

# ***Exhibiting Colonialism and Nationalism: The Case of Egyptian Museums and Its Cultural Heritage***

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**Abstract:** Egypt is one of four ancient civilizations acknowledged by the international community as having a time-honored historical legacy and a profound cultural heritage. However, from the 19th century onward, Egypt's cultural development trajectory underwent a significant shift due to the influence of Western colonial powers. Subsequently, with the uninterrupted progression of the nationalist movement, the trajectory of Egyptian history and culture, in addition to the conservation and investigation of cultural heritage, underwent yet another transformation. Museums, as crucial instruments for the conservation and exhibition of cultural heritage, have played a pivotal role in the history of Egyptian cultural research, bearing witness to the transformation in the preponderance of Egyptian historical narratives. This paper examines how historical narratives and cultural developments in Egypt were shaped under the influence of colonialism, with a particular focus on the profound impact of Orientalist theories and practices on the construction of museums about the study of historical and cultural heritage. In the post-colonial period, Egyptian museums have served as conduits for disseminating the country's rich cultural heritage and as instruments for enhancing Egyptian national identity. These institutions have played a pivotal role in the formation of national identity and the "decolonization" of the country's cultural heritage, largely due to their irreplaceable cultural space and their capacity to adapt to changing needs. As Egyptian museums have evolved, they have played a significant role in shaping national identity and contributing to the processes of decolonization and de-Westernization. Furthermore, they symbolize the prospective trajectory of Egyptian national identity within the context of globalization and the emergence of a more interconnected world.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Nationalism, Orientalism, Museums, Egyptian Cultural Heritage.

## **1. Introduction**

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the expansion of colonialism enabled the expansion of Western powers in Egypt. As a consequence of the significant impact of Orientalism, there was an increase in Western interest in the history and culture of Egyptian, leading to numerous pioneering research efforts focused on Egyptian history and culture. However, this research extended beyond the confines of academia and was also influenced by the competitive and aggressive stance of colonial powers in shaping the narrative of Egyptian history. To emphasize the achievements of the colonial powers, numerous museums in Egypt were established and controlled by the West during this period. The exhibits presented an "orientalized" image that conformed to Western aesthetics and expectations.

However, with the advent of Egyptian nationalism, museums underwent a gradual transformation into Egyptian cultural sites of resistance against colonialism and the reshaping of national identity. This paper aims to examine the dual function of the Egyptian museums within the historical process and to evaluate their significance in shaping Egyptian national identity.

## 2. Explanation of Key Terms

In this paper, some key terms will be used frequently. The third edition of *the Oxford English Dictionary* provides four definitions of “colonialism”. This paper adopts the definition as “the principle, policy or practice of achieving total or partial political control over another country, with settlers occupying it; the principle, policy or practice of maintaining a colony”. Occasionally, an example may be substituted. [1]. The concept of “decolonization”, which is essentially the process by which a colonized region takes steps to achieve the dissolution of colonialism, first arose in the post-World War II period and refers primarily to the active struggle for national liberation in colonies in sub-Africa. The definition of “nationalism” is wide-ranging, and scholars have analyzed it from many dimensions, and the term has been deeply understood and studied. In the context of this paper, the term can be defined as the pursuit of national development and prosperity by the people of a nation with complete autonomy in the governance of the country, free from external influence and interference, including in numerous domains such as culture, politics, and the economy. A clarification of the aforementioned definitions of terms is beneficial in order to elucidate and debate the arguments presented in this paper, as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical support and research background.

