

# Egyptian Workers in Paris: Pilot Ethnography

*Reem Saad*  
*SRC, American University in Cairo*

*Video Document by Nasseif Azmy*

May 2005



Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty  
University of Sussex  
Falmer, Brighton BN1 9SJ  
United Kingdom  
E-mail: [reemsaad@aucegypt.edu](mailto:reemsaad@aucegypt.edu)

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Egyptian labour migration to Europe is a growing phenomenon. However, apart from journalistic accounts, and dramatic depiction in films and soap operas, this phenomenon has received little scholarly attention. If Egyptian migration to Europe has recently come into the spotlight, it is only because of the rising number of tragic deaths of would-be migrants who are being trafficked in very risky conditions.

On both sides of the Mediterranean, labour migration from North Africa to Europe is seen as a problem. At the official levels, it is treated as a security threat, with the greatest efforts directed at closing the loopholes through which migrant labour manages to reach Northern shores.

Young men from many parts of the 'South' go to extreme lengths and bear great risks to get to Europe. This research project addresses the case of Egyptian labour migrants in France. It attempts to understand migration from the point of view of the migrants themselves, particularly in the context of the now chronic problem of unemployment in rural Egypt. In fact, my interest in this issue stemmed primarily from my work on elements of social change and development challenges in rural Egypt, issues that have been at the core of my research concerns over the past two decades. Indeed, it is not just the issue of unemployment, especially for those with intermediate education; many of the youth begin nurturing dreams of travelling to work abroad quite early on. With diminishing prospects of travelling to work in Arab countries, Europe has recently become an attractive option, but the realisation of this dream is proving very costly in many ways.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Meera Warriar of the Migration DRC, Sussex, and Kasia Grabska of FMRS (AUC), as well as Hania Sholkamy. I am also grateful to Sara Sadek and Zeinab Ali for research assistance, and of course to all my informants in Paris.

This study focuses on workers from Gharbiyya village of Mit Badr Halawa. This village boasts a large number of clandestine workers living in France, working mainly in the construction sector and in the weekly food markets in Paris. Apart from Mit Badr, there are a number of other Gharbiyya villages whose names occur very often in this connection, such as Mit Habib, Mahallet Ziad and Bena Abu Sir. Mit Badr, however, remains the most prominent<sup>2</sup>.

These Mit Badr Halawa workers migrate primarily to make money to improve one's (and one's family's) living conditions at home. One important feature of this type of migration is that, regardless of actual outcome, the immigrant considers his stay temporary. The typical profile of members of the most recent wave of such migrants is that they are young men with intermediate-level education and a certain amount of training, usually in building and construction work. They start as apprentices with wages averaging 40 Euros. Within a year or two they acquire the skills that enable them to become full-fledged skilled workers with daily wages ranging between 70 and 100 Euros.

This research draws a preliminary map delineating the characteristics of this group/community, and starts to address the question of why this village, in particular, stands out as an exporter of labour to France.

### **Methodology and Fieldwork**

This research project relied exclusively on qualitative methods, which are best suited for the exploratory nature of this topic. In addition, given the sensitivity and precariousness of the position of clandestine migrant workers, issues of rapport and trust are crucial for obtaining credible data.

The research relied mainly on the classical anthropological method of participant observation, in addition to in-depth interviews with key informants. Interviews were conducted

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, in an article in the official daily *Al-Ahram* on labour migration to Europe, Mit Badr Halawa is singled out as an example of a village exporting its men to France. ('Travellers Without Return', *Al-Ahram*, 19 April 2004)

in the men's homes and in public places, especially cafes. I attempted to observe and interview the men at their workplaces. This was only possible in the various weekly markets in Paris, which provided an accessible and open public space. Access to the building and construction sites where a lot of the migrants worked was not easy since my informants were not comfortable having the research team 'hang around' there.

