4. The Micro Cosmos of El Bîr

4.1 Introduction

> "The earth itself seemed to him a symbol of strength, of that which will endure forever, and of honour! In all the night there was nothing to see. And yet he knew every inch of it, every detail. This land was his own life and his own history. When a boy Abdul Hadi had been given a little hoe, the same tool that his father had carried before him. And when he had grown up, and his father had died, the hoe had grown too. He knew the history of this land, of its crops, of its beasts, since the time he had first tethered a buffalo… that had been when he was eight… he remembered hammering the wedge into the earth. Not one detail connected with the land would he ever forget, and after him his son would inherit his memories with the land itself… The land never let you down. His father had planted *berseem*, had changed to cotton, then to beans, or perhaps sugar cane, and always the land was generous, if you were generous to the land. If you were faithful to the land, if you tended it and cared for it, it would care for you."

Egyptian Earth, Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi, p. 40

As indicated in Section I, there were more incidents of violence related to Law 96 in certain villages and areas of the Egyptian countryside than in others. Although landholding issues became particularly contentious in parts of Daqahliya governorate, they did not always lead to bloody clashes between farmers and local agents of the state

or other influential power brokers. Accounting for the lack of violence within village communities, therefore, is just as important as trying to understand the various land tenure disputes that arose during the same period. Despite the sharp rise in rents since Law 96's introduction that hit tenant farmers hard in El Bîr[1], as in many other parts of the Egyptian countryside, the tendency to avoid confrontation seemed to be a common response of the villagers to the new status quo. First, however, , an interpretation of key concepts that are relevant to the study, such as evolving notions of farming and the land will serve as an introduction to the micro cosmos of El Bîr. In addition, a historical overview of land tenure will be provided in this chapter. Important aspects of contemporary village life, such as the main income-generating activities and the ways in which these have been affected by recent structural adjustment measures, will help to identify the specific socio-political dynamics that arose with the full implementation of Law 96 in October 1997.

A farmer harvests *berseem* as the sun sets over El Bîr

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[1] See Section 6.2 for details on the increase in land rents in El Bîr after Law 96's introduction.

Amitav Gosh, in his study of a Delta village in the governorate of Beheira, noted that the fellahin who had no land were regarded by the other villagers as *nâs ghalaba* ('poor' or literally 'defeated' people). According to their interpretation of the household economy, the landless were deprived of the means of growth, since "land begets land and property begets property."[2] It will be shown in this chapter that ownership of land continues to be valued highly amongst El Bîr's inhabitants as a means to enhance one's economic and social status. The aim here is not to portray a case study example of 'small farmer romanticism' or to buy into populist notions of the agrarian myth.[3] On the contrary, the revenue derived from farming and related activities, even on a part-time basis, remains a vital source of income for many of El Bîr's inhabitants.[4] This needs to be understood within the context of the changes in tenure resulting from the enactment of the new land law.

4.2 An Initial Glimpse of Village Life

> Soon after the dawn prayer, the cockerels started crowing. A smell of mud and wood smoke wafted through the dusty streets. The mist was just beginning to lift off the fields and shafts of sunlight caught the tops of the trees. A beautiful acacia in full red blossom framed the skyline dotted with the occasional minaret and the crosses of Coptic tombs. Apart from the low voices of the fellahin on their way to work, the only sounds that could be heard were the croaking of frogs and the gentle swish of the date palm fronds in the cool morning breeze. Just beyond a plantation of fragrant citrus trees was the well – El Bîr – the place where women from the village come to perform fertility rituals. It is said that the waters of the well have mystical powers...

El Bîr is an average-sized Egyptian village only seventy kilometres to the north of Cairo in the governorate of Daqahliya. Its official population is 8,716, although it is likely that

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[2] Ghosh 1987, pp. 131–133

[3] The relation between high agricultural productivity and small-scale farming in Egypt has been demonstrated in several important studies, such as that of Graham Dyer (1997). See Bernstein (2001 and 2003) and Brass (2000) for a critique of 'small farmer romanticism' and 'new' populist notions of the peasantry.

[4] Despite the trend in increasing rural differentiation which has encouraged low income households to seek off-farm employment, it has been estimated that agriculture still accounts for approximately 19% of Egypt's GDP and employs at least 36% of the labour force. Furthermore, agriculturally-related industries, such as processing and marketing of commodities, as well as provision of agricultural inputs account for another 20% of the country's GDP and employ a substantial portion of the work force. (Tingay *et al* 2002, p. 4)

the real number of inhabitants is at least several thousand more.[5] It is the 'mother village' of the surrounding hamlets and smaller villages and thus serves as the key focal point in the area for marketing and transportation of farm produce. Every Saturday, the inhabitants of El Bîr and people from surrounding villages come to conduct business at the bustling marketplace: farmers, livestock traders, petty merchants, money brokers, fruit and vegetable sellers and all kinds of artisans. Suzuki pick-ups and micro buses conglomerate each morning and evening on the tar road near the bridge at the entrance of the village. The drivers tout volubly for customers commuting to the capital and to nearby industrial cities, such as the Tenth of Ramadan. Apart from the weekly market, numerous small shops and stalls line the main thoroughfare of El Bîr, where villagers can buy most of their basic daily necessities.

According to a knowledgeable informant, up to ten percent of El Bîr's inhabitants are Coptic, although many of the rich Coptic families reside elsewhere, leaving their elegantly dilapidated villas empty most of the year round[6]. The Coptic quarter is located beyond the houses of the former *'omda* (village head)[7] and the village sheikh near the citrus gardens; the poorer members of this community live in a street parallel to the villas. There are eight mosques and a large Coptic church in El Bîr, as well as two guest halls for special public gatherings, such as weddings and funerals. The villagers are fairly well educated and huge investments are made by families into their children's schooling. There is an Azhari primary and preparatory school, in addition to two state primary and preparatory schools (with one shift in the morning and one in the afternoon).[8] The nearest state high school is located in a village a few kilometres away, while the closest university is in Zagazig. Many of the more privileged sons and daughters of El Bîr hold a university degree, although this no longer guarantees them a government job.