## 3. Excavating an Orientalised Egypt

The Invasion of Egypt by Napoleon's Army in 1798 Resulted in the Colonization of the Country. This invasion was not only a military and economic expedition but also a cultural exploration. As a result, Egypt was gradually incorporated into the research agendas of Western countries. Some scholars who accompanied the French army were tasked with meticulous documentation and analysis of Egypt's monuments, history, culture, geography, and natural resources, marking the advent of systematic Western inquiry into Egyptian affairs. Simultaneously, Orientalist ideas exerted a profound influence on Western academic and cultural movements, as Said describes. The West essentialized these societies as static and underdeveloped, thereby fabricating a view of Eastern cultures that could be researched, portrayed, and reproduced in the service of imperial power. This fabrication, he argues, is predicated on the assumption that Western societies are developed, rational, flexible, and superior. [2] Orientalism reinterprets Egyptian civilization from a Western-centric perspective of the “Other,” portraying it as a mysterious and ancient culture that requires “interpretation” and “preservation” by the West. For example, the multi-volume work *Description de l'Égypte* presents the results of research conducted by Napoleon's army scholars from the perspective of “Orientalism.” During this period, Orientalism, a Western-dominated concept of scholarship, had a profound impact on Egyptian historical narratives and cultural development, resulting in “the Orientalized Egypt”.

In light of the mounting interest in Egypt among Western scholars, Orientalist scholars emerged as a pivotal force in the construction of the historical narrative of Egypt during this period. These scholars reinterpreted Egyptian history based on Western perspectives and research theories that were inherently biased towards Western interests. Additionally, the trajectory of Egyptian culture and the narrative of ancient Egyptian civilization were shaped by these perspectives through the study of ancient Egyptian artifacts, architecture, antiquities, and artwork. The efforts of French scholar Jean-François Champollion led to the successful interpretation of the hieroglyphs on the Rosetta monument, which was discovered during Napoleon's expedition. This marked the birth of

Egyptology and facilitated the widespread understanding and study of ancient Egyptian texts by the West [3]. However, it should be noted that the discipline has historically relied on Western interpretations and translations. William Matthew Flinders Petrie, regarded as the pioneer of scientific archaeology, devised a chronology of ancient Egypt based on the analysis of seemingly inconsequential artifacts that had been overlooked by other archaeologists. Petrie published *Ten Years of Excavations in Egypt, 1881-1891 (1892)*, an account of his extensive archaeological excavation experiences [4]. This provided a wealth of practical records and materials for Egyptology. The gradual dominance of these findings in Western scholarship, as well as their dissemination through museum exhibitions and scholarly publications, served to reinforce the influence of Orientalism on Egyptian culture. The establishment of a large number of museums and cultural institutions in Egypt at this time did not signify a new level of cultural development within the country; rather, it reflected the continued dominance of the colonizers and their efforts to showcase the results of their colonization of Egyptian culture. They persuaded Khedive Tawfiq to establish the Committee for the Preservation of Monuments of Arab Art in 1881, which led to the opening of the Museum of Arab Art in 1884 and the establishment of the Institute of Islamic Archaeology at Cairo University by the Ministry of Culture, under the direction of Englishman K.A.C. Creswell.[5] The museum constructions and developments that occurred in Egypt were a consequence of the colonizers' endeavors to categorize, deconstruct, and present Egyptian history from a Western perspective. This approach involved a comparison between Egyptian ancient civilization and its cultural heritage with the standards of Western civilization, emphasizing the "otherness" of the former and thus reinforcing the Western-dominated cultural order.

During this period, Orientalist scholars devoted considerable attention to Egyptian history and culture, portraying it as an "Orientalized" civilization and interpreting it through academic research, museum construction, and exhibitions. These interpretations were disseminated globally and constituted the dominant image of Egyptian culture at the time.

#### 4. Displaying Egyptianness in Museums

In a previous observation, Duncan Cameron, the Director of the Brookson Museum, likened a museum to a balance, with a "temple" and a "public forum" positioned at opposite ends. The "temple" represents the museum's role in safeguarding and educating the public about its collections, while the "public forum" symbolizes the museum's function as a public space for learning, discussion and entertainment.[6] The value of museums as rich and functional cultural spaces for narrating history and culture more visually is a significant factor in understanding the dominance of the museum as an institution by both colonialists and later nationalists. In response to the postcolonial movement, Egyptian museums have begun to challenge the conventional narrative of "orientalization" in their presentation of history and cultural heritage. They are striving to reposition and reinterpret their own historical and cultural identities in terms of "Egyptianness."

