

**‘An Autobiography as Case Study’  
of an Egyptian Sociologist:  
Sayyid ‘Uways, *The History which I Carry on My Back***

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I

This is going to be my personal notes on ‘an autobiography’ as a translator, *The History Which I Carry on My Back—A Case Study (al-tarikh alladhi ahmil-hu ‘ala zahri, dirasat hala)* written by Dr. Sayyid ‘Uways, an Egyptian sociologist (b. 1913 – d. 1989). This book is being translated into Japanese, its partial and experimental Japanese version will be published in mimeographic series of Institute of Developing Economies in March 1995. I hope that both this partial translation and the translator’s notes may contribute to prospective publication of the whole translation of this book in the near future.

There are two motives which have led me to take much interest in this book and to decide to translate it into Japanese. The first motive is an academic one; that is: to make use of this book’s substance for my recent research theme, ‘Egyptian Intellectuals and the Popular Heritage (*al-turath al-sha‘bi*)’. I am planning to compare academic attitudes of two Egyptian intellectuals in the context of their personal histories. One is the author Sayyid ‘Uways and the other is a Marxist historian Ahmad Sadiq Sa‘d (b. 1919 – d. 1988). Both lived in the same age of nationalist revolutions and found common concerns about the Egyptian popular heritage through their different social practices: the former as a social reformer in the field of social welfare activities, and the latter as a revolutionary in the communist activities and the commitments to the labor movement. It is my assumption that there exists a complementary relationship between the two in their search for the Egyptian popular heritage. Such a research can provide some useful perspectives for thinking of the critical situation of Arab intellectuals in the contemporary Arab thought, and the problem of their alienation from the common people.

The other motive is rather an emotional one. The late Prof. Masanao Odaka (b. 1915-d. 1994), a prominent Arabist in Japan, the former Japanese ambassador in Damascus, who died in February last year, was a intimate friend of Dr. ‘Uways. In the spring of 1989, Prof. Odaka made a short trip to Syria and Egypt where he was to stay as a diplomat, and visited Dr. ‘Uways in the residence in Aguza, who would leave the world only some months. I had a chance to hear about that story from Prof. Odaka, but to my regret, forgot to ask him

in detail how they were associated in the past. From the spring of 1994, to dedicate to the memory of their friendship, I started to translate this book.

## II

Although I introduced this study as ‘an autobiography’ at the opening paragraph, this term is not precise. According to the author’s explanation, this book is not written as an autobiography but ‘a case study’ in which a sociologist (or a social caseworker) tries to make researches on himself. Thus the introduction of this book is started from an episode of the day when the author began taking his first “casework study” as a training program of Cairo Social Welfare School in 1938. He selected as his first client a juvenile delinquent who lived in Khalifa District where the author himself was born. Contrary to his presumption that he was acquainted with all the places of the district and could easily find the boy’s house, he was to face many troubles before reaching it. And finally he met the boy’s family who were living with the dead in the cemetery. They lived in a urban slum area, which is called today ‘the City of the Dead’. This first casework interview with such a ‘ghost-like’ family gave him a great shock, making him feel as if ‘his eyes had been replaced with new ones’. After experiencing this, a turning point in his life and work, the author conducted a lot of casework studies which were basic social welfare activities, and through which he could turn and read the pages of ‘the encyclopedia of Egyptian society’, so to speak. But he compared these researches dealing with other people, the latter casework study on the researcher himself, which ‘was unable to repeat’, was much more painful for him, as he confesses. As an experiment of a casework study by a social scientist who tries to describe himself as objectively as he can, this book is rich in methodological implications. But it is not difficult to imagine that the methodological fascination of this book is a result from the author’s sacrifice to undergo painful efforts of conducting an objective casework study on himself.

Thus this book can be valued as a research document the genre of social science adopting a special description form of case study. And from another point of view, it can be seen as ‘an autobiographic literature’, rich in literary expression. But with my poor literary ability, I shall neither analyze it as a literary work and to locate it in the history of autobiographic literatures in the modern Egypt, nor compare some excellent works produced in this literary tradition such as of Taha Husayn and Ahmad Amin—both of their autobiographies already available in Japanese. I only aim at reviewing this book as a social scientific work, based on my personal and practical motive as mentioned above.

In short, we can treat this book in two ways: as a social scientific work presenting a case study on one hand, and as a literary work defined as an autobiographic literature on the other hand. In this review, I choose the former, is suited to the author’s motive of writing as he wrote in the introduction of this book.

