. The social dislocations that resulted had a considerable impact on social norms and social structures, such as patterns of family life. The rapid growth of these two urban centres was underpinned by the political centralisation of Egypt so that the concentration of opportunities in Cairo especially further strengthened the urbanisation trend and side-lined rural areas. Consequently, the latter have remained underdeveloped and experience much higher levels of poverty and

illiteracy. In fact, Egypt has one of the highest proportions of its population living in rural areas. This has been stable over the past three decades at approximately 57 per cent according to World Bank figures. This is significant because 'Rural poverty is three times higher than urban poverty and more than 80 percent of the extremely poor live in Upper Egypt, which is home to about half of Egypt's population' (Ghanem 2014: 1).

Those living in rural areas suffer increased likelihood of marginalisation then, partly due to the focus of infrastructure and opportunities in the urban centres and also due to the huge disparity in poverty rates. Although Copts are found throughout Egypt, they have traditionally been more concentrated in Upper Egypt, meaning that Copts are very much impacted by these demographic patterns. The combination of the marginalisation of rural areas, the higher rates of poverty, lower standards of education, and the disruption of traditional social structures and traditions caused by rapid rural to urban migration, have potential implications for who is visible and is omitted from official Coptic heritage narratives. This requires further study, but it is likely that the impact is felt in three main ways.

First, the dislocation between rural and urban areas suggests that access to the means of producing and consuming official narratives of Coptic heritage would be more limited for those in rural Egypt. Second, the bias towards urban areas often leads to prioritising the interests of urban residents and their greater visibility vis-à-vis rural residents. Third, there is a reduction in knowledge of heritage in terms of a loss of traditional rural ways of life and forms of daily lived heritage; for example, oral culture, food rituals, and other customs (Thomas 2004). These may be looked upon as parochial or inappropriate in the urban setting, especially when associated with the idea of being 'low class' or backward, as Sedra suggests (2009: 1052).

A further clear social aspect impacting on omissions in narrations of heritage is the lens of gender. As al-Ali argues, 'the struggle for women's rights intersects with the struggle against other inequalities' (2014: 122). The reverse is equally true; other inequalities intersect with the struggle for women's rights. This compounds the omission of Coptic women both in the Church and in Egyptian society (Tadros 2020). It has already been observed that the Church hierarchy and traditions have historically accorded women a subordinate role to men. Therefore, in examining causes contributing to the inclusion/exclusion of voices in official heritage narratives, gender must be considered and studied further.

A concrete example of the way in which the omission of women from the production of Coptic heritage is compounded by a combination of social and political factors, alongside the privileged voice of the Church hierarchy, is the content of the flourishing film and video sector, particularly in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Armanios and Amstutz

(2013) present a detailed analysis of the religious films that reinterpret the stories of saints' lives (hagiopics). They argue that there was an increased visibility of women in these films but that this visibility served to entrench the Church's patriarchal teaching by focusing on 'themes of female subjugation and modesty' (515). Women's voices were co-opted to affirm the existing, dominant narrative, illustrating the important point that inclusion alone is insufficient in terms of redressing omissions. A measure of democratising control over the production and dissemination of heritage narratives is crucial in order to more effectively increase the diversity of voices.

## 6 'Unorthodox' spaces within Egypt: who else narrates Coptic heritage and where?

This paper has argued that the Coptic Orthodox Church, especially the upper echelons of the hierarchy, is the main actor in the shaping of official narratives of Coptic heritage. It has also explored the ways in which this role is maintained by Church practices and community practices, as well as some of the ways that the dominant heritage narratives support this reality. As Armanios (2011: 8) found, 'lay and clerical leaders collaborated, at least intermittently, in preserving communal traditions and supporting forms of religious expression that captured the needs of fellow believers'. The cohesion of the Coptic community, especially during periods of increased threat, supports solidarity between the Church and lay Copts with heritage acting as a powerful symbolic language of cooperation and communal structure.

