

Nomad on the Nile* An International Conference in Cairo

by
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We arrived at the appointed hotel where we were welcomed by the Institute for African Research and Studies (IARS) staff who wanted to make sure that we were deprived of none of the pleasant civilities and unbegrudging hospitalities on which Egypt's reputation for genteel urbanity rests. This trait (a collective Egyptian predisposition to be hospitable to foreigners remarked on by many outsiders) may well have stemmed from a national survival instinct, given that they have had to receive guests--mostly unwelcome guests--for five thousand years.

The IARS staff reconfirmed the conference time schedule as January 5 (Saturday) through 10 (Thursday), 1985. One of them Dr. E. S. el-Badway, a man of winsome physique and warm personality, said genially: "Welcome, welcome, welcome." Then as if dissatisfied that English is not as adequate as Arabic in welcoming ceremonies, he said cheerfully: "Marhabah, marhabah marhabah." (I confess the juicy marhabah, with its tone of down-to-earth tent camaraderie, conveyed to me a more genuine gesture of hospitality than the bloodless "Welcome.") Badway's companion, whose name now escapes me, proceeded to distribute to the just-arrived guests brown satchels which contained everything relevant to the conference--program schedule, meal tickets, special tours and events, reception invitations, copies of conference papers and pertinent instructions--a satchel whose contents signalled what later became general knowledge--that Seoudy and his staff had done their homework well for this conference, making plans for all contingencies down to the minutest detail. There was, just to cite a small but not untelling example, a memo sent earlier to participants-to-be advising them of Cairo's weather during the week of meeting and what appropriate clothes to bring along. Another stated:

YOU ARE WELCOME! How happy we are to have you amongst us; Perhaps this is your first visit to Cairo, perhaps you have come before, but at any rate we hope that you will like your stay with us. You have come to help us build bridges of understanding and friendship within the international community of scientists. You were also quick to respond positively to our

*This is an abridged version of Professor Samatar's hilarious travelogue, reminiscing on an international conference on the Horn. UFHAMU couldn't carry the whole article for lack of space - Ed. © Said S. Samatar

call for this meeting which aims at pondering over the chronic soars(sic) in the Horn of Africa. We thank you deeply for this noble spirit and we do appreciate your cooperation with us. We have very little to offer in return, but we assure you that we will spare no effort to make your stay comfortable, enjoyable, as well as useful.

"We have very little to offer in return"--this betokens the epitome of modesty, considering the amount of time, manpower and money they must have expended to bring this conference off, but more of the sentiments of this memo later.

Conference business began in earnest the next day at the Egyptian International Center for Agriculture at Nadi el-Seid Street, a large but unpretentious rectangular building which looked impressive against its humbler neighborhood dwellings. On a billboard at the entrance lobby were inscribed in bold Arabic calligraphy the words: "TAHTA RI'AYATA RA'ISE HOSNI MUBARAK," (lit. "UNDER THE TENDER PASTORAL CARE OF PRESIDENT HOSNI MUBARAK."). A middle-aged Somali whom I befriended on the way and who spoke a pedantic, mixed English idiom, no doubt picked up from texts authored by British Somaliland Camel Corps officers and by American Peace Corps volunteers, said: "I say, it is jolly well good omen that we are going to be under the tender pastoral care of President Mubarak." I agreed.

"We will be none the worse for it," I said. "in this part of the world you need a ra'i (shepherd/protector) to get on, and it is our good fortune that we have President Mubarak for our shepherd."

"Yeh," he continued, "the Super Shepherd of all Egypt, and also of the Sudan and Somalia." He winked at me and said, "Mubarak is our Shepherd, we shall not want." He apparently knew some Bible, too.

"How so, Sudan and Somalia?" I asked.

"As loyal satellites these two countries defer to Egypt in all matters external, following her wherever she jolly well pleases to go diplomatically."

I found it "jolly well" prudent to discontinue the conversation as it was beginning to draw the interest and attention of some bystanders.

At 9:00 a.m., one floor above and time to get to business. The Egyptians evidently attached considerable importance to this conference, to judge by the crowd of "big men" who showed up for its opening ceremonies. In attendance were nearly all the deans of Cairo's University system (including that of the legendary al-Azhar), Butros Ghali, the Egyptian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, and a number of other highranking officials. The opening ceremonies consisted of a Koranic recitation by some mufti (the Koranic reading being in all probability a prudent concession to the Akhwan Muslimin, "the Muslim

Brethren", a shadowy secret society of Muslim fundamentalists who lurk about behind the modern veneer of Egyptian institutions with deadly schemes for revenge on the secular order.) A set of mercifully short speeches by Minister Ghali and several others followed, the last being that of Professor Seoudy who outlined plans and proceedings of the conference for the rest of the week. Dr Ghali's comments dwelled on Egypt's "very special relationship" with the countries of the Horn and the Nile, emphasizing the "historical, cultural and economic ties" which make the region a single political zone. Though he did not say so, Egypt was understood to be the regional power with the self-offered mission of maintaining order and stability in the region. He wished the conference a success and hurried off, no doubt to more sublime goings-on of the day's business. A huge portrait of President Mubarak hung over the august gathering to dispense its protective tender care.

That Mr. Ghali, a Christian, should, pleasantly, harmoniously and agreeably, share a podium with a Muslim mufiti could not but serve as an eloquent testimonial to the mutual tolerance between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, a country in which the unity and obligations of common citizenship apparently override those of religious cleavage. This is a powerful symbol of that urbane civility which marks the Egyptians out as a breed apart among Arabs. Where else in the Arab world--or any other for that matter--can one find such triumphant spirit of ecumenical harmony between the adherents of so antagonistic faiths?

