

Imagining the Nile: knowledge – power nexus in the 19th century Anthropocene

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Setting the scene

What would the Nile be without any of its hydraulic infrastructures – the numerous networks of canals, the towering dams, the barrages? Was it at one time imagined the way we see it in the eighteenth century map (figure 1), as a free-flowing entity devoid of any barriers?



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Figure 1. Detail of Cairo by Piri Reis, circa 1730



Source: Kitāb-I Bahriyye. Walters Art Museum, MS W.658.305a, image CC BY. Available online at <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/77733/the-city-of-cairo/> (accessed 30th March 2022).

Although such a vision might have been a reality of the Nile, it is only partial. The story is missing one integral element: the layered imaginations of the Nile, as represented in the form of multiple writings and travelogues from the nineteenth century onwards. There have been debates as to whether we can consider rivers as solely ‘natural’ in their essence or as ‘artificial’ due to humans’ interventions.¹ Such dichotomous views are rather reductive and can no longer apply to the ‘hybrid entities of the Anthropocene’.² Instead, we adopt a view of rivers as ‘complex entanglements of artificial and natural forces – hybrid forms that are neither natural nor cultural, neither human nor nonhuman, neither social nor material, but confluences or mixtures of all these’.³ Similarly, the study of the Anthropocene has been understood to be an analysis of the collision between ‘natural forces and human forces’.⁴ From this footing, we thus develop our understanding of modern rivers in the Anthropocene ‘not simply as physical landscapes; they are cultural worlds as well, shaped at the interface between humans and nature’.⁵

In this paper, we use different means to understand and read the Anthropocene as layered ‘human storytelling’⁶ with and within nature, or an expression of ‘powerful imagination’,⁷ or as Kelly refers to it, as ‘anthropocenic consciousness’.⁸ By doing so, we study the

¹ For discussions, see for example M. Edgeworth and J. Benjamin, ‘What is a river? The Chicago River as hyperobject’, in J.M. Kelly et al. (eds), *Rivers of the Anthropocene* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), pp. 162–175.

² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

³ *Ibid.*, p.163.

⁴ Zalasiewicz et al., ‘The new world of the Anthropocene’, *Environmental Science and Technology* 44 (7) (2010): 2228–2231, p. 2231.

⁵ Kelly, *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, pp. xv–xxv.

⁷ C. Deane-Drummond, ‘Rivers at the end of the end of Nature: Ethical trajectories of the Anthropocene grand narrative’, in Kelly, *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, pp. 55–62.

⁸ T. McHolm, *Representational Challenges: Literatures of Environmental Justice in the Anthropocene* (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Oregon, 2017), p. 17.

⁹ This refers to the permanent changes to the earth that American and European elites were effecting by the early nineteenth century, as supported by empirical evidence. J. Kelly, ‘Anthropocenes: A fractured picture’, in Kelly et al. (eds), *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, pp. 1–18.

Nile, the ‘hybrid entity’ comprising both the natural resource that it is, and the product of humans’ storytelling, imaginations and consciousness through writings and travelogues.

In the nineteenth century, the Nile River in Egypt was perceived by political, capitalist and knowledge-making powers (namely Ottoman and European empires) as ‘pristine nature’ and/or ‘ruined landscape’, which was open for exploration and exploitation.⁹ As such, Egyptian modernists and European explorers (e.g. archaeologists and travellers) produced incongruous knowledge about the Nile. On the one hand, the river was positioned in the land of civilisation(s) – Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic or Hellenistic.¹⁰ On the other hand, the river was ruined and surrounded by ‘uncivilised’ Egyptians, or at least illiterate and unskilled peasants.

This case study of the Nile River centrally examines the workings of power manifested in the knowledge produced about the agency of the Nile and the Egyptians. Kelly wrote:

while individuals have the capacity to consciously effect change, our actions are limited by the contexts in which we find ourselves. Each of us is shaped by our material, socio-political and cultural worlds¹¹.

Similarly, Celia Deane-Drummond argues that we need ‘to consider the ways in which humans tell stories or narratives about river systems.’¹²

Understanding rivers and the Anthropocene as entangled nature–culture storytelling enables us to read how nature is ingrained in human power dynamics. This perspective pushes us to analyse

⁹ C. Hoffmann, ‘Environmental determinism as Orientalism: The geo-political ecology of crisis in the Middle East’, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 31 (1) (2018): 94–104, p. 96; D. Davis, ‘Imperialism, orientalism, and the environment in the Middle East: History, policy, power, and practice’, in D. Davis and E. Burke (eds), *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), p. 13.

¹⁰ K. Blouin, ‘Beyond the Nile: Orientalism, environmental history, and ancient Egypt’s Mareotide (northwestern Nile Delta)’, *History Compass* 15 (10) (2017): 1–11; E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

¹¹ Kelly, *Rivers of the Anthropocene*, p. xxiv.

¹² Deane-Drummond, ‘Rivers at the end of the end of Nature’, p. 55.

how writings on natural resources echoed human personal journeys and experiences.

