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The Sphinx, with the pyramid of Cheops in the background—probably one of the strongest symbols of Egypt's ancient civilization.

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EGYPT

Crossroads of Three Cultures

By Paula L. Jewell

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following article on Egypt was inspired by a recent visit to that country by the writer, who is a special assistant to the president of Howard University. She spent three weeks in the Arab Republic of Egypt during the summer as a member of a tour group from the United States.

Egypt is frequently called the "Cradle of Civilization." It should also be referred to as the "Crossroads of Three Cultures." One of the oldest nation-states in recorded civilization, it is a country which paradoxically is at times Mediterranean, Arab and African. The archeological records of ancient Egyptian empires date back to 4000 B.C.

In terms of history, international relations, politics, law and the role of women, Egypt has been influenced by its geographical position at the gateway to three areas of the world. As early as the Amayad Dynasty in 750 A. D., scholars from all over the world came to Egypt to teach and to learn. Works from many different countries were translated and people were encouraged to become bilingual. The University of Al-Azhar, founded in 968 A. D., as a center for Muslim scholarship, enjoys an excellent international reputation even today.

Egyptian history is replete with stories of invasion and domination by foreign powers. The Persians conquered Egypt in 525 B. C. and the Greeks in 333 B. C. After Alexander's conquest, a policy of assimilation was begun which encouraged crossbreeding between Greeks and Egyptians. A period of Turkish domination ended the Greek rule.

A new European influence appeared in the country in 1798 with Napoleon's invasion. Even today Egypt reflects its French colonial past. For example, the better restaurants in Cairo offer menus in both French and Arabic, which is readily

and fashion magazines are found in large number, as well as other imports from France, including the latest Parisian fashions.

The Greeks and the British have also left their imprint. In the area of religion, 90% of the Egyptians are Muslims; 10% Copts. Many of the Copts originally settled in Alexandria, which was a major center of learning. The Muslims were able to accept new ideas from the Copts and merge them with their own. The British influence started after 1882 when Britain supervised the administration of Egypt. Later, from 1914 until its independence in 1922, Egypt became a protectorate. During the British administration, the Copts became a favored group and controlled a greater proportion of the wealth and enjoyed a greater percentage of educational opportunities than their numerical representation would normally dictate. In the early days of Christianity, Egypt also acted as a conduit for religion—sending Christianity down the Nile to Sudan and Ethiopia.

Colonialism and imperialism, however, brought a growing hostility on the part of the Muslims toward the Copts. During the 19th and 20th centuries, occasional riots became a physical manifestation of resentment toward a minority group which had been given a favored position in society.

Until the 1950s, the Egyptians thought of themselves in terms of their Egyptianism and not as a part of the Arab world. Also, although geographically part of the African continent, they did not see themselves as Africans.

A New Era

The Egyptian Revolution of the 1950s saw the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser to power and a change in the Egyptian's self-perception. Nasser as a military officer helped form the Free Officer's Movement that engineered the overthrow of King Farouk on July 23, 1952. After the revolution, a Revolution Command Council of 12 officers took control of the government. At the outset, General Muham-

mad Naguib was named Premier on September 7, 1952. The next year, on June 18, Egypt became a republic and Naguib became the country's first President and Prime Minister, staying in office until April 18, 1954 when he was removed and Nasser—then a Lieutenant Colonel and a principal mover in the revolt—took full control of the government. Nasser was elected President on June 23, 1956. He became a hero of the Arab world when he nationalized the Suez Canal in the summer of 1956.

Nasser's primary goals were to consolidate and maintain political power, to introduce political and economic change in Egypt and to develop a new foreign policy which emphasized Egypt as a part of the Third World.