There were (by my count) 150 official participants representing some twenty-two countries (Africa: 7, Arab: 4, Europe: 7) and Turkey, Canada, the U.S. and the Soviet Union with subjects that embraced nearly all the major disciplines--history, politics, linguistics, literature, anthropology, environmental sciences and others. With such diversity of language, nationality and disciplinary matter, a Tower-of-Babel-like chaos and confusion threatened as alarming prospects. This, fortunately, did not happen, for the Egyptians planned well. Indeed they pulled it off with a professionalism and competence which proved to be a pleasant surprise. The papers were presented in three languages (English, French, Arabic) and they managed, without a hitch, to run a simultaneous translation in the other two of whatever language was in use. In this way everyone could follow what was going on and a potential linguistic incoherence was avoided. They were also well-heeled, financially. Not only did they provide a substantial amount of travel and accommodation money but they gave out quite a few prize awards (each \$100) to papers they deemed of exceptional quality. The concluding remarks were, moreover, televised--whether by video or nationally, I know not--four hours' prime time. Unquestionably, the latter had been my nearest scrape with fame and immortality, to say nothing of stardom!

The papers were fitted into four broad categories (politics and economics, geography and natural resources, history and anthropology, and linguistics and literature), a sensible scheme which, happily, accommodated everybody, but also a great deal of academic gobbledygook. Of the latter kind, reportorial integrity demands me to name names or cite examples, but charity--and self-interest--forbids me to do so.

A conference attended by Ethiopians, Eritreans, Oromos, Hararis and Somalis, and their respective expatriate fellow travellers was not a likely place for orderly proceedings, given the seemingly irreconcilable political conflicts which divide these nationalities into mutually antagonistic camps. Throughout the week these belligerents and their respective expatriate partisans pounded one another viciously with venomous words and, on occasion, came close to doing so with fists. As usual, they took care to conceal their intramural personal attacks behind the name of academic analysis. It seemed all but certain that had not the vigilant Seoudy intervened at critical points blood, literally, might have been drawn.

For starters the Ethiopians, to a man, ganged up on the main Eritrean spokesman, whose every utterance--even seemingly harmless utterances--they found an occasion to castigate, and his supposed personal motives even more occasions to impugn. But they found, to their exceeding aggravation, that he was a vigorous match who gave it back as good--more often, as raw--as he got it. Here is a sample exchange, and not the most embittered one either:

Eritrean: The Horn of Africa in general and Eritrea in particular may well be compared to a dying man whose unbound, bleeding wounds will surely come to haunt one day a world community that remains so indifferent today.

Ethiopian: Sir, you will do well to remember that it takes a doctor to heal a sick man, not another sick man. (For which read: "You are sick.")

Eritrean: May I remind my worthy colleague of the Amharic proverb that "Man's best medicine is man." (Read: "You Amharas are bloody liars and duplicitous intriguers; you preach one thing while practicing another. Who the hell can coexist with you?")

An expatriate fellow traveller interjected with the remark: "Ethiopia's relationship to Eritrea is a case of black-on-black imperialism. But the world community is reluctant to call evil things by their name, because

in this case the colonialist is a black state. Such political mileage has Ethiopia drawn from the politics of skin pigmentation!"

Ethiopian: Sir, I have known academic pretenders who profit by championing bogus causes contrived to exploit understandable differences among Ethiopian tribes. (Read: "You are an academic pretender and an opportunist.")

Fellow traveller: May I remind my colleague that certain forms of language overstep the bounds of decent debate. (Read: "You S.O.B.--You are hitting below the belt. Your comment does not deserve the dignity of a reply!")

Thus they went at each other--these wily highlanders. They have nothing if not a way with words, "sir-ring" and "colleagu-ing" each other while viciously going for the jugular vein. The tragedy is that their artful tongues have yet to be harnessed for a responsible, imaginative search for peace rather than for mutual contempt and opprobrium.

This highland art of saying one thing while meaning another had me misled in the first couple of days, making me conclude, wrongly, that the Ethiopians were disconcertingly monolithic in outlook as in expression, on the order, say, of the dogmatic ideologues in George Orwell's Animal Farm, "Four legs good, two legs bad." In fact, if one read between the lines (or between the words), they were far from monolithic in their opinions and outlook. Of the three frequent speakers one seemed to embrace the position of a traditional Ethiopian patriot (or a crude chauvinist, depending on how one judges the implications of his utterances), holding firmly to the well-worn "Ethiopia-Teqdem" ("Ethiopia-First") doctrine, and allowing of no dialogue which he deemed prejudicial to the interests of the empire-state. Like guardians of empire elsewhere, there seemed lodged in his mental prism a blind spot for the claims or grievances of marginal groups in Ethiopia. Therefore, judging by his pronouncements and propositions (and I hope I am not unjust to him through misunderstanding), he seemed to have closed the door for negotiations with what he alternately called "malcontents" or "seditious elements"--namely the liberation movements of the Tigreans, Eritreans and Oromos.

The second, by contrast, showed himself possessed of a complex personality: flexible, subtle, imaginative, yet a thoroughgoing nationalist. Though cool and detached for the most part, he could lose his composure in the face of opinions which he strongly disagreed with or found fatuous. For example, he once attacked an Egyptian presenter in a rather earthy (and to my mind, embarrassingly abusive) language over the issue of whether a quarterly publication in Apartheid South

Africa qualified as a bonafide, respectable, quotable source. The diatribes which he let fly in that moment of strained passion seemed out of character with his conduct for the rest of the week.

