Westernisation, Modernisation and Colonialism

THE CASE OF THE EGYPTIAN UPPER CLASS

It is often claimed that the upper classes in colonised lands adopted colonialist tastes, mannequins and lifestyles precisely due to colonisation. However, I contend that the Egyptian upper class looked to the North long before British colonialists set their feet on Egyptian soil.

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zation. As I shall demonstrate in this article, European influences in Egypt predated 1882, the date of occupation.

Westernisation Prior to Colonisation

As early as 1870, «The Times» magazine commented upon the westernization of the Egyptian elite:

The evening dress of the Egyptian is a *fez*, white cravat, vest white or black, single-breasted black frock coat with upright collar, and he is always white-gloved. The man of this type always speaks French, sometimes German, rarely English, he keeps high trotting horses, a brougham with inside furniture for the Shoubra road, is a keen politician, and detests the Turk if he is not one himself, and will play his head off at *Ecarte* or *Baccarat*.²

TEXT: Magda Baraka

THE FOLLOWING CONTRIBUTION draws in large part on existing research on the Egyptian upper class between 1919 and 1952. The arguments and data presented in this article are based on «The Egyptian Upper-Class between two Revolutions 1919-1952»¹. As a study in socio-cultural history, my PHD-thesis examined class relations, perceptions, class language, and lifestyles, of the Egyptian upper class of the time, all of which were marked by considerable degree of westernization. The study attempted to adopt an approach that was more adapted to the need to explain social change, to address how people lived and made social change. How they might have welcomed, resisted, adapted to, or selected from the macro changes and translated them to the micro level of their individual lives.

While the title of this edition of *Babylon* emphasizes the effects of colonization on culture, I would like to qualify my following contribution by stating in advance that it establishes no direct causal relationship between westernization and coloni-

Indeed, the occupation of Egypt needs some qualification. Unlike other parts of the world, especially India, and vast areas of sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt's colonial experiment was short and qualified. While the British invaded Egypt in 1882, it remained under Ottoman «suzerainty». The British exercised their role in the government only in the name of the Ottoman Sultan. The *khedive*, the Sultan's representative in Egypt remained the official ruler assisted by the British High Commissioner in Egypt. Direct rule only intervened in the short period of 1914-1922. As the Ottoman Empire was officially at war with the British during World War One, Egypt was declared a British protectorate during the war years. Immediately after the end of the war, the eruption of the 1919 uprisings culminated in a unilateral British declaration of Egypt's independence. The 1922 declaration included reservations maintai-

ning a measure of British military presence and administrative influence that made for an incomplete independence, the completion of which was the pivot of Egyptian political life for the following three decades.

Hence, my study demonstrates that westernization, and modernization is not necessarily synonymous with colonization. Westernization in Egypt was rather the result of a cultural encounter even though

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an unequal one. The first encounter with western culture was the result of another invasion – albeit transitory by the French (1798-1801) who left behind them the press and other military, administrative and urban forms of modern organization. It continued with the scientific missions sent to France once again by Mohammad Ali¹ (1805-1840) who also invited many scientists and experts into Egypt, through the role of modern secular education introduced by Mohammad Ali and his successors, through the role of a westernized upper class, through the effects of a large foreign influx to Egypt concomitant with the British occupation and finally through the role of mass production and commercialization.

An early and predominant factor in the spread of European influences could be attributed to the emergence of secular nati-

onal education, which co-existed alongside earlier existing religious education. The latter no longer profited from the earlier monopoly of the educational process it had previously enjoyed. While the religious figure was the wise-man to which all queries could be referred, there emerged a new secular pole, that of the intellectual. Educated people were described as enlightened, translated into *mutanawireen* in Arabic. The intellectual was rendered, a modern time source of council and opinion. His views were popularized through the agency of daily journals and publications read aloud in coffee shops and heard there by the non-and the lesser educated. This press was to become instrumental in fashioning what in Jürgen Habermas's terminology could be termed a 'public sphere'. There, opinions on national and public concerns were voiced. This, often resulted in, or contributed to the crystallization of a mainstream 'public opinion'. The vehemence of this public sphere in Egypt was particularly evident in periods of turmoil and accelerated change.

