

# Arabs, Copts, Egyptians, Americans

## An Exploration of Identity in the Diaspora

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"Coptic," "Christian," "Orthodox," "Egyptian," "American," "North African": All of these words describe my identity, some more than others. As a Coptic Orthodox Egyptian American woman, one word, "Arab," is particularly problematic. Many Copts, including some of my dearest friends, vehemently deny the "Arab" label. The Copts, they say, are not Arabs, but descendents of the Pharaohs. Only Egyptian Muslims can call themselves Arab. The Egyptians who remained Christian after the Islamic invasion in the seventh century, the Copts, were not Arab. This idea was further reinforced when I read Leila Ahmed's memoir *A Border Passage*, and discovered that even some Egyptian Muslims reject the Arab identity.

But how else might Egyptians define themselves, if not as Arab? Were Egypt not hostage, as it has been in our time, to a politics that so firmly fixes its identity as Arab, we might easily see that, on the basis of the country's history and geography, there are in fact quite a number of other ways of conceiving of Egyptian identity (Ahmad, 2000, p. 11).

Empowered by the possibility of different ways of understanding Egyptian identity, I continued to hold fast to the sentiment that "I am not Arab", though in recent years, through my work in grassroots international development,

I have begun to understand "Arab" as a geopolitical linguistic appellation, rather than a religious or ethnic designation. I started to tolerate the label, aware that it is usually being used to talk about the populations from the Middle East and North Africa. However, I have become less vehement about rejecting the "Arab" label mainly because I have grown weary of explaining why.

Nonetheless, I flinch when even knowledgeable presenters at policy and academic conferences conflate the terms "Arab" and "Muslim" for convenience sake, only occasionally giving a cursory mention to the millions of Christians living in the Middle East and North Africa (if I am lucky that day), but thereafter talking about the region as if it were entirely made up of Muslim adherents. I often find myself constructing questions that force presenters to acknowledge the existence of the Christian minority in the region. How can I accept the use of "Arab" as a descriptive term for my identity, when so many others use it to describe a group of which I am not a member?

Identity, especially amongst diaspora communities, is a living concept, defined as much by individuals' and communities' perceptions of themselves as they are by politics, religion, history, and anthropology. Thus, rather than exploring

this issue through research into the history of Arab nationalism in Egypt or the Copts in Egypt, I decided to carry out some action research among my various Egyptian American friends and acquaintances. Using email, I posed several questions focused on how they understand their identities as Egyptian Americans in June and July 2006. My questions asked about their understanding of an "Arab" identity, a "Coptic" identity, a connection with ancient Egyptian roots, and how these various identities affect their lives as Egyptians living in America.

Albeit not a random or representative sample,<sup>1</sup> I received 24 responses from the approximately 30 friends I contacted. The insightfulness and passion of the responses took me by surprise. Some responded by answering each question thoroughly; others by writing an essay about the topic, touching upon the issues I raised in my questions. Clearly, many Egyptian Americans wrestle with these identity questions and look for opportunities to discuss them. Almost all agreed that I could quote them and use their full names, but others requested anonymity. For the sake of consistency, I will use initials throughout.

Among the 24 Egyptian American respondents, there were 17 Christian females, three Christian males, two Muslim females, and two Muslim males. The respondents came from various parts of the U.S. Most lived in the Washington, D.C. area, others in New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Illinois. Their ages ranged from 21 - 45 years old, with the majority between the ages of 25 and 35. All the respondents had a university education or higher. All the Christian respondents were members of the Coptic Orthodox Church and active participants in their local churches in the U.S. Most of the Christian respondents, and all the Muslim respondents, are active participants in Egyptian American community life, members or leaders of such organizations as the Egyptian American Alliance for Youth, the Egyptian American Cultural Association, and the Alliance of Egyptian Americans.

