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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Rifʿa Rʿfiʿ al-Tahtʿwʿ (Arab discovery of European sociability)

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Mots-clés

Dress

Europe

France

Theatre

Travel

Résumé

The encounter between East and West from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards is considered as one of the historical events that fostered the cultural Arab Renaissance and led to the Arab discovery of European sociability. A number of travel reports of the period were instrumental in introducing some of its models to Arab society, such as *Takhlʿs al-ibrʿz fʿ talkhʿs Bʿrʿz* (*The Purification of Gold Regarding Paris in Brief*) by the Egyptian Rifʿa Rʿfiʿ al-Tahtʿwʿ. His book is considered as one of the earliest records of the impact of traditional Arab culture on modern European civilization.

The encounter between East and West from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, starting with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1798-1801), is considered as one of the historical events that fostered the cultural Arab Renaissance (*Nahda*) - the socio-cultural revival movement that has spread from Egypt and the Syrian-Lebanese area to the rest of the Arab world since the first half of the nineteenth century - and led to the Arab discovery of European sociability. A number of travel reports, such as *Takhlis al-ibriz fi talkhīs Bīrīz* (*The Purification of Gold Regarding Paris in Brief*) by Rif'ā Rīfī al-Tahtāwī (1801-1873), contributed to the introduction of some of its models to Arab society. Born in Tahtā, a city in Upper Egypt, al-Tahtāwī graduated from the famous religious university of al-Azhar in Cairo. He was one of the pioneers of the Egyptian *Nahda* and, when he was twenty-four-years old, he was chosen by governor Muhammad 'Alī (1769-1849)¹ to participate in the first great Egyptian mission to Europe. al-Tahtāwī accompanied, as spiritual guide, a group of forty-four students sent to Paris to learn the French language, military techniques and other relevant subjects. He remained in Paris for five years (1826-1831), documenting all aspects of French society and sociability discovered during his stay, such as food, eating and drinking habits, housing, clothing, hygiene, medical sciences, political institutions, education, urban architecture, arts and crafts, entertainment, male-female relationship. His travel report, published after his return to Egypt (1834), is one of the earliest records of the impact of traditional Arab culture on modern European civilization.²

When he first arrived at the port of Marseilles aboard the French ship *La Truite*, al-Tahtāwī was amazed by European social habits. Even what was considered in the West as ordinary, seemed to him for the most part strange.³ For example, when they were served breakfast in the quarantine building in Marseilles,⁴ al-Tahtāwī discovered that the French ate seated at a table and used their own cutlery. They did not use other people's cutlery nor did they eat with their hands:

‘We also received about 100 chairs to sit on, since in this country it is considered strange for people to sit on a kind of rug spread out on the floor – indeed, the very fact of sitting on the floor amazes them. [...] Each person received something in his plate which he was supposed to cut with the knife that was before him, and then to bring it to his mouth with the fork – not the hand. People here do not eat with their hands and they never eat with someone else's knife or fork or drink from someone else's glass. They claim that this is cleaner and healthier.’ (al-Tahtāwī, *An Imam in Paris*, 154)

al-Tahtāwī focused on cleanliness in his book describing, with wonder and admiration, the level of hygiene of the French people and highlighting the care given to personal cleanliness:

‘The dominant feature about their dress is not the ornamentation but the extreme cleanliness. One of their best customs is that they wear a chemise, underpants and a vest underneath their clothes. A wealthy man will change

his underwear several times a week. In doing so, they attempt to prevent vermin from breeding and thus all but the very poor are free from fleas or any other such creatures.? (al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, 225-226)

With regard to the clothes worn by the French, his observer's gaze betrays the amazement of someone who came from a traditionalist society, in which the individual must submit to conventional social and cultural models, including clothing:

?It is known in our country that the Frankish head-dress is the hat, that their footwear generally consists of black shoes or mocassins and that they usually dress in black cloth. However, the French, though they usually dress in this manner, do not have a special uniform; everyone dresses as he pleases and as he is allowed by custom.? (al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, 225)

During his stay, another sort of French manners captured al-Tahtawi's attention, i.e. recreation and types of entertainment, many of which were unknown in Arab society at that time, such as couples dancing together at parties. However, he pointed out that, quite differently from what happened in Egyptian and Arab culture, in France dancing:

?[...] is considered something distinguished and elegant, instead of morally depraved. By the same token, it never departs from the rules of decency, whereas in Egypt the dance is one of the specialities of women since it arouses desires. Conversely, in Paris, it is a special kind of jump, which is entirely devoid of even the slightest whiff of debauchery.? (al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, 234)

Then he described public feasts, such as the one called *al-Karnawal* (the Carnival), during which people could masquerade and disguise themselves as they pleased: men dressed up as women and women as men, the rich could pretend to be poor and vice-versa.