However, heritage is a discursive practice and alternative actors, though resisted, are not completely invisible. Mina Ibrahim has conducted fascinating research on Copts who step outside the system of social structures supervised by the Church, for example by rejecting the traditional *khidma* system or stopping attending Sunday school or Church. This does not necessarily mean rejecting the Church altogether, but Ibrahim describes how some Copts seek a different form of *khidma* than the Church organised one, which some see as antiquated (Ibrahim 2020: 67–8). In his detailed description of the way that a certain charitable Coptic organisation negotiates its independent path, it is clear that this is not conducted in resistance to the existing system but parallel to it, and often in support of it (*ibid.*: 89). Further work by Ibrahim (2019) points to the existence of Copts inhabiting other spaces than those provided by the Church and the *khidma* interface, but his empirical data suggests that this leads to invisibility rather than resistance or challenge to official narratives. This section asks whether there are spaces available for more visible challenges or for the construction of 'unorthodox' narratives of heritage not directed by the Coptic Orthodox Church.

## 6.1 'Other' churches

Although the Coptic Orthodox Church is by far the largest denomination in Egypt, it is not the only one. There are of course many other denominations established by immigrants to Egypt and by missionaries, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the relationship of each one to Coptic heritage in depth. I will focus on two, the Coptic Catholic Church and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt. Both were established through missionary work among Egyptian Christians.

Egypt's Coptic Catholic community numbers less than 200,000 members today. The community originated with the first missions in the seventeenth century with a Capuchin mission in Cairo in 1630 and Jesuit missionaries active since 1675. The modern Coptic Catholic Church developed most significantly after the re-establishment of the Coptic Catholic Patriarchate in 1895. Despite joining the Catholic Church, links to Coptic heritage are retained through the name of the Church, using similar design and art within Coptic Catholic churches and by keeping some Coptic language in liturgies. The liturgy used in services is the same as in orthodox churches and the vestments worn by priests and deacons have many similarities. The Coptic Catholic Church then has sought deliberately not to completely disconnect Coptic Catholics from all aspects of their heritage. Despite its small stature next to the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church has contributed to Egyptian and Christian life through its institutions, such as the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies and the Franciscan Cultural Centre for Coptic Studies, but particularly through their schools.

The largest protestant congregation in Egypt is the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt, also known as the Synod of the Nile, which has its origins in the American Presbyterian missionaries in 1854. It is thought to have a membership of approximately 250,000. Participation could be larger because Copts from the Orthodox Church may attend protestant churches but continue to have rites such as baptism and marriage conducted within the Coptic Orthodox Church for social reasons (Tadros 2013: 74). The evangelical churches do not usually echo Coptic art, architecture, or liturgy. Like the Catholic Church, the evangelical churches have developed a network of organisations including schools and hospitals. The Synod has also established the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Cairo, including the Centre for the Study of Middle Eastern Christianity.

In these examples, neither church entirely supplants the role of the Coptic Orthodox Church as the dominant author of Coptic heritage narratives. The story of the Orthodox Church and the material culture owned and supervised by it continues to represent the history and origins of Copts. An incident in January 2021 illustrates how the community

guards this priority for the Orthodox Church. Popular Egyptian talk-show host Ibrahim Eissa invited a Christian scholar, Mina Fouad, as a guest on his show, with the intention of discussing how Christianity became established in Egypt. He discussed the tradition of the foundation of the Church by St Mark which is a central narrative in Coptic identity.<sup>11</sup> Although he did not deviate from the standard narrative, Fouad received public criticism on social media. Due to his position as an instructor at the Episcopal Church Seminary in Cairo, he was criticised by some for appropriating Coptic heritage because, they argued, it was not his right to do so as a member of the Episcopalian seminary.

In summary, while the non-orthodox churches in Egypt have their own spaces and institutes, their small numbers and the strength of the Orthodox Church as the legitimate voice for Coptic identity and history ensures that it is generally considered the most appropriate author and spokesperson for Coptic heritage. By extension, other churches cannot claim the same legitimacy in speaking about heritage that predates their establishment in Egypt and can even be criticised for cultural appropriation, especially when approaching topics that are considered the exclusive domain of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

## 6.2 Archaeology

Scholarship on heritage and archaeology suggests that the discipline can be political (Smith 2004: 1) or at least that it can be used for political purposes. Archaeology is often linked to cultural resource management, particularly outside of the academic sphere and so archaeologists can be considered as actors with impact on what gets defined as cultural heritage and how it gets to be preserved or engaged with. As noted in Section 1, Coptic heritage received less attention from archaeologists and the state actors in the field of archaeology. However, a Coptic archaeological movement did also develop in the early twentieth century. Although the Orthodox Church has control of many of the archaeological sites and other objects of material culture, and the office of the Coptic Archaeological Society is based in al-Boutrosiya Church at the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo, an alternative space was also carved out by Marcus Simaika.