I present their responses in this essay as part of an ongoing discussion about Coptic, Arab, and Egyptian identity in the diaspora. My analysis organizes the responses based on the idea of an "Arab" identity, a "Coptic" identity, "ancient Egyptian" roots, and finally, for the female respondents, the experience of living out this mosaic of identities in the diaspora. Since little action research has been published on this topic, this essay presents both an engaging discussion and a call for further exploration of Egyptian diaspora identities in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

### **An Arab Identity?**

"As an Egyptian, how do you identify with the word 'Arab'?" I asked this to all the respondents, whose

answers were divided in half between those who do not accept the term "Arab" as part of their identity (12 respondents), and those who accept it completely or with a modified definition of the term (12 respondents). Those who rejected "Arab" included nine Christian females, one Muslim female, and one Christian male. Those who accepted "Arab" included seven Christian females, one Muslim female, one Coptic male, and one Muslim male.

Most of the respondents who identified with the term "Arab" identified with it in terms of a shared language and culture that encompassed history, food, music, and so on. "I speak the language and share history with the Arabs," S.H., a Christian female, wrote, "The people that had to change their religion under oppression of the Arab rul[ers] are my people and are Egyptians" (June 21, 2006).

M.Y., also a Christian female, wrote,

Both Copts and Muslims share the common Arab heritage. They are entertained with the same films, eat the same food, laugh at the same jokes, speak the same language, so I have a hard time separating modern day Copts from the Arab diaspora simply because Copts live an 'Arab' life, but the only difference is the religion (June 22, 2006).

The religious connotations associated with the word "Arab" complicate this term. M.G., a Christian female who rejects the word "Arab," noted that she has no problem being identified with other Arab Christians in the Middle East — in other words, while she rejected the word "Arab", she accepts this term if it identifies her with the Middle East Christian minority (June 23, 2006).

Establishing a connection with other Arabic-speaking diaspora members is thus key to Egyptian Americans in identifying with the word "Arab". M.E., a female Muslim, wrote,

There were few Egyptian-American families around while I was growing up in Tucson, Arizona, leaving me with a feeling of utter isolation ... Since there weren't a lot of Egyptians with which I could identify, I had to cling on to the other 'Arabs' for a sense of community and belonging.

M.E. went on to question the dictionary.com definition of "Arab", and then constructed her own meaning: "Descendants of Arabic-speaking countries in North Africa and the Middle East who identify with a common cultural experience through music, dance, food, and language" (June 26, 2006).

H.E., however, did not define "Arab" in this way. She defined it as "those who live in the Arabian peninsula", and wrote, "I am a Muslim Egyptian and I do not consider

myself Arab" (June 25, 2006). H.E.'s perspective is interesting when placed in contrast with the Egyptian Christians who did not identify with the word "Arab".

To all the respondents, I asked, "How do you feel when you are categorized by others as an Arab in different contexts?" M.H., a Christian female, wrote, "It's insulting to be called something you are not and even more insulting when others insist you are" (June 28, 2006). Similarly, C.B., a Christian female who accepts the word Arab if it denotes modern Egyptian society, wrote, "People often confuse 'Arab' with 'Muslim', and I take umbrage to that because my Christian identity is most important to me" (July 1, 2006). The conflation of the term "Arab" with "Muslim" is the reason why all the Christian respondents rejected identification with this term. Some also further rejected it because of the "terrorist" stereotype associated with the word "Arab", especially after September 11, 2001.

J.Z.'s words reflect some of the sentiments I mentioned earlier on in this essay. "I am not the one who is excluding myself from being an Arab," she wrote. "The Arabs are the ones who excluded me from being an Arab when they based the Arabic nationalism on religion and language" (June 23, 2006). Thus, while some Egyptian Christians and Muslims accept the term "Arab" because of how it connects them to different members of the Middle Eastern diaspora community, others reject it because they see that it is actually a term of exclusion.

