MEDIATING POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITIES: INFRASTRUCTURE, MOBILITY, AND SOCIAL ACTION IN EGYPT’S NILE DELTA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation captures the story of materially embedded political mobilization histories in Egypt. However, the story does not emerge from the revolutionary urban centers, as was the popularly and scholarly mediated experience of the January 25, 2011 Revolution. Studied from the Nile Delta vantage point, this dissertation brings together two villages in two different governorates, al-Beheira and al-Daqahliya, located one-hundred-and-eighty kilometers apart. The villages tell the story of state development, neglect, and community mobility as enacted, mediated, and contested through infrastructure. Infrastructure is a means of not just navigating physical space but is also a way of organizing everyday life, materially—through roads, bridges, irrigation networks, and affectively—through political mobilization, connection-building, and customary rural governance structures. These
infrastructural instantiations are embedded in the material histories and built environments of where citizens emerge from. The history of one of the villages of my research, Tahseen, is directly indebted to 1952 independence that brought President Gamal Abdel-Nasser to power, yet the village launched a secession movement from its municipal government in 2012, six decades after its creation. The second village of research, Nebeira, is also shaped by the history of 1952 through the process of the Nasser government’s land reform. In this dissertation I argue how the everyday experience of politics between citizens and the multiple state bodies emerges infrastructurally. Infrastructure is both material and social—it is a site where politics are mediated and a site where people reproduce the social infrastructure that organizes their lives.
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CHAPTER ONE: The Nile Delta Between Two Revolutions: 1952 & 2011

In this dissertation, I capture the story of materially embedded political mobilization histories in Egypt. However, the story does not emerge from the revolutionary urban centers, as was the popularly and scholarly mediated experience of the January 25, 2011 Revolution (Deeb & Winegar 2012: 539). Studied from the Nile Delta vantage point, this dissertation brings together two villages in two different governorates, al-Beheira and al-Daqahlia, located one-hundred-and-eighty kilometers apart. The villages tell the story of state development, neglect, and community mobility as enacted, mediated, and contested through infrastructure. Infrastructure is a means of not just navigating physical space but is also a way of organizing everyday life and aspirational mobilities, materially—through houses, roads, bridges, schools, irrigation networks, and affectively—through political mobilization, connection-building, and customary rural governance structures. These infrastructural instantiations are embedded in the material histories and built environments of where citizens emerge from. The history of one of the villages of my research, Tahseen, is directly indebted to 1952 independence that brought President Gamal Abdel-Nasser to power, yet the village launched a secession movement from its municipal government in 2012, six decades after its creation. The second village of research, Nebeira, is also shaped by the history of 1952 through the process of the Nasser government’s land reform (Saad 1999; Ayeb 2012; Bush 2002; El Nour 2020; Ahmed 2015; Mitchell 2002; Misako 2009). The stories of both villages are sometimes complimentary, while at other times divergent in their relation to the forms of political subjectivities that emerge from their material histories. What I will primarily draw out in this dissertation is how the everyday experience
of politics between citizens and the multiple state bodies emerges infrastructurally. Infrastructure is both material and social—it is a site where politics are mediated and a site where people reproduce the social infrastructure that organizes their lives (Elyachar 2010; Simone 2004; Kleinman 2014; Abel 2020; Newman 2020; Gaudio 2020). A road in Tahseen, for example, condenses how infrastructure is a node through which politics are contested. Citizens’ experiences on a lack of a paved road produce a felt sense of abandonment and neglect. The road, therefore, is a tactile site where people encounter state neglect and a site of potential political action through funding and planning of its construction; where citizens intervene when the state will not. In Tahseen, the community’s conception of infrastructural necessities emerges from what was provided by the state in the 1950s when it constructed the village with homes, a school, and a mosque through waqf, religious endowments funds. While a paved road was not considered a necessity during their settlement in the village and their primary reliance on an agricultural economy, three decades later, demands for a road emerged with the villagers’ increased need for mobility, migration, and seeking out non-agricultural economic opportunities. In Nebeira, informal housing on agricultural land emerged as a key infrastructure through which villagers acted when the state would not. In addition, Nebeira ’s demand for sewage infrastructure demonstrated an acknowledgement of state neglect: their lack of development in comparison to urban centers and neighboring villages.

In this chapter, I provide an ethnographic, historical, and theoretical introduction to the centrality of infrastructure in state-making, citizenship-claiming, place-making, and political subjectivity in rural Egypt. I will first present the histories of Tahseen and Nebeira, elaborating how these two villages’ specific political histories diverge and converge with
the revolutions of 1952 and 2011. As I will explain, the history of Egypt since 1952 is materially embodied in these spaces. Colonial-era train tracks used to transport cotton grown in Nebeira were uprooted and reused to build homes as a part of the 1952 revolution. In 2012, an independence claim emerged through local infrastructural neglect in Tahseen. I will also discuss local histories more broadly to better understand these sites' particularities. I theorize the Omda, rural village leadership, as a form of socio-political infrastructure key to materializing basic needs and services. This kin-governance structure spans centuries and different forms of national governance. It is a means of socially structuring village life and essential to unpacking wealth, land ownership, kinship, and power in the Nile Delta. I will then situate literature on infrastructure, political subjectivity, mobilization, and theories of the state, which I draw from, and elaborate on, not only in this chapter but throughout the dissertation. I end this chapter with a reflection on my methodology and how my experiences in the field were intimately governed by the realities of surveillance, both state and familial. This work addresses the imbrication of rural political mobilization histories as materially embodied histories. This imbrication can be seen both in the villages I discuss as much as in my experience conducting that fieldwork.

The dissertation nuances the study of rural Egypt and of the Nile Delta specifically. Tahseen and Nebeira are two villages in different governorates, but while they are both Delta-based Egyptian villages, their social and material characteristics vary and tell alternate stories of the history of state-development and political subjectivities in Egypt. I write them as two different narratives that try to tell the same story: the material-affective bases for political mobilization in rural Egypt.
The process of researching and making connections is a process of making sense of fragments of knowledge, of experiences, and of archival pieces in attempt to patch together a larger tapestry of Egypt’s rural development from the 1950s to today. Tahseen was created in the 1950s under the socialist populist regime of Gamal Abdel-Nasser as a result of land reform and land reclamation policies. In fact, Tahseen in Arabic means “improvement”, reflected in the “land’s improvement” from marshland to cultivable land. Nebeira, however, is an older village, a seat of rural Ottoman and British protectorate rule: its neighboring village, Kom Ge’eif has ancient Greek and pharaonic ruins. Tahseen is a small village, with three thousand inhabitants. Nebeira is four times that size. Given its history, Nebeira is infrastructurally better developed, although still lacking major services like a sewage system; Tahseen suffers major neglect or absences of basic infrastructures such as a paved road. While Nebeira has a stratified class structure (landowners, small scale farmers, and traders), Tahseen mostly consists of small-scale farmers. Nebeira is government-aligned, as represented through its housing of the Omda, a state administrator who serves multiple villages, and in this instance an inherited position. Tahseen seceded from its governance by an Omda and currently operates with an elected village council. Yet, despite their variances, both villages paint a larger picture of the potentialities for material-affective political mobilization efforts as mediated through infrastructure between two revolutions: 1952 and 2011.

I centralize rural Egypt as a point of departure, as significantly half of Egypt’s population continues to reside or maintain residence connections outside of urban spaces. I do so through a historical lens that is rooted in contemporary phenomena, and from which my research emerged. When talking about history, I mean both national narratives, as
derived from national state and ministerial archives, as well as oral history narratives. Yet my approach to historical experience is very much a lived one through the intergenerational experiences I draw out.

My decision to do ethnographic research both in Tahseen and Nebeira was not preplanned nor intentional, but fortuitously led me to think about the varying experiences of rural political life. While I describe my research trajectory later in this chapter, I provide a brief overview to situate my research here. My connections to Tahseen preceded my dissertation research visits as my first encounters with the village were as a journalist and not an academic researcher. Nebeira is the village my parents and grandparents grew up in—it is my family village, and I have known and frequented the village all my life. Ethnographic research is about the entanglements one faces as a researcher and how one gets led into different paths, or is forced to divert her way due to not only the research questions but also due to the reality of the people one researches and the environment they are in. This dissertation is mostly a description of these journeys as I experienced them and as dictated by where people and ideas took me. I begin with vignettes that illustrate the connections between infrastructure, the state, and different forms of rural political mobilization. I will then situate differences in the villages through embodied historical descriptions, explain my theoretical choices, my dissertation chapters, and my ethnographic contributions.
Tahseen: An Infrastructural History of Revolutionary Citizens

Tahseen emerged as a new village in 1956, four years after the “Free Officers Coup”, or the 1952 Revolution that ended the monarchy of King Farouk and ultimately brought Gamal Abdel-Nasser to power. President Nasser’s main political program followed an anti-colonial and socialist-leaning policies, supporting land reform and social justice reforms for the majority of small-scale peasants. Following the land reform laws, which facilitated the redistribution of lands from pre-1952 *Izba* large estate landowners, new villages were created under the policies known as “Land Reclamation”. These were barren lands, state-owned tenancies offered to peasants for eventual private ownership on the terms that they develop them into arable, productive fields and pay symbolic “rents” to
the Ministry of Agrarian Reform and Land Reclamation for an unspecified period of time. Tahseen was one of several “reclaimed” villages in Egypt created during the Nasser presidency.

President Anwar El-Sadat, who ruled from 1970 to 1981, moved the country away from Nasser’s socialist-leaning policies to what became termed the “Open Door” economic liberalization policies. Under Sadat’s presidency, counter-land reform measures started to take effect. Under President Hosni Mubarak’s presidency from 1981 to 2011, official policies increased economic liberalization and 1990s neo-liberal policies were enacted. During the Sadat and Mubarak presidencies, the reversal the Nasser-led land reform policies allowed former pre-1952 landowners to reclaim ownership of their land. Some of the additional effects of counter-reform included farmers that had to pay market rent for the lands reaching more than twenty-two times the land tax price paid under Nasser’s reform policies.

The Tahseen farmers labored on the land beginning in 1956. As tenanted farmers to the state, they cultivated it for the Ministry of Agrarian Reform and Land Reclamation, paying largely symbolic rents and creating “sweat equity” through their work. In 1962, they received official ownership documents. In the 1990s, they were however ordered to buy the land as a result of new land ownership policies. This shift in policy coincided with the counter-land reform laws officially passed in 1992, which focused on returning land sequestered from the large Izba estate landowning families. The change in policy meant that farmers in land reclamation villages needed to buy their properties from the state at 1992 land market values, erasing the four decades of labor and care these farmers had put into developing the land and raising its market values.
Neither Tahseen nor Nebeira faced land sequestration in the 1950s because Tahseen was a new village created in response to the new land reform system and Nebeira’s landowners owned less than the maximum fifty feddans slated for sequestration and nationalization. However, they faced other forms of changes to property rights and farming subsidies that made working the land unsustainable. Tahseen’s farmers, who experienced the benefits of land reform through the creation of their village in the 1950s, bore the brunt of having to re-buy land they already owned in 1992. They also faced similar raises in land taxes, and debilitating land debts, as I will explain in chapter two. At the time, many of the farmers in Tahseen had to first pay off their agricultural debts in order to buy the land. They were provided a fifteen-year grace period during which they could pay the cost off in installments, but were threatened that if they did not, the land would be auctioned to bidders external to the village. In an interview I conducted with a Tahseen farmer in 2014, he had mentioned to me that he was able to pay off all the installments two years prior but was still struggling to receive the official land ownership deeds.

Tahseen creates a clear timeline connecting 1952 to 2011: it emerged as a village four years after the 1952 Revolution, and yet launched its independence from state administrative control in 2012, alongside Egypt’s nationwide uprisings. While rural Egyptian revolutionary history tied to 1952 has been central to the nationalist narrative and popular culture representations, the representation of rural participation and centrality to the 2011 movement has been scant (Schielke 2015; El Nour 2015; Abu-Lughod 2012; Deeb & Winegar 2012: 539). Tahseen’s citizens conceive of their collective and individual lived experience of their material history in conjunction with these two signposts, 1952 and 2011,
but also have a subjective experience of temporal revolutionary history that precedes 2011 with the start of their movement in the early 2000s.

To provide a brief timeline of Tahseen’s mobilization trajectory before proceeding, in September 2012, Tahseen village leaders announced “administrative independence” from the municipal government. While the movement was officially pronounced in 2012, its roots went back to 1990 when the previous generation demanded a road and new school from the municipal government at the time. In 1995, Tahseen also rejected its Omda, the official state-appointed representative of the village (who resided in a different village), for ignoring the requests of the community and not supporting them. As I will explain in chapter three, the Tahseen community viewed the Omda as a direct example of state corruption. Following twenty years of negotiations between the Tahseen community and the municipal government over the lack of provision of any of the initial services requested, Tahseen officially launched their independence movement in 2012. As a result, they refrained from paying taxes, water and electricity bills, and forbid entry to any state representatives to the village. This came a year-and-a-half after the nationwide 2011 Revolution that brought President Hosni Mubarak’s 30-year rule to an end, and called for significant social and political reforms. Residents of Tahseen clearly saw themselves as part of the revolutionary history:

Why do you mostly find revolutionaries here? It is hard to find other villagers in the countryside with our genetic makeup… Tal’aat, Shammas, Sam’aan, Abdel Hadi, these are all former estate lands whose village names have remained the same as the names of the [pre-1952] estate landowners who used to own them. The farmers who lived there lived as servants to them…they were only ordered to cultivate and not eat from the crops they grew; to work and not receive any income for their work…they were slaves and a slave cannot know much about freedom. But Tahseen is different; it was initiated by [Gamal Abdel] Nasser to counter this system of o’boodeya (slavery). He created us as an example to take us [fellahin, peasantry] out of o’boodeya. The state created Tahseen so we could grow on our
own, to cultivate our crops, and then feed the nation in return… from a very young age, we were born free, and we emerged from here…we refuse to be unjustly ruled… many decades later, we dissociated from our Omda [village headman]. So, if a problem arose, we would not deal with it o’rfeyan (customarily), we would directly go to the municipal government to make our demands, and we knew we were capable of working it out ourselves …We never depend on others for anything we need, and we have a deeply entrenched experience here.

Fawzy, a blacksmith from the Nile Delta village of Tahseen and one of the village’s movement leaders, recounted to me in 2014 the history of the village and the political subjectivities that emerged from growing up there. In his mid-thirties at the time of our conversation, he hails from the third generation of Tahseen villagers. He was born in 1979, twenty-three years after his parents and grandparents moved to the village, shortly after its creation in 1956 by land reform and accompanying land-reclamation (conversion of desert land for agricultural use) policies passed under the regime of Gamal Abdel-Nasser.

The government, under the tutelage of the Ministry of Agrarian Reform and Land Reclamation, constructed sixty homes in the village and a school. “The government built us the homes to attract us to move here from previous villages, to relocate to Tahseen and to commute the long distance from the [main] road to make it here,” Sheikh Gibril, a first-generation Tahseen elder, clarified to me. He explained that the land was “Barren and the soil had high salt levels, and it was not ready for cultivation right away… They made us work the land to make it cultivatable for two years before they officially granted us ownership [potential for ownership titles] deeds… They paid us eighteen piasters a month (0.5 USD in 1960s rate), in addition to a monthly carton of sugar and one bottle of oil”.

Tahseen in the 1960s cobbled together a group of small-scale farmers who newly inhabited and cultivated the land. Tahseen was notably the only land amongst all its neighboring villages that had remained uncultivated and uninhabited as former marshland.
Its nearby villages were all former estate lands, and therefore were inhabited by fellahin (tenant farmers) and landowners until they became nationalized under Nasser’s government. Thus, Tahseen was a new community, a pariah, among its neighboring villages because the inhabitants were new and unknown. The villagers’ experience of abjection continues to be an enduring sentiment until today. (I will further explain this sentiment in the chapter three that addresses the preferential treatment of road construction to a neighboring village). Other examples the Tahseen villagers recounted included the bullying of young children when they commuted three hours each day to another town to get to their closest school.

Most of the farmers fully settled in Tahseen by 1964. They received rental contracts to the land that would be transformed into ownership once they paid their full rents to the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform. As I describe in depth in chapter two, land reform in Egypt became the leading political backbone of the post-1952 Free Officers government, under the presidency of Gamal Abdel-Nasser. Law 178 started the process of land reform two months after the ‘Free Officers Coup’ on September 11, 1952. In addition to land reform, the Nasser government also started a process of ‘land reclamation,’ creating new village settlements for farmers to inhabit. Tahseen was one of these new villages.

Sheikh Gibril, the main ma’zoon (the official authorized to perform Islamic marriage ceremonies) and a respected elder, mentioned how his family was the third family to move to the Tahseen. He and the majority of the village’s initial settlers I interviewed all explained how the first years after settling in the village came with significant hardship. “It took us ten years working on this barren land before crops finally started to grow,” he stressed. In addition to their initial experience of extreme difficulty, they also experienced
debilitating agricultural policies and the reversal of their land deeds in the 1990s. Sheikh Gibril added, “Instead of being indebted to the state for loans we cannot pay off, the state should pay us back! We are the ones who improved this land, ‘amarna we salahna el ‘ard (we improved and developed the land); the state should honor us instead of fighting us.” In chapter two I explore in more detail how the differential experience of land reform and counter-reform policies carried out under Presidents Anwar Al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak shaped political subjectivities in different villages.

The task of establishing a life in a new village is not easy. The villagers tell of challenging experiences faced in trying to make the land cultivatable. “Our village really suffered in making it what it is today...for ten years we were really struggling, trying to produce crops that were not flourishing due to the high saline levels in the soil...we were trying to sustain a life that was near to impossible to sustain”, Hagga Adra, the wife of Sheikh Gibril stated. She pointed to her thirty-three-year-old daughter Nadeen—a mother of three and one of the few women who commuted out of the village for work. Hagga Adra stressed: “Our kids used to shout at us, asking us why we brought to them to such a place, ‘is this a place to live?’”, they would always lament. The difficult memories of first settling in the village continued for decades. When I met with them after the 2011 Revolution, they felt as if they were being punished for the sacrifices they made, instead of being acknowledged. Part of this agreement of many villagers to move to a new territory and create a new settlement was a social pact between the farmers and the state. In return for their labor and cultivation, they would receive promised land titles, homes, education, and medical services. Instead, the predominant sentiments expressed by the farmers in Tahseen were unfulfilled promises for sacrifice made on behalf of the country. These unfulfilled
promises where the main incentives for their movement of independence in 2012, as manifested through the youth movement of “administrative independence” in the village.

The Ministry of Agrarian reform granted the new village inhabitants four to six feddans (1 feddan = 1.037 acres) of land to become official tenants and to start its cultivation. The villagers built all of the new homes after the 1960s to sustain the growing population of the village. Tahseen village today has reached approximately three thousand inhabitants. Half reside in the village, mainly women and children. The other half consists of a male migrant labor workforce, working in Egypt’s city centers, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Each family line that settled in Tahseen came from eight destinations from around the Daqahliya governorate but also al-Sa’eed (Upper Egypt). While in the village, these groups identify themselves by the place from where they came: “The Sawayda” from the village of Mit Suwaid; “El-Diyarbeya” from the village of Diyarb El-Khodar; “El-Fawarseya” from Mit Fares; “El-Shemooneya” from the village of Ashmoon El-Roman; Dirb Negm; and “El-Saa’aya” southern Egypt (Sa’eed). Their family identities were clearly linked with land, a place of origin, and these titles remain the way they colloquially refer to themselves within the village. Outside of the village, they were more well known as the village that declared independence from the state because the state had failed to recognize their labor for the state by providing or maintaining and renewing basic infrastructures.

**Launch of Independence: Physically Materializing Independence in Tahseen**

On September 23, 2012, Tahseen launched a civil disobedience movement and declared “administrative independence” from the local municipal government. Tahseen’s refusal of the local municipal council’s governance, the face of state failures for them, was
their response to the state body they saw responsible for their village’s infrastructural neglect. The village movement included farmers, migrant laborers, women, and children who collectively agreed not to pay state taxes, electricity bills, nor return a portion of their agricultural yield to the state-controlled agrarian cooperatives. On my first visit to the village as a journalist in 2012 to cover the movement, I accompanied my close friend Heba Khalil who was also a researcher at the Egyptian Center of Economic and Social Rights (ECESR). Heba had informed me that a village near the city of Mansoura was planning to launch a civil disobedience campaign a week later and needed media coverage on the launch of their movement. One of the movement leaders was a lawyer from the village, Haleem who had reached out to ECESR’s legal unit for their support of the village movement. I accompanied ECESR’s visit to Tahseen.

Reaching Tahseen from Cairo takes between three to four hours. During our first visit to Tahseen, we took the train from Cairo to the city of Mansoura, then rode a microbus from Mansoura to the main municipal town center, Beni Ebeid, then switched to a second microbus to get to Tahseen. It took about four hours to reach the village. During later visits to reach Tahseen, I would take a regional microbus from Cairo’s Abboud station, heading on the Cairo-Alexandria agricultural road, switched once in Beni Ebeid, then transferred another time to get to Tahseen. The village is the deepest in the fields from the provincial road, making it the last lands of Al-Daqahliya governorate, bordering agricultural fields in the Al-Sharqiya governorate. Due to the village's isolation and the lack of a paved road, many microbuses refuse to drive to Tahseen, and it would take a lot of bargaining and a raise in price to convince drivers to deliver one to the village.
Once arriving to Tahseen on my first visit with the group, Abu-Senna, a well-built, mid-twenty-year old construction laborer in the village, ushered us to what looked like an open courtyard. Standing inside the space, it soon appeared to be the grounds of an old mosque. Abu-Senna explained how this open prayer space, with half the wall remaining due to time-wear and lack of maintenance, was no longer functioning as a prayer space. He explained that many villagers had, over time, decided to create a make-shift prayer section at the back end of the village instead. It was next to a large group of livestock, and many in the community viewed it as not an appropriate praying space, primarily because of the manure smell.

He then took us to the school grounds. It looked like an old, abandoned building. The entry gates and small open courtyard of the school grounds appeared to be in much better shape than the school structure itself. The school was now abandoned and had not been in use for at least a year. We walked into one of the classrooms where only two dusty desks remained. The sand-colored walls had long cracks extending all across them, and the ceiling had holes in it. Abu-Senna mentioned that despite its frail state for over a decade, it continued to house students until the rain started dripping through the cracks in the ceiling.

This ruination of the built structures—the crumbling walls, rubble and dust—reflected and resonated into the social neglect and structural violence the Tahseen community expressed. When walking out of the school, a woman approached me, carrying her sleeping toddler on her shoulder who appeared to be less than a year old. “The village should be known as the Tahseen cemetery,” lamented the mid-forty-year-old mother. She explained that her child was paralyzed after not being hospitalized early enough when
contracting a high fever. Due to absence of a viable road, she had spent hours trying to navigate the dirt path leading out of Tahseen to the nearest hospital, fifteen kilometers away to get her daughter the medical assistance she needed. Sadly, she was too late: the damage caused by the fever was now irreversibile. Hers was not an isolated case, “There have been at least five other instances of paralysis in the village for the same reason”, she added. “This is unjust, unjust; may God forgive those responsible for leaving us to decay in this way; the village is in despair,” she wailed. By this time, more of the villagers approached us, each waiting for their turn to tell their story, eagerly hoping we would amplify their laments of state neglect. We tried to be attentive listeners, while taking notes and photographs.

A sixty-year-old grandmother, who later claimed her daughter was one of the exceptions of schoolgirls finishing a high-school education in the village, approached us. “No one knows about us, and no one has ever heard of Tahseen... it’s only now that anyone is paying attention to us… for years, we have called out, but to no avail”, she stressed. Abu-Senna, who had become our guide through the village, added, as if talking to himself but not necessarily meaning for us to hear: “Yes they have heard of us, but only in the obituaries.”

These expressions of neglect reflect the social and material decay experienced by the community, their sense of physical and symbolic isolation. The physical manifestation of state neglect was most visible in the lack of a paved road leading in and out of the village. “The road is the key,” asserted Fawzy, who recounted to me the revolutionary history of the village earlier in this chapter. The issue of the road has long been a central grievance for the villagers, as the only access to the rural community was via a long and unpaved
path. Towering maize fields surrounded the route, and in the summer the dusty track had consistently been the scene of car and motorcycle accidents, miscarriages, sexual harassment, and child mortalities. An added danger was the smoke from the burning rice fields at the end of the summer agricultural season, making it very hard for residents and visitors to enter or leave the village through the plumes of black. Having a functioning road, Fawzy explained, would provide a safe and quick access point for services, which the village badly needed but did not have. “We would be able to have ambulances, police, government representatives, and visitors come,” Fawzy continued. “But unfortunately, as we see in the Egyptian classics, the authorities only show up in the end, after the crisis happens.” He added that the winter months were especially challenging: “We are usually locked inside the village for days, unable to leave. No one can enter due to the muddy roads,” he explained.

At the end of our visit, the village members accompanying us took us into the home of one of the younger village leaders who later became my host when I returned for fieldwork in 2014. We sat down with a group of approximately fifteen men from the village and listened to more of their grievances. One of the accompanying ECESR researchers took out her phone and started to press record, I did the same, taking my handheld voice recorder and placed it on the table. In the meeting, an older man jokingly added, “Don’t tell me you are Al-Jazeera”, prompting laughter from the men in the circle. He was now dominating the discussion and took the lead in explaining how he was one of the men in the village who faced numerous arrests every couple of months. I questioned if the arrests were related to their independence movement but Youness clarified that his history of arrests went back years and was connected to his agricultural debts. “Every six months,
they come to take me in.” The debts incurred by Youssef were a result of loans he received from the agricultural bank for cultivation and which he was not able to pay back in time. [I will explain the debts in chapter two].

The official response many of the movement leaders faced from the governor was, unsurprisingly, dismissal. In a video recording of a meeting held in his office with one of the movement leaders, the governor questioned the intentions of the village, and accused them of being instigated by foreign agents. He added that a claim to independence was illogical. “Would it be reasonable for me as al-Daqahliya governor to claim independence from Egypt? What would I be a part of now? Israel or America?” While he mocked Tahseen’s movement and claims as unreasonable, he also indexed that such a move was a treacherous one: resisting government authorities could only mean the villagers were being influenced or acting as agents to Israel and the US. Yet, the Tahseen movement leaders questioned the governor’s legitimacy. “How is it that we have a democratically elected [post-revolution] president [Mohamed Morsi], but a governor that is a remnant of the former Mubarak regime?” Fawzy posed. This lack of structural change in provincial governance after 2011 was one of the reasons for the powerful counter-revolutionary movement that culminated in a coup in 2013. The genuine revolutionary change hoped for did not take place in Egyptian political structures, despite the post-2011 political shuffling. Still, a lot of the base political infrastructure, especially in rural governance peripheral to the urban megacities, had remained the same.

For Tahseen, their political efforts and independence movement after the 2013 President Sisi coup continued to promote them as forgotten in the story of meaningful
social transformation in Egypt. They saw themselves as ever marginalized, particularly to more politically urgent and urban-centered demands.

**Embodied History: Infrastructural Recycling and the Making of Peasant Politics in Nebeira**

Before introducing the infrastructural histories in Beheira, I will first provide a timeline of the history of Nebeira as it pertains to the major events I will describe through my fieldwork. Starting with Mohamed Ali’s rule of Egypt from 1804 to 1848 until the end of King Farouk’s rule in 1952, *Izba* agricultural estate lands were the predominant agricultural system, in which lands were awarded by the Sultan to individuals and families in exchange for political loyalty or as a reward for service. These estates were legally established in 1840, but the practice preceded that time. As part of several reforms, taxing regulations, and rural development initiated under during this period, the *Omodeya* rural governance system also began in 1840. Both of these governance policies have shaped Nebeira, the second Nile Delta village in which I worked.

Prior to the 1952 Revolution, Egypt was ruled by an autonomous sultanate, kingdom, and the British Protectorate. British control over Egypt officially lasted between 1882 and 1956. Throughout the period from 1882 to 1914, British controlled politics through the Khedivate of Egypt as an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire. The khedivate system ended with the disbanding of the Ottoman Empire in 1914 and Sultan Hussein Kamel declared himself Egypt’s ruler, independent of the Ottoman Empire, under official protectorate rule by the British. Even though official British protectorate rule in Egypt legally ended in 1922, under the Unilateral Declaration of Egyptian Independence, the British stationed troops and continued their control throughout the rule of King Fuad I.
and King Farouk I, until his deposition by the Free Officers in 1952. That coup facilitated the rise of President Gamal Abel Nasser and his agrarian land reforms that politically mobilized *fellahin* (small-scale tenant farmers) of the Nile Delta. Nebeira’s history is intimately tied to these political shifts, as the following accounts will illuminate.

In Beheira—another Nile Delta Governorate located one-hundred-and-fifty kilometers west of Tahseen—infrastructure factored centrally in village historical experience of revolution and political mobilization. Nebeira was my second field-site and is the village where my family history resides. The history of infrastructure in Nebeira and its connection to Nasser-era reforms illustrates the ways political subjectivities emerged in different ways based on the material at hand.

Today, if you go to some of the villager’s older homes, you will find that they used the old train tracks as support for their ceilings, they used them to renovate and modernize their old brown mud-brick homes into the newly-built and white-stone buildings. The *fellahin* (small-scale farmers) repurposed train tracks that had initially been used by the Sultan’s [Hussein Kamel] family for his transportation and the transportation of his estate’s crops.

In a conversation with Nebeira ’s elementary-school counselor, one of my main research interlocutors, about the history of the village and its neighboring villages, he recounted to me the incident of the reused train tracks for home construction. The counselor, whose extended family resides in the village where he has lived all his life, explained that the train mainly functioned for the transport of Sultan Hussein Kamel’s estate’s crops, primarily cotton, between the village and the municipal centers. Sultan Hussein Kamel was Egypt’s nominal leader during the British protectorate of Egypt from 1914 to 1917. His estate lay in Nebeira ’s neighboring village Gabares, where one can still see the architectural ruins of the Sultan’s property. Gabares today falls under the
administrative control of Nebeira, “the mother village”. After the monarchy ended—as a result of the Free Officers Coup in September 1952 that brought Nasser into power and brought an end to the monarchy of King Farouk, the grandson of Sultan Hussein Kamel—the railroad no longer had any use. The villagers dismantled the steel rods and made use of them in tangible ways, as domestic building material for those with the least means.

Shortly after the dismantling of the train tracks in 1952, President Gamal Abdel-Nasser passed by Nebeira in an entourage of cars. This was a moment where the villagers saw Nasser in flesh and blood, and it remains a commonly recited anecdote by many of the villagers. Many saw him as an idol figure and a proponent of land reform, a law that many fellahin came to term the “freedom law” for the new sense of heightened status the law afforded them. In celebratory mode, the farmers raised the dismantled train rods to the air as they waved at him and attempted to catch a glimpse of their champion. Gameela, a small-scale farmer in the village (who I talk about in chapter four), was approximately fifteen years-old during this incident in the 1950s. She recounted to me, as if star-struck, how she caught a glimpse of Nasser and he waved back at her.

My first knowledge of the existence of the train tracks emerged from a walk I had with my grandmother in the fields, located at a fifteen-minute drive from our family house. During my time in Nebeira, I regularly took sunset walks in the fields. I would try to make my grandmother join me, but she was usually busy with evening domestic and farm chores: tending to the chickens and cows or making tea for the many visitors coming to the house for meetings with my uncle, the Omda. One of the few days she was able to join me, she mentioned the train tracks. As we were approaching the border of our family’s fields, which was separated from the neighbors by a canal, she recounted that the Sultan’s colonial train
tracks used to also run right along the canal. The fact that train tracks used to pass by us here was surprising to me because I would not have imagined them in such a section of the fields. There seemed to be no remnants—it was just a dirt path now. I asked if there were any physical markers of the train that used to pass by where we were standing. She mentioned only the small bridge connecting the two properties divided by the canal. I remembered a rail and two very old vertical iron bars with a chain between them. It was probably used to block the passage of people walking between the lands when the train would pass through. The iron barriers had caught my eye several times before, as I had photographed them multiple times years ago. Something about their rustiness and their historic feel caught my attention. Only now had I learned to situate them within the larger narrative of a colonial railroad infrastructure connecting the village to the state.


That the village *fellaḥin* recycled the train tracks for their home improvements, as an attempt to modernize, was an infrastructural embodiment of post-feudal sentiment. The
train no longer served the state physically after the revolution but lived on as a symbol of infrastructure’s role in political action. Through the material insertion of the train rods as an essential structure of the house, the ceilings—coupled with the sentiment of post-1952 revolutionary fervor as reflected in their raising of the rods when Nasser’s passed by the village—demonstrates the centrality of the material-affective political mobilization in Nebeira.

**Nebeira: The Materiality of Rural Egyptian Governance**

Nebeira is a village in the Nile Delta governorate of al-Beheira, located between Cairo and Alexandria. To reach Nebeira from Cairo, you take the Cairo-Alexandria Agricultural Road, connecting the two major cities northward through al-Qalyubia, al-Gharbeya, and al-Beheira governorates. Itai El-Barud is the closest town center and is a major transit spot, including a regional train station, microbus stop, and *tuk tuk* spot.

![Itai El-Barud train station. April 2017. Photo: Nada El-Kouny](image)
Reaching the village takes twenty minutes by microbus or car, half the time in a *tuk tuk* or on a motorcycle, and at least double the time on the back of a donkey. The route, unlike Tahseen’s, is much busier, with traffic usually clogging up the road. The majority of the way is asphalted, although several sections of the road have ruts and potholes in them from the weight of the tractors driving on them and wearing them out. There are two possible routes to take to reach Nebeira. The first is the longer route, going through the middle of three villages on the way, and passing kiosks, shops, mosques, and governmental buildings like the village council and post offices along the way. The second route to Nebeira is quicker, cutting through the village exteriors, along a canal with green cultivatable fields on the right. This road is a much quieter and more scenic route, adorned with sizeable beautiful sycamore-fig trees. This picturesque route is an iconic image that has remained largely the same for as far as my memory takes me, since I was a child. It is the primary image reflecting my arrival to the village today. Over the years, discarded plastic bags, along with other garbage, have been a defining characteristic of the canal, along with the absent waste management system and sewage infrastructure. This is true for the majority of Egyptian villages in the Nile Delta today. As part of the modernizing efforts of Muhammed Ali, the sophisticated canal system was built in the 1860s specifically to facilitate the cultivation of cotton and yet provided no viable waste options. The village inhabitants regularly burned the garbage to discard of it, but in a lot of cases, it remained there, clogging up the canal. The creation of a viable waste management system has been an ongoing issue the village has for years tried to solve.
Nebeira is made up of fifteen-thousand inhabitants, making it four times the size of Tahseen. The Kouny family makes up half of the population of the village. The second most major family in the village is the Siwi family. (I will explain the significance of both families later in this chapter). Nebeira village is also a *qarya omm* (mother village), meaning it manages the affairs of eight surrounding villages through the office of the *Omda* (village chief), who has been a member of the Kouny family for generations. The size of the village is 2,084 feddans; 1,917 of which are used for cultivation, and the rest for construction. This will become significant to understanding the political subjectivity of informal housing in chapter two.

Nebeira, in comparison to Tahseen, is better connected to its closest municipal center, as it lies along a twenty-minute drive from the main regional town road. The majority of the road is paved, and the transportation networks run frequently and with ease in and out of the village. One of the major transport stops in Nebeira is located by a small bridge, in front of the main kiosk in the village. One does not need to wait more than ten minutes at the stop for a microbus or a *tuk tuk* to appear if it is not already waiting. The village consists of two schools, a state-appointed agricultural cooperative, a village council, and a post office. It does, as mentioned, lack a sewage network, which is its main demand on the state through the municipal town center. Historically, Nebeira was, like many estate-era villages, key to Ottoman-era and British protectorate rule over rural Egypt through its perennial irrigation system, cotton cultivation, and the railway: Sultan Hussein Kamel’s train. Cotton was a key Egyptian commodity tied to rural livelihoods and government wealth from the early 1800s until the 1980s (Abaza 2013; Owen 1969). The landed gentry’s
control of lands and resources were just as central in the production of their materially embedded political subjectivities as the lack of these was for the small-scale farmers.

