

COPTIC FAMILY LIFE

Egypt has been described as the oldest folk-nation in the world. The Egyptian family, whether Coptic or Muslim, inherited some of its main features from ancient Egypt. The continuity of a settled life in the Nile Valley provides a context for the continuity of family tradition.

The temples and monuments of ancient Egypt show an affectionate relationship between [husbands](#) and wives and a kindness of parents toward their children. In ancient Egypt, the institution of marriage was grounded in the legend of the marriage of Osiris and Isis. Marriage became an honorable partnership between husband and wife. The parental system found its roots in a recognition of the husband, and not a totem, as the real father of the child. The family was a basic unit in which the husband held the authority. In an ancient Egyptian text we read: "If thou art a man of note, found for thyself an household, and love thy wife at home, as it beseemeth. Fill her belly, clothe her back; unguent is the remedy for her limbs. Gladden her heart, as long as she liveth; she is a goodly field for her lord" (Erman, 1966, p. 61).

Monogamy was the prevailing pattern of the ancient Egyptian family. Brother-sister and father-daughter marriages might have existed among the ancient Egyptian peasants.

The woman in ancient Egypt enjoyed equal rights to the man in most aspects of life. She was not veiled or immured and was given the education suitable for the role she performed. Some women became queens and sat on the throne of Egypt, as did Hatshepsut; others were women priests, and still, others were goddesses. Nevertheless, the most important role for the Egyptian woman was performed in her home as a wife and mother.

The children in the ancient Egyptian family were the focus of family life. The ancient Egyptians gave much [care](#) to their children and to their

education. The father trained his children to succeed him in his fields, workshop, or office. In one of the ancient texts, a man was given the following advice: “Take to thyself a wife when thou art youth, that she may give thee a son. Thou shouldest beget him for thee whilst thou art yet young and shouldest live to see him become a man. Happy is the man who has many people, and he is respected because of his children” (Erman, p. 235). After a father died his son inherited his possessions, but the dead father was considered alive in the person of his son, who carried on the responsibilities of the father. The sons were also held responsible for their aged parents.

Some of the characteristics of the ancient Egyptian family have existed in Egypt down to the present, especially in the Egyptian villages. The woman in the Egyptian village works side by side with her husband. The ties between husband and wife and between parents and children are strong. The responsibility for the family is shared among all the members of the family. Once grown up, the sons and daughters carry some of the family responsibilities. The older brothers are responsible for the younger ones and for their sisters. In general, the Egyptian father holds the authority in his home. The pattern of family life inherited from the ancient Egyptians continues to prevail in the Egyptian home today, Coptic and Muslim alike.

Christian Tradition in the Coptic Home

When the Egyptians became Christians, their family life was reshaped according to the principles of Christianity. Oxyrhynchus—the capital of the province in the Fayyum valley, situated about 120 miles (200 km) from the banks of the Nile—flourished as a monastic center and as a leading Christian city in Egypt. The nonliterary papyri found there offer a picture of private life of the people and the social relations among them. The Oxyrhynchus papyri include letters exchanged among parents and children that demonstrate the intimate relationship and mutual concern among them and reveal the solidarity of family life among the Egyptians.

Coptic women found their ideal life in the examples of pious women mentioned in the New Testament, such as the Virgin Mary, Salome, Martha and Mary, and Mary Magdalene. The history of the Coptic church has supplied Coptic women with stories of heroic virgins and devoted mothers, of whom Saint DIMYANAH AND HER FORTY VIRGINS who were martyred with her in the time of Diocletian and the mother of Saint Augustine are good examples.

Coptic marriage is one of the seven sacraments of the Coptic church. It is considered the fulfillment of the union between man and God. Man participates with God in the creation of life and “partakes in God’s nature.” The Coptic wife is not a tool for the pleasure of man but the helper of her husband. Her dignity has been expressed in her chastity before marriage and in the glory of her home.

The life of the Coptic home offers the child an atmosphere that has been very effective in shaping his identity as a Copt. The naming of the child after biblical figures and the saints itself imprints a sign on the child’s personality as a Christian. Following the apostolic tradition, the Coptic church has practiced infant baptism through the centuries. The child becomes a member of the church through baptism, and recognizes his spiritual distinction from the non-Christians. In the baptismal service of the Coptic church, a godmother or godfather is appointed to become responsible for bringing the baptized child up in accordance with the Christian teachings and ideals. This godparent pledges before the priest, at the very beginning of the baptismal ritual, that she or he acknowledges Christ and promises to educate the child under their charge in the Christian faith and life within the fellowship of the Coptic church (2 Tm. 3:16).

The Coptic family has been traditionally the center of religious life in collaboration with the church. Coptic parents nurture their children in Christian faith and life and nourish them in the love of God. Acquaintance with the Scriptures and sacred writings has been stressed because they

are useful for teaching virtue.