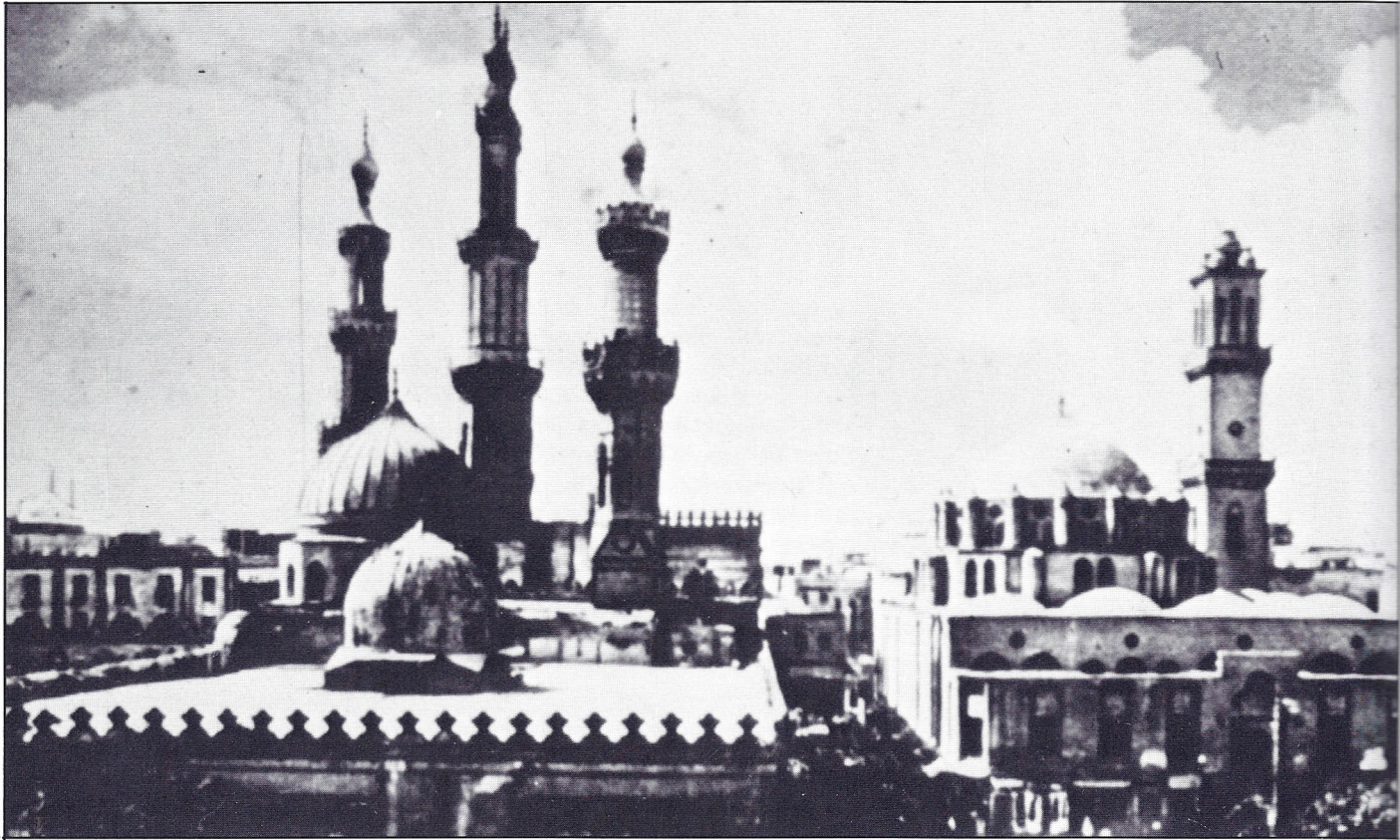
In his first few years of leadership, Nasser moved to reduce the political influence of both the right and the left. For example, in 1955 he took steps to curb the activities of a group called the Muslim Brotherhood, a religious and political movement that was formed to promote the doctrines of Islam. But he was not fully successful as the movement went underground. Even today, one finds college students who want their nation to return to the strict tenets of the Muslim faith. Between 1955 and 1965 Nasser moved to outlaw Communist influences in Egypt. He was also able, by the end of 1965, to diminish the influence of the Wafd Party, which was controlled by wealthy Egyptian landowners. In the process of achieving political control, Nasser may have sacrificed many of the democratic institutions adapted from the Western tradition. On the other hand, he solidified his power base.

Nasser also solidified his political position by his efforts to redistribute the country's wealth. He was responsible for Egypt's agrarian reform program and a leveling of the class structure throughout Egypt.

