A Tale of Shutb

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A Tale of Shutb
Nadia is an eleven-year-old girl, in the fifth primary grade who lives in Shutb village, Asyut, Egypt.
Every morning, Nadia walks to school with her classmates.

On their fifteen-minute walk, they pass by the mosque, the clinic and the historical hill of the village (Al- Kôm).
One morning while Nadia was passing Al-Akhdar Road (the main road in the village), she saw some people working on Al-Kôm and noticed them digging in particular spots. She wondered what they were doing.

Nadia and her classmates kept watching the workers for a while.

A man approached them saying that those people are archaeologists excavating and researching in Shutb.
The young girls talked to the man:
- Nadia: “Archaeologists! How amazing!”

The man introduced himself as Ashraf, an inspector from the Ministry of Antiquities who accompanies the mission.

Ashraf promised to give Nadia and her classmates a simple explanation of archaeology on their way back from school at 2 pm.

Nadia was very happy and excited to know more about old Shutb.

On their way from school, Nadia and her classmates again find the inspector waiting for them on the edge of Al-Kôm.

- Ashraf: “Are you willing to hear the tale of old Shutb and to know what the archaeologists are really doing here?”

- Nadia: “More than willing!”

- Ashraf: “The archaeologists have been working on an excavation project here since March 2016.”

- Nadia: “And what are they looking for?”

- Ashraf: “They are excavating the layers of old Shutb to study the history of the village and its ancient timeline.”
Nadia: (pointing to the piles of pottery collected by the archaeologists) “What about all of these pottery pieces? What does pottery have to do with archaeology?”

Ashraf: “By examining the old pottery, archaeologists can exactly determine the eras in which people of old Shutb lived.”

Karema: “But how can they do so?”

Ashraf: “Each piece of pottery reflects a specific historical period; through the material it was made of, its shape, design and the decoration on it. Moreover, by classifying and examining the pottery pieces found in excavations, the pottery specialist, who is a member of the mission, sets the timeline of old Shutb.”

Nadia: “What else can they discover through examining ancient pottery?”

Ashraf: “Well, through examining ancient pottery, an archaeologist can discover the different shapes of pottery vessels which were used for domestic purposes such as pots, food storage and plates; these can also tell about the history of the house in which these vessels were found.

“We are sure that more antiquities will be discovered in the upcoming years amidst the remains of old Shutb.”

“Furthermore, the researches of the archaeologists revealed that Shashotep; the old name of Shutb, was densely populated for four millennia and that the oldest pottery piece found in Shutb dates back to 2000 BC, nearly 500 years before the rule of the famous king Ramses II.”
Nadia: “Wow... All of these things are found in old Shutb! What about the ancient tombs? Are there any beautiful ancient tombs in Shutb like the famous Pharaonic tombs in Luxor?”

Ashraf: “The tombs of old Shutb’s occupants are located at Deir Rifeh (the monastery of Rifeh) and the most famous one is the tomb of ‘the Two Brothers’. It dates to the 12th Dynasty of the Middle Kingdom and was discovered undisturbed and filled with finely crafted furniture and statuary. The tomb's inscriptions indicate that the tomb belonged to both Khnum-Nakht, a priest in the temple of Khnum, and Nakht-Ankh, known as ‘the Worthy One’.

Thus, Nadia is wondering who is Khnum! Soon she will know more about him.

Nadia: “All these inscriptions were written in Hieroglyphics! I would love to learn hieroglyphs!”

Karema: “And do you know any more information about the people of old Shutb?”

Ashraf: “Yes. Ancient documents found in the tombs of Deir Rifeh have proven that mummification was one of the most important professions of the ancient people of Shutb. Apparently, their work in mummification had largely increased in the Greco-Roman period according to the currently archived papyri in the British Library in London.”
Happy and astonished by everything she had heard from Ashraf about old Shutb and its successive historical phases, Nadia returned home. Even though she went to bed, she was still busy thinking about the stories of old Shutb; unaware that she would envision it once again in her dreams. As soon as she fell asleep, her journey of exploring old Shutb and learning more about its occupants started.
In her dreams, Nadia's journey started when she heard some noise outside her house and looked from the window to discover what was going on. She found out a group of young people talking and greeting one another; then they went away separately. Nadia noticed one of them picking something up from the ground, something similar to ancient Egyptian statues which she could clearly identify from her Social Studies book. The young man seemed willing to take the statuette back home which urged Nadia to rush out and ask him!

- Nadia: “Hey you! Stranger! Wait! What is this thing in your hands?”
- The young man: “Do you mean this? This is just a statuette.”