This pilot ethnography, aiming at delineating the major characteristics of this community, also involved video documentation which was undertaken by Nasseif Azmy, a social worker and artist living and working in Paris. It is important to mention that he is also my husband. The nature of this team affected the way fieldwork was structured. In general, this arrangement was advantageous to the research because, given that this is a predominantly male setting, there are many places I would not have been able to visit on my own, particularly, for instance, the workers' homes. Azmy is himself an Egyptian migrant who has settled in France since 1977. Although his current social profile does not fit the group we are dealing with, the nature of his job, in addition to his wide network of friends and acquaintances in various circles, facilitated 'entry into the field' and guaranteed a degree of trust and rapport amongst the informants.

I was, however, not able to access the world of women. Although most of the members of our target group were not married and lived together in all-male accommodation, there were some who were married and lived with their families. Though people in general were quite friendly, they were not enthusiastic about having us visit their homes.

The major part of the fieldwork was conducted during September-October 2004, and December 2004. Some visits and interviews were conducted in April, and August 2004, prior to the official commencement of the project. We also made a day trip to the village of Mit Badr Halawa in May 2004. This was to deliver letters to the families of two of our key informants and

to take pictures and video shots of certain persons and sites in the village that the people in Paris wanted to see.

It is important to mention here that a number of issues that are relevant to this research could be potentially incriminating. Informants were generally justified in their reluctance to discuss things like 'new' ways of arriving in France, or ways of transferring money to the village. In cases where they were forthcoming with information, I did exercise a degree of censorship in order to avert any possibility of incurring harm upon my informants.

### **Egyptians in Paris: The Official Framework**

The most obvious problem that faces any research of this type is the lack of reliable (or even unreliable) data. This is mainly due to the fact that we are dealing with mostly clandestine migrants who are, by definition, not registered. The available information based on official national statistics pertain mainly to permanent legal migration, and estimates the number of Egyptians in France at 36,000.<sup>3</sup> The reliability and usefulness of this figure is contested<sup>4</sup>, even by Egyptian officials. The Egyptian Consul General in Paris, Ambassador Nahed Al-Ashri, said that this figure is greatly underestimated, and that the number could not possibly be less than 60,000. She estimated it to be closer to 100,000. The official figures emanate from consulate registers which only takes account of those who register themselves voluntarily. Ambassador Al-Ashri sees that a long tradition of mistrust has characterised the relationship between Egyptian citizens and their Consulate. Among her top priorities when she assumed office in 2002 was to work towards gaining such trust and building stronger links with the Egyptian

---

<sup>3</sup> Central Agency of Mobilization and Statistics. Quoted in 'Why Do Migrants Leave their Countries' (2003).

<sup>4</sup> A report issued under the auspices of the Ministry of Manpower and Emigration questions, in particular, 'the reliability of national estimates regarding the total number of Egyptians abroad, especially those related to the permanent or semi-permanent migrants who migrate to non-Arab countries.' (Contemporary Egyptian Migration 2003: 36). A similar point is made by Zohry and Harrell-Bond in 'Contemporary Egyptian Migration: An Overview Of Voluntary And Forced Migration', pp. 18-19. DRC Working Paper (WP-C3). ([http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/working\\_papers.html](http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/working_papers.html)).

community in France. She published an appeal in the Egyptian daily *Al-Akhbar*, one of the most popular newspapers, strongly urging Egyptian citizens to register themselves with the Consulate in order to benefit from the backing and support of their government. This appeal was addressed to those with and without legal status. She then hosted a series of meetings with 'the Egyptian community' which crystallised in the formation of an 'Association for the Egyptian Community in France'<sup>5</sup> (see below).

This type of reaching out is commendable and, in many ways, unprecedented. However, a digression is due concerning the main reason why those without legal status will never register themselves anywhere, especially with their Consulate. An illegal immigrant's worst fear is deportation. This is a long and complicated process which cannot be finalised unless the nationality of the deportee is established. Illegal immigrants (of all nationalities) either get rid of, or hide their passports so that their nationalities cannot be identified. In cases where arrests are made the person is referred to the consulate of their suspected nationality. If that person is registered with the Consulate, then evidence of nationality is there and deportation becomes inevitable.