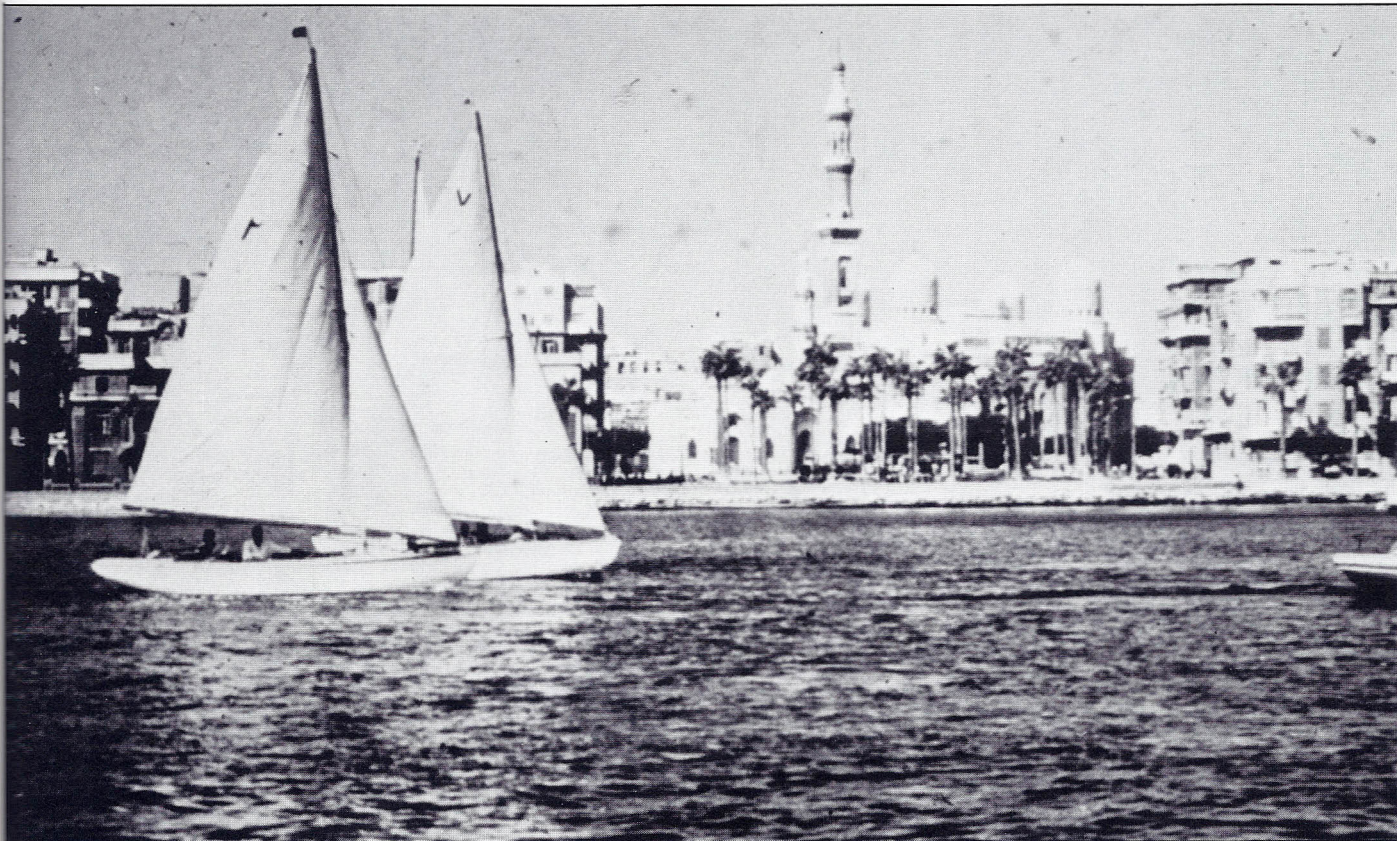
In the area of foreign policy, Nasser was deeply involved in making Egypt a leader among the underdeveloped coun-

Al-Azhar University in Cairo, built more than 1000 years ago.

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Sailboats at the old port of Alexandria.



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tries. He also worked hard to make Egypt part of the Arab World. Nasser emphasized the Egyptian heritage and potentialities and made the Egyptians proud of being Arabs. A brief union between Egypt and Syria was formed between 1958 and 1961 at which time the name United Arab Republic was adopted. (The country's official name today is the Arab Republic of Egypt).

Egypt also became interested in assisting African liberation movements, with attention shifting in this period from the Nile Valley to all of Africa. And it became a member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963.

In 1955 Nasser attended the Bandung Conference, which condemned neo-colonialism and supported non-alignment. While he officially proclaimed a policy of non-alignment, in reality he

seemed to shift alignments from one of the great powers to the other. During the initial stages of his rule, Nasser tried to develop close ties with the United States but a rift between the United States and Egypt developed in 1955, after the United States refused to sell arms to Egypt. A few months later, Nasser accepted a Soviet arms offer and refused to align Egypt with the Anglo-American sponsored Baghdad Pact. (The Baghdad Pact was a Western defense alliance. Of the Arab states, Iraq alone became a signatory. It was denounced by Radio Cairo as an example of Western imperialism). In 1956, Nasser extended diplomatic recognition to mainland China. The split between the United States and Egypt became complete when the United States refused to help Nasser finance the Aswan High Dam. Again, Egypt turned to the Soviet Union

and the billion-dollar dam project was completed in 1971 with financial and technical assistance from the Soviet Union.

Egypt Today

Today, under the rule of President Anwar el-Sadat, Egypt is strengthening its ties with African nations and opening its arms to the West. For example, Egypt has established a branch of Cairo University in Sudan and has plans for another branch in Somalia.

