



1938

Taha Hussein, 'The Future of Culture in Egypt' (Excerpts)

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Summary:

The text printed here, an English translation, is constituted by two excerpts from the famous yet controversial Arabic book *Mustaqbal al-thaqafa fi Misr* (1938) [*The Future of Culture in Egypt*], by Taha Hussein (1889-1973).

Born in a village in Upper Egypt and blind from the age of three, Hussein was first educated in his village school. He went on to the famous Azhar Islamic university in Cairo, to the newly founded Egyptian (Cairo) University, where he received a doctorate in 1914, and to Montpellier and the Sorbonne, which in 1917 awarded him another doctorate. For one thing, Hussein was a powerful educational institution builder, as Hussam Ahmed's *The Last Nahdawi: Taha Hussein and Institution Building in Egypt* (2021) shows. Thus, he became a Cairo University professor in 1919, teaching Islamic history and Arabic literature, and he was the university's Dean of Arts (1928, 1930-32 and 1936-39), a member and then president of the Arabic & Language Academy (1940-73), and Egypt's Minister of Culture (1950-52). For another thing, Hussein was a supremely influential intellectual and a specialist of premodern and modern Arabic literature. Thus, from 1926 to 1967 he published the three-volume autobiographical novel *Al-Ayyam* [*The Days*], and in 1926 wrote *Fi al-shi'r al-jahili* [*On Pre-Islamic Poetry* (2016)], which he revised as *Fi al-adab al-jahili* [*On Pre-Islamic Literature* (1927)] after traditionalists (unsuccessfully) took him to court. And although helping to introduce thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre to Arabs as the 1945-1948 editor of the journal *al-Katib al-Misri*, he belonged to the Arab Renaissance (nahda) literati who were from the 1940s accused by many younger intellectuals for not supporting committed art; in turn, he defended the necessity of not delimiting what art should be or do.

His 1938 text *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, excerpted here in a 1975 English translation, was very detailed—it included dozens of suggestions about how to improve Egypt's educational system—and quite complex. On the one side, Hussein confidently took Europe to task in the main body of the work, and emphasized the need to thoroughly know one's own culture and history. But on the other side, he saw European empires as still very powerful; thus, a lagging Egypt should embrace European

concepts—an approach internalizing (self-interested) European Orientalist views, as Stephen Sheehi has argued in *The Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* (2004). In a sense, both of these two sides were framed by his work's immediate historical context: the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. Maximizing Egypt's sovereignty and allowing it to become a League of Nations member in 1937, this treaty showed strength—but also continued weakness vis-à-vis Britain, whose troops remained in the Suez Canal zone. In the same vein, the introduction's argument about Egypt's geo-civilizational position accepted the discourse of a dominant Europe—only to make Egypt its geographical and historical pioneer by giving it great weight vis-à-vis Ancient Greece, which was conventionally seen as the cradle of European civilization.

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Transcript - Arabic

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THE FUTURE OF CULTURE IN EGYPT

Taha Hussein

Translated from the Arabic by
Sidney Glazer

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I do not like illusions. I am persuaded that it is only God who can create something from nothing. I therefore believe that the new Egypt will not come into being except from the ancient, eternal Egypt. I believe further that the new Egypt will have to be built on the great old one, and that the future of culture in Egypt will be an extension, a superior version, of the humble, exhausted, and feeble present. For this reason we should think of the future of culture in Egypt in the light of its remote past and near present. We do not wish, nor are we able, to break the link between ourselves and our forefathers. To the degree that we establish our future life upon our past and present we shall avoid most of the dangers caused by excesses and miscalculations deriving from illusions and dreams.

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At the outset we must answer this fundamental question: Is Egypt of the East or of the West? Naturally, I mean East or West in the cultural, not the geographical sense. It seems to me that there are two distinctly different and bitterly antagonistic cultures on the earth. Both have existed since time immemorial, the one in Europe, the other in the Far East.

We may paraphrase the question as follows: Is the Egyptian mind Eastern or Western in its imagination, perception, comprehension, and judgment? More succinctly put--which is easier for the Egyptian mind: to understand a Chinese or Japanese, or to understand an Englishman or a Frenchman? This is the question that we must answer before we begin to think of the foundations on which we shall have to base our culture and education. It seems to me that the simplest way to do this is by tracing the complicated development of the Egyptian mind from earliest times to the present.

