

Fishing boats in El-Max

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Abstract: El-Max is situated within the city of Alexandria, Egypt, a prominent coastal metropolis in northern Egypt. Specifically, it is located adjacent to the Mahmoudiya canal, which serves as a vital waterway connecting the Nile River to the Mediterranean Sea. This strategic location not only facilitates fishing activities but also underscores El-Max's historical significance as a maritime hub within the larger urban landscape of Alexandria.

El-Max region stands as a quintessential example of a geographic area deeply entrenched in maritime traditions, characterized by its rich fishing heritage and boat culture. This academic study explores the fishing heritage of El-Max, and examines the integral role of boats within El-Max's maritime ecosystem, highlighting their diverse typologies. By scrutinizing the craftsmanship behind boat construction and the socio-cultural rituals associated with boat ownership and usage, this research unveils the profound connections between boats and the identities of El-Max inhabitants.

Moreover, this research paper aims to document El-Max region as a local cultural heritage with its distinctive character. It highlights the importance of documenting the region in light of development projects undertaken by the state, which often involve significant alterations to El-Max area.

In conclusion, this paper emphasizes the urgency of documenting El-Max as a testament to its unique cultural heritage amid ongoing development pressures, the significance of fishing boats in El-Max extends far beyond their utilitarian function; they are emblematic of a deeply ingrained cultural heritage that binds together generations of coastal communities. As symbols of resilience, craftsmanship, and communal identity, these boats embody the rich maritime traditions of the region.

Keywords: El-Max, fishing, fishing boats, Alexandria, fishermen village, maritime traditions, coastal communities

Introduction

Ethnography represents a distinct approach within the realm of social research, albeit diverging somewhat from conventional methodologies in archaeology. This method draws upon a diverse array of information sources and involves immersive engagement with the community under study. Ethnographers actively participate in the daily activities of the community for varying durations, conducting observations, listening attentively, and posing inquiries to gain insights. They also gather recent data from the field to address pertinent research inquiries. The definition of ethnography varies depending on the specific context and objectives of the research. Within the domain of maritime archaeology, maritime ethnography serves as a valuable method for investigating maritime seafaring remnants, coastal settlements, and maritime tools. This approach entails gathering data from coastal residents and individuals with seafaring expertise. Detailed documentation of traditional maritime practices and boat construction methods enables researchers to discern evolutionary trends in boat designs and construction techniques over time (Hammersley 1983; Naidoo 2012; Agius 2019).

For instance, the prevalence of wooden boats has dwindled in modern times, with contemporary construction incorporating a variety of materials such as metal and fibreglass. As highlighted by McGrail in earlier writings, ethnographic studies continue to offer valuable insights for archaeologists by presenting diverse solutions to common challenges. Through the lens of ethnographic analogies, archaeologists can propose speculative reconstructions of incomplete artefacts and structures, hypothesize functions of ambiguous architectural elements, and elucidate the manufacturing processes of objects and structures. However, it is important to exercise caution when applying this approach to doc-

umentation. The tools utilized by contemporary craftsmen may not have served the same purposes in historical eras, necessitating careful consideration and contextual analysis. (McGrail 1984; Bowens 2011)

So, the disappearing maritime heritage in El-Max underscores the critical need for maritime ethnographic research in this coastal community. As rapid urbanization and modernization reshape the landscape of El-Max, traditional maritime practices and cultural heritage are facing unprecedented threats of extinction. This introduction sets the stage for understanding the urgency and importance of conducting ethnographic research to document and preserve the vanishing maritime heritage of El-Max.

El-Max, nestled along the shores of Alexandria, Egypt, has long been revered for its rich maritime heritage, deeply rooted in centuries-old fishing traditions and seafaring livelihoods. However, in recent years, this once vibrant maritime culture has been steadily eroding under the pressures of urban development, environmental degradation, and socio-economic changes. As a result, invaluable aspects of El-Max's maritime heritage, including boat craftsmanship, fishing techniques, and community rituals, are on the brink of disappearance.

