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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

# **Understanding the Extremely Impoverished: An Exploration into the lives of the poor in Upper Egypt**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, and Egyptology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

In Sociology- Anthropology

By: **Shanaya Noelle Frazier**

Under the supervision of **Dr. Reem Saad**

**May 2013**

## **Dedication**

For my Loving Husband Ashraf Ahmed Hassaan Ali

## **Acknowledgements**

I first would like to acknowledge the creator of all Allah, without the will of the Omnipotent there is nothing

This research would not have been possible without the help of many people to whom I will always be grateful to.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The American University in Cairo\* Understanding the Extremely Impoverished: An Exploration into the Lives of the Poor in Upper Egypt\* S.N. Frazier

Within an area of Luxor named Al Qurna (within Upper Egypt) there exist a great number of individuals and families living in extreme poverty. For many who are impoverished in this area, charitable donations are the only source of income and way of meeting necessities. While these donations are appreciated, it is far from enough and do not supply an efficient amount of income to dismiss impoverished circumstances. By ethnographically exploring the lives of the poor in Al Qurna using semi-informal interviews and participant observation, I was able to experience firsthand the creative ways they survive with the small amount of necessities provided to them. I was also able to get to know what social factors contribute to creating and maintaining poverty in the region. The individuals that I studied are extremely poor, yet they are able to survive and get by on what little they have available to them. This research offers an in depth look into the fears, social circumstances, creativity, activities, resources, and life experiences of the poor. The realities that were revealed may be considered unimaginable, yet they enable an understanding of poverty as experienced and perceived by the poor themselves.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

On a hot summer day in Upper Egypt (Luxor, east bank), I walked past an old man sitting on the side of the road. As I passed he asked for the sake of God if I could give him money. I kept walking thinking that there are thousands of beggars on the street and I usually only choose women to give charity to. As I kept walking he shouted in Arabic “you are just like the rest, you don’t see me and you do not care.” For some reason these words stung in my heart and I wanted to go back and tell him that I do care and he should not assume that everyone is cold hearted. My husband pulled my hand to suggest that I keep walking and told me not to worry about him. Later that same day, I was on my way to a restaurant next to the Nile with my husband and friends. As we walked on the upper section of the corniche, I encountered what appeared to be a poor woman and three children near the restaurant we were going to. The mother came up to me and stated that her husband is dying, she has no money and the government will not help her, so could I please give something because she has children. I handed her 5 pounds and continued with my day but the sound of her voice and her words of desperation stuck with me. I wondered how they were meeting their needs and how they would continue to survive on a daily basis. Towards the end of the day, I decided to pray and visit a beloved Sheikh at a mosque in west bank. While I was there he was making plans and preparations to go around the area of Al Qurna to give the impoverished in that area meat and blankets. There were many people present who looked tired, dirty and withered looking to get help from Sheikh Abdullah. They spoke to me asking me questions while they were waiting for their share of the charity. The questions kept coming, they wanted to know where I am from, what my name is, what is it like in America and much, much more. It was interesting to talk to poor and homeless people because I had never done that before. Where I am from in New York, there are plenty of poor people but I never



came in close contact with them, they would just be a part of the scenery on the street and they would blend in with the background noise of NYC. After my many conversations one of the women there handed me a carved elephant and said that her son makes and sells these but she is going to give it to me for free even though she is poor because she thinks I am kind and beautiful and God willing she will be blessed. I thought to myself how she could give me a gift when she has so little. Then I thought maybe she wanted me to feel kindness towards her and give her some money. I decided to just accept the gift and continue speaking with the poor around me. The day finally came to an end and when my husband and I reached home I thought back on all that I have heard and witnessed in the day. The questions began to roll around in my mind about how these people live and cope with their circumstances which motivated me to want to learn more. In that instant I found my thesis topic.

Poverty was always something mysterious to me, a life of extreme poverty seemed impossible to deal with and I wanted to know how the impossible is done. Of course I couldn't take on studying the lives of the world's poor entirely in one shot. Aware that poverty is an inexhaustible area of study, I decided to focus on Upper Egypt. Why Upper Egypt? Simply because poverty in Upper Egypt has been an ongoing problem and is still increasing. I also chose Upper Egypt because of the access that I have to it. I have been studying in Cairo, getting to know Egyptians from all cities within Egypt and being married to an Upper Egyptian has placed me in an interesting and unique situation to study the poorest of people in rural Egypt. The rural poor in Upper Egypt are amongst the poorest in the region and much could be learned from them.

According to the World Bank; "The Household Income, Expenditure and Consumption Survey (HIECS) for 2010/2011" showed that the poverty rate increased from 21.6 percent in

2008/09 to 25.2 percent in 2010/11. 51% of Upper Egyptians lives in poverty and constitute about 22,000,000 people, out of the 43,000,000 people that live within the Upper Egyptian governorates in total. The World Bank defines the poor as those persons whose spending falls below 3,076 LE or \$500 per year. The rural poor are increasing every year and are becoming a huge issue<sup>1</sup>.

The subjects of my research are families and individuals living in extreme poverty in Luxor (a city in Upper Egypt) within a region named Al Qurna. I explored how the members of this relatively extremely impoverished community survive and cope with scarcity, how poverty is embedded in their everyday life activities as well as how their life circumstances were socially produced. I will try to decipher many of the creative and adaptive ways poor people in this region survive and deal with having to live without sufficient supply of life necessities. I also explored the possible social factors that are within Al Qurna which may contribute to the manifestation and perpetuation of an environment conducive to extreme poverty. When I refer to social factors I am looking at the social norms, commonalities and traditions of the society and how the poor interprets it. I did not just focus on the material aspects of their survival equating to food, shelter, water and the coping mechanism thereof. I focused on the non-material ways as well such as their fears, motivations and attitudes. People living and surviving in extreme impoverished conditions have fascinating and valuable experiences to share in terms of basic life activities. This can be extremely useful to the average person who may benefit from this type of practical knowledge. Doing this ethnographic fieldwork enabled me to see firsthand what is not always obvious and cannot be assumed: to go beyond the superficial appearances. It also enlightened my understanding of how society, as a whole, in Al Qurna contributed to the

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<sup>1</sup> The World Bank, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/egypt/overview>

manifestation of these conditions of impoverishment that may be unthought-of by the people living there.

This ethnography attempts to understand poverty from the perspective and experiences of the ones living through it. It is thus part of the phenomenological current. This research emphasizes the importance of studying the poor in order to enable a well-balanced understanding of what poverty truly entails. Economic factors are important, but for the sake of this thesis the social aspects of poverty are focused on because they are not as transparent as economic factors are. Also because the social and economic factors affect each other, yet the social is not emphasized enough in my opinion.

#### *The Field Site: Al Qurna (Upper Egypt) and The Subjects of My Study*

Al Qurna is a region on the west bank of the Nile in Upper Egypt; it is within the rural area of Luxor. It consists of villages and farmlands side by side with a huge beautiful mountain overlooking it all. Within Al Qurna there are even smaller regions that are spaced out into small neighborhoods or towns. In many sections throughout Al Qurna there are people who live in extremely poor conditions in comparison to others that live in the same area. I visited many parts of Al Qurna and noticed that some areas consisted of extremely poor only, while neighboring villages consisted of a mix of middle class, poor and extremely poor. Many Individuals and families in regions throughout Al Qurna have very little (almost non-existent) resources to survive on. The resources are scarce for many members within these communities that I have come into contact with, not so much because Al Qurna lacks resources, but because of specific circumstances that leaves them marginalized and unable to have access to a stable income. These issues will be touched on throughout this thesis. Only small charitable incomes being available to

them each month, and most of them have to depend on this charity and other types of charity to sustain their livelihoods. What sets the people I am studying apart is the fact that they are not like the majority of the poor people throughout Luxor, they are poorer than the most poor because they lack family to help them which is important in rural Upper Egypt. Also they have no assistance from the government which is another issue in itself.

The majority of the poor people in these rural areas in Luxor have indicated that they have been abandoned or cast out by their family. Their needs are neglected or they are unable to support themselves because of a physical challenge, death of a spouse, old age or simply because their families are struggling with poverty themselves and could not take care of them. I have come to learn the different attitudes that many of them have regarding their situation. Some feel they are a burden to themselves and society: they have lost a sense of self and dignity due to this dependency and abandonment. There are also many who are resilient and choose to have a positive attitude towards their life situation. Each case is unique.

I explored what resources are available to them; how they are accessed and in what ways they-utilized and consumed what is at their disposal. I explored their daily activities and practices to capture the creative ways through which they express their tensions and normalize their harsh realities. I investigated what social factors produced and perpetuated the circumstances of their life by exploring their relationships to society and by collecting some oral histories to learn how and why they became impoverished. Lastly, I investigated how the people living within Al Qurna, both poor and non-poor define poverty and the problems of poverty in order to get a clear definition of what makes a person impoverished in Upper Egypt directly from the people living there.

Within Al Qurna, I emphasize that there is a link between the life experience of the poor and key social issues that allow for the manifestation of poverty and its perpetuation. I am not negating the fact that economic issues hold high importance when considering problems within poverty. I chose to focus on the social aspects because within my experience as I mentioned earlier, they are not as transparent as economic issues and could use some attention. Also in many instances the social aspects could be aggravating the economic situations.

The social issues within the region may not be considered a problem. They benefit some, but are harmful to many. I argue that the people living in extreme poverty like the ones I have interviewed and studied do not fit in the social, political and economic set up of this region and thus are marginalized. The difference that they carry which isolates them comes from not obtaining certain requirements that enable a good life in Al Qurna. I argue that this difference, which will be discussed in chapter three, is apparent in both their community and their wider society as a whole. Within their own communities and spaces within society they lack the buffer of family. Within the greater society they cannot compete in the capitalistic system and the way it functions. These two levels represent the double disadvantage which sets them apart from the average poor person in Upper Egypt.

## **Literature Review**

My research explores how people living in extreme poverty survive and cope with scarcity and also how impoverished life circumstances in Al Qurna are socially produced. Exploring poverty through the perception and experiences of the poor is the main focus of this research, thus I chose to engage with literature related to the life experiences of the poor in Rural Egypt that will enhance an understanding of the impoverished living there. I also briefly cover

why it is important to explore the lives of the poor in Upper Egypt. Lastly, I touch on the problems that are found in poverty studies when analyzing the poor, to emphasize clearly the ideologies and theories that I am staying away from in this research.

### *Understanding the Impoverished in Upper Egypt*

While exploring people who live in poverty in Upper Egypt, I found it important to distinguish culture as a social construct from culture created and embedded as a response to certain conditions, as well as how they are both understood and interpreted. I believe it is important to understand that many aspects of the culture that are found amongst the impoverished were not always inherited. Survival mechanisms both old and new are morphed into cultural practices because of the frequent need for them due to the constant hardships faced on a daily basis. The coping becomes a part of their daily practices and therefore over time a part of their culture. Yet, the way they interpret and act upon these contemporary challenges is very much a part of their longstanding culture that has been passed down throughout their history. The ethnography by Hania Sholkamy entitled, "Being sickly or eating well: the conceptualization of health and ill-health in an Upper Egyptian village" emphasizes this as a part of understanding health and ill-health of the poor in Upper Egypt (Asyut). Sholkamy(1998) stresses the importance of understanding that disease, ill health, and coping with misfortunes prevalent within a village named Rihan in Asyut(Upper Egypt) come from poverty, hardships and powerlessness but are culturally interpreted in ways that is sometimes more hurtful than helpful. These interpretations are parallel to their cultural beliefs and give the people a way to understand something they cannot comprehend or explain outside of the constraints of their cultural understanding. Sholkamy(1998) speaks of the villagers describing a child who is always sick

as “*batlan*”, The term literally means 'unwell,' and implies weakness and lack of energy. When a child or an adult is described as “*batlan*”, it does not just mean being sick, but also intimates being sickly. In reality it could be of any sickness that is long-term, chronic or of a syndrome nature. Physicians at the general hospital in nearby Abnub, at the clinic in 'Arab Mattir village, and at the government clinic in al-Hamam all expressed their frustration at this category of ill-health. Adults bring their children and when asked for symptoms they say that he or she is “*batlan*”. The physician is then obliged to go down a whole list of possible symptoms to diagnose the case because “*batlan*” is nothing specific to enable a doctor to treat a patient, it just means sickly. This makes perfect sense to them, because within their culture “*batlan*” is clear and is understood to be a person who is sick long term and may get well or not. What is most frustrating to the doctors is that they sometimes cannot diagnose a particular condition and wind up prescribing expensive vitamins so as to avoid the embarrassment of prescribing nothing in particular (Sholkamy 1998:207). There are many instances in the study that show how the actions and decisions of the villagers of Rihan are based on cultural constructs that shape their interpretation of reality. In Rihan, it is believed that if most family members are strong and not sickly then all of their offspring are expected to be the same unless they see that they are “*batlan*”. A child named Muhammad had fallen extremely ill even though he was a member of a family that had majority strong healthy members. His grandmother would not take him to the hospital because he never was “*batlan*” and most of her family is well. She decided to wait days until his father returned to take him to a doctor. When his father finally arrived home and took his son to see a physician, he ended up dying before he was seen. The family just explained that he just died and was not sick, due to their incapability to understand that Muhammad could have just had a disease that needed to be checked out and was neglected because of their cultural

beliefs. It is important to understand cultural perceptions like these in order to eradicate confusion when trying to understand and translate people's perceptions in an accurate manner.

Another important aspect of the lives of the poor in Upper Egypt that must be considered when attempting to understand their perception and way of life is their religious beliefs and how they interpret it. In the article "Islam, Fatalism, and Medical intervention: Lessons from Egypt on Cultivation of Forbearance (Sabr) and Reliance on God (Tawakkul)" Sherine F. Hamdy, shows how western academia regards Muslims as "passive fatalist" while at the same time attempting to show that they also have agency, without understanding how Muslim's disposition is achieved. Hamdy(2009) draws upon fieldwork amongst poor dialysis patients in Egypt (2002-2004) to revisit questions about fatalism and medical treatment. She analyzes when and under what circumstances devout Muslims in contemporary Egypt appeal to utter submission to divine will and when they seek particular medical intervention (P.174). Hamdy(2009) attempts to terminate the assumption that the belief in utterly submitting themselves to the divine will of the omnipotent creator causes Muslims to have no incentive to work for social progress and is an impediment to scientific knowledge. She observes and interviews patients who are struggling for life under dialysis treatment and chooses to accept their trials as a test and wisdom from God. She found that:

"Many patients worked with in Egypt under dialysis conscientiously and rigorously trained themselves to regard all acts as products of God's perfect wisdom and ultimate will. Many lamented that they fell short of the religious virtue that they sought to attain. True faith, as they saw it, is accompanied by *tawakkul*, a disposition that must be continuously cultivated through pious practice and reflection. It is only through constant prayer and strong belief, they often told her, that they can endure such trials". "Whereas



the disposition of forbearance can clearly provide great social and psychological relief to the patient, this does not mean that patients manipulate religious sentiments to maximize benefits from it” (Anthropological Quarterly: “Islam, fatalism, and medical intervention: lessons from Egypt on the cultivation of forbearance (sabr) and reliance on God (tawakkul)” Sherine F. Hamdy, 2009 P 175: Internal quote from Asad 2003 & Mahmood 2005).

From this we capture that people may work to align themselves with what they believe to be the will of God, but this does not necessarily mean that they are docile to every hardship in their lives. They try to understand and accept their trials in life as test and wisdom from God, but they do not necessarily believe that they are powerless and should do nothing because everything is out of their hands. Seeking comfort in religion may be a coping mechanism for the poor, but not in a way that makes them accept everything in their life as just and fair because it is the will of God. Their trials and tribulations for them may come from God but as a way to enable them to have comfort and understanding, not become inactive and passive fatalist.

Even though this thesis does not specifically focus on gender, it is impossible to ignore this issue while observing the impoverished in Upper Egypt. Gender plays an important role in Upper Egypt as it affects to a great extent a person’s opportunities, behavior, perceptions and agency. In the most general sense women and men have traditional roles in Upper Egypt. According to the article “Women’s Work and Status in Rural Egypt” by Barbara K. Larson, rural Egyptian men are usually considered the breadwinners. They work and provide for their families and are the dominant controller and decision makers. Most women in Upper Egypt are the caretakers of the children and the home. Women who work outside the home, do so only because they are forced either due to widowhood, divorce, poverty or the inability of their husbands to

provide sufficient income for the household. Women who do work outside the home are confined to certain fields of work, such as housework, childcare, agricultural work, craft production and recently amongst younger women government employment. Even these work opportunities are limited and under male supervision, or with male partnership. Upper Egypt is a patriarchal society that gives men more advantages over women when it comes to schooling and work. There are flexibilities and variations but in general, because men are perceived as the providers for women and children there are more opportunities for men. Also, women and men function separately and only come into contact with each other if they are family or spouse. Therefore if a woman does not have a male to work for or with that is related to her, it may be very difficult for her to find a job unless only women were involved, which is rare.

Understanding the importance of identity in Upper Egypt amongst the impoverished is crucial for comprehending their experiences and perceptions. The majority of Upper Egyptians identify themselves as a tribe member. The presence of tribalism and people who carry a tribal identity sets Upper Egypt apart from Lower Egypt. The Article “Tribal Identity and Politics in Aswan Governorate” by Hans Christian Korsholm Nielson discusses the frequent reference to the notion of tribe and its dominating presence in Upper Egypt. Tribalism is a major presence in Upper Egypt, that is often a source of tension with the state. ”State and Tribes are often seen as two incommensurable entities: the state demands a body of uniformly loyal citizens, and the presence of the tribe not only diverts the loyalty of the subjects, it also creates divergence and discord between citizens” (Nielson 2004:221). According to Nielson(2004) there is hardly one Muslim in Upper Egypt who does not identify himself/herself with a tribe. The notion of tribe may cover different aspects such as common ancestry, coming from the same village or town, or even groups that come together based on ideas of solidarity. It is important to understand that:

“Tribal identification is a central element in the shaping of collective identities. An affiliation with a tribe both gives the individual the possibility of relating himself to a specific group of people and at the same time the affiliation may ascribe certain values or qualities to the individual.” (Nielson, 2004: 224).

There is a long history of Tribalism in Upper Egypt that we will not get into here, but it is important to understand that different groups of solidarity which are called tribes has a major impact on how both individuals and the Upper Egyptian society as a whole identify themselves and functions.

#### *The importance of studying the poor in Upper Egypt*

Studying the lives of the poor can assist in understanding poverty and in determining what is needed to help the poor in an efficient manner without assumptions. Attempting to understand, define or eradicate poverty without studying the ones that are experiencing it can lead to many failures, waste of money, waste of time, misconceptions, misunderstandings and inefficiencies. Truly understanding poverty cannot be based on economic factors or appearances alone. In order to get a clear balanced picture of what poverty entails exploring the lives of the poor is necessary and taking their perceptions into consideration is a must. This is shown quite clearly in the article “National geographical targeting of poverty in Upper Egypt” by Saker El Nour. Nour(2012) examines government policies that were established under the regime of former president Hosni Mubarak, Specifically one policy approach that was implemented known as “the geographical targeting of poverty in rural Egypt”(Nour 2012:148). He criticizes this approach of defining and assisting the poor to be inefficient because the government attempts to define what regions are impoverished and what services are needed from their own ideologies

and perceptions. Instead of understanding what is needed to assist in eradicating poverty from the impoverished living in these regions, the government took it upon themselves to provide services in a manner they seen as fit. These services that they provide are based on certain techniques that they concluded to be useful in enabling them to define where the poorest regions are located, who needs help, and how they need to be helped. This approach also took away payment of subsidies to the poor and replaced it with policies targeting those actually identified as being poor by the government which was based on the standards of their region upon other things. The problem is that the government sometimes has distorted views and understandings of who the poor are, what they actually need and what poverty entails. Nour(2012) emphasizes that “state policies do not reflect the actual conditions of the poor, representing rather the views of policy makers” (P. 148). In order to explore the capacity, implementations and outcomes of these types of programs in Upper Egypt he undertook a case study in Qusiya district in the governorate of Asyut, Upper Egypt. The geographical scope was the village of Markaz. Nour(2012) argues that a better understanding is needed of the mechanism of poverty in Egypt. While in the field he came across many interesting points that justify his criticisms. Because the poorest regions were not being targeted due to the inefficient way the government policy makers defined poor regions and the fact that the experiences of the poor were being overlooked, the dimensions of how important agriculture is in alleviating poverty for this region was ignored. Also from the case study one conclusion he arrived at that is important to note here is that:

“The method of geographical targeting of poverty defines poverty as being based on consumption and welfare indicators. This definition neglects the local perception and people’s own perspectives of poverty. The poorest farmers define themselves as people with insufficient assets, with fewer employment opportunities, and low financial

capacity. In addition, poverty refers to a lack of access to healthcare, clean water, and education services. These definitions were not taken into account during the program geographically targeting anti-poverty measures on the poorest 1,000 villages in Egypt by the government” (P. 165).