Many of the Christian respondents who identified with the word "Arab" indicated that they felt they were alone in this sense of identity. Their words implied a general perception that the Coptic community in the U.S. overall rejects an "Arab" identity. "One of the reasons I feel disenfranchised from the church," S.H. wrote, "is how they separate themselves from the Arab world and act like they could not care less!" (June 21, 2006). Here, even someone who is "included" in the Coptic community by being a Christian feels "excluded" because of her perception that this community rejects an Arab identification. However, the diversity of opinion within the responses I received indicates that this perception may be as much a stereotype of the Coptic community as the stereotype that all Arabs are Muslims.

### **A Coptic Identity?**

Just as I asked all the Egyptian American respondents about their identification with the word "Arab", I also asked them about their identification with the word "Copt". While all the Christian respondents, unsurprisingly, identified wholeheartedly with this word, what was surprising was that three out of the four Muslim respondents identified with this word as well. With such a small

number of respondents, it cannot be assumed that this reflects on the general Egyptian-American Muslim population, but it raises the possibility that just as "Arab" does not necessarily mean Muslim, so "Coptic" may not necessarily mean Christian.

S.E., a male Egyptian Muslim, wrote:

First ... just hearing the word [Copt] is like hearing one of those words that only relate to Egypt or its people or my ancestry. Words like Pharaoh, Nile, or Felookah (Egyptian sailing boat). Secondly, I do believe that all Egyptians, my ancestors, at some point of history were Copts. Now, a Copt to me means fellow Egyptian who only has a different faith. Otherwise, all other identities of a Copt are (should be) very similar to mine. In addition to all this, my parents used to teach art and art history ... I would often go with them and their students to the Coptic museum in Old Cairo and to the "Fayoum Portraits" museum in Fayoum; both museums record the Coptic heritage in Egypt. Also, my father once took my sister, myself, and two other family friends' kids to visit the Anba Bishoi Monastery in Wadi Elnatroun. It was a great visit that I will never forget. It happened to be on the first day of Ramadan of that year. They treated us as special guests ... my point is that the word Copt or Coptic means a mixture of all these things to me (June 24, 2006).

In the above email, S.E. made his connection to the word "Copt" to the influence of the Coptic language on Egyptian colloquial Arabic,<sup>3</sup> to a part of his ancestry, to the artistic and historical heritage of the Coptic period in Egypt, and to the living connection he felt when he and his family visited one of the famous Coptic monasteries in Egypt.

M.E., a female Egyptian Muslim (also quoted in the previous section), identifies with the word "Copt" for a different reason than S.E. does. She wrote:

I have a relationship with the word "Copt" because of my affection for Coptic Christian Egyptians, not because of the word's original meaning. In spite of our religious differences, I still greatly identify with our common experiences ... I appreciate Copts to such a deep level because I identify with their experience of being the minority religious group in Egypt as I am a member of a Muslim community living in the United States (June 26, 2006).

The word "Copt" originally meant "Egyptian". It is derived from the Arabic word for Egypt, "Dar Al-Qibt" (home of the Copts), which came from the Greek word for Egypt, "Aigyptios," which came from the Pharaonic word, "Hikaptah" (house of the ka, the temple of one of the gods of Pharaonic Egypt) (Kamil, 2002). Due to the modern use of the word "Copt" to mean an Egyptian Christian, it is unknown how many Egyptians are aware of this history. While S.E.'s comments indicate this knowledge and a con-

nection with this Coptic ancestry, M.E. has a closer connection with the minority status of the Copts in Egypt, comparing it with her minority status as a Muslim in the U.S. However, in the case of both S.E. and M.E., while there was an identification and affinity with the word "Copt", it was very clear that modern use of the word signifies Egyptian Christians.<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of three Christian females, all of the Christian respondents defined and identified with the word "Copt" as it relates to being an Egyptian Christian, and did not include Egyptian Muslims in that definition. While most of the Christians acknowledged that at one point, "Copt" did mean just "Egyptian", they identified with the word in its modern definition only, "Egyptian Christian." "When I say I am Coptic", wrote M.I., a Christian female, "I am referring to my faith, being a Coptic Orthodox Christian" (June 22, 2006). Similarly, M.G., a Christian female mentioned in the previous section, wrote,

Copt as simply Egyptian is meaningless to me apart from the Christian aspect. Maybe it would be more correct for me to consider Egyptian Muslims 'Copt', but I do not and I don't think they would welcome that (June 23, 2006).

