# Notes on the Institutional Development of Anthropology in Egypt, and Toward its Decolonisation

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## Introduction[1]

Egypt has provided inspiration for Western anthropologists almost from the discipline's inception; and with some significant variations over different historical periods, it has continued to do so ever since. Travellers who wrote accounts of their journeys describing the customs and manners observed along the way (for example, Edward Lane or Johann Ludwig Burckhardt) exerted an enormous influence that lasted for decades. Such accounts affected the first Egyptian scholars who tended to study Bedouin populations and focus on "primitive" and remote communities, and on cultural artefacts that were in danger of disappearing because of the encroachment of the modern way of life. At the turn of the 20$^{th}$ century, ethnography was already well established as a discipline and as a distinctively modern mode of analysis in the country, with two separate branches of the discipline enjoying some prominence: the research in biological anthropology, which among other things tried to situate the Egyptian "race" between Europe and Africa (Boëtsch 1995); and the researches being carried out in partial cooperation with the Société Géographique d'Egypte, founded in 1875, with the aim of collecting the folklore heritage of the different peoples and tribes across the country, including the Sudan (Perrin 2005; El-Shakry 2007). Almost all anthropologists

1 Some parts of this chapter also appear in Daniele Cantini and Amal Abdrabo, "Tracing Histories and Institutional Developments of Anthropology in Egypt" in Daniele Cantini, Abdallah Alajmi, Irene Maffi and Imed Melliti (eds.) (2025). *Social Anthropology in the Arab World: the Fragmented History of a Contested Discipline*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn.

associated with these trends were Europeans. While this period was marked by a European predominance, ethnology did not come to Egypt as a direct result of the colonial experience, but rather as a complex endeavour in which different logics were at play, including the desire to modernise the country.

Social anthropology came at a later stage, during the British colonial occupation of the country. Egyptians started to be attracted to anthropology in the 1930s, with a group of scholars who trained abroad and then carried out fieldwork in Egypt or the Sudan (Hopkins 2014). By this time, the colonial-modern mode of social-scientific inquiry had established itself in Egypt, as elsewhere, bringing forth new understandings of "society" and "progress", for instance, and indeed a new understanding of knowledge and of its relation to society. This mode of knowledge production had transformed Egypt into a "great social laboratory", in which the peasantry, or indeed the entire population, became the objects of scientific inquiry, understood as social engineering, with very little change occurring in the post-independence phase following the colonial period (El-Shakry 2007). Strategies of governance based on the development of instrumentalist knowledge, statistical languages, the logic of rational planning and, more broadly, the systematic targeting of the subaltern population toward improvement in the fight against backwardness were all features early on. During these, the insistence of colonial anthropology, ethnographic or anthropometric, on race became an insistence on identity, less interested in colonial difference and more interested in the uniqueness of the collective national subject (ibid.). There was not a simple reproduction of colonial practices and understandings, but rather "an attempt to render models of modernity intelligible through the grid of indigenous social and cultural values and practices, and through reformulation or critique" (El-Shakry 2007). The question of how to be modern while maintaining the specificity of cultural identity was a central preoccupation of Arab intellectuals in the 19$^{th}$ and 20$^{th}$ centuries. El-Shakry notes how in resisting the totalising and racialised nature of European claims to progress, reason, and the nation-state, the Egyptian nationalist intelligentsia staked the claims of social science on the particularity of local difference – as in the attempt to create an "Arab social science". In attempting to argue, however, that as non-Westerners Egyptians had internal indigenous sources of progress, indigenous reformers inadvertently accepted many of the very premises central to western categories of thought (progress, reason, the nation-state).

An indigenous anthropology was hard to come by, however, for a variety of reasons. Particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, at the height of the national-

ist struggle, anthropology had a very marginal role, probably since it was seen with scepticism as an instrument of colonial domination, suspected of primitivising Egyptians (Hopkins 2010: 5). Other disciplines were deemed to be more attuned to the time, and more relevant for the development of the Egyptian nation, for instance, economics, sociology, and political science, obviously in addition to the "exact" sciences and medicine. This trend continued after independence and was surely exacerbated by the fact that local institutions were increasingly understood as instrumental in reaching development goals set by the different governments. Social sciences as a whole came to be considered useful in solving societal problems, an understanding that proved durable. As I discuss in this chapter, this understanding of social sciences as being at the service of the state, and instrumental in allowing developmental projects to be implemented, is clearly a central feature in the shaping of the conditions of possibility of anthropology in Egypt, as elsewhere in the region.

In this early nationalistic phase, the few anthropologists who were active in Egypt had been trained abroad, mostly in the UK and less so in France and the USA. The most prominent among them is perhaps Sayyid 'Uways, and Ahmed Amin if we include folklorists. Their research, largely focused on finding out the authentic character of Egyptian people, was partly in line with the constructivist approach to knowledge and to the need for nation building (Roussillon 1985). In this phase, however, there was still no institutional base for Egyptian anthropology, if we exclude the American University in Cairo (AUC) and its Social Research Centre (SRC). Another two decades elapsed before the founding of the first department of anthropology, at Alexandria University in 1974; in this phase, there are a few towering figures who established the discipline in Egypt, and who perhaps inevitably, largely determined its shape. Among them, Ahmed Abou Zeid is widely considered to have been the most influential. At the time of writing, there are six departments in public universities all over Egypt offering degrees in anthropology.

Knowledge produced locally has had a very limited influence on international academic discourse even when it directly concerns the region. This characteristic was noted quite early on "a large part of the reason lies in the historical development of anthropology as a discipline and the nature of relations between the First and Third Worlds. These issues have been insightfully treated, for the Middle East, by Asad, Said, and Turner" (Shami 1989). Without negating this underlying reality, Seteney Shami focuses on the socio-cultural anthropology produced within the Arab world. Such analysis requires an understanding of the local development of university education and the social sciences gen-

erally. In this chapter, I offer some preliminary observations to continue such work.