From this article we can capture that understanding poverty and how to create approaches to ease its difficulties should include the perceptions and experiences of the poor. To geographically target poverty based on certain classification of regions in order to either understand or help with alleviating their harsh circumstances without taking the lives and perceptions of the poor into consideration may include risks of inadequacies, acquiring misconceptions and running into failures. Also with in Upper Egypt, programs based on assumptions and misconceptions like this one may continue to be established if the perceptions of the poor are not included in the creation of policies targeted to help the poor. This is important to consider especially for Egypt, without having an efficient foundation for creating policies and initiatives to help the poor, there will be a repeated cycle of wasting time and money that the country may not be able to afford due to the frequent increase in poverty.

#### *Problems within poverty studies*

The main problem that I found in poverty studies is the Culture of poverty theory that has been discredited by many social scientists yet is still used in one way or another to explain the unbreakable cycle of poverty, the mindset of poor people as well as the attitudes of the impoverished. The culture of poverty theory argues that the poor are not actually lacking resources; they are poor because of their values and behaviors. According to Oscar Lewis, "The subculture [of the poor] develops mechanisms that tend to perpetuate it, especially because of

what happens to the world view, aspirations, and character of the children who grow up in it.” (Moynihan1969:199). This is problematic and causes all types of discriminations to occur. He argues that there is a difference between the rich and lower classes by segregating the commonalities that human beings share. He places a value on people according to their participation in trade. This approach diminishes possibilities of the actual problems that maintain and perpetuate chronic poverty, by assuming that poor people do not understand history and by making people seem indifferent when they are not. Oscar Lewis states:

The people in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging. They are like aliens in their own country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, of personal unworthiness. This is true of the slum dwellers of Mexico City, who do not constitute a distinct ethnic or racial group and do not suffer from racial discrimination. In the United States the culture of poverty that exists in the Negroes has the additional disadvantage of racial discrimination. People with a culture of poverty have very little sense of history. They are a marginal people who know only their own troubles, their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, and their own way of life. Usually, they have neither the knowledge, the vision, nor the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of others like themselves elsewhere in the world. In other words, they are not class conscious, although they are very sensitive indeed to status distinctions. When the poor become class conscious or members of trade union organizations, or when they adopt an internationalist outlook on the world they are, in my view, no longer part of the culture of poverty although they may still be desperately poor. (“Culture of Poverty”. In Moynihan,

Daniel On Understanding Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences. Oscar Lewis  
1998)

“Cultural determinist theories assume that individuals are "locked" into poverty by a "unique but maladaptive culture". Reflecting Fitzgerald's comment on the rich, the poor are viewed as different” (Marks 1991: 448). This is problematic because if you consider someone to be different to yourself, you could never come to understand anything about them and would therefore reach conclusions based on assumptions. It is about trying to understand and relate as much as possible so a bridge can be built over the gaps. I just want to make clear that I am exploring aspects of culture amongst the impoverished in Upper Egypt, but I am not blaming their culture for their impoverished circumstances. I am actually arguing that the survival and coping mechanisms that are embedded in culture are manifested from a response to the hardships and impoverished circumstances that are experienced. I will not elaborate on this issue within my thesis, but during my research I kept this approach in mind as a model of what not to do in my fieldwork, so I could have a chance to pull forward as much data as possible that could be used in a helpful light.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

#### *The collective consensus*

In trying to understand the mindsets, morals and the actions of the impoverished inhabitants of Al Qurna, we can take into consideration “the moral economy” as a conceptual framework. In the article “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” E.P. Thompson puts forth the understanding that there is a collective and shared understanding or assumption that is held by from the poor of what is right and wrong when it

comes to the rules of reciprocity and what is the correct way the economy should function. This type of economy is good, just and fair because the expressions of the collective morals of the community were strong and could not be resisted or challenged and because it was endorsed as well as licensed by an authority. The moral economy is based on what is deemed right and fair when it comes to the functioning of the economy, in comparison to the market economy that is based on the supply, scarcity and demand in a capitalistic society which can be based on profit and greed. It's a very complex economy because it is not political yet not apolitical because it is based on "passionately held notions of the common weal-notions which, indeed, found some support in the paternalist tradition of the authorities; notions which people re-echoed so loudly in their turn that the authorities were, in some measure, the prisoners of the people" (Thomson 1971: 79). This moral economy is held in high regard because it is the collective moral assumption of the poor, and if anything goes against it a riot will occur. Thompson uses the food riots in eighteenth century England to apply his concepts of the moral economy. The moral assumption within England at this time was that the poor should come first and the selling of goods should cater to all people of all statuses that is in a fair way. In this moral economy of England bread was of high importance because it may not have been the main food of the people but it was consumed highly. A conflict over the price of bread occurred when traditionalism was faced with a new political economy. In the beginning the bread was sold in fair way that benefitted all, "bakers were considered as servants of the community, working not for profit but for fair allowance" (Thompson 1971:83). The markets were regulated to protect the poor. Then white bread became the preferable taste amongst people of status, and the bakers discovered that they could profit by selling bread at a higher price therefore they started to cater to the people of status. "It was to the advantage of the bakers and of the millers to sell white bread or fine flour,



since the profit which might be gained from such sales was, in general larger”(Thompson 1971:80). This caused much conflict and the bakers were constantly being regulated to ensure that the poor would not be forgotten and still were treated justly. But the battle between the moral economy and the market economy started to create unfortunate circumstances for the poor. The bakers understood the market economy to be better in respect of self-interest than the fair and just moral economy. They began to do all that they could to benefit from greater profits at the cost of disadvantaging the poor. The bakers would begin to make less of the brown bread that the poor could afford and make more of the white bread that made them more of a profit, so there was not enough bread available that poor could afford. Some would even permanently adjust their machinery so they could only produce fine flour for white bread because they didn’t want to make the brown bread any longer because it didn’t make a profit. They would stop selling bread in quantities affordable to the poor. They would also go so low as to place poisons in the brown bread making poor people sick and unable to work. “In the cities, which were alert to the dangers of adulteration, dark bread was suspect as offering easy concealment of noxious additives” (Thompson 1971: 81). This became an ongoing conflict and battle between the moral economy and the interest of people for the market economy. The poor would go to extremes of stealing and going without pay if they were allotted bread, the government would attempt to regulate the bakers but they would hoard grain and sell underhandedly. Violence was on the rise and the chaos kept increasing then the riots began. The moral assumptions of the people were challenged and they stood together sharing the same understandings of what the economy should be, acting in a cause to bring the moral economy back.

Considering this model that Thompson puts forth, we can fit it to the economy of al Qurna in helping to understand the community and the positions that the poor are holding. The

moral assumptions of the poor in Al Qurna are constantly being faced with challenges, yet the poor do not riot and we would have to explore why that is the case. The collective assumptions when challenged do not always end in riots and chaos, even though there is a challenge between morals and self-interest that the market economy injects into a society. In attempting to understand the perceptions and behaviors of the poor I think it is important to ask specific questions. What is the moral economy of Al Qurna? And when challenged why don't the poor do anything about it?

From being in the field and getting to know the poor I have come to the conclusion that the collective moral assumption of respect and obedience to your elders as well as do not question authority is quite present. From my understanding, there was a time when the older people made all the decisions about how the moral economy should function and it was just and fair, because it wasn't a saturation of self-interest. I was told that the elders made sure that everyone including the poor was looked out for in one way or another but over time things have changed. Islam as a practice mixed with the wisdom of the elders created a balanced economy based on the morals and values of the members in the community that everyone benefitted from including the poor. The poor understood that they would not go hungry because Zakat would be given which would enable them to eat, and in general no one would let them go hungry. Things were made affordable for everyone so even the poor could have a chance in a fair market. The government set up ways for the poor to receive treatment from the hospitals without any charge or maliciousness attached. People in general felt that it was their duty to look out for the poor, and this in turn made the poor feel more secure about their survival.

This moral economy became challenged when the market economy showed up with all its attractions<sup>2</sup>. Tourism started flourishing in Luxor which had a ripple effect on motivation to seek a profit. People started businesses to profit from tourism, the agriculture business that many people mostly poor benefitted from took a back seat to tourism. Capitalism started to become the new face of the economy. People started to look out for self and self-profit, not really concerned about anyone outside of their personal circles. The obligation once felt for taking care of the poor decreased. The Elders started to make decisions that were based on self-interest and not the greater good for everyone. The competition in the market made people more isolated from one another. The poor became more of a burden than a responsibility; doctors would not want to serve anyone who was unable to pay or would give low quality service to the people without money. The market economy took the place of the moral economy, and even though the collective moral assumptions of the poor are the same, they do not riot or attempt to create change. This may be because of the instilment that elders and authority figures must be respected and obeyed is still the dominant way of thinking. The tradition of not questioning and obeying authority is very present and prevents them from going against their authority figures even when they have disadvantages. This is mixed with Islam as a practice and is very preventative towards riots in Upper Egypt. The people that I interviewed and did participant observations with would commonly make statements such as: I will be patient and Allah will help me. They would also emphasize that they were fearful to question authority because they do not know what other people would think. They emphasized that there is a consequence behind

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<sup>2</sup> I am not sure what period of time or what event took place to initiate strenuous challenge towards the moral economy. From the perception of my participants they felt that people were more just towards them twenty-three years ago. Based on this information I would refer to the 1990's when policies of economic liberation was established. To learn more about this refer to: Cooper, M. N. (2012). *The Transformation of Egypt (Rle Egypt)*. Routledge.

trying to change bad ways. It is very likely that the infiltration of capitalism had and continues to have grave effects on the poor and weak.

## **Methodology**

### *Ethnographic approaches*

I used personal networks to introduce me to a variety of individuals and families living in Al Qurna. It enabled me to conduct semi-structured and informal interviews with key informants as well as participant observation. I had access to a network of very prominent group of Sheikhs in Luxor as well as an NGO that provides services to this impoverished community named *Al Jam'iyya Al Khayriyya Al Ahliya* (started by the Muslim Brothers in the 1970's). Members of these two networks took me around to meet and interview poor people throughout Al Qurna that were available, according to their ability and willingness to participate in my study. I informed them that I looked to interview ten families or individuals struggling intensely with poverty, they ended up introducing me to forty-four different households. Some I was introduced to in the office as they were collecting their monthly allocation, and some I was introduced to in their homes.

First, I did forty-four separate informal/semi-structured interviews with forty-four different families and single persons who live alone who were willing to participate in my study. I did not take preference of whom I chose to interview and I think that contributed in the great variety that was available to me. I informed them that the criteria will only be people struggling with impoverished living conditions who are willing to participate in my study and the flood gates opened. I asked that at least one family consisted of male informants or at least one individual be male and ended up getting fifteen different males to interview. I understood that in

Upper Egypt they may automatically pair me up with women only because of the traditions of men and women who are not family operating through life separately, but this seemed not to be much of a problem. They stated that “you look like one of us and you are married to a man from Upper Egypt so you are allowed to talk to anyone you want.” I greatly appreciated the willingness and openness I received. It helped my ethnography a lot. Within these interviews I attempted to learn the following: what resources are available to them and how they are accessible? How do they perceive themselves and their life circumstances? What are their daily activities? What relationships are prominent in their lives? How do they perceive the society they live in? How do they define poverty? What are some of their oral histories? And what hardships are dealt with on a daily basis? Most were open and willing to talk but there were many that covered up many of their life experiences and did not feel comfortable enough to talk about their lives, when I saw a barrier being created I just allowed them to speak of whatever they wanted and asked questions according to what they wanted to talk about. I found that, with certain individuals this technique gave more information than guiding the interview.

Second, I chose 4 out of the 44 interviews I conducted for participant observation over a two month period throughout the summer of 2012. The ones that I chose were Monsoorah age 35, who lives with and takes care of 3 children (ages 12, 9, & 6) and the mother of her deceased husband; Sabah age 30 who lives with and takes care of her three sons ages 15, 10 & 6; Badaweeyah age 60 who lives with and takes care of daughter; and Muhammad age 40, alone single and disabled (paralyzed from the waist down). These four cases were the most open and honest about their life and I felt that they would be the most helpful with the collection of data for my ethnography. I stayed with each individual or family chosen that agreed to participate from 6 am until 10 or 11pm once or twice a week for two months throughout the summer in

order to capture their everyday life activities, learn their oral histories in-depth and identify how they survive and deal with living on scarce resources. My goal was to spend as much time as possible with them and to interact with each family on a consistent basis so they can become familiar enough with me and see me less as a stranger so they can feel comfortable enough to let me into their lives. I was successful because as time went on they became more open with me. I also believe the fact that I am African American and was able to dress and blend in with them worked to my advantage. Also I had a great relationship with the group of sheikhs that helped these people. In addition, being married to someone from Luxor placed me in a position that enabled me to have more access than a completely unfamiliar person would have had.

Finally I performed semi-structured interviews with people in the region who were not struggling with poverty in order to understand how poverty is defined from the perceptions of the relatively non-poor. I did 5 semi-structured interviews with people who were considered not to be poor. I was able to have access to these people through the same way I accessed those struggling with poverty. In these interviews I learned clearly their ideas of what factors define who is poor and who is not poor. I also learned their perceptions of the poor, how they see the poor being treated within Al Qurna and what resources they possess themselves. I also learned what resources they had at their disposal to get a clear idea of what distinguishes the poor and the non-poor.

Some notes were taken during the interviews and then detailed later in my living space. For the participant observation I did my field notes at night in my living space, I wanted them to feel comfortable and free to be as they are every day and I think not having a notebook around taking notes helped. I also kept on me a small notebook and a tape recorder that I used to keep track of important things that aided in my memory later at night and this was very helpful to jog

my memory. The recordings and the small notes that I took down in the field were done in the most discrete way.

Throughout the interviews and the participant observation there were many hardships that I had to deal with. The heat was intense and the water was scarce and the food gave me an illness, but all of this added to my research and I decided to use my own experience as a mechanism to understand fully first hand some of the hardships faced by the poor. I noted my own experiences as well to use as a method of presenting their lives from yet another angle.

### *Limitations*

Being a non-native Arabic speaker was a bit of a challenge, there was a bit of a language barrier in the beginnings of my fieldwork because this population only speaks Arabic with a thick Upper Egyptian accent. As time went on I picked up on the language quickly and some of the children were most helpful because they spoke a bit of English from trying to sell things to the tourists that visit Luxor each year. My husband stayed with me through the interview process and served as a translator. When I began my participant observation he left me alone with my agenda and this in turn forced me to create ways to communicate words I did not know in Arabic in a different way. Later when I was done, I sometimes found myself confirming things I was confused about during the day with my husband.

Also I am a woman and cannot be around the men alone and cannot go in some areas only men go in Upper Egypt, so I had my husband assist me in places that I cannot be so I can have a full report later. Also I had an Egyptian woman stay with Muhammad and me when my husband was unavailable, so I would not be left alone with my male case study.

In the beginning I thought I would have to take into consideration that I am an “outsider” and therefore a stranger to the Egyptians I will be studying. This meant that I may have to work harder on gaining their trust in order to create a comfort level for them to open up to me. This became a non-issue simply because I was introduced to them through people whom they trusted and were familiar with. The fact that I was an African American Muslim woman in full hijab also helped with comfort as well.

### **In the coming chapters**

Throughout this thesis I stayed very close to my ethnographic data because it was abundant and I didn’t want to waste valuable data, so I engaged with it throughout all of the chapters. There were many findings and many conclusions that I organized into specific themes in order to create a well-grounded understanding of the impoverished I studied and what was observed in the field.

Chapter two entitled: *Getting the Picture* is meant to set a foundation for understanding my main findings. It discusses my experience in the field and attempts to provide an understanding of the true position that my subjects are in when it comes to their status within their society. It also gives an overview of the interviews I conducted as well as information on the NGO that I worked with.

Chapter three entitled: *Poverty as a Social Construct: Factors of Production and Perpetuation*, entails all of my main findings about the social factors that have manifested, maintained and perpetuated impoverished life circumstances within Al Qurna. My findings that I discuss within this chapter are based on the experiences and perceptions of my subjects, thus I highlighted many of their hardships and struggles.



Chapter four Entitled: *The Perpetual Psycho-Emotional State of the Extreme Poor: Insecurity, Uncertainty and Fears*, Gives insight into the fears, uncertainties and insecurities of the poor that I have studied from their perception and experiences. It also shows how they cope and survive under these circumstances.

Chapter five entitled: *Food, Water and Resources: Coping and Utilization Strategies*, along with chapter four gets into the heart of what I was looking to find out. It highlights the way my subjects utilized their limited resources and how they adapted under harsh circumstances.

Finally Chapter six entitled: *Final Thoughts and Updates*, concludes the thesis by giving the details of the conversations I had with my participants on my final day of observation, summing up my findings, asking questions for thought as well as giving an update on what happened when I returned to Al Qurna for a visit.

## II. GETTING THE PICTURE

In order to clearly understand the true position of the extremely poor that I have studied, it's important to understand their status in the context of where they live. In this chapter I will attempt to set a firm foundation for the rest of the thesis by touching on the connection between the circumstances of the extremely poor who were my subjects of study with the conditions of the area that they live in; the educational and vocational system; employment and lack thereof; importance of family roles; the governmental programs for development and poverty; and the NGO that assisted me. I will also discuss the interviews that I held in order to enable a common sense of the circumstances that are at hand. I will begin with my experiences in the field in order to give a clear picture of the ethnographer behind the ethnography, and then I will cover the other important aspects that aid in the understanding of my subjects mentioned above.

### *My experiences in the field: a useful agency of the self*

Being a first time ethnographer I was nervous but chose to be myself and not let my nerves show or get the best of me. I was also anxious because I was about to endure extreme impoverished conditions in Upper Egyptian heat that I myself was not used to. I was afraid of getting sick or seeming indifferent towards my participants and I did not want neither of these things. When I first arrived I was immediately greeted by Sheikh Mahmoud who was extremely happy that I chose to study poverty in Upper Egypt, I was fortunate enough to have my husband set the stage for me upon arrival. He made it clear to them what I wanted to do and why before I arrived. In a sort, they already understood what my project was all about. This comfort of familiarity helped me extremely and opened doors for me that otherwise may have opened with more of a resistance or never at all. During the interviews that I conducted, I had to answer just

as many questions as I asked. It was definitely a give and take process and even though I made it quite clear that I wanted to interview them, their curiosity about me and where I come from took over from time to time. I would have to submit to being under the microscope in order for them to answer my questions. Many of them thought I was Nubian, Nigerian or Sudanese; being that I am an African American that covers with a hijab confused many of them because of their pre-conceived notions of what Americans are supposed to be like. Their notions did not fit who I was at all. This was a bit annoying but I just kept my composure and kindness and eventually they would pour their story out. Many of them stated that I look like I could be their sister or cousin so they would consider me as family and told me to ask them anything that I wanted. I started to think that my look was a tool I could use in the field so I completely went with it, as time went on I even started to dress the way the Upper Egyptian women dressed and I blended in quite well. I feel that this gave me even more of an acceptance because they even started telling me stories of family members that I resembled. I tried to make them forget as much as possible that I was an ethnographer, we would sit and drink tea and talk about their lives with my guidance and I found this technique to be helpful. When people get comfortable with you they forget that they are being interviewed and become more open. I would write a small amount of key things down that would jog my memory later. I did not want to spend time writing too much during the interviews because I thought it would take away from my data. The great thing is that if I forgot something later I would call Sheikh Mahmoud and he would remind me because he knew all of these people well.

When interviews were over and I chose my four cases I was already seriously overwhelmed with the information that I had received. Additionally, I was happy the interview process was over because it was quite draining driving around from house to house on days

people didn't come to the office of the NGO. Sometimes we would spend more time driving in the heat with no air conditioner than interviewing. I was unsure about what direction I wanted to take when it came to participating in these people lives. I just decided to roll with the punches and ask questions along the way. It was a very challenging experience living as the poor live in the heat from sun up to way past sun down. I was hot, thirsty, tired and even became sick with a stomach virus in the beginning. I had to figure out a way to get through this field work. I decided to drink as much water as I could when I was in my living quarters and would freeze two big bottles of fresh water to keep with me in order to make it through the day. I would also keep anti-septic pills with me just in case I felt sick again from eating the food that my participants prepared. This helped a lot and I understood quickly that I am not superwoman and I would have to look after my health while experiencing their life. These small adjustments I made went a long way and my participants didn't mind at all and understood that I was not used to these life circumstances.

The whole time I was in Luxor doing my fieldwork I was uncomfortable so I knew that I was on the right track. After a while it did get easier. The people were so accommodating even though they did not have much to offer that I forgot my discomforts which helped me focus. I was definitely challenged even though there were moments of ease. A small glimpse of some of the things I endured may not do justice to complete the understanding, but can give an idea of what it was like. I was almost bitten by a scorpion; jumped over a snake I didn't see until I was close up on it; struggled to breathe from time to time because of extreme heat; got a stomach virus from the food or water I drank while in the field; and to top it off, even though I used sunblock I got sun burned which I thought could never happen to someone like me with so much melanin in the skin. I managed to get through these obstacles and complete my ethnographic

research and gain both abundance in ethnographic data and a surmountable amount of life experience at the same time. When I say surmountable, I am referring to the experiences that I was fortunate enough to gain that were completely different from my life and the way I am used to living. This gave me a first-hand understanding into what it is like to be poor. Pushing through and adjusting according to what I was dealing with was challenging yet important. I even thought of changing my thesis topic a couple of times while in the field, but I am glad that I didn't, poverty was always an interest of mine, and I am glad to have witnessed it head on.

