

## **AZHARISTS, MODERNISTS AND ORIENTALISTS: THE INTELLECTUAL RIVALRY IN EGYPT FROM THE LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TO THE EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

(Lepasan al-Azhar, Modenis dan Orientalis: Persaingan Intelektual di Mesir dari  
Abad ke-19 hingga Abad ke-20)

<sup>1</sup> CHING-JEN WANG

<sup>1</sup> Department of Arabic Language, National Chengchi University (NCCU), Taipei,  
Taiwan

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article aims to study the rather complicated relations and interactions among three major intellectual groups in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Egypt-the Azharists, the modernists and the Orientalists. The Azharists have been the custodians of traditional Islamic values since its establishment in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The modernists, however seek to change and either replace or revitalize the unpopular Islamic elements in the society, which were blamed for being the hindrance of progress. The orientalist were not in direct confrontation with the Azharists or the modernists, until they were brought in from Europe to teach in the newly established Egyptian University (later Cairo University) in 1908. The orientalist were favored by many young Egyptians who especially enjoyed the Western scholars' innovative approaches to knowledge and study. The time frame of this study is set to begin roughly from the time when Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) was active as a maverick Azharists scholar until the establish of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. During this of time, Egyptian society witnessed one of the most vibrant intellectual exchanges and competitions. This article will focus on some of complementary viewpoints on religion, education, history and other subjects, from Egyptian intellectuals and orientalist, such as Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida (1865-1935), Taha Husayn (1889-1973), Carlo Nallino (1872-1938), Gaston Maspero (1846-1916), Louis Massignon (1883-1962) among others and demonstrate how the intellectual rivalry at the turn of the century

helped transform Egypt into a more diversified and multifaceted society, compared to its neighboring Muslim nations.

**Keywords:** Azharist; modernist; orientalist; Muhammad Abduh; Taha Husayn

### **ABSTRAK**

*Makalah ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan dan interaksi yang agak rumit bagi tiga kumpulan intelektual utama di Mesir pada akhir abad ke-19 iaitu lepasan al-Azhar; modenis dan orientalis. Golongan lepasan al-Azhar telah menjadi penjaga kepada nilai Islam tradisional sejak penubuhannya pada abad ke-10. Namun, golongan modenis berusaha untuk mengubah, menggantikan dan menghidupkan semula unsur-unsur Islam yang tidak popular dalam kalangan masyarakat, yang mana dipersalahkan kerana menjadi penghalang kepada kemajuan. Golongan orientalis tidak berdepan secara langsung dengan lepasan al-Azhar atau golongan moden, sehingga mereka dibawa masuk dari Eropah untuk mengajar di Universiti Mesir yang baharu ditubuhkan (Sekarang Universiti Kaherah) pada tahun 1908. Golongan orientalis lebih disukai oleh ramai dari golongan pemuda Mesir muda terutamanya yang selesa dengan pendekatan sarjana Barat dalam bidang pengetahuan dan penyelidikan. Kerangka masa kajian ini secara umumnya bermula dari zaman Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) aktif sebagai lepasan Azhar yang hebat dan berakhir ketika kemunculan Ikhwan al-Muslimin pada tahun 1928. Selama ini, masyarakat Mesir menyaksikan persaingan pemikiran yang sengit. Kajian ini, akan menilai pandangan yang berbeza dan menjadi pelengkap kepada agama, pendidikan, sejarah dan subjek lain daripada ilmunan Mesir dan orientalis, seperti Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida (1865-1935), Taha Husayn (1889), Carlo Nallino (1872-1938), Gaston Maspero (1846-1916), Louis Massignon (1883-1962). Ini menunjukkan bagaimana persaingan intelektual pada pergantian abad telah membantu mengubah Mesir menjadi masyarakat yang lebih pelbagai, berbanding negara-negara Muslim yang berjiran.*

**Kata kunci:** *Lepasan al-Azhar; modenis; orientalis; Muhammad Abduh; Taha Husayn*

### **INTRODUCTION**

This article was originally intended to discuss in details the interactions among various intellectual groups in Egypt at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This article, I will discuss the intellectual development in Egypt and three major intellectual groups in their involment in this issue. I will give a specific example of an historical event, the so-called 'Pre-Islamic Poetry Affair' in 1926, which involved the well-known

