Life and Spatial Structure in Saqqara Village, a Settlement Adjacent to an Archaeological Site (Vol. 4): The Existing State of Saqqara as an "Old Village" (*Karya*-Type Village)

Eriko OKA*

[Abstract]

This paper examines the role of Saqqara village as a settlement in Egypt, based on previous studies on the Egyptian settlement, the findings from our studies over a three-year period, and a supplemental survey that we conducted this year. Although located in the vicinity of the large city of Cairo, Saqqara has characteristics of a typical old village, or a *karya*-type village. Its local community and culture as well as its old buildings and living space make Saqqara a potential tourist site that can offer visitors insights into old Egypt.

1 Overview of the Study

Saqqara, the most significant archaeological site in Egypt, which features the Step Pyramid among other pyramids, is located 17 km south of the Egyptian capital of Cairo. We have conducted a three-year study on Saqqara village, a village located closest to the site. This settlement is said to have existed for about 4,000 years since the Saqqara burial site was established. In 2011, after his three decades of dictatorship since 1981, the fourth Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, was replaced by Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was elected by the Egyptian people. The aftermath of this regime change is felt in various ways in Cairo; streets are more congested, the number of vendors on the pavement has increased, regulations have been poorly enforced, and more stores have opened in villages.

We focused on the following three objectives in our previous studies: 1) revealing the spatial structure of the Saqqara village through an understanding of its geographical features and urbanization, 2) painting a picture of the villagers' living space, housing conditions, and life in Saqqara, and 3) finding potential elements in Saqqara's landscape that can attract tourists to the village in the future.

---

*   Faculty of Environmental and Urban Engineering, Kansai University, Japan

In the summer 2012 study, we conducted an interview with the former chief of Saqqara, who is also a major landowner of the village, and also conducted a survey of the village's communal space to complement our studies and to identify the characteristics of Saqqara as an Egyptian settlement.

2 Saqqara among other Egyptian Settlements

Kato and Iwasaki (2011) surveyed nineteen Egyptian settlements regarding the demographics, family structures, and other detailed information about each village to explore the history of settlement formation in Egypt, and reported the results in *Village Map in Egypt.* Here is an excerpt from the paper:

Settlements in pre-19th-century Egypt were established based on a simple principle: because the Nile River flooded regularly once a year, the settlements were built on an elevated location, or a mound, that remained above water.

The Egyptians used the Nile floods to their advantage in what is called "basin irrigation," in which floodwater was directed into basins, large cultivated lands, surrounded by banks when the water level was high during a flood, and excessive water was drained out of the basins when the water level dropped. Due to this practice, basins got flooded when the Nile did, making the region look like an ocean or an enormous lake. This is why Egyptian settlements had to be formed on the elevated lands.

The settlements have remained in the same places over a long period of time unless the river conditions changed dramatically. This resulted in the development of settlements with a long history. These settlements, which were formed under restricted circumstances, took an agglomerated form, and expanded in size over time. Thus, these naturally spawned Egyptian villages served as terminal administrative units of local governments (pp. 131-172).

Saqqara's structure makes us believe that it was also originally established on a mound. This settlement pattern changed drastically after the completion of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s. According to Kato & Iwasaki, "The banks that surrounded the basin were destroyed in the process of building the dam," and that is how settlements started to appear in basins. This also explains how the urban area of Saqqara has expanded.

An old village whose origin dates back to the ancient times, like Saqqara, is called a *karya,* and a new village which has developed from *karya,* is called an *'izba. Karya*-type settlements are located in areas with a long history of agriculture, reflecting the pre-modern settlement pattern in basins with an optimal cultivation environment. In addition, the society of *karya* has been governed under a Council system with the chief (*umda*) and an elder (*sheikh el-balad*) as the heads, along with powerful families in the village, as its members. It has also been found that the people of *karya* unswervingly identify themselves with their own village, which is reflected in the fact that *karya* has many communal facilities such as community centers and holy mausoleums.

