

Pharaonism: Decolonizing Historical Identity

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*WRITER'S COMMENT: I had no idea what I was doing when I began writing this essay. I didn't feel confident in my understanding of the basic history of the early 20th Century Middle East; I needed to incorporate theory, primary texts, and secondary texts into a piece that thoughtfully articulated an argument about the emergence of anticolonial nationalism and decolonization in this region and time period. And to be honest, I might not have done all the reading that would have helped prepare me to write this essay. But one of the secondary texts we had at our disposal caught my eye, an excerpt from Elliott Colla's *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, and Egyptian Modernity*. The excerpt detailed the historical moment at which Egyptian antiquity and modernity clashed on the global stage. After a close reading of this text with cross-examination with the primary and theoretical texts at our disposal, my thoughts began to flow. What I found was that Egyptology, the colonial branch of history and archaeology that many California sixth graders now playfully explore with papier-mâché imitations of King Tutankhamun's tomb, emerged as both an aesthetic-intellectual and strategic political exercise in Egyptian sovereignty.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In my History 193B course, "The Middle East in the Twentieth Century," students are asked to write a paper exploring some aspect of anti-colonial nationalism while utilizing a specific historical case study and mobilizing at least one text of theory, one primary source, and one secondary source. Finely attuned to the exigencies of historical argumentation and the use of evidence, Harley took on a topic that few, if any, students tackled, namely the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb and its relationship to anticolonial nationalism and decolonization in Egypt. Focusing on the dialectical interplay between colonial Egyptology's and anti-colonial nationalism's assertion of sovereignty over the domain of ancient Egypt, Harley deftly demonstrates the aesthetic, political, and legal contours of decolonization. Most notably, the essay is characterized by a sophisticated use of postcolonial theorists (Edward Said and Partha Chatterjee), and yet marshals their theoretical insights in an original way. Theory, primary, and

secondary source material are seamlessly interwoven into the argument, alongside a felicitous and riveting writing style.

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The English word Egyptology bears both the mystery and certainty that the Western imagination has prefigured for the Orient, or as Edward Said would describe, “a distribution of geopolitical awareness” into the Western textual tradition to characterize and inform the West’s exercise of interests in the Orient.¹ However, British archaeologist Howard Carter’s discovery and attempted expropriation of the tomb of King Tutankhamun equipped a formally independent Egypt with the aesthetic, textual, archaeological, and political iconography of anticolonial nationalism. The discovery coincided with the Egyptian Nahda, a period from 1875 to 1925 of cultural and intellectual reconciliation of Egypt’s Arabic, Islamic, and nationalist identities with its colonial status and history.² Several leaders of the Nahda incorporated the popular imagery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb into arguments for the ancient indigeneity and rightfulness of an independent Egypt into a nationalist discourse called Pharaonism.

In this paper, I explore archaeology and Egyptology as a colonial process of discovery that informed the West’s Orientalist perception of Egypt and that perpetually justified its colonization. I argue that the Nahda’s development of Pharaonism developed as a counter-narrative to the Western episteme of ancient Egyptian history as both disinterested taxonomy and mythological fantasy. I then argue that the Nahda’s affirmation of Egyptians as subjects of their own history translated to the theater of Howard Carter’s conflict with the Egyptian government, developing Pharaonism into not just an aesthetic-intellectual exercise, but also a strategic political and legal exercise in Egyptian decolonization.

Elliott Colla notes that prior to the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb, Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyed, a liberal nationalist from the Nahda, most prominently linked the traditions of ancient Egypt to the modern anti-colonial project.³ Al-Sayyed’s language demonstrates Pharaonism’s transition from ornament to authoritative discourse. In his piece “In Praise of Liberty,” al-Sayyed deplors the normative acceptance of restricted free-

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), p. 12.

2 Omnia El Shakry, Lecture, History 193B, April 14, 2015.

3 Elliott Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 211.

dom and serfdom in Egypt, a tradition that defies the discrete colonial chapters of Egyptian history. He writes: “Any lacunae in our liberty stem not only from the law, be it ancient or modern, but also from the general behavior of the rulers which is now so widespread that it has come to constitute a kind of law.”⁴ He traces the history of Egypt’s lack of liberty to “our make-up – a lack produced by the ancestral despotism... which we have lived with era after era”⁵ Al-Sayyed’s contribution to Pharaonism is not found in the rigor of his historiography, but the casualness with which he derives the spirit of the modern Egyptian from an ancient Egypt that coalesced thousands of years prior. Ancient Egypt is not something dead and locked in a buried sarcophagus, waiting to be unearthed by a European archaeologist financed by a British earl. Al-Sayyed’s commentary assumes ancient Egypt to be alive in every native Egyptian.

Partha Chatterjee discusses the relationship of colonialism to the formation of the modern state by theorizing a “rule of colonial difference” between colonizer and colonized. He argues that race, and within it the supposed inborn capacity for civility and rational self-governance, justifies the imposition of particular rational-bureaucratic colonial administrations that maintain the colonial difference between ruler and ruled.⁶ Colla’s analysis of Carter’s journals and bestselling book *The Discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamen* demonstrates how Carter’s alleged scientific disinterest and expertise played the role of rational bureaucracy in this exercise of colonial difference. Colla argues that “the claims of Egyptologists such as Carter resonated deeply with the long-standing arguments that legitimated the European administration of modern Egypt on the basis of disinterested, rational governance.”⁷ Colla quotes Carter’s extensive precautions against theft and his fears of “extravagant tales... about the gold and jewels”⁸ spread by local Egyptians, arguing that this fear “was coded within a particular colonial antagonism and entailed a familiar colonial fantasy: white Europeans saving Egyptian antiquities from Egyptian

peasants.”⁹ Despite Carter’s administration of the rational-bureaucratic means by which colonial difference could be justified and maintained, the widespread dissemination of imagery and sensation from the Valley of Kings to the global presses and university exhibitions fueled anticolonial nationalism in Egypt. For anticolonial nationalists, it connected the ancient indigeneity and naturalness of Egyptian sovereignty with some of the most epic imagery of early civilization that the world had ever seen.