Anthropology in Egypt is marginalised as a discipline within the country, being simultaneously mocked as "folklore" within the academy and feared for the proximity to research subjects that the ethnographic method requires. Moreover, this happens within the context of a widespread crisis of education, higher education and research systems that is well known and debated both inside and outside the country. However, despite all these difficulties, particularly after 2011, there was a resurgence of interest in anthropology as a discipline among young Egyptians, who – in contrast to their great-grandparents, who were put off by the idea that anthropology was a colonial science dealing with "primitive" people – were attracted by the closeness to the street and the people that anthropology, and particularly the ethnographic method, promised.

In this chapter, I offer an overview of the development of anthropology as a discipline in Egypt. I first discuss the different phases of this development, before focusing on the institutional dimension. I then problematise the cleavage between anthropology *on* Egypt and anthropology *based in* Egypt, by discussing some authors who, particularly in the 1990s, tackled this question, often when moving in-between worlds. I thus go back to the institutional dimension in recent years, paying particular attention to how collaborative projects attempted to readjust the imbalance between local and international production of knowledge. I conclude by offering some glimpses of what has been happening since the 2011 revolution.

## An Egyptian anthropology vs. the anthropology of Egypt?

This brief overview of anthropology in Egypt should by no means be taken as an assessment or an account of the state of the art in the development of a regional variety of the discipline, a task for which I would be greatly inadequate. As I will make clear in what follows, it is not immediately apparent how to differentiate between an indigenous and exogenous anthropologist, given the number of Egyptians who were educated abroad, and the different layers of interdependence, for example, at the level of research funding. Similarly, Nicholas Hopkins (2010) in detailing the origins of anthropology in Egypt does not attempt to define a differentiation because his analysis ends before the institutionalisation of anthropology in Egypt. Moreover, as pointed out by Jean-Noel Ferrié

in his introduction to a two-volume examination of anthropology of Egypt, the very idea of an Egyptian anthropology, or the interest in detailing its state of the art, should not be taken as self-evident, "*ce ne va pas de soi*" (Ferrié 1995). In his critical examination, he claims that it would be necessary to be explicit about what the goal of such an assessment would be, to avoid that the analysis of the works produced by Egyptian anthropologists transforms them "more or less consciously from producers to objects of knowledge or, in the best cases, unwilling informants" (ibid., my translation).[2] Presenting the works collected in the two volumes, he goes on to specify that most of them are studies on Egypt, where Egypt is the field, although two authors included in the collection are indeed Egyptian. "We do not pretend to assess the Egyptian anthropology, that is an anthropology produced in Egypt by Egyptians trained in Egyptian institutions, the essence of which production would pass through special needs, also defined as Egyptian" (ibid.). Such an endeavour, he concludes, pertains rather to the sociology of science, and in any case the interest of such an exercise is not to be taken as self-evident. However, this should not be construed as a lack of attention. Ferrié indeed recognises that it would be difficult to examine Egyptian anthropology, because it is not well developed, and, he adds, the causes of such lack of development are to be researched within the structure of the academic field in the country, rather than in the oft-repeated points about the link with the colonial past or because it does not sit well with developmental goals.[3] Apart from Ahmed Abou Zeid, who "took part in the reformation of a Mediterranean anthropology at the beginning of the sixties", "not many names come to mind" (ibid.) if one considers the impact they had on the international community. One could surely not speak about an academic community nor an established anthropological tradition.

The debate on decolonising knowledge offers the possibility for a different approach, and this became apparent in Egypt particularly after the 2011 revolution. Issues of who produces knowledge, on what, and from where, have been a necessary step in producing anthropology all over the world since at least the crisis of the discipline in the 1960s. Inequalities in access to research training and facilities, as well as in being able to access the international publishing markets, have always existed, but these are increasingly being questioned,

2 As elsewhere in this chapter, all translations are mine.

3 The flourishing of Indian anthropology, in his analysis, proves the point. The lack of development in Egyptian anthropology must be investigated within Egypt and its academic field.

and rightly so. Moreover, the ideal of academic cooperation is becoming central in the new understanding that anthropology has of itself; in this context, a closer examination of the local conditions of producing knowledge and research is definitely not an assessment in the sense of making an inventory of what is lacking, but rather the precondition for more adequate future research projects. In my view, and as I have already started doing, research projects should include as much training as possible, not only in the Global North but also in Egypt, with the aim of familiarising foreign researchers with the specificities of doing fieldwork in, and producing knowledge on Egypt. A discussion of the local developments of the discipline within the broader political and social contexts, as well as in relation to the developments of anthropology globally, thus does not have the goal of evaluating or assessing, but instead aspires to instigating open discussion, with the explicit aim of trying to overcome contemporary inequalities, as I have made clear elsewhere (Cantini 2021).

Finally, I do not want to imply that knowledge produced by Egyptians on Egypt is more authentic, or less in need of explicit position-taking than scholarship produced by non-Egyptians working on Egypt. All scholarship needs to be situated: it cannot be taken as given and needs to be critically assessed. Decolonising knowledge does not necessarily mean dismissing all that is produced elsewhere (for an earlier take see Morsi et al. 1990, which I discuss below), but should instead aim to increase our knowledge and understanding, particularly of the conditions that shape knowledge production. This has been my goal in much of the work I have done so far, and the importance of this approach seems to be confirmed by the rising interest around the discipline in Egypt, particularly after 2011.