D.G., a Christian female, separates "Arab" culture from "Coptic" culture.

Although Arab [sic] and its language, traditions, etc. has become a part of our Coptic culture — I still feel that we have tried to preserve as much of our Coptic culture as possible and that has only happened through our Church — where the Coptic music, hymns, and traditions are still preserved (June 28, 2006).

While D.G. talked about the existence of a distinct Coptic culture, with language, music, and other traditions separate from that of Arab culture, she pointed to the fact that the only way it is preserved today is through the Coptic Orthodox Church, which still uses the language in its services and the music in its hymns. Although based on a related musical tradition, Coptic Church music is still quite different from Arabic music.

M.Y., a Christian female, wrote that because the culture is only preserved through the church, it is hard to say that she is culturally Coptic:

...How many Copts go around speaking with the language of the Pharaohs outside of the Coptic language that is used mainly during liturgies ... I have a difficult time expressing myself as a Coptic American because I have been exposed to the Coptic church through a religious sense. I mean when was the last time someone cooked for me a 'Coptic Dish'? (June 22, 2006).

M.Y. preferred to refer to herself as an Egyptian American, rather than a Coptic American or an Arab American. However, she concluded her email by writing that above all this, she classifies herself as a Christian first.

C.B., a female Christian respondent, took this concept a step further in her email:

As a Copt born in the U.S., I only consider myself Egyptian insofar as it is the nationality of my parents and my family for several generations. Being a Coptic Christian is my true identity — a timeless identity that crosses all political, cultural, national, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. I relate being a Copt much more to the concept of being Christian than being Egyptian — for we have so many Copts who are not Egyptian (July 1, 2006).

The "Copts who are not Egyptian" that C.B. refers to at the end of this quote are non-Egyptian Americans who have become official members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. These non-Egyptians participate in all the worship and rites of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Some joined the church through marriage to an Egyptian Christian; others learned about the church one way or another and decided to join it. When asked about their religion, some of these Americans who joined the Coptic church say they are "Coptic" or "Coptic Orthodox". This represents an entirely different facet to this Coptic identity question in the U.S. For C.B., this phenomena indicates that her Coptic Christian identity can transcend the history and culture it came from, and has evolved into an identity that even non-Egyptians can claim for themselves.

### Descendents of Pharaohs?

The idea that the Copts of Egypt are the direct descendents of the ancient Egyptians, without any mingling with the Arab invaders from the Persian Gulf is at least a century old. Elizabeth Oram's unpublished dissertation (2004) traces this idea that the Copts are the "Sons of the Pharaohs" back to at least the British colonial period, when the phrase was often used to describe the Copts in European travel writings, anthropological studies, and Egyptology studies during the early twentieth century. While it is not known when the Copts began referring to themselves in this way, it is a common phrase used by Egyptian Christians, especially those in the diaspora.

Out of the 20 Egyptian Christian respondents, 19 had heard about this description of the Copts. I asked them the question, "Many Coptic Christian Egyptians insist that they 'are not Arab', but are the 'descendents of the Pharaohs, the original Egyptians'. Do you fall into this category?" Seven of the respondents, five female and two male, said "yes", they do fall into this category. P.F., a Christian male, wrote, "... Coptic Christians by circumstances of history were isolated

and less likely to marry with other groups [and] as a result [are] probably closer in blood to the ancient Egyptians" (June 28, 2006).