The third was a political middle-of-the-roader who, to all appearances, possessed no hard-fixed doctrinaire positions of his own. What he possessed was a remarkable ambiguity with nothing he said indicating whether he favored resolution of the conflicts in the Horn by peaceful means or by military force. Despite these differences, the Ethiopians throughout maintained a facade of a unanimous front, avoiding any appearance of division in their ranks. This is understandable. These fine scholars had to return to Socialist Addis Ababa where any discovery in their performance at the conference of "ideological heresy" or deviation from the official line could mean trouble for them and their families.

The Oromo militant/intellectual (whose presentation I missed owing to my being at a separate panel) maintained, for the duration of the week, a running bout of guerrilla skirmishes with the Ethiopians which from time to time heated up into a shouting match. Unlike the highlanders he, refreshingly, did not mince words but stated his views with brutal candor. His most memorable performance involved no academic abstractions or chic argument but came in the form of a plain but powerful emotional outburst. Interestingly, this related not to Oromia (name of the yet-to-be-born republic on the various Oromo lands), as might have been expected, but to Eritrea, which has become the Cassandra of the conference, provoking many a heated exchange. This is what he said (which I do not pretend to reproduce verbatim) in reply to an Ethiopian's confident assertion that Ethiopia had the national will and the military means to crush the Eritrean secessionists:

Mr. Chairman, my point is not to advance abstract arguments but to affirm the inevitability of victory for the Eritrean freedom fighters. I was in the field last year where I witnessed firsthand the inexorable progress with which the Eritrean revolution is being propelled forward by the heroic sacrifices of this much-aggrieved land's brave sons and daughters. They have bought their freedom with their blood and there is no stopping them, whatever the desperate genocidal measures of the tired guardians of a dead empire. Cause, events and heroism have come together in a historic collision to shape a new destiny for Eritrea.

This was a passionate, unrehearsed outburst and it reverberated throughout the great hall, imposing on the conferees an uneasy moment of silence. It was as embarrassing as it was effective; embarrassing because it took liberty of academic coolness or detachment; effective because it carried a lacerating ring of feeling and conviction. It assumed

the mystical quality of a prophecy. Personally, its sage spiritual tones, however moving, much unsettled me. I imagined, with a shudder, the bloodshed to come.

I met no partisans of the Tigrean cause at the conference other than an Eritrean intellectual who often mentioned the Tigreans as part of the "disinherited" family of peoples in Ethiopia. At this as at other conferences, it was intriguing to note the emergence of what seems a nascent alliance among the Eritreans, Tigreans, Oromos, Hararis and other marginal nationalities against the Addis Ababa establishment and the Amharization which it represents. Intriguing also was the fact that the representatives of these groups at the conference found it necessary to converse socially in Amharic (though officially refusing to speak it), the language of the imperial order which they seek to overthrow. This has had parallels elsewhere in Africa, for example, among Anglophone and Francophone Africans who hold on to English and French, respectively, as a precious legacy despite their expulsion and anathematization of the colonial imposers of these languages. Black or white, the language of empire has a way of becoming for the natives the prestige heritage *par excellence* long after the imperial system which implanted it has fallen into disfavor.

Lacking an intrinsic unity of ethnic affinity (except possibly the Tigreans and Eritreans), these strange bedfellows, the children of imperial Ethiopia, were thrown together by a simple logic, the unifying logic of a common struggle against a perceived common foe, notably the Addis regime. The wonder is that they have so far failed, miserably, to implement in the field the unity which they are apt to proclaim at conference lecterns. Inexperience, poor planning, mutual suspicion, selfish leadership--these are some of the factors which frustrate their unity efforts, to the great satisfaction of the Ethiopian authorities. But if ever the day comes when these fragmented nationalities manage to develop the organizational sophistication to coordinate their activities on the field, the Ethiopian regime will have reason to worry.

As for the Somalis, they remained surprisingly tame and unexcited throughout, stirring no fireworks of a memorable sort. The one unremarkable exception occurred when one of their number came up with the curious proposition--which he stated publicly too--that Menelik conquered Harar with the indispensable aid of a 1,500-man contingent of Italian army veterans and adventurers. He was duly asked what history books he had been reading, to which he responded by citing some obscure Italian source.

The Somali mood of complacent indifference may have been due to the fact that they were in a friendly territory (both literally and academically) in which their "Ogaadeen Dilemma" was treated with compassion and competence by numerous Egyptian contributors. The Somalis were not sufficiently beleaguered (thanks to the hospitable soil

and climate of the conference) to crank up a combative spirit. Their academic apathy may also have been due to the demoralizing effects of their political situation at home, where a universally disliked regime remains firmly entrenched with no sign of a meaningful movement towards a transfer of power in the offing. Thus, with the two independent parts of the Somali nation languishing in an economic and political morass, and with social cynicism and clannish antagonism mounting by the day in Somalia proper, to it was not easy to work up an enthusiastic clamor for the three missing parts. Was it the peasants of the then newly independent Congo--to cite a not-too-irrelevant analogy--who, after five years of post-independence political anarchy, wishfully and nostalgically asked: "When will independence end?"