### **The Place of Mit Badr Halawa**

It is similarly impossible to know the number of Badrawis (as those from Mit Badr Halawa are known) in France. Their estimate of their number is most probably highly exaggerated. A figure that they often mention is 4000<sup>6</sup>, which does not seem reasonable, given that the total population of the village is 16,813 (CAPMAS; 1996 General Census). The impression that they are 'everywhere' comes from their visibility and increasing monopoly over certain jobs, especially in the construction sector and in the weekly food markets.

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Her Excellency Mrs. Nahed al-Ashri Egyptian Consul General in Paris. 9 December 2004.

<sup>6</sup> This is also the figure quoted in a newspaper story on Egyptian migration to Europe. (*Al-Ahram*, 19 April 2004)

Because in the village, the normal (or rather ideal) career trajectory of young men is to migrate or try to migrate to France, there is an impression that 'half of Mit Badr is here'. In the words of a man from Mit Badr: 'Today, any young man who finishes his education tries to go to France. From each household in Mit Badr you would find two or three in France.'

The exaggerated estimate by Badrawis of their numbers may also be related to the perceived impact of Mit Badr on other places in Egypt. Badrawis think that they are the reason for an increased number of Egyptians in France, even comparable in numbers to other Arabs (Tunisians, Algerians and Morroccans). This sentiment may be exaggerated. However, it is true that Mit Badr occupies a special place within the Egyptian 'community' in Paris. For example, the head of the newly launched Association of the Egyptian Community in France is from Mit Badr.

## **Networks**

One key characteristic of the migration enterprise is that the young man who crosses the Mediterranean does not embark on this undertaking as an isolated individual but as a member of a family and other networks back home and, often, on the other shore. It is almost a truism to say that social networks are important among immigrants. Networks of course exist; what is important is the ways in which these networks operate and the purposes they fulfil. A distinguishing feature of the Mit Badr Halawa community in Paris is the strong, efficient and closely knit networks. Here we can talk of three types of networks:

### *1. Network of Egyptians:*

The first type is what we can call the 'Egypt network'. The most formalised version of this network is the recently launched 'Association of the Egyptian Community in France' (*Rabitat*

*al-Galiyya al-Misriyya fi Faransa*), an organisation that was an initiative by Her Excellency Ambassador Nahed Al-Ashri, the Egyptian Consul General in France (*Al-Ahram*, 11 April 2005). According to her, the purpose of this Association is to enhance the weight of the Egyptian community within French society, as well as in Egypt. The Association began its activities about two years before its formal launch, during which time it concerned itself with issues relating to the question of Egyptians' integration within French society, as well as issues of concern to the settled Egyptian community such as the establishment of an Egyptian school. It is interesting to note that, as mentioned above, the elected president of this association is Mr Saleh Farhoud, a prominent figure from Mit Badr Halawa.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the importance of this type of institution and its networking functions, it is not the most relevant for the group we are dealing with -- migrants whose often clandestine status keeps them away from any official connections. Also, their concerns tend to be immediate and practical, like finding accommodation and work. For them, other types of organisations and networks are more important. I will present the case of an informal institution that serves as a focus (and locus) of strong network links among Egyptian workers in Paris. This is the café in Simphon named the Association of the Sons of Gharbiyya Governorate.

This café is not to be compared with the mushrooming Egyptian cafés in Central Paris, which form a new 'fad' on the Capital's entertainment scene and are frequented mainly by Parisian youth who are attracted to the distinctive atmosphere, and drop in for a mint tea and water pipe. The Simphon Café is a real Egyptian coffee shop (*ahwa baladi*), although it does not look like one. A square room lined with benches (*kanaba*), it resembles the guest room (*mandara*) of a village house rather than a coffee shop. This all-male space is mainly used for leisure in the same way as a traditional Egyptian coffee shop is: smoking water pipe, playing backgammon, watching TV. The television is always turned on some Arabic channel, either the

---

<sup>7</sup> We tried several times to get an appointment to interview Mr Farhoud but did not succeed.

Arabic radio and television channel showing Egyptian movies, Jazeera, or a sports channel showing an Egyptian football match. Yet it is not only a place for spending free time and getting a taste of 'home', it is also a place for exchanging important information (mostly on work and accommodation) and making work appointments. Again, in its function as an information centre, it is no different from the traditional coffee shop at home.

