

Viewing the World Through Egyptian Children's Eyes: The Predicament of Local and Global South

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Introduction

Worldviews indicate perceptual framework and/or social imaginary through which ordinary persons view their world. Worldviews are not expressed in theoretical terms but are manifested in images, legends, and narratives (el-Aswad 2012; Hiebert 2008; Taylor 2004; Wagner 2001). This study recounts the narratives of Egyptian children belonging to low-income families living in the Miami area of the al-Muntazah District in Alexandria. The essential quality of Egyptian children's narrative lies in the involvement of interweaving the unknown, the imaginary, the mundane, and the extraordinary into the fabric of their everyday lives.

Between July and August 2021, I interviewed 12 children (pseudonyms used) whose ages ranged between twelve and sixteen years old. In a conservative community where boys are more independently active outside their homes than girls, I investigated the boys' activities/narratives. Ethnographic methodology allowed children to engage in dynamic types of narration/storytelling (el-Aswad 2010; Shaw 2022) and informal, situational conversation (Corsaro 2003; Lancy 2015; Swain and King 2022) from which the article's findings are concluded.

The children's narrations demonstrated shared worldviews clustered around the imaginary and socially-religiously certified concept of "possibility" (*mumkin*) within their worldviews that go beyond the divide of north/south. The concept of "possibility" maintains the balance between the Global North/South where children, although they are experiencing extreme poverty, show a great deal of integrity, responsibility, and independence (el-Aswad 1993, 2008, 2014a).

Local and Global South

Both the local and Global South have been depicted in terms of backwardness and otherness (Miller 2004). In Miami, ethnography was conducted along one of the major roads, *khamisa wa-arba 'in* (Street 45), which encompasses multiple worlds in which rich and poor people live within locally divided places. The northern higher-income area, with proximity to the Mediterranean Sea (*baħr*), is called '45 *'albaħr*,' while the southern lower-income enclave is called '45 *'ibly*' (south).

In Miami, a railway separates the affluent north from the impoverished south. In the southern slums of Miami (*'shwa 'iyyāt*), the monthly income per capita of the families of the children being studied range from 1,000 to 1,600 Egyptian pounds (US \$64 - US \$102) reflective of the overall poverty rate in Egypt. In 2019, the official poverty rate (at US \$3.20 per day) was estimated in Egypt to be 29.7%, up from 18.1% in 2015 (World Bank 2021).

Nationally, Egypt is geographically divided into the north, known as *baharī*, and south, *ša'īd* (Upper Egypt). Numerous poor Upper Egyptians (*ša'īdī*) migrate to the north of Egypt seeking job opportunities (el-Aswad 2004).

Globally, the hierarchical relations between West/East, addressed by Said's Orientalism (1978), are reproduced by other hierarchical relations between North/South resulting in growing socio-economic disparities between/within countries of the Global North/South (Kiely 2016; Sassen 2014). Frequently, Northern rulers practice hegemony over poor Southern people (Gramsci 1995). Several anthropologists (Foster 1965; Lewis 1961) contend that children growing up in poor environments are unable to exploit economic opportunities. Egyptian children's activities/worldviews put this contention to the test.

Viewing and Narrating the World

This section addresses three narratives. The first pertains to Samir, a 15-year-old boy who, by using a *tuktuk* (a three-wheeled motorized vehicle), provided transportation in low-income areas of Street 45. I met him in July, 2021 when I hopped in his *tuktuk* for a quick ride to a pastry shop. While escorting me, Samir said, "*al-ḥaraka baraka*," meaning "mobility is a blessing." He said, "I keep moving by the *tuktuk* to secure my *rizg*." By the vernacular uttering of *rizg*, Samir meant "*ar-rizq*," a livelihood/source of revenue, which, according to Muslims' beliefs, belongs to the unknowable and invisible realm (*al-ghaib*) through which the occurrences of unexpected fortunes can be explained (el-Aswad 2019a, 2019b). When I asked him if he owned the *tuktuk*, he replied, "No, I work for an owner, but one day I will, *insha'allh* (God's willing), have my own *tuktuk* because everything is possible (*mumkin*). My father told me, 'strive and Allah will strive with you'."

"Possibility" here is a concept indicating that a desirable object or action, while not presently available, might be available in the near or far future. This concept, implying new potentialities, hope, and imagination, is certified by the belief in God's willing (*mashi'at allah*) that renders what is unattainable attainable.

On another occasion, I asked Samir to take me to the corniche by *tuktuk*. He politely declined since the Alexandrian governorate banned the use of *tuktuks* along the corniche as being hazardous. The fine for violating the *tuktuk* ban is 10,000 Egyptian pounds (US \$636.00) (Mounir 2021). Samir recounted, "The government protects the rich, not the poor, pushing us to the poor southern zones in which we live."

The second narrative relates to Yasir, a 16-year-old boy, whose father was an Upper Egyptian gatekeeper (*bawwāb*) of a grand residential building. As a middle school student, Yasir worked as a cleaner in an internet café during the summer, and currently works as a cyber attendant. He recounted that his elder brother, who migrated to 'Amrica' (the U.S.), was financially supporting his family, bringing "*rizg*" and "*farag*," or new possibilities for economic relief. Yasir stressed that the "North/West" and "South/East" shared mutual benefits (*maṣāliḥ*).

The third narrative concerns Hamdy, a 14-old boy who helped his mother (Zakiya) run a small grocery store after his father's death. The mother referred to Hamdy as "the man of the house"

(*ragil al-bait*) for assuming the responsibility for protecting her and his two younger sisters. Hamdy narrated, “Patience is a key to an exultant relief (*aṣ-ṣabr muftāḥ al-farag*) and my family seeks *as-satr* (cover),” meaning whatever can be socially and economically secured, even with a minimum income. *Patience (aṣ-ṣabr)* and *cover (as-satr)* relate to a worldview that liberates the individual and society from the increasing attitude of materialism and individualism (el-Aswad 2002, 2014b).

In conclusion, this inquiry does not claim that all Egyptian children view the world identically but rather confirms certain significant underlying principles upon which their worldviews are constructed. The polarities of local-Global North and South are reconstituted through children’s narratives into flexible and positive attitudes implicit in their activities/worldviews.

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To cite this article: el-Aswad, el-Sayed. 2022. "Viewing the World Through Egyptian Children's Eyes: The Predicament of Local and Global South." *NEOS* 14 (1).

To link to this article: <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol14iss1sp22/elaswad/>