### ***Some background***

From first glimpse of Luxor you will see green lands, huge ancient temples, kids running and playing along the sidewalks, poor people either begging or just sitting in a corner observing the life and much more activities that are full and frequent from day to day. There is something very special about Luxor. The issues of poverty and history in the region just like everywhere else in the world could use some attention. Peter Grain understood this importance and indicated that:

“The subject of Upper Egyptian history in modern times is one of the least developed aspects of the field of modern Egyptian history. Fragments exist in dozens of books, which bear on one aspect or another of the subject. Few books however treat the subject on its own. There is nothing comprehensive whatsoever on Upper Egypt for the field of history. What is also noticeable is that there is a certain rationale for this state of affairs. The subject of Upper Egyptian history is taken by most authors to be an unimportant one. It falls into the category of rural history. Rural history is taken by most historians to be less important than urban history. And Upper Egypt is taken to be the most backward part

even of this rural history” (Upper Egypt in Modern History: A Southern Question? Peter Grain, 2004:79).

Understanding that writings on Upper Egypt could use some recognition made me think about what aspects of Upper Egyptian society could tell me the most about the position that the poor I am studying are in. I came to the conclusion that the educational system, the employment availability, the importance of family, the conditions of the area they live in and the Governmental involvement in poverty and prosperity in the region could help in situating the status and position of the extremely poor that are present in Al Qurna. I find that their circumstances and status are a response to their society, and that their lives reflect this. We will cover the lives of the poor and how exploring their lives could help us understand about their society in the next chapter, but for now we will discuss what position they are in when it comes to the aspects mentioned above.

The area Al Qurna where I conducted my research is within the city of Luxor which is in the heart of Upper Egypt (*Sa'id*). Luxor has two sides, East Bank which is on the left side of the Nile if you are traveling south. Then there is West Bank which is on the right side of the Nile if you are traveling in the same direction. East bank is more urban and west bank is rural. Within Luxor there are villages on both east bank and west bank. My research was conducted on the West Bank in one of the six villages present on that side named Al Qurna. Within Al Qurna you have different regions even though it could be considered one big village. The towns that I visited within Al Qurna is Al Ababda, Al Tharf, and Awwariyya. Al Ababda is a village that consists majorly of poor people; most of them live on less than fifty cents a day. The area of Ababda was in a very poor condition, every home was attached together in shabby conditions that all was one level with a maximum of three rooms. Al Thawf was less of a shabby town but

consisted of a mix of one and two level homes with great variety of style and room numbers. They had two small markets in the area and some homes were old and crumbling while some were kept up even though you could tell that most of the homes were very old. Awwariyya I would call the town of illusions because at first glance it seems nice but as you drive further and further in you start to see tremendous deterioration of homes and unclean areas full of garbage. They had a handful of stores and even a small clinic but I couldn't tell if this area consisted of people who were all poor or a mix of classes together.

The rural poor are impoverished on many levels and there are an abundance of economic issues that contribute to impoverishment under the umbrella of education, employment and lack of adequate government assistance for the poor. Let's start with Education in Upper Egypt and the many problems within it that has contributed in placing members of the society at a disadvantage. The educational and vocational training system in Egypt has a long and complex history. Its beginnings and foundations come from what is thought to be great for the prosperity of the country by the early Egyptians and British colonial agenda. At around the age of six years old children both girls and boys start primary school; they stay in primary school for six years. In this school they learn the basics, such as alphabet, reading, writing and arithmetic as well as some history. Then they enter preparatory school for 3 years, either a vocational preparatory or general preparatory depending on the type of certificate they hold after primary school which is dependent on their grades. Vocational preparatory school provides skills training and instruction in essential basic subjects, students who fail in primary school and also those who fail in the first 2 years of general preparatory are placed in vocational Prep. To give more details students who attend vocational schools are eligible to receive a higher education if they pass all the required exams even though vocational schools are not under the Ministry of Education, their certificates

are recognized as legitimate by the Ministry of Education so the students can enjoy nationwide acknowledgement (Krapp,1999:67-69). These students are trained in one thing, to become skilled and that is it. After three years in preparatory school, depending on their grades they get to move on to secondary school. The children that went to general preparatory school get to choose to move on to either general secondary school or technical school for a duration of three to five years. In the general secondary students learn arts and sciences. In the technical secondary students become technicians in agriculture, industry or commerce. Both of these secondary schools lead to higher education at a college or university. If a student went to a vocational preparatory school they can only move forward to a vocational secondary school which is less demanding than general or technical secondary schools. These students receive a certificate from some ministry such as the ministry of transportation or the ministry of industry. The vocational schools agenda is to create a skilled worker in some specific area, but is outside of the ministry of education and is on a complete separate track with separate responsibilities to the students. There is much more details that could be discussed here such as the unchanged expression of the British agenda of: “Educate only those who can be absorbed easily by a government with limited resources, with due regard for the cultural prescriptions of the country being ruled” that is still present at this time and causes problems (Krapp 1999:79). But for the purpose of this thesis the basic foundation of the system will be the focus.

The extremely poor that I have studied expressed that the educational systems has failed them and only caters to people with money, status or high intelligence. The majority of them claimed that they either left school because they were too poor to afford to go, or they just couldn't pass and didn't see the point to keep trying. Even though primary school is compulsory in Egypt, the illiteracy and dropout rate is very high especially in the rural parts and is a huge



problem. Most students would drop out before gaining any efficient reading or writing skills (Krapp 1999:80). During my interviews, when I would talk about education, many of them felt uncomfortable, especially the men. I would generally hear that school doesn't help the poor because they expect you to pay for everything. I would also commonly hear that if you are not smart enough for school, working may be better for you. The women I talked to would tell me that they were good in school, but had to get married therefore dropped out. From my experience in the field and learning about this educational system in Egypt, I have learned that the people I have gained information from were at a huge disadvantage when it came to education: it placed them in a position to continue to be impoverished; accept any type of job that was low waged; or, dependent on family to always help them. The ones that I spoke to and had passed through primary school, dropped out because money to move forward with school was not available. The ones that passed and went through the vocational system were only eligible for low paying jobs which did not help them improve the quality of their life or help them get out of poverty. Finally the ones that I spoke to that actually made it passed general secondary school did not have enough money for college so they had to stop. Also females in poor small villages had a very low enrollment rate, woman was not on the priority list to become educated and mostly stayed at home. Many of my informants have claimed that the people with a good education are able to have a good life; everyone else was at the mercy of society if they didn't come from a family of status. The value that is placed on education is not as high as it could be. I observed that the impoverished did not become educated which could possibly lead to a better life because they just cannot afford it. Also many couldn't pass the exams and therefore were not given priority when moving ahead. There is also the fact that they are very poor and need to work in

order to have anything or contribute to the family's income. Lastly, their traditions did not place education as a primary factor unless it was learning the Qur'an.

The next important information to take heed of is employment in connection to poverty in Upper Egypt. Most of my informants have expressed frustrations on the availability of jobs and the low wages that both the private sector and the government provide. I heard people say that a man with more children will get a higher salary but not enough to provide for his family. I have been told that on average the maximum pay for a laborer in both the private and public sector is 600LE a month because there is a common assumption that no one is independent of their family and families would put their salaries together to survive. Therefore, paying low wages is justified by this common understanding. Wages are very low in most jobs for people who live in the rural areas of Luxor in particular. It may be because of a variety of things such as the agricultural activity being depressed which at one time was the main income for most rural inhabitants; the fact that salary is not based on job responsibilities alone, but is based on what position you are in when it comes to your family; and that there are so many levels of corruption that cannot be detangled here. Also the lack of higher education decreases the prosperity of this region as a whole.

A study done by The Egyptian Center for Economic Studies (ECES) focused on agricultural productivity growth, employment and poverty in Egypt (Kheir-El-Din & El-Laithy 2008). They found that agriculture is specifically important for the poor because this is their main way of having an income. In relation to poverty, agriculture makes up 58% of the total employment in rural areas. The unskilled poor usually turns to farming for income, accepting wages of 20-25 LE a day from working sun up till sun down. Many of the people I have encountered depended on farming to survive and with the decline of farming, poverty keeps

growing. ECES found that agricultural growth contributes to poverty reduction and employment through various channels. Even though there are constraints on agriculture on Upper Egypt because of the limited amount of useable land, it needs to be utilized more efficiently because many of the rural poor depend on it.

As mentioned above, in many cases, when a person is able to find work they are paid according to their family and family support system. An individual's choices and decisions are therefore affected by the roles the wider society ascribes to her or him as a member of a household-an institution that has been proven resilient in the face of social change and economic development (Wilk 1984, Booth 1993; Anderson, Bechhofer, and Gershuny, 1994; Singerman and Hoodfar, 1996). This identity based on family mixed with fluctuations in industry, limited resources and corruption in government is good to keep in mind for understanding the source of the reasoning's behind such low income.

Low wages and the disappearance of jobs are on the rise even though tourism is huge in Luxor, and a great deal of its development was contributed by it. Jobs were created through businesses that cater to tourism and the university that is present in Luxor (east bank) focuses on the tourism industry and influences Egyptians to take degrees in tour guidance as well as languages that cater to the different nationalities and ethnic groups that visit Egypt each year. This may be positive news, but this does not cater to the poor, most people who work with tourists and benefit greatly are educated or have their own business. The jobs that were created due to tourism that reaches out more to the masses are mostly low waged and limited.

Setting aside issues within education, agriculture, low wages, interdependent identity and corruption in government, we also must consider that the limited amount of jobs comes from underdevelopment as well. There is simply a lack of production growth, and development needs

to be placed on high speed. I know it may be hard to explain to poor hungry people that their country needs more time to develop to be able to help them, but in Upper Egypt this is a reality. I understand that it is more complex than this, but the underdevelopment contributes greatly to all economic issues, including poverty.

Development projects are initiated and taking place presently. There have been numerous programs both non-governmental and governmental initiated to help alleviate poverty and give the poor a better quality life. The problem is that what you read in scholarly articles or governmental program information booklets does not match what is going on in the field. I am not stating that the works of the various NGO's and governmental assistant programs are fruitless, however I am emphasizing that there is definitely much lacking in efficiency.

I have come to learn that there has been many initiatives started by different ministries throughout Upper Egypt offering many things from micro and macro credit to the poor (rural women in particular) to providing assistance to the poor to receive an education. There are organizations from USAID that offers various types of rural development; there are ministries that offer regulations of Zakat and charitable donations and much more. The government has established policies to be of assistance as well, one major one that is well known is the governmental food subsidy program administered by the ministry of trade and supply. Subsidies are provided for food yet are limited to bread and flour through government sponsored bakeries (Assaad & Rouchdy 1999:77). This is the main reason why bread in Upper Egypt is so cheap to get. There has been much focus on agriculture development in Upper Egypt with intentions of boosting the economy there and eradicating poverty. The problem is that these initiatives and establishment of policies though helpful are not reaching the depths of assisting people who are impoverished.

Throughout my time in the field, people would express that they feel that their government does not care for them and will never do anything to help them. I believed these statements because when I looked around and observed the conditions and harsh circumstances that the people were in, I came to the conclusion that there is no way that the government made good enough efforts to help these people. I may be wrong because I have not researched all aspects of initiatives and governmental programs to eradicate poverty, but from being amongst the impoverished I studied it didn't seem like much help was reaching them. I was told about a program started by the government to give impoverished people a home, my informants stated that this was nice but it was very limited and the only people who qualified were people who had no home and no family. If you were poor living in horrible conditions you were not eligible. Also they did not have enough flats to supply an adequate amount of poor people with a home; it would be twenty-five flats at a time in a span of 2-3 years. The people I have studied seemed to know what was going on when it comes to what the government was doing, but expressed that they were always overlooked, or just not assisted at all.

### *The importance of family roles*

The family is very important and significant in Upper Egypt. There is no way to understand Upper Egyptians unless you understand the dynamic behind the family unit. Saad Z. Nagi(2001) efficiently puts forth the importance of the family and the roles it plays, as a unit in the Egyptian Society:

“...a long span of history the family has been, and continues to be, a strong institution in Egypt.” on all fronts, Egypt provided a stable environment in which family institutions could flourish and survive in relatively stable form...” The values and norms of the

family such as emphasis on ascription; placing value on Primary relations, these relations often being ends in themselves; reciprocity of favors and obligations; respect for seniority; and differentiation in gender roles and status positions, even permeate other institutions. They also exert powerful influence on organizational behavior including that in government which have been described as “familial” bureaucracies” (Poverty in Egypt: human needs and institutional capacities Nagi 2001, P 187: internal quote from Rugh 1984:11).

Within my field work this was evident and made me understand the intrinsic value placed on family in Al Qurna. The impoverished that I studied felt as if they were the poorer than the most poor because they either did not have family or their family ties were weak in one way or another. They did not have any support because Upper Egypt functions solely through family units; which does not benefit the single person. “The family retains the primary, if not the exclusive, responsibility for supporting and assisting its members during their years of dependency and times of need. These include infancy, childhood, and old age, as well as periods of illness, or disability and/or unemployment” (Nagi 2001:188). This was very much confirmed through the interviews and participant observations that I had done. My informants would emphasize the importance of family to be able to survive. All of my subjects are ill, disabled or unemployed without a family to support them while living in a society that depends on the family to care for people with their status. As mentioned earlier even the way people interact with the greater society is through identifying themselves through familial identities not independent of it. It has also been argued that the domestic unit acts as a buffer to protect the individual from the shock of the state policies and rapid social changes (Sayigh 1981, Booth 1993; Singerman and Hoodfar, 1996). The family serves as a protection and a buffer to survive

and get through life. Many studies were done on survival strategies and it was found that most people in the developing world interact with society as member of a group, not an individual (Hoodfar 1997:19). I found this to be true especially amongst the poor; even the ones that did not have family would refer to themselves as the son or daughter of deceased so and so (Hoodfar 1997:6). “Poor household members tend to rely on internal and external relations of solidarity and social connectivity to sustain their livelihood”(Assaad & Rouchdy 1999:37). Poor Egyptians depend on family units and neighborhood interactions for everything from being able to marry to being able to bury their dead.

Having this understanding was important as an ethnographer because I had to talk to them from a perception of family and being a part of a group. I noticed that individualism was foreign to them, even the ones who were single and poor. They would only be able to express their life circumstances through the context of their position and status amongst their familial situation. This made it clear to me that they were at many disadvantages within the society. They didn't have an efficient education so couldn't really get a job or would only be able to get a low paying job. They didn't have great opportunities for employment because they are limited and wages are low. They didn't have family to support them so even if they were able to work and to accept a low paying job they did not have any other streams of support to make ends meet. Many of them were ill or disabled which placed them in a great vulnerable situation. They were always overlooked by governmental assistance because of one reason or another and they could not access what little was available because of mobility issues. They are in hard situations with disadvantages from every corner, which leaves them to only be able to survive through those providing charity.

### *The NGO That Helps*

The poor in Al Qurna are not accessible as one would think. They keep to themselves in specific certain areas being as modest as they can be. Having access to certain networks made the process to gather the data I was looking for easier. This access would not have been provided if I were a complete stranger to those in the field. The name of the NGO that helped that assisted me is *Al Jam 'yyah Al Shar'iyya lil'amilin bil-kitab wal-sunnah al Muhamadi 'yyah* which in translation means: "The lawful religious association for those who behave according to the Book and the Muhammedan Sunna" (Assaad & Rouchdy,1999:80). This organization was started by the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970's. Their goals were and still are to provide for the needy and strengthen Islamic ties. They are implanted throughout Egypt but the chapters operate independently of one another. They opened up their resources to me and I was happy to receive this assistance. They made it clear that not many people want to study poverty in Upper Egypt and they wanted more focus on the topic. Being that I was one of the few that were interested in the impoverished in that area, they really wanted to help me.

Let me give a little background on this small local NGO. They were established around 1978 and are known as the largest non-profit Islamic organization in Egypt. They provide what they can to impoverished people, and take special interest in orphans. In Luxor they serve roughly 1500 households and individuals on both the west bank and the east bank. Sheikh Mahmoud informed me that even though they have been around for a while and have been able to establish themselves pretty well, the organization's chapters in certain regions needs more help. They informed me that the funds and resources received from Zakat and other forms of charity are limited and not enough. Thus, they are able to provide help on very small scales. They hold meetings each week to create an agenda on how to help the needy even more and



strengthen Islamic associations. This NGO deals with a large range of issues of the impoverished throughout west bank within Luxor, I would consider them the protectors and keepers of the poor in the region. I really did not dig deep into their political background or agenda because not much has been written about them. From my experience in the field, they seem to be held in high regard because they are religious sheikhs. The ones that run the NGO are the very same ones that give religious guidance in the region. They do have heavy influence on the people, but I didn't notice if there were any agendas or motivations for what they do outside of helping the needy. The only thing I can say is that there is a possibility that they want Islam to be strengthened in the region so that may lead to a more religious state.

They collect from whoever will give and then distribute this charity amongst the poor in a variety of ways. They have people who contribute charity every month and then they have people who pay once in a while when they can. Without these local donors the whole system would collapse. They do their best in collecting money, food, and clothes. They keep a record of everything that is collected in their inventory books. They try to be as fair as possible when distributing the charity. Their distribution is based on the available monthly inventory. Nonetheless, on a regular basis, they have a standard that they go by. If you are a single person with no income and no way of receiving an income and are beyond working age you will receive 40 EGP every month. If you are a person who has a family of 3 or more and no way to receive an income you will receive 80EGP every month. If you have a small income but have an emergency that needs financing you can apply for assistance. They also check on the impoverished elderly daily to make sure that they have their needs met and are able to be met or simply to make sure they are still alive. They keep documents on each case that they take on. The books compiled from their work are large and great in number. They know just about every

poor person in Al Qurna. This is the reason why they were a great access tool for me to meet poor people and to achieve my research goal. The group of Sheikhs that volunteer their time to run the NGO have a great rapport with the people. I understand that this may only be because they help them stay alive but as I was watching the interactions between the NGO and the people who came to the office to get their monthly income or those whose home I visited for a possible interview, there was respect and dignity on both sides. These sheikhs help give people an income but also reminded them that they were human, deserved to have a share in what was on the earth and also reminded them to keep their dignity under all circumstances. As I sat in the NGO office which consisted of a room about 15 feet long and 10 feet wide and two desks and 3 book shelves filled with books, I noticed the voluntary efforts and was happy to be a part of it. The NGO appeared to be doing charity for the sake of charity and may not look for anything in return, but their status in the community is elevated and derived because of their charitable work.

### *Interviews*

The interview process was a long one in comparison to the amount of time I had for my fieldwork. I spent a total of two weeks just doing interviews and I was fortunate to have a considerable number of people who agreed to allow me to interview them. Many were open and honest, many were hesitant to give their whole story, and many just wanted to meet me and see what I was all about. I was able to interview thirty-five females and nine male heads of households. I spent some time in the NGO office meeting individuals and families and sometime making home visits to have interviews there. There were 44 potential cases I was introduced to and interviewed. Out of all of those cases I chose four to do participant observation with. My interviews were semi-structured, so I left a lot of room open for dialogue. The main information

that I was looking to receive from these interviews was: Personal and family demographics (age, name, marriage status, area live in, children); what were the types of income; their self-perception in terms of poverty; how they defined being poor; why did they think there were high levels of poverty in the West bank; some family history (what did they know of their mother, father, sisters, brothers and other extended family); what did they think would help alleviate poverty; and, what were their daily routines. Everyone had their own reservations and ways of answering but I found the majority to be open and willing to share their story. The dialogue was interesting and sometimes it went so deep I would have to readjust and get back to the initial questions that I was looking to get answered.

Every person I interviewed had a unique story but there were themes that overlapped in a significant way. There were many widows who claimed to be suffering and poor because their main source of income had died with their deceased husbands. The women who had deceased husbands were the most outspoken and seem to be very upset and expressed a sense of unfairness that they did not have a greater number of opportunities to work. The ones that I was able to do visit at home a home were open and gave me a tour of their home pointing out horrible conditions such as crumbling walls and ceilings, sunken floors, no hot or even running water and also small dark spaces that had to be shared by the whole family for sleeping because there was only one bed. Most of these women claimed to have been managing before their husbands passed away but there were a few who stated that poverty had been in their lives throughout their whole life. Their husbands had held occupations such as tour guide, alabaster factory worker, farmer, and day laborer. The women who had farmers as husbands were the ones who had been poor their whole lives. They stated that their husbands did not own any land and would work on other people's land as a laborer to receive fifteen to twenty Egyptian pounds a day (this equaled

to twelve hours' worth of labor or sometimes more). The ones who had been poor all of their lives showed less stress than the others: they really had a grip on ways to survive with limited resources. The women who were entrenched in poverty were more in distress and more open about what appeared to be their misfortunes. They all complained that no one cared about them any longer because their husbands were out of the picture. There were out cries and expressions of frustration for the fact that women without families are ignored and treated as if they did not matter.

