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THE EGYPTIAN SATIRIST WHO INSPIRED A REVOLUTION

By Anna Della Subin and Hussein Omar, JUNE 6, 2016

This past February, in a speech laying out his plans to repay Egypt's titanic debt, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi said, "By God, if it were possible for me to be sold, I would sell myself." Within hours, an anonymous vender put Sisi up for sale on eBay. The President (free shipping, no returns) was "slightly used," the seller noted, by his previous owners—royals from the Gulf. Bidding reached more than one hundred thousand dollars before the post was taken down.

In the three years since Sisi overthrew the democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi in a military coup, public dissent



Through comic dialogues and elegant illustrations in his handwritten newspaper Abou Naddara, the late-nineteenth-century satirist James Sanua galvanized Egyptians against the political ills of

in Egypt has been violently muted. State police have raided newspaper offices, and journalists have been imprisoned, N.G.O.s expelled, and hundreds of suspected activists forcibly "disappeared." Yet, in April of this year, the streets of Cairo broke out in protest once again when Sisi announced that he had given a pair of islands in the Red Sea to the government of Saudi Arabia. On the surface, the fate of the uninhabited islands would seem to have little impact on the daily lives of Egyptians. But to many observers the news seemed like proof of the hypocrisy of Sisi's regime. The President himself had amended the constitution to prohibit the country's ruler from ceding Egyptian territory to foreign powers; the gift of the islands coincided with Saudi Arabia's promise of an oil deal and $1.5 billion in investment. It was easy to feel as if Sisi were now selling off bits of Egypt to the highest bidder. On April 9th, the exiled satirist Bassem Youssef tweeted in Arabic, "Roll up, roll up, the island is for a billion, the pyramid for two and a couple of statues thrown in for free."

their day.

There is a cartoon from the late nineteenth century that conveys the very same scene. In it, Egypt's leader sits at a table in front of the Giza Pyramids, wielding an auctioneer's hammer, as a crowd of interested foreign buyers looks on. "Lovers of antiques, the pyramids and the Sphinx are for sale in cash. The currency is pounds," he cries. "*A la uno, a la due*, by God people, bid!"

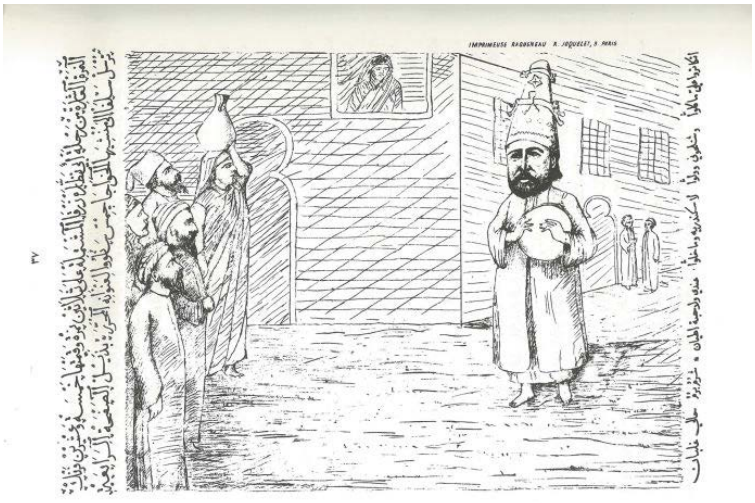


A cartoon from the May 30, 1879, issue of the newspaper Abou Naddara shows Egypt's leader auctioning off the Giza Pyramids to a crowd of foreign buyers.

This image was published in the May, 1879, issue of a satirical newspaper called *Abou Naddara Zarqa*, or "The Man in the Blue Glasses." Then, just as now, Egypt's economy was in chaos, and the country was being kept afloat by hefty loans from foreign benefactors. The extravagant Khedive Ismail, Egypt's Ottoman governor, who had purchased his title from the Sultan in Istanbul, had gone wild with ambitious building projects, for which he had borrowed huge sums from British and French banks. The Khedive's European creditors in turn installed themselves in his cabinet, and began to buy up large swaths of Egypt's land and infrastructure, while Ismail imposed steep taxes on the poor. As anger simmered across the country, an enigmatic publication began to circulate, written by hand. (Forgive me, it pleaded, "my letters stand up

like the ears of a donkey.") On the cover of certain issues, a robed figure with a turban and a mustache held court, flanked by Sphinxes and an enormous pair of glasses too large for his head.