The Egyptian Museum provides an illustrative example of this fusion of history and modern technology. The comprehensive digital display on the official website of the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities represents a significant advancement in the promotion of Egyptian identity in the context of globalization. The background of the museum's construction and the detailed stories of typical artifacts can be found on the website, which also features multifaceted images and other visual displays. These allow tourists and other interested parties to see the museum's exhibits and its narrative of history, story, and culture, as well as to acquire first-hand knowledge about ancient Egyptian civilization by gaining access to the information they seek. As the oldest archaeological museum in the Middle East, the Egyptian Museum boasts one of the largest collections of pharaonic artifacts in the world. [7] For instance, Amenhotep III and Tiye Colossal Statue depicts the royal couple, Amenhotep III and his wife Tiye, along with their three daughters. This is the largest known

ancient Egyptian family group statue ever carved, and it is fitting that it dates to the reign of Amenhotep III, whose prosperous rule was marked by great such monumentality.[8] These statues, preserved in Egyptian museums, serve as both artistic embodiments of ancient Egyptian aesthetic concepts and illustrative representations of the social landscape of ancient Egypt. One of the museum's most notable features is the dual status of the pharaoh as both a national and a religious leader, reflecting the unique combination of divine and royal power in ancient Egyptian society.

Therefore, innovative approaches to the exhibition of museum artifacts through the utilization of contemporary technology will facilitate a greater global awareness of Egyptian history and civilization, whilst simultaneously enhancing the influence of Egyptian culture on the international stage. Consequently, this will serve to reinforce the role of museums as a cultural space and medium for the expression of "Egyptianness". The expansion of cultural influence has resulted in a heightened awareness and understanding of Egypt as an ancient civilization that has endured for millennia. In addition to recounting the ancient Egyptian past, this influence serves to establish the foundations of national cohesion in modern Egypt. Concurrently, Egyptian museums illustrate this "Egyptianness" by recounting the long history of ancient Egyptian remains and their close relationship to the modern Egyptian national identity. From the perspective of modern Egyptians, the use of visualization and digital technology allows them to establish an intuitive connection with an ancient and glorious civilization through the examination of ancient Egyptian cultural relics and cultural heritage exhibited in museums. This connection enables them to explore their own cultural roots and, out of reverence for the splendid history, enhances their sense of cultural belonging and pride. From the perspective of globalization, the Egyptian Museum plays a crucial role in disseminating information about Egyptian civilization to an international audience. thereby reinforcing the notion of Egypt as a nation with a rich and enduring cultural heritage.

## 5. Cultivation of Egyptian Nationalism

The formation of Egyptian national identity through the medium of museums and its cultural heritage has been a challenging process. During the initial stages, the influence of museums was largely concentrated in the hands of colonizers due to the pervasive impact of colonialism, which was often disputed among them but remained predominantly under the control of Western forces. Henry Salt, the British consul general in Egypt, and Bernardino Drovetti, an official of the French consulate in Egypt, engaged in a fierce competition to collect ancient Egyptian artifacts. The two parties engaged in a dispute over the artifacts in Karnak, which ultimately resulted in the division of the east and west banks into their respective spheres of influence, with the Nile River serving as the boundary.[9] The above case illustrates the contradiction between Britain and France over the ownership of some Egyptian cultural heritage and artifacts. Egypt's own forces have not yet been involved in its disputes. Additionally, its cultural discourse does not have a significant influence. The cultivation of Egyptian nationhood is still constrained by the colonial power's political, military, and economic forces of contention. Consequently, the process of development is gradual. Following the First World War, the anti-British uprising in Egypt in 1919 and the attainment of partial independence in 1922, particularly the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb, stimulated a renewed interest among the Egyptian populace in the Pharaonic era. The campaign against British rule, spearheaded by Zaghoul, was ultimately successful in ensuring the preservation of Tutankhamun's treasures within the Egyptian Museum.[10] Such testimonials to ancient Egyptian civilization serve a reminder to Egyptians of the glorious "Age of the Pharaohs," which in turn resonated throughout the country and became an important source of national cohesion. The ascendancy of cultural artifacts and museums was subsequently supplanted by the ascendancy of Egyptian national forces. It can be argued that Egyptian nationalism achieved a pivotal breakthrough during this period in its tenacious resistance to colonialism and its ardent struggle for national independence. However, in the course of Egypt's modernization, with a view to

