The Fellahin of Upper Egypt
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Winifred S. Blackman

The Fellahin of Upper Egypt

With a new introduction by
Salima Ikram

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Introduction

by Salima Ikram

The Fellahin of Upper Egypt, first published in 1927, is very unusual in concentrating on the social, economic, and religious life of the Egyptian fellahin in the early part of the twentieth century. Ethnographic studies of any sort are relatively scarce in Egypt, perhaps because the emphasis has been more on the antique than the contemporary. What studies exist have tended to focus on Bedouins or, more recently, on urban issues. Prior to the Second World War, aside from a scant handful of books and a few articles, there is little published by anthropologists, especially in English, on the habits, beliefs and customs of the inhabitants of rural Egypt.

The author is no less unusual than the book. Winifred Susan Blackman, born 14 August 1872, was the eldest of five children born to the Reverend James Henry Blackman (1844-1913) and his wife Ann Mary (née) Jacob (1846-1941). Information about her early life is meager. One might suppose her to have engaged in all the usual activities of a clergyman’s daughter in the Victorian era. But Blackman did not limit herself to these. After the family had settled in Oxford in the early part of the century, she attended the university in an affiliated capacity, reading anthropology, a rather unorthodox choice for a woman of her background. Blackman was active in her subject and served as secretary to the Oxford Anthropology Society for several years. She was at Oxford at a time when few women entered the world of academia, and even fewer studied anthropology. She completed her course and took her diploma in Anthropology in 1915: until the 1920s women were awarded diplomas, not degrees, at Oxbridge, despite attending the same lectures and sitting the same examinations as men. Winifred was not the only Blackman to study at Oxford. Aylward M. Blackman, Winifred’s younger brother and junior by almost eleven years read Egyptology there. Brother and sister went on to work together and, as their publications show, to influence each other in their work.

Winifred Blackman worked at the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, as an assistant to Henry Balfour, the then curator, for at least eight years, both before and after receiving her diploma (1913-20). There her work entailed cataloguing charms and amulets from all over the world: no doubt the catalyst for her later interest in magico-medical ideas and practices, so much evident in her fieldwork in Egypt. She was also employed as the librarian of the Social Anthropology department, and the assistant to R. R. Marett, her former professor of social anthropology. During this time she published several articles in various journals and encyclopedias.
In 1920-21, at the already advanced age of 48, Blackman was appointed research student by the Oxford Committee for Anthropology. This funded position (a risible sum of money to start with: £25.00) enabled her to go to Egypt for the first time, and to embark on a lifetime’s study of the manners and customs of the Egyptian fellahin. Her country specialization was no doubt influenced by her brother’s accounts of working in Egypt, as well as her own predilections. Her work during this first visit to Egypt was done while she lived in a tomb at her brother’s camp at Meir, between Minya and Asyut. Her letters home to her family are effusive: “Everything is much better and more exciting than my wildest hopes” (letter to Mrs. A. Blackman, 1920); “I love being here . . . there is so much work to do. It is an untouched area and a very important one” (letter to Elsie Blackman, 1922). Her enthusiasm for rural Egypt was enormous, as was her desire to do as much serious research there as possible to fill the tremendous gap in anthropological literature concerning the fellahin and their customs. It was during this time (15 June 1920) that Blackman was elected Fellow of the Royal Anthropological Institute, sponsored by R. R. Marett and Henry Balfour.

From 1922 to 1926 Blackman headed the Percy Sladen Expedition to Egypt. As director of the expedition she could spend at least six months a year in Egypt; it was during this time that she collected much of the information found in The Fellahin of Upper Egypt as well as the material for the many articles that she published.

Most of Blackman’s fieldwork was concentrated in Middle Egypt in the Asyut region and in the Fayum, particularly in the area around al-Lahun. She took not only copious notes but also photographs that documented many aspects of daily life that, save for her images, would have remained unrecorded. Initially, at Meir, when she was learning Arabic from Ibrahim Narooz, the village schoolteacher and a fount of knowledge concerning local customs, informants would come to her. Narooz himself provided her with a great deal of information, and as Blackman’s diaries and correspondence attest, became interested in his local traditions to such an extent that he would write to Blackman whenever he came across something that he found interesting and astonishing. As Blackman’s knowledge of Arabic increased and she established good contacts with different villagers (in part thanks to her major-domo and friend Hideyb Abd el-Shafy and his wife Saida) she took to spending more time traveling between villages and going to informants, as well as attending mulids, zars, funerals, and birth rituals. Blackman’s informants came from all strata of village life: magicians, healers, women of all ages, headmen, beggars, priests, imams, potters, tattooists, and farmers. She became integrated into village life, especially in al-Lahun, Hideyb Abd el-Shafy’s village, and the place that she lived the longest in Egypt. She was the first and, until recently in many cases, only westerner to view certain rural Egyptian rites and practices such as the zar and many female fertility rituals. While in Egypt she became involved not only in recording folk remedies but in ‘doctoring’ women and children by
dispensing simple medicines and teaching basic hygiene in an attempt to
cure or at least diminish cases of eye and skin diseases. Whenever she
arrived in a new village several people (sometimes hundreds) would queue
up to be treated. This earned her the sobriquet ‘Sheikha Shifa,’ the Sheikha of
Healing.