## The beginnings of anthropology in Egypt

Anthropology began to be practiced by Egyptians in the 1930s, and one of its earlier and more significant practitioners was Mohammed Galal (1906–1943). After completing high school in Zagazig, he went on to Paris to study; there he had the good fortune of studying under two of the most revered scholars at the time, Marcel Mauss and Luis Maussignon, finding himself working between different institutions that were just starting to grant degrees in anthropology. Thus "Mohamed Galal was arguably the first professional Egyptian anthropologist in the sense that he had academic training, carried out fieldwork, and published an anthropological study. Unfortunately, he died prematurely. His

early death and the relative inaccessibility of his major publication mean that he is largely unknown to the present generation of social scientists in Egypt or the Middle East" (Hopkins 2014: 175). His major publication was a book-length study of funerary rituals in contemporary Egypt, which his mentors feared could rouse the ire of the country's religious scholars; hence the suggestion to publish his thesis in France, and to consult Taha Hussein – an influential figure in Egyptian intellectual history – for some key rewordings (ibid.).[4] For this book, he conducted research in different areas of Egypt, particularly Sharqiya, but also in Beheira, Asyut, Aswan, and Cairo. During his research, he sought direct contact with the rural population, avoiding the "sanitized view" that officials would have provided for him (ibid.: 179).

During his years in Paris, he also helped to curate two ethnographic collections for the Musée de l'Homme. His mentors helped him administratively and financially, finding a way for him to receive a stipend from Egyptian authorities; this was however paid irregularly, and Mohamed Galal was denied support for his subsequent fieldwork in Sudan, or for publication of his thesis (ibid.). In 1938, Galal was finally awarded a grant from the Institut d'Ethnologie for research in Sudan. The grant was a significant amount of money, and apparently comparable to that which French researchers under the auspices of the Institut d'Ethnologie were receiving. He undertook more than a year of fieldwork in different parts of South Sudan, having also sought advice in Oxford from Evans-Pritchard and Seligman. Once war broke out, Galal was evacuated by the colonial authorities to Egypt, where he eventually taught at Cairo University. He then contracted an inoperable brain tumor, died, and was buried in the Sendenhour cemetery in 1943, leaving a wife and two daughters (ibid.: 186–187).

Hopkins notes that Galal's pioneering efforts were not followed up in Egypt because of his early death, and because of the interruption occasioned by the war. The fact that his main written work was published outside anthropology

4 Only two decades earlier, Mansour Fahmi, an Egyptian scholar who had studied in France and published his philosophy thesis on the condition of females in Islam underestimated the wrath of religious scholars at home. As a consequence, his professorial position at the Egyptian University was cancelled, and he had to wait years before being reinstated, also thanks to Taha Hussein. Subsequently, he never again published anything as controversial as his thesis. For more on Mansour Fahmi, see Reid 1990: 65–67.

in a journal of Islamic studies, and in French, may have discouraged successors from taking it into account. However, the decade of the 1930s in Egypt saw other social science beginnings. Sayyid 'Uways, who I discuss below, also began his studies at this time but did not publish until after 1945. While Galal's achievements cannot be taken as representative of the anthropology in Egypt of the time, his trajectory somehow exemplifies the pioneering phase of the discipline – largely individual efforts, with training abroad that often determined subsequent academic links, and a production that had almost no impact on Egypt due to the absence of infrastructures at home, such as academic jobs or scientific associations or journals.[5]

During this phase, another path, not limited to anthropology, was that of the amateur, the person with expertise in another field who would also embark on studies in ethnology and folklore. The figure who could be taken as representative is Ahmad Amin (1886–1954), who at the end of his career produced a singular work, a dictionary of the mores and customs of the Egyptians. His career was very similar to that of Taha Hussein. Both men came from a modest background, studied in the religious schools up to the tertiary education at *Al-Azhar*, followed by an encounter with modern culture. In Amin's case, however, this was done in an autodidactic way, without training abroad. After a career as a law professor at the newly established Cairo University, where he taught from 1926 until his retirement in 1948, he started working on his dictionary of Egyptian customs, traditions and expressions, which he published a year before his death, *Al-Qamus al-'adat wa al-taqalid wa al-ta'abir al-misriyya* (Perrin 2002). He presents this work as a collection of what he learned growing up in a traditional neighbourhood. This work does not provide a theoretical reflection on what traditions and customs are, and seems to be largely understood as having been inspired by the work of Edward Lane; moreover, in the framework of his larger work this singular reflection on folklore looks more like a *divertissement* than a serious disciplinary engagement (ibid.).

5 This also reflects in the lack of scholarship available in Arabic, on this phase and in general on the development of anthropology in Egypt. I thank Amal Abdrabo for this critical remark.

## Writing at the service of society – anthropology and revolution

The period immediately after Egypt's independence saw, particularly from the late 1950s onwards, an expansion of education and higher education systems, probably one of the most visible results of the new system. While anthropology and the social sciences were really never at the top of the political agenda for scientific development, in this phase there was a significant institution building effort (Cantini 2020). For Egyptian anthropology, this was the phase in which more and more scholars went abroad, mostly to the UK but also to the USA, to earn their PhDs. Due to space limitation, I will only discuss one example here, Sayyid 'Uways (1913–1989) who was the most representative example of the generation who reached maturity in the 1940s and which was closely analysed by the late Alain Roussillon. This generation was a founding one, coming to assume and embody the "series of ruptures" that characterise contemporary Egypt – "confronted with the failure of the liberal experience and the exhaustion of the reformist thought […] its members were responsible for assessing the colonial period at all its levels, from the economy and social structures to the system of values, in the bodies and minds of the people" (Roussillon 1985, my translation). Already evident to his contemporaries, one of the greatest merits of Sayyid 'Uways was to be able to inscribe these ruptures within the continuity of what he called "the eternal Egypt", while providing a model for integrating the changes brought forth by modernity into this structure.

