

Using Social Studies Themes to Investigate Modern Egypt

Janie Hubbard

Many elementary teachers explore the marvels of ancient Egypt with their students, as evidenced by the numerous available websites on this topic for teaching elementary history. The drama and mystery of ancient civilizations with treasures such as mummies, King Tut, and the Giza Pyramids are intriguing to children, yet there is another layer of fascinating topics awaiting investigation in today's Egypt.

After teaching in Egypt for several years, my reflections suggest additional appropriate topics, for elementary students, that reveal the essence of modern Egypt by focusing on three themes—**1 CULTURE; 2 PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS; AND 3 PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION**—from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.

Theme 1: Culture

Teachers can help students recognize how too much attention to exotica might interfere with cultural understandings. Substantive culture teaching aims for a balance between teaching cultural differences and commonalities.¹ Researching and comparing today's diverse Egyptian cultures can aid young students in identifying common universal characteristics among cultures. Egypt, like other nations, has regional differences associated with historical traditions and geography. When teaching Egyptian culture and how it has changed, it is also natural to refer to similarities with the evolving culture of the United States. Doing so

helps students begin to understand that humans often create changes to accommodate different ideas and beliefs. Both friendly and hostile interactions with others may influence such cultural elements as religion, politics, food, language, and societal norms.

Though remains of human development, found near Abu Simbel, date back to 700,000 B.C., the Early Dynastic Period (a 500-year period) is commonly considered the beginning of Ancient Egyptian history and the formative stage of its culture.² Traits in Ancient Egyptian culture include the Divine kingship form of government, a polytheistic religion hosting about 700 different gods and goddesses, and writing that evolved from a few simple hieroglyphic signs to several hundred that include both phonetic and ideographic values. The famed Rosetta Stone helped scholars learn that early Egyptian language consisted of a combination of Egyptian hieroglyphics, Greek, and a Coptic Christian language.³

Today, Egypt's diverse cultural groups maintain distinctively different customs, social arrangements, and

religions that, like in ancient times, greatly impact the overall culture. Islamic armies from Arabia invaded Egypt in 640. The following year, Cairo was conquered, and in 647, the city of Alexandria surrendered, bringing Muslim rule to the whole country. Consequently, today indigenous cultural groups speak Arabic and most people are intensely devout Muslims. The Coptic Christians, a once proliferate religious group, founded around 42 A.D., now only represent about 13 percent of the population. The modern official language, Arabic, has replaced the ancient Coptic language that was used as early as the fourth century by the Coptic Church of Egypt.

Bedouins, a nomadic, tribal people who wandered the central Sinai desert with sheep, goats, and camels for centuries, still exist. It is difficult for the government to calculate the number of Bedouins in Egypt because of their wandering nature, however, government policies such as schooling and law enforcement, oil production, and a desire for improved standards of living have influenced many Bedouins to become settled citizens.⁴ Bedouins live in and around el Arish, a wadi (valley) and town built around an original Bedouin camp. Traditionally, Bedouin brides in Egypt wore black dresses adorned with brightly colored embroidery or cross-stitch and veils



The three pyramids seen through a palm grove, Cairo, Egypt. Matson Photo Service, 1936 (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-matpc-00273).

covered with dowry coins. Today, the women, many who are artisans, create colorful, exquisitely embroidered dresses, shawls, pillow covers, and scarves to sell each Thursday to tourists in the marketplace.

The Nubians are the people of northern Sudan and southern Egypt. Their homeland is that of Africa's earliest black culture with a history traced from 3,800 B.C. In antiquity, Nubia was a land of great natural resources, gold mines, ebony, ivory, and incense, but later the economy became primarily one of agriculture. Date exporting was the most important source of income in the early 1900s, before the construction of the first Aswan Dam. The height of this dam, raised three times in 75 years, caused changes that reduced cultivation to four months out of the year. At that time, vegetables, cultivated in small amounts, became the main source of income. Therefore, many of the men gave up farming and traveled long distances to work, returning home only a couple of times per year. By the 1960s, Nubians lost the last of their ancient homeland when Egypt built the Aswan High Dam that formed Lake Nasser. The area flooded and washed away many of the Nubians'

historical sites and monuments. Nubian people reluctantly settled in and around Aswan and villages to its north. Under United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) auspices, the Nubian temples at Abu-Simbel were moved and reconstructed (1963–68) to a cliff above the old site. As a gift for its financial assistance in this project, Egypt gave a nearby temple built by the Romans, the Temple of Dendur, to the United States in 1965. This temple is now displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Climate, wind, and religion all influence clothing customs. Because of the extreme heat, both women and men wear galabeyas, long, loose fitting dress-like garments, when at home or not working. Cotton scarves, wound around heads and faces, shield men against glaring sun or sweeping desert winds that constantly carry dust and sand even into the cities. Although modern Egyptians usually dress much as Westerners for the workplace, the teachings of the Qur'an strongly encourage Muslim women to cover their hair with scarves, and a Muslim woman's arms are never publicly bare. Because of current interpretations of the Qur'an, many women wear abayas,

caftan-like outer garments, and niqabs, veils concealing all of the face except the eyes, as signs of modesty. Hijab, a word that means to veil or cover, refers to a woman's commitment to dress and behave modestly. With this trend, designers and manufacturers have discovered a growing market for fashionable Islamic women's clothing.