Simaika, a central figure in the movement to preserve Coptic heritage, overcame resistance from the state and the Church, to establish the Coptic museum. His efforts to preserve Coptic heritage were met with resistance from the Church because he sought to move responsibility for the preservation and restoration, for example, of ancient churches, to the Comité and the Patriarch blocked Simaika's appointment to Comité for nine years until he was eventually approved in 1905. He then went on to become the president of the committee until 1944 (Simaika and Henein 2017: 123–4).

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<sup>11</sup> Al-Qahira wa al-Nas, uploaded 6 January 2021, [https://youtu.be/6Y\\_cBD4S4wo](https://youtu.be/6Y_cBD4S4wo).



During his work overseeing the restoration of ancient buildings and monuments, he collected objects such as carved wood from churches and had the idea to collect them into a Coptic museum. In 1908, he made a request to the Patriarch to exhibit them, along with some manuscripts and icons in rooms next to the famous and centrally important site of the Hanging Church, al-Kenissa al-Mu'allaqa. The request was refused.

Simaika believed this refusal was due to his position on the Majlis al-Milli and his frequent clashes with the Church authorities over Church reforms in this capacity. He also realised that he could not establish a Coptic museum without the acquiescence of the Church and that it would take some persuasion to convince the clergy to allow the collection and display of items that were traditionally destroyed after their use in Divine services (Simaika and Henein 2017: 131). He was able to reach a compromise with the Patriarch by assuring him that the items displayed would remain the property of the Church and under the supervision of a priest in the al-Mu'allaqa Church and was thereby granted initial permission (*ibid.*: 132).

Museums are sites often involved in constructing heritage for a national community (McLean 2008: 285). It is perhaps telling then that the opening of the Coptic museum came after museums dedicated to the Pharaonic, the Greco-Roman, and the Islamic periods, suggesting a lower state priority for constructing a Coptic heritage narrative. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the Coptic museum was the only one with an Egyptian founder-director, suggesting that this museum was a particularly important heritage project for the Copts as a community previously marginalised in national heritage projects.

Simaika raised the funds through subscriptions from acquaintances and although it belonged initially to the Coptic Orthodox Church, it was transferred to the authority of the Egyptian government in 1931 after the king issued a decree (Simaika and Henein 2017: 137–9). This transferral required a long negotiation process. In fact, the move was resisted by both the Church hierarchy and the Coptic lay notables who all argued that the museum should remain a Coptic institution under Church supervision, rather than a state one (*ibid.*: 146). This first and main Coptic museum remains under state direction until today. However, it should be noted again that although it represents an important space for Coptic heritage outside of Church control, it does not necessarily challenge official Church narratives of Coptic heritage.

### **6.3 Academia and Coptic studies**

It is often through archaeology that Egyptian universities include spaces for the academic study of Coptic heritage. Unlike the religious institutes established by the Coptic Orthodox Church and other churches, which focus on Church history, hagiographies, and theological studies, the study of Coptology (al-Qibtīyet) in public universities is generally tied to archaeology departments, such as in Cairo University, the American University in Cairo,

and in Alexandria University. There are some specialist institutes that have been established in recent years that expand the scope of Coptic studies in Egyptian academia. In 2014, an Institute for Coptic Studies and Research was established as part of the Faculty of Literature at the University of Alexandria and includes departments in the fields of Coptic art and monuments, Coptic history, and Coptic language and literature. Another centre for Coptic Studies is based at the University of Damenhour where it forms part of the department of Greco-Roman archaeology. After the university held a conference on Coptic studies in 2017, the Coptic Church offered financial support to the centre to help promote Coptic heritage.<sup>12</sup>

A further public initiative is the Center for Coptic Studies. It is managed by the Library of Alexandria with cooperation between state and Church under the supervision of Dr Luay Mahmoud Saeed. The project's mission is to 'introduce the Coptic heritage and culture as an integral part of the Egyptian culture'; 'disseminate the Coptic heritage among all Egyptians, not only Christians', and to go 'beyond the religious and theological studies that falsely confined Coptic heritage to Christians, and focuses more on its civilizational and cultural aspects'.<sup>13</sup> This echoes the Church-state narrative of national unity and suggests an agenda of broadening awareness of Coptic heritage nationally, but only certain aspects of it.