I conducted a number of interviews of individuals in poverty who felt abandoned or shunned by their family for one reason or another. They were apprehensive to tell their story. But as I promised that they would remain anonymous, they would open up. The abandonment that they claimed to have faced was harsh. Many stated that they made choices in life that led their family to disown them. Therefore they had to live a life of struggle. The reasons for this abandonment were numerous. The significant claims were disinterest in the family, shame, resistance, feud over property and much more. Some people declared things such as "I didn't marry who my family wanted me to marry so they are punishing me"; and, "I decided to leave and work abroad and when things did not work out they did not accept me back" and "I had sex without being married so I am a shame to my family and I am just happy that they spared my life" and "I didn't want to work with the family business so they went out of their way to make sure I couldn't work anywhere else"; and, "I am too old to marry now, no one wants me and my father is no longer alive." Many expressed the thought that they were poor because of being in opposition to their families, abandoned by their families or just unfortunate not to have a strong family unit for reasons of death or migration.

There were also a number of people who were disabled and found it almost impossible to be independent even though they really made it clear that they accept having a disability. I encountered a sixty-five year old woman who was blind; a forty-four year old man who was paralyzed from the waist down and used a wheel chair; a mother of a young boy with a spinal disease; and an older man about seventy years old who had hearing impairments and was blind due to faulty operations on his eyes. They all had a different challenge but they all expressed difficulties in their lives because of their disability. They pointed out not being able to do anything with their lives and therefore not being able to earn an income. For instance, Sameya, the blind sixty-five year old woman that I interviewed declared that because of her age, disability and lack of family (all being deceased), she is left without a way to take care of herself on her own. When her father died, the restaurant business that sustained her died with him. In addition, her mother went blind and Sameya had to take care of her mother alone because her sister married and lived far away. After a while, Sameya started to go blind as well. She and her mother learned how to live on their own with the income of eighty pounds from the NGO. They cooked and cleaned and rationed food in order to survive. Then, her mother passed away. Now she is alone and indicates that being old is enough to disable you and now blindness is added to her struggle. She does not know where her sister is and has not heard from her for a long time. All of the interviews I conducted with people who had a disability emphasized that they wished there were more institutions available that catered to the disabled.

I was also introduced to youth whose parents had died. They were left to take care of themselves. There were about four young adults who became heads of households because of the death of their parents. There was Sara who is about the age of eighteen who takes care of her three younger siblings, Samer who is about seventeen who takes care of his one younger brother

and Ayah who is about twenty who takes care of her two younger sisters. They all lost their parents, Sarah lost hers in a motorcycle accident; Samer lost his father from cancer; and Ayah lost her father from heart failure. These young ones held themselves accountable for their younger siblings and mostly work as laborers on other peoples' farms to get by from day to day and they also benefited from the assistance of the NGO.

In between my participant observations, I would interview people who were not in poverty when the chance presented itself. I was able to talk to three men and two women about poverty in Al Qurna; they chose to remain anonymous. They all agreed that poverty was a major problem in Upper Egypt as a whole and stated that people who live in poor conditions and struggle to eat are the ones who are poor. They stated that if meat is considered a luxury then that indicates that they are impoverished. Two of the men stated that there is not enough emphasis on helping the poor. I gave the analogy that there is an elephant in the room that nobody talks about and act like they do not see it (the elephant being poverty) and they agreed completely with this image. The two women stated that more jobs for women needs to be available and the government should create more programs that could assist the poor. All of these five individuals recalled stories with me on hearing about the poor people's struggle and indicated they would give what they could even though they understood that it would never be enough.

The interviews that I were able to conduct were very well rounded and covered many different issues of poverty in Luxor. Each case was unique but they were all unimaginable and would never be thought of unless they were told by those living them. The life experiences that I was invited into revealed the complex issues behind the lives of the impoverished in Upper Egypt. They also allowed me to understand that poverty always goes beyond what you first think it is.

### **III. POVERTY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT: FACTORS OF PRODUCTION AND PERPETUATION**

To find the sources that produce and perpetuate poverty is not an easy task; it entails engaging issues with high complexity and could result with unclear understandings. There are so many things to consider and to recognize before coming to any one conclusion. In most cases there are multiple aspects that have to be taken into consideration before coming to a final understanding. This was confirmed within my study, because I was attempting to try to find the one thing that had a ripple effect on all circumstances of poverty within Al Qurna. After getting to know the lives of my participants I later realized that poverty is too complex to have a single source. Yet I did notice how one thing affects the other, in a way that there were many links in the chain leading to uncover the realities of those under poverty.

In this chapter I am highlighting that the aspects in the lives of the poor reflect both the economic and social issues that are in society. The economic issues are more transparent than the social. Because the economic causes of poverty are more visible and related information is more available. I decided to focus on the social factors which without studying the poor remain unveiled and are not easily understood. In many cases social issues have a huge effect on economic issues and vice-versa. Hence, in order to grasp clearly one without the other will continue to create situations where misunderstandings are prevalent and inappropriate strategies for solutions are created. I also will discuss the marginalization of the people I have studied and emphasize that they are not excluded within society so the reality that they live within a margin is not recognized. Their unique marginalized and excluded status is not so easy to define, but as one follows their life the blurs starts to become clearer.

There was one interview that helped me to begin to connect the dots in order to understand what could be one of the key factors that produces and perpetuates life circumstances of poverty in Al Qurna. His name is Ahmed, and before I could get his cooperation I had to appease him by allowing him to ask me questions first. He asked me things such as what village and what family are you from in New York? How many families are in New York City? Why have you come all the way to Egypt to find a husband? Was there not anyone in your family to marry? And where is your family, why are they not with you? And who allowed you to come here on your own? I laughed in confusion but he looked at me anticipating my answers with all seriousness. I tried to explain to him that I don't come from a village and that in America we work and are a part of society as a whole and not everyone has a family to look after them. I also tried to tell him that I just happen to meet my Husband while I was in Egypt on vacation and this was unexpected, something that just happened without my anticipation. No matter how much I tried to explain to him the differences in my life, he couldn't accept it and thought of it as wrong. It was foreign to him that a person, especially a female, could move through life without permission or support from family. We spent a total of thirty minutes discussing what he considers as issues in my life. After this interrogation was over he finally was willing to answer my questions. I asked him about his income and his daily activities as well as his life story of how he became so poor. Ahmed claims to have been a poor farmer all of his life, He just made enough to maintain himself. Before he was diagnosed with arthritis, he revealed that he used to make up to thirty Egyptian Pounds a day working on other people's farms. He stated that now he can barely walk so working was out of his physical capacities. He claimed that if he had married and had sons, he would have had a better chance at a more comfortable life in his old age. At the age of sixty-two Ahmed lives in a one-room shack and survived on the charity, of fifty pounds a



month given to him each month from the local and only NGO In the area. In addition, his brother comes to check on him weekly to see if he can help him out with anything. Ahmed stressed to me that his family was always weak and out of touch. According to him they never wanted to take risks to be more prosperous in life. I asked him what does he mean by this and he responded by looking at me with a dense serious look and stated that he couldn't tell me everything. Then he asked if I knew anything about the Mafia and if it existed in America. I told him that in New York where I am from the Italian families were considered to be the mafia and it was well known in the past. He said ok well use your imagination. This is the interview that was the most unsettling yet the most enlightening. Following it, I started to question the social phenomena that could possibly make people vulnerable to poverty from a different perspective. I started to understand that the tribalism that is a part of the functioning of Upper Egypt and that I didn't take so seriously was actually a key element. I concluded that tribalism was a major part of the society in Al Qurna and it contributes greatly to many of the Upper Egyptian social perplexities including poverty. After I left Ahmed I sat back and started to think about all the Mafia movies I have seen in my day, movies like "The God Father" and "Scarface" would come to mind. I noticed that the families in these movies were just like a tribe on a much more sophisticated complex level, but all the aspects of tribalism were within them. Then I laughed and thought that I can't believe I am thinking about mafia movies when it comes to poverty.

There is a relationship between society and poverty that is very intimate and complex in Upper Egypt, the true nature of this relationship could never be uncovered from the outside. While in the field I noticed that aspects of tribalism were embedded within every aspect of the society and was actually the fabric of their functioning. I will not only discuss the link of tribalism that affects poverty that I understood by studying the individual lives of the poor, but I

will also begin with it because I noticed that it is central and has a common effect on all the people that I have studied. Tribalism contributes to both their impoverishment and marginalization. Before we get into how's and why's, let's clarify what I mean by tribalism.

It is quite commonly known that a tribe is a social group connected and loyal to each other on the basis of kin for reasons of survival and companionship. I understand that the ideology behind Tribalism, as a concept, may have a stigma to it because anthropologists and sociologists have been using this term to describe a sort of primitive people before development has taken place in colonial times, especially when referring to early African or other indigenous groups and their modes of living. When tribalism is mentioned, there comes to mind an image of individuals living in nature off the land, who have a governing system that is primitive yet ensures the survival and security of the tribe members connected to one another through bloodlines. I would like to move away from these early implications of tribalism and extend an invitation to consider a modernized society with tribal tendencies and practice embedded in the very structure of the society. Just to be clear I am not speaking of the neo-tribalism that Michel Maffesoli introduced, which is the idea that modernism would fail and people would look to past tribal ways of governing as a resort (Maffesoli, 1996). I am talking about Tribalism being a central part of all avenues of life that exist within the functioning of just about everything within the society. If we take the definition of tribalism from the World Encyclopedia we will see that "Tribalism is the state of being organized in, or advocating for, a tribe or tribes. In terms of conformity, tribalism may also refer to a way of thinking or behaving in which people are more loyal to their tribe than to their friends, their country, or any other social group<sup>3</sup>." In Upper Egypt this is evident; the system is organized in the form of tribe and interacts with the rest of society

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<sup>3</sup> The definition of Tribalism from The World Encyclopedia;  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648225/The-World-Book-Encyclopedia>

on the basis that is best for the tribe. I learned that each tribe which they call family has a governing system within itself and is completely based on the survival and best interest of their members only.

In Al Qurna families are responsible for their members in every way, and they even live life with an understanding that the government is not what governs people. If anything happens to an individual the first questions that the onlookers would ask, is what family does this person belong to? After confirming what family he/she belonged to, people would attempt to help according to his/her family credentials. There is no doubt that the government plays a role in the functioning and governing of the society. But we must understand that even though we have the appearance of a modern state, both the people who are administering governing affairs and receiving governmental services do it with an undertone of tribalism. For example, one of my informants told me that when he got married, his own personal family sheikh married them. When it was time to get their marriage license they would just call their family member to get the paper for them. They would never have to waste time going down to the court and signing anything. I asked him if someone did not have family in the courthouse could they make a phone call and get their paperwork done. He stated no, only if they have family working in high offices, if not they would have to go to the court and go through the whole legal process, which takes all day sometime. From this I understood that, of course it's about who you know, but that there were actual loop holes in the system for people who were related to those who worked for the government. Not everyone could enjoy benefits of others because it was strictly according to who is a part of your tribe. He emphasized that in Upper Egypt, people think in the best interest of their family because they understand that in turn this is the best thing for them. The

government is used as a tool that aids in various things, while the main responsibility of people is placed on their family or tribe.

From my conclusions and based on what I observed, the government seems happy to place more responsibility on the families because it eases their burdens of providing services such as assistance for the poor. The government also benefits from a tribal-like society by being able to have a scapegoat of blame when things go wrong. Because the family deals with many major issues in society, the government benefits from this reallocation of social responsibilities and, perpetuates and validates this way of living on all levels. Everything you do with the government is based on your membership to your tribe. It also has less responsibility to share the states wealth with the people of Upper Egypt because their family unit is their vehicle to resources and income as we discussed in the previous chapter. Also families with money and status enjoy having power by having their members working and entangled in affairs of the state. I did not spend a great amount of time analyzing the government during my time in Luxor but this is revealed from observing the people and paying attention to their convictions. During an interview with Muhammad age 40, he explained to me that if you do not have family to help you get a job or give you money when you are down there are hard days ahead of you. He explained to me that the government feels that they should not have to do much because most things when it comes to money are a family issue. So I asked, what are state issues then? He stated that the state is there for easy things such as paper work or resolving issues that your family cannot resolve. Muhammad explained to me that whenever you deal with the government, they deal with you in accordance to your family status, not as an individual. If you have a problem or need anything they will ask you what have your family done to help you. In Upper Egypt almost everyone is dependent on their Tribe or family unit which consists of hierarchies of power within

themselves. They work hard to maintain a great status in society because they have a better chance of power in the mainstream. They form alliances in the family through marriage, maintain their powers over their members by having individuals who are judges, sheikhs, counselors and even treasurers of the family's money, so looking outside for help for anything would be unnecessary. If anything goes wrong, the state looks to the family to take care of things first before they get involved. When it comes to Upper Egypt,

“It is important to note that the state does not act as if it were in competition with the customary councils or arbitrators. It generally accepts their intervention as a useful and important means of alleviating the work of an overburdened and exhausted judiciary system, and it most often sees the non-state arbitrators as being an efficient tool when it comes to dealing with the otherwise uncontrollable violence that may erupt in the villages of the Nile valley and the poorer quarters of large cities. The state, and through it the police, at least on the local level, often encourage the work of the arbitrators and the councils, and in some instances it tacitly grants them authorization to deal with issues that go far beyond settling civil dispute”(Islamic Law and Society: “State and Customary Laws in Egypt. Hans Christian Korsholm Nielson. 2006, P 126).

It's not just about loyalty for the sake of kin and survival any longer, it's about the modernized platform being ripe and still making sense of governing through tribalism. Continuing with the definition that was initiated earlier:

“Tribalism infers the possession of a strong cultural or ethnic identity that separates one member of a group from the members of another group. It is a precondition for members of a tribe to possess a strong feeling of identity for a true tribal society to form. The distinction between these two definitions for *tribalism* is an important one because, while

*tribal society* no longer strictly exists in the western world, *tribalism*, by this second definition, is arguably undiminished. People have postulated that the human brain is hard-wired towards tribalism due to its evolutionary advantages.”<sup>4</sup>

This is also evident in Al Qurna; the majority of Upper Egyptians are descendants of Bedouins who for the survival of their people organized in the form of tribes that is based on bloodlines. The wellbeing of the tribe is the most important thing and anything that is outside of the tribe or in opposition to the tribe is a threat and must be gotten rid of because the stability and survival of the tribe means the stability and survival of the group members.

This embedded tribalism within the society, functions at a disadvantage to many members especially the poor. The people that exist without a tribe or possess a weak tribe that has the power to do nothing leaves them vulnerable and they begin to live and survive on the margins of society. The people that I studied possess an indifference to the way the society functions, even though they are not excluded, there is no avenue for them to be included in a way that enables them to benefit from what was made to be beneficial in the society. “There is a failure to understand that poverty does not emerge because of exclusion but as a result of poor people’s ‘differential incorporation into economic and political processes’ (Bracking & Harrison, 2003). The lives of the poor all reflect this in one way or another.

### *The Origins of the Tribal System of Al Qurna: Alif, Be, Siin*

The people that I studied are at a disadvantage to the tribes that are the major presence there. There are three major tribes that are established, a story of how their tribes came to establish themselves is a part of their oral history. According to a story that I was told by Sheikh Mahmoud, there are a total of three tribes present in Al Qurna that stem from a history of

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<sup>4</sup> The World Encyclopedia. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648225/The-World-Book-Encyclopedia>

migration: Tribe Alef who reside near the mountains, Tribe Be who reside near the Nile and tribe Siin who reside in the middle next to all the farmlands<sup>5</sup>. According to the story these tribes came into being from the migration of three men more than an estimated one hundred years ago, no one could really tell me an exact date. These three men migrated to the area of Al Qurna on West Bank of Luxor. Exactly where these three men came from is in question, no one I have spoken with knows but from my research their origins can come from what we now know as Sudan, or Aswan. These three men were brothers and settled in Al Qurna. All of them lived off the land making a life for themselves and their families from agriculture. They all were married to many women (the exact number of wives each one had was unclear also, but if we make assumptions from the religion that is widely practiced it may have been four each) and had many children. I am not sure if anyone was established in Al Qurna upon the arrival of these men, but if there were they may have been pushed out later. One of these brothers was a Sheikh and was a devout Muslim, while the other two were not as religious and were considered not to be good Muslims by the standards of the sheikh telling me the story. The brothers disagreed a lot about everything, chaos between them started to rise and they ended up separating from each other. They all were married with many wives and produced many children as I mentioned before, but they all had split up into three different tribes instead of living as one family. One inhabited land near the mountains, one near the Nile and the other in the center next to the farmlands. The families have expanded and up until now their descendants still reside in the same areas that they first settled to years ago and built their tribes.

All three family make-ups are quite similar and all three families strive for success and power within Al Qurna. Each tribe which they call family has its own system for maintaining and controlling the members of their tribe. Within each tribe there is a hierarchical system for

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<sup>5</sup> I Changed the true names of the tribes due to confidentiality

decision making, reconciliation and problem solving with the family. In each tribe there are sheikhs for religious support and judges for settling disputes and making financial decisions. The eldest men in the family hold the power to have the final say so over any and all matters. Marriage outside of the tribe is forbidden; marriage is seen as an alliance and loyalty in the family and enables the material possessions and power to stay within the tribe. Each family are responsible for their family members so there is a heavy responsibility placed on the tribe to control and maintain their family members on all levels. All individuals are representatives of their family so there is a lot of strong mechanism of control that takes place to ensure that the society has utmost respect for their tribe. Each tribe works hard to maintain their material possessions and it is important that these possessions are maintained in the family. So I stress again marriage to a cousin within your tribe is a must. Basim age 39 stated that his wife who passed away was chosen for him by his grand uncle. He initially did not love her or want to marry her but could not dispute the arrangement because his eldest uncle made the decision and he is the highest authority figure in the family. Even though they were poor and nothing was contributed to their marriage they still had to respect his uncle's decision. These social facts spills over into the mainstream, because all of the people who hold positions of authority in society comes from a tribe and share a tribal ideology and therefore together maintain all societal functioning under a tribal system that manifest itself in all aspects of society.

*A Look at the observed effects of a tribal system on the life of the poor:*

As I introduce the story of my participants that I spent time with and observed, notice that you can clearly see that they are in opposition or carry a separation from this tribal system in one way or another. There were numerous experiences learned about during my participant



observation that revealed the entanglement of tribalism in the society of Al Qurna and how this negatively impacted the lives of many. All four of my participant observation volunteers showed quite clearly what happens and what issues have come about as a result of living in a tribal-society. As mentioned above, I chose four out of the forty-four cases I interviewed and engage in-a process of participant observation. The four I chose were Monsoorah, a 35 year old widow who takes care of her three children one having a spinal disease and mother in law; Sabah, a 30 year old widow who takes care of her four sons; Badaweeyah, a 65 year old who lives with her daughter; and Muhammad, a 40 year old who is paralyzed and alone. I chose these four individuals because they were the most open with me initially. I connected more with them than with others and they shared the most information about their life with me. This made me understand that they would be the best cases to take on for participant observation because they would be the most open and willing to give me the data that I needed. I visited each of these four homes one to two times a week and stayed with them from around 6am until 10 or 11 pm. I decided to do as they do not just observe, if they went somewhere I was right with them and helping them along the way, if they did not eat or drink neither did I and if they ate I ate what was available with them and of course, contributing my own share (but I matched whatever they ate no matter how little it was).

### *Monsoorah*

Monsoorah lives in an area within Al Qurna named Ababda. She comes from a poor family of farm laborers. Her father was a laborer farmer and her mother used to sell food items in the souk. She emphasizes that she was always poor but never felt the hardships because she ate every day and even though she did not have much growing up, her parents managed. At the age

of seventeen Monsoorah married her cousin Ahmed and they moved into a home that was in poor condition but belonged to their family from ages ago. Before her husband died he worked as an assistant on a motor boat that would transport people across the Nile or take tourists for a ride up and down the Nile. He made a daily salary of twenty Egyptian pounds. This would ensure that they had food to eat every day. I learned from Monsoorah that being poor is not the most horrifying thing: it's when you cannot eat or take a shower that is hard to deal with.

Monsoorah's life became very difficult due to the death of both her Husband and her parents. The night her husband died he was walking home after a long day of work and as he was crossing the street he was hit by a police car so hard that it flung him about 10 feet in the air and he landed on the opposite side of the street. He died immediately and Monsoorah and her children were not compensated with anything. And to add more insult to injury, they told her she had to pay for the damages her husband caused to the police vehicle when he was hit by the police car because the accident was his fault. Since she was poor and could not pay they left her alone. Monsoorah stated that because she was a woman alone without a husband or a living strong family support, the police thought they could push her around. She would always insist that when you do not belong to a major family here, people show lack of respect towards you. Family is everything in Al Qurna according to Monsoorah, they provide support and protection. Monsoorah stated that the government may not recognize people's civil liberties and just function in a way that benefits them and their own wellbeing if there is not a group of people to make them do otherwise. The only income and support she had left died in the car accident along with her husband. She stated that she went to the court house because she heard about a program that offers up to 150 L.E a month to the poor who could not work, but was just placed on a waiting list and told her to try to find a family member to help her.

