

The 1919 Revolution as Seen by an Egyptian Child

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Introduction

The 1919 Revolution was a great popular uprising seeking the complete independence of Egypt and her liberation from the British colonial rule which was formalized after the declaration of protectorate of Egypt in December 1914. The storm of revolution started as a protest movement to the exile of Sa'd Zaghlul and other nationalist leaders who attempted to attend the Versailles Peace Conference, but were refused by the British government. Immediately it spread to all over the country, not only in the major cities such as Cairo and Alexandria but also in rural areas. It is considered that this revolt was one of the biggest popular uprisings in the Middle East in the 20th century, which can be compared with the 1979 Iranian Revolution. While the latter occurred within the confines of the major cities, the former was one of the biggest peasant revolts in the third world in the modern times [Goldberg 1992].

Many Egyptian authors have described this revolution as an intermediate knot tying two other nationalist revolutions: the Urabi Movement in 1881 and the July Revolution in 1952. However its evaluation has been a complicated matter treated as a focus of political controversy in the historiography of contemporary Egypt [Kato 1989]. On one hand, in the official nationalist historical discourse (for example, the Egyptian National Charter issued in 1962), it resulted in 'a setback' of the nationalist revolution and the the democracy after the revolution proved nothing but 'a shameful farce' which was managed by 'defeated remnants' of big landlords and bourgeoisie classes, and it was destined to be abolished by the true nationalist revolution [*The Charter*: 25-26]. On the other hand, the critics against the July Revolution regime have regarded that the 1919 Revolution was the most distinguished event in the history of Egyptian nationalist movement, which gave birth to a modern state system (the 1923 constitution system) and introduced the age of Egyptian liberalism.

It seems that the study of this revolution has made slow progress, although I do not

know whether it might have been influenced by the above-mentioned political controversy or not. Most of Egyptian researchers still use the classical work of al-Rafi'i [al-Rafi'i 1946] as a primary source and also utilize the British consular report, newspapers, memoirs of political leaders and some of unpublished document (petitions to the military court, for example), but they rarely used materials providing the common people's ideas and their experiences of the revolution. However, in recent years, we found some new trends emerging in the study of 1919 Revolution. One is a trial to describe the revolution from the viewpoint of local societies [al-Dusuqi 1981, Isma'il 1991], and the other is foreign researchers' studies on peasants revolts in the Revolution using a new comparative theoretical framework [Schulze 1981, Goldberg 1992]. It should be noted that the latter, using the Moral Economy theory and others, belongs to the recent trend of studies on political behavior of Egyptian peasants [Brown 1990], and it provokes a critical idea to the primitive populist historiography which has depended on the usage of a monolithic and essentialist concept of 'people.'

In recent years, we also find a new methodological trial in the historiography of the modern Middle East which emphasizes the 'people without history' who can not represent themselves. This aims to criticize the elite centered historical writings and the conventional historical reductionism of non-personal actors, such as religion, capitalism, and world system. [Burke 1993]. In other words, this trial of new historical writing aims to describe 'experiences' of individuals who eaged to secure their usual lives, which were often tossed by the waves of political ideologies and socio-economic changes, and also were restricted by the above mentioned non-personal systems.

In this essay, I would like to challenge to describe voices of people who experienced the 1919 Revolution through the eyes of a child. Later this boy became a famous sociologist, Dr. Sayyid 'Uways (1913-1988) known as the author of *The Phenomenon of Sending Letters to Imam Shafi'i Mosque* ['Uways 1965]. He was one of a few Egyptian social scientists who made a profound study on the popular cultural heritage of Egyptian society. Late in life, he wrote an autobiographical 'case study', titled *The History which I Carry on my Back* ['Uways 1985]. I am translating this book into Japanese (See my book review, [Nagasawa 1995]). I believe that this autobiography of an Egyptian intellectual, who grew up in a traditional city quarter in Islamic Cairo, is useful as an exceptionally rich document for the study of social history of modern Egypt¹.