Egyptian author Taha Husayn and demonstrate how people reacted to such an event which directly involved the reading of the sacred text, the Quran. Finally, I will point out a significant, historical event and the Lewis Affair, which had played an important role in the shaping of the development of the intellectual activities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **THE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT IN EGYPT**

Since Napoleon invasion Egypt in 1798, the political and economic impact of the West on the Arab world had become direct and extensive and at the same time, a new wave of thinking mode had been lurking everywhere in the Egyptian society. The development of the printing press, newspapers and journals became popular among intellectuals in the Arab world. Knowledge was not a rarity anymore, if one possessed the ability to read, one was able to obtain wide range of knowledge from religion to science and technology and western literature, among others. Muhammad Ali was the governor of Egypt since 1805. He intended to transform Egypt into a modern state. He believed in order to modernize a new type of education was essential. Since the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in 1826, Muhammad Ali sent education missions to European countries, mainly France, to study the most updated knowledge of science and technology, among the students in the missions, Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, who later founded a translation school, introducing various Western texts into the Egyptian society. These overseas students, when they came back to Egypt, became the core of a new intellectual movement. Some of them challenged the traditional religious mode of thinking. Thus we witness various topics being discussed and debated among various intellectual groups.

The main issues being debated among them in the Egyptian society were, the role of religion, i.e. Islam in the society and the compatibility of religion and modernization, among other things. By what we can gather from the historical accounts, we can easily imagine that these were fierce debates among them. There were three major groups the conservatives, represented mostly by the Azharist scholars the modernists (or Islamic reformists), who held the assertion that the society needed reform and modernity and religion could co-existed side by side without conflicts; and third party was the orientalist, scholars from Europe, who possessed the knowledge of the East and many of them described and criticized the Muslim society as being stagnant and lacking progress.

### **The Azharists**

20<sup>th</sup> century, witnessed the traditional Azharists in conflict with the modernists, who were exposed to Western mode of thinking by studying in the Egyptian University

or studying abroad. Some of the Azharists knew quite well that al-Azhar needed to go through some way of reform, be it mild or radical, in order to be competitive and compatible with the advent of the new age under the Western impact. Al-Azhar was not just a local religious institution, but also a renowned sunni learning center, many Muslims came from far away to study here. Because of its significance as the leader of the sunni world, as early as the 1830s, some scholars already called for its reform. That is why some of the Azharists, even though they had previous conservative Azharist training, would think that it was imperative for the thousand-year-old institution to go over some sort of transformation (Gesink 2014).

### **The Modernists**

The Modernists were the ones who usually study in the Islamic education system at an earlier stage of their lives, such as the *kuttab* and at later stages, they were exposed to a more westernized institution in Egypt or abroad, such as Qasim Amin (1865-1908), Taha Husayn (1889-1973), and Ahmed Lufti al-Sayyid (1872-1963) were the modernists, who, after their exposure to the western knowledge, felt the need to modernized the religion, in order for it to be relevant to the modern world. Some of them even had more extreme ideas, calling for the complete integration of Egypt into European civilization (Johansen 1967; Jung 2012, 2011). Their world views, of course were in conflicts with the conservative Azharists. The reformers often called themselves *muslihum* (reformers) or *muhaddithun* (modernists).

### **The Orientalists**

The teachers of many the modernists were the European scholars, who were called the Orientalists because of their scholarship concern the Orient, i.e., the East. These orientalist were originally scholars stationed in Europe and had no direct contact with Egypt. However, Muhammad Ali's successors continued his project to modernize and a western type of university was founded. Thanks to the much effort from numerous Egyptian elites and intellectuals, Egyptian University (now Cairo University) was founded in 1908, and it stirred the young hearts of countless Egyptian students immediately. Many of the initial faculty members were European academics, so called orientalist, whose teaching methodology and new research approaches to various subjects had shocked the knowledge craving Egyptian youths, such as Taha Husayn, Ahmad Amin and Lutfi al-Sayyid. The presence of the Western faculty member in the Egyptian University also provoked the animosity of the Azharists, who deemed themselves as the custodians of traditional and religious values, which was threatened by the critics of a new group of western educated Muslims.

During this period of time, with these three groups in sight, Egyptian society witnessed one of the most vibrant intellectual exchanges and competitions. Many important figures emerged during this period: from Egyptian intellectuals and orientalist, such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), Rashid Rida (1865-1935), Taha Husayn (1889-1973), Carlo Nallino (1872-1938), Gaston Maspero (1846-1916), Louis Massignon (1883-1962) and so on.