**Experiencing Egyptian Rural History between the Revolutions: 1952 to 2011**

The village of Tahseen emerged as a project of Nasserist state infrastructure and social engineering (El-Shakry: 2007): a new agricultural settlement created in the 1950s. It was similar to many new agricultural settlements created in that period, the most famous of which was Modereyet El-Tahrir created in 1952 in the Delta. Yet the creation of new agricultural settlements was a larger Pan-Arab socialist experiment like that of the Baathist regime in Iraq (Dewachi 2017, chapter five). Tahseen was initiated a month after the “Free Officers Coup” that brought Egypt’s first post-colonial government to power. Led by Nasser along with Mohamed Naguib (the initial short-lived president), and Anwar Al-Sadat (the Egyptian president who followed Nasser), they overthrew King Farouk I of Egypt and the Sudan, the tenth ruler of the Muhammed Ali Dynasty that had lasted for a century and a half. In effect, Tahseen was a product of the first independent Egyptian government, one of whose major policies was land reform. Tahseen also embodied the ideals of Arab Socialism, whose major sources of income came from agriculture. Through the policy of offering farmers land and services, the state secured peasant political support in return for their agricultural productivity for the nation, especially during an economic policy of import-substitution-industrialization (ISI), an economic policy encouraging domestic production over foreign importation (Hopkins in Hopkins et al. 2015: 23).

Yet, five decades after the village’s emergence as an embodiment of state infrastructure and empowering political subjectivity, the village launched a movement of civil disobedience, resisting the state’s legitimacy. It is the point of this tension that I
decided to investigate ethnographically, to understand the shifting political subjectivities and their links to state support, neglect and infrastructure. In order to understand this shift in status, that may come across as resisting your own creator (a la Hegel), it is important to flag some major developments in the case of rural communities and the shifts in socio-economic and agrarian policies. This was experienced by Tahseen along with the majority of Egypt’s other rural communities. These shifts included President Anwar El-Sadat’s shedding of Nasser’s Pan-Arab Socialist policy via the “Open Door” economic liberalization policy, which was sustained by President Hosni Mubarak and the neo-liberal policies of the 1990s. During the Sadat and Mubarak presidencies, the reversal the Nasser-led land reform policies allowed former pre-1952 landowners to reclaim ownership of their land. Farmers then had to pay market rent for the lands, which reached more than twenty-two times the land tax price. These policies affected the state of agriculture (Saad 1999, 2004; Ayeb 2012; Bush 2000). Additionally, the global shift in structural adjustment policies of the 1990s made it unviable for farmers to continue farming, binding them instead to a cycle of debilitating indebtedness. The second chapter in this dissertation will explain in more depth these socio-economic policies as experienced through both villages.

Writing about two defining moments in Egypt’s modern history brings up questions of periodization and the need to critically assess the emic experience of temporality amongst my research interlocutors. As much as my interlocutors do use 1952 and 2011 as signposts in their understandings of their political governance experiences, subjective temporalities do also shape their experience. Dominant nationalist and populist historiographies, as well as geographically and temporally specific periods, erase other temporal experiences of mobilization efforts. Moreover, muted revolutions like the fellahin
mobilization efforts to the counter land reform movement in the 1980s to 1990s, were also central to their political subjectivity.

While villagers in Tahseen and Nebeira saw themselves implicated in the nationwide uprisings of 2011, their struggles long preceded the urban-based movements of 2011. The movement in Tahseen, for example, had its precedents from the early 2000s, as will be elaborated in chapter three. Though the 1952 revolution narratives centered the rural experience through movies and literary scholarship mainly through the representation of the fellah as the embodiment of national character (Selim: 2004), in 2011, the revolution was cast as an urban phenomenon. This sidelined rural mobilization efforts, especially their role in the trajectory of popular movements. Analysts have pointed out how if it weren’t for the urban movements the rural uprisings would not have emerged (Sassen: 2011). Some have also pointed out that this was solely an urban-based movement, similar to the French revolution, mainly in how it failed to be able to reach out to the rural populations (Shukrallah: 2013).

The 2011 Revolution did not reverberate with visible revolutionary action in Nebeira, among most villagers, as it did in Tahseen. Tahseen saw 2011 as a political opportunity to re-ignite a movement that started a decade prior and used it to frame their “administrative independence.” Nebeira, however, experienced 2011 with looting and land grabbing. In Nebeira, unknown assailants set some lands on fire in the middle of the night. While it remained unclear as to who the perpetrators were, villager narratives indicated prolonged land disputes between landowners and fellahin. More importantly, villagers started building informal residences (as I describe in chapter two). These moves to create much needed housing infrastructure for the population boom in Nebeira were a quieter but
very material means to exert their political subjectivity, to claim their right-to-housing on their own terms. For the small-scale farmers in both villages, the state (manifest through the *Omodeya*, the municipal functionaries, the army, the ministries in Cairo, and the Presidency) had failed to meet their infrastructural needs, and their different responses were linked to their material-affective histories.

The *Omda*: Kin-Governance Social Infrastructure

The *Omodeya* village chiefdom governance, is an inherited position passing through the male members of a specific family. While males are those who customarily serve, at least as has been the case in Nebeira, female *Omdas* have nevertheless governed in several Egyptians villages. I analyze the *Omda* system of governance as a rural social infrastructure of the state that has persisted since Ottoman-era Egypt and continues to shape political mobilization in villages like Nebeira and even those aligned against it, as in Tahseen. Etymologically, *Omda* comes from the root noun ‘*amd* meaning “structure” or “foundation” such as “structuring the wall”. In effect, it is a form of governance that combines rural governance, land ownership, and kinship as its main characteristics of power.

The *Omodeya* is both a traditional and modern form of governance, both state-aligned and customary. It preceded the nation-state system, as reflected in its Ottoman era roots, yet it was included in modern governance, as *Omdas* became state representatives. Not only are *Omdas* officially approved by the Ministry of Interior, during the Mubarak presidency for example, they were all expected to be members of his National Democratic Party. Similarly, under President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi’s election campaigns, the *Omda’s*
role consisted of calling on villagers to support Sisi. The Omda’s responsibilities were also to report on any dissident behavior such as counter-Sisi campaigning.

Similar to how this dissertation attempts to center rural mobilization histories, it also attempts to shed light on rural governance mechanisms, primarily the Omodeya. While critical assessments of the Omodeya were more common in historical scholarship, as I will refer to in the following pages, there has been scant contemporary social science literature looking at rural political systems. I, therefore, propose it useful to interrogate the role of the Omodeya today, as a confluence of traditional and modern forms of governance, as well as a social infrastructure bridging or by-passing rural residents and the state in everyday political life.

James B. Mayfield’s study of the Omda structure in a Nile Delta village during Nasser’s presidency lists the Omda’s powers as follows: “His authority is rendered legitimate by the vast majority of the villagers, both because his family has monopolized the office of [Omda] and also because the office of [Omda] is perceived as an official position of the central government. His influence, therefore, rests mostly upon his wealth and family connections, although his connections with government officials and his recognized power and authority in settling disputes adds to his influence and prestige” (1971: 88). Mayfield recounted that prior to 1947, the central government appointed the Omda but with the show of popular support of the villagers, stressing: “He is the government’s man in the village” (1971: 81). While the 1947 law regarding the Omda’s appointment shifted the power a little in providing election of the Omda, it still did not affect the authorities’ final say in his appointment (1971: 83).
In Nebeira, *Omdas* have always emerged from the Awad line of the Kouny family. (There are four other Kouny patrilineal lines). While the *Omda* is an inherited position, when an *Omda* dies, the legal process is to open the position to a son or male relative of the previous *Omda*. However, there could be nominations allowing others to take over. Despite this technical rule, it is not common for someone outside of the Kouny bloodline to nominate themselves as *Omda*. A self-nomination could, in fact, be an outright message of resistance to the legitimacy of a status quo that has persisted for over a century. Responding to such a possibility in the power shift, Nebeira’s *Omda* clarified: “If there were opportunities for other candidates to jump in and nominate themselves, this would actually cause a lot of instability, there would be much more of an incentive for problems to arise; internal conflicts between different families in the village would emerge”. A change in the structure of *Omodeya* is seen by him to be a threat to the larger social structure of the village.

Candidacies open up, and anyone can nominate themselves for the position of *Omda*. Yet, any *Omda* has to be interviewed and approved by the Ministry of Interior and are thus state appointees. *Omdas* are also expected to report to Damanhour city governor every three months as I observed during my fieldwork, conducted in 2016-2017. The *Omda* mentioned that there were direct orders to keep strict reporting appointments, as security forces were on priority alert for heightened militant activity and suspicious groups.

The place of the *Omda* has diminished in importance over time, with several villages across the country not necessarily following the *Omodeya* process any more. Some have raised the question of traditional versus modern governance and the confluence of different governance systems, such as village chiefdom and parliamentary representation.
(Mamdani: 1996). In Egyptian rural governance, the status of the *Omda* has significantly decreased over time in villages that have preserved the position. One felt example of this shift was in the *Omodeya* initiation ceremonies held between changes in the laws governing *Omdas*. While the 1996 meeting included the minister of interior and several of his deputies, the 2016 conference did not include the same show of political importance: no ministerial representatives were there.

The *Omodeya* in Nebeira continues to run within the Kouny family through male inheritance. *Omdas* serve as social continuity of the past into the present. They rule through local-level governance, practicing customary law and solving village level disputes. They provide a quicker and less-visible alternative to the state legal system. During my fieldwork, there were several instances in which farmers sought remedy for land disputes and family feuds through legal procedures and law cases. The cases had been shelved for years left unresolved, so many villagers chose to return to the *Omda* as a dispute-solving mechanism. Informal, customary law here superseded the official legal system and bureaucracy. Traditionalism proved more functional than modern legal mechanisms in these rural contexts. The *Omda’s* continuity from the past materializes their appointment by the Ministry of Interior and serving as the “eye of the state” in places where the state does not deploy their resources—in the rural “peripheries”. The *Omodeya’s* social infrastructure continues to be used by many in Nebeira to get things done they cannot through other legal or bureaucratic channels.

**Post-2011 Attempts to Change the Omodeya**

While customary rural governance has persisted throughout history, new societal changes, especially when it comes to more popular representation, is evident in Nebeira. It
is important to nevertheless stress that not everyone in Nebeira finds the *Omodeya* legitimate or goes through the *Omda*’s network. Indeed, there are direct resistances to the *Omda*, as a government-appointed village leader, similar to what took place in Tahseen village, as I will later explain. Yet, my positionality in the village as a member of the *Omda*’s extended family limited my ability to directly observe or document these resistances. As in all ethnography, there are limitations to the data and thus the conclusions. This does not, however, undermine the key point I seek to make, that the *Omodeya* serves as an important social infrastructure in rural Egyptian life, precisely when resisted because of its state-alignment.

Mayfield (1971) described how the *Omodeya* was shaped by large-scale national shifts in state policies or regimes. While the majority of *Omdas* remained unaffected by Nasser’s politics of nationalization, the politics of sequestration and land reform did affect major landowners in the country, many of whom were *Omdas* (Mayfield 1971: 164). One major defining incident of Nasser’s social reforms in Egypt reflect the power struggles that erupted in the tensions between governing systems, as mentioned in Mitchell (2002: Chapter 6). In 1966, the Fikki landowning family in the Delta village of Kamshish conspired with the *Omda* to kill farmer’s rights activist and member of Nasser’s Arab Socialist Union, Salah Hussein. Hussein was husband of veteran farmer’s rights and women’s rights activist Shahenda Maqlad who passed away in 2016. In response to this incident, the Arab Socialist Union advocated for the abolishment of the *Omda* system (Mayfield 1971: 85). Some villages made the change, but Nebeira did not.

Tahseen, on the other hand, found the *Omodeya* too unresponsive and outright discriminatory in representing their infrastructural needs to the state. As a new village, they
did not have the familial and historical connections needed to navigate Omda approvals. I will describe how this affected their political practices in chapters two and four.

The Omda structure in Nebeira did not face any major changes to its authority during the period of revolutionary upheaval, from 2011 to 2013. Neighboring villages did, however, experience some changes in their governance during that period. A nearby village had opened up its Omodeya to a nomination process, allowing twenty-five new residents to express interest in taking on the reigns when the candidacy opened. “The fear of the Omodeya opening up to an electoral process is that the village won’t have a kabeer, a big man to dictate and to govern strongly…chaos would easily emerge with such fragmentation of power”, Nebeira ‘s Omda stressed. One of the elders in the village, an older man in his seventies who usually serves as the Omda’s assistant, Sheikh el Ballad, chimed in the discussion and echoed the Omda’s statement by stating, “An Omda solves disputes through an agreed-upon set of rules and through his own thekal (weight).”

Following the 2011 revolutionary moment, there were a lot of voices calling for the opening of the Omodeya to an election process. There were several proposals on the need to make governors elected by local constituencies instead of appointed by the state, and even a few suggestions and attempts for political changes to take root in Nebeira. While a change in the official governing structure of the Omda was out of the question, the Omda and his confidants did acknowledge that it was important to make his customary governance more representative. During my fieldwork in 2016, deliberations were taking place over opening a committee of ten men who would serve as istishareyeen, forming a consultative council to the Omda. “It is important to renew blood, to expand the center of decision control” the Omda stressed. Anwar, a regular visitor to the Omda circles,
mentioned how essential it was to have younger representation in village decision-making, as the Omda and his assistants were all over the age of sixty. “Many of today’s problems emerge from disputes on Facebook and public shaming, causing greater problems between families… It is important, therefore, to have more representation from the youth and people who are more in touch with that”. How much of these negotiations were seriously being considered, as opposed to being a matter or rhetoric and performative change is up for questioning. Nevertheless, the existence of such a conversation points to newly emerging political subjectivities and attempts at democratizing governance in Nebeira, in response to larger nationwide citizen-led popular calls for increasing democratization. While the social infrastructure of the Omda has persisted historically, Omdas nevertheless need to justify their position of authority, especially during moments of citizen-led calls for political change.

Investigating a Family Crime Story of Rural Governance

The centrality of agricultural wealth in rural Egypt, as sustained through the social infrastructure of the Omda, is central to the maintenance of state wealth. As I will describe in the following section, agricultural wealth through land, as experienced during British colonial control over Egypt, the feudal monarchy, and independence and nationalization in the 1950s, is a central tenant through which rural political subjectivities of both small-scale farmers and landowners alike are formed. I describe below the centrality of wheat mills as an infrastructure connecting villagers, land, the state, memory, and politics as it emerged from a document I retrieved from the archives. I explore its ethnographic valence through a violent family and village history, and connect it to a broader context of agrarian development in the Nile Delta. However, as I tell the story, there are many fragments to
this history and to my attempts at patching the different parts together through an ethnographic sensibility. I make notable connections, yet, just like many investigative accounts—especially one that involves uncovering a past and depends on memory and narrativization—some missing parts remain. I have tried my best to make sense of them by finding the connections between the information I retrieved archivally, the ethnographic importance, my analysis, and its connection to infrastructure and rural subjectivity in the Nile Delta.

While researching at the Egyptian National Archives in Cairo in 2017, I came across a document mentioning Shehata El Kouny, a landowner in Nebeira between 1904-1915 who owned a wheat mill. I then proceeded to ask about this document in Nebeira in an attempt to get at why such a document would be archived. While conducting my fieldwork, the document prompted my grandmother’s narrative of an oft recounted family crime story. It was only an anecdote, one that was relegated to family stories, until its reemergence during my fieldwork. The tale of Hoshy’s death by Salah and Taher, two young men from landowning families in the village, unfolded connections I was beginning to see between local governance practices, political mobilization, and state infrastructural projects. Towards the end of my fieldwork research in the village, I sat with my grandmother in the living room of our family house seeking refuge from the mid-July summer’s heat, listening to the sound of the ceiling fans squeaking above us. We passed the noon hours indoor watching television. I took the remote, muted the TV, pulled out my laptop and started going through some of the pictures of documents I had been collecting at the archives that referenced the village or the family. When I came across the document
mentioning Shehata El Kouny, I asked my grandmother about the oft alluded to tale of rural intrigue.

The story goes as follows: In the late 1950s, during Nasser’s presidency and the height of land redistribution from the estate landowning families in Egypt, Shehata El Kouny and Taher El Siwi, a member of the second-largest family in the village of Nebeira, conspired to kill Hoshy. Hoshy was going to inherit the assets, primarily the land of a recently deceased woman named Hagga Sekeena. Since she had no children, Hoshy was next in line and would inherit all her wealth. Hoshy, however, did not get a chance to indulge in the wealth as his life was prematurely cut short by Shehata.

My grandmother recounted: “His body was found floating on the surface of the canal. They [Shehata and Taher] were greedy over an elderly woman’s wealth, and wanted to steal her inheritance. We were living in never-ending sagas at the time. The police would come here [the Omdas house] every day and carry out their investigations, and we had people in the house all day talking and trying to solve the issue.”

My grandmother was the wife of two previous Omdas: my grandfather, and then his younger brother following my grandfather’s death. My grandmother, who is from a different village in the Beheira governorate, moved to Nebeira following her marriage to my grandfather in 1959. Her memory of the investigations taking place in the family house and the one I was sitting in as she was telling the story, was when my grandfather (her husband) was not yet Omda. Instead, his father, my great-grandfather was the Omda at the time.

It was not the first time I had heard this family-related crime story. It was one of a few crime stories in the village that our family was involved in and commonly referenced
over the years by members of the family. It would sometimes come up in fragments; at other times, it would be performed in storytelling events as I, along with the other kids in the family, listened excitedly to the mystery unfold through my uncle’s skillful narration. The crime stories’ narrativization also relegated the events to a past that has been moved beyond. These stories involved our family, since most of the village at the time came from the Kouny family (as I mentioned prior half of the village today is the Kouny family). In addition, the family was the line from which the village Omdas were chosen, and therefore, was where a lot of the dispute-solving took place. The family home was also the usual meeting space for the authorities when they visited the village.

The document I discovered was in the National Archives building, located on the banks of the Nile in the downtown neighborhood of Shubra, Cairo. The building is notorious for its impenetrability, as research permits are increasingly hard to get post-2013, and researchers experience heightened surveillance while conducting their work. (I will elaborate on the increased politics of access and heightened security over knowledge production in a later section of this chapter).

The archived file was titled “Grinding Mill of Shehata Mohamed El Kouny in Nebeira, Markaz Itai El-Barud in Beheira, the year 1904” and included twenty-three papers spanning from 1904 to 1915. The papers include specifications of the wheat grinding mill, a collection of maps detailing the site of the mill, a sketch of a boiler house, Ministry of Public Works reports, and Egyptian State Telegraphs messages sent by Shehata El Kouny to the Ministry of Public Works in Cairo. The stamps on the document were from the Ministry of Public Works during the British Protectorate of Egypt, and the telegraph correspondences between Cairo and the regional center of Itai El-Barud were in English,
indexing the colonial oversight of rural agricultural infrastructure projects. Agricultural infrastructures were not peripheral to governing interests.

The archived mill documents mentioning Shehata El Kouny had no connection to the case of the killing of Hagga Sekeena, in fact the mill documents were from several decades prior. The link between the homicide story recounted and the archival document I retrieved, however, was the figure of Shehata El Kouny. While the document in the archive was stuck in time, the retelling of family stories kept events alive. This created a dynamism to them, a bridge between the past and the present. The connection provides one vantage point through which we can tie together questions of infrastructure provisioning, wealth, power, and kinship through a landowning family that has also served as the Omda in rural Egypt.
The Shehata El Kouny’s mill documents were recorded when rural Egypt was mostly governed by the *Izba* estate agricultural colonies, created in the nineteenth century to facilitate capitalist cotton production for British mills (Mitchell 1988). Mitchell describes the Izba as a confluence of a market economy, private property, and modern administrative policies of surveillance in the countryside (2002: 70). Farmers were divested of land rights as the state increasingly consolidated property into private estates granted to a newly emerging landholding class (see Beinin & Lockman 1987). The patrilineal side of the Kounys originated from the city of Konya in Anatolia (hence the family name El Kouny, colloquially meaning “of the Kounys”). They arrived in Egypt during the Ottoman era, when Muhammad Ali Basha (or Mehmet Ali) established the *Omodeya*, or village chief system of rural governance in the early 1800s. Ezzeldin (2013) clarifies the family history: “The state endowed vast lands and high social privileges to the Turkish and Circassian army commanders and officers and based its new administrative policies west of the Delta in cooperation with those new elites who invested in real estate and agriculture”. Shehata El Kouny was part of the landowning and village ruling family headed by the Kouny family.

To bring us back to the historical subjects mentioned at the start of the story. The Kouny family’s dominance in the village created feuds with another majority-landowning family, the Siwis. Although in some instances, as reflected in the initial anecdote of this section, they formed alliances to protect their common interests, on the whole they viewed each other as enemies competing for wealth and power. Taher El Siwi was the man who contrived with Shehata to kill Hoshy over Hагга Sekeena’s wealth. Such family feuds reached their peak during the 1920s when the Kouny *Omda* at the time allegedly hired the
anticolonial patriot Adham Al-Sharqawy to kill Sheikh Hussein El Siwi. However, the feud between the families originated in the mid-1800s, when the Kounys, consisting of the village aristocratic class at the time, felt threatened by the rise of a competitor agricultural bourgeoisie represented by the Siwi family (Ezzedine 2013).

Today, however, such tensions between the Siwi and Kouny families only superficially linger on in the village, especially amongst the younger generation. A lot of intermarriages commonly take place between the two families in the village. One member of the family, however, refuses to forget, a grandson of the murdered Sheikh Hussein El Siwi. He has inherited and continues to express the trauma of Kouny Omda governance.

Coincidentally, during the period of my fieldwork, both my mother and I, months apart, met the grandson of Sheikh Hussein El Siwi, Adel El Siwi, who is a well-known visual artist based in Cairo. My mother met him at an art exhibition in Cairo. I met him while visiting Siwa, an oasis town bordering Libya seven hundred miles west of the Nile Delta. In both instances, when finding out we were Kounys, El Siwi responded: “ehna a’ daa” (we are enemies).

I met El Siwi, along with his wife, while having tea at a lodge in Siwa that I had been frequenting when I go to the Oasis town. The owner of the lodge introduced us and mentioned El Siwi was an artist and writer. Upon making the connection, I excitedly responded, “Oh, we are from the same village”. I recollected my mother’s reception from a few months earlier when I was faced with the same comment: “But we are enemies, you know?” he responded matter-of-factly. I jokingly responded: “Yes, but these things are of the past, our families have moved past those times.” I then recounted to him my knowledge of his grandfather’s murder by my family, following which their family fled the village and
relocated to Cairo. I thought it fitting we were discussing this in Siwa, given his family’s historical origins and family name, El Siwi. In fact, across the banks of the salt lake from where we were sitting for tea, he was building a new house, a home away from Cairo. I further attempted to appease El Siwi during our conversation of the murder of his grandfather by mentioning my friendship to a history graduate student at The Graduate Center in New York, who had extensively interviewed him when writing his master’s thesis on criminology in pre-1952 Egypt. My friend, Mohammed Said Ezzedine, had written about the family murder history in his dissertation. It was through Mohammed that I first came to know of the historic feuds between the two families. When we first met and through hearing my family name, he excitedly and triumphantly mentioned how he had attempted for several months to reach a member of the Kouny family. After describing his dissertation topic and its focus on the Egyptian anti-colonial figure, Adham Al-Sharqawi (who allegedly hid in our family home in in Nebeira in the 1920s), he eagerly requested contact information for a Kouny family member in Nebeira. Mohamed had been able to meet the Siwis but needed to interview a source from the Kouny family to bring his dissertation full circle. I gave him my uncle’s telephone number, and he was able to interview him a month later. By presenting my friendship to Mohamed, I was able to open the door to an ongoing connection with El Siwi, whose daughter is also a few years younger than me. My chance encounter with Siwi and the discussion that transpired between us contributed a layering of ethnographic encounters with village memory, reflecting the persisting effects of the historical feuds over land wealth and rural governance in a village context. They also portray the kind of political subjectivities that emerged out of these experiences. Adel El Siwi’s nuclear family, specifically his father and grandfather, Sheikh
Hussein El Siwi, suffered death and forced departure from Nebeira. Adel El-Siwi viewed his family’s history in relation to the Kouny family as victims of these rural feuds, despite also emerging from the landowning elite in the village; it is a feud that is personal and very raw. At the end of my encounter with El Siwi, he mentioned that my mother, an aspiring painter, approached him at his art exhibition in Cairo and asked if he offered workshops that she could take. He informed her that he did not offer any courses. He told me, however, to inform my mother to get back in touch with him and that he would be willing to find a way to work with her. I sensed from his offer that he had dismissively rejected her request at the time she asked, and that in retrospect, he felt that he should reassess. My amicable conversation could have been a reason for his reassessment, or it could have been my acknowledgment of his family’s past, through my mentioning of Mohammed’s research.

I have learned to connect rural governance, political subjectivities, and state infrastructural projects through the method of patching together family narratives with the archival document and complementary stories. I can contextualize the state documents through ongoing evocations of the story concerning political-economic action in the killing of Hoshy by Shehata El Kouny and Taher El Siwi for Hagga Sekeena’s wealth. I experienced the multiple convergences of time in coming across a document at the Egyptian National Archives from 1904-1915 mentioning a family member who I had previously heard about from a story retold by my grandmother and uncle since I was a child. I then later reassessed the document to examine the history of land ownership and political power in a village context.

Both feuding families, the Kounys and the Siwis, ironically saw themselves as victims of Nasser’s land reform policies, feeling threatened by his regime’s political
reforms. Nasser’s reforms brought an end to the Izba or estate agricultural colonies, and redistributed land ownership to the *fellahin*, landless peasant farmers. The policy was nevertheless officially reversed four decades later under the presidency of Hosni Mubarak in 1992, although debates about its reversal started under the preceding president, Anwar El-Sadat as part of his political and economic liberalization policies, the “Open Door”. The reversal of the land reform policies and an initiation of counter land-reform agricultural policies meant that post-1952 small-holder farmers would now be stripped of their land title claims and forced to pay market prices for the land’s tenure, (as discussed more in depth in chapter two).

How do archival documents, recording what may seem like a banal account of the building of a wheat grinding mill, a rural colonial state infrastructure, bring life to a family story and afford new connections? How can cross readings of personal histories and arcane archival material illuminate substantial political transformations in the ethnographic present? How do memories emerge in these encounters, and take on new meanings? This dissertation is an attempt to weave together personal memory, archival research, ethnographic research, and oral history narratives. The multiple sources situated in different time periods can provide a path to navigate these experiences for an analysis in the present.

This method lays bare the multiple temporalities living in the various sources, stories, and affects associated with them (Stoler 2010). To echo Rinehart Koselleck’s notion of “multiple temporalities”, it can bring stories to life and therefore provide new readings and connections to them in a way that reflects how the present is a constellation of the past and the present together (Jordheim 2012).
It is essential to start with the grinding mill as the object of the archival documents. As I assessed the reports in more depth to try and understand why such a banal document would generate so much correspondence and be stored in the national archives, my ethnographic encounters of state infrastructure neglect in the present began to give these historical papers new significance. The wheat mill is essentially a capitalist agricultural infrastructure. Owners of a mill were usually the powerful agricultural elite in a village and the mill would be constructed on their property. This was corroborated by one of the maps I found in the archival files. The mill’s motor was also commonly used for water distribution from the canals built to facilitate capitalist export commodities such as cotton and wheat (Hopkins 2018[1987]: 86). Ownership of a mill facilitated ownership over both agricultural production of wheat, a staple of Egyptians diet, and water as a resource.

Grinding mills were an essential icon in Egyptian anticolonial imaginaries after independence. In popular culture, mills served as a key object and symbol of peasant resistance to foreign capitalist production and British protectorate control over Egypt (1882-1914), as reflected in the stamps on the archival document by British officials. The British stamps on the documents illustrate the capitalist control of Egypt during the period when mills became iconic symbols of capitalist infrastructural development, and just as centrally, fellahin’s resistance. Mills were also a key object and symbol of local agricultural elite, as represented through the figure of Shehata El-Kouny, the mill owner. The wheat mill factors in depictions of feudal estate capitalism and fellahin resistance in numerous cultural productions of the 1960s. Some of these productions include the play Waboor al-Taheen (The Grinding Mill) performed in 1966 (starring Magda Al-Khatib) around a village’s resistance to the feudal system. It also factors in El Zoga El-Tanya (The Second
Wife) directed by Salah Abu Seif in 1967 (starring Souad Hosni) that revolves around the struggles between the village Omda and Hosni’s husband played by Shukry Sarhan, who works in the Omda’s mill. Another short story, Hadethat al-Waboor, (The Mill Accident), recounts a killing that happens in the chamber of the mill.

According to popular belief in several Egyptian villages, one of the sites where ‘afarit (spirits) tended to reside was grinding mills. On Barak (2013) writes about the introduction of technology and timekeeping in colonial Egypt and the presence of spirits emerging around these technologies such as trains. Barak cites one of the first female anthropologists, Winifred Susan Blackman, who described peasant beliefs about these infrastructures and their connection to unseen forces in her writing “The Fellahin of Upper Egypt” (1927 in Barak 2013: 100).

Within a year [of an engine’s installment] three people were killed by the irrigation machinery belonging to the ‘omdeh [omda] of the village…This ‘omdeh [omda] had made no sacrifice before using the engine, so a number of the villagers went to him and demanded that he should kill an ox on the spot. This he did…and some of the blood of the animal was sprinkled on the engine. Apparently, this has appeased the ‘afarit [spirits], for I have heard of no accidents since the sacrifice was made.

The steam-engines of hydraulic pumps in wells or agricultural machines were potentially haunted apparatuses. The hauntings that circulated colonial technological infrastructures like the mill is critical to assess in considering how farmers related to their landowners and experienced infrastructural developments in their villages. Anthropologists have extensively documented the role of spirit possession in connection to colonial encounters and modernity as experienced through the fast-paced changes in their societies (Kramer 1987[1993]; Colson 1969; Taussig 1980; Rouche 1955). Mills in Egypt were owned by an agricultural elite, supported and sometimes provided by the
British, ensuring crop production of wheat for the landed gentry as well as, for capitalist colonial output. In pre-1952 Revolution and its subsequent social and land reforms, small-scale landless farmers worked these mills and produced wheat as an agricultural output during a time when their labor was exploited on agricultural izba estates. Their resistance to, and fear of the mill as an agricultural infrastructure in the colonial era, through their engagement with working on the mill, helped shape their exploited political subjectivities.

The archival record of the mill owned by Shehata El Kouny proves central in bringing full circle the ethnographic valence of family history and the multiple temporalities of archival records. I came to recognize many forms of infrastructure as key to rural citizen political subjectivity through one village’s social infrastructure, the Omodeya, which has socially persisted through Ottoman, British, feudal monarchy, post-independence, and contemporaneous governance via many means, including violent ones.

Why Infrastructure?

Tahseen’s movement of administrative independence emerged from how the villagers made sense of their everyday lived and tactile experience with infrastructure, its breakdown, or its complete absence. It is from this point of departure, the centrality of infrastructure in organizing and facilitating life, that I developed the overarching framework for this dissertation. I probe the role of infrastructure in the way a rural Egyptian village chooses to hold the government accountable to one of its roles, service provision. I use the theme of infrastructure, emerging from grounded theory (Bernard 2011), to address how political claims, like an “independence” claim, is enacted, contested, and mediated through physical infrastructures like a road, a mosque, and a school. I later also realized
how central a role social infrastructure of *wasta* connection-building, political organizing, and the *Omodeya* factored into the production of political subjectivities.

For citizens in peripheral centers of control, infrastructure becomes the central platform through which they air their concerns and put pressure on the government. Residents of Tahseen, who were literally disconnected by the absence of a paved road, voiced their main experience with the state through infrastructural failures. As a result, a central node of contention through which marginal citizens, such as those living in rural communities today, choose to hold the state accountable is through infrastructure. In Nebeira, contrastingly, state control is avoided and its failures addressed through the built infrastructures of informal residential buildings and the social network of the *Omda* and director of the agricultural cooperative (as I will explain in chapter two). As recounted in a 2012 article by anthropologist Reem Saad in Egypt’s daily Al-Shorouk Arabic newspaper, villagers cut train tracks because it was a way to get the attention of people in the urban centers of control. Similarly, in Tahseen, negotiations over the asphalting of a road became one of the main demands of the movement leaders to get central government attention. Contentions over the road will be one of the central examples I discuss in chapter three.

Infrastructure is one of the most visible ways in which states enact policies. Notably, President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi continues to pronounce his major political projects through infrastructure, as will be elaborated in chapter five. The rhetoric of *ingazat* (accomplishments) that became so dominant and foregrounded in the political discourse and President Sisi’s official speeches referred to mega-project constructions like the New Suez Canal Corridor in 2014, the New Cairo Capital in 2015, and the widest
suspension bridge in the world in 2019. The *fellahin* in the villages saw these major urban and national infrastructural announcements as hollow rhetoric seeking to cover the massive infrastructural neglect ongoing in the rural areas.

**Theoretical Interventions & Chapter Summaries**

Infrastructure in my project functions as a medium through which politics are produced, enacted, and contested (Larkin 2018). It becomes a way through which the state produces itself and enacts its presence with the building of roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals. Yet state enactment through infrastructure is also a way that reveals the superficial claims of the state through the building of “hollow” infrastructures. These are infrastructures that do not function as they should and merely stand in as representational objects, such as a partial asphalting of a road, or painting over a cracked school wall in Tahseen. Citizens, therefore, call for a real base structure and not a scaffolding or a veneer of political prowess. Thus, while the state in Egypt attempts to reproduce itself and flaunt its accomplishments through infrastructural provisions, it can also easily be unmade through its lack of maintenance or absence of such infrastructure. The state’s construction of an infrastructural veneer—such as the widest bridge in the world or the new Suez Canal Corridor—is an example. By challenging the state through infrastructure, citizens are, in effect, questioning the state’s legitimacy as a governing authority. They enact their citizenship and claim their belonging through contestations over infrastructure. In the case of Tahseen, their independence launch became materialized in their building of the lacking infrastructural services not provided or maintained by the state. While infrastructure mediates and facilitates movements, it is also the avenue through which new forms of subjectivity emerge. The infrastructure projects they provided, like the school, partial road,
mosque, and the medical unit, also stood as a physical archive to the movement that post-2013, had no urban environment for continuity. With the closing up of the short-lived political opportunity and with a more muscular security clampdown in place after their movement’s launch, the infrastructural projects they built stood in as a living archive to their movement.

Infrastructure serves multiple functions, as will be reflected in the different chapters in this dissertation. Infrastructure can serve as a representation of state power (chapter five), as embodied national and rural history (chapter one), as an archive of a grassroots movement (chapter three), to facilitate change and offer opportunities for social mobility (chapter three), a way to make territorial claims over space (chapter two), and as a way to build alternative modes of living and needed services (chapter four). Yet Nebeira and Tahseen’s political incentives are dictated by their relation and interaction with the material-built environment and the way that policies materialized or were left as ruins.

Why was infrastructure critical in this context? Because at a time when public discourse, rights, and the political sphere are almost non-existent for grassroots representation, citizens lay claim to that space through the presence of infrastructure. Importantly, this action in rural communities makes them compare themselves to their antithesis, the urban cities. The lack of infrastructural provision and their position as one step behind the developments afforded to urban centers—as well as their transnational mobility in search of work opportunities—is nevertheless rooted in their keenness to develop their own community. In a sense, rural citizens are living in a perpetual liminal state when it comes to infrastructure provision. They pay their dues to the state, but they experience a process of endless waiting. Many have no choice but to depend on themselves,
and those who can rely on themselves financially, take matters into their own hands. In a way, they have been able to achieve more than the urban uprisings of 2011.

To summarize, people’s everyday interactions and engagements with the state and their understanding of their place as citizens emerges from an affective-material and sensorial experience of infrastructure. Infrastructure becomes the medium through which rural citizens experience the state and choose to demand their rights. In Nebeira, citizens embodied and transformed a post-colonial system through the reuse of train tracks. The cases of Tahseen and Nebeira are examples of citizens’ engagements with infrastructure as the medium through which politics are mediated, enacted, and contested both on the part of the state and on the part of citizens.