A graduate of the newly established Cairo School of Social Work, 'Uways started working as a social worker mostly tackling juvenile delinquency. During this time, he was twice selected to attend non-degree programmes in the UK, until eventually entering a PhD programme at Boston University in 1952. In the thesis he wrote there he made comparisons between the youth delinquency occurring in problematic neighbourhoods in both Cairo and Boston (Hopkins 2010: 108). Upon his return to Cairo, he joined the newly founded National Center for Criminological Research, organised as a research unit under the Ministry of Social Affairs, where 'Uways had worked before embarking on his PhD.[6] He worked there as research professor until his retirement. Per-

6 Egypt's post-1952 leaders preferred to establish new institutions, such as the National Research Center (which had frail roots in the old regime) and the Center for Criminological and Sociological Research, rather than to refurbish old ones like the Egyptian Geographical Society (Reid 1993) or to invest in universities as research institutions,

haps his most famous work is a book in which he analyses letters written in the 1950s to the Iman al-Shafi'i, a prominent Sunni scholar who lived in the 9th century and was buried in Cairo (ibid.). In his work, he constantly mediates between the present society and its past, the tradition, the authentic, so as to make apparent the deep differences within the present and at the same time show the strength of the links that bound it to the past (Roussillon 1985). But he also mediates between the inner truth of society and the external world, and between national cultures and western values in the process of globalisation.[7] His output is characterised by a push towards scientific, socio-anthropological research from one side, and from the other by a sort of Romanesque writing. According to Roussillon, Sayyid 'Uways exemplifies the "figure of the organic intellectual, capable of self-identification with collective aspirations and of formulating a model of mobilization that allows at the same time for social change and for fidelity to itself" (ibid.).

After the 1952 revolution Egyptian universities underwent a serious transformation, partly dependent on the massification of access, a key promise of the revolution itself particularly when linked to employment opportunities in an expanding public sector, and partly dependent on the new ideology of the state. The university was regarded by the army officers as a stronghold of conservatism and anti-revolutionary thought (Najjar 1976). In 1954 over 60 professors lost their positions in what became known as the Nasserite purges (Reid 1990), and the revolutionary powers exerted considerable effort in transforming academia toward their goal of building a new society (Awad 1963). Particularly after 1961, Nasser intensified the pressure on universities to conform to the socialist design of the revolutionary society. Universities however were never completely under governmental control, not even at the height of Nasser's power; the regime sought to establish research centres

since they were less easily brought under state control (see Cantini 2021 for a detailed discussion). Some of these research institutes have very interesting histories, rather telling of political developments and of fashionable topics in research. A proper history of anthropology in Egypt cannot be written without examining their role, alongside those of universities.

7 A similar preoccupation with not only accounting for Egypt's uniqueness but also for its belonging to the region, and to Islam, originated the multivolume "*Shakhsiyyat Misr*" (*The Character or the Personality of Egypt*), in which Jamal Hamdan, a geographer who became a full-time writer, swept through millennia of Egyptian civilisation from an historical geographical perspective (Hamdan 1970).

instead, to promote younger academics deemed more loyal to the new ideological line, and to pursue interests more attuned with political goals (see note 6). Some institutes survived from the previous phase, adapting to the new political circumstances; research in this endeavour was clearly subordinated to political needs. For example, the Institute of Sudan Studies, hosted at Cairo University and created by King Faruq – who overprinted "King of Egypt and the Sudan" on postage stamps – was made independent from the University and renamed The Institute of African Studies in 1955 when the Sudan moved toward independence from Egypt as well as from Britain (Reid 1993: 564). The institute developed graduate programmes in geography, history, natural science, anthropology, politics and economics, and languages and dialects. In the 1970s, it began issuing a journal, the *African Studies Review*. By the 1980s, the *African Studies Review* no longer appeared regularly, and the institute now remains marginal to Egyptian national concerns. As long as Egypt's access to upstream Nile waters was not seriously threatened, the institute's place in Africa was not, after all, the prime concern of Nasser, Sadat, or Mubarak (ibid.). This interest seems now to be resurgent, and the institute was turned in February 2019 into a Faculty of African Graduate Studies, as a part of the plan to "serve the African continent", as stated in its mission.

## The institutionalisation of anthropology in Egyptian universities

From an institutional perspective, the first department of anthropology was founded at Alexandria University in 1974; it was the first in Egypt and in the Arab world. Anthropology courses had been offered at Alexandria University since its inception in 1942, and the institution counted Radcliffe-Brown as one of the first professors, but this offering was often discontinuous, despite the presence of scholars such as Aly Issa, who guided several students between 1954 and 1964 (Hopkins 2010: 48–50). Anthropology was first taught at the American University in Cairo in 1956, and the Social Research Center, established three years before, hosted a series of mostly developmental projects in which several Egyptian researchers, including anthropologists, took part (more on this below). The situation was bound to change with the establishment of the first department entirely devoted to anthropology, and in a public university. In this

context the pioneering figure was the one of Ahmad Abou Zeid (1921–2013).[8] He was the first to establish a school that spread across different Arab countries – he even claimed to have been the first to write "anthropology" in Arabic, in two articles about myths and "primitive" thought in 1946 (Hopkins 2010: 79). In the academic year 1999/2000, there were four full professors at the Institute for Anthropology at Alexandria University; one was Abou Zeid himself, at the time emeritus for more than a decade, and the other three had all studied under him (Lange 2005: 49).

Despite the department in Alexandria, and the few others established in recent years, anthropology in Egyptian universities is still however primarily affiliated with departments of the social sciences, especially sociology. Some of the social science professors working there contributed significantly to the shaping of the anthropological field in Egypt – for instance, Mohammed al-Gauhary from the Department of Sociology at Cairo University, and Alya Shukry from the Women's College (*Kulliyat al-Banat*) at Ain Shams University. A married couple, they obtained their PhDs in West Germany and went on to train vast numbers of anthropologists in Egypt (Lange 2005); the former was virtually the sole PhD supervisor for well over a decade (Dessouqi 2021). Courses in anthropology are now offered both at under- and postgraduate levels, and while the theoretical framework is largely structural-functional, there is an emphasis on the practical dimension of anthropology in order to implement modernisation and development plans and to help build the nation (Al-Sayed Al-Aswad 2006).

