

The **Mermah Game** and the Modern Gladiators of Upper Egypt

Introduction: Monika Savier

Text and Photos by **Adel A. Bayoumi**

Lay-out: Mario Brunetti

Riding for Family Reputation and Village Honor

Doing your photographer's job during an Arabian horse show can be a dangerous business at times. It's not really the Arabian horses that pose the problem, it's rather the young hotbloods – usually called handlers – who create the risk when they step into the ring with the show horses entrusted to them. Well, they don't step, actually, because they come storming in with shocked horses whose faces look as if they were fleeing from the devil.

After gyrating around the bend at the entrance to the show ring, they race along the side boards of the ring – more often than not at breakneck speed – passing decorative flowerpots and spectators rustling plastic bags in their hands. All of that happens on their way to the middle of the ring, where they wring a sliding stop from their horse just in front of the judges so as to be able to make him take up the stand-up position.

In El Zahraa state stud in Cairo, during the National Championships there, I took my stand exactly in that bend to the arena entrance several times. In front of the ring, the horses were stirred up until the moment when they could take their forward flight, so then there were stallions thundering along, often alongside handlers who were almost children and just half as tall as the horses. My neighbor and me did our poor best to try and photographically capture the dynamics, but were forced to dive for cover quite frequently. While we were running for our lives once again, I called across to him „these are today's gladiators, they want to be heroes, and you can only be that at maximum risk!“ To which he replied that „well, yes, it's a bit like martial arts!“



Later, he told me “if you are interested in riders keeping up the Arabian tradition of mounted fighting games, come and attend my exhibition in Lamasatt Art Gallery, Kasr El Nil street in Cairo. It’s about the Mermah game in Upper Egypt, where they still keep up Arabian traditions in the villages.” I knew well about mounted games, often tailing back to medieval roots and involving a high risk for both riders and horses, from my home in Central Italy, where they are just as traditional. In the ancient cities that organize them, they still hold true to the concept that only riders can rise to be heroes, and that heroes need to come two at a time: the rider and his horse.

I was interested in the history of the Arabian horses and tribes in the South of Egypt, along the fertile banks of the Nile river, and even if I couldn’t make it to the exhibition, award-winning photographer Adel Bayoumi sent me his pictures and the story to accompany them. Here they are.

Monika Savier



The Mermah Game of Upper Egypt

Horses have always been the means of man to establish authority on Earth. It was horses that lined the borders of the ancient kingdoms and determined the importance of kingdoms in war in the whole world: for the strength of an army was measured by their cavalry and the horse-operated machines. Nowadays, horse riding is also a feature of the rich and powerful in the Arab societies. People in Upper Egypt used horses for several purposes: they would cross long distances on horseback to visit relatives or friends in nearby villages, they used horses in the wars that were fought among the tribes of Upper Egypt, and they rode them while guarding the vast areas of fields used for grazing in the desert. Horses also played an important part for wedding ceremonies: Riding behind a boy of her relatives, the bride would only go from her parents' house to her husband's on horseback.

The Mermah games that are played in Upper Egypt are a purely Arab tradition not influenced by the world of the pharaohs. It is thought that these games were introduced by Arab tribes coming from the Arabian Peninsula to settle in upper Egypt. Since then, people have devised games in which they used horses, including «Al-mrmah», where the knights would throw and catch a ball, try to hit a target on the ground, or pick items off the ground all without stopping their horses. All of these moves were meant to show the versatility and flexibility of the knight, and the speed of the horse – the Arabic word “Al-mrmah»” derives from “running fast”.

Today, Al-mrmah is an annual race organized in some villages particularly in the provinces of Qena, Luxor and Aswan. The event serves to keep up contact and emphasize the spirit of love and compassion among the Arab tribes throughout Egypt by celebrating their folklore and heritage. Lately, the race has been taking on some features of a touristic attraction for the Arab

tourists coming from the Gulf States. Even so, it is not just one event, but several of the same name: For example, Aswan Governorate organizes about 15 of these annual celebrations in a number of villages.

A Game of Knights

With the duration of the event reduced from the original 15 to just two or three days, preparations still begin a month in advance. Invitations are sent out and people begin packing down the race track in one of the desert routes, also setting up tents, marking observation points, and roping off aisles for guests and families. Vendors arrive for offering saddles and bridles as well as foods and beverages, not to forget items such as candy and balloons for the children. Hundreds of horses, trained by the tribesmen and qualified to participate, gather. The games are coordinated by one of the high profile villagers. Delegates participating in the event are celebrated with drums and flutes in the village's biggest squares, where most of the parents and visitors flock to follow the horse racing and each group contributes to the opening ceremony by dancing to the rhythm of the drum. Dancing on horseback often is a part of the joyful celebration. This traditional presentation features horses dancing, with some riders so skilled that they can move the horse's feet to the beat of the drum used in the celebration.

The race usually begins before sunset with an hour or two during which the young people go out and ride their horses to go to the Mermah Square. They hold their chins high and are full of pride. They come from all villages in the surrounding areas to attend the race, wearing the uniforms of the jilbab (their traditional wide outer garments) and shawls of cashmere.

And then, it's time for the Mermah proper. Almost lost nowadays is a rough form of the game, the “Ramah” or cutting game played in a confined space before a crowd of





spectators. Armed with a long bamboo stick, the first “knight” enters the arena and begins the ceremonial movements of an executioner beating his opponent with a whip while the rival knight tries to block the whiplashes using a palm tree leaf and so starts the battle between the attacking executioner and the defender knights. The game has fair, set rules and ends after a tip from the knights to the head of the musical band accompanying the game. At the end of the day’s feasting, everybody gets ready for the next day by taking a rest and taking care of horses. The Mermah game as it is mostly played today takes place on the well-defined lane of packed-down dirt predetermined by the coordinators of the “Al-mrmah» of that particular village. The lane is a straight line where two knights, carrying long bamboo sticks or palm leaves as lances, can race side by side with a distance of three meters between them, to avoid accidental touching or accidents. The aim can be to touch the opponent with the leaf, or to finish the distance as the first rider. However, the race has special rules and conditions not set by organizing committees, but agreed upon among the contestants themselves. The length of the race differs, three and a half kilometers is the traditional distance, but often the riders go as short a distance as 500 meters.

After the Game

The winner of the Mermah is honored with a green flag or sometimes, a Mermah Cup which he gets to keep until next year’s games when somebody else may win the title. He will be honored for his bravery and chivalry, and his family and supporters cheer among the tribes. As to his horse, he rewards him for his efforts by giving him the best food. If some rider wins both parts of the game, he is called the “winner with excellence” and receives special honors. It is not unknown for one of the knights to die in the games. However, a man who died during a horse race isn’t to be avenged for, by either his family or his tribe, as the customary law of Upper



Egypt prohibits revenge for deaths during races, whatever the custom may be in other cases. Needless to say, horse racing has many benefits such as reviving the heritage of the Arab tribes residing in Egypt, developing horseback riding skills, training boys as to how their seniors used horses in attack-and-defense situations, and being able to think on their own two feet, introducing them to new friends, and finally teaching them to be kind to animals. Horse racing has continuously been a sport in Upper Egypt cities for hundreds of years. Hopefully, this good tradition will continue to be passed down and celebrated.

Adel A. Bayoumi

Adel A. Bayoumi Award-winning Egyptian photographer: 1st place in Wikimedia’s Wiki Loves Earth contest of 2017. Engaged in the field of photography for about 20 years, focussing on landscape and street life photography. First exclusively Bayoumi. exhibition launched in December 2017