

# Comparative Value-Systems and the Arab-Japanese Dialogue

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**I- Introduction: Mutual perceptions.** Since the time of al-Afghani and modern reformist movements in Egypt, Japan has been a model of modernization. The Mekado is similar to the Khalifa and even more, a charismatic leader, a Just Despot, an Emperor, the son of the sun, a new Amon. Hafez Ibrahim, the national poet, chanted the beauty of the Japanese young girl Ghadat al-Yapan. The Egyptians in all Japanese wars admired the courage of Japanese soldiers and always hoped for a Japanese victory against China, Russia and the axe. Vice-versa, the Japanese renaissance admired the Egyptian one during Mohammed Ali. Emperor Meiji sent emissaries to Egypt in order to understand its process of modernization. Lately, the Japanese admired the courage of Egyptian soldiers crossing the Suez Canal during the October War in 1973. The number of Japanese Muslims increased. Arab-Japanese dialogue began on the ground before three series of intellectual dialogues began through the NIRA foundation and the establishment of Japanese studies in Egypt, at Cairo University.

It is very risky to make broad judgments on national characters. Is it possible to make a judgment on the Japanese character without surveying 130 million Japanese? Can a scholar make a judgment from the particular to the universal without surveying all the particulars? The analysis of national characters was common in nineteenth-century Europe, which was dominated by racist theories of Gobineau and was under the impact of biological and social Darwinism. Now in social and human sciences, the value-system is accepted as a topic of study for individuals and groups, for peoples and nations, and even for Easterners and Westerners. Some prefer worldviews *Weltanschauungen* which determine national behavior. This study on comparative Arab-Japanese value-systems is based on a phenomenological analysis

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of living experiences of an intellectual who lived in Japan and in the Arab World as well. Egyptian culture is an Arab and Islamic culture with its own specificity. Others prefer Egyptian culture. However, the difference between both is minimal. Both terms “Egyptian” and “Arab” can be used in an interchangeable manner.

Some common values between Japanese and Arab cultures can be summarized in the following seven points:

1- **Historical State.** In both cultures, historical State is the corner-stone of the nation. The State is the main agent for internal development and national defense. Hydraulic States and the necessity of central power for water distribution and agricultural cycles such as China, Egypt and Iraq, may accentuate such features. Separated islands, like Japan need a central power for linking and protecting them against the dangers of separation.

2- **National Cohesion.** The unity of the people may be a natural outcome of the historical state and the central power capable of transcending ethnicities, confessed, sectarianism and all forms of national diversities.

3- **Ideal Mission.** Historical State with national cohesion has an ideal mission to accomplish such as: Power, *Lebensraum*, the center unifying peripheries, as it appears in ancient Afro-Asian cartography.

4- **Authenticity Versus Alienation.** In both cultures, the endogenous prevails over the exogenous, the internal has priority over the external. That is why there was strong resistance against cultural and political foreign domination.

5- **Ethical Worldview.** Between different worldviews, rational, scientific, voluntarist ...etc worldviews, Japanese-Arab cultures essentially have an ethical-aesthetic worldview. Moral Law is similar to natural law. The world has an aesthetic dimension being a work of figurative or acoustic art.

6- **Individual Sacrifice.** In both cultures, community prevails over the individual. Individual sacrifice in the case of shame in the Japanese value-system is similar to *Shahada*, self-sacrifice in defense of the dignity and honor of the community in Islamic cultures.

7- **Work and Productivity.** Worldviews became synonymous with the Japanese worldview in regard to emphasis on precision and surplus in production. In Arabic culture “to do” has an absolute priority over “to think.” Mysticism and law as practical disciplines prevail over theology and philosophy as theoretical disciplines. *Homo Faber* prevails over *Homo Sapiens*.

Can this affinity between the two value-systems be considered as the framework of Arab-Japanese Dialogue?

**II- Historical State.** In both Arab and Japanese cultures, the State is a pillar of modernization. The process of modernization is so huge that an individual and private enterprise cannot achieve it alone. The process includes huge projects such as the High Dam, Aswan Dam, al Quanatir Dam, digging and widening the Suez Canal, digging new canals parallel to the Nile, land reclamation, free education, hardware and military industrialization, agrarian reform, nationalization of the Suez Canal, Egyptianization of foreign companies ...etc. The same thing occurred in Japan during the Meiji era. The corner-stone of the State is the army, being the most organized and efficient national institution. Armies in the Orient are peoples' armies like in China and Vietnam during the national liberation war. In both cases, state bureaucracy is an obstacle. Corruption of public servants through bribes is also common to expedite decisions and transaction. State planning and the public sector are the main initiators of development, similar to Japanese corporations included in *MITI*. The charismatic leader in the Arab cause such as Nasser is the promoter while in Japanese case, the Emperor is only a figurehead. The parliament in the Arab World is dominated by the ruling party with the State intervention in public elections. In Japan the *Diet* is composed of consensual democracy between political parties and their fractions. Hegel's concept of the State is very oriental, the State as the incarnation of *Geist* in history.