Starting with the reign of Mohammad Ali, the state was the agent for the changes that resulted in accentuation of western influences. It was the state that introduced modern secular education, sent students to study abroad, built the opera house, built western-style palaces and changed official costume from Ottoman to western attire.

Egypt started witnessing something akin to the bourgeois Cultural Revolution that took place in Europe between the 16th and the 19th centuries. In the guise of modernization, an army of politicians, artists, scientists, and architects undertook the global mission of introducing Egypti-

ans to western-inspired forms of political and social organization. This bourgeois Cultural Revolution had an explicit ideological mission: First, to replace older forms of absolute and sacred power with secular forms of authority. Second, to replace a temporality based on the seasonal agrarian cycle and the rhythms of religious festivals and activities, by secular temporality marked by clock-time precision and the work-day routine of a punctual industrial society. Third, to replace an old space, heedless of meticulous regularity and infused with meanings and intensities, with the geometric grid, and the world of measurement, symmetry, uniformity and Cartesian extension.

In this regard, it could be argued that the main contribution of British presence in Egypt was administrative rather than cultural. As one of the main pretexts of foreign presence was Egypt's insolvency, which resulted in its inability to meet its foreign debt obligations, the role of the British High Commissioner was to straighten up Egypt's administration in a manner that would enable it to repay its debt. Thus, the British reorganized the various ministries, modernized the land survey system, the irrigation system and the system of taxation, amongst other things.

Pre-Colonial Education

The bulk of foreign and missionary schools were established before the colonial era, and it had been before the colonial era that the Egyptian elite started looking North both for national salvation against a perceived «lagging behind», and as a means to distinguish themselves from «inferior social classes» whose «local» tastes and someti-

mes «uncouth» mannerisms were pejoratively described as *baladi* (local) as opposed to the *faranji* (foreign) codes of dress and behavior. Throughout, there was a consciousness for the need for reform, and that there was a gap to be bridged. Egyptian intelligentsia were influenced by French ideas of the age of enlightenment (*l'âge des lumières*). They tried to combine the idea of a western scientific, political, and organizational superiority with a preservation of identity and the supremacy of values of a religious derivation.

While one's intimate private identity remained steeped in tradition and faith, nonetheless one's patterns of behavior and ones views of social organization were irredeemably coloured by life north of Marseilles.⁴

The royal family of Albanian Ottoman origin, and the Turkish elite were – even in folklore – famous for their disdain of the indigenous population. Egypt's sizeable resident European community likewise exhibited Western civilization's unabashed feelings of superiority and self-certainty. It was perhaps the contact of the Egyptian upper class with elements of both which led them in many ways to try to distance themselves from the manners and customs of the indigenous population and to emulate those of the court and the westerners.

Edward Said's testimony regarding the education he received in his school days in Egypt in Victoria College, Cairo and the British Gezira preparatory school tells something about how schools would have contributed to this attitude. He was:

subject to the discipline of a colonial school

system an imported mythology owing nothing to that Arab world among whose colonial elites, for at least a century, it had flourished. Its main tenet was that everything of consequence either had happened or would happen in the west in so far as Arabs were concerned, they had to deal with the challenge or the discipline of the west by learning its ways, or where it was impossible to do otherwise, by copying them.⁵

Little wonder that after the 1952 revolution, Edward Said was destined to leave Egypt as did many of the elite students of those schools. It is also to be remarked that many of those students played a prominent role in business and politics, but played no part in the intellectual and literary life of the nation, which was dominated by middle class figures with a solid Arabic education such as Al-Manfaluti, Alrafi, Ahmad Amin and Abbas Al-Aqqad. By comparison, the «*literature Egyptienne d'expression française*» by authors such as Prince Haydar Fazil, Albert Cosseiri, George Henein, Wasyf Boutros Ghali and Joseph Oscar Nahhas was much more circumscribed. It hinged upon the short-lived existence of a cosmopolitan community and disappeared with its disappearance.

