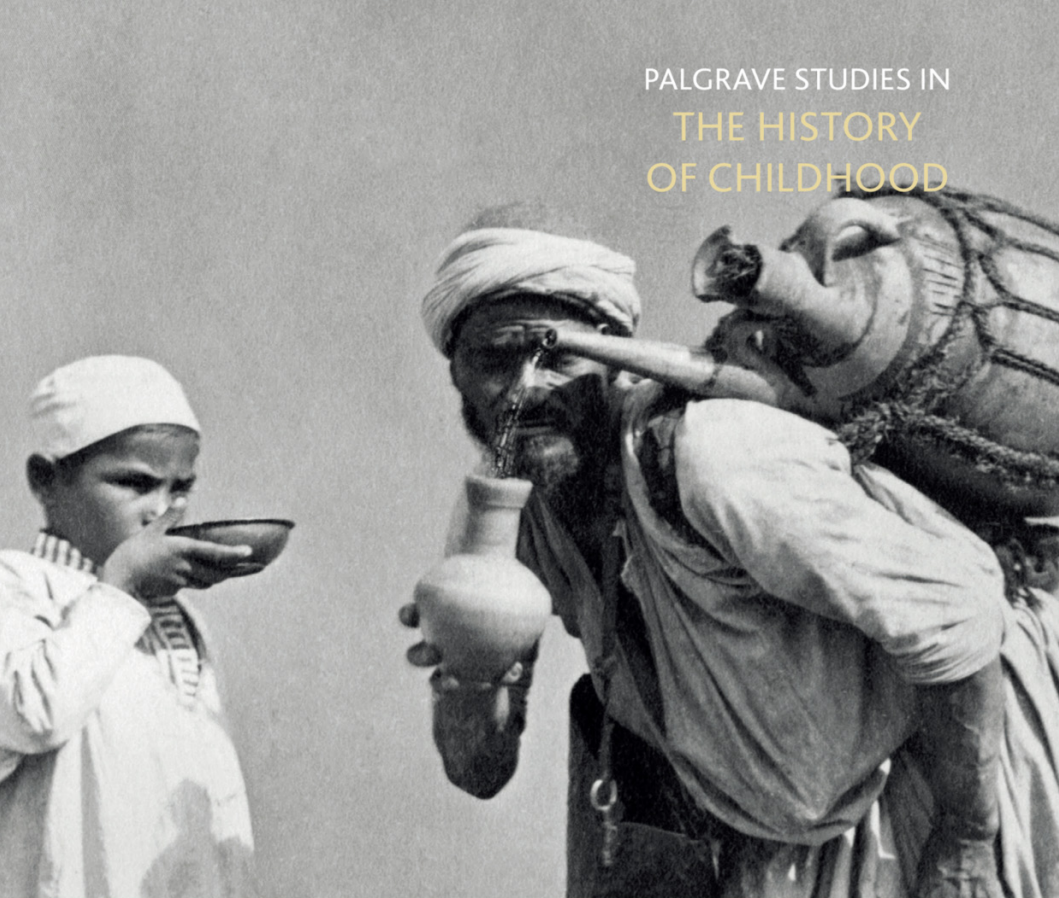
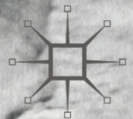


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Childhood and Colonial Modernity in Egypt

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Childhood and Colonial Modernity in Egypt

Heidi Morrison

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For my mom and dad

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As a high school student, I spent a summer in Egypt with the widow of the esteemed late Middle East historian Malcolm Kerr. During the tumultuous Lebanese civil war of the 1980s, Malcolm was president of the American University of Beirut. Islamic extremists assassinated him in his office, leaving behind his wife Ann and four children. Ann did not let the unjust and untimely loss of her husband blind her to seeing that the killers did not represent the majority of the Middle East. Ann brought high school students to the Middle East to educate about the region, in hopes of building better US–Arab relations. The catastrophic death of Malcolm set me on the path to becoming a professor of modern Middle East history. My hope for this book is to play a small part in continuing the legacy of Ann and

Malcolm's breadth of humanity. This book is, in part, dedicated to the children of Egypt: past, present, and future.

