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FEATHERED BRIDES AND BRIDLED FERTILITY: ARCHITECTURE, RITUAL, AND CHANGE IN A NORTHERN EGYPTIAN VILLAGE

The village of al-Bakatush in the Nile Delta region of Egypt maintains a custom which has not been documented by researchers from any other region of Egypt or the rest of the Arab world. During Ramadan, the inhabitants of al-Bakatush apply mud, brightly colored paint, and roughly fashioned figurines adorned with feathers to a specific location on the exterior of their homes. Each day at sunset during Ramadan, when the call to prayer signals the end of the day's fast, adolescent boys fight mock battles with families as they attempt to capture these "brides" by prying the figurines off the walls and then delivering them to the threshold of the central mosque of the village where they are crumbled back into dirt and scattered. The key issue explored in this study is the socially constructed connection between a particular architectural feature, the mastaba (a mud-brick bench attached to the façades of most traditional houses in the village), local ideas and rituals concerning fertility, and the impact of sudden architectural change in the region. The data for this paper were collected by the author from fieldwork conducted in 1983, 1986–87, and 1988.

The study of ritual has achieved an important position in both anthropology and folklore. Although scholars of architectural history have frequently highlighted the connection between monumental architecture and the rituals of state, the insights of ritual studies have far less often been applied to the analysis of vernacular architecture.1 In what follows, I shall attempt to demonstrate a critical interaction between the various social forces which have resulted in rapid changes in both architecture and social mores in a single Egyptian village over the course of one decade, 1983–93. First I will offer a description of the Ramadan mastaba ritual as it was found in the village of al-Bakatush until the mid-1980's and highlight a series of structural relationships which appear to have helped constitute the ritual's significance and continuation until that time. Then I will present an overview of the competing social ideas which have led to dramatic change in the vernacular domestic architecture of the village and which in turn have led to changes in village patterns of etiquette concerning greetings, entering a house, visitation patterns, and, coincidentally, the demise of the Ramadan mastaba ritual. The primary focus throughout is on the descriptions and analysis offered by the inhabitants of al-Bakatush themselves, that is, upon their perceptions and evaluations of change and conflict, as evidenced in lengthy conversations and interviews conducted during the three separate periods of fieldwork.

ARCHITECTURE AND RITUAL

The village of al-Bakatush is located on the flat, alluvial plain of the Nile Delta, about one hundred kilometers north of Cairo and some twenty-five kilometers from the city of Disfuq on the western branch of the Nile which flows on through Rosetta to the Mediterranean. It is the largest village in a region of several square miles and is surrounded by nearly a dozen smaller villages and hamlets, all of which look to al-Bakatush as their mother village. The population of al-Bakatush is well over 12,000 people and might therefore warrant the label "town" to outsiders; however, the indigenous categories of hamlet (izbah), village (qarya), town (bandar), and city (madina) are quite distinct. Although al-Bakatush is a large village, it indeed is a village, for it has only a weekly rather than a daily market; it possessess no central commercial street or space for shops; and it is not directly served by either trains or buses. At least one of these features would be necessary for al-Bakatush to be regarded as a town by the local population.

From the train stop, it is a kilometer and a half to the village itself, a walk which takes one through the seasonal textures of the village fields and past various types of irrigation systems, both ancient waterwheels (s. sagiya) and Archimedean water screws (s. tambur) and various sizes of modern gas-motor-driven pumps. The approach to the village from any direction is through open fields and
small irrigation canals flanked by willows, eucalyptus, and mulberry trees.

Once one enters the village proper, however, one finds a radically different environment. There are few traces of greenery or vegetation of any sort; the only open spaces are those of work areas reserved for threshing, winnowing, and drying grains. The interior of the village is a densely constructed, tightly packed, yet haphazardly divided and angled space. Traditional houses built of brown or “raw” brick are powerful, angular, almost monumental forms which create self-contained environments of dark, cool, protected, private interiors (fig. 1).²

There is very little in the way of intermediate zone between the private interior and public exterior of these house forms. The main entrance is either a heavy wooden doorway large enough to accommodate farm animals (donkeys, cows, water buffalo, and even, in some families, camels) within which is set a smaller, lighter doorway for people, or a double wooden door, one side of which is left open for people to use and the other side opened when necessary to accommodate animals (fig. 2). The traditional floor plan relegates the central entrance hall to domestic, and therefore primarily female, work; the large doors to the outside world are therefore seldom left wide open, but rather are usually standing slightly ajar throughout the day.

The mandara, or men’s sitting room, is the only space in the house to which outsiders are readily admitted; it is customarily used for entertaining male guests and is typically furnished with benches along three walls and, in wealthier families, chairs.³ When family members sit together, it is often on reed mats in the central hall. The mandara’s location to the immediate right or left of the main entrance makes it easily identifiable even from the exterior of the building, and accessible without passing through more private areas of the house — guests pass only momentarily through the central hall when entering the mandara. In addition, a recognized convention of