The politics seems clear here: supporting a narrative of Coptic heritage that is acceptable to non-Christians necessitates the omission of other aspects of Coptic heritage. This represents the dilemma faced by minority or marginalised communities and integration into national society; the choice between exclusion or assimilation that carries with it the risk of lost heritage. This dilemma is one of the reasons why the Coptic Orthodox Church asserts its role as the main actor in preserving and disseminating Coptic heritage, and why this is accepted by many Copts as the best way to secure Coptic heritage and safeguard the community and agency over its identity.

There are few institutes that are independent of either state or Church administration. One unusual case is the Patristics Institute. It is independent, established by scholars mainly from the Coptic Orthodox tradition but privately financed and run with the aim of translating primary texts and offering courses, for example in Greek, that enable Copts to gain increased access to written texts.<sup>14</sup> Another centre focusing on translating and publishing rare Coptic texts is the Panarion Center established by the scholar Joseph Faltas.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Author's private correspondence with Dr Joseph Faltas, January 2021.

<sup>13</sup> [www.bibalex.org/en/center/details/centerforcopticstudies](http://www.bibalex.org/en/center/details/centerforcopticstudies).

<sup>14</sup> [www.patristiccairo.com](http://www.patristiccairo.com).

<sup>15</sup> [www.facebook.com/PanarionCenter](https://www.facebook.com/PanarionCenter).

The number of such institutes, centres, and university departments of course multiply once we look outside Egypt. These are a mixture of Church-led institutes and university-based departments, as well as individual researchers from a growing variety of disciplinary backgrounds such as Coptic history, theology, art, politics, and sociology. Fordham University offers a research fellowship in Coptic Orthodox Studies and there are academic journals devoted to Coptic studies, such as the *Journal of Coptic Studies* and the *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies*. Claremont Graduate University hosts a Coptic Studies Council headed by Saad Michael Saad and the digital edition of the Coptic encyclopaedia as a continuation of the work of renowned Coptologist Aziz Atiya. The scope then for studying different aspects of Coptic heritage in the academic sphere outside the Church is growing and thriving, as is clear from the increase in academic conferences, symposia, and publications in all aspects of Coptic studies. There is potentially the momentum for this to expand, particularly outside Egypt and with a growing number of diaspora Copts seeking to research Coptic studies.

#### **6.4 Egyptian media**

The Coptic Orthodox Church developed a substantial media presence by the end of the twentieth century, but it could not control all media and examples of struggle have emerged. Although most public Coptic newspapers and magazines had ceased or lost influence by around the middle of the twentieth century, one new publication was established in 1958 by Anton Sidhom called *Watani* (My Homeland). It sees itself as a national newspaper offering a Coptic perspective with an agenda to increase the visibility of Copts in the public sphere and to support an understanding of Coptic identity as Egyptian citizens (Iskander 2012a: 30–33). Unlike many Coptic publications, *Watani* is displayed and can be purchased in the public space from newspaper vendors and not only from within Church spaces. Nevertheless, the readership is mostly Coptic and van Doorn-Harder and Vogt (1997: 146–7) describe reading the newspaper as part of the Sunday ritual for Copts.

*Watani* has clashed with the Church over what is possible to print. Iskander (2012a: 89) illustrates this with the description of a dispute between *Watani* and Pope Shenouda in 2006. The three points of contention all involved challenges to the Coptic Orthodox Church's leadership and included the newspaper's coverage of a conference held by an organisation called the Secular Copts Front, an interview with Max Michel who had attempted to set up a rival patriarchate, and the distribution of a worship CD produced by a protestant church. All of the incidents under dispute involved giving space to actors challenging the Orthodox Church's predominance as leader of Copts and voice of Coptic identity and heritage. In response, Shenouda threatened to withdraw his weekly column

from *Watani* and in a papal address he stated that *Watani* was operating against Church guidelines.

During this period, national newspapers also offered spaces to individual Coptic writers as a non-Church platform through which to discuss Church reforms and other issues related to the Coptic community. The Secular Copts Front, a movement seeking a greater voice for lay Copts used this space after their foundation in 2006. The national newspaper *Roz al-Yusef* in particular carried many articles by Coptic journalists and writers, including Kamal Zakher, Robeir al-Fares, and Hany Labib (Iskander 2012a: 43). The lay Coptic writers defended their use of the media to discuss Coptic affairs and speak for the Coptic community, including discussing reforms within the Church (Labib 2012: 339). This was resisted by the Church, also sometimes using the press when particular red lines were touched upon, mainly centred around issues of 'the church's theology and religious culture' (Guirguis 2016: 107). The Church's ability to control this was weaker than in the *Watani* incident. Nevertheless, the Secular Copts Front did not receive enough communal support to sustain their momentum.

