Two Pharaohs

In countless cartoons, fictional scenes, and dialogues (muhawarat), the journalist Ya'qub Sanu', an Egyptian Jew of Italian descent, derided Isma'il for acting the Pharaoh in the pages of his popular colloquial periodical, *Abu Naddara*. The depictions appearing in the late 1870s were unflattering, harsh, and hilarious, poking fun at the tyranny, capriciousness, and illegitimacy of Egypt's Turko-Circassian rulers as well as their supposed lack of religion. How did these images of Pharaoh, which had more to do with age-old Qur'anic narratives than with recent Egyptological discoveries, come into being? The answer to this question goes to the root of colonial rule in Egypt: as public intellectuals like Sanu' grasped the injustices of the emergent colonial order, they found inspiration in those traditions of considering ancient Egypt that modern education had begun to eclipse.

The development projects of Egypt's nineteenth-century rulers were expensive. By 1876, as Khedive Isma'il began to default on his loans, British and French interests had established the Commission of the Public Debt, which oversaw increasingly greater shares of the Egyptian economy. The loss of economic sovereignty was bound to create serious political repercussions, and in 1879 the commission forced Isma'il to abdicate, replacing him with Tawfiq, whose inexperience they correctly guessed would play in their favor during the tempestuous negotiations over Egypt's finances. Rather than resolve Egypt's economic and political crisis, Tawfiq's accession only intensified the resentment felt by Egyptians. Not only did they direct their anger at Europeans for their hegemonic position in Egypt's economy, they also challenged the Turko-Circassian elites whose spending had largely created the debt crisis. It did not help that these same elites appeared all too willing to capitulate Egypt's sovereignty in order to
maintain their privileges over Egypt’s Arabic-speaking populace. In 1881, questions about undue foreign influence and the legitimacy of Tawfiq’s rule became intractable. In the army, ethnic Egyptian junior officers chafed at a new draft law that officially reserved the military’s higher ranks for Turko-Circassian elites. Under the leadership of a junior Egyptian officer of peasant descent, Col. Ahmad ‘Urabi, Egyptian officers petitioned Tawfiq to consider their protest. Tawfiq replied by ordering their arrest. By the time their regiments rescued ‘Urabi and the others from the barracks in which they were being detained, an uprising was under way in the military ranks. As others, including ethnic Egyptian notables, constitutionalists, discontented Ottoman elites, and peasants, joined ‘Urabi, the demands widened: first, representation in the government, and then a constitution.

To Egypt’s creditors, the situation was alarming. Not surprisingly, both the French and British opposed the new government. Likewise, European powers were frightened by the reformers’ demands for an end to the system of extraterritoriality known as the capitulations, which gave European citizens special privileges in Egypt’s freewheeling economy. As the power of the nationalists grew, the British and the French turned increasingly anxious. As Tawfiq saw his power waning, he turned more and more to the French and British ambassadors for help. In 1882, when it began to seem only a matter of time before the Assembly would depose Tawfiq, the British and the French began to move more openly to support him. After British warships anchored in Alexandria’s harbor in a show of strength, riots between Egyptians and foreign nationals broke out in the city. The British responded by bombarding the city, devastating much of it. Invited by Tawfiq, British troops landed. Within weeks they defeated the Egyptian army and arrested ‘Urabi and other members of the nationalist government. Egypt fell under British colonial rule.

By all accounts, Sanu’ was the most articulate journalist supporting ‘Urabi’s government. A publisher, satirist, and fiction writer, Sanu’ is credited with coining the nationalist slogan of the era: Egypt for the Egyptians. Throughout this period Sanu’ spoke out vehemently against the abuses and structural injustices of the international finance system that had created Egypt’s debt crisis: from the usurious practices of European financiers to the foreign political and military cliques who enforced the power of the banks. He complained about corrupt local elites and inept notables,
and how peasants were forced to bear the economic and social burdens of the Pashas’ bankrupting development schemes. At one point, Isma’il Pasha had been Sanu’’s patron. But as the debt crisis intensified, Sanu’’s criticism of the ruler became increasingly sharp and daring. Among the many forms his criticism took, Sanu’ drew on Pharaonic images in the struggle he waged in the pages of *Abu Naddara*.

