

Over the past forty years, an unfounded fear of cultural invasion has taken hold, permeating the thoughts of many in our society. Ever since the Eighties, when the division of the world into distinct "Eastern" and "Western" blocs came to an end and the concept of globalisation emerged, the issue of what is termed "cultural globalisation" has been extensively discussed here, with the fear being voiced that this global culture will overwhelm our cultural specificity.

I have written extensively concerning this issue, and have stressed repeatedly that only those with a modest store of cultural specificity are thus threatened; countries with a vast cumulative legacy of cultural specificity such as ours, whose cultural identity is interwoven with historical and geographical factors, have little to fear: like the Japanese, our cultural specificity is too deeply entrenched to waver. Those who describe the Japanese as having been culturally invaded by outside influences cite only inconsequential, culturally negligible phenomena such as eating fast food and wearing American-style clothing; however, human relationships, the veneration of elders, strong family ties and the dedication to work quintessential to the Japanese culture, have all remained unchanged for the past sixty years, during which Japan has been actively and

overwhelmingly exposed to dealings with the West.

Nevertheless, while it could be understandable that some might raise concerns over our ability to maintain our cultural specificity when confronted with the wave of globalisation sweeping the world, the question of progress is a completely different matter. The principles and values underlying progress are completely in accordance with the principles upon which our cultural specificities are based: no one could possibly allege that the fundamental beliefs of Egyptians, Arabs, Muslims and Copts conflict with concepts such as the value of time, dedication to work, the global nature of knowledge, team work, the culture of systems and of individuals, and a firm conviction that management is a key tool in achieving success.

## Rocking the boat

By Tarek Heggy

### Phobia of cultural invasion

In fact, I would have imagined that many of us would lay claim to the fact that these very principles were inherent in our history hundreds of years before they became the mainstay of present-day human civilisation. It might be thought that what I said applies to most of the values quintessential to progress, but would be difficult in the case of pluralism, for it is believed by some that Muslim religious thought is based upon one model of pure, absolute truth; this in my opinion is a grave misconception, for there are numerous texts in the Holy Qur'an, which support pluralism, the most significant of which is perhaps the text, which points out that if God had wished all people to follow one single religion, He would have done so. The *Sunna* (the traditions of the Prophet Mohamed) also abounds with texts that

provide ample proof that pluralism is an inevitable fact of life.

It would indeed be strange to assume the existence of a conflict between our cultural specificities and between values such as respect for time or dedication to work; such an assumption simply propagates primitive, backward ideas. In fact, if additional proof be needed that the values of progress do not conflict with our cultural specificity, it is enough to note that such values flourished in Egypt during the last century, and only dwindled at a later date when what some people term "the disintegration of Egyptian society" took place.

I remember during the Eighties when I was working for one of the most spectacularly progressive entities in south-east Asia, it was generally held by most economic institutions in the area that there



were two distinct work forces, the Chinese and the Malawi; and the prevailing belief was that for work to be done efficiently and well, it was best to rely on the Chinese, who were known for their dedication, good team work and strong work ethic. The Malawis (who were Muslims) were, on the other hand, known to be lazy, inept slackers with no respect for the work ethic. This belief prevailed until one man took over leadership of a country where more than seventy per cent of the inhabitants were of the denomination categorised as ineffectual and unlikely to achieve: the country was Malaysia, where the population is predominantly Muslim. This leader was able to achieve a miracle, taking his

country to the highest levels of distinction in every field, so that in a period of less than twenty years, all the values of progress were manifest in this country which had previously been wallowing in a mire of laziness, ineffectuality and backwardness. The world, thus, discovered two major truths:

-First, that backwardness is not due to unalterable biological factors, but rather to circumstances which, if changed, could reverse the situation completely.

-Second, progress can be planted and flourish in Christian, Buddhist or Muslim environments and is not exclusive to anyone.

It is worth noting that all Malaysian cultural specificities pertaining to human relationships, family ties, and religious values remained unchanged in this age of progress and did in no way diminish. And to those who venture to say that this progress was brought about by the Chinese minority in the country, I would simply reply that this - if true - simply goes to prove that progress can be contagious, which is actually not a bad thing at all, though to refute this theory in the case of Malaysia in particular is easy, for the simple reason that the Chinese minority had always been there in Malaysia - what had been missing was a formula that enables the Chinese minority to be the engine of the Malaysian train - which is precisely what happened.

# The Jewish community in Egypt

Ahmed Kamel  
Special to the Mail

After Mohamed Ali's accession to power in 1805, Egypt turned over a new leaf. A modern state, in every sense of the word, was born. Ali's declaration of religious equality was a great incentive for an influx of Armenian, Levantine and Jewish immigrants. A melange of faiths coexisted peacefully on the banks of the Nile. Egyptians - Muslims, Christians, and Jews - shared the very same hopes and dreams, the very same worries and pains. Above all, they worshipped God.

