

## Book review

### Then and Now: Egypt's Story

The Author: Hussein Shabka

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*Then and Now: Egypt's Story* is a fascinating journey that takes the reader through Egypt's political, economic and social changes throughout the ages. With not a single boring page, but a rather colorful, and sometimes poetic text, it is an historical account in which Shabka describes the "events that reflected and influenced social and cultural values and practices in Egypt through the centuries," and how these shape the "core of an Egyptian's world-view and self-view." As a social scientist, Shabka focuses on the development of religion, customs, and values which have formed the foundation of Egypt's social structure and its people's view of the world, of themselves and of the very foundations of their ancient civilization. Indeed, this is not only a book for historians, but also one for all social scientists, and for any educated person.

*Then and Now* chronicles the history of Egypt from pharaonic times—3100 B.C.—to the election of El-Sisi in May 2014. It is a study of social history in which the author describes the characteristics and changes of the Egyptian people through each period of their history, their life course, the events they lived and how they reacted to them.

Shabka begins by focusing on "the rhythm of life" in Pharaonic Egypt, emphasizing the central role of ancient religion in shaping Egyptian culture, not just as a belief system, but as a way of looking at the world. The book describes how this rhythm of life fueled the Pharaonic era's scientific and engineering advances that not only gave us pyramids, temples and monumental statues but also shaped a rich society that offered its people structure, comfort, well-being and security.

The important role of Egypt's Pharaonic religion within society was also astutely recognized by early foreign rulers, from Alexander the Great to Julius Caesar. Shabka illustrates how, by recognizing "the link between mortals and the world of gods" and adopting the "protocols of the Pharaohs" these early foreign rulers were able to perpetuate long periods of social stability and enable Egypt to continue making advances in the sciences. He also explores how, by embracing rather than suppressing Egypt's religion and cultural values, they were able to blend their own Hellenic and early Christian culture and traditions into the very fabric of Egyptian society.

These early millennia of relative stability and prosperity gave way to the Arab invasion in the seventh century under the leadership of Amr Ibn el-Aas. This period in Egyptian history is characterized not only by the introduction of Islam, which would quickly become the country's dominant religion, but also by a pattern of oppression, heavy taxation and plundering. "Cultivating the culture of despotism" and instability became the defining theme in Egypt's history from this point forward and continuing through to modern times.

Shabka provides a detailed historical exploration of foreign rule from the Caliphs to the Fatimid's, Ayyoubis and Mamluks. More importantly, he provides insightful analysis of how this period served to erode Egypt's ancient social fabric and value system, to create anomie and to carve a wide gulf between Egypt's people and its rulers. In spite of this, Shabka points out, Egyptians managed to maintain their age-old veneration of learning, their respect for books and their love of life throughout this long period of oppression.

Moving on to the early modern era, the author examines the impact—and contrasting styles—of British and French colonial rule. While Bonaparte's rule was short-lived, he embraced and sought to learn from and celebrate Egypt's rich cultural and scientific history while also instilling modern social values. In sharp contrast, Britain, allied with the Ottomans and Mamluks, perpetuated the cycle of oppressive foreign rule and profiteering that started under Amr Ibn el-Aas.

In 1805, Mohamed Ali, the Father of Modern Egypt, was appointed as Wail. He set out to modernize the country, began an industrialization program, built a strong army and in many ways Egyptianized Egypt. He set up the country's first consultative council, brought in extensive land reforms, established a modern education system, started new industries, and sent students abroad. In doing so, Mohamed Ali laid the foundations of modern Egypt, which his successors built upon, from the Suez Canal to establishing new universities, creating a free press, and advancing music and the arts that were the hallmarks of the "liberal era."

This era ended abruptly in 1952 when a military coup forced King Farouk to abdicate the throne and go into exile. An army Colonel, Gamal Abdel Nasser, became President, a role he would hold until his death in 1970. During his rule, Nasser disregarded the constitution, passed extensive land reforms of his own, and built the Great Dam. His reforms led to the transfer of wealth and power from the old aristocracy and westernized middle class to a *petite bourgeoisie* that was both socially conservative and inward looking. Shabka illustrates how, under his authoritarian rule, Egypt eventually began to suffer from overpopulation, rising illiteracy rates, unemployment, as the natural outcomes of misguided economic policies and imprudent foreign policy which led to ruinous conflicts, and gave rise to the endemic levels of corruption that continue to characterize Egypt. Under Nasser, education and expertise were severely devalued, with trust and fealty given priority over qualification for political appointments. These traits, Shabka asserts, "took root in the culture and turned into impediments to reform."