Genderizing Education

French schools were by far the most populous and comparatively of greater number than British, American, German, Italian or Greek schools in Egypt at the time. The cause for joining them for the majority of their male population was for reasons of preparation for the later study of law, which was conducted largely in French and drew on French legal codes. As the century progressed, there was a greater

Anglicization of male education, while a French education remained for young upper class Egyptian women. This was not without effect on the family-life:

There was a terrible dichotomy between the men and the women in the same family. The women were Frenchified, speaking bad Arabic, and the men spoke only Arabic with a bit of English and couldn't get on with their wives. The men lived very separate lives. They used to frequent cafes and clubs, while at home there was the Obusson salon, and the woman in charge of everything. And sometimes the man would have a second life with a prostitute, a dancer, etc. There was a rift between the man and the woman and the family was split in upbringing and manners.⁶

This impact of this educational landscape was divided between the competing English and French languages in Egypt. One notices how different functions were shared out between the two languages and the city mapped out into carefully guarded zones of influence:

The social circles of the mixed courts, where justice was dispensed by Scandinavian, Italian, German, American, and British judges, belonged essentially to this French speaking world. The banks and cotton houses the vast majority of foreign schools, the Catholic missions in Egypt, the nascent Fouad the first secular university, the royal family apart from King Fouad himself who preferred Italian, the Egyptian plutocracy both Muslim and Coptic, the Masonic lodges, the department stores, the Suez canal company, the majority of the press (including the editors of the Arabic papers), the eligible young girls

of all communities who expected brilliant marriages, the habitués of the tea-rooms and restaurants, the young cinema industry, the legal profession, the better class brothels, the hotels, the tram and metro-inspectors, the learned societies, the antiquities service, and naturally the French community itself, all were French speaking.⁷

By contrast, the study of English was promoted in government schools from which the Egyptian civil service largely drew. In higher education, the school of

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medicine was a bastion of English as were the schools of engineering and agriculture. The railways, postal service police, irrigation department, national bank and finance committees were all domains of British influence in Egypt.

In his book 'Challenging Colonialism'⁸, Eric Davis finds a correlation between political orientation and education received. He gives examples of prominent Egyptian professionals; particularly engineers and doctors who played a role in Egyptian public life at the time⁹, whom he says bore the stamp and perhaps the sympathies of the British system, with its emphasis on pragmatism and empiricism, while leaders of the nationalist movement¹⁰ were educated at the Egyptian faculty of law which closely followed the French tradition. The

theoretical and abstract orientation of a French educational system, sharpened by moral questions akin to the study of law was more likely to encourage the politicization of its students.

Clearly, the Egyptian upper class of the early twentieth century was different from earlier elites of the Mamluk or Ottoman eras, as well as from the elite that formed after 1952. Western influences which were mediated by Mohammad Ali and his successor Ismail, became increasingly direct, later. The beginning of the British occupation, followed by a large influx of European nationals brought about the erosion of Ottoman influences upon the character of the country whose rulers were themselves thoroughly westernized. The last two monarchs of Egypt, Fouad and his son Farouk had a policy of staffing the court with Italians. Moreover, to counterbalance that, the British made sure Farouk was tutored by a British governess before travelling to England for his formal education.

The Upper Class and the Revolution

The trend towards Europeanization was also bolstered by the new commercialism and mass production. For instance, with the advent of commercial recording, singers and composers became far less dependent on the sponsorship of rulers or wealthy patrons and hence less bound by their tastes. The same could be said of theatre programs or of styles of clothing or furniture. Hence, in the realm of music for instance, the difference between pre- and post World War I music was great. The difference between Ottoman, but also to a lesser extent Persian Andalusia and Sufi influences on the one hand, and western technical as well as artistic influences, on

the other. Commercialization of culture rather than upper class tastes were instrumental in the prevalence of more Europeanized musical forms such as waltzes, marches, and theatrical dialogues over older traditional / Arabic ones, such as the *dawr* or the *mawwal*. The latter were not adapted to the newly-introduced 78 r.p.m. recordings, which had only a few minutes recording-time on each side". The modern recordings also favored catering for urban more exposed and moneyed tastes over the poorer rural indigenous ones.

Thus class is relevant to the analysis on several notes. Firstly, studying how the upper class adapted to westernization and whether it had an influence in spreading westernization. Moreover, westernization was part of the way the upper class defined itself and was defined by others. These exercises of definition were not unrelated to the final outcome of the upper class's political fortunes.