She continues to live in her husband's home taking care of her children and mother-in-law Samiyah. She confessed that she cries a lot because some days she doesn't know how she can feed her children. As mentioned above, Monsoorah has three children; a son who is 11 years old named Basim, a daughter who is eight named Rahma and her youngest child a son age six named Mustafa who suffers from a crooked spine and mental disorder. When Monsoorah was pregnant with her youngest son she tripped and fell on her stomach very hard. Because her husband did not have enough money to enable her to go to the doctor, Monsoorah just continued with her pregnancy without having any medical attention. She believes that this hard fall damaged her son that was within her womb. When Mustafa was born he had an s shaped spine and mental damage that made him unable to stand up at all or have normal functioning. Samiyah stated that her son did not have money to take Monsoorah to the hospital but if he had known someone who worked there she may have been seen for free without money. She emphasized that family takes care of family. I have always known in life that sometimes it's about who you know to get what you want, but it was interesting to think that something so crucial such as medical attention could be denied to you not only because of money but also because of the connections you lack.

The home that they occupied in is not in a condition for human beings to live in. It's dark, small and damp. The walls are crumbling and there is a moldy smell that hits you upon entering. Monsoorah must try her best to keep the house standing and ensure the livelihoods of the members in her household. Her mother in law is too old to help and was being taken care of by her son (Monsoorah's husband) before he died. Monsoorah had to continue to care for her because she has no one either.

I asked Monsoorah what was the reason she was not able to get assistance. She cried and told me that there is no one that she can turn to for help, all of her family is elsewhere and poor themselves. I asked her about any programs that were possibly available in Luxor to help her besides the one that she applied for, she stated that only the local NGO that gives her eighty pounds a month was of any help and that governmental programs are very limited.

### *Sabah*

Sabah, age 35, lives in Al Howaikim, a small town in Al Qurna. Sabah comes from a poor family. Her father, Mohammed, who died fifteen years ago at the age of sixty, was a farmer, and he worked on other people's farm land as a laborer but would also work other laborer jobs that were available when he could. He would bring home ten Egyptian pounds daily to feed his wife and two daughters, one being Sabah. Sabah would work and sell items in the souk to help her family and there is where she met her husband Saed at the age of seventeen who just happened to be her cousin that she never knew of. Saed was working as a farmer as well and did not have much but was very ready to marry she told me. He went to her father and asked permission to marry Sabah almost a week after their encounter. He lived alone, not with family when he married Sabah, because of the death of his parents and the marriage of his sisters the house was left to him. They married and moved one hour from her home city Naga Al Barkha to Al Howaikum.

Her husband earned 20 pounds every day. Some days he would receive less, and on the days he couldn't work he wouldn't receive anything at all. Sabah noted that life was hard after she married because her husband was always gone and she felt lonely because she did not live near her parents. She lived next to the Nile with her husband for ten years and claimed to be poor

and unable to meet many needs but survived on a daily basis. Her husband began to become sick and worked less and less and they would have to ask neighbors for food because their daily income that would feed her family was dwindling and becoming non-existent. Her husband developed lung cancer and eventually died a slow death she stated. She claimed that those times were tough because they had no food or medicine and would pray a lot to eat on a daily basis. She emphasized that she was on her own when her husband began to become ill and that there is such a lack of help in Al Qurna but people do what they can if anything. She told me that during the period that he was ill, which was about two years, she would do things such as go from door to door begging. She would also plant seeds near her home and grow her own tomatoes and cucumbers, which helped a lot.

When he passed she decided to move because she was scared to stay there alone by herself next to the Nile with no neighbors close by. Sheikh Nasser (one of the NGO volunteers) decided to rent a one room flat for her and her children in Al Thawa for one hundred pounds every month. The walls are crumbling, the stove barely works, it has a dirt floor and it has only one bed in it. She stated that she is grateful that she does not have to live in such a lonely isolated area anymore but the flat she moved to is horrific. Two of her sons are sick with a chronic cough believed to be bronchitis. Since she does not have the money to take them to the hospital to find out for sure what it could be, she just accepts her assumptions. She stated that her children and her mother give her the most stress. Her mother is still alive but sick with brain cancer. Being poor with brain cancer is a misfortune because you cannot even go to the hospital for any type of ease due to lack of funds and treatment for brain cancer is expensive. Sabah tries to see her mother as much as possible and stated that death is knocking at her door and that she has no money to negotiate with death if that was a possibility at all.

The only income she receives is from the NGO; the amount that is allocated to her every month is 50 L.E., which is not nearly enough to feed her children but claims that it's better than nothing. Spending time with Sabah made me think a lot about the lack of assistance that is available to people like her. From talking to her, I realized on a deeper level the value of family ties in Al Qurna.

### *Badaweeyah*

Badaweeyah is sixty-five years old and lives in Al Ababda a small impoverished town within Al Qurna. Badaweeyah used to live as a Bedouin in and around the mountains close to New Valley which is six hours away from Luxor. She lived what is considered a traditional tribal life with herds of animals in the desert. She was married to her cousin when she turned twenty and he was thirty-five. They had conceived two boys Ali and Muhammad and one girl named Minah. She claimed to have a very hard life in the mountains working all day in the sun but would not complain. Even though they lived away from the urban areas near Aswan, from time to time, they would go into the city to sell goods such as meat and milk. Unfortunately one of her sons, (Ali), on a visit in the city, was shot by the police in Aswan for stealing in the market and he died. Later her husband died from natural causes and old age. She was tired and she and her remaining son decided to sell their livestock and move to Luxor for a more urban life that may be easier to deal with. They sold their possessions, left the other members of the tribe and rented a small three room home for her, her daughter Minah and her son Muhammad. They survived on the income that Muhammad brought home from his job working as a bread maker, and would dip in their savings from time to time when needed. Their savings and his income took care of Badaweeyah, Minah and Muhammad and allowed them to live comfortably.

One day Muhammad was delivering bread to a nearby place and he was accidentally hit by a truck and died from this. This is when life began to get really hard for Badaweeyah and her daughter. They no longer had an income, savings began to run out, there are no jobs available for women and her family is back in the mountains as Bedouins but she cannot return to that life because it's hard. Her parents are no longer living and no one would accept her daughter for marriage because everyone will only marry within their own family.

Badaweeyah depends on charity and from time to time the neighbors help her out. She receives 50 LE every month from charity to feed and sustain her and her daughter. She even asked if her daughter could be a second wife, but no one was interested. While I was with her, she would cry often and scream in Arabic "Allah please have mercy." I see from this that tribalism may have its perks, but it can really leave people down and out that do not fit the mold.

The three room house they live in is very dark, electricity is only in one room, and they store water from the Nile in bin tubs made of tin because the running water is not reliable. They do not have a real ceiling; it's just tree branches that cover their roof. They are still renting, the NGO pays their rent of one hundred and fifty Egyptian pounds every month.

### *Muhammad*

Muhammad, age 40-45, lives in an area called Awwariyyah on the west bank of Luxor. His home is located in a small area next to a lesser Nile or large pond. Muhammad claimed to be shunned out by his family because of his dream to work and live in Saudi Arabia. He told me that he used to live in a very poor quality home that was over crowded with his mother, father and nine sisters and brothers. Then he married and the tradition is that the wife comes live with the husband's family so his wife was added to the household as well. Then they had four children

Nada who is sixteen currently and about to marry, Aisha who was 8, Asma who is six and Abdullah who is currently three. Muhammad stressed that the household was so cramped and he wanted to create a new life for him and his children with better opportunities. According to him many Egyptians go to Saudi Arabia and become very successful working on farms and then creating their own business. His father did not want him to leave and asked him to stay and help fix up their home. Mohammed left anyway and was told not to return if something happens. His father stressed that they would not help him and when the home is fixed and everything becomes ok he will not benefit from this. He worked on a chicken farm in Saudi Arabia with his wife and 4 children and life was tough for them but worked out for a while. After about three years his new venture became a failure and his plans of raising money to start his own business ceased when he lost his job. Muhammad believed that his ventures failed because he did not have the blessings of his mother and father upon leaving. In Islam it is believed that if your parents especially your mother is angry with you nothing in your life will succeed. Muhammad, his wife and four children returned to Egypt with a small amount of savings and went to his father for help. His father refused and would reiterate to him that he meant what he said. They managed to rent a small home and he worked as a laborer getting any job he could from day to day mostly selling food for the animals. Later his father died and at the same time his daughter Aisha had gotten sick with a heart disease and needed a heart surgery that cost between 75,000 L.E. and 100,000 L.E. Even though it was against his deceased father's wishes his brothers tried to help him raise the money but they could not raise enough money in time to save Aisha, so she died without surgery, and his wife and three children remained. They are very poor, and things worsened when Muhammad had got bitten by a snake due to living close to the Nile. Now he is paralyzed from the waist down. Muhammad always says that life is not kind and has no mercy.



Due to his inability to take care of his family he sent his wife and children to his wife's father's home and he visits them when he can. He only receives 40 LE a month from the NGO and has a hard time managing this. Muhammad also constantly feared for his life because he is seen as a disgrace to his family. He stated that at any time they could attempt to take his life and that his death would be an honor killing, which would possibly help with his family status. I didn't really understand how this would be good for his family. I asked him about this but he wouldn't answer me, and changed the subject.

Muhammad would shake his head in disbelief when he told me his stories. He would say that no one in his family wants to be seen with him or be in contact with him because they are scared of being abandoned or tormented as a consequence. From time to time he would emphasize that the impossible thing to do is stand on your own two feet without your family. He indicated that he learned this the hard way. He stated that he aimed for getting a better job but they always knew what family he belonged to or would ask who his father is, and then he would not get the job. I guess he is linking his status with his family with his failures in life. From spending time with Muhammad, I seen clearly that he represented change, and the hardships that he faced were a consequence of trying to do something different in the face of forces that were change-resistant.

All of the people I have done participant observations with have shown great struggles in their life and claimed to have gone through hardships with little relief because they did not have a family to help them, assist them or even support them. They are isolated either because they lack strong family or they represent change that can weaken the system. Badaweeyah is firm on the idea that she could not possibly receive any further help outside of what she calls God's mercy; the NGO helps her because she has no family to assist her and therefore she has nothing,

no power, no authority and no visibility. Badaweeyah would make statements such as that she wished she had grandchildren who would have a lot of children so she could build a new family foundation for herself so that she could have a greater position in society. Badaweeyah and her daughter would spend most of the day talking about their past and how strong their family used to be and how life was better for them back then because they had people to help them and provide for them. Badaweeyah would constantly say that there is no power if there is no family or you are nothing without the people you come from. It seemed to me that the people in Al Qurna may not have helped because she was not family or connected with a family and this in itself is harsh, but many other things appeared to be present to me as well. There is a lack of social services in Luxor for poor widows with no family like Badaweeyah and this is because of the way the society places so much responsibility on the family structure. Also many people do not have much and would not help her or would be of small assistance because they could barely help themselves. Moreover, no one would marry her daughter because she was not their family and being that she was poor and they may not have had much themselves they just could not afford more of a burden.

Monsoorah just would emphasize that she wished that her family was more intact to be able to help her. She shared her understanding with me often that Upper Egypt is all about family and family values and how family is so important to help you get through this life. She would cry often and hold her hands to the sky and say that ‘God I know you have taken my husband but please make a way for me to live without him, I have no one but you in a world that only sees me if I have a family.’” I could see how a strong family would definitely make life easier, especially in Al Qurna where life is lived and functioned through a tribal-society. It seems to me that a

person like Monsoorah suffers the most from the lack of assistance that the state has available for the poor.

Sabah felt that her family has always been poor and therefore never taken seriously by society. Consequently, life was always hard but she also appreciated the time when she had family and would say “well at least we had each other.” This made me understand the reality of the competitions of the tribe. I thought it was enough that individuals had to compete in the world for status and wealth. The realization that whole tribes would compete with each other was interesting. I asked Sabah what she meant when she stated that she was never really taken seriously. She laughed and said that because her family was always poor, no one was interested in what they needed or had to say in places outside of her village. I started to think that this is kind of like a corporation that sells stocks, the more money you possess and put into it, the louder your voice becomes and the more your opinion starts to be taken seriously.

Muhammad was the one who put forth the realities of the social factors in Luxor most clearly. Through his actions and behavior, he always would bring up that fact that he sent his family back to his wife’s father’s home because he knew that they would have a better chance at life if they were with them: they are a family that is respected and not considered poor.

Muhammad also told me many stories on how he used to do illegal things but because his family was highly respected he never went to jail when caught by authorities, the more money and power your family has the better off you are as a person. He stated that only the poor and the weak were vulnerable to the police because they did not have anyone to speak up for them or bribe the police to let them go.

Women are at an even greater disadvantage than men if they do not have the safety net of family. They have fewer resources to be able to take care of themselves in a place that is

suitable predominantly for men to work. The husband of Saidah one of my interviewees died and she had a huge fight with her family (mainly her uncles on her father's side) about land that was owed to her. This disagreement was very difficult for her and the family wrote her off as crazy and from then on no one in her family wanted anything to do with her. They even tried to admit her into a mental hospital to prove to the community that she was insane and was incapable of land ownership. Saidah stated that being in a mad house sure makes you sane because it makes you realize what people are really about and it teaches you how to be strong. She stated that she was released because she did not cause any conflict and promised to be good. When she was released her husband's home was still hers and that's where she lives currently. She has a daughter and a son, both married. Her son comes to check on her from time to time and stated that he suffers as well from not being able to call his family if he needed something: they shunned her whole unit out of the family. Her daughter was divorced once and the child conceived from her first marriage was Azhar. She remarried and Azhar decided to stay with her grandmother because her mother's husband did not want to take care of Azhar. Also Saidah's daughter did not want her mother to live alone. She claimed that she lost the land that was owed to her because her family had something against her because she didn't marry her cousin and married outside the family. She believes they want to leave her with nothing until she dies.

In Luxor, for most families marrying outside the family is a greatly discouraged. It is believed that marriage within family ensures the survival of the family. I understand that there are traditions of marrying within the family in order to ensure that the family stays strong and keeps material possessions within the family. If one challenges this tradition, the individual will be fought against or even abandoned. The Story of Souad's one of my interviewees reflects this. Souad mother and father married outside of her family even though the families were strictly

against it. Its members argued and tried to kill each other over this marriage, eventually they left them alone but vowed that they would not be considered family and could not be helped by anyone. Ten years after they had gotten married Souad's father divorced her mother and abandoned them because he claimed to be uncomfortable with her. So Souad and her mother Aisha went to live with Hayat who is Souad's father's sister. Aisha's family would not accept her back so she sought refuge with her former sister in law Hayat who has become very close to her. Hayat was divorced and lived alone in a big house, so she allowed both Aisha and Souad to live with her. Because Souad was not 100% her father's family blood and her mother disobeyed her family by marrying outside, the family did not treat her with the same closeness as the rest of the family. She stated that she always felt loved but not a full member of the family with full rights. She stated that she was not treated the same as the others. It's almost like she did not fit fully anywhere. Souad stated that her blood represented change and Upper Egyptians do not like change especially when it comes to their way of life. As Souad got older she had heavy pressure to marry one of her cousins from her father's family so she could over time regain her full rights as a family member; rights which were lost because of the union of her mother and father. But she loved a man outside of the family. Nobody objected because they stated that she was not fully part of their family's blood line anyway and if she does not marry within us she will be considered a complete outsider. Hence, they allowed her to do so if she wishes. Souad went on and married the one she loved and currently is only able to visit two of her family members from her father's side are willing to accept her visit. She stated that they refuse to help her if she needs anything, especially when her husband lost his job. Her husband was a driver for other people making 100-110LE a month. He lost his job because he had an accident. She mentioned that he never really made much money and she always had to sew, fix garments, thread faces<sup>6</sup>, sell

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<sup>6</sup> Threading is a way that people remove hair off of their face and other body parts. It is done with the use of thread

things in the market and do henna to make ends meet. When he lost his job they depended on her income only. They have four children and she was pregnant at the time when I was doing my research. She stated that they will never help her or her husband and sometimes she feels that she should have married her cousin so she can have access to more resources, thus, have an easier life. Souad stated that many times all the gateways to livelihoods are through your family because society cannot see you without your unit. Their home is old and worn out and her husband's family will not help him either because they feel like he betrayed them by marrying Souad. They chose love over money they stated. Holding on to traditional ways is becoming difficult as time moves forward and the world evolves. I see Souad's hardship as a way of protecting what is known and what has always worked for the people in Al Qurna, at the price of strong cruelty to diffuse the threat in question.

Going against the family is not something tolerated because from the logic of the tribes it creates dissension and unwelcomed changes in their values. Reem another of my interviewees age 29 was abandoned by family because of shame. She stated that she was engaged to get married but before the wedding she and her fiancé had intercourse and broke the strongest traditional rules. He broke off the engagement and decided to marry someone else for reasons that she did not state. The family found out what happened and was furious and told her ex-fiancé that he must marry her or else there will be war within the family. He refused and soon after that he went missing, no one knows where he is until this day. They were going to execute her as an honor killing but decided to have mercy and just kick her out of the family. They decided to have nothing to do with her and to let her suffer alone as a woman without family. That would be enough: due to her reputation, no one will marry her or give her a job. She stated that she rather be dead. She lives in a shack and receives 40 L.E. every month from the local

NGO and does her best with that. Being expelled from her family and stigmatized through shame in the society, she was experiencing an isolated, lonely and extremely difficult life.

Through my participants and earlier interviews, I learned that tribalism protects, provides and governs people, yet creates hardships for people who are cut off from this way of life, enables corruption and inequality on many aspects, controls people and proves to be a true contributor to poverty. The group of people that I have been observing are left out or pushed out of what could help them due to the system not taking more measures for people who may not be able to have support of a tribe. Let me be clear, I am not trying to create a picture that distorts people's way of life, and I do recognize the benefits that tribes may enjoy. I am just trying to highlight certain consequences and disadvantages that people face as a result of this societal functioning.

There were other social issues that I was led to learn through the lives of the poor that were interesting as well. I consider tribalism to be the major one, but there were reflections in the lives of the poor that revealed others. The way death completely strips a person of all their life necessities is a huge problem, as we see in the life of Monsoorah, Sabah and Badaweeyah. They all were meeting their needs until the death of the men that took care of them occurred. It is difficult for poor women to succeed without their male counterparts, which is another issue within itself. Most women do not work in Upper Egypt, which makes it difficult for women such as these three to gain an income in the case where it would be absolutely necessary.

The way social ideologies and traditions affect literacy and education of the members of society is an issue also. As mentioned in the previous chapter many people in Al Qurna drop out of school to work or in the women's case to get married. They drop out in many circumstances because they were too poor. But also, because of their social norms, it is more important to find

work and to marry than to seek education. Many of my informants told me that most people go to school with the intention of dropping out because their families needed them to or told them that is what they must do. Education is not valued enough in Al Qurna, because the people see it as too time-consuming and costly. In my interview with Souad, she stated that with the same amount of time it would take her to finish school she would have married and had four children and started a business. To her it made no sense to waste time and money on school when it would not change any factors in her life anyway. From her understanding, if she were to put her life on hold to go to school, she still would be doing the same thing just at a later time, so why waste time. They do not see the benefits of education outside of religious studies, and this could be because the government has not made it apparent how education could help their society. Or it could just be because of their traditions that hold other agendas in life in much higher regard.

The prevalence of corruption and greed is another social issue that places unfortunate circumstances among people. I was told that many high officials were able to get away with everything, including stealing, extorting people for money and even killing because people were afraid of them. I was told that when the government finally sets up a program to assist the poor, it is diminished by almost half to appease certain officials. Many people know of this but do not say anything because they fear for their own lives and those of their families. In one interview I had with Saeed, I was informed that if anyone opens their mouth about greed and corruption they would go missing the next day. The way these corrupt authorities punish people for doing what is right is unbearable, so people stay out of their way. I will recount a story that gave me the understanding of why the fear was so great. I cannot reveal who this story is about nor where this story took place for confidentiality purposes, nor can I reveal who told me the story.

Furthermore, I have no proofs of its validity. I was told that there has been many instances of



people who tried to reveal corruption, being taken into the mountains, tied up and then honey poured all over them and then left to be eaten by mountain lions, snakes and vultures. It was revealed to me that this along with people being set on fire in distant regions happens from time to time to ensure that the fear inside the people would be maintained. If I were a member in this society I would also keep my mouth shut. The economic realities of the poor in my opinion cannot be adjusted until some of these social issues that block success are addressed.

### *Living on the Margins: Perceptions Vs. Existence*

Just like it is difficult to define what it means to be impoverished, to define what it means to be marginalized is very complex. There is no specific way of providing an explanation for it; it depends on the region, the people, the social situations and the economic foundations. From my understanding marginality is unique to a region just like social factors because various degrees of it can be applied. Therefore, to be clear, for the sake of this research, I am establishing that the people I studied are marginalized for the same major social factors that contribute to their disadvantages. Their isolation in the collective tribal system that Al Qurna and the majority of Upper Egypt have embedded in their social structures created situations where they became marginalized. I would not go far as to say that they are excluded or carry a stigma for being different. They share the same culture and ideologies just like everyone else, yet understand that they are at a disadvantage. The problem is that the greater society sees them as impoverished people who needs help without taking into consideration the whole complex picture.