The place was founded as an Association to look after the interests of Egyptians. It is rented and run by a man from Mit Badr. Its Cairene founder, Hajj Mohamed Ali, is the owner of a travel agency next-door, specialising in Egypt tours. He recounts how and why this place was established:

I found that Egyptians here do not have any place to resort to. I thought of having a place where they can get together. In the year 2000, I initiated the founding of an Association to look after the affairs of Egyptians here. We called it 'The Association of the Sons of Gharbiyya Governorate', because most people here come from that governorate. It turned into this meeting place where Egyptian youth meet. He who needs work can find work, as all the 'bosses' hang out here. We thought that other governorates would follow suit and establish their own meeting places. But instead everybody started to meet here: those from Sharkiyya, Assyut and Alexandria.

According to Hajj Mohamed Ali, this Association/ Café also facilitates locating suitable accommodation. This is an area where information regarding availability is crucial. More importantly, he says that the association acts as a guarantor for tenants, thus overcoming one of the main obstacles that accommodation seekers face in Paris.

Interestingly, the Hajj emphasises a moral dimension to this place, as it keeps Egyptian youth away from the temptations offered by French society, especially those that may be in contradiction with principles of Arab morality:

This place does not serve alcohol. It is impossible to have people praying here and others drinking alcohol next to them. The main aim of having this place is to keep our youth off the streets. If he does not come here, where will he go? He may go chase women or go to a French café where he would be dealing with other types of people. If he has no money, he

may go begging. But here, he can find work if he has no work, and a place to live.

The Consulate-based Association and the Association-based café support different types of mobilisation and networking towards specific ends. However, the greatest majority of network-based exchange of support and information are not institutionalised but spontaneous and ad-hoc. The most pertinent example of mobilisation of Egyptians is when an Egyptian in Paris dies. In such an event, the Consulate pays for the repatriation of the body. However, Egyptians often mobilise to collect money to pay the airfare for someone to accompany the body to Egypt, and they also send a sum of money to the family of the deceased in Egypt. This is apparently a common and standard practice. The sums collected are substantial with figures ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 Euros.

## *II. The Village of Mit Badr:*

This type of networking is also about information concerning work and accommodation, but it goes a step further. It is also about obligations towards the village in general. The name of this village is always associated with the idea of the loyalty of its people, mainly because the Badrawis in Paris have shouldered a number of projects in the village, the most important of which is establishing a sewage system, in addition to building a school, and a health unit. In fact, the previous mayor of the village used to make special trips to Paris in order to collect money from Badrawis for these matters. When I asked people from Mit Badr Halawa and other Egyptians about why they think Mit Badr is so prominent in France they cited this type of collective action as illustrating that the people of this village help each other and have loyalty to their village. Illustrations of this type of network/collective action include:

*The Sewage System:* The most prominent so-called self-help project carried out by the Badrawis of Paris for their village is collecting money for constructing a sewage system there. A

committee in Paris was responsible for the collection, which was aided with a visit from the mayor of Mit Badr to Paris. According to a member of the committee a payment was imposed on the 'patrons' (bosses, employers, business owners), whereby each of them paid 2000 Francs. Others made payments according to their abilities. The project was only partly realised due to some administrative complications. But the rest of the money remains in a special account in the bank in Egypt.

Apart from being the most significant contribution of the sons of Mit Badr to their village, this case also illustrates two important features of the Mit Badr community in Paris. First, that prominence in the village and in Paris are interlinked. The leadership of the community in Paris (the Sh. family), and their active role in organising this activity, translates into prestige in the village and vice versa. Second, it points to one of the main bases of differentiation of the community where leadership is almost synonymous with being a 'patron' or 'boss'. He is the head of a business, either in the market or in the construction sector and is someone who has 'papers', meaning he is a legal resident, another important basis of power.

