



Culture is the Solution: The Civilizing Mission of Egypt's Culture Palaces

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Since the early 1990s, the Egyptian government has devoted significant resources to new culture projects. Unprecedented numbers of new cultural institutions have been built or renovated throughout the country, including libraries, museums, culture palaces and houses, and creativity centers. These host thousands of public programs every year. The government has also started two new television channels devoted specifically to culture (*thaqafa*).¹ Book fairs and art biennials have increased in number and expanded, new cultural periodicals and book series have been published, and new cultural competitions and prizes created. Nearly every day in the state press, one finds articles and announcements detailing cultural events and programs, as well as editorials on the importance of *thaqafa* to Egyptian society. The strong interest in culture projects emanates from the Presidential Palace itself, with the appointment of new Minister of Culture Faruq Husni (1987) and the creation of the Cultural Development Fund by Presidential Decree (1989); with the President's continued support of the culture minister despite his run-ins with the state's religious establishment, Islamist activists, and intellectuals of all stripes; and with First Lady Suzanne Mubarak's huge literacy initiatives in the form of new book series, fairs, and libraries.² The Ministry of Culture and the Supreme Council of Culture run the majority of these culture projects, but the Ministries of Information, Education, and Youth and Sport are also involved.

This massive increase in monetary, institutional, and discursive focus on culture in the Mubarak period coincides with the spread of the piety movement and Islamic activism. Indeed, the heavy emphasis on “culture” by the Egyptian government (and secular intellectual discourse) can be directly traced to the early 1990s, when Islamist groups launched violent attacks against intellectuals, government figures, and Western tourists, and when the new forms of public piety became impossible to ignore as a passing trend. It is clear that *thaqafa*—as defined in particular ways and created through certain government institutions and discourses—has become an important feature of state projects to manage Islamic practice and identifications.³ Among self-described “cultured persons” (*muthaqqafin*) in the upper echelons of government institutions, many of whom are also self-defined secularists (*ilmaniyyin*), the goal is to create national subjects committed to national high culture. In this configuration, Islam is presented as only one component among many of that national high culture, and Islamic practice becomes the object of *tathqif*, or the process of “making cultured.” *Tathqif* also contains notions of cultural uplift, cultivation, training, or education, and is linked to the concept of gaining taste (*tadhawwuq*). Whereas Islamic activists, including the Muslim Brotherhood in recent elections, have posed Islam as the solution, for many state-affiliated intellectuals culture is their preferred solution.

This modernist project of civilizing Islamic practice and interpretation is found throughout different institutions in the state cultural apparatus.⁴ Here I focus on its appearance in the culture palaces (*qusur thaqafa*) initiative, because it is one of the key initiatives meant to target those seen by urban intellectual elites as in need of civilized national culture: lower class residents of large cities and provincial towns, rural people, women, youth, and children. Although the Mubarak government has overseen the building of over eighty new culture palaces and the renovation of many others, the culture palace project dates back to the Nasser period.⁵ In tracking the culture palace discourses from that period to the present, we can see continuities in how top planners envision culture palaces as inculcating a notion of national high culture that draws on European Enlightenment and socialist development formulations. But we can also see a shift. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s the focus was on raising the cultural level of workers and peasants in the interest of social equality and development (*al-‘adala/al-tanmiya al-ijtima‘iyya*), in the Mubarak period many culture workers argue that cultural levels must be raised in order to fight religious ignorance and extremism. What is at stake for them is their power to determine the future of the Egyptian nation.

***Tathqif* in Nasser Era Culture Palaces**

In 1958, the Ministry of National Guidance became the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, a shift that reveals the importance as well as the understanding of culture in the postcolonial state. One of the first initiatives of the new ministry was to build fifteen culture palaces in the major cities and towns of the country, and to establish fifteen cultural caravans (*qawafil al-thaqafa*) to travel to areas not serviced by a palace. To build a new Egyptian nation, Ministry officials argued, one needed not only technological and bureaucratic modernization, but also cultural modernization, meaning modern cultural institutions and culture employees to guide the new nation with the steering wheel of culture, and to raise the cultural level of workers and peasants by guiding them into modern national culture. These groups were described as in need of *tathqif* because they were illiterate and supposedly unproductive in their use of time, lacking a sense of collective national responsibility, and prone to dishonesty and superstition. The film, theater, music, fine arts, reading, and lecture programs were meant to fix these problems, as well as to employ Egyptian artists and encourage the production of national cultural forms more generally.