## Her name is Carmen

She brings an aura of vividness to the place. During our interview, her quips and smile are like a refreshing spring breeze, cooling the air around us on a hot summer evening. Her eyes radiate a warm affability.

Her looks denote that she must have been beautiful in her youth. A sensitive lady who loves Halim (the late Egyptian singer Abdel-Halim Hafez) as well as the old Egyptian films and plays. When I ask her what her favourite song is, she replies: "Ahwak [I Love You] by Halim."

When I mention *Faier Ganbena* (She Walked by Us), another of Halim's hits, she smilingly replies: "Who's passed us?"

"Egypt is my home," says Carmen Weinstein, chairwoman of the Jewish community centre in Cairo, at the beginning of our three-hour interview. "I have never thought of leaving Egypt," adds Mrs Weinstein, who was born in Heliopolis.

She studied at Le Lycée Français, then went to Cairo University (formerly King Fouad I University), from which she graduated in 1954. In 1972, she gained her MA from the AUC.

Carmen is a second-generation Egyptian, born of an Ashkenazi (East European) father and a Sephardic mother.

"There were 30 students in our class in the English Department. The university administration divided us into three smaller classes. I dare say my generation were very favoured and had a very good education," she says.

The French culture prevailed in Egypt, as Egyptians rejected their English colonisers in the first half of the 20th century. After World War II, there was a growing propensity for the Anglo-American culture with hundreds of American movies flowing into the country. Therefore, English schools became quite popular.

## Jewish artists

Jews made a major contribution to Egyptian cinema and the performing arts in general. Jacob Sanua, whom Khedive Ismail (1863-1879) called the 'Molière of the Orient', laid the foundations for Egyptian theatre in the second half of the 19th century.

Numerous Jews were famous singers, musicians and actors on the silver screen. There were the Murads: Zaki Mordechai, the famous melody writer and singer; Laila (his daughter), who made a brilliant career as a singer and actress; and Mounir (or Maurice, Zaki's son), who contributed to the Arabic music scene with a variety of upbeat songs performed by brilliant crooners such as Halim,



CARMEN (L), Mrs Clinton (2nd left), Carmen's mother Esther (3rd left) and Chelsea Clinton pictured outside the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo.

Shadia and Laila Murad (Maurice's sister).

Daoud Hosni (David Haim Levi), a pioneer composer, introduced a new trend in music, based on genuine Arabic tunes laced with Western melodies.

"Togo Mizrahi produced and directed a number of films for Om Kolthoum [the legendary Egyptian singer], the idol of every Arab. Togo was a friend of my father, Moise. He used to invite us to all the premieres of his movies.

"Then there was actress Raquia Ibrahim [Rachel Abraham Levi], a superstar in the forties; comedian Nagwa Salem [Ninette Salem] of the Rihani troupe; Negma Ibrahim [who played Rayya in the unforgettable film, 'Rayya and Sakina'] and Camellia [Lilian Cohen]. They were all Jews," Carmen elaborates.

## Days of prosperity

In a time marked by social, political and religious diversity, Egyptian Jews made quite a contribution to Egypt's economy.

"The Egyptian Jews are composed of three communities: the Ashkenazim [who came from Eastern Europe], the Sephardim [Oriental Jews] and the Karaites, one of the oldest communities.

"Ashkenazim and Sephardim are Rabbanites, who believe in the Pentateuch [Torah], the Prophets [Hanaviyim], the Writings [Haketuvim] and the Talmud," she says.

"The Karaites - a minority within Judaism itself - rejected all the sacred books but the Pentateuch [the first five books of the Old Testament]. Historians trace the Karaites back to the Muslim conquest of Egypt in AD 640."

Although the Karaites were Egyptian to the core, many of them had French nationality as the Nationality Law of 1929 deprived them of Egyptian citizenship. The Karaites had a bimonthly Arabic newspaper - *Al-Kalim* - which adopted a nationalist line. Youssef Kamal (Daoud Hosni's son) was its Editor-in-Chief.

Leon Castro, a Wafdist, published a French-language newspaper in the wake of the 1919 Uprising. According to the Egyptian census of 1947, there were more than 65,600 Jews in Egypt, 5,000 of whom were Karaites.

The majority of Jews lived in Cairo

and Alexandria, while there were small numbers in the Delta and Upper Egyptian cities. They were jewellers, goldsmiths, bankers, engineers, physicians, merchants, craftsmen and even politicians.

Despite the passing of the years, many Jewish names survive. If you go for a stroll in downtown Cairo, you'll come across chain stores like Cicurel, Hannaux, Ben Zion, Gattegno, Ades, Omar Effendi and Pontremoli.

