Expanding oral history access through a transcription and translation initiative: The Qurna Hillside Oral History Project at AUC

Stephen Urgola, Rare Books & Special Collections Library, The American University in Cairo

AMICAL 2022 Community Idea Exchange
Documenting lives of older relocated villagers across the Nile from Luxor in southern Egypt

Qurna Hillside Oral History Project
Team from AUC conducted 70 digital audio interviews in 2016, aided by local partners

Qurna Hillside Oral History Project
Oral history interviews were transcribed with support from AMICAL Small Grant

Qurna Hillside Oral History Project
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title (English)</strong></th>
<th>Mahmoud Ahmed Sayed Abdel Rahman Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title (Arabic)</strong></td>
<td>مقاطبة محمود أحمد عبد الرحمن</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviewee (English)</strong></td>
<td>Mahmoud Ahmed Sayed Abdelrahman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviewee (Arabic)</strong></td>
<td>محمود أحمد عبد الرحمن</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interviewer</strong></td>
<td>Mohamed Farag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>2016-05-02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Description (English)**

Mahmoud Ahmed Sayed Abdel Rahman, a retired 75-year-old former resident of the Qurna hillside, describes his life experiences. Coming from the Abdel-Rasoul clan, known for its association with ancient monuments of the Luxor area, Mahmoud outlines the work of his family in the tourist trade, and his own work in ticket offices at local tourist sites. He offers an account of how residents of Qurna had long interacted with tourists, and relates how younger residents more recently relocated to work in tourism in distant parts of Egypt like Sharm El Sheikh, or took on jobs in other professions; he mentions the education and careers of his own daughters as well. Mahmoud describes life in old Qurna, including wedding traditions, mould festivals, games, and changes over the years in areas like farming and the availability of water and electricity. The displacement of residents from old Qurna is covered, including the demolition of the old houses; he compares these with the new housing provided, and speaks of the current levels of pollution not found in the old village.

**Description (Arabic)**

وصف محمود أحمد عبد الرحمن، المتقاعد البالغ من العمر 75 عاماً، والقيم سابقًا في نيل الفن懒، تجاره الحياة، يشرح محمود عن عشيرة عبد الرسول المعروفة بارتباطها بالآثار القديمة في منطقة الفن懒، ويبين عمل عائلته في التجارة السياحية، وعمله الخاص في مكتب بيع التذاكر للمواطن السياحي المحلي. يقدم وصفًا تفصيليًا لتفاعل سكان القرية لفترة طويلة مع السياح، ويرى كيف أن الكل السكان الأصفر ساً مؤخرًا للعمل في السياحة في أجزاء بعيدة من مصر مثل شرم الشيخ، أو عشروا ومالوا في مهن أخرى، كما يذكر تعليم وهم بناته أيضًا. يصف محمود الحياة في القرية القديمة، بما في ذلك تقاليد الزفاف ومهن المولد والأعمال والترفيه على مدرَّسة، في مجالات مثل الزراعة وتوفر المياه والكهرباء. تمت تجهيز هذه السكان من القرية القديمة، بما في ذلك هذه المزارع القديمة، بدورات تدريبية، ويتخذ من مبادرات التنمية الحالية في القرية القديمة المقدمة.
[00:15:00]

Interviewer Mohamed Farag:
Um, how did the end of the annual flooding of the Nile change people's lives?

Interviewee Mohamed Ahmed El-Tayeb:
My father, may his soul rest in peace, used to tell me those stories. When there were floods people went to the top most of the mountain to live in the stone doors [these were doors into the stone hillside – these were tombs that the Qurnawis used as part of the house]. To live in these stone doors means that we used to live in it, each family had these stone doors. [They lived there] till when the floods passed. [Sound of motor and women’s voices]
The Necropolis Guard and The Duat at Dusk

Nestled in the lower slopes of the hills behind the Theban Necropolis lay several abandoned villages, as the majority of their people had left after being forced to relocate. Mud brick houses with honeycomb-looking walls of caves in which thousands of residents once lived sit atop and next to tombs of nobles, including various New Kingdom pharaohs’ most trusted and loyal viziers, treasurers, and keepers of vineyards. Separate houses with the same honeycomb walls and mud brick architecture can be found on the plethora of royal tombs, statues, and valleys that worldwide read about and hope to visit to become this place — El Qurna, or to locals, El Gourna — and being the name of the pyramidal hill where

Process Memo

The original inspiration for the first draft of this story came from the Rare Books and Special Collections Digital Library’s “Qurna Hillside Oral History Project,” wherein residents who had been relocated shared information about life in Qurna and shared memories. The two oral histories I found to be especially informative in helping me craft this story were the interviews with Gamal Gereis Boktor and Fatma Ahmed Taber, as both discussed a belief in the supernatural in some way and also shared encounters with spirits/ghosts or “goblins,” as one of them refers to it. This stemmed from the notion that the land they lived on was “possessed” and the site of ancient nobles, as well as a former battleground.

Challenges: Local dialects
Usage: Linguistics study, Student fiction for class

Qurna Hillside Oral History Project
About this collection

The Qurna Hillside Oral History Project documents the lives and experiences of residents relocated from their homes on the West Bank of the Nile near Luxor. Qurna has long been a focal point of interest, prominent for its hillside location near ancient sites and its decorated houses. A government attempt in the 1940s to move the residents to a new settlement designed by architect Hassan Fathy failed, but from 2006 to 2008 numerous village houses were demolished and their residents relocated. The oral history recordings and transcripts in this collection are the product of a series of interviews conducted in spring 2016 by a team of student and library staff oral history interviewers from The American University in Cairo, assisted by two local liaisons, who visited former residents in their new homes. The more than seventy interviews, many with elderly men and women, addressed their upbringing, work, family life, material culture, and traditional practices in areas like religion and medicine. Also covered are encounters with outsiders like tourists and archaeologists, as well as the interviewees’ experience of their relocation. The interviews were conducted in Arabic (with interviewees typically speaking in local dialect); for some interviews access must be requested from RBSCCL staff. This project was a joint effort between AUC’s Rare Books and Special Collections Library and Caroline Simpson’s Qurna History Project, and made possible by an AUC Faculty Research Grant and an AMICAL Small Grant.