In response to this looming crisis, maritime ethnographic research emerges as a crucial tool for safeguarding and celebrating the unique cultural identity of El-Max. By immersing themselves in the everyday lives of fishermen, boatbuilders, and coastal communities, ethnographers can uncover hidden narratives, oral histories, and indigenous knowledge systems that encapsulate the essence of El-Max's maritime heritage. Through participant observation, interviews, and archival research, ethnographers can document vanishing practices, record personal stories, and capture the intangible heritage woven into the fabric of daily life in El-Max.

In conclusion, the disappearing maritime heritage in El-Max necessitates urgent action to document, preserve, and revitalize its cultural legacy. Maritime ethnographic research serves as a potent tool for confronting this challenge head-on, offering a holistic approach to understanding, valuing, and safeguarding the intangible and tangible aspects of El-Max's maritime heritage.

El-Max

El-Max, situated adjacent to the Mahmoudiya Canal, is a community primarily comprised of fishermen. The canal, excavated in 1820 under the directive of Governor Muhammad Ali, served dual purposes: to channel water from the Nile to Alexandria and to facilitate maritime trade via cargo vessels. Functioning as a subsidiary branch of the Nile, the Mahmoudiya canal traverses Alexandria before reaching its terminus at the Mediterranean Sea. Due to its unique position, where Nile waters mingle with seawater, the marine ecosystem in this locale exhibits distinct characteristics.

Historically, the canal bore the name of Sultan Mahmud II, reflecting Egypt's status as part of the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century. This waterway played a main role in navigation and trade, contributing significantly to the region's economic and social fabric during that era.

The word "max" in the Arabic language dictionary means tax; perhaps this name is due to the function of the place in the past. Referring to the old maps, Al-Max area was on the western borders of the city, where there were some sources the presence of a wall for Alexandria city from the sea to the lake, and in later sources it is found as part of a port for goods where the Gulf of El-Max or the Gulf of Bab Al-Arab.

El-Max is one of the large areas in Alexandria governorate, which has historical and archaeological importance because of its forts and ancient lighthouses. It is also considered a local heritage area because of its different nature. Where there are fishermen's houses that wrap around a waterway that ends in the Mediterranean Sea in the so-called fishermen's village, in addition to the lighthouse and the houses adjacent to it and the fish market *all* these features gave the place a different character.

Fishermen village:

The Fishermen Village, or Qarya El Sayadeen, located in the El-Max area of Alexandria, Egypt, is a picturesque coastal settlement renowned for its vibrant fishing community and traditional maritime culture. The fishermen are affected by the marine environment surrounding them, and this appears in the way they decorate some of their homes in the fishermen's village.

The fishermen's village Qaryat El Sayadeen,, also referred to as 'the trench', is comprised of quaint residences inhabited by local fishermen, situated along the banks of the Mahmoudiya canal. This canal, constructed in 1820, served as a crucial conduit linking the Nile River to the Mediterranean Sea. Throughout the nineteenth century, it served as a vital artery for the movement of merchandise, underscoring its significance in facilitating trade and commerce in the region. The Fishermen Village has a rich history dating back centuries, with fishing being the primary livelihood for its residents. This coastal settlement has witnessed the ebb and flow of maritime trade and cultural exchanges, contributing to its unique identity. The residents of the Fishing Village adhere to time-honored fishing techniques passed down through generations. Fishing remains a central aspect of daily life, with fishermen setting out to sea in colorful wooden boats each day to cast their nets or lines.

The Fishing Village is a bastion of maritime heritage, preserving age-old customs, rituals, and folklore associated with seafaring life. Traditional songs, dances, and celebrations reflect the community's deep connection to the sea and its bountiful resources. Fishing is not only a cultural tradition but also an economic lifeline for the residents of the Fishing Village. The local economy relies heavily on the fishing industry, with fish being sold locally and distributed to markets across Alexandria (Fig. 1)¹.



Fig. 1 An old picture of Fishermen village before removing it (photo: Y. Osman)

The lighthouse residences

The lighthouse residences or The Al-Fanar housing area, or as it is called the cabins, are the area of the fishermen's houses in El-Max, adjacent to the lighthouse and the fish auction, is characterized by its direct proximity to the sea. These houses line the shoreline, offering unobstructed views of the Mediterranean and the bustling activity of the fish market. Perched on the edge of the coast, the houses stand as a testament to the close relationship between the fishing community and the sea. as fishermen prepare their nets and boats for the day's work, creating a vibrant atmosphere along the waterfront. Most of these houses are inhabited by fishermen as well (Fig. 2).