However, nine of the Christian respondents had mixed feelings about this phrase, "descendants of the Pharaohs, the original Egyptians", acknowledging that this is a difficult statement to prove due to the numerous invasions of Egypt throughout history, and their own limited knowledge of their direct lineages. Of these nine respondents, some acknowledged that there may be some truth to the idea, but were uncomfortable with claiming a sort of "ethnic supremacy". Four of the Christian respondents completely rejected this phrase, believing it to be ridiculous at best, or racist at worst.

M.I., a female, wrote, "I have heard my parents say that. Truthfully, I only know my lineage up to five generations on my father's side and three generations on my mother's side." (June 22, 2006). While M.I. acknowledged that she cannot directly trace her family's lineage to the ancient Egyptians, D.F. pointed out that there is no way to know if other cultures, including British, French, and Turkish, were mixed into this lineage (June 22, 2006).

E.Y., female, also noted that she probably has some French and Lebanese in her heritage, and wrote, "It's probably naïve to think that there's 'no Arab' in my background." She also wrote:

It's a pretty cool concept to think that you're related to greatness (the designers of the pyramids, highly skilled mathematicians, early surgeons, etc.) or royalty. It's interesting to me that no one thinks of themselves as a descendent of Pharaoh's subjects, which in my mind is the more logical scenario (June 27, 2006).

M.I., quoted above, also thought it was "cool" to say that one is a descendent of the Pharaohs. S.S., a male, questioned how "cool" it is to make this claim:

If most people knew the complete history of the Pharaohs, I am not sure if they would want to identify themselves with them. Yes, they were an advanced culture in terms of science, art, and superior architecture, however, their history is full of corruption, murder, vanity, black magic, and incest (July 2, 2006).

M.A., a female, was similarly ambivalent towards this identification.

... I feel it's a little derogatory to say that only Coptic Christians are true Egyptians, perhaps because even Coptic Christians share so little in common with ancient Egyptians; (although I do often feel that connection when I sing in Coptic, or hear about our other traditions that have close parallels with ancient Egyptian practices)" (June 25, 2006).

M.A. was not the only respondent to comment that limiting ancient Egyptian ancestry to the Christians of Egypt is derogatory. J.Z. also rejected this ancestry idea:

... I do not believe in this nonsense. Egypt is the land of many, many, many invasions ... Whether it was a Muslim, British, Turkish or Roman invader, everyone at some point intermarried and thus I highly doubt there is any pure descendent of Pharaohs left ... I find no pride in being a "pure descendent of the Pharaohs". These people were idol worshipers, they were science and math geniuses who were ignorant pagans. All Egyptians, my Muslim geography professor, my Muslim [doorman door attendant], my Christian math teacher are all one way or another descendants of the Pharaohs. Arguing a purity of blood issue, if such argument was to hold, is in my opinion a covert form of racism (June 23, 2006).

Like S.S., J.Z. found more to dislike about claiming a unique ancient Egyptian ancestry than there was "cool" about it.

Out of the 24 total respondents, only three were not familiar with the "descendants of the ancient Egyptians" idea. One was a Christian respondent, and the other two were Muslim respondents. S.E. was one of the Muslim respondents who had not heard a Copt make this statement, and his response agreed with J.Z. that all modern Egyptians have some ancient Egyptian ancestry. "Copts probably have less ... mixture than other Egyptians and have more direct ancestry. But all Egyptians have that ancient ancestry" (June 25, 2006).

These various responses about ancient Egyptian ancestry and the assumptions about how the "native" Egyptians intermarried or culturally mixed with various invaders for centuries indicates a dearth of real historical understanding of what has happened to the Christians and to Egyptian culture since the seventh century, after the Arab invasion. What Egyptians believe about their ancestry now is thus informed by the history of colonization, and mostly European studies of Egypt, with few, if any, translated primary sources from Egyptians themselves during that period.