Class is defined as much by culturally typifying practices as by economic factors. My study traces the emergence of a gap between the upper class and the rest of society, which gradually widened and ultimately contributed to the downfall of the class and the advent of the 1952 revolution, which brought about a republican regime. This gap was identified in socio-cultural terms and not solely in terms of economic disparities and injustices. The overall cultural westernization that characterized the class justified its later de-legitimization by the new revolutionary regime. It was dubbed the tails of colonization (*'adhnab el-ist'-mar*). And, this, despite the fact, that this Egyptian upper class had been deeply involved in the nationalist movement since the 1919 uprisings. This was a moment at

which it had provided the leadership of the nationalist movement.

Paradoxes of Class

In my study, I view class not in terms of shared ideologies or programs of political action, but in terms of lifestyles, perceptions and languages. From this perspective, a westernized lifestyle did indeed play a role of class marker, and was a factor of class groupness for the Egyptian upper class. Thus, the cultural and the political intertwined. All the more so, at a moment in history marked by anti-colonial nationalism where the political is subjugated to the cultural. For, in the nationalist logic, each cultural group attempts to create its own nation-state. This perhaps accounts for an ambivalence that so marked the language of the upper class. While they privately looked down on lower-class tastes, mannerisms and lifestyles as *baladi* (local) as opposed to their own European polish, they publicly underscored their national belonging by referring to themselves in such political fora as the parliament as peasants (*fellaheen*). The peasant, being the romanticized symbol of an eternal Egyptian nation.

In politics on the other hand, there were limits to Egyptian political culture being guided by western political values foremost amongst which is democracy. A constitution was in place by 1923. A popular assembly existed- with interruptions- since 1866, and yet apart from the populist Wafd party, elite parties never really accepted the idea of being vetoed out of power by the «rabble». They fashioned the 1923-constitution to protect their interests, and had thus comfortably maintained themselves in privilege till the 1940's, when due to

a change of political culture from below, especially on the part of a growing and increasingly competing and self-confident middle-class, it was no longer unnatural for the rest of society to accept a change of the established social order.

While the Egyptian upper class adopted a self-styled form of democracy, the consequences of Egyptian society's openness to other ideas of western derivation also merit interest. While Egyptian communism had made its appearance as early as 1924, it did not prove as ominous to the fortunes of the Egyptian upper class as other ideas that made their entry into the stage during the 1940's, and were espoused by an influential segment of the Egyptian middle class.

During this decade, the idea of «Social Justice» acquired a new sense of urgency and support not unrelated to the victory of the Soviet-Union in the Second World War. Moreover, throughout the decade, the lure of Republican ideas could contest an enfeebled monarchy, ideas of «Land Reform» could contest practices now easily identified as «Feudalism». However, at the same time, the multi-party system was not seen as a vehicle for the peaceful change of a system in crisis. It was all too easily associated with defense of certain stakes, and multi-party differences were denounced as «factionalism». There was an evident squeeze of the liberal centre attributed to the weakening of the populist and liberal Wafd party.

The conservatism of the middle-class had started timidly since the 1920's with the appearance of the religious «Muslim Brotherhood Movement» in 1928. It gained momentum in the 1930's with the rise of the Young Egypt Movement (*Misr el-*

Fatah), a development parallel to the Great Depression and the rise of the Fascist political movements in Europe. With the advent of the 1940's this middle class was withdrawing its mandate of leadership from the older Egyptian westernized and somewhat liberal upper class and creating its own extra-parliamentary political organizations.

Thus, while the British colonial government continued to be the source of modernist interventionist practices, it had done so partly in an indirect manner. By consolidating private property and improving irrigation and taxation, it had bolstered the incomes of a class of Egyptian owners of large agricultural estates which were able to sponsor and finance civil society institutions. After the 1922 independence and the enthusiasm it had engendered, it was not to wane. The Egyptian intelligentsia saw modernity as some sort of a formula combining Egyptian control of decision-making and Western technique particularly in an age of exciting Western advances in transport and communications.¹² Yet, in the process, many if not all grew alienated from their local base:

In the milieu in which I grew to know Egyptians. Cairo and Alexandria were cosmopolitan not so much because they contained foreigners, but because the Egyptian born in them was himself a stranger in his land.¹³

The temporary end of this process owes itself to the eruption of the 1952-revolution when agrarian reforms deprived the landed class of its economic base, and the state itself was involved in what it called «Egyptianization» (*al-tamseer*).