I myself once crossed swords (my only feeble contribution to the polemics of the week) with Rs, who gave a paper on Italy's encroachment on the borders of northern Ethiopia in the 1880s and Menelik's consequent cession of Eritrean territory to the Italians. He pointed to this episode as the root cause of Ethiopia's "present tragedy." The tone and content of his remarks impelled me, in a moment of imprudent rashness, to accuse him of playing "the sneaky apologist" for imperial Ethiopia and of concealing his political bias behind a recondite conundrum of statistical oddities and arcane maps (many of which were flashed on a screen for effect, as I thought then). I all but regretted this accusation later on, for in subsequent conversations he came to impress me not only as a scholar of great depth and erudition but also as a man of manifestly honest intentions. Yet a historian's erudition and intentions, however honorably deployed, are not unsusceptible to the obtrusive inroads of his personal impulses as a normal human being. His professional endeavors, understandably, sensitize him personally to the problems and aspirations of the peoples of his chosen area, often accompanied by the unwitting insensitivity to those of other areas. This often results in a colored critical judgement, if not an *ex parte* vision of the broader context. Thus it can be argued, with justice I think, that a lifetime of heroic devotion to research and writing (which have informed, and even inspired, a generation of younger historians) on central Ethiopia has induced in Rs a predisposition to view the problems of the Horn with a pair of highland binoculars. This of course is a common enough occupational hazard among Horn of Africa specialists whom Professor Asmarom Legesse, in a typically witty remark, has labelled "apostles of vicarious ethnocentrism." Nearly all of them have their "peoples" or "areas" whose problems they put forward before all else. Fairness compels the admission that Rs is not alone in having a particular set of binoculars.

Speaking of an emotional outburst--the solitary Russian delegate, who throughout exuded the bedrock aura of academic cool, only once, untypically, lost his scholarly composure. This occurred

when an Egyptian speaker branded the two superpowers as equally "global interventionists" whose imperial rivalries constituted the fons et origo of the Horn's ills. The normally calm Russian reacted with a vehement denunciation of the Egyptian's presentation, taking a strong exception to the linking of his country to "imperialist" America. "Do you know the Soviet Constitution?" he asked the Egyptian, visibly shaken (though not sufficiently so to forfeit his mellifluous Slavic accent). "Soviet Constitution serves as the sole guide to Soviet global behavior," he declared and proceeded to cite an article of this constitution as evidence of the Soviet Union's "firm solidarity" with the anti-imperialist struggles of Third World nations. Predictably, his angry assertion of Soviet innocence in global tensions only managed to draw a hushed skepticism from the amused conferees.

In me, though, the Russian's "righteous indignation" induced another thought: those of us living in the West are accustomed to daily Western mass-media headlines and pronouncements of "Kremlin experts" cheerfully musing on the imminent collapse of Soviet society owing, the pundits tell us, to "wide-spread cynicism" and "apathy" which allegedly characterize Soviet citizens. Cynicism is an impulse not easy to judge, apathy less so. This one Soviet citizen was certainly not apathetic, especially where his country's interests were concerned. If anything, he exhibited patriotism of a kind that I had thought did not survive Dostoyevsky's Russia. Could we, in the West, be unsuspecting victims of misinformation as misleading and as pernicious as anything attributed to Pravda and other news organs of the Eastern bloc?

Conference business wound up on Thursday morning (January 10, 1985) with proposals, recommendations and resolutions whose tone and content did much to reflect the sentiment of the earlier cited memorandum, notably to "build bridges of understanding and friendship within the international community of scientists" with a view to "pondering over the chronic sores" of the Horn. I summarize them as follows: a) to create "an international consultative body of scholars" charged with the task of coordinating scholarly research and reports on the Horn and of monitoring relevant political developments there; b) to institutionalize the conference by convening it biennially with a view to pooling research and information-gathering efforts among scholars on the region; and c) to explore ways research findings could be practically deployed to stimulate a peace dialogue and reconciliation initiatives among the combatants of the area. This is presumably to lead to a negotiated settlement of the various conflicts through a judicious use of Egyptian good offices.

An ambitious program, to be sure, but one which Egypt surely is uniquely qualified to conduct. For one thing, no one country can rival the inside track which Egypt commands with the Somalis and

Ethiopians. The Nile and Coptic/Orthodox Church constitute powerful economic and spiritual links between Egypt and Ethiopia, just as Islam and the Somali military (a great many of whose top brass were trained in Egyptian war colleges) give Egypt a position of preponderant influence in Somalia. (This may well be what Butros Ghali had in mind when he referred to Egypt's "historic, special relationship" with the countries of the Horn.) With these natural advantages and with the weight and prestige of her standing among the African community of nations, surely Egypt has plenty of resources to play the honest broker between the Somalis and Ethiopians.

In this connection it may be instructive to compare the declared aims of the Egyptian conference with similar conferences held in America. The latter, frequently and self-congratulatingly, announce their primary purpose and business as the "detached propagation of disinterested research." With the victorious spirit of "disinterested research" reigning at these august gatherings, it is little wonder that the Horn of Africa comes in handily as a "vast scientific laboratory" offering possibilities of more and more esoteric searches and, hence, corresponding opportunities of career advancement. No consuming worries seem to disturb the grave minds of these "detached scholars" in the face of the manifest though grim reality that life for the inhabitants of this wretched corner of the earth has indeed become "*nasty, brutish and short.*"

I heard an Ethiopian at the conference refer to scholar/expatriates as "academic mercenaries"--no doubt an unfair, even crude remark. Yet none of the conferees indigenous to the Horn (who had been eager to quarrel with him on other matters) found this particular charge sufficiently offensive to pillory him on it. Did his sentiment reflect a collective native mood?