These days, Egyptian entertainment and art can be traced to origins from Islamic traditions. For example, a Whirling Dervish is a religious movement that has transcended to a performing art. The Sufi, a mystic order of Islam, has performed this "dance" for about 700 years. "The performer 'turns' or whirls endlessly while manipulating skirts in a colorful display..."⁵; the ceremony represents a spiritual journey towards love and truth. Sharing this website with a video example of an Egyptian Whirling Dervish dancer, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jj4xl6jYom4, is a way to introduce a continuance of an Islamic tradition in action.

The Hajj paintings are another form of folk art inspired by Islam. The pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia is considered the most important experience of a Muslim's life, for both the rich and poor. Especially in Upper Egypt, professional as well as untrained painters record these journeys on the outside walls of homes. The mode of travel to Mecca, the pilgrim's experiences after arriving, and symbols of the welcome-home celebration of a Hajj, along with pictures of common farm life, are proudly displayed on a pilgrim's home for all to see. Moinard interviews a modern day Hajj painter and describes his technique,

Like other artists, Badr has a basic overall design for each of his murals: He includes a rectangle above the front door in which are placed the name of the pilgrim and the date that the hajj took place; adjoining this, he paints the Ka'bah [sanctuary at Mecca and object of the pilgrimage] and the Prophet's Mosque, with an airplane to one side, then

A couple stands on a bridge on the Nile during Valentine's day in Cairo, February, 14, 2010. Reuters/Asmaa Waguih



appropriate Qur'anic verses to enhance the final effect.⁶(¶ 27).

Examples of real life photos depicting Hajj paintings, published by the American University in Cairo Press, are presented in the book *Hajj Paintings: Folk Art of the Great Pilgrimage*, by Ann Parker and Avon Neal. As part of studying Egyptian culture, students might create similar type murals in their classrooms, perhaps basing individual pictures on travels they have made.

Restaurants in large cities such as Cairo prepare a variety of foods from around the world. Traditional Egyptian cuisine, though, has special characteristics that blend ancient cuisine with Middle Eastern and European products. Foods created with dates, from the many date palm trees, along with fresh

seasonal fruits and vegetables, grown along the Nile River, are common. The cost of food greatly affects everyday life, thus many staple meals are made with nutritious beans and inexpensive, yet filling, carbohydrates. Two daily staples of the Egyptian diet are bread and beans. Eeish (life) Baladi bread is round, coated with bran, and used to dip and scoop up various foods. Ful consists of brown fava beans, slowly cooked and served with olive oil; this is popular for breakfast but served with any meal. Koshari is another national dish made with a combination of rice, lentils, and macaroni topped with caramelized onions and accompanied by a spicy tomato sauce.

Theme 3 - People, Places, and Environments

The theme of *People, Places, and*

Environments helps students focus on making informed and critical decisions about the relationships between human beings and their environment.⁷ In Ancient Egypt, physical geography significantly influenced human practices, and it continues today.

Throughout Egyptian history, two of the most important landforms for human movement have been the Nile River and the Sinai Peninsula. Their functions, though, have evolved as the country has grown more economically dependent on tourism, and this process, in turn, has impacted cultures in positive and negative ways.

The Nile, the longest river in the world, has supported settlement for about 5,000 years and affected the agriculture, commerce, architecture, art, calendar, and religion of ancient people. Today, its

waters are still vital for irrigation and traditional transportation and commerce; however, recreational cruises, dinner boats, and feluccas (small party boats) have greatly expanded the Nile's economic opportunities for people.

The Sinai Peninsula, located between the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Red Sea to the east, serves as a natural land bridge to Asia. The 1978 Camp David Accords returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt from Israel; the clear, turquoise waters are habitats for exotic marine creatures and popular destinations for global trekkers who enjoy sunshine and water sports. The Sinai's Biblical significance also attracts another group of visitors. The economic rewards of tourism on the peninsula have encouraged resort development and displaced some Bedouin tribes.