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Note on Transliteration and Translation

For the Arabic transliterations, I have followed the system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. The Glossary at the end of the book lists some important Arabic words used in this book. The translations are all mine, unless otherwise noted.

Introduction

At the end of the summer of 1920, seven-year-old Egyptian ‘A’isha returned to her hometown of Dumyat to find her childhood turned upside down. While she and her family had been visiting relatives in the countryside, underwater demons had eaten her girlfriends back home. At least that is what ‘A’isha initially thought had happened to her playmates when she did not see them one afternoon at their usual meeting place on the bank of the Nile. ‘A’isha’s thinking was in line with Egyptian lore, which attributed much of the unknown to invisible good and bad spirits.¹ Inquiring around the neighborhood, she discovered that the girls were in reality safe and sound, sitting in rows of chairs indoors, wearing uniforms and reading books. Excited to join them in their new endeavor, ‘A’isha ran home to ask permission from her father. He informed ‘A’isha that these girls had indeed been consumed by a demon: the new government-run school.

‘A’isha’s father, a religious scholar, said that no daughter of his would study anywhere except in the home. “The school corrupts,” he declared, commenting on the new government-sponsored, secular schools that were popping up in Egypt alongside the longstanding religious schools.² He ordered ‘A’isha to read a verse from the Qur’an about the Prophet’s wives. She wanted to retaliate against her father’s conservative interpretation of the Qur’anic verse, but remained silent out of fear. For the next few months, ‘A’isha watched longingly through the window of her house as the schoolgirls in her neighborhood passed by every day.

Were it not for ‘A’isha’s mother approaching her own father about the matter, her daughter might never have gone to school. The

maternal grandfather, who was also a religious scholar, made a deal with his son-in-law to let 'A'isha go to school on condition that she also continued her religious studies at home and that she stopped attending at 13 years of age. 'A'isha's father agreed.

When 'A'isha reached 13, she wanted to continue her schooling, but there was no high school in her area. Her mother snuck her out of town to take a placement test, and sold her own gold bracelets to buy 'A'isha a ticket for a school in Cairo, but 'A'isha's father covertly sabotaged the process by making sure there was no spot for his daughter in the school when she arrived there. Eventually, 'A'isha returned to Dumyat to appease her father, and studied on her own at home. 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman, known today in Egypt as *Bint al-Shati* (Girl of the Shore), held various academic posts and wrote on religion and women's rights until her passing in 1999.

One afternoon, at seven years of age, 'Abd al-Rahman suddenly found herself at the center of different expectations about how she should spend her childhood. 'Abd al-Rahman's father thought that home, religion, and family could provide the best upbringing for her, whereas government leaders favored the new schools. Within 'Abd al-Rahman's family, there were also different ideas about her future. The tug of war that ensued was similar to that experienced by many other children, boys and girls, across Egypt at the time. Girls customarily spent their childhood at home doing chores and learning homemaking skills. Daughters of the economic elite or daughters whose fathers were religious clergy (such as 'Abd al-Rahman) received a basic religious education from a private tutor. Even though government primary schools for girls had operated in a limited number since 1873, the idea was still foreign to most Egyptian families in the early twentieth century. Many boys at the time also found their childhood disrupted by the new prospect of attending government schools: primary schools for them had operated in a limited number since 1837. Parents weighed the options of sending their sons to these schools or continuing the customary routine of attending religious schools and working the land.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a pivotal period in Egyptian history. The country was searching for an identity in the face of intensifying western imperialism, the emerging nation-state, changing gender roles, and a rising middle class. In the context of colonialism, Egypt's encounter with these forces