We experimented with our approach by analysing two readings in juxtaposition and thinking how they might have converged to influence our understanding of the river. The first book is by the Egyptian modernist Alī Mubārak (1823–1893): *Nukhbat al-Fikr fi Tadbir Nil Miṣr (Elite Thoughts on Managing the Nile of Egypt)*, written in Arabic in 1881.¹³ The second book is a collection of Western travelogue diaries of visits to Egypt, named *A Nile Anthology: Travel Writing Through the Centuries*.¹⁴ Alī Mubārak’s book is written from the perspective of a scientific expert and was intended to be a source of reference for policymaking in modern terms. The travelogues were also written by prestigious intellectuals of the era, including Pierre Loti, Harriet Martineau, James Silk Buckingham, Amelia Edwards and Jean-François Champollion, among others. They mostly intended to document their travels; however, their travelogues quickly became sources of knowledge about both the river and the locals. They contributed to producing a certain divergence of agency in the mind of the European readers, especially since travelling was a privilege inaccessible to all but a few. Even if these travelogues did not target colonial administration directly, they facilitated colonial missions by focusing on the natural resource and dismantling the locals’ agency. As Derr argues, the British colonial administrators and engineers did not engage with what Egyptian intellectuals such as Mubārak produced about regulating the Nile. By contrast, English writings about the Nile had an opportunity to be circulated, being British-produced knowledge.¹⁵

¹³ A. Mubārak, *Nukhbat al-fikr fi tadbir Nil Miṣr* (al-Qahirah al-Mahrusah: Matba‘at Wadi al-Nil al-‘Arabiyah wa-al-Ifranjiyah, 1297/ reprinted by Egyptian National Library and Archives, 2012). The publication date was in 1297 according to the Islamic calendar (Hijri), which corresponds to 1881 in the Gregorian calendar. It was published before the British formal occupation of Egypt in 1882.

¹⁴ D. Manley, S. Abdel-Hakim and W.H. Bartlett (eds), *A Nile Anthology: Travel Writing through the Centuries* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2015).

¹⁵ J. Derr, *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

We divide the article into four sections. Firstly, we present an historical brief on the main powers that tried to control the river across history (in the Ottoman and the British eras). Secondly, we focus on Ali Mubārak's ideas and plans for the Nile and the peasants (*fellahin*). Thirdly, we focus on the Western travelogues' perceptions and descriptions of the Nile and the locals. Investigating the diaries written for western and eastern readers (people from the Orient), as well as investigating the intersections and the differences between these narratives, enables us to understand the agency of the Nile and the locals in the Anthropocene as an outcome of storytelling through time. This is made possible by being attentive to the complexity and fluidity of memories and memoirs of nature (in our story, the river) across history.

Historical background: checkmate powers on the river

'When, eventually, the waters of the Nile, from the Lakes to the sea, are brought fully under control, it will be possible to boast that Man – in this case, the Englishman – has turned the gifts of Nature to the best possible advantage'.¹⁶

'He – Mohammed Ali Pasha – established many bridges/barrages and canals and considered maintaining them. He constructed the summer canals to improve the summer-seasonal agriculture. He replaced the foremen with engineers in irrigation works. Additionally, he sent many of the countrymen to Europe to study and master the art of agriculture to serve their country'.¹⁷

¹⁶ E. Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 2nd volume, pp. 461. Lord Cromer was the British Consul-General of Egypt from 1883 (after the British occupation) to 1907. He designed and administered the economic and political plans in Egypt.

¹⁷ J. Zaydan, *The Modern History of Egypt: From the Islamic Conquest to the Present Day with a Brief on the History of Ancient Egypt* (Egypt: Hindawi Foundation, 1889/2019) [in Arabic], pp. 698-699. The quote was translated by the authors. Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914) was one of the Arab renaissance 'Nahḍah' scholars. His writings in Islamic history, Arabic literature and journalism fed the Arab Nahḍah thoughts in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

These two sentiments reflect how actors located in rival powers – the elite in the British Empire and those under Mohammed Ali's reign – similarly imagined the Nile as an abundant river, albeit neglected and not yet 'properly' well exploited. Both employed modernist knowledge to remake the river as a 'perennial river',¹⁸ which helped fix their imperial powers.

Mohammed Ali Pasha (ruling from 1805 to 1848) built his vision of a 'new Egypt', semi-independent from the Ottoman Empire, by regulating the Nile's water to increase land productivity as a means to secure his military and economic capabilities and to expand his international power.¹⁹ Accordingly, during Mohammed Ali's reign the Nile was imagined as primarily serving its downstream areas, and in particular the delta, where extensive irrigation projects were established in order to export cash crops to Istanbul and Europe. By contrast, when the British occupied Egypt (1882) they reached and almost controlled the source of the Nile in the Equatorial Lakes. Their irrigation policy was aligned with their imperial plans in the other riparian countries.²⁰ Inside Egypt, the British built up its hydraulic and technological power on top of what Mohammed Ali's rule had already constructed.²¹ Nevertheless, the British Consul-General of Egypt, Lord Cromer, accused the Ottoman ruler of inefficient and unscientific management of the Nile floods and droughts. The English engineers were therefore perceived as 'the saviour of the Egyptian irrigation'.²²

¹⁸ Derr, *The Lived Nile*.

¹⁹ K. Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); A. Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For more analysis about the Nile in the Ottoman era, see for example: R. Dankoff et al., *Ottoman Explorations of the Nile: Evliya Çelebi's Map of the Nile and The Nile Journeys in the Book of Travels (Seyahatname)* (London: Gingko Library, 2018), p. 98.

²⁰ T. Tvedt, 'Hydrology and empire: The Nile, water imperialism and the partition of Africa', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39 (2) (2011): 173–194.

²¹ R.L. Tignor, 'British agricultural and hydraulic policy in Egypt, 1882–1892', *Agricultural History* 37 (2) (1963): 63–74.

²² Lord Milner (British administrator who served in Egypt from 1889 to 1892)

Historical scholarship of imperial powers in the Nile Basin has emphasised the hydraulic management of water through engineering technologies as a tool of control over the river and its people.²³ Not much attention has been accorded to the role of travelogues and memories in producing certain imagination and cultural discourses.