The Soviet influence in Egypt appears to be on the wane. While Egypt depends upon Russia economically for machine parts, it is concerned with winning American support. President Sadat is concerned about projecting to the Western world the image of a stable and liberal democratic nation. While most industrial enterprises

The lotus-shaped columns of Luxor, ancient city of Thebes.

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still are government owned, through its open door policy Egypt has been attempting to attract foreign investors in order to strengthen its weak economy. Egypt has also started to remove restrictions on foreigners and foreign publications coming into the country. By American standards, however, the country has yet to enjoy full freedom of the press. Almost all of the newspapers are owned by the government, as are broadcasting facilities. In this respect, Egypt is no different from many Third World countries.

Egypt's African and Arab ties seem to overlap in the sense that the Arabs have shared a common history of fighting British and French imperialism with the Africans. A substantial portion of Arab land and inhabitants are in Africa. Besides membership in the Organization of African Unity, Egypt is also a member of the Arab League, which has its headquarters in Cairo.

The Mediterranean influence as well as the Arab influence may be seen in the area of law. Although Egypt's traditional legal system is based on Islam, the Egyptian code is based upon the French Civil Code. Yet, particularly in the area of domestic relations, there are still strong Islamic influences. A Muslim husband may divorce his wife by saying "I divorce you" three times before a witness. On the other hand, if the wife wishes to secure a divorce she must go to court and prove that her husband is not supporting her. But in some areas of the law, women in Egypt seem to be far ahead of their Western counterparts. For example, Egyptian women keep their last names after marriage and continue to maintain individual title to all property which they bring into a marriage.

In 1956, under a temporary constitution, women were guaranteed the right to vote, the right to receive education and the right to work outside the home. An Egyptian woman is entitled to paid maternity leave. But there are no laws which guarantee equal employment opportuni-

ties for women who have suffered job discrimination.

According to Dr. Sumaya Fahmy, a leader in the Egyptian feminist movement, social reality lags far behind the rules stipulated in the nation's constitution. Even today, more boys attend elementary school than girls and more girls leave school without graduating. In spite of this, Egyptian women are slowly becoming more liberated and some, including President Sadat's wife, are becoming interested and active in the women's liberation movement.

In the past, however, men were leaders in the fight for equal rights for women. In 1860, Refou Tahlawi wrote "An Honest Guide to Education of Boys and Girls." Kassern Amin, another leader in the liberation movement for women, published two books in 1900, "Women's Liberation" and "The New Woman."

At first, girls were only allowed to study the Koran with their male counterparts at religious schools called kottabs. Later, in 1889, after the Minister of Education took charge of the kottabs, foundations of Islam, Arabic, calligraphy and arithmetic were added to the curriculum. The first primary school for girls was started in 1895 and the first secondary school in 1900.

Opportunities for women in higher education materialized in 1925, after Cairo University became a government institution and started to admit students of both sexes. Alexandria University accepted women as soon as it opened in 1942. In 1950, Anciens University—a separate college for girls—was created. Higher Institutes for Nursing were opened during this period in Cairo and in Alexandria, with admission limited to female students.

Today, more than 28% of the university students in Egypt are women. On the other hand, the rate of illiteracy for women is still higher than for men. While law schools are attracting women, the country does not have its first woman judge. Egyptian women have tended to enter the

more traditional areas of work, particularly teaching.

Crossroads

From a geographical standpoint, Egypt stands at the crossroads of three civilizations. Alexandria, with its location on the Mediterranean Sea, its historic monuments such as the Pompey Pillar and its architecture is very reminiscent of Greece or Rome. Luxor and the other parts of Egypt near the Sudan, remind one of West African terrain. There are also the kind of desert expanses that one would expect to find in Kuwait.

Culturally, Egypt is a fascinating nation that combines, in a most unique way, the features of many cultures. In its museums and mosques the visitor can see the multi-cultural influences. Vases very similar to the ones which are found in Greece sit in rooms next to Persian rugs and busts of a decidedly African cast. In Upper Egypt, one can find Pharonic and Christian design elements, while in Alexandria most of the design elements are Mediterranean. Architectural design elements in Cairo are varied and reflect both the Mediterranean and the Islamic influence.

Whether one is interested in religion, international relations, politics and law, women's rights, geography or art and architecture, Egypt offers an opportunity to see the "Crossroads of Three Cultures."

One of the most revealing questions that must be asked—given Egypt's multi-faceted civilization—is: How do the Egyptians perceive themselves? When a visitor asked an Egyptian professor whether the Egyptians perceive themselves as being Black, White, or Oriental, the gentleman answered, "We are Egyptian." □