

# Cultural Authenticity and National Identity

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There is considerable consensus that the two notions of cultural authenticity and national identity are mutually intersecting, interpenetrative and interdependent. Both authenticity and identity are challenged by a certain tendency towards 'globalization', an effective standardization that levels out and thus obliterates distinctive characteristics.

Cultures are determined, as far as I can see, not only by a historical, that is, temporal, perspective, but also by a non-historical, an *a-temporal* or transcendental scale of values. In the context of my own, the Egyptian-Arab-Islamic culture or 'cultures', there is an illusion to be shed: that of a rigid monolithic unity that would willingly marshal into one undifferentiated mould, devoid of any nuance, all the cultural constituents and tributaries of this Arab – and now less frequently called Islamic – nation. To be sure, one can readily discern common denominators within this extremely variegated cultural entity, including those one might call global or place under the aegis of emerging humanisms. These common denominators are what contribute to making the cultures interact as organic components of a whole instead of bigotedly isolated, secluded, closed-in contraptions.

What must be stressed, however, is that diversity within a certain encompassing harmony is a factor much more of enrichment than of dispersion or division. But I might add that this is by no means intended as a call for secession or separatism. For if we admit to a plurality of 'cultures' or 'emerging humanisms', we are also recognizing that these cultures and humanisms share channels of mutual intercommunication, both historical and in process. Through these channels, the various tributaries flow into one broad stream, enhancing and complementing one other.

The presence in the Arab-Islamic culture or 'cultures' of the idea of diversity within harmony need not be corroborated. Evidence abounds: regional/political diversity, the variety of local dialects or vernaculars deriving from mother tongues, the prevalence of bilingual practices both in officialdom and in literary and artistic creations, to name but a few. Far from constituting an ethnic or racial affiliation, our cultural authenticity is indeed an accumulation. A fusion of unitary constituents – Pharaonic-Coptic, Islamic and modern in Egypt; but also Assyrian, Phoenician, Berber, Black African legacies, in Mesopotamia, the Levant, North Africa, the Sudan

and Somalia respectively – it overflows political borders and takes root in multi-referential sources, contributing to the emergence of a new and yet historical humanism.

Paradoxically enough, and concomitantly with the dynamic nature of the phenomenon, the common Arab-Islamic heritage goes a long way to harmonize and synthesize these various legacies, fusing them in a complex multi-layered organism. To obviate a ready and pervasive misconception, I would say, axiomatically, that heritage, be it from a folk, a classical indigenous or a humanistic trans-boundary tradition, is something that we own, not that we are owned by. No less tentatively, we must extract it from the dust of centuries, revivify and re-live it through whatever means, methodical or technical, artistic or re-interpretative. We evidently choose, re-create and adopt our heritage as our own.

To consolidate the authenticity of our culture – age-old as it is – there is no alternative but to scrutinize, as thoroughly and honestly as possible, the roots of the present state of regression if we are to do away with social and political oppression. Priority must be given to the variables, even if what is viable in the immutable elements of our heritage must be also safeguarded. It is easy to surmise that our culture is in dire need of resisting and refuting the onslaught of a pseudo-culture proffered by certain ruling sectors of the West that advocate consumerism and an overwhelming manipulative flow of biased information – a pseudo-culture that does as much harm to the peoples of the West and the North as to peoples of the South and the Third World, and is bound to sap national identity in both spheres. Yet, what would mar no less the authenticity of our culture is its would-be subjugation to ancestral dictates. Culture cannot genuinely prosper except to the extent that it affirms its inherent freedom, eschews the tyranny of the past, and maintains that precarious balance between the pre-eminence of reason and the free play of inner forces that escape the rigid domination of a rationality which is itself irrational and injurious to reason.

In rather more persistent ways than within western cultures, we can observe in our midst subsisting traces of tribal, communal, sexist-generic, class or geo-ethnic subcultures (Bedouins, workers, gypsies, Berbers, women, etc.). I would not at all be in favour of eliminating or suppressing these differences, which may be conducive to vigorous emerging humanisms. I think that the all-embracing, unifying factor is here much more operative than the inherent process of secession: a conflict that can be a source of power rather than an inducement to feebleness.

This immediately brings us to the duality that is manifest in the Arab culture or 'cultures' between an ancestral, bound-to-the-past way of life that embraces an impossible, illusory return to a medieval golden era ruled by a reactionary brand of thought going back to periods of degeneration and decadence on the one hand, and the enlightened culture that is based on discernment, tolerance, intuition or rationality and has no need for formalist practices and hollow rituals on the other.

For my part, I would deem as authentic the liberating culture that sees its *raison d'être* in the quest for such values as reason, freedom and justice – no hackneyed concepts, whatever some postmodernists might say. What establishes and indeed enhances the authenticity of such a culture on the intellectual level is its openness to questions as opposed to a dogmatic rigidity; on the political level, it is democracy as

opposed to totalitarianism or, as is frequently the case in the region, to paternalism or despotism.

In today's post-capitalist, high-technology, information-based society, the thriving and indeed the survival of the Arab tradition depends on the preservation and the development of a common reservoir of its many 'cultures', with their blend of rapprochement and unity, but also diversity and multiplicity. Flexible and organic, the culture of rationality that places relativity above immutable absolutes and fosters tolerance and dialogue with the self and the 'other' alike represents, as I see it, the only safeguard against the primacy of a culture of ancestral domination, fable-like notions, and irrationality which by its very nature is uncontrollable.