**III- National Cohesion.** In both Arab and Japanese cultures, national cohesion is a main feature to guard against divisions, and the minority-majority dichotomy. Possibilities of civil wars are minimal especially in Egypt. All Egyptians, Arabs or Muslims belong to one Nation, *Umma*. This is what Ibn Khaldun called spirit of solidarity '*Asabiyya*'. King Mena in Ancient Egypt unified the North and the South of Egypt, which have remained unified until the present. In popular custom, Egyptians find themselves in communal festivities such as Saints' anniversaries *Mawalid*. Pilgrimage, *Hajj* is a communal act of the whole *Umma*. Departmentalization of the country is inconceivable. In Egypt, Muslims and Copts form one national community exactly like Confucians, Buddhists and Shintoists in Japan. In both cases, peoples are connected to land. In addition, Arab immigration is a recent phenomenon. Japanese abroad are living in a Japanese community, eating Japanese food and speaking Japanese, just like Arabs abroad, who live in Arab districts, eat Arab food and speak Arabic. In politics, fractions and dissents are only under the table and cannot be divulged in public in Japan for the sake of a consensual agreement. Arabs also dislike dissent. That is why the opposition is weak. The ruling party plays the role of national catalyst for national cohesion. Factions in Japan are incorporated in the

whole while in the Arab World they are excluded, marginalized or live clandestinely.

**IV- Ideal Mission.** Both Egypt and Japan have the sense of carrying an ideal mission. Both, chosen by destiny, have a historical role to play. Egypt's vocation is stipulated upon in the prophetic *Hadith* "Its soldiers are the best on earth. Its people are ready to fight until the day of resurrection." Egypt is also mentioned in the *Qur'an* as the land of milk and honey, peace and security. Japan has also a Divine mission given to the Emperor to disseminate the Japanese value-system. Both Egypt and Japan are centers of peripheries. Egypt, is the center of the Arab World, stretching from Africa to Asia. Japan, although in the Far East is the center of the Asian World. Each has its vital space *Lebensraum*. Each is the center of a commonwealth, an Arab commonwealth and an Asian commonwealth. Egypt stretches towards land, north south and east. Japan stretches towards sea also west and south in Asia and east in the Pacific. In moments of defeat, Japan in 1945, Egypt in 1967, both shrink inside their own borders, Japan has built itself into an economic superpower and Egypt built up its infrastructure, long neglected during the Egyptian commitment to the Arab World. Politically, both depend on the USA in their foreign policy. Japan with China and Russia makes a new economic and political Asian pole. Egypt with Turkey and Iran make another one.

**V- Authenticity and Modernization.** Both Egypt and Japan are continuous nations in history through the process of authenticity and modernization, maintaining simultaneously tradition and modernity. In Egypt, different terms were used such as: Reform, and Renaissance. In Japan the word restoration was used during the Meiji era. The difference between both experiences is only in the model. The Japanese model is based on juxtaposition and division of work between tradition and modernity. Tradition for private space, modernity for public space. The same division exists between male and female. Male is for outside, female for inside. The Egyptian model is based on continuity through change, "new wine in old bottles," the meaning of the German verb *Aufheben*, negation and affirmation at the same time. Christianity is a spiritual reading of Judaism, "I did not come to abolish the law but to make it more perfect." Islam is a balanced reading between Judaism and Christianity, between law and love, a free choice based on justice. Nowadays in Egypt, there is a large gap between traditionalists and secularists, while in Japan the distance is not that great. In Japan, there is one discourse, while in Egypt there are two. Japan is ambitious to supersede the West, while Egypt is underestimating herself, depending on the West. Muslim Japanese are Japanese Muslims. They do not lose their Japanese identity. Westernizers in Egypt are linking themselves to the

West and cutting themselves off from the tradition which caused a reaction by the traditionalists, linking themselves to the tradition and cutting themselves off from the West.