Lest the preoccupation of this discussion with the serious goings-on of the week should imply that the Egyptians neglected the social needs of their guests it should be salutary now to look at light happenings. On Tuesday evening the African Society (established in Cairo in 1972) gave a glittering feast--glittering, that is, by Egyptian tastes--to the whole crowd at the quarters of the IARS. The feast consisted of a vast assortment of homemade cookies, mostly oily but palatable, and a great variety of soft drinks. Not a drop of alcohol--no doubt another concession to the Muslim Brethren. A plump Egyptian of avuncular disposition and manners, and also a high official of the Society, rhapsodized enthusiastically on its functions and achievements. He referred, with feeling, to the illustrious men--Ahmad Sekou Toure, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and others high on the pantheon of African father figures--who had spent time in this humble premise. As the plump Egyptian talked on, I saw, in a moment of *deja vu*, the specter of Nkrumah with his multi-colored native kente slung from side

to shoulder, sitting quietly at one of these worn-out desks, thinking revolutionary thoughts.

The Egyptian stopped and an ANC man (African National Congress, the party fighting for majority rule in South Africa) held forth. He was a small, mild-mannered man with hollow, sunken cheekbones of the Bushmanoid sort. But his diminutive figure belied his sonorous, menacing voice. He breathed fire and revolution and destruction--all aimed at Apartheid. Fury inhabited the small man, and one could not help reflecting, with a faint shiver, on the future of South Africa when he and his comrades of exile, hate and bitterness drift back to their native land and make a common cause in igniting the oft-predicted conflagration. Can one look at South Africa without seeing the vision of a coming Armageddon? However that may be, the prospect of the one prosperous and technologically viable country in Africa going down in flames is perhaps not out of character with the legacy of disasters that has become the Dark Continent's speciality.

OJ's nudge in the ribs shook me off my dreamy mood. "What is the matter, tonight?" he asked. "You do have a demoralizingly vacant look" Then he looked contemptuously at his Pepsi drink and hissed angrily: "D---mn this. I thought I'd be relieved of the sight and smell of pop for the week I am out of America. How wrong I've been! This thing has taken over the consumer taste of the Egyptians, too."

"Easy, Chief," I said. "American pop has a far longer reach than you think." I went on to recount to him my desultory wanderings, during my research trip of 1977, among the nomads of the Horn where a common sight had been that of ambling camels heavily laden with rattling Coca-cola bottles.

"Say," OJ reflected gloomily, "are all Egyptian receptions going to be pop affairs--no real drinks?" OJ could not conceive of a reception without real spirits.

On Tuesday OJ and I spent much of the day wandering through the city, ostensibly to shop but also to go, unintended, into places of good and ill repute. From the Rehab Hotel we took a hop to the Arab-States Street, along which we did a brisk hike until we got to the next main street which we called Marlboro Street because a long row of giant Marlboro signs hung from the electric poles with the red/white colors of the brand glitteringly receding into the horizon. Along the sidewalks bearded mullahs, turbaned Nubians in white robes and black-veiled matrons ambled to and fro, going about leisurely in search of their daily lots. The vision of a Marlboro skyline gazing down over a mass of turbaned heads and black veils created a sensation of incongruity, a piece of Kentucky commercialism superimposed over an ancient scene--or, to vary the metaphor, a forced yoking together of Ali Baba and Daniel Boone.

At the junction we stopped at a Kentucky Fried Chicken joint, mainly to see whether the dish retained its American scent or acquired an Egyptian variety, the latter being our distinct preference. On second thought, however, we decided this was an insufficient reason to spend money, and moved on. OJ made a sudden halt and, squinting at the swarms of pedestrians, said, "I tell you. Mother Africa has left her mark on this country." He was referring to the decidedly African complexion of many of the streetwalkers. "But," he said, pensively, "you wouldn't know this from official Egypt; the Egypt of the tv and press and power and influence is a predominantly white Egypt."

"Turkish Egypt, maybe," I interrupted, and went on to pontificate on the "historic role of the small aristocracy of Turkish extraction" - the effendis, beys and pashas - who have held power in Egypt ever since the introduction in Medieval times of the mamlukes, the slave soldiers turned kings. OJ was unimpressed by my apologist attempt to explain away on historical processes the apparent disproportion between "the numbers of power and race in Egypt."

"Turkish or Neanderthal," he persisted impatiently, "all the same, the ruling elite in this Egypt is predominantly white." I expressed to him my doubts whether the Egyptians, unlike Americans, "are into the numbers game of power and race." But as I had little confidence in my powers of persuasion as an apologist, I let the matter end there.

After four hours of eventful wandering (twice we escaped from a menacing gang of angry street hustlers who failed to make us purchase their wares), we stumbled onto a section of Cairo that was clearly the home territory of the Egyptian jetset establishment, a tourist country of wide boulevards, high fashion and neon lights wherein are located such state-of-the-art hotels as the Nile, the Hilton, the Meridian and others. Here, the high and luminous--rich Egyptians and rich foreigners--hobnob with one another pleasantly and pompously and retain themselves in such standard pleasure fares as belly dances and Las Vegas-style movies and other objects of erotica. All new and glitter here, not a trace of ancient Egypt except a troubled youth who emerged from an alley and accosted us at the Hilton lobby (he took us for fellow Nubians) to report tearfully that he had come to Cairo over the weekend to make the one business deal that would turn the family fortunes around, only to lose it all "this very afternoon" on a gambling binge! Was he a fraud or the unhappy victim of lone sharks? OJ gave him some taxi money, and we bade him to stay well.