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[5] This figure was provided by the Population Council. According to Hopkins and Westergaard, the average village size in Egypt is around seven thousand (Hopkins & Westergaard 1998, p. 2).
[6] Interview no. 51
[7] The *'omda* or village head, as Kienle explained, is often incorrectly identified with the function of village mayor.
[8] It was members of wealthy Coptic families who helped to fund the first missionary school in El Bîr.

The Coptic cemetery surrounded by olive trees and palms

El Bîr has several healthcare clinics and one hospital. A new hospital is supposedly being built, but this project has been going on for a number of years.[9] Most of the time, there is running water and electricity in the village, in addition to several manual water pumps. A centralised sewage system, however, is still under construction, so contamination of ground water is a problem. Women gather by the main canal to do their laundry, to wash dishes and to catch up on village gossip. There is also a post office and El Bîr is proud to have one of the first village Sports Clubs erected in the early fifties, as well as one of the oldest Community Development Associations (CDAs). The nearest police station is in a town a few kilometres from El Bîr, as is the

[9] According to the daughter of a well-to-do government employee, however, anyone who could afford to go to a private doctor in the village would do so, as the clinics catered for the poorer inhabitants of El Bîr.

local branch of the PBDAC (Principal Bank for Development and Agricultural Credit) which still provides most small loans to farmers.[10]

"Women gather by the main canal to wash the dishes…"

The houses of the wealthier inhabitants of El Bîr are situated along the canal that runs adjacent to the village, or near to the Muslim cemetery. They are several storeys high and are made out of cement or red brick, many with beautiful latticed wooden

[10] The PBDAC gives loans of LE 4000 or the price of one buffalo per feddan at an interest rate of 7 to 12.5 % (depending on one's luck and connections). Since the introduction of Law 96, only people with a registered holding are eligible for a loan, so those who do not own land are excluded. And as one farmer stated: "If you own twenty feddans, you can get twenty buffaloes, but if you have half a feddan, the PBDAC officials laugh in your face and ask: 'do you want half a *gamusa*?'… Why should 1 feddan only get you a loan of LE 4000, if the value of the land itself is LE 2000/qirat, which means you have collateral of LE 48,000?"

balconies. The owners of these homes usually have a modern flush toilet, a gas cooker, electric fans, a coloured TV and a telephone, although not always[11].

The houses overlooking one of the main walkways in El Bîr

The houses of poorer villagers, on the other hand, are located in the several narrow alleyways branching off from the principal shopping street. The walls are made of mud

[11] Around four hundred houses now have telephones in El Bîr. One of the wealthiest landowning families built a flat for the occasion of his eldest son's marriage. It has a large reception room, a baroque-style dining room, a 'modern' bathroom with a flush toilet and shower, a smart kitchen with a four-ring gas stove, and two bedrooms.

brick and they have dirt floors; the reception room for guests often functions as a bedroom as well and most food preparation is done over a kerosene cooker. Traditional bread (*'aysh*), which is one of the staple foods in Egypt, is baked in all homes in mud-brick ovens. The women often keep poultry in cages on their roofs, or on the top floor of their houses. The coffee shops are popular gathering places for men in the village, while a family outing would normally entail an evening visit to relatives with a stop-over at the stall selling fresh sugar-cane juice and fizzy drinks, or a shopping trip to a nearby town. Women visit each other in their homes, but unmarried daughters who have completed their education are much more restricted in their movements, apart from those whose families are poorer and send them to work in the fields during the main planting and harvesting times.

Rice, maize, wheat and *birseem* (clover) are the principal crops cultivated in El Bîr. Rice and maize are summer crops: that is, planting is done in June/July and the harvesting time is three to four months later in September/October. Wheat and *birseem* are winter crops, so once the rice and maize have been harvested the farmers cultivate several cuts of *birseem* for animal fodder throughout the winter, while the wheat takes four months to ripen.[12] Wealthier farmers in the village (i.e. owning and renting over 5 feddans) often have large date palm and fruit tree plantations (e.g. citrus and mango); these constitute an important status symbol, as well as being lucrative forms of revenue. They may also be owners of diesel water pumps, tractors and threshing machines, which they hire out to other villagers. These farmers have the capital to set up livestock breeding and fattening projects, as well as deriving good income from trading in agricultural inputs. Fairly well-off smallholders (i.e. owning and renting around 2.5 feddans) normally own two or three heads of livestock, while some keep bee-hives and have a few date palms; they cultivate the main staple crops, in addition to a large variety of vegetables for home consumption and the market.[13] Resource-poor farmers (i.e. owning and/or renting up to one feddan), on the other hand, cultivate the same staple crops in addition to some vegetables, but a larger proportion of the produce is kept back

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[12] The most intensive agricultural labour periods are for the planting and harvesting of rice, wheat and maize.