The anthropological approach to infrastructure looks at the relational process between the physical and social realms (Star 1999). By breaking with this dualism, one can come to understand how social relations are constructed and how they play out infrastructurally (Latour 2005, Miller 2005, Bennett 2010). Anthropologists have relationally addressed the affective resonances of objects, their circulation, and their embodiment, especially in the case of nation-state production and its everyday practices of governance, control, and legitimacy (Navaro-Yashin 2002, Abu El-Haj 2001, Hull 2012). Anthropology not only looks at objects and their circulation, but addresses the varied ways in which infrastructure translates into the subject-centered world of sociality, allowing for collectivities to manage and facilitate their everyday lives (Elyachar 2010, Elyachar 2011, Calhoun et al. 2013, 2004; Malinowski 1936[1923]; Kleinman 2014; Abel 2020; Newman 2020; Gaudio 2020). For example, writing about the healthcare system as central to Iraq’s state-building, Dewachi (2017) investigates how Iraqi doctors were an essential social
infrastructure to the building of Iraq, in addition to how the breakdown of governance in Iraq was largely experienced in the exodus of the country’s doctors. My dissertation addresses the literature on infrastructure by more finely linking physical and social infrastructures through a focus on how infrastructural construction and expertise relates to rural political claim-making and belonging. Chapter four, *Wasta: The Communicative Infrastructure of Social Action in Rural Egypt*, makes a claim for attending to the social infrastructures citizens use to achieve the needed material services in the absence of the state’s provision. I theorize *wasta*, the mobilization of mediators to get access to resources or solve problems, as a social infrastructure that is complementary to the physical infrastructures presented in previous chapters. Communicative sociality, therefore, functions not only as an avenue through which people can impart information but also as a way through which they can gain tangible outcomes. It also illustrates the ways that material histories have shaped the privileged modes of communicative sociality in each village.

Recent studies have pushed for an understanding of the state that emerges through a set of relations and interactions as opposed to an a-priori existing entity (Mitchell 2006; Sharma & Gupta 2006). “State effects” (Mitchell 1991, 2006) occur not only in state institutions but also span out into material infrastructures (Mitchell 2002). This illuminates how infrastructure serves as the site through which the state and the citizenry enact and conceive of their mutual responsibilities (Larkin 2008). In Tahseen and Nebeira, despite their knowledge that a current neo-liberal state no longer expects to provide the needed infrastructural services, they continue to press for state recognition of infrastructural rights. Infrastructure is therefore bound up with larger political meanings (von Schnitzler 2013)
to the provision, or lack thereof, of essential services and access to them (Anand 2011: 2006). Infrastructural governance is also a way in which populations in the Arab world are organized and sectarian politics produced (Nucho 2016: 5). In the absence of a functioning sovereign state, a “phantom state” such as the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, the absence of a waste management system and inundation of waste matter, is an overbearing sensorial reminder of the political reality of the lack of sovereignty the West Bank community experiences (Stamatopulou-Robbins: 2020). Egyptian rural citizens experience state and governance as materially refracted in their everyday interactions with, and the production of infrastructure. These infrastructural refractions are also based on the politically affective uptake of historically informed materializations. In chapter two, *The Shifting Social Value of Land in the Nile Delta*, I investigate contestations over land ownership, specifically addressing the infrastructural potentialities of land use and its shifting social value inter-generationally. I examine conflicts over land designated by the state as agricultural but locally used to the ease the housing shortage through domicile construction instead. To understand how infrastructural potentialities tie to political subjectivity in rural Egypt, this chapter provides a historical analysis, through primary and secondary sources, of land reform and counter-reform in Egypt.

I build on work on anthropological scholarship of roads and bridges as quintessential infrastructures that embody specific ideas of modernity, progress, connectivity, and mobility (Dalakoglou & Harvey 2012, Roseman 1996, Moran 2009, Masquelier 2002). Others specifically address how roads become a means through which space is controlled and territoriality extended (Snead et. al 2009, Kernaghan 2012). Yet, just as roads become a means for connectivity on the part of citizens, and a means for
access on the part of the state; the absence or breakdown of a functioning road, proves just as central in analyzing politics (Virilio & Bratton 2006). I explore in Chapter three, *Infrastructures of Mobility: Migration and Socio-Political Mobilization in the Nile Delta*, how the road in Tahseen serves as a metaphorical and material site central to narrative and memory constructions (Roseman 1996) of political mobilization. In cases where connective infrastructures like bridges are built, they could instead exacerbate existing separations and create new divisions in a socially fragmented society (Ghassem-Fachandi 2012: 228). My dissertation builds on the above literature by exploring the functionality of infrastructure and what that reflects about their metaphorical and material effect.

The anthropology of structural violence shows how inequality is produced through state neglect, abandonment and inaction (Farmer 2004, Schepfer-Hughes 1993, Goldstein 2004). Neglect, inaction, or abandonment can be manifested through infrastructure (Rodgers & O’Neill 2012). The repercussions of neglect in the form of accidents, immobility, and marginality, speak to the setbacks of modernity and its violence emerging from failed development projects (Khan 2006, Stewart & Strathern 1999, Menoret 2014, Lamont 2012). Scholarship on ruins and ruination brings together infrastructure and violence closely, especially by taking into account the historical trajectory and responsibility for the process of ruination (Stoler 2013). Ruination and its product, rubble, becomes a living presence of past destruction that lingers on into the present (Gordillo 2014). Ruins also generate specific affective reactions and mean different things to those who live in their presence (Navaro-Yashin 2012, Gordillo 2014). Laying bare these processes and the infrastructural violence that usually appear as natural and invisible, calls for responsibility on the part of actors, institutions, and specific persons (Ferguson 2012).
In chapters three and four specifically, I build on the literature on ruination and rubble to consider how rural villages reimagine these sites and structures of ruination and reuse them to generatively shift the violence of neglect into productive materializations, such as in Tahseen, in the forms of a mosque, school, and a road. Or similarly in Nebeira, with the rebuilding of their homes with old train tracks in an effort to modernize their homes and recasting agriculturally zoned land as private housing.

Through their engagement with material infrastructures, their failures, and their absence, citizens are interpellated into becoming political subjects. Citizens conceive of their place in the world and their status in relation to other citizens through a comparative process of place-making, through the presence and absence of infrastructure. Examples of such presence and absence as experienced by my two field sites involves the provisions of services under a welfare-state and their removal under a neo-liberal system of state-divestment from public services. Or through villagers’ outmigration from their villages and the realization of a different reality elsewhere, through the access to mobility that a road affords. Citizens, therefore, come to understand themselves as beings only in comparison to others (Hegel 1807[1977]). In citizens’ experience of a lack of a road and its provision to a neighboring village, a historical presence of a school and its current decay, or the opportunities afforded to them through outmigration and the understanding of their difference to others upon return, they conceive of how they are seen in the eyes of the state.

The process of becoming political subjects is a process of interpellation, uptake, response, and engagement. Through a community’s demand of infrastructural services and expectation from the state, they become political subjects. In the process of their demand-claiming from the state, they call on the state’s action and its role of service-provision.
However, their demand-claiming, engagement, and response by citizens, is an embodied process of political action, primarily based on intention and affect (Kunreuther 2018). Moving beyond the notion of liberal protest of rights claiming, Kunreuther (2018) presents how wailing, pots banging, and silence are just as importantly, a communitarian and embodied form of protest. Moreover, Cody (2016: 184) pushes us to consider how interpellation should also be viewed through the lens of “interactional reciprocity” beyond citizens and the state, and towards kin and communitarian obligation, to assess how political action emerges. In Nebeira, interactional politics, through the \textit{wasta} and in Tahseen, communitarian sentiment through embodied political claims shaped their emerging political subjectivities.

Political subjectification has a double face, it “grants people or groups positions to claim rights but at the same time, it forces them to accept being subjected to the rules and governing practices of those authorities they address” (Krause & Schramm 2011: 131). Political subjects do not have to be viewed within the framework of official politics, being engaged in a formal political process such as participation in political parties or voting. Samaddar (2010) conceives of a political subject as an actor that engages in politics out of necessity without being part of formal institutional politics, but that operates within its framework. Yet, it is precisely through conflict and struggle that subjectivities are politically molded (Crpanzano 2011). As I presented in this chapter, Tahseen’s political actors were political before the launch of their movement in 2012; it is not necessarily through creating a movement of “administrative independence” that their politicization emerged. In effect, their political subjectification started with the village’s creation in the 1950s. In Nebeira, the villagers’ political identities developed as they embodied and
enacted a history of land reform and counter-reform, navigating life in rural setting through claims to land and competing forms of governance.

This dissertation is also a move to re-center the rural experience to representations of contemporary Egyptian society. More recently, scholars have neglected to consider how rural communities, which make up more than half of Egypt’s population, contributed to the January 25 Revolution (Schielke 2015; El Nour 2015; Abu-Lughod 2012; Deeb & Winegar 2012: 539). Moving away from urban public discourse within the larger context of the January 25 Revolution, I historicize mobilization processes in two Egyptian villages within larger narratives of state infrastructure failures. My research decentralizes urban contexts as sites of contemporary mobilization processes, both spatially and ideologically. I do so for example via Tahseen’s community members and their struggle to define and shape belonging through infrastructure projects previously under the domain of the state and in Nebeira ’s ability to tap into alternative infrastructures though wasṭa, or interpersonal mediation. In the scholarship on recent spectacular political moments, there has been a dearth of knowledge produced on the role of rural communities (Mampilly 2013), despite Eric Wolf’s insights on the importance of rural actions to revolutions (1969). Specifically, rural-urban interdependence has been significantly understudied in contemporary anthropological approaches to revolutionary moments. Throughout all of the chapters, my project therefore decenters contemporary anthropological emphasis on urban revolutionary contexts. It does so by investigating the ways in which the experiences and tactics of political dissent and mobilization were generated outside of city centers and reverberate in relation to possibilities for ongoing mobilization.
Scholars of social movements and collective action have assessed the process of mobilization of protesting actors against the ruling state or market (Bayat 2010; Castells 2012; Clark 2004; Tilly 2006). While this scholarship provides essential insights into political organizing and tactics for political contention, such trends have assumed a material-discursive divide in the analysis of political mobilization. Much less has been said about how infrastructure facilitates and produces political mobilization, with most scholarship centered on infrastructure’s urbanism and global interconnections (Coleman 2014). This, in effect, limits the scope for understanding the way political subjectivities can emerge from material-affective relations. The term “infrastructure” in my project denotes the relational process between the material world (roads, buildings, funding networks), and the immaterial world of experience (communicative practices, social networks) (Elyachar 2010, Simone 2004; Kleinman 2014). In Tahseen and Nebeira, these relations have precipitated a novel sense of political subjectivities in relation to state failures. In this dissertation I will show how such movements translate beyond the social and discursive spheres, since little attention has been paid to the ways in which “speech acts” (Austin 2009[1962])—such as the claim to “independence” from the state—translates into the building of mosques, schools, and roads, as reflected in chapter three.

In short, merging the themes of materiality, state and politics, structural violence and ruination, and political subjectivity in a rural Egyptian context, my project addresses how political mobilization can be generated through infrastructure and how emerging political subjectivities are formulated in that process. It further displays the generativity of violence, becoming the base on which new political structures can be built and used for claims to belonging and rights-claims. Merging these fields on the ground in Tahseen and
Nebeira contributes to our understanding of how this process relies on citizens-subjects’ refracted material conceptions of contemporary state, which carries echoes from the 1950s socialist regime that is central to rural Egypt’s history and present-day construction. I additionally portray how these historical ruins are a source of continuity into the contemporary moment as I do in the concluding chapter, *Shifting Terrain: The Militarization of Social and Material Life in Egypt*. In chapter five, I reflect on post-2013 increasing militarization of public space in the built environment, as also experienced through everyday social life under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi’s regime.

**Fieldwork Methodologies**

I started my official fieldwork in Tahseen for a month in 2014, followed by two months in 2015. In the fall of 2016, I again spent two months in the village, expecting this to be the start of my official fieldwork year, but it got cut short: I had to leave Tahseen as my primary research site. My connection to Tahseen, however, started in 2012, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, when I went as a journalist to cover the village’s launch of “administrative independence.” My engagements with Tahseen, therefore, preceded my time as a researcher. But my shift from being a journalist to then returning as a researcher created confusion amongst many of the community’s members who were unsure as to why I was still so interested in returning to ask them questions and document their experiences. Many in the village saw that my role as a journalist did not differ much from how they first got to know me. I was still holding a notebook, carrying a camera, and using a voice recorder. Many in Tahseen, even those I had been clear with about my new role, continued to be confused about my positionality.
I was commonly referred to in the community as the journalist, even when I continued to return as a researcher and introduced myself that way. For many in my field site, the role of the researcher remains very blurry and unfamiliar. The two functions that are usually associated with someone of my profile (a young, urban-based female Egyptian) is either journalist, NGO, or charity worker. Explaining my role as an anthropologist and needing a prolonged period, at least a year to conduct fieldwork, was also confusing. Firstly, while evolutionary or archeological anthropology is somewhat more commonly understood, cultural anthropology was not a discipline commonly heard-of. Instead, the closest association people would be familiar with was that anthropology is a lot like elm igtimaa’ (sociology) but that it was different in the kinds of questions we are interested in and the kind of extended research I was conducting. I explained that my research was primarily interested in a long-term engagement and in understanding questions of the community’s history and everyday struggles.

Several researchers in Egypt also noted to me the importance of presenting oneself as doing a study (derasa) as opposed to doing research (bahth), which sounded more like an investigation and something connoting a security mindset. Other limitations to building rapport in Tahseen and Nebeira also had to do with my status as a young single woman and therefore limited from a lot of male-only spaces in a rural setting. These limitations eventually became more flexible, and I was able to be in these spaces differently. In Nebeira, my ability to attend some of the village council meetings had to do with my uncle’s approval to interview and observe in his place of work. In Tahseen, the fact that I was not from the village meant that there was more leniency in allowing me to be in these spaces. I did face numerous questions by the women in the village out of genuine curiosity.
They questioned how I lived abroad on my own, if it was with my parents’ approval, etc. Upon my return to the village for the third time in 2015, I was sitting one day after sunset with Hagg Salem, one of the village elders in his seventies, whose family I had come to spend most of my time and whose daughter-in-law and her three daughters I had become most acquainted with. I was accustomed to joining them in their home, watching television, and drinking tea, while the men smoke their shisha. It was an extra-hot July day, and the mosquitos were extra vicious. As I was battling the mosquitos and trying to slap one after the other on my body, he looked at me and embarrassingly questioned, “Why do you put yourself in such a situation? Why do you come here to this difficult place? Is it worth coming all this way, getting on this road, sitting in such heat, and getting bit by mosquitoes? Why would you go through all the trouble?”. I was put on the spot and it took me a minute to garner a convincing response where I mentioned the people and the history of the village has fascinated me since I first came in 2012, and it was the friendships that I developed with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren that kept Tahseen a warm place for me. He did not seem satisfied by my response, however diverting his gaze away from me to the television screen. When I returned a year later in 2016, Hagg Salem had passed away. This was a common experience during my fieldwork. Due to the prolonged nature of conducting fieldwork and coming in and out of our fieldwork sites repeatedly over the years, deaths were ordinary. Throughout the years of my fieldwork, it was common to find several people dying. As much as there new births, there were also several deaths, especially with those who I continue to listen to their voice recordings until now. Despite their passing, their voice and my memory of them continues to remain with me until this moment. After the passing of Rached, very charismatic and joyful and small-scale farmer in his late
seventies who I was used to frequenting with Gameela during evenings in his home where he retold poetry and songs, Gameela had mentioned to me that his family wanted to have some of the recordings of the songs he sung and I had recorded. My recordings have also been a way to keep the memory alive for their families.

My relationship with my second field site, Nebeira, went further back than that of Tahseen and also preceded my transition into a researcher. As mentioned, Nebeira is my family village in which both my mother and father were born. It has been a place that I consistently returned to, despite my transnational upbringing living between Tanzania, Kenya, Austria, Palestine-Israel, and Colombia. Nebeira was my only stable home, as it was the main space for family gatherings, Eid celebrations, weekend getaways, or usual visits to my grandmother and uncle who continue to reside there. It is also where my mother was born and spent the first fifteen years of her life. In 2016, my relationship to the village shifted from being a family member on her usual visit to the village to that of researcher. My shifting role meant that I was now expanding into new networks of people to talk to, which many times ruffled feathers. I was also regularly visiting places in the village I had not been used to visiting before, such as the village agricultural cooperative and the village administrative council. Conducting fieldwork close to “home” made this an intimate ethnography, blurring research with family history.
In both Tahseen and Nebeira, my research consisted of conducting ethnographic fieldwork and engagement in the communities. My research spanned three years in Tahseen and two years in Nebeira. During my time in Tahseen, a family hosted me, with whom I spent most of my time. I lived with them, cooked with the women, assisted in doing children’s homework, accompanied them at least once a day to the fields where they were cultivating crops. I joke with friends and colleagues that a large part of my fieldwork was literal field work.

I also commuted with some of them out of the village members to their places of work, which was an essential part of doing fieldwork. Finding transportation in and out of
Tahseen was not an easy task. To reach Tahseen the commute would take approximately half an hour from the main road path leading to the town center. When trying to catch any form of transportation like a microbus or a tuk tuk to the village, it was challenging finding someone to agree to take me there. “Di balad ma’too’a” (it’s a cut-off village), was a common reaction I would receive when trying to find a way to get to Tahseen. Many drivers would refuse to go because the way back was seen as uneconomical, and many times, my way of securing a ride included having to guarantee a return price for the tuk tuk driver I would convince to take me to the village. The route was a half-hour bumpy dirt path, surrounded by fields on both sides, with a canal running in between the road and the fields. While the first half of the path from the regional town road to Tahseen was inhabited with multiple homes from the surrounding four villages, and some cars and donkey carts commuting on the path, the second half of the road tended to feel a lot more deserted and much more empty space, until reaching Tahseen. Tahseen would appear like an oasis at the end of the path, after a few isolated minutes. It was also the last village in the governorate of al-Daqahliya, bordering al-Sharqeya. In fact, for many of the villagers, commuting from al-Sharqiya was sometimes closer than getting to al-Daqahliya’s Mansoura city or Dekernes city. During my fieldwork in Tahseen, due to the road’s centrality in the villager’s lives and imaginations, I critically approached the road sensorially, metaphorically, and theoretically.

I also attended meetings of the village committee for the planning of infrastructural projects, allocation of village funds, and dispute-settling meetings, when I was allowed to participate. I conducted oral history interviews, especially with the generation of farmers who first moved to the village, whose memories and reflections over their life-history was
an important process for not only gaining a lived historical account of the village members, but it also allowed me and them, through our conversation, to understand their current place in the village. In Nebeira, the methods used were also similar, conducting semi-structured and unstructured interviews with several people in the village, hanging out with people in their places of work such as the kiosks and pharmacies. I also spent time in the cultivation fields at least once a day. I conducted participant-observation in the agricultural cooperative, the village council, the regional center, and the municipal administrative center. I followed the chain of command, from the agricultural cooperative to the village administrative center, to the regional administrative center, the municipal town center, and the Damanhour Governorate Council. Another regular and a central fieldwork space in Nebeira was the four-trees meeting space (mentioned in chapter four), which was the Omda’s daily meeting spot for negotiating agreements, solving disputes, and resolving grievances.

Agricultural cooperative, Nebeira, al-Beheira, December 2016. Photo: Nada El-Kouny
In conjunction with my ethnographic fieldwork, I also conducted four months of archival research. In Cairo, I researched at the Egyptian National Archives, the agricultural ministry library archives, and the agriculture museum archives where I collected documents on agrarian development, British-era, and Egyptian national state agricultural and infrastructural development between the 1940s to the 1960s.

As much as the fieldwork relationship can be an extractive relationship, it is also one of reciprocity. I believe that my warm welcome back to Tahseen as a researcher was largely because members of the community saw my support as a journalist previously to their movement, and my continued interest in them—despite that also being a source of suspicion amongst skeptics in the village. There were, however, examples where my attempts at reciprocity were literally rejected and reflected my shortcomings. In one telling instance, I returned a photo to my friend in Tahseen, Aya, who I had accompanied to the fields one day. As we were sitting in the fields, she took my camera and snapped a few pictures of me. She humorously put on the hat I was wearing and allowed me to take pictures of her. Her cheeks were reddened from the hot day, going well with the red color of the hat. The sun was shining, and I thought her picture was photogenic and would be a good reminder of the enjoyable time we spent together, I decided upon my next return to give her the photo and hoped she would appreciate the gesture. To my surprise, she reacted quite the opposite. She was angry, immediately tore up the picture, and expressed that it was “horrible”. In response, I then got offended that my intention was misunderstood. When we talked after the both of us had had some distance from that tense moment two days later, Aya apologized to me for reacting in the way she did and did not want to make me feel sad. She then told me that the picture that I thought was genuine and flattering was
indeed one that she thought was far from that. She told me that a good picture of her would be her getting dressed up, putting on makeup, and looking presentable for the photo. My gaze and my shooting of the camera was problematic and not indicative of the way she wanted me to portray her.

Similar instances of mismatched intentions occurred, but I learned valuable lessons about representing the villagers. I had taken a candid photo shot of Hagga Nadra’s grandchildren in their grandmother's room, sitting in an old wooden closet. When I gave the pictures to the children on my next return, their mother asked me why I had taken a picture of the children in the closet. She felt it was an unappealing way to portray their home. Following these two incidents, I became more conscious of who I was photographing and in what way I was depicting them. I tried to productively use these moments of tension to reflect on my positionality, and my obligations to represent the people I was among.

**Fieldwork Surveillance and My Place in the Field**

My research trajectory and development in both fieldwork sites was indicative of Egypt’s political shifts in the past seven years. Egypt experienced a period of political opening and then a complete closing between 2011 to today. My fieldwork mirrored this, shifting from mostly open to domesticated observations and interviews, taking place in closed spaces as opposed to the street. Following the removal of Hosni Mubarak after the 2011 revolutionary moment, a transitional government came into effect, there was a period of unprecedented political opening. There were strikes and protests, with weekly million-man marches led by different sectors of society each calling for their own demands. This was also a period when journalists, such as my newly minted university graduate self, could
for the most part cover events in public openly. I stopped writing for news outlets in 2013, a month before the coup that brought current president and former military general Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to power. I did so to start my doctoral studies, but under President Sisi research freedom and citizen surveillance returned. While research freedom and state surveillance has increasingly been controlled since 2013 in Egypt, it is not a new phenomenon. At the same time that Nasser spearheaded social justice reforms, his regime also detained a large number of dissidents, including a large majority of leftist activists (Brown in Odeh et. al 2004: 127-143). Media and research were largely securitized, allowing mainly government-sponsored researched.

The surveillance began for me in the start of the second month of my dissertation research, in October 2016. I was in Cairo, Egypt, for a temporary weekend away where I had just commenced my official dissertation fieldwork year. As was the usual practice of checking in before returning to the village, I called my hosts to confirm my return and approximate arrival time. I received no answer and continued to wait a few days with no response. I became very worried after about a week of my calls not being returned. By the start of the second week, I called another one of my primary interlocutors in the village, the lawyer, Haleem who had been central to the 2012 civil disobedience movement. He commonly took up the role of the spokesperson for the village to journalists and human rights organizations, especially since the village had resisted government-appointed representation such as a village Omada. He eventually answered my call and confirmed my worst fears.

The lawyer informed me that my host had been pulled in for questioning by the regional police. The first subject of interrogation was his outspoken political dissidence
expressed on social media platforms, mainly Facebook. The second subject of his investigation regarded his following of Salafi Islam and his affiliations to “religious extremism” in the post-2013 moment. The third subject of interrogation was his hosting of a "foreign researcher" who had been returning to the village over the years and "whose presence in the village should be approached with more skepticism". The investigators were planning to take me in for questioning as well, but I had traveled to Cairo a day before. In the interrogation, Marwan was reprimanded by the regional town center's police investigators over his naivety of taking in a foreign-affiliated researcher whose intentions were suspect. The police interrogators warned him that I should not return to the village for the sake of his safety and mine, and added that if I did, I might face the same fate as the "other foreign researcher." The interrogator referenced the ongoing tragedy of Guilio Regeni, the Italian Cambridge University PhD student, who was conducting fieldwork on independent trade unions in Cairo a year prior. Regeni was tortured and killed by the Egyptian police after disappearing on the fifth anniversary of the January 25 Revolution, in 2016. After a week-long disappearance, he was found on the outskirts of Cairo near a desert highway, bearing gruesome torture marks on his body. Ironically, but not unsurprisingly, to this day the Egyptian Security forces officially continue to deny their responsibility for Regeni’s killing. They have produced a series of trumped-up charges against several other perpetrators, including four men who were accused of impersonating police officers, allegedly responsible for his murder, and killed in March 2016. And yet this threat against me was an implicit acknowledgment of the security forces' responsibility for the killings.
Luckily, Marwan was let go after this interrogation, something he had experienced multiple times in his life. He temporarily remained out of the village, in Cairo, to alleviate any follow-up threats. While Marwan came out of this situation safe, this incident brought out the seriousness and responsibility of my role as a researcher. It brings to light the entanglements that emerge from ethnographic research. As much as long-term ethnographic research, long-term engagements, recurrent returns, and extended interest in a community as an outsider may be productive in truly understanding a community and phenomena one is interested in, it has a flipside. It also brings with it suspicion, especially during times of heightened political repression.

My premature exit from Tahseen did not result in a complete departure from the lives of the people I was involved with. I continue to be in contact with them, check-in with them. I have also been approached by members of the village to help them find job opportunities and aided a village member collect funds to cover debts following the death of his father and his responsibility to provide for his five sisters, mother, wife and two daughters.

Skepticism and surveillance of my research did not end in Tahseen. My attempts at accessing the Egyptian National Archives, the agricultural ministry library, and Agricultural Museum archives also faced similar skepticism. I applied to conduct archival research at the Egyptian National Archives in early 2016. Yet upon my submission of the requested forms mandatory for a security check, I was notified by an administrative employee at the archives that no approvals had been granted for researchers in approximately six months, and none would be expected soon. I was also aware of numerous other researchers waiting to hear from the archives about their research permits that had
been held up for months. This continues to be an issue. For the following seven months, I went every two weeks to check on my status and kept receiving the same response, that my permit had not yet been issued. It did indeed come seven months later, making me one of the very few who have received permits to research the national archives. When researching at the National Archives, security men would replace the archive employees whose shifts ended at two in the afternoon. In several instances, when leaving the research room, I would be asked to open up the only thing I was allowed to have with me in the research hall, my notebook, and show what notes I had written. Egyptian historian Khaled Fahmy has published in popular and scholarly press on the heightened securitization of the National Archives (2017:147).

I also faced similar concern towards my presence as a researcher at the Agriculture Ministry Library. On the third day of my research at the library and looking at sources in the rare books hall, I, along with a friend also conducting archival research at the library, were summoned into the office by the library's director. When I asked the summoner the reason for our meeting, the employee unconvincingly responded that no one had visited the rare books hall in a while, and the director would like to ask us about our presence. The director asked about our academic affiliations and we were asked to show proof, which we did. He then questioned us about what drew our interest to the rare books hall. I questioned why he was skeptical of our entry into a public library when many other students seemed to enter and carry out their research freely and routinely. I also questioned why there was such concern over the rare books when they were all historical records, dating at least thirty years back, and that a lot of these books could also be accessed elsewhere and in other university libraries abroad.
He responded to singling us out by stating that we were linked to a foreign institution and that he had to make sure who we were and our intentions. He added that in the 2016 Egyptian climate, research was very politically sensitive, therefore requiring extra measures, such as the background check he was carrying out at that moment. He justified his questioning with, "The current period has also seen a lot of unfounded criticism towards Egypt". I attempted to assuage his skepticism by telling him that I was not accessing top security material or political issues per se but interested in agricultural policy and development throughout Egypt’s history. He firmly responded, "Yes, but agriculture has to do with the economy, and the economy of a country concerns its national security!"

To shift the tone of the conversation, I then asked him to tell us about his role, how long he had been director of the library, and to describe the library history and building with its unique paintings and murals. He soon eased up towards us and we enjoyed a more cordial conversation, proudly taking out a photo album and showing us photos of foreign dignitaries like the American and Japanese ambassadors to Egypt on official visits to the library. He then mentioned that the library was made possible by an endowment of USAID. The irony was not lost on me: his skepticism of our presence in the library emerged out of our affiliation to a foreign institution at the same time that the library’s existence was made possible through foreign funding.

Surveillance of researchers, NGO workers, and journalists did not end in Egypt. Twice, while presenting at conferences in Washington DC, I was photographed, and my information was recorded by what seemed to be Egyptian intelligence-affiliated informants. A colleague of mine who was seated behind him in the audience, noted how he took my picture as I screened a PowerPoint slide with “Post-2013 Military Coup” title,
wrote my name down in a chat box and instantly sent the picture and name through WhatsApp to a contact of his.

Moving to my family village was a safer way to continue research after being forced to leave Tahseen. While surveillance by the police could be alleviated here, I experienced another form of surveillance. While I politically aligned more with the movement leaders in Tahseen, I did not share the same political perspectives of many in Nebeira, who supported President Sisi's government. Many of them were my family members. I was now coming to Nebeira as a researcher and there was concern about how I would deal with certain norms, such as who I could talk to in the village and who I should avoid. Yet while the practicalities of doing fieldwork became easier, surveillance shifted from state monitoring to a form of family policing. The Omda, my mother's twin brother, would change his role when talking to me at the dining table as opposed to a village council meeting. As headman of the village, he tried to control who I could talk to. While explaining to him that I would need to speak to as many people as I could for research purposes, he mentioned, "Yes, but first and foremost, you are a member of this family and that dictates who you will be able to talk to". I was encouraged not to go to people's homes to talk to them or their workplaces like kiosk or the pharmacy, but to instead invite them to the Omda's four-trees meeting space. I was also once told off for meeting with an elderly man without first consulting my uncle. They had disputes in the past, but the social distancing was ongoing.

My political stances were also significant reason for skepticism among my extended family since the 2011 uprisings, and especially after the 2013 coup that brought President Sisi to power. I conducted my fieldwork at one of the most politically fraught
moments in contemporary Egyptian politics. Yet politics were very much intimate friction as much as public discourse in many Egyptian families. Even before beginning my studies, when my uncle and grandmother heard of my acceptance to a PhD program in the US, my uncle responded, "So now you will become one of those who got paid (abadi), messed things up (kherebteeha) and fled," presumably to work for “foreign agents”. My acceptance to the Rutgers University joint masters-PhD came at the same time then-General Sisi removed President Mohamed Morsi from power and massacring Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated protesters. This period also brought with it a heightened sense of anti-foreign funding, political meddling, and increased xenophobia. Similarly, in my first summer back to Egypt after starting my PhD, my grandmother asked me: "How can you be sure that the information you are collecting from here [Egypt] is not being used by Americans against us?" I did not have to go far from intimate family space to face suspicions at such a tense and fragile time. At a later visit to the village, once hearing of this incident from me, my father confronted my uncle and expressed his discontent with the accusations my uncle had addressed to me. These political frictions within my nuclear family with my mother and father were less fraught. Even though my father is professionally a government representative as ambassador, he was, on a personal level supportive of the revolution in 2011. He joined me towards the last days of the sit in in Tahrir Square during the 2011 revolution that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak. He also identified as a leftist during his student years at Cairo University in the 1980s, before his entry into the foreign ministry several years later. While my uncle was not able to respond to my father in that confrontational moment over the dinner table in the village in 2013, his support of Sisi dwindled over the years. While he had a picture of President Sisi hung in the dining room
after his ascent to the presidency, he ended up taking it down in 2016 following President Sisi's decision to transfer the sovereignty of two islands in the Sinai Peninsula, Tiran and Sanafir, to Saudi Arabia. This was a defining moment when many Sisi supporters turned more critical. While my uncle had an initially resistant position regarding my political inclinations, he softened in response to a number of state policies and economic endeavors that negatively affected the village, especially his experience with the changing agricultural policies. This shift also meant that our own conversations were becoming less heated politically. All in all, I faced mixed feelings in my family's stance towards me researching the village. While they were very flattered by my interest in the village and spoke for hours on end about the village’s agricultural and family history, they nevertheless remained skeptical of the ends to which my research could be used.

This dissertation addresses rural mobilization histories as materially embodied histories. These histories were shaped by my interlocutors’ experiences, as well as, through my positionality and fieldwork entanglements. I therefore claim that one cannot divorce the political from the specific material histories, and that infrastructure is a key site through which I investigate the experience of the politics of the everyday. Through the vantage point of Tahseen and Nebeira, I centralize the mobilization stories and the kinds of political subjectivities that are shaped in the process as being co-constitutive and socially reproductive.
CHAPTER TWO: The Shifting Social Value of Land in the Nile Delta

The Military’s Correction of the 2011 Revolution in the Countryside

In the winter of 2017, I often saw army tanks on the side of the Cairo-Alexandria agriculture road demolishing half-constructed redbrick houses on land zoned for cultivation. Army soldiers stood near partially bulldozed structures that were left in the middle of the field. Many of these half-built and prematurely destroyed buildings remained that way for years. The army’s building demolitions coincided with its increased presence and enforcement of order in rural Egypt post-2013 and President Sisi’s presidency. President Sisi’s administration exerted enforced order in the urban centers for the first three years, only later turning their attention to rural areas. 2016-2017 was a period with newly enforced campaigns demolishing residential units built on agricultural land.

At the same time as I observed the rural housing destruction, a public service announcement aired on television warning citizens of illegal construction on agricultural land. The army’s production of the statement followed the same genre as the anti-terrorism advertisements commonly viewed on the TV. This genre of army videos was most commonly tied to campaigns in the northern Sinai Peninsula, where the military waged war with militant Islamist groups. The military had imposed a gag order on any press coverage of the Sinai war, replacing that with state-produced video reports of the army’s endeavors in the Sinai. The reportage included a few common elements in all the different versions: nationalistic music, soldiers in military uniform, bulldozers, and fighter jets, an Egyptian flag-waving, set in the Sinai sand hills. The illegal construction on agricultural land videos changed only two things: there were lush green fields in the background as the message read, “Occupying agricultural land is violating (intihak) property that is not yours”. The
warning equated building on agricultural land to ease the housing shortage of growing rural populations with terrorism and would bring the might of the state against those who did so. The army’s newly brought measures to enforce order through building-demolitions were part of a campaign to correct what it termed violations during the transitional period of 2011’s revolution and 2013’s coup. That period saw a significant increase in rural dwellers building residential units without permits on land marked for agriculture. And while the demolitions were highly visible on the main road, state officials seemed to turn a blind eye to “illegal” housing construction on agricultural land elsewhere. This uneven miss-match between villagers’ basic needs and state power raised questions about land use and infrastructural ideologies.

**Introduction**

As noted by Nadim (2019), Egypt’s population of ninety-six million is supposed to double within the next twenty or thirty years. Yet the Egyptian government has not kept up with housing needs—especially in the rural areas. This chapter starts with the opening vignette of the army’s housing demolitions on agricultural land to pose questions around how contestations over rural land use in Egypt developed historically and were tied to emerging political practices. The chapter uses the vantage point of land and infrastructure, primarily through newly built residential constructions post-2011, to investigate how the state-citizen relationship takes effect and is negotiated through land contestations and tensions over land ownership, use and benefit. Egyptian citizens consider housing to be a basic infrastructure that should be provided by the state: the “right to housing” (Shawkat 2020). While building houses without a permit on agricultural land may seem to be far from political subjectivity, this chapter will illustrate the ways political sensibilities
emerged intergenerationally from shifting state investments of basic needs in rural Egypt. It also complicates the notion of the state by paying attention to different scales through which state action emerges: the central government via the army, governorate leaders, municipal leaders, local *omdas*, and agricultural cooperative employees.

There are a lot of contradictions in practice and in the execution of the removal of informal buildings and there are a lot of missing parts inherent to their enactments. Army enforcement of land use laws was uneven, and municipal and village efforts even more so. Bribes allowed those with influence or means the way to side-step demolitions. Smaller villages, like Tahseen, were less likely to build informal residences on agricultural land for a host of reasons: primarily because they had far less means and influence to build individually let alone by-pass army demolitions (as will be discussed in chapters three and four). This also had to do with their ambiguous land ownership. Even though they had paid enough rents to receive their land ownership titles, the ministry of agricultural reform never gave them, and thus by the time the 1990s counter-reform laws were passed (as I will shortly explain), land rights were stripped from them. While Tahseen did not prioritize housing infrastructure in their land potentiality ideologies, they did see a road, school and mosque as the key infrastructures by which the state had failed them (this will be discussed further in chapter three). Thus, different socio-material relations to land potentialities and enactments of state power (or the lack thereof) gave rise to different infrastructural venues for political acts.