The first thing to note is that, so far as is known, we had no regular, sustained contacts with the Far East that could have affected our thinking and political or economic institutions. The available archaeological remains and documents reveal little more than that Egyptians at the end of the Pharaonic period evinced some desire to explore the Red Sea coasts, which they left only with great caution, chiefly for the sake of goods from India and South Arabia. Their attempts were tentative, unorganized, and ephemeral.

The contacts between ancient Egypt and the lands of the East scarcely went beyond Palestine, Syria, and Mesopotamia, that is, the East that falls in the Mediterranean basin, but there is no doubt that they were strong and continuous and that they exerted an influence on the intellectual, political, and economic life of all the countries involved. Our mythology relates that Egyptian gods crossed the Egyptian frontiers in order to civilize the people in these regions. Historians tell us that the kings of Egypt at times extended their sway over them. Ancient Egypt was a major power politically and economically not only in comparison wither neighbors, but with the countries that cradled the European civilization with which we are examining our kinship.

It would be a waste of time and effort to set forth in detail the ties binding Egypt to the ancient Greco-Aegean civilization. [Page 4] School children know that Greek colonies were established in Egypt by the Pharaohs before the first millenium B.C.

They also know that an Eastern nation, Persia, successfully invaded our country at the end of the sixth century B. C. But we resisted fiercely until the Alexandrian era, having recourse at one time to Greek volunteers, and at another time allying ourselves with the Greek cities.

The meaning of all this is very clear: the Egyptian mind had no serious contact with the Far Eastern mind; nor did it live harmoniously with the Persian mind. The Egyptian mind has had regular, peaceful, and mutually beneficial relations only with the Near East and Greece. In short, it has been influenced from earliest times by the Mediterranean Sea and the various peoples living around it.

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The mutually beneficial relations between the Egyptian and Greek minds in antiquity was acknowledged and lauded by the Greeks themselves both in poetry and prose. Egypt is favorably mentioned in the works of the story-tellers and dramatists. Herodotus and later writers and philosophers give great attention to her.

The Greeks before and during their golden age used to consider themselves the pupils of the Egyptians in civilization, particularly the fine arts. History has neither denied this nor subtracted anything from it. On the contrary, the facts affirm an Egyptian influence not only on Greek architecture, sculpture, and painting, but on the applied arts and sciences as well, not to mention the various aspects of daily life, including political conduct.

We must note that Egypt was not alone in influencing Greece. Other Near Eastern nations, for instance, Chaldea, had an abundant share in contributing to her civilization and progress.

The ancient Egyptian mind is not an Eastern mind, if we understand by the East China, Japan, India, and the adjoining regions. It developed in Egypt as a result of the conditions, natural and human, that prevailed there. It only exerted influence on and was in turn influenced by the neighboring non-Egyptian peoples, principally the Greeks.

From these clear and long since proven facts, Egyptians [page 5] have deduced the weird and illogical conclusion that they are Easterners not merely in the geographical sense of the term, but in mentality and culture. They regard themselves as being closer to the Hindus, Chinese, and Japanese than to the Greeks, Italians, and Frenchmen. I have never been able to understand or accept this shocking misconception. I still recall the astonishment I felt several years ago when I became familiar with the activities of a group in Egypt that called itself the "Eastern Link Association" and sought to promote contacts with the peoples of the Far East rather than with the peoples of the Near West. I clearly, indeed intuitively, understand our consciousness of the positive relationships existing between us and the Near East not only because of identity of language and religion, but also because of geographical propinquity as well as similarity of origin and historical evolution. When we go beyond the Near East, however, these factors no longer obtain, except for religion and temporary considerations of a political or economic nature.

History shows that religious and linguistic unity do not necessarily go hand in hand with political unity, nor are they the props on which states rely. The Muslims realized this a long time ago. They established their states on the basis of practical interests, abandoning religion, language, and race as exclusively determining factors before the end of the second century A.H. [eighth century of the Christian Era] when the Umayyad dynasty in Andalusia was in conflict with the Abbassids in Iraq. In the fourth century A.H. [tenth century of the Christian Era] the Islamic world replaced the Islamic empire. Various national blocs and states emerged everywhere. They were built on economic, geographical, and other interests and differed in strength and stability.