Materialising the Nile: Alī Mubārak’s renaissance (Nahḍah) vision

Alī Mubārak saw the river through hydraulic knowledge in pursuit of building a ‘new Egypt’ as envisioned by Mohammed Ali’s reign. He thus formulated a way of telling narratives about a ‘natural resource’ through the need to apply advanced science and technology, and the problem of educating unskilled fellahin. The knowledge he produced and his key writings (on education and hydraulic planning) contributed significantly to the Egyptian renaissance (Nahḍah). Mubārak’s account emphasised the centrality of the Nile in defining the power and glory of Egypt against European countries. Despite his glorification of the Nile’s significance, he emphasised the centrality of material and human interventions and transformation to maximise the productivity of the Nile waters. His renaissance approach, which could be described as ‘imagineering’ (a

quoted in Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, p. 458. Furthermore, when Cromer discussed the British irrigation mission in Egypt, he highlighted the role of the French engineer, saying: ‘the Barrage – a work which owed its origin to the genius of a French engineer’. Meanwhile, he defamed Alī Mubārak’s ideas and administrative skills in repairing the Delta Barrage, which contradicted the suggested plan of the British engineer Sir Colin Campbell Scott-Moncrieff. Cromer thus described Mubārak’s repairment plan as ‘costly and wasteful alternative’ (Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, p. 459). Moreover, Scott-Moncrieff, who was in charge of the irrigation system, removed Mubārak from the Ministry of Public Works (Derr, *The Lived Nile*).

²³ See for example: H.H. Edwin, *The Nile: A General Account of the River and the Utilization of Its Waters* (London: Constable, 1952); W.R. Frederic, *Water Resource Planning in the Sudan: An Economic Problem* (Khartoum: [s.n.], 1966); S.G. Neville, *England, Europe and the Upper Nile, 1882–1899: A Study in the Partition of Africa*, Edinburgh University Publications. History, Philosophy and Economics, No.18 861738969 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965).

term coined by Chris H. Büscher to describe the ‘portmanteau of imagining and engineering’ in understanding waterscapes),²⁴ relied on both advanced technology and educated *fellahin* to revive agricultural practice in Egypt.

Ali Mubārak Pasha (1823–1893) played a significant role in building a ‘new Egypt’. He travelled to France as part of Mohammed Ali’s various educational missions to European countries aimed at acquiring European knowledge and skills (e.g. engineering, medicine, military/naval fields).²⁵ These missions would shape the ‘reformist’ intellectuals and technocrats who later led the process of Egypt’s renaissance (Nahḍah). The orientation of Nahḍah was to eventually blend European science and knowledge with a new national Egyptian identity.²⁶ Since his return from France, Mubārak had a pioneer role in ‘modernising’ the education system and urban planning of Cairo and the main Egyptian cities. Thereafter, he was seen as an icon of modernisation, working on restructuring knowledge production. He endorsed the establishment of a public schooling education system, which created a new space for acquiring and generating knowledge that differed from the prevailing religion-based education under the Al Azhar authority.²⁷

Our analysis of Mubārak’s book reveals his intellectual agency in the production of a ‘modernised’ knowledge of the Nile River. He constantly and explicitly affirmed the necessity of applying ad-

²⁴ C. Chris, ‘Imagineering waterscapes: The case of the Dutch water sector’, *Water Alternatives* **12** (3) (2019): 814–835, p. 815.

²⁵ Mubārak joined the mission to France in 1844 with four princes of the Mohammed Ali family. For more information on educational missionaries, see for example: H.A. Ead, ‘Globalization in higher education in Egypt in a historical context’, *Research in Globalization* **1** (100003) (2019): 1–5.

²⁶ O. El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); A. Patel, *The Arab Nahdah: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

²⁷ L.M. Kenny, ‘Ali Mubārak: Nineteenth century Egyptian educator and administrator’, *Middle East Journal* **21** (1) (1967): 35–51; M.J. Reimer, ‘Contradiction and consciousness in Ali Mubārak’s description of al-Azhar’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* **29** (1) (1997): 53–69.

vanced technology, and educating fellahin, to utilise the Nile's water as a direct way to achieve the Egyptian Nahḍah. Sheehi argues that Mubārak's discourse throughout his works was a clear attempt to materialise the Egyptian Nahḍah as envisioned by Mohammed Ali's reign; importantly, he conveyed this ultimate vision as 'a natural, necessary and self-evident project'.²⁸

The story of the Nile as told by Mubārak contends that the physical power (agency) of the river itself needs to be tamed/utilised by both infrastructure and skilled fellahin. The aim of Mubārak's book was to produce structured knowledge about the Nile that was built on scientific explanations. *Nukhbat al-Fikr* consists of four parts: the first part depicts the River's physiography with details of natural/artificial main and tertiary canals and flood plains across Egypt, as well as water measurement and constructed infrastructures on the Nile. The second part elaborates the agricultural system in Egypt and the causes of its deteriorations, highlighting the impacts on trade and industry. He discussed the main characteristics of Egyptians in the third part. The last part emphasises the importance of maintaining the Nile's infrastructures (i.e. canals and barrages). However, his reformist reasoning could be traced in his writing and argumentation, as he did not completely refute the established traditional knowledge in society. Rather, he injected historical narration, poems, prose and religious expressions to convince the reader of the significance and necessity of developing the Nile River on a scientific basis. Moreover, across the book's chapters, Mubārak illustrated the River's hydraulic features and infrastructures through figures, tables and measurements, while criticising the efficiency of traditional methods of agriculture. For instance, he demonstrated in tables the financial cost and returns of replacing the waterwheels (a traditional irrigation tool) with steam engines, to increase crops yields (Figure 2).