My primary focus in this chapter is to consider the shifting land potentiality ideologies shaping rural development in Egypt. These ideologies revolve around the state provisioning of infrastructure versus its failure or ruin, and in return, citizens’ varied
experiences of fulfillment of these absences. Yet the kinds of subjectivity tied to land and its development varies because ownership on these lands operated differently. Tahseen is a new village created in the 1950s under the socialist populist regime of Gamal Abdel-Nasser as a result of land reform and marshland reclamation policies. The fellahin (small-scale tenant farmers) who moved to Tahseen worked the land for the Ministry of Agrarian Reform and Land Reclamation, who officially owned the land. Nebeira, however, is an older village. Its neighboring village, Kom Ge’eif has ancient Greek, Roman and pharaonic ruins, and within past centuries, was a seat of rural Ottoman and British protectorate rule. Tahseen is a small village, with three thousand inhabitants. Nebeira is four times that size. Given its history, Nebeira is infrastructurally better developed, although still lacking major services like a sewage system; Tahseen suffers major neglect or absences of basic infrastructures such as a paved road. While Nebeira has a stratified class structure (landowners, small scale farmers, and traders), Tahseen mostly consists of small-scale farmers. Nebeira, as a mother village of eight other villages administratively connected to it, has government services like a village council administrative office, a post office, an agricultural cooperative, and an agricultural bank. Tahseen, however, lacks any of these services and has to commute three kilometers to access them. Nebeira is represented by a village Omda, while Tahseen depends on the social infrastructure of a village council, after they resisted the rule of an Omda who resided in a nearby village (to be explained later).

In this chapter, I address the infrastructural potentialities of land for farmers and government authorities and its shifting social value inter-generationally in Nebeira and Tahseen. I address this in conjunction with the state’s response to the land’s shifting uses, to understand why the sudden increase of residential constructions took place post-2011.
To understand these informal, or “illegal” buildings, the state’s unpredictable responses, either the crackdowns or intentional blindness to “illegal” buildings, I illustrate the unprofitability of farming and small-scale farmers’ indebtedness in sustaining farming in Egypt today. More importantly, I will illuminate the centrality of agricultural land to Egypt’s nation-state building and resultant rural political sensibilities, primarily through policies of land reform in the 1950s, and then, counter-land-reform in the 1980s to 1990s.

Land reform did not provide official legal ownership to the fellahin, but instead, afforded them low rental rights. They were allowed to rent, cultivate crops, and profit from their agricultural yield—which would in turn feed the nation, facilitate country-wide development, and secure national sovereignty from foreign powers. While small scale farmers in Nebeira and Tahseen did not face the violent consequences of the 1990s counter-land reform, which returned nationalized lands to previous estate landowners, the counter-reform nevertheless affected all agricultural lands. Both villages did not face land sequestration in the 1950s because Tahseen was a new village created in response to the new land reform system and Nebeira’s landowners owned less than the maximum fifty feddans slated for sequestration and nationalization. Yet, even though the 1950s land reform did not nationalize villager lands in Nebeira and Tahseen, its centrality to agrarian transformations in Egypt was essential, especially when assessing the complementary economic and agriculture liberalization policies in the 1980s 1990s, such as the exponentially increased land tax. Tahseen’s farmers, who experienced the benefits of land reform through the creation of their village, nevertheless bore the brunt of counter-reform by being forced to repurchase land that was originally theirs, faced a similar raise in land taxes and debilitating land debts, as I will explain in-depth later on.
The two villages, Nebeira and Tahseen, will not be presented as conflicting stories but will address complementary aspects of villagers’ experience with the history of land reform and counter land reform in Egypt today. Both villages were similarly affected through the state’s policies of counter reform which made farming an untenable livelihood. The phenomenon of informal building was much more evident in Nebeira than Tahseen, although the driving factors for the building remained the same in both. Land in Nebeira and Tahseen became the site through which contestations over claims to space were fought between villagers, village leaders, regional municipal leaders, and the central government.

First, some background to understand why building on agricultural land is deemed illegal in the Egyptian context and the post-2011 building boom in designated rural areas. A 1966 law prohibited rural landowners from building on more than two percent of their total area owned. The majority of small-scale farmers, if landowning, only held about two acres of land, which made building a residence on two percent and making a sustainable living nearly impossible (as will be explained). The 1966 law further stipulated that the land cannot be left barren for more than a year and has to be continuously cultivated. The 1966 Law dictated agricultural areas that were put in place during the Nasser regime, when land reform was instated. As with other laws governing Egypt, enforcement has been uneven at best. Urban researcher and founder of the Built Environment Observatory, Yahia Shawkat notes: “While hundreds of legislative acts have been passed over the last half-century to shape the built environment, stipulating steep fines and jail terms for those who do not comply, the state has also suspended these laws through a host of ‘temporary’ reconciliation laws to legalize thousands of buildings that did not comply with the law” (2019).
Given the uneven enforcement of law, why would farmers build on land designated for agricultural use and risk fines, demolitions, and possible jail sentences? Sole dependency on agriculture as a small-scale farmer in Egypt became an untenable livelihood. This arose from a series of factors tied to successive governments that moved away from the socialist-leaning welfare state of the 1950s. These range from counter-land reform policies in the 1980s to 1990s to international structural adjustment programs that made it unprofitable for small scale farmers to produce crops. In addition, rural villagers cannot meet their housing needs due to an increasing population boom. While a significant infrastructural increase took place in the construction of residential units after 2011 as a result of lax security measures, most of my interlocutors observed there have always been conflicts over villagers’ building on land designated for agricultural use, especially after the 1980s.

Most significantly, the state is ever concerned about the decline in cultivable land while not providing the means for small scale farmers to live on and develop their properties. Instead, the state increasingly seeks to censure farmers for building on and leaving their land barren. This introduces a more perduring debate concerning the rural and urban divide. Scholarship on rural areas has moved away from Raymond Williams’ (1973) distinction of the country and city and has moved more towards understanding the fluidity between urbanization and ruralization by defining rural spaces as peri-urban (El-Hefnawi: 2005). Today, rural villages point to the need to re-question the rural-urban distinction, especially with the sudden infrastructural boom experienced post-2011. That distinction is mainly a political imagination divide that keeps the rural in a place of traditionalism and the urban as a place of progress (Mitchell 2002; Selim 2004).
Today one cannot assume a resident of an Egyptian village has an agricultural occupation since the majority of young villagers today work in mobile occupations such as urban construction labor. The boundaries of the village and the city have become more fluid, with self-identified villagers living part of their lives and working in the city. Reem Saad (2009) notes other essential social theorists on Egypt who state, “What is defined as rural in the census consists of everything outside the seats of governorates and district towns, that is, the urban is defined in terms of its administrative role, and the rural is residual” (Hopkins and Westergaard 1998: 2 in Saad 2009). Saad (2009) specifies the urban-rural distinction—deeming certain areas as rural and others as urban—as a political means to limit the provision of services such as sewage, transportation infrastructure, and electricity provision. “We thus have many places which socially, economically and demographically are ripe for an urban status but remain deprived of the necessary services to effect this transformation smoothly”, Saad notes. I build on Saad’s analysis to understand the lack of infrastructural provision in rural-designated areas, by explicitly addressing the way state purposeful neglect shapes political practice. In Tahseen, the non-provision of a paved road mobilized villagers to declare administrative independence and shame the municipal state actors into (semi-) action. Similarly, in Nebeira, the state’s municipal leaders’ failure to provide rural housing for the growing population led to their informal construction and the President Sisi administration’s removal of those residential buildings.

It is essential to address how citizens use land for non-agricultural purposes and instead for their infrastructural construction of buildings that connect to electricity, water, and possibly sewage networks if available in their villages. As mentioned in the introduction, infrastructure is a node through which state-citizen relations are negotiated
and contested, and through which claims over space are designated. Anthropological scholarship on infrastructure addresses citizens’ everyday experiences with infrastructure and how they experience political promises, policies, and enactments (Larkin 2018; Larkin 2013; von Schnitzler 2013; Simone 2004; Anand 2011; Appel in Anand et al. 2018; Dewachi 2017; Nucho 2016; Stamatopulou-Robbins 2020). Brian Larkin calls for approaching the study of infrastructure through bio-politics, science and technology studies, and techno-politics, but just as importantly, through the “aesthetic and the sensorial, desire and promise” (Larkin 2013: 327). Rural citizens’ desire for infrastructures such as a road or an apartment building, and whether or not they take on its provision themselves, represents not only the physical manifestation of these infrastructures, but also reflects on state absence, presence, or inaction. Larkin specified that “infrastructures embodied a relationship between the state and its citizenry expressing shared ideas about its role in society” (2008: 245). While that may be true in contexts where the infrastructure works, it raises questions about “shared ideas” about state-citizen relations in Nebeira with the lack of sufficient residential units, and in Tahseen with the lack of a road, updated school and mosque. Infrastructure scholarship usually focuses on urbanism and its global interconnections (Coleman 2014). Yet my focus on rural areas and differential citizenship, especially as materialized through lack of adequate funding allocation to rural areas in comparison to urban areas is key. As I will describe later through the limited provision of sewage infrastructure in rural Egypt, there is a significant budget allocation difference between rural-designated lands and urban-designated spaces. These budgetary issues are caused by a crisis of administrative and strategic planning that keeps provincial governorates at a disadvantage in determining their citizens' primary needs. The rural-
urban divide is a governmentally and infrastructurally produced divide that continues to keep rural-designated areas deprived of basic infrastructural necessities, although almost half of the population lives there, at a disadvantage. In both of Nebeira and Tahseen, differential citizenship for rural residents was most pronounced and materialized in infrastructure. In Nebeira this occurred through the lack of income and dwelling alternatives for citizens with agricultural land. In Tahseen this was most experienced through conflicts over construction of a viable road, which the municipality built for a neighboring village but not for Tahseen (as detailed in chapter three).

The notion of state enactments of differential citizenship through infrastructure has been explored by Nikhil Anand’s research on road construction (2006) and the water supply (2011) in India, and Antina von Schnitzler’s research in South Africa on electricity and water meters (2013). Anand states that citizens see the provision of water as the government's fundamental responsibility and that peri-urban elected representatives are often evaluated and reelected based on their success at extending urban infrastructure, water, electricity, and roads into their communities (2011: 551). Yet more specifically, Anand (2011) reflects on how Muslim citizens of Mumbai were rendered socially and politically abject as a result of the state’s denial of their essential infrastructural services. Von Schnitzler researched the political experiences of water and electricity meters in South Africa. She presented how prepaid meters were used as a counterinsurgency device against rent boycotts by anti-apartheid organizers (2016). For Von Schnitzler, infrastructure becomes the “political terrain” on which central political and ethical questions concerning citizenship are negotiated and contested (2013: 673). I develop Larkin, Anand, and Von Schnitzler’s notions on the political stakes of infrastructural construction and use, by
addressing land use controversies and enactments of political subjectivity. How do rural-based citizens use the land in the context of structural violence through state neglect, debilitating agricultural and counter-land reform policies?

The use of arable agricultural land for housing construction in Nebeira is a socio-economic issue of land potentialities in the Nile Delta. I investigate the different policies of land use as a way to understand how landed property owners in Nebeira see land’s potential for infrastructure. Even though small-scale farmers in Nebeira take the risk of building on land knowing the authorities may demolish their investments, they enact ownership and take a political stand against state neglect through this use. Asef Bayat, in his study of informal communities in 1970s Iran, referred to this phenomenon as the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (2010: 16). Bayat defined squatting in urban Iran as a poor people’s “non-movement” because it was an attempt to further their claims to state basic services through incremental means. While most of the literature on Egypt’s urban environments addressed squatting (wad’al yadd) through informal urban encroachment (Bayat 2017; Bayat 2010; Sims 2010; Davis 2017; Khalil 2019; Shawkat 2020), the case of rural Egypt complicates the issue of informal property rights because construction occurs on conflicting land rights that are valued differently based on generational sentimentalities, in addition to, the land being specifically zoned for agricultural use.

Once the rural inhabitants in Nebeira occupy the informal residences, it is more difficult for the authorities to demolish them as it would mean needing to find alternatives for the people living in them. During my fieldwork, it was common for people to hang clothes and laundry to dry intentionally outside of the red-brick half-constructed buildings. The men would make sure to spend nights in the building to limit demolitions from
happening. While at a state-sponsored agricultural cooperative in Nebeira, I also observed several cases where people resolved illegal building and informal electrical provision by paying a fine and, or bribe, to the authorities to ensure their continued use. Thus, the residential building boom on agricultural land post-2011 brings together questions of small-scale farmers rights, territory claims through basic infrastructure, and contested state-citizen claims to space.

1952 National Independence and Land Reform

Land reform in Egypt became the leading political backbone of the post-1952 Free Officers government, under the presidency of Gamal Abdel-Nasser. It was the central platform on which the newly independent government could gain legitimacy through providing a large portion of Egypt's public, the *fellahin*, a just political system. As direct beneficiaries of the land reform, the peasant farmers served as the primary subjects through which the new nation-state could be created. Similar to the Cuban experience Thiesenhusen (1995: 198) writes about, an important goal of the new revolutionary government was mobilizing a large portion of the peasantry and land reform was the means. Yet the *fellahin* were central to political reform, which was not unique to the issue of land reform and had deeper roots in Egypt's national trajectory. Omnia El-Shakry (2007) demonstrated how the peasantry in Egypt shifted from being represented as undisciplined rural subjects, central to an administrative project of bureaucratic control, towards becoming used as the main subjects of agrarian reform and reconstruction.

In an introduction to a book on the land reform written by Nasser’s Minister of Agriculture during the passing of the law, Sayed Marei presented its ideological and bureaucratic foundations. Citing theories of ownership by John Locke and Jean Jacques
Rousseau as a starting point to his discussion, Marei affirmed that ownership of land goes to those who work it (Marei in Hagras 1970: 7). Marei stated that people's human nature pushes them to run after wealth and "horde it", and as a result of that, measures need to be taken to change these tendencies (Marei in Hagras 1970: 19). Marei made this statement a prelude to outlining why land reform was an essential social project and a way through which humanity could be improved. As mentioned, Marei’s introduction was part of a larger book on land reform written by the Chairman of the General Authority on Agrarian Reform, Saad Hagras. In the book, Hagras compared the success of the Egyptian experiment to parallel projects carried out by Mexico, Cuba, Ecuador, and the Philippines, among several other countries (1970: 740). He presented ambitious land reform as a phenomenon of newly independent populist governments through which the new vision for the nation was anchored (Hetherington 2011: 101).

In Hagras’ view, land reform was primarily a project to ensure social justice and necessary improvements for Egypt's successful transformation into a socialist system. He clarified that the decision was not to be taken as a "literal understanding [of calculated land divisions] but more broadly an idea concerning social justice" (1970: 740). Under the reform laws of the 1950s, land ownership could not exceed 50 feddans (21 hectares) for the individual and 100 feddans (42 hectares) for the family. Hagras presented the division as one that followed an "equitable distribution of agricultural wealth through which to ensure the wellbeing of thousands of the peasantry" (1970: 741). He further added that the "small yet powerful minority are those who are in control of the nation's wealth" (Ibid.). Concluding, Hagras claimed that the law was the correct "way forward for Egypt…it adds an important layer to fighting colonialism and domination…it will ensure the unity of
society and is a way to achieve the politics that the Revolution promised and upholds, fighting for it no matter what the costs are" (1970: 743). Hagras presented equitable redistribution of wealth as a way to create a new just future for the country, providing opportunities for the *fellahin* who were previously part of an unjust system. Nasser’s socialist-leaning welfare system created and relied on local agricultural cooperatives, which supported *fellahin* development and cultivation of crops through the provision of seeds, training, and transportation of their products to urban and transnational markets.

Life before land reform for farmers, especially those living on estates, was very harsh and reflected the need for serious social reforms. I was not able to access the direct experiences of farmers in pre-reform in Nebeira and Tahseen through my fieldwork research, but I nevertheless acquired some information on what life was like pre-1952 village life. Nebeira's primary school counselor, one of my primary interlocutors, reflected on what life was like on Sultan Hussein's *izba*, or large agricultural estates, in Nebeira’s neighboring village, Gabares. "The *izba* had gates that had locks, farmers were locked in and could not leave at all. They had no rights while on the property since the compensation they received for their work was the basic produce they grew: tomatoes and potatoes", he stressed. Timothy Mitchell explained the emergence of estates in 1840 under Ismail Pasha's rule (the grandson of Muhammed Ali Pasha, "not as a form of private property, but as a means of making an individual official liable for paying the revenue arrears of a particular village; any villager who owed taxes was thereby placed in debt bondage to the official and compelled to work the land to the benefit of the official until the debt had been paid" (2002: 66). He similarly described the estates as being power over land but over people, where, "the estate could operate as a sort of prison, in part because to escape from the estate meant
to become both landless and homeless (2002:71). Abaza noted that approximately sixty percent of the Nile Delta's lands were izbas and that the main cultivated crop in the Delta was cotton (2013: 82). Therefore, estates as agricultural colonies were a way in which landowning izba owners stripped the fellahin of sovereignty. Once on the estate, their full rights were taken away.

Nasser’s land reform process faced significant backlash and resistance from landowners and was difficult to pass in many villages. I conducted an unpublished interview with farmers' rights activist Shahenda Maqlad in 2012, the wife of national icon, Salah Hussein. Hussein, Maqlad's husband, was assassinated in the Nile Delta village of the Menoufeya governorate, Kamshish, by the landowning Fiqqi family. He was the leader of the farmer's struggles in the village. He had taken part in nationwide anticolonial struggles, such as fighting against the British in Suez in 1951. Hussein’s struggle against village landowners, as stressed by Maqlad, reflected the continuation of feudal ownership by the Fiqqi family after land redistribution. The Fiqqis evaded the nationalization and sequestration of their lands by registering it under the names of small-scale farmers in the village. From 1958 to 1962, Maqlad and fellahin in Kamshish pushed the Nasser government to fulfill the land's sequestration. The lag in the implementation of the land reforms also pointed to an important complication in the official narrative of reform, which was that Nasser's government included some generals who were also from landowning families. This distinction is critical to make in order to distinguish between land reform as a political project versus land reform as fulfilling genuine social justice reforms. In several cases, the Nasser regime was complicit in allowing certain landowning families to evade the policy.
In 1962 however, land in Kamshish was finally nationalized and resulted in 199 small farmer-beneficiaries of izba land (Ahmed & Saad 2011). In the act of revenge by the Fiqqis, they shot dead Hussein, after previous multiple attempts to kill him. Since that day, Kamshish became a nationwide symbol of the fellahin resistance against feudalists. Maqlad herself became a nationwide political activist, member of the farmers union, and the leftist Tagammu party, which was the only party to support the land reform laws during its repeal in the 1990s. A yearly conference has been held in Kamshish from the late 1960s until recently when I covered it in 2013 while a journalist at Ahram (El-Kouny 2013). The conference was held in memory of the assassination of Hussein and Maqlad always led it until her passing in 2016. In 2013, the conference was attended by a politically diverse number of well-known figures, including 2012 leftist presidential candidate, Hamdeen Sabbahi, Kefaya movement member George Ishaq, engineer and political activist, Mamdouh Hamza, Egyptian writer, Ahdaf Soueif, and former senior Muslim Brotherhood member, Hazem el Biblawi. Thus, land potentialities were and continue to be part of political subjectivity in Egypt.

Land reform was also not new to the Nasser government but rather had its roots much earlier. Debates over land reform started to take place in 1943 in the Egyptian Parliament, nine years before the 1952 Free Officers coup. The earliest suggestion to limit landholding to 50 feddans (21 hectares) was by senator Muhammad Khattab who used to frequent the House of Scientific Research, led by the communist group 'Iskra' (Misako 2009: 28). Another example mentioned was that of Ahmed Sadiq Saad, a leading member of a communist group Al-Fajr Al-Jadid. Saad published an article in 1945 where he stated that the main problem Egypt faced was the "monopolization of one's means of production
by large landowners, which also entails a monopoly on political and social influence" (Misako 2009: 31). However, those who were contesting the law based their attack on the character of the Egyptian *fellah*. One of the leading opponents to the bill was army captain Tantawi Muhammad. In a 1945 article published in the state flagship newspaper, Al-Ahram, Muhammad stated that if the state instilled reform policies, they would spread "Meekness and lethargy among the laboring class in the country" (Misako 2009: 40). In the same view, a specialist in the Ministry of Social Affairs responded to the reform suggestion by stating the law "will create a new class of individuals who do not rely on themselves" (Ibid.). Opposition to the suggestion of reform resorted to statements made about the peasant's character and focused on the lack of individual productivity. Interestingly, these statements were recycled in 1992 (as will be reflected on later) and became the central depictions on which the reversal of land reform were justified.

The belief in the need to significantly alter the social policies in rural Egypt was recognized in 1946 by King Farouk, Egypt's last monarch. In documents I retrieved during my research in Cairo at the Egyptian National Library and Archives in 2017, I found a campaign for rural uplifting and development launched by King Farouk¹. He announced the effort on his birthday, February 11, 1946, where he ordered the establishment of an administration designated to deal with rural problems headed by Khaled Hassanein Pasha. The monarchy announced the campaign policies would begin on Farouk's royal estate (*izba*) in the Nile Delta village of Inchass in Al-Sharqiya governorate.

In this reform effort, there would be a possibility for farmers and their offspring to rent property, and larger families would be encouraged to raise livestock on the rented plots. The proclamation also announced that it would establish a hospital with twenty-eight beds, and a "medical team [would] also visit the farmers to give instructions on hygiene". Water taps would be installed in the estate to provide drinking water, and the building of several public restrooms where farmers could also do their laundry. The plan also announced, "practical education [would] be introduced to the Inchass elementary school, and boys [would] be taught industrial trades". Additionally, the estate's boys would be inducted in the boys' scouts and adults participate in evening literacy classes. By "royal order, a cooperative would be established to include more than 650 members” The king would provide a radio and an amplifier at the premises of the cooperative society. Educational, cultural, and health-related films would also be screened in the evenings for leisure. While these social reforms inaugurated by King Farouk were far from significant land reforms, they nevertheless reflected the monarchy's acknowledgment of the need to make some changes to the social system even if performative instead of substantive. King Farouk was overthrown six years later during the Free Officers Coup in 1952 that shortly brought President Mohamed Naguib, then President Gamal Abdel-Nasser, into power. During Nasser’s rule, Inchass came under his jurisdiction. The first land reform conference was held there in 1954, where Nasser held a ceremony handing out land contracts to the village’s fellahin. It also significantly became the site of Egypt’s first nuclear plant established in 1963. Several Egyptian films starring Abdel Halim Hafez in ‘Day and Night’ (1955) and Farid Shawky in ‘El Fetewa’ (The Tough, 1957) were filmed in Inchass as well.
They were filmed after the gardens of the palace became public property and were opened for visitors. Today, Inchass continues to be the base for military units and a military airport. Land reform was not only introduced by Egyptian parties, but foreign forces also proposed plans. American diplomats in Egypt suggested the need to implement land reform to counter the spread of communism (Mitchell 2002: 43). The Egyptian minister of social affairs supported this claim in 1950, where, in a dispatch to the US State Department, he stated, the "main issue in but a few of communist countries is land reform" (Misako 2009: 51). Here, to avoid the influence of communism and the soviet bloc in Egypt, land reform was the main project to be adopted or co-opted by the government. Thiesenhusen makes this point clear about land reform acting as leverage for political gains, whereby land reform with the Christian Democrats in Chile and the MNR in Bolivia was carried out as a means to co-opt the peasantry into joining and supporting the ruling class (1995: 200). This form of co-optation was what the Nasser government later did more successfully in 1954 with the implementation of a socialist-leaning system nationwide, but primarily flaunted through the Fellahin benefits through land reform.

Even though agrarian reform was primarily a state-led initiative in which Fellahin actual inclusion in the decision-making process was minimal, its importance and value to the them cannot be overlooked. The social effect of reform meant the inclusion of the Fellahin in the national trajectory, centering the role of small-scale farmers as agricultural cultivators of the nation. Referred to as islah (improvement), land reform was the determining characteristic through which the Fellahin conceived of their political sensibilities through the imaginary of the nation-state and through their rental or eventual ownership of land. By perpetuating the metaphor of islah, Fellahin "establish themselves
within national history" (Saad 2002: 186). For many *fellahin* in Egypt, the law represented a temporal rupture, similar to that of pre-Islamic (*Jahiliyya*) ignorance and post-Islamic civilization (Saad in Chatterjee et. al 2002: 188). On an individual level, laboring the land by working on it was a way through which citizens could attain their personhood and produced a sense of communal identity and shared history (Ahmed 2015: 101). Although Nasser's land reforms resulted in the redistribution of only one-seventh of landholdings (Ayeb 2012), they nevertheless allowed hundreds of thousands of peasants to live wholly or partially on their agricultural incomes. Their pre-reform subjectivities as small-scale farmers on *izba* estate agricultural colonies mean they were not afforded rights and did not benefit from what they grew, it all went to the capitalist economy. Land reform, therefore, guaranteed them significant levels of access to their agricultural resources. Land reform, seen through its long trajectory, became a significant milestone in the formation of the modern Egyptian nation-state. This landmark was critical in national legitimacy campaigns of political regimes.

**Snakes, Barren Land, and Historical Violence**

Tahseen and Nebeira had a different relationship to land reform and the division of lands. Tahseen was a new village created out of the land reform and land reclamation policies, while Nebeira had a long history of estate land ownership. Both communities, however, underwent the same land reform and counter-reform policies, which affected small scale farmers. Both villages were similarly affected through the state’s policies of counter reform in the 1990s which made farming an untenable livelihood. The phenomenon of informal building was much more evident in Nebeira than Tahseen, although the driving factors for the building remained the same in both. Tahseen had a mostly homogeneous
social class characterization as a result of their origin story. Their struggles over the effect of counter-reform policies on their land rents were directly fought with the agriculture ministry and the judiciary. In Nebeira, however, conflicts over the repeal of the land reform could be seen in the discourses of large-scale landowners, like the Omda's family, versus small-scale farmers who either owned small portions of land or worked land for a daily wage.

As mentioned in the introduction, a neighboring village to Nebeira, Gabares, was historically the location of several palaces and lands of Sultan Hussein Kamel, the Egyptian monarch from 1914 to 1917, during the British protectorate. Sultan Hussein Kamel was the grandfather of King Farouk, the last monarch of Egypt, before his deposition in the 1952 ‘Free Officers Coup’. Nebeira served as a "mother village", administering eight other villages, including Gabares through the Omda system. A five-minute drive from Nebeira, the izba (estate) of Sultan Hussein and his descendants in Gabares spanned a territory of four-hundred feddans. During my fieldwork, it was colloquially referred to by the people residing in Nebeira and the neighboring villages as the "Palace of the Princess", because a princess relative of the Sultan was the most long-term resident there. It regularly came up in conversations about the historical landmarks of the villages. Today, the remaining parts of the palace are used as post offices, horse stables, and storage space. The building’s exterior walls were covered in handwritten advertisements and telephone numbers for ma’azouns, clerics authorized to officiate marriages and divorces. The walls also offered a collage of silhouettes from several years of presidential, municipal, and parliamentary elections candidate posters. The mosque, built at the same time as the palace was still standing as a functioning historical structure, as villagers from Gabares and the neighboring
villages, including Nebeira, frequent it for their prayers. It is also a significant landmark, serving as the main microbus stop, transporting people in and out of the village. Gabares was the second stop on the way out of Nebeira when driving to the city of Itai El-Barud. Next to the mosque stood former state offices in ruin, slightly decrepit. They were reportedly used as storage spaces for crops and housed the agricultural cooperative during the Nasser years.

The Palace of the Princess and the *izba* in Gabares came up in a story during my stay in Nebeira, illustrating the conflicting discourses over land reform, as experienced between the landowning families and the small-scale farmers. One week in mid-March 2016 there was an intense heat wave, resulting in the untimely appearance of snakes in Nebeira: normally they would emerge later in the summer. I heard Gameela's voice screaming on the outskirts of the *Omda*'s house during the early afternoon, making me head...
out to see what was happening. By the time I arrived, an older man had come to Gameela's rescue and killed a snake on the side of the road towards the Omda's house. A few hours later, the Omda asked Gameela to recount what had happened earlier. After Gameela's retelling of the snake killing story, the Omda responded with a historical account, related to the increase of snakes in the village. He mentioned the reason the snakes became so common was after the Gabares izba became nationalized under Nasser. He stressed that the land was "fragmented", a more colloquial way of describing the redistribution of land, especially by those who opposed land reform policies. As a result of the divisions of the land for redistribution to multiple new owners, many of the very lush orange tree bushes surrounding the palace were uprooted, "when the trees were removed we saw many snakes, different kinds and sizes we had never seen before, spread all across the neighboring villages." The Omda made sense of the snakes, one of the most feared creatures in the village, by recounting his own theorization of the snake infestation as having to do with nationalization and land redistribution of the 1950s. Whether or not there was a logical connection to the events was not of importance. Its significance lay in how narratives over the effect of land reform were recounted in the village. In effect, the Omda viewed land reform as leading to undesirable outcomes, such as snake proliferation in the villages.

While Gabares was an izba and became nationalized under Nasser, land in Nebeira was not nationalized because the village landowners did not exceed the fifty feddan individual ownership clause. Nevertheless, I received a different view through my interviews with small scale farmers, such as Gameela, who witnessed the 1950s period of reform. She had mentioned to me that landowners in Nebeira pushed for reforms informally, allowed increased rent of their land by small scale farmers out of fear for their
assets but also a clear vision that social reforms needed to happen. My grandmother reflected on the passing of the law in an interview I conducted with her in 2016. At the time, she was thirteen and was living in her family village, about thirty kilometers away from Nebeira. She moved to Nebeira once she married my grandfather, the Nebeira *Omda*, in 1959. She recounted,

I remember the news announced on the radio, everyone was afraid to speak, people were firstly unsure about the effect of the new law and were afraid to speak about it. It seems they were afraid because the limit of the sequestration of lands feddans kept decreasing and they were worried the government would decrease it to the amounts they had, and therefore it would eventually affect them too. Nevertheless, we were not members of the ultra-rich *iqtaï’yeen* (feudalist) families.

She stressed, however, that in retrospect, while the landowning families felt threatened by the land reform, “to be honest, changes needed to take place at the time, it became evident that the slave-like treatment of farmers by the *iqtaï’yeen* needed to be of the past, and our society needed to improve them, land reform had to be carried out drastically in the way that it was.”

The Gabares izba also came up a few months later, but was recounted in relation to a different incident, as I accompanied Gameela in a microbus ride to the municipal town center Itai. As we passed the vast fields of the former Gabares estate, I pointed out a portion of the land uncultivated and a much darker brown color than its bordering green plots of land. After several months passing Gabares while traveling in and out of Nebeira, I had observed a significant portion of the property. As we drove by, I pointed out the plot of brown land to Gameela and inquired why it was left uncultivated. She mentioned how the land, formerly part of the Sultan’s izba, but which was redistributed following land reform, had burnt down a few years prior. "Three men died on this land, and ever since, it has
remained barren as you see here", Gameela explained. It began with a feud between two men, that started when one man's herd of goats trespassed and ate crops on the other man's land. Their feud ended up with them killing each. Ever since, "the land, as you see it now with your own eyes, has remained this way", she lamented. Gameela reflected on this incident, pitying the barren and uncultivable land, the ongoing feuds over land ownership and use, and the three dead people. While the dispute in this account took place four decades after the land reform changed social relations by shifting material conditions, it reflected continued conflicts tied to land use and rural sociality in former izba territory.

1992 to 1997 Counter Land Reform and Reverse Feudalism

The process of counter-reform in 1990s Egypt was also drastic and violent. Egypt’s security forces forcefully evicted many fellahin whose land titles would now be deemed void. The debate over counter-reform reflected the revenge of the landowners against the fellahin tenants’ claim to the property. Land reform under Nasser, as in the Mexican experience, was a “reactive” process of the ruling socialist-leaning parties, dramatically shifting their policies in an attempt to suppress and support the demands of the population’s landed aristocracy (Sanderson 1984: 2). The counter-reform law in Egypt, fully coming into effect in 1997, was mainly an attempt to strengthen the position of the former landowners, such as Youssef Wali, minister of agriculture and Secretary-General of President Hosni Mubarak’s National Democratic Party (1982-2004).

Land reform laws initiated in the 1950s were a binding social contract between tenant landowners and the state (Saad 2002: 105). They were fellahin who tilled the land, improved it, built their homes on it, and were, ultimately, legitimate owners of it. Thus, the land became a manifestation of social relations, carrying increased social meanings of
ownership and dignity that were historically embedded (Edelman & Léon 2013). Reem Saad explained through her research conducted in a Nile Delta village that there was strong disbelief by both tenants and political observers that the 1990s counter-reform law would not be fully implemented (2002: 115). Even when the agricultural cooperatives and village banks, the Principal Bank for Development and Agricultural Credit (PBDAC), stopped their dealings with fellahin tenants in 1997, there was widespread belief that the law would not be applied (Ibid.). Many of the tenants were also kept uninformed and unaware of the parliamentary discussions taking place, suggesting there was a purposeful attempt at keeping them in the dark in order to carry out the process as quickly as possible.

The village PBDAC bank and the agricultural cooperatives were initially set up during Nasser’s regime as resources to support small-scale farmers. Since 1997 and the counter-reform initiatives, the agricultural bank and the agricultural cooperatives were used by the Mubarak government for consumerist means. If farmers took out loans from the PBDAC, they were tied to a relation of increased indebtedness and burdened by resorting to the bank in the first place. Farmers were made to pay skyrocketing interest rates that reached as high as twenty percent, in many cases exceeding the price of the principal loan. In a 2017 interview I conducted with the head of the agricultural bank in Nebeira, I questioned him about the problems of debt farmers faced because of the unfavorable lending conditions. He contradicted my statement and mentioned that the fault lay with farmers not paying off the loans; it was not the bank’s fault. Other reasons for farmer indebtedness included factors such as receiving corrupt seeds from the agricultural cooperative and provided by the agriculture ministry. This led to crop failure and inability to make loan payments.
The land reform law, ‘Law 96’ of 1992, implemented in 1997, was viewed by many fellahin to be a return to the era of feudalism. Previously, President Sadat had attempted to further weaken the power of the small-scale tenant farmers working to own their land by removing elected farmer representatives from their positions in rural cooperatives. This strengthened the views of former estate landowners, as they influenced the cooperative policies (Hanieh 2013: 81). Thiesenhusen used Egypt as one of the examples of land reform in which the dominant ruling class was overthrown, but the social differentiation remained intact (1995: 198). The main reason the estate landowning class was able to powerfully strike back, forty years later, was that land reform policies were not able to remove the pre-independence feudal Pasha class (Bush 2002: 23). They mobilized the support of the parliament and the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), created by President Anwar El-Sadat in 1978 and continued under President Hosni Mubarak’s regime, to reverse the material, social and political gains of the fellahin. As this dissertation attests however, the outcomes of the ruling elites’ efforts have shaped political and material sensibilities in ways they could not predict.

Another reason Egypt’s estate landowners were able to repeal the 1950s land reform laws with little pushback from civil society was due to a lack of institutional political representation that would have allowed tenants and their allies to fight back. The only party that represented the viewpoint of the tenant farmers was the Tagammu’ party, through its flagship paper Al-Ahaly. While the Tagammu’ party ceded legitimacy to the landowners due to not wanting to wage a political battle against the ruling NDP party and face backlash (especially in a non-democratic society), it nevertheless attempted to propose an alternative that would support the small farmers. Tagammu’s suggestion was to set up a bank where
farmer tenants who wished to remain on their land would be allowed a thirty-year period to pay loans that they incurred from the PBDAC in installments (Hinnebusch 1993).

The deliberations carried out in parliament and the state-controlled media, used a standard set of tropes to describe why fellahin were unequipped to benefit from the 1950s land reform. These tropes were familiar in pre-independence Egypt under colonialism (Mitchell 2002: chapter 4), portraying the fellah as ignorant, lazy, and in need of social uplifting. In an article published in Al-Gumhuriyya newspaper on the occasion of Farmers Day in 1988, the author stated, “I think there is a link between the Agrarian Reform law and these negative phenomena, for the low rents make the tenant lazy and does not exert any effort to increase his production”. Beneficiaries of the land reform law, fellahin, were allowed to become tenants on the nationalized lands. They did not officially own the land, although they acquired official documents reflecting their legal tenancy of the land, which was not afforded under the pre-1952 agricultural system.