Egypt was one of the earliest among the Islamic states to recover her ancient, unforgotten personality. History tells us that she violently opposed the Persians and Macedonians, the latter being eventually absorbed into the local population. Egypt yielded to the Western and Eastern Roman rulers only under duress and had to be kept under continuous martial law. History further relates that she acquiesced most reluctantly even to Arab domination. The spirit of resistance and rebelliousness that followed the conquest did not subside until she regained her independent personality

under Ibn Tulun and the dynasties that followed him.

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From earliest times Muslims have been well aware of the now universally acknowledged principle that a political system and a religion are different things, that a constitution and a state rest, above everything else, on practical foundations. This is definitely applicable to the Europeans who, when relieved of the burdens of the Middle Ages, organized their respective governments in accordance with temporal considerations, not Christian unity or linguistic or racial similarity.

Let us return briefly to the point I made above, that the ancient Egyptian mind was not influenced by the Far East either in small or large degree, a fact generally ignored by the Egyptians who tend to look upon themselves as Easterners, a term that they cannot satisfactorily explain. The Europeans make the same mistake, even though their scholars have invested much hard work in verifying the connections between the ancient Egyptian and the Greek civilizations, the latter being the source of their own. In their general behavior and diplomacy they treat Egypt and the Egyptians as part of the East. It is neither important nor useful here to examine this European obstinacy which is rooted primarily in political and practical considerations. What is important is that we demonstrate once and for all the utter absurdity of thinking that Egypt is as Eastern as India and China.

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Until the time of Alexander the Egyptian mind influenced and was influenced by the Greek mind, sharing most if not all of its characteristics. After Alexander's conquest of the Eastern lands and the establishment therein of his successors, Eastern contacts with Greek civilization were multiplied, particularly by Egypt which evolved into a Greek or quasi-Greek state. Alexandria became a major Greek capital, in the strictest sense of the word, and perhaps the most potent outlet of Greek culture for the ancient world. It is an indisputable fact that this culture in all its ramifications sought and found a safe shelter in Egypt where it flowered and spread even more than when it was centered in Athens or in other Greek cities of Europe and Asia. It would take us too far afield to discuss the Alexandrian [page 7] philosophy that emerged from this strong link between the Egyptian and Greek minds, which had the profoundest effect on the course of civilization. Egypt's surrender to Roman power did not prevent her from becoming a refuge for Greek culture throughout the Roman period any more than Greece's subjection to Rome destroyed her Hellenism. On the contrary, she succeeded in impressing Hellenism upon the Romans themselves.

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I have been asserting for some time that the Egyptian Government has an obligation not only to spread culture among all the classes of our population, but to export it to the various peoples beyond our borders who are capable of deriving enjoyment and profit from it.

Some countries have called Egypt "the leader of the Arab East." We seemed to accept this and believe it. We must accept the responsibilities that logically follow from this position in order to maintain our self-respect. No one can doubt that God has conferred upon Egypt such power to revive and spread culture as has not been granted to any other Arab country. Egyptians have the reputation of being generous. It does not befit us, therefore, selfishly and tenaciously to hold on to all our blessings. While Arabs in the neighboring countries, for example, read our newspapers, books, and magazines, they have to go to considerable lengths to procure them, for we do very little to help. We could do much more to facilitate access to our printed materials than we have been doing, and our financial and spiritual gain would be proportionately greater.

Egypt should also respond favorably to the request of other Arab countries for teachers and perhaps for financial support as well. Indeed, the responsibilities inherent in our centrally located position impose even weightier burdens, of which I shall mention here only two.

One, Egypt is slowly opening the doors of her educational institutions to Eastern

students and learning to take care of them after they arrive here. However, compared to the way European countries treat their foreign students, Egypt does [page 150] practically nothing. These countries are benefited by the money the students spend and, more importantly, by the valuable propaganda they make for their hosts upon their return home. We do not need this justification for catering to non-Egyptians because our propaganda in the Arab countries is based on love and brotherhood and thus automatically spreads itself. Our task is simply to make the Arab students' stay here as pleasant and as profitable as possible so that they will not have to take the trouble of going to the West.