¹ All the pictures are taken by the researcher during the ethnographic interviews.



Fig. 2 The lighthouse residences (photo: Y. Osman)



Fig. 3 Fishing boat from Fishermen village (photo: Y. Osman)

Fishing boats

El-Max, a coastal community in Alexandria, Egypt, boasts a rich maritime tradition characterized by a diverse array of boats. Situated along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and the Mahmoudiya Canal, El-Max is home to a vibrant fishing community whose livelihoods are intricately linked to the sea. This introduction provides an overview brief of the variety of boats found in El-Max, highlighting their significance to the local fishing industry and cultural heritage. People of El-Max are use boats for many purposes such as fishing and outing. The majority of boats in El-Max are purchased from workshops located in Mataria. These boats are predominantly small in size, constructed from wood, and equipped with motors. They typically feature a straight stern, slightly elevated bows, and are designed with onboard storage compartments (Fig. 3).



Fig. 4 Small boat in lighthouse area (photo: Y. Osman)



Fig. 5 Another type of small boat (photo: Y. Osman)

Similar types of fishing boats commonly seen in the fishermen's village are also found in the vicinity of the lighthouse, alongside various other types of vessels utilized for fishing purposes. These include:

- A small wooden boat designed to accommodate up to three individuals, equipped with a motor for swift transportation to fishing locations, followed by the use of paddles. Fishing is typically carried out using nets (Fig. 4);
- A triangular wooden boat, capable of carrying four individuals solely propelled by a motor, primarily used for net fishing of sardines (Fig. 5);
- A larger motorized boat employed in shrimp fishing, employing a method akin to trawling for catching shrimp (Fig. 6).

In the past, sailors relied on a variety of sailboats of different sizes, as the use of motors was not yet available during that time. Additionally, GPS technology was not accessible, and instead, sailors navigated using the stars or their prior knowledge of sea routes.



Fig. 6 The largest boat in lighthouse area (photo: Y. Osman)

Organization of fishing activities:

Each morning, all boats in El-Max embark on their fishing trips early. Each boat is equipped with a daily logbook, wherein fishermen are required to register their names before departing. Upon returning, fishermen leave these logbooks at the border guards' office, where officials ensure that all fishermen have safely returned.

Sometimes, boats are prohibited from sailing and fishing at sea due to adverse weather conditions. However, fishermen often find ways to circumvent these restrictions by using a large buoy to venture into the sea. Seated inside the buoy, the fisherman places the net on his legs and utilizes oars to row until reaching a suitable fishing spot. He then casts the net, although this method is fraught with risks. Nevertheless, the fisherman resorts to it out of necessity to provide for his livelihood (Fig. 6).

Destruction of the Fishermen village and the future destruction of Al-Fanar:

Unfortunately, the fishermen's village was dismantled as part of redevelopment efforts in 2018. However, fortunately, the area was documented prior to its removal through the utilization of ethnographic methodology. The fishermen's houses in the fishermen's village were removed from the area and relocated to other homes within the El-Max region. Despite this displacement, the fishermen continue their fishing activities in the sea. However, it's notable that the boats no longer dock within the canal (Figs 1–2).

In addition to plans underway to soon dismantle the fishermen's residences adjacent to the lighthouse as part of the Alexandria port development project.

Conclusion

This study is just a small part about the El Max area and the diversity of its fishing boats. In conclusion, the impending destruction of fishermen's areas signifies a significant loss of diverse maritime heritage in El-Max. The rich tapestry of cultural practices, traditional boat craftsmanship, and seafaring livelihoods that have thrived for generations are now at risk of disappearing forever. Urgent ethnographic research is imperative to document and preserve this vanishing maritime heritage before it is lost to future generations. By engaging with local communities, recording oral histories, and documenting traditional knowledge, ethnographers can ensure that the unique maritime heritage of El-Max is safeguarded for posterity.

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