of modernity resulted in new experiences for children. Attending secular school was one of these, and also important were changing children's pedagogy, relations with parents, and expectations for the future. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of ferment for childhoods all over the globe owing to the forces of modernization. This book explores how, in the context of colonialism, changes in constructions of childhood occurred in Egypt, thanks to the ongoing modernization process. The existing narrative on Middle Eastern childhood history, which is expressed tentatively in the form of Elizabeth Fernea's multidisciplinary edited volume *Remembering Childhood in the Middle East* (2002), claims that reactions to modernization and colonialism only served to reinforce traditions related to child-rearing, such as the protection of girls.³ However, this is not the full story. As the example of 'Abd al-Rahman shows, family dynamics were not static during this period.

The process of modernization in Egypt dates to Napoleon's arrival in the country in 1798, when Egypt became the first province of the Ottoman Empire to be occupied by a western power. Napoleon sought to disrupt British trade with India, as well as to found an empire that revived the ancient Greek world. He capitalized on the power vacuum caused by tensions between Egypt's ruling Mameluke dynasty and the Ottoman sultanate in Istanbul. Easily taking Cairo with the aid of gunpowder, Napoleon presented himself as a friend of the Muslims, coming to deliver Egypt from the Ottomans and the Mamelukes.

Napoleon's adventure in Egypt only lasted until 1801, but it was important in that it led to the emergence of the Muhammad 'Ali dynasty that ruled the country until 1952. Muhammad 'Ali was an Ottoman commander from Albania who took advantage of the turmoil in Egypt to establish a monarchy. He had ambitions to run the entire Ottoman Empire himself, and turned Egypt into a large state-owned farm in which all crops had to be sold to his government at fixed prices. Feeling threatened by 'Ali, the Ottomans asked the British for support in exchange for adopting a free-trade treaty (the Treaty of Balta Limani of 1838) that gave Britain tariff privileges and the right to sell anything in the Ottoman Empire. This treaty would later prove to set the stage for British colonial dominance in the region. 'Ali established the basis of the modern Egyptian state by initiating several agricultural, economic, educational, military,

bureaucratic, and social reform projects. His goal was to found a European-style state, and to this end he sent missions of promising Egyptians to Europe to learn the latest innovations and governance methods, while he had the peasantry conscripted into military and labor service.

After ʿAli's death, his grandson ʿAbbas ruled from 1848 to 1854, effectively closing the region off to the West during his rule. ʿAli's fourth son Saʿid ruled from 1854 to 1863, borrowing large sums of money from European banks to finance modernization projects, particularly infrastructure. Saʿid granted a concession to a French engineer to construct the Suez Canal, the terms of which were highly unfavorable for Egypt. When Ismaʿil took to the throne in 1863, he opened the canal with an opulent ceremony. Ismaʿil, who ruled from 1863 to 1879, continued the modernization projects, funding them with loans from the West that ultimately led to a declaration of bankruptcy. The British deposed him, placing his son Tawfiq on the throne in 1879. He assumed full sovereignty in 1882 after defeating the proto-nationalist Urabi Revolt. Egypt technically remained under Ottoman sovereignty and was governed by ʿAli's descendants, but Britain controlled its military, economic, and governmental structures, declaring it an official protectorate in 1914. In 1919, the political leader Saʿd Zaghlul led Egyptians in massive anti-colonial demonstrations against the British. Egypt gained nominal independence in 1922, which resulted in a constitution but also the continuation of Britain's indirect rule through the monarchy. The new prime minister had limited authority and the British retained control of the Suez Canal and Egypt's external defense. The 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty changed the relationship to a 20-year military alliance, although full independence and the end of the ʿAli dynasty did not occur until 1952, when the Free Officers' Movement, led in part by Gamal ʿAbd al-Nasser, took control of the country.