The Church also asserted its right to approve other forms of media portraying Copts, leading the Church hierarchy to challenge the release of films in the 2000s. *I Love the Cinema (Beheb al-Cima)* released in 2004 caused controversy among the Coptic community about its portrayal in the public sphere, even though it was written by a Christian writer. It was the Church that often led the criticism. Both in the case of the film and the newspaper articles, the Church hierarchy criticised them and lamented that the Church had been bypassed, implying the Church is the single correct spokesperson for, and defender of, 'Copticness'. As a result, the next film touching on Coptic themes and characters, *Hassan and Mark (Hassan wa Morcos)* was pre-approved by the Church before its release in 2008. Even into the first decade of the twenty-first century then, the Church claimed and seemed to remain the predominant voice for, and face of, 'Copticness' in Coptic and Egyptian media.

## 7 Beyond the twentieth century and outside Egypt: potential transformations in Coptic heritage narratives

The previous sections have set out the different spaces in which interactions between lay Copts, the Church hierarchy, and the national context have operated to shape and privilege certain discursive practices of Coptic heritage. Not ignoring challenges, they set out how these interactions tend to support the Church as both the main character and only

narrator of official 'Coptiness'. The paper has identified some alternative spaces and voices that challenge this status quo, though this mainly took place indirectly. As a result, representations of Coptic heritage outside of this official set of relations operated with less visibility and often much less impact. However, the following section points to some of the developments that are challenging this synergy between Church and lay Copts and the ways in which omission and inclusion in official narratives of Coptic heritage might be affected as the twenty-first century continues to unfold.

It is difficult to ignore the impact of the 2011 Egyptian uprising, especially since frustration at the lack of participation and the continuation of corruption and inequalities at all levels of social, economic, and political life were at the core of the uprising. For Copts, the uprising was an opportunity to seek visibility and recognition in the public sphere as individual Copts without the Church acting as the intermediary representative. It was also an opportunity to challenge the Church hierarchy's authority over Coptic affairs and to seek to negotiate internal reforms within the Coptic community. Although the Coptic Church initially advised Copts against joining the protests, large numbers still took part. In the immediate aftermath, lay Copts were more visible in the public space than before and more vocal in calling for reforms within the Church and Coptic community. These initiatives were met with resistance in both national and Church spaces. Coptic activists were squeezed out of public spaces as they were closed down once again after the uprising and there was a sense that Coptic concerns were 'factional' and marginal to **Egyptian** ones (Monier 2014).

This climate suggested that the situation for Copts had returned to its pre-uprising character. However, there are further factors, mainly outside of the physical borders of Egypt, that are likely to continue to drive a change in the previous rigidity of inclusion/exclusion of certain voices in Coptic heritage narratives and the priorities driving debates within the Coptic community. The impact of globalisation, new technology, and further social and economic dislocations caused by demographic factors and changes in the national political context, could impact on inclusion and exclusion in official Coptic narratives of heritage, both inside Egypt and in the diaspora.

### **7.1 The impact of growing and deepening diasporas**

An emerging space for the re-negotiating of official Coptic heritage narratives is the diaspora. The establishment of diasporas changes the politics and priorities of a community and therefore impacts on politics of heritage and the actors who can contest it. The Coptic diaspora is not new. However, it has grown in the wake of the Arab Spring, and it has 'deepened', in that second and third generation Copts who were born and/or grew up in the diaspora are now gaining more influence in their respective communities

and bringing with them different experiences and priorities. This requires a response from the community hierarchy, either through increasing efforts to maintain traditional discourses, or by allowing managed re-negotiation.

Coptic diaspora communities began in the 1950s, with a significant expansion in the 1960s and further waves throughout the twentieth century, leading to the establishment of new churches and dioceses (Brinkerhoff 2016). This movement has also resulted in a network of institutes, NGOs, and charitable organisations. In the 1990s and 2000s, some Coptic activists in the diaspora tried to mobilise a human rights discourse to speak for Coptic rights in Egypt and challenge the Church hierarchy's narrative of Coptic status in Egypt. This was a marginal movement, at least publicly, that was portrayed as a betrayal of Egyptian and Coptic heritage resulting from the adoption of the interests and norms of the host country. In this way, alternative narratives and spaces were 'othered' because they did not fit with the prevailing narrative of national unity, 'Coptiness', and communal hierarchy upheld by Church and state (Iskander 2012b).