State institutions instantiated *thaqafa* with the goal of creating modern citizens adaptable to new technological and bureaucratic regimes, with a range of cultural knowledge and capabilities. Culture came to be an established field of modern governance, increasingly defined not just as knowledge of reading and writing (the common connotation of *thaqafa*), but also as a knowledge of the arts more broadly, and as a set of cultural sensibilities that reflect and engender a civilized national subject. In this period, then, Enlightenment and bourgeois values were mixed with socialist development ideology to render the culture concept a means of both leveling and creating social distinctions.⁶

The New Culture Palaces

In 1989, the culture palaces were given higher administrative profile through the creation of the General Organization of Culture Palaces (GOCP). With a bigger mandate and budget to construct (but not necessarily adequately run), the GOCP embarked on a major plan to build hundreds of cultural palaces (and their smaller versions, “culture houses”) throughout Egypt, and to expand their programs. Thousands of employees run thousands of programs in the completed branches of the GOCP every year. By 2006, the GOCP budget was being planned at nearly four million Egyptian pounds a year.⁷ The majority of the programs are conceived in Cairo, and as such often reflect a northern urban elite view of what should constitute culture.

Featured events in culture palaces reveal enduring definitions of literate, national, high, and technologically modern *thaqafa* at play: literary readings of works by Egyptian writers; “folk” dance and music performances; performances of the Egyptian theater “classics”; recitals of classical Arabic music and choral singing; displays of fine art; and conferences, lectures, and workshops on various arts as well as on “technology and information.” But we also find increasingly more elaborate Ramadan program scheduling as well as celebrations of the Prophet’s birthday, programs featuring Sufi singers, and lectures given by state-sanctioned shaykhs on the fundamentals of religion. Not only does religion occupy an explicit category in culture palace programming, but it has also become a key “problem” in cultural discourse produced in and by culture palaces.

In 1990, officials committed the GOCP to regularly publishing a periodical entitled “The New Culture” (*al-Thaqafa al-Jadida*).⁸ Ostensibly a platform to encourage writers from the provinces, the journal covers the activities, goals, and challenges of the culture palaces, other cultural activities (such as the International Cairo Book Fair), and what are called Egypt’s “cultural crises.” Like much state and secularist discourse in Egypt, this periodical assumes a “need for more *thaqafa*” in Egypt. In the press, in interviews, in public conferences, and in casual conversation, Ministry of Culture officials and secular intellectuals bemoan, often in tones of exasperation and lament, what they see as the loss of Egyptian cultural identity and a declining level of culturedness. This loss and decline is frequently seen as both cause and effect of the growth of the Islamic revival. Any number of aspects of the revival can be perceived as objectionable and lacking in culture.⁹ Some common examples include the increase in visual and/or aural markers of piety, the platform of the Muslim Brotherhood, the actions of al-Qa’ida or the Jama’at Islamiyya, the lessons of Islamic television preachers, or the views and actions of religious family members, neighbors, or colleagues. These phenomena are described as resulting from a loss or decline of culture, due to causes such as the influx of Western commodities and media with globalization and economic liberalization, the poor management of contemporary cultural institutions, and the defunding of cultural institutions in the Sadat era. Put simply, the loss or decline of a strong national Egyptian identity is understood to lead to a problematic rise in religious activity. But the rise in religious activity is also frequently presented as a cause of Egyptian national culture loss. In this opposite argument, people are becoming attracted to misguided notions of Islam often through *transnational* media and migration, and thus are losing their “true” *national* identity as Egyptians. Culture officials and writers share an anxious sense that they have lost control of the

public sphere, and a determination to fight a transnational Islamic threat with cultural institutions and programs.

Culture: A Light Upon the Nation

The view that more culture is needed to fight wayward religion is so dominant among state officials and among intellectuals generally that it is rare to find a critique of the state's culture project outside of its terms. In 1997, the Ministry of Culture published a glossy book detailing the achievements of the previous decade, and claiming that the state is a primary source of culture in Egypt. Entitled *Culture: A Light Upon the Nation*, the book places culture palaces in the Ministry's larger project to raise the culture of Egyptians and to draw positive attention to Egypt through its programs. Even many critics of the government believe it is the state's job to provide the infrastructure of cultural enlightenment, which will be led by themselves, the "true" intellectuals. Criticisms of the culture palaces usually stress that they are underfunded, mismanaged, or corrupt, not that they should be abandoned. Outside critics and culture palace employees both argue that the culture palaces fail in their mission because of the "lack of culture" or religious extremism of some employees and of the general population. The language of light Culture and dark Islamism abounds.

In the Mubarak period, culture palace officials still frame ignorance as resulting from illiteracy, but dishonesty and superstition are now more explicitly and regularly linked to Islam through the use of words such as "reactionary," "darkness," "stagnation," "closedness," and "misunderstanding." In many discussions based on the idea of a "cultural crisis," aspects of the Islamic Revival are lumped together and contrasted with notions of "light," "progress," "development," "awareness," "correct understanding," "openness," and "taste." Culture palace officials still frame culture as a tool of social development and modernization in the same language as Nasser-era socialist discourse on culture. Culture is trusted with making people value work and time and therefore with creating a "productive society."¹⁰ A former event organizer at a provincial culture palace told me, "We were into social equality and freedom. We thought that art could change people." "Change them from what?" I asked. He used metaphors of darkness and closure to describe the society whose "blockade" must be "taken apart" in the project of "building another society."