When Isma’il closed *Abu Naddara*, Sanu’ moved to Paris. There he continued to publish the journal, changing its name and appearance often to fool censors and customs officials. After the end of the ‘Urabi revolt, his printing shop became a regular meeting place for other exiles from Egypt, from Muhammad ‘Abduh to Jalal al-Din al-Afghani. Though illegal, copies of *Abu Naddara* were smuggled into Egypt, where they were especially popular with Egyptians who had supported the ‘Urabi revolt. When Isma’il was deposed and sent into exile in 1879, *Abu Naddara* took special delight in the fall of the tyrant, that is, the modern Pharaoh. In a long fictional dialogue published in the pages of one of the instantiations of his journal, Sanu’ resurrects Mehmed ‘Ali Pasha, who is appalled by the state of Egypt under Isma’il. He puts the latter on trial. Isma’il’s prosecutor, the persona of Abu Naddara, exclaims, “Isma’il! Isma’il! . . . You have ruined Egypt and made its children unhappy. Unbridled liar! Wicked hypocrite! I have not forgotten your words when you mounted the throne of the great Mehmed ‘Ali. You said: ‘ . . . I will open the eyes of my subjects to the lamp of civilization! . . . Under my reign, Egypt will be happier than it was under the Pharaohs, more resplendent and glorious than it was under the Ptolemies!’ . . . But alas, you misled us. Later you betrayed us. And finally, you murdered us!” Isma’il responds to his accuser, “I dug canals, I imported machines . . . and I followed the French formula: liberté, égalité, fraternité!” The ‘ulama’ then step forward to make their case against Isma’il: “The infidel Isma’il is mistaken! May God’s curse fall on him!” Tawfiq is similarly tried and is told, “Just as Pharaoh and Haman were punished on earth, so too will you and your father be.” At this point in the story, “Six large peasants armed with whips seize the two tyrants,” who are then beaten, fed slow poison, and drowned in the Nile.

Isma’il and Tawfiq were not the only rulers of modern Egypt to be called Pharaohs. This ancient Egyptian figure of tyranny was famously invoked again a few years later to refer to Evelyn Baring (later Lord Cromer), the former head of the commission who governed Egypt from the outset of
the British occupation. Cromer ruled Egypt for a quarter of a century and resigned shortly during the economic collapse of 1907, just months after the Dinshiway incident and trial, in which a number of Egyptians were unjustly tried and executed. For Egyptians (and many others), the incident illustrated the injustice and gross negligence of decades of British rule, and they were glad to see Cromer leave. For his part, Cromer was unapologetic and used his departure as an occasion to boast about the legacy of British rule. Congratulating England for the favors it had done for Egypt, Cromer concluded that Egypt was still not ready for self-government, reiterating the same theme of modern Egyptian stagnation and decline that appears throughout his writing: “Can any sane man believe that a country which has for centuries past been exposed to the worst forms of misgovernment at the hands of its rulers, from Pharaohs to Pashas, and in which, but ten years ago, only 9.5 per cent of the men and 3 per cent of the women could read and write, is capable of suddenly springing into a position which will enable it to exercise full rights of autonomy?” In a farewell address at the Cairo Opera House in May 1907, Cromer singled out for attack the nineteenth-century rulers of Egypt, from Mehmed ‘Ali to Isma’il Pasha. The audience, which included many Egyptian notables, sat in silence. The furor created by Cromer’s parting shots prompted a number of Egyptians to reply to Cromer’s address. Only days after the speech, the Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi published these lines, which remain among the greatest of neoclassical Arabic poetry:

Are these your times, or those of Isma’il? Or are you Pharaoh lording over the Nile?
Or are you absolute ruler in the land of Egypt, never questioning, never responding?
O you who enslaves necks with your power, could you not have taken a path to men’s hearts?
When you departed, the country thanked God, as if you were an incurable disease taking leave.

While the gist of Shawqi’s attack on Cromer is clear, his citation of Pharaoh is slightly complicated. In the first line of the poem, Shawqi asks about whether Egypt’s present moment belongs to Cromer, Isma’il Pasha, or Pharaoh before them. Shawqi appears to be compiling a list of despots,
punctuated by the figure of Pharaoh. In this reading, the poem invokes the figure of ancient Pharaoh to criticize Cromer’s tyranny in the present: like Pharaoh, he has established himself as the absolute sovereign; like Pharaoh, the colonial viceroy rules by force and violence. Shawqi continues:

You threatened us with perpetual slavery and continuing humiliation, and a state of being that would never see change,
Did you think that God was less powerful than you, incapable of effecting change or alteration?
God rules over kings, and states that vie with him for power do not last. Before you Pharaoh was greater in strength, and a mightier backer to have in this world.8

Here again, the subject is Cromer’s tyranny and injustice. There is nothing ambiguous in his accusation that the British ruler had attempted, like Pharaoh, to place himself on the level of God. Yet Shawqi makes a distinction: while Cromer’s tyranny may resemble that of Pharaoh, the scope of his power falls far short. Shawqi’s figure is thus not merely a citation of a received figure—“Pharaoh as tyrant”—but a careful poetic reinvention of it. Pharaoh here articulates the despotism of the British viceroy while also insisting upon the superiority of Egypt’s ancient past over its colonial present.

Though mainstream literary Pharaonism often imagined the rulers of ancient Egypt as benign, others were there to remind Egyptians of the less savory aspects of ancient Egyptian life. The figure of tyrannical Pharaoh has recurred at key moments in modern Egyptian history, to refer to rulers who abuse the power they wield or who fail to use it for the right and the good. As Shawqi’s poem illustrates, the modern reference to Pharaoh is not a mere citation of a very old tradition, but something new. At the same time, the persistence of the negative figurative tradition of Pharaoh indicates an abiding tension within the modern appreciation of the ancient past.