1. *The 'Uways Family and the 1919 Revolution*

Sayyid 'Uways was born in February 1913 in a typical popular quarter (*hayy sha'bi*) in Cairo, Khalifa District. The 'Uways family at that time was a big extended family headed

1 Naguib Mahfuz's trilogy of novels, *bayna al-qasrayn*, *qasr al-shawq*, and *al-sukkariya*, also show us a typical image of Cairene family and describe its young members' participation in the 1919 Revolution [Mahfuz: 1956, 57(1971, 72, 76)]. We can compare this novel with 'Uways's autobiography.

by his grandfather, a rich merchant and absolute dictator of the family. This family was composed of Sayyid's father and mother; households of his grandfather, the grandfather's brother and his father's brother; and relatives of his grandmother and others (the number of children reached 15 members). When the revolution revoked, Sayyid was only six years old and went to an elementary school. In the autobiography he recalls the impact of the revolution on his family as 'sad and exciting incidents' as follows:

I can not forget incidents which arose during the 1919 Revolution. Everybody talked about the revolution in houses, streets, or coffee shops. I knew it from my grandfather and my cousin, Abdel Mune'em, who was a young man studying at al-Azhar (the center of Sunni Islamic education). After the popular uprising, the English (army) paraded streets, in Cairo carrying guns so as to sow seeds of fear and terror in the minds of Egyptian men and women of all ages.

When a parade of army was passing at the entrance of our alley, my cousin, Abdel Mune'em was not in the house. He went out of the house to participate in a demonstration alongside his classmates. They filled the streets and shouted slogans such as "Down with the English and the betrayers, Cheers for Egypt!" At the moment when English (army) came carrying guns to the alley, my cousin's mother, Umm Abdel Mune'em, suddenly gave a scream and continued it for a while. As soon as my father listened the scream, I don't know why he was in the house on that day, sounding from a room in our house, he went out from his room and rushed to the room of the source of scream, and shouted to my cousin's mother, "Shut up!"

My father, the eldest son of my grandfather, regarded himself as the head of the family when his father was absent from the house. But Umm Abdel Mune'em didn't stop screaming. I was at the age of six years old at that time, but clearly I remember that I watched a scene that my father attempted to beat my aunt and my mother tried to interve between them so as to prevent his beat on my aunt. And as soon as he found my mother in front of him, he beat her cheek as if he had discovered a place of unloading his anger. However she was pregnant at that time. My aunt soon calmed down and regained her presence of mind. That is the scene which turned to be familiar with my eyes later. However, what occurred on my mother's body was beyond my imagination. I witnessed a doll made of a lump of flesh in a manlike shape in a washtub. After a while they told me that this doll had fallen from my mother's belly....

Silence reigned in the house until my grandfather returned from his work and my cousin, Abdel Mune'em, came back from a street demonstration. Then a storm evoked. After a while I heard an excited conversation between them. They looked like actors who I had watched in a theater, accompanied by my father at one of festivals. My grandfather, gripping a *korba*j (whip) in a hand and grasping Abdel Mune'em's hand in the other hand, shouted: "What did the English do? This pig! It was them who granted us the tramways. What did they do? My son, this pig!" Protesting it, my cousin also cried, "Cheers for Egypt! Down with the English!" My grandfather shouted whipping my cousin and whipped him again as he protested again. Women of the house, sitting far from them, took turns at uttering in a small voice, "I am sorry.

Please stop beating, my lord.”

I was puzzled to hear Abdel Mune'em's cry, "Cheers for Egypt! Down with the English! Cheers for Egypt! Down with the English!," at each time he was beaten by my grandfather. I and other children in the house kept sitting without uttering a voice, embarrassed by the incident occurring before our eyes. However Abdel Mune'em's cry shook our little hearts which started growing in those days. We felt him near by our hearts and sympathized with him and gave vocal supports to him at our hearts, but we could not do anything for him." [Uways 1985: 32-33]

It is likely that this incident happened one day at the end of March 1919 after the great popular uprising broke out on 9 March and a great number of the British soldiers were dispatched to Egypt to suppress this popular movement. A military parade of the British army after going round many streets in Cairo passed by an alley in a popular quarter where the 'Uways family lived. The sound of soldiers' shoes approached near to the ordinary people who didn't directly take part in any kind of nationalist movement such as anti-British demonstrations. These people touched the colonialism itself for the first time and directly confronted with its menace, thus provoking social tensions which gave a great impact on relations inside their family. The revolutionary fever mingled with nationalist passion, and the terror of violence stirred up the calm atmosphere of the customary family life and provoked intense frictions among its members. As we see later, the revolution shook the patriarchal authority in the family and such unusual situations uncovered some delicate and even concealed relations among its members, in regard to political stands as well as affective feelings.