Another example that used the above fellahin tropes painted estate landowners in a light that made the land reform law appear as a gift of the previous owners’ benevolence, rather than a law for social justice and national development. One of the quotes that best reflects this sentiment was made by an ex-councilor at the Court of Appeal in 1992 and published in the Wafd Newspaper, the flagship of the liberal Wafd Party whose members were firmly in support of the counter-reform law:

For over 40 years, the tenant’s pockets were being filled with thousands of pounds that he used to buy agricultural land with and rode in Mercedes cars with. This happened while the owner gave up half of his land for the tenant. The balance has tilted, and the tenant became the owner of 80 feddans that he acquired from selling crops on the owners [estate landowners] land… President Mubarak is known for his tendency to issue laws that are just, do not contradict [Islamic] Shari’a law, and are not imported from communist countries. It is high time to get rid of these laws and to alleviate the injustice
befalling the downtrodden citizens [former estate landowners] who have lost everything except their belonging to their country.

The quotation above in Saad (1999) points to the way proponents of the counter-reform laws mobilized public sentiment using a legal Islamic Shar‘ia argument in addition to exacerbated claims of tenants’ ability to own land. Saad (1999) draws on the quote of the Court of Appeals councilor as an example of landowning propaganda, an exaggeration of the effects of the law on tenant farmers. The claim by the councilor also reflected the newly afforded economic mobility of the small-scale farmers through land tenancy and cultivation. Over time, this afforded them opportunities for land ownership. It also reflected the attack on small-scale farmers’ nouveaux-riche class mobility in comparison to “poor” estate landowners who had been robbed of their rightful wealth.

Yet, even though a legal precedent was set for its reversal, the discourse reflected how unworthy the fellahin were of the good deeds afforded to them. They were not deserving of the benevolence and sacrifice made on the part of the estate landowners. The language further seemed to echo an act of revenge by landowners against the peasants for claiming the right to property that was not originally theirs. Therefore, the debate over counter-reform was represented to suggest fellahin should be placed back where they belong in a pre-Nasser era social structure, curtailing their aspirations for social mobility.

Thiesenhusen states that land reform is not a static process but is instead reflective of the social transformations happening in society at large (1995: 195). The process of counter-reform was not only revenge by the landowning class but was also in response to a set of global socio-economic shifts. The Sadat and Mubarak era were moving away from socialism and Soviet control, toward a US encouraged liberalizing of the economy and
instilling an open-market system. This was a direct attack against the political project adopted by Nasser. The ex-vice president of Egypt’s State Council, the highest judiciary body, claimed, “socialist laws wasted our belonging to Egypt” (Saad 1999: 392), portraying an attack against the socialist-leaning regime. This shift in global level political allegiances had its roots in the 1967 defeat against Israel and the acceleration of the economic crisis in Egypt at the time. Pressure against the Nasser regime created allies of those seeking American regional influence (Mitchell 2002: 166). Indicative of this shift was the rise of American allied Anwar Sadat over pro-Soviet Ali Sabri, even though both belonged to the 1952 Free Officers.

Another major global socio-economic shift was the liberalization of Egypt’s market, promoted by the minister of agriculture, Youssef Wali, former agriculture minister and member of the NDP party, and pushed by the World Bank and the IMF’s strategies towards private ownership. A 1997 report by the World Bank stated that rural development required “competitive agriculture and agribusinesses as the main engines of growth” (Hanieh 2013: 78). There was a push from small-holder farming and individual land tenancy towards what were viewed as a more lucrative increase in agribusiness farms. The IMF also recorded a decline in agricultural productivity at a rate of seventeen percent from 1989 to 1990 (Ayeb 2012). The was used to argue for the unprofitability of socialist land redistribution, public spending and service-provision policies enacted through the PBDAC and the agricultural cooperatives. Moreover, they argued that clear property rights would afford smallholders incentives to improve productivity and manage their natural resources more sustainably (Hanieh 2013: 79). Hanieh further claimed the IMF touted the Soviet Union as a successful example of privatizing land in the early 1990s. Small farmers, the beneficiaries of Nasser’s
land reform, were used as an example of unfulfilled economic gains promised through the 1950s reforms. Instead, they advertised a shift towards large-scale agribusiness farming, as well as desert land reclamation and development schemes, as a way to ensure increased productivity. Adriansen (2009) mentioned that the new desert reclaimed lands established under Sadat and Mubarak were mostly a way through which foreign donations, primarily USAID, and other international investments, could be spent. As a result, a shift appeared between Nasser’s social welfare programs for small farmers from the 1950s to the 1970s, toward a neoliberal project of export-led growth in the 1990s. The enactments of Nasser era land reforms were presented as a hindrance to economic development and of a past socialist-leaning era at a time when Egypt was moving more toward the west, through ‘Open Door’ (infitah) economic liberalization policies (Bush 2016: 295).

The effect of the counter-reform policy on a large sector of Egypt’s fellahin was largely detrimental and continues to break the backs of most small-scale farmers, as experienced in Tahseem and Nebeira. Saker El Nour notes that ‘Law 96’ of 1992, “liberalized agricultural rents—raising them in some instances by more than 400% and gave landowners the right to evict tenants at the end of a five-year transitional period. The law had harmful effects on the livelihoods of approximately one million farmers and their families and led to a significant increase in rural poverty” (El Nour 2020: 4-5; El Nour 2017; Ahmed 2020; Saad 1999, 2002; Bush 2002).

Habib Ayeb states that in direct correlation to the counter-reform law, tenanted farmers completely disappeared from the year 2000 census, as many became landless peasants when they could no longer pay their debts (2012: 81). The implementation of the law came with violent dispossession. The year 1997 saw an increase of police-induced
violence against resistances to evictions by *fellahin*. The Land Centre for Human Rights organization—that was later ordered to close following its defense of *fellahin* facing evictions—noted that 49 people were killed, 956 injured, and 2,785 arrested, several of whom were tortured. It was further estimated that 432,000, almost half of those affected by the counter-reform laws dispossession and violence, were now landless (Mitchell 2002: 265).

For those who continued to live on the land, as experienced in Tahseen, rural debt was the primary binding force that characterized their connection to the area. The minimum amount of debt per farmer was about $1,000, accumulated over the past two decades. Moreover, according to official government statistics in 2012, Egypt’s farmers owed approximately $214,077,294 in total debts from the state-owned PBDAC. The PBDACs and the agricultural cooperatives were initially set up as resources to support small-scale farmers but had, instead, in the counter land reform period, become an added burden for farmers through debilitating interest rates and enforcement of products and policies benefiting estate landowners and capitalist agribusiness. Counter land reform policies affected the majority of farmers in Egypt, whether they were direct beneficiaries of the 1950s land redistribution or not. The counter-land reform laws and the agricultural system put in place during a period of economic liberalization, affected evicted tenanted farmers on nationalized land, as well as farmers who did not directly benefit from the land redistribution like Tahseen and Nebeira. It affected a new village community like Tahseen, reclaimed from marshland in the 1950s, because their lands were rented from the state and thus vulnerable to the increased rents. In Nebeira, which was not sequestered land, despite having landed gentry like the Kounys and Siwis, (although the neighboring village of
Gabares included a former *izba* estate), the counter-reforms hurt small-scale farmers through the seed and fertilizer loans that they were increasingly unable to pay back with their commodity sales. As a result of the counter-reform policies, both Tahseen and Nebeira faced rising land tax rates, debilitating debts from PBDAC loans incurred to support their livelihood, increasing competition from emergent agribusiness, and decreasing support from previous welfare policies. In response to the inability to continue make a living from farming, village residents had to find a way to use land that was costing them more than their labor was valued in “open market” Egypt. As became evident two decades later, post-2011, a primary way of making use of land that was no longer economically sustainable through cultivation, was through residential infrastructure construction in Nebeira. The economic destitution of Tahseen’s community, despite the meager economic necessities they could provide through labor remittances, determined public infrastructures they chose to provide for their community. More importantly, their land ideologies involved trying to force the state to enact the Nasser-era social contract. They were entitled to necessary infrastructures in return for their labor on the land. Moreover, the kinds of social support, *wasta*-connections (to be elaborated in chapter four), and government-affiliated village members who could support and turn a blind eye to the informal constructions in Nebeira, were not as resonant in Tahseen. The material history of the land differed in both villages: Tahseen as a village created as a product of the land reform, and Nebeira as a pre-existing community, their relationships to the kind of social responsibility and social contract with the state, in return for their labor, differed. However, even though both villages’ material histories and their relationship to land differed, the counter-reform policies that took effect in the 1990s and their complementary policies of tax increase,
rental increase, and debt increase affected the majority of small-scale farmers similarly in both contexts.

**Local Municipal and Rural Leadership Legislation over Informal Building**

The military’s 2013 hard clampdown against informal constructions on agricultural land reverberated within the three scales of rural governance: Beheira's regional governor, Itai El-Barud's municipal director, and the head of the Nebeira agricultural cooperative. I conducted an interview in 2017 with the newly appointed governor of Beheira, Nadia Abdo, who had been in her new position for only a week. During that short time, she had also gained significant media attention as the first Egyptian woman to be appointed in a governor's role. In her Damanhour city office, Abdo emphasized, "the area where one of our biggest challenges and our main efforts need to be placed is enforcing stringent laws and cracking down hard on illegal constructions, a new law is under discussion now that will enforce a five-year sentence to those building illegally on agricultural land". Responding directly to the magnitude of the informal construction, she cited one million acres of illegal buildings, 700,000 of which were built after 2011 in the municipality of Itai El-Barud (under which Nebeira village is registered). To support the government’s clampdown, she claimed a seventy percent increase in the rate of informal structures after 2011.

When tracking down how this played out in Nebeira, Hassan, the head of the village's agricultural cooperative stated: "A total of seven-hundred-and-twenty-eight complaints were issued by the cooperative, as the most local state-affiliated body in the village, after 2011 to remove the new constructions. The demolition orders by the municipal authorities for these encroachments amounted to five-hundred feddans (1.037
acres) but those enforced and where the authorities removed the buildings is only about sixty-seven cases". The limited number of enforcements had many reasons, such as the fact that the majority of these buildings were immediately inhabited and, therefore, challenging to demolish and make the residents homeless. Moreover, it was clear through my visits in and out of the village that the army's demolitions, while enforced in the more visible areas like on the outskirts of the Cairo-Alexandria highway, were not taking place as much within the less visible village lands.


This was clear while driving with Nebeira's primary school counselor, who dropped me off on one of the agriculture cooperative visits. I pointed out to him a massive building in the middle of the fields. The building stood out, even among the many illegal structures, as they usually stood on the outskirts of the fields and not in the middle. He mentioned that
this was a building inhabited by a judge, and said, "he will end up paying a bribe to continue constructing it and eventually living in it too". This idea that people could get away with such structures was widespread. While the agricultural cooperative would register official complaints and the army would authoritatively bring down these newly built, informal buildings as a way to perform order, there was a belief amongst farmers and village-based government employees like the agricultural cooperative head, that most of these structures would be left to stand, primarily when inhabited. The demolishing of the buildings was a selective process. There were multiple other cases, such as the judge's building in Nebeira, where the authorities turned a blind eye towards illegal constructions. Not only was the magnitude of the number of buildings built massive but taking action against premises that were already inhabited would not be a smooth procedure. The development of these buildings fulfilled a need for housing and if demolished, the authorities would be expected to provide alternative housing for those in need; a task they were not willing to take on.

Differential Infrastructural Provisions: Ancient Greek Ruins & Sewage Infrastructure

At the same time that housing construction was contested and demolished, controversies concerning another primary infrastructural service, sewage, reflected the differential treatment between urban and rural citizens. It also illustrated the differential treatment between the rare number of villages that would receive sewage infrastructure and all the rest. This emerged while I was talking with Omar, a Nebeira resident who worked as a part-time private driver bringing me back from the governor's meeting in Damanhour. As we drove, we passed by the neighboring village of Kom Gi’eif. Nebeira's community, including my own family, humorously refers to Kom Gi’eif as Kom Genef (“the Geneva
village”). The play on words evokes the similarities of the village’s picturesque landscape with Geneva. Kom Gi’eif has a big lake frequented by white ibis birds, and large sycamore trees dangling on the edges. When driving into Kom Gi’eif with Omar, he commented on its beauty and pointed out how it is a shame that the village does not use its pretty landscape to its advantage. "Look at how beautiful it is here…Imagine if there were tables and chairs and umbrellas placed around the lake and people could come and visit, they could even come from Alexandria to sit at the lake and enjoy the view", Omar commented.

Kom Gi’eif was famous for its beautiful landscape. However, it was more notably known for being a historically significant site that contained ancient Greek artifacts, primarily pottery. According to Herodotus’ accounts, Naukratis as it was named then (Kom Gi’eif today) was the first Greek colony in Egypt between 1600 and 1100 BC (Leonard & Coulson 1982: 361). It was the center of cultural relations between Greece and Egypt in the pre-Hellenistic period. The archeological site was discovered in 1884 by British Egyptologists, Sir Flinders Petrie. Then, further excavations were followed by British archeologists David George Hogarth and Ernest Arthur Gardner between 1886 to 1903. Between 1977-1982, an American archeological research team led by William D.E Coulson and Albert Leonard JR returned to the site to launch the ‘The Naukratis Project’. However, the excavation project was not successful as the researchers, instead, found the archeological ruins submerged under the lake: the water table had risen by fifteen meters (Leonard & Coulson 1982: 154). Leonard and Coulson further noted in their findings that Kom Gi’eifs farmers had dug at the site seeking high phosphate fertilizer for their crop cultivation (1979: 159).
As derived from my fieldwork, villagers continue to excavate for artifacts today, digging beneath the land to unearth and sell objects in the black-market antiquities trade or when coming across them by chance in their newly built homes. Omar amusingly recounted, "it is common to hear the sound of digging throughout the night, and we can hear it across the canal all the way into Nebeira. There was a funny story once told of two neighbors who were digging beneath their houses in the middle of the night and ended up bumping into each other while digging." He further added that the authorities tended to turn a blind eye more in Kom Gi’ief than in Nebeira. The number of complaints raised against informal building construction in Kom Gi’ief was not regulated to the same extent. In Kom Gi’eif social mobility was significantly experienced through feloos el athaar antiquities money. Kom Gi’eif was treated differently through government infrastructural provisions because of their exceptional status, being listed as antiquities land. They were provided a sewage infrastructure and not faced with the same policing over informal construction as other villages. While I did not conduct extensive fieldwork in Kom Gi’eif, despite my walks to the village and brief encounters with its residents, I inferred from my interlocutors that possible black-market deals between the authorities and the village
inhabitants were made. This was commonly practiced in other archeological ruin contexts in Egypt, as antiquities serve as valuable commodities that can be exploited.

Omar mentioned a significant discrepancy between Kom Gi’eif’s infrastructural provisions and Nebeira's: a sewage system. Nebeira, a village of twelve-thousand people, operates without a sewage system, a basic infrastructural service, as do a vast majority of Egyptian rural communities. There is a significant lack of sanitation in rural areas in comparison to urban areas in Egypt. The main reason for this absence is a lack of a “clear institutional framework for sanitation in rural areas, and of a national rural sanitation program defining technical interventions and an appropriate financial framework.”² As a result, sewage systems in rural areas, including Nebeira and Tahseen, include soak away latrines. However, they prove inefficient as groundwater levels are usually high and end up seeping into the home and causing cracks in walls. Sewage leakages, therefore, seep into the streets and village irrigation canals. Other sewage disposal methods include informal discharge by sewage trucks into agricultural drains, which creates water pollution for farmers. During my fieldwork period in Nebeira, I witnessed the Omda trying to lobby family members in higher positions of the municipal government and ministries to use their networks and push for the provision of sewage infrastructure in the village. Likewise, before I met with Governor Abdo, my uncle informally told me to push her, questioning why a significant village such as Nebeira does not have a sewage system. One of the significant inter-familial tensions in the village involved an aunt of the Omda. Her house lay at the end of the canal, where there was a buildup of disposed garbage and sewage. As a result, a strong stench emerged from the canal and reached her home. For years, she had

pressed him on his role as *Omda* to provide a solution and insert a sewage system in the village. They are still waiting.

Beheira’s new governor, Nadia Abdo, had extensive water policy experience, since she served as the chairperson of the Alexandria Water Company and had worked there for thirty years. Abdo informed me that while water access is available at a level of one hundred percent to all villages, sewage provision is only at fifteen percent. When I asked about sewage as one of the pressing demands of rural inhabitants in Egypt, Abdo concurred. She clarified, however, that the budget needed for sewage infrastructure provision was “very high”, and that the central government in Cairo dictated the budget for infrastructure provision in villages and did not prioritize the funds for sewage infrastructure. “This discrepancy is not a result of the unequal decentralized sources across the different governorates, but it rather has to do with a centralized challenge regarding the allocation of public funds across all governorates nationwide,” Abdo stressed.

What Abdo meant by infrastructure budget discrepancies as a centralized challenge could be better explained as a lack of overlap between administrative planning and public spending allocation in Egypt. In an interview I conducted in 2015 with Magd Zahran, Urban Governance and Planning Specialist at UN Habitat Egypt, he specified an inherent issue in the budget allocation of public funds to rural-designated areas. Yet, this budget allocation is not necessarily due to the lack of funds available, but instead due to an administrative and planning issue. This planning “paradox” as Zahran phrased it, means that even though the government’s strategic plan is categorized on the level of cities and villages; the central budget, however, is categorized based on central (*markazy*), regional (*iqlimy*), and provincial (*mahally*) units. Therefore, the administrative and budgetary
categories do not overlap and create a significant lag in how and where the budgets get allocated. Zahran further clarified that this “crisis of planning” results in the governorates (Beheira and Daqahliya for example) not having the primary say in what services are needed. However, instead, it falls within the purview of the ministries, like the Ministry of Water Supply and Sanitation Facilities, The Ministry of Electricity and Renewable Energy, and the rest of the ministries needed for infrastructure provision. Specifically, governorates like Beheira and Daqahliya include directorates in charge of education, health, electricity, water and sanitation, etc. However, they are only administratively located in the governorates even though their budgets are allocated from the ministries of education, health, and electricity.

So how does the country’s central budget then get allocated? The governorates present their budgets-quote needs, they then address it to the ministries (like the education or health ministry). Then, the ministries request these amounts from the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development as well as the Ministry of Finance. What gets budgeted in the end, however, ends up being divided on the administrative categorization of the specific directorates of health, education, water and sanitation for example, as opposed to the governorates themselves to allocate the budget as they see best fit, based on their citizens’ needs and demands in an ideal situation.

Given this administrative and budgetary mismatch that keeps governorates unable to provide the needed services to villages, village leaders like an Omda, village authorities like the village council director, and the village residents, end up resorting to other strenuous means to achieve their needs. A lot of that depends on the social infrastructures and wasta-connections (to be explained in chapter four). Yet, other exceptional situations
also occur in certain villages’ provision of basic infrastructures like a sewage network. In an interview I conducted with the head of the Nebeira village council, he mentioned that only two villages had sewage systems in the Itai El-Barud municipal center, which administered the area including Nebeira village. The first was Kom Ge’eif and received it because of its antiquities defining as I mentioned prior. The other village he stated had “well-known people who were able to get their voice heard.” He further mentioned that to build a sewage network in a village like Nebeira, the cost would be exponential, reaching twelve-million EGP ($750,000). The village council head further stressed that such a system should have been introduced in the 1950s with the introduction of the water network. Electricity was shortly after provided in the 1970s. He stressed that people in the village only started to realize the importance of needing to provide a sewage network in the 1990s, with increased illness, specifically liver dysfunctions.

Kom Gi’eif, however, was the exception to sewage infrastructure provision. It was one of two villages in the administrative unit of Itai El-Barud that has received a sewage management system. Kom Gi’eif was included in a project launched by President Sisi in the seventh annual Youth Conference in August 2019, The Decent Life Initiative, addressing the country’s neediest villages, targeting thirty-two million people (out of Egypt’s one-hundred million population). Yet based on my 2016 fieldwork, the rationale for the sewage infrastructure construction in Kom Gi’eif that began in 2014 was because it was listed as antiquities land and thus valued by local state officials for black-market profits—not because it had the greatest needs. Artifacts found through the construction of the sewage network would need to be protected through proper underground water dispensing systems. The network was still being completed during my fieldwork in 2017,
as I could see water tubes from the construction site, in addition to preparations for the asphalting of the road after the network's completion. Informal home construction took place in Kom Gi’eif as it did in Nebeira. However, the municipal authorities like the police and the judiciary treated Kom Gi’eif differently not only in its informal constructions, but also in the rarely afforded sewage infrastructure provisioning. The exceptionality of Kom Gi'eif's profits from archeological ruins did not compare to the majority of other villages that could only depend on the diminishing agricultural wealth. The government's provision of necessary infrastructures in some villages over others raised questions about the infrastructural potentialities of land, which was further complicated in Kom Gi’eif due to its antiquity’s assets and historical significance.

The Shifting Generational Value of Land Use

My father is one of the people whose health deteriorated for nothing. He is fifty years old now, and until today, only works in farming. I look at him, and I see his wellbeing is being wasted, he is not making an income, he is always in debt, when I tell him to give farming up, he asks me in return: 'and what will I work?' There is nothing but farming that he knows and can sustain himself by, he has also repeatedly told me: 'find your path elsewhere [out of Nebeira] and stay there.

I sat under the four trees meeting space in the summer of 2017—where the Omda in Nebeira usually holds his meetings with the village members—with three men, the Mansour brothers. They had just returned from Cairo for a short visit before heading back to the city by the start of the work week. They reflected on their relationship with farming. One of them lamented his father's unfulfilled and unreturned farming labor. "I am one of those who finished my schooling and then traveled immediately after, as soon as I turned eighteen", he clarified. Even when returning to the village for visits like this one, "we hardly help out in the land", he added. While they first worked in the sales business, they
eventually started working in a dairy factory a few years later. We were having a discussion about what kind of relationship they had to the village and land, in addition to what types of investments they were willing to make in farming. One of them mentioned how agriculture was not only no longer sustainable but was only sinking them into a relationship of more debt.

The eldest of the Mansour brothers, accompanying them in this meeting, had not sought a living outside Nebeira, as his brothers. Instead, he was still cultivating their father's land. "Those you find today working in farming are only the old aged; it is hard to find youth working on the land; no one depends on cultivation as the primary means of income today." Counting himself among the category of "old aged", despite being in his early forties, the eldest of the brothers clearly supported his younger brothers' decision. He stated that getting into agriculture was very difficult and debilitating. Working in a shop or factory was "cleaner" than working on the land. By cleaner, he meant less labor-intensive, more physically clean, and also viewed it as a higher standard than farming. "When exerting effort there [Cairo], you will find a decent return; exerting effort here [Nebeira], you will find no return", he stressed.

Despite leaving the village, the two brothers' income was critical in supporting the family. In addition to taking care of their parents, the three brothers had three younger sisters, meaning that they would incur additional financial responsibilities, including their dowries. Dowries in villages today are a major source of financial burden and debt accumulation. In 1997, Egyptian families spent, on average, four and a half times the GNP per capita $1,290 in 1998 on the cost of marriage or $5,957. The "marriage burden" was
significantly difficult for families living below the poverty line in rural areas (Singerman & Ibrahim in Hopkins 2001: 81).

The eldest Mansour brother stressed, "If I had not helped my father out in the land, he would not have been able to pay for the girls' marriages. The land would have never married off the girls". For the Mansour family, income generated in Cairo was central in supporting the family. "In the past, families used to marry their children off through cotton money, or rather 'Gold Money' as it was commonly referred to in its heyday, but the last time we grew cotton was in the early 1990s.” Hassan, the head of the agricultural cooperative, had mentioned to me prior, that in cotton’s heyday in the 1940s, it was grown on six hundred feddans of land in the village. In official family expense books, including one I was presented by a distant relative in the village when conducting archival research dated 1944 to 1946, cotton expenses, cultivation, and profits took up most of the book's detailed calculations.

The Mansour brother, however, lamented, today's crops are the non-lucrative types like “watermelon for seeds", the eldest brother clarified. While Nebeira was a majority cotton-growing village until the 1990s, it moved towards primarily growing maize, wheat, and cash crops such as vegetables and fruits. Mitchell (2002: 217) noted:

In 1989, cotton occupied only about one million of Egypt’s six million acres. The other major industrial crop, sugarcane, occupied a little over a quarter of a million acres. Of the remaining four and three-million quarter acres, more than half was used to grow animal fodder principally Egyptian clover (barseem) in the winter and maize and sorghum in the summer and autumn. Egypt was now growing more food for animals to consume than for humans.

Cotton cultivation was proving no longer tenable, nor profitable due to global and local transformations. The cotton growing area in the Nile Delta halved between the 1950s and 1980s. Scholars have argued for several reasons Egyptian for this decline: labor, the drain cotton made on soil productivity, and government below-market pricing (Abaza 2013; Mitchell 2002). There was a move towards mechanized agriculture with Egypt’s economic liberalization under President’s Sadat and Mubarak. Cotton required a full eight months of cultivation and significant manual labor, which was hard to mechanize. In addition, cotton was seen as draining on the soil, so the government introduced strict crop rotations in the 1950s, which many farmers resented because it decreased their ability to benefit from cotton’s profit as estate landowners had under the British. Farmers also had to sell their cotton through the agricultural cooperatives, which U.S. government scholars viewed as negatively setting the prices below-market in order to manage global cotton commodity prices and regulate the flow of foreign currency in-country (Metz 1990: 188-189). Mona Abaza described her family estate in a former izba in the Nile Delta and mentioned how after 1985, cotton cultivation ceased in her family village and neighboring
villages (2013). Abaza specified that a shift to more lucrative crop cultivation like vegetables, grains, wheat, and maize, was a trend encouraged by the Open Door (*infitah*) economic liberalization policies (2013: 256). However, Abaza importantly noted the nostalgia towards cotton cultivation is tied to capitalist colonial British production and local landowning elites. For Abaza’s family, cotton cultivation was the primary catalyst for social mobility, buying land, building mansions, building villas in Cairo, and using servants from the villages to work as semi-slaves (Abaza 2013: 66). For most *fellaheen* working on the cotton fields, Abaza stated, cotton required significant human exploitation, physical violence, regimentation, and abuse of women and children for its cultivation (ibid.).

The head of the agricultural cooperative, the central municipal cooperative head, and the *Omda*, confirmed the Mansour brothers’ sentiments. They expressed to me several times (especially when not officially fulfilling their government-appointed roles), their understanding of the villagers' building on land as a response to being pushed out of sustainability through farming, population increase, decreased child mortality, and remittance income from outmigration. While sitting in the fields during the 2017 wheat harvesting season, the *Omda* stated, "people build because they see the land has no return, the land has become a burden, this [illegal building] is a logical consequence". He viewed building on agricultural land as a rational response to increasing inability to survive economically through cultivation. At that time, we were observing across the field the wheat harvest, where calculations would soon be made to determine its marketability. He further stressed that the inevitable increase in residential building on agricultural land would raise the price of land—making it even more difficult to make a living from cultivation.
In Tahseen, the fathers and grandfathers were the ones working on the land while the youth, mostly unmarried men and therefore financially dependent on their families, mainly worked in the urban construction industry. There was a visible discrepancy between who was working on the property. While it was still common to see the women in the fields, the majority of men were seen on a day-to-day basis working the land at early dawn and during sunset—and they were over forty years old. People like Marawan and Fawzy, introduced in the previous chapter, were not present in the village long-term, but were in and out every couple of months due to their construction jobs in Cairo and abroad. They would sometimes help out on the land when around.

It was especially common to see everyone in the village out in the fields during sunset, at the end of the villagers' working day. This was when I had multiple encounters
with Younes, a fifty-eight-year-old farmer who was the brother-in-law of Marawan. Younes had spent several years working on farms in Jordan but was now residing in the village. He passionately talked about the state of agriculture today, international politics, and several other pressing international events. One day at the end of summer in 2014, I sat with Younes on his land and reflected on agriculture. We had a very disenchanted conversation about the state of economic and infrastructural impoverishment that he saw in Tahseen. I probed him about the agricultural debts he had incurred and that he had openly talked about in our first encounter in 2012. I added if he had ever considered moving away from Tahseen or giving up on farming. He responded, "But where would I go? Farming is all I know". Younes' statement, however, came right after this statement: "It almost seems as if there has been a deliberate effort to bring down the state of agriculture in Egypt today," making it nearly impossible for small-scale farmers to make a living from it. Younes situated the significant decline in the state of agriculture during the administration of Mubarak-era Minister of Agriculture and Land Reclamation, Youssef Wali, from 1982 to 2004. Wali, one of the elite estate landowners, also held the position of secretary-general in President Hosni Mubarak's now-defunct National Democratic Party during the years the counter land reform law passed. Under Wali's leadership, the state of corruption in Egypt more generally became increasingly exacerbated. Wali was most notoriously known in the Nile Delta for his importation of contaminated fertilizers that resulted in high toxicity and cancer rates in Egypt’s villages, as reflected in Ahmed’s interlocutors’ accounts (Ahmed 2020: 11). Ahmed (2020) whose fieldwork research was conducted in a village in Fayoum owned by Wali, writes about her interlocutors’ experience with domestic land grabbing. She explains how cash-crop grape fields replaced the Egyptian staple wheat, which was
linked with socialist-era bread subsidies. Ahmed explains her interlocutors’ connections between state agricultural policies and political awareness thus: “That the spread of disease such as cancer go beyond the pathological, and soil degradation beyond the technical, to implicate the growing grapes on land previously filled with wheat crops” (2020: 5).

In Tahseen, Younes echoed a similar sentiment. He directly blamed Mubarak and his government’s ministers, primarily Wali, who he saw as "deliberately trying to bring down the state of agriculture in Egypt". In conversations with farmers and their families in both Nebeira and Tahseen, there was a significant level of ambivalence towards their relationship between farming and land. They were both tied to it morally and economically and continued to pursue farming, at the same time that they felt a burdensome connection to cultivation as currently practiced.

**Conclusion**

In Tahseen and Nebeira, small-scale farmers and large-scale farmers (landowners) alike referred to Youssef Wali as responsible for the devastation of Egypt's agricultural industry. The number of regressive policies that took place under his rule were vast. They ranged from a scandal around toxic fertilizers to shifts in commodity crops. More importantly, Wali symbolized the class of crony aristocratic capitalists epitomized in the 1990s counter land reform moment, who employed revenge mechanisms against small-scale farmers economically empowered and politically mobilized under the 1950s land reform. For most rural Egyptians working in agriculture, the 1990s counter-reforms dealt a massive blow through dispossession and indebtedness. Coupled with a process of “de-Nasserization” (Saad 1999), the reversal of socialist-era laws with the advent of a neoliberal economy in 1990s Egypt, and a decrease in public spending on rural social and
infrastructural services, the majority of rural citizens were left to fend for themselves. For the majority of small-scale farmers, the reality of sustaining agricultural land became untenable, in addition to the need to deal with an increasing population in villages. The post-2011 revolution period provided a political opportunity for many farmers to make use of the land in building houses. Not only was this a result of the decreased policing but also due to the opportunity to make formerly profitable cultivatable land valuable again—but for social rather than economic needs. With President Sisi's ascendency to power post-2013, and an accompanying nationwide security clampdown nationwide, his presence more pertinently materialized in the countryside through the demolitions of informal residential constructions. These military-led demolitions were both a return to pre-2011 order, as well as serving as a spectacle of army prowess, given the selective process of where and when destruction was taking place. The forceful removal of the building constructions differed on a number of factors; if they were deep within villages as opposed to being more visible on the outskirts of the main agricultural road; whether it was wealthy judges as opposed to small-scale farmers and their ability to provide bribes to the authorities for pardoning; if the buildings were inhabited or recently-constructed and empty. Land's potentiality for infrastructural construction in Egypt was a post-2011 phenomenon and made visible key shifts from its historical political and nationalist sanctity in agricultural use. A shifting generational value to the land was, therefore, evident between the farmers' generation of land reform beneficiaries, counter-reform victims, and post-reform migratory laborers attempting to make use of their property in profitable ways to sustain themselves.
CHAPTER THREE: Infrastructures of Mobility: Migration and Socio-Political Mobilization in Rural Egypt

In 2016, I was sitting with Yasmine after breakfast, a mother of two boys, just before I set out for my daily walking rounds in Tahseen, searching for people to greet and talk to. Yasmine flipped through some of her children’s textbooks, looking at what exercises they had filled out that day after they were dismissed early from school, only two hours after they had started. As we were discussing what her children were studying at school, the conversation soon developed into the abysmal quality of education in Tahseen. Yasmine explained that the road was the main factor for the lagging education level between Tahseen’s children and the other schools in the governorate. “The road is an example of why the teachers do not care about coming here and spending time with the kids. The kids are dismissed from class early all the time, and it is also common that classes are canceled regularly,” Yasmine lamented. Teachers found the difficulty of traveling to and from the village on the unpaved road to be sufficient cause for leaving early or not coming at all. When I questioned her as to whether this was specific to Tahseen or could be regarded a result of the general state of public-school education in Egypt, she responded that she had relatives in al-Daqahliya’s Mansoura City whose children were in the first grade and were a lot more advanced than her kids. “The teachers put effort into the students there; teachers in Tahseen do not want to exert effort coming here in the first place, and when they do, they are not interested in teaching”, she added. The teachers’ lack of respect in educating Tahseen’s schoolchildren was a commonly expressed sentiment by the village’s members. They linked the teachers’ unwillingness to exert the extra effort to make it to the village explicitly to the severe road conditions.
Introduction

Yasmine’s perceptible experience with the infrastructural impediments in Tahseen is directly connected to the more enduring effects of impeded community development. In Tahseen, infrastructure is directly connected to the village’s futures and pasts. Yasmine’s experience should be seen in the context of the infrastructural history of the village and its perduring effects until today. The infrastructural history of the village shapes its physical and social mobilities, in addition to the emergent political subjectivities of the villagers. This chapter will illuminate the connections between physical infrastructure projects, with their accompanying mobility affordances, like a road, to social mobilities tied to economic labor migrations. The chapter takes a circular path, starting from the locale of the two villages, first, Tahseen, al-Daqahliya, followed by Nebeira, al-Beheira. I describe later in this chapter the experience of commuting out on village roads, through regional kin-network migrations, metropolitan centers of Cairo and Alexandria, as well as international labor destinations of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Italy. Tracking rural villagers’ movements, as construction laborers, the chapter pertinently addresses what kinds of reinvestments are made in their villages upon their return. Primarily, I consider what forms of material and social remittances are invested back into the village, as well as how these are facilitated or hindered by their mobility experiences vis a vis infrastructural provisions (or the lack thereof). The chapter illustrates how citizens materialize their aspirations for a better future for themselves and their communities. These aspiratory politics took place in Tahseen through the building of the lacking communal infrastructural services from remittances generated abroad. These remittances supported the initiation of a political movement, by addressing the local municipal government authorities in their lack of provision and
maintenance of the infrastructural services. Migrants in Nebeira invested their cash remittances in buying land from other village members choosing to sell their land for fast-cash money. Newly returned migrants also constructed new homes on agriculturally zoned private land and navigated state efforts to police land-use laws. In both villages, physical mobility precipitated attempts to shift familial social status, however their infrastructural investments pointed to the ways in which political subjectivities emerged.

The differences in the kinds of return investments made between the two villages lie in their differing social structures, a product of their different material and infrastructural histories. The village of Tahseen was created in the 1950s during Gamal Abdel-Nasser’s nationalist-socialist regime as a new village, created from “reclaimed” marshland. Its social structure was overwhelmingly made up of small-scale farmers who had primarily relocated to Tahseen from other areas in the governorate of Daqahliya. The newly settled farmers were beneficiaries of land reform policies that complemented the creation of these new rural villages. Nebeira, however, located in the governorate of Beheira, was a more “common” Egyptian village. It had a much more stratified class social structure divided between the fellahin small-scale farmers and landowners. The struggle between the landowners (both estate and non-estate landowners) and the fellahin were central to the history of Ottoman control over Egypt (Cuno 1980), followed by British rule and then Nasser’s populist post-colonial government that initiated land reform policies. The shifting history of state governance, as experienced by Nebeira, is reflected in the mobility struggles of the different social groups in the village, primarily between the landowners and the fellahin.
The social makeup variations of the two villages were intimately grounded in their contrasting histories and materially built environments, and resonated through other domains of social life. By addressing rural to urban and rural to transnational infrastructures of migration, this chapter traces how migrants' experiences capitalized on these movements. Specifically, I address the forms of social mobility and political mobilization these physical migratory infrastructures and networks enabled to illustrate how rural Egyptians' political subjectivity was shaped by their everyday experiences with their material-built environment. Tahseen’s everyday efforts with infrastructural provisioning like a road shaped how that community saw itself in the eyes of the state: as a set of mutual expectations from citizens towards the state to which they pay taxes and rent. Yet, their view of the state differed in what ways they chose to seek demands from the state. For example, while Tahseen launched a movement of independence, they specified it was not to disconnect from the Egyptian state but that they chose to disconnect themselves from the municipal government, as the most direct government body to them. When expectations were not fulfilled, such as the governments’ absence from its Nasser-era patronage role and its preferential treatment of other communities through the provision of services to them, a break in the Nasser-initiated relational contract emerged. In addition, this chapter considers the fluidity of infrastructure that is not fixed in place such as an asphalted road, but instead shaped by the movement of people, ideas, and resources, and affording channels of mobility back and forth between the migratory origin and the places they are migrating to.

