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The Joy of Reading Personal Histories from the Primary Sources: Encounters during My Research on Islamic Thinkers in Egypt



Ayaka KURODA

Associate Professor
Ritsumeikan Asia-Japan Research Organization
Ritsumeikan University
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I would describe myself as an early career researcher in Middle Eastern studies. I've been engaging in the study of

contemporary Muslim intellectuals, their ideas, and their roles in the Arab-Islamic society. While secularization is widely recognized in Japan as the prerequisite of modern society, religion controls social life in Egypt, my research focus, to a greater extent than in Japan. As a result, religious and social problems often emerge as intertwined issues, and disputes arise over the relationship between religion, law, and politics.

Some Egyptian thinkers have been trying to solve these problems by renewing the interpretations of Islamic thought and pursuing the creation of the “Islamic modernity” as an alternative to the secular modernity. Their ideas evolve around the coexistence of different religions and civilizations, the refutation of radical thought, and the relationship of religion to democracy. Their ideas help us to understand the current standpoint of Islamic thought, which remains unknown in Japan as well as in the West.

Most works of these intellectuals are written in Arabic and not translated into English, to say nothing of Japanese. For this reason, starting with the Cairo International Book Fair held annually from January to February, I have found opportunities to travel to the region to collect literature and conduct interviews. It is an enjoyable experience to encounter new books, but not easy to bring them back to Japan safely.

In my last fieldwork in Egypt in February 2020, one of my informants generously offered me books related to my research. I decided to pack all the precious materials in a suitcase and take it back to Japan because of the postal situation in Egypt. However, the books weighed twenty kilograms, which meant that the suitcase I brought from Japan was far from sufficient. Mr. Mustafa, who was working in the hotel where I stayed and always offered me a cup of tea when I came back from my interview work, took me to a bag shop downtown. I was humbled when he yelled in front of the shop, “a *Doktoor*

(doctor) staying in my hotel is looking for a new suitcase!” After having a typical conversation with an old storeowner, I found a fine one (“This suitcase is a very good one and usually expensive, but I’ll offer you a special discount because you’re a friend of Mustafa...”). A few hours later, I had to go there again to ask the owner to exchange the suitcase for an even a bigger one.

Finally, I rushed to the airport with two brimming suitcases but encountered a new problem. Since there were so many books inside the suitcase, an airport security suspected during the X-ray examination that I intended to smuggle bills out of the country, and I had to open my suitcase in front of him.

During my last fieldwork trip, I found a sense of crisis about the COVID-19 virus that had silently spread in Cairo. We could easily point out many factors which might accelerate the spread of the virus: the crowded markets and trains in Cairo, the condition of public health in the overpopulated cities, and the food culture based on bread. After the first carrier of the virus was found in mid-February, the Egyptian government had to seek a balance between the economic stagnation and preventing the virus from spreading, as other countries around the world were doing.

As is widely acknowledged, researchers on humanities are facing unprecedented difficulties under the spread of COVID-19. The pandemic has made international travel difficult and many researchers are still unable to conduct fieldwork abroad. Libraries and archives were closed under the lockdowns. The sudden need for online teaching at universities also ate up the time of faculty members which should have been ordinarily dedicated to research activities.

In fact, researchers engaging in area studies often face difficulties according to the political and social situations in countries they focus on. Our fieldwork abroad becomes

impossible when wars break out or our research topics are frowned on by the government. However, the pandemic newly urges not only some researchers in area studies but all researchers to consider how to “survive” in the situation where international travel is impossible.

In my case, the books and documents which I have collected for years enable me to continue research even in the current different environment.

Fortunately, during my last fieldwork trip to Egypt, I found a book that is essential for my research. A compilation of the interviews with Tariq al-Bishry (1933-2021), one of the most renowned Islamic thinkers in modern Egypt had been published.

Al-Bishry has been interested in the way to achieve democracy and national unity in Egypt and the Arab countries, and has been searching for a way to build a civilized society independent from the West. Having left secularism in the early 1970s and started to reconsider the role of the Islamic civilization, he authored books on many significant topics, such as the tradition and modernity in the Islamic world, the unity of Muslims and Christians, and the reform of Islamic law. Besides his career as an intellectual, he served as a judge in the Egyptian administrative court and sometimes issued a decision against the autocratic regime’s will. Being a moderate Islamic thinker as well as the defender of the rule of law and democracy, he has gathered the respect of people with diverse political visions. In the transition process after the collapse of the Mubarak regime in 2011, he was inaugurated as the head of the committee responsible for the revision of the Egyptian constitution. In this sense, his life as an intellectual and a judge strongly reflects the political and social development in Egypt.