Ahmad Abou Zeid was supervised by Radcliffe Brown for his undergraduate studies at the University of Alexandria. In his memoirs he remarks that he was greatly influenced by his coming of age in the then cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, and of having been fascinated by French sociology before picking up an interest in anthropology. He then went on to Oxford, to achieve a B.Litt. in 1953 and then a D.Phil. in 1956, both under the supervision of Evans-Pritchard (Hopkins 2010). He thus studied under two of the main representatives of British functionalism, and this had a clear impact on how he thought of society – he regarded social structure as a unit, composed of several systems: ecological, economic, political, and kinship (Zayed 1995). He published widely

8 Transliteration of Arabic names could be inconsistent across different publications; this is also the case with Abou Zeid's name. Hopkins reports that Abou Zeid's preferred spelling was Ahmed Abou-Zeid, but in the Library of Congress catalogue he is spelled Ahmad Abu Zayd (Hopkins 2010: 79n). Other variations are possible as well.

in Arabic and English and his perhaps better-known book is on *al-tha´r* (feud or vendetta), the result of two months of fieldwork in a village in the Asyut district in Upper Egypt (Hopkins 2010).

In this context, it is perhaps more relevant to point to his legacy in establishing an understanding of what society is, and in setting the standards of anthropological research; both themes draw on fieldwork on which he published several handbooks (Lange 2005: 51). He was also very active on an institutional level, associating himself with the National Center for Criminological Research in Cairo, before becoming professor at Alexandria University, which he eventually led as Rector. He was a full member of the generation of the 1940s, briefly sketched above; a deep commitment to Egypt's development was to last through his life, as well as an attention to how change in values and orientation could be brought forth (Hopkins 2010).

This activism, however, did not prevent him from acknowledging the difficult condition of anthropology in Egypt and indeed in the Arab world, which in recent years he characterised as representing backwardness, *takhalluf* (ibid.: 52), largely for its failure in offering any theoretical advancement, limiting itself to becoming a data-collecting and largely ancillary branch of a discipline whose standards were continuing to be set elsewhere. In particular, he lamented the lack of a scientific institution or journal that could collect researches made in Egypt and put them into conversation with works from elsewhere. In 1995 there was a conference of Egyptian anthropologists, but its results are not easily accessible and it ultimately failed to reduce the dispersion of the practitioners (Lange 2005). I now turn to the discourse concerning crisis in education and research, before hinting at other non-university related developments in anthropology and then moving on to describe the present stance of anthropology in Egypt.

## What is anthropology for? Anthropology as an academic discipline...

Abou Zeid's honest recognition of the dire condition of anthropology as a discipline matches a widespread sense of crisis, which the educational system as a whole – and as a consequence higher education and research – would have entered at some point during the 1970s, as I discuss in more detail elsewhere (Cantini 2021), and anthropology was no exception. This sense of crisis can be linked to many aspects, but here I would like to point mainly at the two which have been solidly established in the representation of the crisis over the last

couple of decades: these are the crisis within the educational system on one side, and, on the other, the broader sense of political crisis, which included the subordination of research to politics and more recently to economic goals.

I dealt with the first aspect most directly in a research project I led on doctoral studies at Egyptian public universities, published in Arabic and in English (Cantini 2018, 2021); here I limit myself to a few considerations. Three decades ago, it had already been noted that public Arab universities faced serious shortages in funds, particularly as they had been confronted with massive growth since the 1970s. Professors, whose salaries are often meagre, are allowed, and at times actively encouraged, to increase their revenues by producing a textbook for each class they teach, which is then sold to the students. The resulting prioritisation of teaching over research makes the latter a limited exercise, particularly when field research is involved (Shami 1989). Since their inception the social sciences have been understood as a second-best option, and usually allow into their courses large numbers of students who were not "lucky" enough to gain admission to the more competitive departments of sciences and professional schools, to which they provide a cheap alternative, since they do not require labs or special equipment (Shami 1989). The establishment of social science departments is also related to another role that the university often fulfills in Arab society: that of a containing and even conservative force, tasked with providing youth with an alternative to unemployment (Hijazi 1986, quoted in Shami 1989). Despite some massive changes that the university systems in different Arab countries and in Egypt have undergone since the 1990s, when privatisation and internationalisation contributed to the enormous growth of the higher education system (Cantini 2016), this analysis is still by and large quite sound.

Secondly, in common with countries such as Iran or the Sudan, where anthropology has an indigenous history and development that make it necessary to discuss the issue of knowledge and power beyond a condemnation of coloniality (Shahshahani 1986, Monzoul 2018 as samples), in post-independence Egypt it was firmly established that science (including social sciences and hence anthropology) should be subordinated to, and at the service of, the state, a position which invariably conflated these disciplines with the executive power. The only way to justify the existence of such disciplines, generally regarded as luxuries, is by defending their value via the contribution they make to the solution of social problems (Shami 1989). This type of research found concrete expression in national institutions such as the previously mentioned National Center for Sociological and Criminological Research in

Cairo, which produced research output of a strictly utilitarian sort, with issues generally handled in an uncritical, ahistorical, and purely quantitative manner (Hijazi 1986, quoted in Shami 1989). The often-made parallel was that social scientists should understand their role as social engineers, and that sociology and anthropology are a sort of human technology; the goal of enhancing social control is never really too far away.