My research builds on a selection of key scholarship that addresses transnational labor migration and the effects of social and economic remittances on migrants’ lives and
I engage critically with the concept of mobility following Tim Cresswell’s intervention in thinking about the politics of mobility, the limitations such a term may have in predisposing movement and easily permeable borders (2010: 21). Cresswell elaborates, “mobilities are both productive of social relations and are produced by them” (2010: 21). The hindered mobilities of Tahseen’s community members, such as the teachers and Yasmine’s children, are due to infrastructural impediments. I consider who is able to be mobile and who is not, based on gender and class distinctions, in addition to the infrastructural opportunities afforded to Nebeira over Tahseen. Moreover, I address what forms of sociality emerge in relation to these differential treatments of infrastructural provision.

Other scholars have explored links between urban social and physical mobilities in the Middle East. Kristin Monroe (2014) writes about the precarity of Syrian delivery workers in Beirut and in thinking about spatial movement in an urban environment and how it is navigated by a precarious labor force. Farha Ghannam (2011) also addresses mobility in an urban Arab context by looking at two siblings’ movements through Cairo while navigating their social positions of gender and social class. Ghannam explains how gender expectations are not necessarily mapped onto the limitations for physical mobility, since due to the sister’s higher social status through her job and the advantages that affords her over her brother’s mobility as a man. I take Monroe and Ghannam’s interventions to heart when thinking about the need to be attuned to the specificities of navigating an environment both spatially, and as dictated by different social statuses such as gender and class. While this literature starts from the vantage point of an environment that presupposes mobility facilitated by urbanity, my research takes two rural contexts as the starting point.
of thinking about mobility, especially important when thinking through spatially and socially marginalized villages. I build on Monroe and Ghannam’s work by linking the spatiality of mobility, the physicality of infrastructure, and the tangibility of their entanglements. I explore what happens when infrastructural failures like a lack of a road end up mobilizing certain kinds of responses, like migration, as a way to build the road.

This chapter explores the interconnections between the point of the village's locale and the places rural laborers migrate to as connected to migrants’ sense of belonging, networks of movement, and return investments. Reem Saad (2007) writes about Egyptian migrants from the Nile Delta to Paris in thinking about their cohorts of migration. Saad, drawing on Basch, Schiller & Blanc (2000), notes that the Egyptian migrants need to be conceived as “trans-migrants” and as defined through a transnational network, living between two locales as opposed to being divided by them. Rural Egyptian migrants are to be conceived as living between two places, where the origin and destination are part of the same social field. Ulla Berg (2015) writes about indigenous Peruvian migrants to the US and characterizes their relationship to Peru as “active citizens” in their communities of origin. Berg identifies them as “phantom citizens”, who threaten the state, even when physically absent since they are just as active in their communities of origin when abroad. They are influential members in their villages and threaten the governing elite through their new-found heightened social status attained through migrating abroad (2015: 230). I follow Saad and Berg in thinking about the interconnections of the migrants’ two locales of the origin and destination via their social and economic commitments. I build on these ethnographic considerations further by paying closer attention to the specificities of what
locale of origin the migrants emerge from, such as a village with a majority homogenous social class, versus a more stratified one, as dictated by the material histories of each locale.

Migrants’ connections to home are sustained most effectively by their return investments in their villages of origin through remittances. Nicholas Van Hear (2002) addresses remittances as the main driving force behind migrants’ incentives and means for migration. Van Hear conceives of remittances as the material manifestations of transnationalism. Peggy Levitt (1998) however, points to the need to take into account how social remittances are just as central to the economic and material returns generated by migrants, especially in the form of the social capital gained and used by migrants. In both Tahseen and Nebeira, remittances are one of the key sources of development, specifically infrastructurally in the villages. Natasha Iskander (2011) provides a similar experience to the one I describe of Tahseen but in Morocco. Iskander presents a village’s infrastructural development in the rural Moroccan Souss region through decades-long migration to France. This emerged through the kinds of expertise and the remittances reinvested in their village upon their return. Primarily she showed how that shifted the regional and national power structures, setting an example for communities around them to follow. However, these works do not illustrate how differing social and physical infrastructural histories of a village might shape these political subjectivities and emergent infrastructures. My research connects the social and the material in thinking through migrant’s reinvestments in their villages of origin and how they materialize in their incentives for building homes or schools, and their aspirations for social mobility.

Migrants’ incentives are driven by a need for economic security, as much as individual aspirations for self-worth and individual freedom. When it comes to Egyptian
migration, Samuli Schielke stresses, “international and rural-urban migration is close to a total social fact in Egypt, second only to marriage, the military state, and the worship of god”, and “according to the 2017 national census, one out of eleven Egyptians currently resides abroad” (2020: 5). In their rich ethnographic descriptions of migrants’ everyday hopes, aspirations, and disenchantments, Schielke (2015) and McMurray (2005) illustrate the powerful affective work of mobility. Schielke illustrates young Egyptian men’s aspirations for social mobility, primarily attaining a middle-class existence as only being possible through migration since all other roads towards attaining a job are blocked (2015: 159). Nevertheless, migration for these men is grounded in building a good life at home, rooted in a vision of a world exterior to them (Schielke 2015: 152). Therefore, their migration abroad is tied to a need to make money abroad through traveling, but one that is rooted in building a good life for their families in their villages of origin. David McMurray (in Burke & Yaghoubian 2005) provides a detailed life history account of a Moroccan migrant to Germany. By following his life through several decades, McMurray assesses how the migrants’ sentiments of migration and social mobility pass down inter-generationally to his children. The migrant father viewed his migration as a sacrifice in pursuit of a more stable life for his children, transporting them into a higher social class in Morocco than he had. He did so through the purchase of land, building of a home, encouraging education, and seeking good marriages for them—though these did not work out as intended because of his extended absences. He faced a disenchantment of migration when his children also chose to embark on a similar path, a life of instability, rather than guaranteeing a decent return on the sacrifices he made. Migration stories are, therefore, always embedded in a complex set of social relations, attachments, and responsibilities to
family members and their communities of origin. The affect of hope and disenchantment dictates how migrants conceive of their migration experience. Both of these accounts, and many others of Middle East migratory experiences, illustrate unknowingly the infrastructural grounds upon which migratory affect rests: the roads, houses, mosques, and schools that facilitate physical and social mobilities and the concomitant political awareness of one’s relation to the state.

This chapter builds on the above bodies of literature on migration, remittances, and mobility, by illustrating the interconnections between physical mobility, social mobility, and political mobilization. My research makes a significant contribution to this body of literature by more tangibly addressing how the physical mobility networks of migrants are affected by the material histories of the places of origin from where these migrants are migrating. We see this difference in newly created Tahseen, versus a more historical village like Nebeira. The chapter examines the entanglements of the social, material, state, and public infrastructure, and how these entanglements take different forms based on what kind of village the migrants are leaving, returning to, and investing in. The experience of originating from one village, Tahseen, over another, Nebeira, produces different political subjectivities: such as choosing to negotiate with the state on infrastructural provisions, in the former, as opposed to bypassing the state and providing the infrastructural services themselves, in the latter. Mobility, therefore, serves as a shifter between physical, social, and political mobilizations. Citizens in Tahseen and Nebeira choose to tap into each form of mobility to see which one works best in attaining their needs and what moment in time, sometimes choosing to tap into all, at other times, choosing only to pursue the most successful form of mobility.
Women’s Hindered Mobility

Hagga Samira, who commonly cared for her grandchildren in Tahseen while their mothers worked outside of the village or farmed the family’s land, reflected on the dangers the village children faced. “Several young kids were robbed on the road, there was also a young man running behind them on his motorcycle to harass or rob them, you never know. There are a lot of thugs. I have a daughter who got excellent grades to go to university, but we did not make her go because we were afraid for her safety.” Many Tahseen women only leave the village as a group in the back of a pickup truck for the weekly market (Larson 1985) in a neighboring village half an hour away. Especially once completing middle school, girls’ opportunities for mobility drastically decreased. As the school in Tahseen only offered education through the sixth grade. They had to travel out of the village for further education, and the unpaved road further added to their mobility limitations. Young marriage for girls in Egyptian villages is common. Once they reach puberty by the end of middle school to start of high school, they get married, start having children and become tied to the house through domestic and agricultural work.

Marawan’s nieces would attend school only a few months a year when their father was present, primarily because he could transport them himself on his motorcycle rather than make them walk on the dirt path on their own. Faten, Marawan’s sister, mentioned to me that the lack of a decent road would hinder her giving her girls a good education. Women in Tahseen lamented daily about the girls’ limited mobility, and their fears that arose in conjunction, as recounted by a twenty-five-year-old woman from a family I met with regularly:

I was once walking with my sister in law on the dirt path, and we were each carrying our child on our back. It was starting to get dark, and a man on a motorcycle drove
up really close to us and threatened he would come back to get us. We started to run and scream, but it was in the middle of nowhere, only corn fields around us, and no one could hear us. Ever since that day, I have been terrified of walking on the path alone. My sister in law still gets panic attacks when she talks about this incident.

The absence of a paved road and the three-kilometer dirt path in its stead meant that the Tahseen community was essentially cut off from the closest village and regional road. In the winter, the village would get cut off from the village's muddy path. The municipality also neglected its provisioning of the road and its lighting for safety in commutes at night. Transportation was difficult because microbuses and tuk tuk refused to get to Tahseen due to its harsh road condition and distance from the town center. The village is also the deepest in the fields from the provincial road, making it the last in the governorate of al-Daqqahliya, followed by agricultural fields in the al-Sharqeya governorate. Due to the isolation of the village, transportation is not easily accessible, and only a few villagers owned motorcycles or cars due to their limited economic means; it was common to find multiple families sharing each other’s motorcycles. The village’s isolation was also due to it being a new village and the last stop on the road, in addition to their social isolation and lack of wasta-cultivation with authorities or an Omda. It was also unlikely, due to customary norms in the village, for the women to drive a motorcycle or car by themselves so they would have to depend on public transportation. For the women in Tahseen, securing a properly paved road, therefore meant that public transportation would be more accessible for them and their daughters—especially when husbands and fathers were working in Cairo or the Arab Gulf. In addition, they would have better access to goods. Importantly, a properly paved road would include other infrastructural provisions like lighting, making it a safer journey. The girls and women in Tahseen expressed the main reason for their reduced mobility, and
in return, their stifled educational possibilities afforded by mobility, as being directly attributable to the threats of commuting on the unpaved, unlighted, unmaintained path. The harsh road conditions and the lack of security faced by the more vulnerable populations like women and children resulted in their limited mobility. The limited mobility was especially pertinent in an environment where women in a rural Egyptian setting are already facing lesser chances for mobility than men, by working in either the fields or in the home. Mobility, in this instance, points to the need to be attentive to the positionality of those affected, especially gender and age social characteristics. The materiality of the unpaved path used for moving in and out of the village had a direct effect on the kinds of opportunities available for social mobility, such as an education and job futures for the children.

**Political Mobilization: “Administrative Independence”**

Tahseen’s community lacked a paved road and had only a three-kilometer, poorly maintained dirt path in its stead. The community explained that the state was neglecting their needs and felt this neglect was a form of violence. The village also experienced other indirect forms of violence, such as impeded access to higher education and healthcare. The absence of a road also increased the threat of medical emergencies as the closest medical unit or hospital was at least three kilometers away. In the winter, Tahseen would also get completely cut off when it rained, making it almost impossible for anyone to leave or enter the village.

The community experienced the state’s failure to provide a road as a direct tangibly felt example of deliberate negligence and structural violence. The village council leaders made the road a key pillar of village political action. Multiple negotiations with the
municipality by the village leaders since the early 1990s revolved around Tahseen’s calls for the provision of a paved road, a new primary school building, and a new mosque, as both these buildings were structurally unsafe. Yet, when the demands for these projects started in the 1990s, those leading the negotiations with the municipality were the fathers’ generation of those who officially launched the movement in 2012. Three of the main village leaders in 1990s, included Hagg Salem, who I mentioned in chapter one, Amm Malek who was in charge of cleaning the new mosque every day and also worked as a tailor in the village, and Sheikh Mohsen, a dairyman who was the main point person in charge of delivering the needed paper work for negotiations with the municipality. Yet, many who I had interviewed about the movement’s history, both from the movement’s generation leaders and their father’s generation, blamed Sheikh Mohsen for being the reason the initial demands in the 1990s did not lead anywhere. They claimed that while he takes credit for being the first to draw the municipal authority’s attention to the village, as he had also made sure to stress to me when I interviewed him in 2014, they also mentioned that he was more interested in developing a relationship with the authorities as opposed to prioritizing the community’s tangible demands, and had lost valuable bureaucratic paper work for the school construction efforts. During the 1990s, the previous generation did not express themselves as starting an official movement, but their activities were central to the trajectory of their sons’ movement and its resurgence in 2012. Primarily, it was in 1995 that Tahseen rejected its Omda, located in a nearby village but who was officially registered to represent Tahseen to the municipality.

When the Daqahlia municipality and its governor failed to fulfill these infrastructural promises for twenty years, claiming there was no budget for the provision
of these services, Tahseen’s youth leaders (in this case, men in their twenty’s) took advantage of the political opportunity found during the revolutionary upheaval as a result of the 2011 nationwide revolutionary uprisings to push for their demands once more. Tahseen’s village youth launched a movement of “administrative independence” in September 2012, during the construction of some long-neglected infrastructural services. Their main reason for launching the movement when they had already built some of the projects they had demanded was both a way to reflect their break of the social contract of paying taxes and provide all the essential services themselves. It was also a way for the movement, through media attention primarily, to shame the state into funding the road in particular, since it required a much higher budget than they could afford. Thirdly, it was also an attempt to bypass the municipal government and get attention from the authorities in Cairo and other possible individual funders, as I will elaborate further below.

The main projects constructed by the community members were the school, the mosque, and the medical unit, which they were able to manage through their experience as laborers working in urban construction sites. The funds collected for the construction of these projects came from the economic remittances earned abroad and reinvested in Tahseen. Most of the village’s youth would commonly leave at the age of fourteen to Cairo to seek work opportunities there. Once becoming legal adults, they migrated abroad, working in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or Jordan. Most ended up in the construction sites where family members from the village previously worked, pursuing the migratory networks their community before them had established. When their continued requests and negotiations for state support of these infrastructural projects stalled with no promising emerging outcomes, the movement leaders chose to dissociate from the Daqahliya governorate.
Following their claim for administrative independence in 2012, the village’s leadership refused to pay taxes, electricity and water bills, and forbid entry to any state representatives. The movement took place almost a year following the 2011 uprisings in Cairo’s Tahrir Square. Although Tahseen’s movement was launched in 2012, its roots were present almost a decade earlier, with multiple protests in the Al-Daqahlia municipality. In a picture published by the Egyptian daily Almasry Alyoum in September 2012, a number of Tahseen’s children and youth held a banner that encapsulated the movement’s goals. One slogan read: “Before the Revolution we were Downtrodden, After the Revolution we are Forgotten”. The second slogan read: “The village of Tahseen declares Civil Disobedience not because of Inadequate Services, but Because of their Lack!” These statements foregrounded the distrust of the community in what they characterized as urban-driven political change. In their framing, the political movements of 2011 were only another in a long line of unfulfilled social and political promises.

Several village members had been in negotiations with government representatives for two decades, demanding a new primary school be built as the original one constructed in the 1950s, when the village was created, had received no maintenance in sixty years. The school was crumbling. The ceiling was caving in, and parts of the walls were exposed, posing a hazard to the students. Yet, it was only once the village members declared they would work towards its funding and construction that the armed forces as a state institution finally stepped in. In Egypt, the government commonly uses the army as a contractor to build state infrastructures since it manages significant state budgets and has conscript labor as free labor. However, as expressed in chapter two, with the municipal funds for sewage infrastructure provisions, municipal authorities in Egypt are not afforded sufficient funds to provide the needed services that villages need. Instead, those ablest to provide roads, bridges, and sewage networks, are the local parliamentarians who lobby for services on the villages’ behalf. Therefore, cultivating a relationship with an MP, as Tahseen’s neighboring village did with the road’s provision, was not available for Tahseen. As a new and isolated village, they were unable to cultivate these networks of wasa creation with municipal and village Omda authorities. Instead, they chose not to be affiliated with him.

However, even though the army stated it would provide the raw materials to build the school in Tahseen it stipulated that the village would have to buy the land first and provide the labor force to build it. Villagers had to buy the land because they were tenants, and not owners, due to the history of the land reform laws in the 1990s, as discussed in the second chapter. When they first settled, Tahseen’s farmers were provided homes and lands, but these properties were owned by the Ministry of Agrarian Reform and Land Reclamation. Even when the villagers were able to pay the total amount of land cost to the
ministry authority by the 1970s to become owners of the property, they were ordered to rebuy the land due to a shift in land ownership policies that coincided with the counter-reform policies in 1992. As clarified to me by Youness, mentioned in the previous chapters, the Tahseen farmers were notified that the land by 1992 was deemed “state property”, demoting them to tenants. Moreover, even though some of the village’s farmers were finally able to pay off the installments to their land by 2012, they were still waiting their official ownership contracts, known colloquially as the “green contract”. Despite the Tahseen farmers’ labor on the land and practical ownership throughout the years, they still struggle for official ownership.

The school, completed in 2014, was a towering four-floor building, the tallest in the village. However, there was a significant ambivalence towards the construction of the school. A mother of five young girls expressed to me the crippling state of education in Egypt at that time. She posed: “What does such a magnificent looking building do for us anyway, what function does it serve if the teachers don’t come and when they do come, they make my daughters clean the classroom instead of educating them?” There was a disconnect between the messages of state provisioning portrayed by physical infrastructural projects and their uptake by inhabitants in Tahseen.
The mosque was the second infrastructural project built by pressure from Tahseen’s movement leaders with some support from other organizations. The village leaders initiated the mosque project following a video report about Tahseen’s infrastructure deficiencies and administrative independence claim on a private Egyptian television channel by one of Egypt’s top television news broadcasters, Amr Adib. In response to the airing of the report, Bank Al-Ta’aam (The Food Bank), a service organization, approached the village leaders about building the mosque. Although Bank Al-Ta’aam is viewed as a charity organization rather than a building firm, they appointed an engineer from the Bank to oversee the mosque’s construction. However, it was the majority of young Tahseen locals who planned and physically built the mosque. Marawan, a self-identifying Salafi, had taken on the leadership and management of the mosque construction since 2011. He stated, “This is the first time they [Bank Al-Ta’aam] have taken part in building anything, as they mainly specialize in handing out blankets and food to the needy, which we have repeatedly refused.” Since the 2000s, the organization regularly had advertisements on
Egyptian national and satellite television calling for viewer donations for people in need of essential goods. While acknowledging the support provided by the organization in wanting to provide help to the community, Marawan highlighted that construction expertise lay within the village from the experience they gained in their migratory urban construction work. He felt that this gave them an upper hand over city-raised engineers. Successive generations of villagers left the subsistence farms carved out of unarable land by their fathers to work as laborers in Cairo, sending their remittances home and returning back every couple of months. The village members generated a portion of the building funds through their work remittances, while Bank Al-Ta’am provided additional donations. Thus, the village workers understood the real-life costs involved in building the mosque far more than urban engineers or urban residents who would attend a mosque built by the state. For Marawan and others in the village, their physical mobility through migration, which had in turn been created through the land counter-reforms of the 1990s, had created the expertise foundational to both their political action and their infrastructural projects.
After the completion of the building of the mosque in 2014, metal rods could be seen protruding on the roof, in anticipation of a second floor yet to be built. During my last stay in Tahseen in 2016, the village members were planning, and had started allocating village remittance funds towards building a medical unit on the second floor of the mosque building. A medical unit had previously not existed in the village—a major community grievance of state neglect. Instead, the village inhabitants would have to make it to the municipal town center, approximately one to two hours away depending on the transportation medium, in the harsh road conditions, for medical help. This had resulted in several deaths, such as when children had high fevers parents could not treat, or pregnancy loss due to unavailable medical care.
The system generated for the funding of the mosque similarly sheds light on the social infrastructure of Tahseen. The local fund was set up about a decade prior which was designed to provide for village necessities in the absence of state care. The funding system required each family member, depending on the number of family members, including kids, to contribute a set amount of money on a bi-annual basis, following every agricultural yield. Through this fund, the village movement youth leaders allocated blocks of money towards needed services or medical expenses for the chronically ill. The fund was put to use before to treat a leukemia-diagnosed teenager. After his death in 2013, the funds gathered for his care were channeled into opening up a kiosk for his mother to make a living by selling essential goods.

While most of the men in Tahseen’s movement were construction laborers who physically built the infrastructure projects, the active mind behind the movement was a human rights lawyer, Haleem. Haleem was Marawan’s cousin, and while both men agreed on the motives of the movement, they disagreed on the method of achieving their demands. While Haleem preferred to address the media, rights organizations, and lawyers, Marawan preferred to stay out of the media spotlight and practically managed a lot of the movement’s goals from the ground up like the building of the road, mosque, and medical unit. Haleem was the main person behind branding the political claim as an “administrative independence movement.” The 35-year-old lawyer worked in Dekernes and Mansoura, commuting daily from the village and was rarely seen in Tahseen during the day. In fact, all of my interviews with Haleem were conducted while we were commuting out of Tahseen in his red Fiat. Since he was one of the few people with a car, Haleem would volunteer to drive anyone needing to exit the village. I took advantage of that opportunity
as much as I could. The lack of public transportation due to the absence of a paved road sometimes made getting out of the village more difficult than arriving to the village.

The rights-based framework for the branding of the movement derived from Haleem’s background as a socially committed lawyer. He was politically active during his university years in the Mansoura city chapters of several activist groups, such as the 6th of April Youth movement, one of the main groups that called for the 25 January, 2011 protests which originally originated in the industrial Nile Delta city of Mahalla El-Kubra, not in a metropolis like Cairo. He was also the primary connection to Cairo-based rights organizations like the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), who had stepped in to support and defend Tahseen’s movement in 2012. Over his fifteen-year career, Haleem had taken on several cases, mainly having to do with police torture and corruption in al-Daqahliya governorate. He was a leading spokesperson behind Tahseen’s independence claim and was commonly seen speaking to the cameras covering the 2012 movement. By 2015, two years after the 2013 coup by President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi that brought the Egyptian revolutionary moment to a halt, Haleem had found a job abroad. Even though he is no longer physically present, his work and leadership are just as active. Before his departure, Haleem left a group of young lawyers he had trained in charge of his office in the regional city of Mansoura to continue taking up the cases he would have taken under his guidance from afar.

The political mobilization of the community is reflected in the state’s neglect of basic infrastructural services, hindering physical and economic mobility, which generated specific political subjectivities predicated on dissociating from the state. This dissonance is represented through Haleem, one of the main figures of the movement. The experience
of the movement in Tahseen is also one connected to the origin story of the village, created by the state in the 1950s (as explained in the first chapter). Tahseen’s experience of the increasing recession of the state, reflected in the lack or the decay of infrastructural services as Nasser’s socialist-leaning state projects merged into the open-market political era, propelled the political subjectivities that precipitated alternative infrastructural provisioning.

**The Materiality of the Road and Tahseen’s Disconnect**

Marawan, another critical figure in Tahseen’s movement, was widely respected as a community-leader outside of the 2012 events. While Haleem was the representative behind the movement and more of a public speaker, Marawan was the active person in the village. Haleem was a respected figure and played an essential role in the movement, but his commute to work at the courthouses six days a week, made him more of a mentor to the village. Marawan was the cousin of Haleem and had become one of the few Salafis in the village, a follower of a movement of Islam that adopts a literal meaning of holy scripture at the expense of other interpretations. However, while he followed the Salafi doctrine, he politically dissociated with the Salafi Nour Party in 2012, following its siding with the transitional Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) in the first referendum held after the 2011 uprisings, over the redrafting of the Egyptian constitution. After spending several years working as a construction worker in Cairo’s developing and expanding satellite cities and Saudi Arabia, in the mid-2000s, he took up the unofficial role of acting village leader in the absence of the customary *Omda* (village mayor). He had followed an existing migration network established by the father of his second cousin, Fawzy, who migrated to Saudi Arabia for work in the 1980s. In one of my interviews, he
recounted how the villagers agreed, in 2004, to cease affiliating themselves with their government appointed *Omda*, who lived in a neighboring village. The absence of the *Omda*—customarily a locally elected but government-monitored leader—in Tahseen’s engagements with the state was a precursor to the foregrounding of infrastructure in their claim to independence. The defining moment for this decision was when the central Daqahliya governorate had sent a budget to a village close to the main road to pave the road connecting them to the regional town center. Tahseen leaders were incensed that the village close to the main road was prioritized over them, despite their need being greater. Marawan cited the nepotism of local village members affiliated with regional parliamentarian representatives (as I will describe in chapter four).

Marawan had led the mosque building project, overseeing its construction. After its construction, he had also led the process towards planning and funding of a medical unit on the second floor of the mosque. This, however, caused some disputes as several men expressed the lack of purity and cleanliness (*Tahara*) central to a sacred space and place of worship. They felt that the bodily fluids present in the medical unit would threaten the ritual purity of the mosque below. Marawan, in return, stated that the priority of emergency care would supersede religious stringency about the cleanliness of worship-space. As a result, the process of constructing the mosque and the discussions generated over its functionality coalesced in producing new interpretations on the uses of sacred space in Tahseen. For Marawan, civic responsibility of what was commonly viewed as a correct religious practice was encouraged over a literal text-based interpretation. This example of Marawan’s interpretation was central to his character, as his commitment to his community’s needs made him practically reinterpret his Salafi beliefs. More importantly,
it points to the material-affective relationship between infrastructure construction and the political subjectivities that emerge through their construction. Most of the scholarship on religious-political awareness in Egypt neglects this key point.

Marawan usually volunteered to update me on the events, tribulations, marriages, deaths, and births that would occur during my absence. He hosted me with his family in their home throughout the three years of my fieldwork in the village. In 2015, he greeted me at the beginning of my third year visiting Tahseen and instantly recapped the year’s developments regarding the road, mosque, and medical unit under construction. He asked me if I saw the shattered road on my way in and explained that over one million Egyptian pounds (114,000 USD) were put into the building of one-third of the road from Tahseen toward the main regional agricultural road. The reason only one kilometer of the three-kilometer road was completed, was because after months of deliberations with Tahseen’s movement leaders, the municipal government only offered funds to complete a third of the road. It was not paved all at once, and instead only a portion of the road leading out of the village. The asphalt was slowly chipped away through the villagers’ commutes in and out. It was also apparent from the multiple heat-induced dents, that the quality of the asphalt used was poor, so that the municipality could save money. Therefore, the funds that went into the building of the road proved useless shortly after, and any more of Tahseen’s movements leaders’ planned negotiations over the funding of the rest of the road were now going into re-building the shattered portion. The municipality’s allocation of funds for the building of the road, could by this time be seen as a way of placating the movement leaders. Al-Daqahliya’s government officials were performing to the media and rights organizations that had supported Tahseen’s movement of having paid their dues. They were
further seen to respond to Tahseen’s demands as a way to assuage the community’s supporters without concretely fulfilling their responsibilities.

Marawan showed me pictures on his phone of the shattered asphalt. It appeared that two months prior, half of the asphalt was destroyed through people’s commutes in and out of the village. This section of the constructed road was perceived as one of the only tangible yet unacceptable achievements from the local government that emerged out of Tahseen’s “administrative independence” movement. The provision of the road was the primary demand of the movement leaders. However, they were repeatedly informed by municipal leaders that there was no budget for its provision. Even though the movement’s main demand for a decade was the road, and even though a third of the village communal funds were allocated for the road, the state continued to fail in its duty to complete it. Marawan reaffirmed this was a central demand through which they would continue pushing the state to provide. They would make them “bow down to their demands.” Even though they had started “administrative independence” as a way to disconnect from municipal government control baa’d ma fasaloona (after they “disconnected” us), Marawan asserted that the community nevertheless chose to pressure the government on the main demand, fulfilling its infrastructural duty, such as providing a paved road. Negotiations over the road’s construction became a way to hold the state, in this case a municipality, accountable to the community’s demands, by not letting it completely free of its expected responsibilities to provide essential infrastructural service to the village.
As manifested in the anthropology of the state literature, roads as infrastructures embody specific ideas of modernity, progress, connectivity, and mobility (Dalakoglou & Harvey 2012, Roseman 1996, Moran 2009, Masquelier 2002). Yet, just as roads become a means for connectivity on the part of citizens, and a means for access on the part of the state; the absence or breakdown of a functioning road, proves just as central in analyzing politics (Virilio & Bratton 2006). The road in Tahseen serves as a metaphorical and material site central to narrative and memory constructions (Roseman 1996) of political mobilization. The road became the main point of contention between Tahseen, the municipal government, and the vestiges of Nasser-era state-citizen social contracts. The relationship between Tahseen and the municipal government materialized in and was negotiated through the road's construction. The materiality of the road and its chipping away due to not being constructed correctly as a result of the government’s cheating became a direct way for Tahseen to make sense of how it was seen in the eyes of the state. Contentions between Tahseen and the municipal government over how the road could
afford connectivity for Tahseen through its construction, or through a disconnect like the launching of a disobedience movement, was a way in which politics were played out on the road. The disconnect of the road was both physical and metaphorical.

**Alternative Infrastructural Reinforcements: Local Village Fund**

While deliberations over the road construction reached a deadlock, Tahseen’s political mobilization successes materialized in other forms. One of the primary outcomes of the movement was the creation of a steering committee to plan and manage the construction of lacking infrastructural projects. The committee included Marawan and Haleem as leading members. While the road was vital, there were other significant projects on the agenda, such as the building of the mosque, school, and a medical unit on the second floor of the mosque. The committee included some of the leading youth movement leaders, Haleem, Marawan and Fawzy. Fawzy and Marawan were both blacksmiths who had worked on construction sites in Saudi Arabia and Cairo. Fawzy was Marawan’s second cousin, whose father had established the first migration network to Saudi Arabia.

Tahseen’s local village fund originated in 1995, when the village collectively agreed that the money generated from outmigration and other income such as the agricultural yield, would go towards several village necessities, ranging from goods and services to medical emergencies. As a result of this fund, the village youth created an alternative system of local funding, bypassing the state and allowing for a system of self-sufficiency to take its place. This fund was essential to the construction of needed infrastructural services by the community.

Tahseen’s oldest generation, the majority of whom had sons in Cairo working on construction sites, typically reflected on the state of the village today as being a product of
their sons’ labor. “This village would not be what you see of it today if it were not for our boys working in construction.” Tahseen’s members commonly shared how the meaningful infrastructural investments in the village were a result of their sons’ work. Hagga Samira explained that even though the government in the 1950s constructed Tahseen with sixty government-built homes, when I was speaking to her in 2014, the village now had 300 homes. “A lot of these homes are supported from Cairo and Saudi Arabia; they are funded by the money earned from outside the village.” She stressed how the village was mainly built by those working in urban centers and abroad. Her own 18-year-old son sat on the couch next to us and scrolled through his phone. He was one of the young men who was looking for work in Cairo at the time we spoke. Tahseen’s youth migrant laborers migrated to Cairo and the Arab Gulf, mainly Saudi Arabia, to work in construction sites. The skills and experiences they gained from being abroad were not only invested in the village’s residential homes, but their efforts were, more importantly, channeled into constructing the lacking infrastructural projects for their community. Migrant remittances in Tahseen were essential in the provision of services that the state failed to provide or maintain in the village. These remittances were reinvested through the fund for the public use of the village, which were generated out of the personal experiences of the migration of these laborers.

**Migrant Remittance Home Constructions**

While Tahseen villagers invested their remittances in infrastructural services to benefit the whole community, in another Nile Delta village, in the governorate of Beheira, remittances were channeled for seemingly more immediate, individualistic needs. Nebeira will be the main contrasting case study for the rest of this chapter, where I will analyze the
connection between the physical migration networks and what forms of social mobility, such as class mobility, its citizens individually aspire for in the village.

In the winter of 2017, I headed to the dokkan (small supermarket) in the center of Nebeira village, where I was set to meet Amer. I had heard that Amer worked in Italy and returned once a year. When he was in the village, he took shifts at a small shop, filling in for his two brothers. One of Amer’s brothers worked as a low-ranking policeman in a neighboring city during the day and worked at the kiosk during the evening. The three brothers took different shifts at the shop throughout the day.

The kiosk was one big shop, divided by a wall. One section was where basic food needs could be bought like detergents and canned goods, while the dokkan’s second section was mainly snacks: towering cartons of chips packets and fridges filled with soda bottles. At night, it became a place where the three brothers would hang out with other village men. It was common to see a group of six to seven men usually sitting on chairs in the street, right outside the kiosk. When driving up from a distance, the place could be easily mistaken for a coffee shop, as it turned into a common socializing space with those sitting smoking a shisha waterpipe and listening to the TV in the background, most often news channels.

I walked over to the dokkan after the sundown prayers to try and get a hold of Amer. I had gone earlier in the day to try and find him but instead ran into his police-officer brother, manning the cashier. He informed me that Amer was not around and that I should return in the evening instead, which was when he was expected to be there. When I returned in the evening, Amer was sitting outside the shop but then led me to sit inside, pulling along two chairs to the second section of the shop where the snacks are stored. We sat in the middle of the shop, with bright neon lights on above us, surrounded by cartons filled with
chips around us. It felt as though we were on display to those passing by who would wave in greeting and then stare a little longer trying to make sense of me in that setting.

“You think we live in Zamalek? We are not like you are,” Amer responded assertively to my naïve questioning. I asked him what his incentive for migration was. He added that while he was a member of El-Kouny family, he was from a different line than the one I belonged to, and from which the village leaders like the Omda (village chief) originated. While Amer had just made the distinction between us one of different social classes, despite originating from the same family tree, he nevertheless leveled the difference between us by indicating a shared sense of acquired taste between us. Pointing to the small embroidered shoulder bag I commonly held throughout my interviews in the village, Amer reflected: “In Italy, we have a lot of similar-looking bags, they are very stylish and practical.” Amer gestured towards a similar sense of style we both shared while also affirming his affinity to Italy, where he had lived for almost two decades.

Amer’s migration to Italy, a desired European destination for migrants from the Nile Delta, especially during the 1990s, was a way for him to secure a living for his family, after getting married and having children of his own. As the eldest sibling, he was also responsible for his two brothers’ nuclear families when they needed financial support. Accumulating new-found wealth was a way in which he could sustain a better living for his family, but also aspire to a higher social status, as reflected in his newly built home and family kiosk business that he invested his money in. By reflecting on our shared sense of taste by pointing to my bag while mentioning the distinctions between us, Amer attempted to embody as much as perform his aspirational class positioning (Bourdieu 1984; Ghannam
More importantly, aspirations for new-found wealth were also a way to achieve power and status, especially in a class-segregated village like Nebeira.

Rural to transnational migration in Egypt started with waves of migration to the oil-rich and manual-labor-poor Arab Gulf countries in the 1970s to the 1990s. However, migration routes to Europe increased in the 1990s, with several Nebeira men, like Amer, migrating there. Villagers reflected class mobilities in the kind of return investments they materialized, most often made through land purchase and the building of new homes. The dokkan was located in the center of the village at the bottom floor of a four-story building, which also included a space Amer and his brothers rented out to a medical clinic on the second floor. The other floors in the building were rented out as apartments to other residents in the village. Many of the new residential houses constructed would usually be a minimum of three floors high. The building was part of the phenomenon described in chapter two, increasing vertical and horizontal construction on land post-2011 that was previously zoned for agricultural use on village lands but outside of previous residential areas. The village included more residential buildings that were three to four floors high, more shops, pharmacies, and cafes that villagers could access by going to the closest municipal town center. The residential apartment buildings sustained the increasing need for space of increasing families in the village, in addition to, making use of the land that farmers could no longer sustain merely through agricultural use.