The Khan Khalil Bazaar is a world apart, even by Cairo's standards: a patchwork of rickety overpasses, underground tunnels and overheated catacombs animated with an assortment of shopkeepers, street-wise corner vendors, peddlers of exotic confections touted as potent aphrodisiacs, amiable charlatans, farout-looking mystics with grizzled beards and ponderous worry beads, pickpockets, fortune-

tellers, holy fools, conmen, hoary ancients with vacant expressions--a crossection of Cairo's underworld. Khan Khalil is, to evoke a wild and distant analogy, a Medieval version of London's Leicester Square without Leicester's hellfire preachers on the seven deadly sins.

I wanted to buy an Egyptian jalabiya and 'immah, and the challenge was to make my purchase without getting ripped off. We stopped at a joint to enquire whereupon the attendant, an excitable friendly fellow whose trade was the sale of perfume essences, offered to take us to a jalabiya-selling store. With this guide we passed through a barely-lit labyrinth which made my imagination alive to the possibility of getting robbed underground or, worse still, strangled to death. These dungeons and alleyways seemed custom-made for assassins. The only thing that restrained me from bolting away midway in the journey was the disconcerting knowledge that I could not find the way out, even if I tried.

Finally, light at the end of the tunnel. We emerged onto the ground level and slipped through a crack onto an up-leading stairway at the end of which we found our shop. I pointed to my items and said, "How much?"

"Mi'a dolaar," said one of the attendants and beamed with a wolfish grin. Under no circumstance would I pay a hundred dollars for a mere jalabiyah and an 'immah, I told him. Thus there followed a half-an-hour's hard bargaining conducted in my Koranic Arabic with the aid of gestures--at the end of which I managed to get the merchandise for the equivalent of \$30.

Meantime, OJ was sweet-talked by my attendant's fellow Philistines into making a purchase, too. I was mindful that he might get fleeced but, since he had rebuked me severely earlier in the day for haggling over taxi fares in a manner "unworthy of a gentleman and a scholar," I left him to his own devices. Which amounted to his being stripped of \$600 for a thumb-sized bottle of essence and three other items--a necklace, a pair of earrings and a handring--which they touted as being struck from the finest gold in the Middle East.

OJ was pleased to have made a killing bargain; so was I. Elated and felicitous, we took a taxi back to the hotel, congratulating each other on a dashingly successful shopping venture. But felicitous moods are the stuff of which subsequent heartaches are made. In a conversation in the evening an Egyptian friend swore, privately, to me that he could acquire the whole lot combined--OJ's and mine--for \$120, at the most \$150. He shook his head sadly and wondered how two grownups, who look so sophisticated for all the world, could so easily be taken in by a couple of Khan al-Khalil ruffians. This knowledge I suppressed from OJ on the not-unreasonable ground that it serves no purpose to wreck a friend's peace of mind by imparting to him information that is bound to make him feel he has been had.

Wednesday - wholly devoted to tours and sight-seeing of Cairo's antique treasures. But where does one start looking in a city so laden with antiquities? Our hosts sensibly selected for us three of Cairo's landmarks, the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities, the Citadel and of course the tourist must see royal ruins of Pharoanic Egypt at Giza.

The museum, an imposing mastadon with Romanesque arches and massive columns, houses a myriad of artifacts and statues whose singular effect is to impress the visitor with ancient Egypt's morbid preoccupation with death and dying--mummies and mummification instruments everywhere. As far as the extent and variety of these death objects go, the British Museum seems to boast, astonishingly, a richer and more glamorous collection (or so it appeared to this casual observer) than its Egyptian counterpart. If true, this is evidence of the extent of British loot of Egyptian treasures during their 60-year colonial tenure of Egypt.

More interesting than the treasures of the museum was our museum guide, a portly young Egyptian with the acting and oratorical histrionics of a Jimmy Swaggart. With a playful voice and a masterly grasp of verbal timing, he delivered a major oration on the processes of embalming arts. He did his job too well though, to judge by the reactions of a delicate-featured Scandinavian matron who stood by me and who began to wince and wheeze with his every strategic, though blunt, flourish of the body's evisceration--the removal of the heart, the lungs and innards together with the collecting of the blood in a separate container--prior to the enactment of the actual embalming. The delicate lady wanted to faint when--mercifully from her viewpoint, disappointingly from mine--the oration ended, thereby denying me the opportunity for a deed of heroism, the chance to lift up a fainting woman in Cairo.

After the visit to the museum, the party of academic sightseers, by now tired, hungry and dust-ridden, moved off in convoy vans to the Andrea Restaurant for a late outdoor dinner. The dinner consisted of an exquisitely marinated chicken and a variety of local salads. Andrea is apparently not only a popular tourist spot but also a great cat haven. Swarms of outrageously brave cats pranced about lightheartedly over and under the dinner tables and between the legs of waiters. These cats excelled in guile and strategy, for whenever the leisurely Nubian waiters in multi-colored robes and Turkish fezzes turned, the cats dashed off for the open trays and made off with a considerable loot. This had me concerned at first about the possibility of there not being enough left for us but I was proved wrong. Our hosts kept piling it on till all--guests and cats--ate to satiation.