Another form of amusement discovered by al-Tahtawi were gatherings for entertainment purposes in places the French called *al-tiyatr* (*le theatre*), a venue for *al-sibiktal* (the spectacle). He observed all these activities with the curiosity of the traveller but also with the gaze of the reformer looking for models to export and apply to his own country to promote its progress, without however renouncing his Arab and Islamic cultural identity. That is why, despite his young age, he immediately grasped the didactic value of these performances which he called *al-'ab* (games) that represented reality through jest and from which people learned amazing lessons 'so that the French say that it [the theatre] punishes and improves people's morals. [...] On the screen that comes down at the end of the play, there is a Latin saying that may be translated as follows: *amusement improves the morals*? (al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, 228-229).⁵ For al-Tahtawi, the greatest spectacle in Paris was the one called *al-'bbira* (the opera), in which the best musicians, dancers and singers performed together. He described the architecture of these theatres as magnificent houses surmounted by a great dome, with several floors, displaying the same wonder and appreciation, that he showed towards the city's architecture, including squares,⁶ bridges and homes. In Paris al-Tahtawi

discovered other places of entertainment where the French could socialise, i.e. the huge public parks, the many *cafés* and the *ristur?t?r?t* (restaurants), where everybody, including lovers and eminent members of society would meet to eat, drink and make merry.

From a linguistic point of view, all these words - *tiy?tr*, *sibikt?kil* and so on - are some of the many European terms that were introduced in those years into the Arabic vocabulary in their Arabicized version.⁷ Actually, as a result of the West's impact on Arabic culture, the interest in language matters became of central importance for Arab intellectuals and translators. Many of them wrote grammars and dictionaries also with the aim of making it possible for Arabic to express new western concepts and ideas.

With the same richness of details and repeatedly using the adjective '*az?m* (great), al-Taht?w? depicted the progress achieved by Parisians in science, arts and crafts, and the complex organizational structure that supported these activities that served, at the same time, a cultural and a social purpose. He was amazed by the numerous libraries and by the great regard in which they held books of all cultures. He noted with deep admiration that one of these libraries, *al-Khiz?na al-Sult?niyya* (Bibliothèque Royale), housed a huge number of Arabic books that were rare anywhere else including in Egypt. It even contained extremely rare copies of the Qur'?n. He also discovered another type of cultural structure called *Khaz?'in al-mustaghrab?t* (storage places for strange things), corresponding to the modern word *mathaf* (museum), a word used for the first time, a few years later, in another travel report by the Lebanese Ahmad F?ris al-Shidy?q (1804-1887).⁸

For al-Taht?w?, Paris was the model for cultural and social progress and the French success was due to their comprehensive educational system which provided citizens with a vast range of knowledge. He emphasized the fact that the French devoted a great amount of energy to acquiring new knowledge and, for that reason, sciences in Paris improved faster and faster: 'Not a year goes past in which they have not discovered something new' (al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, 259). al-Taht?w? examined and classified the various French cultural associations: *akadima* (académie), *majma'* (société), *majlis* (conseil), *instit?t* (institut), *k?layj* (collèges), highlighting how, in some of them, foreign languages and literatures were studied, including Arabic, as in the *K?layj al-Farans?wiyya al-Sult?n?* (Collège Royal de France) and *Maktab al-Lugh?t al-Mashraqiyya al-Musta'mala* (Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes).

On his return home, he strove to introduce some of these aspects of French culture and sociability in Egypt. For example, he fought to have legislation passed that would safeguard Egyptian antiquities, thus inaugurating the trend known as pharaonism and promoting the opening of museums in Egypt.⁹ Then, in 1835, he contributed to the creation of a modern educational system by proposing to Muhammad 'Al? the foundation of the first school of modern languages in Egypt, initially called *Madrasat al-Mutargim?n* (School for Translators) and later *Madrasat al-alsun* (School of Languages).¹⁰ Here a good number of works representative of European thought were translated, either by him or under his supervision,¹¹ as he had learned French under the guidance of Edmé-François Jomard (1777-1862), a

veteran of Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign, and the famous orientalist Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838). al-Tahtawī was a strong promoter of the translation movement, which was taking shape at that time and he was keenly aware that translations played a pivotal role in spreading European thought: in 1863, he and his collaborators were charged by the *khedivè* Ismā'īl (1830-1895),¹² with the task of translating the French Constitution, the Civil Code, the Criminal Code and the Commercial Code. About the French Constitution, years earlier, he had written in his travel account that the laws applied in France were contained in a book called *al-Shart*, 'from the French word *La charte*' (al-Tahtawī, *Takhlīs al-ibrz f' talkh's B'r?z*, 100), i.e. the charter. Although most of what it contained was neither in the Qur'ān nor in the Sunna of the Prophet,¹³ the book was worthy of attention because it made known:

'[...] how their intellect has decided that justice (*'adl*) and equity (*ins?f*) are the causes for the civilization of kingdoms, the well-being of subjects, and how rulers and their subjects were led by this, to the extent that their country has prospered, their knowledge increased, their wealth accumulated and their hearts satisfied.' (al-Tahtawī, *An Imam in Paris*, 197)

His encounter with French thought also influenced his vision of women's role in Arab society: in Paris al-Tahtawī observed that European women participated in social and worldly activities; they were educated and sometimes even held jobs, without being considered disreputable. Clearly, he was among the first Arabs, together with the Lebanese Butrus al-Bustānī (1819-1883),¹⁴ to support a revolutionary position for those times: the access to education for women. His views on female emancipation were expressed in the book *al-Murshid al-amn li 'l-ban?t wa 'l-ban?n*.¹⁵ On that very year he inaugurated the first school for girls in Egypt.

In conclusion, his Parisian experience helped him mature his social and civil commitment aimed at getting Egypt out of cultural and social delay. His thought embodies the intellectual curiosity and the mental openness towards the West and towards all its forms of sociability, in the broadest sense, that characterized many Arab scholars and thinkers of that time. Without ever denying their identity, they opened the doors of the traditional Arab world to Enlightened European thought.

1. Probably of Albanian origin, Muhammad 'Alī was an illiterate Muslim mercenary, who was sent by the Ottoman government – to whose empire Egypt belonged – to oust the French from Egypt. In 1805 he was appointed walī (governor) of Egypt and received the honorary title of pasha. He is considered the founder of modern Egypt, because his policy was aimed at modernizing the administration and the Egyptian society along Western lines.

2. When the shaykh Hasan al-'Attār (1766-1835), an educated and far-sighted cleric, presented this manuscript written in Arabic to Muhammad 'Alī, he appreciated it to the point of ordering that it be translated into Turkish and that a copy be distributed to every civil servant.

3. Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawī, *An Imam in Paris. Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)*, trans. Daniel L. Newman (London: Saqi Books, 2011), p. 154.

4. According to the French custom of the time, anyone coming from abroad was put in quarantine in the lazaret before being allowed to enter the city of Paris.

5. Actually, with Napoleon's expedition, the Egyptians had already witnessed the first theatrical performances in Cairo held in French, organized to cheer up the French troops.

6. Speaking of squares, al-Taht?w? records that in Paris there were several great open spaces which the French called maw?di' (places, i.e. squares), ?which are similar to al-Rumayla square in Cairo, though only in terms of its size, not dirtiness!?. (al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, p. 176) Rumayla square is a big square at the foot of the Cairo Citadel.
 7. al-Taht?w?, for all the new words recorded in his book, reports in the footnote the vocalization of the single consonants. See Rif?'a R?fi' al-Taht?w?, Takhl?s al-ibr?z f? talkh?s B?r?z (al-Q?hira: D?r al-Hil?, 2001), p 133-134, 136 ff.
 8. Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, p. 263. Ahmad F?ris al-Shidy?q was another Nahda pioneer.
 9. Although Western studies of Egyptian archaeology have always celebrated Western archaeologists such as Jean François Champollion, Auguste Mariette, Gaston Maspero, many indigenous scholars, such as al-Taht?w? and Ahmad Kam?, have also made significant contributions in this area. On this subject, see Donald M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
 10. Today it has become the Language Faculty (Kulliyat al-alsun) of the Egyptian University of 'Ayn al-Shams.
 11. al-Taht?w? translated twenty-five works from French, but if we add the translations of his disciples and collaborators, we get to about two thousand translated volumes on the most varied subjects: from literature to law, from medicine to military arts.
 12. Khediv? of Egypt and Sudan from 1863 to 1879, he shared the modern vision of society and administration of his grandfather, Muhammad 'Al?.
 13. The Sunna is the collection of words, habits and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, which constitutes a model to follow for Muslims. After the Qur'?n, the Sunna is the second source of the Islamic Law.
 14. Another Nahda pioneer.
 15. *The Trusted Guide for Girls and Boys*, 1872
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Citer cet article

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[On our stay in the city of Marseilles, 1826-1831](#)
[An Imam in Paris \(1826-1831\)](#)