*Rotating Savings Associations:* Another important example of how networks operate at this level is the rotating savings associations (*Gam'iyya*), which are organised among members of the village. It could, of course, include other Egyptians who are not from Mit Badr but the greatest majority of participants and the organisers are from the village. The *gam'iyya* is an extremely widespread informal financial institution that exists all over Egypt. In brief, the *gam'iyya* is formed of a number of people who commit themselves to the payment of a fixed amount of money each month. The duration of the *gam'iyya* is usually a number of months equivalent to the number of participants<sup>8</sup>. At the beginning of each month, one of the participants receives the whole sum paid by all the participants in that month. Each *gam'iyya*

---

<sup>8</sup> More or less. Sometimes two persons may participate as one 'share', each paying half, or one person may participate with two shares.

has a leader whose role is crucial to the smooth working of the *gam'iyya*. The leader should possess a reputation of being a trustworthy person, and has to possess the necessary organisational abilities. Here too we see that 'patrons' play a crucial role in the leadership of the *gam'iyya*. And since they are always in possession of liquidity, they are charged with being guarantors of *gam'iyya* participants in case of default.

### *III Family Networks:*

Here we are referring to something akin to a clan or mini-tribe. Another reason cited as to why there is such a large number of Badrawis in Paris is 'jealousy among the families' in the village itself. Although this issue definitely requires a separate study, it is obvious that this expression refers to the social structure of the village being built around the existence of a number of big families with tribe-like structures. It is at that level that most activities relating to the migration process take place. The number of people from each family in Paris is taken as an indication of the strength and prestige of this group, both in Paris and in the village.<sup>9</sup>

The family-level network is the context and facilitator in a number of key areas. The most important activity that takes place at the level of the family is sponsoring newcomers. This practice is not only responsible for the steady flow of newcomers, but also for the increasing strength and magnitude of the Badrawi community in Paris. The ability to bring more family members to Paris is related to the strength of the family, and it is also a factor in increasing its strength through the consolidation of this core unit. The ability to bring more family members is a point of pride, as it is an index of the strength of the family.

---

<sup>9</sup> This type or level of network is the one that is best described in a study on networks and migration: 'Beneficial network externalities arise when previous migrants provide shelter and work, assistance in obtaining credit, and/or generally reduce the stress of relocation to a foreign culture.... These personal connections provide potential migrants with information about the labor market in the host country. They offer important data that work to mitigate imperfect information about the labor market in the host country, enabling the migrant to obtain better paid and more stable jobs' (Bauer and Gang 2002: 1)

As mentioned earlier, the decision to migrate is only partly up to the individual migrant. The decision, and the subsequent steps of the migration process, is mainly undertaken by the family. And here we should note the continuity that exists between the family in the village in Egypt on the one hand, and the family members already in Paris on the other.

The selection of who will go to France is a family decision (meaning household). It is the family that determines whose turn it is to go, because an equally important decision is who will stay to look after the affairs of the family and, mainly, to oversee the investment of the money that will be sent by the migrant. Family members in Paris will also take part in recommending who should go next; this is based on their ability to judge what kind of work is available for example. They are also the ones who are responsible for advancing all or some of the expenses of the journey. This practice indicates building an economic dimension into the kinship relationship; sponsoring a relative's journey creates a patronage bond.

What is referred to as 'buying the visa' really means meeting all the expenses of the journey. They say visas now are a lot more costly than they used to be. The figure cited is between 35 and 40 thousand Egyptian pounds or even more<sup>10</sup>. However, they always hasten to add that people have stopped coming. This may not be the truth but this issue is too sensitive and maybe they feel they have to protect newcomers.

People are, understandably, very secretive about the issue of the visa, or rather of arriving in France. Although more people keep 'appearing' in France, it is said that people have stopped coming.

Apart from paying for or contributing to the expenses of the trip, the family-level network arranges for work and accommodation for those newly arrived, at least during the

---

<sup>10</sup> Egyptian authorities have just arrested members of a ring specialised in trafficking Egyptian and Asian youth to Europe from the Egyptian coast using fishing boats. The fee quoted for the trip is between 30,000 and 40,000 Egyptian pounds, i.e. a figure very similar to that reported by my informants. (*Al-Ahram* 23 May 2005)

initial phase. A Cairene owner of a market stall describes the way Badrawis benefit from their networks of relatives in the area of food markets:

They know the work, and they teach it to each other. For example, someone who is a long-time client of a trader in the wholesale market (*Rangis*) would take his cousin who has just arrived, introduce him to the trader and ask him to give him the same treatment. Thus someone who arrived to Paris only yesterday would have the advantage of someone who has been here for 20 years.