[13] Such as onions, eggplant, coriander, cumin, *molochiyya*, cabbage, red beet, *ful* Soya and *ful baladi*, loofas, barley, and even some potatoes.

for home consumption. They usually own at least one buffalo, in addition to having some poultry and the family income is often supplemented with seasonal wage labour.[14] An estimate figure of 1,160 feddans was given for the land under cultivation in El Bîr. This is mainly credit land, as there is no Agrarian Reform land and only 50 feddans of religious endowment land in the area[15]. The number of big landowning families, both Coptic and Muslim, according to official and unofficial data gathered, amounts to around fifteen. In the cooperative records for the year of 2002, the registered holdings of various members of the same wealthy families ranged between 10 and 15 feddans in size. Most of the other registered holdings (around 1,200) were between one and two feddans in size, although a considerable number of holdings were less than one feddan.[16] Thus, the distribution of land ownership remains highly skewed. One of the most influential Muslim families in the village is that of the former *'omda* of El Bîr. This family originally owned 250 feddans altogether and as one interviewee stated, "it used to be like one big estate"[17]. The former *'omda* of El Bîr bought 10 feddans of reclaimed land near Ismai'liya and, through successful investments, accumulated 75 feddans; he cultivated citrus trees and enjoyed a considerable income. His land has been

[14] During the rice harvest, all families help out. It is one of the periods in the agricultural year in El Bîr when women are seen working in the fields, although wealthier families would only allow their wives and daughters to prepare food and tea for the workers. Resource-poor farmers use a system of labour exchange (*zamîl*) and there are strict rules of reciprocity to be followed. The richer fellahin hire wage labourers. The rice is reaped with a sickle and laid out to dry in the sun for a few days. It is then put into bundles and stacked up into big piles, making sure that the side previously unexposed to the sun is on the outside so it can dry out as well. The next process is to feed the rice into a threshing machine. This costs LE 4 to LE 5 per qirat to hire and there are around 10 to 15 machines in the village, but no-one owns a combine harvester. The chaff is burnt to fertilise the soil for the *birseem* and wheat planting. The *tibn*, the fine dust that comes out of the machine, is used for animal fodder. At the final stage of the process, the rice is poured into sacks that are sewn up and transported to the house by donkey cart, ready to sell to the trader or to keep for home consumption.

[15] There are 2 feddans of Agrarian Reform land in the administrative area (*zimâm*) of the village opposite El Bîr.

[16] These figures were provided by employees of the Agricultural Cooperative in El Bîr. Before Law 96 was implemented, there were 700 registered tenant holdings, but this figure included the inhabitants of the village opposite El Bîr, so no useful comparative data could be derived from the current registered holdings, which only consider owned land in El Bîr. Furthermore, the cooperative employees would not allow access to any written records of registered holdings, so the figures mentioned above may only be taken as rough estimates.

[17] Interview no. 53

subdivided over the generations, however, and the remaining family members now own 5 feddans in El Bîr.[18]

The larger tracts of land under cultivation are referred to as 'estates' by the villagers. The owners of these 'estates' often employ wage labourers and many of them hire supervisors to oversee their land, although others appoint a resident family member to do this. Those who did not live in El Bîr continue to rent their land out and only come to the village periodically to collect the rent. Others reside in the village and run other business ventures, such as a chicken farm or a pesticides shop. On one stretch of land there are five big farms ranging from 7 to 24 feddans in size. Some of these farms have remained intact over the years – in other words, they still belong to the original families though much diminished in size (i.e., in the cooperative records, the holding is in the names of different family members, but is intact in the sense that no pieces of land have been sold off to new owners). Other farms have been divided up and sold to new owners. For example, the *izba* (estate) of the Hamdy brothers was bought from the children of Mahmoud Abou-Zeid, a very wealthy man who owned a large poultry breeding outfit.[19] There are eight sons in the Hamdy family and most of them live in Saudi Arabia. The Hamdy brothers could be defined as the new class of landowners in El Bîr. They made a lot of money in Saudi and bought land in El Bîr and surrounding villages. Previously, they did not own a feddan between them, but now they farm 15 feddans of land and live in a large villa in a luscious date palm grove.

The so-called Coptic lands also tend to be located all in one area, although they are rented out to many different tenants. One wealthy Coptic family in El Bîr owns 30 feddans and rents it out in small pieces to predominantly Muslim tenants. In another case, a family of two brothers and two sisters own 10 feddans in the same area.[20] One of the sons lives in a nearby town and often comes to El Bîr to ensure that the family's interests are running smoothly. The biggest landlords in El Bîr are members of a Coptic

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[18] His brother was the *'omda* before him and ran for the People's Assembly twice. He, in turn, managed to accumulate 80 feddans of land, but it was also subsequently carved up through inheritance.

[19] The Hamdy brothers bought 7 feddans of the original 14 feddans, while the remaining 8 feddans were bought by another man in the village currently buying any free land he can find. He trades in dates and also made money in Saudi.

[20] These are the children of the former *'omda* of the Coptic community.

family. They used to own 100 feddans, but the land was subsequently sold and divided, leaving 50 feddans, which was inherited by several sons. These owners hired a supervisor, who evicted sixty tenants when Law 96 was implemented. Another influential Coptic family used to own 500 feddans in El Bîr before the 1952 Revolution. This land was also divided and sold over the generations, but three or four of the family members still live in the village.[21] Allegedly, one third of the land in El Bîr is still owned by Copts, but most of them live in Cairo or Alexandria or in the States and in France. More and more Muslim residents are buying land from these absentee owners. Larger tracts of land have remained in the hands of Coptic families as they often have fewer children to leave it to when they die. At the same time, Coptic owners may leave their land to the Church if they have no children or if there are family conflicts over ownership. In this way, the Church has accumulated land over the years. According to one source, the Church currently owns 35 feddans and is a "virtual landlord"[22]. When Muslim tenants had to leave their land in 1997, the Church appointed a Copt to supervise the newly vacated plots and as one villager stated, "You can't buy land there without the Church being involved". According to this interviewee, there is a committee of 'big shots' in the Church, who collect the rent from tenants.[23] The rent is used for repairs to El Bîr's church, to support the priest and his family and is given to the poor.[24]

It is important to note here that a distinction was always made by villagers between small landowners living in the village, who often rented land under tenancy or sharecropping agreements as well, and absentee owners from the richest and most privileged families, all of whom live outside the village. In fact, when people were asked about the history of land tenure in the village, their response would depend on how they defined an owner in the first place. A big owner could be defined as someone coming from one of the historically influential families in the days before the

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[21] One farmer explained that before the Revolution, the Copts had their own separate administrative area: "The grandfather of the Copts in this village had the title of *nazir q'ism* ('station headmaster')… he was the equivalent of the Governor of Daqahliya and owned 500 feddans in El Bîr." (Interview no. 62)

[22] Interview no. 63

[23] Interview no. 57

[24] It was emphasised that this had always been the role of the Church and the implementation of Law 96 did not affect it in any way.