Apart from the above mentioned explanation, we can classify both of case study on the author himself and the autobiographic literature into a same category called “the personal history”. And yet this book is unique since it is a personal history of a social scientist with a special form of autobiographic case study, which is quite unusual among intellectuals’

autobiographies. For example, we can recognize a tense relation specific between a describer and a described subject or between an analyst and an analyzed subject in this study. This book contains a lot of prime research materials in the fields of folklore and popular beliefs, the intensive concern of the author for his research activities. Noteworthy is that these folkloristic materials—such as a *zaal* ritual which played an important role in the time of his birth as he disclosed—do not belong to any alien and etatic culture existing outside the analyst himself, on the contrary, they have a dynamic and indivisible relation to the formation of his personality, that is his self-formation process as a social scientist in his personal history.

We can also utilize this book as the source of research materials for the study of intellectual history of modern Egypt, because it illustrates the evolution of social and political thought of an intellectual who lived in the age of nationalist revolutions. And in his personal thought history, two aspects of his personality as a social reformer (in the field of social welfare) and a social researcher in the field science were impartibly combined as if they were one woven fabric for the formation of a profound social thinker. This combination of two aspects of his personality was fostered by his nationalist zeal expressed in his words in the introduction saying that he could not imagine to study on another research subject other than Egypt. At the start of his research activities, he aimed 'to identify precisely to which direction the Egyptian people were proceeding and what was the cultural heritage, old but always new, indicating this direction'. He points out in his works the strong trend of perpetuity in Egyptian cultural heritage which might be misunderstood as a type of so-called 'Pharaonism'. We can find, in such an expression of admiration toward his own-culture, a profound and multistoried comprehension about 'popular cultural heritage' which exceeds a superficial understanding of plural structures of the culture. This comprehension is a big fruit brought forth through the formation of a complex personality of this intellectual: a warm-hearted social activist as well as a self-possessed social researcher.

This study is consisted of three parts; Part One 'the Earth and the Roots', Part Two 'the Water of Life', and Part Three 'the Fruit'. These parts were published as a series of *Kitab al-Hilal* from *Dar al-Hilal* (No. 417 Sept. 1985, No. 429 Sept. 1986, and No. 443 Nov. 1987). According to the author's explanation, Part One is a story of 'the earth', that is his family, his extended family, his clan, and his neighbours of quarters, the *hara* and *hitta*, where 'the seeds' of the author were sown. The author talks in Part Two about 'the water of life which is streaming forth and ceaselessly keeps streaming to the future', that is the spring water of thoughts which he encountered when he studied abroad. And in Part Three, he shows the fruits, namely the products of interaction between 'the earth and roots' and 'the water of life'. Given since the ancient times Egyptians believed this: 'as the earth itself does not produce a fruit, neither the root nor the water bore anything by itself'.

In other words, that is an organic composition of a personal history consisted from the three elements: 'the national earth' which raised the roots, namely, the symbol of the author himself; the modern thoughts which gave him 'the water of reason' to be a social reformer and a social researcher; and the research products resulting from the interaction between above mentioned two elements. Thus this study discloses how a non-European scholar who

acquired the methods and thoughts of the modern social sciences meets face to face with his own culture and ponders it in the course of tracing back the history how his personality was formed.

Such is the structure of this book mentioned above, therefore we can read it along the line of a self formation as a social scientist. In addition, we can select another way of reading from the opposite aspect, in order to search for ‘the earth and the roots’ or ‘the water of life’ in ‘the fruits’ of his studies. In the next section, I shall introduce some contents partially from this book I have translated, providing special considerations to the relation between ‘the fruits’ and ‘the earth and the roots’.

### III

The part of this book which I have translated are ‘Introduction’, Chapter 1: ‘My Mother in the Genital Family’, and Chapter 2: ‘My Father in the Extended Family’. Through reading the first two chapters included in the part of ‘the earth’ of his life, especially concerned with his parents, it’s not difficult to recognize how ‘the seeds’ of his research’s fruits sown in that earth. For example, in ‘the earth’, we can find the motive and background to make a research which was to become one of his most important works, *Features of the Contemporary Egyptian Society: the Phenomenon of Sending Letters to Imam Shafi’i* [first published in 1965] in which he analyzes the saint worship in context of the Egyptian cultural heritage. The motive of his research on this phenomenon stemmed from his practical concern to ‘hear the sounds of silent people’ as well as to reveal ‘invisible crimes’, about which he mentioned in the same book (pp. 19–29) [in second edition in 1978]. Nevertheless, by reading the translated part after some interval, we get a different impression: His selection of this research theme was fateful to his personal history, as if he had encountered the said theme which was to determine his ‘roots’.