- Nadia: “Where did you find it? This statuette is an antiquity! You don't have the right to take it! That is illegal.”

- The young man: “How is this possible?! My father made this statuette and now I am on my way to his workshop to fix it. So why do you say that I cannot take it?”

- Nadia (astonished) “You say that your father made it? Who are you? What is your father's name? What happened to the village? What happened to my neighborhood? Where is my school? This is not my village, Shutb!”

- Nadia stumbled over something on the ground while she is walking, so she picked it up. The young man explained that this is a part of a spinning tool from one of the textile workshops in Shashotep, his village and his name is 'Khnum-Hotep' and this is his sister 'Meret'.
- Nadia: Khnum-Hotep? What a strange name! What does it even mean?

- Khnum-Hotep: “I am named after the most important Egyptian deity ‘Khnum’ which is figured as a ram-headed man and considered the guardian of the sources of the Nile. He is also credited with the creation of human beings that he shaped from clay with his own pottery wheel, and my name Khnum-Hotep means ‘Khnum is pleased.’ Since we live in Shashotep in which the significant temple for the deity Khnum is located, a lot of people are named after him such as my beloved neighbours Khnum-Nakht and Nefer-Khnum.”

- Nadia: “My village’s name is Shutb, not Shashotep, which is the name of old Shutb in ancient Egypt as the antiquities inspector told me!”

Khnum-Hotep is perplexed.

- Nadia (asking Khnum-Hotep): “what does the name Shashotep mean?”

- Khnum-Hotep: “Shashotep means ‘Shai pleases’. Shai is the god of the region and he is considered the god of fate who was figured as a donkey or a dog, and he also resembles the deity Seth”.

- Nadia: “Seth! Osiris’ brother?”

- Khnum-Hotep: “Yes”.

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- Nadia: “Seth! Osiris’ brother?”

- Khnum-Hotep: “Yes”.
- Khnum-Hotep: “Shashotep is located on a water stream and it turns into an island during the annual flooding of the Nile”.

- Nadia: “Wow! An island?! Then people must have needed boats to travel back and forth between Shashotep and Asyut. Was there a wharf for the boats?”

- Khnum-Hotep: “A wharf?! The people coming from Asyut use sailboats, but if they are sailing against the tide to the north down the river to the Mediterranean, they use oars to row”.

- Khnum-Hotep: “If you would like, you can accompany us to our house where you will see more statuettes in my father’s workshop and on our way we will also see Shashotep’s stream,”.

- Nadia: “Of course! I would love to.”
When they arrived, Nadia was surprised by the style of the house and wondered, “Why does it look different from the old houses of Shutb?! It does not even look like my grandparents’ very old house?!”

Khnum-Hotep (Explaining): “To build our houses, we don’t use burnt bricks, but we mix the topsoil with animal waste and straw. We stack them in wooden molds in the sun to dry to produce bricks that are cooler in hot weather”.

Khnum-Hotep and Meret took Nadia on a tour to see Shashotep, pointing out that most people of Shashotep worked as farmers. Most of the village’s houses had animal barns and yards with no roofs for light and air to cool down their water flasks.
While some other people worked as priests at the temple of Khnum, and their daily work was to protect the deity's shrine and observe that the special rituals of Khnum's statue were regularly performed.

In addition, few people worked as clerks because most occupants did not know how to read and write, so they helped them writing their own letters and contracts.

- Meret: "Now, let's go to visit the temple of Khnum. It is the most sacred and significant place in the village. You have to see it Nadia".

- Nadia: "But I have to go home soon because it is almost time for school".

At this moment Nadia heard her mother's voice wakening her up to go to school. She realised that her visit to Khnum-Hotep and Meret's house was merely a dream. She ended up wishing to continue the dream to discover more and more about old Shutb.
Nadia's family lives in a house nearby the train station. One day, while she was passing by the train station with her classmates to go to school, they saw a group of artists from Cairo who came to paint a graffiti inspired by Shutb's traditional folklore.

She also noticed that there was a group of filmmakers preparing to interview some of the villagers about Shutb's history and monuments to produce a documentary. Nadia was overwhelmed and delighted because this documentary would help a lot of people to know about the history and heritage of her village, Shutb.
On Fridays, Nadia is used to spend the day at her grandparents’ house; so she and her mother take a Toktok (a small three-wheeled car used for transportation in villages) on a ten minutes ride to reach their house which is very close to Shutb’s local market. The house has a distinctive construction featuring old Shutb.