The Fellahin of Upper Egypt appeared in 1927, and was, as Blackman
remarks, ‘a semi-popular volume’: an extremely accessible and readable
work written in a narrative style containing detailed case histories,
descriptions of festivals and events, and verbatim reports from her
informants. She wrote the book in order to engage the interest of the public
and to enlighten both lay and scholarly readerships in the hope of raising
additional funding for more thorough work in Egypt. Like many scholars,
Blackman was plagued by an absence of funding, perhaps even more so
than other contemporary male scholars due to her gender and her age.

Blackman was, despite these handicaps, partially successful in her bid to
raise funds, as she managed to attract the interest of Sir Henry Wellcome,
the pharmaceutical magnate. Between February 1927 and August 1933 she
received small but regular grants (£200–£300) from the Wellcome Historical
Medical Museum. Much of her time while working for Wellcome was spent
gathering information on magico-medical practices in rural Egypt, as well as
collecting charms, amulets, spells, and recipes for the Wellcome Museum
from the Fayum and in Cairo. Some of these, together with a catalog written
by Blackman, were sent to Amsterdam for an exposition on children in
Africa. Sir Henry Wellcome unfortunately severed the connection with her in
1933 once he felt that he had a sufficient number of representative objects
from Egypt. With the disbanding of the Wellcome Museum, these collections
were dispersed among the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford, the Science
There are now ongoing plans to establish a Wellcome Gallery at the British
Museum, where some of the Blackman collection will be displayed.

Indirect sources allow one to piece together Blackman’s activities from
1933 until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Letters to and
from her suggest that she was living in an apartment in Shubra, Cairo,
working on various books, and perhaps making an ethnographic collection
for what is now Cairo University, as well as giving lectures there. Letters of
recommendation written by Sir Arthur Evans (professor of classics), Professor
Langdon (Assyriology ), Professor Peet (anthropology), and R. R. Marett
(reader in social anthropology), supporting Winifred Blackman as a
candidate for such a university position survive. Her notebooks show that she
continued her investigations in magico-medical practices, although with a
Cairene focus rather than a Fayum one. It is curious that other Englishmen
and anthropologists, most notably Evans-Pritchard, who were living and
working in Cairo do not mention Blackman, and in turn, are not mentioned
by her.

Blackman appears to have been engaged in working on several books
during this period. As she states in her preface to The Fellahin of Upper
Egypt, she was occupied with a more scholarly work on the same subjects covered in that book. She had made a large collection of tattoos common in Egypt, for which she was hoping to provide a descriptive catalogue. She was also working on an extensive project on the Muslim and Coptic saints of Egypt in which she planned to list the saints, the dates and descriptions of their *mulids*, and any specific magico-religious practices associated with each one. In addition to these projects she was writing a general book about magico-medical practices common in the Fayum and Cairo. Unfortunately none of these projects was ever completed, although the notebooks and fragments of the various book manuscripts are kept in the archives of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Liverpool, where Aylward Blackman was professor from 1934 to 1938. Some of these are being prepared for publication.

The family continued to live in Liverpool until 1938, when Aylward retired from the university and the family moved to Wales. With the outbreak of war Winifred returned to Britain where, in December of 1941, the Blackman residence was destroyed in an air raid. Her mother died shortly thereafter, and the family, which consisted of Winifred, her younger sister Elsie, and Aylward, moved to another residence. Winifred Blackman did not return to Egypt after the close of the Second World War in 1945. At that time she was 73 years old. Perhaps it was age and infirmity that stopped her from completing any of her books, although some of them appear to have been nearing completion. She died at the age of 78 on 12 December 1950 in Denbigh, Wales, a few months after the death of her sister Elsie had caused her to have both a mental and a physical breakdown. She was survived by Aylward, who died in 1956.