‘The roots’ of his research fruits could be found, for example, in the episode of his first casework study on the boy’s family living in a cemetery yard, in a tale related to the values and moral consciousness prevalent among the poor who were begging for money in the cemeteries in Khalifa District, or in his experience of a visit (*ziyaara*) to saints’ tombs taken by his parents. But more important than the above mentioned stories are his own experiences of the “deaths” which he faced in his family in his childhood. The first two chapters are filled with stories concerning the deaths and the dead. He experienced of the deaths of his young brother and sister, his aunt and his granduncle, and his father.

His father’s death affected his life decisively because he was obliged to give up his study in the high school in order to succeed the management of his father’s shop. His experiences of these deaths (concerning the moment of respective death, the process of time passing up to the death, family members’ sentiments to the dead) and his sensibility on the death and the dead were to be the basis for his later study of popular beliefs in ‘the letters to the dead’, which he considered a genuine cultural heritage Egyptians have been keeping in their minds ever since the ancient times.

One of the central issues in the part I translated this time, manifested in the titles of the chapters, concerns to the 'family' problems, with great emphasis on the question of the status of women in the patriarchal extended family. The author repeated many times to speak on the status of women and the family relationship in the Egyptian society, not loudly but quietly with words rich in implication in such a work as *the Speech on the Contemporary Egyptian Woman: a Cultural and Sociological Study* (published in 1977). This book shows us that his warm and loving eyes toward Egyptian women originally came from his personal history, especially that of his childhood.

As far as I remember, he once disclosed his idea in a newspaper on the question of the reform of the Personal Status Law which was causing a heated discussion in the People's Assembly. He said that the splendid wall paintings in our ancient remains remind us today that the equal relation between a husband and a wife and between parents and their children were and should be the basis of moral consciousness in the society (*al-Ahram*, 1985 June 3rd). He is of strong opinion that such a primordial sense of family relationship as a cultural heritage Egyptians have inherited since the time of antiquity that should be regenerated for reforming social relations in the contemporary Egyptian society. Yet, he does not claim any radical negation of the conventional social relations as well as the consciousness of cultural values in the past.

When he illustrates the problem of patriarchy, he does not simply demonstrate a one-sided relation between oppressed women and tyrant men in the family. For example, he describes his paternal great-grandmother who rudely oppressed family members with an overwhelming power as 'the master of the house (*raagil il-beet*)'. This story is suggestive of the characteristics of ideological structure of the patriarchy in the Egyptian (or Arab) society. He also points out that this patriarchal relation is always accompanied with some tensions, showing an example of his uncle's wife who tried to revolt against the men's rule in the family. In her childhood, she was acquainted with the westernized life at that time through his father's friends who belonged to the *effendis* (privileged white-collar) class. But her marriage led her to enter into a traditional big family in the popular urban area. While her innocent but bold actions and words against the patriarch, namely the author's grandfather, appear to be a smile-provoking episode, her challenging actions against the author's father, namely the deputy of patriarch arouse our pity, as we know that these actions were an expression of her complexed sentiments to him.

Apart from the problem of patriarchy in Egyptian families, this book discloses varied aspects of family relations inside a big household of a merchant family who lived in a popular urban quarter of the city of Cairo. For example, vividly described are the world of women in the family, including conflicts and struggles between 'the women of the family' who became the wives of sons of the grandfather, and his married sisters and daughters who legally left the family, and the management of household, especially the division of labor among the women of the family. And descriptions regarding economic relations among family members are worth noting since they include a custom of distribution of clothes among family members by his grandfather as a *zakat* (almsgiving) in the *Muharram* (the first Islamic month), and mutual relation between the shops managed by 'the men of the family'

(his grandfather, his granduncle, his father, and his uncle) and a type of family business among Cairean merchants. When an extended family functions as a coercive apparatus of patriarchal rule, or as an economic system of family business and livelihood, it is on these grounds that the rich world of sense of family relations among family members exists. It seems that the author believes in the national cultural heritage which Egyptians have been preserving since the ancient times and should be as a basis of the national Renaissance today and in the future.

The fascination of this book stems from the magnetism of the author's personality. His affection to his family and his attachment to the dead reminds us some distinguished Japanese scholars who sincerely and whole heartedly tried to inquire the cultural heritage of traditional Japan. Just as the Egyptian society has been characterized as 'a family-centred society' or 'family-dominated society', the Japanese society has been characterized as 'the *ie* (family) society' by many researchers. The Japanese society has also been preserving the beliefs in the death and the respect to the dead as an important cultural heritage. It is my honest hope to make a comparative study between these Japanese scholars and the author with consideration of their personal histories.