Historians have shown that the process of making modern Egypt was not just one of throwing off the occupiers and awakening as a nation-state. The process required control over many segments of the population: peasants to build the army and cultivate the land (Fahmy 2002; Gasper 2009); mothers to raise future citizens (Pollard 2005); middle-class (*effendi*) men to strengthen national honor (Jacob 2011); and the poor, around whose needs politicians vied for power (Ener 2003). Children were also increasingly controlled and turned

into subjects in the modernization process. As part of the increasing state control over the people, ensuring the well-being of children was recast as a responsibility of government and elites. Adults in distant cities began to play a significant role in decisions that affected children, although they were unrelated to them. This was a change from the situation whereby family and community had served as the sole caretakers of children. Tangible manifestations of the professionalization of child-rearing occurred in the establishment of new institutions for children, such as government-run schools, as well as children's literature and health and welfare campaigns. In 1923, a year after Egypt was transformed from a protectorate into a semi-autonomous state, nationalist reformers saw to it that elementary education became compulsory for all Egyptian children, even though very few actually attended school.⁴ In 1920, there were 70,000 pupils in the country's 700 elementary schools, whereas by 1948 there were a million attending 5000 such schools.⁵ Reformers created new ways to communicate with children, through standardized school curriculums, a children's press, and so on, so that nationalist ideas, class identities, and gender roles that were essential aspects of making Egypt's modernity could be passed on.

Additionally, nationalist reformers relied on representations of childhood to advance their visions for Egypt, to mobilize and emotionally manipulate adults to suit political agendas, and to legitimize nationalist narratives. Photographs in children's magazines, for example, showed children mastering new western technology, such as the telescope, even though in reality most Egyptian children did not even attend school. Representation is a disciplinary act because one person is speaking for another. The photographs embodied the characteristics that reformers wanted Egyptian children, and by extension Egypt, to embody. The fact that the reality of children's lives was usually very different from the representation further illuminates the visionary aspect of the photographs. Representations of childhood also appeared in autobiographies of childhood. Egyptian authors encoded social critiques in a palpable manner by articulating them through the innocent voice of the child. 'Abd al-Rahman's autobiography, for example, is not just a testimony of her life, but also a contemporary plea to reform girls' education. Controlling representations of the child in Egypt's past was a way of envisioning the country's present and future.

Existing historical narratives about Egypt's encounter with modernity generally do not acknowledge that the encounter created new social knowledge about childhood. From the start of the nineteenth century, however, changes in childhood began to take place. Muhammad 'Ali sent missions to Europe to learn customs and habits (including those relating to offspring, marriage, games, and sports) that could be transmitted to Egyptian domiciles in the hope of modernizing the masses.⁶ Changes for children intensified at the turn of the twentieth century owing to Egypt's encounter with western modernity in the context of a British occupation. Egyptian intellectuals, reformers, and nationalists sought to modernize the country and to end the occupation by making Egyptian children competitive with their European counterparts at social, political, and economic levels. As symbols of the next generation, children were a means for social change. The elite reconfigured notions of childhood in order to produce and reproduce new class identities, gender norms, and state apparatus (autonomous from the British). Reconfiguring childhood was a common phenomenon among states throughout the Middle East and the world in the early twentieth century, and the dynamics of this for Egypt are examined here.

Viewing early twentieth-century Egyptian history through the lens of childhood reveals new conceptions of childhood that impacted the country's institutions and family dynamics. It also reveals that modernity cannot be associated with linear progress and development, nor a direct embodiment of western ideals. Discourses about childhood were a microcosm of larger forces underway in Egypt at the time. While new opportunities emerged for some upper-class Egyptian children, most children saw no change at all, created hybrid identities (combining the new and the old), or intentionally evaded change altogether. Furthermore, discourses on childhood unfolded within a primarily religious framework and in a language that embraced Egyptian heritage. Changes for children were often couched in terms of a lineage of *adab* (culture, good manners), a literary genre dating to the ninth century that focused on norms of conduct, such as building children's moral character. A new cultural conception of childhood emerged for some children in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. This had a synergistic relationship with the process of modernization. Modernization cannot be separated from the reconceptualization of categories of age.