Amer’s home, a ten-minute drive away from the kiosk and the center of the village, used to be a more generic one-floor, white stone building familiar to village constructions pre-2000s. More recently, however, vertical constructions of buildings emerged, with multiple floors built using red brick. The use of unpainted red-brick is a way that villagers
keep their homes appearing to be still under construction, despite physically living in them. As a result, they are not taxed and are not dealt with as fully completed buildings. Most of the red brick buildings built, in villages, as well as in Cairo, are built informally and not officially licensed.

Amer’s newly constructed home, three floors high, one for each brother and their wives and children, was built with *feloos Italia* (“Italian money”), as wealth earned abroad was more generically called by people in the village. The new home reflected the newly-acquired foreign-style aesthetic, not common to house exteriors in the village before the 1990s migration wave. The home was constructed with Roman columns and friezes at the entrance of the house, in addition to a white horse statue propelled on its two legs, standing at the entrance of the house. The second-floor balcony of the house was adorned with rose flowerpots. Interestingly, the aesthetics of Amer’s home had drastically changed from what I remembered a decade prior when I used to pass by it while visiting the village. These new markers of wealth invested in the village and their display through the flowers in the balcony and the roman style columns, indexed a particular connection to Italy. The representation of new-found wealth generated from abroad was reflected in the style of the construction itself.

Interestingly, the Italian style catered to the other village members’ imagination of what a house in Italy would look like. Amer did not live in such a home in Milan; as a construction worker, he lived in a small apartment that housed twenty other men working with him. It was probably rare for houses in Milan to look this way. However, this was a way through which a local marker of style could fit other village members’ image of what Italy was, as well as perform newly made wealth. This was a way through which Amer
chose to invest his remittance money and seek a more comfortable level of living that he felt he deserved after making the sacrifice to migrate to Italy. Amer’s attempts at class mobility were driven out of a familial infrastructural project and class-mobility aspiration, which differed from that of villagers in Tahseen. As described in the first half of this chapter, Tahseen migrants would direct the remittances towards the building of public infrastructures like a school, a mosque, and a medical clinic. Because Nebeira had a representative political figure like an Omda, with deep connections to other municipal authorities and ministries, it was more established infrastructurally, and thus more advanced than Tahseen. In rural Egypt more broadly, migratory remittances were not supposed to be for public infrastructure, but rather the government should provide them. Instead, the state disregarded their responsibility to provide basic infrastructure as a result of the reversal of Nasser’s land reform and land reclamation policies in the 1990s. The Tahseen community learned to depend on itself to mobilize private and alternate state actors to build its road, mosque, school, and medical infrastructure. In Nebeira, the growing need for housing infrastructure as a necessary infrastructure for extended families on agriculturally zoned land, were fueled by remittances. Differing political subjectivities emerged in conjunction with the differential experiences of state involvement in Nebeira and the villagers’ familial-investments versus state-recession in Tahseen and community-level-investments in state-lacking service-provision.

Unequal Migratory Networks: Channels of Legality and Illegality

A successful migration story like Adel’s is not always the standard in Nebeira. Despite the village being advantaged in relation a more neglected village like Tahseen, the more common migration stories are those in which people exert much effort, time, and
financial strains, as well as cultivating pre-existing social networks many times to no avail. Some of the tragic consequences of attempted migration stories involves death or incarceration, and is somewhat familiar for rural-transnational migrants.

One such tragic scenario involved Anwar, Adel’s cousin, who attempted to migrate informally to Italy for a job opportunity in 2006. He was one of three from Nebeira (another cousin and a distant relative) heading to Europe as part of a larger group of fifty-one men. They were smuggled into Libya on foot and embarked on a boat bound for Italy. But their aspirational journey was short-lived. One hour into their late-night journey, the boat capsized for exceeding its weight limit of 30 persons. Anwar told me about the thwarted migration experience on a day when we were both sitting under the four trees, before the Omda and his visitors arrived. We spent a half hour chatting as I was battling the flies in the hot summer midday heat. My constant hand flapping felt like a distraction and disrespectful to Anwar’s retelling of his heartbreak story, as he had many long pauses, sporadically staring into the cornfields behind me, and tearing up as he recounted the following:

All those poets and writers who talked about the sea, they are a huge nightmare, this is something despicable, the sea, when you are in it, you feel like the globe is so small, I swear to god, Prophet Muhammad said that the sea is water beneath which there is fire, and fire beneath which there is more water.

Anwar made it a point here to reflect on the sea in a way that de-romanticized it, contrary to how writers viewed the sea. In his experience, water was a huge nightmare, a near-death experience. He referenced the infinite feeling of being in the middle of the ocean as an infernal experience.
Anwar went on to describe how he spent twenty-one hours in the water, buoying himself on a piece of the boat’s debris until he reached the shore. His cousin, who had left with him from Nebeira, was not as lucky and drowned at sea. To Anwar’s surprise, however, it was not the Italian shore but the Libyan shore from which he departed that he found himself washed upon. Returning to where he started, he found himself detained by the Libyan authorities for his illegal migration attempt. However, instead of the two years he was sentenced for, he was released four months later as a result of a washta (mediation infrastructure I will analyze in chapter four) that intervened on his behalf. Through the Omada’s familial network (a relative in the foreign ministry who was able to negotiate with the Libyan ambassador in Egypt), he and the other surviving family members were released and returned to Nebeira.

Anwar’s failed migration story, as he recounts it, was one with significant hardship. “I came back with my tail between my legs, and my head bowed down,” he reflected. In fact, in our conversations until this day, there remains something broken about his demeanor. He noted to me how difficult it was to have sacrificed a lot and invested a lot and come back in a position worse than where he had set off from. The material investments in travel went to waste, and he had to start from point zero in the village again. But he also had to bear the initial feeling of shame for failing to facilitate his family’s social mobility, and in fact increasing the labor and investment he would need to do to improve their circumstances and status.

For Amer and Anwar, migration routes to Italy took place irregularly, bypassing the conventional means of accessing a visa and a flight ticket. Many like Amer and Anwar had migrated to Italy in attempts to find better work opportunities abroad in the early 2000s.
and took this route because it was the more economical way of leaving Egypt. Amer had left for Italy for the first time in 2003 through Libya. “We entered Libya illegally, of course,” Amer stressed as he described the journey. He took off with thirty-five people on a boat. The route took three days at sea before reaching Napoli in the south of Italy, though their final destination would be Milan. They would go to the Red Cross reception centers where asylum seekers would first register upon entry. “We hid the identity cards that would in any way identify us being Egyptians, attempting to disguise ourselves as coming from the other countries that were experiencing [political] turmoil at the time like Iraq”. He added that the migration routes to Italy through these unofficial channels were the most common routes to take. It was much easier than trying to go to Saudi Arabia, where the process of finding a sponsor and getting through the needed paperwork could take much longer than expected.

The chosen migration routes and the established migration networks out of Nebeira differed based on what kind of person was migrating. The different migration experiences of men like Anwar and Amer over Emad, to be addressed below, point to the cost-benefit analysis made towards chosen migration routes. Migrants like Anwar and Amer who have more limited means and fewer assets to save for the pricey migration routes, chose to take a higher risk of informal migration because it was less costly but entailed the threat of being caught and detained, or even worse, facing death. While others like Emad, a more economically secure migrant, chose to take an official migration first to Saudi Arabia, and then at a later attempt and where he resided today, the United Arab Emirates. Migrating to the Arab Gulf required a much higher personal financial investment to buy a flight ticket, attain a visa, and to secure a guardian (kafeel) in Saudi Arabia. This meant that some risks
may be slightly relieved by going through an official legal route. However, while Emad may have been successful going through the legal channels, it has become more difficult recently for Egyptian migrants attempting to work in Saudi Arabia to be granted visas. Villagers marked a class-status differentiation when discussing the “illegal” migration paths to Italy or “legal” routes to the Arab Gulf. The sites chosen for migration represented different ideologies about what kind of person was embarking on these routes. The socially established hierarchy of migration status became a class-distinguisher of the mobilities in the village between a manual laborer like Amer, versus an accountant like Emad. Emad, a Nebeira migrant to Dubai who had recently returned, had invested his wealth in building an eight-story apartment building in the city of Itai El-Barud, a twenty-minute drive out of Nebeira and where the closest regional train station was located. I sat with Emad in his dokkan in the ground floor of his newly constructed red brick building amidst the loud noises of honking cars and squeaking tuk tuk (rickshaws) quickly speeding by. Emad, casually smoking shisha, explained to me how he had real estate investments in the town Itai, including this eight-floor apartment building in which the apartments were being rented, as well as his other investments in the land around the village.

Housing infrastructure in Nebeira was, therefore, also a key marker of aspirational social mobility. Emad’s apartment building mostly housed village people who chose to move away from the village and live in the town center, like Emad, who described his conscious move with his family to the buildings in Itai as a more industrial center, while only maintaining agricultural land in Nebeira.

Emad characterized himself as a “legal” migrant who went to the Arab Gulf through the “official” channels, as he made sure to stress to me. He distinguished himself as “unlike
those who go to Italy and Greece,” such as Amer and Anwar. While the United Arab Emirates is not as common an Arab Gulf destination for rural Egyptians migrating for work, Emad clarified how this migration path to the Gulf started in the 1980s. A woman from Nebeira, a distant relative of his, accompanied her husband on his move to Dubai. Her brother followed her and settled there, after which several other Nebeira villagers soon followed. Migratory channels were established through which kin members followed, soon creating a whole cohort of Nebeira members in the destinations of which they settled, like Dubai or Italy. These sites of migratory settlements from Nebeira and Tahseen were termed as the “Nebeira village” in Milan and “Tahseen clan” in Jeddah.

Migration paths and the risks attached to them can be viewed as a trade-off. Adel and Anwar may have taken the less costly migration route due to their economic limitations. However, it came with a higher risk. While Adel was lucky and has been able to sustain life through his migration journey, Anwar, like many others embarking on this route, risked losing his life and served time in jail for it. For Emad, however, taking the official route of migration and going through the needed bureaucracy meant his risk was lower, but the financial costs were higher. In all cases, the need to migrate was largely determined by the need for economic stability, social networks, and physical routes. The physicality of the migration route, whether it be by boat to Europe such as in Adel and Anwar’s cases, versus a plane to the Arab Gulf like Amer, dictates who can migrate where and what kinds of migration experiences are attained in return. The different migration routes also portray how migrants pursue alternate infrastructures of mobility. When the physical way of travel was blocked for Anwar, he tapped into wasta infrastructure (described in chapter four) and found a middleman in between.
Conclusion

This chapter draws a comparison between two villages, Tahseen and Nebeira, in illustrating what kinds of experiences of mobility are achieved or restricted due to what kinds of infrastructural provisions are afforded. The entanglements of the different forms of physical, social, and public infrastructures are rooted in each village with its differential history to state-making. The differing histories of Tahseen and Nebeira concerning the state’s provision or lack of infrastructures, produce specific experiences of citizens mobility on the lack of the road, as seen with the contentions over the road in Tahseen. The life-threatening experiences of commuting on the road as represented in Tahseen, are central in the production of the political subjectivities for Tahseen’s citizens, that culminated in the launch of the movement in the village. Remittances in Tahseen were significantly invested in the provision of public service infrastructures like the school, the mosque, and the fund. For Nebeira, mobility is more easily afforded as a result of its connection to infrastructural services, as a historically state-aligned village, making it a more connected village to other outside towns and services. Individual class mobility was sought after more in Nebeira and is manifested through remittances in more individually attained projects like the building of homes and investments in land. These contrasting experiences of mobility in the two villages are determined by the physicality of the origin place, as embedded in their infrastructural histories. Mobility in this chapter functions as a shifter, illustrating how physical mobility, social mobility and political mobilization are sought at different moments in time, based on what goals are sought after.
CHAPTER FOUR: Wasta: The Communicative Infrastructure of Social Action

On a mid-November day, the village men gathered for the daily communal meetings of the Omda (village chief) in the Nile Delta village of Nebeira, al-Beheira governorate in Egypt. I sat in between the Omda and two men, Anwar and Hassan, regularly present under the ‘four trees’ where the gathering occurred. Hassan was the head of the agricultural cooperative in the village, a state-aligned body that in its current state, mainly dealt with land sale transactions. Anwar (whose migration story I introduced in chapter three) was a former government employee who now took part in small businesses like the chicken trade. Anwar and Hassan, the most common visitors to the Omda circle gatherings, engaged in a discussion that ranged from preparations for the wheat season cultivation to a review of President Sisi’s rule and his economic policies. Anwar and Hassan interjected at several moments in the sitting with the following statements.

Anwar: “The ‘Awad line of the family’ [from which the Omda claims descent], is the most respectable”
Hassan: “You are a geha siyadeya [sovereign authority] and no one can take your place, not anyone can play the role of Omda”.

Anwar: Omda Hamed [former Omda who was the uncle and step-father of current Omda] had more weight than [President] Mubarak at the peak of his time.”
Hassan: “Many [in the village] believe they can buy their way up class by showing off their cars and how high their houses are, but no one stands close to your stature”.

Introduction

The seemingly excessive oratory expressed by Anwar and Hassan are a way of performing allegiance to the Omda and reproducing power hierarchies. In return, these oratory performances are also the way through which the Omda’s status, as the village leader, is reaffirmed on a daily basis. Yet, it is important to think about what other communicative function this practice of “sweet-talk” serves. Sweet-talk, a form of
mugamala (flattery), is a term I find most closely captures the kind of coaxing and subordination to authority characterizing this communication. It is commonly practiced when speaking to a village chief in Egypt. However, it also became clear how this expression of flattery laid the grounds for requesting a favor. Sweet-talk, evidently seemed to be an expected communicative code in the Omda’s presence. More specifically, sweet-talk was the channel through which a washta would be developed. Wasta, deriving from the word waseet, or mediator in Arabic, is a common practice of connection building. Many settings involve a wasta, a term both descriptive of the practice of mediation but also of the person as a waseet to intervene on behalf of a requester. Common practices of developing a wasta take place when trying to get a job or speeding up bureaucratic paperwork. Since the bureaucratic process can be a maze to navigate and involves a long process of waiting and endless returning to the government institutions to attain, many citizens attempt to find shortcuts to the system. A way in which these shortcuts are initiated is through developing a contact-person to serve as a mediator on behalf of a requester.

Nebeira village community meeting with Omda al-Beheira. May 2017. Photo: Nada El-Kouny
In this chapter I focus on communicative channels that are established in two different contexts, one village in the governorate of al-Beheira, Nebeira and the other village in the governorate of al-Daqahliya, Tahseen. By focusing on communicative channels, the chapter develops the notion of “language materiality” (Shankar & Cavanaugh 2012) to illustrate what effect verbal intercommunication has in producing material outcomes. Communication therefore functions not only as an avenue through which people can impart information, but also a way through which they can gain material outcomes. These outcomes, like the building of roads, mosques and schools, or the landing of a job, are key to political mobilization since they are the avenues through which authority is negotiated and contested. I analyze two Nile villages’ differing relationships to representatives of state governance to understand how different speaking genres arise from, and give rise to, the material infrastructures in the two villages.

Not everyone is afforded the opportunity to capitalize on a *wasta*, due to their exclusion from networks of power like a village chief, or by actively refusing to be part of these networks. Tahseen, the second village to be addressed in this chapter, practices a speaking genre opposite to “sweet-talk”, that of direct talk. As mentioned previously, youth leaders in Tahseen launched a movement of “administrative independence” in 2012 in response to state neglect of the provision and upkeep of basic infrastructural services like a road, mosque and school. Tahseen’s movement leaders mobilized since the early 2000s. One of their first steps was to distance themselves from their *Omda*, who they saw as ignoring their requests in negotiating on their behalf with the municipality for the provision of a paved road. Haleem, one of the main movement leaders in Tahseen reflected on what the lack of a road meant for the community. During the first week of the civil disobedience
movement in Tahseen, I was interviewing Haleem at the entrance of the village, when he stated emphatically: “The village of Tahseen declares civil disobedience not because of inadequate services but rather due to their lack.”

Haleem’s statement was the driving slogan for the movement, which was also written on banners that the village’s children held up for pictures. He reflected on what the lack of a road meant for his community, especially the children who were forced to walk three hours a day on a dangerous path to get to school. The children would experience several casualties on their commute such as falling in the canal on the side of the path, fears of harassment, or kidnappings for organ trafficking. “This is not just. We will not end this protest. We will not be made to choose an ultimatum, the education of our children or their death. We hold all those responsible accountable, starting from the governor [of al-Daqahliya] all the way up to the president of the nation” he stated.

This form of direct, confrontational talk practiced by Haleem was also evident amongst other members in Tahseen, especially the youth in the village, as they directly held authorities accountable and launched an independence movement. Nevertheless, direct talk in Tahseen functioned as a way to bypass official government representatives and instead address alternative political actors in Egypt like the media and civil society organizations.

Political scientists and business economists writing on the Middle East have extensively addressed the concept of *wasta*. Yet the way in which *wasta* is commonly addressed is principally as a form of nepotism and cronyism, pushing out those unable to develop these connections and placing them at a social and economic disadvantage (Barnett 2013; Talib 2017). *Wasta* is also seen as a reflection of an immature political system, in
which societies with a significant reliance on *wasta*, have not reached a modern bureaucratic structure (Barnett 2013). Cross-cultural understandings of *wasta* have compared it to the concept of Guanxi in China as a form of social capital (Lutomia et al. 2017). *Wasta*, in comparison to Guanxi, is mainly viewed as a way in which individuals capitalize on kin networks and social relations to get through loopholes related to the official bureaucracy (Hutchings & Weir 2006). Cunningham and Sarayrah (1994) concede, rather than seeing *wasta* as a problem, its widespread cultural prevalence should be seriously addressed. Therefore, *wasta* in itself is not a problem but becomes a problem when it is overused.

Developing a *wasta* is a process of creating an informal network of support especially for communities that are placed at a social or economic disadvantage. Singerman (1997) proposed how developing these informal networks for the less powerful are ways in which communities like the poor in Cairo, build up networks with more powerful members in their family or their community to access resources. My approach to *wasta* as a social network more closely aligns with Singerman’s (1997) approach of informal networks. I prefer to propose *wasta* as a social infrastructure rather than a social network. I develop Elyachar’s (2010) notion of the social infrastructure of “phatic labor,” communicative practices that require labor to facilitate networks among people. Amongst the women in Cairo who Elyachar studied, these networks were ways in which they empowered themselves in contexts of economic disparity. I expand on Elyachar’s notion of social infrastructure to illustrate *wasta* as a key channel by which status can be gained, social leverage can be initiated, shortcuts to sometimes-impenetrable government institutions can be taken, and physical infrastructures build or maintained.
A focus on forms of sociality and communication as means of social organization in anthropological literature has been significantly addressed in Middle East literature. Abu-Lughod (1988) has elaborated on forms of sociality through poetry in the Awlad Ali tribe of the Western Desert in Egypt. Poetry as a genre, functions as the socially acceptable framework through which sentiments of people’s personal life, such as love, could be expressed. Early (1993) addressed how low-income communities in Cairo conceived of their cultural authenticity as true Egyptians through their ritual daily greetings and performances of hospitality. Yet sites of sociality, such as village leadership meetings, are spaces where power hierarchies can be played out. Gilsenan (1996) writing on these masculine spaces in Lebanon, seriously probed joking, humor, and bullying as a form of play that reinforced power hierarchies between the men present in these spaces.

Using both cases of Tahseen and Nebeira to reflect on how wasta is enacted through sweet-talk or direct talk, I address the “social infrastructure” (Elyachar 2010) in rural Egypt as a key channel for citizens’ access of state services. Wasta as a social infrastructure serves a basis through which citizens, especially those in marginalized rural communities develop certain communicative skills and channels of alliance building that are essential to navigating the opaque state bureaucracy and accessing necessary material benefits.

The presence of an Omda (village chief) in the first village versus a youth-led village council in the second, produces different speaking genres like “sweet talk” versus direct talk. The two villages’ differing communicative practices serve as a channel for wasta initiation and are directly linked to their differing rural histories and connections to land. As described in the introduction, Tahseen, is a “new village” created in the governorate of al-Daqahliya as a result of President Gamal Abdel-Nasser’s nationalist-
socialist-leaning land reform and reclamation projects in the 1950s. This process provided fellahin, small-scale farmers, with land ownership opportunities. The second village, Nebeira, in al-Beheira governorate was former estate land under Ottoman and British rule of Egypt that became nationalized under President Nasser and then returned to private landowners during the 1990s under Egypt’s open market policies.

This chapter connects the social infrastructures of the materiality of communication (sweet-talk and direct-talk) to the physical infrastructures of the materiality of place (new village settlements in the 1950s as opposed to former estate lands). By connecting both forms of infrastructure, I analyze how wasta is perceived and created in different rural Egyptian contexts, what essential function it serves in attaining certain objectives, and what that means for those who are excluded from the spaces and subjects of wasta initiation in the village. The materiality of the two rural sites, based on their different relationships to village governance, produce different socialites. The history of a deep-seated Omda, village chief structure in Nebeira and a resistance to customary village governance in Tahseen, produce differential opportunities for accessing the needed communicative channels. This chapter illustrates how a wasta functions by connecting it to the contrasting communicative channels like sweet-talk in Nebeira versus direct-talk in Tahseen. While the concept of wasta toys with favoritism and corruption, a societal ailment, wasta is also a social infrastructure that is essential to everyday sociality to a majority of marginalized citizens.

I am not arguing that direct talk in Tahseen and sweet-talk in Nebeira are fundamentally different kinds of wasta. I am also not arguing that wasa is an inherently rural Egyptian phenomenon. In fact, the social infrastructure of wasta is practiced in
different cultural contexts, such as in US academia, where doctoral candidates practice sweet-talk with professors in academic conferences to help aid their chances of getting a job in their departments. What I am, however, arguing is that the labor and habitus required to turn affective talk to material benefit works on different linguistic infrastructures. Several factors influence these linguistic infrastructures like the material histories of the two villages, the power dynamics in each village based on their relationship to government authorities like an Omda, their out-migration experiences, and their educational infrastructures.

The practice of sweet-talk and direct-talk in wasṭa-initiation as a social infrastructure are primarily learned behaviors that can best be described as acquiring a specific habitus (Bourdieu: 1977). In Nebeira, the ‘Four Trees’ meeting space is a place where this practice is learned. It is also learned in the workplace, such as in the village council between young employees and their bosses, where sweet-talk reproduces the power dynamics in place. However, direct-talk, as practiced in Tahseen, is mainly a resistance to what they perceive as illegitimate power hierarchies that fail to fulfill their role like the Omda or al-Daqahliya governor. Direct-talk in Tahseen is also a way to address alternative, non-government representative political actors like the media and civil society. While many in Nebeira attempt to initiate a wasṭa and capitalize on it, it has to be smoothly performed, where the wasṭa-initiator expresses flattery while at the same time not coming across as too overbearing or nagging. Moreover, if one seems uncomfortable or awkward in performing the bodily habitus, based on several factors such as their age, gender, or lack of understanding of the norms of the communicative frame in that context, it can create a break the communication and leave the desired outcome unfulfilled.
Initiating a Wasta

The Omda’s circle where Anwar and Hassan were present, takes place under the four trees each day. Held after the late afternoon prayers and going as late as sundown prayers, people from the village come to meet with the Omda on a daily basis. This is a meeting space that brings together those from the village and sometimes neighboring villages that want to meet with the Omda to solve a grievance, settle a dispute, or carry out any transactions having to do with land sales.

While the Omodeya is a traditional form of governance that has persisted until today in several of Egypt’s villages, over the past three decades it has become less commonly followed. Yet, in villages that still abide by this system of governance, the role of the Omda is mainly a dispute-solving position, superseding or sometimes standing parallel to the state’s official legal process. The Omda is responsible for solving disputes, overseeing land transactions, and maintaining order through customary law. The Omodeya serves an
alternative to the official legal routes of problem solving. A common comparison made by the people in Nebeira in regard to their preference of choosing to solve disputes through ‘aadet ‘orf (customary mediation sitting or meeting) over the courts is familiarity and speed. It has become a useful alternative to taking the legal route, which can be a very difficult and prolonged process of navigating the bureaucracy for the purpose of resolving disputes that can be shelved for seven years. Since Nebeira is administratively a qarya omm or mother village, its Omda overseas the affairs of seven other villages.

Some, namely those who have the cellphone number of the Omda, call him beforehand and inform him of their expected presence. But the majority show up, sit and wait for him to appear. The Omda usually walks in from his istiraha built adjacent to the main house, a private hangout and invitation-only meeting space for his close friends and associates. Slowly, people trickle in and sit to chat together until he shows up. These circles are mostly male dominated, where even if a woman is the subject of the dispute, it is more common for a male member of the family to represent on her behalf. Many of the women who do show up themselves, end up sitting on the far-end corner of the squared sitting area. More commonly however, they stand to the side; catching the Omda before he enters the circle and sits down, ready to attend to the different people waiting to speak to him. For a few minutes, they stand to chat with him, either talking to him on the outskirts of the sitting area while still standing or waiting until they are invited to sit down with the rest of the those on the margins of the circle; sometimes taking the invitation to join the circle; other times surrendering to the order.

The men in the circle start to groom themselves into speaking to the Omda by establishing rapport, such that the conversations only start about fifteen to thirty minutes
after his arrival. Depending on who the participants are, as well as the mood the Omda is in, those attending warm up with jokes, sarcasm and gossip. The men who have a closer relationship to the Omda sit close to him; while the lesser known usually sit further away from him. Customary in these meetings is a tradition where each person takes part in oratory flamboyance, both by competing against each other, as well as by dominating the space. Initiating these oratory performances of flattery is the foundation for any further discussions.

Anwar and Hassan were both very capable of practicing the techniques of sweet-talk. Both men were able to do so by being part of the circle for years. Their presence was based on kinship ties with the Omda, despite being of different classes, and a keenness in building on these connections at the four trees meetings. Both men, being connected to the Omda, sought to capitalize on his network in solving disputes that they were both involved in.

One of these instances, in which a wasta-initiation situation worked in the favor of Anwar, involved the tragic scenario described in chapter three, in which he attempted to migrate informally to Italy for a job opportunity in 2006. He, along with his cousin and another distant relative, were part of a group of fifty-one men who were smuggled into Libya on foot to embark on a boat headed for Italy. Their aspirational journey was short-lived, however as one hour into their late-night journey, the boat capsized, and he ended up in a Libyan jail. Anwar had told me about his tragically thwarted experience of migration to Italy on a day when we were both sitting under the four trees prior to the Omda and his visitors arriving. As related in chapter three, Anwar was sentenced to two years, but was released after four months because of a wasta that intervened on his behalf. A relative in
the foreign ministry was able to initiate conversations between the Libyan embassy in Egypt and the Egyptian embassy in Libya for his release.

Having a *wasta* through the *Omda* was also a way of getting Hassan out of trouble. One day after returning from the agricultural cooperative, I mentioned to the *Omda* how I was surprised to see Hassan in his professional attire of a shirt and pants as opposed to his *galabeya*, the dress-like robe he usually wore and is also commonly worn in the village. The *Omda* laughed, mentioning how this was actually something that got Hassan into trouble for not going to the office in professional attire or following work orders. Hassan’s refusal to dress in professional attire caused an altercation between him and his superior. Hassan continued to occasionally dress in his *galabeya* when at work, despite his boss’s several warnings to him to dress in a shirt or trousers. Hassan, known for being a hot head, apparently crossed the line in raising his voice to his superior. His supervisor threatened to sideline him from his job. The *Omda* intervened on Hassan’s behalf to facilitate his reinstatement to his position—because he had already laid the social infrastructural groundwork through his sweet-talk performances.

The hierarchical chain of initiating a *wasta* through a village head and the practice of sweet-talk was almost non-existent in Tahseen. Tahseen initiated a movement of “administrative independence” in 2012 that had its roots about a decade prior. Tahseen’s youth movement leaders cited one of the main precursory steps they took was to dissociate themselves from their *Omda* in the 1990s located in a neighboring village. The community chose to not be affiliated with him anymore since they viewed him as not representing their needs: he gave preferential treatment to other villages over Tahseen. But the last straw for them was one of the major infrastructural projects, the building of the road. They petitioned
their Omda to lobby for the paved road on their behalf, but they kept getting the usual responses that the municipal center did not have the requisite funds to do so. However, this statement was proven to be inaccurate when they saw a neighboring village had been granted a paved road, even though that village was closer to the main highway than Tahseen and thus, was in lesser need of it.

Marawan, one of the movement leaders in Tahseen explained to me, “Things are different in other villages, for example, in the neighboring Mubarak village, they have a school, in fact it had recently been built in place of an older one. The village also has a medical unit, and even though it is not well equipped, there is a pediatric consultant that goes every Thursday.” Sitting in the communal area in his home in the summer of 2014, with news broadcasting in the background, Marawan recollected the initial break with the Omda, MP, and the regional governor. “The MP started fighting us publicly when we officially made a statement that we would not vote for the MP the second time around because we supported him the first time around and he gave us promises but we saw nothing in return. He blocked a lot of our paperwork from reaching the municipality. When we ended up building the school on our own, he was actually shocked about it and fought us again by coming and claiming they would shut the school down and started to take the desks out.”

The village of Mubarak had been able to develop a connection with an MP who lobbied on their behalf and mobilized his wasṭa connection to facilitate the road’s construction. If it was determined on a needs-basis, Tahseen would have received a priority for the road’s construction, but it was Mubarak village’s preferential treatment facilitated by their MP’s wasṭa that granted them the paving of the road.
Because Tahseen leaders did not have a connection to the *Omda*, they developed a more grassroots method of getting things done through direct representation. Therefore, the form of communicative socialization of sweet-talking to reach people in positions of positions of power, like that seen in Nebeira, was not evident. While codes of respect were always directed towards their village elders, the same was not seen in relation to people in political authority such as the *Omda* they had dissociated with or the governor of al-Daqahliya. In fact, the claim to “independence” in Tahseen was a direct representation of the refusal of communication and negotiation with municipal state personnel. This direct-talk of refusing negotiation with the municipal authorities and their refusing entry to Al-Daqahilya’s governor to their village during their civil disobedience action in 2012 was a physical materialization of that direct-talk.

Some of the independence movement leaders such as Haleem, a lawyer from the village who had received his degree from Mansoura University, had been an activist since his university days. He was involved in multiple activist circles such as pro-Palestine protests, ‘The 6 April’ youth movement that emerged in relation to labor rights and had been in contact with people from the Cairo-based Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims. This exposed him to protest spaces and forms of direct, outspoken statements made to authorities and a specific way of presenting arguments. Some of the cases he commonly took on were corruption cases. “I have filed complaints numerous times to the general prosecutor and have accused the governor, the municipal head and their disciples of wasting public funds. I have also accused the municipality of deliberate corruption.”
Haleem would usually be at the forefront and spoke to journalists regularly when representing the movement in Tahseen. He was also invited to Cairo for a talk show covering the movement in his village. Haleem always seemed to portray the same persona on screen and off screen when in conversation with me. He packaged his statements of injustice in a rights-based language and used facts and statistics from his court cases to make his claims.

I often sat next to Haleem in the front seat of his red Fiat car as he drove us along the bumpy path leading out of Tahseen. I held the recorder in my hand to capture our discussions, as it was difficult to jot down notes in the notebook on my lap. Haleem would head out of the village each morning to his office, an hour away; or to the courthouse in Mansoura for a hearing, about two hours away. He was one of the few people in the village with a car, so I usually would wait for him the in the morning at the exit of the village as would many others also seeking a ride out.

Haleem talked about his political trajectory and its connection with the class-based discriminations he faced during our hour-long ride. He viewed his trajectory as a part of the unequal treatment of his rural community.

I was feeling injustice on a personal level more than a national level. People cannot be employed unless they have a wasta and cannot have their rights in a certain job unless they have a wasta. If you lack power and don’t have wealth you are illegitimate, you can never attain your right, even if it is a God-given right.

Haleem illustrated how the regional municipality’s funds are not allocated to the different villages according to a well-studied needs-based distribution of services. Instead, it is allocated according to *wasta*, a form of favoritism. This was most evident in the case of parliament MPs, where they would allocate the budgets to the different governorates
and municipal centers not according to a needs-based assessment but according to the places with the highest voting blocks.

Tying this connection of a *wasta* to the misallocation of public funds, Haleem shared a telling example of a case he was directly involved in:

The beautification of Mansoura city on yearly basis costs 3 million Egyptian pounds (EGP). And this is not for infrastructural improvements for example or the building of bridges but just the beautification of the korniche (Nile boardwalk) and the main city squares. With this same amount, you can improve the infrastructural services in a total of six villages. A medical unit for example that we have been fighting for in Tahseen is worth 60,000 EGP at most.

Haleem made a clear distinction between a needs-based versus a *wasta*-based infrastructural provision. This reflected his methods of sociality, embodied through his upbringing in Tahseen and his socialization as a lawyer. Haleem’s Tahseen upbringing meant that in response to prolonged state neglect, he along with the other youth in the village, got used to bypassing political leaders and getting things done on their own. His professional socialization in law school and subsequently the courtroom, also made him acquire a confrontational approach.

In Nebeira, infrastructures of sociality are initiated and maintained through investing time and energy in sweet-talk. These connections can then be capitalized on later when a material service or need arose. The social infrastructure of *wasta* therefore has to be maintained. Sweet-talk as a practice, is a way to foster closeness to the *Omda* and ultimately ensure his support whenever any party would need to utilize it at a later stage. For Anwar, having the connection to the *Omda* circle afforded him a protective network that eased his Libyan detention. His *wasta* channel mobilized a Libya-Egypt connection to provide him support and a lobbying force on his behalf for his early release. For Hassan,
initiating the *wasta* through sweet-talk paved the way to his reinstatement to his job when he got into trouble. Yet these networks of sweet-talk facilitated *wasta* support, while easily accessible in Nebeira, were almost absent in Tahseen. They viewed it as a form of sociality to be avoided because it put them at a disadvantage, and they saw it as a form of corruption. Nevertheless, direct-talk in Tahseen functioned to create a different kind of *wasta*, one directed towards grabbing the attention of non-state actors like the media and civil society groups like *Bank al-Ta’aaam*, which supported the mosque building. While a clear connection to the *Omda* could be established in Nebeira, for Tahseen villagers, who disassociated from the *Omda* residing in another village, an explicit and direct form of rights-based language was more effective, as performed by Haleem. In fact, this break in communication and resistance to the *Omda* in Tahseen was one of the main reasons for their claim to independence in 2012.

**Wasta as Reciprocity**

Taking part in *wasta* is a form of connection building where an implicit social agreement that binds an expectation of a return for a favor. Marcel Mauss’ description of gift giving as a form of binding social relations is what can best describe the expectation of a return. Similar to the potlatch gift-exchange, *wasta* here is viewed as a way in which its initiation connects people together but does so with the “obligation to repay” (Mauss in McGee & L. Warms 2007: 96).

Anwar and Hassan’s flattery of the *Omda* through sweet-talk was pursued to cultivate the necessary social infrastructure of requests and services. They equally worked to reproduce the legitimacy of *Omda* as a village leader. It is a reciprocal process in that the return for the *Omda* is the socially reproduced legitimacy of his authority as the village
leader, especially that it is done with an audience in place at the four trees meeting space to witness and participate in this process. Moreover, the four trees meeting space also acts as an arena in which additional networks are created that do not necessarily directly involve the Omda in the exchange. On a June afternoon in 2016, about fifteen men joined the Omda to address a dispute. They started a heated discussion in which their high voices could be heard from the balcony across from the four trees. Gameela, wearing her dark blue galabeya and two ponytails supported by a bandana, approached the circle in what first seemed to be getting their drink orders. Despite being a woman, she smoothly penetrated the male-dominated circle and started chatting up one of the men. She walked behind Amm Mabrouk, lowered her head and started to whisper into his ear. However, this was not surprising however, as Gameela had always been able to comfortably bend normative gendered segregation. At the age of about sixty (she does not know her official birth year), she had been unmarried her whole life, making her appear somewhat ambivalent as far as gender expectations were concerned. She had also spent the majority of her life working in the cotton fields with the men and socializing with them. This could explain her ability to maneuver the space in that way and acquiring a habitus that helped in this instance. Soon enough, about five minutes later, she was in the middle of the circle and directly speaking to Amm Mabrouk. Amm Mabrouk was meeting with the Omda that day to discuss the vandalizing of his car, a “crazy” woman’s doing. The woman’s brothers were there to represent her.