Coptic parents offer to their children a good example of Christian life in their own lives. The father is a model before his children of what it means to be a Christian. The father leads his wife and children in family prayers; he acts as the priest in the sanctuary of his house. The family altar, or holy room, has been the place where the child learns from his father how to pray. Family worship includes reading the Bible, singing hymns, and reading the seven canonical hours of prayer which contain psalms, Scripture readings, and several prayers. Religious practices in the Coptic home have tied the children to the tradition of the Coptic church. In fasting, for instance, the child learns self-control and sacrifice; in addition, it is an opportunity for the Coptic family to share with the rest of the [Coptic community](#) a common religious tradition. Through the centuries, the means of recreation for the Coptic home were also religious. The occasions of the celebration of the feasts of the saints served as reminders to the Copts of the example of Christian life given by the saint whose feast was celebrated and at the same time as an opportunity for recreation and meeting friends and relatives.

Influence of Muslim Society on the Coptic Family

The similarities between the Copts and the Muslims in family life and social customs may be attributed mainly to the common social and cultural context in which they live. Although they follow two different religions, both religions have interacted and integrated with the total Egyptian culture.

Under Arab and Turkish rule, the Copts lived a separate life within their own community with few social contacts with their Muslim neighbors. The *millet* system, which was established by the Ottoman empire, gave the heads of the *millets*, or religious minorities, the right to administer their own communities as autonomous entities in their spiritual, personal, and administrative affairs.

The Changing Structure and Functions of the Coptic Family

The responsibility for personal affairs of marriage, divorce, and inheritance has shifted from the church to the state. For centuries, marriage and divorce among the Copts were considered entirely religious matters for which the Coptic church was held responsible. Under Arab and Turkish rule, the patriarch, the bishops, and the [priests](#) of the Coptic church conducted the marriage and decided about divorce according to the canon laws of the Coptic church. When the Coptic *millet* councils were established in 1874, one of their major tasks was to organize *millet* courts and maintain records of marriage and divorce.

In 1955, the Egyptian government replaced the *millet* courts by civil courts, which took over the responsibility for marriage and divorce cases among all citizens—Muslims, Copts, and other religious minorities. The principle of religious community laws, however, was preserved in the civil courts. Hence, the Coptic priests, as well as [priests](#) and ministers of other churches, are licensed as registrars for marriage on behalf of the government. The task of the priest ends with his filling in the registration forms and the liturgical celebration of the wedding. When problems later arise in the life of the family, concerned parties apply for divorce in the civil courts, which grant divorce to Coptic couples for reasons other than adultery. Consequently, the number of divorces among the Copts has increased.

The family is [gradually](#) being deprived of its traditional functions. The economic, educational, religious, recreational, and protective functions of the family are transferred to specialized institutions in the community.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, the Coptic family lived as an extended family: married sons lived with their parents in the family home, which then contained three or more generations living together. This pattern of family life has given way to the pattern of the nuclear family in which the newly married couples leave their parents' homes to start a

new family life in a separate home.

The socioeconomic changes in Egypt since the beginning of the nineteenth century have increased mobility in two directions— mobility between the social classes and migration from [villages](#) to towns and cities and from one city to another. The development of agriculture, industry, business, and government employment has resulted in greater social mobility in the twentieth century.

Traditionally, the peasant's wife and daughter worked side by side with him in the fields. At the same time, the women in the city were veiled and their place was the home. Since 1923, a revolution in the emancipation of the Egyptian woman has taken place. [Gradually](#) more opportunities have been opened to her. She has taken off her veil, found her place in education, and competed with men in many fields. Many women now occupy positions in the professions as doctors, teachers, lawyers, and engineers. They also work as secretaries in offices and as laborers in factories. Women have been granted political rights. They have been given the right to vote; some women have been elected as representatives in the Nation's Council and some have become ministers of state.

The question of the effect of the new status of the woman in Egyptian society has not been yet studied. However, it may be said in general that the educated woman becomes more independent of her family. She does not wait for a husband chosen for her by her family, but she becomes the one who has the final decision. The working wife also becomes a source of family support and consequently gains more say in family decision making. The husband's authority in the home may be weakened and more conflicts between the husband and the wife might be expected. The mother's employment outside the home might have an effect on the children.

The mass media have also had a noticeable effect on Egyptian family life. The family and the [school](#) are no longer the only basic sources of

information in the life of the child. The role of both the parent and the teacher is changing with the growth of mass media.

Television, however, has a remarkable effect because of its particular attraction in the home. It has become an impersonal power in shaping the relationships among the members of the family and a factor beyond control that is affecting family values.

The Coptic Church and Family Life Education

The changing pattern of family life in Egyptian society raises serious questions concerning the religious function of the Coptic home and the responsibility of the Coptic church toward the Coptic family.

The continuity of Christian life in the Coptic home depends upon the awareness and maintenance of the religious and spiritual function in the home. In 1973, the Family Life Education Program (FLEP) was established.

By 1984 twenty-five Integrated Family Health [Care](#) Centers had been established in dioceses from Aswan in the south to Alexandria and Port Said in the north. Family life education and family counseling were offered along with medical treatment and family planning methods. Books, pamphlets, and educational materials have been published by FLEP for use by families and training programs.

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