Thus *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* is the only book that Winifred Blackman ever published. It was translated into French (1948), and recently into Arabic (1995). Although now the book is dated in terms of both writing and anthropological style, this should not detract from the fact that the information contained in this volume is unique and thoroughly researched. One should also remember that Blackman conceived of this as a ‘semi-popular’ volume and not a scholarly tome, which is why the tone is often quite personal. In going through Blackman’s notebooks held at the University of Liverpool, the thoroughness of her research methodology is clear. She records, checks, and re-checks from several different informants any material that she has gathered before committing it to print. Her notebooks are full of references to related works, cross-references, and injunctions to ‘check!’ or ‘confirm’ information. Blackman’s extensive and complementary photographic documentation, portions of which appear in her publications, is also an invaluable archive for folk traditions as well as agricultural technology and industries such as pottery and mat-making. Letters home mention using a ciné camera to document various activities such as harvesting, and it is unfortunate that the whereabouts of these films is currently unknown.

Blackman’s notebooks, book, and letters show that she was very concerned about the extinction of traditional beliefs and customs in Egypt. In
the preface to *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* she writes: “With the spread of education the old customs and beliefs are already beginning to die out. It is thus most important that they should be recorded at once, before they suffer complete extinction.” She therefore raced to record as much as she could before this occurred. Indeed, some of the practices that she documented have become less common and evolved somewhat, whether due to modernization or governmental pressures, leaving her publications as the only source of information now available. *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (together with some of Blackman’s articles, listed in her bibliography below) provides especially useful information on village women (fellahat) that is found nowhere else in the literature. Like other later women anthropologists, Blackman was in a unique position to gather information from both men and women. As a woman she had access to other women, who were happy to engage in dialogue with her. Her status as a European woman, or ‘honorary man,’ meant that men were prepared to do the same.

In *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* the authorial voice occasionally jars. Prejudices and tirades on cleanliness and women’s education can take over the narrative (as in Chapter 2). Here, one must remember that Blackman was the product of her environment: a clergyman’s daughter, and an ‘English Lady’ of the Victorian era, albeit an unusually well educated and daring one, with a feeling of responsibility to her fellows. Yet she was often equally critical of the British government’s policies in Egypt in general, and its attitude toward the fellahin in particular. Her letters and notebooks indicate that she saw herself not only as an anthropologist but as an Englishwoman in Egypt, and as such an ambassador for her country, who could improve the Egyptians’ views of the British. Such lapses from a more academic tone do however furnish a clearer idea of the author and her attitudes, and are therefore a useful indicator of bias.

Blackman thus occupies a unique position in the anthropological literature of Egypt. She was also remarkable for her contribution to Egyptology. First in conjunction with her brother and then later independently, Blackman worked on ties between ancient and modern Egyptian folk traditions. This early ethnoarchaeological work on ancient Egyptian survivals, many of which are outlined in the final chapter of *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, gained some small popularity in Egyptological circles, and Blackman’s work was well received as it explained several ancient Egyptian traditions and artefacts satisfactorily. The identification of a wheat arusa (a fertility symbol) in ancient Egypt, and the curious tradition of giving children’s hair as an offering are particularly notable. The use of ancient Egyptian amulets [or modern versions of ancient Egyptian amulets] and the magical properties assigned to ancient remains by the fellahin as described by Blackman are very interesting too. Additionally, her use of modern analogies to explain ancient Egyptian material culture are also of particular value as, once again, the use of ethnographic models to explain archaeology becomes more widespread. Blackman’s work on contemporary pottery manufacture, butchery, and mat-
making are a significant contribution too for the study of their ancient counterparts. Yet her name has not figured prominently in the history of either anthropology or Egyptology.

In the 1920s and 1930s, when Blackman was most active, her work did receive recognition and favorable reviews from contemporaries such as A. C. Haddon, Charles Seligman, and Beatrice Blackwood. As Blackwood (1889–1975), an anthropologist who followed and surpassed Blackman, wrote of Blackman’s work, “Although small in quantity, her published contribution to anthropology is valuable for its careful and detailed recording and scientific interpretation of data in a field where specialists are few” (Nature 4239, January 1951). However, as trends in anthropology and Egyptology moved on, much of her work was forgotten and discounted, as it was not considered orthodox or topical. One reason for this was that as Blackman spent so much time engaged in fieldwork she was unable to continue her professional development, ignoring changes in anthropological trends and theories, and her work consequently suffered professionally. In the later 1920s ethnographers, under the influence of Malinowski’s Argonauts of the Western Pacific (London, 1922), took a more problem-oriented focus, and accepted some form of functionalism as their basic framework, while Blackman continued in a more descriptive and less analytical vein. She was perhaps not totally unaware of developments in her field; in some instances she might have chosen to ignore them. In a letter to her sister Elsie (1924) she writes: “Often by just sitting and talking with the people you get a better insight into their minds than by doing what some people would call ‘systematic work on a pre-arranged plan.’”