In this episode, the revolution is described as an inseparable part of the family history. In this epitomized national history in one family, we found a group of people of the 'Uways family who were involved with the revolution in a variety of forms: Sayyid's aunt could not stop her scream because she was anxious about her son who went out to take part in anti-British demonstration; his father who scolded her with a shout and attempted to strike out at her; his mother who tried to interve them and was beaten husband; his cousin and his grandfather confronted about the revolution and quarreled after their return to the house; and children of the family who felt deep sympathy to their cousin.

It is likely to say that these may represent various attitudes of Egyptian people toward the 1919 Revolution, but of course of not all of Egyptians. Attitudes and behaviors of Egyptian people to the revolution and their opinions on the British colonial rule showed a great variety of forms depending on their social positions. We should be cautious in imaging a monolith-like people who automatically could be mobilized to the nationalist movement. Here we are going to move to focus on a vivid scene of the confrontation between Sayyid's cousin who dared to participate dangerous demonstrations and his grandfather who showed his sympathetic attitude to the British rule.

2. *Different Opinions of the British Colonial Rule: the Confrontation between Sayyid's Cousin and His Grandfather*

The March Revolt was begun on 9 March 1919 immediately after his arrest and exile to Malta on 8 March by a demonstration of students of the Law School, from which Sa'd Zaghlul graduated. They shouted that they could not study the law in the country where the law was trampled down, and many students of other schools such as the Agricultural School, the Engineering School, the Medicine School and the Commercial High School, joined them and organized a big demonstration, crying, "Long live Egypt! Sa'd is the leader (*hayat misr, wa zu'ama sa'd*)."

It was on 10 March when the students of al-Azhar where Abdel Mune'em was studying joined this movement, while their demonstration was well prepared and organized according to an observation. These student demonstrations were followed by massive strikes of workers and government employees and junior high school students, girl students and to our surprise pupils of primary schools participated in anti-British demonstrations. On 11 March a student was killed, being the first victim, by a fire of the British soldiers, and on 16 March a woman from Khalifa District, Sayyid's home town was killed, being the first female victim in demonstrations. [Markaz Watha'iq wa Tarikh Misr al-Mu'asir 1984: 52-65]. These anti-British bloody demonstrations gathered strength by organizing a series of funeral demonstrations of these victims (we can find its similar pattern of popular movement in the 1979 Iranian Revolution which occurred sixty years later).

Al-Azhar students always stood at the head of these demonstrations and played an important role to spread the revolution nationwide, especially to the countryside because most of them were sons of rural notables ['Abd al-Muttarib 1990: 29]. When all the schools were closed during the upheaval days, Abdel Mune'em became a private teacher for the children in the family. He taught them the Arabic grammar and also explained them political affairs at that time. And he tried to make them learn nationalist poems by heart. Young Sayyid thought that his cousin 'had the most accurate view of the situation of the revolution among the family members.' Actually Abdel Mune'em played a similar role in propagandizing the revolution to the general public including ordinary families, just same as his classmates of al-Azhar did back in their villages.

Sayyid's grandfather, who struck his grandson in anger with a whip, shouting that he was a pig ignorant of the benefit of the British rule, was a kind of war profiteer who accumulated his fortune during the World War I. He inherited a drug shop (*'itara*) from his mother, Sayyid's great-grandmother, who had been regarded actually as 'the lady patriarch' (*lagul beyt*), then expanded his business by acquiring the position of the sole agency of the Shell Oil Company in Cairo and began to deal with kerosene, gasoline, lube oil, and grease instead of selling wax. He opened an office in Ataba square, a famous commercial center in Cairo, and expanded his business by increasing his clients all over the city, and finally he bought

ten shops and ten houses. He esteemed the British colonial rule as if seemingly achieved the economic development through the inflax of foreign capital and the construction of modern infrastructure since its occupation in 1882.

