

The Nahda, Slavery and the Liberal Arts
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{slide 1 – title slide} I am so grateful to have been invited by President Fadlo Khuri to speak on the 150th anniversary of the founding of the American University in Beirut. That you would honor me by with the task, as a historian, to give some perspective on the significance and power of the liberal arts, at this moment in AUB’s history, is almost overwhelming. When I was a young scholar in the late 1980s and 90s, it was much more difficult to conduct research in, or visit, Beirut as an American. I learned about Beirut from its beautiful diaspora – like my dear friend from graduate school, Dean Nadia El Cheikh, and from the many who came to Cairo in 1984, to AUC (dare we call that a sister school?) where I had landed my first job, or had settled in Cairo and Alexandria by the early 1990s when I was doing the research for my dissertation. I have yearned to be in this place for over half of my life, and I thank you again for this chance and this inclusion of me in AUB’s formidable, 150 year-old, history.

Although I know the three students who have won the essay prizes have done this with more understanding and eloquence than I can, I do want to begin my talk today with the words of AUB’s second president, Howard Bliss. In 1911 he said:

“the purpose of the College is not to produce singly or chiefly men who are doctors, men who are pharmacists, men who are merchants, men who are preachers, teachers, lawyers, editors, statesmen; but it is the purpose of the College to produce doctors who are men, pharmacists who are men, merchants who are men, preachers, teachers, lawyers, editors, statesmen who are men.”

And by 1911 he could refer to a long line of AUB graduates (I will get to women soon) who had indeed proven themselves to be lawyers, doctors and writers who were men, preachers, scholars and editors who were men.

One of these men who has influenced over a century of scholarship is the legendary Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914) {**slide 2**}. As a scholar of the Nahda, especially in Egypt, I have read dozens of articles from *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilal*, where Jurji Zaydan, both as co-editor, editor and writer, explored to the full the spectrum of the liberal arts. From scientific discoveries to ethnographic studies (and early anthropology) to history and creative writing, Jurji Zaydan invested his belief that this kind of education, and the means of disseminating and producing these types of knowledges, would create generations wiser than his own. Jurji Zaydan employed the liberal arts to situate himself and his contemporaries in history – hoping that by his research and his writings, he would also teach his contemporaries about their history, particularly as Arabs.

Another such 19th century renaissance man (or *rajil al-nahda*) was Jurji Zaydan's older Egyptian counterpart, Ali Mubarak Pasha {**slide 3**}. Born in 1823, Ali Mubarak (give his brief biography) worked his way through the engineering school and through two years in France as a member of an official delegation sent by Muhammad Ali to glean the secrets of science from French schools, to become the first native-born Egyptian to achieve very high rank in the decades of the Khedives Isma'il, Tawfik and Abbas Hilmi. But it is in his 20-volume historical topography – *al-Khitat al-Tawiqiyya al-Jadida* – that he reveals how important it was for him as a child to attend the new secular school in Qasr al-`Aini. He had failed repeatedly at all other schooling in his early life. It was not until he met `Anbar Effendi, a mid-ranking official in the service of the Khedive who was a former Ethiopian slave, the son of a slavewoman who had been one of the first midwives trained at this historical hospital, and heard `Anbar's beautiful classical Arabic, that he knew and begged to be admitted into a secular school.

Ali Mubarak, for the rest of his life, combined his scientific and technological knowledge of draughtsmanship and engineering with his profound sense of history and literature. He wrote *Al-Khitat* while he was also the Minister of Public Works in Egypt. In these volumes, he hoped to ensure that Egyptians understood the history of the country around them, and the meaning of important geographical and architectural sites, even though his mission as Minister was to tear down many of these sites and build new structures, particularly in Cairo.

What I have always found fascinating in both Jurji Zaydan and Ali Mubarak Pasha was their interest in slavery, as a reality of their times and as a literary trope. Jurji Zaydan's first historical novel, published in 1891 – *Al-Mamluk al-Sharid* – tells a tale of exile and a complicated enslavement of both black and white characters. Most notable, to me, was the image of the Sudanese slave to the elite princess, whose language is as elegant as his ugliness is purported to be. Zaydan's second historical novel – *Asir al-Mutamahdi* – tells the story of a prisoner of the Sudanese Mahdi (and he wrote this when actual Egyptian personages were still being held by the forces of this long rebellion). Slaves are everywhere, as is the idea that the wrong people were being enslaved by a false prophet. For Ali Mubarak, Mamluks who represent for him white slaves built an older, medieval Cairo, even ruled it. African slaves perform for their owners throughout the work, sometimes even attaining greatness, like Anbar Effendi. He admits to buying and selling slaves repeatedly throughout the book, sometimes though as if this institution is as fragile and time-limited as the classic but worn-down buildings he was commissioned to tear down.