However, there are signs that the diaspora post-Arab Spring and under Pope Tawadros II is not so easily marginalised. Its growth means that the diaspora as a social space can increasingly have an impact on the construction of heritage narratives. The Coptic Church has expressed its concern with helping immigrants and new generations to navigate between their Coptic heritage and integrating into their immediate surroundings (Brinkerhoff 2016: 473). This approach has allowed the Coptic diaspora to flourish and also enabled the Church to maintain its status as the leading authority of the community. However, there are indications that this flourishing of the diaspora has increasingly strengthened the Coptic diaspora's influence. The recent #CopticMeToo and Coptic Survivor campaigns pushing for action from the Church over sexual abuse suggests that the diaspora is able to hold the Church hierarchy to account (Saad 2020).

As the diaspora community continues to expand, the aspect of maintaining Coptic heritage will become more complicated and will require adaptation from the Church as it must reimagine heritage to serve a twenty-first century global Coptic community (Marcus 2020), while navigating the challenges presented in the Egyptian context. One way in which the changes precipitated by the diaspora is having an impact is illustrated by the issue of gender roles. For Copts growing up in a different cultural, social, and political environment to that of Egypt, questions about the participation of women in the Church can become complicated. As Brinkerhoff (2016) found, the Church is the central space through which Copts in the diaspora mediate their heritage and seek to participate in it. The limited roles available to women clashes with the ways in which they participate in society outside the Church and frustrate aspirations to maintain Coptic heritage. Consequently, there are the beginnings of a debate about expanding the roles available to women in the Church hierarchy.

An illustration of this is the way that two Coptic American academics are using their academic training in an effort to build debates in the community. Ethnomusicologist Carolyn Ramzy is undertaking a project called 'Coptic Women Sing too', to address the omission of female voices in Coptic churches and to open up spaces for debate.<sup>16</sup> Donna Rizk Asdourian, the founder of the Orthodox Women's Ministry,<sup>17</sup> works on the theological aspect in order to differentiate between theological perspectives on gender and social constructs. This academic space available in the diaspora serves as a platform for discussions on gender in the Coptic community and Egypt more broadly, such as the comprehensive body of work by Mariz Tadros, which also feeds into debates about Coptic women (Tadros 2009a, 2014, 2016).

By using academia and other public spaces outside of the Church to build discussion, but also bringing these discussions into Church and community spaces, Copts in the diaspora are increasingly participating in shaping their community and heritage. The extent of the impact of such debates in diasporic and academic spaces on Coptic communities in other geographical locations, including Egypt, is worthy of further research.

## 7.2 New media

Alongside the changing demographics and therefore changes in the dynamics and influence of the diaspora is the impact of new media technologies. The emergence of new media has irrevocably altered the way people are able to access and produce media globally (Obar, Zube and Lampe 2012). The Coptic Church established a number of official Coptic satellite channels with Aghapy established in 2005 and CTV in 2007. These have been followed by more based both in Egypt and abroad. Similarly, the way the Coptic Church has adapted to new media technology demonstrates the ability and commitment of the Church to occupy and utilise new tools and discursive spaces to maintain the Church's symbolic power, and control over the communication of meanings of 'Coptiness'. Through these means, the Church has been able to actually expand its reach through these developments.

Just as printing and satellite television had been employed to maintain the Church's leading position as narrator of 'Coptiness', so new media has been utilised by the Church, especially for youth ministry. This includes the diaspora youth, which the Church sees as a particular priority in terms of maintaining its role in the socialisation of Copts (Botros 2006: 181). During the period of the 2000s, the Church was able to largely maintain its predominance in the new media spaces, due to its symbolic position, the structure of the

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<sup>16</sup> 'Coptic Women Sing Too', St Maurice and St Verena Coptic Orthodox Church, 21 January 2021. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTqeno8676o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTqeno8676o).

<sup>17</sup> <https://orthodoxwomensministry.com/>.

community, and the volume of Church media spaces produced and monitored by the Church. This was aided by community contributions, much like the 'real world' *khidma* system. Consequently, up until the early 2000s at least, 'through producing Coptic media the Church has been able to centralize a collective understanding of "Coptic community" and the discourses of belonging to it' (Iskander 2012a: 96).