In the *Nukhbat al-Fikr*, Mubārak posited the Nile as the central means to attain Egyptian power in the world. He repeated throughout the book that 'the Nile is the cause of Egypt's happiness or misery'.

²⁸ S. Sheehi, 'Towards a critical theory of al-Nahḍah: Epistemology, ideology and capital', *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43 (2–3) (2012): 269–298, p. 279.

Figure 2. An excerpt of Alī Mubārak's numeric tables showcasing the cost and efficiency of steam engines

		جدول الموابرات							
ملحوظات	خمسة أمتار		أربعة أمتار		ثلاثة أمتار		متران ٢		ملحوظات
	خيول بخارية	آلات	خيول بخارية	آلات	خيول بخارية	آلات	خيول بخارية	آلات	
القوة المفيدة	٧٧٢		٦١٨		٤٦٩		٣٩٠		
القوة النظرية بما فيها الصايع	١٠٢٩		٨٢٣		٦١٨		٤١١		
قوة الآلات والأدوات		كل ٦		كل ٥		كل ٤		كل ٤	
آلات وطمليات	١٧٥	واحد	١٦٥	واحد	١٦٠	واحد	١٠٩	واحد	واحد
مواسير وملحقات	١٤٠	١٢ شرحة	١٣٠	كل ١٠ واحد	١٢٠	كل ٨ واحد	٨٠ متر مكعب	واحد	واحد
زينة الآلات	٢٧٥٠٠٠		٢٠٠٠٠٠		١٦٠٠٠٠		١٤٠٠٠٠		زينة الآلات
زينة الطمليات	١٨٠٠٠٠		١٥٠٠٠٠		١٢٠٠٠٠		١٢٠٠٠٠		والمحقات
زينة القزانات	٤٣٢٠٠٠		٣٣٦٠٠٠		٢٦٥٠٠٠		١٦٠٠٠٠		بالكيلو
زينة المواسير والملحقات	٣٠٠٠٠		٢٥٠٠٠٠		٢٥٠٠٠٠		١٦٠٠٠٠		
آلات وطمليات	٦٦٠٠٠٠		٥٥٠٠٠٠		٤٤٠٠٠٠		٤٠٠٠٠٠		
قزانات	٣٣٦٠٠٠		٢٨٦٠٠٠		٢١١٢٠٠		١٦٠٠٠٠		
مواسير وملحقات	٣٠٠٠٠		٢٥٠٠٠		٢٠٠٠٠		١٦٠٠٠		
مصاريب الحزم	٢٠٥٢٠		١٧٢٢٠		١٣٤٢٤		٩٥٢٠		أثمان
مصاريب الاستحضار إلى إسكندرية	١٨٢٤٠٠		١٤٢٢٠٠		١١٣١١٠		٨٧٢٠٠		المهامات
تفريغ وجمر وكوميسون	١٠٢٦٠٠		٨٦١٠٠		٦٧١٢٠		٥٧٦٠٠		والآلات
نقل من إسكندرية إلى محل التركيب	١٢٤٨٠		٩٤٨٠		٧١٣٠		٥٢٨٠		بالفرنك
أبنية وتركيب	٦٠٠٠٠		٥٠٠٠٠		٤٢٠٠٠		٣٠٠٠٠		
سقفية حديد على الآلات	٤٢٠٠٠		٣٥٠٠٠		٢٨٠٠٠		٢٠٠٠٠		
بيارة	٤٦٠٠٠		٤٠٠٠٠		٣٧٠٠٠		٣٠٠٠٠		
مجموع تكاليف العليون متر مكعب	١٤٩٢٠٠٠		١٢٤١٠٠٠		٩٧٩٠٠٠		٨١٥٦٠٠		
فائدة باعتبار خمسة في المائة	٣٧٣,٠		٣١٠,٨٥		٢٤٤,٧٥		٢٠٣,٨٨		
على فرض كون الإدارة ٢٠٠ يوم					٤٨٩,٥٠		٤٠٧,٧٥		
مصاريب الإدارة والإطفائات	٧٤٦,٠٠		٦٢٠,٥٠						اللازم
عطشجية باعتبار ٣ فرنك يوميا	٣٦,٠٠	١٢	٣٠,٠٠	١٠	٢٤,٠٠	٨	٢٤,٠٠	٨	صرفه
رؤسا عطشجية باعتبار ٣٢ يوما	٢٤,٠٠	٢	٢٤,٠٠	٢	٢٤,٠٠	٢	٢٤,٠٠	٢	للحصول
مهندسين باعتبار ٣٦٠٠ سنويا	٣٦,٠٠	٢	٣٦,٠٠	٢	١٨,٠٠	١	١٨,٠٠	١	على مليون
فهله لتقدير الوقود باعتبار فرنك يوميا	١٠,٠٠	١٠	٨,٠٠	٨	٦,٠٠	٦	٤,٠٠	٤	متر مكعب
فحم باعتبار الطن ٦٠ فرنكا	١٨٠,٠٠		١٤٤,٠٠		١٠٨,٠٠		٧٢,٠٠		بالفرنك
زيت وشحم وكهنة	٥٥,٠٠		٤٥,٠٠		٣٥,٠٠		٢٨,٠٠		
احتياطي بما فيه الورش والتعمير	٤٢٠,٠٠		٣٦٥,٧٥		٢٢٨,٧٥		١٩٥,٣٧		
المصرفوف اليومي للإدارة	٣٥٠,٠٠		٢٨٨,٦٠		٢١٥,٠٠		١٦٢,٥٠		
المصرفوف على المتر الكعب	٠,٠٠٣٦		٠,٠٠٢٨٨		٠,٠٠٢١٥		٠,٠٠١٦٢٥		