The specific problems of anthropology in this double impasse, within and without the university as an institution, are only exacerbated by its identification with the colonial time, and with its focus on "primitive" cultures. If science as a whole needs to contribute to the establishment of the nation, from a cultural and ideological point of view this nation is seen as arising from Islamic history and heritage and having a clear path ahead. Thus, a study of different practices and beliefs at local levels – a rather average pursuit for anthropology – is invariably seen as detracting from the desired overall unity: for example, a monograph focusing on family structure in an urban community was rejected by a major social science publisher on the ground that it did not contribute to an understanding of the unity of Arab identity (Shami 1989). This existential difficulty is made worse by some serious misunderstandings about the nature of the discipline, in part also caused by the superficiality of most research done by anthropologists who study groups that are safely marginal, such as Nubians and Gypsies in Egypt, Dinka in Sudan, and so on, invariably concluding that modernisation and increasing awareness of true Islam are inclining these groups towards better integration into society (ibid.: 653). As mentioned above, this harsh critique seems warranted by the overall emphasis on finding an authentic national identity after decolonisation, which not only in Egypt but, for example, also in Morocco, has been a core feature of the broader social sciences (Roussillon 2002). While these disciplines were originally imported during colonial times, and their methodologies and theories were largely adopted but not developed further, the disciplines were taken over by local elites and used to contribute to national constructs and to dispute the image of themselves that was provided for these societies by colonial science (ibid.). The hypothesis I advance here is that when the modernising efforts came to a halt, mainly for geopolitical reasons, social sciences also entered into a crisis mode, since their scope was no longer clear.

## ... and as a set of techniques serving social development

The crisis briefly sketched above should not be taken to imply that anthropology almost extinguished itself, as the opposite case was true. While, as an academic discipline, anthropology was too dispersed to be influential and not quite able to transcend the conditions in which it was founded in the post-independence period, from the late 1950s on there was a veritable boom of anthropological works as part of renewed developmental efforts, first under the auspices of the state, then funded by international donors. An anthropology at the service of societal change was high on demand in developmental projects, and there was no shortage of these in the newly independent Egypt, nor elsewhere in the world of course. Particularly during the 1960s and 1970s anthropologists, affiliated to the American University of Cairo (AUC) and national (Egyptian) universities and research centres, worked collaboratively in various development projects including the project of resettlement of Nubian communities initiated by Laila el-Hamamsy and Robert Fernea (Al-Sayyed al-Aswad 2006). The Nubian project is of particular relevance for several reasons; first, it took place at the height of Nasser's power, and yet it explicitly sought expertise from Western countries. It allowed collaboration between Egyptian and foreign scholars; this collaboration, mostly through the Social Research Center of the AUC, had already begun in 1954 with the analysis of voluntary resettlement projects of populations in the Fayoum and the Delta, and was extended in 1961 to the Nubian case (Hopkins 2010: 97). In the 1960s, the construction of the Aswan High Dam occasioned the forced displacement of a large part of the Nubian population. The project consisted in a survey of the Nubians to be moved and those already outside their historic homeland, with the goal of recording and analysing their culture and social organisation (Hopkins and Mehanna 2011).

Although not of this epic calibre, in subsequent years there was no shortage of developmental projects, despite all geopolitical developments. Although research in anthropology and the social sciences in Egypt depends on various funding sources including the national government, funding by foreign agencies and organizations, such as USAID, UNICEF, the Ford Foundation, Fulbright, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the National Democratic Institution for International Affairs (NDI) among others, forms a dominant factor in sustaining research activities carried out by both university research centres and private research centres (Al-Sayyed Al-Aswad 2006). Research in these projects tends to be focused on societal issues, particularly those arising as a consequence of globalisation in different Egyptian contexts

– peasants and agricultural laborers now being employed in factories, for instance. Given the research funding shortages briefly sketched above, these projects have become a major opportunity for many university professors, along with employment abroad – particularly in Arab Gulf countries. This sort of "contract research" is not harmful *per se*, of course (Shami 1989); but considering the scarcity of research carried out in university departments, some of which are also doing this kind of research, its share within the knowledge produced in and on Egypt seems to be at odds with the possibility for the emergence of a well-formed, indigenous way to conduct anthropology, particularly from a theoretical point of view.

Parallel to this, there is a surge in anthropological studies conducted in Egypt outside the academy. Compared to the discourse of crisis affecting university departments, the difference could hardly be greater:

> "Anthropology has been "born again" in Egypt. National policy makers and international donors working in Egypt (and perhaps elsewhere) have an increasing awareness of the contribution that anthropology can make to social research and human understanding. In fields as diverse as health sciences and medicine, demography, and other population sciences, ecological and environmental research and advocacy […] anthropologists who had barely been humoured previously are now sought and heard" (Sholkamy 1999: 119).

But immediately after this statement, the author acknowledges that "on closer inspection one finds that anthropology has been born again as a collection of qualitative methods […] Quasi-anthropological techniques are in demand, not anthropology with its precepts and concepts" (ibid.).

To return briefly to the 2015 conference, this attitude was again reiterated by the head of the governmental funding agency, when confronted with the critique that there were too few social science projects being funded – his position was that "we" need more social sciences. What he meant was that there was a need for social sciences within scientific projects, in which social scientists' participation is strictly circumscribed to performing specific tasks within projects that are largely, if not completely, already predetermined.