enhancing economic efficiency, the Egyptian tourism industry has been mainly directed at foreign, and predominantly Western, tourists. As such, it largely satisfies the image of ancient Egypt that is expected by Western audiences.[11] For example, ancient Egypt is perceived as a land of enigmatic allure and exoticism. Consequently, tourists may direct their attention towards the country's mythological traditions, curses, mummification practices, and other elements of its rich cultural heritage. The plethora of amulets in Egyptian museums, for instance, often captures their interest. Indeed, these museums are regarded as one of the region's most treasured attractions. However, it is important to note that tourists may occasionally overlook the intricate and multifaceted nature of ancient Egyptian society. This can potentially lead them to seek out these mystical symbols in museums with minimal consideration for historical accuracy. In essence, the historical narratives and cultural studies of Egypt, particularly as reflected in the growth of the cultural and tourism industries, have not been entirely autonomous. There is still a considerable distance to traverse in the formation and evolution of Egyptian national identity. Despite the collaboration of Egyptian scholars and nationalists, the construction and exhibition of Egyptian museums have achieved certain results in terms of "decolonization" and "de-Westernization." However, the enduring legacy of colonialism or Orientalism persists as an inevitable consequence.

Therefore, it is essential to fully harness the potential of museums in fostering Egyptian national identity. This entails not only utilizing the multiple functions of museums but also fully realizing their value as a pivotal cultural space. Furthermore, it necessitates an in-depth exploration of the country's rich historical and cultural heritage, intending to identify points of national resonance. This approach will not only reinforce national identity but also serve to enhance the museum's role as a key cultural institution. Furthermore, the museum should adhere to the principles of tolerance and openness, allowing scholars from other regions, such as Europe, to actively participate in the research to the greatest extent possible, while excluding the influence of political factors. This will facilitate cross-regional and multidisciplinary collaboration in the context of globalization, thereby promoting the preservation and sustainable development of Egyptian civilization and protecting the common heritage of humanity.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examines the intricate relationship between colonialism, nationalism, and the role of museums in influencing the formation of Egypt's cultural heritage. An examination of Egyptian museums under the influence of colonialism and Orientalism reveals that these institutions were initially established as instruments of colonial power with the aim of presenting Egypt through a Western lens. This "Orientalized" portrayal of Egypt served to reinforce Western dominance in the presentation of Egyptian history and culture in a manner consistent with colonial goals. However, as Egyptian nationalism developed, these museums gradually became sites of revolt and were repurposed to foster a sense of national identity and cultural pride.

It is important to acknowledge that the research presented in this paper has certain limitations. This paper focuses on the museum as a thread, examining the various roles and functions that this cultural space has played throughout its historical evolution. It draws upon historical sources as the basis of its argument and examines the content related to museums based on an overview of the relevant history of Egypt. A further area for investigation would be an exploration of how museums continue to "decolonize" and address the legacy of the past in contemporary Egyptian society. In particular, it would be beneficial to examine how these concepts can be put into practice in the context of specific museum construction and development activities. For instance, how can the issue of restitution be effectively maintained, considering the need to negotiate and communicate various interests and positions? In conclusion, throughout Egypt's fluctuating history, museums have served as pivotal preservation sites for both tangible cultural heritage and abstract historical narratives. They have

borne witness to the profound impact of colonialism on Egypt, as well as the emergence and growth of Egyptian nationalism. With the global community becoming increasingly interconnected, museums serve as invaluable platforms for fostering interconnection in this era. All countries and regions of the world must continue to dismantle the invisible barriers and divisions that exist between them. It is imperative for them to take advantage of the current opportunities and engage in peaceful international exchanges and cooperation in order to foster a more harmonious and tolerant global community.

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