I want to emphasize here that my participants are marginalized when it comes to access yet this is not recognized because they are not considered to be excluded. They have no access to jobs, assistance from the government, and other benefits but the reasons why, which is that they

are not connected to a tribe that could help them, are not completely recognized or understood. They may have an identity and a status that creates for them a social isolation on the basis of how the society functions and simply because they have either no tribe or a weak one. But this isolation is denied within the society, making their marginalized status even more permanent. The primary focus in Luxor is on tribes, so where do my participants fit in? The problem is that they don't. The notion of helping people outside your family is very limited. It seems that not many are taught to extend help to others on a level that would make a difference. Now please do not misconstrue what I am saying, I am not suggesting that there are not people who want to help the poor. I am stating that the collective action of the society is based on a consensus of tribalism in which my subjects don't fit. The family is the one that helps with accessing everything you need in life. Being provided with money, home, marriage, a job and other necessities is extremely difficult in this region without the crucial tribal kinship connection. Therefore, one could imagine the huge disadvantage that the people I studied have. This system fails people who do not have a tribe, or have a weak tribe, yet they are seen as being a part of society like everyone else, but just end up being poor as a result.

Another part of the issue that maintains their circumstances is that they interact within society and everyone understands that they are extremely impoverished, but the fingers are pointed at the government that does not help them. All the people that I have spoken to collectively believe that the government is not doing enough and that they really do not care. According to my observations I do not think that they realize that the very fabric of the society and the ramification for their collective actions contributed to the impoverishment of the poor. I do not think that the types of margins these people live on are clearly defined. The very members of society that were not poor, would express that the impoverished are poor because

they do not have a business; or that jobs are unavailable; or that they are not married or even that the government needs to care more. The understanding that they are denied access to a better quality of life because they lack the familial buffer that can get them through is not accepted.

The concerns for people outside of family ties needs to increase. The understanding that it is beneficial to the community to ensure the wellbeing of those that do not have the same benefits as the majority needs to be made clear. The true contributor of their impoverished and marginalized status needs to be made clear, but that only can happen when their lives are paid more attention to. My subjects of study live in a space where they are seen but not recognized. They live in a region that emphasizes family but treats their own as if they were foreign. They perceive themselves to be Upper Egyptians yet understand that they are different.

#### **IV. THE PERPETUAL PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL STATE OF THE EXTREME POOR:**

##### **Insecurity, Uncertainty and Fears**

The lives of the poor that I observed in Al Qurna are full of insecurity. They had no sense of stability. Their survival depends on their day to day activities and their protection is defined as challenges emerge. Their life is full of uncertainties: no moment goes by without them worrying about how to eat or receive life necessities. Their life is also a life full of fears due to the extreme vulnerability they are exposed to every day. These are the psycho-emotional states that shape the daily lives of the poor in Al Qurna. In this chapter, I will reflect on the experiences of my participants' lives that reveal their insecurities, uncertainties and fears and how they cope with these day to day challenges. I will also highlight the great and powerful advantages that come about in getting to know these aspects of the lives of the poor. It enables us to have a deep understanding of how quickly they are able to manage and/or create their coping and adaptation mechanisms while being under stressful circumstances. More importantly, I hope this section will contribute to the dismissal of any misconceptions relating to how the poor deal with their life.

Monsoorah's son has all my gratitude for saving my life. As I sat amidst the family in the living room observing their daily activities something was moving in my direction amongst the dirt floors inside of the small flat. Spontaneously, Basim shouted, while looking at the ground "ALLAHU AKBAR" three times. He then, took a skinny stick and stabbed the scorpion that was right next to my foot and escorted it outside. I was shocked by the thought of being bitten by one of these poisonous creatures. Monsoorah looked at me with grief and apologized for such an experience. She clarified that they come inside the homes all the time and they blend in with the

dirt floors making them almost invisible. People are always in danger of being a victim to a scorpion bite. I asked her how can you protect yourself from scorpions, what do you do? She looked at me and said that all is needed is a hard tile floor and they won't come in or at least you would be able to see them more clearly. I thought about how just a small adjustment and change can take away a mountain of stress.

Being impoverished has a bundle of meanings from worrying about one necessity or another to coping with lack of food and resources. In the field, I quickly noticed that poverty is not just about deficiencies of any sort. It's a reality that is intertwined with an abundance of experiences that are difficult and stressful and may come from lack or different reasons. Inadequate provisions are only one part of the story. There are unimaginable realities that the impoverished face on a daily basis that compile problems and fears. Many of these problems are major but stem from situations that are small matters and could be fixed easily. Small, slight fixable things are the causes of major stressors in the lives of the poor. At the same time, I also noticed the bigger issues that cause both small and huge problems as well. I think there is power in recognizing the source of stress both big and small and get away from just the material inefficiencies that poor people are faced with. I will focus on the source of the issues, not just the symptoms.

*The Home of the poor: Being free within an open-door prison*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Even though my participants were free to move around as they like, they were in no better position than prisoners in a prison cell because each home represents hopelessness, restrictions, controls the quality of life for each individual and powerlessness just like a prisoner in a prison. Each home that I encountered is similar to a systematic environment produced by the panoptic nature of the rigidity of culture and social policies of governments enforced for the sake of a prison cell. The difference is my participants are under circumstances of impoverishment, while prisoners are under circumstances of detention. The environments and the way the environment has control over their lives are quite parallel. My participants' environment has more power and control over their life than they have themselves, just like a correctional officer has more control over a prisoner's life than they have over their own lives.

For all four of my participant observation volunteers, their living conditions reflect exactly how poor they are. I questioned whether these homes were legal or suitable to live in, and whether or not I was in danger myself. Stepping into Monsoorah's home, you immediately felt as if you are sinking. The walls, with remnants of pale green paint left behind are crumbling and look as if they were made of mud. The dirt floors are damp and shaky; and, the ceiling is low and looks as if it is caving in with wooden beams saving the day every day. The kitchen is dark with a stove that only has one pilot that works and in the northeast corner there is an old refrigerator that does not function properly on a consistent basis. She is fortunate enough to have a one small sink in the living room with running water; thanks, she told me, to her husband who installed it prior to his death. On a daily basis, the main fears that are dealt with by this family come from their living conditions: they have no shelter from rats, snakes, scorpions and other pests because of the holes that are in their walls and the dirt floors that not only attract pests but camouflage them as well. They are scared to sleep on the floor because of the possible scorpion attacks; they are not secure in a bed or a couch because the snakes that crawl in due to the dampness; and from above, the rats fall from the ceiling from time to time. They are even careful on walking around hard on their floors because, according to Monsoorah, it will cave in any day now and they can all die. To minimize the fear of sleeping in their home, they all sleep together in one room, on two beds and surround the beds with bags of plastic and other materials so they can hear if something is crawling around in their house at night. Every morning Basim wakes up first, inspects the room and lets his mom, sister and grandmother know whether it is safe or not to get up. They are constantly looking around, in a paranoid way, because they cannot always see any creatures crawling around. The sinking floors and the caving ceiling is what bother them the most. They applied for the emergency fund with the NGO and-they are waiting to see if their

application to get their floors and ceiling fixed is approved or not. Monsoorah looked at me and mentioned that she would be praying that it will be approved before it all caves in. The look itself is a prayer.

Sabah's small apartment also has crumbling walls, but at least she had a sturdy floor and ceiling. It was a one room home with a bathroom and a small kitchen outside. The main room was made of dirt floors and crumbling walls with one twin size bed. The bathroom was a very small room with a hole in the floor for a toilet, small shower line, no sink and no ceiling was there as one looks up. The kitchen is about ten feet long and five feet wide. There is no refrigerator, or working stove, just a table that things are piled up on. Sabah expresses appreciation for her home because, after the death of her husband, she is now in a village near people as hitherto fore she lived in an isolated area by the Nile alone with her children after her husband died. They are all fearful of taking a shower and using the bathroom. Sabah also mentioned, that when she wants to wash her body she does not enter the bathroom, she just fills up a large tin of water and goes behind the curtain that is off to the corner of her room. I asked why and she explained that when you use water in the bathroom it attracts snakes and they can easily come in above you while you are washing because there is no ceiling. She looked terrified and I, along with her, was petrified of the thought. She does not take her eyes off of her children for one minute. She conceded that her home, an unhealthy environment, may be a significant factor for the eventual death of her kids. Her youngest son is very sick and is always coughing. The neighbors give her cough medicine from time to time but this does not help. She cannot afford to see a doctor, but she stated that the dust and dirt were making matters worse. She believes that her home is toxic and fears for her son's life on a daily basis. She tries to make sure

he drinks plenty of water to flush his system out, but she understands that this may not be enough. She understands that this is something done to ease their minds for a while.

Badaweeyah screams for help on a daily basis, whether it is addressed to a neighbor or the sky above. She lives in a more spacious house than Monsoorah and Sabah but has more of a hard reality to face. The rooms were dim because she only had one light which was in the living room and not much sun light could enter because of the high walls without windows. The same crumbling walls and dirt floors were apparent in Badaweeyah's home as well. Badaweeyah's running water and electricity were not reliable, so she tried her best to keep water stored and candles handy. The dark blue walls with patches of brown made it even darker in the apartment. There were four rooms, one large living room, a kitchen and two bedrooms. One bedroom was not being used because they both were afraid to sleep alone. Badaweeyah and her daughter shared a room as a way to prepare against the possible invasion of rats each night. The water being unreliable especially at night has forced them to store as much of it as they can in a big round tin tub. They are cautious about this water because there were many incidents in the past that a person dies from drinking stored water because of snake poison. The snakes may enter the home and crawl into the tin tub without anyone's knowledge. If one goes to drink any water without looking, the snake could easily jump up and bite the person. Even if there was no snake in the tub, there is a chance that one was present and left while contaminating the water with its poison. Before they drink or use any of the stored water, they take a stick and stir the water with caution, if no snake pops out then they take some of it and smell it and examine it carefully before it is approved for use.

There did not seem to be anything of practical use in Muhammad's home. His walls were crumbling; there was no running water when I initially met him; and nothing that operated



properly in his kitchen. He did have a toilet, but it couldn't flush and there was unreliable electricity in the whole of the two room apartment that he resided in. Muhammad was hard to read because he didn't really express his fears or talk about anything he is scared of. I assume this has to do with the ideology of masculinity in Upper Egypt: he didn't want to show fear. I observed that his concerns were mobility in his living space. For Muhammad, having to get around with a wheelchair was not easy for him because of the uneven dirt floors and the small doorways. He worried that one day he will fall or get stuck somewhere and no one will be around to help him. He would move very cautiously throughout the room when he needed to, making sure he didn't ride over a lump or dent in the floor by looking down and around as he slowly went from one end of the room to the other.

It was interesting to me to notice that the greatest fears such as death, injury, and pest attacks all stemmed from the living conditions these individuals. I felt unsettled with the understanding that the realities that I observed could be shifted for the better with minor changes. The thought of what a concrete or hardwood floor means is not actively considered. The stability that a closed roof, running water, refrigerator and stove provides is not always paid attention to and sometimes taken advantages of. A whole new reality and a much better quality of life can occur with having provisions that do not require much effort to change and could last for a lifetime if just fixed once properly.

Hard concrete floors and stone walls would keep the scorpions and the rats out of the homes of my participants and give them the peace of mind to sleep at night. A closed roof would enable Sabah and her sons to take a shower and no longer be frightened of attracting snakes. Running water would make Badaweeyah and her daughter safer being that they wouldn't have to risk drinking and using poisonous water on a daily basis. A refrigerator and a working stove

would enable Monsoorah, Sabah, Badaweeyah and Muhammad to store the little food that they gain on a daily basis, and would enable them to accept more food from people because they have somewhere to store it and cook it. These slight implications determine the misery or relief in one's life; I believe that these things go unrecognized because they are so slight and not really thought about. The general picture of being poor is always the dominant factor, but the devil is in the details. Instead of trying to understand poverty from a perspective of impoverishment, we should concentrate in on the factors that make life particularly difficult. A closer look of the living environment will help us understand that most of miserable experiences of the poor may come from small implications that could easily be corrected.

#### *Medical Treatment has a Determining Fear Factor*

Ahmed who is a paralyzed and blind seventy year old man explained that when he was younger he had sight and strength but developed glaucoma and needed a small laser operation to prevent himself from going blind. His family could not afford to pay for the operation. Consequently, they had no choice but to go to the low cost doctor that the government provides. He decided to go through with the operation at the age of thirty-five, thinking that it is a small procedure and that everything should be fine. The minor procedure went wrong. As a result, Ahmed became completely blind in both of his eyes. He was not compensated for his loss nor was he able to sue because he could not afford a lawyer. Ahmed feels that poor people are at a disadvantage all around. He indicated that about ten years after he was blinded, he was going to the market alone like he always did (even after his blindness) and was hit by a car. This accident paralyzed him and now he uses a wheelchair to move around. He stated that being disabled in

Upper Egypt means to have a disabling life especially if you do not have children to take care of things for you.

Access to proper medical treatment is a burden for an individual without a means to get money. This inaccessibility of proper health care has caused the poor to develop a fear of having to be told that they have an illness that requires treatment. Those fearing sickness and who cannot afford medical treatment are, also the most vulnerable to getting sick. The harsh conditions that they live in render them extremely vulnerable to disease and other illnesses. The poor quality of health care that is available to them and the inaccessibility of better medical treatment due to lack of funds, are well-known facts in Upper Egypt. What are unknown or unrecognized are the fears that arise because of this reality: stories such as Ahmed's are well known and great in number. People live in fear of the inadequate low cost and limited medical care in the community in Al Qurna. Even when it comes to serious matters, the people who need help yet have no money are extremely afraid, thus, reluctant to visit the doctors that are available. In addition, another heartbreaking moment relates to the funding necessary for the required medicine for treatment: the fear of needing anything that is unaffordable is very intense. In Al Qurna, people try to avoid the doctor at all cost because the three pound co-pay that is the standard cost for the poor to see a doctor can, easily, turn into a huge physical and emotional cost for them.

While Monsoorah was carrying her youngest child, at the sixth month of pregnancy, she had an accident and slipped and fell flat on her stomach. The pain shot through her whole body and all she could think of is my child is dead. When she felt a movement, some relief came over her. Her husband ran to her side consoling her, trying his best to make her pain go away and making sure she and the baby were alright. She knew she needed medical attention. But her

household unanimously decided to just proceed with the pregnancy because no one had the money to pay doctors' fees. Since the baby was still moving they were convinced that everything was alright. Monsoorah constantly feared for her unborn baby's life for the remainder of her pregnancy. Her fear about having a dead fetus inside of her gave her nightmares. She constantly wished she could get a confirmation that the baby was ok from the doctor, but was afraid to see the low cost doctors and this became a heavy burden. She decided to just pray. When she had her son, he was alive but was not well. He had a mental and spinal disorder and now she must care for him in ways that she cannot afford, especially with her husband no longer around. Her son lies around the home all day as they surround him to play because he cannot stand or talk. They try their best to make him laugh and smile on a daily basis; a comfort to him and them as well.

Seeking comfort is a way that fear is dealt with. The more Sabah's youngest son coughs the more worrisome she looked. She frequently expresses that she needs to see a real doctor because the low cost doctor is not helping at all. She fears that her son will not be able to bear the coughing and one day he will just give up. She constantly takes him to the pharmacy and has the doctor who works there take a look at him. But without the proper tools he can only guess. She has been given many different types of medicines that just comfort him and suppress his cough for a while. She is jumpy and runs to him often when he begins his intense cough. She just tries to make him as comfortable as possible.

Amongst the poor in Al Qurna, the thought of needing a doctor is a fear in itself. Before taking on this fieldwork, I thought people got upset because they hated going to the doctor. The opposite is true in this region: people hate even the thought of getting sick because they would not be able to go to the doctor or have to take a chance and get low cost treatment that is

unreliable. The women I observed would pray a lot and try many home remedies before they admit that a doctor was required.

*Death: A feared and prematurely invited guest in the life of the poor.*

Death is always a major concern for the poor, Islam being the practice makes it quite commonly known that death is natural and is guaranteed for everyone. This religious understanding that all must die does not ease the fears for my subjects of study. Death is taken seriously and is always thought about because of the dangers that they face on a daily basis. The insecurity of food makes poor people scared of dying from starvation or mal-nutrition; living in instable homes causes fears of dying from snake, scorpion or rat bites as well as other dangers that are inside their homes; not having money to receive proper medical attention causes fear of dying from a sickness or a disease; not being able to have adequate access to running water creates a fear of uncleanliness leading to disease which may cause death. Every day, in one way or another, fear of death knocking on the door is present amongst the poor in Al Qurna. In order to cope with this lethal threat, they delve deeply into their religion for comfort and consolidation. They take it very seriously that God has a paradise where there are no pains, worries or ailments. This does not help them invite death, but it makes them feel better and accept it. Badaweeyah always talks about how much she looks forward to Paradise after living in a life that seems like hell.

The fear of death linked to food insecurity was very apparent while observing Sabah. Sabah's fifteen year old son is of working age and is in a position to help his mother. But he is unable to do so because of the lack of food that is available to him. Sabah stated that if I send him to work for one day, he will sleep for one month because he is so weak, and I do not want to

lose my oldest child. Food is scarce for Sabah and her children. As a result, they are very weak and afraid to do anything. Her oldest son looked at me and said that if a car tapped him lightly he may fall to the ground and die. Sabah is constantly praying. She said that prayer is the only thing that gives her peace and makes her forget that at any moment she can die or lose her children.

Comfort of the fears of death cannot always be achieved. As mentioned earlier Muhammad lost his daughter to a heart condition and believes that she could have had a chance to live if he could have afforded her surgery. The surgery was expensive as mentioned earlier; to pay 75-100,000 pounds is not easy for a person struggling with poverty. But he is convinced that his biggest fear came true because he is poor and that the poor are at a disadvantage when attempting to fight death. He thinks of this little girl often and confesses that death takes a special interest in the poor. He looks around and mentions frequently that just not having electricity could kill a person because they could not escape the heat or the cold in the winter. Muhammad did not appear to fear death, but feared his position of vulnerability to death. He expressed to me that death is a part of life, but he also would say that if he had money he would have a better chance to live; of course, if God willed it to be.

Living in constant fear can have long term traumatic factors on a person. Badaweeyah and her daughter would express major concerns about the rats that invaded their home every night. They believed that these rodents would kill them one day. I was told that one night when Badaweeyah was asleep, a total of four rats fell on top of her covering her nose and mouth. She had trouble breathing which woke her up and she almost fainted from the shock of finding rodents on her. From this day forward Badaweeyah has trouble sleeping, she fears not being awake because she cannot protect herself while sleeping.

These experiences revealed the fears internalized by the poor. Their vulnerability to death was indeed unimaginable. These people did not fear death because they are sick, on their death bed or have a disease so they knew death was around the corner. They feared death because they were vulnerable to it due to their life circumstances. Death is very much real and not frequently out of touch for the impoverished in Al Qurna: they are not allowed to forget about it and do not have the luxury to be in denial.

### *Food and Water Insecurity*

We will discuss in the next chapter how water and food are utilized which will reflect the scarcity in the lives of the people I studied. Here, I just wanted to reflect on the insecurity, uncertainty and fear that living without an adequate amount of food and water creates.

All of my participants are very modest when it comes to their hunger and water troubles. They do not like to show how scarce it really is to them. I had to pay attention to their actions, statements and behaviors to notice just how serious the situation of being without an adequate supply of food affected them and how much they valued water and what it means to them.

Monsoorah stressed to me that there are nights and even whole days when she and her family went without food. She stated that this was not hard if you are used to it and that they are ok. I guess she did not want me to feel sorry for her. She tried to make me believe that she handled hunger well as she held back the tears that were rolling down her face as we discussed the matter. Her son would scream that he was hungry and would barge out and come back as if he satisfied his needs, but nobody asked where he has been. I was curious and asked where he went; he said: “oh nowhere, I just went to take a walk.” Maybe he went to a neighbor who fed him or maybe he went to a field and ate some bananas that were growing, I didn’t know so I just

left the issue alone. When they have food to eat, they all took a small portion and claimed that they were satisfied. Later, I would hear them complain about hunger pains to each other, while they thought that I didn't know what they were discussing. I don't know where these acts of shyness stemmed from. I only can assume that it comes from a culture of conservatism which is dominant in Luxor. Even though, they were not forthcoming with their hunger and water troubles, I observed that they are hungry on a daily basis and eat just enough to get them through the day. I also noticed that sometimes the water would stop running and they would just wait and pray past their extreme thirst due to the upper Egyptian heat. As a family they feared not being able to eat, and Monsoorah as a mother feared more for her children than for herself.