### **Coptic Orthodox Egyptian American Woman**

There is an additional gender dimension to being an Egyptian American. To explore this dimension, I asked the female respondents, "How does the additional identity issue of being a female Egyptian/Coptic/Arab living outside of Egypt play into your life?" Nine of the respondents, all Christian, directly addressed the female aspect of their identities. They discussed it in terms of their livelihoods, their church volunteer work, and their experiences as minorities in the U.S. Most discussed the freedom they have to affirm the various aspects of their identities openly living in the diaspora versus living in Egypt.

D.F.'s response addressed some of the feelings of alienation through being a "triple" minority.

Having grown up in the States, I felt as though I related much more to my Egyptian side, however, evidently during my recent trip to Egypt, I realized I was as much a foreigner in Egypt as I am in the States. It is definitely difficult to cope with at times; however, you learn that you are always going to be different from everyone no matter what — being a minority (female) of a minority (Coptic Orthodox Christian) of a minority (Egyptian) in the States (June 22, 2006).

D.S.'s response also discusses a sense of being a minority. In this case, she felt that her English language skills make her a minority in her own church.

As one of the few native-English speakers in my church, I was tasked with serving the younger generations whom the older immigrants could not connect with. Till this day, there aren't any female servants in my church who are native English speakers who are comfortable serving and helping high school and college age youth. This drought of female Copts who are active in their community is an added stress for all those who serve this age group (July 3, 2006).

D.S.'s words touch on a challenge that many Coptic Orthodox churches in the U.S. face as they try to reach out to second and third generation Coptic children and youth. Because the first wave of Coptic immigration to the U.S. occurred in the mid-twentieth century (El-Badry, 2006), the adults who are active in the churches are often not native speakers of English and thus find communicating with the younger generations more challenging. Some churches do face the "drought" of female native English speakers that D.S. refers to, but others have a larger number of female Copts who are active in their church community.

D.G., C.B., and S.H. are three such female Copts, and their responses all talked about how much they enjoy the freedom to live out their female and Christian identities. D.G. wrote:

I definitely feel like I have more opportunities in the States. I know it (from what I hear from family) is discriminatory against Christians and hard for women in Egypt so I am thankful that I have much more of a voice here and freedom to choose a career how I want and freedom to worship and evangelize (June 28, 2006).

Similarly, C.B. wrote, "As a woman, I thank God for the freedom I have living outside the Arab world and living outside Egypt. In Egypt, I did not see many instances of women being able to find their voice in society, in politics, in cultural affairs" (July 1, 2006). S.H. wrote, "I am so proud to call myself Egyptian and even more proud to say that I am

Coptic Orthodox. I feel it is easier to say that and not feel scared when living outside of Egypt" (July 10, 2006).

The stereotype that all women, and particularly minority Christian women, are living in constant fear and oppression is one that A.E. works to break by living out her identity in the U.S. She wrote, "Being a woman from Egypt ... unconsciously I want to prove to people around me that there are women in Egypt who are modern, not veiled, educated and not submissive to their husbands" (June 27, 2006).

### Conclusion

In the mid-winter 2006 issue of the self-published journal *Photo X Quarterly*, Sally Bishai wrote about the Fourth International Coptic Conference, which convened in June 19-21, 2006 in Newark, NJ. This conference gathered many Coptic and human rights leaders, and was entitled "Religious Freedom of Christian Minorities in the Middle East." During the coffee breaks, she wrote, one of the discussions centered around the question of "What is a Copt, anyway?" The varied viewpoints she quoted reflect the diversity of opinions that I have quoted in this article. Some believed all Egyptians are Copts, others that only Egyptian Christians are Copts, and one believed that it referred to the religion of the ancient Egyptians. "Interesting viewpoints, all," she writes, "but I must confess that I am no closer to having formed an opinion on the matter than I was last week" (Bishai, 2006, p. 3).