Source: Alī Mubārak's book *Nukhbat al-Fikr fī Tadbīr Nil Mīsr*, p. 266

In saying that, while he believed in the agency of the Nile as a central natural resource for Egyptian political power, this physical agency still needed to be controlled and utilised by implementing advanced knowledge. The irrigation canals had deteriorated under the rule of Abbas (1848–1854) and Sa'id (1854–1863).²⁹ Mubārak therefore advised the rulers during Mohammed Ali's reign of the necessity of agricultural education so that *fellahin* could be productive with less effort:

The governor (wāli) ought to establish peasantry schools to provide basic education by excellent educators ... This country deserves many peasantry schools that should be distributed across its corners by allocating places for experiments so each community will be able to get the results of the scientific explorations and the fruits of peasantry experiments.³⁰

Firmly believing in the economic power of 'new Egypt', Mubārak addressed the international demand for Egyptian cash crops as a staple of the agricultural economy. He pointed out Egypt's comparative advantage based on its natural features, or 'our land's treasure', in other words fertile lands, the availability of water, weather conditions and a central geographic location. The comparisons that Mubārak included in his analysis aimed at showing the rulers during Mohammed Ali's reign how Egypt could be an international power equivalent to European powers (e.g. France and Britain). This lofty purpose, according to Mubārak, could perhaps be achieved by a divine blessing – but equally with Khedive rational policies. The knowledge-based rationalisation of upgrading the agriculture sector coalesced into 'the production of a single commodity'. This was combined with an attendant infrastructure through policy, i.e. expanding transportation, the land tenure system and security mechanisms. All these transformations would serve the objective of building or retaining the sovereignty and power of Mohammed Ali's reign – a vision of a 'new Egypt' facilitated at the same time, ironically, as the growing involvement of European power in Egypt's economy and colonisation.³¹

²⁹ Derr, *The Lived Nile*.

³⁰ Mubārak, *Nukhbat al-fikr fi tadbir Nil Misr*, p. 111 (translated by the authors).

³¹ T. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 16.

Mubārak's renaissance vision did not, however, posit the Egyptian identity against or in contrast to European modernisation. Instead, as a reformer, he discussed the main characteristics of Egyptians as *fellahin* credited for inventing the 'agricultural art' that was transferred to other nations around the world. Mubārak explained that Egyptians are favoured by nature, being located in flat and fertile land with domesticated animals; this appealing 'natural' ecology enables Egyptians to farm and produce. They were also favoured by their religious beliefs, which educate Egyptians to avoid immoral/savage behaviour; and by the government, which likewise urges people to be law-abiding. Mubārak framed Egyptians as a superior nation. He argued: 'there is no nation now, or in ancient times, that has been at the top of civilization and as moral as the Egyptian nation'.³² Moreover, he compared Egyptians with Europeans, who had initially been savage and underdeveloped, but whose fortunes and positions had changed and who came to be recognised by all other nations. Mubārak's reformist vision provided a way for recovering Egyptian glory with a belief in Egyptians' capabilities to restore the position of their moral and pioneer fellahin. In other words, Mubārak's vision aimed to place peasants at the foundation of a superior agricultural production infrastructure. They were the 'human resource' who filled an infrastructure gap in agriculture. In Mubārak's account, however, the agency of fellahin had been weakened and they had become non-productive because they did not improve themselves. Hence, he discussed Egyptians' conditions through the lens of educational and technical capabilities, these being crucial for the maintenance of Nile infrastructure and for the cultivation of crops. Peasants should therefore be 'instructed' on how to use upgraded technology and to apply advanced techniques in farming, besides work on constructing the overall hydraulic infrastructure. This in turn, established a 'structure' in which power was practised.³³ Mean-

³² Mubārak, *Nukhbat al-fikr fi tadbir Nil Misr*, p. 360 (translated by authors).

³³ Mitchell argues that Mubārak's role contributed on one hand to setting up a schooling system of 'personal discipline'; on the other hand, his urban plans established the model village and city as a 'spatial order' in pursuit of building the mod-

while, he omitted discussing the suppression and unjust taxation system which was linked with land property and forced labour.³⁴ In conjunction with this production vision, Mikhail argues that peasants gradually disconnected from their local environment i.e. their small farms, livestock and inherited knowledge because the governments perceived them as mobile labour to dig and repair canals away from their home.³⁵

Mubārak's ideas and perceptions about the Nile were derived from structured/secular knowledge that reconfigured the river's agency through the necessity of hydraulic infrastructure, and the agency of peasants through the necessity to build technical knowledge. Hence, Mubārak placed the river squarely at the centre of Egypt's renaissance and its accelerating economy.

Experiencing the Nile: foreign travelogues and people of the Nile

The collection of diaries and travelogues in the book under study were derived from the collision between the travellers' culture, societies, and interaction with nature in their own worlds. Even more, these travellers' diaries mediated the production of dominant knowledge at that time, since travelling was not accessible to the ordinary public. Thus, these writings were far from just personal stories once these stories themselves travelled across place and time. Such writing becomes an important analytical object whose performativity and agency in making universalising cultural discourse needs attention. The travellers were pioneers in their fields, such as the founder of modern nursing, Florence Nightingale, and one of the first female sociologists, Harriet Martineau. Some of the travellers' interests in Egypt had a direct impact in advancing scientific knowledge. French scholar Jean-François Champollion, for example, was able to de-

ern Egypt. For more information, see Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, chapter three.