Two, some ten years ago I submitted to H.E. 'Ali Mahir Pasha, who was then Minister of Education for the first time, a confidential report on an archaeological conference which I had attended in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Having observed the intellectual influence of the foreign schools scattered throughout these countries, I recommended that we too build primary and secondary schools there; for I felt that Egyptians were psychologically closer to Syrians and Palestinians and therefore more likely to make an impact upon them, than were Americans or Frenchmen. The Minister of Education warned me with a smile that that was impossible, not because Egyptians were indifferent, but because the foreign powers would certainly not permit it. Inasmuch as we have signed the Montreux Convention and Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq have gained varying degrees of independence, I fail to see any political obstacles, internal or external, in the way of achieving this kind of cultural cooperation among the Arab countries which have in common language, religion, and ideals, not to mention important economic interests.

The principle of reciprocity, which is basic to the abovementioned Convention, should enable us freely to establish educational institutions in the Arab countries still more or less under the control of Europeans, since their schools in Egypt enjoy the fullest measure of autonomy within the limit of our laws. (We are not interested in building Egyptian schools in France, England, or Italy.) All Egyptian schools abroad will function the way European schools do here, i.e., they will strive to promote genuine cultural cooperation between Egyptians and the people of a given country by enlisting the aid of competent local personnel and by devoting, for example, as much attention to their history and geography [page 151] as to our own history and geography. Egypt will be adequately rewarded for her efforts, if--in thus discharging her responsibility--she gains the affection and esteem of her neighbors.

It may be objected that the obligations of the Egyptian government are too heavy and the domestic educational needs too great to permit this extension of cultural propaganda beyond the borders. While there is some justification for this argument, it should not be forgotten that independence entails responsibilities and that remissness in discharging them ill suits our honor and traditional claims to leadership. Throughout the Islamic era Egypt was a fountain of knowledge and intellectual inspiration for the entire Arab world. It ceased being so only under the pressure of the Ottoman rulers. But now that we have regained our independence, we must resume our cultural hegemony in the Near East.

The cost of establishing, staffing, and maintaining the proposed schools would not be unduly high nor would it fall exclusively on the government. Many private Egyptian citizens as well as nationals of the various countries would share it. There is no question that these institutions would be much more useful to Egypt and to the countries concerned than many of our consulates and legations.

Saudi Arabia is a country where foreigners have not had the right to build schools and where the people lack the means to educate their children properly. Undoubtedly, Egyptians would be happy to help by spending money to build at least two schools, one in Mecca, the other in Medina. I am told that the Saudi Arabs are very anxious to have them.

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Egypt has still another assignment to execute in connection with the diffusion of culture. So widespread and so sharp is the sense of urgency that the Ministry of Education has already been impelled to lay the groundwork for it. I am referring to cooperation in organizing and integrating the educational curricula of the various Arab countries. A common effort is needed because of the identity of Arab ideals and the fact that Egyptian higher education has reached such a degree of development

that students are attracted to it from all over the Arab world. The system is so complicated [page 152] that few foreigners are able to master it and obtain certificates and degrees. Hence, their preliminary preparation, it is reasonable to suggest, ought to be comparable to that of Egyptians.

A group of opinion leaders interested in many phases of cultural cooperation met more than a year ago with the Committee for Authorship, Translation, and Publishing to discuss the problem. Their ideas were presented to the Ministry of Education which was stimulated to make plans for convoking an Eastern Arab Conference. My hope is that it will be held periodically and in different places, as is the case with the medical conference organized some time ago.

Last year I attended a conference of the National Committees for Intellectual Cooperation²¹ as a representative of the Ministry of Education. I told the delegates that Egypt could become one of the most important focal points of cooperation if she consciously assumed the intellectual leadership of the Arab world. Her central location and modern renaissance enable her faithfully to approximate the League of Nations' ideal of pure intellectual cooperation and peace among nations. The Egyptian University, for example, is a meeting place of almost every human culture; its faculty is composed of outstanding Egyptian and European scholars representing all political, religious, and economic opinions. The heterogeneous cultures fuse in the Egyptian mind which adds to them the characteristic Egyptian impress. The resultant product is then diffused throughout the Orient, free from the normally destructive forces of fanaticism.