Food and water troubles leave the impoverished I studied to think hard about how they were going to get through the day. Most of their time was spent thinking about what to do next. This could be a reason for the ability to cope and adapt quickly. Just like Monsoorah and her family would just stay hungry or thirsty, Sabah and her family did the same thing but often Sabah would go out and attempt to bring home something. Sabah had more of a stress and was more willing to beg because her sick son required at least some food and water to get by. She would stay hungry herself but would go out to the fields and pick some fruit or something trying not to get caught in order to give her children something. She didn't want me to understand how deep their hunger was, but she caved in and told me how she would steal fruit and vegetables growing on people's property in the night as I stared at the fruit sitting on the table in their one room flat wondering where they came from. She stated that she does not do this all the time, only when she runs out of money and food because she would endanger her life. She was afraid that someone would see her and shoot at her. She stressed that it is for a good reason and she prays



that God will forgive her. I just thought to myself, how can anyone judge someone who is hungry and has children to feed.

I learned that dealing with scarcity of food and water quickly disciplines and enables one to adapt and adjust to harsh matters quickly. Muhammad keeps what he calls a water hole. He informed me that there have been plenty of times when he ran out of fresh water or the water was too hot to drink due to the very hot weather in Luxor. He takes a gallon sized bottle and fills it with fresh water, closes it and keeps it in a hole he dug in his flat. He stated that the hole keeps the water cool and enables him to forget about it unless he really needs it. I thought to myself that you would have to be, frequently, in a bad situation when it comes to water to think of doing that. I asked him what made him come up with this idea, he stated that one time he was nearly choking to death off of food he was eating and had no water to help him, and there was no one around to aid him either. He stated by the grace of Allah he survived and now he fears being without a drop of water when he needs it.

In many ways the impoverished have no other choice but to get used to dealing with fears. They adapt and adjust when it is possible and pray when there is nothing else for them to do.

## **V. FOOD, WATER AND RESORUCES:**

### **Coping and Utilization Strategies**

After being around my participants for over a month, I felt comfortable enough to freely enter their space. As I approached the home of Sabah, I knocked on the door but I did not get any answer. I knew that she would be expecting me and I was concerned that something may have happened, so I just opened the door and entered. As I stepped in the front door I observed Sabah praying in the Islamic way and she was in the position of Sujood (when the head, hands, knees and feet are all touching the floor) for a long time. I sat quietly and waited noticing the tears and sobs during her prayers. When she was done she looked at me and told me that she was sorry she kept me waiting but she had to speak to God for a moment. I asked her if it was alright if she shared with me and ok if I knew what problems she was dealing with currently. She told me that she did not have any money for food because an unexpected emergency happened with her son the night before. She had to take money from the food budget to buy him medicine. She confessed that she was asking God to provide her with food or a way to get money. She also established that she had to be patient because Allah would provide. I asked her how does praying help her, she stated that God always makes a way if she asked. I smiled and agreed with her completely.

Studying the poor in Al Qurna and encountering their life experiences first hand I learned that poverty requires self-discipline that derives from creativity while instilling utmost patience. In this chapter, I will present some of the ways my subjects utilize their scarce resources. I will also discuss the creative ways that they come up with to deal with their inefficient supply of basic necessities and how they cope with these difficult circumstances. There are amazing

strides that my participants showed me which they endeavor for their survival and peace of mind. They utilize their resources in the most efficient manner and create ways of getting through during the toughest days in terms of scarcity.

### *Badaweeyah*

From Badaweeyah, I learned efficient ways of utilizing necessities that I currently put to use from time to time in my own life. I would never think that 1 L.E. (1 Egyptian pound equals a little less than 20 cents of 1 American Dollar) could stretch so far until I met my participants. Badaweeyah receives an income of 80 Egyptians pounds a month (roughly \$12), and she also keeps two-three chickens in her small yard that are donated to her as baby chicks about 2-3 times a year, either from neighbors or other people in the community who donate from time to time. One thing that I noticed about Badaweeyah was that she never really wanted to me to know in its entirety all that she possessed or received. I couldn't tell whether it was because she was being modest or whether she thought I wouldn't give her anything by the end of my project if I knew she was able to eat on a daily basis. I never promised anything, but I could feel certain assumptions and I could tell that there may have been some type of expectation placed on me from her that I didn't pick up on from my other participants. I literally would have to follow her everywhere she went to get a sense of all that she had. I could tell that this probably annoyed her, but she wouldn't want to seem rude in my opinion and would just submit and let me in on all that she was doing. We would take a trip to the bread oven every time I was there and would spend 2 L.E. to get fifteen loaves of bread. Bread goes a long way in Egypt and has been a major important factor throughout Egypt since ancient times. And, it shows: Badaweeyah made it clear on a daily basis how much she cherished bread, she feels that she and her daughter are able to

survive because of bread. Beans are another important food item which is a major part of their diet. Badaweeyah buys two, 2 kilogram bags of beans for 10 L.E. each, thus, spending a total of twenty pounds a month on beans. After the purchase of beans, Badaweeyah is completely out of money, She rations the food between her and her daughter trying to make the food last until the next 80 L.E. comes in. They each eat 3-5 loaves of bread and one cup of beans each day for the whole day. Sometime they would spread it out throughout the day and sometimes they would eat it all in one sitting. There were even days that they were able to eat eggs. Even though this was not all the time, they maintained chickens in the yard which provided them with up to 8 small eggs in a week. Some weeks there is nothing because the weather is just too hot and, I was told, chickens do not produce well in extreme weather conditions. The extra five pieces of bread and whatever could be spared of beans was given to some of the children that lived nearby who were just as poor as Badaweeyah and her daughter. Nothing would go to waste and everyday bread was bought and beans were made fresh. It seems as if this gave them something to look forward to. They would tell me that bread and beans leaves them full all day. But I knew this wasn't true because later throughout the day they would say things like I wish there were more food, or I am feeling weak or I will sleep past my hunger pains. I would just act as if I didn't hear anything because I knew that they thought either I didn't hear them or didn't understand them because of my limited Arabic. What my participants didn't understand is that my Arabic was limited when it came to speaking, not so much in terms of comprehending. So I found out a lot about their troubles, whether they wanted me to or not, by just listening to comments they could not help expressing.

By the end of the month, they usually would run out of food which they thought would last for sure. I noticed that it was their sharing and sometimes due to the fact that they ate more

than their allotted amount that would push them past budget. At this time and only if they were desperate, they would kill the two chickens that they raised, which had been donated with the understanding that more baby chickens may not come for a while. This seems like a dreadful occasion during which they ate and enjoyed the meat but were sad of the fact that they would not be able to eat eggs or have meat for another 3-4 months. By the end of the second month money ran out again. As usual I thought, but this time there were no chickens to kill, so Badaweeyah would go out and start begging. The first time I witnessed her going out to ask for help, she was unsuccessful and came back home empty handed and they didn't get to eat too much that night. They only had the left over scraps of bread that was in the kitchen. I accompanied her the second time I was there and she went out to ask for help. She went knocking on people's door and then would go to the main road and would start begging in the street. She never wanted me to go because she expressed that people may not want to give her anything if they saw me with her. I asked if I could just walk behind her, she agreed. But I never did this again because I noticed that I took the attention away from her, even though, I tried to make it appear that I was not with her. People would stare at me and try to figure out where I am from, not even looking in the direction of Badaweeyah. Her neighbors would also assume that I was giving her money and would be reluctant to share. I stopped accompanying her outside her home because I did not want to interfere by reducing, through my agency, what little benefits she received from asking for help outside. After begging either neighbors or people in the street, Badaweeyah would eventually come home with something, the day I walked far behind her she brought home about 10 L.E which supplied them with food for the remaining days in the month before it was time to receive her 80 L.E. from charity. The next month that I was there and she went begging, she didn't reveal to me what she was able obtain help. Instead, she came home with bread so I knew she

was fortunate. Badaweeyah expressed that she understands that Allah does not allow anyone to starve, she stated that Allah may not give you everything you want but will always supply you with just what you need and right on time. I can understand why she feels that way, and I understand from her story that when Badaweeyah was doing well financially and her son was alive she was very generous. Now that she is poor, many people look out for her as a way to return her generosity. Naturally, she will feel fortunate when someone reaches out to her and helps her right before she and her daughter were about to starve. The one time I did go out with her, I observed that it was people who were her neighbors who helped her the most and were struggling with poverty themselves. It would not be much; they would spare about twenty-five or fifty piasters<sup>8</sup> and would make her promise to pay them back when she received her money. In that sense, Badaweeyah borrowed just as much as she begged. She would go to certain women in her neighborhood that she felt sure would not deny her a loan. If she asked to borrow some money and pay them back later and they denied her a loan she then would go on a long tangent about how they have family and she does not until they finally caved in and gave her whatever they could.

Water is a major issue in Badaweeyah's home. As I mentioned in chapter 4 she has no running water and has to store her water in large bin tubs made of tin, putting her and her daughter at risk for snake poison. She stores a lot of water from the Nile to drink, make her beans, and keep the dirt floor wet when it's really hot as well as to wash clothes. She complains that no matter how much cheap soap she uses the clothes never come out as clean as she likes. I observed that the water was not completely clean, even after she filters it as much as possible with an old rusted strainer that she keeps handy for cleaning the Nile water that she gets every day. I would see how much soap she uses and wondered where in the budget was she able to

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<sup>8</sup> A piaester is 1/100 of the LE and 25 piesters are ¼ of the LE

afford soap. I asked and she looked at me with grief as if I was so nose-y and stated with frustration that she gets it for free by standing next to the store for hours continuously asking the store owner for soap until he gives it to her. She laughed and elaborated that she knows he is tired of her and only gives her the cheapest soap available. I looked at it and it was brown with no smell and about 3 inches all around.

Once a week, she washed her and her daughter clothes, which consisted of eight galabaya's.<sup>9</sup> Five were for the home and three for going outside. I was informed that all of their clothes were second hand and were given to them during Ramadan, when people in the Muslim world are most generous. Obtaining water was not a problem for Badaweeyah because the Nile water was abundant. The problem was the cleanliness of the water. They were always complaining of being sick, and not being able to clean themselves properly. Some days they would go to a neighbor's home who had running water and would take a shower. They would only do this when they felt that they really needed some relief. Badaweeyah never liked asking for anything, but would when she was in the tightest of spots.

There were no sheets on the beds in the one bedroom that they shared and the two covers that they had to cover themselves were very holey with knots in it. The knots come from them trying to repair the holes the best way they could. I wasn't able to experience the cold in the winter while I was there. Nonetheless, I was told that the winters were tough to get through because of the lack of covers and the limited amount of clothes they possessed to cover themselves. They stated that to be able to stay warm in the night Badaweeyah and her daughter would sleep together at night huddled together, hugging each other for body heat. According to them, this was the only way to get through the cold winter nights.

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<sup>9</sup> Galabaya is a long dress traditionally worn by rural women

There were no working lights in the bedroom so the only time you can see inside is in the daytime because the sun shines light through the one small window in their room. At night if something was needed out of the bedroom, they would light a match to attempt to find what they was looking for, or they would just say forget it, it can wait until the morning.

### *Monsoorah*

There was something very genuine about Monsoorah. She never held back and she was always open to giving me any information I needed. According to her, the more people who knew of her and her family the better. For Monsoorah, making sure that everyone in her household ate everyday was a challenge more so than Badaweeyah. It was because she had more people to worry about and feed with the same amount of income or actually less because she never received any donations of chickens because she didn't have a place in her home to keep them.

Monsoorah spends a bit more on bread, every day she takes a trip to the bread oven and buys 3 L.E. worth which is about 22-25 pieces of Egyptian style bread. All her money is spent on bread, and she has no money to purchase anything else. Therefore everything she receives is donated. She also has a small piece of land her husband left to her. Instead of making use of this land of about 10 feet long and wide she rents it for 150L.E. a year (about \$25). This money goes so fast that she doesn't even budget it with her daily spending. She informed me that she tries to save this money, but spends it on doctors' visits for her children every year to make sure that their harsh living conditions is not causing any permanent damage to their health.

She and a few neighbors of hers make trades very often as a useful way of helping each other. They have a barter system that enables them to receive more of what they need. I



witnessed this system a number of times when I was observing Monsoorah. Neighbors would knock on Monsoorah's door and she would greet them to come in almost as if she was expecting someone every time this happened. They would give their greetings of peace and then ask if she visited the bread oven, or if she had any leftover soap or beans etc., depending on what they were looking for on that particular day. She would answer them according to whether she indeed has what they were looking for. After it is established that she did possess what they wanted they would ask her if she needed anything. If she did, she would answer in the affirmative and then an even trade would take place. If she needed something the person did not have they would ask if they could borrow what they were looking for and a date would be set as to when she would get her items returned to her and in what form. If Monsoorah didn't have what they were looking for, they would just thank her and assure her that if she needed anything she shouldn't be afraid to ask. Through such system, the poor people in Ababda are much help to each other. They appear to relate to each other and have an understanding that has turned into an everyday practice and a common assumption. Word would get around if someone in the neighborhood received, purchased or obtained something somehow, so everyone knew what was up for trading or borrowing. I remember Monsoorah telling her mother-in-law that a neighbor of theirs was able to get their stove fixed and received extra money from the NGO because they applied for medical assistance. They expressed happiness and would imply that now if they needed to use an oven they could. It also was an understanding that this particular neighbor may save some of the extra money, so borrowing from her was definitely an option. Even during Ramadan when most of the charity to help the poor is done (because of the belief that this pleases God) many poor people would let each other know who is giving away what as if they counted each other's charity as their own.

Water fortunately was not a huge issue for Monsoorah. She had one small sink in the living room that usually operated well. She was always able to wash her clothes and keep herself and her family clean from this one line of running water. They would fill huge tubs up and wash their clothes by hand. One tub would be for the washing and the other tub would be for rinsing. Every time I was there and the sun began to set, she would fill up these same tubs for bathing her children, it appeared that they looked forward to this time of the day and would make fun out of bathing. Monsoorah would stand and watch them play in the water and laugh. As I was allowed to see, these moments were special: they almost made me forget how poor they are.

After their bath Monsoorah would go in the kitchen where she stores her bread and beans in plastic bags and would give each of her children a small serving of beans and one slice of bread. They would eat and most times ask for more, but Monsoorah couldn't afford to let them eat much more. So to ensure that they would have food for the next day, she would tell them that they have to save some for tomorrow. They would agree, and then go and play with each other for the rest of the night as she continued to feed her son with spinal injury until he had his full. I heard her whisper in his ear that he can have as much as he liked because he was special. I don't know if he understood but he did keep eating until he was full. I noticed that he would have one piece of bread more than everyone else. Monsoorah would only be able to allow each person in her household to eat four pieces of bread and a handful of beans a day. Sometimes she would sacrifice her bread if any of her children were still hungry after their share. This was the daily portion, but there were many days at least once a week when some other kinds of food was donated such as fruits and vegetables, never really meat unless it was Ramadan.

The bathroom in Monsoorah's home is very damp, dark and deteriorating. There are leaks taking place behind the walls that are causing the floors and the ceilings to become weak

and unstable. Stepping into her bathroom one can immediately feel as if the floor and the ceilings are caving in. Monsoorah was allotted two thousand Egyptian pounds to fix the problems in the floor. The floor was replaced, but the problem returned because the source of the disturbance was not remedied to. They utilize this bathroom with great care. As they step into the bathroom they tip toe only on certain spots. There are spots on the floor that are dryer and less weak than other spots, so stepping on only the stronger spots on the floor is very important. By stepping on weaker and moist spots in the floor, the chance of breaking the floor or causing holes in it is much greater. They use the bathroom as quickly as possible and step out as quickly as possible, hopping on only the strongest places on the floor. Even when it's time to clean the bathroom, no one enters it; they take buckets of water and throw it everywhere to give it a good rinse.

In the winters they share two thin brown blankets about six feet wide and seven feet long. Sleeping together is very important because they have only two twins sized beds as well as two blankets to utilize. They are able to stay warm from each other's heat, so in the night they all hold on to each other as they drift to sleep

Everything in their home is used to its capacity over and over again, nothing goes to waste, if a small bean is dropped on the floor, it is picked up washed off and eaten. They even utilize the dirt from the floor to patch holes in the wall. Dirt from their house floor, mixed with water makes a paste, and this paste is used to fill holes that are in the walls to diminish the amount of rodents and bugs that enter their home.

There is a certain peace of mind that comes with keeping busy; I noticed that Monsoorah and my other participants as well, utilized their time in a way that does not give them a minute to think. Monsoorah and her children do not stay in one spot for more than two minutes until the night approaches and everyone is tired. I would even have to follow her around her small space

in order to have a complete conversation with her. She would clean and re-clean the same area ten times; then, she would visit a neighbor; then, she would prepare meals with whatever was available at the time; then, she would sit and eat; and after they were done, she would clean again. After she cleaned for the nth time, she would chase after and play with her children, including sitting with her ill son for a while trying to make him smile. Then, she would get up and prepare the children's baths and when bath time was done she would take the water down the street and dump it. When she returns, she would talk to her mother in law while standing and moving around about the day's event. Then she would take a walk to buy bread if she had the money. When she returns she would wash up herself and then get ready to wind down for the day. There is almost not a minute that goes by when Monsoorah is not busy. I asked her why does she not take a rest and sit with me, she responded nicely and stated that she doesn't want to give her mind a chance to work against her. Even time is fully utilized to its capacity within Monsoorah's home.

### *Muhammad*

In the front door of Muhammad's one room shack-like home there is a wooden board used as a ramp to get in and out of his doorway. He placed it there himself from wood that he found in the street and hammered it down with rusty nails. Every time I entered his home, I experienced shaking and wobbling on this three feet long and about two inches thick board. It's hard to walk on because the middle of it is sunken in, but Muhammad uses it perfectly. When getting in and out, he has a method of pushing with more strength as he reaches the middle of the board.

The 40 L.E. that Muhammad receives monthly is spent exactly the same way every month. He has 50 piaesters worth of bread delivered to him every morning which is about five pieces. He has 3 L.E. worth of cooked beans delivered once a week on Sunday which is about one kilo. The people who work for the bread oven is nice enough to deliver bread to Muhammad every morning and on Sundays pick up his order of beans for him on their way to his home. He purchases two bars of 50 piaester soap once a month. Then he uses the remainder 13 pounds on cigarette use. He told me that he wants to quit so he can save some money, but it's very difficult for him. He buys 3-4 packs of cigarettes a month for about 3-4L.E each pack. I think that the clerks give him a discount because of the long way he travels with his wheel chair to purchase them. There are no stores near his home, so Muhammad must roll his wheel chair around 5 kilometers on a specific route that has less bumps in the road to get to one. I went with him one day, keeping my distance so no one would continuously ask who I was to him. I was surprised at how long of a distance we had to go to get to a small kiosk on the side of the road. If I had to travel this far once a month I would have taken the bus or a taxi. His cigarettes were very limited. In each of the 3 packs he gets per month there are twenty cigarettes. He would have about sixty cigarettes to stretch for the month. He would try to limit himself to 2-3 smokes per day. Some days more, I assume he sacrifices smoking some days to be able to smoke more on other days. When I asked about his family he would smoke more, so it's according to his stress and discomfort level.

Everything Muhammad does is calculated. He counts everything as well as makes up in his mind how he plans to utilize his resources day by day. As I sat with him every week he would let me know what he planned on doing for the day. It would change slightly from day to day but not by much. He would set aside two cigarettes, one would be for the morning and the

other would be for the evening. He would set aside two and half pieces of bread with some beans and a cup of tea for breakfast and would set aside the same amount for dinner. Once while I was there his brother visited and gave him a kilo of bananas. He would set aside one per day. When I returned the next week he was on his last banana.

Water is crucial to Muhammad. When I first arrived he had no running water, but two weeks after I began my participant observation research he was approved to get his sink fixed and water running again. This enabled him to take care of himself better. He would fill up water and go into his small bathroom and wash himself while sitting in the wheel chair. Just about every day in the summer I was there he would drench his clothes in cold water before he put them on, in order to stay cool in the Upper Egyptian heat. While I was observing him, throughout a day, he would drench his clothes up to ten times to protect himself from the heat. He would also drink water constantly and express all the time how much the human body needs water more than food. He feels as though the water keeps away the hunger, so what he has to eat is enough for him. When it's time to pray, he performs his ablution, and would place his prayer matt that he obtained two years prior as a gift from his wife on the floor in front of him. He prays in his chair making sure his feet are touching the prayer rug with his heels at the very end of the rug. He measures everything; he even knows how many steps it takes to get from one end of his flat to the other. I questioned him about calculating everything in his life, he simply replied that it helps him feel better and more secure knowing that he has a plan that is calculated and that he knows exactly what he has and what's around him even though Allah can change everything. As for the present, Muhammad knows every possession he has in detail, and calculates everything he does and uses in the present. He also plans strategically for the future, both near and far. He plans to get himself out poverty through a slow strategic process, understanding that when you are

extremely poor, it may take a lifetime to uplift yourself. He plans to grow a huge garden around his shack since he lives so close to the water. He is currently trying to collect through charity as many tools that he needs to get started. So far he has one small shovel and a few buckets. He wants to be able to obtain a hose, some seed of tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes and other fruits and vegetables. He even calculated, according to how consistent charitable donations are, how long it would take him to collect everything he needs. He believes that he will be able to get started within the next two years, especially if he is approved for extra funds from the NGO. He believes that a plan and prayer can keep you going.