After a brief twilight excursion into the royal ruins at Giza, we were treated to the crowning event of the day--a sound and light show of the Sphinx and pyramids. This was a professionally staged job: an

alternation of amplified sounds, searchlights and a voice-over that boomed like that of a deity, all focused on the massive monuments and so cinematically ordered as to induce in the beholder a hypnotic, transfixing effect. The somber figure of the Sphinx first came into full view, and it was numbing to imagine him sitting in that crouching pose for several millennia, with his placid, inscrutable face, his lips slightly parted in a serene, knowing, almost contemptuous smile at all that he has come to witness: the long and absurd progression of conquest and bloodshed that constitutes the sum-total of what is called history. Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Christ, the Muslim Caliphs, Napoleon, the British Raj--they have all come to gaze at this placid face. Conquerors have come and gone but the Sphinx abides to smile mysteriously and mockingly into eternity. According to a popular tale, which I have been unable to verify, the irascible Napoleon had been driven into a deep fury over the serene, indifferent expression of the Sphinx, which he found insulting, whereupon he ordered his heavy gunners to aim an artillery barrage at him, perchance to awaken him of his complacent pose, and to teach him a lesson in the art of respecting great conquerors. That ordeal too the Sphinx survived, seemingly none the worse for it except a shot-off nose which, far from diminishing his resplendent stature, has actually given him a renewed dignity by the element of pathos. Napoleon would turn in his grave at such a turn of events.

The searchlights moved off to reveal the looming silhouette of the Pharaoh Khu-fu's pyramid, the biggest and the most awe-inspiring of the three Giza pyramids. Aside from the staggering feats of mathematical and engineering skills which the builders of this wonder monument must have possessed, the imagination shrinks in disbelief at the riches and resources at the disposal of the man who ordered it built for the sole purpose, as far as can be determined, of preparing for himself a descent burial place. There are, according to the show's commentator, 3.6 m boulders each weighing over a ton to constitute that towering pile of stones, a piece of evidence which led someone to the not unreasonable estimate that it would have taken 100,000 men toiling hard and unceasingly day and night 30 years to build it.

But the wear and tear from the day's busy schedule together with the numbing effects of this tale of wondrous monuments to dead rulers had the scholar/audience dozing off in the show, to judge from the audible snorings of my neighbors.

After the show was over we boarded the buses, at which point the conductor asked us to indicate by a show of hand whether we intended to go to the Ethiopian or the Somali Embassy. It was then that I learned of an after-hours' diplomatic rivalry in the works between the Ethiopians and the Somalis, whose embassies chose to hold simultaneous receptions that evening for the guests. The diplomats,

instead of holding a joint reception in the spirit of the regional cooperation which the conferees urgently called for during the week, proceeded to issue rival invitations, thereby testing implicitly the scholars' loyalties to their respective causes and counter-claims. The result was a hushed, reluctant split in the ranks of the scholars into an Ethiopian party and a Somali party, demonstrating once again the seductive charms by which diplomacy overwhelms scholarship.

OJ and I declared for the Somali embassy, not out of any desire to make a partisan statement but on the pragmatic calculation that more of our buddies would be at the Somali embassy and this would afford us the greater fun for the evening. When we arrived, the ambassador's residence was nearly full of an assortment of guests--diplomats, scholars and hangers-on--all in a convivial mood induced partially by a liberal intake of potent libations. We greeted the ambassador and hurried on to view the feast. What we saw delighted the eye: plenty of zambuzas, mutton, succulent salads and enough spirits to quicken the dead. OJ was pleased. This was a real reception.

A universal good time was had at this repast with the amicable crowd of unassuming socializers sloughed about on colorful couches or standing in friendly clusters to genial chitchats, all sipping, sipping, sipping. There was no evidence of the dark, on-the-side tete-a-tetes or shady political armtwistings that ordinarily make up the *raison d'etre* of diplomatic receptions. Perhaps there was nothing worth arm twisting for in such causes and issues as were likely to come up in the embassy of a penny-priced Third World Republic. The only wrinkle in an otherwise joyous occasion stemmed from a lamentable imbalance of sex gender in the gathering--too many males and too few women. (This perhaps another concession to the Muslim Brethren by whose code of conduct women must lead an indoors, subterranean existence separate from that of men, a rule which evidently even diplomats must oblige.) One must do with imperfections, though there is something deplorable about having to party with a multitude of bleary-eyed men without the redeeming presence of feminine grace.

If the reception remained in want of feminine grace, it made up for this in other pleasant, and unpleasant, diversions. For example, the subject of race and race relations once came up in the conversation of a group that included Egyptians, Palestinians, and Afro-Americans--a volatile mix. I own to having initiated the spicy remark that set off the fireworks. This happened in response to an Egyptian woman professor who expatiated on her 14-year-old daughter's habitual nightmares about an alleged Ethiopian threat to divert the Nile waters from Egypt, as a punitive measure against Egypt's supposed pro-Eritrean, pro-Somali policy. I said, "The Ethiopians have been threatening to do that since the fourth-century A.D. reign of King Ezana, and nothing has ever come of it, and probably never will. Their technology and

organizational competence are too primitive for them to tackle the waters of the mighty Nile." Laughter. Then thinking that I had been unfairly rough on the Ethiopians, I decided to bring in the Somalis, too, for good measure. I said, "The Ethiopians are sufficiently competent to give the Somalis a sound drubbing but not sufficiently competent to do much damage to their remoter neighbors, like Egypt." No Somalis, fortunately, were near enough to hear my remark. If they did, they might have garroted me right in the ambassador's bedchamber.