³⁴ S. El Nour, *Land, Peasant and Investor: A Study of Agrarian and Peasant Questions in Egypt* (Cairo: Al Maraya for Cultural Production, 2018) (in Arabic).

³⁵ Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History*.

cipher the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Egyptologist Amelia Edwards founded the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1882 (currently known as the Egypt Exploration Society, which still supports and funds archaeology research projects in Egypt and Sudan). These were powerful intellectuals in their home countries, and they viewed the Nile based on their backgrounds, travels and experiences. In this section, we highlight these analogous writings and unravel the commonality in their observations, which re-produced ‘antecedent authority’³⁶ about the Nile. In doing so, we analyse the agency of both the resource and the locals by differentiating between the romanticised language used to describe the beauty of the river and its *Dahabiyeh*,³⁷ and comparing it with the language that was used to characterise the locals as poor and disempowered.

The diaries present physiographic and hydrological attributes of the river as a beautiful resource amidst, and despite, the vast deserts of Egypt. These sentiments came from the ecological contrast between abundant water and parched deserts in the same location. French naval officer and novelist Pierre Loti conveyed this by saying:

All along the banks of the Nile this movement of the antennae of the shadufs is to be seen. It had its beginning in the earliest ages and is still the characteristic manifestation of human life along the river banks. It ceases only in the summer, when the river, swollen by the rains of equatorial Africa, overflows this land of Egypt, which itself was made in the middle of the Saharan sands.³⁸

Irish traveller and novelist Elliot Warburton’s sentiment described ecological attributes in romantic phrases: ‘The sailing on the moonlit Nile has an inexpressible charm; every sight is softened, every sound is musical, every air breathes balm’.³⁹ In contrast to Mubārak’s vision and discussions on agriculture, the diaries did not include

³⁶ Said, *Orientalism*.

³⁷ Also written as Dahabeeyah or Dahabeah. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it ‘a long light-draft houseboat used on the Nile that is lateen-rigged and is often propelled wholly or partly by engines’.

³⁸ P. Loti, ‘Notes along the Nile, 1910’, in Manley, Abdel-Hakim and Bartlett (eds), *A Nile Anthology*, p. 5.

³⁹ E. Warburton, ‘Nile by night and dawn, 1843’, in *Ibid.*, p. 48.

observations about farms or green landscapes despite the significant exports of Egyptian cotton and crops to Europe, and travellers could not have missed seeing farms in their journeys. The focus on the imagery of the desert allowed green fields to be omitted. As Said explained, the 'citation of authority' in describing the Orient compelled travellers to follow narratives produced by antecedent travellers; even if they saw new things, one did not see it in their writings.⁴⁰ Western travellers frequently documented desert and sands in their diaries, as well as Bedouin, camels and tents. The desert complemented the romanticisation of the Nile and the Orient. As Timothy Mitchell writes about nineteenth century European intellectuals travelling to Egypt:

On the other hand, however, while setting themselves apart in this way from a world-as-picture, Europeans also wanted to experience it as though it were the real thing. Like the visitor to an exhibition, travellers wanted to immerse themselves in the Orient and 'touch with their fingers a strange civilisation'.⁴¹

In view of this, these travelogues enable us to extend Edward Said's ideas of orientalism from cultural practices to perceptions of waterscapes. Said argues that the documentation of the Orient is constructed on 'the restorative citation of antecedent authority',⁴² such as when travellers reiterated the narratives and images as explained by former travellers. In cases of divergence between what was cited and what travellers really experienced, travellers often framed the new observations according to antecedents. As Derek Gregory states, through the act of travelling, places become 'sites' for tourists, 'located within an "imaginative landscape" where they become meaningful as "sights"'.⁴³ The 'sights' and 'sites' of the Nile described in these writings are made with continuous references to

⁴⁰ Said, *Orientalism*.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, p. 26.

⁴² Said, *Orientalism*, p. 176.

⁴³ D. Gregory, 'Scripting Egypt: Orientalism and the cultures of travel', in J. Duncan and D. Gregory (eds), *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 114–150, p. 116.

'home' standards. For example, positioning the Nile in analogy with the Thames is reiterated in many diaries to explain the beauty of the river and the organised plan of writers' journeys. Englishman John Fuller envisioned his sailing along the Nile like 'an excursion on the Thames'⁴⁴ because of the feeling of security he experienced from the presence of a police attendant and by the fact that he did not experience an incident of robbery. Another analogy to British life comes from Florence Nightingale, a British statistician and the founder of modern nursing, who sailed along the Nile in December, writing of her enjoyment of the Egyptian weather. She compared her feeling cold on the cruise to an experience of an 'English morning in October'.⁴⁵ Besides the weather, even the Pharaonic monuments were assessed with reference to English buildings. British journalist and traveller, James Silk Buckingham considered the temple of Hermopolis in Minya to be as eminent as the building of 'St Paul's Cathedral to Westminster Abbey'.⁴⁶

Another type of distinctive site, which grabbed the tourists' attention a place of intimacy and authenticity, included stretches of the river with the *Dahabiyeh* (figure 3), which literally translates as 'gold'. The first luxurious sailing boat in the South of Egypt was called the *Dahabiyeh*, managed by the Thomas Cook Company and originally used during the reign of Mohammed Ali for the royal family's trips. Later, the *Dahabiyeh* style was replicated and its name came to describe a type of luxurious houseboat still in use today. Ziad Morsy, who has traced photographs of Western travel writings and used maritime ethnographic research, argues that the boats almost went extinct after Nile travel was commercialised with non-traditional boats.⁴⁷ In the description of the *Dahabiyeh* cruise and its distinctive structure, foreign travellers recalled their home 'sites'.