However, similarly to Abdel Mune'em, the grandfather also educated his grandchildren according to his own method. He commanded them everyday to read aloud articles of newspapers in front of him and corrected their grammatical mistakes. Sayyid himself remembers well that he read an article on the assassination of Sir Lee Stack, Governor-General of Sudan in November 1924. And it should be noted that both of the grandfather and the cousin shared 'a common cultural environment': namely, the Islamic intellectual tradition, in spite of their difference of opinions of the British colonial rule. The grandfather, who had a large collection of books on Islam such as commentaries of the Koran in his library, sometimes ordered the cousin to read one of them for his grandchildren.

3. *Shaking of Authority: the Father and the Aunt*

The alley (*hara*) in Cairo, similar to other Middle Eastern cities, is regarded as private and intimate social space, in contrast with the street (*shari'*) as public space. Sayyid's alley, which was consisted of six houses, was a safe playground for children who could take bread and water from any house in the alley in any time they wanted. Sayyid and his friends usually played ball there and in Ramadan month they made a model of cannon by bricks which was used to tell the time of end of the fasting. Therefore when the British army came from main streets near to entrances of alleys, common people in the alleys considered this parade itself as a serious invasion to their private living space.

It was Aunt Zaybab, Abdel Mune'em's mother, who responded the military parade most sensitively in the family. She gave a sharp scream because she was anxious about her son who participated in the anti-British demonstration at that time. And she did not stop it although Sayyid's father was in the house. Or it seemed that she knew it well and dared to do so intentionally. She did such a 'careless challenge,' the boy imagines, because she had complicated feelings toward his father.

Aunt Zaynab was an odd person in the 'Uways family. Her father was of the *effendi* (educated urban white collar) class, working as a *katib* (clerk) in a *da'ira* (royal estate) owned by a prince. She was obliged to leave her father's house in childhood immediately after her mother died and her father got the second wife. She was brought up in her mother's family, but she sometimes was permitted to visit her father's house and had chance to come in contact with her father's world, the society of *effendi*. She desired to join this westernized fashionable society, but it was impossible. Eventually she got marriage with Sayyid's uncle and joined in a typical family of common people in a popular quarter, while she kept a complexed affection toward her father's world. She brought an unruly behavior into the family, lodged an objection to its custom, and created a stir in its traditional relations. It was

unthinkable for other family members that she talked so outspokenly and even dared to ask money to the grandfather who was regarded as the absolute and dreadful patriarch by all the family.

She seemed to have taken a complicated attitude toward Sayyid's father. While she tried to make a 'psychological attack' on him, the guardian of the traditional custom of the family, she felt complexed affection to him. One day, she dared to invite her boyfriend into the house. She did it intentionally although she knew that Sayyid's father was in the house, and he blamed her harshly and kicked out him. But she was neither an insincere nor immoral woman. Rather, Sayyid interprets that she dared to take such a shameless challenge because she esteemed his father's high position in the family. She seemed to consider that Sayyid's mother did not match such a splendid man like her husband. Sometimes she watched intently Sayyid's mother meeting the father who came back from his work at the door side. She was a disagreeable aunt for young Sayyid. For example, he remembers that she explained him that his father suffered his first heart attack because he tried to exercise his right of marriage life. However, now he can understand the reason why she did not stop her scream at that day.

"She was filled with horror at the men marching in a military parade (the British soldiers) because she might have misunderstood that they came to the family in order to deprive the position of the head of family, the man in power formally and actually (that is Sayyid's father). The horror which she showed in such a situation was considered an expression of her affected arrogance and conceit, but the action she took at that time resulted from various cultural, social, economic and political situations" [Uways 1985: 46].

4. *The National Consciousness of the Mother*

It is his mother's miscarriage that was so striking scene for young Sayyid and burned into his mind and became unforgettable. His parents were not blessed with children but one child, while other couples in the family had many children. He knew that some elder brothers and sisters had died immediately after their births. Therefore his mother and aunts tried to conduct a cult of *zaar* (a ritual to appease spirits which a person may be possessed) for the sake of his birth. They even deceived the father who regarded this cult as a superstition (but Sayyid supposed that the father might have known it and cooperated with them). He deeply understood his parents' special affection to him, their only child. He remembers well that his young brother departed two months after his birth and his sister also died at the age of three years old. He got to know that he had his died elder brother, Kamil, when the father and mother were called as Kamil's father and Kamil's Mother, even between each other. The name of their eldest son was taken from a famous nationalist leader, Mustafa Kamil. The name of Sayyid itself was derived from a famous

Sufi (Islamic mysticism) saint, al-Sayyid al-Badawi in Tanta. He asserts that Egyptians have preserved an ancient tradition of naming their children by names of gods, Christian and Islamic saints, kings and political leaders since the time of Pharaonic period.