The creator of the paper—the man in the blue glasses himself—was James Sanua, an Egyptian-Italian Jew born in Cairo, in 1839. A freemason who knew a dozen languages, Sanua first became famous as a playwright before channelling his talents into satirical journalism. He swore that *Abou Naddara* wasn't political; the paper's subtitle declared itself merely "a thing to be laughed at." But through an idiosyncratic mix of fables and dream narratives, comic dialogues and elegant illustrations, Sanua fearlessly took on the political ills of his day: the repressive cruelty of the pharaoh, the ruined economy, the censorship of the press. In one cartoon, the Khedive is shown in a dervish hat with a tambourine, singing in the streets for money to bail Egypt out of debt. In another, a creature with the Khedive's head and the body of a fox is trapped in a cage at a circus, as European onlookers gawk at the curious display. The paper became wildly popular in Egypt: peasants crowded into coffee shops to hear it read aloud, and sheikhs were rumored to hide it in their turbans. "It was in every barrack, in every Government-office," a British observer reported in the late eighteen-seventies. "In every town and village it was read with the liveliest delight."

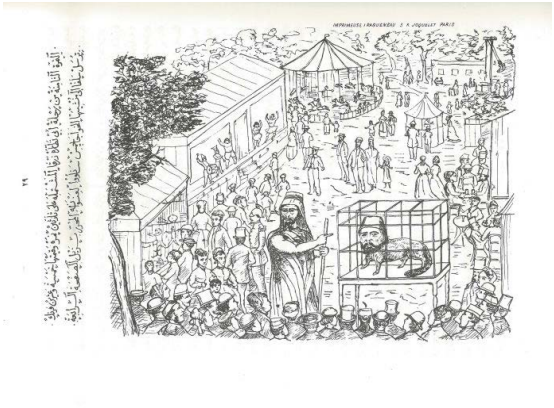


A cartoon from the November 25, 1878, issue

Recently, through the efforts of a team of German academics, the complete archive of *Abou Naddara* has been digitized. Yet in Egypt today the paper remains largely forgotten, and, like so many of the documents relating to Egypt's own past, it is nearly impossible to find physical copies inside the country. Public access to the National Archives is

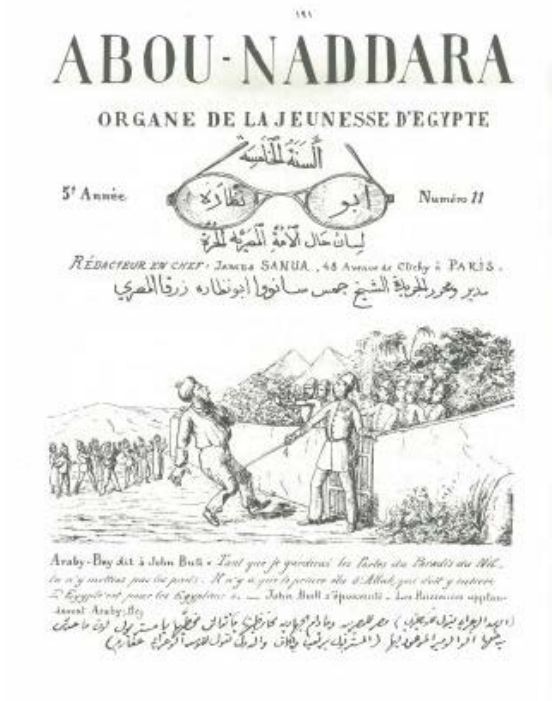
showed the Khedive in a dervish hat with a tambourine, singing in the streets for money to bail Egypt out of debt.

limited; draconian state security regulations prevent all but a privileged few from accessing their country's past. These restrictions can create a certain sense of historical amnesia in Egypt. On January 25, 2011, when thousands of protesters flooded Tahrir Square, many bewildered political analysts and pundits, local and foreign, declared that the uprisings were unprecedented, and had emerged out of nowhere. "Egypt captivated the entire world but, more importantly, Egyptians surprised and mesmerised themselves," one observer recalled, as they overturned "the received wisdom" that Egyptians were "docile and apathetic."