Revolution, when up to 250 feddans of land may have been registered in the family name. If this definition were used, people would say that there were no longer big owners in the village as most of their land had been sold or divided up through inheritance over the years. In other words, the informants would be referring here to the former estate owners or so-called 'feudal' landlords.

At the same time, people might describe someone as an owner if he came from one of the well-known landowning families in the village, regardless of how much land he currently owned. Furthermore, the notion of a 'large' piece of land would differ depending on who was being questioned. For example, one person might differentiate between large, absentee owners and those landholders living in the village who were 'fellahin' and '*only* owned between 10 and 30 feddans'. Another person might describe a rich man as anyone owning over 5 feddans. This would be a great deal of land from the perspective of an average smallholder.[25]

4.3 The Right to Work: Respect and Self-Esteem

Overall, the inhabitants of El Bîr believed that the fundamental right of anyone in the village was the right to work: "The most important right is the right to work, in order to be able to live"… "People must have enough to eat and drink and to receive health care, if necessary. Also, the right to work should be the right of every young person."[26] In fact, the widespread problem of increasing unemployment among young, educated people was often referred to: "A person's right is to live in a *halal* (correct) way. Begging is not for young people who are in good health. You should be able to work for your living"… "The biggest wrong in the countryside is unemployment. They (the government) give our children certificates to 'sit down'. This will only lead to immoral behaviour." And in the words of a high school supervisor, "the basic right of everyone

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[25] Highly intensive small-scale contract and tenant farming in the Delta is the norm, with the average farm size being around 2.5 feddans (almost one hectare). Even before 1952, despite the prevalence of large ownership of land, estates were leased out to intermediaries who divided them up into smallholdings which were cultivated by tenants and sharecroppers. (Abdel-Fadil 1975, p. 6)

[26] Interviews no. 48, 43

should be to work, in order to be able to live… Nowadays, unemployment in Egypt is high, even well-educated people cannot find a job.'[27]

"The most important right is the right to work"

Moreover, the importance of making a decent income was linked to notions of respect and self-esteem. As one man expressed it, "First, a man should have confidence in himself and in his income… The other important right is for people to respect one another. These are the two most important rights. If you are self-confident and you know that people respect you, you will have a beautiful life (*'aysha helwa*) 'twenty-four qirats' [i.e. one hundred percent]."[28] The expression '24 qirats', meaning 'one hundred percent' or 'ten out of ten' is interesting to note: a measure of land size (one feddan is equal to 24 qirats) is used to emphasize how pleasant life could be. The emphasis on

[27] Interviews no. 35, 3, 47
[28] Interview no. 45

land as a fundamental source of wealth and happiness was a reoccurring theme and will be explored in detail in the following pages.

As farming was no longer bringing in an adequate income, however, those inhabitants with enough capital were trying to invest in income generating projects (e.g. livestock breeding and input supply). In fact, most fellahin in El Bîr had engaged in part-time farming since the early eighties. One young woman pointed out that "these days, it is definitely not enough to have the land only. We rely a lot on the cash our husbands bring from Cairo."[29] The main source of government employment in El Bîr was administrative work in the schools[30], in addition to the El Azhar Institute. Two sweet-making factories and an ice-producing factory also employed a number of villagers. At the same time, since migrant labour employment in the Gulf States was no longer a viable option and public sector jobs had been severely cut due to structural adjustment measures, many people had tried to find jobs in the private sector.[31] For example, industrial cities like the Tenth of Ramadan City had provided considerable employment opportunities in the last two decades. There were eight micro buses per day transporting workers from El Bîr to the Tenth of Ramadan in morning and evening shifts.[32]

Members of the younger generation in particular aspired to leave the village as soon as they had completed their education. Young women dreamt of marriage to a wealthy man, so they could move into a decent flat in Cairo, for example, in Sixth of October City. Young men, on the other hand, hoped to be able to join the military as this was seen to be one of the avenues open to them for the betterment of their social and economic status. Apart from the industrial cities, volunteering for the military was one of the main sources of employment for young men in El Bîr. At the same time, it was

[29] Interview no. 37

[30] According to one interviewee, forty people were employed in the administration of his school alone and as he expressed it, "they fight over the only chair to sit on first thing in the morning when they get to work, while the women bring in their *molochiyya* leaves to prepare for lunch!"

[31] For example, real estate was currently far more profitable than farming. The owner of a house could demolish it and put up a two- to three-storey building to rent out as shops/flats at LE 150/month for each floor. It was prohibited to build on agricultural land, but the villagers were willing to pay the fines as real estate brought in such good income.

