

COPTIC IDENTITIES AS INDIGENOUS:

POLITICS OF RECOGNITION & INTERFAITH RELATIONS IN EGYPT.



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While extensive studies have explored the socio-political and religious elements of Coptic identity in modern-day Egypt, a significant gap in academic literature has been the exploration of Coptic indigeneity as a distinct identity marker. This research embarks on a nuanced exploration of the Copts' indigenous identity. By initially drawing upon the criteria delineated by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the study explores how the Coptic identity is rooted in the characteristics of indigenous peoples. The research chronicles the historical adversities faced by the Coptic community, ranging from the Byzantine era to contemporary challenges, illuminating the profound impact of historical persecution on their modern indigenous identity.

Through a synthesis of historical analysis, contemporary commentary from significant figures, and analysis of modern Egyptian discourse on the Coptic indigenous status. I argue that in indigenous identification, Copts' greatest struggles lie in navigating the politics of recognition, and these politics dictate not only their expression but also how they interact with their native land and other Egyptians. Recognizing the Copts as an indigenous group in Egypt is a politically charged endeavour influenced by historical marginalization and contemporary interfaith sensitivities. The research underscores the imperative of acknowledging the Copts' indigenous identity, explores the politics of recognition of this identity and stresses the significance of doing so to create mutual respect, understanding, and coexistence in Egypt's diverse socio-cultural milieu.

Coptic Indigeneity

Copts are an ethno-religious minority in Egypt, most are part of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Defining indigeneity is indeed complex, but as shown through the criteria given by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues¹, Copts fulfil this criteria.

Copts have a **distinct genetic makeup as descendants of the last Ancient Egyptians**. The **Coptic language**, the same language spoken by the last Ancient Egyptians², is maintained and taught within the communities is passed on intergenerationally. **Cultural rituals** practiced by Ancient Egyptians permeate Coptic traditions, shaping pivotal life events, from birth to marriage to death. Distinct from the dominant group, Copts maintain **ancient links to the natural territories** of Egypt³. Even the Coptic calendar that hangs in many Coptic households is designed to be in tune with the rhythms and seasons of the Nile floods and desert sandstorms.

When recognising indigenous people, a moving definition has been of those “who have creation stories, not colonization stories”⁴. Copts have remained a **distinct group and after significant persecution became a minority**, identified and maintained as specific groups who have remained in Egypt throughout the Late Roman era, Antiquity, Grecian era, Byzantine, Ottoman Empire, European imperialism until modern Egypt.

Indigeneity & Historical Persecution

For Copts, recognising how this creation story is one of varying discrimination is useful to understand the modern identity.

Historical persecution of the Copts has influenced their modern treatment. For instance, a singular example is Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996-1021 AD), who banned celebrating epiphany or Christmas, banned wine used in communion, wear kilos-heavy iron crosses to be identified⁵, and prohibited the use of the Coptic language in homes and public, under threat of cutting Copts' tongues off⁶. During his reign, Copts lost their majority population status despite being indigenous to the land. In 1321, there followed years of the destruction of Coptic churches and massacres of Copts⁷. In modern-day Egypt, this land usage restriction remains.

The 2016-17 Minya pogrom is one example where there was an organised massacre of Copts, which continued for months of continuous targeting and was a national scandal.⁸ In 2017, twenty-eight Copts who were travelling to a monastery on a bus were shot to death⁹, and in 2018, another seven were killed on the same journey to the monastery.¹⁰ Coptic women and girls have often been abducted and forced to convert and marry. For example, between 2011 to 2014, more than 550 Coptic girls were kidnapped and forced to convert¹¹.

Politics of Recognition

Recognition of Copts as an indigenous group is tied to their historical and modern persecution and has been a sensitive topic. For example, in 2010, Anba Bishoy, the Secretary of the Coptic Synod, stated that Copts are: “Ashab al baled el assleyen” (“أصحاب البلد الأصليين”)¹², the closest in Arabic to the word ‘indigenous’. The backlash was extreme and widespread. Amro El Shobaki (an academic and former MP) suggested this recognition opens the door for terrorism against the Copts¹³. Even for prominent Muslim scholars such as Tarek Heggy, recognising Copts as an indigenous community in Egypt was met with widespread backlash⁴. The confluence of historical marginalisation and fears of inflaming sectarian violence engenders a delicate balance in the politics of recognition of the Coptic identity.

Implications for Interfaith Relations

1. The absence of recognition fosters marginalization and erasure of history.
2. Sectarian violence through interfaith dialogue, understanding the historical shaping of identities is essential for navigating complexities and finding paths to resolution.
3. Recognition of their presence and treatment in Egypt, serving as a crucial step towards fostering active discussion and inclusivity.



Concluding Findings

Echoing the struggles of indigenous communities worldwide—be it in North America, Latin America, or Australia—the Copts have confronted analogous challenges: suppression of the Coptic language, burning of churches, persecution, pogroms, gender-based violence, and systemic marginalization. Yet, as the recognition of the above indigenous communities has shown, recognising indigenous people's identities and histories is a painful process but pivotal for history. The modern Coptic identity is indeed ethno-religious but also indigenous, and recognition is vital for positive interfaith relations.



¹ United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. (2015). “Who are Indigenous Peoples?” Fifth Session. <https://indigenous.fiu.edu/news/2015/who-are-indigenous-people/>. DOA: 10/10/23.

² Atiya, A. (1968). A History of Eastern Christianity. New York: Routledge. pp.17

³ Meinardus, O. (2002). Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press. pp.28.

⁴ Tuck, E. & Yang, K. W. Yang. (2012). Decolonization is not a Metaphor. Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society. pp.6

⁵ Swanson, M. (2010). The Popes of Egypt Volume 2: The Coptic Papacy in Islamic Egypt (641-1517). Cairo: American University in Cairo Press. pp.54

⁶ Youm7. (2008). “Al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah forbade the use of “Coptic” even in Christian prayer.” (Translation of Headline from Arabic). <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/nov/17/police-surveillance-technology-voyager>. DOA: 4/12/23.

⁷ Little, D. (1976). Coptic Conversion to Islam under the Bahri Mamluks, 692-755/1293-1354. Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London 39(3). pp.563

⁸ Al Masry Al Youm. (2020). “The Case of the Lady of the Karm from Her Stripping to her Innocence”. (Translation of Headline from Arabic) Akbari, A. et al. (2019) Platform Surveillance and Resistance in Iran and Russia: The Case of Telegram. Surveillance & Society. 17(1).

⁹ Al Watan News. (2017). “By names, 28 Martyrs in the Incident of Amba Samuel Monastery.” (Translation of Headline in Arabic). <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/21332>

¹⁰ Al Masry Al Youm. (2021). “The Third Annual Remembrance of the Seven Martyrs of Amba Samuel Monastery”. (Translation of Headline from Arabic) <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2454015>

¹¹ Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. (2015). Egypt: Situation of Coptic Christians, including treatment; state protection available (2014-May 2015). <https://www.refworld.org/docid/557e7e814.html>

¹² Al Masry Al Youm. (2010). “The Muslims Are Not Guests”. (Translation of Headline from Arabic) <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1851041>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ El Hewar Al Motamaden. (2009). “The Case of the Coptic Problem in Egypt”. (Translation of Headline from Arabic). Ibid DOA: 1/12/23.