While new media is often seen as an opportunity to bypass communal gatekeepers (Riggins 1992), it can also be used to reproduce existing relations of power. Armanios and Amstutz's (2013) illuminating study of portrayals of women in Coptic films illustrates the way Church narratives of gender and 'Copticness' are reproduced in new spaces via developing media formats so that omissions are reproduced. Westbrook and Saad's (2017) work on the Coptic e-diaspora conceptualises Coptic diaspora electronic media as a compensatory space for the loss of the territory of the homeland. They also note the collaboration of actors from the clergy, lay Copts, and indeed non-Copts in some cases, in constructing the Coptic e-spaces and their content. This seems to suggest that the e-diaspora is often a place for re-affirmation and 'consciousness raising' (*ibid.*: 341) rather than contestation of what Coptic identity and heritage mean or challenging communal hierarchies.

However, as these technologies continue to evolve and become more widespread, it is likely new forms of activism, and a wider range of contributors will begin making diversity more visible. It is the participatory, interactive nature of communicative spaces such as social media that changes the landscape because it is not simply unidirectional like mass media. With new media, the boundary between author and audience is more porous (Georgiou 2013: 82–3) and the cost (both financial and social) of producing content that challenges official narratives is lower. In addition, communities are no longer isolated geographically or denominationally but are 'networked' (Monier 2017). Yet the existing scholarship on electronic media in the Coptic diaspora suggests that rather than a challenge to the existing official heritage narratives, the main contribution of the growing media, diaspora, and academic communicative spaces is to reduce omissions in the narratives rather than replacing official narratives with others.

Contributing to this focus on increasing the diversity of voices and thereby redressing omissions is an apparently growing interest in recording heritage from below, particularly using oral history methods (Akladios 2020). Again, this development does not necessarily seek to revoke the core of the official Coptic heritage narratives. The main impetus is to communicate pluralistic understandings of Coptic heritage through increasing opportunities to communicate 'Copticness' and greater recognition of the diverse experiences of negotiating Coptic heritage in everyday life. I will discuss two examples of inclusionary initiatives that address the omitting of everyday and non-elite/Church experiences and ways to record and preserve them. They connect the developments



noted in academia, diaspora spaces, and new media technologies. The first case is a video series entitled *Mirathna fi Turathna* and the second is a blog initially named the 'Coptic Canadian History Project' and renamed 'Egypt Migrations' in 2020.

### ***7.2.1 Mirathna fi Turathna***

A programme entitled *Mirathna fi Turathna* ('Our Inheritance is in our Heritage') is presented by Professor Mariz Tadros and broadcast on internet television channel al-Horreya TV, an Arabic language Christian channel based in the USA. The episodes are also available on YouTube and Facebook with the first episode airing on YouTube on 14 July 2020.<sup>18</sup> Each episode takes a topic and uses interviews with 'ordinary' Copts, usually in rural areas of Egypt, to enable people to tell their own stories. The aim of the programme is to highlight and record the culture and history of Copts to address the omission in official Church history and studies. It provides a rich social history of the Coptic community using oral history methods that go beyond elite priorities and concerns.

This series also highlights that the different forms of lived heritage are at risk because only the official discourse of heritage is normally recorded. In the episode broadcast on 21 January 2021, the focus is on the celebration of Eid al-Ghattas (Epiphany).<sup>19</sup> It is clear that the enduring element of the Church liturgy for the festival is a pivot for the community that is preserved but that the traditions, folklore, and stories that are connected with this official expression of the festival is ever changing yet unrecorded. In one interview, a Coptic woman recalls how in her youth she would bathe in the river with her friends during Eid al-Ghattas and splash water on the houses before the formal Church celebration. She laments that this no longer happens. Recording people's stories in this way not only illuminates 'Copticness' from below but also records and preserves knowledge and traditions that are threatened by changing socioeconomic conditions.

Whereas ancient history and material culture are preserved by official projects and narratives, it is this everyday practice of Coptic heritage that is most at risk of being lost. This is where the tools provided by digital media and the training of academics and researchers can contribute to providing a counterbalance to the consequences of omitting everyday heritage from formal narrations of Coptic heritage.