International meetings are often held at these same resorts and are mentioned in the news. Many U.S. presidents and delegates have attended conferences in Sharm-el-Sheikh throughout the years, especially in support of peace efforts between Israel and Palestine. Most recently, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attended the International Gaza Reconstruction Conference held in Sharm-el-Sheikh where she pledged continued U.S. commitment to comprehensive peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors.⁸

People in Egypt adapt to harsh climates and benefit from the natural resources within their control. The Sahara Desert, the largest non-polar desert in the world, spans about 3,000 miles across Northern Africa. Sand is abundant, and Egyptians have successfully mastered it in creative ways. Sand continues to provide the basis of concrete structures for millions of city dwellers; it is rare to see a house or apartment building built of wood or even red brick. Rural homes usually consist of hand-made mud bricks and palm frond roofs. Glassblowing, as a craft, traces back 3,800 years in Egypt. Modern-day glassblowers use sand to produce fashionable perfume bottles,

beads, and Christmas ornaments sold to tourists in markets and souvenir shops. The natural sand sculptures of the White Desert are primary examples of landforms created by wind erosion, and Wadi Al-Hitan (Whale Valley), about 150 miles southwest of Cairo, is the site of hundreds of primitive whale fossils, a species now extinct. Desert locations, such as these, are popular recreational and academic research destinations for people of all ages.

Young learners, investigating the environment, study about landforms, but more importantly, they should realize why certain landforms are critical for the livelihood of humans who live in specific locations and how people symbolize their dependency and gratitude. Discussing reasons why the Nile River is so vital for sustaining life in Egypt leads students to make further connections about why the river was consistently represented in ancient art, architecture, religion, and the calendar. Additionally, discussing products that Egyptians create from the Sahara Desert's sand may prompt students to examine how some, less obvious, natural resources are managed and used in local environments. People find ways to use what is available to them within their environments. An essential understanding for students is that humans not only interact with their environments, but also are dependent on them in economic and personal ways.

Theme 7 - Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Examining economic decisions and comparing their own economic experiences with those of others widens the knowledge of the consequences of decisions on groups, communities, nations, and the world.⁹ Egypt's present-day economy relies on tourism, agriculture, textiles, and some industries such as cement and fertilizers. The country is self-sufficient with petroleum and receives additional income from the Suez Canal. Other modern aspects of Egypt's economy include the stock exchange, telecommunications, and the television and film industry. The

Egyptian Exchange (EGX), the stock exchange which began during the late 1800s, is a premier capital market in the Middle East and North African Region benefiting Egyptian and international clients. Egypt is one of the world's fastest growing locations for global outsourcing services, and Telecom Egypt, which supplies modern telephone and Internet services, has been steadily expanding for 150 years. A new television and cinema production center, one of the largest of its kind outside of Hollywood, has strengthened Egypt's century-old media entertainment industry. Although rich in natural and manmade resources, Egypt still struggles with providing for its rapidly escalating population, which affects the distribution of wealth.

While Egyptians use their natural resources, they also manage their unnatural resources. Over 17,000 garbage collectors and their families live in Mokattam Hills, southeast of Cairo. There they collect, sort, recycle, and resell the garbage of Cairo's large population. According to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, the zabbaleen, garbage collectors, were originally Coptic Christian farm laborers living in a village outside of Cairo. During the 1930s, poor opportunities and failed crops forced them to work as garbage collectors, creating garbage villages around the city.¹⁰ By the 1970s, there was a growing interest to help these villagers help themselves to improve their conditions. Within the village, today, a program sponsored by the Association for the Protection of the Environment trains young women from the most disadvantaged families to recycle rag scraps and reuse them to produce rugs and quilts. This venture, as well as another paper-recycling project, helps elevate the status of young women while also providing classes aimed at raising awareness of health issues related to child birth and care. Another interesting point about Mokattam Hills is that Mansheiyet Nasser, the mountain behind the village, contains seven beautiful Christian churches and chapels carved within its walls. The churches are a tribute to the

USEFUL WEBSITES

Ancient Egyptian Gods, www.globalegyptianmuseum.org/

Ancient Egyptian Society and Family Life, fathom.lib.uchicago.edu/2/21701778/

The Association for the Protection of the Environment, www.ape.org/eg/overview.html

Aswan Dam, www.infoplease.com/ce6/world/A0856748.html

Bedouin—New World Encyclopedia (2008, June 4), www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bedouin?oldid=725530

The Bedouin Way, www.geographia.com/egypt/sinai/bedouin02.htm

Coptic Christians of Egypt, www.touregypt.net/featuresstories/copticchristians.htm

Egyptian Economy & Religion, countrystudies.us/egypt/

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Khan el-Khalili, www.touregypt.net/khan.htm

Modern Egyptian Women and Clothing, www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1886206_1858237,00.html

Nile River, www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/415347/Nile-River

Nubian Immigration – Colonization Project at Lake Nasser, www.tt.fh-koeln.de/semesterprojects_extern/reg_plan/nubia.htm