## Who counts as an Egyptian anthropologist?

As indicated in the introduction, an Egyptian anthropology cannot be easily separated from the anthropology of Egypt. Even differentiation criteria that look solid from afar, such as national origin or the place where scientific qualifications were obtained, do not stand closer inspection. All the personalities I sketched in this chapter underwent a decisive formation abroad, and this is still a general rule for anthropologists in Egypt; moreover, many of those who receive training at home will probably be employed abroad, at least temporarily, or will take part in research projects designed and funded elsewhere. The degree of mobility, already a rather salient characteristic of scholars worldwide, is, in the case of Egypt, and anthropology in particular, very strong. From the other side of the equation, how long does it take for a non-Egyptian to be considered an Egyptian anthropologist, or at least partaking in Egyptian anthropology? The question is again less clearcut than it may seem, to the point that Nicholas Hopkins in his mapping of the first two thirds of a century of Egyptian anthropology mixes scholars who were Egyptian by nationality with many who weren't, such as Hans Alexander Winkler or Michael Gilsenan, among many others.

Here, in an exploration of decolonisation, I think it's particularly useful to present a discussion on the indigenisation of social sciences, which I think is a misleading way out of the conundrums provided by knowledge and power; even more so, the parallel perspective of an islamisation of anthropology, whose heyday was much shorter. The validity of this perspective has been discussed at length and questioned (for example, Lange 2005). Morsi, Saad, Nelson and Sholkamy (1990), that is three indigenous and one non-indigenous anthropologists who "conducted fieldwork in and on the Arab world for nearly twenty-five years", discuss the issue of how to create an Arab social science. This should rest on some foundations that are culturally specific while being inscribed in the global social sciences, thereby not denying the scientific aspect of the discipline in favour of a specific nationalism. They proposed recognising that its foundation lies in the methodologies used, and not in any theoretical or ideological assumptions – particularly because the "problems of 'our' people cannot be understood without making reference to global situations" (Morsy et al. 1990: 91). These authors clearly identify the "political, epistemological and methodological issues raised in the 'call for the indigenisation of the social sciences'" (ibid.: 102). If an indigenous anthropology is defined as "the practice of social and cultural anthropology in one's own national setting", the

concept obscures a number of critical issues in the production of social science knowledge – in particular the idea that nationals studying their own societies, or women studying their own gender, would produce more authentic and relevant knowledge. This aim is a valid and worthy one, but it has to be reached by questioning the research relationships through which anthropological knowledge is produced, namely the positioning of the researcher, wherever she may be, and the peculiar configuration of the power/knowledge nexus that transpires from her research (ibid.: 103).

If anthropology is not the science of the "primitive", but a comparative science of society and culture, the practice of which needs to be assessed from the methodologies employed and the positionality of the researcher, then an Arab or Egyptian anthropology must question received wisdom not on ideological grounds, but on the basis of field research; this research may be conducted by native or non-native anthropologists who actively engage in Arab society and do not consider it simply a source of data (Shami 1989). A special issue of the *Cairo Papers in Social Sciences*, edited by Seteney Shami and Linda Herrera, was entirely devoted to the question of producing social sciences, and anthropology in particular, in and on Egypt; all papers included in the collection explicitly discuss the positionality of the researcher in the research process and in the ethnographic encounter (Shami and Herrera 1999).

## Producing anthropological knowledge in Egyptian universities today

The 2011 revolution represented a window of opportunity to bring forth change in the institutional conditions of doing research. I thus decided to focus my research project on the doctoral phase as being particularly significant in the life of the institution, a crucial and formative moment in the production of knowledge, a true moment of passage between different statuses. In short, a liminal moment in the life of the institution, at a time in which change seemed possible. The actual project started in 2014, when the momentum of change was already gone, although that was not immediately apparent at the time. The picture I gathered over the next two years was the one of the institution in crisis, as briefly sketched above; I was repeatedly told that the doctorate is not a formative moment, and generally not to be confused with doing actual research. This assessment is coupled with the informally widespread wisdom that there is no research in the social sciences and humanities at Egyptian public universities, particularly at the doctoral level. For a detailed discussion of the project and of its results I refer to Cantini (2018, 2021), but for the purpose of the discussion

here, the main point is that the discourse of crisis was solidly in place, as well as the idea that actual research is produced elsewhere, mostly in consultancy or in institutions abroad. At the same time, however, parallel to the devaluation of local production of knowledge there is a continuous growth in the numbers of people pursuing postgraduate studies, coupled with the continued practice of sending some students abroad on government fellowships, or increasingly on foreign-paid scholarships; for example, over a thousand students went to Europe as part of the Erasmus programme. The discourse of crisis continues to side with an expansion of the system, at least in sheer quantitative terms.

This growth indicates that the need for obtaining research credentials and qualification continues unabated, and that one would be well advised not to take the discourse of crisis at face value, but rather to contextualise it in the broader international knowledge economy and in relation to the new imbalances that are created in the process. The project was not only relevant from its content point of view, but perhaps even more so in its structure as a training process for the scholars involved, all doctoral candidates at Egyptian public universities. It was thus an attempt to set up a truly collaborative project, with the aim of readjusting the imbalance between local and international production of knowledge, and of increasing communication between different contexts.

In order to ascertain what exactly concerns anthropology as an academic discipline, a recent research project surveyed the MA and PhD theses produced at anthropology departments in different Egyptian universities between 2000 and 2016 (Badawi 2017). The article confirms the crisis discourse, and the diminished importance of universities as places of knowledge production. Limiting the analysis to Alexandria University, in 1996–2016 there were 35 MA and 12 PhD theses compared to 47 and 33 respectively in the 1976–1996 period. All over Egypt, in the period 2000–2016 there were 91 MA and 35 PhD theses in anthropology, with Alexandria as the first and Beni Suef as the second most productive departments. The latter was established as a Cairo University branch in the 1970s and became independent in 2006. Other departments that admit theses in anthropology are found at Cairo, Ain Shams, Helwan, Minia, and Sohag (ibid.: 293). More than two-thirds of theses were written by female scholars and almost all of them by Egyptians, with a handful of exceptions in Cairo and Ain Shams. As already observed, there is a notable concentration in the supervision of theses, despite some dominant supervisors being already retired. Although the theses produced have a strong regional focus, the research themes are very scattered (ibid.: 303–304) and lack a proper research agenda or even a strategy.