The house was built with handmade bricks as all old local houses of Shutb. These lightly burnt bricks cool down houses in summer and keep them warm in winter. The house is old and decorated on the front wall with bricks shaped in the form of a girl. Although this female figure is very common amidst Shutb’s houses, its true meaning and symbolism is still a mystery.

In her grandparents’ house, Nadia enjoys helping her grandmother with baking bread using the traditional mud-brick oven and she anxiously waits for the weekly gathering to listen to her grandmother’s fascinating tales about ancient times.
Now, the grandmother is telling the folk tale known to all the people in Shutb “Once upon a time, a man walking back home suddenly met a stranger on the road. The stranger gave him some bread. When the man returned home, the bread turned into gold and the man was astonished. So, he decided to go back and ask the stranger about the magical bread. But the latter told him that he would visit him again on the same day next year”.

“Exactly on the same day, a year later, the stranger came back, and the man asked him again for more bread. The stranger told him that he had already taken his share of luck and now it is his turn to give other people bread”.

The people of Shutb believe that the stranger is an angel.
After lunch with the family, Nadia asked her grandfather to tell her about the paintings and shapes on the front door. He told her that the paintings are spells to protect the house from evil and that they are common on doors of old Shutb.

- Grandfather: “Nadia, have you noticed that the soil of Shutb is sometimes red while other times it is black?”

- Nadia: “Yes! I have; specially when I mix the soil with water to make clay shapes or dolls’.

- The grandfather: “Do you know why?”

- Nadia: “Not exactly. Would you tell me, Grandpa?”

- The grandfather: “This happened because, as the folk tale says, Shutb was burned down seven times,”

- Nadia: “Burned down seven times!”

- The grandfather: “Yes! This happened because of a dispute between two kings; the King of Shutb and the King of Durunka. Then the King of Durunka decided to burn Shutb down!”

- Nadia: “But why would the two kings fight?! And how did the King of Durunka burn Shutb down?”

- The grandfather: “The folk tale tells that the King of Durunka burned Shutb using a large reflecting lens because he got angry, when the prince of Shutb wanted to marry the king’s daughter against his will.

The story did not end with burning Shutb only once, but seven times until the whole city was turned into a pile of ruins and ashes.

- Grandfather continues: “A friend has told me that the Arab historian Ibn Duqmaq mentioned the tale of Shutb’s burning into a ‘red hill’ and noted that modern Shutb was built next to that old hill (Al-Kom). They also believed that there was a stream of the Nile passing by the south-west of the hill where there were a number of workshops for making glass, bricks and perhaps metal.”

- Nadia whispering: “Yes, I saw that in my dream!”.
The next day, Nadia went to school; very stimulated and happy with everything she knew of old Shutb's history.

Later in history class, Nadia asked the teacher about the dispute between the King of Shutb and the King of Durunka and all those stories about burning Shutb seven times. Nadia talked about all what she had heard from her grandfather.

The teacher then asked her to tell the story to her classmates and announced that their lesson that day would be about an important historical period of Shutb when the martyr Prince Tadrus paid his visit to the village.

At this moment, Nader, one of Nadia's classmates, said that he knew the story very well because he recently visited the monastery of Prince Tadrus Al-Shutbi in Shutb. He also asked the teacher to give him the chance to tell the story to his classmates.
The story tells that when Tadrus, the martyr came to visit Shutb, the people of Shutb commemorated Tadrus’ visit by erecting a pillar near the Nile carved with tributes, overlooking the ships.

At this moment Nadia remembered her visit to the ancient stream of Shutb on her journey with Khnum-Hotep and Meret. The teacher then added that around the fourth century AD, the number of Christians in Shutb increased.

- Nadia whispered proudly: “I am really pleased with my village and its ancient history, thanks to all the information I got since I encountered Ashraf, the inspector, until this history class”.
Next Friday, Nadia went to her grandparents’ house on Al-Kom, but this time she admires Shutb’s old hill and remembered all she had learned about the ancient history of Shutb in the past weeks. She remembered her friends Khnum-Hotep and Merit and their house which mostly lies in the deepest layers of Al-Kom.

Nadia hopes that archaeologists will find that house one day. She would also like to meet them once again in her dreams because she loved them and enjoyed their company. She has a lot of questions about old Shutb that need to be answered...
The End!
A Tale of Shutb

A *Tale of Shutb* is a fictional story including accurate historical facts within the narration of the events. It is an initiative to present the recent discoveries of the British Museum’s expedition to Shutb to the local audience in a brief and interesting way. This story was written in Arabic language to educate new facts and to achieve entertainment at the same time through introducing the true historical facts in a fictional story. We encourage children and young people to discover their ancient history and its effect on their daily lives.