This book is based on interviews conducted during a two-year period and was compiled by some Egyptian academics in order to pass on his wisdom to the next generation. Not only

did it contain his thought-provoking views on various topics such as history, politics and Islamic thought, but it could also be read as an oral memoir of his life. He was born in the era of Egyptian nationalism in which the influence of Britain, the former colonizer, remained strong. Then, he was attracted to secularism in the period when the nationalist leaders were advocating independence. After that, he changed his direction and started to write in the field of Islamic thought. By tracing his personal history and his intellectual journey, the readers can understand the social and intellectual development of Egypt in the twentieth century.

The book also covers the episodes which have not been well described in his previous books, including his personal relationship with his family and friends, his familiarity with Sufism and Western literature, and the vivid psychological experiences he gained during his pilgrimage to Mecca.

While following his personal history through the book, the episode over “the appearance of Virgin Mary” attracted my attention. In April 1968, the rumor spread that the Virgin Mary appeared in the Church of Saint Mary in the Zaitoun district in Cairo. Even *al-Ahram*, the government-affiliated paper reported this event in the headline. The rumor continued to spread from 1968 to 1971 and it became a social phenomenon in Egypt.

Both Christianity and Islam are monotheistic religions in the Middle East and they sometimes share common religious narratives; The story of the virginal conception of Mary (Maryam in Arabic) is related in the Qur'an as well as in the Bible. Therefore, not only Christians but Muslims rushed to the Church of Saint Mary to witness the appearance of the Virgin Mary.

Al-Bishry, who was still a secularist at that time, took a typical attitude concerning this case. Having heard about the

rumor, he visited the church with friends at one time and with his family at another time. Unfortunately, he saw nothing but the light from inside the church. Instead, what attracted his attention was the gathering of Christians of all ages who visited the church to witness Mary. They seemed to have come from the various parts of the country. Among them were even elderly people in the wheelchairs. Despite different religious affiliations, both Muslims and Christians shared a belief in and deep attachment to the Virgin Mary. Al-Bishry recalls that this event caused him to pursue the theme of the relationship between Muslims and Christians over the years.

Recently, I found that Rev. Moritada Murayama, a Japanese clergyman dispatched to Egypt from 1964 to 1968, also mentioned this incident in his book, *Living in the Coptic Society*.

Rev. Murayama visited the Church of Saint Mary in the spring of 1968. Although he visited the church impelled by curiosity, he took a skeptical view of the appearance of the Virgin Mary. He visited the church in the daytime and did not see anything like that.

However, he was shocked to see the apparent sick people who were laying in the garden of the church. They seemed to have traveled from the rural areas and believed they would recover from their sickness if they could catch sight of Saint Mary. The scene he saw was similar to the one al-Bishry witnessed.

According to Rev. Murayama, he generally interpreted the episodes in the Bible where Jesus Christ cured the sick as just a miracle tale. However, seeing those who longed for a glance of Saint Mary to have their illness cured, he felt as if he had been transported to the world of 2000 years ago. He described, "I felt as if I had encountered the unswerving fact that could not be disregarded as a miracle tale in the Bible."

The appearance of Virgin Mary in Cairo in the late-1960s and the people's gathering as a result had a different influence on the Egyptian Muslim thinker and the Japanese clergyman. The former, al-Bishry began to tackle the problem of the unity of Muslims and Christians. It also gave Rev. Murayama an important opportunity to reconsider the interpretation of the Bible and the meaning of faith for both ancient and modern humans.

Though we, researchers, do not necessarily write about such discoveries in our papers, it brings great joy to us. Borrowing from Rev. Murayama's words, I felt as if I too had stood in the Cairo of around fifty years ago and witnessed the intersection of the different personal histories.

Under the continuing spread of COVID-19, I feel some anxiety and exhaustion. In order to cope with these difficulties, it is important to find and collect such small joys in our daily lives. I wish I could delve into the mountainous pile of Arabic books and documents, which I have been collecting dust for years.

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Author's Profile

Ayaka KURODA: Associate Professor, Ritsumeikan Asia-Japan Research Organization, Ritsumeikan University. Ph. D. (Area Studies, Kyoto University). Specialties: Studies of Islamic Political Thought, Middle Eastern Studies, and Study of Modern Egypt. Among her works: *Moderate Islamic Thinkers Formulating the Future: In the Midst of Social and Political Transformation in Contemporary Egypt*, Kyoto: Nakanishiya, 2019; “Rethinking Discussions on ‘Islam’ and ‘State’ in Contemporary Egypt: The Community Based Approach in Tariq al-Bishri’s Political and Legal Thought,” *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies*, 34 (2), 2018, pp.1-34.