Muhammad spends most of his day reading the Qur'an; he wants to make the most of his time getting close to Allah. He utilizes every opportunity to talk about what he understands about God and the problems with people in this world. He makes sure to make it to Friday congregational prayers in the masjid. I would make sure not to visit Muhammad on Fridays because he spends much of his time on this day in the masjid. He would use his best galabaya<sup>10</sup> on this day out of the three that he owned. Two of them are second hand that were given to him by sheikh Mahmood. The other one was custom made for him by a different sheikh that he knows and this is the one that he uses on Fridays when he is going for prayer. Muhammad places much effort into not dwelling on his poverty and this helped me to feel as if he was not impoverished even though all the realities he was dealing with were of an impoverished individual.

*Sabah*

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<sup>10</sup> galabaya is a type of clothing traditionally worn in rural Egypt. There are some made for women and some made for men

“I have too many boys to feed and they eat a lot,” Sabah utters on a daily basis. She expressed how little fifty Egyptian pounds is when you have nearly grown boys to feed. Sabah depended on neighbors’ generosity a lot to get her through. Because the NGO pays her rent every month and she has a fifteen year old son, she is only allotted fifty Egyptian pounds a month. The NGO explained to her that somehow she will have to get him to work in order to help provide for the family. She wants him to get his strength and health better before she allows him to work every day.

Instead of getting bread from the bread oven like everyone else, Sabah buys a 25 kilo bag of flour for 24 L.E. and bakes her own bread in her neighbor’s oven. This 25 kilo bag usually last the whole month. She bakes the large thick Egyptian bread, and usually makes fifteen of them for the week. Instead of buying beans already done, she buys a 2 kilo bag of beans and cooks this at her neighbors’ home as well, which usually last two weeks give or take. Her neighbor lets her use her stove in exchange for baking some bread from the flour supply that her neighbor buys. This particular neighbor is old. So Sabah spending the day baking for both her household and her neighbor’s house hold is a big help to them both. Each morning her three sons eat some bread and some beans. She makes sure that they understand that this has to last, but does not regulate them strictly. The oldest son makes sure he eats last, and usually takes only a handful of beans and some bread equivalent to 2 loaves. They all usually eat small portions 2-3 times a day each. She only has running water in her bathroom so they fill up their cups and drink as much water as they like after each meal. Because the water, coming out of the pipes, is so hot in the summer, Sabah usually fills up a plastic tank and keeps it covered in the coolest darkest place in her one room flat. They use water all day long, wetting the dirt floors to keep cool, drinking to keep hydrated, to balance hunger as well as to wash their bodies at least once a day. I



mentioned earlier that there is no roof above her bathroom and the water attract snakes, so they all just wash up behind an old curtain in one corner of the room that is held up with old rusty nails that could anytime fall and expose whoever is behind the curtain. On the days that have intense heat, Sabah would dump a lot of water on the dirt floors, place some old mats that she has on the floor and they would all lay on them and enjoy the temporary coolness the damp floor provided. I would lay down there with them and it did make much of a difference in degrees, making the temperature on the wet floor 5-10 degrees cooler than the rest of the room. Also her two oldest sons would go swimming in the Nile to stay cool as well. This family would always try to dodge the heat, they really did not like the summers in Upper Egypt and looked forward to the winters. Even though they had one big blanket for them to share and claimed to suffer in the cold winters, they still preferred it to the summer.

The rest of Sabah's money is spent on medicine for her sick son, within one month she has to buy him medicine for his respiratory system and cough medicine twice. The respiratory medicine is 10 L.E. and the cough syrup is 6 L.E. It puts her off her budget and obliges her with having to either borrow or beg for an additional 6 L.E. to be able to obtain his cough syrup. Usually when she goes to the pharmacy, they will just give her the bottle of cough syrup that she cannot afford and ask her not to tell anyone of this matter. She depends on this because some days her youngest son coughs so much that he starts to bleed. The cough syrup gives him relief by suppressing this cough. There was a time when there was no cough syrup for her son in the home and he began to cough profusely. She rushed out leaving him in my care and his older brother placed cool rocks on his chest to calm him down and make him stop coughing. This helped somewhat and gave him slight relief until his mother returned with his medicine. I asked Sabah about the rocks and she explained that the energy in the rocks calms him down, especially

when cool. I was still confused about this so I decided to research this further to see the link of cool rocks suppressing coughing. I went to MayoClinic.com and searched for cough suppressants. I found that coughing in many cases is linked to high temperature, Hence, anything cool such as methanol in a cough drop suppresses coughing. Now, I could understand why they attempt to bring his temperature down by giving him cool water and placing cool rocks on his chest. Dark rocks especially the black ones that they used retain low temperatures, making it convenient to cool the body down. In that instant when no medicine was in the home they had to create a way from what they had in order to give her son some relief.

After Sabah purchases the bread mix, the beans, and her son's medicine she is completely out of cash. So when she runs out of supplies, she must go begging like Badaweeyah. Sabah expressed how much she hates going out and asking people for money, but she must do whatever it takes to ensure the survival and wellbeing of her family.

The creativity of utilizing scarce resources comes from the struggle to survive. Survival instincts become activated under stressful impoverished circumstances as shown above. These creative ways of surviving became a part of their everyday practice. They don't stop to think that I am adapting to survive. They understand that they are poor but they see these creative adaptations as just a part of their lives. It is second nature to them to do things such as plug holes in the wall with dirt and water, or to store water from the Nile while being cautious of snakes. It has become embedded in their everyday activities. The poor neighbors come up with a system with each other to help one another anytime the need arises. It is more of an expectation. If a neighbor asks for help and you deny them you are taking the risk of not being able to be helped in the event that you are in need.

*Overlapping Themes: Bread, Beans, Ramadan and Water*

Bread and beans are the staple food of the poor that I studied in Al Qurna, All of my participants lived off beans and bread. These food items are just about the only food that they can afford, and they spend most of their allowance on them. Bread fills them up quickly and beans gives them protein and other nourishment that they need. Thus, they make their budget around these specific purchases. All of them showed signs of hunger, but being able to have a portion of these staple foods allowed them to be above a state of malnutrition. They may have showed signs of fatigue while I was there, but they were able to function and think about other creative ways to survive.

Ramadan is one of the favorite times of the year for all of my participants: it's a time of the year that they can eat meat and enjoy other types of treats. During the month of Ramadan all Muslims fast from sun up to sun down and do many other good deeds to please God including giving charity. During this time an abundance of clothes, food including meat, blankets and money is given to the poor people. There are also huge celebrations to which the poor are invited to eat and are given many resources. I was not able to witness these donation rallies to the poor during Ramadan but they were described to me in great detail by my participants.

Badaweeyah stated that during Ramadan she always requests meat for her and her daughter, and they usually are donated about 2 weeks' worth of meat to enjoy. Monsoorah stated that during Ramadan she appreciates all of the money and clothes that her family receives. She explains that it's enough to clothe her children especially her son for the coming school year. Sabah appreciated the extra cash that comes in from the NGO during this time and said that she uses this money to buy her own meat of her choice and purchase two months' worth of medicine for her son. Muhammad stated that he appreciates the visits because he usually doesn't get many

visitors. During Ramadan there is an increase in concern for him and he likes this. He also confessed that he loves the sweets that the people give away during this time. He usually cannot afford to eat sweets but he gets his fill during Ramadan. This time of year gives them a boost to deal with the difficulties that are to come for the next eleven months.

Another commonality that they all shared is how they valued water. None of them suffered from lack of water, they may have had struggles with utilizing it but they were all able to get as much water that as they needed. I observed that water was a comfort for them and they used it abundantly. Badaweeyah would complain about the fact that she did not have running water in her home, but would always show that she appreciated just having water to use. Muhammad would state that water helps him get through his hunger and without it he would feel incompetent. When Sabah would bake her bread she would say “Thank God for water”, and Monsoorah found joy watching her children play in water, it made her forget her trouble for a while. I understand that water is very important for life on this planet as a whole, but it has deep intrinsic value amongst the poor that I was fortunate enough to study, every drop counted.

In a sense, the coping and creativity found within this ethnographic study shows what being impoverished requires. My participants budgeted and utilized their resources in ways that demand much discipline. They are able to think on their feet and be spontaneous to fulfill a need. They also seek comfort and motivation within their religion. They revealed that dealing with poverty takes strength and sometimes.

## VI. FINAL THOUGHTS AND UPDATES

Every ethnographer who has an experience getting to know people unlike themselves comes out on the other end of the research with new insights and new perceptions. My final day in Al Qurna, I made it my business to visit all of my participants. As I walked down the street in Al Ababda to see Monsoorah I noticed the smell of baked bread in the air, the banging of pots from someone cooking beans, children laughing and women sitting in front of their homes enjoying each other's company. I actually started to value these small sights and smells because I began to understand the story behind them. I knocked on Monsoorah's door and she yelled for me to come in as she always does, but on this particular day she seemed indifferent. She looked at me and asked is this my final visit, I responded by telling her maybe I really don't know but for sure I will not be here next week. She began to tear up. I told her to stop because she will make me cry, so she turned away from me and looked back at me with a smile. We sat and drank tea and talked about our crazy summer together realizing that we both became important to one another. "I swear I never thought I would ever be friends with an American girl who wanted to know about being poor; I think it is time for me to learn about you. Why don't you take me back to New York so I can experience what life is like for you" Monsoorah declared. I laughed and said if we can get you a visa before we both die then it's a deal. She said that she heard how hard it is to go to America if you are poor. I just nodded in agreement. I expressed my gratitude for her participation and informed her that I would never forget her and her family and I hope we can remain friends. She asked if I thought differently about poor people, I told her before I didn't really notice them and just wondered about their life once in a while, but now because of her help I can see and understand them much better. As I left Monsoorah I thought about the true

importance of studying their lives and why it matters. I concluded that it bridges a gap and tears down the walls of alienation and indifference to the poor, as well as helps in understanding both the economic and social issues in society. There is a gap between the poor and the rest of society that is unsettling.

I knocked on the door of Badaweeyah's home and she reprimanded me for knocking, "you are my family now you do not have to knock, now come in here" she yelled. I looked at her and asked if she would miss me following her around all day. She chuckled and said "yes, you made me feel important even though you were annoying sometimes, why do you have to go so soon?" I told her that I have to visit my mom and spend Ramadan in New York. She looked back at me a little aggravated and said "Why? Isn't your husband here?" I told her yes, but I cannot leave my mom to fast for Ramadan by herself. Finally after going back and forth with her about my intended departure she agreed that I can go back to New York and see my family. I thanked her for putting up with me all summer long and told her that I will try to visit her whenever I can. We sat and talked about poor people In New York, and she couldn't believe that there were impoverished people in America. I told her about the pan handlers on the New York City subways and the homeless shelters that house thousands of poor people. For some reason this made her feel better about where she lives. She said now Egypt doesn't seem so bad. I informed her that poverty is a global problem and that there are people who live like her or maybe worse in the world. The conversation became in depth, we discussed the poor in India, South America, China, and other countries in Africa. After we talked I helped her clean and collect her water by the Nile for the day. As I was leaving she made sure to give me one of her favorite scarves. I told her that she doesn't have to give me anything. She insisted stating that she did not want me to forget about her and must take something with her scent on it. Leaving

Badaweeyah's home made me realize that studying the poor helps people remember the impoverished. I was reminded that poverty studies can be a trend, die and come back in style again. This fluctuation of interest should stabilize and society should remember them because they do play a part in the functioning of the whole.

Muhammad waved to me as I was approaching his home by car. He was sitting in front of his home reading some Qur'an. He looked at me and said "surely I know that this is your last day with me, I calculate everything." I responded "yes it is and I am grateful for all of your help." He expressed how he wanted me to do well in my studies and learn Arabic better as if a father talking to his child. I just sat and listened to him give me practical advice for my near future. He told me things like stay humble and not to let anyone tell me what I can achieve or not. He expressed the importance of obeying my husband and looking after my parents. I started to think he prepared this speech all summer long in preparation for my last day with him. He also asked me to make sure that I let the world know about what I experienced and to make sure that everything I do is for the sake of God. If I remember correctly, this preaching lasted for about one hour. I made sure to let him know that I will take everything he said very seriously. After he said all that he had to say as if he was releasing things that have been in his heart for a long time, we drank tea and I departed. After we drove away I thought long and hard about Muhammad. Muhammad made me understand how smart and resilient poverty can make someone, in my opinion if he was to be given one million dollars within five years he may be a billionaire. Poverty instilled in him the discipline to calculate or plan and to always understand what is around you. There is nothing special or different about the poor and the non-poor, it's all about what life has dealt them and what obstacles had to be overcome.

Sabah and her three boys were home lying on the floor trying to escape the heat as I walked through the door. The youngest one ran to me and said that he didn't think that I was coming today. I told him that of course I had to come today because I am leaving soon to see my family in New York. Sabah jumped up and said "what, you are leaving? I must have forgotten." I told her yes that's why I made sure to visit today. She expressed that she was sad, especially because she has no one now to help her bake bread, I laughed and asked her is that all I am good for. Sabah looked at me and said that the bread tasted better when I helped her with it. I thought to myself how good Upper Egyptians can make you feel, whether she was telling the truth or not. I wouldn't know. I thanked her just like I thanked the rest for participating in my study and told her that I would visit when I can. She laughed and said that she will contact me the next time she is in New York. I let her know that I would be waiting. I ended up going with Sabah to take the boys swimming in the Nile. Sabah and I sat on the bank of the Nile with her youngest son, allowing him to play in the shallow part of the water. She opened up about her feelings towards her life, telling me how hard she thinks life is. I just listened noticing that she just wanted to vent. After listening to her, I just simply stated that it's up to her, to somehow in some way, find peace, and that no one can do that for you no matter how much money you have or how hard life is. She nodded her head and agreed as we stood up to collect the boys to bring them back home. As I left, they all said their goodbyes and asked me to come back soon. From Sabah, I learned that sometimes people want to tell their story and no matter whether there are benefits in it we should listen. Sometimes people just want to be heard and understood and we all should just take time to understand them.



### *Focusing the lens*

Taking an in depth look into the lives of the poor was a daunting task for me. I am new to the world of ethnography and the harsh and somewhat inhumane circumstances that I had witnessed while being in the field proved to have made this experience quite difficult. For a brief amount of time I had a share in the challenges that my participants are faced with every day, which made me understand more about coping and survival as well as being at a disadvantage in the very society you live in. Living under impoverished circumstances does not allow for a moment of complete ease and comfort; it is constant work of fighting obstacles to obtain victory.

My participants are fearful of becoming a victim of snakes, rats or scorpions due to living in a home that lacks secure shelter. Yet they create ways to cope and minimize their vulnerabilities. Death, lack of medical treatment, and disabilities are very much a part of their hardships, but they cope through adaptation, acceptance of their circumstances and through belief in their religion (Islam). They may only have two kinds of foods to eat with limited portions, yet they budget themselves to have something to eat every day, and are able to spontaneously deal with days when food is scarce. They may be in a position of not having family to assist them within a society that depends on family units to take care of people in their position which places them at a huge disadvantage and marginalizes them. Yet, they help each other in one way or another. Most of the emergency help that my participants receive comes from people who are extremely poor like themselves. They have no assistance from the government, yet they don't expect it and find ways of surviving with the limited resources they acquire. They can only depend on charity as an income, yet, they seem to understand that help will always come, and while I was in the field I noticed that it always does.

I may have completed my fieldwork, but the inquiries about what I found in the field continue to be present. Questions such as: could tribalism be maintained and still benefit the poor? What could possibly change? The living conditions discussed throughout this research may enable survival, but are they humane and just? What would have to happen to change the circumstances of the poor? Do the poor that I have studied have enough power within themselves to make a change? Are there enough resources in Upper Egypt to make these changes? And what can impoverished people depend on when it comes to their future? The answers to the questions are left to my imagination yet supported by my logic.

I don't really know for sure the answer to all of these questions, yet I noticed that tribalism motivates people to have self-interest which would place the weak at a permanent disadvantage. Corruption and power struggles may always play a role in the oppression of people because each person is fighting for the status and power of their own family. I believe that this tribal foundation that is embedded into the very fabric of the society of Al Qurna may never change, because there are too many entanglements and people at the top who benefit from this system in order for it to vanish completely, one may beg to differ.

There may be difference of opinion when it comes to settling whether or not the living conditions are just and humane. I would say no because of the fears and uncertainties that are attached to living within these run down homes that I have gotten to know my participants in. Change is necessary but, I don't think people would pay attention to the homes of the poor being in horrible conditions. I believe that the experiences from living in such insecure shelters needs to be publicized to the government, in order for someone of authority to take notice enough and make moves towards changing these circumstances. I don't know if the government and those in positions of political power know the true implications of living in fear of being bitten by rats,

snakes and scorpions in your own living space where you are meant to feel safe. I don't think the authorities in Upper Egypt understand what it is like to live with limited water, sinking and dirt floors, no working stove, no working refrigerator, and limited electricity that I have come to find while in the field. From my experiences in the field I don't see how their living conditions can change without higher authorities stepping in and doing something about it. The NGO works at a low capacity and the people themselves have nothing to help themselves with. I do think they know that the housing is inefficient, but the experiences of living in such housing may need to be emphasized more.

I don't want to completely negate the power of the impoverished that I have studied because to some degree I feel that they are not completely powerless and may have to fight a bit more for their rights. I think they have power in numbers; they would have to complete the model of the common consensus that I discussed in the introduction, and riot. They would have to begin to stick together and make noise, so people can remember that they are there and need assistance. To fight takes strength and balance which my subjects do not have unless they come together. The only way I can see them creating change for themselves is by telling their stories to whoever will listen. Is this likely? I would unfortunately have to say no because of the extreme conservatism that is within their culture. From my observation, they do not like to draw attention to themselves, so to riot or tell their stories is not likely. Is there another way? I would say that there is always another way, but it would have to be found. It must be a way that best suits them and their way of life in creating change.

I would have to do some investigative research to know if Upper Egypt has enough resources to make livable conditions and provide opportunities for a better life on a larger scale,

but just from living in Egypt I would argue yes. To give someone a tile floor, running water, stove, refrigerator etc. in my opinion is very basic, but this may have to be researched more.

The future of my participants may look just like the present unless something is infused in the society to benefit them. If we look in the past, agriculture was a great sustainer, so for the future agriculture should be invested into for the betterment of the Upper Egyptian Society and relieving impoverishment to some degree.

Just to end on a lighter note, my subjects do not starve to death, or are permanently stuck in a hole that leads to their end. The help is never consistent, yet, is always on time, and may come from different avenues frequently, but a way is always made. But just to give some food for thought; is it enough just to survive in life? I would say no, life is about much more than survival but the poor may not get a chance to experience that.

#### *Brief Updates: Returning to Al Qurna*

Six months after I finalized my ethnographic research I went back to Al Qurna to visit and see if there were any changes. I wanted to know if Egypt's newly elected president Muhammad Morsi made any strides to help the poor in Upper Egypt. Moreover, I wanted to see if there were any personal changes in the lives of my participants.

I was informed by Sheikh Mahmood that yet again the poor people were disadvantaged even under President Morsi. He stated that a new program was started that gives rice, oil and beans to every Egyptian whether in need or not. I was confused thinking that this is a good thing and that finally the poor can have some relief. I listened as he told me the problem is that they are only giving this food to Egyptians with national identification and all the poor people that we help do not have this ID card. Therefore, the people who are not impoverished get all of the rice,

oil and beans and sell it to make a profit. I asked him how can the poor obtain this identification card, and he stated that it would not be easy because they would have to prove that they are Egyptian, and most of them do not have a husband or family to vouch for them. I asked him if anything else may have been done to help the poor since I had left, he stated that no but people are talking about starting a hospital for the poor but it's just an idea at this moment.

Sheikh Mahmood accompanied me to see my four participants, letting me know that they were happy to hear that I was in town. Monsoorah informed me that she finally got a job helping in a restaurant. She told me that it helps a lot but makes her anxious because she has to leave her children home with their grandmother for most of the day and she is older and tired. I asked her how she got this job. She explained that Sheikh Mahmood used his connections to get me a position and she couldn't refuse the offer. She informed me that she may have a little more money, but still cannot afford to fix her home and worried about the sinking floor and ceiling all the time.

Sabah was at her neighbor's home baking bread when we arrived to her home. She asked if I wanted to help and I told her that I would have to pass on this offer this time. She told me that her son got a job working in an alabaster factory. I congratulated her and asked how he got that job; she looked at Mahmood and smiled so automatically I understood. She told me that her son working has helped with purchasing her youngest son medicine and this makes her feel a lot better. She looked at me and said "I am still very poor Shanaya, don't think this is a huge relief, it's just a temporary ease."

Nothing seemed to change with Muhammad and Badaweeyah; they both let me know that they are still just trying to survive day by day. Muhammad wanted to talk about how much he hated their new president Muhammad Morsi and how he thought he would do more for the

poor but he does not. Badaweeyah just wanted me to give her a hand with getting water from the Nile. And I did.

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