### **THE 'PRE-ISLAMIC POETRY AFFAIR'**

Now I will talk about 'The Pre-Islamic Poetry Affair' was described by the American scholar Donald Malcolm Reid, as "may be the most famous Arabic literary battle of the twentieth century" (Reid 1987, 1975, 1984, 1990). The incident involved the famous writer Taha Husayn, who studied at al-Azhar, but did not pass the exam. (Hussein 2000) He had an aversion towards the century old institution, al-Azhar, because of its curricula and teaching methodology. He registered himself at the newly founded Egyptian University in Cairo and became the first Ph.D. recipient there. He then further his study, on a scholarship offered by the Egyptian government to study at Sorbonne University in Paris, where he was under the supervision two famous orientalist, Emile Durkheim and Paul Casanova (Jung 2012, 2011). Taha Husayn came back to Egypt with a totally different views towards his own society and devoted himself to many sensitive issues.

In 1926, Taha Husayn published a book entitled *Fi al-Shi'r al-Jahili* (On Pre-Islamic Poetry), the publication of the book immediately caused a huge storm of word fighting among Arab intellectuals and in the media. Taha Husayn claimed in the book that many pre-Islamic poems were fabricated for political reasons and the Quranic story about Abraham and Ismail building the Kaabah was not a historical truth. The Azhar scholars were especially offended when Taha Husayn, making literary comments by using orientalist approaches, following the ideas of the British scholar David Samuel Margoliouth, claimed in his book that many *Jahili* poems were forged after the advent of Islam and discredited the study of the Arab philologists. Conservatives were outraged by Husayn's orientalist charge and the whole event was brought into the Egyptian parliament for debates among its members. They demanded Taha Husayn resignation from his post as a professor at Cairo University. With the support of Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, the president of the university and some of his colleagues, Taha Husayn survived the storm. However, because of the overwhelming blame from all directions against him, Taha Husayn eventually apologized and deleted the problematic passages from his book and changed the title of the book to *Fi al-Adab al-Jahili* (On Pre-Islamic Literature) and republished the book in 1927.

We see the entangled intellectual rivalry among the conservative force from the al-Azhar, the modernists, represented by Taha Husayn and the orientalist Margoliouth. In this controversy, it was originally purely a case of literary criticism, but somehow the text being examined was the sacred text the Quran, which gave rise to a storm of vehement reactions and criticism from all sides of the Egyptian society, especially the conservative group the Azharists. The conservative group cannot accept any insinuation that many of the *Jahili* poems were fabricated because these poems were an essential part of the Arabic cultural heritage. The Azharists also could not agree with anyone who suggested that the account regarding the Kaabah was false because the Quran is considered the sacred words of Allah, any doubt about the Quran is offending Allah, is thus blasphemous. Taha Husayn was a modernist with western ideas in mind, it was natural that he adopted an orientalist's approach as the methodology towards the text. In the Western view, any text can be examined, including the sacred text such as the Holy Bible and the Quran. But for Muslims, the Quran which is Allah's words is beyond criticism. This incident of complicated entanglement regarding societal issues was just one manifestation of the many intellectual conflicts during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian society.

### THE LEWIS AFFAIR

'The Lewis Affair' had a very strong impact on the development of the Egyptian intellectual environment. This is the reason why Egyptian society 'enjoyed' such vibrant intellectual exchanges at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as compared to other Arab countries at the same period. I used the word 'enjoy' because I believe that multiple intellectual engagements is good thing for the society.

The intellectual developments in Egypt and Syria (Lebanon) before the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were mostly independent, which means, if there was any interaction between them, the scale was small. But two events gave rise to the exodus of Syrian intellectual to move from Syria to Egypt, the new press law in 1876 and the Lewis Affair in 1882. The Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1842-1918), who in 1876, issued a new press law, imposing more censorship, which caused the exodus of many of the Syrian intellectuals to leave their homeland to Egypt *al-Ahram*, for example, the most circulated newspaper in Egypt, was founded by two Lebanese brothers, Beshara Tekla and Salim Tekla in 1876. The other event was the Lewis Affair.

In 1859, Charles Darwin published his observation and assumption, *The Origin of Species* in the book, there was the Theory of Evolution which claims that human

beings evolved from animals, not created by the divine force. This theory in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of course shocked the world and most religious groups could not accept this theory.