This line of reasoning made a good impression upon the delegates. But will it have any effect upon Egyptians and will they sense the golden opportunity that is theirs? While we unfortunately still need the services of the Europeans in our educational system, we can make a virtue of necessity by becoming the emissaries of knowledge, culture, peace, and reconciliation between the East and the West. Given the desire, Egypt will experience no difficulty in capitalizing the opportunity. She need only strengthen the link between herself and the Committee for Intellectual Cooperation in Geneva and the Institute for Intellectual Cooperation in Paris on the one hand, and on the other, the link between herself and the scholarly organizations and institutions in the Arab or rather the Islamic East.

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This book has grown far beyond my expectations, but there is one final question that must be asked and answered. Is there an Egyptian culture and, if so, of what does it consist? My answer is that an Egyptian culture undoubtedly does exist, however weak and imperfect it may be, with its own distinctive traits. It rests primarily upon our national continuity and forms as powerful and profound a part of our modern Egyptian soul as of our ancient Egyptian soul. Mirroring our hopes and ideals, it is a part of our future as well; indeed, it impels us toward this future.

As you contemplate any branch of science, literature, and art produced in Egypt, you will note how impressed it is by the potent, eternal, and indelible Egyptian stamp. You will see therein this Egyptian taste which is neither pure smile nor pure frown, but a mixture compounded of much joy with a dash of sadness. You will observe this Egyptian soul which combines the new with the old, which steadily pushes forward and yet pauses from time to time to look backward. You will sense the Egyptian moderation which derives from the temperateness of the Egyptian climate and preserves Egyptian life from the extremes of conservatism and reform. You will also not fail to perceive the naturally graceful and effortless use it makes of the Arabic language. Egypt, of course, shares this Arabic language with all Arabic-speaking countries, but Egyptian Arabic has its distinguished style and expressions. Other Arab countries are influenced by Egypt and perhaps vie with each other in borrowing her idioms and modes of expression.

Egyptian culture may be clearly analyzed into the ancient Egyptian artistic component, the Arab-Islamic legacy, and the borrowings from the best of modern European life. These elements are strongly antithetic to each other. As they clash, the un-Egyptian qualities are rejected and a purified blend emerges which is then transmitted from father to son and from teacher to pupil.

I realize that many prominent European thinkers are opposed to national cultures because they want mankind to have but a single culture. I feel that this, however, is contrary to nature. While certain things, of course, are the common property of all men, for example, many branches of science, [page 154] others are individual and limited to a given nation, as in fact are many kinds of art. Human life is so constituted that people are afforded the opportunity of particularizing the general and stamping their own imprint upon it. Science has no homeland of its own, but when it settles in a country it becomes influenced by the prevailing atmosphere, physical and social, and is thus able to reach the souls of its inhabitants. Art, on the other hand, is personal, portraying as it does the soul and temperament of its producer. It scarcely appears when by the very fact of existence it acquires an indefinable quality that brings the artist closer to his fellow men everywhere. An Egyptian statue is purely national in that it embodies the Egyptian nature and taste; yet as soon as cultivated people glimpse it, they are moved by admiration. Similarly, a piece of typically German or French music, say by Wagner or Berlioz, will touch the hearts of all sensitive listeners.

Culture is neither exclusively national nor international; it is both, often individual as well. Who can separate Beethoven from the music of Beethoven or Racine from the poetry of Racine?

Egypt has a culture which is international but which, at the same time, reflects the calm, eternal personality of ancient Egypt. It can nourish and enlighten other peoples and afford them a kind of pleasure which they may or may not be able to derive from their own cultures. Witness the way it is admired and appreciated both by non-Egyptian Arabs and by Europeans, on the basis of the little that has been translated into their languages. Essentially, our problem is to prevent it from suffering neglect or becoming rigid. If we apply all the energy and intelligence we can muster to the enrichment of Egyptian culture, it will greatly contribute not only to our national growth but also to that of mankind.

[...]