

My life as an Egyptian Australian

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Coptic Cultural tour for Mosman Community College

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Good afternoon ... today I like to give you a glimpse into the life of an Egyptian Australian and, in particular, my life as an Egyptian Australian.

If I could summarize it in a couple of words I would say ... Vegemite and Falafel (not in the same sandwich of course).

First a little about myself ... My parents as two young doctors, migrated to Australia when I was a little under 2 years old, a little over 30 years ago now. Of course at the age of two I had little choice in the matter – but I am told that I did exercise my democratic right to yell and scream at Cairo airport as my parents pried me away from my grandparents, uncles and aunts.

It was a life changing move that my father felt he had to make. It changed our family forever because it divided us by about 20,000km. Australia is literally at the end of the earth.

But distance is a funny thing because, like currency, 20,000km in the 1970's is not like 20,000km today. Because of the advancement in air travel, my family in Australia was fortunate enough to fly home and visit relatives every 1 or 2 years. We would often visit from any where between several weeks to several months, depending on whether we were in school, university, or whether we were working at the time. The distance actually made our hearts grow fonder, making us closer in spirit to the family in Egypt and although time with them was limited, it was not at all taken for granted.

So growing up for me has been a tale of two cities ... Cairo and Sydney ... a tale of two suburbs ... Strathfield and Shoubra ... a tale of two countries ... Egypt and Australia ... and a tale of two cultures.

I had heard many times growing up that I should have had an identity crisis. Well it didn't really happen to me – not as far as I can recall anyway. I think I was just too busy being who I was, an Egyptian Australian who loves both Vegemite and Falafel, and who found no conflict between the two. (So long as they're not in the same sandwich of course)

And this I think was the key ... migrants in this country are in an enviable position. They can pick and choose the best from both worlds.

I have been able to sit back and say I love how the Australians are honest and fair, they believe in the ideals of justice and in a classless society, I love the system of government and the system of life and the opportunities that it provides for all of its citizens independent of race, sex and religion. A country that values initiative and creativity and that judges a person not by who he is, but by what he does and by his character. I love how a hardworking train driver with ability can become a prominent prime minister. I love these characteristics and so I choose them unto myself.

I love how Egyptians have strong family and community ties. How they are bound together by love. I love the Egyptian sense of humor that can induce heart-moving laughter, even in the face of trial and adversity. I love the religious Christian tradition that was introduced by St. Mark and tempered by the ascetics of the deserts, by the intellectuals of Alexandria, and by the martyrs who paid the ultimate price to deliver to me my faith. I love this living tradition and the influence it has on my life. I love all of these characteristics and so I choose them unto myself.

Australians, who open their arms and welcome these cultures, are also in an enviable position, as they bring the world to Australia they can learn about other cultures and choose unto themselves what they may see as best. So long Australia moves forward choosing the best that all peoples of the world have to offer ... then Australia will be a richer place. I don't believe in cultural supremacy. All cultures have positive aspects and no culture is immune to flaws.

But it is exciting living on the border where one culture meets another. And today I would like to welcome you to this border. Here there are excellent opportunities of two cultures working together to build a greater Australia.

Let me give you an excellent example of this, that I am lucky enough to be involved in personally. I enrolled to study Egyptology at Macquarie University in the year 2000 because I wanted to learn more about my ancient history. After I enrolled, by chance, I discovered that Lisa Agaiby and two other Copts were also studying the course – they were also keen to learn of their history. I am actually a software engineer by profession and not a historian. The fact that Macquarie University offers Egyptology to working professionals is a fantastic thing in itself. The architects of the Egyptology program designed this evening course to make this sort of education accessible to ordinary people, thereby popularizing the study of Egyptology here in Sydney.

I found myself in classes learning how to read hieroglyphs with people from all walks of life: lawyers, fellow engineers, business people and many retirees, all wishing to expand their knowledge of the history of Egypt. In the last 25 years, hundreds of people have graduated from Macquarie University with a Master of Arts in Egyptology and there have been dozens of doctorates.

I think this is great in itself ... but there is more. At the end of 2002 our community approached Prof. Naguib Kanawati, the head of Egyptology at Macquarie and a major force behinds success, and asked him if we could introduce Coptic courses for our youth

and community. I still remember his reply as if it was yesterday: “Not only will we introduce Coptic subjects but we will introduce a whole MA program.”

By the end of 2003 our good leader Bishop Daniel signed an agreement with the former Vice Chancellor Di Yerbury to help financial support the program during a three-year trial period. A handful people from the Coptic community, who desire to see our history preserved, honors this agreement by providing the financial support. Prof. Christina Slade, the head of humanities, is a visionary who drove this initiative and adopted it as her little baby. Dr Boyo Ockinga, a prominent Egyptologist at Macquarie in his own right, architected and designed this brand new course.