In his autobiography, Sayyid wrote that he had participated in anti-British demonstrations twice. He kept in memory some words which his mother uttered to him when he came back home during such upheaval days. He remembers them as follows:

“I remember well mother’s words which she spoke to me during this great popular revolt. I suppose that my readers have already known some features of my mother’s character (from what I mentioned above in this book). She was a person who did not have a bit of enough national consciousness in any form. It is supposed that both of her anxiety for everyday life and circumstances in which she grew up prevented the emergence of this consciousness in her mind. However, on one of the days of the revolution the mother uttered to me in tears filled in her eyes, crying, “Oh, Sayyid, Al-Liwa was poisoned. The English poisoned him!” I could hear only the second syllable of ‘*Liwa*’, so I could not understand what she said. For her ‘*Liwa*’ means Mustafa Kamil who died while still young². This great leader died at so early age that millions of people rumored that his death was not a natural one and an enemy of Egyptians poisoned him. This enemy is the English, the enemy of the freedom which great leader advocated and devoted his short life for.” [‘Uways 1985: 58-59] “I clearly remember that my mother’s heart was trembling because of her sorrow and she was about to shed tears. Then I immediately realized that an autocratic oppressor (*zalim*) knew usually remembered what he had done, but he was totally ignorant about the most important thing, the response of his action. And I also confirmed that the nationalism is a feeling which could not be erased by poverty or ignorance, even nor by intellectual confusion like mist.” [‘Uways 1985: 81-82]

This is his objective interpretation of his mother’s national consciousness. It is supposed that her words had a great influence on his intellectual development. And it may be possible to make one speculation about this story as follows. At that time, Sayyid’s mother might have reminded ‘poisoned’ (as she thought) Mustafa Kamil of her dead son, another Kamil. Further she might have reminded Sayyid, who had participated in the demonstration in the streets, and she was very anxious about, of the images of two Kamil, her ‘dead sons’. It can be said that national consciousness may emerge in minds of individuals from weaving threads of emotions of their intimate persons into a wide fabric of common belief of nation. During the strained days in the revolution, national consciousness was taking shape in the mother’s mind, by overlapping the images of her sons after she experienced again another sad accident of miscarriage of her baby.

² *Al-Liwa* is the name of newspaper published by this nationalist leader who died at the age of thirty two in 1908, and people used to call him by this nickname.

5. *The 1919 Revolution and Young Sayyid*

It is a distinct feature of the 1919 Revolution that various social strata and groups both in cities and villages participated in it all together. Especially it has been repeatedly pointed out to this day that Muslims and Copts cooperated and confirmed their national solidarity in the revolution, and also that women played an important role in it. Actually the first women's demonstration in 16 March showed the starting point for Egyptian womens' movement. Besides these adult participants, children were also mobilized in the 1919 Revolution. Frequently observed is that children vividly took part in mass movements in Middle Eastern cities, such as in the Intifada movement in the occupied Palestine and other urban riots. Concerning this point, it is interesting to compare these modern movements with those in the medieval times. Also it should be noted that many children fell victims to the 1919 Revolution, as in the case of Intifada.

According to Sayyid's memory, he participated two times in the revolution. First, he took part in a strike and a demonstration organized by elder students in the elementary school, and secondly in another demonstration he shouted together with his friends, "Down with the Milner Mission!", without knowing its meaning³. And the 1919 Revolution could be named as the revolution of songs because during the revolutionary days a number of nationalist popular songs and ballads, which sometimes contained people's hate against the British colonial rule, prevailed in all over the country. Sayyid himself chanted revolutionary songs every day such as ones of Sayyid Darwish, a famous musician in those days.

Even after the revolution passed its peak, its fever remained around young Sayyid's life. One day he watched that hundreds of high school students invaded the yard of the primary school which he entered after his graduation of the elementary school in 1921 at the age of eight. They broke the school gate, entered the yard and occupied it. It was an examination day. But the examination was cancelled, and Sayyid and his friends glanced down at the yard from the windows of the classrooms, finding that the school master was surrounded by a party of high school students. This school master usually stood above them like a giant, but on that day he looked like a dwarf in a group of high school students. The revolution shook the order of authority in the school as well as in the family.