In Syria in 1866, with the establishment of the Syrian Protestant College, what is now the American University of Beirut a lot of new Western ideas were introduced to Lebanon. In 1882, in the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut, Dr. Edwin Lewis a Professor of Chemistry and Geology, presented his graduation address to the graduates, in his speech, he praised Charles Darwin as a great scientist. Lewis thought that Darwin's Theory of Evolution was based on sound research, even though he made clear that it was "still in need of much scientific study before any conclusions could be drawn as to its validity" (Leavitt, *Muslim World* 85). However, it was apparent that the act of confirming Darwin's theory was not acceptable to conservative religious people, the Christians, not the Muslims, (because the Muslims did not know much about the theory of evolution yet) were not happy about Dr. Lewis' comments. They were afraid that Darwinism would eventually lead to atheism, which is against the principle of Protestantism.

The event caused a major unrest on campus, some faculty members asked him to apologize and resign, and some others supported him. Many students were on his side, protesting by refusing to go to classes. Eventually, 13 days after the eruption of the event, Dr. Lewis presented his resignation (Leavitt 92). Some students went back to their classes while others who were suspended, refused to go back and left for Egypt to continue their study.

The Lewis Affair seemed to be a single incident, but the ripple effect had yet to be seen. Jurji (1990), one of the suspended students, decided to leave Syrian Protestant College and went to Cairo to continue his study in medicine, but somehow he found another interest in writing and publishing, and established his business in the printing press afterwards. Zaydan's account of the Lewis Affair was published posthumously, he described the actions of the students as 'the first student rebellion in the Arab world'. He called the movement 'the beginning of a renaissance among the students of schools all over the East which was unprecedented' (Leavitt 98). The significance of the Lewis Affair was not whether or not Darwin's theory itself was valid, but rather, to train students' capability to decide for themselves the validity of new things. With this spirit, Zaydan came to Egypt and started his career as a journalist and writer and publisher and became one of the most influential writers in Egypt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Darwin's Theory of Evolution was being mentioned in the Lebanese journal, *al-Muqtataf* founded in 1876, years before the Lewis Affair. The founder of al-



Muqtataf, Ya'qub Sarruf, also a Syrian Protestant College graduate, was a tutor (some sort of lecturer) at the college as well. After the Lewis affair, Sarruf also moved his influential journal *al-Muqtataf* to Egypt in 1884.

The Lewis Affair was apparently the main reasons of the convergence of the intellectual development of Egypt and Syria. The Syrian intellectuals fled to Egypt: Sarruf moved his *al-Muqtataf* to Cairo, Jurji Zaydan quit his study in Beirut and started his new life in Cairo, and later founded *al-Hilal* in 1892, the longest living Arabic journal the culturally influential Arabic magazine, which is still publishing till today.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the process of modernizing and westernization became the center of a series of conflict between several modernizing forces, the Azharists, the modernists, and the orientalist. Many Muslim reformers, starting from al-Tahtawi to Muhammad 'Abduh, all reform thought had to be done to the highest Islamic learning institution. The curricula were too narrow to teach new generation of scholars a worldview that was compatible with the impact of the West.

Taha Husayn is no doubt one of the most important litterateurs, educators and thinkers in the modern era of the Arab world. His impact on the Arab society is immense and immeasurable. A figure like him could not stand against the conservative forces that pulled the Egyptian society from moving forwards, joining the rest of the world for the process of modernization. The Orientalists did leave some imprints on the Egyptian intellectual trend, but around two decades after the foundation of the Cairo University, their influence in Egypt faded.

The 'pre-Islamic poetry' incident clearly indicated that Egyptian society was not yet ready for the complete adoption of the western approaches to knowledge. Even though some of the conservatives might be willing to open up their minds for new methods, however the Quran as a sacred text will always be the untouchable issues to be brought to the discussion table. It is expected that this situation will remain so for quite a long time for the Egyptians or most Muslims to accept criticism on their religious related affairs by way of a western orientalist methodology.

When we study the intellectual history from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we cannot overlook the importance of the publishing industry. The existence of the newspapers and journals, such as *al-Ahram*, *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilal*, played essential roles of bringing new ideas to the Egyptian society. The founders of these publications were



all Lebanese immigrants. It is evident that they played an important role in the development of the Egyptian intelligentsia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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