

A Bridge Between Cairo's Monuments and its Streets

Legends of the House of the Cretan Woman
By R. G. Gayer-Anderson
The American University in Cairo Press, 2001
107 pages, 16 illustrations by Abd al-Aziz Abdu

Cairo is not only a city of monuments, it is itself a monument to human achievements that bridge the universal to the local. To anyone who has ever visited or lived among its congenial people and astonishing history, it is clear that you are breathing ancient air mingled with aromas that are also strangely ancient. The vignettes in **Legends of the House of the Cretan Woman** are grounded in the local landscape, and chauvinistically assume Cairo is the center of the universe where all great and small things happen.

The fourteen legends revolve around the Kretli family who occupied the 17th century Bait al-Kretliya palace that audaciously buttresses the austere 9th century Ibn Tulun Mosque complex, like a boulder hugging a shoreline. Surrounding these two structures is a crowded poor neighborhood with a relatively new history where the legends continued and took on a life of their own. R. G. Gayer-Anderson acquired the Bait al-Kretliya in 1935. It had just been renovated and became a shell for all of his carefully chosen objects, furniture and Islamic treasures. He heard about the local legends regarding the palace and began collecting them, too, with the help of the last remaining Kretli descendant, the mystical Sheikh Sulaiman. During his eight year residence Gayer-Anderson commissioned a resourceful local artist, Abd al-Aziz Abdu to illustrate each legend.

The legends playfully and at times outrageously distort sacred biblical stories of the Koran as well as weave in Pharaonic deeds. For example, the hill where Ibn Tulun and the palace, Bait al-Kretliya, sit is where Noah's ark landed, it is where Abraham sacrificed a ram rather than his first born son, Ishmael as well as where Moses and the Pharaoh interacted! The legends earnestly explain why the legend is the truth and how the bible through a chain events was inadvertently misinterpreted. These stories are to be read both with a grain of salt and with a sense of healthy gullibility because they are born of that special and mysterious interaction between people and monument. Take the time to read the introductory chapters and footnotes throughout. They provide the backdrop for the various and intertwined parts of the book.

R. G. Gayer-Anderson's grandson, Theo Gayer-Anderson, has republished the book, a handsome version of the original published in 1951. The new edition includes helpful features such as brief introductory chapters and a redrawing and modification of the original drawings – the adding of color and erasure of ambiguities by Theo Gayer-Anderson himself. It has an inviting cover, almost like a child's storybook, and Abdu's stylistic illustrations have a folksy and labyrinthian style. In fact I read several stories to my ten-year-old son and was able to keep his attention.

Legends of the House of the Cretan Woman is full of social and historical facets. One facet is about the original 17th century Egyptian family that tightly entangled their home against the walls of the ancient Ibn Tulun, as did other families of that time. The mosque as part of the everyday fabric of life is part of an older Islamic mindset that is not seen in newer large mosques. Despite the deliberate separation in the early 1920's of the original neighborhood from Ibn Tulun, the new, less attached neighborhood proved to be extremely fertile ground for these legends to continue flourishing. Yet another facet is the 20th century patriarchal British expatriate who fell in love with the palace and "restored" it to a hybrid, colonial-Arabic esthetic. Then there are the quirky short legends themselves.

The difficult task of weaving these facets together, the historical, class and social strands into a critical whole, is a research project on its own.

In this attractive book we are reminded that the local legends and the shepherding of the house out of obscurity were not only salvaged by Gayer-Anderson but restored to a higher status. They deserve to be praised again. His grandson's revival of the book guarantees that some of Cairo's more elusive treasures, that could be lost among all of the tangible ones in this bigger-than-life city, are not forgotten.