My next example of a scholar and intellectual, a specialist in the liberal arts of languages, was perhaps unknown to Jurji Zaydan or Ali Mubarak, although he lived and taught in Cairo during years in which both of our authors were spreading their influential wings there. This is

Father Daniel Sorur Farim Deng **{slide 4}**. Born a year or two before Jurji Zaydan, in what is now South Sudan, the little boy Farim Deng was kidnapped at the age of 11 or 12 and sold into slavery. He was brought as a slave to El Obeid, where he remained in captivity for 2 years until he escaped into the refuge of the Comboni missionary compound, named for Father Daniele Comboni, who would protect Farim Deng and guide him through his catechism, baptism and seminary training (where he was named after his protector – hence the Daniel). Daniel showed a brilliance for language acquisition. He learned Arabic in Cairo and was then sent to Rome, where he became fluent in Italian. Through his many lectures in Europe about the plight of African slaves, it appears he also earned proficiency in German.

Father Daniel Sorur used this gift for languages to write passionate and sophisticated articles about the “travails of Black Slaves in Africa” and his beautiful *Memorie*, or *Memoirs*. He also taught languages in Cairo, first at the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Zamalek and later, because of his ill health (he had terrible asthma, which eventually killed him) in Helwan. He was deeply valued by the Comboni Missionaries – who exist to this day – because he represented something rare and powerful in his time: an eloquent and multi-lingual former slave who spoke against a universal racism against black people. **{Slide 5}** The skills he learned in the study of foreign languages enabled him to be heard, by Egyptians and Europeans, as a man (as I imagine Howard Bliss would think) deserving of respect.

And now for the women, for whom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century societies in which the men I have discussed lived, a liberal arts education required a father or brother devoted to reforming the status of women. Halide Edib Adivar **{slide 6}** was born in 1884, the first Ottoman woman to go to the American College for Girls, and one of the first to write novels describing late Ottoman life, but also what life was like for Ottoman women. She

was an activist before and after WWI, a nationalist leader as the Ottoman Empire became the Turkish Republic and an exile when she rebelled against Ataturk's leadership.

Pictured here as well is Huda Sha'arawi, Halide's age-mate. Born in Egypt in 1881, Huda was an elite young woman who also became an activist in the 1919 Revolution against the British occupation. Not a novelist like Halide, Huda was an even more effective politician, who founded the women's rights movement in the country, but fought to keep women's issues and concerns in the minds of the members of Egypt's first parliament and subsequent governments.

Both women wrote, in their memoirs, about the slaves who raised them and were raised with them. Halide had powerful memories of her Ethiopian slave, Reshe, whom she freed once she had married, and whose beauty and intelligence she greatly admired. Huda was less conflicted about slavery, although also and often in her memoirs remembering them with kindness. But her close attachment to slavery and her outspoken criticism of Egyptian officials willing to cede the Sudan to Great Britain provoked harsh caricatures, as we see in **{Slide 7}**. This is from a 1926 copy of Al-Kashkul. You cannot see the caption but I will explain the work being done here. The irony here is also that this represents Sa'eed Agha, the eunuch who raised her and her brother after the death of their father. In her memoirs, this is the man who refused to let her learn proper classical Arabic, asking humorlessly whether she would ever be a lawyer or a doctor. Liberal arts made her into something completely new.

How Did Liberal Arts Save Them?

All of the people I have discussed used their education to persuade and to teach, while often leading nationalist movements, women's movements or abolition movements. Many of them also faced discrimination or prejudice as well. Jurji Zaydan fled Ottoman repression in Mt.

Lebanon, but also faced discrimination in Egypt. He took this on clear-eyed with his pen, his printing press and his imagination. Ali Mubarak found himself in liberal arts again and again as a novelist and encyclopedist while working as the top civil engineer in the land. Father Daniel Sorur Farim Deng faced more outright racism than I can ever imagine, yet used his skills to write himself into humanity. Halide Edib Adivar used her novels to fight the discrimination she saw in polygamy in the Ottoman Empire. Huda Sha'arawi employed her skills into becoming a master politician.

What do they teach us? That the liberal arts remind us of what is timeless: our connections to each other are most strongly expressed in prose and in poetry, in music and in dance, in the social sciences of how we relate to each other, and in the natural sciences of discovery and healing. These are the arts and tools which make, if I may paraphrase Howard Bliss, doctors, pharmacists, merchants, preachers, teachers, lawyers, editors, statesmen – who are human and can find the humanity in others.