

How Badly Our Culture Needs Organizing

Al-Musawwar, 9 February 1940.

In its latest reforming initiative, the Ministry of Public Education has established a new office, which it has named the "General Culture Bureau," choosing to head it the brilliant Professor Dr. Taha Hussein Bey. Al-Musawwar's correspondent met with him and asked him about the purpose behind the creation of this bureau, its program, and its aims in the service of general culture, and His Excellency was kind enough to offer the following remarks:

The Ministry of Education has two missions in the dissemination of culture: the mission of disseminating it within its own schools, those under its supervision, and the mission of disseminating and organizing it outside these schools. This latter mission has remained without definition, without organization, and without any fixed aims, even though it is more consequential than the first, and more closely bound up with the nation, its institutions, and other nations. The Ministry therefore wished to remedy this deficiency, and to set boundaries that would enable it to serve general culture in the best possible manner, with the soundest purpose and the most assured results; and so it created this bureau, placing under its administration two sections: a Section of Translation and Statistics, and a Section of Cultural Cooperation.

Let me leave aside this administrative organization, with which I am still occupied, and speak to you instead of cultural organization itself. The truth is that we stand in need of organizing general culture, of defining it, indeed of unifying it, should such unification prove possible. For all the efforts expended upon it are scattered, the work being carried out within it verges on chaos, the Ministry of Education's services in this field are unorganized, and their very purposes are unknown. This cultural organization concerns both the interior of the country and its exterior. Within Egypt we have scientific and literary societies, and committees for authorship, translation, and publication. These bodies are assisted by the Ministry of Education each year with some fifteen thousand pounds. There is no doubt that they discharge their duty in the service of general culture, but their efforts are unorganized and their output unbounded. Were it possible to organize the efforts of these societies, we might be able to build out of them a general scientific academy no less than the

scientific academy of France. We have in Egypt, without any doubt, a scientific and literary wealth, but it is, as I have said, unorganized, and no proper supervision of it exists. I do not claim that we equal France and England in our intellectual wealth, but I do say that we are not inferior to Belgium, Spain, or Greece, nor even, I would say, to Italy, in our scientific and historical wealth.

When the war broke out, the Fuad the First Academy of the Arabic Language stood on the verge of opening its annual session, and some of its members abroad sent their apologies. The Academy therefore decided to postpone its session, but the Ministry of Education saw in this postponement something that would defeat the very purpose of the Academy's existence, and so entrusted the General Culture Bureau with organizing its membership in such a way that its general majority would be resident in Egypt, so that we might keep pace with its work continuously, and so that our output might be swifter.

The General Culture Bureau further observed that the study of ancient Egyptian history and Arab history in the Ministry's schools is confined almost exclusively to books, and so it proposed that the staff of the Egyptian Museum and the Museum of Arab Art should deliver lectures on these subjects to teachers, so that the teachers in turn might give their lessons to their students amid the antiquities of these two museums. The Ministry has already begun to put this proposal into practice, and specialists in Pharaonic and Arab antiquities are now delivering these lectures.

As for the revival of the Arabic heritage, I have proposed that the Egyptian National Library redouble its attention to the production of the finest works of Arabic scholarship and literature, and to the translation of the finest foreign works, printing them in its own press, which ranks among the most advanced of presses. This proposal has met with the attention and the great interest of His Excellency the Minister of Public Education. His Excellency has likewise taken an interest in the work to establish an Egyptian orchestra for foreign music, to take the place of the foreign ensembles which the Ministry summons every year to perform and present at the Royal Opera House, at a cost of six thousand pounds. We now have a number of Egyptian men and women who have mastered this music, just as we have others capable of performing in foreign

languages, able to meet the needs of foreigners in Egypt. It may not be long before this orchestra comes into being.

These are some aspects of the organization of general culture within the country; as for its organization abroad, Egypt maintains cultural relations with both the countries of the East and those of the West. The countries of the East now send their student delegations to Egyptian institutes, just as they summon certain Egyptian teachers to teach in their own institutes. Since the curricula of these institutes differ considerably from the curricula of education in Egypt, the Egyptian institutes have come to set certain specific conditions for the Eastern delegations, and to hold special examinations among their students. The dispatch of Egyptian teachers to sister countries likewise requires special organization. It therefore falls to the General Culture Bureau to attend to this organization, and to work toward bringing the curricula of the Arab countries closer together, so as to ease cooperation, and to lead toward the hoped-for Arab unity.

As for Europe, Egypt has for a long time now been in the practice of summoning some of its scholars and university professors to study in its institutes, of adopting some of its systems, of exchanging cultural affairs with it, and of sending its delegates to attend its scientific conferences, just as certain European countries send their own scholars to attend scientific conferences held in Egypt. These cultural relations between ourselves and Europe stand in need of organization and of special attention, lest Egypt appear before the advanced countries in a light that diminishes its standing, and lest Westerners come to view our scientific movement in a manner inconsistent with what the Ministry of Education has taken upon itself: the advancement of scientific and literary renewal, and the service of general culture in the most complete fashion, by the soundest systems that guarantee the preservation of the country's dignity.