After the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb, Muhammad Husayn Haykal, leader of the Liberal Constitutionalist party, edited the journal *al-Siyasa al-Usbu’iyya* and made it the premiere platform for literary Pharaonism. Haykal writes that “Between modern and ancient Egypt is an abiding spiritual tie. Many forget this, thinking that the developments Egypt has experienced since the age of the Pharaohs... have definitively cut the ties between the present nation and the Egyptian nation.”¹⁰ To Haykal, ancient Egyptian history is neither reducible to the taxonomy of its pharaohs nor the mythology of its religion; rather it is an historical essence that lives in all Egyptians. *al-Siyasa* included the poems of Ahmad Shawqi, a quintessential anticolonial nationalist and Pharaonist,¹¹ who explicitly depicted Tutankhamun as a living sovereign returning to his land after “forty centuries, considering them all until he came home, and found there... / England, and its army, and its lord, brandishing its Indian sword, protecting its India.”¹² His poetry also situates Carter in the drama of post-1919 Egyptian anticolonialism, using his conflict with the Antiquities Service and Egyptian government as an allegory for the hopeful potential for Egyptian independence that had only been formalized, not realized, after the 1919 Egyptian Revolution.¹³

In 1919, the newly formed Wafd Party, composed of prominent Egyptians and led by Sa’d Zaghlul, traveled across Egypt to make the case for independence. Zaghlul was soon arrested and exiled, triggering massive protest across the country – hundreds of deaths and thousands of arrests – until the British agreed to negotiate Egyptian independence with the Wafd. The Wafd’s conciliatory tactics secured Egypt titular independence

9 Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, p. 189.

10 Muhammad Husayn Haykal, “Misr al-haditha wa-Misr al-qadima: khulud.” *al-Siyasa al-Usbu’iyya*, quoted in Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, p. 214.

11 Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, p. 215

12 Ahmad al-Shawqi, “Tut Ankh Amun wa-I-barliman,” quoted in Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, p. 220.

13 Ibid.

4 Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyed, “In Praise of Liberty.” *In Contemporary Arab Political Thought*, ed. Anouar Abdel-Malek (London: Zed Books, 1983), p. 113.

5 Ibid, p. 114.

6 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 14-34.

7 Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities* p. 175.

8 Howard Carter, *The Discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamen* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), p. 105, quoted in Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, p. 188.

constrained by four points that maintained Britain's control of imperial communications, military defense, the Ottoman Capitulations, and the future status of the Sudan.¹⁴ However, the discovery of Tutankhamun enabled the ruling Wafd Party to translate, within the limited scope it could, the romance of anticolonial Pharaonism to state action in two seemingly innocuous arms of government: the Department of Public Works and the Antiquities Service.

Prior to 1919, codes governing foreign excavation in Egypt had almost always been enforced to the benefit of the concessionaire of the excavation, limiting Egyptian sovereignty over the excavation, preservation, exhibition, and ownership of their own antiquities.¹⁵ After 1919, the Antiquities Service was emboldened to better enforce its codes and the terms of Egypt's concessions, scrutinizing Carter's preferential treatment of European press and visitors.¹⁶ Colla notes that Carter had been openly contemptuous of both European and especially Egyptian officers of the Antiquities Service, fueling a conflict that finally sparked in February 1924. In preparing to open Tutankhamun's sarcophagus, Carter and his staff wished to allow all of their wives to attend the opening. The Department of Public Works disapproved of the fact that none of these assistants or their wives were Muslim and refused to permit them to attend. Carter responded with an "archaeological strike" and locked the tomb. However, after the Wafd's victorious election to Parliament in 1923, Prime Minister Zaghlul set out to reform several parts of the Egyptian government, including the Department of Public Works and the Antiquities Service.¹⁷ He responded to Carter's lockout by changing the tomb's locks and ordering guards to lock Carter out of the tomb. Zaghlul spoke to a crowd defending his actions and Egypt's sovereignty over its antiquities. "Howard Carter does not have the right to lock tombs that are not his..." he said, to which the crowd responded by chanting "Long live Minister Tutankhamun!"¹⁸ This began a new Wafdist tradition of politicians making highly publicized visits to the tomb, Colla argues, to associate their image with that of the pharaohs.¹⁹

14 William Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), pp. 180-182.

15 Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, p. 210.

16 Ibid, pp. 204-205.

17 Ibid, pp. 205-206.

18 Ibid, p. 206.

19 Ibid.

Nahda Pharaonism envisioned Egyptian postcoloniality as an explorative discourse that transcended colonial periodization, pages of a book dog-eared by the Napoleonic invasion of 1798 and the British occupation of 1882. Pharaonism reclaimed the iconography that the West had used to reduce Egypt to a Neolithic wonder overrun by backward Ottomans incapable of admiring their own history, and then it employed this iconography to demonstrate the ancient indigeneity and rightfulness of Egyptian independence. Egyptian statesmen capitalized on the opportunistic nexus of global Egyptomania, Pharaonism, and formal independence to locally decolonize the tomb of Tutankhamun and challenge British rule in an appeal to anti-British sentiment within the familiar, legalistic framework with which it negotiated titular independence. Pharaonism became more than the aesthetic flair to the Nahda's pensive contemplation of Egyptian liberation from colonialism; it was an act of decolonization, the practical means by which Egyptian nationalism could decolonize its historical identity from European interruption.

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