⁴⁴ J. Fuller, 'Just an excursion, 1819', in Manley, Abdel-Hakim, and Bartlett (eds), *A Nile Anthology*, p. 8.

⁴⁵ F. Nightingale, 'At home on the Nile, 1849', in *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ J.S. Buckingham, 'The Temple of Hermopolis at Minya, 1813', in *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁷ Z. Morsy, *Traditional Sailing Boats of Egypt: A Maritime Ethnographic Research of the 19th and 20th Century Boats* (MA thesis in Maritime Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, Alexandria University, 2016).

Figure 3. Dahabiyeh.



Source: Daniel Willard Fiske Papers #13-1-1165, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

For instance, Egyptologist, traveller, journalist, and novelist Amelia Edwards described it as more ‘a civic or an Oxford University barge than anything in the shape of a boat with which we in England are familiar’.⁴⁸ Moreover, the interior design of the cruiser was analysed in comparison to European ideals and innovation. Edwards described the kitchen, ‘which is a mere shed like a Dutch oven in shape’.⁴⁹ Furthermore, standards of cleanliness were framed in com-

⁴⁸ A. Edwards, ‘The Dahabiya, 1873’, in Manley, Abdel-Hakim and Bartlett (eds), *A Nile Anthology*, p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

parison to European standards. The English author and translator, Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, wrote, 'the boat is quite as clean as an English boat as crowded could be kept, and the engine in beautiful order'.⁵⁰ She continued comparing crew dynamics and their professionalism with British standards. She expressed her fascination with the work of a multinational crew under the leadership of a Turkish captain in English uniform, saying, 'all the crew and captain too, wear English clothes and use the universal, "All right, stop her – fooreh (full) speed, half speed – turn her head"'.⁵¹ Ziad's analysis of thousands of travel stories and his vast collection of photographs show that the diaries offer only a partial photographic perspective on the range of boats actually existing at the time. He argues that the travellers were not paying attention to their own boats.⁵² This suggests that Western reference points had influenced travel writers' observations and their imagination, which in turn affected the accuracy of the description of boats, people and places on the Nile.

Additionally, the foreign travellers, regardless of their backgrounds, were keenly interested in commenting on social dynamics in Egypt. On the one hand, their diaries included many stories and sentiments which reflected their perception about Egyptians who inhabited the Nile's banks. On the other hand, the documentation of minor interactions drew a comparison between the reproduction of the Orient (Egypt) in Europe on the one hand, and the external reality they experienced on the Nile cruisers on the other. Said argues that the detailed elaboration in diaries reflects how Europeans reproduced the Orient that they had read about before their actual visit. Their descriptions thus constituted what he termed 'orientalising the Orient'.⁵³ The descriptions of the beautiful Nile stood in contrast to the condescending writings about the locals and their lifestyles. Travellers encountered Egyptians when they walked off the

⁵⁰ L.D. Gordon, 'On board a river steamer, 1863', in *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Z. Morsy, *Nile Boats through the Eyes of Western Travellers*, Research Presentation (Southampton: UK Centre for Maritime Archaeology, University of Southampton, 2018).

⁵³ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 167.

cruise to visit temples and ambled around the surrounding villages. Florence Nightingale wrote:

But no European can have the least idea of the misery of an African village; if he has not seen it, no description brings it home...we walked round the village, the huts all tumbled together up and down, as animals build their nests without regularity or plan. The pigeons seemed better lodged: they had round cones provided for them ... There was not much curiosity about me, though they (the Arabs, not the pigeons) could never have seen a European woman before; but they looked on with the same interest which dogs did, –no more.⁵⁴

This description of the village and its people, with its racist overtones, de-humanised Egyptians. Simultaneously, we see a romanticised sentiment of villages on the banks carrying a different tone when it comes to describing the locals. The female English pioneer in sociology, Harriet Martineau, wrote ‘there was the ferryboat, with its ragged sail, and its motley freight of turbaned men, veiled women, naked children, brown sheep, frightened asses and imperturbable buffalo’.⁵⁵ The French scholar who deciphered the hieroglyphs, Jean-François Champollion, wrote about their becoming lost after leaving the cruiser to reach a temple in Luxor, and he described the Egyptian who found and guided them back to the Temple: ‘This poor devil, barely reassured at first, took us along a good route and finished by walking with good grace, thin, dry, black covered with old rags, this was a walking mummy’.⁵⁶ Travellers could not bring themselves to describe or perceive the human agency of the workers on the cruise. Some travellers simply described Egyptians as ‘black shadows’ or ‘servants’ in their trips.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ F. Nightingale, ‘At home on the Nile, 1849’, in Manley, Abdel-Hakim and Bartlett (eds), *A Nile Anthology*, pp. 18–20.

⁵⁵ H. Martineau, ‘So much to see, 1848’, in *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵⁶ J.F. Champollion, ‘Coming upon Dendera by Night, 1829’, in *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ These sentiments were expressed in the following statements in the travelogues: ‘For the crew there was no sleeping accommodation whatever ... they just rolled themselves up at night, heads, and all, in rough brown blankets, and lay about the lower deck like dogs’ (Edwards, ‘The Dahabiya, 1873’, in *Ibid.*, p. 13); ‘The perfect freedom from all restraint, and from the conventional tram-