Another important aspect of support that is provided by relatives is preparing the new immigrant, even while still in Egypt, in terms of providing him with basic information that facilitates the initial stages of adaptation to living and working in France. Ahmed, who knew before he arrived that he would be working in the market, recounts how he was 'prepared':

I arrived from Egypt knowing the names of all commodities. I knew what grapes are called (in French), and what oranges are called. And one would arrive here knowing the numbers until 100, and as long as you know these numbers then you can handle money during buying and selling. Also, before I came here I had a map of Paris, the one that has the metro line. They had instructed me how to get to the house if I did not find someone waiting for me. I hadn't been here for three days and I got around all the metro stations of Paris, and I could even change lines.

Family members in Paris have a collective obligation towards the family in the village. The way these obligations are fulfilled require a level of organisation and mobilisation. This mainly takes the form of collecting a monthly sum which is sent to the village. There is a committee in Paris to organise the collection, and one in the village to oversee the utilisation of this money.

Mohamed from the numerous A. family explains this system as follows:

There are 40 people from our family here. Each contributes some money, whatever he can give, but no less than 10 Euros each month. This money gets sent to Egypt. In Egypt, three or four of the elders of the family then decide what to do with the money. For example, if there is someone from the family who is ill, they pay for his treatment, they can designate a monthly payment to a poor widow, or contribute to the marriage expenses of a girl whose father cannot pay for her. At one point, the family needed to buy a tomb, so they used our contributions towards buying the land necessary for that. Now they are thinking of building a guest house for the family in the village. We want to do that in the future.

This type of collective action seems to be modelled after a tradition of collective action at the level of the family in the village. And, apart from these monthly contributions, the *zakat* (alms) money is also collected in Paris and sent to the village to be distributed among the poor.

Last but not least, the large family provides security in the most immediate, basic and literal sense where family members are mobilised when one of them or their friends is involved in a fight. This story is recounted by Ahmed, a Cairene who has benefited from his close connection with one of the Badrawi families who have a large contingent in Paris:

Once someone hit my parked car. I went to talk to him but he pushed me and summoned four of his friends. They wanted to hit me. I quickly made a phone call to my friend from Mit Badr. In a few minutes there was a little army of 25 people from his family who arrived immediately. Here if you say that someone from this or that family is involved in a fight you will find 50 people coming to help. That is why people think twice before getting on the wrong side of someone from a numerous family from Mit Badr.

## Investing Earnings

As mentioned earlier, the main purpose of this migration is to earn money for improving one's own and one's family's living conditions at home. Earnings spent in Paris are used only to cover basic necessities. The rest is saved and sent back to the village. In a typical sequence, the first thing the migrant does is to repay the money he had borrowed to travel. This takes between a year and two years. Then he buys land in order to build a house, and then he builds the house. If all this has been achieved, the next thing is to think of a 'project' that he could run when he goes home. This can be buying a car to turn into a taxi, or a mini truck. Another interesting development has been some people investing in reclaimed agricultural land in Beheira and getting involved in commercial farming. I was told that there is an area there where many people from Mit Badr have bought land and are investing in farms.

In all cases, however long the Egyptian immigrant stays, he considers his stay temporary and aims to eventually go back to Egypt. This is not just what people say but is more significantly reflected in their plans for their own and their children's future, whereby even those who have all but settled in France have invested in building houses in their village, in addition to other investments in Egypt, mostly real estate. The general pattern is to go back each year with the whole family. The house they build and other second homes in Cairo or on the Northern coast are intended for the use of their children. Whether or not the latter will comply with their parents' plans for them is an issue that requires a separate study.

Whether or not a migrant will stay on in France or will go back is, to some extent, determined by the type of marriage he enters into. If the man is married to a French woman or, more commonly, to an Arab woman with French citizenship, this family is more likely to stay on in France, especially if they have children. A more common arrangement amongst the group I am dealing with is marrying a woman in the village and visiting her and the children for a couple of months every year. In such a case, the man has more definite plans of returning to Egypt.

