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Raouf Abbas Hamed: 1939-2008

Al-Ahram Weekly pays tribute to three Egyptian intellectuals who died late last month

Obituaries are difficult to write, especially when one knows the deceased. How can that person be made to come to life again for readers who may not have known them? How can one put memories and impressions into words? How can one describe, but not reduce, eulogise, but not idolise?

Rarely does a single life encapsulate so much about a nation, while at the same time retaining its individuality and uniqueness, as did that of the late Raouf Abbas Hamed, who died last week at the age of 69. Raouf Abbas was the product and the image of an Egypt that existed throughout much of the 20th century.

Born in 1939 to a family of modest means from Upper Egypt and Port Said (his father was a railway worker), Abbas was the eldest of eight siblings. He struggled to finish school at a time when education was neither free nor compulsory, and went on to obtain a doctoral degree in history from Ain Shams University in Cairo in 1971. His subsequent career led him to become one of Egypt's foremost historians of the modern period, as well as Chair of the Department of History at Cairo University and of the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies.

One thing that many people will remember most about Abbas is his apparent serenity. He was a quiet presence, respected by those in the same room and always discreet. He would often sit at the side of a lecture hall, or in the back row of a seminar at the Supreme Council for Culture. He was very far from being the kind of self-advertising intellectual who is given to grand gestures. On the contrary, Abbas would intervene only quietly, but firmly, at lectures, seminars or meetings.

His influence as a professor of history was just as subtle and profound. There are no stories of Abbas having "ruined the dissertation" of any of his graduate students by imposing his own views. If anything, he always encouraged his students to think for themselves, still a rare trait among supervisors worldwide. In his role as professor, Abbas also stood up for students sometimes overwhelmed by academic bureaucracy or corruption.

I was fortunate enough to enroll in a seminar on 19th- century Egypt that Abbas taught when he was a visiting professor at the American University in Cairo in the mid 1990s. I shall always remember, not without shame, but also with considerable gratitude, his lack of comment after my uninspired presentation on Egyptian agricultural reform. I went to see him



Raouf Abbas Hamed

after class to ask if I could give another presentation, and he agreed. After my second attempt the following week his only comment was "much better" and a smile.

He was not a man of many words, yet he told me when I first started teaching that it had taken him ten years of lecturing to get over the fear and anxiety he felt before facing class. By the time I studied under him he would come to class without any props to fall back on if monotony crept in or wit failed. There were no textbooks to turn to or notes to go through. There was only him, accompanied by his characteristic glasses.

Abbas marked modern Egyptian historiography in a number of ways. Firstly, he marked it simply by becoming an historian, in other words, by choosing, the son of an ordinary Egyptian family, not only to continue postgraduate studies but also to specialise in a field that neither makes fortunes nor produces fame, thereby bringing unique social insight to Egyptian historical studies.

Secondly, Abbas marked Egyptian history writing by the type of history he wrote, which continued in the tradition of the pioneering generation of modern Egyptian historians, including Ahmad 'Izzat 'Abd al-Karim, Ahmad 'Abd al-Rahim Mustafa and Mohamed Anis. Abbas insisted on the use of archival material as the proper source for Egyptian history writing, and his relationship with the Egyptian National Archives continued throughout his career, so much so that he later served on its board of directors and was head of its Centre for Egyptian History.

Abbas's best-known publications include a pioneering study of the rise of the large landowning class in Egypt and its effects on the social order between 1837 and 1914 (1973) and a study of the labour movement in Egypt between 1924 and 1937 (1975) based on British documents. These books remain pioneering works in that they studied the history of Egypt by focusing on long-term structural and socio-economic change. His study of the large landowners in particular remains one of the cornerstones of modern Egyptian historiography, along with Assem El-Desouki's study of the 1914-1952 period and Ali Barakat's study of the development of landownership and its effects on political movements between 1846 and 1914.

In his book on the landowning class, Abbas emphasised this group's class solidarity, which, regardless of ethnic or even national differences among its members, worked to safeguard and promote its interests. Between the lines of Abbas's study a deeply patriotic sensibility can be felt, one that tries to make sense of the economic and political realities of the second half of the 20th century by studying their roots in the 19th. The work criticised then dominant historiographical theories, both Marxist and Modernisation, arguing for models that take historical specificity into account.

Abbas's interest in the Egyptian labour movement also led him to edit the papers of Henri Curiel, founder of the Communist organisation *al-Haraka al-Dimuqratiyya li-l- Taharrur al-Watani* (Haditu or DMNL) that flourished in the 1940s. After receiving several academic fellowships in Japan, Abbas also went on to write a book on Japanese society under the Meiji Dynasty, 1868-1912 (1980), as well as a book on *The Japanese and Egyptian Enlightenment* (1990). As a result, he became one of the few Egyptian historians to practice what they preach about moving beyond Euro-centrism and introducing non-Eurocentric comparative history into their studies.

Thirdly, Abbas's influence will remain alive through the students he taught, whether in his formal classes, through his graduate supervisions, or through the Ottoman Seminar he organised.

It was at the latter seminar that many younger historians came to know and respect Abbas. He established the monthly seminar in the 1990s, when it was held at the Department of History at Cairo University, before moving to the Egyptian Society for Historical Studies, of which Abbas was made chairman in 1999. Open to all, the seminar welcomed students from national universities outside the capital, and it continues to be an opportunity for younger scholars to present their work, as well as for all present to interact with fellow scholars from a variety of academic disciplines.

So tied to Abbas's presence did the seminar become that it was often referred to as "Dr Raouf's Seminar." Papers and talks presented in it have given rise to a new generation of Egyptian historians distinguished by an interest in social and economic history in the broadest sense, as well as in "history from below" and in the use of non-traditional sources. This is also a generation that has had the courage to question and revise entrenched assumptions.

A few years ago Abbas published his most popular book, his memoirs, entitled *Mashaynaha Khuta* (2004). In this book, Abbas recalls his childhood and the struggles he underwent in order to survive and complete his education. The first part of the book chronicles his early life living with his paternal grandmother in the Cairo district of Shubra. Dickensian in character, this section of the book is itself a significant historical document that brings the history of the Egyptian lower and lower-middle classes at mid century to life.

The bureaucratic struggles that occupy the second half of Abbas's memoirs make sense in the light of his lifelong battle against all forms of corruption. Not having enjoyed a privileged upbringing, Abbas knew what it was like to be denied opportunities at first hand, and he used his professorial clout to help the disadvantaged and insist on the implementation of regulations. This pushed him into disputes within the University, but it also led him to become a dynamic member of the 9 March Movement for Academic Independence, the most vocal contemporary opposition movement among university faculty. Abbas's commitment to academic independence and integrity also led him to write a history of Cairo University.

Professor Raouf Abbas will be sorely missed in academic and intellectual circles in Egypt and the Arab world, as well as by generations of students who looked to him for inspiration, guidance and support.

By Amina Elbendary

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/904/cu1.htm>