The culture palaces still embody European Enlightenment notions of high culture, often in their very European neoclassical architecture. The programs of culture palaces mainly (though not exclusively) feature the "high culture" of fine arts and literature. Ministry of Culture officials and

their affiliated intellectuals not only hope that exposure to this high culture will bring people out of darkness and ignorance, but will induce them to quit “distasteful” behavior, to become more “cultured.” Examples used as evidence of ignorance and distasteful behavior cover a range of bodily and consumption practices, showing the link between notions of culture and the different senses. The following examples are often conceptually lumped together and sometimes rattled off as lists that increasingly include religious elements: littering, driving without “taste” (*dhawq*), arguing loudly in the streets, using violence instead of “logical conversation” (applies equally to street criminals and Islamist groups), increase in wearing the hijab (especially) and Islamic dress more generally (men’s Islamic dress often described as bad Salafi or Gulf taste), the volume and style of sermons and the call to prayer (especially the dawn call to prayer), beard growing, popular, cheap, and “non-scholarly” books (*al-kutub al-safra*, especially those seen to present Islam as a restrictive or violent religion), and even the use of the natural twig toothbrush (*siwak*) in the tradition of the Prophet. These examples, in the context of discourses on the importance of culture palace programs, suggest that national high culture is increasingly meant to regulate religious thought and behavior according to a certain Cairene class-based aesthetics as it intersects with an important state political agenda.

Thus, although much of the programmatic content of the culture palaces and the language used to discuss culture’s role shows the continued influence of both socialist and European Enlightenment notions of culture, these are now frequently constituted in reference to religion as a problem of both thought and behavior. This becomes clear when we consider the new discourse of culture that has combined with the older ones: that of culture as a “weapon” or a “front” in a war against religious ignorance and extremism (*tatarraf*). A frequent writer to *al-Thaqafa al-Jadida*, reporting on the President’s appearance at the International Cairo Book Fair, says that he came to participate in a discussion of the ramifications of September 11th, “because culture is one of our important weapons in facing” them.¹¹ In the press and casual discussions alike, “culture” is called an effective weapon against ignorance and backwardness that is frequently associated with wrong interpretations of Islam. This “culture as a weapon” discourse is very similar to that used by the U.S. government during the Cold War, and during President Bush’s public diplomacy in the Middle East. At some level, its appearance in Egypt at this time is likely related to the strategic alliance between the governments of Egypt and the U.S. against political Islam. Culture palaces in particular are framed as a key weapon against religious ignorance and extremism because they are the main (or only) cultural institutions in areas perceived to be in need of enlightenment: working

class areas of cities, and towns and villages throughout the countryside, especially in areas of the south which have seen sectarian violence and Islamist activity since the mid-1980s.

***Tathqif* and Islam**

Examining the content and form of culture palace activities shows how state officials redirect and reformulate the culture concept in relation to their view of the correct place of Islam in the national project. In the culture palace presentation of a combined *national* and *high* culture, certain definitions and practices associated with religion are selected, while others are rejected. Those that *are* selected are subject to *tathqif*, and, one could argue, to nationalization and secularization as well.

First, religious events—and indeed all culture palace activities—are stripped of oppositional political content through surveillance and bureaucratization. Many culture palaces have been built near local police or state security force headquarters (and vice-versa). Any stirrings of protest against government officials or policies are immediately quelled, either through force or, more typically, by the threat or perceived threat of force. As a culture palace event organizer once said, “everyone knows that the number for state security is at the top of the phone list of any culture palace director.” In rural areas, the town mayor, police chief, and other powerful figures are always invited to events and often come. On a more mundane but no less significant level, religious events are entered into bureaucratic forms and schedules alongside other events at the culture palaces. These schedules, along with permission and funding procedures, circumscribe the timing and scope of these events. State monitored and trained shaykhs are hired into the bureaucracy to instruct people in Islamic practice that is both state-sanctioned and viewed as “cultured.” These are typically on restricted topics such as how to calculate alms and perform the hajj.

