

Coptic Identities as Indigenous: The Politics of Recognition & Improving Interfaith Relations in Egypt

Ironically, truly understanding the modern Coptic identity requires a journey back to ancient Egyptian history. An embarrassing childhood experience of mine can demonstrate why. As a child, when I would speak of who I was or when envisioning my family tree, it included the figures of Queen Nefertiti as a grandma, Cleopatra as an Aunt, and Tutankhamun as a cousin. My father had introduced the complex topic of ancestry in this way when I was a child, and whilst whimsical, it does underscore a vital and forgotten dimension of the modern Coptic identity- that the Coptic identity is indigenous.

Transcending conventional descriptions of Copts as merely an ethno-religious minority in Egypt by recognising their indigenous identity has been regrettably overlooked in academic, domestic, and international discourse. Considering the sectarian violence in Egypt, one must appreciate the multifaceted nature of modern Coptic identity as one tied to ethnicity, faith, and gendered experiences anchored in an indigenous identity. Understanding the complex tapestry of the Copts' persecuted indigenous history allows for a better understanding of the sectarian divides and interfaith dialogue that is more open, productive, and conducive to a more equal and peaceful Egypt.

Defining indigeneity is complex; the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) abstains from a rigid definition but suggests a criterion¹- one Copts indeed fulfil. Foremost, Copts exhibit profound ties to Egyptian territory². Copts- like my own family's - have a distinct genetic makeup as descendants of the Ancient Egyptians. The Coptic language, the same language spoken by the last Ancient Egyptians³, is maintained and taught within the communities and passed on intergenerationally. Personally, my own father teaches me Coptic. Cultural rituals reminiscent of Pharaonic practices permeate Coptic traditions, shaping pivotal life events from birth to marriage to death, and distinct intangible heritage shapes Coptic households. Distinct from the dominant group, Copts maintain ancient links to the natural territories of Egypt. Even the Coptic calendar that hangs in many Coptic households is designed to be in tune with the rhythms and seasons of the Nile floods and desert sandstorms.

When recognising indigenous people, a moving definition has been of those “who have creation stories, not colonization stories”⁴. For Copts, recognising how this creation story is one of varying discrimination is useful to understand the modern identity. Copts have remained a distinct identity and have been persecuted as indigenous natives throughout Egyptian history: from the Romans, Byzantines, the 639 CE Arab Conquest, Abbasid (747-1512), Mamluk (1252-1517), Ottoman (1517-1798), Colonisation by French and British, and

¹ United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. (2015). “[Who are Indigenous Peoples?](https://indigenous.fiu.edu/news/2015/who-are-indigenous-people/)” Fifth Session. <https://indigenous.fiu.edu/news/2015/who-are-indigenous-people/> DOA: 10/10/23.

² Meinardus, O. (2002). *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press. pp.28

³ Atiya, A. (1968). *A History of Eastern Christianity*. New York: Routledge. pp.17

⁴ Tuck, E. & Yang, K. W. Yang. (2012). *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society. pp.6

various presidencies. The level of ostracization to ethnic cleansing has ranged from massive increases in taxes to massacres.⁵

Historical persecution of the Copts has influenced their modern treatment. For instance, a singular example is Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996-1021 AD), who declared that Copts could not celebrate epiphany or Christmas, banned wine which was used in communion, wear kilos-heavy iron crosses to be identified⁶, and prohibited the use of the Coptic language in homes and public, under threat of cutting Copts' tongues off⁷. He even personally walked the streets of Cairo to eavesdrop on Coptic-speaking homes to punish Coptic-speaking families.⁸ During his reign, Copts lost their majority population status despite being indigenous to the land. In 1321, there followed years of the destruction of Coptic churches and massacres of Copts⁹. Medieval Egyptian historian Al-Maqrizi wrote, "[in] all provinces of Egypt... no church remained that had not been razed"¹⁰. When considering the importance of land rights to an indigenous community, it is even more harmful.

In modern-day Egypt, this land usage restriction remains, and Copts face extreme challenges in protecting, maintaining, and rebuilding burned Churches. For example, in 2022, nine Copts were arrested for peacefully protesting for the right to rebuild the only church in their village that had been burned down years earlier.¹¹ My family home in Minya is opposite one of the Coptic churches, and I have grown up used to the presence of military personnel guarding it and tanks outside of cathedrals. The mere presence of military and police personnel outside of Copts' places of worship is symbolic of how Coptic persecution continues. Amidst thousands of cases of persecution, I would like to point to some recent examples in my family hometown of Minya, in Upper Egypt.

The 2016-17 Minya pogrom is one example where there was an organised massacre of Copts, which continued for months of continuous targeting and was a national scandal. In 2016, a seventy-three-year-old Coptic woman was beaten, stripped, and dragged naked in the streets, and a mob of 300 men targeted seven Coptic homes because her son was

⁵ El-Maqrizi, T. & Malan S. C. (2009). *A Short History of The Copts and of their Church (1873)*. Montana: Kessinger Publishing. pp.76.

⁶ Swanson, M. (2010). *The Popes of Egypt Volume 2: The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641-1517)*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press. pp.54

⁷ Youm7. (2008). "Al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah forbade the use of "Coptic" even in Christian prayer." (Translation of Headline from Arabic). <https://www.youm7.com/story/2008/11/20/51609/-/الحاكم-بأمر-الله-حرم-استخدام-القبطية-حتى-في-صلاة-المسيحيين> DOA: 4/12/23.