The Transformation of the Upper Class

Today, in 2006 there is a different upper class with different cultural characteristics, and it needs a thorough study. If it had been education and a cultural encounter that helped fashion the westernized horizons of the upper class under the monarchy, westernization still marks a currently existing upper class but in very different ways. Instead of the European influence, there is now «Americanization» of soap operas followed by Egyptian English-speaking audiences since the seventies on Egyptian television and satellite screens from «Dallas» to «Knots Landing», to «The Bold and The Beautiful». «TOEFL» exams have largely given way to the American «SAT» exams, and schoolchildren speak English with an American accent. In many cases, the influence of the new superpower has not been a direct one, but through the media, and often through schooling in one of the Gulf countries where the parents held expatriate jobs. On Cairo streets, the two most popular cars of the high and mighty are the German Mercedes Benz for the parents' generation and an American Jeep or Cherokee for the younger generation. The legal profession totally lost its attraction as helpful in the making of a 'future minister' as it previously did, and even the attraction of the 50, 60s and 70's for the careers of doctors and engineers gave way in the nineties and in the current opening years of the twenty first century to the dream of a career in the financial markets, and this as landowners-hip and industry no longer hold pride of place in national wealth or in the popular imagination.

The Italian cameriera and the Swiss and British governess and wet nurse who

instructed children in languages and etiquette have now left their place to the Philippine and Indonesian house- help whose primary role it is to free the lady of the house's time for more work and more leisure. On the more positive side, relations between man and wife are less marked by the previous French-English educational dichotomy, and, indebtedness and gambling are no longer sine-qua-nons of upper class existence. But, political and social liberalism has suffered much. And, the fight against superstition as well as intellectual soul-searching for the root-causes of western «progress» versus national «lagging behind» seem to have been skimmed over, in favour of an easy adoption of western consumption patterns. High literature has given way to a culture – at best – of «best-sellers». While, the generation of 1919 was reading Anatole France, Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells Bertrand Russell, and later embodiments of the fusion between enlightenment and 19th century liberal and positivist thought, they were succeeded by a generation which read Shelly, Byron, the Russian novel, Freud and Marks. The current generation hardly reads classics if they are not students of foreign language departments. For, perhaps while in 1919 there was no television, and thus literature was a prime means for amusement and self-edification, fast-living has now become the norm, and with it the «thrills» in movies, and the best sellers in literature.

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1 My doctoral thesis was submitted to Oxford University and later published in book form, Baraka, Magda: *The Egyptian Upper-Class between Two Revolutions 1919-1952*, St. Anthony's Monograph Series. Ithaca Press, 1998. The present article has been edited by Mona Abdel-Fadil & Naima Mouhleeb.

- 2 *The Times*, 28 January 1870.
- 3 Mohammed Ali is seen by many as the builder of modern Egypt. He governed the country over the period 1805-1840.
- 4 Wahba, Magdi «*The Egyptian Enlightenment and the Egyptian mind*» unpublished paper, 1989.
- 5 Said, Edward: *Out of Place: A Memoir*. London, Granta Publications. 1999.
- 6 Magdi Wahba, interview, February of 1993.
- 7 Wahba, Magdi. «Cairo Memoires» in *Encounter* vol. 62, May issue, 1984, p.76.
- 8 Davis, Eric. *Challenging Colonialism: Bank Misr and Egyptian industrialization*. Princeton, 1982.
- 9 For instance, Ahmad Abbud Hafez Afifi and Amin Uthman.
- 10 Prominent leaders of the nationalist movements were by example; Mustafa Kamil, Muammad Farid, S'ad Zaghloul, Talat Harb.
- 11 Traditional songs were very long, usually much too long to fit onto these types of recordings.
- 12 Mohammad Sidqi, the first Egyptian to drive an airplane from Berlin to Alexandria between December of 1929 and January 1930 received a national hero's welcome. The first national company for film production carried the name of Egypt: *Misr*, and the mere appearance of the name of the *Misr* company for film production on cinema screens was enough to produce standing ovations on the part of the audience in the early twenties.
- 13 Ghali, Waguilh. *Beer in the Snooker Club*. London. Serpent Tail, 1964. p.18