[32] Young men could be taken for a "traineeship" at the Tenth of Ramadan, where they worked for six months to a year, without being on a contract (i.e., they were not insured). It was common practice to ask workers to sign an undated letter of resignation at the same time as they signed contracts. This letter could then be used by the employer whenever he pleased: for example, if demands for salary raises or attempts to unionise were made. (Kienle 2000, p. 78)

becoming more and more expensive for couples to marry. According to one interviewee, at least LE 50,000 was needed as an initial lump sum, a lot of money, even for those with a secondary income.[33] In the view of the older generation, young people's expectations had changed in the last two decades: they wanted to start married life like the Cairenes with a fully-furnished flat; they wouldn't settle for one room in the family house anymore. It was often emphasised that "The new generation does not want to farm… the way of life of the fellahin will die out. Even if someone fails his exams, he would prefer to work as a wage labourer in the Tenth of Ramadan."[34]

The future of this farmer's son remains to be determined

[33] Interview no. 56

[34] Interview no. 18: The elders of the village often complained about the behaviour of young people in the village. One interviewee commented: "The whole country is frustrated… if someone has graduated and has been jobless for the last sixteen years, what is the point of education? Families cannot afford to support their lifestyles… they want to wear a clean *gallabiya*, drink coffee and if they start smoking, it is really bad news. They have no objectives, they don't know what they want to do". (Interview no. 6)

4.4 Land and Property in El Bîr

In fact, without effective institutional support, most small farmers in El Bîr were struggling. They were unable to benefit from increased crop productivity, due to the sharp rise in production costs experienced over the last five years. Increased rent and high input costs were major constraints and with decreased profit margins for crop and livestock revenues, farmers could not put back into the land what they got out of it. The quality of seeds from the agricultural cooperative had deteriorated over the last decade[35], so farmers preferred to buy seeds from traders on the 'black market'.[36] Most farmers in El Bîr believed that the quality of wheat, maize and rice seeds had improved in the last few years, in particular that of wheat seeds.[37] But, at the same time, seeds and fertiliser were considered the two most expensive inputs for smallholders, and the monopoly of traders over inputs as well as marketing of produce was a problem for them.[38] Traders were also the main suppliers of fertiliser; they could afford to stock up on inputs from the cooperative or from private companies and other big suppliers at the beginning of the planting season. They then resold these inputs at high prices to farmers, thus making a substantial profit. In general, the cooperative provided few input and marketing facilities to farmers and its agricultural extension services were largely ineffectual. Before the introduction of structural adjustment measures (ERSAP) in the early eighties, which greatly diminished the role of agricultural cooperatives, El Bîr's cooperative had been the main provider of inputs to small farmers.[39]

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[35] For example, farmers stopped cotton cultivation ten to fifteen years ago when the seed quality from the cooperative became very bad and market prices fell. El Bîr had already been a rice growing area for many years, however, so the switch from cotton to rice was not difficult for farmers.

[36] This refers to the fact that prices were no longer fixed.

[37] The yield of one feddan was 20 ardabs of wheat in 2002, whereas yields were as low as 7/8 ardabs per feddan in the early nineties.

[38] If the fellahin could afford the prices, they would not make their own seeds. One farmer pointed out that he saved himself LE 200 to LE 300 the year by producing his own rice, maize and wheat seeds. If he cultivated his own rice seeds, it cost him one sixth of the price of rice seeds from the cooperative. Furthermore, the prices of pesticides and fodder had soared during the last few years. (Interview no. 26)

[39] As Abdel Aal notes, "Field observations suggest that small farmers, whether owners or tenants, were the most harmed by the withdrawal of cooperatives from input provision." He goes on to say that, "Moreover, to small farmers, cooperatives were not just a place to secure inputs when they were needed, but rather they were an integral component of the small farmers' decision-making setting." (Abdel Aal 1998, p. 297)

Fluctuating prices were another serious problem for resource-poor farmers in El Bîr, as the farmers often had to sell their crop to meet immediate household needs without being able to store it until prices improved. If they sold when prices were low, their purchasing power was significantly reduced. For example, traders banded together at the beginning of the rice harvesting season of 2002 and bought rice from small farmers at LE 480/ton. They then resold it at the end of the harvest for LE 1000–1200/ton (i.e., they had benefited from the deregulation of prices to the disadvantage of the farmers, who were becoming increasingly indebted to them[40]). Moreover, many farmers complained about the cost of wage labour and the fact that supply was limited in El Bîr. In their view, education had raised young people's expectations.[41] Wage labourers tended to come from the village on the opposite side of the canal where more landless and tenant farmers lived. However, smallholders had less money than before to hire labour and were thus relying to a greater extent on unpaid family labour.[42]

Yet farming and the land were still perceived by many inhabitants of El Bîr to be of vital importance to their existence: "The land is everything in life. It is the basis of life."[43] In the excerpt below, a fellah in his seventies recounts the story of the 'water that talks', which he compares to the notion of land as being the principal source of life, well-being and wealth. This view was expressed frequently by the villagers.

> "I will tell you what the land is … Haven't you heard the story about the water that talks? Once, a man proposed to the father of a beautiful girl. The father told him: 'I won't marry you to my daughter until you

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[40] One interviewee explained that in the past five years, tenant farmers who did not have the cash to buy the necessary inputs would sign blank cheques, in order to obtain credit from a trader. If their crop failed or prices were bad, they would then become even more indebted to him (Interview no. 54).

[41] There was a lot of demand for wage labour, but no supply, as young people tried to find jobs in the industrial cities, or refused to work in the fields. Daily wage labour in 2002 cost LE 20/day in the peak season for wheat harvesting. During the rice harvesting season, wage labourers were paid according to the various tasks undertaken: the *yoomeyya* (daily wage) varied between LE 8/10 to LE 15 the day plus tea and lunch for 6 hours of work (4 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the afternoon). Female labourers were paid LE 10 to LE 12 the day; young boys and girls worked during the summer holidays and peak seasons. According to one female farmer, people in El Bîr were generally well off, so women only worked in the fields during the peak seasons. During the transplanting of rice seedlings, however, daily wage labourers made a lot more money. To transplant 1 feddan of rice seedlings, workers were paid LE 60 to LE 70. A team of eight workers could transplant 1 feddan in an hour, i.e. 5 feddans the day, which earned them LE 300 to LE 350. They divided this lump sum among themselves, but the contractor always took a generous commission.