⁸ Swanson, M. (2010). *The Popes of Egypt Volume 2: The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641-1517)*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press. pp.102

⁹ Little, D. (1976). *Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahri Mamluks, 692-755/1293-1354*. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 39(3). pp.563

¹⁰ Ibid. pp.568

¹¹ Amnesty International. (2022). "Egypt: Release nine Coptic Christians Detained for Attempting to Rebuild Church." <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/03/egypt-release-nine-coptic-christians-detained-for-attempting-to-rebuild-church/> DOA: 5/12/23.

allegedly in a relationship with a Muslim woman.¹² The men who committed this crime were found innocent after three trials, despite a public statement from the President in her defence and insistence on accountability for crimes.¹³ In 2017, twenty-eight Copts who were travelling to a monastery on a bus were shot to death¹⁴, and in 2018, another seven were killed on the same journey to the monastery.¹⁵

Being a Coptic woman presents its own intersectional vulnerabilities. Coptic women and girls have often been abducted and forced to convert and marry. For example, between 2011 to 2014, more than 550 Coptic girls were kidnapped and forced to convert, and 40% of these girls were raped and married to their captors¹⁶. Coptic women have also been labelled as 'prostitutes' and 'whores' and accused of leaving their houses with the purpose of being sexually harassed or raped¹⁷.

Recognition of Copts as an indigenous group is tied to their historical and modern persecution and has been a sensitive topic. Whilst Copts may, among their own tight-knit communities, voice their identity of being native to the land, externally, they do not identify this way due to the sensitive interfaith relations they navigate. For example, in 2010, Anba Bishoy, the Secretary of the Coptic Synod, stated that Copts are: "Ashab al baled el assleyen" ("أصحاب البلد الأصليين")¹⁸, the closest in Arabic to the word 'indigenous'. The backlash was extreme and widespread. Amro El Shobaki (an academic and former MP) suggested this recognition opens the door for terrorism against the Copts¹⁹. Even for prominent Muslim scholars such as Tarek Heggy, recognising Copts as an indigenous community in Egypt was met with widespread backlash²⁰. The confluence of historical marginalisation and fears of inflaming sectarian violence engenders a delicate balance in the politics of recognition of the Coptic identity.

Avoidance, however, of sensitive conversations seems erroneous when aiming for a fairer future for all Egyptians. Certainly, recognition of Copts as an indigenous identity is contentious, yet there are multiple advantages to initiating the process of recognition.

¹² Al Masry Al Youm. (2020). "The Case of the Lady of the Karm from Her Stripping to her Innocence". (Translation of Headline from Arabic) <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2192783> DOA: 12/12/23.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Al Watan News. (2017). "By names, 28 Martyrs in the Incident of Amba Samuel Monastery." (Translation of Headline in Arabic). <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/2133281> DOA: 12/12/23.

¹⁵ Al Masry Al Youm. (2021). "The Third Annual Rememberance of the Seven Martyrs of Amba Samuel Monastery". (Translation of Headline from Arabic) <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2454015> DOA: 12/12/23.

¹⁶ Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. (2015). Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015). <https://www.refworld.org/docid/557e7e814.html> DOA: 1/12/23.

¹⁷ "Elaph. (2013). "Abu Islam is under Penalty of Insulting Christian Women and the State is Accused of Silence". (Translation of Headline from Arabic). <https://elaph.com/Web/news/2013/2/793556.html> DOA: 12/12/23.

¹⁸ Al Masry Al Youm. (2010). "The Muslims Are Not Guests". (Translation of Headline from Arabic) <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1851041> DOA: 13/12/23.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ El Hewan Al Motamaden. (2009). "The Case of the Coptic Problem in Egypt". (Translation of Headline from Arabic). <https://www.ahewan.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=160633> DOA: 1/12/23.

Firstly, within the modern Coptic identity, recognition of their indigenous identity represents the quest to acknowledge equal belonging and equal rights in modern Egypt. Recognising the indigeneity of the Coptic people in the absence of explicit legal, social, and political recognition in Egypt and representation on the international stage perpetuates a sense of marginalisation and erasure of history. By embracing and recognising historical and modern injustice, all Egyptians, regardless of whether they are Copts or not, can chart a path towards a future of equality, respect, and peaceful coexistence. For true equality of all people in Egypt, the different identities that preside over the same land area must be recognised.

Secondly, whilst approaching interfaith dialogue is a delicate activity, when understanding the identities behind sectarian violence, both belligerent and victim, a return to how history has shaped these identities is critical. Historical processes impact how communities behave, react, and operate, and by recognising the Copts' history, we can develop a clearer path to resolution.

Thirdly, the negation of one's identity, either formally or informally, is a form of marginalisation, which is antithetical to the aims of creating an open dialogue. Coptic communities have successfully protected their indigenous practices across dynasties and will surely be able to continue to do so. However, one must hope for more than this, and historical recognition of the Copts' presence and treatment in Egypt is a vital step forward in encouraging active discussion.

Echoing the struggles of indigenous communities worldwide—be it in North America, Latin America, or Australia—the Copts have confronted analogous challenges: suppression of the Coptic language, burning of churches, persecution, pogroms, gender-based violence, and systemic marginalization. Yet, as the recognition of the above indigenous communities has shown, recognising indigenous people's identities and histories is a painful process but pivotal for history. The modern Coptic identity is indeed ethno-religious but also indigenous, and recognition is vital for positive interfaith relations.

Whilst I must admit the Pharonicism I was taught to understand my positionality between ancestors and descendants is an embarrassing and funny story, it continues to remind me of the importance of remembering my own identity and, through it, the history of the people I write to and for in this essay.

Mariam Habib Matta, London School of Economics and Political Science