The juxtaposition between the exotic description of the Nile and the condescending description of the locals has been very shocking. Furthermore, there was no reference to the locals as Egyptians, but rather as 'Arabs'⁵⁸ in many of the stories, thus indicating a wider 'othering' by dismissing diverse ethnicities in the region. The label 'Arab' reflects two entangled layers. The first is the ecological fact that the Nile runs through the heart of the desert, unlike the imagination of other Arab countries in the region. The second layer embeds an orientalist understanding of the desert and its uncivilised inhabitants as homogenous entities – i.e. as 'others'. In her fascination with sunsets on the Nile banks, Harriet Martineau described how 'the vast and dreary and hazy Arabian desert became yellow, melting into the purple hills'.⁵⁹

Blouin argues that Western colonial power focused on Egypt as narrated in Greek and Latin texts and narratives. According to this

mels of civilized society, from an episode in a man's life that is vastly agreeable and exciting' (J.L. Stephens, 'Only on the river, 1836', in *Ibid.*, p. 27); 'We got used to it, as one gets to everything in time; but it looked like slaves' work, and shocked our English notions disagreeably' (A. Edwards, 'Tracking, 1873', in *Ibid.*, p. 30); 'It was near a little mud village, of which I forget the name, and several Bedouin tents were on the bank, in one of which I was sitting smoking a pipe' (J.L. Stephens, 'Wind-bound, 1836', in *Ibid.*, p. 35); 'Finally, a man was discovered; we called to him and he bolted, taking us for Bedouin, for, dressed in the eastern manner and covered with a great white hooded cape, we resembled to the Egyptian man a tribe of Bedouins, whilst a European might have taken us without hesitation for a guerrilla force of Carthusian monks armed with guns, sabres and pistols' (Champollion, 'Coming upon Dendera by night, 1829', in *Ibid.*, p. 61); 'thin, dry, black covered with old rags, this was a walking mummy' (*Ibid.*, p. 62); 'Don't think us grown quite savage and uncivilised. It is very hard to be all day by the deathbed of the greatest of your race, and to come home and talk about quails or London' (F. Nightingale, 'Life at Thebes, 1850', in *Ibid.*, p. 77).

⁵⁸ The reference to locals as 'Arabs' or others occurs in several stories and statements, including: 'Be stared at by the Arabs' (Stephens, 'Only on the river, 1836', in *Ibid.*, p.28); 'The Arab always covers his head' (Nightingale, 'At Home on the Nile', in *Ibid.*, p.19); 'Arab boatmen' (S. Poole, 'Nile-boat prayers, 1842', in *Ibid.*, p. 13); 'Arabs were out' (Stephens, 'Wind-bound, 1836', in *Ibid.*, p. 36), 'Arabian desert' (H. Martineau, 'So much to see, 1848', in *Ibid.*, p. 52).

⁵⁹ H. Martineau, 'So much to see, 1848', in *Ibid.*, p. 52.

European classical discourse, the Nile was the centre of Egypt. Nevertheless, European archaeologists, for instance, were not interested in investigating Egyptian people and their connections with the Nile.⁶⁰ Here, the Nile was imagined as part of European heritage and civilisation. So, they produced a river ‘de-socialised’ from its surroundings,⁶¹ even though the river was intimately connected to the travellers’ own cultural worlds. These European travellers were influential thinkers of the time and had an integral role in the discovery of ‘faraway’ places, rendering an Egyptian river a part of the European imperial landscape.

Conclusion

The control of the Nile for state purposes, and harnessing it for the aims of renaissance in the nineteenth century, was made possible by specific discourses of the river, its ecology, and its people. This examination of discourses of the river reveals how the Nile is produced by cultural discourses in making nature as a co-constitutive process.

We discussed how Mubārak imagined the prosperity and hardship of Egypt as dependent on the advanced management of the Nile River. Therefore, his narrative about the Nile incorporated scientific analysis of the Nile’s features and inhabitants, with the purpose of enhancing state power. On the other hand, we saw a clear separation in the foreign travellers’ memoirs between how they described the Nile and used it as a comparative lens to the advancement already existing in their country, and their description of the locals as workers for the natural resource and the travellers. The different hierarchy of their stories also reproduced a certain image of the Nile on one hand and the Egyptians on the other.

On the surface, the European travelogues and Mubārak’s book appear like a paradox of perceptions regarding the Nile and its inhabitants; however, the core of both narratives facilitated the re-making of

⁶⁰ Blouin, ‘Beyond the Nile’.

⁶¹ Hoffmann, ‘Environmental determinism as Orientalism’.

the Nile, control over its ecology and the imposition of authoritative power over peasants. Travellers saw the flowing river as a beautiful spectacle of 'sites' in a landscape of uncivilised people, making a series of comparisons with a European 'home'. This narrative fixed the colonisers' mission of civilisation and development but also contributed to the entrenched view of underdevelopment of nature and its resources – a view paralleled in Mubārak's own writing. Mubārak's vision of capitalising on knowledge, technology, and agrarian labour in maintaining Nile infrastructure transformed the river into a fundamental 'natural resource' serving state objectives. Peasants were eventually rendered marginal in the pursuit of a nationalist cultivation mission. We conclude that the impulse of both the Egyptian nationalists' and European travellers' narrative traditions were not divergent as far as their effect on the agency of the Nile and its people was concerned. Both writing legacies legitimised the need for the Nile and its people to be transformed by human ideas and did not leave it as just a free-flowing river, devoid of any human entanglement. Moreover, both the experts and the writers created '(un)sustainability imaginaries'⁶² in their writings of unsustainable and conflicting futures which dismissed the agency of the river and the peasants responsible for its development. Both the discussed imaginaries created an enduring genre of knowledge that continues to serve as a tool for political control of the Nile and its populations.

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⁶² S.E. Nabavi, *More-than-water, more-than-human: a transdisciplinary sociology of water conflict in central Iran* (Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University, 2017).

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