By Mid 2004 Dr. Heike Behlmer, who is an excellent Coptologist and a great teacher, was appointed as the first Coptic Studies lecturer at Macquarie University. The first class started in March 2005.

One of the things that we requested was that the course be delivered online. We knew that there were potentially thousands of Copts around the world that could do the course if it was offered on the Internet. We saw this as being smart because we knew that the population in Sydney might not have been able to economically sustain the course.

Today in 2006, the second year of it being offered, in one particular class: Coptic Art and Archaeology, there are 40 students enrolled from Sydney and from around the world! About half of whom are copts, and the other half non-copts, half of whom in class and the other half on the Internet. I was lucky enough to attend earlier this year a Coptic studies conference in southern Egypt. Prominent Coptic academics from around the world were present and they have already recognized Macquarie as one of the biggest teaching centers of their field.

We study at Macquarie things such as: the rise of Christianity in Egypt, Egyptian history in the first millennium, Coptic monasticism and its impact on Western Monastic tradition, Coptic language, literature and sayings of the desert fathers. And all of this can be delivered to your home in bytes per second. Now if this is starting sound like a shameless plug for the course ...it's probably because it is... you'll find information about the course in a bag the organizers have prepared for you ... if you are ever that way make sure you look the course up.

This is an amazing thing and Macquarie University prides itself in being the innovative university, and it is truly innovative. Macquarie saw a great opportunity to provide what I call ‘boutique education’ to a world audience that is bombarded with online MBA’s and all sorts of other things. Macquarie wins because it has placed itself at the forefront of this area of research in a big way. Australia wins because it will become richer for the knowledge about this very important part of world and Christian history. The Copts win because their history is understudied in the world. I say with sadness that not even in Egypt is Egyptian Christian history studied adequately. However now, any Egyptian with an Internet connection can learn about this history.

So this is an example of two cultures meeting and building something good. By building our tertiary institutions we build civilization. Egyptians were known in ancient and antique times to build civilization ... and now Australia has put Coptic Australians back into the business of building civilization.

Egyptians have always had a very strong focus on Education. I am lucky enough to be on the board of one of our three Coptic schools. Our aim is to make children the best they can be, while grounding them in the wealth of their orthodox Christian tradition. We have programs that will create the next generation of academics, scientists, engineers, businessmen, sportsmen and politicians. We are busy producing the next generation of civilization builders.

Our parents came to this country with literally nothing. Yet they worked very hard and were talented. It wasn't long before this great society rewarded their efforts. They soon built all of these magnificent churches and monasteries, and they established the schools. My generation is lucky enough today on to be able to stand on their shoulders ... we are lucky because we stand on the shoulders of giants.

Australia is a beautiful tree that has had grafted into it a small vine of the our rich cultural and religious heritage ... this vine now grows and takes nutrients from the soil around it and it will be different ... It will not look identical to what we left in Egypt and it will not look like any other part of this beautiful tree ... but it will be unique and taking the best of both worlds it will be something that is beautiful.

This beautiful church you are sitting in is a living expression of this. This church is my favorite because it is a living architectural expression of both who we are today and where we came from. You will notice the coptic style domes and the apse. The church downstairs has an ascetic feel with all of beautiful coptic artwork. If you walk into the courtyard at the back the architecture of the walls has the impression of an ancient Egyptian temple. The palm trees in the courtyard remind us of the beautiful Nile Valley. And the actual style and color of the brickwork used has a distinctive natural Australian feel. Nothing sums us up better then the architecture of this beautiful church.

And so when I travel abroad I frequently get asked where I am from? – People may be confused by my Middle-eastern features and my Australian accent - I proudly say in one breath that I am born in Egypt and bred in Australia. It is both nature and nurture that has made me who I am. And that's when I start craving Vegemite and Falafel. (Not in the same sandwich of course)

In one of the Coptic classes we translated a teaching in humility from the sayings of the desert fathers, who are Christian ascetics that made the Egyptian desert their home in the 4th - 6th centuries. Their sayings are considered by many as pearls of Christian teaching from this period. The process of translation was exciting in itself as we uncovered, word by word, what this ancient writer wished us to know. It goes something like this:

A disciple was asked by his teacher to go fetch some water. The water was a very great distance from his cell. When he arrived at the well he realized that he forgot to bring some rope to lower his bucket into the well, and so he prayed to his Lord, not because of me, but because my master asked for it. The Lord obviously smiled at his humility, and it is said that the water rose up immediately, after which he filled his vessel and then returned to his cell.

Today, in the spirit of that disciple, my prayer is that God blesses Australia and makes it the best country in the world. Not because it is my wish, but because it is the wish and desire of many good Australian men and women who love and continue to build this great country. (and Lord, water springing from the ground would also be good thing for this drought afflicted land). Thank you.