[42] One farmer emphasised: "Owners are farming the land themselves these days, as they cannot afford to hire labour." (Interview no. 3)

[43] Interview no. 26

> know whether the water talks or not.' The man told him: 'Take a thousand pounds... take two thousand pounds.' But the father said: 'No, no, I am richer than you… just find out whether the water talks or not and come back, and then you can marry my daughter.' Now, how will he find the answer? He travelled through many lands until he reached the far away country. There, the people were educated and enlightened. So the man, who was going to find the words that would enable him to get married, called out to a girl: '*Ya, bint* [my daughter]'… She replied: '*Nâm, ya ab* [yes, my father]… what do you want?' Then the girl who was listening to the water told him what it was saying: 'The origins are from me and within me. I am the one in the *wâdi* [valley] who ran through it, and the plants sprout from me, and I am the one who has been burnt by fire.' So the man went back to tell his story and he married the beautiful girl…
>
> Arabs [i.e. desert dwellers] who live far away from the countryside and from the cities are strangely intelligent. And they live in the wilderness. They don't have eye pain, they don't say that it is cold, and they don't go to doctors... ever. And they have money. One of them has more money than in the whole of Egypt. And they eat from God. The rain falls and the land produces food. They eat the food and at the end of the night you find them sitting around in a circle, with their heads together and that's it. Morning arrives and they go out searching for their livelihood. Their world is spacious. Isn't that right? Water irrigates the trees, the trees grow, and we use the trees to make fire… coming from the earth, returning the earth. Do you know now what the land is… it is like the story of the water that talks: 'the origins are from me and within me: I am the one in the wâdi who ran through it, and the plants sprout from me, and I am the one who has been burnt by fire'."[44]

In this tale, we are taught about the wisdom of the desert dwellers and how nature provides for all their needs. The notion of land as the source of all good things, however, was also directly linked in the view of many people to the practice of agriculture: "Land and agriculture are the roots/origins of life (*el ard wi el zira' asl el hayâ*)"… There will always be land and there will always be fellahin; agriculture is the basis of everything, it is what we eat from and it clothes us, it is very important."[45] For the older farmers in particular, working on the land was more than their principal source of income. In their view, it was a way of life, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

> "I can't leave the land, because I was brought up on the land. If I leave it, where would I go? We were born with this lifestyle. The land is everything to me. If it weren't for the land, where would I be now? I must take care of it… *'ayshîn minha* [we eat from this land]. At this

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[44] Interview no. 26: In classical Arabic, '*el ard*' means 'the Earth', although '*ard*' is also land, ground, soil, terrain, area, region, territory and country. Therefore, when people were asked to explain what land meant to them, it could take on a more cosmic sense as inferred in the story of 'the water that talks'.

[45] Interview no. 48

> age, what other kind of work could I do? I would just be sitting in the village doing nothing. I love the land. It is my only means of survival… My sons don't feel this way, they keep telling me: 'enough *dawsha* [noise or fuss], leave the land', but how will I eat? They tell me to stop farming and that they will look after me, but this is just ink on paper. I know that without the land I would not be able to eat."[46]

"The land is everything in life. It is the basis of life."

Not only was land talked about as the basis of life, but it was also seen to be precious in the eyes of the fellahin. For example, one woman explained: "There is everything in the land (*el ard fiha kul hâga*)… it is gold (*dahab*), treasure (*kinz*). I will tell you something I was taught when I was a little girl. Once, there was a man who went to his son and told him that he wanted to give him some treasure. So he took him to a piece of land and said: 'I am giving this to you, it is where all the treasure is. If you look after the

[46] Interview no. 28

land well, it will give you everything you need'.'[47] As the land was something to be treasured, so could farming be considered 'blessed', as a way of life. One young man recounted:

> "Since I was seven years old, I have loved something called the land, agriculture, all the plants that grow in it, the trees that come out of it. Do you know I was offered once a government job, as a driver in the Emirates, but I refused it… why? You know why I said no? The salary was great, around LE 1,500 the month, but I refused it, because I love something called the land and I love to grow things and I love greenery. I could not live without it. Even to this day they tell me to get a job, but I say no. I love farming and I am going to do it until the day that I die. Farming and the land: this has become a holy thing for me now."[48]

Returning to the village to take over the family land may have been a sacrifice for the new generation of young farmers on the one hand, but on the other, it was still considered a worthy occupation: "If I stayed longer than ten days away from here, I would feel like a stranger, I would feel that I need to come back, change my clothes and go out to the fields. Many people warned me not to leave my job. It was a big loss to give it up, but now my children are fine and I made the choice to come back to the land. The land is my life; the land is like my child.'[49]

In fact, the idea of caring for one's land as one does for one's children was another way in which people often defined their relationship to land: "The wisdom of the fellah is that the land is like your son, and if you don't look after it, you may lose it. The land is your livelihood"[50]… "My father still quotes to me a *fellahi* saying: 'if you walk around the land and look at it only without even touching it or doing any work on it, its yield will increase by half' [i.e., your mere presence is important]. It is the same with sons. If my father raises me well, he does not want anything from me, except for me to go home at the end of the day and say something nice, and that is the result of taking care of a son like one's land. All I want is the fruit it bears…"[51]

Indeed, acquiring land was the ultimate goal for people in El Bîr who knew they would remain there, or that they would return to the village one day: "The land we own helps