In a cartoon from the September 30, 1878, issue of Abou Naddara, European onlookers gawk at a circus creature with the Khedive's head and the body of a fox.

But the events of *Abou Naddara's* time prove that these stereotypes could only have been maintained through a process of forgetting. In July, 1879, in response to Egypt's mounting debt, the British seized the Khedive's assets and deposed Ismail, installing his timorous son Tawfiq as a puppet on the throne. James Sanua, having been the target of two assassination attempts, had by then sailed to France and renamed his paper *Abou Naddara's Journey from Victorious Egypt to Splendorous Paris*. Even in exile, the nearsighted publisher could somehow still see clearly the events unfolding in his native land. He printed the paper on


ABOU-NADDARA

ORGANE DE LA JEUNESSE D'EGYPTE

5e Année. Numéro 11

RÉDACTEUR EN CHEF : JAMES SANUA, 48 Avenue de Clichy à PARIS.

Araby-Bey dit à John Bull : « Tant que je garderai les Portes du Paradis de Mahomet, tu n'y mettras pas le pied. Il n'y a que le glaive de Allah qui doit y entrer. L'Egypte est pour les Egyptiens ». — John Bull répondit : Les Britanniques applaudissent Araby-Bey.

A cartoon from November, 1881, sketched Ahmad ʻUrabi as the Archangel Michael, blocking the British from entering the walled paradise of Egypt.

smaller sheets, so that it could be smuggled back into Egypt inside less inflammatory publications, and each time it was banned by the authorities he would simply change the title. Alone in Paris, he invented an entire imaginary society of activists—men in green, yellow, and red glasses—who penned provocative articles for the paper. (“Even when read aloud to the sea, they made it stormy,” he wrote.) Another of his avatars, Shaykh Abou Naddara, quoted heavily from the Koran and reproached Egyptians in an apocalyptic tone for their inaction: “Soon you will be occupied! This day is very near! . . . On doomsday Egypt will be English and eat her children!” Calling upon the Egyptian people for a revolution “for the last time,” he added a threat: “I will destroy my newspaper and break my glasses.” The paper was surreptitiously distributed to Egypt’s troops, who were on the verge of mutiny.

A charismatic young Egyptian officer named Ahmad ʻUrabi was inspired by what he read. Shouting the slogan “Egypt for the Egyptians!,” he led thousands of peasants and soldiers in protests at Tawfiq’s palace, and for a brief three months the revolutionaries dethroned the Khedive and ruled in his place. Sanua, from Paris, sketched ʻUrabi as the Archangel Michael,

blocking the British from entering the walled, Edenic paradise of Egypt, and he drew himself cheering on the revolution from the basket of a hot-air balloon. But, soon after, with gunships and cannons, the British Army violently suppressed the uprisings. Thousands were killed, ‘Urabi was banished to Ceylon, and so began seven decades of British occupation. Egypt’s first major revolution had failed.



A cartoon from the February 18, 1881, issue reads, “Abou Naddara applauds from his balloon as the peasants rise up against their tyrannical rulers.”

Since 2011, many Egyptians have gone into exile, self-imposed and otherwise. Like Sanua, many of these modern émigrés continue to advocate for revolution from abroad, including Bassem Youssef, who is often called “the Egyptian Jon Stewart.” Within Egypt, these outsiders are frequently dismissed as saboteurs: What right do they have to meddle in the affairs of a country they no longer live in? Was it fair for James

Sanua to encourage people to revolt from the safety of his Parisian flat? Those on the outside might counter that it is indeed their responsibility to speak, given that Egyptians at home have been silenced. But the exile is forever caught in an ethical dilemma: rather than be the agent of the change she wants to see, she can only incite others to bring it about for her and risk their lives in the process.

Sanua continued putting out his paper for three decades, galvanizing people of all social classes with the help of philosophizing cats, weeping Sphinxes, and his odd society of myopic clones. He ceased publishing only in his seventies, when his Parisian optometrists urged him to preserve what was left of his failing eyesight. Sanua died soon after, dismayed that nothing in his native country had changed. But one can imagine him today somewhere up above, peering down through his specs upon the latest turmoil in Egypt, waiting for the next revolution.

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