Umda's authority in the present-day Egyptian villages has been shaken up. As a national official, *umda* represents their village and governs the villagers. We learned that there had been a long debate on whether *umda* should be elected by the villagers or appointed by the country. Over time, the latter has become the mainstream, and as of 2010, *umda* has been officially appointed by the country, which was given the power to do so by law in 1994. It has been pointed out that, as a result of this system, *umda* is losing its substance and becoming merely a symbol. In some villages, *umda*'s office has been replaced by a police station (*Nuqta*).

We were fortunate to meet *umda* during our 2010 survey. We requested a meeting with *umda* again in our 2012 survey, but it was after the change of the regime, and we were set up with someone who we think was sent by the country; namely, Mr. Samir, manager of the Statistical Information Center, who cooperated in our interviews in both the 2010 and the 2012 surveys. Despite the regime change, Mr. Samir was aware of what was going on in his village and was an influential figure among the villagers. The regime change in Cairo did not seem to have much impact on village management.

3 Interview with the Former Village Chief (*Umda*)

We conducted an interview with Mr. Abdo Osman (Photo 1), former chief of the Saqqara village (*umda*), at his residence on September 5, 2012. Mr. Osman served as *umda* of Saqqara until 1998 for over twenty-five years. Both his father and his grandfather were also *umda* of Saqqara. As *umda*, Mr. Osman primarily counseled his villagers and mediated disputes among them on issues such as land ownership, marriage, and divorce. His family have been major landowners in Saqqara for generations. They still own a number of farmlands and earn an income from leasing these lands.

Mr. Osman currently resides in a four-story concrete building near a canal in the east part of Saqqara (Photo 2). Facing a paved road along the canal, the building has a front yard where several cars can be parked. Before building this property in 1997, the family lived on the west side of the old town in the new urban area, which used to be cultivated land. The current residence is an apartment-style building, in which Mr. and Mrs. Osman live on the first floor, which has a guest room, a living room, a cafeteria, a kitchen, and a bedroom, and his three sons and their families live on the second, third, and fourth floors, respectively. Mr. Osman said that once his grandsons reach a certain age, each of his son's families will build a similar type of residence with separate apartments on each floor and move out of his house. Mr. Osman's house, then, will become a place where his family gets together.

Photo 1 Mr. and Mrs. Abdo Osman in their living room

Photo 2-1, 2 Mr. Osman's residence (front and back)

The house Mr. Osman had lived in until fifteen years ago (Photo 3) is located a few doors from the beltway, north of the old town. The two-story concrete building has a large yard, but no parking space. The road in front of the house is not paved; it is a dirt road. No one currently resides in this building, but it is equipped with basic necessities since Mr. Osman's family gathers here for meals during Ramadan and Tabaski, or the Feast of the Sacrifice, celebrated after Ramadan.

Across the street are two houses that Mr. Osman also owns (Photo 4). We assume that these houses, both of which are made of concrete and have two stories, have the same floor layout. Although

they are fine-looking houses with an entrance approach, they are both currently vacant, and it is not known how they used to be used.

On the north end of the old town is a residence in which Mr. Osman's mother lives. Located on a hill, it has the most prominent appearance of all houses in the village. There is about a flight of stairs to go up to reach the door.

How the family of the former *umda*, the top individual of Saqqara, transitioned from one place to another (Fig. 1) can been considered as a model that influences the living patterns of the villagers. We were unable to ask the family why they decided to move from inside the old town to the new urban area outside the beltway, to a place near a paved road in the new urban area. Judging from the locations of these houses, however, changes in their attitude toward family and living space as well as the introduction of cars into the household must have played major roles in their decisions.