### **Impact on the Village**

One of the most important consequences of the migrants' remittances and their pattern of investment has been the significant rise in land prices in the village of Mit Badr Halawa. Another aspect of change that is more readily visible is the presence of a large number of huge multi-storey houses in a very characteristic architecture that is extremely decorative and very lavish-looking. They are painted in various striking colours, their roofs and facades are tiled, and they have conspicuous and very huge decorated iron gates. There are two very different ways of talking about the changes in Mit Badr that are due to 'French money'. Badrawis generally talk of the changes in the village, especially the 'new architecture' in positive terms and regard this as a sign of progress. Others who are not from Mit Badr, particularly those from

an older generation of migrants who were generally more educated, are very contemptuous and cynical about these changes. This group generally regard Badrawis as fellahin upstarts, and see in their new architecture a blind and distorted imitation of what they saw in France. An example that is often cited to illustrate the sterility of these imports is that of the house that has a swimming pool on the roof which is stagnant and full of mosquitoes because nobody uses it.

That a degree of contempt is expressed towards Badrawis by this particular group has to be seen in the context of a situation where members of this older educated generation are now working side by side with those they deem of a lower status. This is particularly evident in the market place which is witnessing the encroaching monopoly of Badrawis<sup>11</sup>. This situation is best expressed in the words of a Cairene, university-educated man who came in the late 1970s for post-graduate studies and is now an owner of a market stall in a predominantly Badrawi area:

Before the 1980s, those who came to France were the educated class. Now it is different. The types of people who came later are fellahin. They do not compare in terms of culture, education or morals. Especially after the Gulf war France attracted all types indiscriminately. And now all of us in the market are wearing the 'yellow suit', and like in the army we all look the same.

### **Accommodation and Living Arrangements**

The typical arrangement is for four or five people to live together in a small flat (averaging about 30 sq. meters). This collective arrangement is not only meant to save on the rent but also on the food expenses, beside of course providing much needed emotional support and a sense of belonging. It is here that most arrangements related to work are made. This is because flats, just like the café, serve as a meeting place for relatives and friends who visit each other frequently. Many evenings are spent with groups of friends and relatives watching Arab satellite

---

<sup>11</sup> Detlef Müller-Mahn (2000) discusses the dominance of Badrawis in the Belleville market (translation from German courtesy of Nicholas Hopkins).

television and, inevitably, exchanging information, support and services. On average, a person pays between 100 and 150 euros a month for rent and bills, and a similar amount on food.

Egyptian labour immigrants tend to cluster together in certain quarters (like Belleville and Simplan), and they often occupy several flats in the same building. In quarters with a high concentration of Egyptian workers, Egyptian shops have opened selling Egyptian products such as tea, feta cheese, fava beans, lentils, tahina, Cleopatra cigarettes etc. This is one readily visible clue to the Egyptian workers' lifestyle in which they try as much as possible to stick to their familiar world. Apart from food and cooking (see section on Commensal Relations below), this attribute is apparent in the way they spend their leisure time, either watching Egyptian movies and soap operas on Arabic satellite channels, or listening to Arabic songs and music. On some evenings and weekends, they may go out to the Egyptian café for a water pipe and backgammon. In summer months, some of them are involved in football tournaments organised between Egyptian workers.

### **Commensal Relations**

There is usually a division of labour whereby someone is assigned the shopping, another the cooking and another the cleaning up. As many of them work in food markets, the standard meal is composed of cooked vegetables and veal or chicken (halal) and rice cooked in the Egyptian style. They always stock Egyptian food such as fava beans, lentils and feta cheese. Most of them take their lunch with them to their working place, usually bread, cheese, and tuna or sardines. The main meal is eaten in the evening and it is a traditional Egyptian meal (vegetables cooked in tomato sauce with rice and chicken or meat). Despite the fact that the reason for this type of migration is to save money, and despite the fact that Badrawis are very careful about spending money, they usually do not deprive themselves and tend to eat well.

During Ramadan, the menu is more varied and lavish. It is reported that the expenditure on food almost doubles during that month.