While I must admit that I have also not formed a definitive opinion on the question of an Arab, Coptic, Egyptian, American identity, I have drawn a few conclusions. First, an "Arab" identity remains just as complex and nebulous for Egyptians, both Christian and Muslim, as it has been since Ahmed wrote her memoir. It is an identity that is rejected by those who feel excluded by it (based on the stereotype that all Arabs are Muslim), rejected by those who feel strongly that their Egyptian identity supersedes it, and accepted, either wholly or in part, by those who believe it connects them to a larger community in Egypt and outside of Egypt.

Second, the Coptic identity is perceived as specifically an Egyptian Christian identity, even for those Egyptian Muslims who embrace a Coptic ancestry or a common minority experience with the Copts in the U.S. In the U.S., the Coptic identity has further evolved to possibly include non-Egyptians who join the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Third, in order not to impose on other Egyptians the sense of exclusion that Copts sense when Arabs are stereotyped as being all Muslim, I believe that Copts in the diaspora need to be careful about the claim that they are the direct descendents of the ancient Egyptians, possibly excluding other Egyptians from this heritage, and

creating more division that as a minority, would only create more exclusion for them. The majority of the Egyptian Christian respondents did understand that Egyptian Christian ancestry is probably just as diverse as Egyptian Muslim ancestry. Thus, a direct lineage to the Pharaohs should not be assumed by anyone, although a common heritage from a great and not so great civilization can be claimed in one way or another by all Egyptians.

Finally, I concur with the opinions expressed by the Egyptian American Christian women about how they live out their identities in the U.S. My frequent travels between the U.S. and Egypt have allowed me to spend large amounts of time with young Egyptian women, Christian and Muslim. I have concluded that while these young women do face challenges in Egypt that they would not face in the U.S., they also display an inspiring amount of creativity, courage, and empowerment.

However, because of the challenges they face, it is much more difficult for them to live out their identities contrary to the stereotypes. I agree with A.E. that it is important to break stereotypes about Egyptian women while living out my identity in the U.S.

Thus, by fully living out my identity as a Coptic Orthodox Christian Egyptian American woman and embracing all those aspects of who I am, I break many stereotypes. I break the stereotype that all Egyptian women are oppressed. I break the stereotype that all Arabs are Muslim, and that all Egyptians are Arabs. I break the stereotype among Egyptians in Egypt that all Americans live "immoral" lives. I am no longer weary of explaining "why I am not Arab", as I mentioned in the beginning of this essay. I am now energized to talk about the multiple aspects of who I am, rich with history and community, to anyone who is willing to listen.

## Endnotes

\* Phoebe Farag was born in Cairo, Egypt, grew up in New York, and now divides her time between Washington, D.C. and Cairo. An active member of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the U.S., she works with youth in her local church in Washington, D.C., and also participates in the Justice for Women Working Group of the National Council of Churches. Currently the program director for an international nonprofit organization, she holds an M.A. in International Education Development from the George Washington University and a B.A. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University.

1. There are an estimated 300,000 Copts in the U.S., if not more (Abd al-Fattah, quoted in Ayalon, 1999, p. 9).
2. Although it is not known what percentage of Egyptian Americans are Christian, according to an article by Helen Samhan, originally published in Grolier's Multimedia Encyclopedia in 2001, and republished by the Arab American Institute in 2006, approximately two thirds of the estimated three million Arab American immigrants and their descendents in the U.S. are Christians. Her definition includes Egyptian Americans as Arab Americans (2006).
3. Hundreds of words used in Egyptian colloquial Arabic have their roots in the Coptic language, which was the last phase of the Egyptian language before the Arab invasion in the seventh century. Coptic continued to be spoken in parallel with Arabic until the 11th or 12th centuries (Youssef, 2003).
4. My experience with Egyptian Christians in Egypt who are members of the Catholic Church or the various Protestant denominations is that they also refer to themselves as Copts and are included in the general statistic of eight million Copts in Egypt. My survey did not include Egyptian Christian Americans who are not members of the Coptic Orthodox Church, so I am not aware if Egyptian Christian Americans from other denominations identify with the word "Copt." This is another complication to this topic that merits further exploration.

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