Photo 3 Mr. Osman's former residence

Photo 4 Mr. Osman's two other properties

Photo 5 Mr. Osman's mother's residence

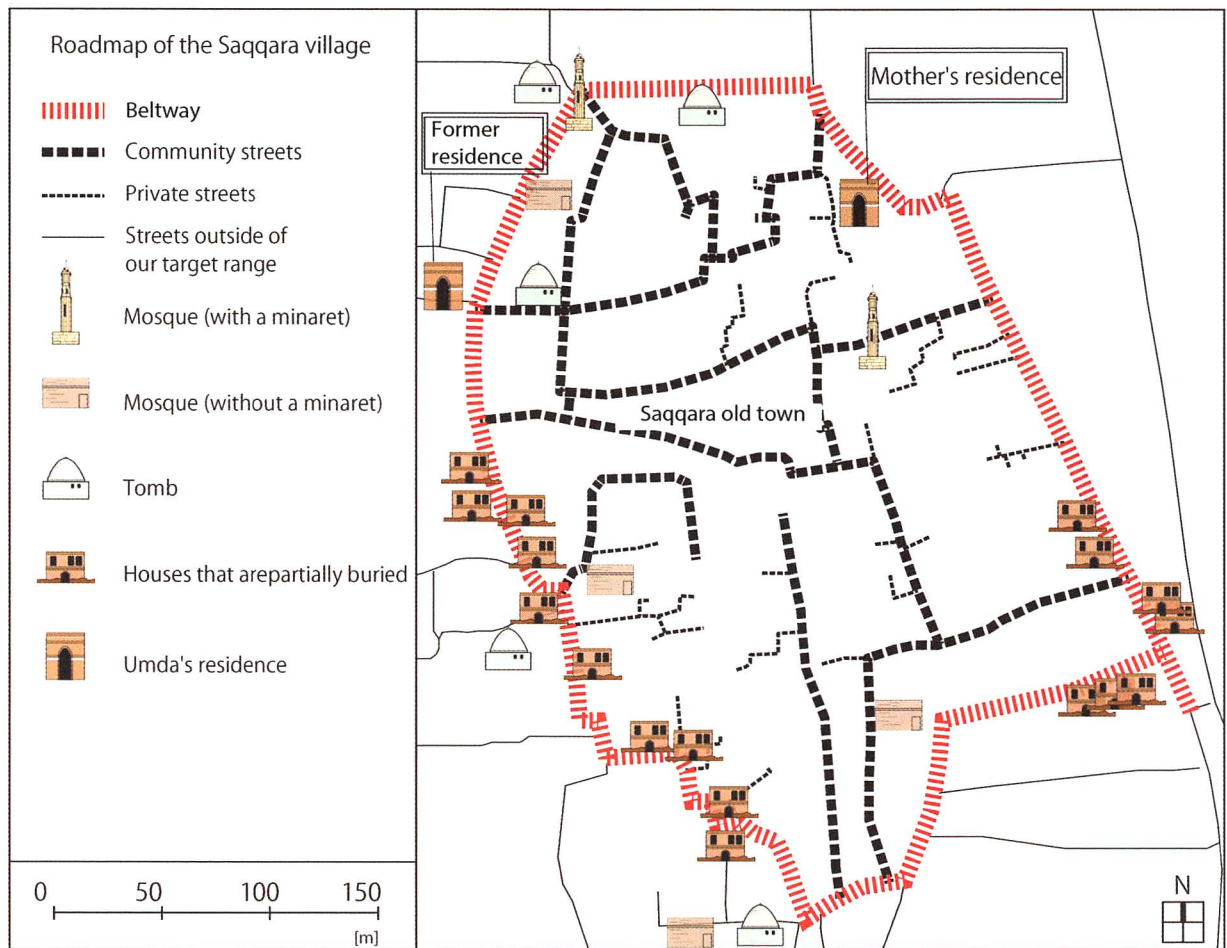Photo 6-1, 2 The Entrance of Mr. Osman's mother's residence, outside and inside (an entry room)

Fig. 1 Locations of Mr. Osman's former residence and his mother's residence

4 Open Spaces and Communities around the Holy Mausoleums

Previous studies in 2011 indicate that there are eight holy mausoleums in Saqqara village. In this study, conducted on Wednesday, September 5th, 2012, we found another mausoleum (Photo 7) located in the east of the old town. This newly found mausoleum is a square-type tomb and not conical in shape like the other mausoleums. According to the residents living next to the mausoleum, it is a tomb for a Muslim saint named Suliman Ilbatatohi. The residents living around the mausoleum get together with the whole family to hold festivals in July. Thus, nine holy mausoleums in total were found in both the past and present surveys.