Nubia: Lost Civilization of Egypt, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7963042.stm

Nubia Museum, www.numibia.net/nubia/nubia.htm

Mokattam Hills (Recycling Project for Girls), www.un.org/Pubs/CyberSchoolBus/habitat/units/un06txt6.asp

Mokattam Hills – People & Places: Curriculum Resources on Human Environmental Interactions, www.outreach.world.org/Files/u_texas/cairo_zabballeen.pdf

The Monastery of St. Simon the Tanner at Mokattam Hills, www.touregypt.net/featuresstories/tanner.htm

Mount Sinai (Biblical Site), www.geographia.com/egypt/sinai/stcatherine.html

Ramses II Temple – Saved by the UNESCO, whc.unesco.org/en/list/88

Rural Egyptian Life, pagesperso-orange.fr/agrisport-france2/egitto.htm

Sahara Desert Map, geology.com/records/sahara-desert-map.shtml

Sharm el-Sheikh (City of Peace), www2.sis.gov.eg/En/Tourism/famouscities/sharmskhiekh/060603000000000001.htm

Temple of Dendur (Metropolitan Museum of Art), www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/68.154

Whale Valley, whc.unesco.org/en/list/1186

Whirling Dervish (Film), www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jj4xl6jYom4

ingenious artisans who created them and the villagers who carefully maintain them today.

Vegetable and fruit vendors tempt pedestrians with tastes; it may be a strawberry, an orange, or a juicy, red tomato; making the daily economy of Egypt visible to anyone on the street. Butchers grind and chop beef or lamb while you wait; however, pork for sale is almost nonexistent as the Qur'an forbids Muslims to partake or handle it. In towns, there are small, independent shops (kiosks) for bread, keys, electrical supplies and paper products, while street peddlers sell wares such as fish, flowers, and buffalo hair rugs. The most famous of all the markets is the Khan el-Khalili, in Cairo, established in 1382 and still thriving. There are literally hundreds of shops both inside and outside the buildings, and although it is true that tourists shop for souvenirs there, Egyptians purchase and provide the market with household goods, fabrics, and other daily supplies. Most of the shops, for specific goods, cluster together creating sections in the market place, such as the area for coppersmiths. Like many of the markets in Egypt, the prices are not fixed, and vendors expect shoppers to negotiate for an agreed upon price.

Introducing young students to economic concepts and language requires authentic experiences and discussions. Experiences related to other nations can accomplish vocabulary and concept learning. Examining photographs of the Khan el-Khalili market demonstrates to students that people in other cultures visit markets, instead of malls. In the classroom, students might role-play market negotiations with vendors to gain perspectives about how people buy and sell. The recycling center in Mokattam Hills also reflects examples of modern-day consumption, recycling, and social responsibility decisions in Egypt.

Conclusion

The topic descriptions offered here only scratch the surface of attempting to refocus studies of Egypt to include more than

exotic, ancient history. Consider that further inquiries may advance learning, while simultaneously teaching concepts, generalizations, and skills related to other social studies themes. For instance, Theme 9 *Global Connections* highlights the importance of understanding diverse global connections among world societies. Older students might peruse journal and newspaper articles for information related to the international peace conferences held in Sharm el-Sheikh or the 1978 Camp David Accords. Students also might be curious about why the Aswan High Dam, which displaced some Nubian people, was considered necessary. In this

case, students might also reflect on questions in Theme 8 - *Science, Technology, and Society*, such as how new technologies might result in anticipated as well as unanticipated social change, or how the greatest number of people can benefit from technological advances. Theme 10 *Civic Ideals and Practices* includes the decisions citizens and politicians make and can be addressed when students discuss, form opinions, and debate the moral issues related to technological progress. Prompting questions to accomplish this include: Are traditional cultures helped, displaced, or changed by “progress” from tourism, technology, politics, or religion?

What is worth preserving? What is OK to give up? Who should make these choices?

Within the context of learning about Egypt, many of the social studies themes can be connected to illustrate the application of social studies concepts and generalizations. Consider supplementing your next study of ancient Egypt with topics that extend and expand your students', often old, perceptions of Egypt to include the present. Keep digging for information and, along the way, more and more treasures will be revealed! 🗺️

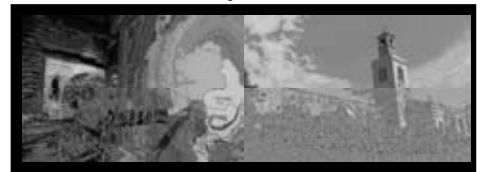
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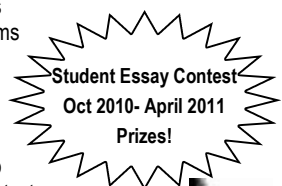
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