Another reason for Blackman’s marginalization in anthropology might be that her chosen fields of Egyptian ethnography and ethnoarchaeology were of limited interest to most people. The majority of ‘acceptable’ and modish ethnographic studies concentrated on exotic tribes, rather than colonized peoples. Europeans worked mainly on sub-saharan Africa (with the exception of the ‘Nilotic’ peoples of Sudan), India, or Oceania, while Americans concerned themselves with the Native Americans, so it seems that among anthropologists Blackman’s reception was sometimes lukewarm. Indeed, there were few ethnographers working in the Near East, and even fewer women. Hilma Granqvist (1890–1972), the Finnish anthropologist who worked in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s and published extensively on the customs found in the village of Artas, was her sole female contemporary. Later on, a few other women7 started to work in the Near East and the Maghreb: Henny Hansen worked in Iraq and Bahrain in the 1950s, Isabelle Eberhardt in Algeria, and Mathé Gaudry with the Aures Berbers in the Maghreb and Algeria. The majority of the male ethnographers working in the Near East at roughly the same time, such as Alois Musil and H. R. Dickson, tended to concentrate on the Bedouin. Edward A. Westermarck, author of Ritual and Belief in Morocco (London, 1926) is the only contemporary male writer who comes close to doing in Morocco what Blackman did in Egypt.
Other anthropologists who received their training during the 1920s later followed different approaches to ethnography. Most seem to have adopted specific anthropological philosophies and doctrines, such as functionalism, in their approach. Blackman follows none of these, perhaps because her initial training took place at the turn of the century when ethnography was more descriptive and anecdotal, and thus less 'scientific.' However, she was very much a trailblazer for female anthropologists by not only obtaining one of the earliest diplomas in the subject from Oxford but also pursuing her work in the field at an advanced age and being the only anthropologist to study Egyptian village customs in the early part of the twentieth century. As Beatrice Blackwood points out in Blackman's obituary (Nature, no. 4239, January 1951), “Winifred Susan Blackman was one of the first women to adopt anthropology as a profession,” and a role model for others who followed.

Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Blackman's work is more important than ever before as the traditions, practices, and technologies that she documented are, for the most part, dying out, leaving The Fellahin of Upper Egypt as their most accessible record. Thanks to Blackman's careful recording, these Egyptian traditions are not lost to us today.

Notes
1. I would like to thank Patricia Winker and the Department of Archaeology at the University of Liverpool for their kindness, help, and hospitality when providing access to the Blackman archives. I am also grateful to Nicholas Hopkins for instigating, encouraging and helping with the republication of this book and spending many hours discussing Blackman and her contemporaries with me.
2. In the early part of the twentieth century, the ‘Nilotic’ cultures of southern Sudan rather than of the Egyptian Nile Valley have been the focus of anthropological attention. In the early part of this century the British government supported anthropologists’ work in that area, most notably CSeligman; there was no equivalent government anthropologist in Egypt.
3. Lyman H. Coult Jr.'s book, An Annotated Research Bibliography of Studies in Arabic, English, and French of the Fellah of the Egyptian Nile 1798-1955 (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami, 1958) has several listings, although many of the entries are government publications on village statistics or lists of villages written after 1940. Most of the earlier works mentioned in the bibliography tend to be travel writing, rather than more rigorous studies of village life. Notable exceptions are H. Ayrout's Fellahs d'Egypte (Cairo: Sphynx, 1952), and H. M. Anmar's Growing Up in an Egyptian Village: Silwa, Province of Aswan (London: Kegan Paul, 1954). A striking omission in Coult's book is the work of H. A. Winkler, whose books on rural Egypt are extremely useful (Bauern zwischen Wasser und Wüste (1934), Die reitenden Geister der Toten (1936), and Ägyptische Volkskunde (1936), all published in Stuttgart by Kohlhammer). There are several more recent anthropological studies of village life in the Nile Valley as well as of the oases that are too numerous to list here.
The Percy Sladen Memorial Fund sent anthropological expeditions all over the world.

In one of her letters home she writes that "other than Mrs. Seligman in the Sudan, I am the only Englishwoman to have witnessed a zar."

A roughly contemporary study, J. W. McPherson's _The Moulids of Egypt_, (Cairo: Nile Mission Press, 1941), does cover this. His work differs from Blackman's in focusing on larger moulids throughout Egypt and local Cairene moulids, while she concentrates on all moulids, large and small, in Middle Egypt.


Bibliography of Works by Winifred S. Blackman


Approximately 4,000 photographs in the University of Liverpool, Department of Archaeology archives.
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THE FELLĀḤĪN OF
UPPER EGYPT
ROPE-MAKING AT AKHMIM

The man seated in the centre of the picture is twisting the split and softened strands into a thin cord. See p. 161.
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TO

MY MANY EGYPTIAN FRIENDS

I DEDICATE THIS BOOK