### ***7.2.2 Coptic Canadian History Project***<sup>20</sup>

Another project that takes the recording of everyday heritage and preservation of Coptic social history as its central aims is a blog established by Michael Akladios in 2016. The blog was conceived of as a public history and community outreach project. Whereas *Mirathna*

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<sup>18</sup> 'Mirathna fi Turathna, Episode 1', al-Horreya TV, 14 July 2020, <https://youtu.be/ZqvGuqrX154>.

<sup>19</sup> 'Mirathna fi Turathna, Episode 23', al-Horreya TV, 21 January 2021, <https://youtu.be/d4e10XK9fLA>.

<sup>20</sup> <https://thecchp.com>.

*fi Turathna* focuses on Egypt and oral history, this blog concentrates on the diaspora and collecting documents. In his academic research on Coptic migrants in North America, Akladios found that there was a scarcity of relevant materials in public archives. Although he found many people had personal archives, they were not accessible and at risk of being damaged or lost. In order to prevent the loss of this knowledge and history, the team behind the blog sought to locate and digitise materials to preserve the memory of Coptic migrants. The growing interest in everyday Coptic heritage and in recording this 'unofficial' expression of 'Coptiness', especially in the Coptic diaspora, is thereby manifested in this project. The blog has also acted as a platform for introducing marginalised voices, such as discussing the role of women in the Coptic community and also lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) issues. In 2020, the blog was renamed Egypt Migrations<sup>21</sup> to reflect an interest in expanding the project to collect and digitise materials pertaining to all of Egypt's migrant populations and to locate Coptic experiences within Egyptian migration experiences.

## 8 Conclusion

This paper has examined the production of official Coptic heritage narratives and the politics that underpin who and what is included. Based on a discussion of the processes through which heritage is claimed, produced, and disseminated, it argues that the Coptic Orthodox Church remains both the primary author of, and central character in, narratives of Coptic heritage. This has set up a series of omissions that include gender, socioeconomic status, national politics, the relationship to the Orthodox Church, and hierarchical positions within it.

While the Orthodox Church and its leadership sits at the top of a communal hierarchy, this position is generally held with at least the partial consent of a large part of the community. This is based on claims to a legitimate leadership role, control over sources of Coptic heritage, and the ability to protect and communicate a formal, standardised 'Coptiness' within the community and to others. This constellation of power in the Coptic community is not uncontested though. Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a push and pull between the Church and the state and between (and among) the Church hierarchy and lay Copts. Particular points of tension are connected to the official history of Christianity in Egypt and Coptic Orthodox doctrines, as well as who is allowed to communicate them.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://egyptmigrations.com>.

The findings of this paper suggest two themes for future research on the politics of Coptic heritage. The first is whether developments in the community, particularly since the turn of the new century, actually challenge official Coptic heritage or simply address the omissions in the official narratives. The discussion of the Coptic case in this paper suggests that grass-roots claims to heritage do involve many of the imminent concerns of the community and contribute to efforts to ensure that the Coptic community is flexible enough to adapt to changing socioeconomic and political realities.

At the same time, it seems that efforts to include more diverse Coptic voices in the community do not necessarily seek to displace the Church. As Stuart Hall suggests, adding 'other' heritages does not automatically lead to revising the main heritage narrative (Littler and Naidoo 2005: 1). Likewise, it cannot be assumed that Coptic efforts to include a wider range of voices is done with the intention of revising the core narratives of Coptic heritage or the Church's role in preserving and communicating them.

The second theme is the conceptualisation of a framework for Coptic heritage that unpacks the synergy between formal and informal forms of heritage. A continued emphasis on official forms of Coptic heritage as the priority supports the dominance of communal elites. It also undermines and obscures the importance of forms of lived heritage experienced and narrated through daily life and perpetuates the marginalisation of Copts who belong to other churches or no church. This risks the loss of the intangible heritages of lay Copts. Just as Arabic language retains a formal standard Arabic for writing and formal situations, alongside a colloquial Egyptian Arabic used in normal daily life, I suggest that it is important to understand both formal expressions of heritage and their 'colloquial' everyday forms. Each has a different purpose.

Coptic heritage cannot be understood through the formal representations alone then but neither does raising awareness and recording of everyday Coptic heritage replace the formal Coptic heritage narrative. I also suggest that the two are not mutually exclusive but work together, to preserve Coptic heritage and empower the community in its internal relations and negotiate its place in Egypt and the diaspora. In this context, the development of new technology and the turn in scholarship to digital archives and history 'from below' may support new channels and methods for a narration of heritage that reduces omissions and increases engagement.

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