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[47] Interview no. 35
[48] Interview no. 23
[49] Interview no. 27
[50] Interview no. 32
[51] Interview no. 27

us a lot and anyone who can buy land now is doing so. Its value never decreases."[52] One widow explained why she had decided some months ago to postpone the marriage of her eldest son, although the family had been saving up for it for a long time. They heard that a plot of land situated right next to theirs was up for sale at an affordable price, and this was an opportunity not to be missed. She emphasised "in the village, if someone sells his land in order to build a house, the others mock him… it is *'aib* [shameful] to do so." And in the words of another villager: "The land is the sum of one's worth [*el ard zaay el 'add*]. If a man gives up his land, he gives up his worth. Isn't that right?"[53]

"The land is the sum of one's worth"

At the same time, it was implied that if one was lucky enough to own land, it was God-given wealth: "Ownership of land is something for God. It is *nasîb* [literally 'fate' or 'given share from God']. I believe in this, but you should not rely on that, you still have

[52] Interview no. 32
[53] Interviews no. 24, 26

to work for it." However, it was also emphasised that "Ownership should be a right. It is something that the government should do. They should send out committees to conduct research. This did happen, but some people were cheated, and whoever qualifies for ownership of land should be given some. I wish I could do it, but it is not in my hands."[54] Ownership 'rights' were referred to frequently during discussions with farmers about the implementation of Law 96 in El Bîr, as will be illustrated in Chapters 5 and 6.

Yet it was also pointed out that the way in which people valued their property depended largely on whether they still lived in the village or not: "People value land differently. Some would never sell as they consider it to be their life's blood, while others would have no problem to do so"… "People who don't live here anymore may sell their land if they want the money to buy a flat for their son who is getting married. They sell the land if they need the money. But the fellahin who own land in the village would never sell it. For the fellahin it is a nice thing to own land."[55]

In other words, for those who cared about their reputation in the village, owning land was perceived to be more than an economic determinant of their standing; ownership was also a vital determinant of social status. Abdel-Fadil underlined in his study that land in Egypt is not valued for its income generating capacity alone. 'Its possession', he writes 'stood as a symbol of social prestige and a form of political power'.[56] As one inhabitant of El Bîr expressed it, "people don't buy land for the love of farming; they do it so that people will talk about them, just like they are always talking about the *hajj*".[57] Indeed the emerging class of *nouveau riche* had managed to accumulate considerable portions of El Bîr's available land in the last two decades and particularly since the implementation of Law 96. This had led to transformations in the way land was valued.

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[54] Interview no. 27. The allocation of reclaimed lands to displaced farmers was implemented in the second half of 1997 as explained in Section 2.5. Individual claims were sent to the Ministry of Agriculture and committees were set up at governorate level. Bush pointed out, however, that "rural patron-client relations were used as a criterion for identifying eligible ex-tenants, who in some circumstances seemed also to be the farmers who least objected or protested to the implementation of the tenancy legislation" (Bush 2002, p. 189).

[55] Interviews no. 14, 46

[56] Abdel-Fadil 1975, p. 6

[57] *Hajj* is the term of respect used to address someone who has made the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca.

It could now be related directly to capital and not only to social status. Land had become a piece of merchandise or a commodity (*sel'a*): "keep it in mind that land is like a commodity now. It increases in value, just like the price of a bottle of oil increases as well".[58]

One new owner was known by the villagers to be a 'crafty, stingy fellah', who had been 'buying up land all over the show'. He bought 7 feddans after Law 96 was implemented and had managed to accumulate 21 feddans so far. He ran a chicken farm and by obtaining bank loans had set up a successful livestock project trading in milk and fodder. The more land he acquired, the more livestock he would buy.[59] Another new owner was described as follows: "He was not even a fellah, he did not own any land before. But he went to Saudi and worked in construction. He made it good and started trading dates and then he came back to the village and started buying land. Now he comes to the village every two months or so and buys five or six feddans here and there. He buys any free land he can get hold of in the village. Everyone is talking about him: 'The *hajj* has come, the *hajj* has gone'."[60]

Nevertheless, it was believed that the hated 'feudalists' would never return to El Bîr, at least not to the same extent as before Nasser's reforms. One fellah pointed out, "They [the government] don't need the feudal landlords anymore, the big guys were living here, but not anymore… They are into other stuff now".[61] And in the words of a high school teacher, "There are no feudal landlords in El Bîr. The current big owners are like the Saad brothers, who inherited an estate of 25 feddans. That is not a lot."[62] However, some villagers believed that the existing large holdings surrounding the village could be compared to the estates of the old days, only that they were smaller: "Perhaps there will be new feudalists, but not as many as before the Revolution. Take the Hamdy brothers for instance. In a way, they have built up an estate with money saved from the Gulf and

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[58]Interviews no. 11, 43, 34
[59] Interview no. 10
[60] Interview no. 16
[61] Interview no. 21. Another interviewee explained his view as follows: "There is not enough land to build up the estates as they were before… unless the estate was kept intact over the years and was rented out, and now the owner has the capital to take it over again. These people could become feudal landlords like in the old days". (Interview no. 17)
[62] Interview no. 40

they have one big piece of land… They hire wage labourers and rent in other plots of land elsewhere".[63] It was also emphasised that those rich owners originally from the village, who continued to hire supervisors to oversee their land were essentially of the same breed as their 'feudal' ascendants: "The new feudalists are from the same landowning families as before… They are keeping their land".[64]

On the other hand, the new landlords were perceived to be different from the old class of landed aristocracy: "The new feudalists are the ones whose salary is in dollars." This message was directed towards another farmer present during a group discussion, who continued to boast how 'life had been like honey' for him lately, since his son returned from Kuwait with a large sum of money and started buying land.[65] Some people who had bought land in the last five years in El Bîr had closer connections to it than the children of the rich landowning families who lived in Cairo or had emigrated overseas. For example, as one interviewee explained: "The new owners are sons of the village, so the treatment is different… They came back with money and invested it into the land." And according to another villager, "The ones who are buying the land now are sons of farmers; maybe they had a business venture that worked well or they went abroad and made money".[66]