As for national identity, if it is to serve as a relevant component in view of emerging humanisms, it is in my view neither as an *a priori* eternal metaphysical essence or given pre-determined datum, nor as an immutable, irrevocable legacy projected from the past and immune to the effects of history and to the dimension of temporality.

It would rather be as a dynamic, a historic-temporal, concrete reality to be continuously moulded, forged, developed and shaped. Therefore, it can hardly be preconceived in mythical, pseudo-romantic and rhetorical terms as was dogmatically claimed by certain prevalent trends in Arab thought in the 1960s. National identity can only gain its viability – to say nothing of its credibility – from a capacity to evolve and to react to historical, socio-political and cultural data and a consciousness of this very characteristic of flexibility, openness and critical response. That is not to say that I propose an identity that is amorphous, fortuitous or ephemeral. Nor would it be an arbitrary contrivance of heterogeneous elements. I would rather tend to see the Arab national identity as combining both components of stability and mobility.

An essential constituent of identity here is undoubtedly that age-old heritage that cut across ethnic and geo-political boundaries with the astounding Arabization and Islamization that occurred over the ages in the region we now know as the Arab World. But we cannot arbitrarily separate this heritage – a unifying factor – from the pre-Arab elements that continue to enrich and diversify it. The Arab heritage is neither sacrosanct nor monolithic and, in my view, this is directly reflected in the constitution of the national identity. It is axiomatically delusional to consider that the ready-made cast of a historical age can be projected onto the present. The past can be neither copied nor repeated.

Contrary to common belief, my conviction is that the Arab mind is nurtured on a pluralism that is both intriguing and provocative. While rationality, moderation and the recourse to a certain down-to-earth pragmatism and tolerance are solidly and profoundly grounded in the constitution of this identity, the frankly phantasmagorical, a-realistic and epic are also part and parcel of its legacy: the folklore that is constantly self-renovating, the persistence of a one-thousand-and-one-nights quality, the imposing challenges to the merely mundane reality as concretized in temples, church-buildings and mosques, deliberately breaking with the human-scale perspective inherited from the Greeks (also defied in western culture, by the Gothic).

While a great measure of malleability has helped the Arab conquerors to benefit from the acquisition of cultures they prevailed upon, historically, in matters of administration, state finance or warfare, for example, the cultures of the Arab and of

the Arabized peoples preserved and sustained an abstract quality that was no doubt instilled by great expanses of seemingly endless desert. This metaphysical quality remains powerfully evocative in the fine arts, not to mention the craftsmanship of calligraphy and design, which, by their very nature, are infinite. But the practical and even pragmatic vein of the Arab national identity is not inconsistent with a sense of mystic ecstasy, a mysticism which has survived the ages, even if reduced – in certain cases – to mere ritual and meaningless incantation.

One can thus safely assume there is in fact a unique although never uniform Arab national identity and dispense with conferring on it any metaphysical, immutable or uni-dimensional traits. National identity here – defined as an over-arching concept embracing and synthesizing diverse but not contradictory components – can no longer be conceived of in the crude and rather virginal terms of its origins. It can no longer be inspired by an exclusive self-assertion or by a negation of the 'other', be it through confrontation or through an implicit assumption of non-existence.

As of now, it must merge with and adapt to an emerging phenomenon of universality, which is gaining ground day by day. This is neither the universality of the techno-post-industrial militarist complex, nor that of the transnational, trans-state monopolies. It is a universality based on democratic determination, on the respect for individuation, on national and cultural differentiation where heterogeneity and mutual correlations can blend – a process that can dialectically reproduce itself at the many levels and scales of subcultural constituents which are formative of the national identity. If I may offer my own, personal experience as an example, I would confirm that I belong to such a subculture, the Egyptian Coptic, which I feel in my own inner being as inseparable from the dominant Arabo-Islamic culture. Such would be the case with Kurdish, Nubian, Berber or Levantine Arabs.

We must at this late hour put aside some of the claims of the old orientalists who presuppose that the Arab mind is characterized by fatalism and a negation of individual freedom; that Arabs, *per se*, cannot grasp the concept of the abstract; that they are by definition sensuous beings, stimulated only by the concrete, the immediate, the partial, and therefore the transient; that intellectual speculation is as foreign to their minds as methodological doubt, and so on. All this is readily refuted both by a legacy that is at the very basis of the now prevalent western culture, and by the intellectual endeavours of Arabs who can and do absorb this western culture and contribute to it.

Needless to say, the classical language constitutes a powerful unifying constituent of the Arab identity and culture. From a certain point of view, Arabic is, by definition, a sacred, absolute language. Traditionally, it is the very word of God. And yet, as the medium of contemporary culture, the Arabic language has no alternative but to be critical, flexible, relative and dynamic. This dual character of the language – engaged in conflict and tending towards synthesis – cements a national identity that is itself intrinsically pluralistic and unitary at the same time: a combination of the universal and of the irreplaceable, a blend of indigenous traits that proceed to construct a valid totality. My view is that this diversity within unity is at the basis of an emerging humanism.

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