Photo 7 A holy mausoleum (the tomb of Suliman Ilbatatohi)

In our 2011 survey we interviewed many villagers to confirm the locations of the mausoleums. Many villagers knew of the large mausoleums because of big festivals held at these mausoleums, but some of the small mausoleums had been forgotten. In fact, in our survey last year no villagers even mentioned the tomb of Suliman Ilbatatohi. We learned from the previous studies that holy mausoleums commonly have some sort of space with trees around them where festivals are held.

During our survey this year, we saw people preparing for a wedding in spaces around three mausoleums (Photo 8). We conducted our survey on Wednesday, and a wedding ceremony was to be held from the night of Wednesday and continued into Thursday and Friday. Electric ornaments, banners, and tents were set up. When a woman living around a mausoleum gets married, the wedding ceremony and reception are held in the space around the mausoleum.

Kato & Iwasaki describe holy mausoleums in the article cited earlier as follows:

Holy mausoleums were once thought of as the center of the villagers' life. Nowadays, however, it is only elderly villagers that see saints as associated with the existence of the village; younger people seem indifferent to saints. Also, at the annual saint's festival, participants are mostly those who live outside of Saqqara village.

Incidentally, the interview surveys in Saqqara village have revealed that people of the younger generations are not interested in saints and among the nine holy mausoleums, only five hold the festival of a saint every year.
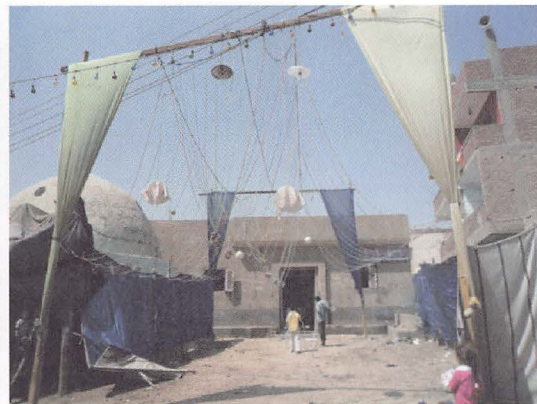

Photo 8-1, 2, 3 Preparations for a wedding ceremony near the mausoleum

During our visit to Saqqara village this year, wedding arrangements were being made at the open spaces at the "Tomb of Abbas," where a festival of a saint is held every year, at the "Tomb of Hammad," (located next to the former Koran school and now a garbage-strewn place) where no festivals are held, and at the "Tomb of Hamzawi," where festivals have been suspended for the last seven to eight years. We found that, although people are less interested in mausoleums, villagers have been utilizing the spaces around them. These spaces serve as smaller units than a village and provide villagers with a communal space where they can get together.

5 Conclusions

Saqqara village is in a suburban commutable area of Cairo and its social environment reflects many traditional elements. However, these traditional elements may gradually disappear due to the aging population as well as to the increase in untenanted houses and vacant ground in the old town. To preserve traditional housing and to protect the spatial structure of alleys in Saqqara, it is necessary

for the villagers to pass this traditional culture on to future generations. If successful, Saqqara will be able to offer valuable attractions to visitors as an old village, or a *karya*-type village. This study reminded us of the importance of valuing small communities around holy mausoleums and upgrading the mausoleums.

Reference

Kato, H. and E. Iwasaki (2011). Village Map in Egypt. *Hitotsubashi Economics Department Bulletin Papers, 4* (1), pp. 131-172.

This is English version of the paper published in *Semawy Menu* 4 (2012) in Japanese.