Religion is also subjected to *tathqif* through turning religious practices and objects into aesthetic objects to be contemplated. Crafts drawing on historical Islamic visual traditions are hung on walls or placed on pedestals. At Ramadan music and dance performances, everyone sits in chairs and watches, just as they do at literary readings or plays. Audiences are meant to show appreciation by seated applause, typically at what is judged the “end” of a segment of performance. Ramadan performances often feature music and dance categorized as “folklore,” a category framed as national more than religious. Sometimes culture palaces feature programs of Sufi lyrical recitation (*inshad*), but again audience members sit in chairs and are expected to applaud, rather than sway their bodies in Sufi *dhikr*.

Finally, religion is subject to *tathqif* through its compartmentalization as one component, typically presented as historical, among many components that make up national culture. Egyptian national culture is programmatically created as composed of the high literary and fine arts, and technology, alongside folk dance, folk music, and Islamic arts. Ramadan schedules mix explicitly religious events with others that are not framed as such. Culture palace officials and secularist intellectuals typically select historically oriented crafts and Sufi expressive genres as the acceptable religious arts, and Sufi genres are often subsumed under “folklore.” Thus, in the composition of culture palace programming, and in the selection of religious programs, we see the subsidiary place of Islam in the larger architecture of national high culture.

Clearly, Egyptian Ministry of Culture officials and secularist intellectuals have decided that the rise in public piety and religious activism require them to instrumentalize culture in order to civilize certain Egyptians, and Islamic religious practice in particular. This does not mean that they seek to erase Islam, in part because some of these people are themselves religious, but also in part because—since before the Nasser period—culture projects have used religion as a gateway to cultural uplift (the “people” to be uplifted being prone to respond more easily to religious discourses). Elites seek to train Egyptians in what they see as enlightened Islam: interpretations and practices that do not challenge their privilege, their ideology of the good society, or the state’s aim to create national citizen-subjects. Most program officials and state intellectuals believe that Egypt is the cultural center of the Middle East, and view their project as having region-wide significance in developing Arab society and thwarting backwardness, the most threatening form of which comes in what many call the “name of Islam,” but not the true Islam.

Over the past two decades especially, Arab governments have faced serious challenges to their modernization projects and to their legitimacy from religious parties and social movements. They have employed a variety of repressive measures to control religious activity and determine its meaning. I hope that this essay will direct attention to the perhaps more subtle, but no less important, role that culture concepts play in this political struggle. ✧

End Notes

¹The Nile Cultural Channel and Enlightenment (*Tanwir*) Television.

²For more on the fights between the Ministry of Culture and intellectuals, see Samia Mehrez, *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008).

³The unprecedented spending on culture also coincides with Mubarak era neoliberal economic restructuring, a connection I explored in *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). Mona Abaza offers an important and detailed critique of government and secularist enlightenment discourses in “The Trafficking with Tanwir (Enlightenment),” forthcoming in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*.

⁴For more on this process in visual arts institutions, including state arts colleges, see Winegar, *ibid.* Gregory Starrett also analyzes state attempts to manage Islam in the field of education more broadly in *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). See also Samuli Schielke’s study of state civilizing missions towards Sufi practice in Egypt in “Policing Ambiguity: Muslim Saint’s-Day Festivals and the Moral Geography of Public Space in Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 35(4):539-552, 2008.

⁵Two newly published works include analyses of elite uses of culture concepts before the Nasser period, uses that continue to this day: Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) and Michael Gasper, *The Power of Representation: Publics, Peasants, and Islam in Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). Both private and public institutional cultural education and uplift programs pre-date the Nasser era. The immediate precursor to the Culture Palaces was the “Popular University” (*al-jam‘a al-sha‘biyya*), a combination of government educational programs founded in the 1940s.

⁶Two main sources for the public culture programs from the Nasser period forward are Mahmud Sa‘id Mahmud, *Khamsun ‘amman min al-thaqafa al-jamahiriyya* (Cairo: Al-hay‘a al-‘amma lil-qusur al-thaqafa, 2005), and Fu‘ada Al-Bakri, *Al-tanmiya al-thaqafiyya wa al-thaqafa al-jamahiriyya*. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shabab, 1992).

⁷*Khatwa ‘ala al-tariq: khitat al-anshita al-thaqafiyya wa al-fanniyya li-‘amm 2006-2007* (Egyptian Ministry of Culture: The General Organization of Culture Palaces).

⁸Since its inception in 1970, its publication had stalled on several occasions, likely due to defunding in the Sadat period.

⁹Many state culture workers are believers, and some practice religion actively, even though they might advocate the state cultural institutions’ approach to religion. In fact, they often see the state’s approach to religion as preferred, from a religious point of view.

¹⁰Sami Khashaba, “ ‘Ann kalimat al-ra’is Mubarak wa dawr al-thaqafa al-misriyya,” *al-Thaqafa al-Jadida* 153:4-6, February 2003.

¹¹Yusri Hassan, “As‘ila al-lahza al-rahina,” *al-Thaqafa al-Jadida* 153:8-12, February 2003.