Nevertheless, it is also true that this school master helped his students to cultivate their national consciousness through his unique education. Young Sayyid was attracted in a chronological figure of the ancient Egyptian dynasties drawn by the school master and was deeply impressed by a trip planned by him to the pyramids and the sphinx in Giza. Through

³ The Milner Mission was dispatched by the British government to investigate the unrest situation in Egypt and conditions for reconciliation with Egyptian nationalist leaders from December 1919 to April 1920, but its boycott movement spread to all the country.

such an education, studying historical heritages, he felt disgusted not only in Turkish to the mother of the king with his classmates whenever she came back from her summer vacation in Turkey. That is why he was indignant at an arrogant attitude of an English teacher whom he would meet in the high school days.

Besides the influence of education in the schools on his national consciousness, the education in its broad meaning in the family and the local society also affected his intellectual development. In addition to the above mentioned private lessons given by the grandfather and the cousin in the family, it is political gatherings of the father and his friends that provided an important chance for Sayyid to affirm his nationalist thought. His father's friends were working in different occupations such as a tailor, a painter, a military officer, a writer, and an owner of book shop, but all of them were members of the National Party (*al-hizb al-watani*) lead by Mustafa Kamil. It is considered that they composed an association called as *shilla* in the Egyptian politics.

In August 1927, the boy witnessed the funeral procession of Sa'd Zaghlul held on a large scale at a cemetery near the Tomb of Imam Shafi'i in the same quarter of his father's shop. At the age of fourteenth, he gave a cool evaluation to Sa'd Zaghlul as a politician. He said, "He was really a human being who sometimes made mistakes and was afflicted with them." [Uways 1985: 111]

Politicians in the Wafd Party headed by Sa'd were considered to be the new generation of political leaders who strengthened their position during the 1919 Revolution. Unlike the old generation of the National Party, they were trained in modern education and got administrative experiences under the British rule. But it is important that, while having felt sympathy to the National Party, young Sayyid seemed to begin perceiving vaguely the coming of the post Wafdist age, in other words, the road to the July Revolution, and understanding its social background through his personal experiences in these days after the 1919 Revolution. It is these experiences that greatly influenced on his intellectual development through which he followed an academic life as a specialist of social welfare activities as well as a sociological researcher.

One day he played ball with his friends in a vacancy near the Citadel. On their way home, they found half-naked women at the foot of the Citadel, shamelessly slapping their cheeks by hands and shouting, "Hello Johnny, give me money. Hello George, give me food," then English soldiers laughed all at once and threw biscuits and sweets down at them. At sight of this scene, Sayyid and his friends threw stones at these women, who got angered and ran chasing the boys but could not catch up with the boys [Uways 1985: 96]. These women were of the poor people living in Khalifa District, subsisting by begging those visiting the tombs of their families and of famous Islamic saints.

Furthermore, in the first half of 1920's, many workers whom the boy knew well lost their jobs because of the economic crisis after the World War I. They were obliged to earn their livings by peddling foods and other miscellaneous jobs. In addition, he noticed that many

people were conscripted as service workers of the British army for the sake of getting 'a slice of bread' in the wartime. They were dispatched to Syria and Palestine, leaving behind their families in the country. It is said that the number of farmers conscripted to this military service workers reached one and half million, and this conscription became one of important reasons of the 1919 Revolution. [Barakat 1991: 66-67; Goldberg 1992: 268-271]

Later, Sayyid left the high school due to his father's death, but he could not relinquish his hope of studying and entered the Cairo Social Service School in 1938 when he was already thirty five years old. On the first day of his first casework training in this school, he encountered an extremely poor family living inside a tomb in a cemetery area in Khalifa district which turned to be a famous slum called as 'the town of the dead'. When he was shocked at the sight of this family so much that he felt 'as if his eyes had been interchanged with the new ones' ['Uways 1985: 11], his mind was captured again by the same critical mind having sensed at the time of the 1919 Revolution. That is his unique critical mind of social reform in Egypt which is intermingled with his nationalistic emotion.

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