Doing research in Egypt is also a dangerous endeavour, however, and any discussion of knowledge production cannot ignore the real perils and risks that researchers have to fear. This is not a new phenomenon, sadly; Al-Gohari, an anthropologist mentioned above, insisted that the social sciences were most damaged by the 1952 revolution with the introduction of the requirement to apply for research permission from CAMPAS (Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics) which was run by an officer under the Egyptian military regime. This was the moment that marked the beginning of the "criminalization of collecting data and conducting research" (Abaza 2010: 202). The revolution instituted a law making it illegal to gather information that could harm the state; and the law also put restrictions on fieldwork and the collection of statistics. According to Al-Gohari, after this law was passed in the 1950s it established the association of sociological investigation with spying and information-gathering for the "enemy" (ibid.). Doing research was criminalised, although the actual red lines were never clear, even less made public, making it impossible for researchers to know in advance what could become an issue. Even when research was commissioned by the government, if the results were not deemed acceptable for the public, they would be withheld, along with the research materials collected. Conflicts over the permissible limits of doing research, particularly on ethical themes that are normatively regulated in Islamic jurisprudence, have been present since the beginning of the university in Egypt, where both Egyptians and non-Egyptians were involved. Yet the criminalisation of doing research seems to have reached new heights since the 1990s, perhaps linked with the reforms that were altering the structure of Egyptian economy and society, or with the relative pluralisation of Egyptian society.

In an article aptly titled *Why is Anthropology So Hard in Egypt*, Hania Sholkamy reflected on the case of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, a political scientist who was among the young enthusiasts of the revolution in the 1960s. Ibrahim's work has acquired a considerable political and economic capital since then due to its direct relation with presidents in Egypt and in the USA, and because of his disgrace over allegations of being a spy for foreign agents (for details on his case, see also Abaza 2010). According to Sholkamy, the real issue in this *cause célebre* was the right of the authority to shape and give currency to truth; the Egyptian press demonised the accused and criminalised his whole profession. "They conveyed that it was not only Dr Ibrahim who was guilty of wrong doing, but all those like him who conduct research in towns and villages, defame the national image of their country and attend conferences abroad where they describe and share their research findings.

This sad situation expresses a crisis in the understanding of research and in the proscription of a censorship of its findings" (Sholkamy 1999).

After the 2011 revolution and the moment for change that it offered, the situation changed dramatically, with months and years of clashes on campuses and deep interventions into the structure and the functioning of the university. In the current political climate, it should thus come as no surprise that, when research is discussed, it is the emphasis on the needs of the state which is being put forward again, as in the post-independence period. For example, in November 2018, the Alexandria University's Council for Postgraduate Studies and Research demanded that the dissertations presented to the institution must comply with Egypt's 2030 Vision, a long-term development scheme launched by the president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in 2016.

## Decolonising anthropology in Egypt

In this chapter I have tried to provide a succinct account of the development of anthropology in Egypt, as well as on the overall possibilities of doing research, in and on the country. The situation looks as complicated as ever, and most of the problematic issues sketched here are continuing unabated: the crisis in the university as an institution, and consequently the very possibility of the establishment of anthropology as a discipline in its own sense, capable of accumulating knowledge and making theoretical interventions that are relevant outside the country's borders; the understanding of anthropology as being at the service of the developmental needs of the state; and the ongoing repressions that make the pursuit of independent and critical inquiries rather dangerous. Even the few places where anthropology had some chance of establishing itself, such as the AUC, are currently being run according to a neo-conservative model in which the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake does not seem to be a priority, even less so when social sciences are concerned.

Moreover, the global imbalances in the distribution of power and knowledge that subordinate the "Global South" to epistemic necessities set elsewhere were also evident during the 2011 revolution. As soon as Egypt had acquired a new relevance in the eyes of the world, scores of journalists, commentators, and researchers rushed to jump on the bandwagon, struggling to gain privileged access to the protagonists of *Tahrir*, the rebellious yet peaceful and ingenuous youth movement that had been able to inspire the world. In the process, local academics were (again) treated as providers of data and of contacts,

as facilitators and fixers, while the real analyses were done elsewhere (Abaza 2011).

Despite all, however, the moment for change offered by the 2011 revolution did touch anthropology as well. For perhaps the first time since its inception, many young Egyptians came to see anthropology not as a primitivist or a colonial science, but rather as a discipline that could offer a methodology closer to the street and to the voice of the people, perhaps even able to speak their language. PhD theses proposing to examine the revolution or addressing topics such as creativity in sociological research were registered, and although the political conditions changed all too soon, the interest in the ethnographic method, and perhaps also in anthropology as a discipline that has the potential to imagine things otherwise, is still there. In recent years, a series of initiatives have tried and are still trying to intercept this interest and to provide young researchers with the theoretical tools to be able to construct their own research topics – institutes such as Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Science (CILAS), for instance, the reading group in the theory of anthropology set up at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in collaboration with the Center for Future Studies, or the *Seket al-Maaref* (Knowledge Rail), an initiative run by some anthropologists to read theoretical texts outside the university campuses.

These are just examples of recent initiatives that are proliferating despite the discouraging political climate, and the more broadly problematic conditions of doing research. They are a sign that the interest in anthropology as a discipline open to experiment and contamination with other experiences, particularly the arts, is gaining recognition in Egypt. Perhaps the growth of anthropological interest in Egypt during recent years within the overall discipline, also linked to the 2011 revolution, has been instrumental in creating more occasions for contact between local and foreign scholars, and funding opportunities to obtain scholarships abroad; collaborative projects have probably played a role too. In this sense, one could conclude that, for those who care to watch closely – and despite all constraints – anthropology in Egypt is already becoming decolonised.

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