**VI- Ethical Worldview.** Both Arab and Japanese worldviews are ethical ones. Ethics are the basis of being. Confucian ethics are similar to Islamic ethics. That is why Huntington foresaw a coalition between both in a future bi-polar world. Confucianism is an ethical code like Islam. Buddhism is also a theory of self-control as also seen in Islam. Shintoism is a national and state religion as is Islam. The Islamic ethical system is based on a doctrinal principle, that of unity, while the ethical system in Japan is self-sufficient. The Arabs are, *Ash'arites* while the Japanese are *Mu'tazilites*. However, who knows, perhaps the Buddha and Confucius are prophets in the Abrahamic sense, since to every nation God sent a prophet. The Arabs know only the prophets of Israel. Eschatology is an integral part in the Arab and Islamic value-system while in Japan it is not. Immortality of the soul by the Arabs is individual, while in Japan the question of the afterlife is not posed. Both systems may converge on the same ethical code while diverging on the metaphysical foundation of ethics, unity, in the case of Egypt, or multiplicity in the case of Japan.

**VII- Individual Sacrifice.** In both the Arab and Japanese value-system priority is given to the group over the individual, a collective and communitarian worldview. In Arab culture, it is called *Umma*, people *Quawm*, tribe *Quabila*, herd *Raht*, Relatives *'Ashira*, group of people *Unas*, ...etc. Similar terms exist in the Japanese language. The family is one of them, the sacrifice of the parents for the sake of the children. Other popular terms express this sense of social solidarity such as: Promotion *Duf'aa*, friends group *Shilla*. In Japan, cooperative ethics are based on this solidarity group. Sacrifice is one of the highest values, in Arab culture called martyrdom *Shahada*, in Japanese *Bushido*, heroism or chivalry. The popular hero *Futuwwa* or *Ibn al-Balad* is similar to the *samurai*. In Japan, ethical suicide is a reaction to disgrace, lack of responsibility and in defense of honor. In Arab culture, martyrdom leads to eternal life.

**VIII- Work and Productivity.** Both Arab and Japanese cultures are work oriented. If Japanese are workholics, the Islamic value-system is alike if not Muslims. "Work" is a Divine imperative. Manual labor is of the highest value. Even in agony man can plant a green tissue in soil if he can. Words without deeds are nonsense. Faith manifests in deeds. The difference between one man and another is work. Etymologically the word 'work' *'Amal* is the same as knowledge *'Ilm* and as world *'Alam*. That means work is the implementation of knowledge in the

world. Work is also the corner stone in the Japanese value-system. Japanese surplus becomes a problem. Japan has no primary material for industry. However, it imports energy from the Arab World, the Gulf States, steel from the USA, and Japan creates its own science and technology. Japanese precision in work is similar to the Arab dictum "God loves whoever is doing something precisely." Japanese and Arab cultures are practically oriented. Their *cogito* is not "I think then I am," *cogito ergo sum* but "I do then I am," *faber ergo sum*. Many theoretical issues have their solutions in practice not in theory. The hand is the expression of the mind. Practical reason comes before theoretical reason. Knowledge is action. Information is power.

#### **IX- Conclusion: For a better mutual understanding.**

Mutual self-correction concerning the image of the other is the role of coming generations. The actual image of Japan in Arab consciousness is seen in terms of industry, super-technology, wealth, surplus, foreign aid ...etc. The actual image of the Arabs in the Japanese perception is in terms of energy, markets, and places of capital investments. During Egypt's expansion in the first republic, Japanese aid was provided for digging and widening the Suez Canal for the passage of big tankers, a project similar to the High Dam with the Russians. After Egypt's isolationism, Japan built an opera house for the new Cairo elite. Is it possible to conceive huge projects between Egypt and Japan, not only symbolic ones like the friendship bridge over the Suez Canal linking Africa to Asia, but a real economic one such as an Arab *Shinkansen*, Riz-culture, the fish industry and software, things necessary to help make the Arab World independent from the West? Is it possible to make a new commonwealth between the Arab World from one side and Japan, China, and Russia from the other side? Is it possible to make an Afro-Asian pole from Egypt, Turkey and Iran with India, Korea, China and Japan, including the countries in between such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Central Asia? The paradigm would be: Energy from the Arab World, raw material from Siberia, technology from Japan and markets from China. The Arab World is linked to Asia by land through Persia, India, China, Russia and by sea through Japan.

The aim of Japanese studies in Egypt is not only to teach Japanese language and culture but also to conceive a common project between the Arab World and Japan. Scholars are also citizens. Some may be prophets.