Following Nasser's death, Anwar Sadat took over the presidency, bringing with him a vision to pursue Egypt's national interests rather than personal glory. He created an

administration based on “national-legal authority,” appointed a civilian prime minister and implemented social changes in both domestic and foreign policy. Sadat's achievements were significant—he ended the constant state of war with Israel, regained Sinai, returned the name of Egypt to the country, ended the Mukhabarat's reign of terror, restored freedom of travel, opened the economy, and abolished the one-party system. He was assassinated on Oct 6, 1981, by religious extremists, having left the country in a much better shape than when he took office.

On succeeding Sadat, Hosni Mubarak allowed many of his predecessor's reforms to continue. For example, he regained Taba, honored the peace treaty with Israel and assiduously protected Egyptian land and sovereignty. However, there were also many grave failings during his tenure. Perhaps the greatest of these in this context of territory and statecraft, Shabka illustrates, was his neglect of Egypt's relations with its African neighbors along the Nile valley. However, the most defining aspects of Mubarak's rule were rampant, corruption, and incompetence. A small clique amassed vast fortunes while the rest of the country slipped into poverty and fostered religious extremism.

Shabka gives a detailed account of the 2011 revolution that toppled Mubarak, exploring how the modern social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and mobile technologies were used to organize a groundswell of non-violent protesters demanding freedom, justice, and democracy. More than two million filled Egypt's streets and squares demanding and finally forcing Mubarak's resignation.

In 2011, Mubarak handed power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), then headed by Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. SCAF eventually held parliamentary and presidential elections.

The turmoil and, uncertainty favored the Muslim Brotherhood, who went on to win 70% of the seats in the People's Assembly, with Mohamed Morsy being elected President in June 2012. Morsy immediately set out to remake Egypt in the Muslim Brothers image, installing its members across the government, the military and police academies, releasing mass murderers from prisons, and developing close ties with Hamas. Frustrated by Supreme Constitutional Court rulings that his actions were unconstitutional, Mors issued decrees giving himself greater powers and judicial immunity. As his supporters besieged the Supreme Court, the rest of the country rose up in protest once again.

Central to this was the Tamarod movement, which collected 22 million signatures calling for new presidential elections. Demonstrations erupted on June 30, 2013, after their demands were ignored. At this point, the military intervened and issued Morsy an ultimatum. When he duly ignored this as well, military, religious and opposition leaders aligned and, on July 3, 2013, announced that the country had deposed him, naming Adly Mansour as interim President. Two months later, elections were held, with General Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi and a politician, Hamden Sabahi, as the two candidates. Sisi won and has ruled Egypt as President since.

Reflecting on the state of contemporary Egyptian society, Shabka highlights a second Arab invasion currently unfolding, one in which media—free books, audiotapes, video, broadcast television and the internet—are being used to promulgate religious ideologies of hate, bigotry, intolerance and violence toward non-believers. These new invaders are also using their vast financial resources to promote extremism by buying or taking control of Egyptian enterprises and using them to impose fundamentalist religious values on their workers and Egyptian society.

As the “cradle of civilization,” Egypt has for millennia cast a spell on those born in it and those who conquered it. The poet, Ahmed Abdel Mo’ti Hegazi, likens the struggle happening today in Egypt to the mythological struggle between good and evil, with Isis and Osiris representing goodness and fertility, battling Seth, who represents evil and barrenness.

Extending this metaphor, Shabka argues that Egyptians today must take up the call for moderation and reform. Moreover, with the “creative experience of building a civilization in the distant past [that] is embedded in the Egyptian national psyche, the author calls upon readers to re-examine the historical developments that gave rise to contemporary society and its current problems. It is as if Shabka were writing this history for all contemporary Egyptians, urging them to regain perspective, to reinvigorate their native identity and to rebuild a modern Egypt that guarantees stability and social order, that allows their “*joie de vivre*”, their live and let live attitude, to reemerge and overcome their “smoldering anger and rigidity in belief.”