Those who were currently accumulating land in El Bîr, therefore, tended to belong to that class of fellahin, whom Abdel-Fadil defined as belonging to the 'middle' and 'rich peasantry'. According to his classification, the 'middle peasantry' included those farmers owning between 5 and 20 feddans, who were engaged in other income-generating activities, such as retail trade and money lending, and thus had a fallback source of income in case of low yields. The village heads (*'omdas*) and notables

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[63] Interview no. 20. Another major reason given for the fact that 'feudalism' would not return to El Bîr was that people were too well-educated. This is indicated by the following statements: "Nowadays, the fellahin are educated, so it cannot go back to what is was"; "It will not go back to the era of the feudalists. There is more education these days. Even a beggar today educates his children"; "Things are still better now than they were before the Revolution. There is more awareness/education [*tamadûn*] these days". (Interviews no. 9, 13, 41) At the same time, a number of villagers believed that the big-scale commercial farms or other business ventures set up on large tracts of reclaimed desert land could be compared to the 'feudal estates' of the old days: "The new feudalists are those in the reclaimed lands… What was the point of redistributing land in the first place if now people can buy 1,000 feddans in the reclaimed areas?" (Interview no. 16)

[64] Interview no. 18

[65] Interview no. 19

[66] Interviews no. 9, 11

(*a'yans*) were often drawn from these ranks. The 'rich peasantry', on the other hand, were proprietors of between 20 and 50 feddans with a high propensity to invest and engage in entrepreneurial activities. Abdel-Fadil identified the 'rich peasantry' as belonging to the emerging class of 'capitalist farmers' or 'rural bourgeoisie' who had benefited most from Nasser's reforms implemented in the fifties and sixties.[67] He emphasised that this stratum of medium-sized proprietors carried "decisive political weight in the Egyptian countryside, as they were elevated in the social hierarchy by gaining possession of more land to till or control."[68] Hence, if we apply Abdel-Fadil's broad stratification of agrarian classes to more recent times, the 'sons of villagers' belonging to the category of 'middle and rich peasantry' were those with the means and the influence to strengthen their position even further after the implementation of Law 96. Their ability to manipulate rural patron-client relations to their advantage at the local level mirrored the way in which powerful landed interests at the highest level (i.e. within parliament) lobbied successfully for their 'ownership rights' in the decade preceding October 1997.

However, owning land in El Bîr was not enough to be considered a member of the village elite. You had to come from a good family, to have roots, and this was something that still could not be bought. One farmer emphasised that "Owning land used to be a status thing, as you had to own at least 5 feddans to stand for the position of the *'omda*, but now people are buying land for speculation purposes as well, as an investment." Any yet, he also argued, "this does not change who you are. You can't just buy 300 feddans and pretend you are something that you are not."[69] Even villagers who no longer owned land, but whose families were known to have been land owners at one time, were considered to be 'good people', as owning land and having roots in El Bîr were considered to be closely linked. The following excerpt illustrates this:

> Researcher: "Amm Ashraf, do you think land is a valuable asset in El Bîr?"

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[67] Abdel-Fadil 1975, pp. 41–49
[68] Ibid, pp. 23, 25
[69] Interview no. 16. Abdel-Fadil pointed out that heavy speculation in the rural land market during the first half of the twentieth century had led to a tremendous inflation of prices, without any increase in productive investment in land. He believes that this was one of the key factors that led to the agrarian reforms implemented during Nasser's rule in the fifties and sixties. (Abdel-Fadil 1975, p. 6)

> Amm Ashraf: “Yes, it is. If I had the money, I would certainly invest it in 10 or 20 feddans. Especially these days, when we don’t know what the future holds and there is so little security… Land is the one thing that remains. This has not changed at all.”
>
> Researcher: “Do you think that having land is still important for social status in the village?”
>
> Amm Ashraf: “If we talk about *el asl* [having roots], well, that is the thing that is the basis of everything. A man who got rich and bought land can talk with his money, but such people are not the decision makers. However, if we take the case of two people who have roots: one made money and bought more land and the other one got a PhD and no longer owns land, we are talking about two different sets of circumstances, but they are both from ‘good families’. If we take someone with no roots who went abroad and made money, yes, he is a wealthy man, but that does not change the fact that he has no roots. He is like some ‘Gulfi’ [Gulf Arab] who spends LE 7,000/8,000 on an expensive suit and then wears a terrible tie with it. It ruins the whole effect.”[70]

4.5 Conclusion

It is clear from the above that although many inhabitants of El Bîr no longer relied on agriculture as their main source of income, their attachment to the land remained profound, while certain fundamental values and definitions of class and status linked to ownership of land had not changed. Indeed, for the older farmers or for those without a second income, the land was valued more than ever before, as it was their only means of survival under ever-straightening circumstances. For example, despite the fact that many educated young men had other aspirations, they could always return to the village and help out on the family land as a last resort, if the ever alluring lights of the metropolis failed to deliver their ambitions.

At the same time, land and rent speculation was becoming increasingly attractive not only for richer fellahin residing in El Bîr, but also for wealthy absentee owners, while resource-poor farmers were paying high transaction costs as a result of recent structural adjustment measures. Therefore, there had been many cases of voluntary dispossession of poor farmers in the last five years. Nevertheless, revenue derived from farming and related activities, even on a part-time basis, was still considered to be a vital source of income for the majority of interviewees. This factor should not be underestimated, as it

[70] Interview no. 48

will be illustrated in the following two chapters, how dependence on farming and the land, in particular for those fellahin without a second income, strongly influenced the way in which they responded to the implementation of Law 96.