### **Hardship and Vulnerability**

The biggest and harshest problem the clandestine labour migrant faces is his inability to go back and forth because of two main reasons. First, the risk and expense involved in coming to France would be wasted once he leaves. Second, most of the young men (under 30) who are in France have not performed their military service. Once they reach 30, they can pay a fine and settle this issue, but before that they cannot travel freely. These two obstacles to visiting home intensify the feelings of *ghurba* (estrangement). Migrants' accounts of their experience in France have a sad and nostalgic undertone. In general, they stress their vulnerability and are particularly keen to convey that they are neither happy nor comfortable in France. This sentiment is linked to the fact that the labour migrant's presence in France is partly due to the family's decision and collective interest. Young men actually yearn to get the chance to travel. Yet they never admit that this was their choice, or desire; they present it as if they had been 'pushed' to do it by others in the family. Part of the explanation and justification for his journey is to comply with the wishes of the family elders, and to shoulder the responsibility towards other family members, be they younger siblings, elderly parents, or sisters who need to get married. This is what makes stories of hardship and vulnerability compatible with ideals of manhood, for in this case what is stressed is the man's obligation as the family's breadwinner. The burden of provision is an attribute of a real man. This is one sense in which (the dependent) family serves to cast a noble light on experiences that would otherwise seem socially costly and compromising. An important notion here is that of *akl 'eish* (earning daily bread). It denotes a powerful imperative and is almost always used in association with the

amount of sacrifice and what one has to endure or give up in order to meet that imperative<sup>12</sup>. It is of course not exclusively used in connection with labour migration, but is frequently evoked to explain and justify the amounts of hardship faced.

## **Conclusion**

In the preceding discussion, I have tried to provide a sketch and explain certain features of a particular community of Egyptian workers in Paris. The Mit Badr group admittedly has special and sometimes unique characteristics. At the same time it shares a lot of features with the community of Egyptian workers regardless of their origin or regional affiliation. Egyptian workers, in their turn, are very similar to immigrant workers of other nationalities in similar situations.

One thing I was particularly keen to show is the very close link that exists between the village of Mit Badr Halawa in Egypt and the Badrawi community in Paris. I have to, however, end by saying that I presented only one side of the story. The story cannot be complete without looking at the village itself. It is only there that we can hope to find an answer to the question of why this village in particular stands out the way it does.

---

<sup>12</sup> For more details on manhood, labour migration and vulnerability see Saad 2000.

## References

- Bauer, Thomas and Ira Gang (2002) 'Networks and the Duration of Temporary Migration'. Ministry of Manpower and Emigration. Emigration and Egyptians Abroad Sector. <http://www.emigration.gov.eg/publications/Publication.asp>
- Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (1996) General Census.
- Ministry of Manpower and Emigration and IOM (2003) *Contemporary Egyptian Migration*. [http://www.emigration.gov.eg/StaticFiles/Publication/Contemporary\\_Egyptian\\_Migration.pdf](http://www.emigration.gov.eg/StaticFiles/Publication/Contemporary_Egyptian_Migration.pdf)
- Müller-Mahn, Detlef (2000) 'Ein ägyptisches Dorf in Paris: eine empirische Studie zur Süd-Nord-Migration am Beispiel ägyptischer "sans-papiers" in Frankreich', in Bommes, M (ed.) *Transnationalismus und Kulturvergleich*. Osnabrück: Institut für Migrationsforschung und interkulturelle Studien, pp. 79-110.
- Saad, Reem (2000) 'Narratives of Faraway Experiences: Family and Styles of Manhood in an Egyptian Village'. Paper submitted to the International Conference on Family History And Middle East Studies. University of California, Berkeley. April 7-9.
- Talani, Leila Simona (2003) 'Why Do Migrants Leave their Countries? Motivations to Migrate at the Point of Departure: The Case of Egypt'. Final report.
- Zohry, Ayman and Barbara Harrell-Bond (2003) 'Contemporary Egyptian Migration: An Overview Of Voluntary And Forced Migration'. DRC Working Paper (WP-C3). ([http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/working\\_papers.html](http://www.migrationdrc.org/publications/working_papers.html))

Al-Ahram newspaper.