I witnessed Gameela’s ability to be included smoothly in such a setting as with Amm Mabrouk several times before. As I walked with her around the village, Gameela was hardly ever unacknowledged by the men. She was always greeted by her name and a
shake of the hand. Gameela had also been a reporter to the Omda at times, relaying information to him about the general affairs of the village. At certain times, she volunteered herself to relay information to him, such as when an alleged researcher with the central agency of statistics (CAPMAS) showed up in the village and was interviewing people. As she walked out of the circle about fifteen minutes later, she told me she was going to get Amm Mabrouk a drink. When I asked her who he was, she mentioned that he was the man in charge of the bread subsidies bakery in Nebeira.

Gameela woke up every day to go and get bread for herself at dawn, before returning to the house where she worked. Her main responsibilities were milking the cows and more recently, taking care of the new chickens. She was familiar with the long lines of women and men as the state-assigned bakers mechanically threw in the dough and then a few minutes later, pulled out the crisped loaf of aish baladi (Egyptian pita bread). The women stood in line with baskets balanced on the top of their heads, as children rushed into the school building right across the street. Gameela had mentioned to me before how she constantly got into fights at the bread line when other women cut in front of her while she waited. At other times, it had been fights with the bakers over the inactivity of her subsidies card, officially known as el kart el dahaby, “The Golden ID”.

Walking back with a glass of powdered Tang orange juice she had made for Amm Mabrouk, Gameela winked at me, chuckled, and then hurried back to him as he was deeply immersed in a new conversation with the others. Gameela threw me this line as she rushed by: “This is so he quenches his thirst in this heat and so I can get the bread without having to stand in line in the morning.”
By interacting with Amm Mabrouk in the realm of the four trees *Omda* circle, Gameela dictated the tone and set an obligation for his responsibility towards her in the bread line. Even though Gameela could have run into Amm Mabrouk in another context and chatted him up to facilitate easier access to bread, there was a code of expectation that serving Amm Mabrouk at the four trees would necessitate his reciprocating her gesture.

I was implicated in these entanglements of *wasta*-initiation as well. In fact, I would say that a large part of the ethnographic fieldwork experience is based on cultivating *wasta* connections. I received a call from Hassan as I was heading to interview the new female governor of al-Beheira, who oversaw five-and-a-half million people. I thought an interview with the governor would offer an insider perspective on the inner workings of the government, as well as her previous experience having served as a deputy to the position she was now leading.

I jumped into the car with Omar, a resident of Nebeira who had made a living as a private driver with his own car. On this day, Omar was driving me to Damanhour city, where the governor’s office was located. On our drive on the road leading from Nebeira, which ran parallel to the irrigation canal supplying the village, we spotted Abood who commonly hung out with the *Omda* in his private hangout space. Wearing his iconic red fleece sweater I was used to seeing him wear in the winter months, Abood stood by the side of the road, alongside two other women waiting for the next microbus. He waved Omar down after recognizing him since they were acquaintances from the village and jumped in the front seat next to him. Omar and I had been discussing the illegal encroachments of buildings on agricultural land right before Abood joined us. The topic of illegal constructions described in chapter two was commonly discussed during that period.
It was also a hot topic during that month since government-sponsored demolitions were on the rise. Abood jumped into the conversation right away after joining us in the car, providing an insider viewpoint since he was the agriculture ministry’s driver and transported officials carrying out the demolitions.

About a half hour later, midway between Nebeira and Damanhour, I received a call from Hassan, the head of the agricultural cooperative in Nebeira. Speaking in a very rushed tone as he was trying to get a hold of me before I arrived at the interview with the new governor. “You are on your way to the meet the governor, right? “Wassy ‘ala Mohamed” [put in a wasta for Mohamed, the head of the agricultural administration in Itai El-Barud city].” Hassan wanted me to mediate a request for his boss Mohamed’s promotion to Damanhour city, al-Beheira’s capital from his current appointment in Itai El-Barud. Hassan had introduced me to his boss a month prior, the head of the Agricultural Administration building, the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture that coordinates the work of the village agricultural cooperatives. We met at his boss’ office located at the intersection of Cairo-Alexandria regional agricultural road by the administrative center of Itai El-Barud, under which Nebeira is registered. While on the phone with me, Hassan said, “Slip in a paper with his name on it or something as you leave the office and just tell her to look into it.”

I was unclear how he found out about my meeting with the governor but suspected it was due to a conversation he must have had with the Omda. I abruptly felt cornered into saying I would try my best to do so, but made it clear I could not guarantee it. I did not know what this meeting would turn out to be like, how long it would take or whether it was the right avenue to pursue a wasta connection for someone else, especially when meeting
a person for the first time, let alone someone in her position. I was not able to do so in the end due to the fifteen-minute window I had for the interview. Yet I nevertheless felt a need to try and mediate the *wasta* to reciprocate his support to me during the research process, primarily allowing me to conduct fieldwork at the agricultural cooperative.

The meeting with the governor ended abruptly when a group of parliamentarians from al-Beheira were ushered in to congratulate her and establish their own connections. Lacking the bodily habitus and linguistic performativity of such an act I could picture Hassan so smoothly carrying out, I proceeded to convince myself I could not take on this character of *wasta*-initiation. In order to fulfill this role, I felt I would have had to master the art of suavely doing so. There was a certain confidence, largely dictated by one’s gender, associated with the ability to genuinely flatter the person whose request you sought. At other times it also required a certain bodily comportment of being able to comfortably take up space and assert one’s way through a line, for example, to shove a piece of paper with someone’s name on it into the hands of the official.

Yet, ironically, I myself was able to land the interview through the reciprocity of *wasta*. The first attempt was through an offer by my aunt’s husband, who claimed to be friends with the governor’s son from the French all-boys school in Alexandria they both attended and at which they played basketball together in the 1970s. A few days went by with no leads however, so a contact at the foreign ministry through my father was cultivated to land us the meeting. Many months later, I was approached by this foreign ministry employee, asking me as a former journalist, to help publicize a novel he had recently published. The novel was based on his time spent at a previous posting in Egypt’s Moscow
embassy. Recognizing the expectation of reciprocity, I connected him with my former colleagues at the newspaper.

_Wasta was present and practiced on multiple scales whether initiated in the village four trees _Omda_ circle, transported to the bread collection line, en route to the municipal center of Damanhour or even within one’s own family. _Wasta_ additionally was pursued to jump scales, as seen with Hassan attempting to pass through me in order reach the governor. Yet a central component of _wasta_ was the expectation of reciprocity that was bound to it and that reinforced social relations. These social relations were a way in which political capital (Singerman 1997) was sought, such as landing a job. And, it worked in Tahseen as well.

The process of building connections and establishing viable social infrastructures that can be mobilized for political-economic ends is laborious (Elyachar 2010: 456). As mentioned previously, the village mosque was a key infrastructural project that emerged from Tahseen’s 2012 independence movement in the village. The planning, building and funding of the mosque was presented by the movement leaders as one of the main achievements of their claim to independence materializing the infrastructure that the state failed to provide. On my first visit to Tahseen in 2012 the mosque built in the 1950s was a decaying structure. The ceiling had completely collapsed leaving rubble on the floor, and the ground had hollowed in as the irrigation water from the fields seeped into the building over time. As a result, the building of a new mosque was one of the main demands of the 2012 movement, along with the building of a paved road and a new school. The central figure in charge of the mosque project that spearheaded its funding and construction was Marawan. He did so both as a leader of the movement, as well as being
driven by a communitarian sentiment of being a good practicing Muslim (*thawab*). Instead of petitioning state institutions, he solicited donations from village residents over the course of a year (two-thirds of the construction costs), as well as seeking funding from *Bank al Ta’aam* (one-third of construction costs), a service-centered NGO mainly concerned with providing food donations (the staples of sugar, rice, and oil). It was not common for this NGO to fund mosque-building projects. Tahseen was an exception. The engineer in charge of the project was contracted from the city of Mansoura, two hours away from Tahseen. The mosque was constructed between 2012 to 2015, a very modern building, with colored glass to decorate the exterior windows, light ceramic columns, and digital clocks listing prayer times. It was the most developed building in the village.

While discussing the mosque project during the three years of its planning, construction, and subsequent use, Marawan always talked in terms of the duties of being a good Muslim, especially in relation to the principles of Islam and standing up for one’s
community. During that same period, Marawan had difficulty finding a job, which was why he was one of the men commonly found in the village over the span of these three years. Marawan mentioned this to me during my two follow-up visits, how his participation in the mosque project occurred as a result of hardship in the post-2011 economic downturn. “If the situation was bad under Mubarak, it is even worse now”, Marawan lamented.

When I returned in 2015, Marawan was not present. Umm Shams, his wife informed me on my first day in the village that he had earned a job in a construction site in the resort of town of Al-Ain Al-Sokhna, an hour away from Cairo, working with the engineer from Bank al Ta’aam. While the construction site, part of a residential complex, was not connected to Bank al Ta’aam or to a mosque, the relationship established between the engineer and Marawan during their building of Tahseen’s mosque, facilitated Marawan’s subsequent employment. Throughout those two years, Marawan was in regular contact with the engineer, and used sweet-talk at times, like extending his greetings during religious holidays such as Eid. Marawan strove to nourish the connection with the engineer and developed it for two years, hoping it would lead to a promising outcome. A form of sweet-talk wasata-building was evident in Tahseen in instances like Marawan’s communication upkeep with the engineer. Despite Tahseen’s movement leaders’ explicit articulations of direct-talk as the primary genre of communication and interactional infrastructure, they practiced sweet-talk in other contexts to land a new job. Marawan successfully continued to work in Ain al-Sokhna for three years, making it his first job following a three-year hiatus. A year ago, he moved to Aswan with his youngest brother to work on a construction project there.
Navigating the Bureaucracy with a Wasta

Initiating a *wasta* is a method cultivated as a way to navigate the bureaucracy or initiate a shortcut to get by the endless government restrictions. One day as I was visiting the agricultural cooperative, Hassan received a call from someone he seemed to know well, given the immediate response he gave, “No, no, do not build today!” He went on to explain, as he was rushing back and forth through the room placing land titles into the cupboards, how the government-led demolition campaign had been happening for a couple of days, telling the person on the phone that he should refrain from constructing any structures that day. Hassan’s acquaintance here depended on him as an inside informer to relay the needed information. As a government employee, his job as part of the agricultural cooperative was to report the cases of illegal building on agricultural land. Yet he also fulfilled the *wasta* role of point person within the government bureaucracy who provided a Nebeira resident insider knowledge of the government when needed. Hassan offered information for those he knew like the man who had just called him, openly relaying information that would make it easier for them to bypass construction laws and procedures.

The government had prohibited construction on agricultural land since 1966, as I described in depth in chapter two. Even though a law was in effect prohibiting the building of residential units on private and government owned agricultural land, there was an increase of residential units built on agricultural land, in response to the lax security measures taken post-2011. Those who owned agricultural land decided to build on their land instead of farm it, as a way of fulfilling the need to house their growing families, and in response to the lack of profit from growing crops on their land.
I remember the striking surge of land construction that I saw between early 2011 and late 2012 when entering Nebeira from the Cairo-Alexandria highway. Just over a three-month absence from the village, I got confused about one of the three main turns I was accustomed to taking when trying to reach the family house from the main road. My confusion largely had to do with the fact that the green fields I was used to seeing extend out from the main road were now blocked off by red-brick buildings with iron rods protruding from the unfinished structures. My sense of direction was completely disoriented by the rise of new structures built between the edge of the land and the road just over a span of a few months.

This level of building encroachment became widespread post-2011 with those building on their land encountering sporadic government led campaigns to demolish the buildings. Many of those constructed more recently would be demolished, while those
erected for a few years and inhabited were left standing. Several factors were at play in the
differentiated removal of the informal constructions. Firstly, the role that Hassan as a
waseet (mediator) played in letting certain structures go unrecorded based on his
relationship with those whose newly-built homes were not penalized. Secondly, once these
buildings became inhabited with families living in them, it became harder to kick them out
and demolish the buildings, as the authorities would need to then provide housing for these
families in return.

A similar situation took place at the Itai El-Barud City Council (Magles al-Madina),
where those in positions of power were approached by younger employees because of their
leverage in providing jobs. The office was packed with people sitting in the office and
waiting in lines for their turn to be called to go up to the council president. Two long sofas
spread out facing each other on which fifteen or so people sat, including myself, while at
least ten others remained standing. As I was sitting there for about an hour and a half before
getting my chance to speak to him, doors would repeatedly open on both sides of the room
every couple of seconds, as many hurriedly rushed in and out with paperwork to sign. The
majority of employees stood next to him, briefing him of the multiple complaints in their
hands, some got into arguments over documents discussed, while many more employees
lined up outside the room until more space freed up in the room. Most of the guests like
myself sat on the couches inside his office.

At one point, one of the council employees in the office, a young man in his
twenties, got called after about twenty minutes of waiting, holding a file in his hand. He
timidly walked up to the council president. With an embarrassed smile on his face, he bent
down, slowly whispering in his ear as the rest of the employees stood around, also holding
papers in their hands. He also pulled out his ID from his pocket, showing it to the president as proof of who he was.

Within a few seconds, the president raised his arms up and shrugged. He stated there were no jobs at that time, and if he were to look for any, he should look into the private sector. He told him there was only a five percent job rate in the public sector and that with such a low rate, it would take forever anyway for the order to be issued. The president within a few seconds had dismissively revealed the timid young man’s request of a job on behalf of his relative in front of all of us waiting. The young man used the official setting of a government office, that of the city council president, to pursue a *wasta* for a relative. He attempted to meet with the president, a government-appointed official, who he saw as someone with leverage within the government bureaucracy to find his relative a job. Building a channel through the President was seen as a way in which a job opportunity could be pursued.

Yet, while the young council employee attempted to initiate a *wasta*, it became clear that there was no opportunity for such a request to be followed through. The request was immediately cut short. Whether it had to do with the young man’s lack of ability to confidently pursue his request or warm-up toward building that connection is unclear. However, the young man’s attempt at developing the *wasta* on such a busy day, compounded by his shyness and inability to fully master the performance of requesting a *wasta* doomed the effort. His voice was low; he seemed to hide behind the papers in his hand and was not assertive enough in taking up the space of demanding this request, made this a curt encounter. In contrast with the sweet-talk oratory four trees method, in settings like this one at the municipality, *wasta* has become expected and dry. While there was
ample time and a certain warm up at the four-trees that allowed for a specific build up to which one could then make their request, a government office on a busy day with only a few minutes given to make a request did not afford the necessary social infrastructure to facilitate a wasta initiation. Additionally, it was the council president’s lack of a binding sense of mutual interest in an expected return that made him easily dismiss the employee’s request.

In Tahseen, the lack of an Omda wasta created through sweet-talk meant depending on other social means to access the needed information. My second visit to Tahseen for fieldwork during the summer of 2015 coincided with the passing of a new health insurance law specifically directed at the fellahin. The law passed as a decree and was not advertised well. Tahseen’s residents had heard of it and had been commuting back and forth to the municipal hospital on a daily basis attempting to receive and complete the documents required to enroll in the new health insurance. Kidney failure was a widespread ailment that both residents of Nebeira and Tahseen had been suffering from. The spread of high numbers of kidney failures is very much tied to the state’s lack of infrastructural services (see Hamdy 2012). The lack of sewage systems and the multivalent use of pesticides have been described as one of the primary reasons for kidney failure in rural areas specifically. On my first day back to Tahseen, Umm Shams, Marawan’s wife, welcomed me into their home, helped me take my bags up to the third-floor apartment, and prepared lunch as I washed up. Umm Shams watched me eat, as she would never share a meal with me and only after I had finished would she eat with the rest of the women in the house and their children. Out of the hospitality expectations in the village, I was treated as a guest and would therefore only eat with the official host, Marawan. In Marawan’s home, the food
would be cooked by the women and served to Marawan and me, once we would complete our meal, the children would then eat from the same tray of food served to us, and then the mothers would finish off what remained, filling up more portions if needed from the pots in the kitchen. It took a few months until I build up enough rapport to be allowed into the kitchen with the rest of the women, which had to do with them no longer seeing me as a guest. However, at this moment, Marwan was not present. I asked where Marawan was and Umm Shams informed me he was in Mansoura trying to issue his health insurance to continue his kidney failure treatment.

Wafaa, Marawan’s older sister who I would sometimes hang out with during the lull of the day between the noon and afternoon prayer times, was the first to notify me of his illness. I commonly visited Wafaa in her home, a five-minute walk from Marawan’s, during the afternoon hours when the heat was strongest and everyone in Tahseen was home either preparing food or watching television. It was common for me to head to Wafaa’s for a chat as she watched television, her favorite being the 1980s and 1990s mosalasalat (serials) like Layali Al Helmeyya. Wafaa would commonly make fun of the tastes of the ‘younger generation’ of women, like Marawan’s wife and his sisters-in-law who I was staying with, who mostly watched Arabic-dubbed Indian soaps.

On that day I realized I had come at an inappropriate time. Wafaa was wearing her going out clothes; her face was reddened from the heat, pot steam trailing her as she hurriedly came out of the kitchen. I apologized for my inconvenient visit, but Wafaa insisted I come in and sit down, while she finished up dressing in her room, cleaned up and prayed. She offered me a Seven Up soda bottle as I sat in front of the television waiting for her. Wafaa explained she had just come back from a hectic visit to the municipal center,
where she was undergoing the process of getting registered for the health insurance to cover her treatment.

We are a typical [rural] Egyptian family, the whole family has kidney failure, Marawan, Younes (her husband), my mother died from it, my father died from it before her, we inherit the disease, when I am in el mostashfa el dawly (Mansoura National Hospital), I feel like the whole of Egypt has kidney failure.

Wafaa explained to me that the whole week had been spent going back and forth each day for a two-hour journey from Tahseen to Mansoura. “I left at five this morning when it was still dark and foggy to make it early to the hospital so I could stand at the start of the line today”, she lamented.

Wafaa came to know about the process for applying for the health insurance through Marawan, her brother who was well-versed in the bureaucratic process of filling out the needed paperwork, visiting multiple government offices and medical institutions that were needed to complete the process. Marawan was an expert, having been in charge of following up with the process of accessing government resources for treatment of the liver disease. It was by word of mouth and shared experiences that others came to know of the process of applying for the health insurance law. For some in the village, applying for the health insurance law actually meant producing government identification cards for the first time. The other most common event that dictated people’s need to issue the IDs was in preparation for marriage. A lot of this was by word of mouth, through shared experience and crowdsourcing of publicly shared information on how to get things done. Yet the Nebeira process of establishing a wasta with someone in a higher position of power within the government bureaucracy to facilitate their medical access was non-existent here. “We have to stand in line and wait, and return, and wait some more” Wafaa lamented. This
concept of the endless waiting process was what defined the whole endeavor of applying for the insurance. It was a lot of visits to the hospital, as well as a long time waiting for something productive to be achieved, with no foreseeable end to it.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to reveal the connections that seem so essential to day-to-day forms of sociality, work, and access to basic services. Creating these connections entailed tapping into certain realms of interest and people in positions of power such as the Omda and other government personnel like the head of the Itai El-Barud city council. *Wasta*-initiation required a certain suaveness and embodied performativity that manifested itself in the form of sweet-talk as experienced by Hassan, Anwar, and Gameela. The practice of sweet talk also required an expectation of a return of the favor as was expected from Amm Mabrouk by Gameela, or from me by Hassan with the Beheira governor or the foreign ministry employee who landed us the appointment. While the concept of *wasta* toys the line with favoritism, or its extreme, corruption, the way that it manifested in the different cases presented here was through a form personal connection building that ensured an infrastructure of interests that could easily be accessed when needed. The *wasta* also required an expectation of reciprocity. The *wasta* was an affective infrastructure of sociality because it laid a path to ensure a particular end goal of a service or material benefit, as well as to provide an opportunity for reaching the networks of service provision. Yet it was also apparent how *wasta*-initiation operated as a method of privilege for those who could access the spaces to cultivate *wastas*. *Wasta*-initiation also required time and labor to achieve and sustain, as seen with Marawan and the engineer. Not everyone was afforded these avenues or was willing to partake in them, as was evident in Tahseen’s
movement leaders’ refusal to participate in *wasta*-creation with municipal leaders and village *Omdas* who they saw as illegitimately fulfilling their posts. The chapter therefore addressed the connection between the social infrastructures of the materiality of communication (sweet-talk and direct-talk) to the physical infrastructures of the materiality of place. The linguistic and affective infrastructure of *wasta*-initiation and circulation is influenced by several factors including the material histories of the two villages, the power dynamics in each village based on their relationship to government authorities like a *Omda*, their out-migration experiences, and their educational infrastructures.
CHAPTER FIVE: Shifting Terrain: The Increasing Militarization of Social and Material Life in Egypt

National Infrastructural Accomplishments

This dissertation has argued for the centrality of infrastructure in mediating politics, citizenship, and claims of belonging in Egypt. I have done so ethnographically but embedded it in a historical process to understand how political subjectivities emerged out of the socio-material engagements with, and creations of, infrastructure. In addition, this dissertation grounded the rural Egyptian experience(s) as a point of departure in thinking about questions of state-making, citizenship, and social action. In Egypt, infrastructure was central to rural development under Ottoman, British, and Nasserist control. Infrastructure has also become the grounds on which citizens make political claims and fill in for the state when it fails to fulfill its welfare service-provision role. This political and service shift was most evident in Tahseen’s history.

The centrality of infrastructure to state-making in Egypt has been more pronounced under the current regime of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. President Sisi rigorously led a series of major infrastructural projects in Egypt since his rule in 2013. Notably, one of the most resonant ways President Sisi articulates his major political projects is through infrastructure. The rhetoric of ingazat (accomplishments) that became so dominant and foregrounded in the political scene and President Sisi’s official speeches—alongside the “war on terror” waged primarily in the Sinai Peninsula—mostly centers on infrastructural accomplishments. President Sisi launched the New Suez Canal Corridor project a few months into his presidency in August 2015. The government presented the construction of the canal corridor as a race against time invention. They marketed it as being of the
magnitude of building a new canal, akin to the 1859 canal construction, and rather an extension of it. The 2014 Suez Canal Corridor was initially framed as a developmentalist mega project that would produce revenue for education and health services. The army supervised the corridor’s planning and execution after mobilizing 400 private companies, 25,000 workers, and raising eighty percent of revenues through Egyptians investing in state-issued bonds (Tasch 2015 in Khalil & Dill 2018: 587).

The rhetoric of infrastructural accomplishments as equally being national accomplishments is also not particularly a new phenomenon with President Sisi. During the Nasser era, the building of the Aswan High Dam was one of the most flaunted achievements. During Sadat’s presidency, it was Sadat City, a newly constructed industrial provincial city in 1980s. Common jokes by Egyptians critical of the Mubarak regime mention how his major accomplishments were building bridges. Skeptics humorously pointed to how “You looked out the window and overnight, you’d absurdly see cars driving by your bed”, as my former editor-in-chief would say.

A year later in 2015, the government announced the construction of New Cairo Capital, a mega-infrastructure project worth fifty-eight billion US dollars. The new metropolis is set to be the main administrative and financial capital of Egypt, including ministries, embassies and residential districts. The government has boasted that the new capital will include the tallest mosque minaret, the tallest church steeple, Africa’s tallest tower, and will be the country’s most high-tech city. Moreover, the government started a campaign in 2019 to list a new bridge, the Tahya Masr bridge (Long Live Egypt bridge) on the outskirts of Cairo to be registered as the widest suspension bridge in the world for the Guinness World Records.
The building of these large-scale projects is a method for foreign investments, primarily Gulf (Emirati, Saudi, and Kuwait) money, to be injected into the country. President Sisi’s current political project can be best described as “statist-neoliberalism”, a hybrid between authoritarianism and neo-liberal state expansion (Khalil & Dill 2018). The military in Egypt chooses which projects to implement on its own, mainly the large infrastructure projects and which to leave to the private sector. Since 2011, the military economy has expanded to include various new industries that enjoyed regular tax breaks and cheap labour through military conscripts who fill the military factories (Hauslohner 2014 in Khalil & Dill 2018: 585).

One of the main reasons behind the speed and ability of the army to take on such mega projects has to do with its significant manpower. The army’s function has become like a contractor, where they get the funding from elsewhere, through bonds or through foreign investments, and deploy their manpower to build the projects. As mentioned in chapter two, in interviews I conducted with an urban planner at UN Habitat, he specified that whether it be the building of schools or the construction of roads, the army used funds from their respective institutions like the Ministry of Education or the General Authority for Roads, Bridges, and Land Transportation to build the needed projects with its conscription labor power. Thus, it is important to think about the extent to which this increased militarization of the public and social life of the country affects the citizen-functional or state-performative action of infrastructural “achievements”. From the vantage point of my rural interlocutors and as I will shortly explain, they are performative projects, representing political prowess and not structures that fulfill the functions of transportation and mobility that citizens expect them to serve.
These mega infrastructural and transportation projects and their high budgets did not go unchallenged by the Egyptian public. Despite President Sisi’s clampdown on political and public opposition since his takeover in 2013, in September 2019 large public protests broke out in response to a series of videos exposing government corruption of state-sponsored mega-infrastructure projects. These protests started after a series of live Facebook video posts released by Egyptian army contractor (and part-time television actor) Mohamed Ali where he revealed the extent of corruption and money squandering into the new infrastructure projects nation-wide, such as army generals’ building new mansions. In his first public speech following the protests two weeks later, at the eighth National Youth Conference, without directly acknowledging he was responding to Ali, President Sisi responded: “Yes, I build palaces, and I will continue to build palaces, but these palaces are for Egypt, they are not for me”. The success of many of these infrastructure projects, whether or not they address the needed populations, is questionable.

The Sisi regime’s focus on the ingazat (accomplishments) through infrastructure primarily serves as a performance of its power, specifically, a public-relations stunt. The Sisi regime needed to bolster its image internationally and locally at a time when its image has been significantly tarnished by rampant human rights abuses and torture, exceeding prison detention rates, and a complete shrinking of civil society and political representation.

**Military-led Developments in Rural Egypt**

Military interventions and development projects have also been carried in the rural areas. One of President Sisi’s major projects, is ‘the 1.5 million feddan project’ in Egypt’s Western Desert region, that seeks to ‘restore Egypt’s status as a major
agricultural state and achieve self-sufficiency in crops’ (State Information Service 2016 in Khalil & Dill 2018: 587). The goals of the project are to develop local crop production, encourage youth employment, and encourage movement of the population out of Egypt’s major cities and away from the Nile River basin. The ambitious project is a reproduction of previous ideas of land reclamation of uninhabited or desert land. In fact, it is a similar reproduction of Nasser’s land reclamation policies that brought Tahseen into creation. However, the difference was that while Nasser’s policies were largely a state-engineering project, there was an attempt at social justice reforms; President Sisi’s policies are neo-liberal and seek to cater to a business class of Egyptians. Significantly, the 1.5 million feddan project came at the same time that the state cut farmers’ subsidies and liberalized its food import tariffs to ease food imports from abroad (Khalil & Dill 2018: 587).

Since the army is carrying out these mega projects under the tutelage of the Armed Forces Engineering Authority, they enter into the category of “national projects”. Because it is categorized as a national project, it is exempt from usual procedures of tendering and bidding. The army advertised the real effect of the 1.5 million feddan project as increasing cultivable land in Egypt. Critics have however mentioned that only ten percent of the project so far has been cultivated due to lack of adequate irrigation water and funding issues.3 Yet, notably, while the expansion project is underway, already-existing agricultural lands, like Tahseen, continue to face abandonment and neglect. Similarly, major infrastructural projects that have been demanded by villages for decades, such as the provision of a sewage infrastructure in Nebeira, continues to be denied.

3 https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2019/1/21/
I explain in chapter two the army’s demolishing of residential buildings on agricultural land built by farmers as a way to profit from the land they can no longer sustain for agricultural purposes. Instead of supporting the already-existing agricultural communities in the country, the government pursues new developments and project expansions. Several of my research interlocutors were aware of these nationwide military projects, as advertised to them on their television sets in their village homes. In 2015, I had a conversation with the wife of Amm Ali (in charge of managing the everyday upkeeping of the mosque in Tahseen) about the prospects of Tahseen’s movement’s continuation. She mentioned how many in the village are waiting to see what the new president's results will be and what kind of developments will come about first. She stated, “We are quiet for now because we are patient for these projects like the Suez Canal [corridor project] that are underway”.

A year later, in 2016, three years into President Sisi’s presidency, Youness (who complained of agricultural debts and facing jail sentences for these debts in chapter two) in Tahseen reflected on his view of President Sisi and false representation with election results:

I do not like the look of results that says President Sisi won the elections by ninety-eight percent of the votes, it looks like we are going back to square one, I want a president whose photo I won’t see in the street, I want a president who people can argue with, a president who will think twice before making a decision, but if everyone agrees, it is a big problem, we are creating another Pharaoh in him, we do not want another Pharaoh.

Echoing Youness’ statement, Hagga Samira similarly reflected on a similar sentiment of a continuation of their community’s neglect under President Sisi, as it was under Morsi’s presidency as well, post-2011:

Sisi keeps referencing el sett el reefaya (the rural woman) in his speeches and keeps referring to the successes we are to receive under his rule, but Sisi knows nothing about our village, I want to speak to him and show him what we do here, we are
producers, we produce for the nation, we have been producing for the nation all our life, but what is it that we have seen from the nation in return? We only continue to be forgotten.

Rural citizens are aware of the large-scale national projects developed in Egypt and hope for them to be successful for the country at large. However, they are skeptical of the results of these projects and the legitimacy of President Sisi’s rule, as primarily advertised through infrastructural achievements. While they hoped for projects like the roads and bridges and the New Suez Canal to succeed, they were just as critical of their effect. They were well aware of, and critical of the repeat of the state’s performativity towards infrastructural developments.

**Fragility of Infrastructure & National Sovereignty**

President Sisi’s political prowess materializes in his use of infrastructure. Yet, that prowess can easily be shaken when assessing the citizen-functions of these projects. That fragility is also experienced by the Egyptian state transnationally. While I have addressed President Sisi’s “national” infrastructural projects, another important factor is felt when taking into account sovereignty over infrastructural resources. In 2011, Ethiopia announced its construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), set to be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa and the seventh largest dam in the world. Ethiopia’s building of the dam has brought with it major concerns over Egypt’s water resource level. During the time of my fieldwork in Nebeira, farmers expressed distress around the accelerated decrease of irrigation water for cultivation of crops following the building of the dam. Responses to the water shortage by village authorities like Hassan, the agricultural cooperative head, mentioned that the government had started to decrease water usage in anticipation of the looming long-term threats of water scarcity in response to the dam’s
construction. In 2016, the Egyptian Irrigation Ministry announced a significant decrease in irrigation water provision to farms, especially regarding water-costly summer crops such as rice. There was a rationing of water use for certain villages in different governorates, only allowing certain villages to cultivate rice. In Nebeira, water use decreased by sixty percent during the time of my fieldwork and fines were registered by the agricultural cooperative over farmers’ water use.

The building of Ethiopia’s dam has brought with it significant dangers to Egypt’s water use and resulted in major diplomatic disputes since the announcement of its construction. Ethiopia started filling the reservoir behind the dam in July 2020. The disputes between Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, with US involvement, have taken place since Ethiopia’s decision to change the water rationing to the different Nile-water-beneficiary countries through the building of their dam. However, such disputes can only be understood through a historical lens. Egypt, a downstream Nile basin country, has a rich history of agricultural wealth tied to the river watershed. Egypt dominated water management of the major water source through the 1929 & 1959 Nile Water Agreements, in addition to the construction of its own Aswan High Dam in the 1960s. Ethiopia was left out of these colonial-era water use agreements and was significantly disadvantaged. Ethiopia’s building of the GERD, and the expected significant cut to Egypt’s current water flow, not only put Egypt in a difficult spot with its water provision for a country of one-hundred million. The building of the dam points to a new shift in Egypt’s power as a major African political and economic player. Tracking East-North Africa’s shifting geo-political governance over hydroelectric infrastructure as enactments of state power illustrates that Egypt’s historic monopoly over water as a resource no longer stands. The fragility of Egypt’s sovereignty over resource
governance and its significant effect on its rural agricultural communities will be further exacerbated by transnational infrastructure projects like the GERD.

**Dissertation Chapter Summaries & Ways Forward**

As illustrated in the chapters of this dissertation, infrastructure is a shifter and serves multiple functions for various political actors in Egypt. It can serve as a representation of state power (chapter five), as embodied national and rural history (chapter one), as an archive of a grassroots movement in Tahseen (chapter three), to facilitate change and offer opportunities for social mobility (chapter three), a way to make territorial claims over space (chapter two), and as a way to build alternative modes of living to fill in for needed services (chapter four). Centrally, Nebeira and Tahseen’s citizens’ political subjectivities are shaped in relation to their socio-material built environment and the way that state services physically materialize or are left to become ruins.

I started chapter two by describing the army’s demolition of residential buildings on agricultural land as a way to bring back a tight security grip and “order” after 2013. Yet at the same time such demolitions were taking place, the government—in its many forms (central Cairo ministries, governates, municipal centers)—neglected basic needed infrastructural services, like sewage networks and roads. That chapter addressed the conflicts over ideologies about land’s infrastructural potentialities, and its shifting social value inter-generationally.

Chapter three started with the current generation of rural laborers I talk about in chapter two whose connection to agricultural labor shifted toward urban migrant wage labor travelling transnationally and locally for their jobs. The chapter connected different forms of mobility: physical mobility, social mobility, and political mobilization to look at their
entanglements and the ways return investments in the migrants’ villages illustrate the material-affective bases of political subjectivity. This chapter presented infrastructure’s centrality to the flows and circulatory networks of experiences and movement of people, ideas, and political practices.

Chapter four focused on the social infrastructures of *wasta* connection-building, the materiality of communication, and how they connected to the materiality of place in Tahseen and Nebeira. I proposed *wasta* to be an essential and complementary infrastructure that fills in when the material infrastructure fails or is altogether absent. The communicative sociality of *wasta* functions not only as an avenue through which people can impart information but also as a way through which they can gain tangible material outcomes.

As I described in chapter one, the main drive for this dissertation is to think about the history of state development and political subjectivities in rural Egypt through a focus on infrastructure. I do so by diversifying the study of rural Egypt and the Nile Delta specifically, by arguing for what forms of political subjectivities emerge as a result of the differing material histories of the two villages of Tahseen and Nebeira. The history of Tahseen as a new village created in the 1950s, versus Nebeira as a traditional former-estate land village; a deep-seated *Omodeya* infrastructure in Nebeira, versus a resistance to the *Omda* in Tahseen; infrastructural provisions in Nebeira versus their lack in Tahseen: all produce different ways that the citizens in each village experience state governance. Despite the differences between Tahseen and Nebeira, they paint a larger picture of the potentialities for the material-affective mobilization as mediated through rural infrastructure (or its lack). Thinking about the two main signposts, 1952 to 2011 as
revolutionary moments in Egypt’s history, I situate rural Egypt as understudied and yet central to state-making, citizenship-claiming, place-making, and political subjectivity.

While infrastructure mediates and facilitates movements, it is also the avenue through which new forms of subjectivity emerge. The infrastructure projects the Tahseen community provided for themselves, like the school, road, mosque, and medical unit, continue to stand as a physical archive to the movement drained of its potency post-2013. With the closure of the short-lived political opportunity between 2011 and 2013 in Egypt and with a more muscular security clampdown in place, the infrastructural projects Tahseen built stand as a living archive to their movement. While governments seek to materialize their power in infrastructure projects, citizens continue to lay claim to their space and materialize their presence and subjectivity through infrastructure. While the military state can tout its achievements through infrastructure, its legitimacy is questioned through the functionality of that infrastructure. What remains important to assess is the avenues for material-affective mobilizations that will emerge in Egypt while the military continues its tightening grip and public space continues to shrink. Primarily, it is important to investigate what this will mean for rural communities like Tahseen and Nebeira that the state continues to marginalize politically, economically, and infrastructurally.


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