Moreno Cicurel - the founder of Les Grands Magasins Cicurel - was a Jew from Izmir, Turkey. His son, Salvator, was elected Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. He captained the Egyptian fencing team at the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928.

As for politics, Jews weren't so prominent as they were in commerce and industry. Felix Benzakein, a Wafdist, was an MP in the forties. "Joseph Cattau Pasha was appointed Minister of Finance for the Saad Zaghloul-led Government in 1924," recalls Carmen.

Joseph Aslan Cattau (1861-1942) was the most prominent Jewish politician in Egypt's modern history. He had been a member of Egypt's nationalist delegation to London to negotiate the question of Egypt's independence with the British.

His wife, Alice Soares, was a lady of honour to Queen Nazli (consort of King Fouad I who ruled from 1922 to 1936). The Soares family were pioneers in the transport sector, investing in the Cairo-Helwan Railway.

The Mosseris, a Jewish wealthy family of Italian origin, were involved in many industrial activities. Victor Mosseri was a significant figure in the cotton trade, while Elie Mosseri helped establish the cement industry in Egypt.

There was also another Mosseri, Joseph, who teamed up with filmmaker Togo Mizrahi to found Josy Films, which

owned 10 theatres in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said and Suez.

Egyptian Jews co-founded the National Bank of Egypt as well as Misr Bank with Talaat Harb, the great industrialist, while the Mosseris had their own bank - J.N. Mosseri et Compagnie - which propped up Egypt's economy more than 70 years ago.

Jews held 15 per cent of high-ranking administrative positions in joint-stock companies in 1943. Although they formed less than 0.5 per cent of the population, more than 50 per cent of the personalities in Egypt's Who's Who were Jewish.

## Synagogues

"There were 39 synagogues in Cairo alone. Now, there are 12 that have been declared monuments by the Supreme Council of Antiquities. Many places of worship were sold in the eighties by former members of the Community Council.

"Ben Ezra is the oldest synagogue in Egypt and the whole world. It was built in 350 BC on the very spot in Fustat [Old Cairo] where Moses in his crib was saved from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter," she explains.

Ben Ezra, the Amr ibn al-Aas Mosque and the Church of Abu Serga are very close to each other, reflecting Egypt's respect for all religions. A team of experts led by Phyllis Lambert from the Canadian Architecture Centre spent 10 years repairing the synagogue from 1983 to 1993.

"Another important place of worship is the Maimonides

Synagogue in Haret el-Yahoud, dating from the 18th century, and the Yeshiva next door, where Moses Maimonides used to teach the Hebrew religion," points out Carmen.

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) was a famous physician and philosopher, as well as a religious leader. According to Carmen, the Yeshiva of Maimonides, is very sacred to the Jews of Egypt. People would visit it and spend the night there, asking to be cured of their diseases.

King Fouad I donated a marble plaque to the Yeshiva, because, after visiting it, he recovered from a near-fatal throat wound.

El-Sayyeda Zeinab Mosque, the Church of Saint Teresa in Shubra and the Yeshiva of Maimonides are all places where members of our society go to seek cures. No wonder, as they are all Egyptians, regardless of religion.

Mrs Weinstein then describes the synagogue in Adli Street: "Shaar Hashamayim [the Gates of Heaven] was built in 1905, in the reign of Khedive Abbas Helmi II (1892-1914).

"This synagogue, in the centre of the town, was designed and built by Maurice Cattau and Matasek in a new Pharaonic style. All the rich Jews, whether Sephardic or Ashkenazim, contributed money, while the main donor was Joseph Cattau Pasha. It is the main Sephardic synagogue," she explains.

## Social glimpses

As in other religions, marriage is an important event in Judaism. Inter-faith marriages aren't usually authorised by rabbis. Moreover, the offspring of a Jewish man by a non-Jew are not considered Jewish. On the contrary, a Jewish woman's child by a gentile (a non-Jew) is considered to be Jewish.

## Sponsored Section

### Travel

By: SALAH ATTIA

THE Iberotel Coraya Beach Resort in Marsa Alam received recently for the second time the prestigious Green Planet Award 2006-2007 for observing safe environmental practices.

"We value the importance of sound and exceptional environmental practices, and are very proud to be given this prestigious award," said Mr. Alaa Akef, Regional Manager of Madinat Coraya and Madinat Makadi.

The award, which allows visitors to know that hotels are operated along environmentally sustainable lines, was presented by the Switzerland-based Kuoni Travel Service.

"The standards that the Green Planet award demands of its hotels are high. Kuoni will only bestow the award on hotel partners which demonstrate systematic environmental management, a willingness to innovate and a progressive approach to ecological affairs," explained Mikhail Farag, General Manager of Kuoni Travel Egypt.

Photo shows Magdy Shoukry, Director of Sales and Marketing, Marsa Alam receiving the Green Planet award from Mikhail Farag, General Manager of Kuoni Travel Egypt.



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