Feeling buoyant from my conversational master stroke, I went on with a discursive jumble of low-flying utterances which in the end had me land my foot right smack in my mouth. I said, "The Egyptians are said to have banned Columbia Pictures' docu-drama "Sadat" from being screened in Egypt because Sadat was played by a black man." It was obvious that I had blundered into a sensitive territory. For one thing, the two Egyptians in the group grew livid with a quiet rage, which proved the more devastating by the power of silence. The Afro-Americans looked on with a studied, curious interest, while the Palestinian man winked at me familiarly and beamed an ineffable mirth. He wanted me to continue working the same line of conversation. (Ever since Camp David some Palestinians, I learned, go gung ho on topics that embarrass Egyptians).

My luck held once again. The ambassador, who joined us lately, rescued me from the self-inflicted mess. He explained, calmly and in grave tones, that the banning of the movie had "nothing to do with racial considerations." The Egyptians are eminently justified to "proscribe the film," he said, "because its central message is to present them as gunslinging aggressors in the Yom Kippur War whilst the Israelis are shown as peaceloving doves forced, will-ynilly, into war by a belligerent neighbor." "A cleverly couched piece of propaganda," he added.

An ingenious explanation, I thought: "If the Old General appointed more diplomats of the calibre of this one to represent his cause abroad, he might have pumped some fresh blood into his decrepit and disordered regime." Ingenious, but convincing? In an article breezily entitled "Nix Pix" Newsweek magazine (2/13/84, p. 37) declared: "Louis Gossett...who played Sadat, happened to be black. That bothered race-conscious Egyptians and wouldn't have pleased Sadat, who was sensitive about his color." Which deserves to be afforded the greater credibility, the ambassador or Newsweek?

The Israelis have lately complained bitterly of having been taken to the cleaners by the world press on grounds of their alleged racial insensitivity to the black Falasha Jews of Ethiopia. Would the Egyptians have anything to fear from being held to a similar standard of international scrutiny on their own record of race relations? This thought tempted me to bring up Muhammad H. Heikel's damning

biography of Sadat, Kharif al-Ghadab ("The Autumn of Fury"), in which the illustrious author unabashedly seeks to discredit his subject by claiming that Sadat's mother was a jariya (a black maid) from central Africa. That Egypt's most distinguished journalist and eminent man of letters should be so blatantly contemptuous of Sadat's black forebears may well be a telling commentary on the state of race relations in this ancient land. If a contemporary American white of Heikel's literary and intellectual stature displayed in his writings the crude outlook of primitive racism and naive bigotry which characterize Kharif al-Ghadab, he would be ostracized by the American academic community, black and white, and his views would probably occasion a storm of journalistic and public outcry, condemning such author, in all likelihood, to end his days in disgrace and obscurity. This is remarkable. It was not so long ago that America had a well-earned reputation as one of the world's bedrock bastions of racist ideology and practice, while Egypt, in particular, and the Middle East, in general, seemed to be models of racial tolerance. Has America taken a quantum leap in the last 25 years in racial matters that makes other societies of multi-ethnic composition look Medieval by comparison?

The reception wound up around 11:00 p.m., pleasantly enough, but the rest of the night began to unfold with an unmitigated disaster. A nasty quarrel (no doubt exacerbated by the effects of the fiery waters just ingested) flared up between OJ and DS of our group over the best route to a belly dancer's joint. They quarreled as well to an embittered degree over the taxi fare which the one judged too extortionate to pay, and the other (what with the wild festive mood that possessed his soul) clamorously insisted on paying whatever price it took to see a belly dancer. It was a matter of luck that the night ended without somebody's nose getting bloodied, for on the way to the nightclub they traded a stream of vitriolic abuse that made us wonder, on more than one occasion, whether fists would not come in as a supplement to this two-man show of "civil dialogue."

The price of being seated near enough to see the dancer included our buying a forced dinner and underwriting a variety of miscellaneous charges which amounted to a grand larceny, and which managed to strip us of a major fortune. (My share of the bill alone just about wiped out my monthly allowance). Nor did my grieving soul receive any consolation from the performance of the so-called dancer who, when she finally turned up in the wee hours of the night, proved to be a cause for heartbreaking disappointment. As a dancer, she possessed little charm and less talent. Bony and emaciated, her slithery figure showed no redeeming feature and her movements amounted to no more than graceless jerks that exhibited neither the seductive (lower-abdomen wiggle) of traditional Arab dancers in bedouin camps nor the more suggestive hipwork version of modern night-clubs. Her style was a

poor mixture of the modern and the traditional, in neither of which she displayed any degree of mastery.

OJ said, with voice that betrayed tons of regret, "I've seen better dancers than this in America." I agreed. In fact this fiasco showing in the heartland of the cultures which invented the raqsi technique put me in a mood to think of America's adoptive genius in the light of a remark by a character in one of Plato's dialogues. "Whatever," he boasted "the Greeks have acquired from foreigners they have, in the end, turned into something finer." In the discordant jumble of borrowings which makes up the American heritage, bellydancing may well be one form which Americans "have turned into something finer." At least I can vouchsafe from experience that any third-rate American practitioner of the craft could easily have given a better account of herself than this unremarkable hag.

On Thursday life in Cairo went on without my participation, as I had been laid low, constitutionally, by the misadventures of the previous night. And I left too early on Friday to chance upon anything worthy of description except, possibly, a remark of my taxidriver which struck me as ominous. As we sped along a ritzy quarter of wide boulevards and neatly-manicured lawns, he pointed to a luminous, palace-like structure with a jerk of the head and mumbled mysteriously, as much to himself as to me: "Hosni Mubarak lives there." Upon this utterance his face glowed with the luscious, hungry look of an eager despoiler. Look out, Hosni Mubarak.